

## **Aboriginal housing careers in Western Australian towns and cities**

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# CONTENTS

<b>LIST OF MAPS AND TABLES.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Project Aims .....	2
1.2 Key Research Questions.....	5
<b>2 QUANTITATIVE STUDIES .....</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1 The Housing Policy Triangle.....	6
2.2 More and better housing.....	7
2.2.1 Number of dwellings targeted.....	8
2.2.2 Households by tenure type.....	9
2.2.3 Use of mainstream housing services.....	11
2.2.4 Homelessness .....	12
2.2.5 Overcrowding .....	12
2.2.6 Rental commitment.....	12
2.3 Enhanced participation and partnership .....	12
2.4 Better housing policy and delivery .....	12
2.5 Conclusion.....	12
<b>3 QUALITATIVE STUDIES .....</b>	<b>13</b>
3.1 Assimilation and Acculturation.....	13
3.2 Assimilationism and Family Form.....	14
3.3 Mobility .....	15
3.4 Regionalism.....	16
3.5 Sociospatial Patterns.....	17
3.6 Men and Isolation .....	19
3.7 Household .....	20
<b>4 AN ABORIGINAL KINSHIP SYSTEM IN SOUTHWEST WESTERN AUSTRALIA .....</b>	<b>23</b>
4.1 Who is a Nyungar Person?.....	23
4.2 The Family Community.....	24

4.3	Households and Places.....	25
4.4	Overcrowding .....	28
4.5	Policy Implications .....	29
<b>5</b>	<b>FIELD RESEARCH .....</b>	<b>31</b>
	<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>32</b>

## LIST OF MAPS AND TABLES

<b>Map 1: Rowley's 1965 map of Aboriginal population distribution</b> (Rowley 1972: x-xi).....	4
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<b>Table 1: Percentage of Western Australian Households by Tenure, 2001</b> (Adapted from ABS 2001).....	9
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<b>Table 2: Percentage of Housing Type by Household, Western Australia, 2001</b> (Adapted from ABS 2001).....	10
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<b>Table 3: Percentage of Western Australian Indigenous Households by Housing Type and Tenure, 2001</b> (Adapted from ABS 2001) .....	11
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# 1 INTRODUCTION

For present purposes, we might simply define housing careers as “the sequence of housing circumstances an individual or household occupies over their life (Beer, Faulkner and Gabriel 2006:1). The literature directly addressing Indigenous Australian housing careers is sparse. Contrasting with the paucity of works on housing careers in Indigenous Australia and of great value in the present research context, is a substantial and growing body of works on Indigenous housing in general, much of it foundational to the detailed investigation of Indigenous Australian housing careers. The present Positioning Paper reviews the available literature and data relevant to Australian Indigenous housing careers, and it outlines a major research project that will explore housing careers in concept and practice in town and city locations in contemporary Indigenous Australia, specifically, metropolitan Perth and the West Australian regional centres of Broome and Carnarvon.

Research on Australian Indigenous housing patterns has developed slowly since its early beginnings in the post-War years, gaining pace in the past two decades. There is still much to be done, as witnessed by recent AHURI projects and its program agenda. To date, there has been little social scientific research and virtually no anthropological research directly addressing Indigenous housing careers with the field generally characterised by quantitative, moment in time data and analysis. On the other hand, there is a wide and varied body of anthropological research dealing with the signal aspects of contemporary Indigenous ways of living, namely mobility, localism, regionalism and the operation of kinship related behaviour, which cry out for investigation in relation to Indigenous housing policy and practice.

A number of studies seem especially pertinent to an understanding of Indigenous housing careers. One is Birdsall-Jones' (then Birdsall) 1990 examination of residence patterns in Aboriginal communities in Western Australia's metropolitan, Wheatbelt, Gascoyne and Kimberley regions. Birdsall-Jones demonstrates that kin based attachments to place are a major factor in residential choice and household formation in all of the regions she investigated. Here and in her later work she also suggests that the observable residential broad patterns have not changed much over the years, notwithstanding widening housing options and greatly expanded residential movement to and between houses, flats, camps, improvised shelters and homelessness (Birdsall 1988, 1990; Birdsall-Jones 2001, 2002, 2004). Also of considerable relevance to an understanding of Indigenous housing careers is Memmott, Long and Thomson's identification of a distinctive “culture of mobility” specific to Indigenous people in the course of research carried out in Queensland (Memmott, P. et al. 2004). This research clearly demonstrates that mobility and kinship operate together to give Indigenous society its processual themes within regions and over time.

Associated with the issue of mobility and of local and regional attachment is the issue of residential turnover. Factors both internal and external to Indigenous communities are implicated. Agencies and influences external to Indigenous communities often impel movement from domicile to domicile, but they can also frustrate or delay desired moves. Internal factors, by contrast, generally act to encourage continuity of residence within the kin group's locality and region of affiliation, and arguably to a lesser degree, continuity of residence in particular domiciles. But at least part of the domiciliary turnover is attributable to factors internal to Indigenous communities, sometimes to do with conflict within and between kin, sometimes more subtle influences. The fluctuations in residential

occupancy contrast with what research has generally shown to be strong and stable regional and local affiliation.

Better understanding is needed of the contrasting patterns of local and regional stability and domiciliary instability, and their interaction. It is not unreasonable in this connection to see the local and regional stability in terms of the very human inclination to remain in association with one's own social network rather than going to live among strangers. But this is not to account fully for the strength of local and regional attachment in the Indigenous Australian context, or to explain why it finds expression in the way(s) recorded in anthropological and other research. The culturally defining aspect of Indigenous behaviour in this regard is that it occurs within the idiom of (extended) kin relatedness interwoven with attachments to country. Kin relatedness is not without significance in wider Australian society, but it is not the defining factor in self-conception, in relations between self and the social world, or in economic and political spheres. In Indigenous society, kin relatedness has a pervasive and powerful influence. Our understanding of the movement from domicile to domicile among Indigenous people must therefore take into account the mutually reinforcing interwoven influence of "kin and country" on Indigenous residential patterns and choices.

The present research project seeks an understanding of the influence of the factors briefly discussed above on housing careers. Such an understanding is not possible with a reliance simply on quantitative survey or census data. What is required is an understanding of housing careers grounded in the lived experience of Indigenous people going about the business of finding and then establishing themselves in "somewhere to live". The proposed research is directed to that end.

## **1.1 Project Aims**

The brief set for this project is to provide a qualitative understanding of the housing careers of Indigenous town and city dwellers. The projected field research will be limited to the three major towns and cities, namely Perth, Carnarvon and Broome in Western Australia. These locations have been chosen for the present study, in part because of their relative proximity, in part because they represent different points on the spectrum of Indigenous town and city communities.

In the phraseology still in use in some quarters, one of the three locations (metropolitan Perth) sits squarely within "settled" Australia and the other two rather ambiguously on the edge of the boundaries generally drawn between "settled" and "remote" Australia. The settled/ remote distinction is now found more frequently in the social scientific literature than in official statistics and reports, the latter drawing upon more narrowly defined units of comparison (e.g. the ABS's census districts, the old ATSIC electoral and administrative boundaries, or the like) or upon more graded geographic distinctions (such as the ARIA, the Accessibility/Remoteness Index developed by the Commonwealth Department of Health and the National Key Centre for Social Applications of GIS). The ARIA index provides in the Indigenous Australian context a five point scale, ranging from "major cities" through to "very remote". In terms of this scale, metropolitan Perth speaks for itself as a "major city"; while the town populations of the respective census districts are deemed to be "remote" and their hinterland populations "very remote", the fourth and fifth points on the remoteness scale. In Carnarvon's case, 79.5% of its 2001 population are thus deemed to be "remote" and the remainder (20.5%) "very remote", while the corresponding figures for Broome are 85.9% and 14.1%.

The "settled"/"remote" distinction is still alive in the academic literature, and to that extent it cannot simply be ignored. Discomforting in this respect are its resonances

with the pre-1966 census distinction between “settled” and “nomadic” Aborigines (Evans, J., Kahles, D. & Bate, C. 1993). Present-day usage of the settled/remote distinction stems from the work of C D Rowley’s distinction, later adapted, between “settled” and “colonial” Australia (see, for example, Rowley 1971). Distancing himself from previous ways of thinking about the contrasts within Indigenous Australia, Rowley proposed that a broad contrast needs to be drawn between those parts of Indigenous Australia that had been profoundly and destructively impacted by intensive non-Indigenous “settlement” and those parts that had been protected to a degree by their isolation from the ills and pressures associated with contact with concentrated non-Indigenous populations and land intensive economic activities. As Rowley saw it, the settled/remote frontier was a moving frontier of destruction, as Indigenous land and labour were brought more fully within the framework of activities and structures hostile to and corrosive of traditional cultures and social structures, and the greater the destruction, the less the likelihood of successful Indigenous engagement with the wider social and political system. The situation, as he saw it, has been made all the worse because of the half-hearted and misdirected nature of official efforts to foster Indigenous participation in the wider system, policy rhetoric notwithstanding.

