

The National Apology to the Stolen Generations

QUICK FACTS

February 13 marks the anniversary of the National Apology to the Stolen Generations. It was a significant milestone for healing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who suffered as a result of past government policies of forced child removal and assimilation.

It is important that, as a nation, we commemorate and acknowledge the wrongs of the past, while reflecting on the work that still needs to be done to address the impacts of unresolved trauma.

1. Who are the Stolen Generations?

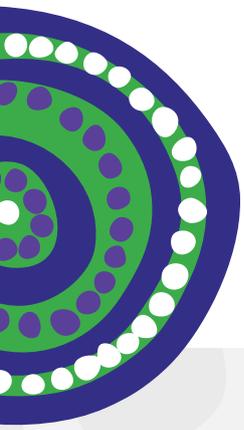
The term 'Stolen Generations' refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were forcibly removed, as children, from their families and communities and placed into institutional care or with non-Indigenous foster families by government, welfare or church organisations. Many of these removals occurred as the result of official laws and policies aimed at assimilating the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population into the wider community.

The 1997 *Bringing them Home* report (resulting from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families), found that between 1 in 3 children were forcibly removed in the years between 1910 and 1970, with removal practices beginning as early as the mid-1800s. The Western Australian and Queensland Governments have confirmed that during that period, all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in their States were affected by the forced removal of children.

It's important to understand that the term 'Stolen Generations' refers to those children who were removed on the basis of their race. The predominant aim of the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families was to absorb or assimilate children with mixed ancestry into the non-Indigenous community. As Brisbane's Telegraph newspaper reported in May 1937:

"Mr Neville [the Chief Protector of WA] holds the view that within 100 years the pure black will be extinct. But the half-caste problem is increasing every year. Therefore their idea is to keep the pure blacks segregated and absorb the half-castes into the white population."





2. How do we know about the stories of the Stolen Generations?

After speaking to nearly a thousand witnesses, the authors of the *Bringing them Home* report documented extensive evidence of past practices and policies that resulted in the removal of children.

It also detailed the conditions into which many of the children were placed and discussed the ongoing impacts of unresolved trauma, on individuals, their families and the broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. The Inquiry received nearly 800 formal submissions from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, government and church representatives, former mission staff, foster and adoptive parents, doctors and health professionals, academics, police and others.

Between 1997 and 2001, all State and Territory governments acknowledged past practices and policies of forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children on the basis of race and apologised for the trauma these policies have caused. The National Apology was made seven years later.

3. Why was the National Apology so important?

The *Bringing them Home* report found that forced removal has had lifelong and profoundly negative impacts for Stolen Generations survivors, their families and communities. These policies continued right up until the 1970s and many of those affected by the trauma are still alive today. The removal of children has created a cycle of intergenerational trauma, where the impact is passed from one generation to the next.

Stolen children lost connection to family, land, culture and language and were placed in more than 480 institutions and fostered by non-Indigenous people. They were often subject to neglect, physical, mental and sexual abuse. The mothers, fathers, families and communities who were left behind also suffered from the loss.

One witness said:

"It never goes away. Just 'cause we're not walking around on crutches or with bandages or plasters on our legs and arms, doesn't mean we're not hurting. Just 'cause you can't see it doesn't mean ... I suspect I'll carry these sorts of wounds 'til the day I die. I'd just like it to be not quite as intense, that's all." (Confidential Evidence 580, Queensland Bringing them Home Report.)

The first step in healing trauma is often the acknowledgment of truth and the delivery of an apology. The release of the *Bringing them Home* report was followed by a wave of apologies to the Stolen Generations by state parliaments, judges, churches, civic associations, trade unions and ethnic groups. However, it remained the responsibility of the Australian Government, on behalf of previous Australian Governments that administered this wrongful policy, to acknowledge what was done.

4. Why was the word 'sorry' important as part of the Apology?

The word 'sorry' in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and cultures holds special meaning, and it is often used to describe the rituals surrounding death (Sorry Business). Sorry, in this context, expresses empathy, sympathy and an acknowledgment of loss rather than responsibility.



