

Australia's Stolen Generations: sorry is not enough



Sorry. A simple word, yet a powerful word. A word that, when pronounced by the then Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, in Parliament on Feb 13, 2008, moved the nation. This historic apology, to the estimated 100 000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were forcibly removed from their families as children, formally acknowledged the deep pain, suffering, and injustices caused by decades of discrimination. In his landmark speech, Kevin Rudd expressed a heartfelt apology to the Stolen Generations and their families, assuring all Australians that it was time to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. August 9 marked the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples—an opportunity to reflect on Australia's history and progress made.

From the early 1900s to 1970 several Australian government policies, such as the Aborigines Act (Western Australia; 1905), were instituted to erase Indigenous Australian culture by removing children from their families, thereby severing their intimate connections with their communities, their languages, and with their land. The forcibly removed children—the Stolen Generations—were raised in institutions and adopted into white families with the aim of culturally assimilating them into a so-called white Australia. These terrible policies are the shame of previous Australian governments, but it is the responsibility of current and future governments to correct these injustices.

The potential devastating social, cultural, and health consequences of traumatic experiences in childhood have been documented. There is mounting evidence of the lasting impacts of traumatic experiences during childhood, and of the links between adverse childhood experiences and impaired health and social functioning in later life and also in subsequent generations, thereby perpetuating a vicious cycle. And the Stolen Generations are no exception. A 1997 Australian Human Rights Commission report (*Bringing Them Home*) detailed the physical and emotional traumas experienced by members of the Stolen Generations. Trauma that has been passed from generation to generation. Although the report made more than 50 recommendations to foster healing and reconciliation, 20 years later, many of the recommendations have not been implemented.

On July 31, 2018, the Healing Foundation and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW)

released—*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Stolen Generations and descendants*. Using data from five Australian Bureau of Statistics surveys of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population (undertaken from 2002 to 2014–15), this report provides contemporary estimates of the numbers of the Stolen Generations and their descendants, and details the legacy of their forcible removal and continued detrimental experiences. It assesses 38 health and socioeconomic outcomes as well as health risk factors and cultural and social factors of the Stolen Generations and compares them with those of similar Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations who did not experience removal, as well as of those of non-Indigenous Australians.

Nearly 40 years after the end of the policies, the report shows that members of the Stolen Generations continue to suffer economic, social, and health effects. In all, 42% have been homeless at least once in their lifetime, 52% had poor or fair self-reported health, and in the past 12 months, 32% reported substance use and 26% were victims of violence. When compared with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were not removed, members of the Stolen Generations had worse physical and mental health, being more likely to have psychological distress and a severe or profound core activity limitation. Risky behaviours, such as smoking and use of illicit drugs, were also increased.

Furthermore, the report tells a story of a continuing cycle of trauma for descendants of the Stolen Generations. 75% of descendants experienced stress in the past 12 months, 34% had poor mental health, and 34% had engaged in short-term risky alcohol consumption. 39% of descendants of the Stolen Generations were homeless at least once in their lives.

The findings reported in *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Stolen Generations and descendants* highlight the failure of Australian governments to genuinely commit to righting the wrongs of the past. It is time for the rhetoric to end. A decade later, saying sorry is simply not enough. The Australian Government must enact tangible policies to support the Stolen Generations and their families. Only when health and social inequalities for all Australians have been eliminated can the deep wounds inflicted on the Stolen Generations truly begin to heal.

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For the **Bringing Them Home** report see <https://bth.humanrights.gov.au/>

For the **Healing Foundation and AIHW report** see <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/indigenous-australians/stolen-generations-descendants/contents/table-of-contents>

For more on **childhood trauma** see **Comment**

Lancet Public Health 2017; 2: e300–01, and **Comment**

Lancet Public Health 2017; 2: e342–43