

Indigenous child removal in Victoria 'highest since white settlement'

Report also shows Indigenous children in Victoria 16 times more likely than other children to be in out-of-home care

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More than one in six of the 6,500 children placed away from their parents in Victoria are Indigenous Australians. Photograph: Paul Miller/AAP Image

Indigenous Australian children in Victoria are 16 times more likely than the state's other children to be in out-of-home care, a report from the state's Commission for Children and Young People tabled in parliament says.

"At current levels, the rate of Aboriginal child removal in Victoria exceeds that at any time since white settlement," the [report tabled on Thursday says](#).

"The Victorian rate of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care is now among the highest in Australia, and is significantly higher than comparable international jurisdictions."

Of 6,500 children and young people placed away from their parents in Victoria, more than one in six were Indigenous Australians, with the number of Indigenous children in out-of-home care increasing by 9.5% a year compared with 5.3% a year for all children.

Aboriginal children make up just over 1% of the state's children.

The Victorian commissioner for Aboriginal children and young people, Andrew Jackomos, is co-chair of a taskforce aimed at addressing the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in out-of-home care.

He wrote in the report that there was “no greater curse” on the Victorian Indigenous community than criminal violence perpetrated on women and children within the family home.

“Unfortunately, [family violence](#) has become an evil and unacceptable part of our culture, with more than two-thirds of our children in child protection there as a result of this curse,” he wrote.

“Two-thirds of Aboriginal children in the youth justice system have graduated from out-of-home care.”

Principal commissioner, Bernie Geary, said the commission had launched an inquiry into Indigenous child placement.

Key to that inquiry would be ensuring children were being placed into care cognisant to their culture, he said, with decisions made on their behalf not often being made by Indigenous people.

“It’s important for children to keep with them the context of their culture; it’s important to their emotional, mental, physical and overall wellbeing,” Geary said.

“Young Aboriginal children are finding themselves for a whole range of reasons in vulnerable circumstances and the government struggles to connect them properly with culturally appropriate services. That’s been a challenge for many years.”

In response to the high number of children in out-of-home care across Australia, the Secretariat for National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) is holding a series of “family matters” forums across the country to discuss solutions with Indigenous community members, practitioners and service providers.

At a forum held in Adelaide on 27 August, Sharron Williams, chair of SNAICC, described the number of Indigenous children in out-of-home care as “alarming and totally unacceptable”.

“We need to take urgent action and consider different approaches – based on greater Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation – to arrest this worrying escalation in numbers and ensure the best outcomes for our children and families,” she said.

“We are still burdened with a system that is not meeting the needs of our vulnerable children and families, is not doing enough to keep families together, nor enough to keep children in care connected with their family and culture.”

“At present, governments across Australia are spending huge sums on child protection and out-of-home care — these totalled \$3.2bn in 2013 — and about a fifth of that amount on prevention and early intervention programs and intensive family support services.”

According to SNAICC, since Kevin Rudd’s national apology to stolen generations in 2008, the number of Indigenous children in out-of-home care has increased by 53.8%. By comparison, the number of non-Indigenous children in out-of-home care has increased by 22.6%.

Muriel Bamblett, the chief executive of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, said Indigenous children were also less likely to be reunited with their family once entering the system.

“All the data suggests reunification of children and keeping them connected with family members and culture has been very poor,” she said.

“The system is failing Aboriginal children and we must look at why.”

All Indigenous children had a right to know about their culture, she said, and were often left feeling disconnected and traumatised by the time they hit their teenage years if cut off from that.

“If we don’t keep them connected to their culture, we’re missing a vital element of what’s in their best interests,” she said.