

Indigenous homelessness in urban Australia



Based on AHURI Final Report No. 383: Urban Indigenous homelessness: much more than housing

What this research is about

This research examines the causes, cultural contextual meanings and safe responses to homelessness for Indigenous Australians in urban settings.

The context of this research

Indigenous Australians comprise 3 per cent of Australia's population, yet they are 15 times more likely than non-Indigenous people to be homeless or at risk of homelessness. Indigenous people also constitute some 27 per cent of users of specialist homelessness services (SHSs), with a rate of support 9.4 times that of non-Indigenous service users. Of Indigenous people accessing SHSs, more than one in five are children aged 0–9 years, and almost two in five (36.9%; 26,432 children) are aged under 18.

The key findings

This research clearly recognises that dispossession, racism, profound economic disadvantage and cultural oppression shapes the lived experience of Indigenous Australians today; non-Indigenous Australians' notions about stark differences between regional and urban contexts may not be ideas shared by all Indigenous people; and there is a lack of dedicated services for Indigenous Australians experiencing homelessness in urban areas, despite their over-representation among SHS users nationally.

Although problems of discrimination, mental illness and poverty make it difficult for Indigenous people to access and sustain housing, it is the barriers resulting from problems and limitations of the housing and homelessness system that merit greatest attention. Inadequate funding for homelessness services, limited crisis and transitional accommodation, the shortage of affordable housing, barriers to housing access and inadequate attention to tenancy sustainment create a revolving door of housing and homelessness for many Indigenous people.

Other barriers to accessing priority housing (and waiting lists) include a lack of identity documents; low incomes; problematic housing histories, including rent arrears and other housing debts and warnings for disruptive behaviour; criminal history; lack of a tenancy history; low tolerance for completing forms as well as low literacy—which makes it difficult to understand forms; and lack of a stable address, making it difficult to keep appointments.

The research also notes that some drivers of Indigenous homelessness (such as crowding) are based in Indigenous cultural and lifestyle practices and norms such as mobility, shared resources and kinship obligations, and that such patterns can be in conflict with mainstream housing systems based on sedentary populations.

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Case studies

Four urban case-study sites were chosen as the foundation of this research: Greater Brisbane (Queensland); Greater Darwin (Northern Territory); Adelaide (South Australia); and Port Augusta (South Australia).

Greater Brisbane, Queensland

In Greater Brisbane, just under 6 per cent of all people experiencing homelessness identified as Indigenous (551 of 9,326 individuals), with the majority in supported accommodation, couch surfing or in severely crowded dwellings. Some 15 per cent of people sleeping rough in inner Brisbane identify as Indigenous.

Indigenous clients come from as far as Cairns and Townsville, the Sunshine Coast, Mount Isa on the border of the NT, and Birdsville on the border of SA. Many respondents also described clients as coming from interstate, especially the NT and NSW.

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Homelessness among Indigenous populations in Brisbane comprises three main groups:

- Individuals and families experiencing short-term difficulties—such as inability to pay the rent, or family violence—and where appropriate support results in the re-establishment of housing security within a short- to medium-time frame
- Individuals in inappropriate or insecure accommodation and who are seeking support for a transfer
- Individuals who are long-term homeless who cycle in and out of insecure housing and homelessness. They are often older, with high levels of complex need, especially mental illness, and chronic physical illness, together with problems of substance abuse.

Darwin (Northern Territory)

The Northern Territory (NT) has the highest rate of homelessness in Australia, which at 599 per 10,000 people is 12 times the national rate of homelessness; over three-quarters (88.4%) of homeless people in the NT are Indigenous.

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A key feature of the Indigenous homeless population in the NT is that 37.3 per cent are children and young people under the age of 17, compared with 21.1 per cent for non-Indigenous counterparts. Coupled with the higher proportion of homeless Indigenous females (90.7% of all homeless female Territorians), this shows the high correlation between homelessness and domestic and family violence.

Factors that explain why Indigenous people are disproportionately represented in the rough sleeping category in Greater Darwin were the over-representation of Indigenous people in the prison system; higher rates of poverty; mobility into the Greater Darwin region from remote areas seeking medical support, or to visit family and kin in prison or hospital; and the need to flee violence.

Adelaide and Port Augusta (South Australia)

In SA, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprise 2 per cent of the population—but almost 15 per cent of the total population of people experiencing homelessness.

Adelaide inner city and Port Augusta are two urban environments strongly connected in terms of kinship, traditional patterns of mobility and pathways to and between services and supports. Within Greater Adelaide, rough sleeping is most common in the city and hills regions and basically non-existent elsewhere; people living in supported accommodation for the homeless are vastly over-represented in the south and west; and an almost equal majority of Aboriginal people are recorded as in supported accommodation and couch surfing in the northern area.

In Port Augusta, Aboriginal people and families face difficulties in accessing suitable and affordable housing locally. Stakeholders noted the market locally is ‘particularly unfriendly’ to Aboriginal households, with discrimination, culturally inappropriate housing and constrained social housing supply. This is a significant concern as almost 20 per cent of residents of the town identify as Aboriginal. Many roads through outback SA either lead to or converge at or near the town, making it a ‘hotspot’ of Indigenous population movement.

