



Forced Adoption

Information for service providers on the history, practices and impacts of forced adoption in Western Australia.

What is forced adoption¹

Forced adoption refers to the unethical and often illegal removal of babies from their mothers.²

It represents a significant system of failures by authorities and those in positions of power to safeguard the parental rights of mothers and fathers and prioritise the best interests of children.

Under forced adoption policies and practices, unmarried women were channelled into an adoption process, often early in their pregnancies, and sometimes without their knowledge.

In WA these practices were carried out by the former Departments of Communities as well as

private solicitors, public hospitals and maternity homes including:

- King Edward Memorial Hospital
- Ngala (also known as Alexandra Home)
- Hillcrest, run by the Salvation Army
- St Anne's Maternity Home and Catherine McAuley Centre (both run by the Sisters of Mercy).

Other state government agencies also played a role in past forced adoption. For example, some staff at the courts engaged in unethical conduct when dealing with mothers signing consent.

Forced adoption policies and practices were wrong and illegal and have caused irreversible harm and suffering to those who experienced them.

Forced adoption practices

- Forcibly restraining mothers during birth.
- Forcibly separating mothers from their newborn babies immediately after birth.
- Administering medication to unmarried mothers without their knowledge or consent, or without medical necessity. This included sedatives and opiates, antipsychotic medications, drugs to prevent lactation, and drugs to induce labour.
- Denying mothers their request to see and hold their newborns.
- Disrupting and preventing babies from forming an attachment to their mother.
- Pressuring or coercing mothers into signing consent forms, including coercive practices such as denying mothers access to their baby until they sign the consent to adoption.
- Maternity homes subjecting women to harsh conditions, including emotional abuse and unpaid labour.
- Providing false or misleading information to mothers about their legal rights.
- Fathers being prevented from visiting mothers and being excluded from any information or decisions relating to the pregnancy, birth or adoption of their child.

- Newborn babies left in institutional care, sometimes for extended periods, while an adoptive family was sought.
- Changing an adopted child's name, replacing their original birth certificate, and denying access to their birth records, effectively erasing their identity.
- Enforcing closed adoption through denying mothers, fathers and adopted people access to information and records.

The impact of forced adoption

The impact on mothers, fathers, adopted people and their extended family members is both lifelong and intergenerational. The impact on an individual is deeply personal, varied and may include:

- Depression
- Anxiety-related conditions, including hypervigilance
- Complex or pathological grief and loss
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD, including complex PTSD)
- Abandonment, identity and attachment disorders
- Personality disorders.³

The impact of trauma

Research shows many people impacted by forced adoption are trauma survivors⁴ who may experience a triggering of their trauma response at certain life stages or at times of significance, such as a birthday or when a child and/or grandchild is born. Certain environments, especially in health and community services, can trigger trauma when they mirror past experiences of powerlessness. Social narratives that portray adoption as inherently positive or something to be grateful for can also invalidate lived experience and contribute to retraumatisation.

Trauma can impact a person's mental, physical, social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing and may increase:

- risk of mental health challenges
- risk of suicide-related behaviour
- risk of further abuse and harm
- likelihood of experiencing harm from alcohol and other drug use
- risk of preventable disease, including cardiovascular disease
- educational and workplace challenges, leading to reduced opportunities
- difficulties in trusting people and maintaining healthy relationships.⁵

What service providers can do

Professionals and service providers can adjust their approach when working with someone impacted by forced adoption in helpful trauma-responsive ways:

- Learn about forced adoption and trauma and minimise the need for people to have to 'educate' the professional.
- Understand not all people impacted by forced adoption may be comfortable to share information with you.
- Respect the person's knowledge and experience and work from a shared-decision making approach.
- Maximise choice and control for the person.
- Recognise the diversity of experiences and trauma coping strategies.
- Take care in use of language – it is best to mirror the language used by the person. In general, some preferred terms are 'mother', 'father', 'adopted person', 'adoptive parents', 'forced adoption/removal'.
- Reflect on consent processes – this includes what will be done, by whom, when, why, under what circumstances and for what purpose.
- Consider the physical environment – noise, lighting, smell, visual signposts such as posters, doors opened/closed.⁶

Further information

For further information about forced adoption policies and practices in Western Australia, including resources, support services and training for professionals, please visit:

[Historical forced adoptions](#)



Endnotes

- 1 Information in this resource is sourced from [Report 66: Broken Bonds, Fractured Lives - Report on the inquiry into past forced adoption in Western Australia](#), unless otherwise referenced.
- 2 [Forced adoption | Department of Social Services](#)
- 3 [Forced Adoption National Practice Principles | Australian Institute of Family Studies](#)
- 4 [Providing care and support to individuals with a forced adoption experience](#)
- 5 [The Queensland Trauma Strategy](#)
- 6 [Providing care and support to individuals with a forced adoption experience](#)