

# Trauma and Health

FIRST NATIONS  
CULTURAL RESOURCES

**Good practice guidance**

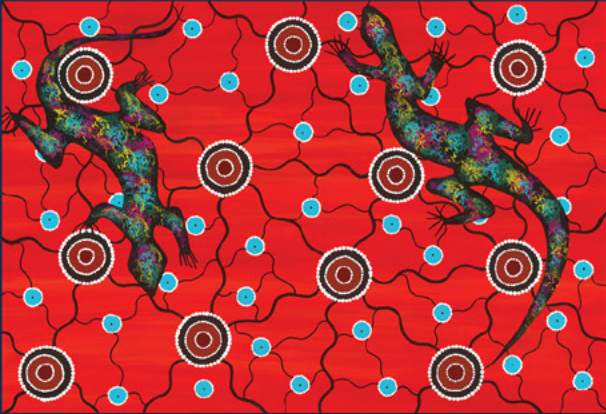


The Centre for  
Volunteering

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## Artwork Details

Title: *Country*

Artist: Graham Toomey  
Wurrumunga Clan of Wiradjuri Nation/  
Wongaibon Nation

About: *Country holds a spirit which is old and at all times this spirit heals me, protects me and guides me. When I'm on Country, I feel this old spirit speaking to me and singing to me. The Goanna is the Wiradjuri's people 'totem' which connects us to our creators, ancestors and to our Identity. The Goanna's protect us and guide us through life.*

This artwork captures male and female Goanna's wandering across Country, ensuring all is well and the people are safe. The artwork depicts the colour of the earth along with ancient tracks, which connects clans to each other. The artwork also features old water holes where spirits linger, welcoming those who wish to drink from these old water holes, once they have paid respects and asked for permission.

## Sensitivity Warning

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers and listeners are advised, this resource contains stories of a sensitive nature and images, voices or names of people who may have died.

In discussing the Stolen Generations, this resource will provide information on acts of genocide, sexual assault, forced removal of children, violence, abuse, and racism. These resources may be confronting for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and for Care Leavers. Please consider your own capacity to engage with these topics when using this resource.



# Acknowledgement of Country

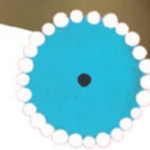
**We acknowledge Country and pay our respects to the Traditional Owners across Australia. We pay our respect to them and to Elders past and present. We acknowledge the self-determination, resilience, and strength that provides inspiration, care, and support for Aboriginal communities. We also recognise that Aboriginal Peoples have and have always had a strong connection to Country and that their culture is a living Culture that provides richness and cultural value to their communities.**



**Wiradjuri Country**

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# Acknowledgements



## Barbara O'Neill

Barbara O'Neill CEO, is a proud Dunghutti Woman, raised on Bidjigal Country in NSW. Barbara has worked for eight years for a Community organisation as the Aboriginal Caseworker and as a qualified Indigenous Trauma and Recovery Practitioner. Many of her clients have been Care Leavers. Barbara also sits on the Walama List headed by Justice Warwick Hunt of the NSW District Court. Her capacity is as a Respected Older Person. Barbara has been published in the NSW Jurisprudence Magazine. The subject was Trauma, and the work is now in the New Judge's Handbook and can be found as an Academic article in various search engines.

Barbara has a Bachelor of Indigenous Knowledge majoring in Aboriginal Health and a Graduate Certificate in Indigenous Trauma Recovery and Practice as well as a Diploma in Counselling. Barbara is currently engaged in a Master's in counselling. Building journeys of understanding for the non-Indigenous communities via evidence based and trauma informed practice is a passion for Barbara.

## Graham Toomey

Graham Toomey is a freshwater man from the Wurrumunga Clan of the Wiradjuri nation and also of Wongaibon Nation. Graham has been the CEO at Gunawirra for the last five years, which is an Aboriginal Community-led organisation in Rozelle. Graham has been with Gunawirra since 2010. In 2010, Graham was Gunawirra's cultural advisor and cultural facilitator who educated and guided staff while also working with the board and management on creating a safe and culturally appropriate place with policies and processors. Gunawirra is supporting over 25 mainly Aboriginal preschools across Sydney and NSW through health and educational programs. Graham has a Diploma of Aboriginal studies and is a practicing visual artist, designer and consultant.

