



The importance of culture and connection

Stolen Generations survivors and their stories of COVID-19 restrictions

February 2022



HealingFoundation

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The Marumali Program®

Since 2000, Winangali Marumali Pty Ltd has been working to increase the quality of support available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander survivors of removal policies, through delivery of its Marumali Program®. The Marumali Program® is based on the unique, original, and unparalleled Marumali Journey of Healing Model developed and delivered by Aunty Lorraine Peeters, a survivor of the removal policies herself.

The Marumali Program® supports service providers to realise the widespread impact of forcible removal and understand the potential paths for recovery; recognise the signs and symptoms of trauma associated with forcible removal in clients, families and others involved with their service; and to avoid re-traumatising Stolen Generations survivors. This supports participants and organisations to respond by integrating this knowledge into their policies, procedures, and practices.

The Healing Foundation

The Healing Foundation is a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation that provides a platform to amplify the voices and lived experience of Stolen Generations survivors, their families, and communities.

We work with communities to create a place of safety, providing an environment for Stolen Generations survivors and their families to speak for themselves, tell their own stories, and be in charge of their own healing.

We promote trauma-aware, healing-informed practice to help government, policymakers, and workforces understand their role in intergenerational healing.

By addressing unresolved trauma in First Nations communities – trauma that was caused by colonisation and actions like the forced removal of children – we are walking alongside communities on the path to healing.

We are governed by a First Nations Board and Executive and guided in our work by our Stolen Generations and Youth Reference Groups.

Our work honours our First Nations ancestors to ensure future generations continue to thrive.

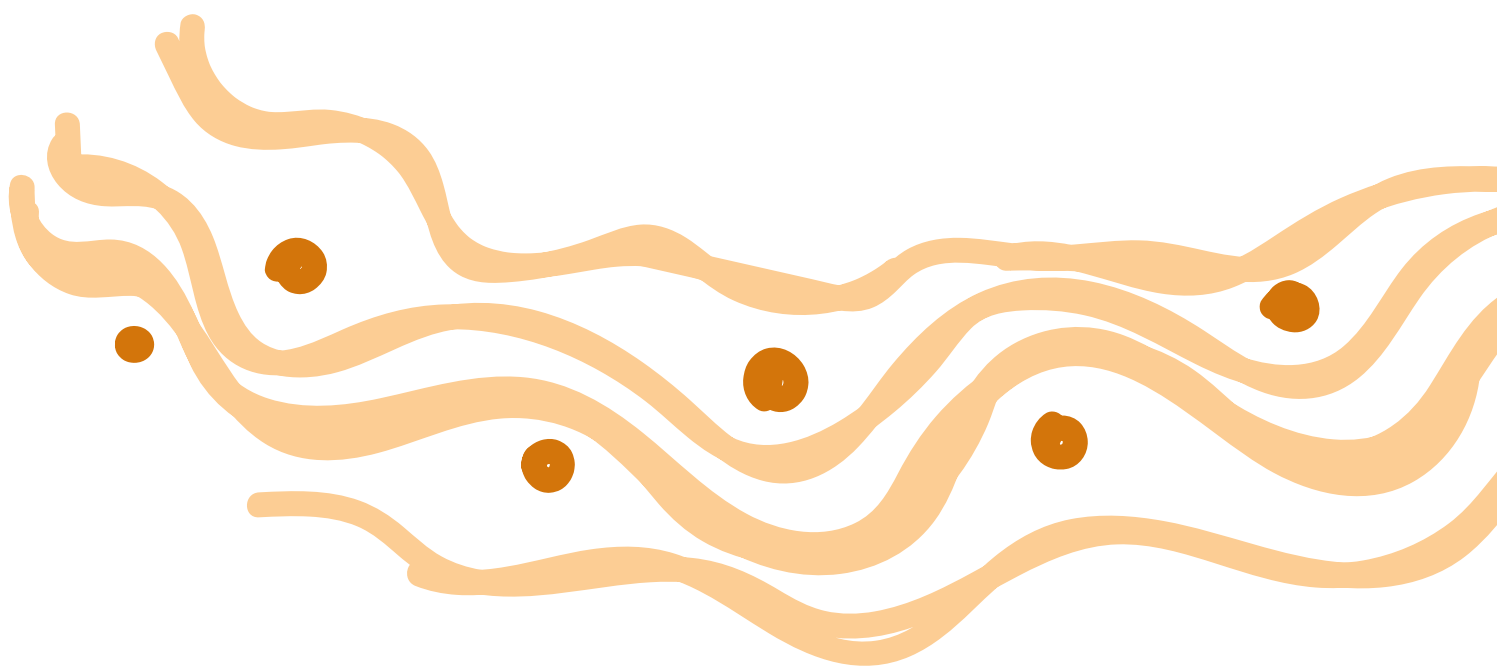
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Shaan Peeters and Dr John Prince led this research and The Healing Foundation thanks them for their significant contributions to ensure the voices of survivors were heard. Thank you also to the Marumali Program® for ensuring a trauma-aware, healing-informed approach was maintained throughout this work and aligned to appropriate cultural protocols.

