
JURISDICTION : CORONER'S COURT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA
ACT : CORONERS ACT 1996
CORONER : ROBYN MARY HARTLEY, CORONER
HEARD : 11 NOVEMBER 2025
DELIVERED : 25 MAY 2026
FILE NO/S : CORC 3314 of 2024
DECEASED : JENNINGS, JOSEPHINE

Catchwords:

Nil

Legislation:

Nil

Counsel Appearing:

Counsel Assisting : Senior Constable Craig ROBERTSON

Case(s) referred to in decision(s):

Nil

Coroners Act 1996
(Section 26(1))

RECORD OF INVESTIGATION INTO DEATH

*I, Robyn Mary Hartley, Coroner, having investigated the disappearance of **Josephine JENNINGS** with an inquest held at Perth Coroners Court, Central Law Courts, Court 85, 501 Hay Street, PERTH, on 11 November 2025, find that the death of **Josephine JENNINGS** has been established beyond all reasonable doubt and that the identity of the deceased person was **Josephine JENNINGS** and that death occurred on or about 15 April 1997 at an unknown location in the following circumstances:*

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INTRODUCTION

1. Josephine Jennings was 32 years old when she was last seen alive at Kalgoorlie District Court on 14 April 1997. She was reported missing on 6 September 2010.
2. The Western Australia Police Force (WAPF) undertook a missing person investigation in a bid to locate Ms Jennings but were unable to find any sign of her.
3. In November 2024 correspondence was received from the Coroners Court of Victoria requesting their investigation into the presumed death of Ms Jennings be transferred to the Coroners Court of Western Australia.¹
4. By way of letter dated 14 November 2024 the State Coroner accepted the matter into this jurisdiction under section 23(1) of the *Coroners Act 1996* (WA) (the Act).²
5. Once the State Coroner accepted jurisdiction, the suspected death of Ms Jennings was required to proceed to an inquest to establish whether a coroner could find that the death has been established beyond all reasonable doubt.³
6. WAPF provided a report to the State Coroner dated 17 October 2024 which concludes that Ms Jennings is deceased.
7. I held an inquest at the Perth Coroner's Court on 11 November 2025. The inquest consisted of the tendering of documentary evidence compiled during the investigation into Ms Jennings' disappearance, supplemented by oral evidence from Detective Senior Constable Wold from the WAPF Missing Person Team who completed the report into the suspected death.

BACKGROUND

8. Ms Jennings is a proud Wangkai/Wongi woman from the Goldfields region of Western Australia. She was born in Leonora, Western Australia, on 16 June 1964, and was the second eldest of five children.
9. Ms Jennings attended a government-run residential facility for primary school children called the Nabberu Hostel. She was a boarder at the hostel from Monday to Friday and went home for the weekends. Ms Jennings

¹ Letter from Registry Manager, Coroners Court of Victoria to State Coroner, Coroners Court of Western Australia dated 6 November 2024.

² Letter from State Coroner, Coroners Court of Western Australia to Registry Manager, Coroners Court of Victoria dated 14 November 2024.

³ Section 23(2) *Coroners Act 1996* (WA).

stayed at the hostel until she was 11 and then attended Kalgoorlie High School from the age of 12.

