

Barriers, incentives and strategies to enhance recruitment of Indigenous carers

Perspectives of professionals from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
organisations, non-government agencies and government departments

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Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies

National Child Protection Clearinghouse

The National Child Protection Clearinghouse has operated from the Australian Institute of Family Studies since 1995. The Clearinghouse is funded by the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs as part of its response to child abuse and neglect. The Clearinghouse collects, produces and distributes information and resources, conducts research, and offers specialist advice on the latest developments in child abuse prevention, child protection, and out-of-home care.

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Acknowledgements

This article is based on two reports that the Australian Council for Children and Parenting (through the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs) commissioned the Institute's National Child Protection Clearinghouse to write:

- *The Recruitment, Retention, and Support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Foster Carers: A Literature Review* (Richardson, Bromfield, & Higgins, 2005); and
- *Enhancing out-of-home care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people* (Higgins, Bromfield, & Richardson, 2005).

The reports were intended to contribute to the research output from the National Plan for Foster Children, Young People and their Carers 2004-2006. Copies of the full reports are available at:

www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/keyreports.html

The authors acknowledge the valuable contribution of Marlene Burchill who was a Senior Research Officer at the Institute at the time the research was conducted. Marlene is a Yorta Yorta and Dja Dja Werong woman. She played a key role in arranging consultations and travel plans, as well as assisting with data collection.

The authors also acknowledge the valuable contribution of Simon Schrapel and the Australian Council for Children and Parenting for their guidance and direction in the early stages of the project's development.

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Design and Layout: Pixel City Digital Design

Printed by Currency Communications

ISBN 978 0 642 39556 6

Print Post Approved PP349181/00604

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“At one stage there it was great, you know, you’d say ‘we’re looking for carers you know, who have you got?’ They’d say ‘we’ll get back to you, no worries’. So that used to happen, but it’s not now... I think people have realised now that the type of kids that we do place are just really high maintenance.”
(Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency representative)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders’ commitment to community is supported by complex personal, family and social obligations of kinship relations that have been central to the economic, social and spiritual life of Indigenous communities for many thousands of years (Kerr, Savelsberg, Sparrow, & Tedmanson, 2001). Yet even with intensive recruitment efforts, organisations have been unable to recruit sufficient Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers to meet demand. In response to a shortage of Indigenous carers, some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agencies have developed innovative strategies to overcome recruitment barriers and recruit new carers.

The study

In a national study, the Australian Institute of Family Studies conducted interviews with *professionals* from government, non-government and Indigenous agencies, as well as *carers* of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and Indigenous *young people* in care (the *participants*). The participants were asked to talk about what they thought were barriers and incentives to recruiting Indigenous carers and the strategies that worked well for recruiting Indigenous carers.

In this paper, we present participants’ views on four main barriers and incentives that influence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ decision to become a carer:

- the influence of past government welfare policies;
- the socio-economic disadvantage experienced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities;
- the increasing numbers of “hard to place” children with complex needs and high-risk behaviours; and
- the cultural commitment to community.

We then discuss ways participants have found to improve Indigenous carer recruitment such as:

- the recruitment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers by Indigenous people;

- community-generated recruitment strategies such as community days to attract potential carers; and
- strengthening collaboration between agencies.

The continuing effects of the Stolen Generation

The history of past government welfare practices.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, an issue that overshadows perceptions of whether to become a carer is the history of past government welfare practices. The practice that left the most enduring impact was the forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from 1910 to 1970. These children have come to be known as the ‘Stolen Generation’. The *Bringing them Home* report on the removal of Aboriginal and Islander children from their families reported that:

“Between 1 in 3 and 1 in 10 Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families from 1910 to 1970....

[M]ost families have been affected, in one or more generations, by the forcible removal of one or more children.”

The report also found that some of the underlying causes for the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care include:

- the legacy of past policies of forced removal and cultural assimilation;
- the intergenerational effects of forced removals;
- poverty; and
- cultural differences in child-rearing practices (Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

Research has shown that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults who were forcibly removed as children have poorer education, less stable living conditions and a weaker sense of cultural identity and connectedness;

and higher rates of arrests, convictions, imprisonment, and use of illicit substances than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults who were not removed as children (Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

Participants in this study talked about people's aversion to welfare, the ongoing grief still experienced as a consequence of past government practices, and how these practices have acted as both a barrier and an incentive to becoming a carer. This finding is consistent with previous research (S.A. Department of Human Services, 1998).

