AHURI Research & Policy Bulletin

Re-thinking Indigenous homelessness

MAINSTREAM CONCEPTS OF 'HOMELESSNESS' DO NOT SERVE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE WELL. THOSE DESIGNING POLICIES OR PROGRAMS FOR INDIGENOUS HOMELESS PEOPLE MAY NEED TO RE-THINK OR CHANGE THEIR CONCEPTS OF 'HOMELESS' IN ORDER TO ADEQUATELY UNDERSTAND AND RESPOND TO THE NEEDS OF THIS GROUP OF PEOPLE.

KEY POINTS

- Conventional responses to homelessness focus on finding accommodation as a pivotal intervention, upon which other interventions depend. However for many Indigenous homeless people, finding accommodation is not necessarily their most crucial support need.

- This is particularly true of some public place dwellers – a significant sub-group of the Indigenous homeless, who have chosen to 'live rough' and who may not see themselves as 'homeless.'

- The way Indigenous 'homelessness' is defined or categorised influences the types of response strategies that are implemented by Indigenous organisations, government and non-government agencies. Services required by Indigenous people who are regarded as homeless may not necessarily be concerned with housing or accommodation issues.

- A key aspect of the re-conceptualising of Indigenous homelessness is the idea that it is not necessarily defined as a lack of accommodation. The authors suggest that homelessness can be redefined as losing one's sense of control over, or legitimacy in, the place where one lives.

- The researchers identified three broad categories of Indigenous 'homelessness', with a number of descriptive sub-categories further illuminating the service needs of these people.

- These categories are: public place dwellers; those at risk of homelessness; and spiritually homeless people.

- To address the needs of these people, housing and accommodation strategies must be closely linked to other social services.

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METHODOLOGY AND CAVEATS

This project aimed to examine the literature and to develop a more useful set of definitions and constructs of Indigenous homelessness, based on the complex range of circumstances and needs of 'the homeless' and those living in public places (known as public place dwellers). This group of Indigenous people was a focus of the research, because the investigators felt that current concepts of homelessness might oversimplify its composition and, by doing so, prevent adequate understanding of, or response to, the needs of this group of people.

A second aim was to clarify how public place dwelling fitted into notions of Indigenous homelessness and how categories of responses matched the needs of this group of people.

Finally, the research aimed to identify and profile good practice responses to Indigenous homelessness, especially those which were most suited to the needs of particular categories of Indigenous homelessness or public place dwelling.

To do this, the researchers considered examples from Brisbane City Council; Musgrave Park Aboriginal Corporation; Ngwala Willumbong and Swinburne University of Technology; and Port Hedland Sobering Up Centre and Homeless Support Service.

In looking at agency responses, this project drew on earlier work by the same research team funded by the Department of Family and Community Services. (See note on Memmott et al 2002 at the end of this bulletin.) Fifteen categories of response, incorporating 73 different responses to Indigenous homelessness, were documented. The researchers then made observations about the relevance of these response categories to the different categories and subcategories of Indigenous homelessness.

There may be scope to further test these definitions and categories with Indigenous people. This research should be seen as part of an evolving program of work.

CONTEXT

In many parts of Australia, small groups of Indigenous people can be found living in public settings. These people continue to live in public places despite, in many cases, the existence of formal 'town camps' and a range of other Indigenous housing options. Although these people are often categorised as 'homeless', a number of them see themselves as being both 'placed' and 'homed', and prefer instead to refer to themselves as 'parkies', 'goomies', 'long grassers', or 'river campers'.

This group of people do not pay for accommodation, usually have a visible profile (socialising, sheltering, drinking, arguing and fighting in public), have low incomes of which a substantial part is often spent on alcohol, have generally few possessions (minimal clothes and bedding), and usually conform to a 'beat' of places where they camp and socialise in particular public or semi-public areas.

The researchers define them as public place dwellers because mainstream labels such as 'homeless' or 'itinerants', have specific, and sometimes narrowly construed, meanings that they believe are not always helpful in analysis and strategic thinking. Developing a greater understanding of the range experiences, motivations and needs of this group has been a key part of the research.

