THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

"A ripple effect of suffering"

Children and young people's experiences of parental immigration detention and deportation

Dr Michelle Peterie
Suzette Jackson (Te Ātiawa)
Dr Laura Vidal

In collaboration with

Australian Human Rights Commission
Celebrating 40 years

The Sydney Centre for Healthy Societies and the Australian Human Rights Commission acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia, and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. We pay our respects to Elders.

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WARNING: the following pages contain distressing content and coarse language.

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Deb Tsorbaris

National Children's Commissioner
The Australian Human Rights Commission

The voices of children and young people and their families are often completely absent from government policy debates in Australia. Yet the policies, laws and systems that have been designed and implemented by adults can affect children the most, sometimes with long-lasting and debilitating effects.

As Australia's National Children's Commissioner, I am especially concerned with protecting the rights of children most marginalised in our society, and whose voices are especially absent from policy debates and the public eye. Under the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, all children have the right to express their views and have these views taken into consideration in decisions that affect them.

That is why I am honoured to be writing the Foreword to this research report *"A ripple effect of suffering": Children and young people's experiences of parental immigration detention and deportation*. Thank you to the University of Sydney for undertaking this groundbreaking research.

The report highlights the voices of children and young people whose parents and primary caregivers have been placed in immigration detention following cancellation of their visas, and who are subsequently deported from Australia. Through 104 in-depth interviews, 105 anonymous surveys, and artwork, children, young people and their families share their stories of being separated from their family members by immigration detention and deportation. In their own words, they emphasise the importance of family unity and relationships for children's emotional wellbeing. Their stories paint a different picture to the usual view presented in the media of people whose visas have been cancelled on character grounds, showing that many are also parents or caregivers. Children suffer the consequences of both adult and government actions through no fault of their own.

I hope that hearing about their experiences, and their wishes for a more compassionate approach, will lead to greater consideration of children and young people's rights when visa, detention and deportation decisions are being made.

2. Foreword by the lead author

Dr Michelle Peterie
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For children living in the Australian community, the immigration detention of a parent can mean years of bedtimes, bathtimes and birthdays without this primary caregiver present. It can mean regular visits to an austere, intimidating institution, or years with no physical contact if a parent is transferred to a detention centre interstate. The detention of a parent can mean prolonged financial strain and crippling stigma as the family struggles to make ends meet. In some cases, where a parent faces deportation from Australia, it can lead to either indefinite family separation or relocation to a (potentially unfamiliar) country to prevent the family being torn apart.

At the time of writing this report, Australia holds 1,054 people in onshore immigration detention facilities. The majority of these 'detainees' are fighting against their removal from Australia after the cancellation of a visa, often on character grounds (Australian Government, 2026).

Many of these detained men and women have children living in the Australian community, some of them Australian citizens.

This report tells the stories of these children for the first time. Amplifying children and young people's voices – and locating their perspectives within their families' broader experiences – this report documents the rippling impacts of immigration detention and deportation.

The research presented here was informed by two aims:

- First, to assess the impacts of immigration enforcement laws, policies and practices on children and young people embroiled in this system via the detention and/or deportation of a parent or caregiver; and
- Second, to promote compliance with Australia's international obligations to act in the best interests of children.

The evidence presented here shows that immigration detention and deportation do not only 'happen' to the individual who is detained and/or deported. These laws, policies and practices also have profound and often deleterious impacts on their children and families.

2.1. About the study

It is now well-established that aspects of Australia's immigration enforcement policies are contrary to Australia's international human rights obligations. For over 35 years, the Australian Human Rights Commission and respective Presidents and Commissioners have consistently found that prolonged immigration detention breaches the right not to be detained arbitrarily. Echoing mounting academic research in this area (von Werthern et al., 2018), consecutive Commission reports have drawn attention to the serious and corrosive impacts of prolonged immigration detention on those who are incarcerated (e.g., AHRC, 2014, 2017, 2024a). In recognition of these impacts on detained children, Australian governments on both sides of politics have taken steps to reduce the number of children in immigration detention. To date, however, little research has been undertaken into the impacts of parental immigration detention and deportation on children and families (Peterie, 2022, 2024). Building on the now well-established evidence of direct harm on people who are detained, this report interrogates some of the indirect impacts of Australia's immigration detention and deportation system.

This report draws on findings from a qualitative study undertaken by my team at the Sydney Centre for Healthy Societies at The University of Sydney. It tells the stories of children and young people growing up in the shadow of Australia's immigration detention and deportation systems. Between March 2024 and April 2026, we conducted 104 in-depth interviews with children (7–17yrs), young people (18-25yrs), and members of their immediate families and support systems. To enable children to share their perspectives safely, child participants were given the option of using arts-based methods in their interviews. This involved children drawing pictures about different aspects of their lives and experiences and telling us about these drawings. 105 online survey responses were also collected from children, young people and family members who preferred to participate in the study anonymously. To safeguard child participants' safety, involvement in this online component of the study was limited to people who were at least 16 years old.

Throughout this report, care has been taken to centre participants' voices and perspectives through the inclusion of direct quotes and stories, as well as children's drawings.

2.2. Research findings

The overarching finding of this study is that children and young people are often acutely and adversely impacted when a parent or caregiver is detained or deported.

In relation to children and young people's experiences of parental immigration detention, we found that:

- When a parent or caregiver is detained, children's family structures, home environments and daily rhythms change dramatically. Many children and young people feel that their world has been shattered.
- Visiting immigration detention facilities with children is prohibitively difficult, compromising children's access to their detained parent or caregiver. Visitor application processes are complicated and time consuming. Inflexible visiting times and distant detention locations create additional barriers to visitation.
- Immigration detention facilities are stressful places for children. Existing facilities and procedures rarely allow families to interact in a natural and developmentally appropriate way. Many children experience acute emotional distress surrounding visits, particularly when leaving their detained parent or caregiver.
- Children of detained parents often face financial strain, food poverty and housing insecurity, as well as reduced access to support as other members of the family struggle to make ends meet. In these circumstances, many older children take on additional responsibilities to help their families, leading to parentification and educational disruption.

- Children and young people impacted by the detention of a parent or caregiver self-report feelings of sadness, abandonment, shame, disconnection, and anger. Many withdraw from their families and friend groups and become disengaged at school. Without robust support, children and young people are at risk of mental ill health, substance use, violence, and reckless behaviour.
- Help is rarely available to families in moments of crisis or arrives too late to interrupt intergenerational cycles of distress, addiction and incarceration.

In relation to children and young people's experiences of parental deportation, we found that:

- The deportation of a parent or caregiver upends children and young people's lives, compromising their sense of safety and stability.
- When a parent or caregiver is deported, older children and young people often have to decide whether to relocate too. Many face impossible choices between their deported parent or caregiver, and their other parent or caregivers who may elect to remain in Australia.
- Children who relocate with their deported parent or caregiver grieve the lives, loved ones and futures they left in Australia. Those who remain in Australia grieve their deported parent or caregiver and the life they shared or might have shared together. For both groups, parental deportation is a source of profound loss.
- Face-to-face visits to the deported parent or caregiver's country of citizenship are prohibitively difficult for many separated families, who face financial and logistical barriers to international travel. Very often, children and young people go years without seeing their deported family member. This robs children and young people of foundational relationships, as well as opportunities to heal. In cases of family breakdown, children in Australia may lose contact with their deported parent or caregiver until they are old enough to pursue this independently.
- Parental deportation contributes to financial stress in many families. Older children and young people frequently take on additional responsibilities to support their families, typically at the expense of other pursuits.
- Children of deported parents or caregivers report isolation from their peers; many grapple with feelings of sadness, loneliness, frustration, and anger, which may contribute to substance use and violence.
- The impacts of parental deportation are long-term and intergenerational in nature, shaping children and young people's education, wellbeing, careers, family planning and parenting for years after the deportation.

For decades, the Australian Human Rights Commission has reported on the serious human rights violations associated with Australia's policy of mandatory immigration detention and has urged successive governments to bring the regime to an end. In widening the analytic lens to centre the perspectives and experiences of children and young people impacted by the detention and/or deportation of a parent or caregiver, this report further substantiates the need for policy reform.

My hope is that the evidence and testimonies gathered in this report will prompt the Australian Government and the Australian community to reconsider Australia's immigration detention and deportation laws and policies. Currently, these laws and policies inflict profound and unnecessary harm not only on the people directly targeted, but also on their families and children.

Urgent action is needed to disrupt the current trajectory towards intergenerational harm.

3. Introduction

"It's a ripple effect of suffering, which can then ripple effect constantly."

(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)

Immigration detention and deportation[1] are hotly contested topics in Australian politics. Questions about who should be permitted to call Australia home evoke strong emotional responses across the community. Governments regularly debate the merits of different policy positions.

The question of how Australia should respond to non-citizens who commit criminal offences in Australia – or who otherwise violate the conditions of their visas – is particularly fraught. Dominant discourses tend to paint such individuals as dangerous outsiders. We can lose sight of the fact that those affected are people. They have parents and colleagues and partners and friends. Many have children living in Australia, some of whom are Australian citizens.

The impacts of immigration enforcement policies are not confined to a single person. When Australia detains and deports individuals, whole families – including children and young people growing up in the Australian community – are affected.

This report centres the voices and experiences of these children and young people.

3.1. Background

3.1.1. What is Australia's policy of mandatory immigration detention?

Mandatory immigration detention of 'unlawful non-citizens' is a key component of Australia's immigration policy. Australia's detention policy purports to both (a) contain people who are in the country without a valid visa, and (b) discourage people, including asylum seekers, from entering Australia without authorisation (Nethery and Silverman, 2015; Peterie, 2022).

Mandatory immigration detention was first introduced in Australia in 1992, under the *Migration Act 1958* (Cth). Initially, the length of time an individual could be held in immigration detention was limited to 273 days. However, this limit was removed in 1994, paving the way for prolonged, and at times indefinite, mandatory detention (AHRC, 2017). As of February 2026, the average duration of detention for people incarcerated in 'closed' immigration detention in Australia is 458 days (Australian Government, 2026). As the Commission has observed and numerous studies now attest to, the mental health impacts of detention tend to worsen as the duration of detention increases (e.g., Robjant, 2009; von Werthern et al., 2018; AHRC, 2020).

The *Migration Act* provides that any non-citizen who is in the country without a valid visa must be detained until they are removed from Australia or granted a visa. This applies to people who arrive to Australia without authorisation, but also to people whose visas expire or are cancelled while they are in the country. Places of detention include *closed detention* in an immigration detention centre/facility (IDC/F), immigration transit accommodation (ITA), or alternative place of detention (APOD), such as a designated hotel or hospital (AHRC, 2026). The Minister for Home Affairs also has the power to allow an unlawful non-citizen to live in the community while their immigration status is resolved under a 'residence determination' or what is commonly referred to as *community detention*. In these instances, the individual must reside at a nominated dwelling in the Australian community and may be subject to other conditions and reporting requirements (AHRC, 2021; RCOA, 2020).

1. This report uses the language of 'deportation' to describe the removal of an individual from Australia, typically following the cancellation of a visa. This usage reflects the use of the word 'deportation' within Australian media and politics, and among families impacted by visa cancellation. We note, however, that the criminal deportation power under s 200 of the *Migration Act 1958* (Cth) has fallen into disuse, since the much broader power to remove non-citizens from the country under s 198 became available. Almost all expulsions of non-citizens from Australia now take place through the exercise of s 198 of the *Migration Act*, and are therefore legally classified as 'removals' (Australian Government, 2023b). Many of the families involved in this research were therefore impacted not by deportation in the strict legal sense, but by a parent or caregiver's decision – in the absence of viable alternatives – to sign paperwork agreeing to leave Australia.

While the Department has made efforts, in recent years, to detain people in facilities that reflect their needs (for example, by minimising the use of closed detention for children), it appears that detention is not based on any individual risk assessment or determination of the need for detention (AHRC, 2021). Further, the Commission has regularly expressed concern that – while the Minister has the discretion to circumvent the need for detention by issuing a bridging visa – detention has been the default in many instances, rather than a last resort (e.g., AHRC, 2021).

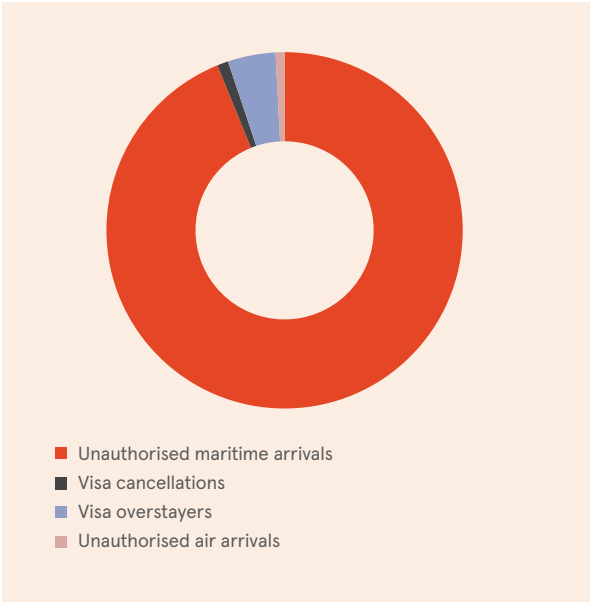
The Australian Human Rights Commission has long criticised Australia's policy of mandatory immigration detention – not least for the ways it "leads to breaches of human rights obligations under treaties to which Australia is a party" (AHRC, 2013: 2). It has called for an end to the policy. The Commission has consistently recommended that detention only be used "where it is strictly necessary to manage unacceptable risks to the community" (AHRC, 2025: 143), emphasising that "almost every human rights problem in closed immigration detention is made worse the longer an individual is detained" (AHRC, 2020: 4). Australia's detention policies are among the harshest in the world and have been regularly criticised on the international stage (Peterie, 2022).

3.1.2. Who are the people currently in immigration detention?

Historically, closed immigration detention has primarily been used in Australia to hold 'unauthorised maritime arrivals'. That is, people who came to Australia via boat without authorisation, typically in search of asylum. From the outset, a stated purpose of immigration detention has been to deter the arrival of asylum seekers by boat (see Hand, 1992).

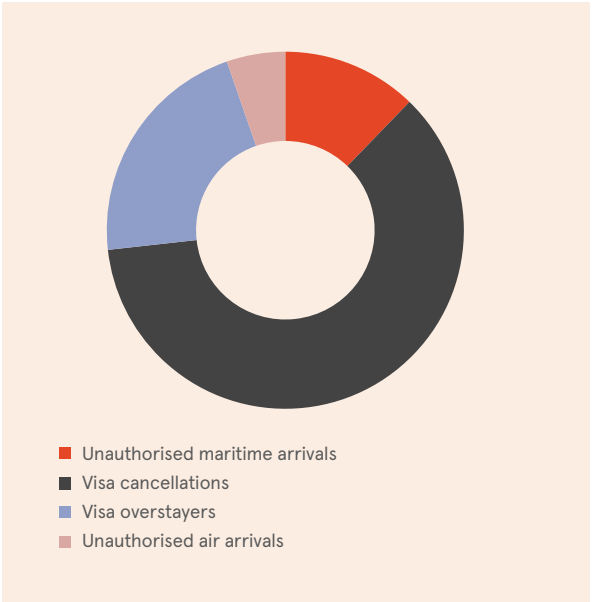
Over the last twelve years, however, the number of unauthorised maritime arrivals in Australia's onshore detention system has fallen dramatically – from 7,308 people (95% of the detention population) in February 2014 (Figure 1) to 129 people (12% of the detention population) in February 2026 (Figure 2). While this population has fallen, another cohort of non-citizens in detention has increased – people whose Australian visas have been cancelled for reasons including "failing the character test, breaching their visa conditions or presenting a risk to the safety, health or good order of the community" (Australian Government, 2026: 7).

Figure 1. Immigration detention population, February 2014



(Source: Australian Government, 2014)

Figure 2. Immigration detention population, February 2026



(Source: Australian Government, 2026)

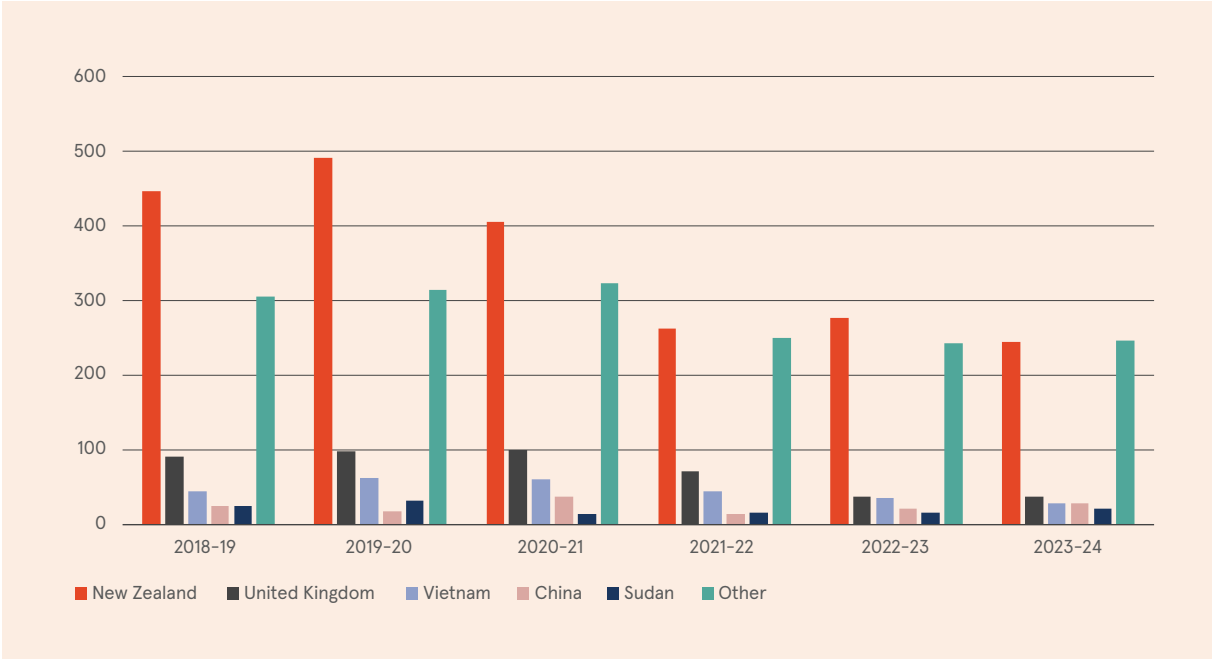
This cohort of people in detention increased significantly following the 2014 introduction of mandatory visa cancellation powers for a range of so-called 'foreign criminals' (e.g., Fabris, 2021; Figure 3). Under the Migration Act, the Immigration Minister already had the power to cancel visas on 'character grounds', based on factors such as whether a visa holder had an extensive criminal history and whether they were considered to pose a threat to the Australian community (Billings, 2018). The introduction of the *Migration Amendment (Character and General Visa Cancellation) Act* in 2014 meant that any non-citizen in Australia who was sentenced to a full-time term of imprisonment of 12 months or longer would have their visa cancelled mandatorily – irrespective of the nature of their offences, the time they had served in prison, whether their sentence represented a single sentence or a series of shorter sentences, or whether their sentence was suspended (McNeill, 2021). The government justified the change as a means to bolster public safety, contending that it would enable the removal of individuals deemed to pose a danger to the community while aligning immigration procedures with overall crime control strategies (Billings, 2018).

Figure 3. Number of unauthorised maritime arrivals and visa cancellations in immigration detention, 2014–2026

(Source: Australian Government, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023a, 2024a, 2025, 2026)

With the enactment of this legislation, many people with deep connections to Australia found themselves at risk of losing their visas – and, as a result, being subject to immigration detention and (in many cases) eventual deportation. This included people who had resided in the country for decades – at times since childhood – as well as people with families living long-term in the Australian community (McNeill, 2021; McHardy, 2022). The risk was especially acute for New Zealand nationals, owing to the 1973 Trans-Tasman Travel Arrangement which permits New Zealanders to live in Australia indefinitely without the necessity of acquiring citizenship (Stanley, 2018; Billings, 2018). This heightened risk is reflected in the Australian Government's visa cancellation statistics. According to Department of Home Affairs figures from 30 June 2024, Australia cancelled 4,774 visas under Section 501 of the *Migration Act* between 1 July 2018 and 30 June 2024, with 2,128 or 44 percent of these cancellation decisions for New Zealand citizens (Figure 4). The most common offence category was drug offences (Australian Government, 2024b).

