

“If we are to heal as Stolen Generation Survivors, we must tell the truth about the Stolen Generations. Our stories have been denied and need to be heard, because without the truth we cannot heal.

If we are to heal as Stolen Generations Survivors, we must have justice for all Stolen Generations people. The genocidal policies and crimes of the past still impact us today, and without justice we cannot heal.

If we are to heal as Stolen Generations Survivors, we must all address truth and justice in this country together; because without truth and justice, Survivors cannot heal, and Australia cannot heal.”

Western Australian Stolen Generations Survivors call to action
The Healing Foundation 10 year anniversary dinner November 2019

The Healing Foundation welcomes the invitation from Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Ben Wyatt MLA to provide feedback on the discussion paper “A Path Forward: Developing the Western Australian Government’s Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy”.

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.

While the organisation’s focus is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people nationally, for the purposes of this paper, we use the term Aboriginal to reflect the Western Australian context.

We welcome the acknowledgement in the discussion paper of the importance of addressing the impact of history and the legacy of trauma and loss. As the voices of Western Australia’s Stolen Generations Survivors above make clear, Aboriginal communities carry a heavy burden of trauma and disadvantage arising from the extensive and deliberate forced removal of children from their families.

Our 2017 report *Bringing Them Home 20 years on: an action plan for healing*¹ highlights that 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, 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 being able to take action and seek assistance, resulting in many members feeling isolated and distressed. The community left behind, while not removed saw generations of their children stolen, such that these actions also had considerable impact in terms of trauma. Many parents, grandparents and family members never recovered from the devastation of losing their children.

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

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

the impact of removal on a variety of health, social and economic factors.²

AIHW estimated that there were more than 4,600 people in Western Australia (in 2014-15) born before 1972 who had been removed from their families. This is about 24% of all Aboriginal people in Western Australia born before 1972. This is the highest rate of removal across all Australian jurisdictions (nationally this proportion is 11%).

Until 1972 Aboriginal children were stolen from their families, communities and cultures and placed in institutions or adopted by non-Indigenous families. The removals were racially motivated, designed to assimilate Aboriginal 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.

With a rate of removal twice the national average it is not surprising that this resulted in a very high number of institutions in Western Australia that accommodated (or potentially accommodated) children removed from their families. Nationally, 416 institutions were identified that housed or may have housed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children removed from their families³. Of these, two thirds (167, or 65% of the total) were in Western Australia. More than 46% of all adult Aboriginal people in Western Australia are directly descended from Stolen Generations Survivors (more than 20,700 adults in 2014-15), compared to 33% nationally. The population of descendants is increasing over time.

Stolen Generations Survivors have multiple complex, compounded needs and their health and wellbeing is significantly poorer than that of Aboriginal 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. For example, compared to other Aboriginal 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 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 (see Appendix 1: Actions to address the needs of Stolen Generations Survivors).

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.

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 adults.

² 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>

³ McCausland R, Nettheim, A, & Kang C (unpublished) *Institutional mapping report*, Research Paper for the Healing Foundation, January 2018.

³ It assessed institutions as to belonging to one of four categories: Categories 1 and 2 were those institutions which had definitely housed removed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children; Category 3 had probably done so; and Category possibly had done so. The report notes that: "due to the large number of Stolen Generations children removed from their families and communities and placed in a variety of institutions over a considerable period of time across each state and territory, the information ... is not exhaustive".

Unless intergenerational trauma is actively addressed, many investments will continue to be ineffective, no matter how well-intentioned. The Western Australian Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy provides a platform for embedding healing informed and trauma aware activities across all policies and services for supporting Aboriginal people.

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. Healing 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

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 people. Healing informed and trauma aware approaches must therefore be embedded in all aspects of systems that engage with and impact on Aboriginal peoples, and in cross-sector initiatives that span the community, health, education, employment, justice sectors and beyond.

Appendix 2: Addressing trauma proposes an approach to building healing informed and trauma aware services in Western Australia and the development of an intergenerational trauma strategy.

Recommendations

The Healing Foundation strongly endorses recognition of the centrality of culture and cultural knowledge in the Western Australian Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy. We support the commitments to Aboriginal-led, locally/regionally co-designed and evidence informed policy and practice with support for Stolen Generations survivor representation throughout the process.

The proposed Western Australian Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy is an important opportunity to ensure policy and programs adopt healing frameworks that address the impact of trauma holistically across activities. Without this, many well-intentioned interventions and investments will continue to be ineffective or detrimental.

