NEW ZEALAND / POLITICS

# The state care decision that rippled through four generations

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*Warning: This story discusses sexual abuse, as well as physical and psychological abuse endured in state care. It also discusses suicide, depression and mental health.*

From the Featherston girls' home they were stuck in, Joyce Harris and her 14-year-old twin sister Toni planned an escape.

They followed the railway tracks, which led them to the Remutaka Tunnel. Built in 1955, the tunnel is almost 9km long. It remains the country's longest.

"We walked through it and every so many feet there was a phone inside the tunnel and there was a little man cave every 70 feet," Joyce, who is now 62, says.

"We counted. Like a little hollow cave."

The tunnel was pitch-black and damp, and water from the ceiling dripped onto their faces. As they walked through, they kept picking up the phones, hoping to reach their family.

"We didn't know they were emergency phones."

"I just happened to look back and I just saw this big light. It was a train and we didn't even hear it. And then we just ran for our lives."

They managed to make it into one of the 'manholes', and the train whipped past.

"There was really strong wind."

Joyce Harris, left, and her twin sister Toni Harris, right, as children in an old family photo. Photo: RNZ / Cole Eastham-Farrelly

After escaping that near-death experience, they kept walking. But when they reached the end of the tunnel and walked out, there were police cars waiting to take them back to the girls' home.

"They took us straight back. I was locked up in the attic for three days. Then Toni and Helen had to scrub the floors of the big hall with a toothbrush as punishment."

But theirs is not a story of teenage misadventure.

The sisters are not from Featherston. They got to that girls' home in the 1970s after having babies at a very young age. The state took their babies away, then moved the girls into institutions and foster homes.

It is also not a story that is contained to their own lifespans. Harris and her twin sister were subjected to repeated sexual abuse by their foster father. At age two, they were placed in his care. By the time they were seven, he had begun abusing them.

The impact of the abuse - enabled by the government that knowingly put them, as infants, in the hands of an abusive man - spiralled into what Harris' son would describe as a "blanket of brokenness and sadness" across generations of the whānau.

When they were two, the twins' birth mother had a mental breakdown. The state decided she was not fit to raise them, and they were put in the care of foster parents.

When he abused them, Joyce says their foster father would brainwash and manipulate them.

Joyce Harris, left, and twin sister Toni Harris as children. Photo: RNZ / Cole Eastham-Farrelly

"I try and block a lot of it out. It started with little bits ... like perving on us ... getting in bed with us and then it carried on from there to sex. We didn't even know what sex was," she says.

"Me and my sister used to really cry with each other afterwards. He would do it to both of us, and then separately. We used to cry in each others' arms and wish it would go away, and wish we could tell somebody.

"He told us not to tell mum, or not to tell anyone, and that it was all right because he loved us. He was sick."

At 12 years old, Joyce became pregnant by her foster father's rape.

It was only because her foster mother saw her throwing up after breakfast every morning that she was taken to the doctor, where she was told she was pregnant.

"They were asking me, 'How did I get like how I am?' and, 'Who's been doing sexual intercourse to you?' And I still didn't know what they meant.

"It wasn't until one of the social workers had two dolls, or teddy bears, and put one on top of the other and asked me, 'Is someone doing that to you?' They asked and I said, 'yes, my foster father'.

"To me, they were angry with me and I just kept crying."

In an instant, she lost her last shreds of childhood. It was the start of years of bouncing between girls' homes, living on the streets and finding refuge in gangs.

The first was the Salvation Army Bethany Home in Auckland's Grey Lynn, a place that was for young and usually unwed mothers.

"There were a lot of underage mothers there, but they ranged from 15 years up. I was the only 12-year-old and I felt uncomfortable."

Because of the circumstances of her pregnancy, the state told Joyce's birth parents and her other siblings. This resulted in a bittersweet family reunion, after 10 years of no contact.

In a large conference room, Joyce and her twin Toni sat waiting by the door to meet their whānau. One by one, they filed in. Birth parents first, then their siblings. What should have been a happy occasion was tainted by the news that had brought them together.


The Salvation Army Bethany Home for single mothers in Auckland. Photo: Auckland History Initiative / University of Auckland

"Mum cried when she saw I was pregnant. Twelve years old and I was eight-and-a-half months pregnant. They were looking at me, and looking at Toni, and they could see my stomach. But they didn't ask anything," she says.