Aversion to “welfare”. Much of the disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities has been attributed to the debilitating effects of past welfare policies and practices enforced by governments. This has resulted in a suspicion of government and a distrust of child welfare services, which has acted as a powerful deterrent to the involvement of some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people becoming carers. Potential foster carers may have experienced foster care themselves, or had relatives in care, and do not want to expose their family or others to what they experienced:

“Indigenous carers are afraid to be carers... [It] raises all their fears in relation to their past connection with welfare. These fears go back to the Stolen Generation and trans-generational issues; the fears are still with many – they are still there. As a result this makes it too difficult for us to get Indigenous carers.” (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency representative)

Unresolved grief and loss. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are still experiencing grief associated with the Stolen Generation:

“Indigenous families haven't been able to deal with their own feelings about removal. Sadly for a lot of children and young people who come into the system, their parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles have not had the opportunity to deal with their own grief.” (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency representative)¹

Professionals suggested that when recruiting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers it was important to build in the opportunity for potential carers to talk about their own grief:

“One of the major [concerns] was around the grief stuff, that we would really need to spend quite some time giving people the opportunity to express their own grief.” (Departmental representative)

Past government practices can be the motivation for becoming a carer. Despite the barriers that prevent Indigenous people from becoming carers, participants told us there were aspects unique to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture that were an advantage for carer recruitment.

For some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, past government practices acted as an incentive as they were motivated to care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in order to help prevent another Stolen Generation, a finding confirmed by previous research (McHugh, McNab, Smyth, Chalmers, Siminski, & Saunders, 2004). One participant told us:

“We don't want the kids to be part of another Stolen Generation, where they don't have any connection with their own family.” (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency representative)

Material and social disadvantage prevents people from becoming carers

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities continue to face social and material disadvantage and to experience higher levels of poverty, lower employment and education levels, poorer health outcomes and shorter life spans (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are disproportionately represented among low-income earners (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003). Research has also shown that many foster carers are low-income earners (McHugh, 2002; McHugh et al., 2004). Foster carers have the added burden of the cost of caring being greater than allowances paid to carers (McHugh, 2002).

Participants believed that a fundamental barrier to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples becoming carers was the social and material disadvantage experienced by a disproportionate number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Participants told us that not only were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers experiencing material disadvantage, but that they were often caring for many children. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were already acting as informal (unfunded) carers to relative children and “could not afford to be foster carers as well” (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agency representative).

Departmental and agency representatives noted that quite often families took on additional children, although barely making ends meet themselves, because

¹ In quotations we have replaced the terms “Aboriginal” or “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander” or “Torres Strait Islander” with “Indigenous” to protect the identity of the participants

they felt that if they did not, that the children would go out of the community or be placed with a non-Indigenous carer. As one Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency representative noted:

“We don’t want to trap Indigenous families in poverty if we don’t provide financial support.”

Material disadvantage was compounded in remote areas where the availability of fresh foods, services and transport was limited. Overcrowding in households was also a difficulty, as current or potential new carers have limited housing capacity to take on other children.

There are growing numbers of “hard to place” children needing care

The increasing number of “hard to place” children was a growing concern for the professionals and carers we spoke to, and was seen as a significant barrier to carer recruitment. There are three types of “hard to place” children: children with complex needs; children without kith or kin willing or able to care for them; and children in need of short-term or emergency placements.

