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Australia

# The new Stolen Generation

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### **Victoria's commissioner for Aboriginal children and young people has released a two-year investigation into state removals of Aboriginal children. Always Was, Always Will Be, Koori Children reveals not only an over-representation of Aboriginal children in child protection and out-of-home care, but the trauma associated with state care.**

According to commissioner Andrew Jackomos, many of the Aboriginal children who had been removed from their homes had suffered "physical, mental and cultural" neglect within the system.

The investigation surveyed the treatment of 980 Aboriginal children and found that more than 86 percent were case managed by a non-Aboriginal agency, 60 percent were placed with a non-Aboriginal carer, and 42 percent were placed in care outside of their extended family. More than 40 percent of the children were separated from their brothers and sisters.

The rate of Aboriginal child removal in Victoria exceeds that at any time since white settlement.

According to the report, the Department of Health and Human Service, along with other community organisations, offered poor cultural safety to Aboriginal children in out-of-home care, including either failing to identify the child as Aboriginal or de-identifying the child as Aboriginal. Only 38 percent of Aboriginal children in care had their identity confirmed during the first home visit by service providers.

An earlier report by the commission found that Aboriginal children were 16 times more likely to be in out-of-home care than non-Aboriginal children. According to the 2014 report, "the rate of Aboriginal child removal in Victoria exceeds that at any time since white settlement".

While children were removed as a result of experiencing family violence in combination with parental alcohol and/or substance abuse, the new report noted that the over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care was closely linked with Australia's colonial settler history.

The "history of separation from community, family, land and culture" experienced by Indigenous people had left "a legacy of disempowerment and trauma", which had negatively impacted on family stability, health and education.

"Tracing the stories of individual children and their families across Victoria, we saw generations caught up in criminal justice and child protection systems, struggling with unemployment, poverty, poor education, high rates of suicide and the over-riding impact of the past impacting on the present", Jackomos said.

Victoria is not alone in its high level of Aboriginal child removals and failure to provide cultural safety. In 2014-15, there were more than 15,000 Indigenous children in care across the country. Despite being only 5.5 percent of children nationally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders make up 35 percent of all children placed in care – a 65 percent increase since 2008.

According to the national children's commissioner, Megan Mitchell, racism has played a part in the high levels of removal. Addressing a federal Senate inquiry in 2015, Mitchell noted "a really high level of surveillance of Aboriginal communities" compared to non-Indigenous communities. "I do think there's a level of racism, whether it's intended or

not", she said.

Mitchell, whose comments were reported in the Sydney Morning Herald in March last year, noted that one of the reasons for the high rates of removal was that the current system of child care and protection was focused on the "removal end, not the family support end". Mitchell argued this was the wrong focus; instead, parents should be offered more support in order to improve home life.

The Office of the Northern Territory Coordinator-General for Remote Services similarly revealed in 2012 that close to \$80 million was being spent on the surveillance and removal of Aboriginal children by the territory government, while a mere \$513,000 was being spent on family support.

As Luke Pearson noted at the @IndigenousX website in February: "That is a discrepancy of 160:1 in terms of resource allocation for child protection and out of home care vs. intensive family support services".

The current child protection regime in all but name continues to enact racist assimilationist policies. We are witnessing the creation of a new stolen generation.

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