



First Nations care leavers: Supporting better transitions

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Overview

In Australia, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander youth are over-represented at all stages of the child protection system. This includes over-representation among care leavers; approximately 1,265 First Nations youth aged 15-17 years exit out of home care (OOHC) annually, and this figure is rising (Productivity Commission, 2021). First Nations care leavers commonly face poor social, economic, and health outcomes. Inadequate and culturally insensitive services contribute to these poor outcomes. This resource is aimed at supporting front-line practitioners to:

- Have a working knowledge of the historical and contemporary context of social welfare policies and their impact on First Nations families.
- Use this knowledge as a starting point to build an awareness of how individual and systemic practices impact First Nations young people and families.
- Recognise the importance of working with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), Elders and respected community members to design and implement strengths-based culturally informed support services.

Introduction

The historical context

Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are recognised as being the oldest cultures in the world. There are more than 500 different First Nations groups on this continent we now call Australia, each with distinctive cultures, laws, beliefs and languages. First Nations culture has a profound spiritual connection to land, water and sky. Each clan group is connected to specific regions, and these regions are referred to as 'Country'. Country is sacred. It represents family, culture and identity. For many First Nations peoples, knowing one's family kinship networks and having a relationship with Country can be central to identity formation and a sense of self and belonging.

First Nations families have experienced tremendous upheaval, displacement and violence since the early days of British settlement (Broome, 2019; Haebich, 2000). As settler occupation spread throughout the nation, autonomy for First Nations communities became impossible (Critchett, 1990; Haebich, 2000; McGrath, 1987; Perkins, Langton, & Atkinson, 2010; Pilger, 1992). From the mid-19th century until the late 1960s, policies to control First Nations communities were implemented by governments, and these included specific targeting of First Nations families and children, including policies of child removal (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997). Stolen Generations survivors and their descendants continue to live with the traumatic transgenerational effects of these policies (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2019).

The removal rates of First Nations children from their families continue to be high. At June 2021, 22,243 First Nations children were in out-of-home care, which was 42% of all children in care despite First Nations children being only 5% of all children in Australia (SNAICC, 2022). First Nations children are 10 times more likely to be in care than non-indigenous children, and this number is rising (SNAICC, 2022). Some argue that the Stolen Generations have never ended (O'Donnell, Taplin, Marriott, Lima, & Stanley, 2019).

The Australian Government, in partnership with SNAICC, the National Voice for our Children, has developed a comprehensive National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy (National Indigenous Australians Agency & SNAICC, 2021). The success of this strategy requires the support of all stakeholders involved in policy and practice relating to the care of First Nations children and youth. All practitioners working with First Nations care leavers are encouraged to build their knowledge of their First Nations community's historical and contemporary lived experiences, and can continue to learn by engaging with the resources listed at the end of this document.

Developing cultural awareness in your organisation

The foundational step that service providers and practitioners must take to support Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people and families is to build their own awareness of historical government policies and practices of First Nations child removal and the subsequent disadvantage that has affected First Nations families and communities. This awareness needs to be incorporated into all levels of practice. To cultivate this awareness, you might like to explore the following:

- Genuinely engage with resources such as media, books, art and music created by First Nations people, so you can build your understanding of the intergenerational lived experiences of First Nations peoples, from their perspectives, in Australia since and before 1788 (see list at the end of this document).
- Set up a First Nations advisory group at your organisation, employing First Nations people to provide specialist cultural knowledge and advice on your organisation's policy and service development and delivery.
- Have discussions within your organisation aimed at reflecting on privilege and systemic bias and how it plays out in welfare systems. Cultivate an organisation-wide willingness to listen to First Nations family perspectives and incorporate these perspectives into the design and implementation of organisational policies and service systems.
- Look for professional development resources and opportunities that support First Nations specific trauma-informed service practices.

The current challenges for First Nations youth leaving OOHC

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and non-indigenous care leavers face significant challenges when they exit OOHC. While examples of successful transitions from OOHC do exist, the following outcomes are common (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs & the National Framework Implementation Working Group, 2010):

- leaving care ill-prepared and unsupported for independent living due to a lack of transition-to-independence planning
- leaving OOHC with poorly developed social and emotional skills as a result of pre-care and in-care experiences
- experiencing short- and long-term homelessness because of severe shortages of affordable housing
- leaving OOHC with diagnosed and undiagnosed health issues
- having difficulty achieving success in education and employment
- following a volatile pathway, potentially including drug and alcohol abuse, family violence and involvement in the justice system.
- Additionally, female care leavers are more like to become pregnant at an earlier age and be at risk of their own children being removed.

