

Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, Commonwealth of Australia

1987 – 1991

Other Names: • Royal Commission into Black Deaths in Custody

Details

On 10 August 1987, the then Prime Minister Robert J Hawke announced the formation of a Royal Commission to investigate the causes of deaths of Aboriginal people while held in State and Territory gaols. The Royal Commission was established in response to a growing public concern that deaths in custody of Aboriginal people were too common and poorly explained. The Letters Patent formally establishing the Commission were issued by the Governor-General on 16 October 1987. Similar Letters Patent were issued by the States and the Northern Territory.

The Commission examined all deaths in custody in each State and Territory which occurred between 1 January 1980 and 31 May 1989, and the actions taken in respect of each death.

The Commission's terms of reference enabled it to take account of social, cultural and legal factors which may have had a bearing on the deaths under investigation.

The Commission examined child welfare and juvenile justice files of people whose deaths in custody were being investigated. The Commission produced Individual Death Reports for each person, and these contain information from the person's files about their childhood experiences in these institutions.

The National Report of the Royal Commission and the Regional are a rich source of information about interactions between Indigenous families and the child welfare system, and 'non-Aboriginal institutional and individual efforts to deny Aboriginal culture and heritage to Aboriginal children'.

The Royal Commission produced a number of reports, including individual reports for each death investigated. These were presented separately as they were completed. The Commission also produced an Interim Report, which was presented on 21 December 1988. The final report, signed on 15 April 1991, made 339 recommendations, mainly concerned with procedures for persons in custody, liaison with Aboriginal groups, police education and improved accessibility to information.

More info

Related Entries

Related Organisations

- [Minda \(1966 - 1991\)](#)

The death of an Aboriginal boy at Minda in 1981 was considered by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

- [Endeavour House \(1976 - 1990\)](#)

The deaths of inmates in Endeavour House were reviewed by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

Resources

- Howlett, Christine, [Deaths in Custody Australia: No. 3 Deaths in Juvenile Detention, 1980-1992](#), May 1993
 - Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, [Report of the Inquiry into the Death of Malcolm Charles Smith](#), 1989
 - Swain, Shurlee, [History of Australian inquiries reviewing institutions providing care for children](#), October 2014
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