

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FINAL REPORT NO. 383

Urban Indigenous homelessness: much more than housing



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Publication Date August 2022

DOI 10.18408/ahuri3222701

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ISBN

978-1-922498-50-2

Key words

Aboriginal, Indigenous, homelessness, service coordination,
policy, urban, cultural safety, mobility.

Series

AHURI Final Report

Number

383

ISSN

1834-7223

Publisher

Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited
Melbourne, Australia

DOI

10.18408/ahuri3222701

Format

PDF, online only

URL

<https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/383>
(full report)

Recommended citation

Tually, S., Tedmanson, D., Habibis, D., McKinley, K., Akbar, S.,
Chong, A., Deuter, K. and Goodwin-Smith, I. (2022) *Urban
Indigenous homelessness: much more than housing*, AHURI
Final Report No. 383, Australian Housing and Urban
Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, [https://www.
ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/383](https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/383), doi: 10.18408/
ahuri3222701.

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Acknowledgements

This material was produced with funding from the Australian
Government and state and territory governments. AHURI Limited
gratefully acknowledges the financial and other support it has
received from these governments, without which this work
would not have been possible.

AHURI Limited also gratefully acknowledges the contributions,
both financial and in-kind, of its university research partners
who have helped make the completion of this material possible.

The authors of this report would like to thank the many people
who gave so willingly of their time, sharing their thoughts and
experiences about Indigenous homelessness in Australia, and
during a particularly challenging 2020/21. A special thank you
also to Ms Clare Rowley, Data and Projects Officer, Adelaide
Zero Project (AZP) for her magic with the AZP data presented
in the Adelaide case study.

The research team would like to acknowledge the Traditional
Owners of the Country on which our case-study research
took place: the Turrbal people of Brisbane; the Larrakia
people of Darwin; the Kurna people of the Adelaide plains;
and the Kokatha people of the Port Augusta region and offer
our respect to Elders, past, present, and emerging. In doing
so however, we also acknowledge that very many Indigenous
peoples and language groups reside within these urban areas
and/or are homeless in and around these now urbanised areas.

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Executive summary

Key points

- Australia-wide, one in 28 Indigenous people were homeless at the time of the 2016 Census.
- The Indigenous homelessness rate is 10 times that of non-Indigenous people (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2019; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW] 2019a).
- The Indigenous population in Australia is expected to grow to around 1,060,000 by 2031. Housing policy frameworks and investment must account for this growth in population.
- A continuity of dispossession, racism, profound economic disadvantage and cultural oppression shapes the lived experience of many Indigenous Australians today.
- Indigenous homelessness is culturally distinct. The drivers of Indigenous homelessness and the entry and exit points to accessing services are different. The notion of 'home' and 'homelessness' are culturally mediated terms.
- There is a lack of dedicated services for Indigenous Australians experiencing homelessness in urban areas, despite their acute over-representation. This combines with other systemic barriers to explain their acute over-representation among specialist homelessness services.
- Indigenous-led services need to be supported and enabled to work more closely with housing and homelessness organisations.

- **There is a policy tension between prioritisation of adequate supply of housing and the services and supports needed to assist people retain housing.**
- **Family violence, community dislocation and economic pressures combine to escalate issues of sleeping rough, overcrowding and intermittent or cyclical homelessness.**
- **Wraparound trauma-informed holistic support is needed for up to a year for Indigenous women and children impacted by family violence.**
- **The over-representation of Indigenous people in Australian prisons increases the risk of homelessness post-release. Indigenous people transitioning out of prison need secure and culturally safe accommodation support, as well as wraparound services that provide pathways out of vulnerability and risk.**
- **A strengths-based approach focussing on the interplay between Indigenous-controlled support services and homelessness support can generate more holistic and culturally safe responses.**
- **Indigenous-led responses to urban Indigenous homelessness are culturally appropriate and thus likely to be more impactful and lasting.**

Key findings

- Homelessness among Indigenous people arises from a clustering of vulnerabilities that easily spiral out of control. Minor problems, such as a broken fridge or a parking fine, can rapidly escalate to a major problem of rent arrears, court appearances and failed tenancies. This breakdown places a further barrier to housing access as a failed tenancy means individuals can be placed on the Tenant Information Centre Australia list, which landlords access to check on the status of housing applicants. Poverty is part of this vulnerability, as a proportion of the homeless Indigenous population have '*nothing but the clothes they are standing in...*' (RD1, Manager Community Service Organisation), are unable to pay bonds, or meet their basic needs.
- As crisis beds become more difficult to find, so frontline workers must spend excessive time placing their clients. Hostel managers and shelters describe turning people away, leaving clients with little option but to sleep on the streets. For legal services, finding appropriate accommodation for individuals exiting custody or jail is '*their number one problem, right across the state*' (RQ2, CEO Indigenous SHS).
- Inadequate funding for homelessness services, limited crisis and transitional accommodation, the shortage of affordable housing, barriers to housing access and inadequate attention to tenancy sustainment, create a revolving door of housing and homelessness for many Indigenous people. Although problems of discrimination, mental illness and poverty make it difficult for Indigenous people to access and sustain housing, it is the barriers resulting from problems and limitations of the housing and homelessness system that merit greatest attention.

