

First Nations Children's Report

First Nations children: Holding the future

Children and young people are central to First Nations sovereign communities, the holders of 'a future that stretches as far out in front of us as it does behind us'¹. Communities nurture children and young people's connection to Country, family, community and culture. With this grounding in sovereignty, First Nations children and young people themselves exercise agency by understanding and articulating their own experiences and needs.

Yet First Nations children and young people's experience in Queensland has two sides. The first is the overwhelming injustice and harms of overpolicing, overincarceration, family separation and withholding education, health, and legal services. These injustices are the result of ongoing structural racism and colonialism by the state, which shapes much of First Nations children and young people's experiences of everyday services, such as going to school, visiting the doctor, or playing at the local park. This violence is deep and ongoing but does not determine First Nations children's lives, or their experience of the strength, sovereignty and care that their communities embody every day.

¹ Aunty Lila Watson quoted in Watego et.al. Black to the Future: Making the Case for Indigenist Health Humanities. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* **2021**, *18*, 8704. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18168704>





Centring sovereignty and voice

It is common for reports like this one to focus on only one side of this experience.

By focusing only on the violence of colonisation and racism, we erase the agency, care and knowledge of First Nations communities, who fight constantly for and with their children.

By only centring this agency without acknowledging what these communities are actually fighting against, we deny the pain of being torn away from family, targeted by police or incarcerated as a child. At the same time, erasing the violence of colonisation and racism allows the state to hide from its responsibilities and accountability. In response, this report holds both sides of the experience in the same frame. Grounded in the voice of children and young people and their families and community, this report reflects the depth of the harms, while showing how these harms are counteracted through the leadership, knowledge and love of sovereign First Nations' children and their communities.

Structural racism

To understand the experiences of First Nations children in Queensland, we need to examine the structures and systems that impact their lives. Government institutions sustain the ongoing colonisation of this continent, which continues to be an extremely violent experience for First Nations people, including children. At its core, colonisation on this continent is founded on the alleged inferiority of First Nations people and the denial of their sovereignty. This interconnection of racism and colonisation remains the legal basis for the Australian state today.

When it operates through government institutions such as policy departments, public services and laws, this denial of sovereignty and full humanity of First Nations people is called structural racism. Structural racism is different from individual acts of racial violence (such as slurs and physical attacks) because it is built-in to the policies and practices that discriminate against First Nations people. Some examples of structural racism include teaching settler perspectives in education, unjust policing, media framing Indigenous communities as 'dysfunctional', poor healthcare treatment for First Nations people. More recently elements of the Queensland child protection Structured Decision Making tool have been reviewed and been determined to be racist. Structural racism is engrained in complex structures and protected by large institutions, and this makes it difficult to identify and call-out, especially when these institutions have a predominantly settler workforce. This form of violence also hides the inequalities it creates by explaining them as natural or inevitable. In reality, issues created by structural racism, such as disproportionate poverty, health outcomes and imprisonment rates, are the result of repeated policy choices by institutions.

Government structures and systems are interconnected, coordinating information-gathering, communication and decision making. Governments often describe this interconnectedness as a 'safety net' of systems that supports citizens' wellbeing across all areas of life. However, by examining structural racism we can see how this 'net' is also used to harm and entrap First Nations people. One example of this harm is the pipeline between schools, child protection, policing and youth justice systems. When coordinated, the racism



inherent in these systems means that they work together to funnel First Nations young people into the youth justice system, rather than keeping them safe in their communities. This coordination intensifies the violence of structural racism, while making it more difficult to identify who or what is responsible. Ultimately, structural racism means systems continually impose on First Nations communities, denying them decision-making power over their own lives, communities and Country so that Australian governments can maintain control.

First Nations children and colonialism

First Nations children are inherently dangerous to colonial ideals, as they represent continuing First Nations existence in the face of attempted genocide. To gain control over this 'threat' to colonialism, Australian governments have portrayed First Nations children as inherently 'vulnerable', and in need of urgent 'saving' by governments, institutions and mainstream services to shape their futures as part of colonial society. As Sana Nakata writes "the brutality inflicted upon Indigenous families and children [is] one effort to realise a white nation on black land, and is a core part of settler-colonial logic"²

This has meant that First Nations children become the focus of particularly violent actions in the name of 'rescuing' them from Aboriginal society. This has been openly stated throughout Queensland history, as in the 1928 government policy that there was a duty to see that Indigenous children were "placed in surroundings and given a training that will fit them later to take their place, if necessary, in a white civilisation. An easy method from one point of view would be to remove them when young from the influence of the aboriginal and form settlements"³. This practice of systematic removal continues today.⁴

Children, young people and communities as decision-makers

Children in general are regularly seen as without agency and opinions on their needs, wants and futures. In the case of First Nations children, this is intensified because of the way it intersects with racial stereotypes of First Nations people as lacking capacity to make decisions about their own lives.

² Sana Nakata, *The Remaking of Nation*, p.398.

³ Moseley, 1935: 7–8.

⁴ Jacinta Krakouer, 'The stolen generations never ended they just morphed into child protection', *The Guardian*, (online 17 October 2019) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/oct/17/the-stolen-generations-never-ended-they-just-morphed-into-child-protection>



Because of the systematic erasure of First Nations children and young people's voices, listening when they speak up and responding to the needs, they identify is a core part of undermining racial and colonial violence.

First Nations children and young people must be centred in all accounts of their lives, and all policies generated on their behalf. This is important because it challenges racism and transfers control from state agencies to First Nations communities. It is important because it reflects the sovereignty and strength of First Nations children and young people. And it is critical because it leads to better policies that allow First Nations' children to thrive. As continually demonstrated through First Nations action and voices, Indigenous sovereignty continues today and is a source of authority, healing, and connection.

By centring sovereignty and strength, this report highlights the immense benefits when communities design and control the policies and practices that affect them. Even in the absence of formal, state recognised community control, First Nations communities have always been fighting for their families and themselves, maintaining strong networks of care. This report showcases examples of community-led practice, giving a glimpse into a future where these existing practices are widely resourced and supported by governments, enabling First Nations children to thrive.

Definitions

Sovereignty:

Indigenous sovereignty is a form of foundational authority that inheres in the land and people of this place. First Nations people are the embodiment of Country, and their sovereignty cannot be given by the state or taken away. First Nations sovereignty is not limited to Western definitions of sovereignty that tends to be hierarchical and signify control over land and people. Instead, it intertwines connection to land, culture, and identity.

Structural racism:

This refers to the interconnected systems, policies and practices which maintain a racist social order. Structural racism describes the operation of racism at the level of deep social, institutional, and governmental structures. While it is related to individual prejudice and racism, it is not the same. Many people only understand racism in its individual sense, which makes it harder to see the ways that First Nations children are affected by government actions.

Colonialism:

In settler colonial states (like Australia) a majority of colonisers come to stay in a place, to replace Indigenous people on their land and to establish a new political society on that land. In Australia, this process is ongoing because colonisers have not returned home, or transformed their institutions in ways that recognise existing Indigenous ownership and sovereignty.



Violence:

Describing the violence of racism and colonialism communicates the harm done by these structures, whether racism is individual (e.g. racist attacks, racist exclusion from school) or structural (e.g. failure to provide health services in First Nations communities, saturation policing of First Nations communities) it is violence. Racial violence is physical – through attacks, incarceration, deaths in custody and ill health – but also symbolic. When First Nations’ people are repeatedly framed as incapable, less than human or dysfunctional, this is a form of violence that harms them psychologically as well as physically.



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