"Then all my brothers and sisters came to harirū us. My oldest brother, Joe, he looked at me and actually he looked disgusted. And he goes, 'You doing that shit already?' And I'm looking at him like, 'What do you mean?'

"He wanted to know who did it straight away. He asked me, 'Who did this to you?' And I just said to him, 'My foster father'. He said, 'You wait till I see him, I'm going to knock him out.' And I felt good because I finally had someone to protect me."

After reconnecting with and meeting her birth family, Joyce started running away to be with them.

"Because I knew where my real parents lived I just wanted to be home, to belong. These were strangers that I was around, even though they did help look after me. I wanted to be with my own ... Every time I saw a window open, or the door open, I was gone. I would run away."

As a result, she says, she was locked in a secure room at Allendale Girls' home for two weeks. She was days away from her baby's due date at the time.

"It was a cell. It had no toilet. Most of the cells have a sink and a toilet, but this one didn't have a toilet, it had a bucket. The bed was hard as, it was only a thin mattress and you got one blanket. That's where I stayed. I wasn't far away from having baby."

Not long after, Joyce gave birth - now aged 13 and without any whānau present. She was scared and in pain.

"I think I was in labour for over 24 hours, and I just knocked straight out. I can't remember much but it was painful. I wished my mum was with me, or Toni."

Almost immediately, in a post-natal daze, Joyce was forced to sign papers, giving the state possession of her baby girl, Rangi Louise.

Due to birth complications, Joyce suffered a collapsed lung and pneumonia, which affect her to this day.

In her 30s, she requested all of her social welfare files from the state.

She says the files show there were already allegations of sexual assault of a minor against her foster father when she was placed with him. As toddlers, she and her twin sister had been put in the care of a man being investigated for child sexual assault.

"I felt then, why did they put us with them when they knew that?"

Now in her 60s, Joyce says the abuse she received is still affecting her and the generations of her whānau that followed. The state is involved in the lives of her children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren.

### 'Blanket of brokenness and sadness'

The final report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care was released on Wednesday. It estimates that up to 200,000 people were abused in state and faith-based care in New Zealand, between 1950 and 2019. A disproportionate number were Māori.

It also found that children and young people in foster care experienced the highest levels of sexual abuse among social welfare settings.

Amanda Hill has represented survivors of abuse in state and faith-based care, supporting them to tell their stories to the Royal Commission. She has heard hundreds of stories and read thousands more.

She has seen first-hand the impacts that abuse in state care can have on generations of whānau.

"People often like to think of things as being isolated events, the sort of 'bad apple syndrome' type of thing. Whereas I've worked long enough in this space to know that often these things come about as a result of systemic problems.

"What I've seen is several generations going into care. And that hurt, that mamae, that affects the ability for people to parent sometimes, because they've got a lot of their own hurt."

Lawyer Amanda Hill. Photo: Tom Gilmartin

Hill worked with the Harris whānau, helping Joyce's son Stuart present his evidence to the Royal Commission.

"There was a lot of harm done to Joyce and that meant that there was a lot of sadness in the family."

When Stuart was a young teenager, his older sister died by suicide while in state care. It was an event that Hill says changed the trajectory of his life.

"The passing of his sister was a trigger for the grief in the family not being dealt with and then Stuart not getting the help that he needed because he was very, very close to his sister.

"It caused a lot of challenges for Stuart and as a result, he was taken out of whānau and placed in a number of different organisations and programmes which caused him harm," Hill says.

"There had been a lot of behavioural problems for him at that point. His mum, because she had had her own adverse experiences, was very relaxed about where Stuart was and perhaps was viewed as not being able to control him and then the family split up."

During his time in state care, Stuart suffered physical, verbal and sexual abuse. He battled with social workers who failed to care for him, and eventually he was referred to the youth justice system and then the criminal justice system, where he spent time in jail.

Amanda Hill says the story of the Harris whānau, unfortunately, is not unusual.

"I've seen this so many times. I hate that I've seen it so many times. What I would see, when I was at Cooper Legal and we had so many clients, was connecting who was related to who. And that sort of realisation that one group of clients, when you connect their name and you go, 'Oh, God, they're related.' And then you realise that actually, you had these client groups which include siblings and parents and grandparents. So It is something that I've seen a lot of, and the Harris whānau, sadly, aren't outliers at all."