- Other barriers to accessing priority housing (and waiting lists), include:
 - lack of identity documents
 - low incomes
 - problematic housing histories, including rent arrears and other housing debts, warnings for disruptive behaviour
 - criminal history
 - lack of a tenancy history
 - low tolerance for completing forms as well as low literacy—which makes it difficult to understand forms
 - lack of a stable address, making it difficult to keep appointments.
- One of the characteristics of Indigenous homelessness is the extent to which some people move between different forms of housing insecurity and homelessness, effectively cycling through the system rather than progressing through it towards long-term housing. Addressing their needs requires more housing and a more assertive approach to sustaining tenancies.
- While issues of overcrowding may have a cultural dimension, we note that while connection is cultural, abuse is not.
- Funds available to housing managers make no provision for the intensity of support required to manage unapproved occupants, who are often highly transient and with complex needs. The pressures of managing the service mean that managers have little choice but to implement a regulatory response rather than a social justice response.
- The introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) has been counterproductive for many homeless people for multiple reasons, as plans cannot be accessed unless the individual has a fixed address. The NDIS is predicated on residence at a stable, fixed location and makes no provision for those in unstable housing circumstances. If you have no home, NDIS support plans are of little value.
- Cultural safety and cultural awareness training are imperative to good practice in the homelessness sector.
- A specifically Indigenous approach to service provision—including the affirmative approach to Indigenous employment—means the experience of clients accessing the service can be distinct from mainstream services, overcoming barriers of distrust and establishing reputational credibility.
- Instead of a one-size-fits-all model, services need to adapt to local requirements. Strategies and practices need to be adjusted to fit local client socio-demographics, such as ethnic or language group mix and local service profiles.
- Partnering with Indigenous community-controlled organisations is key to ensuring good practice for clients.
- The intersectional nature of Indigenous homelessness means people are doubly hard to reach, as both homelessness and Indigeneity can be characterised by a distrust of formal institutions. This lack of trust requires an awareness that, as well as ensuring cultural safety, it may be necessary to work with clients long-term.
- The very high rate of Indigenous incarceration is a critical area for policy attention. There is insufficient coordination between specialist homeless services and the criminal justice system. A formal protocol for advising crisis accommodation services is needed, as is support for sustaining tenancies.
- Developing and maintaining strong networks with local and peak Indigenous health, welfare, legal and financial services is critical to providing effective services.
- To provide an appropriate and culturally safe service to homeless Indigenous individuals and families requires services to establish strong relationships with Indigenous/mainstream services, and to find ways to work together rather than be siloed.
- One way to strengthen Indigenous homelessness services is for Indigenous community health services to play a greater role in the housing and homelessness sector. Indigenous-led services are critical to the success of initiatives to address Indigenous urban homelessness.

Policy development options

A range of policy development options flow from this research, clustered around the three key themes of the study:

Theme 1: Indigenous homelessness is different

1. Cultural responsibilities and expectations can result in fluctuating levels of crowding, and mobility between communities and localities. This can result in situations that fit ABS definitions of homelessness, but which may not be homelessness from an Indigenous perspective. Culturally appropriate responses must respect Indigenous perspectives and focus on safety and understanding ahead of non-Indigenous concepts of home and culturally embedded imperatives.
2. Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) need to be central to efforts to meet the needs of Indigenous people experiencing homelessness. This requires resources and needs to be supported.
3. Co-designed programs and responses to Indigenous homelessness are critical: 'nothing about us, without us' is an important principle in this context, as an expression of the need for self-determination.
4. Lived experience of Indigenous homelessness needs to be recognised and supported as a key form of expertise in the homelessness workforce. Employing Indigenous staff is a key priority.
5. There needs to be a targeted, resourced strategy that establishes goals, standards, and frameworks for supporting the cultural safety of homelessness services. This needs to be at both Commonwealth and state levels.