Children with complex needs. Children with complex needs include those with psychological and behavioural problems that are a consequence of the troubled and sometimes traumatic backgrounds that led to them being placed in care in the first place. Children with a disability or who engage in high-risk behaviours and who may have a juvenile justice history also have complex needs. Many potential carers felt they could not provide care for these children:

“We currently have 6 carers...The last option if children cannot be placed is that the kids have got to be locked up. [The program] is for young people 10-18 years... who are homeless, can’t live with their parents or are on an order... They are a complex needs group, a lot of them are really high risk... most of them are young offenders.” (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency representative)

Professionals reported the need for more non-relative foster carers for “hard to place” children, such as those with a disability, juvenile justice involvement, or those who are isolated from their kinship network:

“We have a high number of Indigenous kids with disability... They tend to go into non-Indigenous care. There is a whole range of issues around that. Some of those issues are cultural issues. I think there’s a different attitude to people with disabilities in Indigenous communities. Traditionally, kids who had disabilities would have been left by their families in the desert (similar with

twins)...Those cultural beliefs are still there. It is also to do with the capacity of people in those communities to meet the special needs of people with disability – even down to the fact that you don’t have footpaths and things like that so that if you’re in a wheelchair you can’t get around as easily as you can in an urban environment and the lack of resources for people in the communities. Another fairly basic issue: we had a kid who was on oxygen and the doctors were very reticent about him going out into the communities with an oxygen bottle because there could be campfires and the risk of having an exploding oxygen bottle was thought to be significant.” (Departmental representative)

Children without kith or kin. The shortage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers has more severe implications for Indigenous children without kith or kin, who have to be placed in non-relative care, as it is more likely they will be placed out of their community and with non-Indigenous carers:

“Indigenous children coming into care should be placed in their own country. Just because they’re Indigenous isn’t good enough. You need to be placed with people who know your identity.” (non-Indigenous carer)

Short-term emergency placements. Professionals reported the need for more non-relative carers for short-term and emergency placements:

“There is a small, unmet need, usually in emergency placements – we don’t have the capacity to place those children and immediately call on non-Indigenous providers to pick up the slippage. [The program] is looking at different ways to meet that need.” (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency representative)

Commitment to community and culture as an incentive to care

Community commitment to care. There is limited research on the motivations of Indigenous people to become carers. However, it has been argued that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders—by the very nature of their culture—have always had a strong commitment to contribute to the benefit of their community (Atkinson & Swain, 1999). Indigenous Australians’ commitment to community is supported by complex personal, family and social obligations of kinship relations that have been central to the political economy, social and spiritual life of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities for many thousands of years (Kerr et al., 2001). The collective maintenance of this commitment, in spite of the dominance of European culture, is linked to the shared experience of feeling excluded or isolated from mainstream

culture, organisations and services, and the poverty and economic disadvantage that is experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Kerr et al., 2001).

The 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander survey found that 29.9% of Indigenous Australians aged 15 years and over engaged in voluntary work (20% if hunting and gathering activities are excluded) compared to 19% of their non-Indigenous counterparts (Altman & Taylor, 1996). In relation to kinship care, in 2005, 76% of Indigenous out-of-home care placements were with kinship carers compared with 40% of non-Indigenous children (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2005).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service providers spoke about the strong commitment and obligation Indigenous people felt towards families and communities and the high value placed on children, which acts as an incentive, for some, to become a carer:

“Indigenous people want to make sure that Indigenous kids are kept with their community. So they try and help out. It’s our culture to keep our kids with us, so people volunteer.” (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency representative)

“Our most valuable resource is our children and young people and we need to support our children and young people and in doing that we support families... However we also acknowledge that sometimes when children can’t live at home they need to live somewhere else, with somebody else... Everybody knows that Indigenous children should be with Indigenous foster carers.” (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency representative).

Professionals’ commitment to care. The commitment to culture and community was also evident among professionals who worked in the out-of-home care sector, a situation that is unique to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and highlights Indigenous peoples’ cultural commitment to community:

“It is a bit hard at times being a carer and working in a care agency. I think it is common; I think you’ll find even some Indigenous department workers.... I mean I wasn’t planning on taking foster children but if they didn’t find someone to take this girl she would have been placed with non-Indigenous carers. They were at court that day and asked “Can you take this girl?” The courts have said I’ll have her until she’s 18.” (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency representative)

“A lot of the workers... who run or work in these services; many of them themselves are carers. This is unusual when you compare it to non-Indigenous services. It

would be quite unusual for a white worker... to also be a foster carer, it’s very common place it’s seems to me for the Indigenous workers.” (non-Indigenous agency representative)

Despite the barriers discussed above in recruiting new carers, professionals have developed innovative strategies to enhance the recruitment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers. These are discussed next.