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Introduction



This research paper is the second commissioned by The Healing Foundation and undertaken by the Marumali Program® to examine the effects of COVID-19 public health responses on Stolen Generations survivors.

In early 2020, there was considerable concern that COVID-19 would disproportionately affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. Despite these predictions, infection rates remained low. Concern regarding the impacts of public health responses to COVID-19 (e.g. social distancing, lockdowns and density limits at gatherings) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples remained high. This was due to the potential for restrictions to increase disconnection from family, community, culture, and country – key social determinants of health and wellbeing for First Nations peoples, and especially for Stolen Generations survivors.

The [Impacts of COVID-19 on Stolen Generations survivors report](#) (The Healing Foundation, 2021) provided evidence for these concerns. Survey data, examining impacts across 23 social and emotional wellbeing indicators, found that Stolen Generations survivors experienced:

- increased sense of isolation and loneliness, with nearly half of those surveyed feeling this deeply
- increased feelings of being trapped in their own thoughts
- disconnection from family, community, culture, and country
- decline in mental health and wellbeing, and a decreased ability to cope with stress
- an increase in family and cultural responsibilities with stress being placed on important relationships
- triggering of memories and trauma, resulting in a negative impact on healing journeys.

After these findings, The Healing Foundation commissioned further research to better understand the stories behind the quantitative data. In examining the [Impacts of COVID-19 on Stolen Generations survivors report](#), eight Stolen Generations survivors spent time with researchers to tell their story of the pandemic and discuss the impacts of restrictions. Six questions drawn from the initial research were developed to guide yarning with participants for this report (see Appendix 1).

It is important to note that, at the time of writing, the early optimism regarding the low infection rates of COVID-19 and impacts for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples may have been premature. While infection rates are still low overall, some communities have been significantly affected. For example, more than 10 per cent of the Aboriginal population in Wilcannia in New South Wales had at September 2021 contracted COVID-19, in what became the state's highest recorded per capita rate (Lysaght and Brennen, 2021).

The pandemic is now known to have deepened some existing inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. For example, First Nations leaders have highlighted the deepening housing crisis in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The lack of social housing and the impact of overcrowding meant that up to four generations were living in the same household during lockdowns. This was a challenging set of circumstances for many families (Higgins, 2021).

Finally, it is important to note that the most recent public health response to the pandemic has been the push to get the Australian population vaccinated. Once again, First Nations peoples and communities 'have been left behind' with poor access and uptake of vaccinations (Allam and Evershed 2021; Brennan 2021).



Stories from survivors



The [Impacts of COVID-19 on Stolen Generations survivors report](#) outlined the experiences of Stolen Generations survivors during COVID-19. The themes outlined below should not be generalised to the broader Stolen Generations population, given the small sample size of the interviews. The themes do, however, provide a deeper insight and understanding of the pandemic's impacts on survivors and their individual lived experiences.

Distress, despair, and disconnection

As previously reported, COVID-19 restrictions led to an increased sense of isolation and loneliness for survivors. Many experienced this sense of isolation and loneliness deeply, feeling 'trapped in their own thoughts'. Interviews provided important examples of how this played out for people.

