

Let's talk...

The Apology



The National Apology to the Stolen Generations

13 February marks the anniversary of the National Apology to the Stolen Generations, who suffered as a result of past government policies of forced child removal and assimilation.

It is important, that as a nation, we commemorate this significant milestone, acknowledging 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 Australians who were forcibly removed, as children, from their families and communities and placed into institutional care or with non-Indigenous foster families. 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 authorities involved were from government, welfare or church organisations.

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 10 and 3 in 10 children were forcibly removed in the years between 1910 and 1970 (removal practices began 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 (proof of neglect was often not required). 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, authors of the *Bringing Them Home* report documented extensive evidence of past practices and policies which resulted in the removal of children. It also detailed the conditions into which many of the children were placed and discussed the ongoing impact 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 people, 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.

4 Why was the National Apology so important?

The National Apology was an historic acknowledgement of the wrongs done to the Stolen Generations. It was a significant step towards building a respectful new relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The impact of the Apology is evidence of the importance of historical acceptance, which is one of the five dimensions we use to describe and measure reconciliation. Historical acceptance is not just about accepting and understanding our shared history and its ongoing impacts – it's about making sure that Australia does what is necessary to ensure past wrongs are never repeated

The *Bringing Them Home* report found that forced removal has had life-long and profoundly destructive consequences for those taken. These policies continued right up until the 1970s and many of those affected by the trauma are still alive today.

Stolen children lost connection to family, land, culture and language and were taken to homes and institutions where they were often abused, neglected and unloved. The mothers, fathers and family 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 who 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, 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. Similarly, the former Australian Government apologised to Vietnam veterans for the policies of previous 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.

To achieve reconciliation, the Australian community and our major institutions must understand and acknowledge the wrongs of the past and understand their effects. The trauma experienced by Indigenous people as a result of past laws, policies and practices continues to be passed from generation to generation, with devastating consequences. Addressing intergenerational trauma involves building a better understanding among the broader Australian community of the continuing impact of past actions on the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today. This process is essential to achieving truth, justice and healing.

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

Evidence shows that the overwhelming impact of the forced removal policy 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 went 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 people 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 victims of the Stolen Generations, similar to steps taken by other countries.

Since then three states (NSW, 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. 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 members.

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. Since then, The Healing Foundation has:

- assisted more than 45,000 people in their personal healing journeys
- funded almost 170 community based healing projects
- provided nearly 500 organisations with grants for local commemorative events

9 How important was the Apology to reconciliation?

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

The Apology made it clear that understanding and acknowledging past wrongs and their continuing impact is crucial to building stronger relationships, which are at the heart of reconciliation. 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.

However, while it was an historic step, it was only a starting point. A comprehensive formal process of truth-telling about our shared history is necessary to achieve justice and thereby healing, and to ensure that past wrongs are never repeated.

10 Why is it important to celebrate the anniversary of the National Apology?



It's a milestone that all Australians can be proud of and it's important to bring all Australians together to commemorate that historic moment. It's an occasion that invites us to take stock of our progress towards reconciliation; to be proud of the progress we've made, while recognising that we have a long way to go.

Many of the Stolen Generations, their families and communities are still feeling the hurt, pain and loss from being forcibly removed from their families and by remembering what happened, as part of those commemorations, we are supporting ongoing healing.

The anniversary is also a time to reflect on the work that still needs to be done to address the unresolved trauma caused by the forced removal of tens of thousands of children from their homes and communities. The *Bringing Them Home* report drew a link between this trauma and contemporary social and health problems in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Recent research shows that the spread of trauma from one generation to the next, is an underlying cause of issues like family violence, substance abuse, suicide, high incarceration rates and the disproportionate number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children entering the protection system. We have found that those affected by the forced removal of children – the Stolen Generations and their children and grandchildren – are:

- 50% more likely to be charged by police
- 30% less likely to be in good health, and
- 10% less likely to have a job.

Anniversaries like this one remind us what we have achieved so far in our nation's journey towards a just, equitable and reconciled nation. They also remind us that the full extent of past wrongs and their ongoing effects have not been formally explored or officially recognised – which is why there is a need for a comprehensive formal process of truth-telling about our shared history, to achieve justice and healing.

