AHURI Research & Policy Bulletin

How is crowding in Indigenous households managed?

STRATEGIES TO MANAGE CROWDING IN INDIGENOUS HOUSEHOLDS CAN REDUCE THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS FOR PEOPLE LIVING IN THOSE HOUSEHOLDS. HOWEVER, TO PERMANENTLY REDUCE CROWDING, THE SUPPLY OF APPROPRIATE HOUSES IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES NEEDS TO BE INCREASED.

KEY POINTS

- Crowding in Indigenous households has structural causes, including the shortage of appropriately designed and affordable rental housing, and cultural causes, including visiting and sharing practices.

- Housing design that caters for large families and visitors would offer the opportunity of fulfilling cultural obligations to house visitors, alleviating some issues of crowding.

- While the Canadian National Occupancy Standard (CNOS) is currently used to measure crowding, it does not distinguish between those situations where crowding causes little stress and those where it does have negative effects for residents.

- Case studies revealed that the number of people living in the house was not the most significant trigger of stress but the lack of control over who stays and their behaviour.

- Locational differences were identified; with those interviewed in the regional centre case study areas (Mt Isa and Carnarvon) less likely to indicate they considered crowding or stress to be a problem.

- The most critical mediating factors for coping in large households are: firm administration of house rules by the householder, rules in organising sleeping space in large households and sharing visitors among other family households.

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CONTEXT

The CNOS uses density to measure levels of crowding in households, based on norms of sleeping and living in a nuclear family. These standards are used to assess which houses are crowded as well as to plan funding for new housing. This study sought to provide greater understanding of crowding in Aboriginal households through the development of a model of Australian Aboriginal house crowding which considered key elements: loss of personal control, variable experiences of stress and specific cultural components of crowding.

RESEARCH METHOD

Householders (69 people) were interviewed in four sites including: two metropolitan—Swan in Perth (18) and Inala (17) in Brisbane, and two regional centres—Carnarvon (13) in Western Australia and Mt Isa (21) in Queensland.

Householders, not visitors, were interviewed and so crowding and self-reported stress is from the perception of the householder.

KEY FINDINGS

Structural drivers of large household formation

Structural factors contributing to the formation of large households include a supply shortage of appropriate Aboriginal housing Australia-wide and access to affordable housing. There are lengthy waiting lists for public housing and a shortage of affordable housing in private rental markets.

Housing design contributes to housing occupancy density with the provision of the three-bedroom houses still the most prevalent (Davidson et al. 2011). Most houses across the case study sites were three-bedroom houses (39 out of a total sample of 69) with one main living area, one bathroom and bedrooms clearly designed for a maximum of two children or two adults per bedroom.

Adequate housing design can alleviate some issues of crowding, through provision of carports and decks, giving additional spaces for large gatherings for cooking or outdoor sleeping. Design for larger households should allow for at least two general-purpose internal living spaces, two bathrooms and additional storage in the form of sheds.

Temporary and semi-permanent visitors contribute to crowding in households, including people:

- Who would otherwise be homeless (due to eviction, looking for a place to live, moving between houses, escaping family problems, prison exits).

- Escaping harsh weather conditions by moving to stay with relatives.

- Needing access to services (medical) and recreational (shopping) opportunities.

- Accessing social and cultural life and structural support services of that location.

Visitor movement may be local or involve travel between regions. For example, looking for another house in the area or part of a 'mobility circuit' linking home country based kin groups with towns where other family lives. Sometimes men who are drunk or unwelcome in their homes may relocate to other family or friends to avoid conflict.

Cultural drivers of large household formation

Visiting is a major contributor to household expansion and crowding. The most frequent reason for travelling is to visit relatives and maintain kinship ties. Funerals are a vitally important ritual event, as well as an important way of maintaining family and social ties. Travelling to be closer to 'country' is also a strong and important cultural driver of visitation.

The case studies identified that people chose to stay in houses with large numbers of people because of strong ties to place, both specific houses and their association with kin, but also neighbourhoods or towns.

Sharing is seen as an integral value of Aboriginal identity. Demand sharing is a mechanism which manages the sharing of resources and money within an extended family group or (rarely) a close

social group. There are clear rules with regards to sharing housing with large numbers of people which are strictly adhered to (particularly in the Western Australian study sites). The cultural institution of demand sharing is also very strong in urban areas. These cultural rules are adhered to irrespective of the constraints imposed by the housing.