In order to ensure that outcomes improve for Aboriginal people, The Healing Foundation recommends that the Western Australian Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy clearly sets out:

- healing as a separately expressed principle of the Strategy, given it is so fundamental to the future wellbeing of Aboriginal people experiencing intergenerational and collective trauma
- urgent action to establish specific programs for reparations and to address the specific, complex needs of Stolen Generations Survivors
- a strategy for addressing collective and intergenerational trauma that requires healing informed and trauma aware approaches to be embedded across all policies and services
- leadership, collaboration and coordination across all levels of government, the non-government sector and, most importantly, Aboriginal people to promote and support healing informed and trauma aware policies, programs and services at the community level
- 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.

Appendix 1: Actions to address the needs of Stolen Generations Survivors

Redress for Stolen Generations Survivors and their families

The 1997 *Bringing Them Home* Report made monetary compensation a central component of making reparation to the Stolen Generations. The Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee also recommended establishing a tribunal to provide an effective process for reparation, including monetary compensation⁴.

The 2008-09 Redress Western Australia program provided payments for people who had been abused as children in state care, but specifically did not compensate Aboriginal applicants for being stolen from the families. *"[This] was not an aspect of abuse that was assessed under the Guidelines...The assessment process only considered the abuse suffered in State care, the amount of time spent in care and the consequential harm endured"*⁵

As part of the new Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy, the Western Australian Government should commit to:

- working with Western Australian Stolen Generations organisations to co-design a Western Australian reparations scheme
- promoting a national approach to redress for Stolen Generations Survivors.

Such redress is justified as:

- an acknowledgement of past wrongs inflicted upon them, and the lifelong experience of trauma and grief that has resulted
- recognition of the lifelong disadvantage that has resulted from their forcible removal from their families, which has produced multiple overlapping issues of poor health and wellbeing
- financial assistance to help address the economic effects of removal, including unemployment, poverty and low rates of home ownership, as well as higher health care and other service costs
- an acknowledgement that reforms related to land such as native title and statutory land rights schemes have not benefited the Stolen Generations Survivors due to their removal from family and country.

Address the complex needs of the Stolen Generations Survivors

Stolen Generations Survivors are ageing, many live with disabilities, and have complex health problems including poor mental health. They are significantly more likely to depend on government payments, not own their own home and to live alone than other Aboriginal people of the same age. They are worried about the future for their families.

Addressing these needs requires effort at all levels to co-design policies and programs that are healing informed and trauma aware and which enable Stolen Generations Survivors to live with dignity and respect, in the knowledge that their families will thrive into the future.

Stolen Generations Survivors are more likely than other Aboriginal people of similar ages to feel discriminated against, and to have problems accessing services. They are suspicious and fearful of government, and frequently experience mainstream services as racist and exclusionary. It is essential that they are offered more holistic social and cultural support in order to access the services that they need.

⁴ Senate Review of Government Compensation Payments (Commonwealth of Australia 2010, p. 37-54), Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee

⁵Western Australian Department for Communities Redress Western Australia final report <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/STAT.0243.001.0246.pdf>

A holistic rather than portfolio focused response to addressing the complex and intersecting needs of Stolen Generations Survivors is required to make meaningful change. The Department of the Premier and Cabinet should ensure that portfolio agencies understand the reasons for and urgency of holistic action, and that they are ready and willing to authorise guideline changes where these are identified as barriers to flexible and holistic responses to support improved services for Stolen Generations Survivors.

To ensure meaningful change the Western Australian Government should:

- resource a series of regional level forums where Stolen Generations Survivors, their organisations and advisors work with policy and program makers from across portfolio areas to co-design policies and programs for delivering services that enable Stolen Generations Survivors to meet their individual and collective priorities and needs
- provide additional resources to Link-Up programs and other Stolen Generations organisations to expand their geographical reach and the numbers of people assisted and ensure that funding agreements enable resources to be used flexibly to meet the needs of Stolen Generations Survivors
- resource Stolen Generations organisations and other organisations identified by Stolen Generations Survivors to provide wrap-around support such as case management to assist Survivors to navigate service systems by providing information and making referrals to appropriate services
- require organisations supporting and providing services to Stolen Generations Survivors to adopt healing informed and trauma aware, culturally competent approaches at all levels including in their underpinning policies and systems, and ensure that government and non-government service providers who were historically associated with removal of children are not funded to provide such services
- improve system capability for delivering services to Stolen Generations Survivors by preparing and delivering resources and training for healing informed and trauma aware policies and practices across key government and non-government organisations and resourcing the involvement of service providers in building these skills (prioritising providers in areas servicing large numbers of Stolen Generations Survivors).

Accountability and monitoring

The Bringing Them Home report recommended establishing a national process for implementing its recommendations, with annual audits by states and territories. There is still no systematic process for monitoring how Stolen Generations Survivors and their families are faring at either state or national levels.

