

# State Controlled Childhood:

The Business of  
Family Policing in  
Queensland



A Report into the  
Family Policing System  
in Queensland 2025 by  
Sisters Inside



## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF COUNTRY**

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We acknowledge the sovereignty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across these lands, waters, and skies - a sovereignty that has never been ceded. We pay our deepest respects to Elders past and present, and we honour the leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, girls, and gender-diverse people, who have defended their families, cultures, and homelands through generations of relentless colonial violence.

We recognise that this report is written and this work is carried out on stolen land. The family policing and criminal legal systems we challenge are part of the ongoing project of colonisation, built on the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and communities. These removals are not a relic of history, they are happening now, at rates that continue to devastate families and communities.

We commit to resisting these systems, standing in solidarity with First Nations communities, and working towards a future grounded in justice, liberation, and self-determination.

## Honouring the Voices of Those Most Harmed: A Foreword

*"One night I got [REDACTED] flogged, like, real bad. I believe that's one of the nights that he dropped me off at the cemetery. That night I had a little photo frame with my mum's photo in it with me, um, a Little Mermaid photo frame. So, I remember just crying, holding the photo frame, going to sleep, wondering, you know, why my mum didn't love me."*

This report includes the voices of people who were once children in residential care and foster care in Queensland - people who are now adults, who carry the scars of these systems, and who have chosen to lend their voices to this report. It also includes the voices of mother who have had their children stolen, and of workers who have walked beside children and families while the family policing system has attempted to break them. We are deeply grateful for their courage and trust. Their stories are confronting in their honesty. They do not sanitise the brutality. They do not soften the violence. They speak truthfully about a system that too often erases their experiences.

Too many reports like this fail to capture the grotesque harms of residential care, foster care, and the broader family policing system. They fail because they avoid speaking to the lived, bodily, emotional, and cultural violence inflicted on children and mothers in the name of "protection." They fail because they centre professional perspectives and bureaucratic narratives, rather than listening to the people who have survived these systems.

If we are to confront these harms, if we are to truly understand the impact of these so-called care systems, then we must be honest. We must be willing to name the violence and go to the root of the problem. It is for these reasons that we have honoured the stories shared with us. We have included them in their brutal reality. Their stories may make you feel uncomfortable. But this report is not about your comfort. Your discomfort is the site of your learning.

This report is about a violent system that inflicts harm every single day on the children and families it claims to care for. It is about the failure of the state to protect, and the success of the state in punishing and disappearing children who are already marginalised.

We all have a responsibility to confront this. Once you have read these stories, you will be compelled to act. You *should* be compelled to act. And if you are not, if you choose to turn away, then you must know that you are complicit in the ongoing violence against children in this state.

## Introduction: A Family Policing System, Not Child Safety

*"The Department of Child Safety - this has been going on for so [REDACTED] long, and they're still [REDACTED] useless. I honestly don't understand what their job is, except stealing people's children."*

What is often referred to as Queensland's "child safety" system is, in reality, a system of family policing. It does not exist to support families or keep children safe in any holistic, culturally grounded or trauma-informed way. Instead, it operates through surveillance, coercion, and the removal of children, especially from poor families, Aboriginal families, Torres Strait Islander families, and families already harmed by colonisation, racism, state violence, and poverty. These are not accidents or anomalies; they are the predictable outcomes of a system designed to control, punish, and fracture families, not to support or heal them.

*"I think it's more just a home for them to put the kids into so they can state that they're doing their job. I don't think anyone really cares about how you being treated or how you're feeling."*

The family policing system does not act to protect children from harm, it acts to protect the state from liability and to maintain social control. It disproportionately targets those who live at the intersections of poverty, race, gender, and disability, while allowing wealthy, white and non-criminalised families to struggle in private without the threat of intervention or separation.

Despite decades of reforms and rhetoric about early intervention and prevention, the system continues to grow in scope, budget and power.

According to the latest available data<sup>1</sup>:

- 5.8 per 1,000 children in Queensland were subject to substantiations of abuse or neglect in 2023–24, which is below the national average of 7.3 per 1,000.
- However, 10.9 per 1,000 children in Queensland were subject to care and protection orders as at 30 June 2024, above the national average of 10.3.
- Likewise, 8.2 per 1,000 children in Queensland were in state placement<sup>2</sup> at 30 June 2024, also above the national average of 7.7.

This tells a revealing story. Despite lower rates of substantiated abuse than the national average, Queensland removes more children and places them under more formal orders than most other jurisdictions. This is not a child protection system acting proportionately, it is a family policing system acting punitively.

Aboriginal children and Torres Strait Islander children continue to be disproportionately targeted by Queensland's family policing system. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are targeted by the family policing system in Queensland and nationally at rates that far exceed their share of the population, reflecting the ongoing colonial project of child removal (8% at June 2022).<sup>3</sup> Although Queensland's rates of mass removal<sup>4</sup> are lower than the national average, the harm remains systemic and extreme. As at 30 June 2024<sup>5</sup>, Aboriginal children and Torres Strait Islander children were more than five times more likely to be in state placement than the general population. This level of disparity is not incidental, it is structured, maintained and justified by the state. It is the result of ongoing colonial violence and the failure of state systems to support First Nations families to remain safely together on their own terms.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Families, Seniors, Disability Services and Child Safety, 'A Queensland comparison to the Australian national average', <https://performance.dssds.qld.gov.au/our-performance/national-data/child-protection-services> [Accessed 28 July 2025]

<sup>2</sup> We use the term state placement instead of out-of-home care to reject the system's sanitising and misleading language. The phrase out-of-home care implies that children are being "cared for" in a safe and supportive environment, when in reality many are placed in institutions, residential facilities, or with strangers under state control. These placements are the result of forced separation from family, culture, and community, and often replicate carceral conditions. By using state placement, we centre the reality that these are forms of state custody, not neutral acts of care, and we resist language that conceals the violence and surveillance inherent in the family policing system.

<sup>3</sup> Queensland Government, 'Over-representation in the child protection system' <https://performance.dssds.qld.gov.au/meeting-the-needs-of-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-children/over-representation-in-the-child-protection-system/over-representation-in-concerns-received> [Accessed 28 July 2025]

<sup>4</sup> We intentionally do not use the term *overrepresented* to describe the presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in state placement. *Overrepresentation* implies a statistical imbalance, as if the numbers are accidental or merely disproportionate. It also risks suggesting that any level of representation in these violent systems is acceptable. We do not and will never condone the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, communities, and Country. What is occurring is not an unfortunate by-product of policy but the deliberate mass removal of children, a targeted, systemic practice rooted in colonial violence and the Stolen Generations. Naming it as *mass removal* makes clear that this is an intentional, ongoing state strategy that causes immense harm to children, families, and communities.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Families, Seniors, Disability Services and Child Safety, 'Child protection services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children', <https://performance.dssds.qld.gov.au/our-performance/national-data/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-children> [Accessed 28 July 2025]

These practices are not new. They echo the logics of the Aboriginal Protection Acts, of welfare raids, of forced institutionalisation. What has changed is the language, not the violence. This is not just a crisis, it is the continuation of the Stolen Generations under a different name. Decades of inquiries, royal commissions and Closing the Gap commitments have failed to reduce this representation.

Words have not translated into justice.

We must be clear: this is not a broken system. It is working as intended. Rather than addressing the actual causes of harm: poverty, housing insecurity, intergenerational trauma, racism, and the lack of culturally safe, community-controlled supports, the system polices, surveils, and separates families who are already struggling. The outcome is not child safety; it is lifelong harm and disconnection. Children in state placement experience higher rates of instability, abuse, mental health distress, criminalisation, and homelessness<sup>6</sup>. The system does not protect children, it often retraumatizes them.

The family policing system is also big business. In the 2014–15 Queensland budget, residential care services cost \$200 million; this financial year, that figure will reach \$1.12 billion. Taxpayers now fund hundreds of thousands of dollars per child, per year to live in placements that are often unsafe and deeply destabilising. Spending on Intervention with Parental Agreement (IPA), a program framed as “voluntary” but enforced under the threat of removal, has grown from \$82 million in 2014–15 to \$766 million this year. Over the same period, Other Support for Disadvantaged (OSD) ballooned from \$118 million to \$354 million<sup>7</sup>.

This is a billion-dollar harm industry. Entire agencies, NGOs, and private contractors advance their own livelihoods on the back of family separation. The state manufactures or exacerbates the conditions that lead to removal, then funds itself and its partners to “fix” the problem it created. No one wants to give up that revenue stream, even as the human cost continues to mount. This is not the language or logic of care, it is the logic of an expanding market.

The child safety system is also a carceral system. It is deeply interconnected with policing, courts, and prisons. The same communities who are targeted by police are the ones whose families are policed and separated. In many cases, child removal is the first point of contact in a lifetime of criminalisation and state control<sup>8</sup>. The family policing system acts as an early pipeline into the criminal legal system, especially for Aboriginal children and children with disability<sup>9</sup>.

We consistently use the term *family policing* because the language of “child protection” sanitises a deeply violent system. True protection means resourcing families and communities, not punishing them. It means investing in housing, income support, culturally safe healing, and community-led responses to trauma. It means returning power to the communities that have kept children safe long before the state ever intervened.

This report will outline the harms caused by Queensland’s family policing system, centring the lived experiences of families and children who have been contained, targeted, punished and traumatised

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<sup>6</sup> Lima, F, Maclean, M, O’Donnell, M 2018. ‘Exploring outcomes for children who have experienced state placement’, Telethon Kids Institute, Perth.