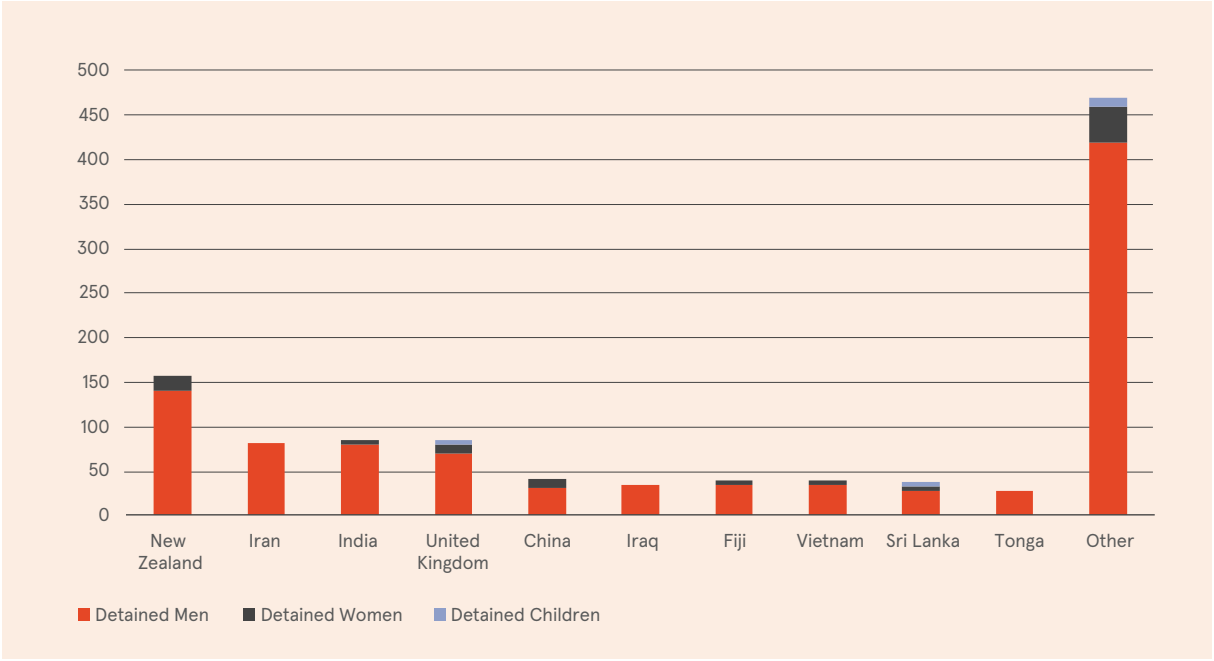
Figure 4. 501 visa cancellations by citizenship, 1 July 2018 to 30 June 2024



(Source: Australian Government, 2024b)

The high proportion of New Zealand nationals among visa cancellations is also reflected in the population of Australia's detention system, where (at the time of writing) New Zealand citizens comprise the largest cohort by nationality (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Number of people in immigration detention by nationality, February 2026



(Source: Australian Government, 2026)

Many of these individuals are ultimately deported from Australia, having exhausted their legal options to remain in the country (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Number of people deported from Australia to New Zealand, by calendar year

(Source: New Zealand Police, 2025)

While deportation typically involves an individual being returned to their country of citizenship, a deal between the Australian and Nauruan governments means that, since 2025, people who cannot be returned to their country of citizenship may face deportation to Nauru (Burke, 2025). This includes refugees, people who are stateless, and people whose country of citizenship does not accept forced returns. This deal was made in the wake of the High Court's 2023 ruling that indefinite detention is unlawful, and targets people who were released from long-term detention as a consequence of the ruling (i.e., the so-called 'NZYQ' cohort).

Detention snapshot

As of February 2026:

The **average period of time** for people held in closed immigration detention is **458 days**.

The **number of people** in closed immigration detention is **1,054**.

61 percent of people detained in closed immigration detention are being held following the **cancellation of a visa**; 89 percent of this cohort (54 percent of the broader detention population) had their visa cancelled on character grounds under Section 501 of the *Migration Act*.

12 percent of people in closed immigration detention are **unauthorised maritime arrivals**, including people who came to Australia via boat in search of asylum.

New Zealand citizens comprise **15 percent** of detainees, making them the largest group in closed immigration detention by nationality.

(Source: Australian Government, 2026)

3.1.3. How are children currently impacted by immigration detention?

Australia's mandatory immigration detention policy applies to children and there is no legislative prohibition against the detention of minors. Through much of the history of Australia's detention system, asylum seeker children were routinely held alongside their parents or caregivers in closed immigration detention facilities. The Commission has previously highlighted the devastating impacts of this policy on detained children, calling for their urgent release (AHRC, 2004, 2014).

Over the last decade, Australia has dramatically reduced its use of childhood immigration detention, and it is now uncommon for Australia to detain minors in immigration detention facilities. Many more children, however, continue to be impacted by Australia's mandatory immigration detention policy, not through their own detention, but through the detention of parent or caregiver. It is these children who are the focus of this report.

There are a range of scenarios in which children and young people may enter closed detention facilities to maintain their relationships with detained parents or caregivers. These include situations where:

- A parent or caregiver is required to remain in closed immigration detention while their child/ren are released into the Australian community;
- A parent or caregiver is re-detained after a period residing in the Australian community; or
- A parent or caregiver is detained following the cancellation or cessation of their visa.

Given the current makeup of Australia's immigration detention system, these later two scenarios are particularly common.

There is little information available about the children and young people who are affected by the detention of a parent or caregiver. Information about the parental or caregiving status of people in immigration detention is not publicly available. Neither is information about people who visit immigration detention. It is therefore not known how many children and young people are impacted by the detention of a parent or caregiver, how many of these children and young people are Australian citizens, or how many children and young people visit Australian immigration detention facilities each year.

Furthermore, the voices and perspectives of these children and young people are almost entirely absent from public and policy discussions about immigration policy and practice. This report shares their stories for the first time.

3.2. Relevant human rights obligations

Children who experience emotional, physical, material, and economic distress due to parental immigration detention or deportation represent a vulnerable population whose rights are protected under a variety of international and domestic human rights law. Australia has obligations under international human rights law to protect children's fundamental rights and ensure their best interests are centred in all decision making that affects them.

The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC), ratified by Australia in 1990, establishes that "the best interests of the child should be a primary consideration" in all decisions that affect them (United Nations, 1989, Article 3.1). This principle is reinforced by Article 9.1, which stipulates that "a child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will, except when competent authorities subject to judicial review determine, in accordance with applicable law and procedures, that such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child" (United Nations, 1989). Article 9.3 additionally requires that "States Parties shall respect the right of the child who is separated from one or both parents to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to

the child's best interests" (United Nations, 1989). Article 12.1 recognises that children who are capable of forming their own views have the right to express these views freely in all matters affecting them, and requires that children's views be "given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" (United Nations, 1989). This includes children's right to express their views concerning them as individuals, but also in policy and laws that affect them as a group.

Article 23 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR), to which Australia is also a party, recognises that "the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State", while Article 17 prohibits arbitrary interference with family life (United Nations, 1966). These provisions create positive obligations for States to protect family unity and prevent unnecessary separation.

The provisions of the CRC are not comprehensively incorporated into Australian law, and there is no national Human Rights Act. However, some child rights are included in domestic laws, such as the *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth). One of the Act's objectives in matters concerning children (S 60B) is the best interests of the child, and the best interests of the child must be the paramount consideration in matters that relate to child custody and care arrangements (s 60CA). In contrast, the *Migration Act* does not include an explicit requirement for consideration of children's best interests when making decisions that affect children, although the child's best interests is included as a primary consideration in ministerial directions that relate to visa refusal and cancellation under Section 501 (Ministerial Direction 110).

Other primary considerations under Direction 110 are:

- protection of the Australian community from criminal or other serious conduct;
- whether the conduct engaged in constituted family violence;
- the strength, nature and duration of ties to Australia; and
- expectations of the Australian community.

It is important to note that the Direction itself provides that "one or more primary considerations may outweigh other primary considerations" (Ministerial Direction 110, para 7(3)).

Previous Australian Human Rights Commission inquiries relating to children have widely documented both human rights obligations and what children and families need to realise their rights. The importance of connection to family for children's rights and wellbeing has been highlighted in many Commission reports, including reports of consultations with children themselves. The Commission's *Children's Rights Report 2019* (AHRC, 2019) emphasised that family unity is fundamental to children's wellbeing noting that the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State under international human rights law. The report further found that when children's "rights are not adequately protected", this often "impacts negatively on their wellbeing and ability to thrive" (AHRC, 2019: 9). In *Keeping Kids Safe and Well* (AHRC, 2022), many children told the Commission that they need somebody who cares for and looks after them, to be connected to their culture, to have enough to eat, to have access to health care and schooling, to live in a safe neighbourhood, and to have time and space to play. Among the top factors identified by children and families in this study as helping keep them safe were family support and parenting programs. As the current report will lay bare, children who experience family separation through immigration enforcement are disrupted in almost all of the domains that contribute to child safety and wellbeing.

The Commission's 2024 report *Help Way Earlier!: How Australia Can Transform Child Justice to Improve Safety and Wellbeing* (AHRC, 2024) identified the profound impact of family disruption and removal from family on children's involvement in the criminal legal system. The report noted the high proportion of children involved in the criminal justice with experiences of child protection system, including out-of-home care, and children with parents who had been in prison (2024: 18-19).

Whilst the focus of this report differs, and the issues relating to child offending are complex, it raises important questions about the relationship between parental separation and children's long-term outcomes. For example, the Commission documented children's insights that being removed and placed far away from their local area, families and communities was isolating and more likely to lead to their own offending behaviour. This was particularly concerning for First Nations children who emphasised that "family and kinship support, and other 'bush' family were things that kept them strong" (2024: 46). Maintaining family and cultural connections not only upholds human rights obligations but is also a key harm prevention approach – for individuals and for communities.

3.3. The need for this research

While the impacts of immigration detention on children and adults who are detained have been extensively researched, comparatively little is known about the impacts of detention on family members, including children living in the community (Peterie, 2024). Research conducted in the prison system, however, attests that the families of prisoners often face financial hardship (Flynn, 2014; Turney, 2015), stigmatisation (Benisty et al, 2020), emotional distress (Braman, 2007) and relationship deterioration (Lanskey et al, 2018; Tasca, 2018) in the aftermath of a parent or family member's incarceration. The imprisonment of a parent dramatically impacts children's wellbeing and can have adverse consequences for children's life trajectories (van de Weijer et al, 2018).

There is reason to believe that these 'collateral' impacts could be even more significant for the children of people in immigration detention. These families must contend with the unknown duration of their family member's detention, the comparative opacity of the detention system, and the prospect of their family member's ultimate deportation. Families may also carry embodied histories of trauma and torture, including physical and psychological injuries sustained during a period of detention. Some detained people's family members may not qualify for social and economic support in Australia, and may face difficulties accessing permanent visas, legal support, welfare payments, education and employment (see, for example, Fleay et al., 2016; Procter et al., 2017; Hartley et al., 2019; AHRC, 2019b). The social, emotional and material contours of these families' experiences are therefore unique and warrant examination.

In seeking to understand families' experiences, there is a particular need to hear directly from children and young people. Children and young people are experts on their own lives, yet their voices are rarely heard in existing discussions about immigration detention and deportation. There is also a need to hear from parents, caregivers and others who support children and young people – particularly children who are too young to communicate their experiences directly, but whose lives have nonetheless been shaped by Australia's immigration detention and deportation systems.

This report therefore investigates children and young people's experiences of immigration enforcement in the Australian context. In doing so, it aims to both:

1. Increase visibility of children and young people's experiences, and

2. Advance evidence-based solutions to help mitigate harm.

Australia's decision to reduce the use of closed detention where child detainees are concerned has delivered welcome improvements in recent years, dramatically increasing Australia's compliance with international human rights law.[2] Further improvements are now needed to protect and enhance rights attainment of children impacted by the detention and/or deportation of a parent or caregiver.

2. It is the view of the United Nations Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families and the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2017) that "[a]ny kind of child immigration detention should be forbidden by law and such prohibition should be fully implemented in practice".

3.4. Research design

3.4.1. Recruitment and data collection

This project took a qualitative approach to understanding the everyday experiences of children and young people embroiled in Australia's immigration enforcement system. Participation in the study was open to children and young people (7+ years old) impacted by the detention and/or deportation of a parent or caregiver,[3] as well as members of their immediate families and support systems.

Recruitment for the study was supported by a range of Australian and New Zealand organisations that support families impacted by immigration detention and/or deportation. An expert advisory board comprised of key stakeholders and people with lived experience of immigration detention and/or deportation also shared recruitment information within their networks. Recruitment materials invited prospective participants to contact the researchers if they had questions or were interested in being involved. Participants, including children, were given the option of meeting with the researchers before deciding about their involvement. People who chose to proceed with an interview were also invited to let members of their families and networks know about the research, in case they were also interested in being involved.

In recognition of the comparatively high proportion of New Zealand citizens in Australia's immigration detention system (Figure 5) – and to enable children who had relocated to New Zealand following the deportation of a parent or caregiver to safely participate in the project – recruitment and data collection occurred in both Australia and New Zealand. Human Research Ethics Approval for the project was secured in both countries, through ethics committees at the University of Sydney and the University of Auckland.

Data collection involved three main methods:

- **Arts-based interviews with minors:** To enable children's safe participation in the research project, interviews with child participants (7–17yrs) were conducted face-to-face and involved two members of the research team. Arts-based methods were made available in these interviews to help children (particularly those aged 7–12yrs) to share their perspectives in a way that was safe and comfortable for them. Interviews took an average of 45 minutes each and elicited both visual and verbal data.
- **In-depth interviews with young people and adults:** Interviews with young people (18–25yrs) and other adults (26+yrs) were semi-structured in nature. These interviews generally occurred face-to-face, although several participants were interviewed via phone or zoom. Interview questions were open ended and allowed space for participants to share the complexity of their and their families' lives. Interviews took an average of 60–90 minutes each.
- **Online survey:** A short survey was available online to allow additional participants to share their perspectives. To minimise risk to younger individuals, participation in the survey was limited to respondents who were at least 16 years old. The survey took 10-15mins to complete and all responses were anonymous.

3. In recognition of diverse cultural understandings of parenthood and wide variations in family structures, participation in this study was open to children impacted by the detention and/or deportation of a parent or caregiver, as well as members of their families and support systems. While the majority of child participants had experienced the detention and/or deportation of a biological parent, participation was open to children who had experienced the detention and/or deportation a different parental figure. This report therefore includes testimony from or concerning children, stepchildren, grandchildren and younger siblings of people who were detained or deported.

We recruited and conducted in-depth interviews with a total of 104 participants. This included:

- **Children and young people:** 26 participants who had been children (0–17yrs, n=20) or young people (18-25yrs, n=6) at the time of their parent or caregiver's visa cancellation. At the time of their interviews, nine of these participants were still minors (7–17yrs), 15 were young adults (18-25yrs), and two were adults (26+yrs).
- **Parents/caregivers and family members:** 56 participants (18+yrs) who were directly involved in children's care, either as a parent or caregiver (n=39) or as an extended family member such as an adult sibling (n=17). This cohort included the parents and caregivers of infants and young children (0–6yrs) who were not old enough participate in the study. It also included family members of children (7+yrs) who preferred not to participate in the study directly, due to the risk of emotional distress.
- **Supporters:** 22 participants who work closely with families impacted by immigration detention and/or deportation, and contributed insights in their capacity as case managers, social workers, lawyers or advocates.

Qualitative data were also collected through an online survey of 105 respondents (16+yrs), which enabled additional participants to anonymously submit written statements about their experiences.

3.4.2. Data coding and analysis

All qualitative data collected for this study were coded in NVivo and subject to detailed analysis. The coding process was completed inductively, meaning the node structure emerged from the data and was not the product of a predefined coding frame. As Thomas (2006) explains, by beginning with the data, inductive approaches help to minimise the impact of researchers' pre-conceptions in the analytic process:

> ***"Although the findings are influenced by the evaluation objectives or questions outlined by the researcher, the findings arise directly from the analysis of the raw data, not from a priori expectations or models. The evaluation objectives provide a focus or domain of relevance for conducting the analysis, not a set of expectations about specific findings".***
> **(Thomas, 2006: 239)**

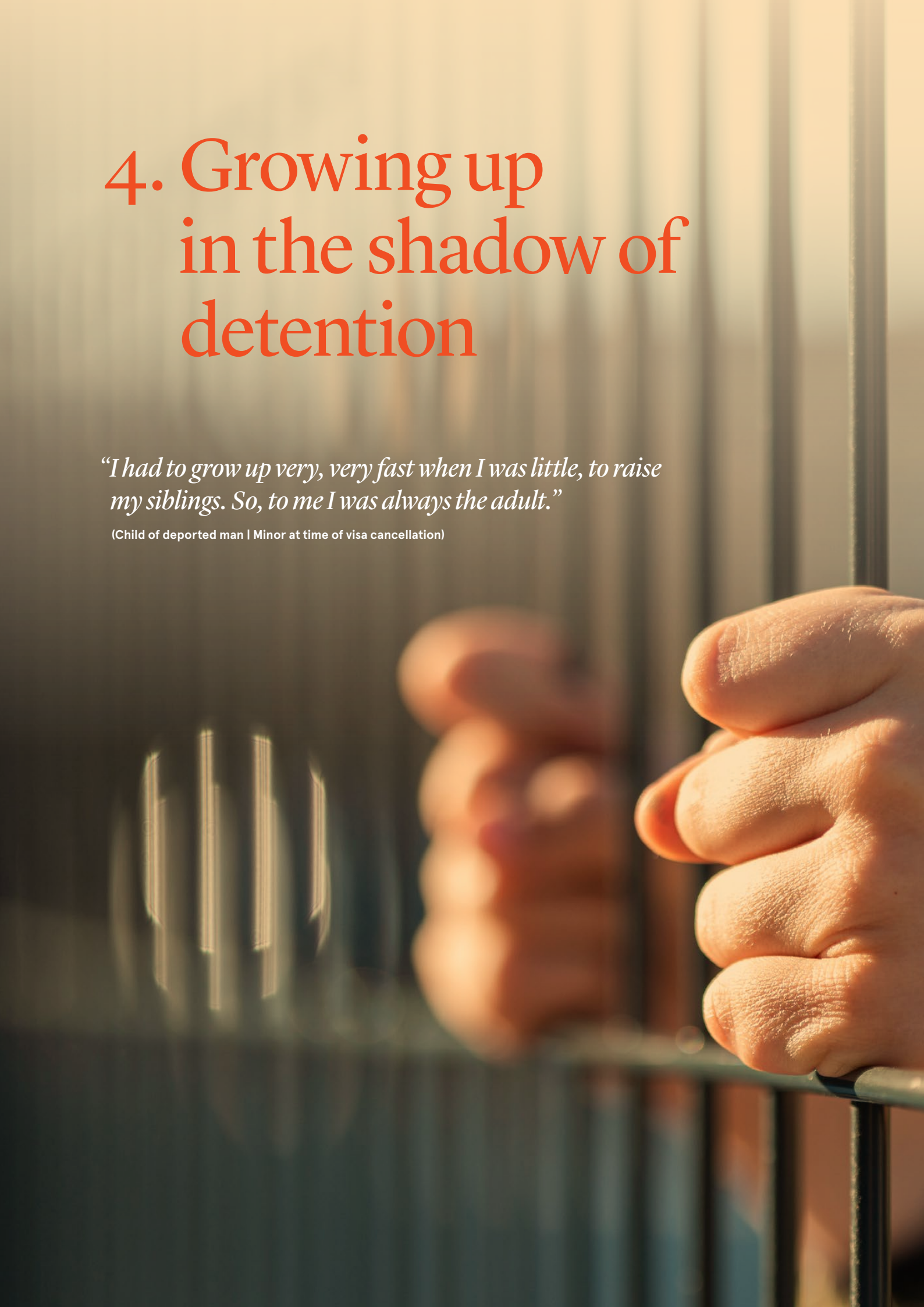
Initial coding was completed by lead researcher Dr Michelle Peterie, after which nodes were reviewed for accuracy and consistency by other members of the research team. We then applied the principle of node saturation to identify key themes across the dataset. Highly saturated nodes – that is, those that included extensive data from multiple participants – were taken to indicate a widely shared experience (Saunders et al., 2017) and, by extension, an important theme in participants' testimonies. Preliminary findings were presented (face-to-face and online) to a sub-set of participants at the conclusion of the first round of analysis to seek further input and to confirm that the findings successfully captured their experiences.

This report presents the findings from this analysis in two parts. Part 4, 'Growing Up in the Shadow of Detention', explores children and young people's experiences when a parent or caregiver is in immigration detention. Part 5, 'The Long Aftermath of Deportation', then turns to consider children and young people's experiences when a parent or caregiver is deported, typically following a period of detention. To help these themes come alive – and to centre children's voices and perspectives, in particular – participants' quotes, artworks and stories are utilised throughout the report to communicate key findings. In Part 6, we conclude by considering 'Children and Families' Perspectives on The Way Forward'. In this closing section, we again centre and amplify children and families' voices, sharing their views about what they want, and what is needed, to help their families and others in their situation.

4. Growing up in the shadow of detention

"I had to grow up very, very fast when I was little, to raise my siblings. So, to me I was always the adult."

(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)



This section of the report is about children and young people's experiences during the detention of a parent or caregiver. It considers how the detention of a parent affects children and young people, including at the level of their family structures, material wellbeing, and socio-emotional health.

4.1. Family separation and visitation

Australian immigration detention centres have often been described as prison-like in nature (e.g., Bull et al., 2013; AHRC, 2014; Peterie, 2018, 2022; RCOA, 2022). People held within these facilities are unable to leave and are subject to a raft of rules and constraints that dictate their everyday lives. Material conditions in detention have regularly been criticised as inadequate or inappropriate for maintaining wellbeing. The United Nations Committee against Torture (UN CAT, 2022: 8) in its 2022 Concluding Observations on the sixth periodic report of Australia identified a number of concerns relating to immigration detention including "poor material conditions in detention", "restrictions on access to social, education and health services", "high reported rates of mental health problems", and "reported excessive use of force and physical restraint".

In relation to family visitations specifically, the Commission has previously expressed concern about the inappropriateness of the visiting facilities for minors, and the way this impacts detained parents' capacity to maintain relationships with their children (AHRC, 2024). Institutional policies and practices – including limited visiting times (AHRC, 2024), complex entrance processes (RCOA, 2017), and the regular relocation of detained people within the detention network (Peterie, 2021) – have also been identified as barriers to visitation.

These aspects of immigration detention are known to significantly impact on the wellbeing of people detained, but also have implications for the wellbeing of their families. Based on a study involving 70 regular visitors to Australian immigration detention facilities, Peterie (2022) found that the detention visitation experience is often highly distressing for family members and friends of people in detention. Themes of powerlessness and ontological disruption recurred in participants' testimonies, and many participants reported physical symptoms that "betrayed high levels of stress, even when they were not fully aware of how traumatic their experiences had become" (Peterie, 2022: 123).