Recruitment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers by Indigenous people

Assigning the responsibility for recruitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander placement agencies reportedly helped to circumvent the mistrust felt by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders towards “welfare”, which in turn improved the likelihood of recruiting new carers:

“The department’s profile of caring for kids is poor – there’s hesitation to letting the department in their home; a lot of distrust; a lot of rules that the community struggles with. The department and the local agency need to work together and think outside the square, because what we have been doing obviously doesn’t work. We need the Indigenous agency to tell us the best way. They know their community better than us. It also means the agencies promoting a better profile of the department with positive messages about caring for kids. We can deliver that message, but it’s not going to have an impact. The Indigenous agency needs to be the bridge between the department and the community.” (non-Indigenous agency representative)

Employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers with personal contacts within the community was seen by some professionals as one way to help bridge the divide between government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Using community-generated recruitment strategies. Agencies that were having more success in recruiting new carers used strategies that were in accord with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural and community life. Recruitment strategies that worked the best were those that used “word of mouth” or community events, and involved people who had connections with the local community (generally Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander workers or agencies).

For example, one organisation arranged a community day at the local football club with workers, volunteers and other Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations in the community. Organisers used the event as a promotional tool for potential carers. An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agency representative commenting on the day said:

“Seeing all the children having a good time reminded people how important children are and how important they are to the community - today, but also tomorrow - so that we stay strong and survive. And it’s a really good recruitment tool.” (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agency representative).

Strengthening collaboration across agencies. Many of the professionals we spoke with talked about the need for collaboration, communication and networking between agencies to ensure cooperative and efficient working partnerships. Participants reported that the roles of government and non-government agencies (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) can become blurred and overlap, and sometimes compete. This was particularly the case in relation to recruitment of kinship carers.

Professionals identified what makes a good working relationship. They were characterised by: clear written protocols between Indigenous and non-Indigenous agencies; clear areas of responsibility; respectful relationships; and a partnership approach to service provision (where all involved are equal partners):

“If you don’t work together with the department, you can say goodbye to everything. If I’m not happy with something, I let them know, and we talk about what are some other solutions. Unless you know how the Indigenous community operates (and you’ll never know unless you are Indigenous) you won’t know all the issues. The department have been great. They ask for your opinion now, rather than just tell us. We meet once a week, regardless of whether there are issues. They say to us: you go in first and find out what the issues are.” (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative)

“The other thing is that I’ve been very clear about since coming into the field is the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle. We’re not as good at doing that stuff with the other [non-Indigenous] cultures. But when we work with Indigenous children we make sure someone from the Indigenous community is there at the annual assessment to ensure that child’s cultural needs are being met. If there is even the smallest link with the Indigenous community we report it to [the Indigenous agency]. [The Indigenous agency] and Aboriginal Child Placement Principle is a strong key. There’s respect and a strong willingness to involve [the Indigenous agency] and [the Indigenous agency] has been stretched due to funding, but have still always been willing to work in partnership. We collaborate a lot in groups, for carers, professionals, etcetera. In [the non-Indigenous service] we have an Indigenous worker, she has Indigenous children, the strength is the understanding within [the non-Indigenous service] of importance of connections.

The focus of [the non-Indigenous service] and other agencies within [the state/territory] from management down is to make space for ensuring cultural connection. I think part of that is because there has been a strong commitment to the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle with top down support from management.” (non-Indigenous agency representative)

Strengthening the partnerships between Indigenous and government agencies can improve the outcomes for families and children who need placements in out-of-home care and ease the pressure on the carers of these children.

