

Stolen Generations

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Aboriginal people are believed to have lived in Australia for up to 60,000 years. They successfully adapted to the often harsh environments they inhabited and developed ways of life that were rich in spirituality, music, art and storytelling. This occupation and beliefs by the indigenous people in Australia still remain.

The greatest part of the Stolen Generation occurred in the 20th Century. A war opposes two enemy armies, the Stolen Generations was an attack by a powerful nation against defenceless civilians, simply because these civilians belonged to an ethnic population, namely the Aboriginal race.

Two factors played a major role in allowing the Stolen Generation to happen. First and foremost was the culmination of years of old prejudices, resurrected and magnified by the British colonial empire. The second factor included modern bureaucracy and the advanced industrial technology needed to carry out genocide in the most effective way.

Because of *who* they were, many thousands of Aboriginals were separated, disenfranchised and sometimes killed by these puritanical policies and attitudes. Old and young; mothers and fathers; grandmothers and grandfathers; uncles and aunts; nieces, nephews and cousins; children like yourself were removed from their families and their traditional lands. Forced to forfeit their traditional lands, native tongue and cultural ancestry, and live a life of servitude and slavery away from their families, youth and an opportunity to live free.

They had done nothing to deserve that fate; they did not belong to one or the other side of the armed conflict, they were not in the path of warring forces. Their only crime was that they happened to have been Aboriginal or “part” Aboriginal. That, by itself, became an automatic sentence of separation from their traditional birth family.

In this manner, many thousands died never seeing their families again. Most the Stolen Generations were children. Entire families, entire communities were wiped out from preserving, learning and handing down their culture. Why did this happen? How could it have happened in civilized Australia? Why did no one put a stop to it until it was nearly too late? This is what we are going to explore when we study the Stolen Generation. It may seem to you that this happened a distant time ago, but it did not. In fact, you or your parents may know of some people still alive today who were caught up in the events of that terrible period. As recent as the 1970’s, were government policies of removal was still taking place in Australia.

Because it happened so recently, it has become very important to study this recent period of history, to discover why it happened and the events that helped create conditions which brought about these unimaginable consequences, so that we may prevent such horrors from ever happening again in this country.

From the Stolen Generation, we can learn not only the terrible things human beings can do to one another, but also the levels of heroism to which we can rise. We will see and begin to understand how things can begin small, and incrementally grow to inhuman proportions, if allowed to do so by the silence, ignorance and inaction of others.

In this manner, we will begin to realize that the Stolen Generation is not just a study of the past but an important path towards your own future, a future in which none among us will be singled out to become a victim or a persecutor. You may find this history of study different from your other studies in several ways. Its main concern and goal lies *not* in exams or grades. Its aim is to educate and for you to empathise, placate yourself and understand.

Because the most important part of Stolen Generation history is awareness and understanding, you will be encouraged to participate in discussion groups, to analyse your own feelings and attitudes, to find out how it is possible to change under pressure from others and why it is important to be able to think independently. It is as if we are going to unravel some horrible mystery crime novel. Yet this was no novel, no mystery, and the horror was real.

The arrival of the British to Australia in 1788 decimated the Indigenous population through massacres and other violence, introduced diseases and loss of access to land, resources and traditional lifestyles. As a result of colonisation Aboriginal people were removed from their traditional homelands and relocated to reserves or missions on the fringes of non-Indigenous settlements. By 1911 all states except Tasmania had appointed a 'Chief Protector' or 'Protection board' with extensive powers to control all aspects of Indigenous people's lives. Aboriginal people needed permission to move in and out of the reserves, marry or hold employment. Parents lost all decision-making powers over their children.

In the 1950s, following more than 150 years of violence against and dispossession of Aboriginal people, Australia formally adopted a policy of assimilation and as many as one in three Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families and communities. The children were placed in dormitories and other institutions, non-Indigenous foster homes or adopted by non-Indigenous families. The ultimate aim was to eradicate Aboriginal people as a distinct cultural group. The policies were not only overtly racist but the resulting disruption to families, communities and culture has also contributed significantly to many of the challenges facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today.

The Bringing them home report

The terrible harm done to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children during this period was comprehensively documented and acknowledged for the first time through the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, established in 1995. The inquiry's report *Bringing them home* described the physical, psychological and sexual abuse, sexual and labour exploitation, racism, grief and suffering, disruption of family life, and loss of Indigenous identity, culture, heritage and community and cultural connections suffered by members of the Stolen Generations.

Impact on Stolen Generations survivors

The diversity of policies and practices that underpinned the forced removal of Aboriginal children in different states and territories means the experiences reported by Stolen Generations members differ widely depending on where they lived and were removed to. Yet around the country the legacy of the Stolen Generations era has had a devastating impact on immediate survivors and their descendants.

The National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families estimated that:

'Between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities in the period from approximately 1910 until 1970. In certain regions and in certain periods the figure was undoubtedly much greater than one in ten. In that time not one Indigenous family has escaped the effects of forcible removal'.