> ***"Sleep problems were extremely common and ranged from difficulties falling or staying asleep in the immediate aftermath of a visit to recurring nightmares and insomnia. It was also common for visitors to experience heightened emotionality, including periods when – in the privacy of their own homes – they were unable to stop crying. At times visitors struggled to concentrate at work or to meet family and social responsibilities because they felt so depleted from and defeated by their experiences in detention."***
>
> **(Peterie, 2022: 123)**

While the experiences of detainees' children have not been a specific focus of any previous Australian studies, participants in our study testified to both the difficulties families face accessing immigration detention facilities and the stressors children experience when visiting within these spaces. The testimonies presented in this report demonstrate that it is often materially and emotionally unsustainable for families to visit detention on a regular basis, particularly when young children are involved. As such, they also reveal that extended periods of detention can place considerable strain on children's relationships with their detained parent or caregiver, as well as their broader wellbeing.

4.1.1. Barriers to visiting immigration detention

For the families who participated in this study, visiting a parent or caregiver in immigration detention was often prohibitively difficult. Parents and caregivers living in the community who chose not to visit detention with their child/ren told us that these decisions were dually informed by a desire to protect their children, and by the logistical challenges involved in visiting within these spaces.

As previous studies have documented (RCOA, 2017; Peterie, 2022), visitor application processes created latent barriers to visitation for some families. As one survey respondent explained the process:

> ***"It was awful. Visits are so hard and tedious to book and you are left at the whim of the people booking on whether they will action it. Visits with children were particularly difficult to book. While the visits themselves were more pleasant and unrestricted than prison, securing visits were a lot more distressing, stressful, time-consuming and frustrating. Inconsistent information given by staff on booking confirmations, and no flexibility for times to visit, except when deportation arrives. Even then we had to push hard to get them to give us an extended weekday visit so we could see our family member a couple of days before they left."***
>
> **(Sibling of deported man)**

For families where a parent or caregiver was detained or had previously been detained in a distant or remote facility, logistical barriers to visitation were particularly salient. Participants with young children were especially emphatic about the challenges associated with travelling to isolated facilities, such as Yongah Hill Immigration Detention Centre in Western Australia, which is currently the second largest centre in the onshore system by population size (Australian Government, 2026).

> ***"I remember taking the kids there [to Yongah Hill]. I don't know if you know what it's like driving with a baby in the car. And when they're constantly screaming and crying. Like it just causes you so much stress. [...] So it's a three-hour drive with two little kids. I remember being so tired one day that I was like, 'Don't fall asleep.' [...] [I]t's just too much. You go there, and then also the visit time is like from 12 until 3 or something like that. So there goes the whole day. So we stopped seeing him so much."***
>
> **(Partner of detained man)**

As this mother explained, her decision to reduce visits – and, by extension, to reduce her children's contact with their father – was ultimately a logistical one. It was not safe for her to continue making the long drive to Yongah Hill on a regular basis. Other participants whose family member had been detained in a different state cited challenges such as securing time off work, managing care responsibilities, and covering the costs associated with travel as major barriers to visitation.

Even when a parent or caregiver was detained within the same city as their child/ren, securing visits could be challenging. Issues of physical accessibility and financial pressure combined with the lived realities of parenting young children to preclude many such families from regular visits.

> ***"I think the way that it played out was the parent that they were in the community with would need to take, often, not just the one child, but three children, pack their lunches, go. [...] [V]isiting hours are usually during school hours or early evening and you might have the only parent who's in the community working because suddenly they've got no income. So, those visits were not always possible for various reasons. I mean in Sydney at least, Villawood Detention isn't easy to get to unless you are driving. It's quite a walk from the train station. And, also, some of these families were not living in these areas."***
>
> **(Support worker)**

The community-based parents and caregivers who organised many families' visits were often under huge pressure to manage their families and finances in the absence of their partner/co-parent. One man who had not received visits from his family during his four years in immigration detention explained that the acute financial strain his detention had caused to his family made visits all but impossible. As his family navigated poverty and homelessness, more immediate needs took priority.

> ***"[My wife and children] didn't come see me because life's a struggle. If you're homeless, why would you want to? How can you go visit someone if you don't have a car? You're just walking, it's a bit difficult, isn't it? So, that's probably the main reason why she didn't come see me."***
>
> **(Deported man)**

For many families, navigating the formal systems through which detention centre visits were arranged compounded these challenges. In addition to finding the time, energy and resources required for the visit itself, community-based parents and caregivers also had to set aside time and energy to complete the lengthy online visitation application.

> ***"When we go to visit him, they require five business days and an application. And it's 13 pages, the online application to go and visit. [...] It was just really hard."***
>
> **(Partner of detained man)**

When community-based parents and caregivers were unable to complete these tasks – for example, because they were unwell or not literate in English – it often fell to older children and young people to navigate these processes for their families.

> ***"[I visited] as much as I could throughout school, sometimes it'd be hard, or if my mum was particularly unwell that week, maybe we couldn't. And I think they also just kind of make it intentionally hard to book [...] [I]t's a very lengthy process, and if you miss one detail, if you forget to bring a document, it's like, 'Well, you can't come in.' Yeah, so that had happened on a few occasions."***
>
> **(Child of detained man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

As these quotes elucidate, the requirement that the visitor application be submitted at least five business days (i.e., one week) prior to every visit was experienced by many families as another obstacle to visiting. This was particularly the case for participants who were juggling casual employment and caregiving responsibilities and did not have a set weekly schedule. Furthermore, several participants expressed frustration that the online visitor application form had to be completed from scratch prior to each visit, rather than auto-populating responses from previous submissions. Again, these time-consuming processes were experienced as particularly demanding by caregivers (including older siblings) of young children, who explained that – in the absence of their detained family member – getting through each day was already a challenge.

4.1.2. Children and young people's experiences in immigration detention

Participants who visited a family member in immigration detention described entering these facilities as a highly securitised and often intimidating process. As one young person explained, the very architecture of detention was confronting given the people held in these facilities were not serving criminal sentences.

> ***"The way that the rooms are, and the front office and stuff like that. It's very, what's the wording, harsh architecture. Just the way it's set up. So seeing him knowing that he's finished his sentence and had served his time, and this is still the kind of place that he was in. [...] That was harder than visiting him while he was incarcerated."***
>
> **(Child of detained man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

One mother, who had visited detention with her baby, described the deep sense of powerlessness she felt as she submitted to security screenings.

> ***"The security is there for a reason, but when you're walking through those doors and you're not with your husband – you already feel so stressed out and [...] they have the control to just end your visit. It's like when you see a police officer walking down the street and you feel like you're doing something wrong. It's like, 'Oh, my God. What are they going to pull me up on? I'm doing this right.' [...] I just feel I've got to get through. I've got to get through."***
>
> **(Partner of deported man)**

These entrance processes, participants noted, were liable to change. Seemingly innocuous rules surrounding, for example, the admission of food to immigration detention facilities changed regularly, and parents and caregivers noted that this unpredictability was particularly difficult for children.

> ***"I get the full security search, the pat down and everything, got to give them my ID. [...] I still remember this one year where they invoked this rule that you're not allowed to bring food to the facility. Even if it's packaged. We were allowed to bring packaged food. But then we were told we were not allowed to bring it. They told me that on Christmas Day. So yes, I had an attitude because it was like, 'Great. What do you want me to do then? Throw it in the bin? Because you don't have a fridge obviously.' [...] It's just so hard on the kids."***
>
> **(Partner of detained man)**

Parents and caregivers frequently described their efforts to facilitate visits that felt 'natural' and 'normal' to their children, and stressed that institutional processes made this difficult.

Children and young people who had visited immigration detention as minors had mixed perspectives on their experiences in these spaces. One primary school aged child, who visited his father in immigration detention, recalled being prevented from entering the centre because he was wearing open-toed shoes. On the way home, his mother remembered, he had been upset, and even months later he continued to ask about his shoes before each visit.

Another child who had visited his father in immigration detention as a four to five-year-old recalled waiting in the reception area and going through security. He also noted that the visiting area itself was not set up for children. While some toys were provided, he told us, his recollection was that this offering was fairly modest. For example, he explained, there was no playground.

> ***"I remember waiting outside [to visit him in the detention centre] kind of like in this area. Then we had to go through security to get in a few times. [...] We had to like line up and they would get these little security scans and like search you with it. [...] There was like a pretty packed area, like heaps of tables everywhere, full of people talking. [...] [The kids' area] wasn't like a playground. [...] Wasn't too much toys there."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Another child, whose father was in detention at the time of our interview, spoke repeatedly about how much he missed playing sports with his dad. This child's mother explained that there was a basketball court at the detention centre that he and his father might have been able to use, but that visitors were not permitted to access this space. Her son would therefore sit inside during their visits, glancing longingly outside at the empty basketball court.

Many of the parents and caregivers we spoke with felt that some detention facilities were ill-equipped to host children. A mother who visited detention with her one-year-old toddler explained that her daughter regularly injured herself during their visits.

> ***"[A]ll the tables in that place are at her head height and they're all pointed corner tables, and she smacks her head so many times when we're there."***
>
> **(Partner of detained man)**

Keeping her daughter occupied was challenging with few toys or sources of entertainment.

> ***"[T]hey've got some board games. But they're old and dirty. And then they've got a storage tub like this for babies' toys. I've taken some things out. I've asked them many times to clean them. They look disgusting. So I've cleaned a few items myself. I took baby wipes in and scrubbed them. So she plays with those ones. In the bottom of this tub, since we started going, are dead Christmas beetles and moths and – no one touches it. It doesn't matter how many times I've complained, they don't care. So I take a few toys in for her. But they're very particular on what we can take in."***
>
> **(Partner of detained man)**

The question of privacy was a recurring theme in the interviews, with community-based parents often remarking that the presence of detention centre staff added to the stilted tone of many visits. While families did their best to create a home-like atmosphere within the visits – to support, as one grandmother articulated it, 'normal' interactions between the detained individual and their children – the presence of detention centre staff, supervising all visits, altered the tone of these interactions.

> ***"Being a detention centre there were doors locked and unlocked. And people who were escorting us. And open the door, 'This is where you stay. This is where you're allowed to be.' [...] You couldn't get close [and] you were with other people as well. So it wasn't just your family. [...] [My daughter] tried to make it a little bit homey and comfortable. [...] She'd say, 'Go give Daddy a hug. Come on Dad, it's your turn to change her nappy. Off you go.' [...] There were some toys that they could play with. It wasn't very natural. It didn't feel very natural. But he did try to be a dad, and hold them, and talk to them, and cuddle them. But having the eyes watching you..."***
>
> **(Mother-in-law of detained man)**

Echoing this sentiment, one mother – who had visited detention regularly with her infant son – stressed that supervised visits in an institutional environment were not conducive to the formation or maintenance of healthy relationships and secure attachments. Maintaining regular (second-daily) visits was important to her and was, she believed, in the best interests of her son. Yet she also recognised the contradictory impacts of these visits, which seemingly heightened both her own and her son's distress by preventing them from establishing a stable routine.

> ***"You go [to detention] to be together but you shouldn't be going to one place every time. You should be at home in your own environment, just – especially being so young for him [my son]. I feel like he was an unsettled baby for that reason. [...] He was quite unsettled because we were having to travel every second day [to visit detention]. [...] In visits, he [my son] did get upset a lot [...] we should be in our home environment doing this."***
>
> **(Partner of deported man)**

Significantly, some facilities were better equipped than others to meet families' needs – or, indeed, were operated by staff who appeared to prioritise children's comfort more than others. As one grandmother put it in relation to one of the smaller facilities in which her son-in-law had been detained:

> ***"[It] is a little bit friendlier. [...] [Y]ou know, they still had to follow the strict rules, but it was a little bit more – a tiny bit more personal, rather than impersonal, like Yongah Hill was. [...] We could say, 'Could we please have some water?' Or 'can we have some more pens for the kids to draw?' And they'd bring it for us. So they were accommodating in that way."***
>
> **(Mother-in-law of detained man)**

Yet as a young man summed up, these accommodations could not make up for the stress associated with growing up in the visiting rooms of carceral facilities.

> ***"[I]t's shit. It's so miserable living a life in a court room, supporting Dad, whatever fuckups he's done. Living a life in a visiting room. That's shit, bro. That's the worst."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Even well-equipped visiting rooms, we heard, were often stressful places for children.

4.1.3. Children's emotions in immigration detention

Children and young people who had personally visited immigration detention as minors talked at length about the emotional contours of these experiences. Indeed, rather than focusing on the practical or material dimensions of their visits, these young participants tended to describe their experiences in terms of the emotions they had experienced (and, in some cases, continued to experience) during their detention centre visits.

For many children and young people, visiting detention was a cause of complex and contradictory emotions. While children generally appreciated the opportunity to see their parent or caregiver and maintain physical contact, they also articulated the pain these visits caused them.

One primary-school aged participant, for example, had been visiting her father in immigration detention for most of her young life. Her father's visa had been cancelled when she was still an infant, and he had been held in immigration detention ever since. During her interview with us, this young participant drew a picture (Figure 6) depicting herself (top right), her younger sister (middle), her mother (bottom right) and her father (top left) hugging goodbye at the end of a visits. Her picture captured the affection she felt for her father and her enjoyment of their time together, but it also spoke to the distress she felt surrounding these visits. As she explained to us regarding the tears she drew on her and her sister's faces, "you don't want to let go".

The theme of children not wanting to leave their detained parent or caregiver at the end of each visit recurred in the interviews. Parents and caregivers described how painful it was to see their children suffering in this way, and to be responsible for carrying their crying children out of the detention facility and away from the family member they were themselves sad to be leaving. One mother, for instance, painted an evocative picture of how these goodbyes played out:

> ***"I don't know if you've ever seen those movies where like there's a child leaving their parent and they're screaming and crying and carrying on, and there's another person that's just taking the kid away? [...] That's what it's still like sometimes. [...] The little one, she cries so much. She says, 'I don't want to leave him.' And clings to him. And I have to just like pick them up and say, 'It's OK. We're going to see him later,' and just walk out. We all have a little cry in the car."***
>
> **(Partner of detained man)**

Speaking to the issue of her own difficult position in these scenes of distress, she explained:

> ***"I'm like walking out the door trying not to cry myself. You can clearly see that I'm crying on the inside. [...] Like you can tell that the kids are like falling apart and I'm just like dragging them out. And [my husband]'s full on trying not to have a meltdown. Which I'm sure he does as soon as we leave. And he was never a crier."***
>
> **(Partner of detained man)**

For their part, detained parents and caregivers articulated the tension they felt between their desire to see their children and families, and their desire to protect all parties – including themselves – from the anguish these visits triggered.

Figure 6. Drawing by child of a detained man, showing her family hugging goodbye at the end of a visit.

> ***"You don't really want your family to come to those sort of places. You do and you don't. You know what I mean? I saw my kids maybe three times when I was in there, maybe four. But it breaks your heart to see them go, so you don't really want your family to come that much. You do and you don't. It just makes you more sad I think. But it's good, it does pick you up a little bit for a little while."***
>
> **(Deported man)**

As children and parents alike navigated complex and sometimes contradictory emotions, parents within and outside detention struggled to discern what it looked like to be 'good' parents in these situations. As one mother noted in relation to her detained husband, "*He loves them [his children] so, so much. He wants to be a father*" (Partner of detained man). Achieving this objective, we heard, would have been considerably easier if families were not constrained to interacting within institutional spaces. That is, if parents were permitted to reside in the community with their children, or if community visits were possible.

4.2. Material consequences

Immigration detention imposes serious material consequences on the families of people in detention. While few studies have examined the impacts of parental detention on children specifically, the extant international research points to financial strain, housing insecurity and food poverty as common challenges faced by families in the aftermath of a family member's incarceration (Wildeman, 2014; Turney, 2015; Patler and Gonzalez, 2021; Peterie, 2024).

In the US context, recent research by Ryo and Levesque (2024: 155) has found that immigration detention can lead to "job losses, exorbitantly priced phone calls and commissary items, as well as direct and collateral costs of coping with health problems arising from detention". As Ryo and Levesque (2024: 155) explain, family members also face "substantial transportation fees and lost wages during visits to detention facilitates, many of which are remotely located and difficult to access".

As we detail below, the participants in this study reported that the detention of a parent or caregiver caused serious financial pressure to many families. Issues of financial strain, food poverty and housing insecurity were recurring themes in the dataset. Our data also underlines the impact of these financial pressures on roles within the family. As we elucidate below, the detention of a parent or caregiver often reconfigures the family unit, placing heightened responsibility on children and at times leading to parentification and educational disruption.

4.2.1. Poverty and deprivation

In our interviews with families in the Australian context, we heard that the detention of a primary breadwinner can impose acute financial strain. When the main income-earner is detained, participants told us, this places considerable pressure on the broader family, including the community-based parent or caregiver, who often has little choice but to find other sources of income at short notice.

As one support worker explained, the financial pressure families experienced in these situations was often compounded by their limited access to social safety nets that might be available to support other families in similar situations. Most notably, family members who did not have Australian citizenship often had diminished access to social security payments and associated services. At the same time, the nature of the work many detained individuals had been employed in afforded them few entitlements to help navigate these challenging periods. Parents employed in blue collar professions or casual roles, for example, could rarely rely on having their leave paid out when their employment was terminated due to incarceration. Similarly, the long-term fallout of even a short period of immigration detention was

severe in these professions, as casual jobs, in particular, were rarely held by employers during a staff member's absence.

> ***"I guess the traditional gender roles played out here as well around the fathers – the men would be the ones who might go off to [...] factory work, butcher shops, supermarkets, heavy labour, so a lot of those opportunities were taken up by the men. The mothers often studied something if they had the opportunity, they were predominantly the nurturers, the people that took care of the children, took care of the home. They might have an odd job here and there, but it will be additional income. It wouldn't be the primary income. So when the provider, or the father, was taken into detention, overnight that was lost. And also, the precarity that [...] they're not working jobs where they get paid out their leave in an emergency or they can have a job to return to or there's some elements of support for the family or even Centrelink assistance not always there. And it takes a long time to set these things up [...] So, overnight families struggled to meet their needs. And even the families that were on welfare support payments, it was never enough for a household with five mouths to feed."***
>
> **(Support worker)**

A mother of four – whose husband had been subject to imprisonment and, subsequently, immigration detention – described the profound impacts of these periods of incarceration on her family's financial wellbeing.

> ***"I was doing 40 hours [a week in my main job]. But then I worked with my oldest daughter of a night. So I'd get home and then at six o'clock go up to a motel and clean rooms up there. [...] And then we'd get back at 9:30, 10:00 and then do it all over again. [...] The working 40 hours, I was wrecked. And then the motel of a night, I was wrecked. But it was never an option. It was one of those things where you just get up and you done it. You can't just sit and cry about it, because I had all these kids that were too young."***
>
> **(Partner of deported man)**

Other community-based parents described similar challenges as they struggled to secure funds to meet their families' basic needs.

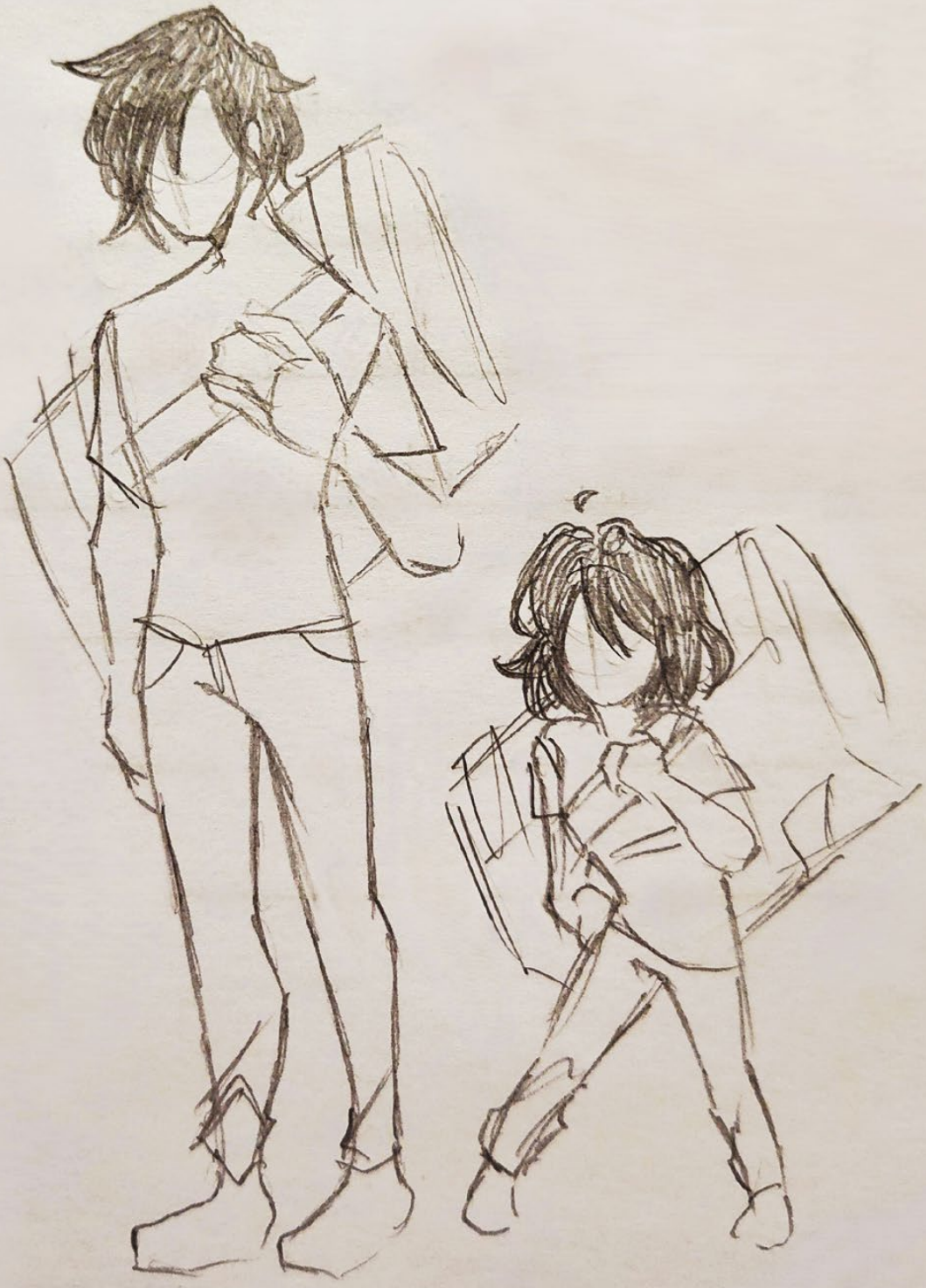
Speaking directly to the consequences of this financial strain for their own lives and wellbeing, many of the children and young people we interviewed described experiencing housing insecurity and food poverty when they were growing up. In many cases, they directly attributed these circumstances to their parent or caregiver's detention.