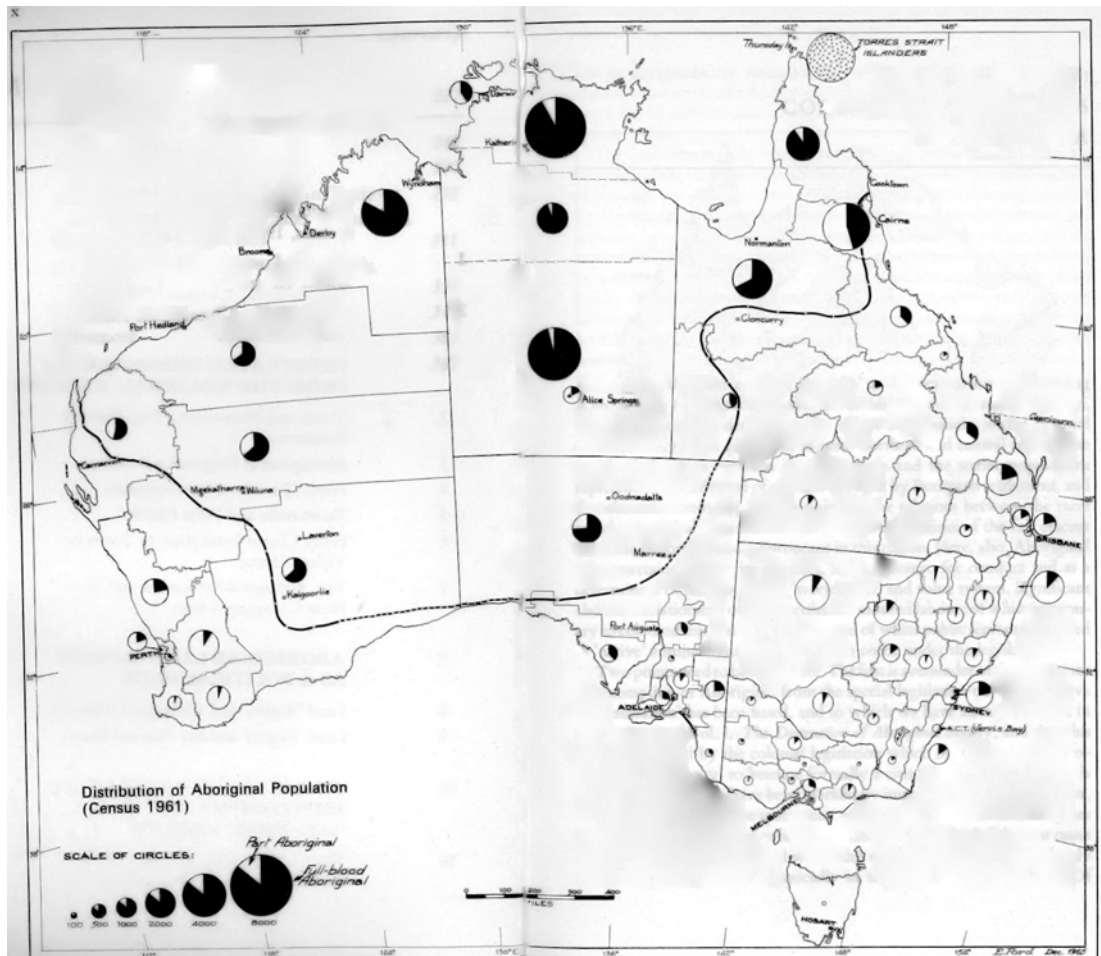
Reflecting his over-riding concern about the destruction of Indigenous society, Rowley (Rowley, C. D. 1972) observed ominously:

the plight of the Aboriginal in ‘settled Australia’ is simply that to which the situation in ‘colonial’ Australia is leading. It has been arrested in a frontier condition by the later beginning and the slower pace of economic development and by the fact that the administration and economic development of the north has in some respects been that characteristic of the tropical colony Rowley (1972: 11-12).

Applying Rowley’s “settled”/“remote” distinction to contemporary Indigenous Australia, the “settled” end of the spectrum would now be identifiable with the small minority populations found in Australia’s major metropolises, all growing more rapidly than the Indigenous population as a whole, and majority and large minority Indigenous communities of northern and central Australia, themselves growing quite rapidly but declining somewhat as a proportion of the total Indigenous population. Between these two ends of the spectrum are the regional towns and cities where, in general, Indigenous populations are declining both as a proportion of the overall local and regional populations and as a proportion of State and nation-wide Indigenous populations. Broome and Carnarvon fall rather indeterminably in this grey zone between the iconic extremes of the settled/remote continuum, neither one nor the other, but demonstrating aspects of each.



**Map 1: Rowley's 1965 map of Aboriginal population distribution (Rowley 1972: x-xi).**



A simple binary division, such as represented by the settled/urban distinction, has obvious advantages in terms of neatness, ease of classification, and visual impact, the latter especially powerful when two mapped, fully contiguous zones are shown with apparently sharply defined boundaries between them (see for example Rowley's map (Rowley, C. D. 1972) of the distribution of Aboriginal population from the 1961 Census shown here as map 1). But what is convenient and visually appealing is not necessarily analytically sound. There are three grounds for questioning whether this is so in the present instance. First, the idea of a shifting boundary implies change and a degree of indeterminacy. Second, there is likely to be much variation within each (such as major mining and administrative centres in the heartland of "remote" Australia), rendering problematic the idea of unbroken, socially and culturally uniform zones. Third, the idea of frontier of destruction, as pertinent as it might have been historically in some aspects, underestimates the challenges faced by Indigenous people on the "remote" side of the frontier and fails to recognise the social and cultural resilience and resurgence on the "settled" side. This criticism applies less to current academic discussion than to Rowley's original formulation, but the connotation of "de-Aboriginalisation" and socio-cultural destruction associated with the moving frontier continues to lurk in the background. For each of these reasons, the "settled" / "remote" distinction needs to be heavily qualified, if still to be used.

Arguments could certainly be made about the “settled” / “remote” status of Broome and Carnarvon. While neither centre would usually be regarded as fully urban, we would argue that they are certainly not remote in terms of past history, current population patterns, interaction with mainstream economic and other institutions, or contemporary Indigenous culture and society. It is also important to note in this context that Indigenous town and city dwellers usually have kin based ties with a range of places outside their local residence either in the urban hinterland or in the hinterland of country towns, and that such links form an essential dimension of their distinctive ways of living. The brief for the present research does not extend to the residential situation of those now living in the hinterland areas, but the significance of this factor is likely to be seen in the housing careers of those now living in the three chosen research sites.

## **1.2 Key Research Questions**

- Why did Indigenous households move house over the past 10 years and what decisions and choices were made?
- How did the housing moves made by Indigenous households compare with their housing aspirations in terms of location, type of dwelling and tenure, including any aspirations for home ownership?
- How were housing moves made by Indigenous households associated with other factors, including life stage, employment, health, and family and community responsibilities?
- How did access or the lack of access to forms of housing assistance, such as public housing and CRA, affect housing moves and decisions by Indigenous households?
- How were housing moves by Indigenous households facilitated by access to formal and informal supports?
- How does the experience of previous housing moves affect the future housing intentions and aspirations of Indigenous households and what assistance is required to achieve these?

In common with the anthropological literature, there would appear to be no quantitative studies of Indigenous housing careers in Australian towns and cities. There are however, a number of features of the Indigenous housing situation generally which have been extensively researched. There are a number of difficulties associated with the interpretation of the various statistical representations of Indigenous housing, primarily that of their comparability. Definitions of the data categories may remain the same but the analyses which may be derived from them are not necessarily capable of being shared from study to study even when the source of the research is the same.<sup>1</sup> Despite this it is necessary to take notice of the statistically based analyses, primarily as a means of providing a base line view of the key features of Indigenous housing generally.

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<sup>1</sup> Fay Gale's Adelaide studies (Gale 1972; Gale and Binnion 1975; Gale and Wundersitz 1982) are a major exception to this and are discussed in detail further on.

## 2 QUANTITATIVE STUDIES

Much attention has been given since the early 1990s to collecting and analysing statistical information on Indigenous Australian housing and housing needs, joined in recent times by studies of housing markets and service provision (about which more is said below). Major studies have been commissioned and undertaken by a range of agencies, pre-eminent among them the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI), and to a lesser degree the federal Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS). The body of statistical data now available is impressive, though daunting in volume and complexity. Of particular value in the present context are the 2002 ABS *Housing and Infrastructure in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities, 2001* (Trewin, D. 2002); the 2004 ABS *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, 2002*; the 2003 ABS and AIHW *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, 2003*, and its 2005 counterpart (Trewin, D. & Madden, R. 2003, 2005); the 2005 AIHW *Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement National Data Reports, 2003-04* (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, N. A. 2003a, b, c, 2005a); and the 2005 AIHW *Indigenous Housing Indicators, 2003-04* (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, N. A. 2005b). All provide background and context for the present study.

Two features of the still rapidly growing body of statistical information on Indigenous housing are particularly worth mentioning here. The first is that the past decade has seen a vast widening of the topics and issues examined. Not least in this respect is greatly expanded attention to housing policy, strategy, and implementation, much of it focused on the policy framework resulting from the 2001 Housing Ministers' Conference (*Building a Better Future: Indigenous Housing to 2010*). The second is that the interconnections between the major policy domains (especially health, education, employment, and housing) are increasingly recognised. When this point is acknowledged, the statistical and other data considered relevant to any given housing issue or problem expands, almost exponentially, not always to the desired effect of good simple analysis feeding good, robust policy and practice. In these circumstances, there is more than ever a need for a holistic perspective on how the many measured factors and influences work together in shaping current housing realities, and in setting a platform for change. There is still much work to be done in this regard, though it would be foolish to imagine that more integrated thinking about Indigenous housing matters can come from quantitative research and statistics alone. That insight provides a rationale for the present study.

### 2.1 The Housing Policy Triangle

A recent (June 2005) AIHW publication, *Indigenous Housing Indicators 2003-04*, is helpful in considering what constitutes sufficient statistical background and context for the current study. This report, part of the AIHW's Indigenous Housing Series, addresses substantive and methodological issues, along with questions of definition and data standards. In both its substantive and methodological aspects, the report addresses the requirements of the National Reporting Framework (NRF) to which the 2001 ministerial conference gave rise (as encapsulated in the *Building a Better Future: Indigenous Housing to 2010* policy document). Central to the NRF, and thus central to *Indigenous Housing Indicators 2003-04*, are 38 indicators linked to seven sought outcomes.