<sup>7</sup> Joint Media Statement. Commission of Inquiry into Queensland’s broken Child Safety System, 18 May 2025, [https://statements.qld.gov.au/statements/102583#:~:text=While%20traumatised%20children%20anguished%20in,\\$118%20million%20to%20\\$354%20million.](https://statements.qld.gov.au/statements/102583#:~:text=While%20traumatised%20children%20anguished%20in,$118%20million%20to%20$354%20million.)

<sup>8</sup> SNAICC 2024, ‘Family Matters – Strong communities. Strong culture. Stronger children’, SNAICC, P. 2

<sup>9</sup> Human Rights Law Centre and Change the Record 2024, ‘Ending Youth Incarceration: Submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee on Australia’s youth justice and incarceration system’, p. 9

by it. It will call for a radical reimagining of how we care for children, one rooted not in surveillance and control, but in justice, accountability, and collective wellbeing.

We write this not only to expose harm but to demand something better. We know that families can thrive when they are resourced, not removed; when they are supported, not surveilled. The solutions already exist, in community, in culture, in care. What is required now is the political will to divest from harm and invest in collective healing.

#### About Us:

*"So, I'm really lucky in the sense that I had Deb to look up to, and Sisters Inside's support"*

Sisters Inside is an independent, Aboriginal-led organisation based in Queensland that advocates for the rights of criminalised and imprisoned women and girls. Founded in 1992, by a group of women in prison, led by Debbie Kilroy OAM, a woman who was herself imprisoned, Sisters Inside was created in direct response to the systemic injustices faced by women in prison, many of whom are there because of state-inflicted poverty, violence, and structural racism.

Sisters Inside walks alongside criminalised women, girls and their families, both inside and outside prison walls. Our work is grounded in the leadership and expertise of those who have lived through the systems we challenge. We do not see women as "clients" or "cases." They are our kin, our sisters, our community. We employ women who have been criminalised, women who have had their children taken, women who *were* children in the so-called child protection system, and women who are still navigating these systems today. Our leadership is not tokenistic; it is core to our survival and our strategy.

For more than three decades, Sisters Inside has been building, piloting, and sustaining programs in partnership with our communities, programs that have proven highly effective in supporting women, girls, and their families to live safe, connected, and fulfilling lives. We are not just a service that people turn to in moments of crisis; we are a place people return to, sometimes years later, for the kind of support that prevents a crisis from ever occurring. We are also a place to share wins, celebrate milestones, and gather in joy. Sisters Inside is a community, not an arm of the welfare industry. Women and girls come to us knowing they will be met with solidarity, not surveillance; care, not control.

Our relationship with the family policing system is one of deep entanglement and resistance. We work with mothers who have been subjected to invasive surveillance, punitive intervention, and forced separation from their children. We support women who are pregnant behind bars, who are denied the right to parent, and who must fight to keep or reunite with their children. We see firsthand how the family policing system operates not to support but to police families, particularly Aboriginal families and Torres Strait Islander families, poor families, and families impacted by criminalisation, disability and trauma.

We also walk alongside girls who are placed in residential care homes and foster placements, girls who are being hyper-surveilled, silenced, and set up to fail. Many of these girls are criminalised for acts of resistance and survival, charged for "wilful damage" or "assault" when they react to neglect or violence in so-called care environments. We work with girls who have been funnelled directly from state placement into watch houses, youth prisons, and the adult criminal legal system. Their stories are not exceptional; they are the predictable outcome of a system that polices children under the guise of protection and uses residential care homes as an early site of criminalisation.

Sisters Inside has existed long enough to see generations of harm repeat themselves. We have walked alongside mothers fighting to keep their children, and now we are walking with those children, grown into young parents themselves, who are being targeted by the same system. The family policing system is not just breaking families; it is recycling trauma across generations.

*"I have had many cases in court where the judge was unaware that Family Policing was not properly supporting the young person until they read my support letter. In one case, the judge confronted Family Policing in court, telling her to do her job and stating that he would be speaking to her team leader. This intervention helped speed up the process for the young person to secure housing, an NDIS assessment, and identification documents.*

*Too often, judges are unaware of the full situation because Family Policing presents only one side of the story. Support letters have proven valuable, as they give the judge critical context—explaining the reasons behind a young person "acting out" or committing the "offence." In this particular case, the judge withdrew the application to revoke her matters, despite the prosecutor pushing for her to be taken into custody. The young person was brought to tears, saying that no one had ever done that for her or fought for her before."*

We are not neutral observers. We are part of the struggle for a world where families are not punished for being poor, where children are not taken because their mothers are criminalised, and where care replaces control. Our work is rooted in community, accountability, and the belief that every family has the right to stay together, to heal together, and to thrive outside of state violence.

## Understanding the Family Policing System

### *The Unspoken Truth About Why Children Are Taken*

There is a dominant story the family policing system tells about itself - one that sits at the heart of its public justification for stealing children from their families: *children are only removed because their parents are abusive, neglectful, or harmful*. This so-called "truth" is repeated so often, and left so unchallenged, that it becomes an article of faith for the community, for policymakers, and for those who work within the system itself.

But it is not the whole story. It never has been.

At Sisters Inside, we are uniquely positioned to see the reality from both ends of the system. We work alongside mothers who are fighting to keep or reunite with their children. We also work with children and young people currently in foster care, residential care, children's prisons, and watch houses - many of whom have been pipelined into the criminal legal system directly from "care." This dual vantage point gives us a clear, uncompromising view of the contradictions, hypocrisies, and outright harms embedded in the family policing system.

From this work, we know that *not all children are taken because of abuse or neglect*. The reality is far more complex and far more uncomfortable for the state to admit. If we examine "neglect" alone, one of the most common grounds for removal (39.9% of all substantiated cases in 2021-22)<sup>10</sup>, we often find that what is being labelled as neglect is in fact a reflection of poverty, houselessness, or domestic and family violence. These are not failings of love or care. They are the

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<sup>10</sup> Queensland Family and Child Commission 2023, 'Queensland Child Rights Report 2023', <https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-08/QFCC%20Child%20Rights%20Report%202023%20%2B1%29.pdf>

material conditions produced by systemic inequality, colonisation, racism, and the state's own neglect.

Yet instead of responding to these conditions with genuine care, resources, and support; actions that could strengthen families, address harm, and keep children safe in the arms of their loved ones, the state responds punitively. It uses the blunt instrument of child removal, severing children from their families, Country, cultures, and communities. This is not about protecting children; it is about policing families, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, poor families, and families already targeted by the criminal legal system.

Because the official narrative goes unchallenged, the public remains largely ignorant of these truths. That ignorance has consequences. It shapes the way communities judge mothers. It erases the voices of children whose removals had nothing to do with abuse. It allows policymakers and bureaucrats to design legislation and direct funding on the false premise that removal is always necessary, always in the child's "best interest." It perpetuates a cycle where poverty and violence are met not with solidarity and support, but with surveillance, punishment, and separation.

The harms of this lie are not abstract. They are felt keenly and daily by the families and children we work with. They ricochet through our communities, deepening mistrust, grief, and trauma. They destroy bonds between children and mothers, and they deny the possibility of collective healing.

If we are serious about protecting children, we must tell the truth about why they are taken. We must name and dismantle the conditions that create risk in the first place. And we must reject the false binary that paints parents as either "good" or "bad" while ignoring the violent role the state plays in producing harm.

Until this truth is spoken loudly and often, by those who know, those who have lived it, and those willing to listen, the cycle will continue, and the state will keep hiding its violence behind the language of protection.

### *Surveillance, coercion, and control*

*"I don't know what's worse, resi care or foster care. I guess with resi care you kind of have different people coming in every 24 hours, so if you don't like one, or you're not comfortable with one, maybe the next one that comes through, you might get along with them, but with foster homes you are kind of just stuck with them, stuck with the same abusers"*

The child protection system in Queensland is fundamentally a system of state surveillance and control. It operates not through care, but through coercive power, gathering information on families, making judgments about their capacity to parent, and enforcing compliance under threat of removal. The relationship between families and the system is not one of support, but of fear.

Intervention often begins with a report, sometimes from mandatory reporters, other times from neighbours, schools, police or service providers. Once a family is on the system's radar, they are subject to an intense level of scrutiny that would be unimaginable for wealthier or non-criminalised families. Homes are inspected. Children are interviewed without parents present. Medical and school records are accessed. Parents are expected to disclose personal histories, trauma, and challenges to caseworkers who hold the power to take their children away. There is no trust, no cultural safety, no consent, only the power imbalance of a system that can remove children without warning and often without evidence of actual harm.

This surveillance is not equally distributed. It is overwhelmingly concentrated on families who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, poor, criminalised, living with disability, or otherwise marginalised. These families are not “at risk” because of who they are; they are made at risk by a system that criminalises their survival and pathologises their responses to structural harm.

### *Systemic Drivers: Poverty, Criminalisation, Racism, Colonisation*

“They can support all these other people. Government can support them and pay for everything they need to look after other people’s children, but they won’t just help the mother herself so she can stay with her own kids.”

Children are not being taken because their families are more harmful. Children are being taken because their families are more heavily policed. The drivers of child removal are not individual behaviours, they are structural conditions: poverty, housing insecurity, the impacts of colonisation, and the criminalisation of trauma.

Many of the women we walk alongside are criminalised because of their efforts to survive. They are imprisoned for defending themselves against violence, for using drugs, or for simply being poor and Black in a system built to punish them. Once they are criminalised, they are marked as “unfit” to parent, and the state moves swiftly to remove their children. This is not care, it is punishment layered on top of punishment.

