AHURi Research & Policy Bulletin

Indigenous homelessness

INDIGENOUS PEOPLE WITHOUT HOUSING WILL APPROACH KINFOLK FOR SHELTER FIRST, AND WILL USUALLY BE GIVEN A PLACE TO STAY. HOUSING STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS INDIGENOUS HOMELESSNESS SHOULD WORK WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLE TO ENSURE ACCESS TO SUFFICIENT AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND RESOURCE FAMILIES TO ACCOMMODATE KIN.

KEY POINTS

- Indigenous homelessness is defined as the inability of an Indigenous person to access appropriate housing that caters for their particular complex social and cultural needs.

- Primary homelessness (rough sleeping) and use of refuges among Indigenous people is reduced because Indigenous people look after one another through kinship obligations. However, Indigenous people experience high rates of secondary homelessness, in which people make use of others' dwellings.

- Because visiting of others is a normal cultural practice in Indigenous culture, this potentially disguises the degree of homelessness. Even so, the high rate of overcrowding is an appropriate indicator of homelessness (in 2004–05, 17% were in overcrowded dwellings).

- While the system of kinship obligation is a useful *hedge* against primary homelessness, it can be strained to breaking point—notably where there are family-based feuds and where alcohol and drug abuse are involved. In these cases, hospitality is sometimes refused or households face eviction.

- With regard to housing, the most disadvantaged people in Indigenous society are single men from remote area communities. Because housing is women's responsibility in these communities, remote area single men lack the knowledge and skill to navigate the public housing system and may therefore remain homeless for longer than men who have partners.

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- Homeless Indigenous people are particularly vulnerable once their life circumstances bring them into conflict with the institutions of the wider society—this makes it much harder for them to exit homelessness.

BACKGROUND

The research sought to understand the place, house and home needs of Indigenous peoples and to identify actions required to address these needs through housing and other service responses that secure sustainable solutions and support stable life conditions.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research investigated the Indigenous homeless experience, and sought to use the understandings and definitions of homelessness developed in previous research to understand how Indigenous culture mediates the experience of homelessness for Indigenous people.

Interviews were conducted within local Indigenous communities in the Western Australian towns of Broome and Carnarvon and in the state capital, Perth and from practitioners working in relevant non-government service organisations. Thirty-two Indigenous women, 10 Indigenous men and 34 practitioners were interviewed making a total of 76 participants. The purpose of interviews was to ascertain the participant's view of the pathways in to and out of homelessness for Indigenous people. It compares the understandings of Indigenous homelessness held by Indigenous homeless people with those of the providers of services to Indigenous people.

KEY FINDINGS

What is Indigenous homelessness?

One simple definition of Indigenous homelessness is an inability of an Indigenous person to access appropriate private or public housing that caters for their particular complex social and cultural needs.

There are various cultural factors that shape how Indigenous people view their housing situation which might contrast to mainstream society:

- An Indigenous person, according to Keys Young (1998) might experience 'spiritual homelessness' where that person is denied access, for whatever reason, to their land, or spiritual home.

High rates of mobility in Indigenous society are sometimes the product of homelessness.

- Travelling as well as family and kinship visits may result in symptoms of homelessness, such as over-crowding, but are usually viewed by Indigenous people as normal cultural practice.

The issue of visiting (and temporary over-crowding) must be distinguished from homelessness as non-Indigenous society understands it. Unlike visiting (where the visitor has a home to return to), those that are otherwise homeless and sharing with kinfolk can become semi-permanent residents and this can lead to long term over-crowding.

In seeking to define homelessness, Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1992) distinguish between primary homelessness (those without accommodation of any kind), secondary homelessness (those with no home but who move between friends, relatives and refuges), and tertiary homelessness (those who are housed in accommodation that is substandard to the societal norm such as caravan parks).

This study finds that Indigenous people are most likely to experience secondary homelessness, which is best gauged from statistics on Indigenous household overcrowding. AIHW (2009) data indicate that in 2004–05, 17 per cent of Indigenous adults were experiencing overcrowding.

Tertiary homelessness (involving residence in a hostel, boarding house or caravan) did not appear to be common in Indigenous society. While Indigenous people may be resident in specific-purpose hostels, particularly dialysis hostels, none could be discovered in a boarding house or caravan.

How does Indigenous culture mediate homelessness?

Kinfolk obligations, which are deeply ingrained in Indigenous society, shape their response to homelessness. Those in need of housing for a wide variety of reasons will most often resolve

this need by approaching their relatives prior to considering other housing options and are generally housed. There appears to be no prioritising of housing need: those without housing are taken in along with those relatives who are merely visiting. This cultural obligation clearly mediates homelessness within Indigenous society; but it can also lead to overcrowding which may in turn lead to homelessness.

