



HealingFoundation

Strong Spirit • Strong Culture • Strong People

National Preventive Health Strategy Consultation

National Preventive Health Taskforce

Submission by The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation
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“Healing is not just a strategy but also a process that enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to overcome trauma, decide their own story for the future, bring about long-term generational change and restore wellbeing, on their terms.”

Professor Steve Larkin, Chair, The Healing Foundation

Supporting intergenerational Healing is one of most significant preventive activities that can be taken to mitigate the often compounding and overwhelming health impacts of trauma.

The breakdown of family and social structures caused by removal decimated communities. It deeply impacted Stolen Generations survivors. They did not know where to go to seek support for anything; they no longer belonged to a community, held no memories of belonging to one and were not able to draw on the strengths of a community to help them. This disempowered Stolen Generations survivors in being able to take action and seek assistance resulting in many feeling isolated and distressed.¹

There have also been ongoing health and social effects for the Stolen Generations and their families. They have significantly poorer physical health and over double the rates of mental illness and alcohol abuse compared to that suffered by those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were not removed. They have also, on average, received a poorer education and are more likely to be unemployed.²

The Healing Foundation is a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation that partners with communities to address the ongoing trauma caused by actions like the forced removal of children from their families. Under the leadership of our Board and Stolen Generations Reference Group, we support evidence-based healing programs and aim to create an understanding of the historical legacy of trauma and its manifestation in communities today.

We support the intention to incorporate the social and cultural determinants of health in the Strategy, and to reflect the reform areas articulated in the Closing the Gap refresh. We also endorse the positioning of culture as central to any framework that is to be trauma aware and healing informed. We also acknowledge racism as a barrier to good health and wellbeing.

The Strategy is an important opportunity to ensure programs and service models adopt trauma aware, healing informed practices. Without this, many well-intentioned interventions and investments will continue to have limited effect.

¹ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation 2017. Bringing Them Home 20 years on: an action plan for healing

² Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). (2011). “4704.0 – The Health and Welfare of Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Oct 2010.” Retrieved 25 August 2016, from <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/lookup/4704.0Chapter470Oct+2010>.

Delivered in 2018, we commissioned the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) to report on the numbers and demographic characteristics of Stolen Generations Survivors and their descendants, and of the impact of removal on a variety of health, social and economic factors.³

AIHW estimated that across Australia in 2018, there were around 17,150 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people born before 1972 who had been removed from their families, about 11% of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people born before 1972.

The AIHW analysis found that a third of all adult Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia are directly descended from Stolen Generations. In 2018, this was approximately 158,000 people, with the population of descendants increasing over time. In some jurisdictions, notably Western Australia and South Australia, the proportion of the population descended from Stolen Generations is much higher than the national average (46% in Western Australia; 38% in South Australia).

The removals were racially motivated, designed to assimilate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. As well as the grief and suffering caused by their removal, stolen children were often subjected to harsh and degrading treatment including abuse, exploitation and racism.

Stolen Generations Survivors have multiple complex, compounded needs and their health and wellbeing is significantly poorer than that of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of a similar age who were not removed. Stolen Generations carry a legacy of social and economic disadvantage, and often lack access to appropriate services including to address their needs as they age. By not addressing their needs we may see direct manifestations of poor health outcomes for example, compared to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of the same age who were not removed, in 2014-15, Stolen Generations Survivors nationally were:

- 3.3 times as likely to have been incarcerated in the last five years
- 1.7 times as likely to have been a victim of actual or threatened physical violence in the previous 12 months
- 1.6 times as likely not to have good health (based on the composite health measure)
- 1.6 times as likely to have experienced homelessness in the last 10 years
- 1.5 times as likely to have poor mental health.

Stolen Generations Survivors are ageing, and many are already elderly and in poor health. As a result, there is an urgent need for redress and for the provision of meaningful support.

If people do not have the opportunity to heal from trauma, they may unknowingly pass it on to others through their behaviour. Their children may experience difficulties with attachment, disconnection from their extended families and culture and high levels of stress from family and community members who are dealing with the impacts of trauma. Epigenetically this can create developmental issues for children, who are particularly susceptible to distress at a young age. This creates a cycle of trauma, where the impact is passed from one generation to the next.

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2018. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Stolen Generations and descendants: numbers, demographic characteristics and selected outcomes. Cat no IHW 195, Canberra <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/indigenous-australians/stolen-generations-descendants/contents/table-of-contents>

The AIHW analysis also demonstrated the extent of intergenerational effects of removal on descendants of Stolen Generations Survivors. Descendants of people who were removed also have significantly poorer health and wellbeing compared to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults. For example, compared to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait adults, in 2014-15 adult descendants of Stolen Generations were:

- 1.9 times as likely to be a victim of threatened or physical violence in the last 12 months
- 1.6 times as likely not to have good health (based on a composite health measure)
- 1.5 times as likely to have a problem accessing services in the last 12 months
- 1.4 times as likely to have poor self-assessed health
- 1.3 times as likely to have poor mental health.

Healing enables people to address distress, overcome trauma and restore wellbeing. Ways to support healing include reconnecting with culture, strengthening identity, restoring safe and enduring relationships and supporting communities to understand the impact that their experiences have had on their behaviour and create change.

Healing occurs at a community, family and individual level; it continues throughout a person's lifetime and across generations. International best practice in healing involves combining traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural healing practices with western methodologies

In order to change how governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities to support healthy living and strong communities, there needs to be an acknowledgement of the continued impact of trauma and genuine steps taken to address trauma as an underlying cause of poor health. While recognising there are many different types of trauma, and that the concepts are continuing to evolve, trauma and dysfunction have become so common in some families and communities that it is now normalised. Evidence about the biological impact of stress and trauma on physical health is growing and work on trauma aware, healing informed service approaches is developing in some areas. It is vital that the negative cycle of intergenerational and contemporary trauma is understood across service systems and steps taken to address it through culturally-informed and strengths-based approaches. These approaches must recognise the unique history across communities and cultures, and that the impact of trauma will be different depending on this history.

It is also essential to take into account that healing is an ongoing process that needs to be integrated across the broad ambit of laws, policies and services that relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Trauma aware, healing informed approaches must therefore be embedded in all aspects of systems that engage with and impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and in cross-sector initiatives that span the community, health, education, employment, justice sectors and beyond.

Recommendations

The Healing Foundation strongly endorses a health equity agenda that it creates and builds an early intervention approach that targets risk factors of prevention. Further to this we support the centrality of culture and cultural knowledge, and to reflecting the cultural and social determinants of health in the Strategy.

The Healing Foundation recommends that the Strategy embeds:

- a focus area on healing to address trauma, given it is so fundamental to the future wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing intergenerational and collective trauma
- healing and trauma-informed approaches across all policies, programs and service models – including workforce planning
- leadership, collaboration and coordination across all levels of government, the non-government sector and, most importantly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote and support healing informed and trauma aware policies, programs and services at the community level
- co-design of policy and programs and investments in community-led services and healing programs that are supported over the long-term, and with self-determination becoming a reality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- a strong evidence base with a commitment to co-evaluation that informs and empowers local decision-making, government investments and policy and programs, and which enables regular public reporting of outcomes.

The Healing Foundation also recommends urgent action to alleviate the burden of poor health for ageing Stolen Generations Survivors.