

Racism 'a factor' in child removal

March 17 2015, by Saffron Howden



Protesters campaign against the removal of Aboriginal children. Credit: Paddy Gibson

For nearly three excruciating days, Albert Hartnett had no clue where his 18-month-old daughter, Stella, was being kept.

Social workers and police officers arrived at their inner-Sydney home one Saturday morning in mid-2012 with paperwork entitling them to remove his baby.

Among the concerns that prompted such drastic action was that Stella did not have her own cot in which to sleep, the dishes had not been done, there were cobwebs on the ceiling, and there appeared to be dog faeces on the floor of the apartment. But, Hartnett says, "[we had] no dog at the time".

The police had reported the family after visiting the unit on unrelated matters. However, by Monday afternoon, after threats of legal action, a long meeting with NSW child protection officials and an assessment of the home, the baby was returned to the family's care.

"They basically did everything back to front," Hartnett says.

In recent years there has been an alarming increase nationally in the number of Indigenous children removed from their parents and placed in out-of-home care – anything from foster and kinship care to family group homes and residential homes with paid staff.

According to the Productivity Commission, 14,991 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were in out-of-home care in mid-2014. Indigenous children accounted for nearly 35 per cent of all children in care despite making up only 5.5 per cent of Australia's total child population.

The National Children's Commissioner, Megan Mitchell, who last month gave evidence before the Senate inquiry into out-of-home care, says racism is playing a part in the over-representation of Indigenous kids in the child protection system.

"We know that there's a level of racism in our community," Mitchell says. "You've got a really high level of surveillance of Aboriginal communities. I do think there's a level of racism, whether it's intended or not."

But she says there are myriad other factors, including problems with the system itself.

"I also think that the way we invest in care and protection is at that removal end, not at the family support end."

Foster care, Mitchell says, should only ever be a short-term response to children at risk of harm. State-based child protection authorities should be using supervision orders – where parents are offered support to help improve home life and then monitored to ensure the child or children are safe – "a lot more".

"We've really got to change things up completely," she says.

The experts acknowledge the tragic social context in the high level of interaction between child welfare authorities and Indigenous families, including the intergenerational trauma caused by past removals of Aboriginal children from their parents, culture and land.

But they are also more likely to be victims of child abuse, neglect and sexual assault, to have higher hospitalisation and mortality rates for injury, and are over-represented in the juvenile justice system and among the homeless population.

In its 2014 publication, Indigenous Child Safety, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) also found the death rate for Indigenous children from intentional self-harm was nearly seven times the rate for non-Indigenous kids.

"The reasons for the over-representation of Indigenous children in the child protection system are complex but may include the legacy of past policies of the forced removal of some Aboriginal children from their families, intergenerational cycles of poverty, and cultural differences in

child-rearing practices," the institute concluded.

"Other factors such as disadvantaged socioeconomic status, violence, drug and alcohol abuse and inadequate housing may be associated with greater risk of [child abuse](#) and neglect."

Paddy Gibson, a senior researcher at Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), says the child protection system is, in effect, punishing Indigenous parents and families for their disadvantage.

"The government response to the very real social issues and social trauma that [are] out there in Aboriginal communities is a punitive one," he says. "Child removal is being funded as a solution to the social problems."

Welfare workers are also not taking cultural differences into account when they decide to remove a child. For example, Aboriginal children generally have a greater degree of autonomy than their non-Indigenous counterparts and the most common reason cited for taking Indigenous children from their parents is "neglect".

"Overwhelmingly, the removals are for neglect or emotional abuse, which are both subjective," Gibson says.

For "Uncle" Albert Hartnett, who is now heavily involved with Grandmothers Against Removals, the [child protection](#) system is a sign of a wider malaise.

"Australian society has lost touch with its humanity," he says.

Provided by University of Technology, Sydney

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