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PRACTICE



Neither society nor the adopter who holds the child in her arms wants to confront the agony of the mother from whose arms that same child was taken.

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Forced Adoption-in the 1950's 1960's & 1970's in Australia

It is estimated that 250,000 Australians were affected by policies and practices of forced adoption, with most adoptions occurring between 1950 and 1975. Unmarried mothers were forced, pressured or coerced to give up their children rather than bear the shame and social stigma of pregnancy and birth outside marriage.

The Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety found there were 39,357 adoptions arranged in Victoria from 1958 to 1984. It is impossible to know how many of these adoptions were forced.

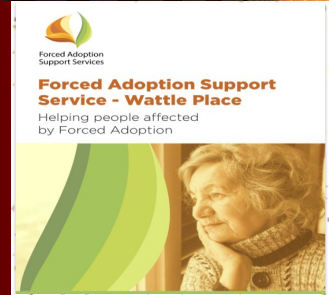
The Welfare Ordinance allowed unwed mothers to be declared as "moral" or "unfit" by welfare officers, leading to forced adoptions.

Until a range of social, legal and economic changes in the 1970s, unwed (single) women who were pregnant were encouraged - or forced - to "give up" their babies for adoption. The shame and silence that surrounded pregnancy out of wedlock meant that these women were seen as "unfit" mothers. The practices at the time, called "closed adoption", were seen as the solution. "Closed adoption" was where an adopted child's original birth certificate was sealed forever, and an amended birth certificate issued that established the child's new identity and relationship with their adoptive family. Such pregnancies were shrouded in secrecy and the mothers hidden away until the post-partum period, when they were expected to return home, forget about their babies and get on with their lives. They did not forget. The Australian Institute of Family Studies in 2012 completed the National Research Study on the Service Response to Past Adoption Practices, which examined past adoption experiences to inform development of best practice models or practice guidelines for the delivery of supports and services for individuals affected by their adoption experiences

More than 1,500 individuals took part in the study, comprising: 823 adopted persons; 505 mothers; 94 adoptive parents; 94 other family members; 12 fathers; and 58 service providers. Some of the disturbing adoption-related experiences reported by study participants included:

- Mothers being used for the training of medical students .
- Mothers being sexually assaulted by medical professionals.
- Mothers experiencing medical neglect or maltreatment.
- Mothers being tied to beds, forcibly held down, having pillows placed over their faces and having sheets held up to shield the view of their newborn son/daughter during labour.
- Mothers being administered drugs that caused impaired judgement/capacity to make informed decisions.
- Mothers and fathers being informed that their newborn son/daughter was deceased when they were not.
- The unethical and illegal obtaining of consent to adopt (or no consent obtained at all).
- Adoptees as babies being used for medical experimentations.
- Adoptees being placed with abusive adoptive parents
- Adoptees being lied to regarding the circumstances surrounding their adoption, including the obtaining of consent from their parents.
- Fathers being excluded from information and decisions about the care of children.

Forced Adoption-the impact on the adopting mothers



The intended goal of adoption was to facilitate a permanent and nurturing family in which children's physical, emotional, relational, and educational needs could be met. In many cases, adoption was also viewed as a chance for children to heal from adverse, and, at times traumatic, experiences encountered prior to placement. This theme – adoption as a child-focused intervention – has been at the heart of child welfare policy and practice ever since

A quite different perspective regarding adoption, however, emerged in the middle of the 20th century and has continued to the present. Researchers reported that adopted individuals are overrepresented in mental health settings and manifest higher levels of adjustment problems compared to their non-adopted peers. Despite the extensive literature on the adjustment of birth mothers to motherhood, the mental health of adoptive mothers is not as well studied.

The psychological impact on mothers who relinquish their babies for adoption can be profound and long-lasting. This impact can manifest as grief, complex loss, attachment issues, and potentially, symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Further Reading:

- Palacios J, Adroher S, Brodzinsky D, Grotevant H, Johnson D, Juffer F, Martinez-Mora L, Muhamedrahimov R, Selwyn J, Simmonds J & Tarren-Sweeney M (2019). Adoption in the service of child protection: An international interdisciplinary perspective. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 25(2), 57–72. 10.1037/law0000192
- Keast K. Psychological impact of forced adoption *HealthTimes* August 2016
<https://healthtimes.com.au/hub/psychology/9/guidance/kk1/psychological-impact-of-forced-adoption/711/#:~:text=The%20illegal%20and%20unethical%20forced,view%20of%20their%20newborn%20baby> retrieved 1 June 2025.
- Australian Institute of Family Studies . National Research Study on the Service Response to Past Adoption Practices 2012. <https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-reports/past-adoption-experiences> retrieved 1 June 2025

The act of relinquishing a child is a traumatic experience that can lead to a complex and prolonged grief process. This grief can manifest as sadness, anger, and a sense of profound loss.

Historically, forced adoption practices, especially in Australia, have resulted in significant trauma and psychological distress for mothers and their children. The psychological impact of adoption can extend into adulthood, affecting relationships, self-esteem, and overall well-being .

Redress is difficult because of statute limitations however the Victorian Government has established a scheme to acknowledge the impact of historical forced adoption practices. The scheme provides financial redress and support to the many mothers who continue to live with the serious, complex and ongoing effects of their experience of forced separation. NSW does have a support service in Parramatta funded by the Australian Government and delivered by Relationships Australia but financial remuneration is very limited.