

Disability royal commission to hear 'confronting stories' from carers and Indigenous people living with disability

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Counsel assisting Lincoln Crowley said this week was about "hearing, not just speaking"

The chair of the disability royal commission has warned Australia needs to be careful not to repeat "errors of the past" when it comes to First Nations children with disability being removed from their families.

Commissioner Ronald Sackville said this week's public hearing, centred on Indigenous people living with disability and postponed from earlier in the year due to the pandemic, would hear some confronting stories that needed to be addressed.

"The multiple forms of disadvantage can be traced to many factors. They include racism, they include poverty, they include barriers to health services, particularly for First Nations people in rural and remote areas," Mr Sackville said.

The inquiry heard the number of Indigenous children receiving child protection services had increased.

A report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare found 51,500 First Nations children received child protection services in 2018-19 — eight times the rate of non-Indigenous children.

"It does seem that despite all the reports and all the programs that have sought to address First Nations disadvantage, things have actually gone backwards in recent years," Mr Sackville said.

"When you read some of the material, it has unfortunate resonance of the Stolen Generations and we have to be careful that this country does not repeat the errors of the past."

Key points:

- A commissioner warned some stories to be heard this week have "resonance of the Stolen Generations"
- The commission heard having a disability makes First Nations people "part of a marginalised group in a marginalised group"
- Research shows Indigenous children are eight times more likely to receive child protection services compared to non-Indigenous children



Commissioners Ronald Sackville and Andrea Mason say there will be confronting stories, as well as tales of "resilience". (AAP)

Commissioner Andrea Mason said First Nations parents with disability were invisible and rarely heard in past inquiries and yet they had been subjected to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation.

"This week, this changes," she said.

"This week we will hear stories of First Nations parents with disability and their attributes of resilience, courage, persistence and about their love for their children."

Counsel assisting Lincoln Crowley said First Nations people faced a greater level of discrimination when they had a disability.

"First Nations people are already marginalised in the Australian community," Mr Crowley said.

"Having a disability makes them part of a marginalised group in a marginalised group."

Child protection orders mean many of the hearing's 25 witnesses will give evidence anonymously.

Foster carer Michelle Bates is not appearing at the royal commission but has spent [30 years working in the disability sector in remote parts of the Northern Territory](#).

She told the ABC she had seen many "heartbreaking scenarios".

"In some instances there might be a cohort of siblings and one has a disability and two or three or four don't, but it's the child with disability that is removed," Ms Bates said.

Counselling and legal support

- Blue Knot Foundation runs the National Counselling and Referral Service supporting the disability royal commission. It also helps people with disability affected by trauma. Contact them on 1800 421 468
- Your Story Disability Legal Support provides free information and advice to people about sharing their story with the disability royal commission. Call 1800 77 1800



Foster carer Michelle Bates said Australia was "failing Aboriginal people". (*ABC News*)

She said the issue was deeply rooted in history, with Indigenous parents being told their child with disability was better off in care instead of being given support to manage in their communities.

"We are failing Aboriginal people because we are not assisting them with the support that helps them to develop a picture of the care that a child with disabilities needs, and what it could look like in their family context," she said.

She said while there were some fantastic people working in the child protection system, she would like to see greater understanding of disability and she hoped the royal commission would lead to change.

"We're running out of time. More children are going to be born with disabilities," she said.

"People need information, they need their culture honoured and they need people walking along beside them supporting them, cheering them on to care for their child living with disability."