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Ransom threat: pay up or you don't see kids

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Aboriginal children in care are being used as bargaining chips to extort money from their biological parents, a royal commission has heard in Sydney.

They are exposed to the sale of drugs and abused by community members meant to protect them, said Jim Morrison from the National Stolen Generation Alliance. He said he had received "horrifying" evidence only in the past few weeks about children being held for ransom.

"So it was the demand of parents 'You can see a child but you are going to have to pay'," he told the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Indigenous and non-indigenous witnesses said that while putting children in the care of relatives was often preferred, it was also subject to less scrutiny.

Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat chairman Dana Clarke said too often authorities went with "expedient" options in placing children in care.

"You want kids to go to family

but they have to be safe. Quite often family (options) sits in front of safety," she said.

"Just because you put your hand up to say you are kin does not mean you are a suitable candidate to care for children.

"Kids need to be in their community and need to be raised there but they need to be raised by people who can do that."

The commission heard of indigenous children facing multi-generational trauma, stemming from colonisation and the perpetration of the Stolen Generations, which instilled a fear of authority in Aboriginal people.

"You can't look at our families without looking at the Stolen Generation," Ms Clarke said.

"We wouldn't have as many

kids in care as we have now if that hadn't occurred. We have one family that has six generations removed just in my service."

Mr Morrison said the development of culture among indigenous children "may mean, heaven forbid, that we revert back to the missions".

"We take our kids out of care or the care that they are not getting ... and put them back on the missions but with their parents, their carers, so we're learning that culture and belonging," he said.

Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care deputy chairwoman Sue-Anne Hunter said she could think of one case where a grandmother hid her children in a basket to hide them from authorities, reliving her own

experience as part of the Stolen Generations.

"So the kids get that same traumatisation of hiding from authorities," she said.

Central Australian Aboriginal Congress chief executive Donna Ah Chee said individual programs could have dramatic effects on the circumstances of children.

She cited one intervention which involved 14 children at a centre in Alice Springs targeted for a daily 15-minute literacy lesson over eight weeks.

"What it has shown is that the vocabulary of these kids as a result of that intervention has improved

by seven months, on average, over the eight weeks," she said.

The commission also heard evidence about children, as a result of sexual abuse, increasingly engaging in troubling sexual behaviour, even on other children in the home.

"When we first started our first program 15 years ago we had about 10 referrals (of children with unacceptable sexual behaviour) a year," Australian Childhood Foundation chief executive Joe Tucci said.

"We are now up to about 250 and that is just for two regions in Victoria.

"We're seeing those numbers

replicated across the country." Mr Tucci said these behaviours often manifested after sexual abuse but could also be triggered by pornography.

"The other reason we have an increase in this behaviour is the increased accessibility of pornography," he said.

"There is no question there is a link between the two.

"It's not just children in out-of-home care but children generally can access pornography very quickly.

"The content is highly graphic, it doesn't represent normal sexual activity, if you like."

'You want kids to go to family but they have to be safe'

DANA CLARKE
ABORIGINAL CHILD, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY CARE