



# Addressing the gap within the gap

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## Abstract

A new report from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has provided vital information about the numbers, demographic characteristics, and health and welfare status of the Stolen Generations and their descendants, which will influence future policy and service development. It has also measured the ongoing impact of past policies which led to the forced removal of tens of thousands of children from their families, by documenting high levels of disproportionate disadvantage across most of 38 critical health and welfare factors analysed.

By showing that the Stolen Generations and their families experience greater levels of adversity than other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (who are already at a disadvantage in Australia), we can see a direct link between traumatic childhood experiences, inter-generational trauma, and many of the social and health issues in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities today.

The Healing Foundation is using this data to help build an Action Plan for Healing and promote the

need for increased and specific healing-centred services across areas of Australia where the Stolen Generations and their descendants live.

**Keywords:** trauma, intergenerational trauma, healing, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage, Closing the Gap, health and wellbeing, Stolen Generations.

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## Introduction

For more than two decades, the Stolen Generations have been telling Australians about the challenges they face in their every-day life, as a result of their painful childhood experiences and the unresolved trauma they continue to carry. They have also documented their fears about a legacy of trauma, and associated disadvantage unknowingly passed on to their families (Healing Foundation, 2017). The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1997) *Bringing Them Home* report, which augmented widespread public discussion around these issues, uncovered individual stories of loss, isolation, abuse, sexual assault, and neglect when children were taken from their homes to be institutionalised and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://healingfoundation.org.au>

trained for domestic servitude, farm work, or fostered with non-Indigenous families. It was also the first report to describe the extent of harm and ongoing burden created as a result of forcibly removing tens of thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, under government legislation to achieve assimilation. However, the report's recommendations designed to address trauma were never properly implemented. As a result of its analysis of anecdotal reports and limited research holdings, the Healing Foundation suspected that trauma-related issues in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities had significantly escalated (Healing Foundation, 2017).

On the back of the *Bringing Them Home* report's 20th anniversary, The Healing Foundation received federal government funding to undertake a demographic analysis and needs assessment to quantify the contemporary size, characteristics, and needs of the Stolen Generations, using both quantitative and qualitative data sources (Healing Foundation, 2017). As part of that broader Action Plan for the Healing project, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW, 2018a) was commissioned to develop Australia's first detailed demographic and policy impact study of the Stolen Generations and their descendants.

This report has four main components:

- Estimates of the numbers, demographic characteristics, and geographic location of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population born before 1972 who were removed from their families, as a proxy for the surviving members of the Stolen Generations.
- Estimates of the numbers, demographic characteristics, and location of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population aged 18 and over whose elder relatives were removed in the past.
- Comparisons of differences in selected health, welfare, socioeconomic, and cultural outcomes between these two groups and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of the same age group who did not have experience with removal.
- Comparisons of differences in some selected health, welfare, and socioeconomic

outcomes between these groups and similar aged non-Indigenous people (AIHW, 2018a).

The report identified numerous gaps in trying to quantify the contemporary size, characteristics, and needs of the Stolen Generations and the specific effects of forced removal practices on critical health, wellbeing, and economic factors. It is also the first time The Healing Foundation has had comprehensive data to illustrate the direct link between the forced removal of tens of thousands of children from their families and the real-life experiences of intergenerational trauma across families and communities.

## Methods

The AIHW (2018a) analysis is based on data from five surveys conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) between 2002 and 2015. This includes the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS; ABS, 2004, 2009, 2016) and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (ABS, 2006, 2013). These are large, nationally representative surveys, containing a consistent set of information and detailed data on a wide range of topics, including removal from family.

Making use of the time series nature of the ABS surveys, the AIHW (2018a) report has been able to make comparisons between outcomes for the Stolen Generations and those for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the same age cohort who were not removed from their families. This approach provides a more reliable perspective on the differences between the Stolen Generations and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and therefore, the specific impact of forced removal practices.