The words 'distress' and 'despair' (or similar) were often used by those interviewed. If survivors reported not feeling these directly, there were many members of their family who had. Stolen Generations survivors suggested that 'lockdowns were all about separation' and that separation was something they were 'sadly all too familiar with'.

While separation and disconnection were themes experienced by many in the broader community during COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns, they appear to have been felt more acutely by Stolen Generations survivors:

"It was like an extra layer of past trauma to deal with and it kept being a layer on layer. Each lockdown re-triggered trauma and emotions of despair and loneliness. It made me very emotional, and I found I was crying at the drop of hat ... It felt like there was no relief from the pandemic and increasingly I felt like hope was disappearing."

According to interviews, this led to sadness and depression, and then anxiety, as people were unable to be with family, culture, and country, or fulfil their cultural obligations. This placed stress on relationships, as one Stolen Generations survivor described, 'my heart really hurt not being able to see my mother and brother ... they are getting older, and time passes ...'. Unsure of how far lockdowns would extend, survivors were left wondering how much longer older family members had left to live and whether they would have a chance to see them again. In some cases this caused additional panic and anxiety.

The inability to fulfil cultural obligations or participate in Sorry Business was extremely concerning for survivors. Interviewees noted that although Sorry Business was a sad time, it was still a time of connection and being together. There was a sense of sadness when Sorry Business could not take place. There was increased sadness if it did take place and border closures meant that family could not attend:

"Uncle passed away in March in the NT and I couldn't go for the Sorry Business. So I felt like I had missed my cultural obligations as the older sister ... it makes me feel like I am not doing what I should be doing ... my cultural obligations ... I go from sad to depressed and then I get pissed with those who are not doing the right thing, and [it] stops me from being able to do what's right for me."

Disturbingly, interviews highlighted certain risks associated with loneliness and isolation. For one interviewee, there was a short lapse into an 'old habit' where boredom led to gambling. Although this was only for a very short period, it highlights how policymakers and service providers may need to incorporate protective mechanisms (including tools and resources) to ensure previous addictions and habits are managed during such lonely and distressing times.

Revisit, reflect, and heal

Like many Stolen Generations survivors, several people interviewed for this research worked or volunteered in organisations providing services to fellow survivors and/or other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

For these interviewees, COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns had been difficult but also provided space to reflect and heal – space not normally afforded to them, given the scarcity of resources and demand for services for First Nations peoples. While some survivors found themselves trapped in their own thoughts, for others the lockdown was an opportunity to sit and be with themselves and connect to spirit:

"I experienced a lot of personal growth. To sit and be by yourself can be a good thing or a bad thing. For me it was good. It provided a safe cocoon where the brain, and memory, and the body could be healed. It allowed time to go into the past, revisit, reflect and heal. It actually gave me time out from a really hectic and busy professional and community life. We can be too busy to deal with it before."

Of course, this does not suggest that lockdowns can be a good thing for Stolen Generations survivors. It suggests that many survivors are too busy supporting others in their families and communities and may not be able to take the time needed for self-care and healing.

It also highlights a broader problem with services available for Stolen Generations survivors, which in their efforts to assist others on their healing journeys, are unable to dedicate the necessary time to their own healing.

This, and other services gaps, were identified during interviews:

"I found it hard to access services ... services already had service gaps and the pandemic only reinforced and widened the gaps ... it just seemed to make things worse."

Others reported positive experiences interacting with COVID-19 response teams, while others were thankful for their local Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS), which continued to provide wraparound services during the pandemic.

Our research indicates that the services required by Stolen Generations survivors during times of national public health crises need to be further developed. Given the success of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group on COVID-19 in guiding government responses to the pandemic in First Nations communities, further input from this group will be critical as communities begin to live with COVID-19.

Reducing the risk of re-traumatising survivors

Interviews highlighted the fine line between doing well and doing badly for Stolen Generations survivors. Many aspects of the State, Territories, and Commonwealth Government response had the potential to re-trigger trauma for survivors. Almost every day of the pandemic created a risk of re-traumatising survivors:

"Here we go again, they are telling us what to do again and telling us where we can go. Well that just brought the sadness back."