The state fails to meet the most basic needs of families: safe and stable housing, access to income, mental health support, healing from violence, and then punishes families for the symptoms of that neglect. Families are blamed for their hardship, while the system that created and maintains those conditions is never held accountable.

For Aboriginal families and Torres Strait Islander families, this happens in the shadow of a long and violent colonial history. Child removal is not new, it has always been used as a tool of colonisation, to disrupt culture, land connection and kinship. The “child safety” system is simply the modern machinery of this same colonial project, dressed in the language of welfare and protection.

### *How the system punishes rather than supports families*

The family policing system punishes families not only through the act of removal but through the constant threat of it. For criminalised women, the punishment is even more severe. Time in prison, no matter how short, can trigger the automatic removal of children into state placement. And once removed, the path to reunification becomes steep, complex, and often insurmountable.

We see this every day: a woman is sentenced to a short period in prison, sometimes just weeks or months, for drug use, self-defence, or charges connected to poverty and survival. While she is incarcerated, her child is placed into foster care or kinship care. Often, she is given no opportunity to participate in planning for their care or to advocate for her child’s needs. In some cases, she is not even notified where her child has been placed.

Upon release, she faces an uphill battle. She is expected to find housing immediately, attend multiple service appointments, engage in parenting programs, meet income support requirements, and prove herself “stable” and “compliant” before reunification will even be considered. These demands are made without providing the material or emotional support required to meet them. She may be told she must wait months for housing. She may be re-criminalised if she is found to be homeless, or if she relapses due to untreated trauma or grief.

This is not support. This is **state-manufactured separation**: a process where the system creates the very conditions it then uses to justify keeping families apart. Reunification becomes a bureaucratic maze, filled with surveillance and shame, where the goalposts keep shifting and the trauma compounds.

Women who survive prison often carry deep wounds, violence, grief, loss, and systemic abandonment. Instead of offering care, the family policing system adds to that pain, demanding perfection from women it has already harmed. It treats criminalisation as proof of unfitness, instead of understanding how state violence has shaped their lives from the beginning.

At every turn, the system chooses punishment over support. Instead of asking, "What do you need to heal and be with your children?" it asks, "How have you failed?" Instead of resourcing families to stay together, it invests in the machinery to tear them apart.

This is not protection. It is punishment. And it is a punishment that falls hardest on those who have already survived the worst of what the state has to offer.

The issue is not that children in care are "demanding." The issue is that they have to beg to be heard at all.

### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families and the Continuation of the Stolen Generations**

*"We are not experiencing a child protection crisis. We are experiencing a continuation of colonisation."*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are at the epicentre of child removal in Queensland. Despite decades of inquiries, reforms, and commitments to "close the gap," the mass representation of Aboriginal children and Torres Strait Islander children in state placement continues to grow<sup>11</sup>. This is not accidental, it is the direct result of ongoing colonial violence embedded in the foundations of the family policing system.

#### *Data on Mass Representation*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children make up just over 8% of the child population in Queensland, but they account for more than 40% of all children in state placement<sup>12</sup>. These numbers are not improving. In fact, over the last decade, the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child removal has increased, not decreased. Today, more Aboriginal children and Torres Strait Islander children are being taken from their families than at the height of the Stolen Generations.

*"I don't even know if there is Aboriginal carers. I know there's, like, Aboriginal carers that will take in their own babies, like, you know, their daughter's family, but I don't know. I've never met an actual foster home that has just Aboriginal parents or residentials where there's Aboriginals that work as the carers for those 24 hours."*

Once removed, these children are often denied the right to remain connected to their culture and community. As of the most recent data, 43.5% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in state placement in Queensland were not placed with kin or other Aboriginal and Torres Strait

<sup>11</sup> SNAICC 2025, 'What is the issue?' <https://www.snaicc.org.au/our-work/child-and-family-wellbeing/family-matters/the-issue/> [Accessed 28 July 2025]

<sup>12</sup> Moore, AW 2024, 'Made me sick': How Kelwun boss is protecting our kids', Gold Coast Bulletin, 16 March.

Islander carers<sup>13</sup>. This is a direct breach of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle<sup>14</sup>, which is supposed to prioritise cultural connection and placement within community.

#### **“Ankle Monitors over Culture and Family”**

A 16-year-old Aboriginal girl, in Family Policing for half her life, was placed in state placement with an ankle monitor. While there, she was refused permission to visit her dying Nana, despite her strong cultural connection to Country. She cut the ankle monitor off and went to see her Nana. Before this, she had committed no offences and was doing well with support. Even when her worker offered to take her, permission was denied. She attended her Nana’s funeral in handcuffs, brought from the youth prison.

This is not historical. This is now.

Behind every statistic is a child growing up disconnected from Country, kin, and culture, and a family grieving in the shadow of yet another state-sanctioned removal. These removals are not only happening at an alarming scale; they are happening with the full knowledge of their harm. They represent not a failure of the system, but its intended function: to continue the dispossession and control of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples under the guise of “child protection.”

It should also be noted that the total investment by the Queensland Government in addressing this mass removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection over 11 years from 2016–17 to 2026–27 is approximately \$775.22 million. The 2023–24 Budget includes \$167.2 million over four years and \$20 million in ongoing funding from 2027–28 for activities and reforms to reduce mass removals.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Ongoing colonial violence and systemic removal*

#### **“No One Believed Him”**

A 16-year-old Aboriginal girl told her worker that her friend, a young Aboriginal boy aged just 15, had been found hanging at the state placement facility where he was placed. He had been moved repeatedly between family members and placements, living with instability and alleged mental health issues. When the boy [who found the child hanging] first reported what he’d seen to a worker, they thought he was joking.

The current family policing system operates as a continuation of the Stolen Generations. It polices Aboriginal families and Torres Strait Islander families through racist assumptions, deficit-based narratives, and culturally unsafe interventions. Instead of understanding the intergenerational trauma caused by colonisation, dispossession, and incarceration, the system punishes families for its effects.

This is how colonialism reproduces itself: by blaming the oppressed for the conditions imposed upon them.

The removal of Aboriginal children and Torres Strait Islander children is not about protection. It is about control. It is about the surveillance of Black families, the criminalisation of Aboriginal women,

<sup>13</sup> Family Matters Queensland & Queensland Government, ‘Our Way. A generational strategy’, 2016, p. 5

<sup>14</sup> SNAICC 2017, ‘The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle: A Guide to Support Implementation’

<sup>15</sup> SNAICC 2024, ‘Family Matters – Strong communities. Strong culture. Stronger children’, p. 83

the pathologising of cultural practices, and the ongoing project of assimilation, now rebranded as "child safety."

We continue to witness the state choosing to remove children rather than invest in housing, income support, healing, and culturally strong, community-based care. The trauma of removal is compounded by experiences of racism, coercion, and systemic neglect, both in the process of removal and in the institutions where children are placed.

#### *Failure of Closing the Gap and government reform agendas*

Despite being a *Closing the Gap* priority reform area<sup>16</sup>, the commitment to reducing the mass representation of Aboriginal children and Torres Strait Islander children in state placement has failed<sup>17</sup>. Government reform agendas repeatedly promise systemic change while continuing to fund and expand the very systems responsible for harm.

Reforms are piecemeal, bureaucratic, and centred on maintaining the authority of child protection departments, not on shifting power into the hands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The targets under Closing the Gap are treated as technical adjustments, rather than a moral and political imperative to dismantle the machinery of the Stolen Generations.

Time and time again, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have told governments what needs to change, and time and time again, those calls have been sidelined or watered down in the name of "risk" and "feasibility."

#### *Community-led solutions ignored or underfunded*

There is no shortage of Aboriginal-led solutions. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have been creating and sustaining models of care that are culturally strong, trauma-informed, and centred in kinship and connection for generations.

These community-led solutions work, but they are systemically underfunded, obstructed, or ignored by the family policing system.

Instead of investing in the leadership and self-determination of Aboriginal communities, the state continues to pour resources into surveillance, removals, and courts. The funding imbalance is stark: dollars flow to the apparatus of child policing, while community-controlled organisations are left to patch together programs without long-term resourcing.

This is not a failure of imagination. It is a failure of political will, and a refusal to give up power.

## **Intersections with the Criminal Legal System**

### *Criminalisation of mothers and its impact on child removal*

*"When a child runs away from care and calls their mum in distress - crying, sometimes suicidal - the mum does what any mother would do: she goes to get her child. But if she doesn't ring Child Safety first, she risks being charged with kidnapping. One mum I know got a call in the middle of the night*

<sup>16</sup> Under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Target 12 aims to reduce the rate of over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in state placement by 45% by 2031.

<sup>17</sup> SNAICC 2024, 'Family Matters – Strong communities. Strong culture. Stronger children', P. 2

*from her child, and now she's facing criminal charges for being protective. These are the exact protective behaviours mothers are told they need to show, but when they do, they're punished for it."*

The family policing system and the criminal legal system do not operate in isolation; they reinforce and accelerate each other. For many women, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, the pathway to child removal is paved with the trauma and consequences of criminalisation. Mothers are judged not on their love, care, or efforts to protect and provide for their children, but on their criminal record, their circumstance, their compliance with system expectations, and their capacity to perform "ideal" motherhood under immense pressure.

Many women are targeted by the criminal legal system as a result of poverty, gendered violence, racial profiling, or the criminalisation of drug use and mental health. Their involvement with police, courts, and prisons is then used as "evidence" of their unfitness to parent. A short sentence, or even a single police interaction, can trigger family policing involvement, and that involvement rarely ends in support.

