

# Forced Adoption

c. 1940 – c. 1970

## Details

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Forced adoption (or forced family separation) are the terms now used to describe the practices where many pregnant unwed women (and their partners) were subjected to unauthorised or illegal separation from their children. From the 1950s to the early 1970s, the prevalence of forced adoption in Australia was high. These practices were unethical, immoral and often illegal. There was a societal expectation for unwed women (the “undeserving”) to “give up” their children to childless, married couples (the “deserving”). Forced adoptions occurred through maternity homes, hospitals and adoption agencies, and privately arranged adoptions. Doctors, nurses, social workers and religious organisations carried them out. Frequently the mother’s (and father’s) own parents were complicit in coercing the mother (and father) into “consenting” to the adoption (AIFS, 2016).

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

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

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

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

[Click here to see the full Find & Connect glossary](#)

## Gallery

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

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

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# More info

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## Related Entries

### Related Events

- [Apology for the Removal of Children from Unmarried Mothers, Parliament of Western Australia \(19 October 2010\)](#)
- [Inquiry into Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices, Commonwealth of Australia \(2011 - 2012\)](#)  
The Senate report, *the Commonwealth contribution to forced adoption policies and practices* found that many adoptions between about 1940 and 1970 had been forced.
- [Apology for past forced adoption practices, Parliament of Queensland \(2012\)](#)
- [Apology to People Hurt by Past Forced Adoption Practices, Parliament of Tasmania \(2012\)](#)

### Related Glossary Terms

- [Closed Adoption](#)
- [Single Mothers](#)
- [Clean Break Theory \(c. 1940 - c. 1970\)](#)  
Clean break theory supported the widespread practice of forced adoption between about 1940 and 1970.

### Related Organisations

- [Lady Bowen Hospital \(1867 - 1938\)](#)
- [Salvation Army Maternity Home Breakfast Creek \(1897 - 1924\)](#)
- [Queen Victoria Maternity Hospital \(1897 - 1993\)](#)
- [St Mary's Home, Taringa \(1898 - 1919\)](#)
- [Queen Alexandra Maternity Hospital \(1908 - 1999\)](#)
- [Tresillian Vaucluse \(c. 1935 - October 1968\)](#)
- [Royal Hobart Hospital \(1938 - current\)](#)

### Related Legislation

- [Adoption of Children Act Amendment Act 1964, Western Australia \(1970 - 1995\)](#)

### Related Concepts

- [Adoption in Western Australia \(c. 1896 - current\)](#)
- [Adoption in Tasmania \(c. 1920 - current\)](#)  
Between about 1940 and 1970, many adoptions were forced.
- [Adoption in New South Wales \(c. 1923 - current\)](#)
- [Adoption in South Australia \(1925 - current\)](#)
- [Adoption in Victoria \(c. 1928 - current\)](#)
- [Adoption in Queensland \(c. 1935 - current\)](#)
- [Adoption in the Northern Territory \(c. 1935 - current\)](#)

## Resources

- Bowen, Jennifer, [Tangled Web, Part II: the sound of dissent](#), 2011
- Luke, Sarah, [Mother and Child Memorial](#), Gippsland Times, 20 March 2017
- Jolliffe, Jill, [My mother, myself](#), The Age, 31 May 2014
- [Australian-first historical forced adoption redress scheme opens in Victoria](#), ABC news, 4 February 2024
- Richards, Blair, [Forced adoptions heartache](#), The Mercury, 9 October 2011
- [Mum tell of years of torment](#), The Mercury, 1 March 2012
- Pearce, Garney, [Catholic claims](#), 7 November 2003
- [Removal of Children from Unmarried Mothers - Apology \[Hansard p7881a-7889a\]](#), parliament.wa.gov.au, 19 October 2010
- Kenny, P., Higgins, D., Soloff, C., & Sweid, R., [Past adoption experiences: National Research Study on the Service Response to Past Adoption Practices \(Research Report No. 21\)](#), 2012

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