The Stolen Generations

Forced child removal, its scale, and the ongoing work of healing

A note before you read. This read refers to events and policies that may be distressing, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers. Please take care as you read, and stop or take a break whenever you need to. If you would like to yarn with someone, support is available through 13YARN on 13 92 76, Lifeline on 13 11 14, and your local Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service.

Who the Stolen Generations are

The Stolen Generations are the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were forcibly removed from their families and communities by governments, churches and welfare bodies. These removals occurred across the country, with the greatest numbers between about 1910 and the 1970s, though removals happened both before and after this period.

Under Protection and later assimilation policies, governments believed that First Nations children, and particularly those of mixed descent, should be removed and raised to live as part of white society. Children were placed in institutions, missions, children's Homes and with non-Indigenous families. The effects of these removals are still felt by families and communities today.

How removals happened, and what children lost

Removals were carried out under the authority of Protectors and welfare officials, often without any finding of neglect and without the consent of families. Children could be taken from hospitals, schools, homes and camps. Many were told their parents had died or did not want them, and many parents were never told where their children had gone.

For the children, the losses were immense. Many lost their language, their connection to family and Country, their culture and their sense of identity. Records were often incomplete or hidden, which is why services that help people trace and reconnect with family remain so important. It is essential to understand that these removals were the result of race-based policy, not responses to individual neglect or failings by families.

Remembrance and healing

The work of healing continues, led by communities and First Nations organisations.

1997	The Bringing Them Home report is tabled, with 54 recommendations including a formal apology.
13 February 2008	The Prime Minister delivers the National Apology to the Stolen Generations in the Australian Parliament.
26 May, each year	National Sorry Day remembers and honours the Stolen Generations and their families.
The Healing Foundation	Supports survivors and addresses the intergenerational trauma caused by removal.
Link-Up services	Help members trace family and reconnect with community and Country.

The scale, and its intergenerational reach

The national inquiry that produced the Bringing Them Home report found that between one in ten and one in three First Nations children were removed between 1910 and 1970. Nearly every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family has been affected in some way.

The impact did not end when a child grew up. Removal broke the passing of language, culture and parenting knowledge between generations, and the grief and trauma it caused can be carried forward through families. This is what is meant by intergenerational trauma. Recognising it helps organisations understand why trauma aware and culturally safe practice matters so much.

Supporting healing in practice

Healing is led by communities, and organisations can support it by engaging with this history honestly and with care. This means speaking about the Stolen Generations accurately, recognising National Sorry Day, and supporting reconnection to family, culture and Country wherever it is relevant.

It also means being ready for this history to be present in a workplace or service. A colleague, client or community member may be a survivor or a descendant. Trauma aware, culturally safe practice, and knowing where to point people for support, is a practical way to walk alongside communities with respect.

Questions to reflect on

- How might the history of removals shape the way a First Nations client or colleague experiences a service or workplace?
- What would trauma aware, culturally safe practice look like in your team?
- How does your organisation acknowledge National Sorry Day and Reconciliation Week?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ The Stolen Generations were removed under race-based policy, not because of individual neglect.
- ✓ Between one in ten and one in three children were removed between 1910 and 1970.
- ✓ Bringing Them Home (1997) and the 2008 National Apology are landmarks in truth-telling and healing.
- ✓ Healing is led by communities and supported by trauma aware, culturally safe practice.

Reference material

- **Bringing Them Home report, Australian Human Rights Commission**
  humanrights.gov.au
- **The Healing Foundation**
  healingfoundation.org.au
- **AIATSIS, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies**
  aiatsis.gov.au
- **National Sorry Day and Link-Up services**
  healingfoundation.org.au/sorry-day

How Emus Talking can help

Emus Talking is a proudly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owned business. We help organisations build culturally safe workplaces and strong partnerships, delivered remotely and virtually right across Australia, or in person by arrangement.

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