

## 4.

# The effects across generations

## Resource sheet

**Note:** This overview is based primarily on the *Bringing them home* report as well as other sources and provides a background to the policies and practices that authorised the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. It is not intended to be used as a comprehensive historical document.

When the then Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (now the Australian Human Rights Commission) heard testimonies from Indigenous people who were removed as children, it heard of their immediate experiences when they were younger. It also heard of the effects that these experiences had on their lives as they grew into adults.

The effects of this history on peoples' lives and Indigenous communities are many and varied. The Inquiry found there were a number of common effects, drawn from the testimony of witnesses and research:

- separation from primary carer
- mental and physical health problems
- delinquency and behavioural problems
- undermined parenting skills
- loss of cultural heritage
- broken families and communities
- racism.

It is important to keep in mind that the removal policies effected generations of Indigenous people. Even Indigenous children who were not removed have been affected in some way, either as a community member or child of a parent who was removed.

### Separation from primary carer

The quality of a person's future social relationships are significantly affected by the relationships they formed as a child. As early as 1951, research showed that separation from a primary carer, especially when followed by placement in an institution, was connected to a variety of psychiatric disorders in adulthood.

Separation from a primary carer also means cutting off a child's main source of attachment and love. Psychological evidence shows that attachment of this kind is important to a child's development, helping them to:

- achieve full intellectual potential
- develop a cultural identity
- sort out perceptions
- appreciate and value the importance of family
- think logically
- develop a conscience
- become self-reliant
- cope with stress and frustration
- handle fear and worry
- develop future relationships.

Evidence submitted to the Inquiry revealed that many Indigenous children were removed when they were less than 10 years old. Between one-half and two-thirds of those who were forcibly removed were taken in infancy (before the age of five years).

The vast majority of these were removed to institutions. These homes, missions or stations were usually run by a manager and small set of staff. Often faced with overcrowding, the staff could do little to provide the kind of care necessary for a child's development. Quite simply, the role of primary carer was usually never replaced after they were removed.

Some children were also moved between institutions, or from institutions to foster homes and then back to institutions. This lack of stable accommodation also prevented new attachments and relationships being formed.

Overall, the removals did not only result in the child's separation from their primary carer. Children were removed from these bonds to poor quality child care and a set of ever-changing 'carers' and institutions.

These experiences were carried by removed children into their adulthood. Mental health problems, continued trauma and difficulty establishing close relationships are just some long-term effects of removal.

**There's still a lot of unresolved issues within me. One of the biggest ones is that I cannot really love anyone no more. I'm sick of being hurt. Every time I used to get close to anyone they were just taken away from me. The other fact is, if I did meet someone, I don't want to have children, cos I'm frightened the welfare system would come back and take my children.**

(Confidential evidence 528, New South Wales)

## Mental and physical health

Separation from parents at a young age had quite immediate effects on the mental and physical well-being of those Indigenous children who were removed. As these children grew older, these effects proved more long term.

Evidence to the Inquiry clearly established that the childhood experience of forcible removal and institutionalisation made those people much more likely to suffer emotional distress than others in the Indigenous community. Mental and physical illness was an effect of the whole experience, of which the separation from parents was just the first step.

Generally speaking, those removed continued to experience self-destructive behaviour, an intensity of addictions, heart disease and diabetes, and psychological problems. These effects were carried into their adult lives.

Many health organisations reported to the Inquiry, commenting on the traumatic effects of the removals and institutionalisation. The Sydney Aboriginal Mental Health Unit reported:

**This tragic experience, across several generations, has resulted in incalculable trauma, depression and major mental health problems for Aboriginals.**

This was heightened in cases where physical and sexual abuse occurred.

The duration of separation and constant relocations caused an 'emotional numbing'. Where abuse occurs regularly over a significant period of time, children learn to blunt their emotions and stop outwardly responding to abuse. Often that develops into a pattern in adult life that is difficult to overcome and affects relationships with others.

## Drug use

**I still to this day go through stages of depression. Not that I've ever taken anything for it – except alcohol. I didn't drink for a long time. But when I drink a lot it comes back to me. I end up kind of cracking up.**

(Confidential evidence 529, New South Wales)

## Delinquency and behavioural problems

For young Indigenous people, the common response to being in an institution was delinquency and crime. This was particularly the case for young males.