Mutual care of extended family was practiced across all research sites and is part of the deep structure of Aboriginal culture. At all study sites, it was found that family could not be turned away if they need or want somewhere to stay. Mutual care can also work to alleviate crowding by sharing responsibility and providing alternative houses.

There is also a drinking sub-culture shared by some family and social groups and households can expand as a result. It is not unusual for people who use alcohol, to drive from town to town visiting different households until they have outstayed their welcome. There are households where behaviour in these drinking parties is well controlled and where children will be housed elsewhere for the occasion.

When does living with a large number of people become stressful?

The study found that the number of people living in the house was not the most significant trigger of stress. People often reported having high numbers of people staying and being crowded, however just under half of the interviewees reported that it was stressful (see Table 1). Most interviewees saw a larger or better designed house, rather than less people staying, as the solution to their crowding.

It was found that the behaviour of people in the house, rather than the number of people per se, caused stress including noise when the householder was trying to sleep, unwanted drinking in the house, children fighting, pressure to conform to tenancy regulations, and people looking into the yard.

Loss of control over who stays in the house created a sense of crowding and stress for householders. Loss of privacy and the ability choose who to be with at any particular time was a significant source of stress. An individual's status in terms of age, social worth and parenting status affected their ability to secure a private space within a house.

Traditionally, matriarchal Aboriginal women provide a stable household head for large households. Young women generally found it more difficult to maintain their houses as they would like. Personal expectations of how a home should be kept and what constitutes acceptable behaviour influenced stress levels and tolerance of large numbers of people. Other issues that cause stress are wear and tear on the house, extremely high utility bills and difficulty keeping food in the house.

Anglo-style household spaces contribute to stress. Physical improvements to cope with crowding included: additional bathroom facilities; more adaptable sleeping areas; and regular repairs and maintenance in general.

TABLE 1: PERCEPTION OF STRESS AND CROWDING IN CASE STUDY SITES

	Mt Isa	Carnarvon	Inala	Swan
Total number of interviewees	21	13	17	18
Householders who had high visitor numbers in the past year	20	10	8	15
Householders who have experienced stress from visitors in the past year	9	4	7	12
Householders who did not experience stress from visitors in the past year	12	13	10	4
Householders who said they felt 'crowded' in the past year (overlapping category)	4	0	7	12

See Final Report for qualifying comments on these data.

Neighbourhood crowding also emerged as an issue in Mt Isa, where people experienced less stress from their approved visitors than they did from the wider neighbourhood (e.g. from drunk people on the street, noise and violence or being near to feuding families). Privacy is an important issue with people covering windows or putting up screens or fences to block the view into yards.

How do people cope in large households?

Careful allocation of private space and sleeping spaces within the household by the householder is important in managing crowding. This was determined on the basis of the individual's status. When extra visitors were staying, people would sleep in the lounge/diningroom, the veranda and other outdoor spaces. Some would bring tents and most of the socialising would take place outside. There are however no universal rules on managing sleeping arrangements for all Indigenous Australians.

The ability to assert household rules effectively was a key skill and the older women predominated as the heads of large households with stable tenancies and firm household rules. Firm administration of the householders' rules included controlling alcohol usage, asking visitors to contribute resources and managing of relationships with neighbours.

Sharing visitors by sending people on to another hosting family, informing visitors that the house is 'full up' without actually turning them down and deferring to tenancy rules helped to manage numbers. Women's refuges and homeless hostels also assist by taking visitors who cannot be housed by family or friends.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

* A culturally appropriate definition of house crowding would assist policy responses to alleviate negative effects as crowding cannot be identified through density measures alone.

* Most housing stock is inadequate to house large, extended and complex family structures typical of Indigenous communities. Housing design should consider the large numbers of people likely to inhabit one house. Provision of more bathrooms and larger kitchen facilities, outdoor living and sleeping spaces and flexible internal spatial arrangement would produce a better cultural fit and reduce both stress and household wear and tear.

* Housing programs should recognise the importance of household management and supporting householders in enforcing house rules.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 20640 *Crowding for Indigenous households in non-remote areas*.

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

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