The Western Australian Government should lead the nation in doing so, by committing to:

- working with Western Australian Stolen Generations organisations to co-design a monitoring and reporting tool for tracking commitments to improving the wellbeing of Stolen Generations Survivors
- annual reporting to Parliament, specifically in relation to Stolen Generations Survivors and their descendants
- promoting a national approach to monitoring and reporting on the wellbeing of Stolen Generations Survivors and their descendants.

Appendix 2: Addressing trauma

The trauma suffered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through the process of colonisation and through to the present day therefore is immense. Perhaps more importantly, the nature of the trauma is collective, cumulative and intergenerational. Trauma is collectively experienced across communities, is cumulative across the life-course of individuals and is passed from one generation to the next within families. That is, as a result of past and present government policies, trauma takes place at the individual, family and community levels.⁶

For many Aboriginal people, trauma is an ongoing experience, either because the discriminatory practices continue, or because they live in families and communities where others have been subject to such practices and then pass the trauma on. Disconnection from country, culture, family and community has had a devastating impact on Aboriginal health and wellbeing. Given that communities live collectively and experience distress collectively, it is important to take a holistic and collective approach to addressing trauma rather than targeting the behaviour of individuals – more often the symptoms of trauma rather than the cause.

In terms of collective responses, acknowledgement, recognition, accountability and justice become pre-requisites for recovery at the individual and community levels. When policies ignore history, the impacts of trauma are increased rather than reduced or addressed.

Unless trauma is actively addressed, many investments will continue to be ineffective, no matter how well-intentioned. The proposed Western Australian Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy provides a platform for embedding healing informed and trauma aware activities across all of the policies and services for supporting Aboriginal people.

The principles underpinning the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy (empowerment and self-determination, culture and country, diversity of people and places, co-designed services, evidence-informed) are consistent with a healing-focus.

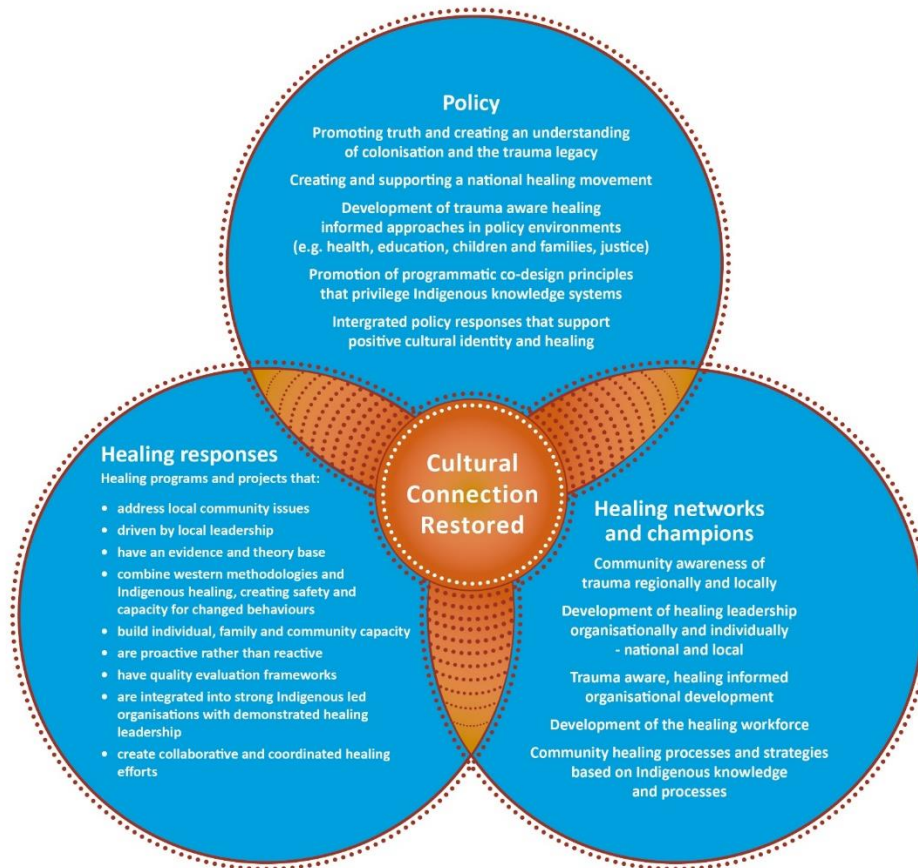
Based on our accumulated research and experience, The Healing Foundation recommends adopting deliberate language and activities that express the critical importance of addressing trauma and healing, across all elements of the Strategy. Because it is so fundamental to the future wellbeing of Aboriginal people, consideration should be given to healing becoming another, separately expressed, principle of the Strategy, with a specific implementation strategy for holistically addressing intergenerational trauma (see section 3.5).