FINDINGS

A definition of 'homelessness' which involves losing one's sense of control over, or legitimacy in, the place where one lives enables a broader conceptualisation of 'homelessness' and arguably, a more finely calibrated response by program/ support agencies.

CATEGORIES OF INDIGENOUS HOMELESSNESS

Three broad categories of Indigenous homelessness were identified as part of the research – public place dwellers, at risk of homelessness and spiritually homeless. In the following table, these are further divided into subcategories and matched with what, in the researchers' observation, is the most relevant category of response. In the case of those categorised as at risk of homelessness (see Table 1 for details), there is a link to an earlier AHURI

study which considered the concept of 'iterative homelessness' to encapsulate a housing career which could include multiple stints of living on the streets, in private rental and in insecure accommodation.

The researchers believe a set of three specific response strategies can potentially create a bridge between all categories of homeless people.

These are:

• philosophies of client interaction;
• regional strategies; and
• phone-in information services.

Details of the best practice responses noted in Table 1 can be found in Table 2 and in the final report of this project.

The extent to which responses are relevant to a particular place or group will vary depending on the local environmental and socio-economic context as well as the history of cultural contact between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

Table 1: Summary of Indigenous Homelessness Categories and Best Practice Responses

Category/Sub-Category	Characteristics	Best Practice Response Category
1. Public Place Dwellers	Living in a mix of public or semi-public places (as well as some private places, which are entered illegally at night to gain overnight shelter), eg parks, churches, verandas, car parks, car sales yards (under cars), beaches, drains, riverbanks, vacant lots and dilapidated buildings.	
1.1 PPD *Voluntary, short-term intermittent*	Often staying in conventional accommodation (eg a relative's house), may have their own residence in a rural or remote settlement. When socialising in public urban places, they may or may not decide to camp out overnight, usually with others, despite the availability of accommodation.	Legislative and police approaches. Patrols and outreach services. Diversionary strategies. Addressing anti-social behaviour. Alcohol strategies. Emergency or crisis accommodation. Service centres and gathering places. Physical design of public places. Public education strategies. Training outreach workers.
1.2 PPD *Voluntary, medium-term*	Reside continually in public places (including overnight); acknowledge they have another place of residence in a home community but uncertain if and when they will return.	
1.3 PPD *Voluntary, long-term (chronic homeless)*	Reside continually in public places (including overnight); unclear whether it is possible for them to readily reconcile with their home community/family due to a range of emotional barriers; they have come to regard a beat of public places as their 'home'.	*(continued next page)*

Category/Sub-Category	Characteristics	Best Practice Response Category
1.4 PPD *Reluctant and by necessity*	Residing continually in public places, and who (a) wish to return home but need to remain in urban area due to a service need or to support a hospitalised relative or similar; or (b) wish to return home but no funds for and/or capacity to organise travel.	
2.0 At risk of homelessness	At risk of losing one's house or of losing the amenity of one's house.	
2.1 At risk *Insecurely housed people*	Residing in adequate housing but under threat of loss of such; lack of security of occupancy; possibly due to circumstances of poverty.	Emergency or crisis accommodation. Medium-term transitional housing. Long-term housing.
2.2 *People in sub-standard housing*	People whose housing is of a sub-standard architectural quality, possibly unsafe or unhealthy housing.	
2.3 At risk – *experiencing crowded housing*	People whose housing is crowded, resulting in considerable stress to occupants.	
2.4 At risk – *dysfunctionally mobile persons*	In a state of continual or intermittent residential mobility, including temporary residence (eg crisis accommodation), that is a result of personal and/or social problems (eg violence, alcohol and substance abuse, lack of safety or security in a social sense, personality or 'identity crisis', lack of emotional support and security).	
3. *Spiritually homeless people*	A state arising from either: (a) separation from traditional land; (b) separation from family and kinship networks; or (c) a crisis of personal identity wherein one's understanding or knowledge of how one relates to country, family and Aboriginal identity systems is confused.	Philosophies of client interaction. Alcohol strategies. Regional strategies. Emergency or crisis accommodation. Public education strategies. Phone-in information services.

