

Commissioner says Australian Aboriginal child separation at devastating rates

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An Aboriginal woman walking with two young children in a community in Australia's Northern Territory.

Over 60 years from 1910, it is estimated that as many as third of Aboriginal children were taken

from their families [File: David Gray/AFP]

Canberra, October 6 (RHC)-- An Aboriginal Commissioner has warned that Australia risks another Stolen Generation if the current “devastating rates” of Aboriginal children being removed from their families continue.

April Lawrie, the South Australian Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, found Aboriginal children were increasingly being removed from their families, despite the state government’s commitments to reduce family separation. If current trends continue, the report found that “the number of Aboriginal children living in out-of-home care will increase by a further 50 percent over the next decade”.

An inquiry led by Lawrie has already heard from almost 1,000 people, including Aboriginal children, families and elders, as well as people working in child protection and family support services.

According to a preliminary report released on Tuesday, many children shared feelings of “disbelief, sadness and anger” at finding out, sometimes years later, that they were taken away from their homes when “there was one or more members of their family or community who could have brought them up”.

Despite a state commitment to ensuring that more children were placed with extended families or within their own communities, Lawrie found that children were often removed without adequate consultation with relevant local Indigenous community organisations, especially in regional areas of the state.

“A child’s cultural identity develops through connection to family, community and country,” said Lawrie. “Family and culture is everything” and “disconnection will only continue the cycle of disadvantage, poverty and trauma”.

“One out of every two Aboriginal children [in South Australia] were subject to at least one child protection notification in 2020-21, while for non-Aboriginal children, these rates decreased to just one in every 12 children,” the report found.

Meanwhile, United Nations experts on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples are currently visiting Western Australia in response to similar concerns there about the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and communities.

The UN experts were invited to Western Australia by the Noongar Family Safety and Wellbeing Council, an Aboriginal-controlled organisation. They will visit the cities of Perth, Albany and Geraldton and are expected to deliver a report when their 10-day visit ends on October 10.

The Stolen Generation refers to a period in Australian history where Aboriginal children were removed from their families at “systemic” levels, according to the commissioner’s preliminary report. It is estimated that between 10 and 33 percent of Aboriginal children were taken from their families in this way between 1910 and 1970.

“In 1997, the South Australian Parliament and in 2008 the Australian Parliament apologised to all Aboriginal people for the Stolen Generations,” the commissioner’s report noted.

Australians are currently preparing to vote in a referendum on October 14 on whether to change the constitution to include an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice in parliament. According to the most recent 2022 Close the Gap Report, the official update on outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, addressing preventable inequalities will require drawing on Indigenous people’s knowledge and expertise.

“We know that to improve the outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, large-scale systemic reform and a paradigm shift in policy design and delivery is necessary to truly empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples,” the report found.

Unlike New Zealand, Canada and the United States, Australia does not currently have any treaties with the hundreds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait nations with continuous cultures pre-dating the colonisation of Australia by tens of thousands of years.

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