

Lockdowns have left Stolen Generations survivors isolated, unsupported

June 2 2021, by Professor Steven Larkin



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[The Healing Foundation](#) has revealed that public health restrictions introduced to contain the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia have had a significant impact on some Stolen Generations survivors, retriggering

trauma among already vulnerable community members.

[The Healing Foundation's report](#) outlines how the measures aimed at protecting Stolen Generations survivors instead had a devastating negative effect on their physical and mental health and wellbeing. This research presents input from 60 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders and Stolen Generations survivors.

The report provides data showing significant effects on survivors and their loved ones, including a heightened sense of vulnerability and increased disconnection from family, community, and Country. The report also found that 20% of Stolen Generation survivor respondents said they had no support during COVID-19, while only 58% reported having some support.

While it can be argued Australia's response to the [pandemic](#) was largely successful when compared to other parts of the world, there are key lessons to be learned to prepare for future pandemics, especially for those most vulnerable in the community.

How restrictions impacted communities

The Healing Foundation is a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organization that partners with communities to heal the trauma caused by the widespread and deliberate disruption of peoples, cultures, and languages over 230 years. This includes specific actions like the forced removal of children from their families.

Work done by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group on COVID-19 ensured that infection rates were very low in First Nations populations.

Only [minor outbreaks in Aboriginal communities were recorded in](#)

[Australia](#), and they were quickly contained. But the COVID-19 restrictions disrupted many cultural, relational, and collective practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, which included collective healing activities.

Physical distancing put a hold on celebrations and ceremonies, including important and traditional family and cultural occasions like births and funerals.

Lockdowns meant survivors were disconnected from family for [Sorry Business](#) and attending community gatherings like NAIDOC Week. Events such as [the Apology anniversary](#) were canceled, keeping people away from marking important cultural dates.

Increased isolation and loneliness

The devastating combination of isolation, loneliness, distance from family, and tight public health directions brought difficult memories back for some survivors of the Stolen Generations, retriggering their trauma.

Survivors highlighted the following findings across the 23 social and emotional wellbeing indicators that were surveyed:

- The vast majority said they had a significantly increased sense of isolation (more than 90% of respondents) and loneliness (more than 80%). A majority also reported having too much time on their own (65%) and feeling trapped in their own thoughts (more than 70%).
- More than 90% reported feeling disconnected from family, community, and culture, while 77% felt disconnected from Country. This is concerning given the degree to which connection to family, community, culture, and Country enhances

health and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, especially for Stolen Generations survivors and descendants.

- Two-thirds of respondents reported a decline in their physical health and a decreased ability to cope with stress during COVID-19, while 75% reported a decline in their mental health and wellbeing.
- Importantly, 66% of respondents said the degree to which they felt safe was impacted by COVID-19, and more than 75% were worried about not being able to get places. Half of respondents said they were worried about not being able to get to a doctor/hospital and/or access the services they require.
- And three-quarters experienced an increase in family responsibilities and 70% an increase in cultural responsibilities. Alongside this, more than 90% of respondents experienced stress being placed on important relationships.

How governments can do better

This research undertaken by the Marumali Program on behalf of The Healing Foundation should assist governments and the broader public health sector to plan for future pandemics and build on Australia's world-leading response.

It has also raised some important questions, such as how can we use technology and social media to not only communicate important public health messages but also feelings of isolation? Or how can Stolen Generations survivors use technology to connect with family, community, culture, and Country?

Technology is just one area for consideration. But what happens when future restrictions have a negative impact on a survivor's healing journey? And what strategies or policies can help to support such

unavoidable effects?

Researchers Shaan Peeters and Dr. John Prince hope the study will lead governments to undertake further analysis to assess the needs, risks, and vulnerabilities of Stolen Generations survivors and their descendants into the future.

Stolen Generations survivors have long told us what they need to heal. Now, we need to understand what they require as Australia emerges from the pandemic and finds its way to a new normal.

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