Much of the evidence to the Inquiry suggested strong links between the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in the crime statistics and the removal of Indigenous children from their families.

In the 1970s, Dr Elizabeth Sommerland surveyed Aboriginal Legal Services across Australia. The survey revealed that a large majority of clients seeking legal aid for criminal offences have also had a history of being in institutions or non-Indigenous foster care.

Other surveys have produced similar results, such as a survey held in 1982 by the Australian Law Reform Commission. In Victoria, 90 percent of all the clients seeking legal aid from the Aboriginal Legal Service had been in placement at some stage. In NSW, this figure was 90–95 percent, with most being raised in non-Indigenous foster care.

For many Indigenous children, delinquency was an immediate response to being removed from their families and relocated to an institution. Again, many carried this pattern of delinquency and rebellion against non-Indigenous society into their adult lives. This would mean that institutionalisation also continued, albeit in the criminal justice system rather than the child welfare system.

**And every time you come back in it doesn't bother you because you're used to it and you see the same faces. It's like you never left, you know, in the end.**

(Confidential evidence 204, Victoria)

## Undermined parenting skills

Another major long-term effect is that those children who were removed experience difficulties in raising their own children. Quite simply, these children were denied role models for parenting.

Psychological studies report on the problems people who were institutionalised as children face in raising their own children as adults. Consider this in light of removals and institutionalisation that would often occur across generations in just one family.

Most forcibly removed children were denied the experience of being parented or at least cared for by a person to whom they were attached. This is the very experience people rely on to become effective and successful parents themselves. Institutions, missions or abusive foster homes are not places where people can develop an idea of what parenting involves.

During the period of removals, many removed Indigenous women were having children quite young. Often, they would leave an institution to work as a domestic servant for a non-Indigenous family, only to return to the institution pregnant. So, many young Indigenous women experienced child-rearing for the first time while they were still experiencing the process of removal.

This set in motion a cycle of removal – the children of a removed child would then be removed. By the stage the discriminatory laws were changed and replaced by welfare laws common to all, Indigenous children were still being removed. These laws required that the child be in a state of 'neglect'. In a large

number of situations, the neglectful environment arose precisely because the parenting skills were undermined.

A majority of Indigenous parents removed as children feared their own children being taken away. Sometimes this would mean they were unwilling to take their children to doctors, school or welfare officers for fear the same thing would happen, as happened to them.

On the other hand, the experience of removal often strengthened their parenting skills. These are people who are conscious of how mistreatment and neglect impacted on their development and seek to protect their children from similar abuses. In other words, they viewed their relationship with their children as even more special, taking it less for granted.

**I have a problem with smacking kids. I won't smack them. I won't control them. I'm just scared of everything about myself. I just don't know how to be a proper parent sometimes. I can never say no, because I think they're going to hate me. I remember hating [my foster mother] so I never want the kids to hate me. I try to be perfect.**

(Confidential evidence 529, New South Wales)

## Loss of cultural heritage

One principal effect of the removal policies was the severe erosion of cultural links. This was of course the aim of these policies. The children were to be:

- 'prevented from acquiring the habits and customs of the Aborigines' (South Australian Protector of Aborigines in 1909)
- 'merged into the present civilisation and become worthy citizens' (NSW Colonial Secretary in 1915).

The intended aim and result of the removals was to prevent Indigenous children from cultivating a sense of Indigenous cultural identity while they were developing their own personal identity.

**When we left Port Augusta, when they took us away, we could only talk Aboriginal. We only knew one language and when we went down there, well we had to communicate somehow. Anyway, when I come back I couldn't even speak my own language. And that really bugged my identity up. It took me 40 odd years before I became a man in my own people's eyes, through Aboriginal law. Whereas I should've went through that when I was about 12 years of age.**

(Confidential evidence 179, South Australia)

In a child's early years, both family and culture are important in developing their personal identity and sense of self. Family and culture also strengthen a person's sense of belonging and personal history. For those Indigenous children who were removed, family and culture were replaced by institutions and non-Indigenous homes – a culture both artificial and alien to them.

For many of those removed, this lack of cultural heritage and knowledge continued through their adult lives as they grew up in a non-Indigenous culture. Some were even denied knowledge of their Aboriginality. Finding this out many years later would change their lives dramatically.