Criminalisation becomes a marker of risk, and once a mother is labelled risky, the system moves to separate her from her children, not to support her, not to address the underlying causes of harm, but to punish and pathologise her. Instead of seeing her criminalisation as a response to violence or survival, the system uses it to justify more violence, including the ultimate harm: removal of her children.

#### *Child removal as a pathway to prison — and vice versa*

Just as criminalisation can lead to child removal, the trauma of child removal can lead to imprisonment. For many women, the removal of a child is a deeply destabilising event, one that can retraumatise, and plunge them into spirals of grief, homelessness, or mental health distress. The state takes their children, offers no real support, and then criminalises the symptoms of their pain.

We have witnessed women who lose their children then lose everything else, housing, income, safety, purpose, and end up in prison. And once in prison, the system uses their incarceration as further reason to keep their children from them. These systems operate in a vicious loop: child protection and criminal legal systems feeding each other, each one treating the mother as the problem rather than recognising and resourcing her as a victim of systemic violence.

This cycle is particularly acute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Women are policed, punished, and removed from their children in the same ways their mothers and grandmothers were. The systems claim progress, but the outcomes show otherwise. Instead of healing families, they are reproducing intergenerational harm - again, and again, and again.

#### *Pathologising Childhood: When Normal Behaviour Becomes a Pretext for Removal*

The family policing system routinely pathologises developmentally normal, age-appropriate behaviour, particularly when children are under heavy surveillance. Everyday silliness, playfulness, and emotional expression are too often reinterpreted as signs of risk or harm. These judgements are made through the lens of suspicion and control, shaped by the system's bias toward criminalisation and its readiness to impose adult meanings on children's actions.

Children who are in state placement are often scrutinised to a degree that other children would never experience. A joke, a tantrum, or roughhousing between siblings can be cast as "dangerous" or "sexualised." When a family is already under the gaze of Family Policing, especially Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander families, poor families, or families with a parent who has been criminalised, these ordinary moments are policed, recorded, and used as justification for further intervention.

This hyper-surveillance strips away the right to be a child. It denies children the space to make mistakes, be silly, test boundaries, or engage in the learning and play that are part of normal development. Instead, their every move is filtered through a deficit lens that assumes risk and wrongdoing. This harms children in the moment, and it sets in motion a chain of consequences that can lead to deeper system involvement, further separation, and long-term trauma.

#### **Case Study 6 – “Punished for Being a Child”**

A mother with five children has her two youngest, aged five and seven, in placement. They were initially placed together in a kinship placement that was going well. Without warning, the placement was ended due to what Family Policing Services called “sexualised behaviour.” The “behaviour” was the seven-year-old pulling his pants down in front of his brother, a developmentally normal, age-appropriate act of silliness. Instead of responding with understanding, education, and support, the system treated it as harmful and removed the older child from the home.

The seven-year-old, who had been living with a family friend for over a year, was suddenly taken away to respite care on the Gold Coast, with no explanation he could understand. He was made to feel like he had done something terribly wrong. His five-year-old brother, left behind, was left to assume the same, that his big brother had done something “really bad.” This unnecessary separation damaged their bond and traumatised their mother who was locked inside – and only told her eldest son was exhibiting “sexualised behaviours”.

Adult and children’s prisons are not separate from the family policing system; they are its sharpest tools. When the state removes children from their families and fails to provide meaningful care, those children are often criminalised themselves. They are moved from one cage to another, from residential care to children’s prison, from being removed to being locked up.

Statistically, children who grow up in care are significantly more likely to end up in prison<sup>18</sup>. In fact, almost two-thirds of young people under youth justice supervision during 2022–23 had an interaction with the child protection system in the last 10 years.<sup>19</sup> Queensland (73%) has the second highest proportion of young people under youth justice supervision during 2022–23 who had an interaction with the child protection system in the last 10 years – second only to the NT (at 81%)<sup>20</sup>. And children whose parents have been imprisoned are also more likely to be taken into care. This is not coincidence, it is the structural design of systems that punish poverty, racialisation, trauma, and resistance. These are not neutral institutions. They are extensions of a colonial and carceral logic that sees certain families, particularly Aboriginal families and Torres Strait Islander families, as unfit to exist outside state control.

Children’s prisons in Queensland, like adult prisons, are filled with Aboriginal children and Torres Strait Islander children, many of whom were removed from their families early in life. These facilities are violent and unsafe, yet governments continue to expand them. Instead of investing in

<sup>18</sup> McGrath, A, Gerard, A & Colvin, E 2020, ‘Care-experienced children and the criminal justice system’, Australian Institute of Criminology, Australian Government, p. 2

<sup>19</sup> AIHW 2024, ‘Young people under youth justice supervision and their interaction with the child protection system 2022–23’ 25 October, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/youth-justice/young-people-youth-justice-supervision-2022-23/summary> (Accessed 28 July 2025)

<sup>20</sup> AIHW 2024, ‘Young people under youth justice supervision and their interaction with the child protection system 2022–23’ 25 October, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/youth-justice/young-people-youth-justice-supervision-2022-23/summary> p. 10 [Accessed 28 July 2025]

community-based care, healing, and support, they pour funding into cages. They treat the incarceration of children as inevitable, rather than seeing it as the direct result of a failed and harmful system.

### *The Family Policing Pipeline: From Residential Care to Prison*

#### **“Arrested for Getting Air”**

An Aboriginal teenager living in state placement had a strict bail condition to remain inside the house after a set time. Feeling angry and needing space, she walked laps up and down the street, still in full view of staff. Instead of offering support or de-escalation and regulation strategies, workers called the police. She was then arrested for breaching bail and spent the weekend locked in a watch house.

#### **“Graffiti and Nowhere to Go”**

A young Aboriginal girl in state placement was removed from her placement by police for drawing so called graffiti on the driveway. There was no alleged violence, no safety risk, just alleged graffiti. It happened late on a Friday afternoon. With nowhere for her to go, she was left to couch surf for weeks until a new placement could be arranged. Despite being under the “care” of Family Policing Services the entire time, she spent weeks without stable housing.

The family policing system doesn't just remove children from their families, it criminalises them. Residential care homes, in particular, are sites where children are policed for everyday acts of resistance, survival, or simply existing under surveillance. Behaviours that would be managed with care and understanding in a real home: emotional outbursts, frustration, self-protection, are treated as offences. Children are charged, arrested, and funnelled into the criminal legal system from the very places that are supposed to care for them.

*“There were times I'd get out of the detention centre, say it was five o'clock in the afternoon, right? I'd get released, walk down to Wacol train station, and use the payphone to ring the carers and ask them to come and get me. They'd refuse. Mind you, I was let out on curfew. But still, they'd refuse to come.*

*“So, I'd catch the train from Wacol into the city, and by the time I'd get there and try to figure out a bus or a train to wherever I was supposed to go, it'd be close to curfew. I'd call them again, and they'd still refuse to come get me. But then, the moment it hits seven o'clock, they'd call the police on me and tell them I've breached my curfew. So, I'd get sent straight back.*

*It's so calculated, hey. Just calculated violence. They set you up to fail over and over again.”*

Every act of defiance is policed. Every reaction to mistreatment becomes a charge sheet.

*“They lock the doors if they don't want you to abscond, and you're known to just leave the property whenever you want. I remember there was one time where the door was unlocked, and I had opened the door and walked down the corridor. They was trying to shut the door on me, like to keep me inside, and I had pushed it open, and when I pushed it open, I quickly got out. But I went to slam the door behind me, and I didn't realise her fingers were in the door, because she's standing there like a deer, trying to make me not leave. So, her fingers got smashed by the door, and so she charged me with assault.”*

In residential care, children are punished not just for acting out, but for protecting themselves, for asserting agency, for refusing to be caged. Minor incidents escalate into criminal charges. And once a child has “priors,” they become a target. Vulnerable kids are scapegoated, set up, and blamed for damage or incidents they didn’t cause, often by unscrupulous carers seeking to deflect blame or serve their own interests.

*“I remember one of the carers. He really didn't like me. I remember he scratched his car. He had a real nice Commodore. Anyway, he pulled up to work and then tried to claim that I was the one that scratched his car. Mind you, I never touched his [REDACTED] car. You know, he came with the [REDACTED] scratch on it, but because his car was scratched, and he must have needed a police report to claim insurance, he told them that I had done it. And so, I had been charged for that as well. And because I was out on, what was I out on? Probably a conditional release order. Yeah, they sent me straight back inside, and I didn't even do nothing wrong.”*

This is how the system builds a record against a child. These charges accumulate, not because of criminal behaviour, but because of the criminalising environment they are trapped in. And once a child is in the system, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

*“My charges started off, you know, as common assaults and wilful damage from, you know, kicking a hole in the wall, or hurting the carer, in the sense that I shut the door. But then once I got locked up, and I was meeting all the girls, and, you know, these girls became my friends. They're older, they're in there for more serious crimes than me. But then once we're all out, and I'm going with the girls and I steal one car. And then that's how I ended up with real serious charges.”*

The system creates the very “offenders” it claims to save. It punishes children for reacting to harm, then uses that punishment to justify further surveillance, control, and incarceration. A child who was removed for “protection” ends up in children’s prison, surrounded by peers criminalised through the same system, and what began as a charge for “wilful damage” becomes a trajectory of so-called serious offending.

This is not about child safety. It is about criminalising trauma responses, punishing resistance, and pathologising survival. Residential care homes are the front line of this pipeline. They are not places of healing — they are the entry point into the criminal legal system.