All SHSs in SA have operated with a requirement that at least 20 per cent of their clients be Aboriginal for some years now, with many services reporting a much higher proportion of Aboriginal access to their services. It was evident that some Aboriginal people, groups and communities prefer to attend a particular service or group of services for support, rather than other services. This trend is also evident in relation to specific workers within agencies, and not for other workers within the same agency. The point is notable for the pressure on some workers—including Aboriginal workers—to assist what can be at times large numbers of people with complex needs. Aboriginal workers particularly feel great pressure, due to their sense of cultural and moral obligation to assist people. Such a heavy sense of responsibility can be intense and impact on workers' wellbeing. However, this was also an indication of the small, close network of people some Aboriginal people, families and communities trust and value.

Key themes emerging from the case studies

Two interrelated factors underpin experiences of chronic Indigenous homelessness:

- the continuing legacy of colonisation on the physical and mental wellbeing of Indigenous individuals and families, evident in high levels of trauma, often linked to lateral violence within the home and repeated experiences of loss extended across the generations
- the impact of poverty on access to the private rental market.

Because many Indigenous people have difficulty accessing the labour market, many are dependent on income support, where levels of payment mean there is little chance of finding appropriate housing within the private rental market. Even tenancies in the social and affordable housing sectors do not protect them from tenancy failure, because of the difficulty of meeting everyday expenses (for e.g. minor problems such as a broken fridge or a parking fine can rapidly escalate into a major problem of rent arrears, court appearances and failed tenancies). This places a further barrier to housing access, as a failed tenancy means individuals are likely to be placed on the Tenant Information Centre Australia list, which landlords' access to check on the status of housing applicants.

The most important failure of service delivery to Indigenous populations is lack of housing options. Hostel managers and shelters describe turning people away, leaving clients with little option but to sleep on the streets.

Virtually all respondents described services as significantly under-resourced, especially those reliant on federally funded programs.

What this means for policy makers

Tenancy support

Addressing complex issues requires levels of tenancy support, especially when people move from crisis or transitional accommodation to long-term, independent housing. Women fleeing family violence find it especially hard to manage living away from their support networks, often managing highly stressful situations in unfamiliar circumstances. Appropriate levels of support are also an especially important issue for many other groups, including people with addictions, people who have recently exited jail—especially after significant terms, young people who have little experience of living independently and people with mental illness.

Tenants need support to manage visitors, including helping them to distinguish between meeting cultural obligations and exploitation of this in ways that threaten their tenancy and damage the tenants' wellbeing and safety.

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Service delivery

Indigenous clients fared better when services were delivered by Indigenous-controlled services. The explanation for this was framed largely within the cultural safety these services afforded, and which was expressed at all levels of the organisation, from the availability of Indigenous frontline workers to the distinctive service philosophy and its emphasis on flexible, client-directed practice.

All the Indigenous services stressed the importance of flexible service delivery. Some Indigenous homelessness services stressed the importance of a holistic, client-directed approach, where the first requirement is the establishment of a trusting relationship. This relational approach requires a persistent focus on engagement that may involve significant commitments of time.

Client directed service brings the services to the client rather than expecting the client to come to them. Indigenous services saw this as a critical feature of the service model and an essential strategy for improving access to homelessness services.

Service access is best facilitated through a ‘no-wrong-door approach’, where clients are accepted even if the problem is not one the service is funded for. A number of Indigenous services also described having a soft-intake approach, where people can come in off the streets without an appointment and engage with the service informally.

Tenants also need support for early intervention for tenancies at risk of failure.

In addition, the Housing First approach remains a critical way for supporting people to permanently move on from homelessness, maximising housing security and delivery of supports.

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Cultural safety

For Indigenous services, establishing cultural safety revolved around their shared connection with their clients to people, place and culture. The personal background of workers, and a specifically Indigenous approach to service provision, meant the experience of clients accessing the service was distinct from mainstream services—and this was critical in overcoming barriers of distrust.

Developing strong sector networks

Developing and maintaining strong networks across the sector was seen as critical to providing effective services and enabled both frontline workers and managers to negotiate the housing and homelessness system and to advocate successfully for their client. This required a comprehensive understanding of both the system itself and the agencies and services that comprised it, as well as knowing which individual to contact for what, how to contact them, and what they can or cannot offer.

The Indigenous sector could be strengthened with funding strategies for improving the coordination of Indigenous housing, homelessness and related services. This includes establishing a peak body for Indigenous housing and homelessness services that is linked into the national body. Also essential are strategies to build local networks within and between Indigenous and mainstream services in ways that facilitate partnerships and strategic relationships.

Methodology

This research reviewed Australian policy, practice, and academic literature, along with literature from other ex-colonial countries such as New Zealand and Canada, and conducted interviews with stakeholders in four case-study sites.

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