5. Why did today's Australians apologise for something they weren't responsible for?

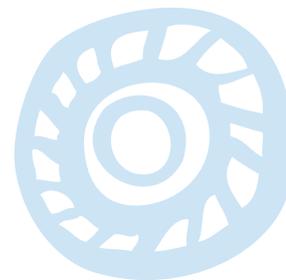
The Apology was not an expression of personal responsibility or guilt by individual Australians. It was provided by the Australian Government in recognition of policies of past governments.

No individual Australian was asked to take personal responsibility for actions of past governments. Saying sorry was about acknowledging the pain and suffering of the individuals, their families and communities.

6. Why should we apologise when many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are better off because they were removed from bad circumstances?

Evidence shows that the overwhelming impact of forced removal policies was damaging and that most children were removed for the reason of assimilation. While some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were removed from their families on genuine welfare grounds, this was not the experience of the majority.

Of those who were sent to foster homes, almost a quarter of witnesses to the *Bringing them Home* Inquiry reported being physically abused and 1 in 5 reported sexual abuse. Of those sent to institutions, 1 in 6 children reported physical abuse and 1 in 10 reported sexual abuse. Many others reported deprivation, neglect and suffering from the loss of their family and culture.



7. Was the Apology a step towards compensation for the Stolen Generations?

The *Bringing them Home* report recommended establishing a national compensation fund for peoples affected by the forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The idea of the fund was to offer reparation to those affected and avoid the courts having to deal with costly individual litigation.

The United Nations Human Rights Committee has also recommended the Australian Government adopt a mechanism to compensate survivors of the Stolen Generations, similar to steps taken by other countries.

Since then, three states (New South Wales, Tasmania and South Australia) have set up compensation funds or reparation schemes to address the ongoing trauma experienced by children forcefully removed from their families. Victoria has announced is in the process of setting up a redress scheme.

We have also seen a range of processes set up to support the victims of abuse in State care or sexual abuse in institutions, which includes some Stolen Generations survivors.

A National Reparations Framework would ensure fair and equal access to compensation and a comprehensive scheme that provides a package of measures to heal trauma at a personal, community and intergenerational level. The Healing Foundation's ongoing study to assess contemporary needs for Stolen Generations will provide vital information that could inform this framework.



8. What has the Federal Government done for the Stolen Generations since 2008?

On 13 February 2009, the first anniversary of the Apology, the Australian Government announced a healing foundation to address trauma and aid healing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This followed widespread consultation with communities.

9. How important was the Apology to reconciliation?

These formal apologies were an important step towards building a respectful new relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians. Many Stolen Generations survivors felt that their pain and suffering was acknowledged and that the nation understood the need to right the wrongs of the past.

In this way, the Apology lays the groundwork for us to work more effectively towards achieving better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and the broader Australian community.

10. What's happening now?

While the anniversary of the National Apology is a milestone that all Australians can be proud of, many Stolen Generations survivors, their families and communities are still feeling the hurt, pain and loss from being forcibly removed from their families. By remembering what happened, as part of those commemorations, we are supporting ongoing healing. The anniversary is a time to reflect on the work that still needs to be done to address unresolved trauma.

In 2018, a report collated by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), commissioned by The Healing Foundation, was released. This report provided comprehensive data that illustrates direct links between the forced removal of tens of thousands of children from their families and the real-life symptoms of intergenerational trauma within today's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The report determined that 1 in 7 Indigenous Australians now aged 50 and over were removed from their families, and it noted how the intergenerational transfer of trauma is an underlying cause of issues like family violence, substance abuse, high suicide and incarceration rates.

The AIHW report is part of an ongoing needs analysis being led by The Healing Foundation, with funding from the Federal Government. It will be used to guide priorities for future strategies and services, especially for survivors of the Stolen Generations approaching their elderly years. The aged care needs for these survivors of the Stolen Generations are far more complex than those of the average ageing Australian, given the high rate of child removal and institutionalisation they have experienced.

The report estimates that 17,150 survivors of the Stolen Generations are still alive today and that they experience higher levels of adversity in relation to almost all 38 key health and welfare outcomes examined. Ensuring that appropriate aged care supports are in place for Stolen Generations survivors is essential to honour them in their final years.