Limited use has also been made of the ABS 2014 General Social Survey (ABS, 2014), and of administrative data from an AIHW Online Services Report on the total Indigenous and Stolen Generations clients who access social and emotional wellbeing support and Link-Up services (Australian Government, 2020).

Where outcomes are measured in a similar way, non-Indigenous data was sourced from the 2014 General Social Survey (ABS, 2014) and compared with the Indigenous data from the 2014–15

NATSISS (ABS, 2016) to measure disadvantage for the Stolen Generations compared to non-Indigenous Australians.

The statistics relating to the numbers of Stolen Generations and their descendants are estimates, based on data from people born before 1972 when it is generally accepted that forced removal practices came to an end (AIHW, 2018a). Due to the way data was collected for the ABS surveys, the numbers could include people who were removed during the period of active Stolen Generations policies but outside the context of those policies. In addition, many Stolen Generations members have chosen to keep their story secret over many decades, and the ABS surveys relied on self-reporting of removal. Also, the surveys only targeted people who live in private dwellings, so anyone who was homeless or living in an institution would not be included.

## Results

### The Stolen Generations

Before this project, we did not know how many Stolen Generations members were still alive and had very limited information about where and how they live making it difficult to confidently identify needs or determine priorities for healing strategies. The AIHW (2018a) report has estimated that 17,150 members of the Stolen Generations are living across Australia today. Among all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people born before 1972 (when forced removal policies were abandoned), around 1 in 10 (11%) report being removed. In Western Australia, almost a quarter (24%) of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people born before 1972 reported being removed from their families. In South Australia, this proportion was 16%, and in other jurisdictions, between 11 and 13%.

We also now know that contemporarily

- almost three-quarters (73%) of the Stolen Generations live in New South Wales (30%), Western Australia (22%), and Queensland (21%);
- just over half (56%) are women;
- the majority (79%) live in non-remote areas; and
- two-thirds (66%) were aged 50 and over in 2015.

In terms of determining the impact of past removal practices, the report paints a disturbing picture of health issues, disability, and poor economic security factors for the Stolen Generations. For example,

- 67% live with a disability or restrictive long-term condition;
- 70% rely on government payments as their main source of income;
- 39%, aged over 50, report poor mental health;
- 62%, of working age, are not employed; and
- 91% never completed Year 12 of schooling.

The AIHW (2018a) data shows that even compared to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the same age group, who are already at a significant disadvantage in Australia; the Stolen Generations are suffering more financially, socially, and in areas of health and wellbeing. In fact, they experience higher levels of adversity in relation to most of the 38 key health and welfare outcomes analysed in the AIHW (2018a) report. This disproportionate level of disadvantage demonstrates the negative impact of past actions that forcibly removed children from their families.

Compared to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the same age group, the Stolen Generations are

- 3.3 times as likely to have been incarcerated in the last five years,
- 2.2 times as likely to have ever been formally charged by police,
- 1.8 times as likely to rely on government payments as their main source of income,
- 1.7 times as likely to have experienced violence in the previous 12 months,
- 1.7 times as likely to *not* own their home,
- 1.6 times as likely *not* to be employed,
- 1.6 times likely to be in poor health,
- 1.6 times as likely to have experienced homelessness in the last ten years,
- 1.5 times as likely to have mental health problems, and
- 1.5 times as likely to have experienced discrimination in the previous 12 months.

The Stolen Generations are also more likely to report chronic health conditions, compared to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in

the same age cohort. For example, they are more likely to suffer cancer (9.1% compared to 7.1%), diabetes (37.8% compared to 28.8%) and heart disease (44.2% compared to 36.9%). Compared to non-Indigenous Australians, the divergence is much greater being 4.5 times as likely to suffer heart disease and 3.9 times as likely to suffer a stroke.

