



21 February 2020

The Chair  
Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee  
Parliament House  
Spring Street  
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Dear Chair

Re: *Inquiry into responses to historical forced adoptions in Victoria*

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into support services and responses to the issue of historical forced adoptions in Victoria.

The Healing Foundation is a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation that partners with communities to address the ongoing trauma caused by actions like the forced removal of children from their families. Under the leadership of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Board and Stolen Generations Reference Group, we support evidence based healing programs and aim to create an understanding of the historical legacy of trauma and its manifestation in contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Our 2017 report *Bringing Them Home 20 years on: an action plan for healing*<sup>1</sup> highlights that breakdown of family and social structures caused by removal decimated communities. It deeply impacted Stolen Generations members. They did not know where to go to seek support; they no longer belonged to a community, held no memories of belonging to one and were not able to draw on the strengths of a community to help them. This disempowered Stolen Generations members in being able to take action and seek assistance resulting in many members feeling isolated and distressed. There has also been a considerable community impact in terms of trauma experienced by those that were left behind with many of their parents, grandparents and family members never recovering from the distress of losing their children.

It is well recognised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities experience poor outcomes across a broad spectrum of social and economic indicators. New evidence now demonstrates that outcomes are even worse for Stolen Generations and their descendants, establishing an irrefutable link between the experience of trauma leading to poor social and economic outcomes for individuals, families and communities.

Delivered in 2018, we commissioned the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) to report on the numbers and demographic characteristics of surviving Stolen Generations and their descendants, and of the impact of removal on a variety of health, social and economic factors.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation 2017. *Bringing Them Home 20 years on: an action plan for healing*

<sup>2</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2018. *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Stolen Generations and descendants: numbers, demographic characteristics and selected outcomes*. Cat no IHW 195, Canberra

This analysis demonstrated the extent of the disadvantage experienced by Stolen Generations and their families. Stolen Generations have multiple complex, overlapping needs. The AIHW analysis found their health and wellbeing is significantly poorer than that of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of a similar age who were not removed. Stolen Generations carry a legacy of social and economic disadvantage, and often lack access to appropriate services including to address their needs as they age.

Compared to other Aboriginal people of the same age who were not removed, in 2014-15, Stolen Generations were:

- 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
- 2 times as likely to have been arrested in the last five years
- 1.8 times as likely to have government payments as their main income source
- 1.7 times as likely to have been a victim of actual or threatened physical violence in the previous 12 months
- 1.7 times as likely not to be the owner of a home
- 1.7 times as likely to have poor self-assessed health
- 1.6 times as likely to be currently not employed
- 1.6 times as likely to have experienced homelessness in the last 10 years
- 1.6 times as likely not to have 'good health' (based on the composite health measure)
- 1.5 times as likely to have experienced discrimination in the previous 12 months
- 1.5 times as likely to have poor mental health (high K5 score).

Adverse experiences in childhood can have lifelong effects. It is now understood that traumatic childhood experiences such as being forcibly removed from families may affect following generations through biological changes in stress responses and by undermining the ability to parent and love freely without fear.

The AIHW analysis demonstrated that descendants of people who were removed also have significantly poorer health and wellbeing compared to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults.

Compared to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait adults, in 2014-15 adult descendants of Stolen Generations were:

- 2 times as likely to feel discriminated against in the last 12 months
- 2 times as likely not to speak an Indigenous language
- 1.9 times as likely to be a victim of threatened or physical violence in the last 12 months
- 1.6 times as likely not to have good health (based on a composite health measure)
- 1.5 times as likely to have a problem accessing services in the last 12 months
- 1.5 times as likely to have been arrested in the last five years
- 1.4 times as likely to have a low level of trust in the general community
- 1.4 times as likely to have ever been formally charged by police
- 1.4 times as likely to have poor self-assessed health
- 1.4 times as likely to have a low level of satisfaction with their lives
- 1.3 times as likely to have poor mental health (high K5 score).

Unaddressed intergenerational trauma is a driver of some of the most serious social and wellbeing issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities today, including drug and alcohol addiction, criminal behaviour, violence and suicide.

In Victoria, AIHW estimated that in 2014-15 Stolen Generations comprised approximately 12% of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population born before 1972, and that approximately 36% of the adult Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population were descended from Stolen Generations. Stolen

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<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/indigenous-australians/stolen-generations-descendants/contents/table-of-contents>

Generations are elderly and often frail, and their numbers are dwindling. Descendant numbers are increasing over time.

The ABS survey data on which the AIHW analysis is based does not distinguish between people who were removed to institutions, or those who were adopted or fostered.

The Healing Foundation is taking practical steps to address Stolen Generations needs. Examples include

- fact sheets aimed at improving services and care for Stolen Generations provided by doctors, dentists and aged care services, prepared in collaboration with the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, the Australian Dental Association, Aged & Community Services Australia and the Aged Care Industry Association. The fact sheets are freely available from our website: <https://healingfoundation.org.au/working-stolen-generations/>
- working with Stolen Generations organisations to improve access to government and non-government records, and to promote trauma-informed practices among records managers. Trauma informed, streamlined access to records can support healing journeys for Stolen Generations and their descendants wishing to connect back with family and country.

In order to properly respect and care for our ageing Stolen Generations and to halt the escalating effects of intergenerational trauma, we urge the Committee to recommend that the Victorian Government:

- collaborates with other Australian governments and with Stolen Generations to co-design a universal, safe and culturally appropriate scheme for financial redress for Stolen Generations and their descendants
- resources programs and policies that are co-designed with Stolen Generations to holistically address their specific needs, prioritising the areas of aged care, disability, health and housing
- contributes to a collective healing fund that expands support and resources for Stolen Generations organisations (and other organisations nominated by Stolen Generations) to deliver co-designed healing programs focused on the specific needs of Stolen Generations and their families.
- works with other Australian governments to resource and implement a national strategy for addressing intergenerational trauma, developed with Stolen Generations that includes:
  - an overarching enabling policy framework
  - investment in community-led services and programs
  - capacity building of communities and other stakeholders to recognise and address trauma
  - consolidation, application and building the evidence base about healing and trauma
  - a sustainable and robust monitoring and accountability process

A first step would be to prepare and resource a Victorian intergenerational trauma strategy.

- contributes to establishing a Communities for Healing program in partnership with The Healing Foundation to strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through holistic, healing-informed approaches that are evidence-based, community led, and empower and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to create a better future
- supports developing a national accountability framework to monitor and report progress towards achieving better outcomes for Stolen Generations and their descendants.

For further information or clarification about this submission, please contact Fiona Petersen, Deputy Chief Executive, The Healing Foundation [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely

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Russell Taylor  
Chief Executive Officer