#### *The Burden of Regulation: How family policing Staff Expect Children to Manage Their Own Trauma*

For children in the so-called care of the family policing system, there is a constant, exhausting expectation to regulate their own emotions, communicate “appropriately,” and behave like adults. The burden of managing trauma, navigating abuse, and self-advocating in a system that refuses to listen is placed squarely on the shoulders of children, often very young children. Meanwhile, the adults responsible for their care hide behind bureaucracy, locked doors, and policies designed to silence.

*“The Child Safety officers are no [REDACTED] better than the carers they put you with. And I understand, you know, they're [REDACTED] flat out because they've got 30 kids on their caseload, but like, that's not the child's fault.”*

The structural under-resourcing of child protection agencies is well known, but it is the children who pay the price. When children attempt to advocate for themselves, when they express distress or frustration, they are labelled “demanding,” “difficult,” or “non-compliant.” The system expects them to speak in calm, regulated ways, to manage their trauma responses, and to perform politeness, even as they are being harmed.

*"The amount of times I went into Child Safety going the [redacted] off, I don't know how many times they used to lock their doors on me and wouldn't let me in, and then they'd just call the police. But it's like, I'm going off because nobody's listening to me. Like, I'm trying to tell you. I'm a kid, but I'm not going to explain it to you or talk to you the way you want me to, because I don't understand how to talk like that. I wasn't raised like that. I wasn't taught that. So, you're expecting a lot from me. They'd say, 'If you ring up demanding'- like, what the [redacted] does that even mean? Brother, I went to grade five. I don't know what demanding means. I can't even get on the [redacted] laptop to look the word up, because they locked that [redacted] up too. Like, what do you mean demanding?"*

Children are set up to fail by a system that demands compliance and composure, while ignoring the reasons behind their distress. The refusal to listen isn't just frustrating, it is dangerous. When children report serious abuse, they are routinely dismissed. Their disclosures are minimised, disbelieved, or filed away as "allegations" that will "be looked into", but never are.

*"They'd call meetings, and the team leader would come in, the Child Safety officer would come, and you'd tell them what's going on, and they just wouldn't listen to you. They'd just tell you it's false allegations. Or, you know, they'll look into it. They don't [redacted] look into nothing. I'm not talking about little things like, oh, the fridge is locked. I'm not talking about like that. I'm talking about like, oh, this man's severely raping me and dropping me at the cemetery to sleep all night, and then coming back and picking me up and dropping me to school. And I'm dirty because I'm covering myself in dirt to stay warm, and people are picking on me. And they still wouldn't listen."*

This is the grotesque reality of a system that demands politeness from children while it refuses to protect them. The expectation is not just that children will navigate bureaucracy, but that they will do so calmly, respectfully, and on the system's terms, even as they are being harmed. When they can't meet these impossible standards, they are criminalised, pathologised, and further punished.

*"I dropped out of grade five was because I've been expelled from every school I'd ever been to. They could put me in behavioural schools, like Flexi schools. I think I had already been in 15 or 16 different schools at this point, and just nobody was listening. So they're all sitting there like, oh, you know, she's a bad kid. She's this, she's that. When it's like, no, I just need attention and somebody to love me."*

## **Intergenerational Impact of State Intervention**

The most powerful evidence of systemic harm comes from the women and families who have lived through it. For many of the women we walk alongside and work with at Sisters Inside, the family policing system is not a one-time experience. It is a generational cycle, one they were born into, and one they now fight to protect their own children from.

### **Targeted Because of the System, Not Because of Harm**

A 16-year-old Aboriginal young woman had just given birth to her first child. Family Policing began investigating her, not because there were any signs of abuse or neglect, but simply because she had grown up in the family policing system herself.

From the start, the process was stacked against her. Family Policing made it clear they doubted her ability to care for her baby, pointing to the fact that her own mother had previously had her children removed. They questioned her with statements like, "How are you going to look after your kid properly?" as though her family history alone proved she would fail.

The young woman's mother had trauma from her own experiences with Family Policing and did not initially want them in her home. This reluctance was used against them. Family Policing also cited unrelated "risk factors" to justify their scrutiny: the young woman's criminal history, and the fact that her brother had recently been released from prison, despite him never being convicted of the behaviour he was arrested for.

Sisters Inside only found out about Family Policing's involvement two weeks before the birth, through a midwife, who explained there was already a plan in place to remove the baby at birth. Sisters Inside immediately advocated for her, committing to support her and the baby after the birth.

Eventually, the young woman's mother agreed to let Family Policing into the home. When they saw it was well-prepared with baby supplies and a safe space for the infant, they allowed the baby to go home. The investigation continued, but this young woman was able to keep her child, not because the system supported her, but because of advocacy, persistence, and the fact she was "proved" safe in the eyes of a system that had assumed from the outset she was not.

We work with women who were taken from their families as children: placed in state care, institutions, and residential homes. Many of them were criminalised while in care, had their trauma pathologised, and were denied safety, culture, and healing. Now, as adults and mothers, they are being judged through the very same system that failed them. Their every action is scrutinised through a lens of deficit. Instead of support to break the cycle, they are met with more surveillance and punishment.

*"Mothers are constantly penalised for doing the very things they're told to do. They can't act naturally — they can't cry during visits, because they're told it might upset the child. But of course the child is already upset. They have to watch every word they say when their child is distressed. If there's more than one child, they're scrutinised over how much time they spend with each one. Women say it outright: I can't even cry. It's like they're being set up to fail — expected to be perfect, emotionless, and constantly under surveillance."*

This is the lived reality of the intergenerational impact of state intervention. Women who never had a chance to experience safe, supported family life are now expected to prove themselves as "good mothers" under impossible conditions. Their trauma histories are used against them. Their survival strategies are criminalised. And when they falter, the system is quick to take their children, continuing the same pattern of forced separation they themselves endured.

*"When I got to the hospital and had my baby, he kept falling asleep on my boob, and they tried to say he was coming down off the bud. Mind you, they were pumping me full of Endone and every [REDACTED] thing else, and that was going through my breastmilk. So of course he was falling asleep. He didn't have no shakes. There was nothing actually [REDACTED] wrong with him, except that he wasn't feeding as much as they thought he should because he kept falling asleep."*

*But they tried to claim to Child Safety that I was on copious amounts of drugs. So, when he was three months old, Child Safety rang me and said they were coming to my house and that I had to be there. I said, "What are you coming to my house for? Did somebody make a complaint?" They go, "Yeah, somebody did."*

*So, I made sure I had Debbie Kilroy at my house for the visit. They came in and drug tested me on the spot, and obviously the test came back negative because I'm not on no [REDACTED] drugs. But then they turned around and said, "Oh, you know we had to do that because our report stated that you're on copious amounts of drugs."*

*Child Safety haven't bothered me since."*

The trauma of losing a child to the state is profound. It is not just a legal process; it is a violent rupture. Women describe the moment their children are taken as a form of death, one that is lived in the body and mind every day. Surveillance replaces support. Threats of removal replace genuine offers of help. Women live with the constant fear that any wrong move, or simply asking for assistance, will be used as evidence against them.

*"But look, every single day, I watch out, because I'm like at any point child safety could come through, and I'm more at risk of losing my baby. So, if say, there's a hole in the wall from [child], because he's throwing the toy or whatever, that's patched up instantly, because I'm not having child safety coming here and make it like this is a dangerous home for my children. Even if I get frustrated, like the first thing to cross my mind is, don't raise your voice, because if the neighbours hear you raising your voice, (although, you know, the neighbours could just come and offer a hand for five minutes), don't raise your voice, because they can call child safety. Everything I do is based off of fear that they might come through one day and try and take my babies"*

We have seen this unfold over years and across generations. Sisters Inside has been around long enough now that we are working not only with mothers who have had their children removed, but with those children, now young women, who are becoming mothers themselves. They, too, are being targeted by a system that reads them as risky before they've even had the chance to parent. This is not child safety, this is child pre-criminalisation.

*"What we often see in court, and what is regularly repeated in affidavits, is the claim that a young mother - who was herself raised in state placement - should have her baby removed because she "lacks parenting skills." The absurdity is that the state was her parent. If she lacks those skills, it is because the state failed to equip her with them. They punish her for the very gaps they created."*

### **The Use of Care: Institutionalisation by Another Name**

*"We work with some of the older girls who were taken as babies and have been moved around to 20-30 homes, and they are no longer wanted, they then get dumped into resi-care, and that is the site of them getting criminalised."*

Residential care (often referred to as "resi care") is supposed to be used as a last resort in the family policing system. Yet in Queensland, it has become a default placement option for a growing number of children, including very young children. As of July 2022, nearly 500 children under the age of 12 were placed in residential care, more than double the number recorded in 2019. This included 26 children under the age of four<sup>21</sup>. These placements are deeply concerning and reflect a system more focused on managing risk than meeting the developmental and emotional needs of children.

*"Kids who are just 9 or 10 years old are expected to take full responsibility for themselves and their belongings. When they're moved between resi placements, they're often the ones packing up their stuff, sometimes in plastic bags, and throwing it all in the boot of someone's car. It's treated like nothing, but it's their whole life being moved around like it doesn't matter."*

Residential care places children, some of whom are infants, in houses staffed by rotating rosters of workers. These environments cannot provide the consistent, nurturing relationships that children, especially those who have experienced trauma, need to feel safe and secure. As child protection advocates have noted, it is distressing for a child to be put to bed by one adult and woken up by a

<sup>21</sup> Cramsie, E, 2023, 'Queensland Children's Commissioner "incredibly concerned" by rising number of infants in residential care', ABC News, 6 July, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-07-06/queensland-children-commissioner-incredibly-concerned-by-rising-number-of-infants-in-residential-care-succes-and/102565838> [Accessed 28 July 2025]

stranger<sup>22</sup>. This lack of continuity directly undermines their ability to form secure attachments and a stable sense of identity.