Taking the NRF's 38 indicators as a guide, there is a surprising degree of segmentation between one outcome and another. As presented, no indicator serves

more than one outcome. The mixed bag of indicators employed for each belies that neat segmentation, as exemplified by the 13 indicators listed under outcome two (better housing services). For the purpose of simplifying comparisons and measuring implementation success, the seven NRF outcomes are here grouped into three, mutually supporting meta-outcomes. The three meta-outcomes, so identified, form the sides of the housing policy triangle, as it were. They are: more and better housing; enhanced participation and partnership; and better housing policy and delivery. When grouped in this way, the interconnections between the various outcomes and associated indicators become more evident.

The more and better housing meta-outcome largely speaks for itself. It embraces existing outcomes 1 and 3, and associated indicators (better housing and more housing, respectively). The enhanced participation and partnership meta-outcome embraces existing outcomes and indicators directed toward maximising Indigenous involvement in all dimensions of the Indigenous housing strategy, from bureaucratic and corporate decision-making through to day-to-day involvement in housing construction and maintenance. It includes existing outcome 4 (improved partnerships) and outcome 7, coordination of services. The title of the latter is ambiguous, focusing not on enhancing the coordination of multiple housing service providers in and across the various jurisdictions, as its title might suggest, but on more effectively integrating housing and other health and wellbeing services, a more than worthy objective in its own right but just one dimension of “coordination”. The latter dimension is covered in the third meta-outcome, better housing policy and delivery. This meta-outcome embraces existing outcomes 2, 5 and 6, together with their respective indicators (respectively, better housing services, greater effectiveness and efficiency, and improved performance linked to accountability).

The three meta-outcomes offer a simplified framework for considering the quantitative data pertinent to the present study’s target populations. Selected aspects of the existing quantitative data are reviewed in the following sections.

## **2.2 More and better housing**

There are two NRF outcomes and 16 indicators for the more and better housing meta-outcome. The Executive Summary in Indigenous housing indicators 2003-04 suggests that 6 more and better housing indicators are especially important in comprehending the present Indigenous housing situation, and in addressing present and emerging Indigenous housing needs. The six are:

*Indicator 1:* Total number of dwellings targeted

*Indicator 19:* Households by tenure type

*Indicator 20:* Households using mainstream housing services

*Indicator 21:* Homelessness

*Indicator 23:* Overcrowded households

*Indicator 24:* Rent as proportion of income

In relation to the 6 indicators listed above, the most readily accessible source is Chapter 4 (Housing Circumstances) of the August 2005 The Health and Welfare of Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, based on a 2002 ABS

survey. That document is the main source drawn upon below. Also valuable in this connection is Flatau et al's 2005 Australian Social Policy conference paper, *Indigenous Housing Need and Mainstream Public Housing Access and Sustainability Responses* (Flatau, P. et al. 2005).

It is perhaps self-evident that, in terms of the indicators discussed below, there are—or need to be—varying degrees of geographic inclusiveness in the available data, ranging from the national level down to the level of particular communities. From a statistical viewpoint, there is still work to be done in this respect, particularly at the regional and local levels, as usually acknowledged. There are also opportunities for researchers operating at local and regional levels to make better use of existing statistical data for the purpose of profiling and comparing units of varying levels of inclusiveness (geographically, for example, from local to national levels). While providing some State by State comparisons, the 2005 ABS/AIHW publication goes only so far in providing for detailed comparisons across and within potential levels of analysis.

Whilst quantitative data and analysis are not central to the present research, further work will be undertaken in this respect as the study progresses in order to provide a fuller context for the qualitative data on Indigenous housing choices and socio-cultural influences. The further work contemplated is evident in the following discussion.

### *2.2.1 Number of dwellings targeted*

Arguably, the number of dwellings targeted is the key indicator defining Indigenous housing circumstances and needs. Consistently, reports on Indigenous housing have underlined the shortage of accessible housing stock. Redressing this shortage is now embraced as a major target of the inter-governmental Building a Better Future policy framework.

Quantifying and comparing levels of unmet supply has proved difficult. The issue can be thought of in one respect as a simple equation linking demand and supply—the gap between dwellings needed and available. The picture becomes muddled when the analysis proceeds to questions of acceptable and unacceptable dwelling standards, location of demand, rates of household formation, and levels of overcrowding and homelessness. The available statistical data, requiring as it does consistent reporting from the various jurisdictions, is still inadequate in this respect, though improving, as repeatedly noted in ABS and AIHW publications. Much work is being directed toward filling the current statistical gaps, simplified and helped by use of the Canadian Occupancy Standards (see, for example, the 2001 ABS publication, *Measuring Wellbeing: Frameworks for Australian Social Statistics* (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001)).

The undersupply of acceptable quality and affordable housing for Indigenous households in all Australian jurisdictions is accepted as a statement of fact (see, for example, Flatau et al 2005: 78-79). Precise quantification of the undersupply awaits further work, from which more fine-boned analysis of housing need and supply at State, regional and local levels could be expected to follow. The current statistical deficiencies in this respect, together with the time available for this backgrounding aspect of the current research project, mean that it is not yet possible to adequately measure the extent of housing demand and supply for the metropolitan Perth, Broome and Carnarvon Indigenous communities.

### 2.2.2 Households by tenure type

On the measure of housing tenure, there are striking contrasts between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. There is little evidence of the gap narrowing, notwithstanding some movement in the desired direction on the part of Indigenous Australians (from homelessness and improvised dwellings to fully owned houses) and some movement in the other direction on the part of others. Flatau et al (2005: 77ff.) report on the incremental progress toward mainstream housing for Indigenous Australians made since the 2001 Building a Better Future inter-governmental agreement.

The majority of Indigenous Australians continue to reside in residential accommodation. In Western Australia, 70% of Indigenous households in 2002 were in rental accommodation, down marginally from 71% in 1994 (ABS 2004:40). The WA situation in this respect is little different from the Australia-wide pattern, the national figure in 2002 being 69.7%.

Further significant Indigenous/non-Indigenous contrasts exist in relation to type of accommodation. These are summarised in the following adaptation of ABS's 2001 census data.

**Table 1: Percentage of Western Australian Households by Tenure, 2001**  
(Adapted from ABS 2001)

	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
Fully Owned	7.4	38.1
Purchasing	19.0	34.1
Renting	65.6	23.0
Other	3.7	2.9
Not Stated	4.3	1.9
<i>Total</i>	100	100

Further information on the types of dwelling occupied is provided in the same document. Table 2 summarises the situation.

**Table 2: Percentage of Housing Type by Household, Western Australia, 2001**  
(Adapted from ABS 2001)

	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
Separate House	81.5	80.6
Semi-Detached, Row or Terrace House, Townhouse	8.8	11.2
Flat, Unit, Appartment	5.5	6.6
Other Dwelling	3.6	1.2
Not Stated	0.7	0.6
<i>Total</i>	100	100

On the face of it, there is quite a remarkable concordance between the types of housing occupied by Indigenous and Non-Indigenous West Australians, remembering of course the difficulties in fully enumerating the Indigenous population, especially the mobile and homeless. When examined more closely, the “other dwelling” category reveals a contrast possibly suggestive of important difference. The ABS divides this category into three (caravan, cabin, houseboat; improvised home, tent, sleepers out; house or flat attached to shop, office etc). Half (51.3%) of Indigenous households in the “other dwelling” category are in the first (caravans etc), compared with three-quarters (74.9%) of non-Indigenous households; nearly a half (44.1%) of Indigenous households in the second (Improvised home, tent, sleepers out), compared with 9.8% for non-Indigenous households; and a small proportion (4.6%) of Indigenous households in the third (House or flat attached to shop, office etc), compared with 15.4% for their non-Indigenous counterparts. This pattern sits squarely within the picture of Indigenous housing marginality.

Re-formatting the information in Tables 1 and 2 allows the tenure type to be correlated with housing type.

**Table 3: Percentage of Western Australian Indigenous Households by Housing Type and Tenure, 2001** (Adapted from ABS 2001)

Figures in brackets refer to non-Indigenous households.

	Owned	Purchasing	Renting	Other	Not Stated	Total
Separate House	8.3 (40.9)	22.2 (38.5)	63.1 (16.6)	3.7 (2.3)	2.7 (1.6)	100
Sem-Detached, Row or Terrace House, Townhouse	2.8 (20.0)	5.7 (25.9)	86.7 (46.3)	1.6 (4.3)	3.2 (2.2)	100
Flat, Unit, Apartment	1.8 (18.5)	4.9 (10.8)	89.1 (61.7)	1.5 (6.0)	2.7 (3.0)	100
Other Dwelling	9.1 (5.1)	2.1 (8.1)	33.8 (24.1)	11.2 (8.5)	43.9 (8.0)	100
Not Stated	8.1 (33.1)	10.1 (28.8)	65.7 (26.9)	4.0 (4.3)	12.1 (7.7)	100
<i>Total Indigenous</i>	7.4	19.0	65.6	3.7	3.7	100
<i>Total Non-Indigenous</i>	(38.1)	(34.1)	(23.0)	(2.9)	(1.9)	100

The main thing demonstrated by Table 3 not otherwise evident in Tables 1 and 2 is that, across all housing types other than the varied “other dwelling” category about which comment has already been made, Indigenous Australians far less frequently own or are purchasing their residences than their non-Indigenous counterparts. In the case of separate houses, 30.5% of Indigenous households either own or are buying their residence, compared with 79.4% of non-Indigenous households. In the case of semi-detached, row or terrace houses and townhouses, the respective figures are 8.5% and 45.9% respectively; in the case of flats, units and apartments, they are 6.7% and 29.3% respectively. It is hard to know what inferences to draw from these figures. Two factors suggest themselves. One is that, when it comes to purchasing, Indigenous Australians are more inclined than their non-Indigenous counterparts, perhaps influenced by family size and kinship obligations. Another factor might simply be that opportunities and supports to buy stand alone houses are greater than for other housing types, though an argument could be made that the other forms of housing are generally cheaper and thus more affordable. A closer look at this issue could be productive, with particular regard being given to the housing stocks and markets in differing regional and local settings. In the context of the present study, that would mean in the first instance examining more closely the respective ownership and occupancy patterns in the Perth, Carnarvon and Broome communities being investigated. Some information and analysis broadly applicable to the study populations is contained in the Northern Territory Government’s National Issues in Indigenous Housing 2004/05 and Beyond (September 2005). Information on a jurisdiction by jurisdiction basis is presented in the 2005 ABS and AIHW report, The Health and Welfare of Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

### 2.2.3 Use of mainstream housing services

Important studies have been made of use of various housing services. Included among them are the previously cited Flatau et al’s 2005 study, the 2002 NATSIS Survey, the 2005 ABS and AIHW report, the 2002 ABS Housing and Infrastructure in



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities, and in the Executive Summary of the 2005 AIHW Indigenous Housing Indicators 2003-04.