Graham has strong Community ties with the Redfern and Inner West Aboriginal communities as well as rural NSW. Graham has been working as a cultural and art consultant, advisor, facilitator across Sydney for over 20 years and has a wealth of Aboriginal cultural knowledge, contacts and experience.

## The Centre for Volunteering

### Zac Harold

Manager – Sector Development and Engagement

### Ben Hillier

Senior Manager – Research, Policy and Advocacy



# Glossary

**Please be mindful that all people and communities are different. Some communities will have different preferences and meanings for terms. It is important to ask the individuals and communities that you are working with what terms to use to refer to people, places, and things.**

## **First Nations peoples:**

'First Nations peoples' is a term used to represent peoples who are Indigenous to a place. In these resources, First Nations peoples is used specifically to refer to the First Nations people of Australia and is adjacent as a term to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. A range of different terms are used in different Communities, including 'First Nations', 'Indigenous', 'Aboriginal', and/or 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders', and different people prefer different terms. Throughout these resources, 'First Nations', 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander(s)' and 'Indigenous Australians' are used interchangeably. This reflects how these communities refer to each other and themselves. It is vital that you always consult with the Elders of a Community when you are working or volunteering in a Community and ask people how they would like to be addressed. Be mindful that some people do not like certain terms being used to refer to them (e.g. 'Indigenous' is often not preferred because of its association with government labelling).

## **Country:**

'Country' refers to an area of land or sea on which Aboriginal peoples have a traditional or spiritual association. It has a broad meaning which can cover Land, Area, Connectedness to Place/Sea/Sky/Land/Animals/Plants, Lore, and Community.

## **Reconciliation:**

'Reconciliation' refers to the ongoing journey to create a positive and constructive relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Aboriginal peoples.

In a just, equitable, and reconciled Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children will have the same life chances and choices as non-Aboriginal children, and the length and quality of a person's life will not be determined by their racial background.

## **Nation:**

'Nation' refers to a culturally distinct group of people from a culturally defined area of land.

## **Kinship:**

'Kinship' means identity and belonging in/through a complex system of social connectedness that covers responsibilities, roles, and reciprocal bonds. Within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations there are clan groups and within clan groups there are family groups. Kinship is at the heart of Aboriginal culture which links people to one another.

## **Elders:**

'Elders' are highly respected Aboriginal peoples held in esteem by their communities for their wisdom, cultural knowledge and Community service. They have gained recognition as a custodian of knowledge and lore. Age alone does not determine whether someone is recognised as an Elder in their Community.

## **Lore:**

'Lore' refers to the responsibilities, customs, practices, and cultural knowledge that the Aboriginal peoples learned from the Dreamtime. Aboriginal lore was passed across the generations through knowledge, songs, stories, and dance and it governs all aspects of traditional life.

## **Mob:**

'Mob' is a colloquial term identifying a group of Aboriginal peoples associated with a particular place or Country. It is used to connect and identify who an Aboriginal person is and where they are from. Mob can refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family, relatives, and/or Community.

## **Community:**

A First Nations 'Community' contains people who work together to advocate and support each other to maintain their Community. The Community shares and builds a sense of cultural identity and belonging that ensures the Community respect each other's differences and values. The same sense of belonging in Community is what connects people to the many relationships they develop. Community Elders and leaders within Community, work together with Community to make decisions that best serves and represent the Community.

## **Culture:**

'Culture' is a broad term. It includes cultural knowledge, traditional practices, ways of understanding the world, and methods of expression such as language, celebrations, and events. Culture also relates closely to Country. It is also best to avoid using the term 'lost' when referring to Culture (and/or language) as it passes over the current First Nations cultures and the survival of current First Nations peoples.

## **Sorry Business:**

'Sorry Business' refers to the process of the whole Community coming together to share grief and the wider period of cultural practices

following the death of a Community member. This allows communities and individuals to mourn the loss properly. This period can last days, weeks, and even months.

### **Welcome to Country:**

A 'Welcome to Country' is delivered by Traditional Owners, (or First Nations peoples who have been given permission from Traditional Owners) to welcome visitors to their Country. It is a protocol which welcomes visitors a safe passage and protection of their spiritual being during their journey while on the Country of a specific First Nations people group.

### **Acknowledgement of Country:**

An 'Acknowledgement of Country' is an opportunity for anyone (First Nations Person(s) and/or non-Indigenous person(s)) to show respect for Traditional Owners of Country and the continuing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to Country.