"Being told what to do by the government triggered me and definitely pushed a few buttons. Like before, we couldn't plan anything and the government planned what we could do and that was awful."

For Stolen Generations survivors who had been forcibly removed from their families and sent to institutions such as the Kinchela Aboriginal Boys Training Home and/or Cootamundra Domestic Training Home for Aboriginal Girls, there was a mixed response to some COVID-19 restrictions:

"Lockdown is a bit different to being locked up ... that was our experience, so this wasn't that bad for me, but some feelings of abandonment came back."

"We were so used to being told where we could go and when, so that bit was not so affecting ... used to automatically accepting being controlled so it's not foreign to us, it's the norm."

"... already brainwashed into being confined and we accept it more but overall I felt in a good place."

Some commentary around the COVID-19 public health response and the vaccines in particular had an impact on Stolen Generations survivors. Much has been written about 'vaccine hesitancy' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Some reports suggested churches had been using misinformation to deter people from being vaccinated, while others suggest the low take-up rate is due to low levels of trust in government. First Nations peak bodies have suggested the low rates, when compared to non-Indigenous peoples, will be best addressed by consistent and accessible supply of the vaccine, as well as targeting messaging and outreach from trusted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers (see Richards et al 2021; Allam and Evershed 2021a; Brennan 2021).

For Stolen Generations survivors interviewed who had been placed in institutions as children, vaccination provided a (potential) 'here-we-go-again moment' that was a cause of anxiety for some:

"Getting the needle though, that was frightening and brought back past anxiety from when they used to give us the needle in the home."

"If the vaccinations are [an] experiment, it's the first time they were not experimenting just on us ... [names institutions] were places of medical experimentation and they used to experiment on us kids."

The comments above suggest that First Nations health services might be better placed to take the lead on the vaccine rollout. It should be noted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health services already have a track record of success in this area, rolling out influenza and pneumonia vaccines. This could also be a process led by First Nations practitioners who know their communities and who know the type of messaging that would be most successful (Allam and Evershed 2021b).

Culture and connection

At the time of writing this research paper, State governments are beginning to present 'roadmaps' to the broader community that are mostly staged processes that mark an end to lockdowns and borders closures. In many communities, this will see an escalation in infections with reduced risk of hospitalisation and/or death for those infected. For Stolen Generations survivors, this will mean a return to some of the most important protective factors against poor mental health and wellbeing:

"I need culture, I need mob. I just felt so isolated and I just want culture ... I miss sitting down and having a yarn and a meal, so I am looking forward to that."

For some interviewees living in Melbourne, the prospect of Victoria returning to 'normal life' after such a prolonged lockdown felt daunting:

"I have never really had anxiety but now I have anxiety just going to the supermarket, so I have been withdrawing. It's hard to know how to be and connect with family again."

Technology, the comfort of family, interaction with young people, arts programs, and Aboriginal Medical Services are some of the things that interviewees cited that helped people to cope and get through lockdowns. These will continue to be a source of support as families and communities adjust. Across both phases of this research (surveys and interviews), technology was identified as a critical factor for maintaining connection to family, communities, and friends, and for maintaining good health and wellbeing:

"COVID could not stop me using technology ... technology made the biggest difference as it's an easy way to connect and allowed us to share our struggles with our families."

"Mobile phones and Zoom meant we could keep working ... especially in the prison system, to keep working with the men."

Interviewees also identified that technology was a source of support that allowed for increased contact between children and older people:

"Young children know how to use technology, so if we have access to it and can use, it it's easier to connect to the children in the family."

These experiences reflect recent work by the University of Sydney's Research Centre for Children and Families, which suggests that children and young people safeguard Elders from social isolation in lockdowns (Smit 2021). The research suggested that for many older Aboriginal carers, having young children in the household was deeply protective against the negative impacts of social isolation. Stolen Generations survivors interviewed for this project suggested younger people really stepped up during the pandemic:

"Young Aboriginal people would come and check in on us ... they would come and check on the Aunties to see if they were okay."