Three key domains support positive, sustainable healing outcomes for Aboriginal communities⁷:

- quality healing programs and initiatives led by communities and developed to address the local impacts of trauma
- healing networks, champions and organisations to promote healing at a national and community level, including trauma awareness and the importance of truth telling
- a supportive policy environment where policy makers and influencers understand and advocate the benefits of Aboriginal healing and its long-term nature.

⁶ The Healing Foundation with Social Compass and the Institute for Human Security and Social Change (La Trobe University, *A Theory of Change for Healing*, 2018

⁷ https://healingfoundation.org.au/app/uploads/2019/04/HF_Theory_of_Change_A4_Mar2019_WEB.pdf



Building healing informed and trauma aware services in Western Australia

Healing is an ongoing process that needs to be integrated across the broad ambit of laws, policies and services that relate to Aboriginal people. Healing informed, trauma aware approaches must therefore be embedded in all aspects of systems that engage with and impact on Aboriginal peoples and in cross-sector initiatives that span the community, health, education, employment, justice sectors and beyond.

Through its work, the Healing Foundation has developed four pillars of trauma recovery⁸:

- **Safety:** creating safe spaces, healing places and identifying safe people to support healing;
- **Identity:** building a strong cultural identity by reconnecting to cultural values and practice;
- **Reconnection:** rebuilding relational support systems with family, community and services that can support us; and
- **Trauma awareness:** learning about the impacts of trauma on minds, bodies and spirits so we can find paths to healing.

⁸ Healing Foundation with Adams, M, Bani, G, Blagg, H, Bullman, J, Higgins, D, Hodges B, Hovane, V, Martin-Pederson, M, Porter, A, Sarra, G, Thorpe A and Wenitong M 2017. *Towards an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander violence prevention framework for men and boys*. The Healing Foundation and White Ribbon Australia



Healing informed approaches based on these pillars can improve outcomes across a range of health and well-being domains, including mental health, social and emotional well-being, family violence, child protection, substance misuse, sexual abuse, youth development, justice and corrections.

Organisations working alongside Aboriginal communities must have the workforce capability to work effectively with people and communities impacted by trauma.

Common elements of a healing informed and trauma aware service model⁹ include understanding trauma and its impacts, creating safe places, employing culturally competent staff, actively involving trauma survivors in their healing, sharing power and governance through community co-design, providing integrated holistic care, and supporting safe relationship building to promote healing.

Trauma aware services are alert to the symptoms of trauma, which can prevent the risk of misdiagnosis. Services must also be mindful that the presence of trauma can undermine the potential impacts of therapeutic interventions¹⁰.

Many people do not understand that trauma played a role in their own lives and behaviours, and developing this understanding can be transformative. Where workforce training enables workers to better understand the impact of trauma and grief on the communities where they work, their confidence to recognise and address trauma increases, which in turn, better positions service providers to assist in Aboriginal healing.

⁹ Atkinson J 2013. 'Trauma-informed services and trauma-specific care for Indigenous Australian children'. Closing the Gap Resource Sheet No 21.

¹⁰ Miller N and Najavits L (2012). 'Creating Trauma-Informed Correctional Care: A Balance of Goals and Environment'. European Journal of Psychotraumatology 2012:3.

Intergenerational trauma strategy

Healing and recovery for Aboriginal people, Stolen Generations Survivors and their descendants must address collective trauma through multiple-level approaches. A formal framework is needed for coordinating evidence and action, and as the basis for empowering key stakeholders to understand and take responsibility for addressing intergenerational trauma.

Such a framework provides a comprehensive, long-term approach where governments, Aboriginal people and key partners work together to co-design generational solutions for how Western Australia addresses the legacy of complex intergenerational trauma.

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 people. Healing informed, trauma aware approaches must therefore be embedded in all aspects of systems that engage with and impact on Aboriginal peoples and in cross-sector initiatives that span the community, health, education, employment, justice sectors and beyond.

We therefore recommend including an intergenerational trauma strategy as a fundamental element of the Western Australian Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy. The strategy would require coordinated action across core elements:

- establishing Stolen Generations survivors, their descendants and the broader youth population as the leaders of the strategy
- creating an overarching enabling policy framework that promotes integration of healing approaches across sectors such as health, justice, children and family services, education and employment
- investing in community-led services and programs
- building capacity of Aboriginal communities, government and key stakeholders to recognise and address trauma, including building the Aboriginal workforce and the trauma competence of non-Indigenous workforces including policy-makers
- consolidating and applying a strong evidence base, with embedded monitoring and assessment of the impact of the healing approaches and a capacity to commission and apply research
- a sustainable and robust monitoring and accountability process.