

Australia's stolen generations: a legacy of intergenerational pain and broken bonds

'Those children who are in child protection now, some of them are eight generations of family that have been institutionalised,' Florence Onus says



The Healing Foundation's Steve Larkin and Florence Onus. Onus says services are not necessarily targeted toward the specific needs of stolen generation members. Photograph: Mike Bowers for the Guardian

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When the Bringing Them Home report was released on 26 May 1997 Florence Onus was too busy to read the news. While Australians attempted to reconcile the truth of the assimilationist policies that had sought to destroy Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture by forcibly removing generations of children from their parents, she was dealing with its direct effects.

Her mother had been removed from her traditional Bidjara and Jagalingu country in central Queensland to Woorabinda Aboriginal mission in 1938, when she was five. She attempted suicide in the 1980s and was no longer able to care for herself.

While the author of the Bringing Them Home report, Mick Dodson, presented the conclusion that stolen generation policies amounted to genocide, and prime

minister John Howard called on Australia to “bear the sins of the past,” Onus was caring for her mother and her own young daughters, worrying that they would be taken from her just as she was taken from her mother, and her mother taken from her grandmother.

It wasn’t until people began telling their stories following the report that Onus realised what had happened to her family was part of a broader government policy.

“You just accept that that’s your lot in life,” she told Guardian Australia. “We were taken off our mother, we were told that we were taken off her because she was a heathen, she was not capable of looking after us ... and so we never really had that conversation on why we were taken and why didn’t she come and look for us.

“I used to throw it back in her face [if she wouldn’t let us do something] and say: well, why are you worried now, you never worried about us, you never came and looked for us, why didn’t you come and get us out of the home? Why are you wanting to be Mum to us now when we were left there?

“Years later, when I realised, I had to ask my mother for forgiveness because we didn’t know those experiences and stories.”

Three generations of Onus’s family were moved to Woorabinda on the same day. They were separated, her mother into the children’s dormitory and the men and women into separate bunkhouses.

They remained on the mission until 1954, when they were exempted from the control of *the Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897 (Qld)*.

That act later led to the 1904 creation of the position of the protector of the Aboriginals, who had ultimate control over the marriages, living conditions, wages and property of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – controls that were not fully relinquished until 1975.

In 1965, Onus and her five sisters were removed. The two oldest, aged 10 and 13, were sent to the Catholic nuns in Rockhampton. The three youngest, Onus included, went to a foster home in Townsville with seven other Aboriginal children.

“We were fortunate in a sense that we already knew who our family was, we had already lived on country with our grandmother and our family after they had been exempted from living under the act and went back on our country ... so we were fortunate in the sense that we didn’t have that lost identity that you hear from so many who had been taken as babies,” she said.

“Even though we came back, all of those that came back, we reconnected but it was a difficult process ... you don’t just go back to being a happy family and pick up from where you left off.

You don’t just go back to being a happy family and pick up from where you left off. **Florence Onus**

“Deep down there’s that resentment and that hurt and that rejection and isolation and everything you felt as a child, not being able to live with your mother and your father and your family, and all those unanswered questions as children. Where is my mother, where is my father, why haven’t they come to get us, why haven’t they come to take us away from our foster family?”

Also “fortunate,” Onus said, was that she and her sisters escaped the sexual abuse that marked the institutionalisation of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including their mother. Instead, they were flogged.

“My sister in particular, when she was being flogged by the strap ... she would stand there and she would keep standing until her legs buckled under her,” Onus said. “And my foster mother would flog her and flog her and flog her. And she would just stand there. She wouldn’t cry and she wouldn’t show any emotion – she would stand as long as she could until her legs gave out under her.

“I guess that would be regarded in today’s society as child abuse.”

Apologising for that abuse, and the policies that caused it, was recommendation five of 54 contained in the *Bringing Them Home Report*. It was fulfilled by prime minister Kevin Rudd in 2008, after Howard, who was presented the report in his second year of office, refused throughout his almost 12 year term.

I lived in fear, fear of the authorities coming and knocking on my door and forcibly taking my children from me. Florence Onus

The bulk of the recommendations have been implemented in part or not at all.

One of the most significant recommendations, for a monetary compensation scheme with a designated minimum amount to be paid to all people who had been removed, has been refused by successive governments.