Further statistical work needs to be undertaken on this important aspect of Indigenous housing in relation to the chosen study populations for the present study populations.

#### **2.2.4 Homelessness**

Important studies of Indigenous homelessness have been undertaken by, among others, Memmott et al (July 2003) and Chambers and Mackenzie (2001), with more work by the latter planned (as reported in the ABS's May 2006 bulletin, 2006 Census: Homeless People). Further statistical work needs to be undertaken on this important aspect of Indigenous housing in relation to the chosen study populations for the present study populations.

#### **2.2.5 Overcrowding**

Further statistical work needs to be undertaken on this important aspect of Indigenous housing in relation to the chosen study populations for the present study populations. A significant constraint in this respect is the current dearth or inaccessibility of locally specific information.

#### **2.2.6 Rental commitment**

More statistical work using existing data needs to be undertaken in relation to this important contextualising factor, focusing on the chosen study populations for the present study populations.

### **2.3 Enhanced participation and partnership**

The second side of what has previously been described as the Indigenous housing triangle is enhanced participation and partnership. Further backgrounding work using existing data is contemplated for the present project. No study specific to Western Australia as a whole or at the local level currently exists.

### **2.4 Better housing policy and delivery**

The third side of the Indigenous housing triangle is enhanced participation and partnership. Some backgrounding work for the present study may be possible in this area, but on the whole work in this area awaits a differently conceived research project.

### **2.5 Conclusion**

A considerable body of statistical information relevant to the present study now exists, and more is progressively becoming available. Little of this directly addresses the Indigenous housing careers, but much is relevant indirectly. Such information will help provide background and context for the present study. In the present section, the available data and analysis has been reviewed with particular reference to the chosen Perth, Broome and Carnarvon study populations. Reflecting the present study's intended policy and practice applications, the material has been reviewed here in terms of what has been characterised as the three sides of the Indigenous housing policy triangle, with particular reference to the first, the sought "more and better housing" outcomes of the Building a Better Future policy framework.

## 3 QUALITATIVE STUDIES

### 3.1 Assimilation and Acculturation

The anthropological study of Indigenous people in the towns and cities of Australia begins with the work of a group of students at Sydney University in the years immediately following World War II. This was the assimilationist era and between 1939 and the mid-1960s, the work of anthropologists in this field, and indeed social scientists in general, is characterised by this perspective. This research is limited by the same caveats ordinarily imposed on the policy of assimilation; a complete denial of the possibility of unique Indigenous culture among groups in settled Australia, the characterisation of their activities as either hindering or helping the process of assimilation, and an emphasis on the interventionist approach of training Indigenous people to adopt mainstream Australian culture (Bell 1956, 1959; Fink 1955, 1957; Reay 1945, 1946, 1949; Reay and Sitlington 1948; Sitlington 1948). This emphasis eased somewhat in the mid-1960s, when a number of researchers produced accounts of Indigenous town and city groups which spoke of “identity”, and the forging of what appeared to be new cultural traditions (Beckett 1958, 1965a, 1965b; Barwick 1963, 1964; Calley 1969).

While none of the early research dealt specifically with housing or housing careers, housing is a topic within this body of research because it was taken to be a highly visible indicator of degrees of assimilation. As well, the programmes undertaken pursuant to the assimilation policy constituted a major influence on all aspects of Indigenous housing and its effects continue to be felt. In this context, we can see a set of themes regarding the nature of Indigenous society which are consistently noted in the literature from the beginning of anthropological discourse on this subject. These are:

1. Most activities within these groups were regulated by kinship.
2. Women appeared to occupy dominant role relationships with regard to social life and economy.
3. The domestic group, as a social and economic unit was not contained within one household but was comprised of a number of kin-related households.
4. Moral, social and economic kin obligation exert a strong cohesive force enabling groups to maintain a high degree of solidarity both regionally and temporally.
5. Individuals and groups maintain a constant and frequent rate of travel among the towns inhabited by their kinfolk.

Often, the commentary was highly negative in tone. Indigenous society was “resistant to assimilation” (Fink 1957:104). Indigenous social life in the towns and cities was characterised as being in a “pathological condition of disequilibrium” (Reay 1949: 112). Indigenous people seemed to “drift” (Reay 1949:118), rather than maintaining a fixed residence. In the context of research undertaken in 1965, Rowley notes one of the difficulties of conducting household surveys in Indigenous communities as being “mobility of the population” (Rowley 1973:305). Despite this, an awareness of the early literature is important because it reveals the consistency of social organisation in Indigenous society in the towns and cities over several

decades and generations. While Indigenous society has changed over the years, the broad underpinnings of Indigenous social organisation appear not to have altered. The differences lie primarily in the way government and researchers have characterised, or labelled, various features of Indigenous society.

### **3.2 Assimilationism and Family Form**

The assimilation policy was interpreted individually by each State and only in NSW did the interpretation match that of the Australian Government. Significantly, only the Federal Government conceived of the assimilation policy as applying to all Indigenous people, both remote and settled. The States considered that the policy should be exercised only in regard to the Indigenous people in the settled regions. This led to certain important differences in the influence of the policy on Indigenous social organisation in the Northern Territory in particular. Collmann (1979) produced a fascinating account of the situation in the Northern Territory during the early 1970s in which people were effectively given a choice between being provided housing and maintaining their social structure.

The Northern Territory Welfare Branch devised a regime for allocating housing which had the effect of separating men from their families. The Welfare Branch required that children attend school on a regular basis and that they have one single enrolment in a particular school. It also demanded that men have stable employment. Houses would be allocated to families on this basis.

However, the only form of stable employment available to men was station work which took them away from town for long periods of time. Aboriginal husbands and wives rejected the idea that they should live apart from each other for most of the year, but there were only two choices to make in this regard. The entire family could accompany the father to the station where he worked and they could remain together. This meant that, for much of the year, the children failed to attend school, and the family failed to pay rent on the house allocated to them. The Welfare Branch would therefore cancel their lease on the house and remove the children in order to send them to school in either Alice Springs or Darwin.

Alternatively, the woman could leave her children in the care of kinfolk and go with her husband to the station. Here too, the Welfare Branch would remove the children because they had been deserted by both their parents. If they desired housing, the Welfare Branch effectively left men and women no opportunity to maintain themselves as families. They were in a position of having to choose. Men, if they wanted to continue as husbands and fathers had to find work in town, but this was practically non-existent for Aboriginal men. If they failed to obtain work, they were declared indigent and the consequences were that the children could be removed from the parents and the family removed from their home.

Apparently, the Welfare Branch actively encouraged women to leave both their indigent husbands and their husbands who were employed on the stations, by promising them housing only if they would leave their husbands and place themselves on supporting mother's benefits. By this means, the Welfare Branch sought to produce stable childrearing home lives for Aboriginal people of the Territory.

Important changes resulted from this interventionist style of welfare. First, some Aboriginal people moved from the towns to the "fringe camps" where they could live beyond the control of the Welfare Branch, but were in danger of having their children

removed because of poor standards of hygiene. Second, those who stayed in town adopted both what Collmann terms a “matricentric” domestic group and a matricentric ideology of family form. They reckoned their ancestry matrilocally, and mothers passed their own surnames on to their children. Third, there were couples who tried to take their children out to the stations with them. On being threatened with legal action some of them decided to give up their children voluntarily.

One of the important points that Collmann makes in his study is that of “recognising that people use particular family ideologies to legitimate attempts to control their domestic groups” (Collmann 1979:391). By doing so, we are able to recognise the centrality of wider family politics in the setting of the domestic group and to explain the apparent fluidity of family form.

The Northern Territory situation appears to have been unique in regard to the rigid singularity of the method and ideology of the NT Welfare Branch; however, it is not the only place where matrilocality developed. Matrilocality family forms and ideologies also developed among the Nyungar people of the southwest of Western Australia (Birdsall 1990). This was largely in response to the *Aborigines Act 1905* (WA) and the *Native Administration Act 1936* (WA). Under both regimes, children of Indigenous parents were likely to be removed for a wide variety of reasons, largely at the discretion of the local police, welfare agent, school and so on. The historic housing careers of most Nyungar families include varying periods of living in the bush in order to escape the threat of losing children in this way. Employment for Indigenous people was limited to hard labouring work for men, women and children, and domestic work for women and children. The availability of work depended on three factors:

1. The prevailing economic situation, for example the years of the Depression;
2. The State Government’s policies on land and agriculture, such as the granting of farming blocks to returned service men;
3. The controls imposed by the 1905 and 1936 Acts on how Indigenous people could be employed, such as the requirement to register Indigenous employees with the Department, to pay a fee to the Department for each Indigenous employee, and the requirement that the Department issue permits for movement of Indigenous people from place to place.