10. Ms Jennings was promised to Phillip Wongawol and in October 1982 she gave birth to their child Carmen Rose Jennings (Carmen).
11. On 8 May 1988 Ms Jennings' second child Spencer Joseph Payne (Spencer) was born. Spencer's father was Ms Jennings' partner at the time, Murray Payne. Sadly, Spencer passed away when he was a baby.
12. Not long after Spencer's birth, Ms Jennings met Barry Arthur Albert Warren (Barry Snr) who had travelled from Victoria to work for the Shire of Leonora. They started a long-term relationship and welcomed a child, Adrian Beau Warren (Beau), on 23 March 1990.
13. In January 1991 Barry Snr's son Barry Wayne Warren (Barry Jnr) travelled to Western Australia with his wife and met Ms Jennings and Beau for the first time. Beau was unwell and it was ultimately decided that Beau would go back to Victoria with Barry Jnr and his wife.
14. On 10 December 1991 Ms Jennings' fourth child, Josephine Nicole Warren (Nicole), was born. While Barry Snr wasn't Nicole's biological father, he was listed on her birth certificate as her father.
15. Soon after Nicole was born, Barry Jnr and his wife took her into their care as well.
16. Ms Jennings visited Beau and Nicole in Victoria three times between 1991 and 1996, often staying for extended periods.
17. Barry Snr retired in 1994 and returned to Victoria. He passed away in 2005.
18. In between visits Ms Jennings stayed in regular contact with Beau and Nicole by telephone. Barry Jnr set up an arrangement where Ms Jennings could call reverse charges whenever she wanted to speak to Beau and Nicole.
19. In about 1996 or 1997 the calls from Ms Jennings stopped without any explanation.

ALLEGED SEXUAL ASSAULT

20. On 5 October 1996 Ms Jennings was drinking near the Laverton Airstrip with family members and friends, including Carey Simms (Carey) who was her sister Janet's partner.

21. One of Ms Jennings' cousins, who was with the group at the airstrip on that date, made a statement to police on 26 November 1996.⁴
22. He recalled taking Carey and Ms Jennings with him when he set off for the airstrip to drive home. Ms Jennings was in the front passenger seat and Carey was in the back behind her.
23. Ms Jennings' cousin's car stopped as they were driving towards the Laverton-Leonora road.
24. Ms Jennings' cousin headed off one way on foot to get petrol and Ms Jennings and Carey walked together the other way, back in the direction of the airstrip.
25. When Ms Jennings' cousin got back to his car after walking to get petrol he returned to the airstrip but didn't find anyone there.
26. As he drove into the bush, he came across Ms Jennings by herself. She had blood coming from her mouth. Ms Jennings' cousin stopped his car and Ms Jennings told him that she had just been raped by Carey. He recalls her being very upset.
27. Ms Jennings' cousin told her to get in the car and he drove her to Laverton Hospital.
28. Two other people who were with the group at the Laverton Airstrip on 5 October 2026 provided statements to police. One of them recalls hearing Carey telling Ms Jennings he was going to sleep with her. Both described seeing Carey hitting Ms Jennings with a stick and punching her in the mouth.⁵
29. Ms Jennings was transferred from Laverton Hospital to Kalgoorlie Hospital on 5 October 1996. She was found to have a broken ankle and forearm and stayed in hospital for four days receiving treatment.⁶
30. Ms Jennings reported the alleged assault to police. She told them that Carey dragged her to bushland against her will, beat her to prevent her escaping and raped her.
31. Carey was arrested and initially made full admissions to the charge of aggravated sexual penetration without consent. He was remanded in custody during which time he entered a plea of not guilty to the charge. The matter was listed for trial in the Kalgoorlie District Court on 14 and 15 April 1997.

⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 15 Witness statement dated 26 November 1996.

⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 16 Witness statement dated 6 October 1996; Exhibit 1, Tab 17 Witness statement dated 5 October 1996.

⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 23 WA Country Health Service Goldfields HCARE Legacy Visits.

32. In a medical report prepared for the purposes of the trial, a doctor from the Health Services Aboriginal Corporation stated:

“The nature of these injuries is consistent with the allegation. The injuries caused a considerable amount of pain and distress to Ms Jennings. In my opinion the injuries were not of a life-threatening nature and would not result in permanent injury to her health. However, I would expect the emotional response to an assault such as this, to be quite considerable and probably take some time to resolve. Ms Jennings may require counselling to assist with her recovery from this experience. I have not seen Ms Jennings since this occasion and therefore cannot comment on whether or not she has recovered”.⁷