For First Nations care leavers, these difficulties can be made worse by an accumulation of other factors. Much of the most recent evidence on this comes from a national study undertaken in 2020 that examined the numbers, needs and outcomes of First Nations care leavers in Australia (Mendes et al., 2020). Through interviews and focus groups, data were collected from government representatives responsible for leaving care policy, non-government organisations (NGOs) and ACCOs. The results of the Mendes et al. (2020) study provided insight into the general challenges faced by First Nations care leavers. These are outlined below.

Service challenges

- **Leaving OOHC with a reluctance to engage with mainstream leaving care services:** Historical and contemporary removal of First Nations children from their families continues to be a significant factor in widespread First Nations community hesitancy to trust and engage with mainstream government services, particularly social welfare systems.
- **Leaving care feeling unsupported and unheard from a cultural standpoint:** There is evidence to suggest that many services are culturally insensitive. First Nations care leavers require care that is culturally informed. Culturally informed care requires First Nations community knowledge; however, most leaving care services are provided by non-indigenous government and non-government organisations. ACCOs are often either poorly funded or not funded to support First Nations care leavers.

Cultural and reunification challenges

- **Leaving OOHC without a cultural plan (despite the known benefits of cultural planning):** The health and wellbeing of many First Nations peoples are intrinsically linked to connections with family, culture and Country (Williamson, Dent, & Bowman, 2020). Mendes and colleagues (2020) found that leaving care without a cultural plan led by First Nations people inhibited First Nations care leavers' sense of identity, self-worth and belonging.
- **Being unsupported in navigating relationships and reunification with family:** Mendes and colleagues (2020) have found that a lack of support for family and community reunification could have a severely detrimental effect on care leavers' transition out of care. Young people often cross state borders and/or travel long distances, away from supports, to return to family. Family may be ill-equipped to welcome them home and these young people can then be at risk of homelessness and isolation.
- **Experiences of transgenerational trauma:** Mendes and colleagues (2020) found that First Nations care leavers were often leaving care and trying to reunify with families and communities that continue to live with unhealed trauma and socio-economic disadvantage.
- **Systems unable to support the mobility of First Nations care leavers:** Historical relocation of First Nations communities, forced child removal and the mobility of First Nations families through generations have resulted in care leavers often finding that their family is dispersed, even living interstate (Mendes et al., 2020).

Housing challenges

- **Australia has a severe shortage of affordable housing:** Finding affordable and culturally appropriate accommodation was a widespread challenge for First Nations care leavers. Many were said to be transitioning into homelessness. First Nations care leavers are known to leave care with a strong desire to reconnect with their family and community. Affordable accommodation is not only scarce generally but almost non-existent in rural and isolated regions. This is a clear problem, especially for care leavers whose families live in rural and isolated regions (Mendes et al., 2020).
- **Government and private rental accommodation does not generally support First Nations ways of living:** Upon leaving care, family responsibilities are frequently central to the lives of First Nations care leavers. First Nations care leavers can soon become the carers of their siblings or other family members. Kinship and community expectations around housing and caring responsibilities are a key challenge for First Nations care leavers. Mainstream government or public housing does not generally support mobility and the sharing of accommodation for long and short periods with close and extended family and community. When a care leaver finds accommodation but breaches tenancy regulations specified by government and private housing providers, they are often evicted and so too are the family and community members sharing the dwelling with them. Housing instability affects all other aspects of the care leaver's life (Mendes et al., 2020).

What does research tell us about how we can do better?

The research findings from the Mendes et al. (2020) study indicate the following ways that we can better support Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander care leavers in our practice.

Service practices

- **Listen to local First Nations community organisations, Elders and community members.** There is no one size fits all approach. First Nations communities nationwide are diverse and it is important to listen to local First Nations community members and utilise their strengths and ideas. Meaningful and equal collaboration with local First Nations people will help to build trusting relationships with the community more broadly and, in doing so, make successful outcomes for your First Nations clients more likely.
- **Start transition planning early.** Effective transition planning for First Nations youth should start early and can begin when they are as young as 12 years old. Transition plans need to be holistic in nature and focus on developing independent living skills and improving relationships outside of care. They should include First Nations-specific and mainstream education and employment pathway planning and housing, and emphasise a strong connection to culture.

Cultural practices

- **Have proper cultural plans in place.** Cultural plans are essential to support the development of First Nations care leavers. Effective cultural planning through collaboration with First Nations people allows First Nations care leavers to build a stronger sense of identity and belonging, and this can benefit all other areas of their lives.
- **Have a focus on family reunification.** First Nations care leavers who are aware of their ancestry and kinship (family) networks are more likely to have a stronger sense of identity and belonging. A holistic assessment of a First Nations care leaver's family situation should start when they are in care and include all important First Nations and non-indigenous people in that young person's life, and possibly family they have not yet met. Family reunification should integrate a whole of family trauma-informed approach.
- **Build service systems and practices that support mobility.** First Nations care leavers often have kinship connections that extend across numerous geographical areas. Supporting this mobility may involve establishing and maintaining support mechanisms outside your organisation's geographical jurisdiction.