It’s hoped the push for a national compensation scheme for victims of institutional sexual abuse will set a precedent for a compensation scheme for stolen generation members, but as yet there has been no movement.

Recommendation 51 sets out the Indigenous child placement principle, which asserts that where a child must be removed by child protection they will be placed with another family member, another member of the same community, or another Indigenous family, in order of preference. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are only to be placed with non-Indigenous carers as a matter of last resort.

It has been fulfilled in policy, but not in practice.

Despite all states and territories adopting this principle, just over half of the 16,767 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care as of 30 June 2016 were living either with Indigenous kin or an Indigenous foster carer, while about a third remained with non-Indigenous carers to whom they were not related. The remainder were with non-Indigenous kin.

New South Wales has recently moved to ensure all Indigenous children in care are case-managed by Indigenous organisations, and Victoria is trialling a program to ensure every Indigenous child in care has Indigenous guardianship, if not an Indigenous carer.

Similarly, funding for healing services for stolen generation members and their families, which formed another set of recommendations, has been delivered but it has not been targeted toward community-controlled Indigenous organisations, resulting in services Onus said are not always culturally appropriate, not necessarily targeted toward the specific needs of stolen generation members, and occasionally delivered by the same churches that were responsible for managing the missions.

“The funding is there, all they need to do is shift the funding back to the Aboriginal and Torres community-controlled sector,” she said.

Onus is a founding member of the Healing Foundation, established in 2010 in a wave of reconciliation actions prompted by the apology, and also runs a program in Townsville called Healing Waters.

She said there was a lack of understanding of or sympathy for the impacts of intergenerational trauma, which she said contributed to the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care today, the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in the prison system, and poor health conditions.

“Those children who are in child protection now, some of them are eight generations of family that have been institutionalised,” she said. “If you were the eighth generation of your family who have all been institutionalised, and eight generations of your family that have suffered from trauma, pain and suffering, all forms of violence including sexual violence and physical violence, do you think that you would be a functioning person today?”

Twenty years forward and we're still in a number of ways facing the same sorts of problems **Steve Larkin**

“Their lives are completely broken ... For them, healing is survival from one day to the next. That's what intergenerational trauma is about.”

In her family, Onus said, it manifested itself as a fear of the authorities, particularly the police.

“When I was raising up my four daughters, from the time they were born to the time they were teenagers, I lived in fear, fear of the authorities coming and knocking on my door and forcibly taking my children from me,” she said. “And I worked really, really hard to ensure that no one would ever take them. I promised myself that no one would ever take my children away from me.”

Without increased support for healing programs designed to address that trauma, Onus said, problems such as domestic violence and alcohol and substance abuse, which were the most commonly-cited reasons for child protection orders against Indigenous children in 2016, would continue to increase.

“[These children] don’t have any role models because their parents didn’t have any role models, and their parents didn’t have any role models, and their parents didn’t have any role models,” she said. “They don’t have the parenting skills because they were institutionalised. They were told what to do, what time to wake up, what to wear, where they could go, who they could talk to ... They know how to make the bad decisions and the bad choices but sometimes they find it really hard to make good choices for their lives.”

On Tuesday, the Healing Foundation released an evaluation report saying there had “never been a collaborative and systematic attempt to address the recommendations,” which had exposed another generation to the trauma of removal.

The prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, said he would “carefully consider the recommendations” of the Healing Foundation’s report and agreed there was “much unfinished business”.

The chairman of the Healing Foundation, Steve Larkin, said he was “very disappointed” that so little progress had been made in the 20 years since the Bringing Them Home report.

“We finally thought that the way forward was set, so it’s quite disappointing and for stolen generation members and their families, very distressing, to come 20 years forward and we’re still in a number of ways facing the same sorts of problems without any increase in services or obvious gain or improvement,” he told Guardian Australia.

He said there was a clear connection between the trauma caused by forced removal policies and the removal of children under child protection policies today.

“They were actively discouraged and punished from any expressions of culture, banned from seeing any members of their immediate family, being told that their self-worth was very low ... that’s how they grow up seeing and experiencing the world and it’s going to inform their values and their ideas and beliefs,” he said. “So when it comes time to have children, all those things are going to then influence how that happens.”