Uncertainty of employment; employment which required a man to live apart from his family; and the threat of one’s children being made State wards owing to lack of facilities for their care have all been part of the ongoing experience of the Nyungar people over the years. The impact of these factors included the enhancement of the power of women, and an increasingly common pattern of matrilineal filiation in the reckoning of kin group membership. For these reasons, women commonly became householders. This theme is integral to much of the research on Indigenous people of the towns and cities as will be noted in the discussion that follows.

### **3.3 Mobility**

This literature has been recently surveyed by Memmot et. al. (2004). The present research specifically concerns Indigenous people in towns and cities, while Memmot et. al.’s literature review was aimed at supporting research in remote and rural Australia. However, their review demonstrates the centrality of the concept of mobility in any study of Indigenous housing careers.

One of the useful points made by Memmott et. al. is the relevance of native title claim evidence to the understanding of Indigenous mobility. It is true, as the authors point out, that the mobility region of a group may extend beyond its native title claim (Memmott et. al. 2004:6) however, the teasing out of landed identity from the evidence of group movement over long periods of time provides strong evidence of the importance of kinship as a major influence on patterns of mobility.

In the context of native title claim work, it can appear, superficially that there are no traditional owners among the claimant group (Birdsall-Jones 2001, 2004). That is, that no one among the claimant group can trace their links with the claim area to the time of white settlement. Examination of the historical record, oral histories and contemporary kin links among the group reveal the movement of groups according to traditional understandings of the ways in which kin links construct regional association.

Geographical features such as rivers are particularly important in linking apparently distant groups through intermarriage regularly and over long periods of time. The regions in which two kin groups conduct their housing careers may hold some towns in common. However, groups will differentiate themselves according to the location each regards as “home”. For one group, the town may be within the region they call home because of ancient attachments which they cannot well define except by saying “this place has always been our home”; whereas for the second group, their ties with the town are rooted in their parents’ and grandparents’ pursuit of employment in the early to mid-20th century. The regions currently defined by the movements and therefore the housing careers of these two groups will vary accordingly.<sup>2</sup>

### 3.4 Regionalism

Regionalism is therefore a strong force in the mobility patterns of Indigenous people of the towns and cities. While mobility itself had been long commented upon in studies of these people, Beckett’s 1957 (republished and updated in 1988) account was the first to actually describe mobility as a phenomenon which was defined by patterns of regionalism, which he calls a person’s ‘beat’. His 1964 follow-up research confirmed this. The constructing features of this regionalism were kinship, a preference for face-to-face relations, and the need to visit as a hedge against individual and community isolation.

...personal responsibility is accepted only for those who are ‘known’. One is known wherever one has lived and wherever one has kin; where one has kin one can also visit and meet the other local people face-to-face. There are no other means whereby one can become known, even by repute. If we are to speak of an Aboriginal belonging to a community wider than the local residential group, it is his or her beat – the localities where there are kin who will provide a *pied-a-terre*. In this sense, each individual [has] a personal community, but inasmuch as people are closely inter-related and tend to marry into the same local groups, communities tend to coincide (Beckett 1988:133-134).

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<sup>2</sup> Native title claim evidence produced by anthropologists contracted to Aboriginal land councils remains the property of the land council and access to such research is restricted until such time as the claim is settled. For this reason, I speak here in generalities rather than specifics. Native title research as a body represents a major data resource and the venue for important developments in analysis. It is unfortunate that this entire body of research must remain unavailable for the foreseeable future.

As an illustration of the centrality of kinfolk in constructing mobility, Beckett notes that:

Proximity is only a minor factor. When first working in Murrin Bridge I was impressed by the fact that most of the people know far more about Wilcannia (200 miles away) and visited it more frequently, than they did Euabalong (only ten miles away) or Condobolin (only thirty) (Beckett 1988:131).

Beckett notes further on that the contrasting rates of visiting near towns versus those farther away correlated with the length of time the Murrin Bridge people had actually been in Murrin Bridge. The reason they visited the towns farther away on the Darling River was because those were the towns they had originally come from and although they had kin links in the nearer towns, they had far more links, and of longer standing, in the Darling River region (Beckett 1988:133).

This was also the case in the researcher's PhD research (Birdsall 1990). Aboriginal people in this study group regularly went from Perth, where they lived, to Carnarvon and Broome where they had their most important family links. They also had links in towns far closer to Perth, in the wheatbelt region, but they went there only rarely. Here, the story begins with a woman from Broome who was taken south to Moore River Native Settlement as a young woman of 18. She married a man from the northern wheatbelt region, raised a large family there and to all intents and purposes became a woman of her husband's extended kin group. On his death, however, she began to move north. She took her dependent children with her. Her older children had already met and married people from the wheatbelt and north as far as Geraldton, and they remained behind. It took her a good few years to get back to Broome, and as her dependent children grew up along the way, they met and married people from the localities in which they lived at that time. They too remained behind, as their mother continued her northerly progress. As a result of this, the family became established in the widely separated towns of Perth, Carnarvon and Broome.

### **3.5 Sociospatial Patterns**

The pattern of visiting among kinfolk distributed through a number of towns is a major factor in maintaining kin links. Gale (1972) discovered this to be the case in her groundbreaking study of Indigenous people in Adelaide. Her study of 1,917 Indigenous people of Adelaide showed a number of patterns in this regard:

1. The most mobile people were those who lived with relatives;
2. More than 10% of the adults living with relatives or in gaol had had nine or more addresses in Adelaide and many of these were more or less constantly on the move between kinfolk;
3. Home ownership more or less brought a halt to residential mobility; and
4. The highest degree of mobility was among those in rental accommodation (Gale 1972:124-125).

Although she notes the kind of accommodation people were living in at the time of the study, Gale does not correlate the kind of accommodation with either the frequency of moves or the progression of moves. As at 30 June 1966, 37.1% lived

in rental accommodation, and 18.8% lived with relatives, usually in rented houses. The remainder were variously fostered, boarding, adopted, hospitalised or in gaol.

A relationship was found between private rental accommodation and the relative proclivity of tenants to extend hospitality to kinfolk. Those who sought to accommodate larger numbers of their kinfolk tended to take up private rental homes. The reason for this was partly because the South Australian Housing Trust discouraged the practice, but also Trust houses were too small to accommodate larger families. Private rental houses that were larger and older than the Trust houses were most likely to be found in the inner suburbs of Adelaide. The inner suburbs therefore were where many “multiple families” lived (Gale 1972:99).

Memmott and Moran (2001) refer to sociospatial patterns in a national overview of indigenous settlement systems. Although their emphasis tends to be on remote area settlements, they do comment on the situation in settled regions. Here, they make the point that although some structures were broken down or disrupted in the course of the assimilation era, there are distinctive expressions of indigenous structures to be found in the urban rental sector. They note that the tendency of people in remote area settlements to cluster residentially into groups along the lines of kinship is evident in the urban setting, albeit at a large scale (Memmott and Moran 2001 Characteristics of Indigenous settlements and residential spaces, part ii, no page numbers). Certainly Gale’s multifamily households are reflective of this phenomenon. It is also evident in the Perth metropolitan region and its considerable hinterland (Birdsall 1988, 1990).

Partly owing to Western Australia’s Indigenous housing policy prevalent through the 1970s and 1980s, referred to as the “salt and pepper” policy, the State Housing Commission deliberately avoided placing Indigenous families in ready neighbourhood proximity with each other, often counter to specific requests from the families concerned. This was supposed to be an aid to the assimilation of Indigenous families into predominantly white neighbourhoods. Despite this, Nyungar families generally had little to do with their neighbours, preferring to travel several suburbs away to visit kinfolk. This visiting was carried out on a daily basis, and entire households might travel by public transport to spend the day with kinfolk in more or less distant suburbs. The only dealings they had with the wider society was in the context of service occupations such as shops, health services and so on. Fieldwork carried out since that time suggests that this pattern remains unchanged (Birdsall-Jones 2001).

Gale repeated (though did not replicate) her research in 1973 for the Henderson Commission of Inquiry into Poverty.<sup>3</sup> Generally speaking, she was able to confirm her previous findings. However, there were some changes. One of the interesting differences between the 1973 research and her 1966 research is that in 1966, Gale had difficulty in identifying the household head, or as she termed it at the time, “the actual tenant”:

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<sup>3</sup> A Commission of Inquiry into Poverty was established in August 1972 by the Prime Minister, Mr McMahon. Professor Henderson was appointed as Chairman of the inquiry (the inquiry was subsequently referred to as the Henderson Inquiry). After the 1972 election the new Prime Minister, Mr Whitlam, expanded the Commission’s size and scope with specific responsibility to focus on the extent of poverty and the groups most at risk of experiencing poverty; the income needs of people in poverty; and issues related to housing and welfare services. These topics were addressed in the Commission’s first main report, *Poverty in Australia*, released in August 1975.

...the identity of the actual tenant is sometimes obscure, as several members of the household may contribute to the rent. Thus the dividing line between these two groups, those who are described as living in a 'rented home' and those who live 'with relatives', cannot be rigidly delimited (Gale 1972:119).

In her 1973 research, no such reservations are present and Gale speaks with confidence about the household head and other members of the household who may be contributing to household expenses including rent. The primary difference appears to be a change of research method. In 1966, Gale used fixed questionnaire forms which were filled out in the course of interviews and with the aid of data on file with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (Gale 1972: 17). In 1973, she used no formal questionnaire and recorded minimal data in the course of her interviews, compiling data forms following each interview. Because of this, interview subjects were more likely to speak plainly about the composition and economics of the household. For example, many women who were listed as deserted wives or single mothers had a partner in residence who was contributing to household expenses. Gale found that "the deletion of a formal questionnaire and the consistent use of one interviewer made this [admission of an 'illegal' partner] possible" (Gale 1975:8). Thus, while the 1966 study could show greater statistical significance, the 1973 study presented a more accurate picture of the situation. By this means, she could show a total of 448 individuals distributed among 70 households, with 142 incomes contributing in some way to the upkeep of those households (Gale 1975:14).