Theme 2: Inflow into Indigenous homelessness requires situationally specific and culturally appropriate responses

1. As with the broader population, domestic and family violence is the largest driver of homelessness for Indigenous women and children. This highlights the importance of enhanced links between homelessness and domestic and family violence services.
2. To reduce inflows from public housing into homelessness, one approach would be to support Indigenous services for intensive tenancy management, so that the established tenancy is sustained, and unapproved tenants are supported towards establishing a pathway out of homelessness.
3. The revolving door of unstable housing and homelessness that characterises some Indigenous homelessness groups makes it essential that housing is accompanied by support—for up to at least six months. This means supporting tenants to maintain rental payments, to budget, to manage daily living needs including cooking, and to keep medical and other appointments.
4. Culturally appropriate assertive outreach based on a Housing First model is a critical component for reducing rates of Indigenous homelessness. Stable housing creates a virtuous circle, in which the impact of problems such as mental and physical illness and substance use are improved and this, in turn, improves the capacity of people to sustain their tenancy.
5. People's homelessness pathways intersect with several other systems—for example, correctional services, justice, health, and mental health services. The responsibility and potential of these systems and institutions to reduce inflows into homelessness is a key to engaging with the complexity of Indigenous homelessness. Linking Housing First strategies to Indigenous health and mental health services is crucial.
6. Identifying the supports tenants need to sustain their tenancy and linking these with supports across other key areas of people's lives (culture, reunification, trauma) is critical in disrupting initial pathways to homelessness and working to ensure stable, long-term housing outcomes.

Theme 3: Exits from Indigenous homelessness require situationally specific and culturally appropriate responses

1. Different Indigenous people experience homelessness in different ways and require different responses. These responses need to include: Housing First pathways that provide culturally appropriate response; a Support First pathway, coordinating the non-housing needs of people in crowded or rough sleeping situations; and a Cultural Engagement pathway, recognising that many Indigenous people perceived to be homeless are not in need of support or housing, but could benefit from coordinated, culturally safe relevant engagement strategies for welcoming, supporting and setting expectations for visitors.
2. There is potential to strengthen connections between homelessness responses and NDIS and My Aged Care funding opportunities.
3. Supply constraints, especially of culturally appropriate social housing, need to be addressed. In addition, eligibility criteria and application processes need to be examined for cultural exclusion risks, and attention needs to be given to the suitability of social housing types and locations for Indigenous people.
4. Culturally appropriate and low-barrier transitional accommodation facilities have the potential to enhance the suite of responses to Indigenous homelessness.
5. An expanded or new Aboriginal Elders village offering specialist aged care for prematurely aged Aboriginal people has the potential to enhance the suite of responses to Indigenous homelessness.
6. An adequately resourced Return to Country program has the potential to enhance the suite of responses to Indigenous homelessness.
7. Trials of housing that can be flexibly configured to accommodate larger family or kinship groups have the potential to enhance the suite of responses to Indigenous homelessness.

The study

This project examines the ‘challenge’ of urban Indigenous homelessness in detail, and focusses on the following core research questions:

- What are the causes, drivers, and cultural contextual meanings of homelessness for Indigenous Australians in urban settings?
- What do culturally safe responses to homelessness look like for Indigenous Australians?
- How are homelessness, family and child support, health and wellbeing, and housing programs targeted, coordinated, and operationalised to support Indigenous Australians in urban settings?
- How are Indigenous community-controlled organisations and governance bodies engaged with/in the provision of homelessness support?

This research builds on previous work about Indigenous homelessness, including that of Long, Memmott et al. (2007) and intergenerational work of Milligan, Phillips et al. (2011), with a specific focus on Indigenous families and children. The research followed a multi-methods approach that included:

- a desktop review of Australian policy, practice, and academic literature, along with literature from other ex-colonial countries such as New Zealand and Canada
- service and stakeholder mapping at case-study sites (and beyond)
- national and jurisdiction-focussed data analysis
- semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in case-study sites.

A case-study approach was decided as most appropriate for this project. It allowed us to capture similarities and differences in how Indigenous people experience homelessness across geographies, as well as place-based responses to the 'challenges' of urban Indigenous homelessness. Four case-study sites across three jurisdictions (Queensland, Northern Territory, South Australia) were selected based on consideration of evidence about homelessness in urban settings nationally, input from key stakeholders and the networks and knowledge of project team members.

Data were collected for each case-study site via individual and group interviews with key stakeholders from agencies assisting Indigenous people experiencing homelessness. Agencies included those providing homelessness services, as well as agencies from intersecting sectors such as health, justice, and community services. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via online platforms.

Although not all participants had an Indigenous background, emphasis was given to the perspectives of Indigenous people working in the homeless or wider service systems in the case-study sites. These informants shared their perspectives on current service provision and the potential for future policy, system, and practice improvements.



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