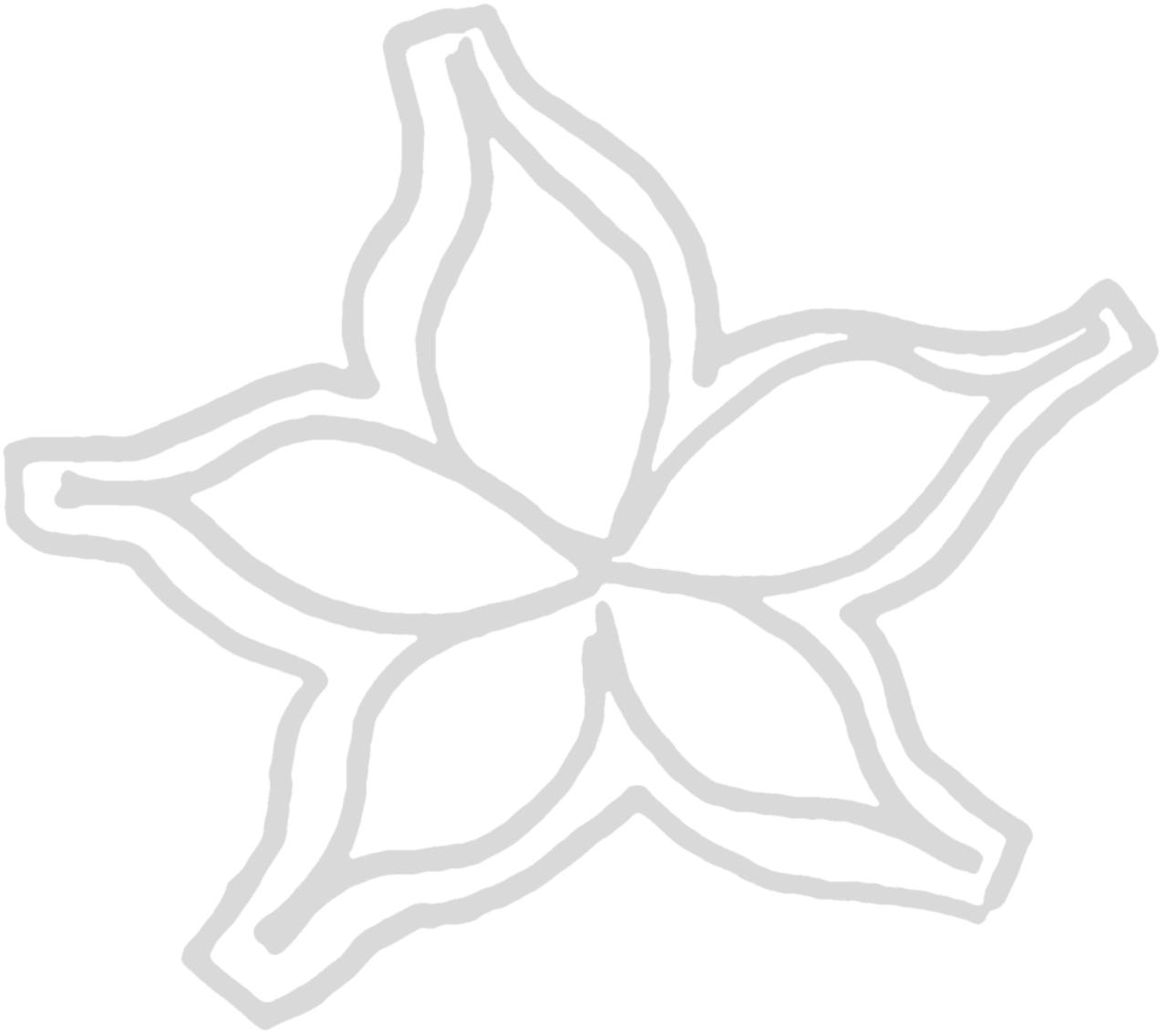
Conclusion

The effects of past welfare practices, in particular the Stolen Generation, have shaped Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ attitudes towards caring for Indigenous children in out-of-home care. For some, the welfare history has acted as an incentive to care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, but for others, past welfare practices and the ongoing grief associated with the Stolen Generation, has acted as a barrier to becoming a carer. An associated barrier is the material and social disadvantage that characterises many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders’ lives and prevents many from becoming a carer. Participants also told us that the increasing number of “hard to place” children entering care acts as significant barriers to carer recruitment. However, the cultural values associated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life mean that Indigenous people have a strong commitment to their culture and community. Despite the difficulties, many community members and professionals are committed to providing care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Professionals have developed innovative approaches to enhance the recruitment of carers. Using Indigenous people to recruit Indigenous carers and community-based recruitment strategies were more likely to build trust and encourage more people to consider becoming carers. Strengthening collaboration between agencies enabled a partnership approach that was found to enhance outcomes for children in out-of-home care.

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