### **Self Determination:**

'Self-determination' is the ability to have power and control over your own affairs. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, this means being able to make decisions that affect Community and being able to practice culture.

Self-determination is about being empowered and having freedom and dignity. It also involves recognising and respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as First Nations Peoples with their own decision-making and knowledge systems. Self-determination for Indigenous people is a human right recognised by the United Nations.

### **Stolen Generations:**

'The Stolen Generations' refers to a period in Australia's history where Aboriginal children were removed from their families through government policies. This happened from the mid-1800s to the 1970s.

These children were taken by the police; from their homes; on their way to or from school. They were placed in over 480 institutions, adopted or fostered by non-Indigenous people and often subjected to abuse. The children were denied all access to their culture, they were not allowed to speak their language and they were punished if they did. The impacts of this are still being felt today.

There are currently more than 17,000 Stolen Generations survivors in Australia. Over one third of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are their descendants. In Western Australia almost half

of the population have Stolen Generations links.

The children, grandchildren and future generations of the Stolen Generations may experience disconnection from their extended families and culture and have high levels of stress. This creates a cycle of trauma, known as Intergenerational Trauma, where the impact is passed from one generation to the next.

### **Sovereignty:**

For First Nations peoples, sovereignty is a spiritual meaning that restrains them to their ancestral lands, (Country or "mother earth"). First Nations peoples were born from their Country and remain attached and connected at all times.

First Nations peoples were self-governing with their own ancestral laws, social structures and systems in place. Sovereignty was never ceded by First Nations peoples, meaning they never consented or agreed to give their country to the invaders, or agreed to live under someone else's laws.

*"... since spiritual belief is completely integrated into human daily activity, the powers that guide and direct the earth are believed to exist with all human life. The first owners of the land were ancestral beings whose creativity and incorporation into the land provides the basis for our sovereignty".*

Aileen Moreton-Robinson, in Jack Latimore, *Sydney Morning Herald*

## **REFERENCES**

- Healing Foundation. *Who are the Stolen Generations?* Last accessed May 18, 2023.  
 Latimore, Jack. *What's Indigenous sovereignty and can a Voice extinguish it?* *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 9, 2023. Last accessed May 18, 2023.





## About

These resources have been produced in partnership between Aunty Barbara O'Neill and Graham Toomey, and The Centre for Volunteering. Resource topics and insights have been informed by both The Centre for Volunteering's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group and non-Indigenous members of the NSW volunteering sector.

Developed through a co-design process with Aunty Barb and Graham, the resources seek to ensure that non-Indigenous volunteer-involving organisations are well placed to understand, support, engage and build strong relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

This information is designed to support people who coordinate, manage and lead volunteers in building relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities by providing introductory knowledge to better understand Culture, access reliable information and appropriately work with Community.

To build on these resources it is essential to continue to do the work of listening, learning and being an active supporter of Community. Transparency, honesty and being genuine are keys to long lasting relationships.

Non-Indigenous volunteer-involving organisations should look to build principles of Aboriginal self-determination into ways of working and program delivery. This includes ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are involved in program design and decision-making on services which affect them. Contact your local Aboriginal Community to gather information about your local area.

**DISCLAIMER:** THE INFORMATION IN THIS DOCUMENT IS GENERALISED AND DOES NOT REFLECT THE OPINIONS OF ALL ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES OR COMMUNITIES. EACH Community HAS DIFFERENT CUSTOMS.



# Trauma

*"When the door to suicide opens it becomes a viable option that you never considered before, but, once ajar, it initiates an invasion strategy. Day by day thoughts blacken under the occupation of the new inhabitant. It becomes an all-consuming addiction that makes its home in your head and heart and, before you know it, the whole neighbourhood is talking and thinking about suicide. Eventually, the mind is overwhelmed by the conspiracy of its own darkness and begins to wage war against the body. At this point, the body is powerless."*

— B.G. Bowers

# Transgenerational Trauma

Transgenerational Trauma effects every aspect of the Aboriginal Community.

There is an evidence base, that extremely distressing and catastrophic events (internal or external to the body) cause the cells of the body associated with DNA to change through a process called 'demethylation'.<sup>1</sup> This change in the structure of the DNA then becomes an inherited change in future generations. This impacts behaviour, physical wellbeing, and the psyche. There is also the effect of these events on the collective psyche of a people which leads to impaired mental health, chronic disease(s), community upheaval, and suicide.<sup>2</sup>

When you work with Aboriginal peoples, you are entering a world that is still recovering from a cataclysmic ordeal. It was only just over 260 years ago that a 65,000-year-old society which embraced democracy, reciprocity, trading, tool making, marketing, medicine, spirituality, astronomy, caring for Country, and the arts was almost destroyed.