### **3.6 Men and Isolation**

With regard to housing careers, Gale noted the "displacement of the Aboriginal male":

He is now often found in gaol, hostel, alcoholic centre or place for homeless men. We consider that poverty and the present welfare methods of alleviating it are partly to blame for the deterioration of the adult Aboriginal male's social status and his virtual eviction from the family...Mothers without husbands are given pensions and various allowances. No matter how poor the family might be, these cannot be paid to a woman who has a husband living with her. Therefore a man who cannot earn an adequate wage is encouraged to leave his family for their own good. Many of the alcoholics and men in gaol, hostels and night shelters say they are there because they are not wanted in their homes (Gale 1975:50).

This points to a wide gender disparity in housing careers, with men more likely to be homeless than women. The finding is repeated in Gale's 1980-81 study in which she states that:

...the survey of 112 families in Port Adelaide showed that exactly one-half did not have an adult male head in residence, while in the newer suburbs surveyed in the secondary study 49.2 per cent lacked a male head. Females thus predominate to quite overwhelming proportions at both the family and household level of analysis. Males show up in a total population count, such as that done in 1966 and in the 1976 census, but are missed out in household studies like those made in 1973, 1980 and 1981 because these did not survey gaols, hospitals, hostels etc. (Gale 1982:71-72)

Certainly this is reminiscent of Collmann's (1979) Northern Territory study and also correlates with my own research experience. While the projected research will not take in homelessness, this finding indicates that in these household structures in



would expect to find that the head of household is more often a woman than either a man or a couple and that adult men will be less well represented in the household membership than might be expected. Accordingly, the projected research will seek to take account of this in establishing patterns of household structure.

The prominence of women in household structures was also found by Kitaoji (1979) in the McLeay Valley and by Teasdale (1971) in the New England Tablelands. In both situations, the data attest to the child's filiation with the matri-kin to the disadvantage of the patri-kin, a high incidence of female-headed households, and a general matrilineal emphasis in the recruitment of household members.

It would seem that town and city dwelling Indigenous society generally has been affected by welfare and housing policies which denigrate the state and status of men in families. It was a striking aspect of the field experience in the 1980s that men were to all intents and purposes absent from positions of authority in the household as well as in overall kin group structure. It seemed then that men simply had no honourable place in the Aboriginal world of the towns and cities. To some extent this resulted from the tendency for most men to drink to excess, were violent toward their women, and were unemployed. However, this picture was also due to the gender separation observable in Indigenous society in both settled and remote Australia. Men and women in Indigenous Australia have separate spheres of activity, and research from that era suggested that women preferred men to remain outside the women's sphere of influence which was household and children (Birdsall 1990:41-47; 1988:151-153; Birdsall-Jones Forthcoming). Anyone wishing to research housing, kin, household, children or anything related to these concerns must, perforce, talk to the women rather than the men. This is a bias of research inherent in the logic of Indigenous society.

It is not however, a fair picture of the position of men in Indigenous society, which becomes clear in the context of native title research. The experience of field research in native title brings one into contact with the men and introduces their specific field of expertise. The separation between men/land and women/family is radical. The question raised is whether this situation as it now stands is reflective of the deep structure of Indigenous society or if such polarisation of gender worlds has been achieved through the application of welfare and housing policies that have served to limit the role of Indigenous men in the towns and cities in the context of household and family. Analysis of this possible relationship is not within the scope of the proposed research; however it is a question that needs to be borne in mind in the study of housing careers.

### **3.7 Household**

The difficulty of defining the Indigenous household as a unit of study or analysis is well noted in the literature. The deficiencies in the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) census categories generally are discussed by Memmott et. al. (2004:4-5). They note in particular that:

The ABS methodology assumes that households occupy one place of residence whereas there is strong evidence in remote Aboriginal communities of linked households or clustered households that are characterised by an extended family group dispersed across a number of places of residence. There is also the question of the distinction between 'visitor' and 'usual resident' in the Aboriginal context. Transient members of households or family groups may not necessarily be considered as visitors by Aboriginal people yet the ABS methodology does.

The problems with the ABS census categorisation of 'household' is noted by a number of researchers (Morphy 2006; Henry and Smith 2002; Altman;2000; Sanders 2005; Neutze, Sanders and Jones 2000; Hunter 1999). This literature tends to focus on remote area groups, however, the point is also relevant to groups in the towns and cities.

Aboriginal households in Perth, Carnarvon and Broome tend to function as an economically and kin-linked unit across a set of residences (Birdsall 1988, 1990, Birdsall-Jones 2001). The issue of the definition of 'visitors' as opposed to 'usual resident' occurs in these places as well. Transient members of the kin group are regarded as having a place to call home in the various towns where their family is resident. Despite this, Gale's point about the problems of men in Adelaide Aboriginal society is important. The majority of transient kinfolk are men and adolescent boys who tend to move around the network of kin related households as groups and present a source of stress on the households of their kin.

Daly and Smith, in an analysis of the 1996 census data, point out that the nuclear family is not the most common residential form in Aboriginal society. While the ABS and similar data schema may seek to take account of this, it is still the case that such categories are unlikely to take account of households characterised by a "small, multi-family, multi-generational core of kin with a highly mobile fringe of transient members" (Daly and Smith 1999:2). Similarly there is difficulty in taking any account of the common childrearing practice in Aboriginal society, according to which the responsibility and care of children is distributed among a range of kinfolk.

In commenting on the ABS's Indigenous Enumeration Strategy, Morphy (2004) advises designers of the census to:

...step back from the questions on household structure, and decide precisely *what* information they wish to elicit. Is it information primarily about family structure, or about the size, age distribution, gender composition, and dependency structures of households? If it is decided that the latter data are the most important, one possibility which would sit more comfortably with the Indigenous facts, would be to add a new type of household to the ABS list – the *extended family household*. (Morphy 2004:iii)

Morphy concludes by calling attention to the fact that "there are limits to what can be quantified" (Morphy 2004:17). This is a salient point in the context of the projected research because it indicates the justification for not adopting the set categories of ABS data and of other social indicators. Rather, it is important to recognise that the contrasts in research methodology require contrasts in the definition of data categories.

In contrast to this view of the ABS categories, Hunter (1999) points out that no matter what measure is employed, the data consistently show that Indigenous people are two to three times more likely to live in poverty than the mainstream population; or as he puts it, "Indigenous poverty is sensitive to changes in measurement methodology" (Hunter 1999:vi). He does however acknowledge deficiencies in standard measurements to the extent that "future research into Indigenous poverty must continue to ensure that differences in household sizes are properly accounted for" (ibid).

Altman likewise argues that conceptual and methodological shortcomings notwithstanding, standard social indicators are still the most useful measures of the broad picture of Indigenous disadvantage. Rightly, he points out that:

...to suggest that economic status, development and growth are merely culture-relative terms provides little solace to those Indigenous groups who are actively seeking to improve their materially marginal lifestyles. Similarly, merely to say that Indigenous people are only relatively poor in the context of the high incomes received by affluent Australians ignores the starkness of Indigenous poverty, a poverty more marked precisely because there is limited adjustment made on the basis of relative income in Australia (Altman 2000: 4).

The spirit of this position may be taken into account by asking in this research context about the nature of household density in Indigenous households in the towns and cities. The issue of overcrowding has been a consistent one since research in this field began in 1939. How should we understand household density? In Altman's terms, we should ask whether the higher household density in Indigenous households should be always be seen as a matter of cultural relativity or if indeed it should sometimes be understood as a reflection of the impoverished, housing-deprived status of Indigenous society generally? There is some American research which may shed some light on this question. Two American studies from the mid 1990s refer to a deliberate strategy followed by low income African Americans which they termed 'doubling-up' (Bolger 1996; Dehavenon 1996). A double-up is "a living arrangement in which two or more families share the same space, for which the host family pays the rent to the landlord and the guest family does not" (Dehavenon 1996:51). The objective of the practice is to absorb kinfolk who are on the verge of becoming homeless.

Stack's (1970) study of residence and family organisation among African Americans dealt with a group of effective kin; kinfolk who establish and maintain effective ongoing relations according to the expectations they hold of their roles in relationship to one another. She terms this group of kinfolk as a 'personal kindred'. Stack's kindred was labile, meaning that its membership was, within limits, changeable, and this labile quality was the focus of Stack's study. She defined the personal kindred as being made up of "the fully activated, ego-centred network of responsible kin and others identified as kin" (Stack 1970:30).

There are aspects of this body of research that resonate with the Australian Indigenous situation. Among these is the existence of a system aimed at dealing with the effects of low income and lack of housing which appears to have arisen out of an existing system of social organization focused on communities of kinfolk. This will be taken account of in the analysis of data with a view to examining the policy implications for the Australian context in comparison with the American context.

## **4 AN ABORIGINAL KINSHIP SYSTEM IN SOUTHWEST WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

The Nyungar people are the original inhabitants of the south-west of Western Australia, however, they are not the only Indigenous group which will be included in the proposed research. They are the only town and city group within the research area whose systems of kinship and social organisation have been extensively studied (Birdsall 1988, 1990; Birdsall-Jones 2001). Many features of the Nyungar kinship system are to be found among other groups in towns and cities throughout Australia. In the course of the research, it will always be important to note the cultural group with which individual participants claim membership. Furthermore, where the research is able to discover them, differences in kinship structures and associated systems of social organisation will be taken account of.

It is clear that there are differences among Indigenous cultural groups in other Australian town and cities and work in Victoria undertaken in connection with native title research confirms this (Birdsall-Jones 2004). The brief examination of Nyungar kinship and social organisation that follows is therefore relevant for the following reasons:

1. The Nyungar people are the dominant Indigenous group in Perth;
2. They are also represented in the Indigenous communities of Carnarvon and Broome; and
3. Their kinship and system of social organisation will enable informed comparison with those of other Indigenous groups in Carnarvon and Broome.

