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‘What works’ to sustain Indigenous tenancies in Australia

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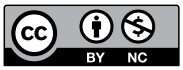

Executive summary

Key points

- The research provides new evidence around the specific factors that contribute to successful tenancies for Indigenous Australians.
- The success of a tenancy should not be judged simply in terms of housing occupancy, but in terms of the degree to which it meets the needs of the person housed and their family.
- Indigenous people's housing aspirations differ according to where they are located on their housing pathway, and therefore definitions of a successful tenancy also vary.
- A one-size-fits-all approach to Indigenous housing policy and practice will be unsuccessful in supporting people to realise their aspirations. Housing policies and programs need to be flexible and holistic, with different types of support provided depending on the circumstances of an individual and the housing outcomes they aspire to.
- The accessibility of appropriate and affordable housing is a key systemic-level determinant of successful Indigenous tenancies.
- Policy development that supports appropriate housing allocation is central to successful housing outcomes for Indigenous people, as is holistic and flexible tenancy support provision.
- An understanding of both the broader policy levers that impact housing outcomes and the impact of historical policies that have adversely affected Indigenous people are required. Partnerships between government departments and Indigenous organisations to co-design policies and programs are needed.

- **Tenancy support programs that have a flexible approach to service delivery, experienced and dedicated program staff—with the employment of local Indigenous workers particularly highlighted—and effective links with broader service providers to enable wraparound supports facilitate successful tenancies.**

- **Further elements of best practice in tenancy support include ensuring programs are delivered by Aboriginal-controlled organisations or at least in partnership with them, empowering tenants through education about their rights and responsibilities, and the adoption of early intervention and outreach approaches.**

Key findings

The research provides new evidence on the specific factors that contribute to successful tenancies for Indigenous Australians. The findings are based on qualitative evidence arising from detailed case studies of three housing programs, plus an analysis of national data from two datasets:

- the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS)
- the Australian Priority Investment Approach Longitudinal Income Support Administrative dataset (PIA).

Together, this research provides new and valuable insights into definitions and determinants of successful tenancies, and the characteristics of initiatives that have been successful in sustaining tenancies for Indigenous people.

The housing careers of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians are very different. Indigenous Australians—particularly those living in remote Australia—have low rates of home ownership and live in higher-density housing compared to the general population. They are also markedly more likely to live in state or territory government housing and, in remote areas, to also live in housing provided through Indigenous housing organisations or community housing organisations.

Our analysis of the NATSISS data found that Indigenous tenants in private rentals and in urban settings—rather than remote settings—experience the least stable tenancies. Mixed-family households, financial stress, health problems and living away from homelands are all associated with less stable tenancies.

As shown by the PIA data, the most common social housing pathway experienced by Indigenous people involved entry into social housing and subsequent tenure stability (27%). Tenants who entered only briefly, and then exited to another tenure (22%), and tenants who 'churned' into and out of social housing on multiple occasions (21%) were also dominant in the profile. Indigenous tenants in social housing are less likely to experience stable tenancies and more likely than the general population to exit social housing. However, it is not easy to readily determine whether a social housing tenancy is successful or not according to the pathway followed by the tenant. There is a need for the housing aspirations of individual tenants to be recognised, and support provided accordingly.

Successful tenancies for Indigenous people

A successful tenancy can be defined by referring to:

- the property itself—its size and state of repair
- its location—whether it is located in a safe area
- the stability of tenure.

Most frequently, a successful tenancy was seen as being one that transcends housing and results in health, social and intergenerational benefits to tenants and their family. For some Indigenous people this included access to their traditional lands.

Indigenous people's housing aspirations differ according to where they are located on their housing pathway, and therefore definitions of a successful tenancy also vary. Where a person is located on a housing pathway will also determine what a successful tenancy might look like, and the types of programs and supports that can best assist them. A one-size-fits-all approach to Indigenous housing policy and practice will be unsuccessful in supporting people to realise their aspirations.

Therefore a variety of programs and policies supporting Indigenous people across the whole housing spectrum is needed: from exiting homelessness right through to entering home ownership. Moreover, housing policies and programs need to be flexible and holistic, with different types of support required depending on the circumstances of an individual and the housing outcomes they aspire to.

Determinants of successful tenancies

The accessibility of appropriate and affordable housing is a key systemic-level determinant of successful Indigenous tenancies. However, at present, a limited supply of housing results in high demand and competition, often pricing tenants out of the market altogether. Discrimination in the private rental sector further reduces the housing options available to Indigenous Australians. Furthermore, the housing that is available is often of poor quality, which diminishes a tenant's motivation to take care of the property or pay the rent on time. For many Indigenous families, a limited supply of larger homes was reported to lead to overcrowding and subsequent strain on the household.

Existing stocks of social housing need to be improved, while funding should be put in place to ensure that future housing stock levels are increased. It is important that these processes be undertaken in consultation with Indigenous housing organisations to ensure that the supply of homes meet the cultural and familial needs of Indigenous households. The greater availability of short-term accommodation (such as visitor and crisis accommodation) could also reduce pressure on current housing and the incidence of overcrowding, which can threaten tenancies.

Policy factors are also central to successful housing outcomes for Indigenous people, including:

- policy development that supports appropriate housing allocation
- adoption of rental models that promote positive tenancy outcomes.

Policy and service implementation settings also need to be flexible and holistic in nature in order to respond appropriately to an individual tenant's circumstances and support needs.