The teenager who drew the below picture (Figure 7), for example, remembered that their father's detention and subsequent deportation had plunged their family into economic stress.

This picture – drawn in response to the prompt 'what was it like when your parent was in immigration detention?' – shows this young person carrying their worldly possessions on their back during a period of housing insecurity. As they elaborated concerning their memories of this time:

> ***"A kid was not supposed to live in that. [...] We didn't really have anywhere to stay. We were just moving a lot. [...] I remember every time we had to move, when the car got taken because she [Mum] couldn't pay it off, we had to walk a lot. So there was a lot of walking. I just remember carrying a lot of stuff and just walking everywhere and it was so tiring."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Figure 7. Drawing by child of deported man, depicting their experience of housing insecurity during father's immigration detention.



Other children and young people described similar experiences of living in cars or on friends' couches because they had nowhere else to go.

Echoing this theme of precarity and deprivation, stories of food insecurity and hunger recurred in our interviews. It was common for children and young people to disclose that their parent or caregiver's detention had left them without enough food to meet their basic nutritional needs.

In some cases, this was a longstanding concern, as parents' histories of drug or alcohol addiction (often, connected with the offending that led to the parents' visa cancellations) had compromised children's access to stable food for some time. One young woman, for example, recalled eating sugar for dinner as a child, because there was no other food available in the house. Her father's imprisonment and subsequent detention for drug-related offences made her predicament even worse – leaving her in the care of a mother who, due to her own struggles with addiction, was unable to provide her children with reliable access to food.

> ***"There would be some times where we'd eat, for dinner, we would eat sugar, you know? Like, as a kid. What the heck? [Not] [e]ven just like one sausage or a piece of bread. No, [we] ate sugar!"***
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

In many cases, however, children and young people drew a sharp distinction between their lives before their parent or caregiver was imprisoned and/or detained, and their lives afterwards. One young woman, for instance, explained that her mother had not worked prior to her father's incarceration. When he was taken away, their lives changed dramatically.

> ***"It become really tough on Mum as well because she was the only one that was looking after us. And providing. And that meant she had to work all the time."***
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

Without adequate funds available to feed the family, this mother opted to go without. As her daughter recalled:

> ***"We were barely affording food and stuff. [...] [Mum] stopped eating [...] got really, really skinny."***
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

This financial strain caused children and young people considerable worry, and – as the next section elaborates – often fundamentally reshaped their roles within the family. As Brabeck and colleagues (2014: 498) observe, forms of parental vulnerability such as "suboptimal work conditions, higher economic stress and higher psychological distress", as well as common issues such as housing instability, necessarily impact children.

4.2.2. Parentification

'Parentification' refers to situations where accepted parent-child roles break down or are reversed (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark, 1973; Nuttall et al., 2019). Where it is generally expected that a child's parents or caregivers will meet their physical and psychological needs, parentification occurs when the parent or caregiver "abdicates their parental responsibilities towards the parentified child or the child's siblings and in return the parentified child performs caretaking behaviors for or towards the parent" (Masiran et al., 2023: 1). Put differently, the child comes to assume the roles and responsibilities traditionally held by parents.

The children and young people we interviewed for this project stressed that it was not only adult members of their families who shouldered additional responsibilities after their parent or caregiver's detention. Older siblings in particular often took on employment and household care work in the aftermath of a parent or caregiver's detention, in order to help the family make ends meet.

Their community-based parents or caregivers, many of these participants told us, had not been able to support the family alone. Sometimes, these children perceived that they had lost two parents at once, as one parent was detained and the other became increasingly physically and emotionally unavailable as they worked long hours to feed the family. For many of the children and young people we interviewed, this loss had begun when their parent or caregiver was originally imprisoned on a criminal charge, and continued following the cancellation of their visa.

> ***"Mum didn't work when he was out. He was the sole provider. As soon as he got arrested, I could see she was quite stressed about it and how she was going to afford to live. It kind of tore our family apart. I remember my Grandfather come over and he said, 'Why don't you put your kids up for adoption?' [...] Then Mum started working, so we saw her less [...] She wasn't very present. You could tell she was really stressed."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

As the oldest or 'most responsible' among their siblings, these young people were often acutely aware of their community-based parent or caregiver's struggles and felt a strong imperative to share the load. Often, this included taking on added emotional labour.

> ***"I'm really close with Mum, so I do talk to her about a lot, but when it comes to her not being present and stuff, obviously I wouldn't say anything to her about that. [...] She was quite burnt out, and it was non-stop. And on top of that, she hated her job."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

It also involved accepting new 'adult' responsibilities, from securing employment and contributing to family's finances to assisting to raise younger siblings or care for unwell parents.

One young man whose mother was detained during his adolescence explained that he never imagined her detention would culminate in deportation. Alone in the community with just his siblings for support, he focused on keeping the house in order during his Mum's absence, working 50-hour weeks just to pay the rent and survive.

> ***"The last thing in the world I thought [was] that my Mum was going to get sent to another country. So in my head, I was like, I work a job. We can sort it out. We can pay all the rent. We can keep this house for my Mum. So I kept all my Mum's belongings, kept my Mum's bed made the same way, I literally made her bed for that day, and everything, and I was like, 'it's all right, I'll just get through it, hard times, we'll be sweet'. And then I lived with my brother for a year and a half, and it was the hardest thing in the world for the first six months. It was just ridiculous. [...] I was literally working 40, 50 hours a week, and I was spending all of my money every week on paying our rent at our house, and just buying food and just surviving for the week."***
>
> **(Child of deported woman | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

Younger children too often took on casual jobs to contribute to the family. Siblings pooled their meagre funds to cover day-to-day expenses – as well as more 'extravagant' costs such as high school graduations and associated rites of passage.

A key theme in these testimonies was children and young people having few options but to 'raise' themselves and their siblings. While common across the dataset, this theme was particularly pronounced in interviews with children whose community-based parents were absent, unwell or living with addiction. One young woman had become the main carer for her sick mother when her father was detained, working to meet their financial needs.

> ***"[From the age of] 15, when [my dad] was either detained or incarcerated essentially, I saw bills piling up, my mum was essentially in a depressive state for a very, very long period of time. She was essentially, like, a vegetable on the couch, and I saw that we were, like $12,000 in debt to bills. So as soon as I turned of age, I got a job at Hungry Jacks, and was kind of working, like, crazy hours, during school to kind of pay off those debts and, like, support, my mum and us and put food on the table."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

As she summed up later in her interview:

> ***"I've kind of had this caring role, I guess you could say, for a very, very long time, and yeah, a bulk of that has been because my dad has not been here to help."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Another young woman, whose mother had lived with addiction during her father's incarceration and detention, told us she had built a flourishing life *in spite of*, and not because of, the support she received as a child:

> ***"[My Dad] he's always like, 'You know, your mum did so good.' I'm like, 'No, she didn't. You weren't around. You weren't around, so you wouldn't know?' And he's just like, 'Yeah, but she raised you.' 'No, she didn't. I raised myself and my siblings.' It's very different. Like at a point there, my little sister would call me 'Mum'."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

For children and young people who 'raised themselves' and their siblings, theft was often a survival strategy. Numerous participants told us that they and/or their older siblings had stolen food or money during childhood, just so they could eat. One young woman had a tacit understanding with a local storekeeper, who – aware of the family's predicament – would allow her to take food when she had nothing to eat at home.

> ***"Sometimes, we had no food in our cupboards for weeks, and I used to go to the shops and steal food. And then the lady at the shop [...] she'd be like, '[Name!]' I'm just like, 'We've got no food again.' And she'd be like, 'Just, just take some milk. Take whatever you need.' She just understood 'cause we, every time my Mum would come in, you know, she'd be high off her kite. [...] They knew what was going on at home."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Other participants recalled their older siblings stealing food to feed them – often secretively, to keep their younger siblings unaware of the family's situation.

> ***"[My older sister] used to stay around a lot. And she used to steal from the shops, her and my older brother. Or take their pocket change and like buy food. [...] At the time, I didn't see that. At the time, I just saw, you know, there was food in the cupboards. So, like I thought that my Mum was grabbing it. But then once I started growing up, I started realising what my Mum was spending all the money on. [...] [My siblings] were still young. 16, 15. [...] They used to do runs from the shop. Used to go in, grab food, come out, you know. [...] That's pretty much it. You really don't care when you're on drugs."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

As these children portrayed them, these acts of familial care were akin to parenting. When older siblings stole food to feed their brothers and sisters, they were adopting roles as quasi-parents.

> ***"And then, the older sister, she would have to step up and be the mother. And, because she would do that and steal like a couple of coins from our mother or like go out and go get coins off her mates or something, she'd come back with the food and then get hidings from my mother because she did that, and stole her money. [...] And that's why she's such, she's a tough nut out of all us siblings, because of all the stuff that she's been through."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Similarly, children whose older siblings supported them emotionally recognised these siblings as their quasi-parents. As one young woman, for example, described the older sister who looked after her in their father's absence as "the dad basically".

> ***"We all really stood up and were there for each other. And especially [my older sister], especially when I was going through some stuff at school and she'd always check-in and be like, 'What's going on?' or help me sort things out. And yeah, just be the dad basically."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

While participants often expressed pride and gratitude concerning the way they and their siblings had supported each other during these challenging periods, caregiving siblings frequently lamented that

they had been forced to grow up too quickly. The notion that these children and young people had been forced to become 'the adult' recurred in these interviews, and participants who were now young adults frequently expressed grief and resentment concerning the childhoods they had lost. As one young woman explained in relation to her own childhood, these formative experiences had made her stronger and more independent, but she hated that that had been required of her.

> ***"That's what I hate, too. Don't wish that upon any kids. Try and stay a kid as long as you can. Because we all had to grow up and, you know, take care of each other. That's what kind of built it; just independent woman."***
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

With the benefit of hindsight, these participants also observed that these familial dynamics and their own adoption of 'adult' responsibilities and personas had at times placed pressure on their sibling relationships. As one young woman told us, "I wasn't playful anymore".

> ***"I don't even know how to explain this. With my siblings and me, I feel like we've always been really close, but it was just different relationships. So I was trying to take on that parent role, and I'd be basically riding them about what they need to do, instead of being a sister and playing, and I wasn't playful anymore. So I feel like when they grew up a bit, and I didn't need to do that, and when Mum was a bit more present at home, our relationships got better in that sense."***
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

Participants also observed that these altered family dynamics could strain relationships between children and their parents, as they introduced confusion regarding children's role in the family and at times fueled resentment. Importantly, extended family members often played a critical role in helping to reshape these family dynamics and help meet children's immediate needs. Children and young people who received care from grandparents or other extended family members frequently identified this assistance as fundamental to their survival – both physically and emotionally.

> ***"My Nana and my Grandad. They were, oh, so good. They took me in quite a bit, me and my siblings, and we actually lived there for quite a bit. [...] And they helped us out a lot. Like, you know, they'd bring us food or, you know, we could call them when they had a phone. But, yeah, they were like the people that I would go to."***
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

For children who had taken on responsibilities beyond their age, being supported and 'carried' by an extended family member was often a welcome reprieve.

> ***"[M]y Nan 'cause she was that person that just like carried us all, you know. She would rock up to our house and bring food if we didn't have any food. She knew all of what happened and that's why she did it, really."***
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Indeed, reflecting the vital nature of their everyday contributions, participants regularly used the language of 'second mother/father' or 'real mother/father' to describe the grandparents, aunts and uncles who 'showed up' for them when life was most challenging.

4.2.3. Educational interruptions

Against this backdrop of poverty, deprivation and parentification, it is perhaps unsurprising that many participants considered their own or their child's education to have been adversely affected by parental immigration detention.

As described by our participants, lines of impact were multifarious. In some cases, the detention of a parent or caregiver and the financial strain this imposed contributed to educational disruptions as children took days away from school. As described earlier, some young people took on employment and/or care responsibilities within the family when their parent or caregiver was detained. Often, this took children away from school or minimised their educational engagement as their families' priorities shifted to survival.

One young woman, whose father's detention had left her to care and provide for her sick mother, explained that her education had suffered as a result of this situation:

> ***"I was working at one point 38 hours, or, like, 30 to 38, like, almost full-time during [high school], so I didn't get a very good ATAR, unfortunately. I definitely struggled in high school because of that, not being actually able to study or do any extra tutoring on the side, just because I had to work. And I prioritized that more than, I guess, school and stuff."***
>
> **(Child of detained man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Professionals who worked with families impacted by parental immigration detention attested that stories of this kind were not uncommon.

> ***"[S]ometimes you also saw seventeen-year-olds start to work a lot more as well, in order to support the family. [...] You might be in Year 11, Year 12, they might say, 'Look, I actually need to work now as opposed to focus on my Year 11, Year 12 examinations,' or whatever. [...] When I was working with families where a parent was taken back into detention, I guess the primary disruption would be around the school being the focus when the remaining parent in the community had other priorities that they felt was far more important for survival. So if they were tasked with, in a traditional household where the father was working and the mum was tasked with looking after the children and the home, the mum then became the primary breadwinner or she might go to work and you might have a 15-year-old who's in charge of two seven- and eight-year-olds. So, sometimes they might be often late to school, they might not get their work done because there's no one at home in the evenings to prompt for that."***
>
> **(Support worker)**

As this support worker explained, such calculations were often driven by very real fears, including (for families from refugee or asylum-seeking backgrounds in particular) apprehension about the consequences of removal from Australia vis-à-vis the whole families' safety and long-term future.

> ***"You also might just have, I remember one Mum saying, 'I just need to get enough, a pool of money, in order to go see a lawyer. And right now I don't mind that my kids might fail school because it's either that or they pass school and then we're sent back anyway.' So their passing school right now is not the priority."***
>
> **(Support worker)**

In other cases, children missed school because their families lacked the financial resources to meet their basic needs outside of the home. One mother explained that she was 'a stickler' and did not abide truancy, but that she had kept her children at home some days when she had nothing to feed them, or when the petrol tank was empty and she couldn't afford to buy fuel.

> ***"There were days where I wouldn't send them [to school] because I didn't have any lunch for them. So I'd keep them home. So, there was days there wasn't enough fuel to drive them there."***
> **(Partner of deported man)**

More often, however, children's experiences of educational disruption took more subtle forms. Time and again, children and young people told us that the turbulence they experienced surrounding the incarceration and (later) immigration detention of a parent or caregiver left them disengaged from their schooling. As the needs of their family took priority, these children continued to attend school, but their thoughts were elsewhere.

> ***"Cleaning, cooking. I did a lot. I did heaps, just trying to help [my mother] because I knew [she] were struggling. I didn't really do schoolwork. Or did, I passed, but I wasn't really trying. I was more focused on helping Mum."***
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

Beyond reduced educational engagement, children and young people at times found themselves getting into trouble at school as they struggled with contradictory and often unruly emotions, and carried these into the classroom.

> ***"[My schoolwork] went downhill straight away. I was so upset and I didn't know how to express that. And with Mum absent and everything tough at home, I just struggled. I was barely passing, and not even that, I wasn't interested in going to school. I was always ditching and just getting into trouble."***
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

As will be elaborated below, the socio-emotional consequences of parental detention were also profound and impacted all aspects of children's lives.

4.3. Socio-emotional consequences

Immigration detention is known to impose serious negative impacts on the socio-emotional wellbeing of people who are detained. In a 2018 review of 26 studies focused on immigration detention and mental health, von Werthern and colleagues found that detained adults, adolescents and children experienced "high levels" of mental health challenges, with anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress commonly reported. Detention duration was identified as a key factor influencing levels of distress, such that extended periods of detention were associated with worse outcomes.

In 2011, the Commonwealth Ombudsman commenced an investigation in response to "the deteriorating psychological health of detainees observed, particularly on Christmas Island, and against the backdrop of several deaths and escalating self-harm in immigration detention" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013: 37). Here, the Ombudsman detailed that the causal factors for mental harm are many – including but

not limited to traumatic events, overcrowded facilities and being surrounded by others experiencing psychological distress. In the years since, the Commonwealth Ombudsman has made several representations to government about the need to expedite administrative processes which prolong the time individuals spend in detention, but detention durations remain long (see 3.1).

Self-harm and suicidal ideation are major concerns in immigration detention (Peterie et al., 2026). A 2019 study by Hedrick and colleagues, for example, found that rates of self-harm in Australia's onshore detention system are 214 times higher than rates of hospital-treated self-harm in the Australian community. By contrast, the rate of self-harm among community-based asylum seekers is four times that of hospital treated self-harm within the broader Australian community. There have been documented instances where lives have been lost as a result of violence and/or suicide within this system. For example, in 2022 the Australian Government reported that across the detention network, two suicides and one homicide had been recorded (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023). While available data on deaths in Australian immigration detention do not specify the cause of death, it is relevant to note that between 1 July 2014 and 31 March 2023, a total of 29 deaths were recorded in Australian immigration detention facilities (RCOA, 2025).

The socio-emotional experiences of the children of people who are detained have received limited scholarly attention to date. The few studies that have been conducted elsewhere in the world (e.g., Zayas et al., 2015; Patler and Branic, 2017; Gonzalez and Patler, 2020; Martinez-Aranda, 2020; Patler and Gonzalez, 2021; Patler et al., 2024; Martinez-Aranda and Black, 2024; Griffiths and Morgan-Glendinning, 2024) attest that immigration detention can impose significant 'spillover' effects on detained individuals' children. In the US context, Martinez-Aranda (2020: 755) has coined the term 'collective liminality' to describe the "shared condition of heightened threat and uncertainty experienced by immigrant detainees and their families, as they wait, caught between two possible outcomes: their loved one's (temporary or permanent release) into [in their context] the US or deportation".

A comparable phenomenon has been identified by Patler and Gonzalez (2021), who use the term 'compounded vulnerability' to describe the stress families in the US endure when a member is at risk of deportation. Patler and Gonzalez (2021) observe that the children of undocumented parents frequently live in fear of permanent familial separation, experiencing 'anticipatory stress' that their parents might be deported. This anticipatory stress, Patler and Gonzalez note, can lead to significant mental ill-health challenges. Some young children in their study, for instance, were reported to "cry inconsolably, wake with night terrors, and cling to their remaining parents", while child participants of all ages "reported loss of appetite or over-eating, self-isolation, trouble sleeping or being unable to get out of bed, headaches, stomach pain and dizziness" (Patler and Gonzalez, 2021: 896).

These international insights align with those of the present study. A key finding of this report is that parental immigration detention had a profound impact on children's socio-emotional wellbeing. When a parent was detained, the children in our study experienced sadness and abandonment, stigma and shame, numbing and disconnection, and anger and harmful behaviour. Often, these impacts also extended to include other children in the detained person's life – for example, younger siblings.

Given what is known about child development and the role that parents and caregivers play in supporting children's mental health, these findings are perhaps unsurprising. From an attachment perspective (Bowlby, 1969), the sense of security established through a child's relationships with primary caregivers – including, in many cases, their parent/s – is essential for the child's social, cognitive and emotional development. The sudden and externally imposed separation migrant children experience when a parent is detained poses a significant threat to children's mental health (Brabeck et al, 2014).

4.3.1. Sadness and abandonment

First and foremost, the children and young people we interviewed talked about the sadness they felt concerning their detained parent or caregiver's absence. They described missing their parent or caregiver in small everyday moments, and provided vivid examples of the gaps this family member's absence had left in their young lives.

One young woman, for example, explained that her father was 'a hugger', and that she had missed this physical affection during his absence.

> ***"When we were brought up as kids, when Dad was out, before he went away, Dad was very affectionate. Love cuddles, like, 'Kids, come here!' And then when Dad left that was completely gone. Completely gone. Mum is not like that. She's good at words. Her love language is communication, where Dad's more hands-on."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

Another participant – a primary school aged boy – missed playing sports with his dad, especially tennis.

> ***"I need my dad to play with me. [...] He is my dad, my best friend, my training partner, my tennis doubles partner".***
>
> **(Child of detained man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Without his dad at home to "protect" him, he also felt vulnerable at night.

> ***"I'm really sad and worried without my dad here".***
>
> **(Child of detained man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Parents and family members similarly identified salient moments when the children they supported seemed to feel their detained parent or caregiver's absence most acutely. As one mother explained concerning her young daughter, children often observed other parents in their social network and longed for their own detained parent to be present in the same way.

> ***"[My daughter's] best friend, her dad is actually a very active present father figure. I've probably caught up with him as much as the wife when we have play dates and stuff. [...] I just remember over the years, how he's just helped in little small ways. Where he'll be like, '[Daughter's name], I brought my tools. Do you want me to take your training wheels off your bike?' [...] And like push them on the swing and stuff like that too. And he's just like tried to be a good role model. And that's just been really something that I've appreciated. But then also you want your own [dad], you know? Like I'm sure that makes her feel a bit hurt in the sense of like it's her friend's dad and not her dad."***
>
> **(Partner of detained man)**

While other adults in children's lives often endeavoured to fill the void left by their parent or caregiver's absence, participants stressed that the detained individual could not be 'replaced'. When community-based parents tried to fulfil roles that would usually be undertaken by the detained parent, for example, they often struggled to do so to the child's satisfaction.

