

Stolen generations—bringing them home

Who are the stolen generations?

The term “stolen generations” refers to the large numbers of Indigenous children removed from their families and communities through much of the twentieth century, many in ways which could only be described as stolen or kidnapped. The *Bringing Them Home* Report uses “forcible removal policies” to identify the authority under which children were removed illegally or through “compulsion, duress or undue influence”.

Australia’s official approach to Indigenous people moved from an early period of segregation, through a period of protectionism – where the Indigenous population was moved to reserves or missions controlled by white officials – to an era of assimilation in which Aboriginal Australians were to be merged and to disappear within the general population. Child separation policies and practices of the time became tools for the assimilation of Indigenous children.

In the twentieth century tens of thousands of indigenous children were removed from their families to be raised in institutions, or by foster parents. Proportional to their population, far more Indigenous children were removed than white children. Sometimes the reason for removal was simply “for being Aboriginal”. Indigenous families and communities were terrified of “welfare” and their powers of removal.

Children were sometimes taken when parents were absent, from their school or on their way home from school. They simply one day never returned home. Children were also taken under the premise of “going on a holiday”. The police who took them promised their parents they would be returned to their families after a short period away. Some saw their parents only thirty years later. Many people who were stolen now recount the trauma of being taken and how their parents attempted to hide them from police and welfare officers.

They remember being rolled in the ashes of the fire when Aboriginal Welfare Board officers were approaching so that their lighter skin shade would be disguised. Others recount being hidden in their mother’s skirts or placed inside potato sacks.

Why were Indigenous children taken from family?

Aboriginal people have been taken since the earliest days of the colony, but the practice became more widespread in the early years of the twentieth century. By then it was generally believed that the numbers of children of black/white mixed parentage were growing. Australian Governments became alarmed at a prospect that could not be reconciled with the white Australia policy. Their answer was to produce a servant class of Indigenous girls as house-maids and Indigenous boys as farm-hands, socialised into white ways. These Indigenous children could be made useful and, after several generations, would lose all trace of Aboriginality. After removal,

administrators treated such children as though they had no Aboriginal ancestry. Churches also became involved in housing and preparing Indigenous children for their future roles in white society as part of this servant class.

How many Indigenous children were taken?

There are immense difficulties in estimating the number of children taken. Many records have been lost and, in many cases, no records were kept. Early in the twentieth century only those of full Aboriginal inheritance were defined as Aboriginal, so many of those removed were not identified. In fact the administrative procedure deliberately attempted to remove a person’s Aboriginal identity. And since anyone who acknowledged Aboriginality put their children at risk of removal, many people of mixed Aboriginal and white heritage were obliged to be a party to this.

Research suggests that in the period 1910 to 1970, 10,000 Indigenous people “did not know their families or communities” as a result of their removal. In 1994 the Australian Bureau of Statistics conducted a survey of Indigenous people aged 25 years and over. About 17,000 stated that they had been removed, 4,500 of them after 1970. Robert Manne, a social historian, used this survey as a basis for estimating that 20,000 to 25,000 Indigenous children were removed between 1910 and 1970. *Bringing Them Home* estimated the number of removals as between one in ten and one in three, and investigations since then tend towards the lower end of this estimate.

The results of being taken from family

The experience of being taken from family was traumatic. It delivered loneliness, dislocation, deprivation of affection and love, and created stress and grief. It resulted in deep depression, losses of identity, of culture, of language, of history, of family and of community and caused deep psychological harm and, in many cases, mental illness. Stolen generations children were deprived of family life and, in turn, many were unable to parent their own children successfully.

For many, a double dispossession has resulted from their being taken. Many have grown up in institutions on the lands of other Indigenous peoples. Not being part of the local Indigenous people, they are excluded from land claims and a share in land purchases bought from community funds or land purchase grants.

Because of their loss of family, community and culture, they have been unable to claim rights such as native title in their home country. Even if they do discover their family, they do not know the culturally appropriate ways of behaving, and their journey from outsider to an accepted community member is often long and painful.

Stolen generations—bringing them home

It is time to do more than walk and sign 'Sorry Books.'

It is time to make things happen in a way that brings justice to the lives of the Stolen Generations, their families and communities for the attempted genocide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, families, communities and nations by the forced removals of tens of thousands of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander children from their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities.

In ten years, the Federal government has committed only \$116 million in response to the *Bringing Them Home Report*. There are still 52 Recommendations of the *Bringing Them Home Report* that have not been fully implemented. We must ask: Where has the money gone? Why are the Stolen Generations still waiting for justice?

At the State and Territory level, Tasmania is the only State that has realised some form of monetary compensation for the Stolen Generations of Tasmania. All States and Territory Governments have apologised to the Stolen Generations of their individual States and Territories. At the Federal level however, the Government has refused to apologise and has not committed the appropriate resources to addressing the recommendations of the *Bringing Them Home Report*.

The National Sorry Day Committee (NSDC) is inviting each Australian to unite in a national 10-year commitment to fully implement the *Bringing Them Home Report* to demand the 54 Recommendations in the report be implemented by the year 2017.

Sorry Day is only one day of the year that commemorates, acknowledges, and honours the Stolen Generations. Action needs to happen every day until all 54 recommendations of the *Bringing Them Home Report* are fulfilled. This needs Individuals, Groups and Communities from every Region, State and Territory.

MUCH MORE NEEDS TO BE DONE.

Bringing them Home Report

On 26th May 1997 the Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families was tabled in Federal Parliament. The *Bringing Them Home Report*, revealed the extent of forced removal policies, which went on for more than 150 years and into the 1980's.

The *Bringing Them Home Report* detailed unquestionable evidence about the forced removal of thousands of Indigenous children from their families and communities. The report documented numerous case studies, outlining the impacts of child removal policies on Indigenous individuals, their families and communities. It examined the contemporary legacies of these policies that are evident in the social disruption and continuing disadvantage experienced by so many Indigenous Australians.

The Report revealed the shattering effects of these policies in terms of broken families; diminished physical and mental health; loss of language, culture and connection to traditional land; loss of parenting skills and the enormous distress of many of its victims today. It also revealed the trans-generational impact and damaging effects that these forced child removals continue to have on the Indigenous families and communities from which those children were ripped apart.

The most shocking finding of the *Bringing Them Home Report* was that to date, not one Aboriginal family had escaped the effects of the forced removal policies. The Inquiry made 54 recommendations on a wide range of issues which were directed to governments, churches, and other community groups.

This largely unknown history has stirred intense concern. The *Bringing Them Home Report* has sold more copies than any comparable report. The release of the findings of the *Bringing Them Home Report* had a profound effect on the Australian public.

The *Bringing Them Home Report* recommended (Recommendation No 7.a) that a National Sorry Day be held each year on 26 May "to commemorate the history of forcible removals and its effects." As a result of this recommendation the community-based organisation the National Sorry Day Committee was formed with affiliated groups in each State and Territory.

National Sorry Day is now held annually on May 26. This day brings together thousands of Australians, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. It is a day to pause, to grieve together and to re-commit ourselves to making things better for members of the Stolen Generations, their families, and communities. It is significant for the social emotional wellbeing of all Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

The National Sorry Day Committee believes that as a nation we have not yet adequately assisted the stolen generations in their journey to recovery and health. This is a challenge for Governments and the Australian community alike. The energy and spirit so evident following the release of *Bringing Them Home* gives hope that if the Government will give leadership, the community will respond.

Reference: www.nsdcc.org.au (National Sorry Day Committee)