Table 2: Analysis of the Response Strategies in relation to the different categories of Indigenous Homeless and Public Place Dwelling People

Response Strategies	Homeless and Public Place Dwelling Categories								
	1.0 Public Place Dwellers				2.0 At Risk Categories				3.0
	1.1 Public place dwellers – short term	1.2 Public place dwellers – medium term	1.3 Public place dwellers – long term	1.4 Reluctant public place dwellers	2.1 Insecurely housed	2.2 Substandard housed	2.3 Crowded housed	2.4 Dysfunctional Mobile	3.0 Spiritually homeless
1. Legislative and Police Approaches (Only in conjunction with other strategies)	✓	✓	✓	✓					
2. Patrols & Outreach Services (Night Patrols, Aboriginal Wardens)	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	
3. Diversionary Strategies (Detox Centres, Sobering Up Shelters)	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	
4. Addressing Anti-Social Behaviour	✓	✓	✓	✓					
5. Philosophies of Client Interaction (Community Development Approach, Healing Framework)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6. Alcohol Strategies	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓
7. Regional Strategies	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8. Accommodation Options									
8.1 Emergency or crisis accommodation (1-3 nights) (Women's refuges, safe houses, sobering up shelters or hostels plus management support)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8.2 Medium-term transitional housing (1-6 months) (hostels, boarding houses, large extended family housing, hospital hostel, managed town camp, plus management support)					✓	✓	✓		
8.3 Long-term housing with management support (houses, extended family houses, managed and serviced camps, flats and units, special housing for aged, men and women)					✓	✓	✓		
9. Service Centres & Gathering Places (Food Provision, Day Centre, Dedicated Space)	✓	✓	✓	✓					
10. The Physical Design of Public Spaces (Storage Shelves, Park Shelter, etc)	✓	✓	✓	✓					
11. Public Education Strategies	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓
12. Phone in Information Services	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13. Skills & Training for Outreach Workers (Effective Use of Field Staff, Staff Training and Development, Information Sharing and Exchange	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	
14. Partnerships	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15. Holistic Approaches	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Current Australian Government and State/ Territory policies recognise the complex and multi-dimensional nature of 'homelessness', and the many structural factors that can cause, perpetuate and prevent it, however many have been informed by a particular definition of 'homelessness'. 'Homelessness' is not always simply created by a lack of 'housing', nor simply addressed by its provision.

Under the Australian SAAP Act, the definition ties homelessness to the constructs of housing and inadequate access to a safe and secure variety of housing. The SAAP IV Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), a joint agreement between Ministers, does recognise that, despite the official definition given in the Act, homelessness may encompass a range of concepts and definitions, and in particular Indigenous homelessness may be different in nature from non-Indigenous concepts. However the researchers found that this recognition did not provide any guidance as to what these definitions or concepts were, and thus it was difficult for this understanding to inform policy or its implementation.

The categorisation of Indigenous homelessness and the profiling of responses to it, demonstrate the need for partnerships between Indigenous organisations and multiple levels and areas of governments in order to address all aspects of Indigenous homelessness. The analysis in the final report of this project provides a basic model of what these interactions might entail, and provides valuable insights into what they might effectively achieve. By profiling the range of responses to Indigenous public place dwelling and homelessness as well as some good practice examples of these responses, it is expected that Indigenous and government agencies will have some useful models that might be adapted or used as benchmarks in the design of other local policies and programs.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 20168, *Categories of Indigenous homeless people and good practice responses to their needs*. Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website (www.ahuri.edu.au) by typing the project number into the search function.

The following documents are available:
• Positioning Paper;
• Final Report.

Earlier report: Memmett et al (2002), Department of Family and Community Services, Australia, unpublished.

Related topic: Robinson (2003) Understanding iterative homelessness: the case of people with a mental disorder, AHURI project 70072, available online by typing the project number into the search function at www.ahuri.edu.au

Or contact the AHURI National Office on +61 3 9660 2300.

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