### Descendants

Around 33% of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adult population, which is between 133,400 to 158,000 people, are estimated to be descendants of the Stolen Generations. For the purposes of the AIHW (2018a) report, descendants include children, grandchildren, nephews, and nieces; portraying the extended family framework in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities. The report found that

- a higher percentage (55%) are women;
- the majority (84%) live in non-remote areas;
- a large percentage (73%) are concentrated in New South Wales, Queensland, and Western Australia; and
- in 2014-15, 13% of the descendants (around 15,000) reported that they had also been removed from their families.

The story of disadvantage continues for these descendants, proving that the negative impact of past atrocities is having a flow-on effect to families and communities. According to the AIHW (2018a) report, descendants consistently experience poorer health and social outcomes. For example, compared to other adult Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, they are

- 2.0 times as likely to have experienced discrimination in the last 12 months,
- 1.9 times as likely to have experienced violence in the last 12 months,
- 1.6 times as likely to be in poor health,
- 1.5 times as likely to have been arrested by police in the last five years,
- 1.4 times as likely to have low levels of trust in the general community,
- 1.3 times as likely to report poor mental health, and
- 1.2 times as likely to have used substances in the last 12 months.

Compared with the reference group, descendants were significantly more likely to experience a range of stressors which affect health, wellbeing,

and economic status; including divorce or separation; death in the family; serious illness; alcohol or drug-related issues; gambling problems; mental illness unexpected loss of job; being a witness to violence, abuse, or violent crime; and trouble with the police.

For example, in 2014–15, 41% of descendants reported being ever charged by police, compared with 32% in the reference group, and 39% had experienced homelessness in their lives, compared with 21% for the reference group.

In the preceding 12 months to the 2015 ABS survey, three-quarters of descendants (75%) had experienced stress, 48% had experienced discrimination, 34% had poor mental health, 34% engaged in short-term risky alcohol consumption, and 31% had used substances.

In relation to socioeconomic outcomes, 67% of descendants (all aged over 18) did not own a home, 45% relied on government payments as their main source of income, 43% were not employed, and 30% had personal income in the bottom three deciles.

### Cultural connection

As increasing levels of research holdings prove the link between cultural connection and wellbeing (AIHW, 2018b) it is significant to note that despite their forced isolation from culture as children, many of the Stolen Generations identify with a clan, tribal, or language group today and that they recognise an area as homeland or traditional country. This shows both the importance and draw of cultural connection and, potentially, the success of Link-Up and reconnection services across Australia since the *Bringing Them Home* report was tabled. However, they were twice as likely as other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the same age group to *not* be able to speak an Indigenous language which is the product of their segregation from culture as children and government policies to prohibit the speaking of languages other than English.

As you would expect, this trend continues for descendants. A relatively high proportion identifying with a clan, tribal, or language group and involved in cultural events but reporting significantly lower rates for speaking an Indigenous language as the main language spoken

at home (3% compared with 17% for the reference group); understanding an Indigenous language (14% compared with 25%); and speaking any Indigenous language at all (13% compared with 24%).

### **Access to services**

The AIHW (2018a) report, supported by The Healing Foundation's ongoing research, also highlights current failures in delivering effective and accessible solutions to heal trauma and close the gap on disadvantage (AIHW 2018b). For example, almost one third (32%) of the Stolen Generations report having problems accessing services (AIHW, 2018a). The Stolen Generations and their descendants are 1.5 times as likely to report access difficulties than other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Our ongoing research suggests that this is largely because of a lack of appropriate healing services across areas where we now know that the Stolen Generations and their families live (AIHW 2018a). Poor accessibility is also linked to issues of trust and a failure to provide services that are trauma-informed and culturally focused (AIHW 2018b).

## **Conclusion and Application**

The data in this report highlights some critical truths about the ongoing impact of forced removal policies and has broad implications across the Indigenous policy landscape in Australia.

Firstly, the AIHW (2018a) report shows that the Stolen Generations and their descendants have become the gap within the gap of prosperity and wellbeing. While appalling, this level of disproportionate disadvantage should not come as a surprise to anyone. If people do not have an opportunity to heal from traumatic childhood events, it continues to impact on the way they think and behave, which can lead to a range of negative outcomes including poor health, isolation, suicide, and violence. This, in turn, leads to social and economic disadvantage. The Stolen Generations were also systematically denied a proper education or an equal wage, which put them at a financial disadvantage right from the start.

