Forced Adoption

c. 1940 – c. 1970

Details

Forced adoption (or forced family separation) are the terms now used to describe the practices where many pregnant unwed women (and their partners) were subjected to unauthorised or illegal separation from their children. From the 1950s to the early 1970s, the prevalence of forced adoption in Australia was high. These practices were unethical, immoral and often illegal. There was a societal expectation for single mothers to "give up" their children to childless, married couples, who were seen as "deserving". The shame and silence that surrounded pregnancy out of wedlock meant that these women were seen as "unfit" mothers.

Forced adoptions occurred through maternity homes, hospitals and adoption agencies, and privately arranged adoptions. Doctors, nurses, social workers and religious organisations carried them out. Sometimes the mother's own parents were complicit in coercing the mother (and father) into "consenting" to the adoption (AIFS, 2016).

In the report, the *Commonwealth contribution to former forced adoption policies and practices*, the Senate's Community Affairs References Committee heard many cases of women who, between about 1940 and 1970, lost their babies even though they had not given consent or who had given consent but only because of coercion. Some women tried to use their legal entitlement under adoption legislation to revoke their consent but were refused.

Examples or traumatising and illegal perinatal practices associated with forced adoption included:

- administration of high levels of drugs;
- differential treatment of married and unmarried mothers;
- preventing contact between mother and baby;
- withholding or giving incorrect information about the baby; and
- bullying behaviour and failure of procedure by consent-takers (AIFS, 2016)

Single mothers' patient records were marked with acronyms, such as UB- (unmarried, not keeping baby) or BFA (baby for adoption). A social worker at Crown Street Women's Hospital, interviewed for the Four Corners program recalled the processes for single mothers: "Well the practice, the general practice was that the baby would be whisked away to the nursery. Ah, it would labelled, you know, BFA – baby for adoption" (Given or taken? Four Corners, 2012).

While adoption practices in Australia have undergone considerable change since the 1970s, the effects of forced adoption and forced family separation are still very much a part of the lives of the many thousands of people involved. The impacts of forced adoption and family separation are diverse and long-lasting, not only for mothers and fathers separated from a child by adoption, but also for the adult sons and daughters who were adopted as babies, and their extended family members.

The Senate recommended that the Commonwealth Government issue a formal statement of apology that identifies the actions and policies that resulted in forced adoption and acknowledges, on behalf of the nation, the harm suffered by many parents whose children were forcibly removed and by the children who were separated from their parents (recommendation 2). This apology was delivered by Prime Minister Julia Gillard on 21 March

2013.

Gallery

"Cherished Mother and Child" Memorial to the victims of forced adoption

Description: This is an image of the memorial titled "Cherished Mother and Child" that was created to commemmorate the victims of forced adoption in Australia. The memorial is a sculpture of a mother holding her newborn child, which is set on a plinth in a bed of flowers. It was unveiled to mark the anniversary of the National Parliamentary apology given to the victims of forced adoption by Prime Minister Julia Gillard on 21 March 2013, and also acknowledges the apology delivered in the Victorian Parliament on 25 October 2012. The memorial was unveiled in Victoria Park, Sale, Victoria, on 17 March 2017.

More info

Related Entries

Related Events
- Inquiry into Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices, Commonwealth of Australia (2011 - 2012)
  The Senate report, *the Commonwealth contribution to forced adoption polices and practices* found that many adoptions between about 1940 and 1970 had been forced.
- National Apology for Forced Adoptions, Parliament of Australia (21 March 2013)

Related Glossary Terms
- Single Mothers
- Closed Adoption
- Clean Break Theory (c. 1940 - c. 1970)
  Clean break theory supported the widespread practice of forced adoption between about 1940 and 1970.

Related Archival Collections
- Adoption Records, State Records of South Australia (1915 - current)

Related Concepts
- Adoption in New South Wales (c. 1923 - current)
- Adoption in Western Australia (c. 1896 - current)
- Adoption in the Northern Territory (c. 1935 - current)
- Adoption in Tasmania (c. 1920 - current)
- Adoption in Victoria (c. 1928 - current)
- Adoption in Queensland (c. 1935 - current)
- Adoption in South Australia (1925 - current)
- Adoption in the Australian Capital Territory (1938 - current)

Resources

- Bowen, Jennifer, *Tangled Web, Part II: the sound of dissent*, 2011
- Luke, Sarah, *Mother and Child Memorial*, Gippsland Times, 20 March 2017
- Jolliffe, Jill, *My mother, myself*, The Age, 31 May 2014
- *Australian-first historical forced adoption redress scheme opens in Victoria*, ABC news, 4 February 2024

- Richards, Blair, *Forced adoptions heartache*, The Mercury, 9 October 2011
- *Mum tell of years of torment*, The Mercury, 1 March 2012
- Pearch, Garney, *Catholic claims*, 7 November 2003
- *Removal of Children from Unmarried Mothers - Apology [Hansard p7881a-7889a]*, parliament.wa.gov.au, 19 October 2010
- Kenny, P., Higgins, D., Soloff, C., & Sweid, R., *Past adoption experiences: National Research Study on the Service Response to Past Adoption Practices (Research Report No. 21)*, 2012
- Moodie, Claire, *The children tasked with looking after babies during Australia's forced adoption era*, 21 August 2024

You can view this page online by visiting https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/entity/forced-adoption/