In Stuart's evidence to the Royal Commission in 2022, he described the grief his family has faced as a "blanket of brokenness and sadness" that went over the whole family.

Hill says that statement stuck with her.

"He's working really hard to turn that around. And I think he's doing a really good job of recognising what that is. But it's a huge mountain to climb for anyone. To turn away from that sadness."

### A pipeline from state care to prison

Dr Rawiri Waretini-Karena has done extensive research into Māori experiences of historical intergenerational trauma.

He also has his own experiences of abuse and time in state care.

Waretini-Karena's home life as a child was extremely abusive and violent. His father regularly beat him, his siblings and his mother.

Dr Rawiri Waretini-Karena and whānau before he was taken into state care, 1974. Photo: Supplied

He was five when he was first taken to Tower Hill Receiving Home for Boys in Hamilton, his body covered in bruises. A three-storey social welfare home created for state wards, it housed up to 30 children at a time.

Waretini-Karena's room was right by the main entrance, so every day he would wait with his bag packed for his parents to come and get him.

"One day turned into one week, which turned to one month, which turned into six months, then it turned into 12 months."

When he returned home, he was blamed for the death of his infant brother, and set fire to the bed in which his father was sleeping. Anger and violence was all he knew.

He spent the next 11 years as a child of the state, moving between state homes, foster parents, and boys' homes. He experienced violence at each. But the violence was nothing compared to what his father had inflicted.

At 17, and around the time he was released from state care, Waretini-Karena heard about a five-year-old who was allegedly being abused by the boy's father.

"The more I listened to it, the more I related it to the boy in my own story. It triggered things and then next thing I know I'm in the room beating, stabbing and killing his father... I was carrying this psychological baggage from my past."

At the trial, he found out the man he had killed was innocent. He was subsequently convicted for murder and sentenced to life in prison.

Dr Rawiri Waretini-Karena (Waikato-Tainui, Ngāti Kahu, Ngāti Hine, Ngāti Manawa, Ngāti Whātua) presenting evidence to the Royal Commission in 2019. Photo: RNZ / Patrice Allen

Waretini-Karena says there is a pipeline from state care to prison.

"When I walked into the yard, never been to prison before, but I turned around and I knew about 80 percent of them. It's because we all grew up together in state care."

Research commissioned by the inquiry shows that between 1950 and 1999 one out of every three children and young people placed in residential care by the state went on to serve a prison sentence later in life. That number rose to 42 percent for Māori.

During his time in prison, Waretini-Karena engaged with the alternative violence programme, eventually working as an inmate facilitator helping other prisoners. He spent 11 years in prison before being released on parole.

But Waretini-Karena does not place blame on his father. Instead, he says the seeds of his own trauma were sown generations ago.

His grandfather, who only spoke Māori, was taken by the state in 1930 and beaten until he learnt to speak English. His own father

was taken by social welfare officers in 1954 and also beaten. His father passed on the same abuse he received.

"That's three generations in state care. It has helped me to understand why I grew up without knowledge of my cultural identity, my language, my heritage, and it helped me understand why we were part of a dysfunctional household, and whole community."

Waretini-Karena says it is important to view state care in a colonial context.

It was not created by the Crown for child health and safety. Instead, it was a strategy to assimilate Māori children away from their cultural identity, language and heritage, he says.

The Royal Commission's final report found that the trauma of the abuse and neglect for Māori survivors was intergenerational, transferring from survivors to their tamariki, mokopuna, whānau, hapū and iwi.

"Māori often experienced disconnection and isolation from their whānau, hapū, iwi and whenua, and their ability to access and participate in te ao Māori. This disconnected them from their tūrangawaewae, causing many to feel a deep sense of whakamā and isolation.

"This disconnection and the ongoing impacts of colonisation and urbanisation, compounded the impacts of the abuse and neglect they suffered. These impacts were felt intergenerationally."

The final report also found Māori and Pacific survivors endured higher levels of physical abuse in care than any other ethnicities.

### The ways trauma lingers

While running from abuse in girls' homes and violence on the street, Joyce Harris turned to gangs for refuge.

Now she wears her Mangu Kaha (Black Power) T-shirt with pride. On it is a fist, and the words 'Tangata whenua'. The gangs were her whānau when she had no one.