THE TRIAL

33. When the prosecutor arrived in Kalgoorlie for the trial, local police told him that Ms Jennings was in Kalgoorlie Hospital receiving treatment for cancer.
34. The prosecutor went to the hospital to meet with Ms Jennings. He recalls that she was reluctant to give evidence in the trial because Carey was an elder with significant authority and she was scared of him.
35. Ms Jennings took some convincing, but she eventually agreed to testify after the prosecutor offered to arrange for her to give evidence from behind a screen so that she could not see Carey.
36. Local police collected Ms Jennings from hospital on 14 April 1997 and transported her to court to give evidence.
37. Ms Jennings gave her evidence from behind a screen that had been set up in the courtroom as agreed.
38. The prosecutor has a recollection of Carey mumbling audibly and making aggressive noises throughout Ms Jennings’ testimony. At some point during Ms Jennings’ evidence Carey shouted out at her in a threatening manner. The threats were made in Carey’s first language. When the prosecutor told Carey not to threaten Ms Jennings the trial judge asked how the prosecutor could know what Carey had said was a threat given the language barrier. The prosecutor asserted that the tone and manner of the outburst left him in no doubt that Carey was threatening Ms Jennings.

⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 3 WAPF Report concerning the disappearance and suspected death of Josephine JENNINGS dated 17 October 2024.

39. At the conclusion of the trial on 15 April 1997 the jury acquitted Mr Carey of the charge.
40. The prosecutor did not see Ms Jennings after the trial.⁸
41. In 2003 Carey was sentenced to a period of 12 years' imprisonment for the crime of attempted murder after he attacked his partner with a spanner.
42. Carey passed away in 2018.⁹

MS JENNINGS' DISAPPEARANCE

43. There have been no verified sightings of Ms Jennings since she gave evidence in the Kalgoorlie District Court on 14 April 1996. Medicare records show that she attended a medical appointment on 15 April 1996.¹⁰
44. For many years, family and friends of Ms Jennings believed that she had gone to Victoria to be with Beau and Nicole.
45. One of Ms Jennings' cousins, who she was very close to, recalls that the last time she spoke to Ms Jennings in about 1997 she told her she just wanted to get to Victoria to visit her children there because she missed them. Her cousin stated that Ms Jennings would stay in Victoria for months at a time when she visited and she thought Carmen may have even gone to school there sometimes. Ms Jennings' cousin also said that as much as she missed her family in Victoria, Ms Jennings' home was always Leonora and she could never stay away for too long.¹¹
46. On 6 September 2010 Ms Jennings' oldest child, Carmen, reported her as missing.
47. A missing person investigation commenced the next day but was inevitably hampered by the passage of time since Ms Jennings' last known sighting more than thirteen years earlier.
48. Nevertheless, wide ranging enquiries were undertaken including contacting and interviewing a significant number of surviving witnesses, family members and associates of Ms Jennings.
49. A number of witnesses recalled an argument between Ms Jennings and her sister Janet that related to Carey. While an exact date could not be pinpointed it seems likely the argument occurred after 5 October 1996.

⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 11 Email to WAPF from Mark Trowell KC dated 11 March 2024.

⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 27 Carey Simms Proof of Death.

¹⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 25 Medicare history for Josephine Jennings.

¹¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 7 Witness statement of Samantha Miriam Banks dated 22 February 2024; Exhibit 1 Tab 8 Witness statement of Samantha Miriam Banks dated 15 June 2012.