> ***"Sometimes, you know, it's things like, 'I'm graduating from Grade 6. And I wanted to get new shoes and Dad got the wrong ones.' It's really little things that are really important."***
> **(Support worker)**

Reflecting children's desire to be close to and comforted by their detained parent, several participants recalled times when – during a moment of acute physical or emotional distress – a child had been unable to cope with their pain without their parent. At times, these were moments of emotional pain, as when a family's dog died during a mother's detention.

> ***"One of the ladies, her daughter took on all the children and then the hysteria was the dog died. The family dog that was old died. And so this 18-year-old had to cope with all the younger ones, and figure out how to bury a dog. You know? It's just – and it sounds little, but that family dog was almost as old as her."***
> **(Support worker)**

On other occasions, the pain that triggered children's intense longing for comfort was physical, as when one young participant injured herself at school and sobbed for her father. In these moments of vulnerability, children were unable to maintain the appearance of quasi-adulthood and longed to be soothed by their detained parent or caregiver.

Importantly, this sense of loss and longing was not only experienced by children who understood the reason for their parent's absence. Numerous parents of infant children reported that their partner/co-parent's detention had caused their babies to become unsettled as they pined for their missing parent.

> ***"I still remember when [my daughter] was one and he went away. I remember that she used to go and wait for him every day by the door when he'd get off from work. And I remember she still did that after he went in. [...] She'd constantly still go and wait there for him."***
> **(Partner of detained man)**

One grandmother similarly recalled her grandchild repeatedly crying out for her 'Daddy' in the months following his initial detention.

> ***"For that child who's one-and-a-bit, for her to suddenly have her dad disappear, she had no idea what's going on, what's happened. So [my granddaughter] used to really, really be very stressed, and suddenly she'll be crying. She'll be saying, "Daddy," and she'll cry. [...] You know, we all tried to soothe her. But she did that often. Just this little person in her heart someone was missing."***
> **(Mother-in-law of detained man)**

As this grandmother elaborated, it was impossible to fully insulate her grandchildren from the reality of their father's sudden absence, as this inflected all aspects of their and their mother's lives. While she and her daughter could make intentional decisions about what to tell the children surrounding their father's absence, they could not alter the reality that the girls missed their father and wanted him to be with them.

> ***"[My grandchildren] both know what Daddy's cooking is. You know, nshima and different African food. So that's what they eat as a family. So I guess his culture also is big in the family as well [...] And hear the language being spoken. And the soccer. And the music. Yes, it was pretty much what they understood. [...] So suddenly when he's not there, you know – and we couldn't explain to her because she was a little girl too. And we can't say, 'He'll be back.' We can't say it. We can't tell her anything really."***
>
> **(Mother-in-law of detained man)**

Importantly, parents and caregivers observed that these experiences appeared to have impacted their children's broader familial relationships. One mother, for example, explained that her daughter would cling to her whenever she left the house, afraid that – like her detained father – her mother would not return.

> ***"I do feel like she probably has abandonment trauma. Which it's not something that I can help, you know? Like she so clings onto me. [...] Even when I go out, she just cries so much. And I think, 'Oh, come on, I'm coming back. You know I'm coming back. You know I always come back, right?'"***
>
> **(Partner of detained man)**

Parental detention thus appeared to interrupt the development of secure attachments in some children, with implications for their mental health and development.

4.3.2. Stigma and shame

For children and young people navigating the detention of a parent or caregiver, stigma and shame were often constant companions. To protect against perceived social judgement, it was common for families to keep their or their family member's detention private, letting members of their community and extended networks believe, for example, that the detained person was 'away' or simply not on the scene.

> ***"I don't even know if I told the school [my husband is in detention]. I just maybe just didn't put him on the [enrolment] information. [...] It's a very weird subject. I think [my daughter's] at a stage now where she might say that to her friends, 'Dad's in detention.' Because I just said, 'He's in detention. The Australian government decided that he can't live here because he's not from this country.' I have not said anything about his wrongdoings. Like I know that obviously what he's done is not right. But then at the same time I don't ever want to like paint that picture in their head that he's a bad person."***
>
> **(Partner of detained man)**

Children and young people reported that people who did know about their parent or caregiver's situation at times treated them differently. One young woman, for example, recalled being ostracised at school because her friends' parents believed she came from a 'bad' family.

> ***"When childhood friends, their parents found out, they would go, 'Nah, we don't want you to go over,' and stuff like that. Yeah, so quite shit."***
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

Other children described being bullied and teased, and recalled their own heightened emotions if anybody at school mentioned their detained parent.

> ***"[I was angry] because people would bring up him. [...] Sometimes, people would bring up my Dad or my Mum. And, since I never lived with them, because I live with my grandmother, it was pretty, it was pretty, you know, [triggering]."***
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Reflecting on her younger brothers' experiences, one young woman explained that while she had been old enough to know her father prior to his incarceration, her brothers had not. Far from inoculating them against any adverse impacts, her brothers had grown up being bullied and longing for a dad.

> ***"I feel like for [my younger brothers], not growing up really with a dad, because they don't really remember much before he was arrested. I feel like growing up, they've tried to find some sort of father figure. They struggled a lot with that, and they got bullied a lot as well. [...] I feel like the boys didn't really have any connection with him whatsoever. I think they struggled quite a bit."***
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

These experiences of stigma shaped children's attitudes to school in profound ways. Indeed, children's experiences of (actual or anticipated) teasing and bullying in the playground left many socially isolated and disengaged from their studies. As one support worker summed up:

> ***"They stop going to school. I mean, that can be such a long time. Some of them might not even re-enter school because if anyone finds out, it's such a silent sentence that you can't turn around and say, 'Oh look, my Dad's in a detention centre.' Because as soon as you do, you're shunned or people have got this perception that they must be a really, really bad person that's in detention. So, the family generally don't tell."***
> **(Support worker)**

In reflecting on these dynamics, participants stressed that children's experiences of stigma and exclusion occurred against a backdrop of political and media discourses that framed detainees and deportees as hardened criminals or 'illegal immigrants' who posed a danger to Australia (e.g., Grewcock, 2011; Haw, 2022). Put differently, the stigma of parental immigration detention intersected with and compounded other stigmas, including, for example, the stigma of a parent or caregiver being convicted of a crime, the stigma of poverty, or the stigma of being a 'boat person'.

These experiences of 'othering' primed children to expect to be looked down upon and dramatically affected their self-understandings. As one participant explained, the children in his family effectively believed themselves to be "second-class" members of the Australian community. Their father's imprisonment and detention, together with the ongoing threat of his deportation, had generated a form of self-stigmatisation in these children, whereby they accepted that they were not deserving of good things.

"You feel like you are a second-class person. Because, 'Yes, my Dad's been in prison. They might send him to another country. I'm not really like the others.' That's something that I think children can internalise without really realising they're doing it. They're going to feel like they are less, and hang out with people that are not really – the ones that aren't going to be supporting them to make the most out of their life."

(Brother-in-law of detained man)

The sense of stigma these children internalised was particularly pronounced, we heard, when the reason for the parent or caregiver's detention was perceived by families to be shameful.

"I guess there are added complexities around a parent being detained as a result of domestic violence or some other character requirement, them not meeting that. Again, I think children often have a shame response. Not just the children, but I think it comes from the other parent who, on one hand, is confused and embarrassed that this has happened."

(Support worker)

A recurring theme in our conversations with these children and young people was that they wanted to be perceived as 'normal' – to have a normal family and lead a normal life – but that this was seemingly unavailable to them.

"I wanted a normal family, you know. Just a normal family with your parents together, all your siblings together. But that wasn't my story. Yeah, that wasn't my story for me, unfortunately. You know, I'm blessed, you know. I've got amazing siblings. I've got an amazing dad, you know. Dad was there but he wasn't there. He was locked-up, you know. That's sad. That's sad and all but that's how it was."

(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)

Again, the small moments mattered to children. Children described, for example, how much it would have meant to them if their detained parent had been able to participate in Father's Day or Mother's Day at school, or to teach them how to drive. One young woman recalled that she loved visiting her school friend's home during childhood because the chores she was given – small tasks like washing the dishes or helping to set the table – afforded a sense of security and made her feel loved.

"I go over to my friends' houses and they all sit there with like dinner, I'm like, 'We don't do that in my home.' And like, 'Why are your parents here?' Like, 'That's just weird.' I'm like, 'Why are your parents all up in your business?' [...] They're like, 'No, that's like normal parenting.' I'm just like, 'Is it? 'Cause like that's just weird as to me.' [...] I would go stay at one of my ex-closest friend's house and her parents were so amazing. So, like some nights I'd go stay there. [...] They would make me like do the dishes, for instance, and help out with stuff. I felt well-loved there. [...] I think that's what I wanted."

(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)

More than anything, one young man told us, what children needed to know, in these situations, was that their parent's detention and their family's separation were not their fault. Personally, this young man explained, what he had needed to hear was that he "was loved".

4.3.3. Numbing and disconnection

A common thread across these testimonies was that children and young people often had insufficient tools to navigate their complex and at times confusing emotions. As their parent or caregiver's detention extended to months, and, in some cases years, children and young people often withdrew from networks of friends and family and sought out ways to numb their pain.

Community-based parents – who at times chose to distance themselves from their detained partner/co-parent as a means of managing their own complex feelings – spoke at length about the way this pattern played out with their children. One mother, for instance, described the change she had seen in her oldest daughter, whose father had been in detention for most of her young life.

> ***"As soon as we get there [to the detention centre] they just want to climb all over him and jump on him, and all this. I'm scared [my oldest child is] becoming a little bit like me, where she wants to close herself off. Because then she's just like, 'Can't deal with it. It's just too hard.' She's very sensitive."***
>
> **(Partner of detained man)**

A young man whose father had spent years of his childhood incarcerated – first in prison and later in immigration detention – similarly described his own efforts to repress any emotions he and his peer group perceived as weak.

> ***"Me mates [supported me]. Yeah. My mates growing up. Yeah. Spoke about it with them for years. It was just, you know, was just like, 'Harden up! Get the fuck over it!' Yeah. 'Keep punchin' on.' Yeah. That's, that's how it was."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Another young man shared a comparable perspective, observing that – as the oldest boy in the family – he endeavoured to hide his emotions and be strong for his siblings.

> ***"I had to look after my brother, teach him the stuff that I would know. I don't really know much. I was just winging it. But yeah. [...] I feel like just being the eldest boy, I was just trying to just not show any type of emotion."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

Importantly, participants like these young men often experienced their parent's detention as a continuation of a longer pattern of parental incarceration. In these cases – where a parent's detention followed months or years of incarceration in the prison system – the pain they experienced surrounding their parent's absence was not new.

> ***"Villawood [Immigration Detention Centre] was just like the norm, kind of normal. Dad's in gaol. It was the normal, normal thing."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

For children whose parents were facing immigration detention after the completion of a prison sentence, one experience of parental incarceration often bled into the next. These children rarely drew a firm distinction between prison and immigration detention. Rather, they talked about their parent not having been around a lot when they were growing up, and about their parent being transferred from one carceral institution to another over a series of years. Critically, they also described their efforts to 'be strong' and 'harden up' in the context of these extended periods of separation. Often, they felt alone and without support.

These participants frequently described their connections with their detained parent deteriorating over time. Sometimes this was because visiting was prohibitively difficult (as described in 4.1), particularly if their parent was being held in prisons and detention facilities in other states. On other occasions, this was because they had made a conscious decision to emotionally distance themselves from their detained parent, as a way of managing the pain of protracted separation.

While long periods of detention thus damaged many children's relationships with their parents, the love children felt for their parents typically endured. As one young man summed up it up, he still loved his dad.

> ***"We were close, obviously, like he's my Dad. But we didn't get to see each other as much, so there was like a barrier there. But yeah, still love for him, got the love."***
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

While children often admitted to having conflicted feelings about their detained parents, it was nonetheless clear that most children wished to have the option of maintaining this relationship. It was also clear that – even when prolonged separation damaged their relationships with their parents – children generally continued to care about their parents in detention. Even in the absence of regular physical or virtual communication, children's wellbeing was bound up with that of their detained parents.

4.3.4. Anger and harmful behaviour

While children's testimonies reveal their efforts to supress and control the emotions associated with their parent or caregiver's detention, they also demonstrate that these emotions are not easily tamed. The young people we interviewed who had gone through the detention of a parent years earlier emphasised the anguish they had lived with growing up. Many explained that their sadness and shame had transformed into anger. They also talked about the way these emotions had fuelled issues such as substance use, violence, and reckless behaviour.

Time and again, the children and young people we spoke with stressed that they had been deeply angry about their parent or caregiver's detention, and about the way this impacted their families' lives.

> ***"That's where violence comes in, you know, because the kids are so angry about their father being gone, or their mother. [...] It builds so much anger."***
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Young men, in particular, described the difficulties they experienced containing their rage. As one teenager put it, *"I've always had trouble controlling my anger"* (Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation).

Parents and caregivers painted a similar picture of teenaged children full of anger they did not have the skills or resources to manage.

> ***"[My grandson] was angry. He was angry. He's done a couple of things that, if you look at it, you can see why. Not being able to have self-control is one of them, because of the way he grew up."***
> **(Mother of deported man)**

Importantly, interview participants stressed that appropriate support could help mediate these adverse outcomes, when it was available. One young man told us that he had been "a really angry child" growing up, and explained that these feelings had been intimately connected with his underlying sadness and sense of abandonment. The circuit breaker came for him, he explained, when he received tailored assistance from a professional support worker over several years. This man's multi-year investment in him had made him feel seen and understood in ways he had longed for growing up.

> ***"I was angry all the time. Yeah. I was an angry, I was a really angry child growing up. Yeah. And when I got to high school I had to go for like programs to fix my anger. Kind of worked. Some of them did. [...] Mostly, the one with like – he wasn't a teacher. He was like a helper. And he'd usually go around to like all the juvies and all that [...] I loved that bloke. He's Tongan. Yeah. He helped me. He helped me and all the boys out a lot, you know, because he grew up similar life like us. [...] He knew how like we were feeling and all that. It was pretty mean."***
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

While this young man credited his 'helper' with changing the course of his childhood, we heard that – in the absence of targeted support to heal from trauma and develop healthy coping strategies – many children and young people struggled.

Substance abuse among children and young people was a strong theme in the dataset. We heard that children and young people whose parents or caregivers had been detained following drug-related offences were at particular risk in this respect. One young woman explained that it was her anger surrounding her parents' absence that drove her smoking and her eventual use of what she called "proper drugs".

> ***"I had a lot of anger growing up; especially, not having my parents around. That's what made me wanna, you know, start smoking at high school, thinking that I'm a cool kid. Yeah. Smoking in the classroom, trying to do it behind the teachers' backs. [...] I didn't start doing like, you know, proper drugs when, probably, when I was 18."***
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Other participants explained that substances had provided them with a welcome escape from difficult emotions. One young man, for example, observed that his main 'coping strategy' when his mother was detained was using marijuana to numb his pain.

Another young man identified illicit drugs and the 'party scene' as his primary escape during adolescence. Beneath his fun-loving exterior, he confided, he had been deeply sad.

> ***"My escape was drugs. Partying, you know. Being reckless. I thought it was cool. But then I got older and started getting older and older, and older, and that's when I realised, fuck, how sad I was. I was sad. Sad and lost. Like for years."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Stories of this kind speak to the multifarious harm immigration detention can impose on detainees' children, but also to the importance of ensuring children in these circumstances have access to appropriate support. As the Commission has observed in relation to other cohorts of children who have contact with the criminal justice system (AHRC, 2024b), help is often unavailable in moments of crisis or arrives too late to interrupt intergenerational cycles of distress, addiction and incarceration.

4.3.5. Fear of parental deportation

For the children and young people we interviewed who had a parent or caregiver in immigration detention, one of the hardest aspects of their situation was often the looming threat of parental deportation. In many cases, families chose not to tell their younger children about the possibility this might occur, fearing this information would add to their distress. Children and young people who were aware of this prospect felt it acutely, often living in a protracted state of fear and dread.

For children and young people in this situation, a key locus of their concern was their parent or caregiver's wellbeing. As one young woman explained concerning her father's prospective deportation:

> ***"[I]t's really hard in there [detention] [...] it's just been really hard seeing him, you know, once a week, and having this potential of him being removed to Nauru or Algeria for fear of, you know, his medical health and his age [...] I don't know what kind of life it would be for him in Nauru. Medically. [...] [T]hat's causing me a lot of anxiety, to be honest. Currently, I've been experiencing, I think, a few panic attacks."***
>
> **(Child of detained man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Children and young people similarly worried about what their parent or caregiver's deportation would mean for other members of their family, including family members who were already struggling with poor mental health.

> ***"[I am] very worried for my dad in terms of his life, and his quality of life if he were to be deported in any of those countries. And on that same vein, like the effects that it would have on my mum as well, you know? She, like, she calls my dad regularly the love of her life, and he's been such a big support throughout all of her own traumas and past experiences as well. So for him to kind of be ripped away to another country where she may not even speak the language [...] or cannot afford to go, or may not be able to get a visa to go, because Nauru is very, very hard. So not only worrying about, like, his fear of life in those countries, and whether or not he might survive, it's also the impact of my mum's mental health, and whether or not she will survive, and, you know, that immediately impacts me."***
>
> **(Child of detained man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

As the above quotes reflect, concerns of this nature were particularly strong among children and young people facing the deportation of a parent or caregiver to a country where continued contact might be difficult – most notably Nauru for members of the NZYQ cohort.

> ***"It does give me a great deal of anxiety to kind of think about what his life would be like in those countries. [...] And to not even be guaranteed, potentially, a visa to visit him in Nauru [...] I genuinely may not ever be able to see him again. [...] Emotionally, it would just ruin me. You know, having a parent that you can't see, and [are] just constantly worrying about is not a fun thing to do."***
>
> **(Child of detained parent | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Participants in these situations feared that deportation would enact a permanent severing of their family bonds, leaving their deported parent or caregiver alone in an unknown and potentially hostile environment, and preventing them seeing their parent or caregiver again.

We also heard that the prospect of a parent's deportation made some children fear for their own futures and question their own belonging in Australia. One young woman explained that her teenaged sister had been angry and upset following their father's visa cancellation and had had several run-ins with the police. Despite being an Australia citizen, she was now afraid she might be deported too.

> ***"[My 16-year-old sister] actually asked me if they decide to deport dad [...] can they send her to Samoa as well. And it completely shocked me, because she was born here. But I think realising like, 'oh my god, this is something that you've been worried about!' Like, 'how long has this – how long have you been scared, or anxious, or worried, thinking that that's how it could work?' So I explained to her, 'You know, we're born – all of us siblings, we're all born here, so it doesn't apply to us.' [...] She pretty much just thought, 'Oh, well, they're saying that I can't get deported, but they keep changing other things, so they can change this as well'."***
>
> **(Child of detained man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Many children and young people lived in a state of constant anxiety, worrying for their detained parent or caregiver, for other members of their family, and ultimately for themselves.

5. The long aftermath of deportation

"I feel like you just lose everything really. You've got to start all over."

(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)

The previous section of this report focused on children and young people's experiences during the *detention* of a parent or caregiver. In this section, we consider children and young people's experiences after the *deportation* of a parent or caregiver, typically following an extended period of detention. This section includes insights from children and young people who relocated from Australia to be with their deported parent, as well as the perspectives of children and young people who remained in Australia, and some who have done both. This section reveals how the deportation of a parent affects children and young people's family structures, material wellbeing, and socio-emotional health.

5.1. Family separation and visitation

Deportation not only impacts the individual who is deported. When a parent or caregiver is expelled from Australia, their whole family is affected. No previous Australian studies have comprehensively explored how the deportation of a parent reshapes a child's world, but studies abroad paint a stark picture. When a parent or caregiver is deported, the emotional architecture of the home is fundamentally changed. Daily rhythms and patterns of interaction are shattered through the separation of loved ones. Other family members often step in to fill the gaps, but cannot fully replace the deported parent's presence or role in the child's life (Dreby, 2012, 2015a; Boehm and Terrio, 2019; Taschman and Muruthi, 2020). As Dreby (2015b) has observed in the US context, deportation regularly results in the forced formation of single-parent, often female-headed households. When a parent is deported, their spouse becomes "suddenly single", "scrambling to be the sole providers [...] with no preparation for single parenthood" (Dreby, 2015b: 31).

The immediate impacts of parental deportation may therefore include the loss of family rituals and a general sense of the family "falling apart" (Taschman and Muruthi, 2020: 117). The loss or interruption of the deported parent's care work within the home can also lead to significant interruptions in children's care. This is frequently the case irrespective of the gender of the deported person. While men are at times reduced to the role of economic providers in discussions about deportation, many fathers pay a key role in nurturing and sustain their families' emotional life and leave a significant void in care when they are removed from a country (Baker and Marchevsky, 2019).

Echoing these insights, a key finding of this report is that when a child's parent or caregiver is deported from Australia, their relationships are markedly changed. Children's relationships with their deported family members are unsettled, but so too are their relationships with other members of their families. Importantly, this is the case when a child remains in Australia with other family members and when they relocate with their deported parent or caregiver. In both scenarios, altered family configurations and relational rhythms reshape children's lives and affective relationships in ways that can cause considerable disruption and distress. When the deportation follows a period of parental incarceration and/or detention, it may compound and aggravate the relational impacts of this earlier separation.

5.1.1. Separation from the deported family member

For many of the families we spoke with, deportation involved the permanent separation of the deported person from children and family members who remained in Australia. These Australian-based participants spoke at length about the pain such separations imposed, and the way they fundamentally restructured family life – adding to and extending the impacts of their parent or caregiver's earlier imprisonment and/or detention.