"I actually felt belonging. They were like brothers and sisters to me. And they did look after me."

People have a lot of misconceptions about gang whānau, Joyce says.

"They don't know them. They look at the patch and they read them straight away as bad and it's not."

Photo: RNZ / Cole Eastham-Farrelly

The Waitangi Tribunal estimates 80 to 90 per cent of Mongrel Mob and Black Power gang members have been state wards.

In her work, lawyer Amanda Hill says she has seen a strong correlation between state wards and gang members.

"Often young men going into state care, the gangs are a form of protection, almost camaraderie in the homes. When you look at the formation of things, like the Mongrel Mob, the King Cobras, all of those. A lot of them were formed in those homes as alliances, to keep safe, either from other boys or from staff. Because there was a strength in numbers."

Gang culture is complex, Hill says.

"It was a way of not being on your own, because if you were on your own, in those places, you were vulnerable. And a sense of pride, people might call that misplaced, but it is what it is.

"Sometimes, when you felt like you were on your own the gangs provided a sense that you weren't."

Toni Harris, left, and Joyce Harris as adults. Photo: RNZ / Cole Eastham-Farrelly

The Royal Commission's interim report on redress, 'He Purapura Ora, he Māra Tipu', found that mental health issues among survivors were common. It said many survivors experienced symptoms of post-traumatic stress including flashbacks, nightmares, emotional distress and trouble sleeping. Many also experienced anxiety and depression, along with feelings of shame, guilt, hopelessness, and anger.

The final report also said some survivors of abuse in care took their own lives as a result.

Mental illness has plagued the Harris whānau.

Joyce's twin Toni gave birth to her first child at age 15, and her second at age 17. Both were forcefully taken by the state. It led to a spiral into depression, and Toni was placed in several different mental institutions where she underwent electro-convulsive therapy.

"I used to go and visit her. She was like a zombie. She was telling me they were putting these things on her head. I didn't like it at all. She used to tell me that she could see things and hear voices," Joyce Harris says.

Both Joyce and Toni have attempted to take their lives, Joyce once and Toni twice.

After Toni's second attempt, she was in a coma for nearly a year due to the injuries she sustained.

Joyce Harris and Toni Harris have both been hugely impacted by the sexual abuse they suffered from their foster father. Photo: RNZ / Cole Eastham-Farrelly

"I just prayed and prayed," Joyce Harris says. "I hadn't prayed since I left my foster parents but I just prayed she wouldn't die. She could tell who I was. I used to talk to her but there was no response. That was very devastating for me."

Toni now has life-long brain damage and lives in an assisted care home.

When Joyce speaks about her twin, her eyes light up. Toni is and will always be her best friend.

"I love my sister. We have always been close. We are always there for each other. We were.

"But she was the stronger one out of us. I'm the opposite of what she was. She was the cleverest, the strongest, the prettiest, the skinniest."

Two of Joyce's children have also died by suicide after suffering abuse in state care.

## The price of redress

How does the state - in 2024 - adequately own, apologise and provide redress for such far-reaching trauma?

Harris says no amount of money will make her trauma go away.

"I really wish that those things didn't happen. I don't even know what it's like to first fall in love. You know, what any human girl goes through to meet their first boyfriend or whatever, of our own choosing.

"It's not a nice thing to live with all your life until you're dead. There's a lot of things I try to block out and just carry on. I put it aside so it doesn't get me down because I've been in those deep holes of depression."

Joyce Harris has lived with her trauma for six decades now. Photo: RNZ / Cole Eastham-Farrelly

Not only was her innocence ripped away; so too was her whakapapa and cultural identity.

"We never got to be taught our whakapapa off our real parents because we were taken at a young age.

"We were spoken to in Māori when we were little, we always understood what they were saying. But then being taken off them, I've lost it. I can't speak Māori, I can understand little words and I'm just learning my whakapapa now at the age of 62."

Hill says the government needs to be willing to spend the money on redress.

"I think what's needed is a political commitment to fund it. Not just let the report sit and say, 'This is a terrible part of our history.' This isn't just our history, this is our now, and it will continue to have an impact until there is a political will for a really, really monumental change."

The first of the Royal Commission's 138 recommendations is for the Puretumu Torowhānui redress system and scheme, as outlined in the 2021 interim report on redress, to be implemented.