Aboriginal peoples are intricately connected through Kin, Country, and Story. The death of one person influences the whole of community. Imagine the effect on the community of mass slaughter and enslavement. Imagine, if you will, that your mother cannot tell you about your grandmother, because your mother didn't carry photographs of your lost Matriarchs. Imagine that you could only obtain these photos from government records or that you had to ask everyone you know if they knew your Matriarchs. It is exhausting.

Aboriginal Men, Warriors, are routinely incarcerated. Upon closer investigation, it is almost always that they are survivors of childhood abuse and care homes. A common trajectory for Aboriginal males is care home, Juvenile Detention. It is easier for Aboriginal children to be removed from their families, disrupting connection to Country and Kin. This is repeating the original cause of their inherent transgenerational trauma.<sup>3</sup>

The everyday signs of transgenerational trauma that you could encounter are:

- Crowded living conditions.
- A Shortened life span.
- A deep sadness.
- Mistrust.
- Chronic illness, sometime multiple.
- Poverty.
- Unfinished education.
- Barriers to employment and the economy.

When people are spiritually and emotionally exhausted, they become sick. Poverty presents as a sign of trauma, because of the need to give up employment and education to care for others who are suffering chronic illness due to the demethylation of their DNA.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Howie et al. (2019). *A review of epigenetic contributions to post-traumatic stress disorder. Diagnoses in Clinical Neuroscience*. 21(4), 417-428.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet. *Trauma*. Last accessed 26/6/2023.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Institute of Family Studies. (2020). *Child Protection and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children*. Last accessed 26/6/2023.

<sup>4</sup> HealingFoundation. (2023). *Intergenerational Trauma*. Last accessed 26/6/2023.

# Health

Aboriginal peoples are still adjusting to Western medicine and pharmaceuticals. Aboriginal peoples will discuss their health differently to non-Aboriginal people. It is important that Men and Women are given the choice of the gender of any health care professional assessing them, especially in Traditional communities.

It is at times difficult for non-Aboriginal people to understand why Aboriginal peoples avoid health services. There is strong evidence as to the level of racism both conscious and unconscious in the Australian health system.<sup>5</sup>

Some Aboriginal people will say “You die if you go into hospital”. This may be because whenever they lost kin in hospital, the health of that person was already in crisis when they finally attended for medical assistance.

A fear for Aboriginal Women is that their children will be taken by authorities if they themselves stay in hospital. This fear is well grounded in historical fact. There is also a level of discomfort for Aboriginal women who attend non-Aboriginal maternity clinics.

You will often read that a worrying challenge in Closing the Gap is the health of Aboriginal peoples. However, it is the same systems that have historically been disastrous for Aboriginal peoples which are trying to encourage them to take up of services for their health.

The Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS) established in the 1970’s in Redfern, NSW, has been an outstanding success. There are also Aboriginal

Controlled Health Services (ACHO’s) that are highly successful. Aboriginal peoples would like to see the large sums of money currently directed at Closing the Gap redirected to their own Health Services.

Aboriginal parents want the best for their children. After all, the survival of Aboriginal peoples depends on this. It should not be assumed that because Aboriginal children have a runny nose and are barefoot that they are neglected.

Aboriginal parents embrace the benefits that Western medicine can offer their children, but they also want to be left to decide when their own healing ways are of benefit to children. The health of Aboriginal peoples is deeply connected with Transgenerational Trauma. This is what needs to be addressed if we are to move forward.

Aboriginal peoples are born with inherent health difficulties caused by Trans Generational Trauma.

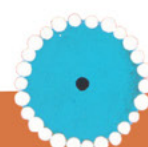
## More information

[naccho.org.au](http://naccho.org.au)

[\*Aboriginal Medical Service Redfern\*](#)

[\*Engaging first peoples: a review of government engagement methods for developing health policy\*](#)

[\*Australia’s National Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research\*](#)







# The Stolen Generations of Australia

*"It is estimated that between 1 in 10, possibly as many as 1 in 3, Indigenous children were removed from their families and communities between 1910 and the 1970s. These children were taken by the police; from their homes or on their way to school and put in to institutions, fostered or adopted out to non-Indigenous families. Many children suffered harsh, degrading treatment (including sexual abuse) and were frequently indoctrinated to believe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were inferior. The forcible removal of Indigenous children was a part of assimilation policies adopted by all Australian governments throughout the twentieth century. Despite the widespread nature of the practice, mainstream recognition of the experience has only been relatively recent".*

BTH20, Healing Foundation.