*"If I wanted to go see my friends, I'd tell them, like, "Hey, I want to go see my friend and hang out today." And it would always be, "Oh, you need to check with the team leader or your Child Safety officer." So, I'd be ringing, ringing, ringing, but they wouldn't answer. Just ignoring me. Who knows what they're doing, maybe in meetings, maybe just flat-out ignoring me because they don't want to hear my mouth that day.*

*So, then I'd have to pretend, like, "Okay, well, can you take me to the store, or to the DVD shop", wherever the [redacted] it was that was near a bus stop or a train station. And we'd just jump out of the car. We'd literally jump out of a moving car, because they wouldn't stop, and they'd even try to speed up when they knew you were about to jump out..*

*And then, the moment you jump out, they're causing a massive scene. They're straight on the phone to the police, telling them you've run away, reporting you as a missing person. So now the police are coming to find you at the [redacted] train station, where you're just waiting for a train to go see your friend, something you should be allowed to do. But they won't take you because they haven't gotten approval from the Child Safety officer. And once the police catch up with you, you get dragged straight back to them again."*

Residential care is increasingly being used to respond to complex needs that the system is otherwise ill-equipped to meet, needs related to trauma, disability, housing insecurity, and mental health. It is also used as a placement option for teenagers who are already criminalised, further blurring the line between the family policing system and the criminal legal system. Rather than providing care and healing, residential care often functions as an extension of surveillance and control.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are disproportionately placed in residential care, compounding the ongoing trauma of removal and disconnection from culture and kin. This is not care, it is a modern form of institutionalisation that continues the legacy of state violence against families.

Despite public commitments to reform, the reliance on residential care has only increased. The system continues to fail to invest in culturally safe, community-led supports that would allow children to remain safely with their families or kin. Instead, it leans on costly and inappropriate institutional placements that isolate children from relationships, culture, and community.

If the government is serious about child safety, it must end the pipeline into residential care. This requires structural change: resourcing kinship care, supporting parents with housing and income, and investing in healing-centred, community-controlled alternatives. Anything less is simply a continuation of harm.

### *Residential Care and the illusion of safety*

*"Resi care is ten times worse than jail. I'd go to court and refuse bail, yeah, because I wanted to stay in the detention centre. I didn't want to go back to the resi homes."*

*"...then the time would come and the magistrate would ask, do you want bail? You can have bail. You don't need to still be in there. And I'd tell Deb [lawyer], I don't want bail. I'm staying there because I am*

<sup>22</sup> Cramsie, E, 2023, 'Queensland Children's Commissioner 'incredibly concerned' by rising number of infants in residential care', ABC News, 6 July, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-07-05/qld-hundreds-of-children-in-residential-care-queensland/102585838> (Accessed 28 July 2025)

*much happier there. I know there's screws, but the screws aren't coming through trying to rape me in the middle of night. So, you know, I'd much rather be in there. So yeah, resi, is 10 times worse."*

Residential care homes are sold to the public as places of safety, stability, and care for children who cannot live with their families. But for the children who grow up in them, these homes are anything but safe. They are carceral environments, run by strict rules, surveillance, and punishment. For many children, residential care feels more like a prison than a home. They are forced to live with adults they don't know, strangers who come and go on shift rotations, yet are expected to interact with them as if they are trusted caregivers. A ten-year-old child is expected to manage their emotions like an adult, to accept arbitrary rules and control, and to suppress the trauma responses that are a direct result of being taken from their family.

One young woman shared the daily punishments that came with this regime of control:

*"If you weren't up by nine o'clock sitting at the table ready to do, you know, your homeschooling, they would go lock your bedroom door so you can't go back into your room. So, if you hadn't showered, or if you want to go in your room to grab anything - your phone, your clothes, anything - it doesn't matter. They're not gonna unlock your door."*

This is not care. This is punishment disguised as routine. These homes operate on the constant threat of removal within removal, control layered on top of control. And when children inevitably react, when they break under the weight of these oppressive rules, they are not met with care, they are criminalised. Residential care homes are sites where children are first policed, first charged, first sent to the watch house. The very system that claims to protect them is the same system that gives them their first criminal record.

*"The main problem with this is, if you cause any type of wilful damage: holes in the walls, you know, kicked in doors, breaking locks, it's a charge. You don't get sent to your room, or get in trouble, or spoken to like, 'Hey, we're not supposed to do that.' So, you wake up, you go to pee, you go to go back to your room. You can't get in your room because they've locked it, so of course, that's [redacted] up your morning. You're having a go at them, they're not listening to you, so you get frustrated. You're not allowed to hit them, because that's a charge. But if you go kick your door, you get charged. So now I'm on my way to the watch house, in my [redacted] pyjamas, still no phone on me because they still wouldn't unlock my [redacted] door."*

This is how the family policing system turns children into "offenders." Not because they are violent, but because the system provokes, traps, and criminalises them at every turn.

Residential care homes are also sites of sexual violence. These homes are not safe. They are places where predators have access to children, and where children are disbelieved or punished for protecting themselves. One young woman described how she was placed in a residential home alone, with two male carers rostered at all times, one of whom the kids knew to not be safe around kids:

*"I was in this resi specifically for me, nobody else. I wasn't allowed to live with anybody else, and they had to have two carers on at a time. There was one - he was a bad [redacted]. He used to try and get into my room while I was sleeping, and I would watch him, because he'd go around the back and through my curtains. I remember I saw him one night when I was laying in bed. I saw him at my blinds, but I didn't want to yell out to the other carer, who, mind you, I don't know this man at all, neither of them, so I don't feel comfortable yelling out to him for help, because I don't know if he's in on it. So, I remember I put my drawers up against my door trying to stop him, just in case he was going to try and come in. And then he did try and come in. So, I slammed the drawers up against the door even harder, and his hand got caught in the door, so he's yelled out in pain, and the other carer heard and came out and goes, 'Oh, what's going on, mate? Are you alright?' And he goes, 'Oh,*

*yeah, no, Dad's trying to check on her, and she slammed my fingers in the door.' So, they called the police on me that night as well. I was charged again. But mind you, this [REDACTED] is a [REDACTED] trying to come in and touch me. I'm not dumb. I've been there, done that. Don't [REDACTED] be trying to come in my room while I'm sleeping."*

This is the brutal reality of residential care. It is not a system of safety. It is a pipeline of violence, where children are surveilled, punished, criminalised, and violated. And when they resist, when they protect themselves, the system turns on them. And when these young people try to speak up, when they try to report the violence, they are not believed. They are dismissed. Their truth is reduced to paperwork labelled as "allegations."

*"But you know, again, you tell them. You tell the police, or you tell Child Safety, or you know, your caseworker, your team leader, whatever - it's all just allegations. That's what they call it. They say 'false allegations.' Yeah, they don't look into nothing."*

This is the silencing power of the system. Children who have already been failed by the system, are then failed again when they try to protect themselves. The very institutions that are meant to be accountable are structured to disbelieve them, to cover for their own negligence, to label the child as "difficult" or "lying" rather than confronting the brutal reality of abuse within their so-called care.

## Limitations & Harms of the Current System

### *Who Really Benefits? Exploitation and Neglect in the Name of Care*

*"One of the kids I work with hadn't had a haircut in years. She wasn't getting new clothes, wasn't going to the dentist - nothing. We emailed the Child Safety worker about our concerns, and they basically said it was up to the resi care provider. They pay the resi place, and the residential is meant to deal with it."*

*Then the resi care provider told us the kid had to be with their "company" for longer than six months before she could get clothing vouchers. They also said she had to "be good" to get nice things, do fun activities, or go out - that meant doing her chores, eating the food provided, and following all their rules."*

The family policing system claims to exist for the best interests of children, yet too often it is carers, agencies, and service providers who benefit from the resources intended to support children in care. While children are policed, punished, and neglected, carers receive financial allowances and support packages, funding that is meant to ensure a child's wellbeing but is too often diverted for personal gain. This exploitation is not rare; it is systemic. It thrives in a culture of minimal oversight, where children's voices are silenced and complaints are dismissed.

*"Every six months the foster family would get a clothing allowance for us, which is only \$300. Yeah, they would go and spend that on their own kids."*

*"The money that they were given, you know, to take us out for lunch or whatever, they spent it on their own kids. They used to lock me in the car. I'd have to sit in the car, starving, while they were in the restaurant, right in front of my face, in the restaurant eating."*

These are not isolated incidents. This is a system that allows carers to financially benefit from the very children they are supposed to care for, while those children are left hungry, cold, and excluded. The abuse is not just physical; it is economic and emotional. Resources meant to provide children with dignity and belonging are instead used to deepen their exclusion and shame.

The lack of oversight in foster care and residential placements enables this exploitation to continue unchecked. Children's complaints are ignored, their experiences are disbelieved, and carers are rarely held accountable for misusing funds. Meanwhile, these same children are criminalised for acts of defiance, punished for "acting out," and labelled as problematic or ungrateful when they resist this systemic neglect.

The system is designed to protect itself and those who profit from it. The children, those it claims to protect, are left to navigate a world where they are a funding stream, not a person.