Practitioners and homeless people agree that overcrowding acts as both a hedge against primary homelessness and as a force that can lead to homelessness for the entire household, particularly where a drinking and or a substance abuse lifestyle is present.

Housing is also seen as the responsibility of women in Indigenous society generally and more so in traditional society. Therefore women take on the responsibility to contact Housing Authorities, for example, to organise public housing and other housing related matters. However, it is their primary role as carer that mitigates against homelessness. As one Aboriginal man said: 'an Aboriginal mother is not going to kick her son out on the street. She can't do that.'

In this respect, Aboriginal single men from remote areas were at a disadvantage in accessing accommodation away from their home community because of strong socialisation that housing is not men's business. The result is that they have no useful experience of how to get through the process of finding a home and so they are reliant on kin to accommodate them.

What are the causes of homelessness for Indigenous people?

Indigenous homelessness needs to be understood in the context of Indigenous culture and society which itself sits within the confines of the wider Australian society.

Practitioners and homeless people themselves differed in the emphasis they gave to different causes of homelessness. Homeless people emphasised their own life circumstances and how these came into conflict with institutions. The circumstances of primary homelessness are varied and include:

- Family and other cultural matters, for example deserting the home in response to the death of a close family member, which is generally restricted to the closest members of the departed's family, and usually involves staying with other relatives for a period of time. If for some reason it is not possible to stay with other relatives, people may end up living in a camp.

- Over crowding, which often breaks the lease requirements of public housing authorities and private rental arrangements; this may in turn lead to the eviction of residents and homelessness.

- Violence, often involving family members that results in victims having to leave their family home and may lead to the entire family becoming homeless. In addition to violence that may occur within households, violence can also occur among extended kin groups, known as 'feuding', leading to the victimised household becoming homeless.

- Alcohol and drug issues may result in visitors being restricted in accessing accommodation with some family members. An Indigenous man from Broome explained his primary homelessness as a result of this: 'I been here (at his cousin's house) for two weeks. I was living with my sister, she's up on the corner there, but she asked me to move out. Before that I was living with my daughter, but she kicked me out on account of my drinking.'

- The real estate market can undermine access to suitable accommodation even if people have jobs. The high costs of rent, the eligibility criteria for public housing coupled with discrimination within the real estate sector can mean households fall into homelessness.

From a practitioner's perspective Indigenous homelessness has come about as a result of specific structural issues such as a lack of suitable housing, or eviction due to an inappropriate use of the facilities. They also included changes to specific policies and practices of housing authorities that result in Indigenous people being unable to negotiate the new requirements for public housing rentals. Practitioners highlighted the prevailing economy that led to a shortage of low cost

private rental housing. Issues of Indigenous life circumstances were also considered as well. For example, ex-prisoners often have difficulty in reintegrating into society after serving a jail sentence. Alcohol, child abuse and violence were also important factors.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The issue of Indigenous homelessness as described in the report is a complex phenomenon, requiring sensitive, flexible and innovative responses from government that meet the specific cultural needs of Indigenous people.

The Federal Government's current policy initiatives in Indigenous affairs are seeking to enlist the support of Indigenous communities in the management of issues concerned with community development and housing (Macklin 2009).

This research supports this policy approach and highlights aspects of Indigenous culture with which future government policy might engage. There is no doubt that engaging the Indigenous community in the development of programs to address the needs of homeless people will be more effective and successful.

Government should investigate ways of better utilising the institutions of Indigenous society in the development of homeless policy, for example the kinship system and its obligations to house relevant individuals and families because this system has been crucial to the maintenance of Indigenous culture in the face of key challenges such as colonisation, protectionism, assimilation and racism.

Government also needs to pay particular attention to the ways in which its policy and programs positively or negatively affect the fabric of Indigenous society. Such policy responses can be adjusted for greater effectiveness.

For example, household overcrowding due to a shortage of both public and affordable private housing is unavoidable. If government recognises that the kinship model in fact ameliorates aspects of homelessness it may find ways of managing household overcrowding to the advantage of both Indigenous households and their neighbours.

Further policy responses are also required that have the objective of interrupting pathways to homelessness, especially in the area of domestic violence, debt to the public housing provider, drug and alcohol addiction, housekeeping practices and educating men in the process of accessing and acquiring housing.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 80368, *Indigenous homelessness*.

Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website: www.ahuri.edu.au or by contacting the AHURI National Office on +61 3 9660 2300.

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