One of the most immediate and direct impacts of deportation is that the deported family member is not available to support their children and families in the everyday moments that made up their lives. One young woman, who was a teenager when her mother was removed from Australia, explained that her mother had always been there for her in practical ways – helping her get ready for school, preparing family meals, and making sure she felt loved and supported.

> ***"It's been so good [visiting]. I got there and I was like, 'This is what it feels like to have Mum again.' She's like, 'Oh, are you hungry?' [...] I have home cooked meals again. I didn't realise how much I missed it until she wasn't there to be like, 'Oh, there's dinner in the microwave,' or, 'I'm making something. Do you want a sandwich?'"***
>
> **(Child of deported woman | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

As she summed up, "She really just looked after me". With her mother's deportation, that all changed. She lost her mother, but she also lost the sense of safety and security her mother brought to her world.

Other participants regularly talked about missing not only their deported relative, but also the sense of safety, home and family that person represented.

> ***"You'd walk in and her house was just always cozy and there was always something yummy cooking and she was looking after everyone. She looked after me so much when I had young children and it's like, she was the person who said, 'You go and sit down. You need time to rest.' Looking after other people and that's what her life had become. It was looking after other people. It was, 'I'm going to work,' and she was a hard worker."***
>
> **(Daughter-in-law of deported woman)**

One woman explained that her mother-in-law's deportation from Australia had left her family fragmented. Where the family had previously been close – gathering once a week for family dinners – the siblings now saw each other considerably less frequently.

> ***"Every Wednesday night, so it was like a whole family [dinner] [...] And everyone tried to make sure they were there each week and since [my mother-in-law]'s left us, we don't see each other anywhere as often as what we were seeing each other. [...] The other brother that's not here, [we've gone from] seeing him each week and now it'd be months between seeing him."***
>
> **(Daughter-in-law of deported woman)**

It was not only a mother and mother-in-law that the family had lost, but their sense of connection and wholeness as a family unit.

In rare cases, the deportation of a parent or caregiver left their child/ren in the care of the state. One survey respondent, whose brother had been deported, explained what her brother's deportation had meant for his daughter:

> ***"My disabled First Nations niece is now left to live in Out of Home Care as a Ward of the State, with no active parents in her life following deportation of her father, who was the only parent who actually wanted to be involved in her day to day life. Her mother has not been active in her life since she was a toddler and she has not had contact with her in nearly [four] years [...] [H]er mother walked away and her father was removed from the country, and she is left with nothing. She has now been relegated to be other Stolen Generation Child, disconnected from culture, living a lonely, parent-less life in Group Homes forever more, through no fault of her own. She will never get to feel a parent's hugs or warmth, and video calls with her father are not able to provide them with anywhere near the same level of interaction or affection for each other due to her level of disability. She spent so many years separated from her father while he was imprisoned, and when they were able to reunite at the detention centre, it was clear to see the love between them and how she sought physical contact with him the whole time, then to see it ripped away from her, there are just no words to describe the level of heartbreak and devastation I feel for her."***
>
> **(Sister of deported man)**

Importantly, the impacts of deportation rippled across generations. When asked about the effects of her father's deportation, one participant – a young woman and new mother – explained that deportation had both robbed her of a father and robbed her children of a grandfather. More broadly, it had robbed them all of the opportunity to be part of the extended family unit that was so central to her understanding of her Māori culture.

> ***"The biggest thing would be the separation of family – the unit of family [...] I feel like that's one thing that's missing [...] is the family unit of grandparents and kids and they're all meeting at home. [...] You don't want your kids or your kids' kids in the generation [to suffer]. [...] I feel like that's the biggest thing. Something that affects me is that I don't have nowhere to just go, 'Let's go to Grandma's house.' That is huge."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

As this young woman stressed, her father had made some bad decisions, but it was his family and children who were now being punished. She felt her father's absence acutely in her sense of isolation as a young mother without familial support.

This idea of intergenerational harm was a recurring theme in the interviews, and something that young adult participants repeatedly raised. One young man explained that his mother's deportation had left his sister struggling to raise her children alone. Where she had previously been able to depend on their mother for support, she now had "nothing".

> ***"She has no help with them kids. She literally has nothing. Me and [my girlfriend] are the only people. My sister will call me crying, having a breakdown, and you can just hear the three kids in the background just yelling, screaming, arguing. Punching each other. And it's like there's no one even there to help her."***
>
> **(Child of deported woman | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

As the participants in this study experienced them, technologies such as smart phones were valuable in ameliorating some of the pain of separation but ultimately constituted an imperfect solution. When asked about her relationship with her deported father, one child in Australia drew herself holding a mobile phone (Figure 8), engaging in a video call with her Dad. This child's father had been deported from Australia when she was an infant. She had no memory of meeting him face-to-face and only knew him via a screen.

Valuable as they were, conversations of this kind could not substitute for a stable face-to-face relationship. Time and again, we heard how maintaining relationships remotely was challenging, especially when young children were involved. Multiple participants described painful and frustrated scenes of parents and caregivers struggling to communicate with young children who did not have the communication skills or attention span necessary to maintain a virtual conversation.

One young man, whose mother had been deported, described his efforts to include his Mum in family gatherings. As he explained, these attempts at times proved counterproductive, exacerbating the sense of distance and disconnection he already felt.

> ***"Sometimes we'll be having a birthday party for the kids, and we'll be at home, and we're trying to film Mum so she can see us cut the birthday cake. And then all the kids are yelling, and everyone's screaming, and [Mum's] just like, 'I've got to go.' [...] And then Mum just sends a message, and she's like, 'Oh, thanks. That was a cool birthday.' I don't know, just little things like that, it sucks."***
>
> **(Child of deported woman | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

While these challenges were particularly pronounced in interactions involving young children, older children could also find it difficult to communicate in this way. As children grew older and had to navigate more complicated feelings about their parent or caregiver's absence, maintaining a relationship virtually could become fraught. Several young people described having become disinterested in speaking with their parent during adolescence, or being so full of anger that they chose to divest emotionally.

A support worker, who worked closely with families impacted by deportation, described one client's deteriorating relationship with his daughter in Australia.

> ***"He has a daughter, she's a teenager now, and he's finding it really, really difficult, it's so sad, because now she's at that age of fifteen [...] Whenever he rings to try and talk to her, she's now at the stage where she doesn't want to have any conversation. And it is so difficult because you actually need to be in teenagers' lives to have that continuity. I mean, because teenagers don't really want to be with their parents, but they do still really, really need them there. You know what I mean? So they're in a really integral part of their lives, but if you're in a completely different country you've actually got no relevance anymore and it's just 'forget about it'."***
>
> **(Support worker)**

This trajectory, she noted, was not an uncommon one, and relational estrangement could at times ensue.

Figure 8. Drawing by child of deported man, showing her video calling with her dad.

5.1.2. Separation from family in Australia

Deportation does not always result in the removal of a parent or caregiver from Australia while their family remains in the country. Rather, the deportation of one family member often precipitates the movement of other family members including children – either permanently, when children and/or partners relocate with the deported person, or temporarily, when older children live between Australia and their deported parent or caregiver's country of citizenship.

The children and young people we interviewed who had relocated – either permanently or temporarily – to be with a deported parent or caregiver routinely identified their separation from other family members in Australia as one of the greatest hardships the deportation had imposed. Children and young people frequently explained that parental deportation had forced them to choose between their deported parent and the family members who had been the main stable and nurturing presence in their lives during their parent's earlier incarceration in prison or immigration detention. As noted earlier, when a parent is detained, other members of the family – including older siblings and grandparents – often take on parental roles in children's lives.

In this context, children and young people who had relocated to be with a deported parent or caregiver underlined the closeness of their relationships with the family members they had left in Australia. One young man described his grandmother as his "second Mum", emphasising how hard it had been to leave her.

> ***"My Nan is my second Mum. [...] [W]hen I was fighting with my Mum, and my Mum just didn't feel like my Mum, I would say, 'my Nan's my Mum'. [...] [S]he'll be like, 'At the end of the day, I'm your Nan,' I'm like, 'At the end of the day, you're my Mum.' I would sometimes [say] that to my Nan. Because, yeah, that woman has done a lot. And it was very hard leaving her."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Another young person described a similar dynamic, emphasising that her grandmother had been there for her growing up and was now her "best friend".

> ***"I would have a laugh with [my Nan's] kids and be like, "No, that's my Mum." [...] But she always reassured us, 'No, I'm not your mother. I'm your grandmother. You've got your parents.' [...] But we made a deal [when I left Australia]. If she doesn't come back, I'm going back there and dragging her back over here. [...] It's just something about being around Nan, you know, 'cause I was around her for so long. And she became my best friend."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Older children stressed how impossibly difficult it was to decide where to live. Leaving Australia, one young woman explained, felt like 'abandoning' the older sister who had helped to raise her during her father's incarceration. Her sister had a young family in Australia and could not relocate. There was no 'good' course of action available when the choice she was confronted with was between her sister and her father.

> ***"I kind of feel like shit leaving Australia. Because just leaving the nephews and nieces, it's pretty hard. And then leaving our older sister that did so much for us, it feels, for me, we're abandoning her after she's done so much. [...] It'd make me feel better if [my sister] was here, if we all just moved here together. But because she's not here, it feels really sickening to my stomach."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

As this young woman elaborated, decisions of this kind were complicated by the reality that while she had the option of relocating or visiting her father, he would never have the option of visiting her in Australia.

> ***"[E]ven if we do, some of us move back, he can't come visit us. You know what I mean? So it's like it's always going to be financially on us to go and see him. [...] Sometimes it still feels like a punishment."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

In these contexts, children and young people felt the grave weight of their decisions, as the physical unity of their family seemed to depend on their choices, yet was often not attainable with different family members living in different countries.

Critically, the decisions these children and young people were faced with were not only choices between their deported parent and extended family members in Australia, but could mean they also had to 'choose' between their parents. Or, indeed, that their parents and family members had to make these decisions on their behalf. We spoke, for instance, with one woman whose son had been deported from Australia. This man had two young children who relocated to be with him in the months after his deportation. This was, we heard, the best decision for the family, as the children's mother was struggling with substance addiction and unable to care for the children. In this situation, however, the deportation of this young father effectively prevented several Australian children from having a close relationship with their mother. It also removed them from their Aboriginal culture.

> ***"They're very isolated. They've got no family there, and that sort of thing. And yes, [the children are] Indigenous. He wants them to learn their [Aboriginal] culture [...] [but] they don't want to leave their Dad. He has really brought them up. But then the Mum, [the deportation] spiralled her out of control. Like she's turned to drugs and she's in and out of gaol. And that's a lot to deal with."***
>
> **(Mother of deported man)**

As this woman elaborated, her grandchildren needed their mother – but it was difficult to see how they might be able to rekindle this relationship while their father was banned from Australia.

A survey respondent whose family was in a similar situation noted that deportation was particularly challenging for blended families:

> ***Our family is a blended family, when my husband was forcibly removed [...] our entire life changed. I have had to separate my children taking my [two] daughters and leaving my son in Australia with his father[,] he was 15"***
>
> **(Partner of deported man)**

As she went on to explain, the decision to relocate with her daughters meant she had not seen her son in over six years.

Participants who had relocated to join a deported partner overseas spoke at length about how difficult these decisions had been, and about the relational costs their choices had imposed on the whole family unit. Just as families in Australia spoke about deportation stripping them of important sources of care and support, so too did families who had relocated speak about the challenges of raising children without the networks of support they had in Australia.

One woman who left Australia to be with her deported husband shared the story of her daughter's birth to illustrate her isolation following the deportation. Welcoming a new child, she explained, should have been a time of hope and celebration for their family. Instead, her small family struggled to cope without local friends or family to assist them.

> ***"It was just [my husband] and I [when I gave birth to our daughter]. [...] [Our son] was 14, so [...] he had to catch the bus to the hospital. We just didn't have any support for him. And here I am in hospital, having to stay there with a caesarean baby for two days. Then she screamed for the first three months of her life, and she had colic and reflux. [...] We were screaming for help and we didn't have anyone here. [...] It really impacted our mental health. I remember her crying one time and all the people saying, 'Oh, just get someone to look after her so you can go and have [a break]' I'm like, 'Who? Where? There is no one.'"***
>
> **(Partner of deported man)**

In addition to limiting the practical care and support that was available to children and their families outside of Australia, these family separations saw young children deprived of the opportunity to form stable relationships with extended family members. Parents and caregivers felt these losses acutely, grieving for the attachments their children were never able to develop.

> ***"I remember my mother-in-law coming over for a holiday and my sister-in-law had just had her second baby and [she was] saying, 'Uncle [name] loves him. He's uncle [name]'s boy,' and I thought, 'What about my son? Who's going to love him? [Crying] Who's going to be his uncle that loves him?' Because all the cousins and aunties and uncles are [in Australia]. Even when we came back over, you could see [...] [my son was] like, 'Where do I belong?' And he doesn't know that he's doing it but I can see it because he's had so much time away from them."***
>
> **(Partner of deported man)**

For their part, children wondered about their relatives in Australia – noticing synergies and similarities, and imagining what it might be like to grow up surrounded by cousins and extended family members.

> ***"I want to see my cousin. [...] He's in Australia. [...] Because like I'm basically him but older. [...] Not really how we look but like our likes and that."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Even comparatively young children seemed aware of the decisions that would one day confront them concerning where and with whom they chose to build their futures, speculating about whether they would ever return to Australia.

5.1.3. International visits

In light of the pain many families experienced surrounding their physical separation, it is perhaps unsurprising that many participants underlined the importance of face-to-face visits in (temporarily) reuniting their families and helping children and adults alike to 'go on'. However, visits of this kind were not equally accessible to all families and were not a substitute for long-term physical proximity.

A common refrain in our data was that children and adults alike often lived visit-to-visit, longing to reconnect with their family members and feel "whole again" in their presence. As one young man summed up, seeing his mother after years of separation felt like finding his "missing piece".

> ***"It was the best thing in the world. It was literally the best feeling. I was so keen for the trip. And then when I was actually at the airport, and I seen her in person, and I gave her a big hug [...] So it was just the best, best feeling. And I felt like – not like a kid again, but I felt like I was whole again. It was just my missing piece."***
>
> **(Child of deported woman | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

He had not felt whole, he explained, since his mother was 'taken' from him during adolescence.

> ***"That was the first time since I was seventeen that I felt reconnected with my Mum, and whole as a person again."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

A young woman whose mother had been deported during her teenage years expressed a similar sentiment – again identifying the importance of being physically held by her mother, and the way her Mum's embrace enabled her to finally relax and release months of pain and pressure.

> ***"It's always the best though, when you finally get to see her though. That big hug, all the tears. [...] When it happened, I didn't see her for, I think, six or seven months and then I finally got to see her and I was like, 'Oh' [sigh]. And then I spent two months with her and when I had to leave her, it was really hard. [Crying]."***
>
> **(Child of deported woman | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

As this young woman's description makes clear, visits could be bittersweet. Participants often identified the difficulties associated with 'saying goodbye', describing scenes of crying, holding on, and not wanting to let go. Parents and caregivers who had been deported described longing to 'come home' with their families. As one participant told us, the pain and desperation of these goodbyes served to bring to the surface the latent pain many families lived with – and at times endeavoured to ignore – on a day-to-day basis.

While visits to see deported parents and caregivers were described by many participants as both painful and healing, they were also an expensive and short-term fix to a problem that seemingly had no long-term solution. Face-to-face visits were prohibitively difficult for many families, who faced financial and logistical barriers to regular international travel. One young woman, whose father had been deported from Australia, explained that she could not afford to visit him – even in an emergency.

Flights alone were expensive and she would need to pay for a passport. The precarity of her father's situation further meant that she could not depend on him for free accommodation or transport once she arrived, adding to the expense.

> ***"It's expensive [to visit] [...] but otherwise, I would in a heartbeat. Once, he got into a car accident. That was hard because I had nothing. I had no passport [...] It's not like there's somewhere to stay there because my brother and my Dad, they stay with people. So I don't know who I'm going to stay with. It's financial too, you know? Cars are like $100 a day."***
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

For their part, parents and caregivers who had been deported were at times reluctant to accept visits from their families, as their own material instability made it difficult for them to meet their own needs, let alone those of visitors. This was a particular challenge where young children were involved. One participant, for example, noted that her adult children were eager to send her grandchildren to visit her, but that – as much as she longed to see them – she lacked the resources to look after them in her current circumstances.

> ***"It's just really hard. They said that they'd like to send the kids over to me. To what? To what? Send them to me? I can't have them here. You know what I mean? She goes, 'Oh, we'd like to send you one of the grandchildren.' I can't even have them do that. I don't have anywhere to have her. I can't have, you know. I don't even have my own place."***
> **(Deported woman)**

Participants like this woman lived in a state of longing – desperate to see their families and to contribute to the provision of childcare and support, but logistically and financially unable to realise this aim.

Logistical challenges surrounding employment and care commitments created further hurdles for many families, including young adults in Australia who were juggling young children and burgeoning careers, and struggled to leave Australia on a regular basis.

> ***"That's just thousands and thousands of dollars to be able to [visit] [...] I've got long service leave coming up so that works out. But then you think about the next time. It's a bit trickier without having long service leave there."***
> **(Daughter-in-law of deported woman)**

One young woman, whose father had been deported to New Zealand, explained that while the three-hour flight to visit him sounded short, the realities were very different – particularly as a mother with young children.

"When they first moved over, my Mum and my siblings had moved over, they kept saying stuff, like it's only just a three-hour trip or something. But it's not just that. You've got to take in financially. I've had to run around and go get passports and stuff organised with the kids, taking work off, it's not – I mean, if it was in Australia, I just feel like it would be – I mean, we'd never be able to make up for lost time, but just being able to work towards that, and building a relationship, yeah, I feel it would have changed everything."

(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)

For this young woman, deportation had therefore separated her not only from the father she wished to reconnect with after a childhood parted by incarceration, but also from the mother and siblings who had relocated to be with him.

In some cases, barriers of this kind left children with no route to see their parent or caregivers – or, indeed, to see other members of the family in the same country.

"The wife said, 'I can't cope any further. I've supported you through prison, but when you go back to New Zealand I can't do it.' And so, yeah, he was on his own over here, and now one of his sons has come over and joined him. But that's fractured that family. The boy is far from his Mum and his younger sisters and it's just heartbreaking. And the Mum can't afford, and he can't afford, to bring the other ones over for a holiday. She's willing for that to happen, but who can afford that?"

(Support worker)

In cases of family breakdown – where children's parents or family members were on bad terms with each other – the possibility of children being denied all contact with their deported parent or caregiver was particularly acute. We spoke to one deported woman who had not seen or spoken with her young sons since her deportation from Australia. She worried they might think she had left them of her own volition.

"I know for a fact that my kids would be saying like, 'Where's my Mum?' [...] I know that they loved me, you know? My youngest, and he'll be thinking, 'Where's Mummy?' [...] How are they keeping my kids quiet in the times like that? Because my kids must be asking about where their Mum is and that, you know? They must. And I always, that's always a thought that comes to my head. I think, 'I hope my kids don't think that my Mummy didn't love me; that's why she left,' you know? That really eats me up, that thought of that."

(Deported woman)

Without the father's consent and cooperation, this participant had no way of contacting her children. The barriers were exacerbated by her strained financial position, which limited access to legal remedy. As this woman explained, pro-bono lawyers in her country of citizenship had advised that she would need the assistance of a family lawyer in Australia. She did not have access to free legal support in Australia, however, and was unable to pay for this service.

5.2. Material consequences

Similar to the impacts of parental immigration detention, the deportation of a parent or caregiver can have serious consequences for their family's material wellbeing. When a primary breadwinner is removed from the country, any economic pressure their family was experiencing as a result of their detention is compounded and extended.

The idea that deportation imposes financial pressure on families is well supported by the existing scholarship, which largely focuses on deportation from the US. This work attests that the loss of the deported person's income combined with mounting expenses surrounding their detention and deportation (e.g., visitation, phone calls, legal costs) can place considerable strain on families (Patler and Gonzalez, 2021). As with immigration detention, children are necessarily impacted by these financial pressures. Most obviously, children's material wellbeing can be compromised by periods of housing insecurity and food poverty. Shifting family dynamics can sometimes push children into adult roles, requiring them to manage caregiving duties or contribute financially in ways that exceed their maturity or developmental stage (Golash-Boza, 2019; Valdivia, 2021). These impacts can be particularly pronounced for older children and young people, who at times have little choice but to abandon or sideline educational pursuits to take on care responsibilities for younger siblings (Valdivia, 2021).

The children and young people who participated in this study attested that their parent or caregiver's deportation had fundamentally reshaped their material lives. As the literature might predict, themes of poverty and deprivation recurred in the dataset. So too did stories of children and young people continuing to 'fill the gaps' for their families – stepping up to support and sustain the fractured family unit, particularly when younger siblings were involved. As the below discussion elucidates, these contributions to the family were often made at some personal cost, and educational and life course disruption characterised many young peoples' lives in the long aftermath of a parent or caregiver's deportation.

5.2.1. Poverty and deprivation

When a parent or caregiver is deported from Australia, the financial wellbeing of their family is often impacted. This is the case regardless of whether the family members in question relocate with their deported family member, or whether they choose to remain in Australia without the material support this individual may have previously provided.

For the person who is deported, the deportation experience is often characterised by insecurity and instability. Many deportees arrive in their country of origin with little money, few personal or professional networks, no local referees, no recent rental history, and a criminal record. The challenges are even more grave for individuals who have not lived in their country of citizenship since childhood, and for those (as we heard in several cases) who do not speak the language of their new home country.

As one support worker in New Zealand explained to us, it was common for people who had been deported to struggle finding stable work and accommodation in the aftermath of deportation.

"There is a stigma there, that people coming out of gaol are bad enough, but 501s[4] are like, 'Ooh'. And that makes it really difficult because they do have Australian accents, the public are aware of these 501s. So actually, anyone with an Australian accent who doesn't look like they've just walked out of a uni maybe. [...] [O]ur guys, virtually never get, and women, never get rentals, private rentals."