The scheme, designed with survivors, would take a holistic approach. Some of the measures outlined include apologies to survivors, oranga services such as counselling and psychological care, education and employment, and payments.

Hill says it is going to be expensive.

"It's still not as expensive as the number of people sitting in our prisons, or the number of people sitting on a benefit, unable to work, or the number of people going into Oranga Tamariki care. You need to think about what you're willing to spend to save on those costs, and the societal benefit of doing it.

"There is a failure to recognise that the costs we're incurring now, they're not inevitable. They are going to have to spend the money, they really are, but it's worth it in my view."

Photo: RNZ / Cole Eastham-Farrelly

It is a rainy day when we pull up outside of Joyce's house in the Far North. We are greeted warmly by her and her whānau, who have been waiting for our arrival.

The walls of her whare are adorned with family photos, art work, and Māori taonga. A framed picture of Bob Marley is hung right at the top.

Even though much of her life has been shrouded in abuse and ugliness caused by state care, Joyce takes pride in making her space beautiful.

In the time we spend with her, there are a lot of tears and deep sighs, but also laughter. She has been through a lot in her life but she still manages to find some light.

Her whānau are all there to support her in telling her life story. They take turns sitting at the kitchen table, listening and sometimes offering murmurs of support.

One of the people we meet is her mokopuna, who offers her cups of tea and water.

In 2008, social welfare contacted Joyce to ask if she would take in three of her grandchildren who were in Child, Youth and Family custody.

"I said yes straight away, yes, I would love to have my grandchildren," she beams.

"It took a little while but we got assessed and got given them. And when I got them, I was so happy. I brought them all up and I felt happy because that gave me a second chance of being a mother again, but properly, because I had a home too. No gang scenes.

"It's been a big job but just giving them love and belonging, helped them."

When Joyce was first pregnant at age 12, she was not given the tools to be a good mother.

"I used to blame myself, because I wasn't a good mum. But I was. I loved my kids.

"Why didn't they set me up to have my first baby? They should have taught me how to be a parent, and set me up in a flat or something, but they didn't think of our futures at all. Just taking children off children."

Photo: RNZ / Cole Eastham-Farrelly

Joyce is not the kind of person who hates, but she will not forget or forgive what the state put her and her family through.

"I wonder what would have happened if this never ever did happen. That we weren't state wards. That we were still with our parents, we had a mum and dad.

"It affected the whole four of my generations. And like the things that did happen to me, did happen to my children.

"I used to think, 'why is this happening to my family?' And the state ... I'm still trying to clean up their mess right now."

But for now, as Joyce heals, loving and caring for her mokos is enough.

**Where to get help for mental health:**

Need to Talk? Free call or text 1737 any time to speak to a trained counsellor, for any reason.

Lifeline: 0800 543 354 or text HELP to 4357

Suicide Crisis Helpline: 0508 828 865 / 0508 TAUTOKO (24/7). This is a service for people who may be thinking about suicide, or those who are concerned about family or friends.

Depression Helpline: 0800 111 757 (24/7) or text 4202

Samaritans: 0800 726 666 (24/7)

Youthline: 0800 376 633 (24/7) or free text 234 or email talk@youthline.co.nz

What's Up: free counselling for 5 to 19 years old, online chat 11am-10.30pm 7days/week or free phone 0800 WHATSUP / 0800 9428 787 11am-11pm Asian Family Services: 0800 862 342 Monday to Friday 9am to 8pm or text 832 Monday to Friday 9am - 5pm. Languages spoken: Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, Vietnamese, Thai, Japanese, Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi and English.

Rural Support Trust Helpline: 0800 787 254

Healthline: 0800 611 116

Rainbow Youth: (09) 376 4155

OUTLine: 0800 688 5463 (6pm-9pm)

**If it is an emergency and you feel like you or someone else is at risk, call 111.**

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NZ Police

Victim Support 0800 842 846

Rape Crisis 0800 88 33 00

Rape Prevention Education

Empowerment Trust

HELP Call 24/7 (Auckland): 09 623 1700, (Wellington): 04 801 6655 - push 0 at the menu

Safe to talk: a 24/7 confidential helpline for survivors, support people and those with harmful sexual behaviour: 0800044334

Male Survivors Aotearoa

Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP) 022 344 0496





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