### **4.1 Who is a Nyungar Person?**

The principal criterion of recognition as a Nyungar person is a recognised connection with one of the large “families” accepted by the Nyungar community in general as being Nyungar. Connection is reckoned by cognatic descent. In a cognatic descent system, people trace their descent bilaterally, that is, from a known ancestor or ancestress (termed an ‘apical’ ancestor) through links gained either through the mother or the father.

Nyungar people will commonly refer to the people sharing descent in this way as being “all one family.” This phrase is commonly employed by individuals in describing the attendance of kinfolk at the funeral of one of their own kin. As in: “All these people, here at this funeral today, we’re all one family.” The sense in which this collectivity of kinfolk may in fact be considered a family requires considerable qualification. For example, there is typically only one occasion at which all these people are expected to attend and that is the funeral of one of their kinfolk. Although it is possible for people to be excused from attending, simple non-attendance carries sanctions, and there is a spiritual basis for requiring attendance. The funeral is the only such occasion in Nyungar culture.

Further, the people that Nyungars refer to as being “all one family” hold no property in common, are not co-resident and membership in the family, potentially, has no clear boundaries. Although there are certain persons who are held in universal respect by all their kinfolk, there could not be said to be any person or set of persons

who hold authority over the entire collectivity of kinfolk. The lack of clear boundaries defining membership is something that has long been remarked on with regard to cognatic systems in general (Fox 1967; Keesing 1975; Astuti 2000; Edwards and Strathern 2000). In and of itself, that is, without modifying agencies such as ideology, privileged relationships, and intergenerational lines of authority, the reckoning of relationships through cognatic descent is unbounded. Potentially, this would result in a membership of recognised kinfolk made up of all the descendants of the apical ancestors. This potential is never realised. By various means, cognatic kin sort themselves into a number of more or less closely affiliated groups (Birdsall 1990:156; Astuti 2000: 100; Holy 1996: 115-116).

Stack (1970) describes the African American community she studied as operating according to a system characterised by personal kindreds. A personal kindred is a group made up of individuals who reckon their relatedness to one another according to their common relationships to one particular individual (Fox 1967). Stack's kindreds include fictive as well as actual kin. An example in Anglo-Celtic Australian society might consist of all the people who one might invite to one's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, or wedding, christening and so on. These people are not all related to each other either by kin or by the ties of friendship, but they are all related in one or another of these ways to the person whose birthday, wedding or christening is being celebrated. Personal kindreds among family members usually overlap, but they are not identical. A personal kindred is more a category of one's own kin and friends rather than a type of group (Goodenough 1962; Keesing 1966, 1975; Holy 1996; Astuti 2000). The personal kindred is purpose oriented, temporary, and to a certain extent, self selected.

Among Nyungar people, the assemblage which attends an individual's funeral is made up of anyone who feels they should be there by reason of relatedness to the individual. This is the personal kindred of the deceased, and it disbands once the funeral is over. This group, referred to by Nyungar people as 'all one family', most closely resembles a personal kindred. It is not the group within which people carry out their daily lives or with whom they have ongoing, intense economic and political relationships.

The group within which Nyungar people carry out their lives is not self-selected, and neither is it formed temporarily. This group persists over generations; one is born into and brought up within it. It never includes fictive kin and, although non-kin people can be closely associated with this group, they never have the same rights as kinfolk; for example they cannot pass membership on to their descendants. Although they may have a long association with the group, they are not permanent members. If it becomes necessary for any reason to deny the membership of fictive kinfolk, the kinfolk will not hesitate to do so. This simply cannot be done in regard to kinfolk. You can never deny your relations, is one Nyungar way of putting it.

In relation to housing careers, this means that in a housing shortage, kinfolk will aggregate in larger and larger households distributed among fewer and fewer dwellings. Their tenancy will be threatened, and perhaps withdrawn, causing greater expansion of households in response to the loss of more dwellings.

## **4.2 The Family Community**

Goodenough coined the term 'nodal kindred' in describing groups of this type (1962:10). While this term is useful in locating the Nyungar family type within the anthropological literature, the term 'family community' will be employed because it

provides a focus on the key feature that Nyungar groups hold in common with all other Indigenous groups and that is that the kin group acts as a community. In particular, they act as an economic community, and housing is a part of this economy. The family community regards the dwellings owned or leased by kinfolk as being a part of the community's assets, which are vital in staving off or moderating the effects of living on low incomes.

The family community in Nyungar society thus holds property in common in the form of knowledge and place. The ties among its membership may be observed in the form of relationships founded in the process of childrearing and socialisation. As well, relatedness among the membership refers to their collective experience of being brought up by a senior sibling-set or sibling-cousin set. This senior sibling/sibling-cousin set (normally made up of individuals from the older generation of the group) constitutes the authoritative body within the group. All lines of authority within the family community will originate with reference to types of relatedness to the membership of this small, closely related set of kin.

The membership of the family community:

1. is bounded by defined types of relatedness, and;
2. it holds property in common;
3. there exists an authority structure recognised by the membership, and;
4. the membership of the group changes primarily with the succession of generations, not according to its activities.

### **4.3 Households and Places**

A Nyungar home, whether a house, a flat or a camp, is usually referred to as someone's 'place', as in Janie's place, or Wizzy's place. The person whose place it is holds the lease, or in a minority of instances, is the homeowner or mortgagee. This person is referred to by Nyungars as the 'boss for that place.' The boss for a place is often a woman. She is the ultimate authority as to how the home is run and who stays there.

The focus of everyday life in a Nyungar family community is this set of homes. On any ordinary day, kinfolk will spend some or all of their time visiting one another throughout the day. Each member of the family community regards him/herself as living primarily at one or another of these homes, but he or she is equally welcome at all the rest. Ideally, each individual household member in receipt of an income will contribute financially, in goods and in services to the upkeep of the place where he or she primarily lives. The failure to do so is not uncommon and will be tolerated for some time by the boss for the place.

The mother of a dependent child is responsible for her child's contribution. Some of her children may be living with other relations and she is expected to send money for their keep to the boss for the place they live. All such contributions are determined by and collected by the boss for the place.

Within limits, the composition of the household group is fluid. The household will always include the boss for the place and her dependent children. Others of the boss' relations can find a temporary, semi-permanent or permanent home at her

place within the limits of space and according to the propinquity of the individual's social and genealogical relationship to the boss for that place.

The primary social requirement for residence is what may be termed a "rearing up" relationship with the boss for the place. "Rearing up" is the term Nyungars use to indicate the process of raising children. Any kin, termed "relations" by Nyungars, who aspires to residence in a place must have been reared up by or with the woman who is boss or been one of the people who helped to rear her up. The only other way people ordinarily can establish residence in a place is to marry or develop a defacto relationship with someone who has a rearing up relationship with the boss for a place.

Children are brought up more or less collectively in Nyungar family communities. To be reared up by or with a person enables the individual to claim certain services from him or her in later life. Mothers therefore encourage their siblings and parents to take part in the process of rearing up each others' children and impress on the children the importance of "knowing your relations" in this particular way.

The reward yielded by this system to the mature individual from whom others can claim services is power. When they are grown, children are obligated to those who reared them up in certain specific ways. For example individuals are obligated to those who reared them up to support their elder in family conflicts, which are often highly political in nature. These conflicts can alter the shape of the family community by triggering new alliances and severing existing ones within the family community. If the conflict is serious enough, new family communities are created out of this process. Apart from her natural concern for their welfare, it is therefore in the interests of the boss for a place to provide housing and support for her relations and their children.

Most Indigenous adults will have experienced this kind of support in the course of their housing careers. Indeed, when they are relatively young and inexperienced in the requirements of obtaining and retaining their own dwellings, the younger adults depend on the help and support of their female elders to guide them through the apparent maze of requirements surrounding State or private rental accommodation.

The membership of a household group changes in response to the pattern of visiting both in town and among the towns inhabited by the family community. Among Nyungars, these towns together are often called the family's "run", and sometimes, the "line". Within town, style of or reason for visiting tends to vary with age. For example the adolescents, who are often called "the kids" may spend more time visiting than their elders. They are highly mobile and tend to visit more than one place per day in their search for something to do. They may extend their visits overnight, not returning home until the following day.

Young women with children who have no houses of their own but live with their relations will daily go to visit their mothers, thereby sharing with them the business of rearing up. They tend to spend more time at a place than the kids and ordinarily visit only one or perhaps two places per day. They do not usually stay overnight. They tend to visit primarily to maintain their relationship with the people they are visiting, rather than to participate in whatever activity is currently in train there, which is the kids' primary concern. These visiting practices may occasionally make it appear that the dwelling is overcrowded, when in fact, all that has occurred is within the context of normal Indigenous visiting practice. However, with regard to housing careers, it does mean that people will favour dwelling choices which permit them to engage in

normal Indigenous visiting practice over those which make such engagement more difficult.

Older women, with places of their own, are visited more often than they visit. In fact, most of their time outside the house is spent not in visiting but in pursuit of family business. They take it upon themselves to ensure that people who are entitled to pensions and benefits from the government make application for them. When something goes wrong with the payments, they undertake responsibility for the task of finding out how to fix things. They take responsibility for the health of the young children, and if a young mother is too shy to take her child to the local health clinic, the older woman will see that she attends. If an eviction notice appears at the place of one of the younger women, she will go with her to Homeswest and help her to make a plea for a second chance. When people fail to turn up at any of the usual places for a time, the older woman will check up on them, searching them out to discover if anything is amiss.