(Support worker)

We heard several stories of individuals being deported to homelessness, and of many more who depended on the kindness of distant family members just to survive.

One woman, who had relocated with her family to New Zealand to be with her deported husband, described their family's challenging living arrangements in the first few months after their arrival. The stigma of deportation was such that securing a rental property proved impossible, forcing her young family into an unsafe living arrangement.

"That's exactly where we went – to his drunk dad. Because you can't just tell someone, 'Oh, you're going [to be deported],' and to get a house over there. [...] Who's going to give you [a property?] – there's 20 people looking at a place, and they're like, 'Oh, where did you come from? Villawood [Immigration Detention Centre]?'"

(Partner of deported man)

Another participant similarly described her own and her children's regular visits to New Zealand following her husband's deportation. As her husband moved from motel to motel – unable to secure a stable living arrangement – she and her children weighed their desire to be reunited as a family with the material realities of this precarious life.

"We had absolutely nothing, staying in motels and jumping from place to place. And then I went back home, but it was lots of communication there. And we said to the kids, 'You don't have to go. I will stay and help you set up if that's what youse want to do.' And [my husband] was quite supportive of that as well. So it's a very open conversation. And even since we've been there, [our daughter] has already said, 'I'm going back. I don't want to be here.' Again, and my youngest son's going to go back in two months."

(Partner of deported man)

One young man, who relocated to be with his father soon after his deportation, explained that he missed having a home and a car.

"It was pretty hard at the start because we were just broke. [...] [L]iving in someone else's house. [...] We didn't really have a car, so we had to try to [...] borrow cars or get lifts."

(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)

4. The term '501s' was widely utilised by participants to describe individuals who had had a visa cancelled under Section 501 of Australia's *Migration Act*.

For young people like him, the absence of these infrastructural supports created a sense of instability and helplessness, which in turn undermined his ability to plan for the future or build a new life.

While some families managed to visit their deported family member or even to pursue relocation, this was not possible for many others. One participant, who left children in Australia when he was deported, described working long hours in entry-level roles to save for his family's relocation. The costs of relocation were prohibitively high, and deportation had returned him to the bottom of the career ladder with limited potential to earn enough to support his family.

> ***"I worked for a minimum wage as a rubbish-bin runner, you know. The rubbish truck for a year. And, you know, my motivation to get my family here was very high."***
> **(Deported man)**

For their part, children who had remained in Australia when their parent or caregiver was deported described the financial impacts of their parents absence. As with immigration detention, these young people recalled the challenges associated with losing a breadwinner, as well as a broader perception that they had been left alone, without a buffer or protector.

> ***"Losing a parent can lead to poverty. Struggles can cause a child to develop traumas in which most of the time, in my perspective, it is very hard for a child to combat these inflicting new emotions, especially alone."***
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

In these contexts, some deported parents and caregivers did what they could to send money 'home' to their families, but this was often challenging given the insecurity many themselves endured. Deported parents and caregivers described the anguish associated with seeing their families struggling and being unable to intervene. As we heard again and again, providing support from afar was difficult, particularly when you were struggling yourself.

5.2.2 Heightened responsibility

Echoing the earlier theme of parentification in the context of immigration detention, the children and young people who participated in this study typically indicated that the deportation of a parent had placed additional responsibilities upon their shoulders. This was especially true for children who remained in Australia when a parent was deported. These participants frequently told us they had to 'step up' when their parent or caregiver was removed from Australia – adopting a (seemingly) more permanent role of responsibility within the family unit.

At times, the sense of responsibility these children felt had been placed on them overtly, as when one young man was told that he was "the man of the house" after his father's deportation.

> ***"Words are real powerful, aye. [...] I know from my oldest son [was told], 'Oh, your dad's been deported. You're the man of the house now.' My son, I know he lost a lot of his childhood from that. So, he felt as though he had to watch his younger siblings too. The weight that they put on his shoulders, he couldn't go out and just be a teenage boy. He started looking for work."***
> **(Deported man)**

On other occasions, children took on these responsibilities because they sensed that nobody else was available to meet their or their families' needs. Older children especially often tried to fill the gaps created by their parent or caregiver's absence – taking on added responsibilities, from paying the rent to locating and securing cheaper accommodation for their families.

> ***"I left when he was like seventeen [...] He was only a kid then, and so that made it very hard for him. Financially, it was really hard for him and [his brother], because I wasn't there to help pay the rent. So, they lost the house. They had to find other accommodation."***
>
> **(Deported woman)**

One young woman, who was seventeen when her mother was removed from Australia, explained that she had helped to pack up and sell the family home when it became clear her mother was not returning. In addition to the huge emotional toll of 'losing' her mother, this young woman described the physical upheaval of losing her home and having to face the future without the stable base and safety net that space had always provided.

> ***"My life was, go home to Mum. Mum makes dinner. I do my chores. [I thought] She'll help out when I go to uni. [...] Now I've got every single little cent just goes towards my future now and living, rather than being able to just step back and go, 'Oh, yes. I'm living with Mum.'"***
>
> **(Child of deported woman | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

As stories like this one evidence, the financial and material impacts of deportation contributed to a broader sense of instability within many children's lives.

5.2.3. Educational disruptions

As with immigration detention, experiences of precarity and the adoption of new responsibilities frequently impacted children and young people's trajectories – including their engagement in education and training.

Interview participants stressed that an important factor shaping these outcomes was that children who continued their schooling in Australia did so without their deported family member present. As one man explained, deportation prevented him from providing his children with the same level of day-to-day support that he once had – compromising his ability, for example, to help with homework and attend school events.

> ***"As far as their education, if I was there, I would be able to help with homework. Be able to go to school events and support them at school. And, and they're just missing out on that. They just haven't got that. They just haven't got me there, you know. It's just a whole thing that's just been taken away from them."***
>
> **(Deported man)**

The broader disruption deportation caused in children's lives also impacted their engagement with education. The young woman quoted earlier, who had helped to pack up and sell her family's home after her mother was deported, explained that the upheaval she experienced at this time all but derailed her plans to attend university.

> ***"I was going to go to uni [...] So now I've kind of had to postpone those plans for later, even though I wanted to do it straight out of high school, get on my feet. But now I have to, like – I can still lean on Mum and I have them [my siblings] to lean on too, but it's just a bit different. [...] I'm mostly at my friend's house because I work with her."***
>
> **(Child of deported woman | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

As another participant emphasised, deportation turned everything upside down.

> ***"[I want the government to know] how much it affects people's futures, the families' futures, how much it impacts them financially, mentally, stability-wise, their social construct. Everything changes. Work, everything. Yeah, it's a rocky situation. Nothing feels stable or clear anymore."***
>
> **(Partner of deported man)**

In the context of such massive disruptions, young people's plans to finish school, pursue university or vocational training, and/or progress chosen careers often came to a standstill. Participants emphasised that they no longer knew what they wanted and frequently felt lost, unsure what their futures held.

Children who relocated to be with a deported parent or caregiver – either permanently or for a time – frequently experienced a different set of challenges. Children who had begun school in Australia before moving overseas identified key issues such as not having friends at their new school, not understanding the new educational system, and not fitting in. Parents who had supported children through these transitions concurred.

> ***"Being at that age, by the time we got there, he was thirteen, fourteen-odd age, boys already had the cliquey groups, and so he struggled, he struggled to make friends."***
>
> **(Partner of deported man)**

Several children also described being bullied for being "Aussie" or getting into fights because they were angry and confused about their new situation.

> ***"I was from Aussie, and they're all, they've all been there their whole lives, so it was like different [...] As soon as I went there, they all had problems with me and that. Had to sort it out, and then got kicked out of school."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Young people who had chosen to relocate in their late teens or early twenties often lamented the loss of the lives and jobs they had left in Australia. One young person described the difficulties she was facing with transferring her Australian degree to a local university in her father's country of origin. She was unsure whether this would even be possible. Another participant noted that leaving Australia had meant giving up the apprenticeship he loved.

> ***"I just started thinking about I would like a father figure in my life. So, that's the main reason why I came over, started to live here really. Yeah, it was kind of shit because I had to quit my [apprenticeship]. I actually really liked the company, but then I had to leave friends, family."***
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

Testimonies of this kind reveal that children and young people are often forced to make significant sacrifices if they wish to continue their relationships with their deported parents and caregivers. Children and young adults' educational trajectories are particularly vulnerable to interruption, with potential implications across the life course.

5.2.4. Life course disruptions

As the educational deliberations described above reveal, children and young people in their teens and early twenties were often faced with difficult choices between the lives they were building in Australia and the deported parent or caregiver they loved. Regardless of the option they pursued, these participants often lived in a state of limbo, questioning their decisions and longing for an avenue that would allow them to be reconciled with their family member while continuing to build a life in Australia.

As one support worker emphasised, young people in their late teens and early twenties may be legal adults, but they often still wanted and needed their parents.

> ***"Even when you're in your early twenties, you actually still need your support of your parents to keep you on it, 'Keep doing working and don't get into trouble and behave yourself.' And that goes on for a long time in parenting. It's not an eighteen and out you go."***
> **(Support worker)**

Young participants concurred with this sentiment, stressing that they needed to be with their deported parent or caregiver, even as they longed for a life in Australia.

Decisions about where to live were a common source of unease, but were particularly fraught for young people with their own partners and children. As one young man explained,

> ***"It's hard because I now have my partner here, her family's here. I have my Mum's parents that are here. So it's like, I can't really pick between the two."***
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Several participants who had young families described these decisions as a choice between their own family and happiness, and those of their partner.

> ***"I'd love for us to be together. But I mean I've got a lot to consider. It's like a whole different country, and I've got my three little ones and my partner. It's, yeah, like we could make it work, but we both have to be on board about it, and we're just not. So it means one of us would be miserable. So it's really hard."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

Having lost her father to incarceration as a child, this young woman explained, she could not rob her children of their father by leaving Australia. Yet remaining in Australia when the rest of her family had relocated was making her 'miserable'. It was also introducing conflict to her relationship.

These same decisions played out on a smaller scale in relation to important events such as weddings and milestone birthdays. Without the option of bringing their deported parent or caregiver to Australia, children and young people had to decide whether to mark important occasions with their parent or caregiver overseas, or whether to choose a celebration that would include their Australian friends and family but exclude the deported family member.

> ***"Obviously they want me to go over there. But then I've got my own family over here. [...] I mean, friends, family, grandparents. And it's just hard, because they're telling me, 'oh, you can go over and celebrate your 21st here, and then do another day here [in Australia]'. But you've got to choose one [...] on your birthday, where are you going to be, where are you going to spend it?"***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Often, these young people speculated that their lives would have been significantly easier if their deported parent or caregiver had been permitted to remain in Australia. In such a scenario, one young woman explained, she and her siblings would have been able to rekindle their relationship with their father without giving up their stability or the lives they were building in Australia.

> ***"It would have been so much better if he didn't get deported. He would have been able to come to our house that everyone has a job and we're just getting support from everyone. But now we've just had to move."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

Even the option of a visitor visa, we heard, would significantly improve children and young people's lives – reducing the burden many felt to sacrifice their lives and futures in Australia for the sake of the family.

> ***"If he was able to come back into Australia to visit, we'd see each other a lot more. [...] Being able to just share experiences, like with him being over – like he's never been to my house. There's certain stuff that we talk about, like the beaches in Australia, or we were just talking about kookaburras the other day, there's little stuff, our favourite places that we used to go to, our childhood memories. It would make a big difference."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

As this young woman expressed, being able to share the "little stuff" with her Dad would help her to heal after a childhood spent apart.

5.3. Socio-emotional consequences

Research on the socio-emotional impacts of Australia's deportation policies is still in its infancy. It is well recognised, however, that deportation is disruptive and destabilising to the person who is deported, and that deportees at times experience unemployment and homelessness on arrival in their country of nationality. Stigma, discrimination and social isolation are also well documented concerns within the extant scholarship (Brabeck and Xu, 2010; Morris and Palazuelos, 2015). In the Australian context, the overrepresentation of Māori and Pacific Peoples is particularly concerning, not least because it is associated with the loss of culturally important whānau (family) support systems.

Available evidence suggests that people who have been deported are at acute risk of mental health challenges. Research in New Zealand, for example, indicate that 22 percent of people deported from Australia under Section 501 of the *Migration Act* require specialist mental health or addiction services; this figure is significantly higher than the 3.7 percent national average (Artus et al., 2023). There are documented cases of people – including New Zealand nationals – committing suicide shortly after their deportation from Australia (Rowe, 2021; ANZSOC Borders, 2023).

While the socio-emotional experiences of the deported individual's children have rarely been considered within this scholarship, research undertaken in other parts of the world connects parental deportation with a number of mental health concerns in their children, including elevated rates of depression, anxiety, aggression, withdrawal, and negative self-esteem (Brabeck and Xu, 2010; Allen et al., 2015; Zayas et al., 2015).

Zayas (2015) posits that children of detained or deported parents - what she calls "orphans of fragmented families" (2015: 232) - experience a unique form of loss stemming from the sudden removal of parental presence and attention. While recent scholarship foregrounds the influence of specific legal and cultural settings on wellbeing outcomes, themes of ruptured familial bonds, disconnection from cultural heritage, social exclusion, and the compounded processes of stigmatisation and criminalisation have been reported across national contexts (Allen et al., 2015; Taschman and Muruthi, 2020; Berg and Herrera, 2022).

5.3.1. Sadness and confusion

In reflecting on their experiences, the children and young people involved in this research frequently described the sadness and confusion they felt surrounding their parent or caregiver's deportation. These participants told us that they did their best to manage their emotions and 'get on' with life, but that the pain they lived with was never far from the surface.

One young man, whose mother had been deported, explained that he did his best to put on a brave face, but that be often broke down to his partner – struggling to comprehend why his mother had been taken from him.

> ***"It takes a lot to actually drag me down. But [...] I always break down to my partner, and the only time that I've actually cried in the last however long I can even actually remember is always over my Mum. And it's always, like, I'll just get to a point, and I'll just see photos of her, and I'll just be like, 'how come I can't have my Mum?'"***
>
> **(Child of deported woman | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

His partner agreed, noting that "about every twelve weeks" the grief he carried would overwhelm him.

> ***"He always lets things build up, and he won't say anything. And I can always – like, 'What's going on, what's wrong?' and he goes, 'No, no, nothing.' And then it always gets to a point, probably about every twelve weeks, where he will have a breakdown about his mother, not having his mother. [...] And sometimes he'll go through phases where he'll be sad, and then he'll be different for a whole week. [...] his whole persona and his whole everything for the whole week, it's just down."***
>
> **(Daughter-in-law of deported woman)**

Other young people shared similar reflections, explaining that – with no long-term solutions in sight – all they could do was swallow their feelings and try to 'keep going'.

Parents and family members also testified to these emotional impacts, with many recalling younger children's palpable distress in the immediate aftermath of a parent or caregiver's deportation. One participant, whose mother-in-law had been deported, remembered that her young daughter had been inconsolable for weeks after the deportation – crying multiple times a day because she wanted to see her Nan.

> ***"[My daughter] loved Nan. They were two peas in a pod. [...] [My daughter] would cry most days, multiple times, just because she really wanted to see Nan and she was seeing her so regularly that, at that stage, she really felt it."***
>
> **(Daughter-in-law of deported woman)**

Importantly, as this quote attests, these emotional impacts often extended to include other children in the family, such as siblings and grandchildren. We heard, for example, about an eleven-year-old boy who collapsed on the concrete when he learnt that the older brother he adored was being deported.

Impacts also endured beyond the initial period of shock and change. One participant, whose husband had been deported years earlier, observed that their daughter continued to grieve her father's loss. Despite having been an infant at the time of his deportation, this child regularly communicated her longing for her father.

> ***"When she wake up in the morning, she's trying to cuddle [her Dad's] framed photo. [Crying] And she start to cry and she say, 'Mummy, I need my Daddy.' When she going to school, she just coming back from school and she said to me, 'It's your fault.' [Crying]. I said, 'Why? It's not my fault.' She said, 'Why my Daddy not coming to school to pick me up?' [Crying]. Her friend at the school and they said, 'Oh, you don't have a dad' [...] She said, 'I want my dad. Where's my dad? Why my dad not here?' What I can say to her? I have nothing to say. It is actually immigration. It is actually Australia. [...] I can't do anything."***
>
> **(Partner of deported man)**

Another child whose father had been deported several years earlier drew an evocative picture of her Dad being dragged away from her family by a faceless official (Figure 9). While her father's deportation had occurred when she was too young to remember the event, her picture communicated the emotional salience of this event, and the pain her family continued to live with.

Figure 9: Drawing by child of deported man, depicting her father being taken away while she and her caregivers cry.

Children who had taken on responsibilities beyond their age or level of development were at times haunted by their inability to prevent the deportation of their family member. One survey respondent stressed that they continued to carry unanswered questions about how what they might have done differently and what really happened when their brother was deported.

> ***"Due to limited resources and English it made the situation much worse because we didn't understand what was happening at the time and as young children ourselves we could not assist our parents or know how to challenge or improve the situation for our sibling being deported. Till this day over 15 years [later] we still don't know exactly what happened and why other options were not provided to our family."***
>
> **Sibling of deported man**

For this respondent and others like them, the pain and confusion deportation caused was not transient or short-term, but something they carried for years and even decades after the deportation.

5.3.2. Loss and disconnection

As noted in 5.1.1., the loss that children experienced in the aftermath of a parent's deportation was not limited to the loss of contact with that individual. While missing their parent was a key aspect of many children and young people's pain, participants also reported grief surrounding other losses. As one young person told us, *"I feel like you just lose everything really. You've got to start all over"* (Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation).

For this participant, the overwhelming sense of loss she felt when her father was deported echoed the loss she experienced when he was first incarcerated.

> ***"When Dad [went to gaol] it literally felt like [...] we kind of lost everything. Everything we'd known that was good, we lost it when he left. And it literally feels like the same thing [...] It just feels like something good has come out of this, which is he has come out, but it feels like we've lost everything else."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

While this participant recognised her father's release from prison as a positive development for their family, deportation had transformed what could have been a moment of reunification and redemption into another experience of separation and loss.

The 'everything else' that participants like this young woman felt deportation had taken from them spanned losses from financial security to hobbies and friends to their very sense of safety and selfhood. We heard from children and young people – as well as their parents and family members – that children often withdrew from social activities in the aftermath of a parent or caregiver's deportation. One teenaged boy, who had been just eleven years old when his older brother was deported, lost interest in sport when the brother he looked up to was no longer able to attend his games.

> ***"There was thirteen-year age gap between him and his brother, you know. As soon as they were born they were up at the hospital. He never missed a rugby game. Because his younger brother was really good. [...] I suppose yes, he's just lost interest in some of that. But he's just lost interest with it now that his brother's gone."***
>
> **(Mother of deported man)**

Children and young people also lost interest in family gatherings and celebrations, noting that these events did not feel the same without their parent or caregiver present.

> ***"I always really loved Christmas. I always really looked forward to Christmas, it was the best thing in the world. And then, yeah, after [Mum was deported], I just hated Christmas. Hated my birthdays. I was just like, 'oh, I'm an adult now, who cares about Christmas? Who cares about my birthday? My Mum's not here, I don't really care about it in a way, in a sense.'"***
>
> **(Child of deported woman | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

Indeed, families often chose to stop marking these occasions because the absence of the deported individual was too painful for all involved.

Beyond the family, children and young people told us that their relationships with friends and acquaintances had also changed, and that joy was now harder to come by. While some children and young people had access to robust support through their immediate circles of friends, many others explained that they had withdrawn from their social groups following their parent or caregiver's deportation. This withdrawal, participants explained, was in part a consequence of their sadness, and in part a function of their inability to communicate what was happening to friends who had no point of reference to understand the scale of their loss.

Young participants who had relocated overseas to be with their deported parent or caregiver were at particular risk of isolation from peers, as they not only struggled to communicate the complexities of their situations, but also faced the significant challenge of making new friends in a new place that did not yet feel like home.

> ***"Some kids it will hit them a lot [...] It'll probably destroy them seeing their Dad leave, you know, and him not being able to come back. [...] And on the kids having to leave all their friends, family, all their loved ones. All the people they grew up with. The neighbourhood they know. That would be a big impact on them."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Another young man shared his own experience of trying to make friends in a new country. In addition to missing the friends he had left in Australia, he explained, trust was a significant issue – particularly in contexts where families were endeavouring to keep their situation private.

> ***"I think the hardest thing was making friends again. I had lost a best mate that I had known since preschool, and all my mates and that, versus having to restart. [...] I moved [in] Year 7, [...] it wasn't till about Year 10, Year 11, that's when I started going out with mates. I'd always be at home. I'd always stay at home. Hang with mates at school, stay at home. So yeah, a lot of things like finding mates, and being able to trust the mates that I had here, which was pretty hard."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

The stigma associated with deportation was such that some children feared they would be judged or ostracised if their peers knew about their family's situation. Some young participants also explained that it was difficult to form close connections with peers because they had promised their parents or caregivers that they would not disclose the reason for their family's relocation. Significantly, children's identification with their deported family member was such that many believed *they* were no longer welcome in Australia and felt an internalised sense of shame concerning what had happened to their family.

> ***"As far as me getting kicked out of [Australia] and not allowed back there, [my son] had, in his mind, wrapped us all up in that. And there was this movie we were watching and someone was getting the pitchfork out of the community. [...] He said, 'Oh, that's like us out of Australia, aye Dad?'"***
>
> **(Deported man)**

These layered losses left many young participants struggling to understand who they were and where they belonged in the world. As one young woman whose father had been deported from Australia put it:

> ***"I feel like I've lost my whole identity. [...] I just feel my whole life has been orientated around my family. And I feel like that's just been ripped away from me. Even as far as my friends. I've probably got one friend. I spend most of my time with my family. So it's really rocked me [Crying] [...] I need my family to be whole, not separated."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

Young participants also spoke to the sense of fear and uncertainty they now lived with, noting that the world no longer felt as safe and secure as it once had. One child, who had been in primary school when her grandmother was deported, remembered this experience through the lens of her parents' distress. When her Nan was deported, she told us, she saw her Dad cry for the first time. As this child's mother elaborated, the sense of distress and uncertainty the adults in their home were experiencing at this time necessarily impacted their children and their sense of safety in the world.

