



# The Stolen Generations

The forcible removal of First Nations children from their families.



Between 1910 and the 1970s\*, many First Nations children were forcibly removed from their families as a result of various government policies.

In Australia, between 1910 and the 1970s\*, governments, churches and welfare bodies forcibly removed many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. These children became known as the Stolen Generations. Their removal was sanctioned by various government policies (AIATSIS 2022a), which have left a legacy of trauma and loss that continues to affect First Nations communities, families and individuals today.

## Why were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children taken from their families?

The forcible removal of First Nations children from their families was based on [assimilation](#) policies, which claimed that the lives of First Nations people would be improved if they became part of white society. Assimilation policies proposed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples should be allowed to 'die out' through a process of natural elimination, or, where possible, assimilated into the white community (Behrendt 2012).

Policies focused on assimilating children as they were considered more adaptable to white society than adults. Children of First Nations and white parentage were particularly vulnerable to removal because authorities thought these children could be assimilated more easily into the white community due to their lighter skin colour (Behrendt 2012).

Children taken from their parents were denied access to their families, communities and cultures and taught to reject their First Nations heritage in favour of white culture. The children's names were often changed, and many

children were forbidden from speaking First Nations languages. Some children were adopted by white families, and many children were placed in institutions where abuse and neglect were common (Behrendt 2012).

## The impact of child removal and government assimilation policies

The removal of children from their families has had devastating impacts on those who were taken as children, as well as their parents, families and their descendants.

Policies of child removal are linked to high rates of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, suicide and poor health, social and economic outcomes (Behrendt 2012). The Stolen Generations survivors, their families and descendants have experienced greater disadvantage than both non-Indigenous Australians and other First Nations people who were not removed (Larkin 2020).



### The impact on children who were removed from their families:

- Many children were psychologically, physically and sexually abused while living in state care and/or with their adoptive families, leading to lifelong trauma.
- Efforts to make stolen children reject their cultures often created a sense of shame about being of First Nations heritage. This resulted in children experiencing a disconnection from land, language and culture, and an inability to pass cultural knowledge on to their own children.
- Many children were wrongly told that their parents were abusive, had died or had abandoned them. Many children never knew where they'd been taken from or who their biological families were.
- Living conditions in the institutions where children were often placed were highly controlled, and children were frequently punished harshly, were cold and hungry and received minimal, if any, affection.
- Children removed from their families generally received a very low level of education, as they were expected to work as manual labourers and domestic servants and received negligible if any payment for their services (see Stolen wages). This has had lifelong social and economic implications.(HREOC 1997)

## The impact on parents and family members of First Nations children removed from their communities:

- Many parents never recovered from the grief of having their children removed.
- Some parents couldn't go on living without their children, while other parents turned to substance abuse as a coping mechanism.
- Many siblings were separated, and many First Nations people are still searching for their parents and siblings. (HREOC 1997)

## The impact on First Nations descendants of members of the Stolen Generations:

- The removal of several generations of children severely disrupted the passing on of First Nations cultures, and consequently much cultural knowledge has been lost or lay dormant.
- People who were removed as children were often deprived of living in a healthy family situation and prevented from learning parenting skills. In some instances, this has resulted in generations of children being raised in state care (Behrendt 2012). Some people and organisations call this a 'new Stolen Generation' (Family Matters 2020).
- Many people are still experiencing intergenerational trauma that results when the effects of trauma are passed down to the next generation.

## Like too many children of the Stolen Generations, Ruth was removed from her mother as a young child

Ruth was six months old when she arrived at Cherbourg Mission. It was during the period of the Great Depression and times were tough. Word had spread that Cherbourg Mission could offer assistance to families in need, and Ruth's mother was seeking support for her aging parents.

What was intended as a temporary visit turned into years of institutionalised living. Ruth's mother was placed into a women's dormitory and was prevented from leaving the mission. When Ruth was just four years old, she was taken from her mother and placed into a separate dormitory. "Once you were taken from your parents, you had no more connection with them", Ruth explains.

Over the following months, Ruth recalls seeing her mother from a distance. However, when Ruth was five, her mother was sent away from Cherbourg and forced to leave her daughter behind. "People would say it was for your own good, but my own good was to stay with my mum", Ruth says firmly. Ruth's story is one of thousands of children and families who were similarly separated across Australia.

## What's been done to address the ongoing impact of the removal of First Nations children in Australia?

Individuals, families, communities and organisations (such as the Healing Foundation) have been working to reconnect members of the Stolen Generations and their descendants with family members, First Nations communities, cultures

and Country, and to heal the hurt caused by child removals. This important work has been ongoing for many decades and continues today.

In 1980, a government Link-Up service was established in New South Wales to support members of the Stolen Generations in their search to reconnect with their families. Over the next 15 years this expanded to all states and territories, and the service continues to assist members of the Stolen Generations and subsequent generations today (AIATSIS 2022b). In 1995, the Australian Government launched an inquiry into the policy of forced child removal. The report, *Bringing them Home*, was delivered to Parliament on 26 May 1997. It estimated that between 10 and 33 per cent of all First Nations children were separated from their families between 1910 and 1970, and concluded that this was a breach of fundamental human rights.

While it was the Keating Government that commissioned the inquiry into the Stolen Generations, the Howard Government had come to power by the time the report was finalised and largely ignored its 54 recommendations.

Recommendations included financial compensation for victims of the Stolen Generations on a national level. Some state-level reparations have been made; however, many people who were removed as children have found they don't fit the criteria for these compensation schemes. Other people have said that no amount of money will ever be able to compensate them for the trauma they were put through (Boney 2016).

## What does the history of the Stolen Generations mean for all Australians today?

The forcible removal of First Nations children from their families had a profound impact that's still being experienced today. It's led to many First Nations people suffering a loss of identity and culture, and left many families living with intergenerational trauma in a cycle of abuse and violence.

A report released by the Healing Foundation in 2020 found that Stolen Generations survivors and their descendants still experience greater disadvantage, across a range of life indicators, when compared to both other First Nations people and to non-Indigenous Australians (Larkin 2020).

The anniversary of the 2008 National Apology is on 13 February, and 26 May is National Sorry Day, the anniversary of the day the *Bringing Them Home* report was tabled in Parliament in 1997. Each year these dates are an opportunity for all people who call Australia home, to learn more by listening to the voices of First Nations people who are affected by the Stolen Generations.

Ruth, featured in the video above, is one of many First Nations people who has taken the courageous step of sharing her story.

Listening to these stories helps people understand what happened, which is the first step towards acknowledging our painful history, and building a brighter future.

\*Policies of forced removals were in place from 1910 to 1969, but there are many stories of forced removals prior to and after these dates.

AIATSIS (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies) (2022a) [The Stolen Generations](#), AIATSIS website, accessed 20 June 2022.

AIATSIS (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies) (2022b) [Link-Up](#), AIATSIS website, accessed 20 June 2022.

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