An understanding is required of both the broader policy levers that impact housing outcomes and the impact of historical policies that have adversely affected Indigenous people. Governments at state, territory and federal levels need to accept responsibility for the outcomes of previous policies that have disadvantaged Indigenous households, and work on putting in place enablers that can change these trajectories. In particular, partnerships between government departments and Indigenous organisations are required to co-design policies and programs.

Our research also suggests that improved housing allocation policies are needed so that Indigenous tenants have enhanced choice, and are better able to access a suitable property in their preferred location.

Tenancy support programs facilitate successful tenancies through assisting Indigenous people to obtain appropriate housing, providing tenancy education, resolving tenancy issues and, where appropriate, linking tenants into broader services. Ensuring the adequate and ongoing funding of these programs is vital.

Finally, several tenant factors promote successful tenancies. These include:

- having good financial management skills
- being willing to develop tenancy management skills
- being part of a well-functioning household.

Wraparound services are crucial in providing additional supports to empower tenants and build their capacity to address broader issues that could threaten a tenancy.

Successful tenancy initiatives

Characteristics that are common to successful tenancy support initiatives include having:

- a flexible approach to service delivery
- experienced and dedicated program staff (with the employment of local Indigenous workers particularly highlighted)
- effective links with broader service providers to enable the provision of wraparound supports.

Further elements of best practice in tenancy support include:

- ensuring programs are delivered by Aboriginal-controlled organisations—or at least in partnership with them
- empowering tenants through education about their rights and responsibilities
- adopting early intervention and outreach approaches.

These elements of best practice consolidate existing knowledge about what is needed to achieve positive housing outcomes for Indigenous Australians. Yet often these measures are not currently being implemented in housing programs that target Indigenous tenants. This finding suggests the need for a 'scorecard' of foundations of practice for housing program providers, which can then be audited to see whether these measures are being met going forward. Given the limited current evidence about the effectiveness of tenancy support programs, there is also a need for more comprehensive and consistent collection of data about program outcomes—the data can then be used by service providers and others to evaluate the program's effectiveness in securing and sustaining Indigenous tenancies.

While there are common characteristics that contribute to successful tenancies, tenancy support programs operating in regional and remote locations face specific challenges relating to limited housing supply, staff recruitment and the availability of wraparound services. In order to foster successful housing outcomes for Indigenous tenants, tenancy initiatives operating outside urban centres will also need to take account of these issues when planning policy parameters and approaches to service delivery.

Policy and program development options

Current housing policy has placed an emphasis on tenancy support in an attempt to improve Indigenous housing outcomes. Despite positive indications that Indigenous tenants can be supported to sustain their tenancies and achieve good outcomes—both housing-related and non-housing-related—currently there is only limited evidence around the specific factors that contribute to successful tenancies.

Our research suggests that there are numerous areas that could potentially be the focus of future policy interventions to improve Indigenous housing outcomes and enhance the sustainability of tenancies. These can be seen to operate at the systemic, policy, program and tenant levels. When developing potential policy and practice options, planners need to consider that some of these areas are more amenable to intervention than others.

Policy and program factors are in the direct remit of policy makers and housing program administrators. As such, the adoption of policy and program measures shown to improve Indigenous tenancy outcomes would have immediate impact. In contrast, systemic factors—such as those relating to housing availability and affordability—will be challenging to tackle, will require coordinated intervention at governmental and industry level, and will thus take a longer time to change and positively impact upon Indigenous tenancy outcomes.

Tenant factors that have been shown to shape positive tenancy outcomes are largely personal factors and depend on an array of socio-demographic characteristics and circumstances. These tenant factors are useful for understanding how to target policies and service delivery most effectively, and are mixed as in how readily amenable these would be to intervention. Some of these factors—such as developing a better understanding of the responsibilities inherent in successfully managing a tenancy—are within the direct scope of tenancy support programs. Other factors—which relate to the personal circumstances of a tenant—will be more challenging to address through housing policy and tenancy support provision. These latter factors suggest that broader closing-the-gap policies, targets and programs will also be important to enable Indigenous people to fully realise their potential and housing aspirations.

Moreover, the tenant, policy, program and systemic factors that facilitate successful Indigenous tenancies are presented here as being discrete—but in reality they are interrelated. This suggests that intervening in one area—such as supporting tenants to improve their financial management skills—will make little difference to the success of a tenancy if, for example, the adequate supply of housing is not also addressed and tenants are forced to live in overcrowded, substandard accommodation.

The study

This research was conducted as a standalone project: *'What works' to sustain Indigenous tenancies in Australia*. The research aimed to provide enhanced understanding and a new evidence-base about the factors that contribute to successful tenancies. This work was motivated by an acknowledgement that Indigenous housing is an enduring policy issue in Australia, and that Indigenous Australians face considerable barriers to achieving successful housing outcomes.

Sustainable tenancies can lead to positive tenancy outcomes and prevent tenancy failure. However, previous research has primarily focussed on what contributes to poor tenancy outcomes for Indigenous Australians and very little is known about the factors that support successful tenancies.

Adopting a strengths-based approach and utilising mixed methods, this project examined the characteristics, outcomes and determinants of successful tenancies for Indigenous people. We also sought to understand the initiatives that have been successful in sustaining tenancies for Indigenous people and what particular elements contribute to this success. Moreover, the project examined how tenancies can best be sustained across:

- different types of housing—private and social housing
- different locations—urban, rural and remote.

The project was undertaken in two sequential stages and utilised both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Stage 1 comprised:

1. a literature review
2. a review of tenancy initiatives
3. the quantitative analysis of national datasets.

Stage 2 was informed by the results from Stage 1, and involved undertaking case studies of three successful tenancy support initiatives, with in-depth interviews conducted with stakeholders and tenants.

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