Older people said that they felt cared for and connected to others. Acknowledging that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples know that connection is critical, this report recommends that governments develop policies and practices that maintain connection for Stolen Generations survivors.

For Stolen Generations survivors – indeed perhaps for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – the future primary focus for governments and policymakers must be to support First Nations community-controlled organisations to develop mechanisms that guarantee continuity of culture, while restrictions that increase social isolation are in place. This may include support for young people who support Elders and older community members. It should include the recommendations made in the [Impacts of COVID-19 on Stolen Generations survivors report](#), about how technology and social media can be used to communicate important public health messages and to connect Stolen Generations survivors to family, community, culture, and country.

Care packages



The Healing Foundation in partnership with National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) enabled 18 Stolen Generations organisations across Australia to deliver COVID-19 response projects, which included care packages, during the pandemic.

Some Stolen Generations organisations, including the Marumali Program[®], delivered care packages and food hampers to survivors and their families.

In conjunction with the production of this report, the researchers evaluated the effectiveness of Marumali Care Packages, which were provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in correctional facilities during lockdowns.

The researchers captured how specific institutional COVID-19 restrictions impacted those who received care packages.

As with earlier research with Stolen Generations survivors, those held in correctional facilities reported:

- health and wellbeing was negatively affected during COVID-19 (88 per cent)
- increased disconnection to family (88 per cent)
- stress on relationships (88 per cent)
- increased disconnection to culture (74 per cent).

Overall, 87 per cent of respondents reported that restrictions had negatively impacted their healing journey, with nearly two-thirds reporting that restrictions had massively impacted their healing journey.

This data, and the effectiveness of care packages, became important to the overall conclusions of this report, as issues relating to the forced removal of children (past and present) and growing up in institutional settings converged in the findings.

For the most isolated people – being those in correctional facilities – connection was secured through the provision of care packages. Research suggests positive effects of care packages on the health and wellbeing for those in correctional facilities – journals and greeting cards were critical, and increased art supplies and cultural resources were improvements for the future. More than 90 per cent of people who received care packages said they enhanced connection to others, connection to culture, and health and wellbeing, all of which maintained their healing journey:

“The care packages helped me feel like I was not forgotten during this time and thank you for staying deep with all of us.”

Conclusion

This small piece of qualitative research has sought to examine the stories behind the quantitative data and findings of the [Impacts of COVID-19 on Stolen Generations survivors report](#). The stories that emerged from interviews show that the impacts of COVID-19 are not the same for all Stolen Generations survivors. Impacts may for some be influenced by unique and historical circumstances, as well as opportunities to heal from past trauma prior to the pandemic.

There are many stories that suggest the public health response re-triggered trauma and reminders of past government controls. For survivors who were placed in institutions, the current response to the pandemic reminded them of past policies and practices. Survivors endured so much growing up that some felt the COVID-19 response was much easier to handle.

The impacts of COVID-19 restrictions and social isolation on survivors have been considerable. This research, along with the [Impacts of COVID-19 on Stolen Generations survivors report](#), makes clear that caring for survivors during pandemics and other periods of social upheaval requires a clear focus on mechanisms for maintaining cultural and family connections.

These mechanisms include technology and connection with younger First Nations peoples. Programs, services, and supports will be most successful in the future, as they have been in the past, when they are strengths-based and delivered through local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations.

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Appendix 1 – Interview/Yarning Circle Guide



Marumali Program® Stolen Generations COVID-19 Interview/Yarning Circle Guide

- It's been 12 months since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. How are you doing right now and how are you feeling about the days ahead?
- What have you found difficult over time and what are the things that made it difficult/better?
- Tell me about your healing journey and what has happened to that journey since the start of the pandemic?
- Some people told us that they had past trauma re-triggered. Did that happen for you and in what ways?
- What has helped you most over this time? What supports, people, programs, and services have helped you most – in terms of your health and wellbeing?
- What would you need next time to ensure your healing journey continues? What would it take?



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