### *Overuse of Care and Protection Orders Despite Low Substantiation Rates*

*"There are huge double standards in the system. We know of an Aboriginal family with three kids living in a three-bedroom home who had their children taken because the house was deemed "unsuitable" for not having a separate bedroom for each child. But those same kids were then placed in a foster home with six other children, none of whom had their own bedrooms."*

Queensland's family policing system increasingly relies on care and protection orders as its primary tool, despite relatively low rates of substantiated abuse or neglect. In fact, 5.8 per 1,000 children in Queensland were subject to substantiations in 2023-24, which was below the national average of 7.3<sup>23</sup>. While substantiations are one measure of harm, the rise in formal child removals signals a system focused more on intervention and control than on prevention and support. The disproportionate use of these orders often bypasses opportunities to work collaboratively with families to address challenges before children are removed.

### *Lack of Culturally Safe, Trauma-Informed Supports*

*"What I'm seeing more and more is the inherited criminalisation of children — especially Aboriginal boys. Child Safety will use the trauma these kids have survived as evidence against them. Just yesterday I was in a contact visit, and the team leader was going on and on at the mum — who is a survivor of domestic violence — saying her 13-year-old son is now showing signs of being a perpetrator. It's just not true. He's one of the gentlest kids I've ever met. They especially target Aboriginal boys — saying they're showing signs of violence, even when it's clear they're just trying to protect their mums. In this case, the team leader is using that narrative as an excuse not to reunify the family, claiming they can't allow the brother near his sister in case something violent happens. It's completely absurd. It came out of nowhere. To say something like that to a mother, right in the middle of a meeting where she's already stressed, already triggered, already doing her best — it was just unbelievable. It's not support. It's harm."*

Families, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, routinely experience the family policing system as culturally unsafe and retraumatising. An ACCO-led study by the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak (QATSICPP) revealed that women felt their trauma was exacerbated by family policing practitioners who use tactics that appear to replicate the manipulative practices of their violent relationships. These approaches left women feeling disempowered and fearful of interacting with child protection workers.<sup>24</sup>

*"Cultural awareness is still a huge issue. At family group meetings or contact reviews, they're supposed to have a cultural liaison officer, and it sounds good in theory, but in reality, they just sit there and say nothing. I was with a woman at a meeting last week, and she turned to him and said,*

<sup>23</sup> 'A Queensland comparison to the Australian national average' 2025, <https://performance.dcssds.qld.gov.au/our-performance/national-data/child-protection-services>

<sup>24</sup> SNAICC 2024, 'Family Matters – Strong communities. Strong culture. Stronger children', P. 60

*'What do you think of this? What are you going to do?' And he just sat there, staring into space. Because at the end of the day, he works for Child Safety, not for the women."*

*One of the girls I work with didn't have a placement, so they put her in a hotel for a couple of nights. But that hotel was the place where she had previously been sexually assaulted. She told Child Safety she didn't want to stay there because it was triggering for her, but they still put her there. They told her that if she didn't go in, they would breach her.*

There is a profound absence of holistic, trauma-informed approaches that respect cultural knowledge and community strengths. Instead of providing supports grounded in culture and healing, the system often imposes Western, deficit-focused frameworks that ignore the social and historical contexts of families' lives.

### *Punitive Responses to Poverty, Disability, and Family Violence*

*"The goalposts just keep moving. I'm working with a woman who has done absolutely everything asked of her — and more. She's completed every course, and even offered to repeat them just to show she's willing. She's got strong support around her, and everyone is backing her, but still they're making her jump through hoops.*

*They held a panel meeting and the only concern they raised was that the father of her child is in prison and deemed a violent offender — even though she's not with him. She's been granted reunification, but only under heavy surveillance. She has what's called a Family Intervention Case worker with her five hours a day — in her home — just to monitor her. One day she asked for time alone with her son, just the two of them, and she was told to 'pull her head in' and comply.*

*This is what reunification looks like under Child Safety: constant policing in your own home. This woman is being monitored five hours a day, while her little boy just quietly accepts it — like it's normal for someone to always be watching you. It's not support, it's surveillance. And it's a total waste of resources. The only reason they're justifying it is because she might still have some contact with the father in prison. That's it. It's about their fear — not her actions. It's unbelievable."*

Rather than addressing the root causes of harm, including poverty, disability, and experiences of family violence, the system frequently responds with punishment. Families experiencing these challenges are subject to heightened surveillance and coercive interventions. This punitive approach criminalises survival and disproportionately harms those already marginalised, compounding trauma instead of alleviating it.

### *Inaccessible Complaint and Review Processes*

*"Kids in resi care are supposed to have access to the Public Guardian or Official Visitor, that's meant to be their independent support, but they rarely ever see them. We tell mums to ask their kids during visits to request a visit from the Official Visitor so they can make complaints, like not being allowed to see their mum. But honestly, it's rare. They're supposed to visit regularly, but it's more like once a month, if that. And because the care is outsourced, there's just no communication between the resi home and the CSO. Everything falls through the cracks."*

*"The whole system's [redacted] You can't tell anyone anything because they don't believe you. And so anytime you know you're saying something, it's like, oh, well, they're adults, and they know what they're talking about, and it's so much not the case. I'm telling you this is touching me. I'm telling you this man is raping me and hurting me and leaving me at places and, you know, eating in front of me and letting these kids break all of my things. And, you know, I'm living, I sleep in the cupboard so, and then they still just didn't, didn't do anything. They just left me there."*

For families seeking justice or redress, the family policing system's complaint and review mechanisms are often inaccessible, confusing, and intimidating. This leaves families without meaningful avenues to challenge decisions or report systemic harm. Lack of transparency and accountability perpetuates cycles of distrust and disengagement, undermining any possibility of genuine reform or healing.

## Systemic Failures in Child Protection and State placement

*"The carers -I don't even know why they call them that. The people they give you to, yeah, you might get a nice one here and there, but most of them are ██████████"*

Frontline staff and advocates working directly with criminalised women and children have observed repeated and harmful failures by family policing authorities and associated service providers. These failures undermine the rights of mothers and children, violate the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, and contribute to the unnecessary criminalisation and institutionalisation of children and young people.

### 1. Barriers to Maintaining Mother-Child Contact

*"One of the women I'm working with was having weekly visits with her children, and things were going okay. But now Child Safety is blaming the kids' behavioural issues on the visits themselves — without recognising the trauma of being removed from their mum, or the fact that one of the children has ADHD. This little boy gets anxious and starts panicking, asking, 'Is it time to go?' over and over. That's trauma, not misbehaviour. But instead of providing support, they reduced the visits from weekly to monthly — punishing the child and the mother for showing distress."*

Mothers in prison consistently face obstacles to maintaining contact with their children, despite clear evidence of the benefits of maintaining these relationships for both mother and child. Staff report that:

- **Family Policing routinely refuses to support contact**, including declining to provide transport for children to attend the TWCC Playgroup, where children can engage in age-appropriate activities and connect with their mothers.
  - One of the most insidious barriers to maintaining mother–child relationships is the way the family policing system manipulates the concept of “attachment” to justify permanent separation. We have seen case after case where newborn babies are removed from their mothers and placed in foster care, and then, months later, affidavits are filed stating that the baby is “attached” to the foster carer, not the mother, and therefore it is in the “best interests” of the child to remain there. This so-called attachment is not an accident, it is engineered. Mothers in prison are routinely denied regular visits, breastfeeding opportunities, or physical contact with their babies, often on the grounds that the system is “under-resourced” to facilitate them. By refusing to take the baby to the mother, the state ensures that the primary bond forms with the foster carer and then uses that bond as evidence to keep the child. This is not about the child’s wellbeing, it is about manufacturing legal arguments to sever the mother–child relationship permanently.
  - Another common barrier is the seemingly automatic removal of babies from mothers in prison, often under the claim that “prison is not an appropriate place for a baby.” In these cases, Child Safety asserts that the baby should be placed in foster care, and prison management frequently goes along with this position without challenge, despite the fact that, in our experience, many General Managers actually support mothers keeping their babies with them. Rather than advocating for the mother–baby relationship, prisons defer to Family Policing decisions, resulting in

unnecessary and harmful separations. Sisters Inside has worked directly to challenge these removals, advocating for babies to remain with their mothers in prison where it is safe to do so. In cases where we have been able to intervene, these arrangements have been successful, with both mothers and babies benefiting from the continued bond, breastfeeding, and daily connection that the system would otherwise have denied.

- **Contact arrangements are inflexible and punitive** - for example, mothers are required to confirm visits on a Friday afternoon for Monday contact, with no allowance made for barriers like phone access or institutional restrictions. If confirmation is not made, visits are cancelled with no opportunity to reschedule.
- **Family Policing shifts case responsibility without notice**, leaving mothers unaware of who their Child Safety Officer (CSO) is, and disrupting communication and case progress.

These practices further sever the maternal bond, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers, and directly contradict policy frameworks that emphasise connection and reunification.