Through decades of family study and psychology practice, we also understand that trauma is often unknowingly passed down to the next generation, particularly affecting children who are more susceptible to developmental damage when they experience trauma at a young age (AIHW, 2019). In the case of the Stolen Generations, parents might also pass on the impacts of institutionalisation, finding it difficult to know how to nurture their own children because they were denied the opportunity to be nurtured themselves. Importantly, research has shown that people are not just affected by the traumatic events that they directly experience. Witnessing or hearing about trauma for their family or community will also result in intergenerational trauma (AIHW 2018a).

As the Stolen Generations' descendant population keeps growing in Australia, so will experiences with trauma and its many negative outcomes, including reduced opportunities in education and employment which are key drivers for personal financial betterment.

## **Next Steps**

It is easy to conclude from this AIHW (2018a) report that if we methodically address trauma, we can make greater inroads into improving all areas of prosperity, health and wellbeing for the Stolen Generations and their descendants. And if we can change the future for this group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders - who have become the gap within the gap, we can make significant inroads in the overall Closing the Gap struggle.

The work of The Healing Foundation over the past nine years has shown that investment in the right healing programs will create change and reduce the burden on public funds. For example, independent analysis shows that participation in

- Men's healing programs have led to a 50% reduction in contact with Corrective Services and a drop in family violence (The Healing Foundation, 2015).
- Programs for young people have potentially reduced contact with the protection system by 18.5% and the juvenile justice system by nearly 14%. (The Healing Foundation, 2017).

More than 70% of Stolen Generations members who have participated in healing projects report

an improved ability to care for their grief and reconnect with family and community (Healing Foundation, 2017).

As part of The Healing Foundation’s ongoing research to develop an Action Plan for Healing, we identified strategies and services in relation to four main themes:

1. Accessible healing resources and services; which means both an increase in services and an effort to make them more trauma-informed and culturally focused. This report shows that the Stolen Generations and their descendants are more likely to be struggling to access the support they need and so we need to scale up healing responses across Australia, particularly where we now know high populations of Stolen Generations and their descendants live. When we involve Aboriginal people in co-designing healing-centred services, we get better results, and when we train service providers so that they understand how trauma works, they are more likely to pick up warning signs early, diagnose problems correctly, and find solutions that work.
2. A national strategy for addressing intergenerational trauma. The symptoms of intergenerational trauma are clearly outlined in this report, providing the impetus for a comprehensive and long-term commitment to increase healing services under the auspices of a specific strategy. This strategy will provide high-level guidance for Australian governments and service providers so that they design and operate programs that meet needs and tackle intergenerational trauma as an underlying cause of many social and health problems in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. If we keep taking a shot-gun approach, we will keep failing.
3. Services to address the specific needs of an ageing Stolen Generations population, with very complex needs. From the AIHW (2018a) report, we see that two-thirds of the Stolen Generations were aged over 50 in 2015 and that within five years they will all be eligible for aged care support. However, their aged care needs are far more complex than the average ageing Australian. The Stolen Generations need and deserve assistance in their ageing years, but given their past experiences, it is vital that we find public-funded alternatives to institutionalisation and

create services to deal with trauma-related issues that emerge with ageing.

4. Reparations to acknowledge the wrongs of the past; and address the disadvantage outlined in the AIHW report (2018a). Almost three-quarters of the Stolen Generations live in New South Wales, Queensland, and Western Australia, and yet only one of those states has comprehensively addressed reparations for the Stolen Generations. We need a national framework to create a comprehensive scheme that is fair for everyone, in line with the national redress scheme being implemented in response to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (The Healing Foundation, 2018). This framework will help make amends for the poor education and minimal wages given to many Stolen Generations members and the multiple issues of poor health and wellbeing uncovered by the AIHW (2018a) project.

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