5.3.3. Anger and harmful behaviour

In describing the layered losses they experienced surrounding the deportation of a parent or caregiver, children and young people often spoke about the anger they had lived with in the immediate aftermath of the deportation and, in some cases, continued to feel. For these participants, grief not only manifested in sadness and withdrawal, but also came out as frustration, rage and even violence.

Children and young people who had endured a parent or caregiver's deportation described their anger as multilayered. Participants whose parents had been deported on character grounds following a criminal conviction at times acknowledged complex feelings about their parent's criminal past and, more specifically, about the way their parent's choices had impacted their family. As one survey respondent explained, the consequences of deportation could breed resentment.

> ***"My mental health has struggled the most during this whole process. In a way my relationship with my father has evolved and healed parts of our bond but there is so much more resentment towards him, my life has turned upside down, my career, study and siblings' relationships have been [a]ffected from the deportation of my father."***
>
> **(Child of deported man)**

In many cases, however, children and young people's anger was directed towards Australia as much as it was towards their deported parent or caregiver. Participants whose deported parent or caregiver had worked hard to overcome issues like substance use and addiction were particularly incredulous that their family was continuing to be punished for a mistake their parent or caregiver had already paid the price for and was unlikely to repeat in the future.

One young man, who had relocated overseas to be with his deported father, told us that he missed his friends and was angry that his family had had to leave Australia. His Dad, he explained, had done the hard work of recovering from addiction and was now thriving. Why, he asked, could they not return to Australia?

> ***"I just think why couldn't we do what we're doing here, what we're doing here over there? It makes me so angry, you know. [...] I've just left all that behind. [...] I have a lot of friends over there. Heaps of friends. [...] And their families were my families too, you know. We, we slept in the same rooms as each other. We, we ate at each other's house. [...] I miss them all."***
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

As with parental immigration detention, young participants talked about the way their anger inflected all spheres of their lives, contributing to problems such as getting into fights and being expelled from school. Young participants also talked about the strategies they deployed to manage their emotions. For one young man, using illicit drugs was a way to numb his pain and distract himself from his anger.

> ***"[My strategy was to] Avoid it. I was high on weed. I was very dependent on weed. I'm not now. I'm sober. But yes, I smoked weed [...] I guess it was an anti-depressant, kind of thing."***
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

We also heard accounts of children and young people – including some as young as ten years old – engaging in self-harm. While this theme was less prominent in the dataset, there were notable reports of suicidality, as well as casual mentions of 'wanting to die'. One survey respondent whose mother had been deported from Australia disclosed:

> ***"My mum being deported was the worse thing in my entire life to this day I still want to die without her."***
> **(Child of deported woman)**

5.3.4. Healing and hope

Despite the challenges many families had to navigate in the aftermath of a deportation, we heard numerous stories of healing and hope. Often, these were stories of people who had been deported showing up for their children and families in ways they had not previously been able to, due to do their incarceration or, in some cases, histories of addiction.

Many of the children and young people we interviewed who had relocated to be with a parent had not lived with that parent for several years prior to their relocation. Often, this was because their parent had spent time in prison and/or immigration detention prior to their removal from Australia. In some cases, these periods of incarceration were connected with histories of substance use and addiction, which had themselves disrupted children's relationships with their parent even prior to incarceration.

In these instances, children and young people regularly reported that they had been nervous, at first, about relocating to be with their parent. One young man explained that he had originally left Australia to join his father in New Zealand because his family had decided this was the best place for him to be. The decision to move had not been his own, and he had worried his father would still be the "loose cannon" he remembered from earlier in childhood.

> ***"At first, I didn't really wanna be over here. [...] Moving's not really a big thing for me. Yeah. Because like I've been moving around my whole life, pretty much. So, moving house to house really isn't a big deal. More the big deal was coming back to my Dad. [...] At first, I didn't think that he was gonna be how he is today. I thought that he was gonna be completely something else. A loose cannon. Junkie, you know. Still on it. Still doing crime. But came over here and then boom! Found something else. [...] He's changed a lot."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Another young woman, whose family had sent her overseas when they believed her father was 'ready' to be a parent again, described a similar sense of trepidation.

> ***"I thought he was gonna be this skinny-looking bloke that I thought he used to look like when I was younger. [...] I can just spot [...] a junkie from a mile away. And that's not what I saw. I saw this big man that just wanted to hug his kids, which was exciting. But then, you know, we had our back and forths in the first year."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

As this participant explained, it took some time – and a series of robust 'back and forth' conversations – for her to believe her father had changed. When it became clear that he had, she was excited to get to know the father she had longed for earlier in life.

For their part, deported parents and caregivers with criminal histories often talked about the lengths they had gone to to turn their lives around, and underlined their desire to both regain their children's trust and ensure their children had the chance to flourish.

> ***"If I actually change my life around, you know, I can change the course of my children, you know? I can stop, put a stop to their suffering. And that's something that really stood out for me. I was like, 'If I don't buck my ears up, my children are gonna suffer forever. And then I won't ever have an opportunity to have that connection with them.'"***
>
> **(Deported man)**

Those who had themselves grown up in families shaped by violence and addiction were particularly emphatic about the need to break what one man described as the cycle of intergenerational trauma.

> ***"I was like, 'I need to get my children back here and create a safe space for them, you know, so I know that I can break this cycle that's happened in their lives, the trauma that they've gone through so, when my grandchildren are born, they're brought into this world, they won't have to go through the same stuff, you know. Sort of like breaking into [inter]generational trauma or something like that."***
>
> **(Deported man)**

In these contexts, children and young people who relocated to be with their deported parent talked at length about the opportunity these reunions provided for them to rebuild relationships with their (previously absent) parent – and, in some cases, to experience for the first time the care they had longed for growing up.

One young man spoke about how meaningful it had been for him when his father taught him to drive. This is something he had deeply wanted during his father's incarceration in Australia. Relocating to be with his father several years after his deportation allowed his father a 'second chance' to be the parent he needed.

> ***"I didn't know how to drive over in Aussie, 'til I came over here. [...] He taught me how to drive. He just chucked me in and it'd be like, 'Yep. Let's see how you drive today.' Pretty much. So, when I turned 16, I actually wanted to learn how to drive then, over in Aussie. But nobody wanted to teach me."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Another young man who had become addicted to methamphetamine during his father's absence remembered his Dad helping him to detox shortly after their reunion. Their first weeks and months together had been challenging, as this young man went through drug withdrawal, but his father had been there for him.

> ***"I was still getting off the drugs too. [...] [Dad helped me detox from] ice. Yeah. Loved it. I was on, I was doing it five years, six years. [...] It was just the thing to do. Maybe, if you weren't doing it, you just weren't part of the boys. [...] I love him for it, man."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

As this young man told us, having a stable and supportive relationship with their deported parent had changed everything for him and their siblings.

> ***"[My younger siblings,] they're stepping into the big wide world, you know. It's cool. It's cool watching them become young adults, 'cause I was there. Just I reckon they're doing better than I done it when I was their age. But they've got me and [...] they've got Dad. We've all got Dad."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

While re/building a relationship in the context of past addiction and/or extended periods of separation was slow and often painful work, children and young people who had chosen this path typically appreciated that it had been available to them.

> ***"We all hurt. We were hurt from it. Now, here, like reconnected with Dad, that's been the best thing, eh? That's been the best thing."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Importantly, these opportunities were generally only available to children and young people for whom overseas visits and/or relocation were an option. Furthermore, prohibitions that prevented deported people from returning to Australia, even temporarily, to see their children meant that these children and young people had to carry the risks and stresses associated with reunion. Children and young people who were unable to visit or relocate to be with their deported parent lamented that their parent's removal from Australia had robbed them of the opportunity to get to know their parent again and heal from the trauma of their parent's incarceration.

6. Children and families' perspectives on the way forward

It is exceedingly rare for the Australian community to hear the voices of children and young people impacted by the detention and/or deportation of a parent or caregiver. While these issues attract considerable public attention, children and young people seldom get the chance to share their stories or contribute to policy discussions about the best way forward.

Listening to the perspectives of children and young people is essential for rights-based policymaking. Australia has committed, under Article 12 of the *Convention on the Rights of Child*, to affording children the right to express their views freely in all matters that affect them, and to giving these views due weight. Hearing from parents and caregivers is also important, particularly for understanding the needs of infants and young children who are unable to communicate these directly.

It was common for the children and young people involved in this study to reflect that we were the first people to ask them about their experiences and seek their perspectives on policy and practice. Many children and young people – as well as their family members – had strong opinions about the supports they needed, and about what the government should do to help them, as well as other children and families in similar situations.

In this final section of the report, we share these perspectives.

6.1. Diversion pathways

Many of the children and young people who participated in this study identified their parent or caregiver's substance use as a primary cause of their detention and/or deportation. These participants told us that their parent or caregiver's offending – and thus their detention and/or deportation – might have been prevented if more timely support had been available to their family.

One young man, reflecting on his father's visa cancellation, stressed the need to address the causes of people's criminal activity:

> ***"They need to think about, why do they do that offence? What's causing them to do that offence? For example, [my Dad] did what he did. All right, what contributed to that? Alcohol, drugs, all this stuff. [...] Then the gangs, it turns into violence, and then violence turns into more violence, and then it turns into people going into jail. [...] [N]ot every person that's done something bad or that has gone to jail is honestly a criminal or a bad person. You've got to really think about what they did, why they did it, and how it all starts, really."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Another participant, whose son had been deported, described their family's efforts to access support for their son in the years prior to his visa cancellation, and the financial barriers that prevented them from doing so.

> ***"I know when he was getting into trouble, everything was drug related. And if there had only been – you know, they'll just get a slap on the hand if they went to court. And if there was ever anything to help them come off the drugs or – you know? [...] We'd talk to different people [about rehab] and we would have tried that. But they said that the cost of it and everything."***
>
> **(Mother of deported man)**

Children, young people and their families wanted drug and alcohol programs to be more accessible. Better and earlier support was needed, they told us, to help substance-dependent parents and caregivers to overcome their addictions, and to disrupt the pathway to offending, incarceration and visa cancellation.

6.2. Visa cancellation

The overwhelming finding from this study is that the whole family is affected when a parent or caregiver is detained and/or deported. As the evidence of this report makes clear, the detention and/or deportation of a parent or caregiver places acute strain on children and young people's family relationships, food and housing security, educational engagement, and socio-emotional wellbeing. Children in these circumstances are forced to "grow up very, very fast" (child of deported man | minor at time of visa cancellation), and many struggle to navigate the emotional turbulence of family disruptions in safe and pro-social ways.

When providing their perspective on what should be done to support families like theirs, participants consistently stressed that the foreseeable collateral harms of severing family connections should be given greater weight in visa cancellation decisions. Children, we heard, should be consulted before a visa cancellation is enacted, and their opinions and wellbeing given more consideration. One young woman, who had both experienced the deportation of a father during childhood and supported a partner through his own mother's deportation, summed up this imperative as follows:

> ***"[T]he government and stuff, they slap down this, 'right, you're getting deported!' Well, hang the fuck on! How about you sit back for a second, and you think, 'OK, this person's got kids, they've got grandkids', all of these people are domino-effected and feeling these feelings."***
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Critically, participants who had been in their late teens or early twenties at the time of their parent or caregiver's visa cancellation stressed that this consideration should extend to include the welfare of young people 18-25 years old. One young woman, whose father's visa had been cancelled when she was 17 years old, explained this need as follows:

> ***"[W]hen I was 17, and, essentially we were kind of fighting my dad's visa cancellation, I had to go to the AAT [Administrative Appeals Tribunal] as a 17-year-old and kind of speak up and, like, take the day off school, and that was a whole thing in and of itself. But essentially, they didn't put much weight on me being a young person or a child, because I would have been 18 in six months, and so although, you know, they typically would have with someone who might have been seven, or eight, or ten or whatever. They didn't care. [...] [T]hey should be putting more weight on the fact that people have families here and have ties."***
> **(Child of detained man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Another young woman who had been through a similar experience concurred.

> ***"[I]t's very unfair to put a number to an age where, like, you don't matter anymore. Especially 18 [years old] [...] If you have to put a number, I think that [...] there's a definition for a young adult being, like, 24 and under, or 25 and under, or something like that. Even if you just decided to shift it from minor to young adult, and you gave a little bit of [...] weight on 18 to 24 year olds, or 18 to 25 year olds. Because, especially nowadays, most 18-year-olds still live at home [...] 18 is way too low of a number to kind of cut you off and say that you don't matter anymore."***
> **(Child of detained man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Children and young people's welfare, participants told us, should be given higher priority in visa cancellation decisions.

6.3. Alternatives to closed detention

People who are contesting the cancellation of a visa – for example, because they wish to remain with their children and families in Australia – are generally held in closed immigration detention. The children and young people who participated in this study repeatedly told us they felt like they were being punished when their parent or caregiver was detained. As one participant put it:

> ***"I feel like they're not only punishing Dad, or the person that's incarcerated. I feel like it's the whole family. It affects everybody."***
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

The Commission has previously recommended that closed immigration detention be used only as a last resort, and be strictly limited and time bound. Participants in this study echoed this sentiment. Children and young people whose parent or caregiver had had their visa cancelled due to criminal offending said they thought it was unfair to hold someone in immigration detention when they had already served their prison sentence.

> ***"[I]t was just really uncomfortable, I think. Because he'd finished his sentence, it was really hard – because obviously, when you're driving in, they've got all the, you know, the huge, like, three layers of fencing, and gates and all the barbed wire and stuff like that, and thinking that I'm visiting him, but he's already finished – he was given a consequence of his crime, and he finished it out."***
> **(Child of detained man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

As this participant stressed, detention seemed like a second punishment.

> ***"The judge at the time of seeing the case decided that was the fair consequence of his crimes, and made that charge and sentence. And so it feels like, how can you come back after he's done seven years [in prison], and he's about to get out, and then say, 'well, actually, we changed our minds. [...] They were wrong, and we're gonna upgrade it'. It feels like add on extra punishments."***
> **(Child of detained man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Children and young people were also emphatic that detention decisions should consider the individuals' *current* situation and should not be made exclusively on the basis of prior offending. People who had successfully rehabilitated in prison, these participants said, should be allowed to return to their families in the community.

> ***"[H]e hasn't done anything for many, many years, and he's a very different person to who he was. Obviously, a lot of his criminal activity was tied to, you know, his mental health and drug addiction, and those are both gone. So the person he is now, I'm prouder than ever to be his daughter."***
> **(Child of detained man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Participants with a parent in immigration detention told us they wanted their family to be reunited. As one child put it:

> ***"Please send my dad back to me so I can be happy again."***
> **(Child of detained man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

6.4. Detention visitation

In Section 4.1 of this report, we explored children and families' experiences of visiting a parent or caregiver in immigration detention. Participants explained that specific aspects of the detention system made family visits more or less distressing for children. Adults who visited detention with children reported better experiences when the detention location was within a reasonable travelling distance from their home, when there was flexibility around visiting times and durations, and when the visitation environment allowed families at least some privacy and freedom of movement.

> ***"Because the distance wasn't so far that you could go more often. And then there were, you know, birthdays or Father's Day or Mother's Day, you know, different times of the year that we could go and visit him more often."***
>
> **(Mother-in-law of detained man)**

Visitor application processes were experienced by many families as unnecessarily onerous and time consuming. This was a particular concern for community-based parents and caregivers who were juggling increased care and/or work responsibilities in the wake of their partner and/or co-parent's detention. One mother of young children explained:

> ***"When we go to visit him, they require five business days and an application. And it's 13 pages, the online application to go and visit. [...] It was just really hard."***
>
> **(Partner of detained man)**

These institutional processes – together with the emotional realities of entering detention spaces – also presented challenged for older children and young people, who at times took responsibility for organising family visits or visiting on behalf of their families.

> ***"I try to [visit] once a fortnight, and it's just a very shitty experience, honestly. I mean, having to see a parent in a room, you know, that they're kind of been caged in, and having to go through that whole process."***
>
> **(Child of detained man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Participants frequently expressed the view that immigration detention facilities are not suitable places for children, and that more should be done to support 'normal' family interactions within these facilities. One mother who regularly visited detention with her primary school aged son and infant daughter explained the challenges as follows:

> ***"[O]n top of everything I have to do as a sole parent, I now have to take the children there a couple of times a week as well. So we're going tonight [...] It would be nice if we could have dinner with him there, like bring a [takeaway meal] or something, but we're not allowed to do anything like that. It's just going to be little packets of sealed food."***
>
> **(Partner of detained man)**

As another mother told us, children's wellbeing would be better supported if families were able to spend time together in a non-custodial setting, such as within the family home.

> ***"In visits, he [my son] did get upset a lot [...] we should be in our home environment doing this."***
> **(Partner of deported man)**

6.5. Support programs

The detention and/or deportation of a parent or caregiver typically imposes financial and emotional stress on affected families. Access to professional support is scarce, and it consequently falls to older children and community-based parents or caregivers to meet children's needs – often with minimal information about the detained or deported individual's situation, or about their families' likely trajectory. One young person, who was supporting her siblings in the aftermath of their father's detention, identified the opacity of the system as a key stressor:

> ***"It adds a lot of shame for, like, even for myself, when speaking to my siblings, not being able to give them any answers. I wish there was enough research or, you know, things that I could read or look up and things like that so that I could figure out, 'OK, we're going to get a decision in exactly eight months, and then it's going to take 30 days'. So I think there's a bit of shame in that, in not knowing."***
> **(Child of deported man | Child at time of visa cancellation)**

As another young person told us, families caught up in these systems are in desperate need of clear information, reliable advice, and practical help:

> ***"Food and rent assistance. Having someone that is qualified and knows a lot about incarceration and deportation, and having that available for kids and parents as the support. [...] [H]elping out with schooling, just financial. Financial and having someone to talk to."***
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

Support workers further noted that where social security provisions already exist, there is a need for families to be given timely information about their entitlements and be supported to access them. Tailored support is additionally needed to meet the unique needs of families surrounding, for example, visits to detention.

> ***"I think when families are separated, having options for the child or the children to have ongoing contact with the parent who is not with them in the community, I think that's really challenging when you put that burden on the parent who's in the community, who actually has to survive and [make] ends meet. I think even simple things like transport arrangements, even things like even actually having more support for the children and the mother in the community around understanding systems [...], filling out forms, even services that help you with that part of it, because that's such a foreign thing for so many people."***
> **(Support worker)**

In the absence of wrap-around support, it often falls to children and young people to help their families (including community-based siblings and parents), while managing their own distress alone. Children and young people told us this was not a fair burden for them to carry. They wanted professional support for themselves and their families, to help lessen their load. We heard that having reliable and early access to mental health practitioners in particular would reduce pressure on children and young people and support their short- and long-term wellbeing.

> ***"I think during the early years, we kind of slipped through the cracks as a family. I think, thankfully, though, one of my teachers during high school kind of picked up on the fact that I wasn't doing well [...] and then they kind of linked me in with the wellbeing centre. I remember starting, like, seeing a therapist for a short time, and I had a social worker, and through that, my [unwell] mum actually got social work. [...] It kind of took some weight off my shoulders."***
>
> **(Child of detained man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

6.6. Pathways back to Australia

Children and young people who had been separated from a parent or caregiver by deportation were clear and emphatic about what would most improve their lives and wellbeing. Without exception, these participants asked that their deported parent or caregiver be given a pathway back to Australia.

In many instances, the pathway these children and young people envisaged included a right of visitation. These participants stressed how much it would mean to them to be able to share their lives and homes with their deported parent or caregiver, even temporarily. Participants who had marked a major loss or life milestone in the absence of their deported parent or caregiver (and, indeed, those who anticipated doing so in the near future) were particularly emphatic that visits should be permitted in such circumstances. They suggested that deported individuals should be permitted to attend family events in Australia, such as funerals, marriages and graduations.

> ***"[B]eing able to come over once a year, or [for] funerals, weddings."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Minor at time of visa cancellation)**

Beyond this right of visitation, children and young people also asked that a return pathway be established to enable deported people to return to Australia permanently.

> ***"After time if they could come and live back in here [that] would be cool. Yes? Because obviously they have to be good for however long the government needs. And then, you know, let them come back if they're good."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

In making this request, participants whose parents or caregivers had been deported following a criminal sentence typically stressed that their family member would need to 'prove themselves' before this right was afforded. Children and young people expected their parent or caregiver to pursue (as one participant put it) the 'straight and narrow', but asked that Australia recognise the possibility of rehabilitation rather than imposing a permanent sanction.

> ***"[I]t would mean the world if she could eventually come back, and she obviously would be able to show that she's chosen a straight and narrow path, and that she wants to do good and she wants to do better. And yeah, it would just mean so much if she could actually be able to come back to Australia and be in our lives again. I wouldn't have to plan my whole life around moving to New Zealand, I could just, she could just be home."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

Even the possibility of their parent or caregiver's future return, we heard, would dramatically improve children and young people's lives. Young people who had been 'stuck' in indecision since their parent or caregiver's deportation explained that a return pathway would free them from the pressure to choose between the parent or caregiver they missed, and the life they were building in Australia.

> ***"I feel like that would change everything. Even just having that hope of he might be able to come back to Australia. Like, I want my family."***
>
> **(Child of deported man | Young person at time of visa cancellation)**

These return pathways, children and young people stressed, would remove the burden of responsibility for their family's reunification from their young shoulders, and place it instead on their deported parent or caregiver. Furthermore, participants posited, these pathways would incentivise and reward good character among deported parents and caregivers, delivering benefits not only to children and their families, but also to society.

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