As mentioned, the aim of these policies was to assimilate Indigenous children into non-Indigenous society so they could 'become worthy citizens'. As many of the submissions and histories show, the reality was that those removed could not assimilate into non-Indigenous society. They faced continued discrimination.

Many witnesses to the Inquiry spoke of their strong sense of not belonging either in the Indigenous community or in the non-Indigenous community.

I felt like a stranger in Ernabella, a stranger in my father's people. We had no identity with the land, no identity with a certain people. I've decided in the last 10, 11 years to, y'know, I went through the law. I've been learning culture and learning everything that goes with it because I felt, growing up, that I wasn't really a blackfella. You hear whitefellas tell you you're a blackfella. But blackfellas tell you you're a whitefella. So, you're caught in a half-caste world.

(Confidential evidence 289, South Australia)

While Indigenous cultures were not destroyed by these policies, and continue to exist, they were profoundly changed as a result.

For Indigenous communities, this has had a major practical impact on their ability to claim native title.

## Broken families and communities

The trauma of forcible removal of children affected the parents and other relatives left behind as well as the children taken. Evidence put before the Inquiry clearly established that families and whole communities suffered grievously upon the forcible removal of their children.

The Inquiry drew on psychological research into the effects of child adoption on the parents and other family members. The research found the effects to be similar to those where the child has died.<sup>1</sup>

For example, evidence suggested that Indigenous men lost their purpose in relation to their families and communities. Often their individual responses to that loss took them away from their families: on drinking binges, ending up in hospitals following accidents or assaults, in a gaol or lock-up, or prematurely dead.

The interesting thing was that he was such a great provider ... He was a great provider and had a great name and a great reputation. Now, when this intrusion occurred it had a devastating impact upon him and upon all those values that he believed in and that he put in place in his life which included us, and so therefore I think the effect upon Dad was so devastating. And when that destruction occurred, which was the destruction of his own personal private family which included us, it had a very strong devastating effect on him, so much so that he never ever recovered from the trauma that occurred ...

(Confidential evidence 265, Victoria)

However, the effects went beyond the family members and had a significant impact on Indigenous communities.

Parenting roles, nurturing and socialising responsibilities are widely shared in Indigenous societies. Relatives beyond that of the immediate family have nurturing responsibilities and emotional ties with children as they grow up. When the children were taken, many people in addition to the biological parents were bereft of their role and purpose in connection with those children.

Often, communities would not just lose children, but also entire families. Some Indigenous families would exile themselves, leaving their community, out of a fear that their children would be taken away if they stayed.

But there was an even greater impact on communities. When a child was forcibly removed, the community's chance to maintain itself in that child was lost. A community's continued existence depends, amongst other things, on reproduction. A society's future lies in its children.

<sup>1</sup> Margaret van Keppel and Robin Winkler speaking at the Third Australian Conference on Adoption in 1982.

In North America, where similar policies of removal were in place, a Congressional Inquiry found that the removal of Indian children had a severe impact on Indian tribes, threatening their existence.

**[Children are] core elements of the present and future of the community. The removal of these children creates a sense of death and loss in the community, and the community dies too ... there's a sense of hopelessness that becomes part of the experience for that family, that community ...**

(Lynne Datnow, Victorian Koori Kids Mental Health Network, evidence 135)

## Racism

Those Indigenous children who were placed in institutions faced a hazard over and above that experienced by non-Indigenous children who were institutionalised. This was the continual condemnation and attack upon their Aboriginality and that of their families.

Many witnesses to the Inquiry spoke of an uncertainty of how to feel about their Indigenous heritage, some even feeling negative about it.

At the core of these policies was a value judgement based on race. They imposed European culture as a positive in preference to Indigenous culture, which was over and again presented as a negative. Some Indigenous children would come to internalise this racism. In other words, they would judge themselves according to these standards.

**I didn't know any Aboriginal people at all – none at all. I was placed in a white family and I was just – I was white. I never knew, I never accepted myself to being a black person until – I don't know – I don't know if you ever really do accept yourself as being ... How can you be proud of being Aboriginal after all the humiliation and the anger and the hatred you have? It's unbelievable how much you can hold inside.**

(Confidential evidence 152, Victoria)