## 2. Kinship Care Denied Despite Cultural and Familial Safety

*"One of the women I'm supporting right now has done everything Child Safety asked of her. She got out of prison late last year and has thrown herself into doing the work, she's completed every course, secured safe housing, stayed completely organised. There is absolutely no reason she shouldn't have her kids back. But still, she's being denied reunification. One of her kids is in a resi facility, and her five-year-old daughter is in a foster placement. That little girl comes to every contact visit with her mum telling us she's being smacked, that the carer is breaking her things. We've both seen bruises on her. We've reported this to Child Safety over and over again, and nothing has changed. They say they've investigated, but the little girl is still there. The irony is that the mother is being treated as the unsafe one, while her child is left in harm's way. And when we raise serious concerns about the paternal grandmother, who's being considered for kinship care, they brush it off, claiming a basic kinship assessment was enough. But a full assessment hasn't even been done.*

*These double standards are everywhere. Mothers, especially Aboriginal mothers, are held to impossible standards, while carers and kin are allowed to slide by. Even the requirement for a Blue Card only seems to get enforced in Aboriginal families. It's discriminatory, and it's putting kids at risk."*

*"A grandmother I know has put in three separate applications for kinship care, and it's just been floating around the Child Safety office for the past 18 months. No updates. No progress. No urgency. Meanwhile, the child is still in care, and the family is left in limbo."*

Staff report widespread disregard for culturally safe kinship placements:

- Children are routinely removed and placed with non-Indigenous carers, despite willing and capable family members being available.
- Approved kinship carers, such as grandmothers with prior experience and existing care relationships, are denied placement on the basis of outdated criminal records or logistical excuses (e.g, school drop-offs).
- In one case, three Aboriginal children under the age of four were placed with a white foster family, ignoring the grandmother (an existing carer for other grannies) and aunty (an approved carer). The children were then taken interstate for a four-week holiday against the mother's wishes. Despite legal objections and community support, the courts upheld the removal and travel.

These actions not only violate the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle but cause ongoing trauma for both mothers and children.

### 3. Lack of Transparency and Prevention

There is a consistent pattern of inadequate early intervention and removal without genuine attempts at family support:

- Pregnant women are often told there are “no concerns” by Family Policing Officers, only to have their babies removed at birth, with no transparency or clear justification.
- Joint Action Plans fail to prioritise access to social housing, resulting in removals solely due to housing insecurity, even when this is the only risk factor.
- Mothers are told their children have “bonded” with foster carers and that this bond takes precedence over reunification, despite reunification being the stated goal of case planning.

### 3. Residential Care Conditions Are Harmful and Degrading

“Could you imagine if they came to my house and my fridge was [REDACTED] locked? Could you imagine? They would take my kids instantly? Like, oh no, she don't feed her kids, you know, her son sitting there trying to open the fridge. [REDACTED] They didn't care when I was in their [REDACTED] care homes”

Staff working with girls in residential care describe conditions that are punitive, restrictive, and harmful:

- **No open access to food**, with fridges and cupboards locked. Meals are often frozen and prepared without input from the young people.
- **Lack of meaningful daily activities**, with girls confined to the house and “no activities” used as a form of punishment.
- **Emotionally abusive language** used by workers, including frequent accusations that girls are “lying” or exaggerating their experiences - further entrenching mistrust and trauma.
- **High staff turnover** and **inadequate access to medical assistance** or mental health support.
- **No coordination of legal support** for children in care who face criminal charges or are on remand without bail addresses.

#### “Nowhere Safe to Go”

A 14-year-old Aboriginal girl, who cannot currently stay in state placement despite being under the so-called “care” of Family Policing Services. With no placement available, Family Policing Services staff are giving her \$50 gift cards once a fortnight to use as “rent” to pay to her boyfriend’s sister, even though her boyfriend is an older, violent man currently in jail. She simply has no other options.

Her last placement ended, and she lost her job at Kmart, after being left overnight with a male worker, despite her explicit request not to be placed with male staff due to being sexually abused by one at age 12. She has been under Child Safety since she was a young child. Both parents struggle with addiction.

These environments are failing to uphold even the minimum standards of care and are contributing to a pipeline of harm, disconnection, and criminalisation.

### What Real Support Looks Like

#### *Community-Controlled, Culturally Grounded Responses*

True child and family safety begins with communities having power and control over the services and supports designed to keep them well. Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples have long been the architects of culturally grounded care, kinship systems, and healing practices.

Community-controlled responses, rooted in culture, identity, and self-determination, must be funded and prioritised. This means resourcing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led organisations, and all communities, to design and deliver supports that reflect their values and realities, rather than imposing top-down, one-size-fits-all approaches.

### *Housing, Income, Healing, and Relational Support*

Safety cannot be achieved without addressing the material conditions of families' lives. Secure housing, stable income, access to healthcare, and trauma-informed healing services are the foundation of family wellbeing. Investing in these social determinants is not optional, it is essential. Supporting families means providing long-term, holistic care that meets their emotional, cultural, and practical needs, including access to mental health and disability supports tailored to each family's context.

### *Healing Justice Alternatives to State Intervention*

Healing Justice is not just about ending the family policing system as we know it, it is about building new support systems that do not rely on surveillance, control, or punishment. Healing solutions centre community care, collective responsibility, and transformative justice. These models imagine a future where families are not torn apart by the state, where harm is addressed through healing and accountability, and where children grow up surrounded by love, culture, and support. Investing in such solutions means redirecting funds from punitive systems to transformative community-led initiatives.

### *Restoring Power to Families and Communities*

At the heart of real support is the restoration of power to those who have been disempowered. Families and communities must be the decision-makers in matters that affect them. This means dismantling the bureaucratic and colonial structures that have stripped away autonomy and replacing them with partnerships grounded in respect, trust, and shared authority. Restoring power involves listening deeply to lived experience and honouring the wisdom of those who have nurtured children and families for generations.

## **Recommendations**

*"So many of the women I support just need a house. They've been approved by the Department of Housing for three, four, even five years, and they're still not getting anywhere."*

*"You've got two government departments that are meant to be working together to support a family, but it just doesn't happen. If there could be some real joining up between one department and another to actually support a woman to keep her kids—especially women leaving DV—it would make a difference. We've got women still living in the same suburb as their violent ex partner, and they need to be looked at for immediate transfer. Instead, they're kept in the same suburb and punished for the fact that trouble could come."*

The harms outlined in this report are not inevitable, they are the result of policy choices, funding priorities, and systems designed to control rather than care. To break the cycle of surveillance, separation, and criminalisation, Queensland must radically reimagine its approach to children, families, and safety.

## Case Study: The 3-2-1 Program - Keeping Families Together

Sisters Inside trialled an 18-month, intensive, values-driven support program with three families.

The program provided intensive, culturally grounded, one-on-one support to criminalised mothers and their families. A dedicated Sisters Inside worker physically worked in the home with each mother and her children, spending up to six hours per day helping to address immediate needs, and build long-term stability. The support was practical and relational: everything from attending medical appointments, shopping together, visiting relatives, to advocating with housing and welfare services.

For the two Aboriginal families, culturally appropriate methods were central. Time was spent yarning in the home and on Country, reinforcing cultural responsibilities and encouraging mothers to reframe their lives away from the “inevitability” of prison and towards their roles as strong community members and parents. Elders were engaged to provide guidance and strengthen cultural connection.

The Sisters Inside worker used reflective listening, narrative therapy, and the natural world to draw parallels to Aboriginal Lore and explain the impact of institutionalisation on the mothers and their extended families. Mothers were supported to identify institutional behaviours that no longer served them and replace them with strategies that supported their children to thrive.

Advocacy was a major component of the program, with the worker intervening directly with agencies such as Queensland Housing, the Department of Community Services, Aboriginal Medical Services, and schools. The intervention was preventative as well as responsive, addressing crises when necessary but focusing on building a foundation that kept families together and out of state systems.

### Outcomes:

- Children remained with their mothers who could otherwise have been removed.
- The state’s involvement in these families’ lives was minimal during and after the program.
- The mothers built stronger community connections, reducing their risk of re-incarceration.

### *End the use of removal as a default response*

Child removal must no longer be the first or “safest” option considered by the state. Separation should be a last resort and only in cases where a child is at immediate and serious risk of harm, and even then, with the clear goal and plan for reunification. Too often, the current system uses removal as a blunt tool to manage poverty, housing insecurity, or family crisis, issues that could be addressed through support, not separation.

### *Invest in community-controlled solutions*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continue to be disproportionately stolen from their families. The most effective solutions are designed and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities themselves. Long-term, secure funding must be directed to community-controlled organisations that provide culturally strong, locally grounded supports for families.

### *Resource peer-led support and advocacy*

Families in urgent need require support from people who understand their experiences, not judgement from systems that have harmed them. Peer-led programs, run by those who have lived through child removal and family policing, are critical to building trust, breaking isolation, and helping families navigate complex systems. These supports must be funded as core services, not short-term projects.

### *Prioritise family reunification and long-term relational care*

When children are removed, the system must commit to repairing and sustaining family relationships. This requires removing the punitive barriers to reunification, supporting parents with housing and income, and providing long-term relational care that maintains a child’s connection to family, culture, Country and community.

### *Dismantle punitive structures and surveillance-based intervention*

The current system is built on the belief that safety comes from monitoring, controlling, and punishing families. This belief is wrong. Queensland must dismantle the punitive and surveillance-driven structures of its family policing system and replace them with approaches that trust, resource, and empower families to care for their children.

### **Conclusion: Toward Collective Safety, Not State Control**

This report is a call for radical transformation, not another round of incremental reforms that leave the system's core violence untouched. The family policing system cannot be "fixed" by tinkering at the edges. It must be replaced with support in our communities so we can centre care, not control, with families as the solution, not as the problem.

Real change will only come when the voices of those most impacted: children, mothers, families, and communities who have lived through removal and criminalisation, are at the centre of decision-making. Their knowledge, strategies for survival, and visions for the future must guide all policy, practice, and investment.

Our vision is for a Queensland where every child grows up surrounded by love, stability, and cultural connection. A place where families are not torn apart for being poor, where childhood is not policed, and where communities have the resources, they need to keep each other safe.

Collective safety is built through justice, care, and self-determination, not through the constant threat of state intervention. This is the future we must fight for. Anything less is complicity in the violence described in these pages.

**SISTERS INSIDE**

**THEY CALL IT  
CHILD  
PROTECTION  
– WE CALL IT  
FAMILY  
POLICING**

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