Housing

- **Provide or facilitate access to culturally appropriate affordable housing.** Young First Nations people require access to culturally appropriate affordable housing close to family and community support networks. Supporting First Nations care leavers to find and keep housing that supports First Nations ways of living is critical. Family responsibilities are frequently central to the lives of First Nations care leavers. Therefore, finding affordable accommodation that can support shared housing with close and extended family members when required is desirable.

Practical guidance for providing culturally safe services

To support the provision of flexible and culturally safe service practices, try the following practical ideas (Mendes et al., 2020):

- At all stages of service provision, make an effort to include the significant people in your First Nations client's life. This may be respected community members and friends or involve taking a 'whole of family' approach to service delivery. Look for the strengths within First Nations family and community networks. Utilise these strengths to support your First Nations care leaver's transition planning, cultural planning, leaving care support systems and family reunification.
- Design your service practice knowing that a 'whole of family' cultural and trauma-informed response is often necessary.
- Be flexible in how, when and where you meet First Nations young people and their families.
- Focus on relationality, be patient and take the time to build trusting relationships with your First Nations clients and their families.
- Within your organisation, through collaboration with First Nations people, create spaces that First Nations young people and their families feel safe and comfortable in.
- When talking with First Nations young people, explore what level of understanding the young person really has. Nodding does not necessarily mean the young person understands or agrees with what has been said. Consider asking the First Nations youth if they would like to be accompanied by a significant person when meeting with an OOH service provider representative. This is particularly important when making decisions about transition planning.
- A less formal approach is encouraged. Avoid jargon and be very careful to explain the purpose and use of formal documentation clearly.



Reflecting on your practice

Important questions for an organisation to consider through collaboration with First Nations community members

These questions are designed to support practitioners to reflect on their practice and consider how this evidence can be drawn on in their decision making. Organisations may want to consider using these questions as a starting point for reflection in discussion groups inside your organisation and in consultation with First Nations community members.

- How can we become more engaged with First Nations organisations, staff, Elders and community members to ensure our approach is culturally driven and delivered in meaningful ways to First Nations youth?
- Are our systems of delivery to our First Nations care leavers culturally and trauma-informed? What are some examples of where we are doing well? What are some examples of where we could do better?
- What are the unique needs of First Nations care leavers compared to the broader cohort of care leavers? What are their core cultural support needs as they transition from care to independence? What would be the best practice for addressing those needs?
- What First Nations and non-indigenous housing, education and employment pathways are available in my jurisdiction? How can our service support improved access, participation and success for our First Nations care leavers through these pathways?

Practical resources

There may be one or more local ACCO in your area and it is possible these organisations can work with your organisation to provide cultural knowledge and understanding. However, these organisations often have limited resources and are not always funded to provide such support, so requests for resources, expertise or support may need to be part of a broader agreement for support or be accompanied by appropriate compensation.

If you are unaware of the ACCOs in your local area, you may like to start by contacting the [National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation \(NACCHO\)](#). NACCHO is the national leadership body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health in Australia. This organisation provides advice and guidance to the Australian Government on policy and budget matters and is responsible for the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) that operate in over 300 clinics across Australia, delivering holistic, comprehensive and culturally competent primary health care services.

The [Bringing them Home Report: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families](#) is a must read for all Australians.

The [Healing Foundation](#) provides culturally informed advice and resources, and supports organisations that are in contact with Stolen Generations survivors and their families.

The [Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies \(AIATSIS\)](#) provides an abundance of resources to support Australian history research and cultural awareness programs. They also support First Nations families who are undertaking family history research.

[Link-Up](#) is an Australian Government-funded service that supports Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples who are over 18 years of age who were removed from their biological family as children to locate and reunite with them.

[SNAICC](#) – The National Voice for our Children advocates for the rights of First Nations children and youth and provides resources to support carers of First Nations children. Each year they publish a Family Matters Report, highlighting the concerns of First Nations children, youth and their families.

The [Lowitja Institute](#) is Australia's only national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled health research institute. They support research that benefits the health and wellbeing of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

[National Indigenous Television Network \(NITV\)](#) is an excellent media platform highlighting the diversity of First Nations peoples' lived experiences nationwide. Programs promote awareness of First Nations cultures and experiences globally and nationally and help to explain how the past lives in the present.

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