Evidence presented to the inquiry detailed the harsh, inhumane and degrading treatment many children experienced. The overwhelming majority of children were forcibly separated from their communities and culture as well as their families, and forbidden from speaking their native language. Many children were taught to believe that their families had relinquished them because they were unwanted and unloved. Others were told their parents were dead. In an attempt to indoctrinate them and diminish their desire to return to kin, country and culture upon their release, Aboriginality was denigrated and Aboriginal people were discussed in derogatory ways.

The living conditions were often sparse and harsh with funding levels provided to institutions that housed Indigenous children far below those of non-Indigenous children's homes. The children were taught only basic numeracy, literacy and life skills, limiting their employment prospects to roles such as domestic servants or labourers. Punishment for minor transgressions was often severe and children were vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation regardless of whether they were removed to foster homes, adoptive families, dormitories or large institutions.

For many survivors the resulting trauma, pain and suffering remains long after these laws, policies and practices ended in the 1970s. They had to come to terms with the realisation that they had been targeted for the purposes of assimilation, lied to, and that their forcible removal from kin, country and culture was deliberate and sanctioned by law.

Impact on families and communities

The *Bringing them home* report highlighted the intergenerational effects of removal, noting that 'the overwhelming evidence is that the impact does not stop with the children removed. It is inherited by their own children in complex and sometimes heightened ways.' Healing is not only required for those that were taken but for the mothers, families and communities left behind.

Swan and Raphael (1995) identified unresolved loss, trauma and grief associated with forcible removals as among the most serious problems facing Indigenous people today, while Koolmatrie and Williams believe that forcibly removing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families has 'left a powerful residue of unrecognised and unresolved grief that [has] pathological effects on Indigenous communities'.

Healing our Stolen Generations

'Healing occurs throughout a person's life journey as well as across generations. It can be experienced in many forms ... Mostly, however, it is about renewal, leaving behind those things that have wounded us and caused us pain: moving forward in our journey with hope for the future, with renewed energy, strength and enthusiasm for life.'

The *Bringing them home* report emphasised the importance of self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities in overcoming the devastating legacy of forced removals from family and country. It recommended that local Indigenous community based services and organisations be supported to lead and develop their own healing responses to enable communities to overcome the trauma of removal and limit the intergenerational transfer of trauma:

'Only Indigenous people themselves are able to comprehend the full extent of the effects of the removal policies. Services to redress these effects must be designed, provided and controlled by Indigenous people themselves.'

The social and emotional wellbeing and healing needs of those who were forcibly removed from their families and communities are distinct from the wider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. Healing needs to be led and developed by Stolen Generations members and recognise their need for connection with one another, their families and their culture as critical to recovery. One of the ways for this to be enabled is through collective healing practices.

On 13 February 2008, a formal apology was made on behalf of the Australian Parliament to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, in particular to the Stolen Generations.

The journey to a national apology began with the *Bringing them home* report with recommendations 5a of the report stating "that all Australian parliaments officially acknowledge the responsibility of their predecessors for the laws, policies and practices of forcible removal."

"Wednesday the 13th February 2008 will be remembered as an important day in Australia's history when the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd delivered a long awaited apology to all Indigenous Australians, in particular those members of the Stolen Generations for the actions of previous governments.

In 2020, after the 12th anniversary of the national apology, it is important that we continue to say sorry, to acknowledge the pain and trauma that was created by the forced removal of children from their families. While the national apology was an important part of healing for Stolen Generations survivors, it is also important to continue to share their stories to understand the impact of intergenerational trauma and to enable them to continue their healing journey.

The Stolen Generation is integral part of Aboriginal and Australian history, and hopefully this resource will aid teachers with a grasp of some of the core issues surrounding this dark chapter of Australian history. Many of these people now live on the margins of society experiencing welfare dependency, homelessness, depression, addictions and failed or dysfunctional relationships. Sadly, some choose suicide."

Collective Healing

Collective healing is where people are supported and empowered to heal through group activities such as gatherings and family reunions. It is particularly important for Stolen Generations' members who were institutionalised.

Collective healing broadens the scope of who 'does' healing and who healing is 'for'. It means moving from a model where expert professionals work with individuals to a model where individuals develop their own skills and capacities to empower healing in themselves and their families and communities. Collective healing engages all participants 'as workers for healing so that working together we grow the wider circles of relationships necessary to develop healing communities'.

Healing in this context is about restoring and making connections for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have been disconnected from family, country and culture. For some Stolen Generations members circumstances will mean that the connections made are not to their Aboriginal family but to their institutional family. Whatever form it takes collective healing involves bringing people with similar experiences together, often with their children and grandchildren, in a safe space where they can share, get to know their own story, build understanding and skills and take positive steps towards a better future.

Resources

[The Healing Foundation \(2019\). Stolen Generations resource kit for teachers and students. Canberra: The Healing Foundation.](#)

[The Healing Foundation \(2019\). Working with Stolen the Generations: understanding trauma. Canberra: The Healing Foundation.](#)