As a result the older women come to know and be known at the offices of Homeswest, welfare agencies and health services. Workers at these agencies will sometimes seek such women out for information and help in dealing with problems they have with members of the family. Such women are the most adept of their families in dealing with these matters and their families depend heavily on them.

In Nyungar households, therefore, there exists a natural pattern of expansion and contraction of membership. The daytime population is swelled by visiting teenagers, looking for something to do, and by young men and women with their children. The night time population may consist only of the boss for that place and her dependent children, but that is rare, in my experience. Nearly always there will be other relations staying there for varying periods of time. A young woman whose electricity or gas service has been turned off on account of non-payment of bills, for example, will go to her relations' place with her children and stay either until next pension day or until she has put together enough money to pay her outstanding bills. There may be other temporary or semi-permanent members of the household. Teenaged nieces or nephews, for example, may be sent by their parents from other towns along the run or line to live with the boss for that place for awhile. This is a common practice used to keep adolescents at school a bit longer, or to get them out of some trouble. It is hoped that a change of place and company will bring a change in behaviour.

The houses and flats leased or owned by members of a family community are thus linked, forming a social environment which is centrally significant in the daily lives of the people participating in it. These dwellings therefore, should not be seen as individual units of housing. Rather, they should be seen together as a functioning unit or family holding. This is particularly true of the city as opposed to the town. In the city, people can be certain of meeting one another only in the homes of their relations. The choice of shopping centres, parks and other amenities is too wide and they live too far apart to enable people to predict where they might find one another. Their homes become the most important venues for socializing of all sorts. In contrast, a country town usually has only one business district situated on the one main street of the town. People can conduct their business and expect to meet one another there.



## 4.4 Overcrowding

There are limits to household density, even in a system which has developed a specialist method of dealing with that problem specifically, like the Nyungar system. There are rules which govern who can share bedroom space, and these utilise definitions of sexuality according to age and gender. Adolescents, for example, may share bedroom space provided the boys are always younger than the girls. A teenaged married couple can share with the adolescents provided it is with the wife's siblings and cousins. However, the girls must always be similar in age or younger than the wife and the boys must always be younger. However, young boys do not share with an elderly man, and if a married couple are beyond adolescence, they cannot properly share with anyone except their own pre-adolescent children. This is particularly the case with elderly married couples. There simply would be too much shame involved for everyone if elderly couples had to share.

When overcrowding occurs then, there will often be established a "girls room", where any girls, women and young children may sleep. If there is no bedroom to make into the boys room, then the boys will be the ones to sleep out in the living area of the house. In the last resort, if there is no bedroom space for them in the girls' room, the adolescent girls will have to give way to their younger siblings, and join the boys in the living area, the boys to one side, the girls to the other.

Overcrowding always occurs on the occasion of funerals, when the all-one-family gathers en masse. But such a situation will not be maintained for long. By the time a week has elapsed from the funeral, all the visitors will be gone, and the actual members of the household will reclaim their own space. Difficult as it may look from the outside, therefore, it is well within the capabilities of the Nyungar system to manage this kind of overcrowding. The kind of overcrowding that the Nyungar system finds most difficult to manage is the housing of the transients within the membership of the family community.

Many of these people follow a lifestyle dominated by alcohol and drugs. Most of them are men, but a good few women are among their number. They travel around the run, or up and down the line, staying for varying periods of time primarily with their mothers and sisters, but also with their aunts and female cousins. How long they remain in one place depends on how many arrive at once, and how much they indulge in alcohol and/or drugs. It may be difficult to get them to move on and various tactics, more or less extreme, are employed according to the personal style of the boss for the place.

Some women are forthright about this business and may even resort to calling the police, although most are reticent to go so far. For the more reticent women, the most extreme tactic involves deserting the dwelling altogether, taking their dependent children and the other members of the household to stay with other relations for a time. One woman who followed this practice would fail to pay the electricity and gas bills until finally, the services were cancelled. When the house was cold and dark, and there was nothing left to eat, the young men moved on, and she and her household returned. She paid the bills, restored the services, and she and the rest of the household would spend several days cleaning the house and repairing such damage as was within their capability.

This is a difficult problem to manage because it represents a clash between what is regarded by Indigenous people as being moral, or ethical, and what is possible within the resources of the household. It can be difficult to tell one's relations that

there is no room, and not enough food. In these situations some are favoured, some are not provided for, and some establish secret caches of food. All of these are offences against the basic morality of Nyungar society (and most societies) which imposes an obligation on the individual to provide for kinfolk in need, and to share resources among the household. When such offences are discovered to have occurred, ruction ensues and not unusually the household membership is reduced, and the losers become homeless. As Altman has said, this is not a matter of cultural relativity. This is a matter of economic marginality which exceeds the capacity of Nyungar social organisation to manage and does great harm to the general wellbeing of the family community.

## 4.5 Policy Implications

As is demonstrated in the literature review, there are commonalities in the situation of the urban poor across time and geographical settings. Key features of this situation appear not to change. In terms of economic structures, these features include a deficit in the supply of low cost/rent housing and high unemployment. Socially, the key features include the reliance of people on a widening collectivity of kinfolk, multi-family dwellings and the promotion of a group economy the purpose of which is to enable the levelling out of the tough times that strike various members of the group at various times. At these times, the threat of homelessness is a present danger that people try to help their kinfolk to avoid by tiding them over until new housing can be obtained. This is not the only reason that people change dwellings and other reasons include the needs of health and education, and the changing needs of people and children that arise in life according to phases of the life cycle.

### Policy Implication

In the absence of sufficient affordable housing, there is a need for a flexible system of support for those members of the family community for whom circumstances of need have forced them to seek shelter from their kinfolk. Owing to the nature of Indigenous social organisation, this need is unlikely to be solved by providing support that separates those in need from the family community because it is not only the need of dwelling space that drives the situation. Of primary importance to those in need is the emotional and social support of their family community. It is more than likely that unless these individuals can continue to access this support, they will choose to live in overcrowded dwellings with kinfolk in preference to the provision of dwellings from which they cannot easily access their kinfolk.

Occasionally, reliance on the kin group cannot suffice to save people from homelessness or overcrowding, that tends to occur at peak times of shortages in the state housing supply and unemployment. These things will be modified, that is, made worse, by the degree of substance abuse that occurs among members of the kin group.

### Policy Implication

Some fallback system is required which can expeditiously be put in place in peak times of housing and unemployment shortages. The community acceptance of such a system depends on how well it answers the need in terms of Indigenous social organization and Indigenous understandings of need in relation to the individual.

For Example, it is not always the present shortage of housing and unemployment that causes present day problems. The damage done to people and families can last more than one lifetime, often because people do not recover from the damage done to them in dire situations. In answer to the question of why her thirty-odd year old sons had no work, looked for no work, and never had worked, one Nyungar elder stated the following:

“Well,” she said. “There was no work for Aboriginal people for a long time when they [her sons] was younger... And they never got any jobs when they wanted ‘em. And now, see, it’s spoiled some of these boys for good.”

#### **Policy Implication**

The needs of men like this woman’s sons are not perceived as being the same as those of young women with children, or adolescent children. While the provision of dwellings which is distanced from the family community would not be considered appropriate for young women with children or adolescent children, it may well be considered appropriate for men who, in the words of the elder quoted above, have been “spoiled for good”, that is suffered lasting emotional damage which obstructs their capacity to become contributing members of their own family communities.

This is a common situation across Indigenous society in Australian town and cities. While the kinship systems and terms of social organisation will vary among these groups, the key issues and concerns remain largely the same. Knowing at least one of these systems in detail will provide a baseline from which to approach comparisons and contrasts among people from other groups who will be encountered in the course of this research.

## 5 FIELD RESEARCH

Field research will take place in the Perth metropolitan region, Carnarvon and Broome. These field sites were chosen first; in order to take advantage of the principal researcher's previous research experience in these places, and second; to provide scope for cultural comparison among groups of town and city dwelling Indigenous groups along the coastal strip of settled Western Australia. Recruitment of Indigenous field assistants from the field sites is currently in train. It is anticipated that these field assistants will represent kin groups from the field sites. The advantage of this for the research is that employing as field assistants individuals, recognised by their kin groups as proper persons, to provide liaison between the families and the research team will facilitate the process of going through the recognised structure of authority within families in order to gain permission to conduct the research.

Field data collection will utilise the ethnographic interview method. This method is uniquely appropriate to the collection of data suitable for thematic analysis and the development of typologies as a means of understanding social phenomena, of which housing careers is an example. Interviews will be conducted with Indigenous informants identified as "householders", meaning the individual in the household group who exercises responsibilities which include the acquisition of housing for the household group. Experience indicates that this will ordinarily be a woman in the third ascending generation of the household group, but the researchers will not be limited by this expectation in identifying householders.

Field data collection will also include focus groups. Focus groups will be employed to gain broad categories of data relating to the research questions, but in particular, to make use of the group memory. This technique has been utilised with success in native title research, where the elicitation of family histories is an important source of evidence. In this group situation, participants who are members of the same family community help one another to remember, and provide a check for individuals in that not everyone may remember particular events in the same way. In the course of a group discussion, not only can more detail be added, but kinfolk can negotiate the meanings of parts of their housing history and come to an agreement regarding this.

Participants will be recruited to the research through links, established by the researchers and field assistants as a result of their research and personal experience within the Indigenous community, commonly referred to as the 'snowballing' technique. Primary data gathering techniques will be focus groups and individual interviews. The field research will be carried out in Perth, Carnarvon and Broome over a period of 14 weeks commencing in June/July 2006.

Analysis of field data will employ the thematic method, in which overall patterns will be identified and related according to themes. This involves a rigorous process of relating the components of individual experience to form a comprehensive picture of collective experience (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Spradley, J. 1979. *The Ethnographic Interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston). This process will result in an analysis which speaks to individual experience and contextualises it within the social framework in which individual experience originates.

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