On the 13th of February 2008, then-Prime Minister Kevin Rudd issued an Apology to the Stolen Generations of Australia. From the perspective of Aboriginal Australia, this was a profoundly moving Apology, but for many in non-Aboriginal Australia, there has been a perception that now that an Apology has been made, Australia can move on.

This is not the case for Aboriginal Australia.

Families are still grieving the parents and grandparents that they were prevented from forming relationships with. The pain still runs very deep.

- There are generations of people who have had no learned way of parenting. This becomes a deficit when they do their best and come to the attention of Child Protection authorities.
- Many Aboriginal people who grew up in Care do not have a knowledge of their Culture.
- There are many Aboriginal people who experienced losing their children because they the parent/parents were hospitalised. This has led to a fear of staying in hospital.

- Many men returned from what would now be called "fly-in fly-out" jobs to find their children had been taken from their homes.
- Many survivors of the Stolen Generations return to communities that do not recognise them or have never been connected with them.
- This is a painful encounter on all parties involved.

## Reading List

[Bringing Them Home Report \(Healing Foundation Summary\)](#)

[Bringing Them home Report \(Human Rights Commission Report\)](#)

[Human Rights Commission Activities and Downloads](#)

[The Healing Foundation – 20 Years On](#)

## Volunteer Managers and Coordinators

As a volunteer manager or coordinator, you and your team may encounter some initial mistrust in a Community. This could be due to:

- Historical accounts of non-Aboriginal people, who have been allowed into a Community, reporting to the Authorities that they do not think that the children of that community are safe. This could have been based on children not wearing shoes, a runny nose, not being close to the family home, and/or many other petty reasons.
- Previous experience with non-Aboriginal people in a Community who created a power imbalance by their presence.
- Misrepresentation of the Community in written articles.
- A failure to acknowledge their status as a visitor to that Community.
- Lack of consultation to understand the community from the viewpoint of the community.
- Visiting a Community with an attitude that the Community is deficient and will be better for non-Aboriginal visitors.

## The Stolen Generations

The Stolen Generations represents children who were:

- Seized by authorities, usually in black government cars.
- Placed in purpose-built institutions.
- Made to participate in hard labour. Children as young as three years of age were included in this practise.
- When deemed to have been sufficiently trained in hard labour they were then “given” to white businesses and families to partake of more hard labour.
- They were often sexually assaulted.
- Girls/teenage girls often bore the children of the males in the places to which they were sent.
- The babies from these sexual assaults were then seized and became another Stolen Generation.

In the first institution to which they were taken, in the words of a boy from Kinchella Boys’ Home in Kempsey:

*“...when we arrived we went through the front door with a name and out the back door a few minutes later with a number, never to hear our own names again.”*

(Unknown)

Recent generations of Aboriginal people have grown up with parents who were stolen as children. These parents have been struggling to deal with the enormous traumatic fall out from their own Adverse Childhood Events (ACES). They have struggled to nurture their children, with strong memories of a brutal and harsh environment away from the family and Community.

There will be repercussions for many years to come as a result of the extreme trauma suffered by the Stolen Generations and their Children, who have experienced the lateral violence and family dysfunction that often is a result of this State sanctioned cruelty against Aboriginal children.

On the 26th of May, 1997, the “Bringing Them Home Report” was released as the result of a Royal Commission. This is a heart-wrenching record of the brutality and cruelty of this systemic State-operated seizure of Aboriginal Children.

There has also been the establishment of The Healing Foundation. The Healing Foundation has been responsible for advocating on behalf of the Aboriginal survivors of the Stolen Generations.

The legal work still continues into collecting the stories of the Stolen generations individuals so that they may receive some legal redress to their pain and Adverse Childhood Traumas.

As someone who manages volunteers or is working in the capacity as a volunteer it is advisable that you don’t ask about previous generations of an Aboriginal person, unless this information is offered to you. If you do know of a prominent person in that family, it is alright to acknowledge this. If you are visiting a community as a health or legal worker, the usual ethics would apply.



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