50. Another of Ms Jennings' cousins, who witnessed the argument, went to check on her afterwards and recalls Ms Jennings didn't want to talk, saying that she just wanted to go away.¹²
51. The Crime file (Brief) relating to the unsuccessful prosecution of Carey for aggravated sexual penetration without consent was obtained by the WAPF Missing Person Team and examined in detail given the close proximity of the trial to Ms Jennings' disappearance.
52. Records obtained from the WA Country Health Service show that Ms Jennings was admitted to Kalgoorlie Hospital six times from May 1996 to April 1997. They confirm that Ms Jennings presented to the Emergency Department on 5 October 1996 and was then admitted for four nights for treatment. The records also show that Ms Jennings was an inpatient from 9 to 14 April 1997, which accords with the trial prosecutor's recollection that he met with her in hospital, and she was taken to the court from hospital to give evidence.¹³
53. A public awareness campaign was undertaken including distribution of Missing Person and Crime Stoppers posters as well as numerous articles appearing in newspapers and online.¹⁴
54. Extensive Australia wide proof of life checks conducted by WAPF at regular intervals through the missing person investigation yielded no results. Ms Jennings has not accessed a bank account, made a Medicare claim, collected a Centrelink benefit, changed her name, married, been registered as deceased, moved interstate or left the country since her disappearance in April 1997.¹⁵

POLICE ANALYSIS

55. The report compiled by the WAPF Missing Person Team includes the following:

“This investigation has identified information suggesting possible suspicious circumstances playing a part in the disappearance of JENNINGS. However, all available investigative actions surrounding any potential involvement SIMMS may have had in

¹² Exhibit 1, Tab 10 Witness statement of Wendy Ranger dated 16 February 2024.

¹³ Exhibit 1, Tab 23 WA Country Health Service Goldfields HCARE Legacy Visits.

¹⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 19 WAPF Missing Person and Crime Stoppers posters; Exhibit 1, Tab 20 West Australian Newspaper article dated 31 July 2022; Exhibit 1, Tab 21 ABC News article dated 1 August 2022.

¹⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 22 Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages search results; Exhibit 1, Tab 25 Medicare history for Josephine Jennings; Exhibit 1, Tab 26 Search results for Centrelink, financial institutions and interstate proof of life checks.

JENNINGS disappearance have been exhausted, and no evidence of any foul play has ever been identified”.¹⁶

56. Taking into account all of the information gathered, WAPF ultimately concluded that it is their opinion that Ms Jennings is deceased. Of particular significance was the exhaustive proof of life checks which have revealed no trace of Ms Jennings after 15 April 1997 and the fact that phone calls to her children in Victoria ceased around the time of her disappearance.¹⁷
57. Ms Jennings’ surviving family members share the view that she is no longer alive.

CONCLUSION

58. Having considered the documents on the coronial brief and listened carefully to the insightful evidence of Detective Senior Constable Wold, I am satisfied beyond all reasonable doubt that Ms Jennings’ death has been established.
59. The overwhelming weight of evidence in this matter painted a picture of Ms Jennings as a mother with a deep and enduring love for her children. The fact that Carmen, Beau and Nicole have not seen or heard from their mother since April 1997 tells me all that I need to know to exercise my decision-making obligation.
60. Added to this, the fact that she has received no income, Centrelink benefits or Medicare rebated medical treatment since her disappearance leaves me in no doubt that Ms Jennings is no longer alive.
61. Given that Ms Jennings’ body has never been located I am unable to make a finding as her cause of death.
62. Similarly, there can be no certainty as to the manner of her passing.
63. As set out earlier, Police thoroughly investigated the possibility that Carey was somehow involved in her disappearance and found no evidence that he was.
64. While Ms Jennings was very likely highly distressed at the time of her disappearance, there is nothing to suggest that she died by suicide.
65. It is evident that Ms Jennings was quite physically unwell in April 1997 but if she had died of cancer or any other medical condition this fact would have been unlikely to escape the notice of authorities.

¹⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 3 WAPF Report concerning the disappearance and suspected death of Josephine JENNINGS dated 17 October 2024.

¹⁷ T 13 – 16.

66. In all of the circumstances I am unable to make anything but an open finding as to the manner of death.
67. I would like to express the Court's sincere condolences to Ms Jennings' children and the rest of her family on her passing.

R M Hartley
Coroner
25 MAY 2026