

The Arrilla Circle



A quarterly communicate exclusive to Arrilla Digital, where authors of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent share their life experiences in order for us to walk in the shoes of another.

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The continuing impacts of the Stolen Generations: a guide to understanding and action



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Shannan Dodson, a Yawuru woman whose family is from Broome, Western Australia, is the CEO of The Healing Foundation, which is urging governments and others across Australia to commit to justice and healing for the Stolen Generations and their descendants.

Nearly 30 years ago, my gugu (dad) Mick Dodson helped lead the publication of the powerful *Bringing them home* report, which told the story of the Stolen Generations. Through the report, many Australians learned about this dark chapter of Australian history for the first time.

It followed a groundbreaking process of truth-telling through the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families. The inquiry bore witness to the trauma of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families whose babies and children were forcibly removed from the mid-1800s until the 1970s under nation-wide assimilation policies and practices, and the continuing and intergenerational effects on families and communities.

I remember vividly the inquiry's impact on my dad, who was the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner and co-lead on the inquiry at the time.

At that young age, I couldn't then understand the full gravity of his role, but I remember seeing him cry for those giving testimony to the inquiry, and for staff and others who heard those experiences.

The inquiry exposed the detail and impacts of the systematic removal of many thousands of children under race-based policies that were in place in every state and territory in Australia.

Children were taken from their loving families and communities, severing connections to Country, communities, culture and language. They were placed in institutions, missions, training farms and schools, adopted by non-Indigenous families or fostered. They were often subject to harsh treatment in institutions. Many were abused, neglected, or both.

Nearly 30 years on, the report still makes for distressing reading. It also presents evidence linking the impacts of the Stolen Generations to so many of the contemporary challenges facing our communities, and presents comprehensive recommendations for action – many of which remain relevant today.

The *Bringing them home* inquiry and report brought about some crucial changes, including — finally in 2008 — a formal Apology to the Stolen Generations from then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on behalf of the nation, which meant so much to many survivors and their families.

It also led to the creation of The Healing Foundation, where is it now my honour and responsibility to continue my dad's work.

But that work remains necessary because so few of the recommendations of the *Bringing them home* report have been implemented, nearly 30 years later.

Last year, we worked with researchers from the University of Canberra to do an urgent stocktake on the implementation of the recommendations.

Its title tells you the verdict, in the words of survivors: *'Are you waiting for us to die?': The unfinished business of Bringing Them Home*.

Our 2025 report showed that only **6 percent** of the *Bringing them home* report's 83 critical recommendations have been clearly implemented. Some others were done partly or poorly, and many not at all.

The recommendations covered critical areas for survivors, families and communities: reparations, rehabilitation and research, records, family tracing and reunion, acknowledgements and apologies, education and training, monitoring and accountability, and guarantees against repetition.

That is a *woeful* response to a human rights travesty which continues to have so many ripple effects today, on the Stolen Generations survivors and their families.

What Stolen Generations survivors want us to know

David Wragge is a Wakka Wakka man from Cherbourg in Queensland. He guides our work at The Healing Foundation as a member of the Stolen Generations Reference Group.

He was taken from his family at the age of nine and became what's known as a "dormitory boy" in Cherbourg from 1967 to 1973.

He wants people to understand this is not ancient history in Australia.

He was living in a dorm with other stolen children, desperately missing family, culture and Country, when Shane Gould won gold in Munich, during the start of the Whitlam years, when the "Life. Be In It" campaign was launched.

Another survivor, Aunty Bronwyn Smith, told us recently:

It didn't happen 100 years ago. It happened in my lifetime. It happened when they had colour TV.....It's still very recent, still very raw....

Today, most Stolen Generations survivors are eligible for aged care. Many have specific and complex ageing needs resulting from the trauma and grief they experienced from being removed.

When we talk about Closing the Gap in health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in fact there is "a gap within the gap" for the Stolen Generations. Survivors and their descendants are more likely to fare worse than other mob on a range of outcomes: social and emotional wellbeing, health, educational and economic outcomes, and negative experiences with the justice system, including higher rates of incarceration.

Yet survivors like Aunty Bronwyn and Uncle David and their fellow Stolen Generations survivors are still looking for justice and support.

Too often survivors don't access the services they need, particularly health and aged care, out of fear they will bring back traumatic memories or cause more harm.

Many survivors and families have still not been able to access records to find out who their families are and to understand their identities, because processes are often convoluted and the default position of record holders is often to say no. Many private organisations, including church groups which operated missions, have not opened up their records and are not compelled to do so.

In the leadup to the 30th anniversary of *Bringing them home in 2027*, the priority unfinished business for survivors includes:

- access to culturally safe, trauma informed aged care and health services
- urgent equitable redress — Queensland is yet to offer *any* redress
- prioritised access to records, and
- investment in Stolen Generations organisations which provide invaluable supports, including helping survivors to reconnect with family and culture and community.

The role we can each play

At a recent workshop involving a range of Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations, one of the participants put out a challenge to everyone there. She asked:

*What's one thing **you** can do, in your work, family or social circles, to address this unfinished business?*

I'd love it if the readers of the Arrilla Circle could respond to the same challenge.

Do you work in government, in legal circles, in health and aged care, in education or the media? Are you an active church member, interested in history and society, or a descendant of a pastoral family?

If you work in education, can you share our school kit resource with teachers and school leaders, or use the lesson plans with students?

If you work in health or aged care, have you considered the guidance and tips in our fact sheets on trauma informed care for Stolen Generations survivors?

If you're interested in history and society, have you seen our map of Stolen Generations institutions and shared this with your networks?

If you work in policy or programs, have you considered our research or recommendations on the priority needs of ageing Stolen Generations survivors?

For those in the corporate sphere there are so many opportunities to partner with us to support survivors directly or help build the evidence base around their priorities.

Can you step up to see whether organisations and others in your orbit have done what was urged?

And at the very least, please contact your local MP and tell them this is important unfinished business.

It is up to all of us to understand the urgency and the need to ensure that those recommendations are implemented fully — not in five years, not in 10 or 20 or another generation, but now.

'The test of a nation is not how far it advances its brightest and its best. The test of a nation is how far behind it chooses to leave its most vulnerable.'

- Ian Hamm (Yorta Yorta), Stolen Generations survivor

To take action or learn more visit www.healingfoundation.org.au