



SUMMARY SHEET

Culture, connection and care: The role of institutional justice capital for enhancing the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care

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Background

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are overrepresented in the out of home care (OOHC) sector, and many children are placed in the care of mainstream OOHC organisations with non-Indigenous foster families. This can cause disconnection from family, language, customs and protocols, culture and Country. Ensuring that cultural connection is maintained is a priority to begin to redress the intergenerational trauma and harm caused by colonisation.

We conducted focus groups with staff working in three mainstream out-of-home care organisations in Perth, where Aboriginal children are cared for by non-Indigenous foster carers. Through the lenses of recovery and justice capital, in this journal article we explored the data from the focus groups to establish the cultural assets and resources that are made available to non-Indigenous foster carers providing care for children, as well as the institutional elements that either inhibit or facilitate cultural connection and activities.

The inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices when ascertaining information about children's culture and connection, is critical to ensuring best cultural practice. Forums that support relationships are largely absent, and we identify important elements of institutional justice capital, that could ensure children's cultural, kin and family connections are maintained.

Key Findings

- It is the responsibility of government and non-government institutions to ensure that the cultural needs of children are supported.
- Recovery from the trauma of colonial child removal practices should be central to child protection policy development.
- In numerous cases, there were no cultural plans. Overall, the information agencies are provided with in cultural support plans by the Western Australian government's child protection services is scant, incomplete, and often not culturally accurate or relevant.
- Forums that support relationships are absent, and we identify essential elements of institutional justice capital that could ensure children are connected to culture and community to reduce harm and trauma.

Recommendations

- The inclusion of Aboriginal voices when ascertaining information about children's culture and connection is critical to ensuring best cultural practice and should be included in the development of cultural plans. The way forward for this work to be successful is bringing together Elders and community knowledge-holders for informing the culturally secure care of Aboriginal children.
- The OOHC agencies are best placed to take on the responsibility of facilitating and maintaining regular cultural knowledge sharing forums where Aboriginal Practice Leaders from the Department of Communities and OOHC agency leaders regularly come together with community Elders and Aboriginal community knowledge-holders, including ACCOs, to oversee and inform the cultural support of children (See Diagram below).
- Given the diversity among Western Australian Aboriginal communities there is a need to ensure wide representation from across Western Australia. We also recommended a greater focus on connecting children and their families with Aboriginal community organisations for their health, education and socio-cultural needs, and a greater focus on facilitating connection to siblings in other OOHC arrangements.

