AHURI Research & Policy Bulletin

How to help Indigenous families into stable housing and sustainable tenancy

APPROACHES TO PROVIDING STABLE HOUSING AND SUSTAINING TENANCIES FOR INDIGENOUS WOMEN ARE AFFECTED BY THEIR HIGH MOBILITY AND POOR SERVICE ACCESS, AND COMPOUNDED BY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE STRUCTURES AND DEFINITIONS OF CURRENT SERVICES AND PERCEPTIONS OF 'HOMELESSNESS' BY INDIGENOUS WOMEN.

KEY POINTS

- Indigenous women and children are often disconnected from the life of their local community, moving house frequently. This means they are often 'hidden' from the very services that could assist them to develop stable housing and sustainable tenancies, because these services rely on finding and retaining contact with their clients.

- For these reasons, Indigenous women and their children often have poor access to mainstream and Indigenous-specific homelessness services. The study proposes the use of outreach services to overcome this.

- Poor access to housing and related services is compounded by a 'perception gap' – the difference between how current services define homelessness and perceptions of 'homelessness' by Indigenous women. While service providers considered over half the women in the study to be homeless for more than six months, only two women used the term 'homeless' to describe their living arrangement.

- Achieving stable housing and sustainable tenancies requires service providers to develop strategies to remain in contact with Indigenous women, and to provide case-managed practical support for Indigenous women for personal, social and family matters, including the development of life skills.

- Homeless Indigenous women do want more assistance, but factors such as 'shame' and illiteracy prevent them from seeking help, such as reporting family violence, accessing services and attending training programs.

- Providers (or potential providers) of culturally appropriate services would also benefit from considering the particular aspirations and understandings of house and home by Indigenous women.

- An understanding of the particular factors contributing to homelessness, such as drug and alcohol abuse, sexual abuse, family violence and debt, could also help develop preventative interventions.

*This research, by **Lesley Cooper** and **Mary Morris**, of the AHURI Southern Research Centre, identifies how to provide stable housing and sustain tenancies for Indigenous women and children who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in both urban and remote areas.*

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METHOD

The research responds to a cycle of homelessness among Indigenous women in urban and remote settings and focuses on the current situation of homeless Indigenous women and their children, and the supports they require to sustain their tenancies.

A particular strength of the research is the viewpoint of Indigenous women. For this project 104 Indigenous women were recruited from Cherbourg and Brisbane (N=37), and Darwin (N=67). Ages were 19 to 63 years and nearly half were caring for children aged less than 18 years. The women were recruited from temporary accommodation services in Darwin and Brisbane. A semi-structured interview schedule was used and interview questions were checked by an Indigenous research assistant to ensure the appropriateness of language and relevance of the questions. Confidential issues raised in the interviews have not been reported.

Interviews were also held with Indigenous service providers in Brisbane, such as Aboriginal Hostels Ltd, crisis accommodation providers (SAAP agencies), health services and domestic violence services in Cherbourg and Darwin. Further, three informal focus groups were held with women in temporary accommodation – two in urban Darwin and one in the Northern Territory town of Nhulunbuy.

FINDINGS

MOBILITY AND POOR SERVICE ACCESS FOR INDIGENOUS WOMEN

Indigenous women and children are often 'hidden' to service providers, due to their high mobility, and have poor access to mainstream and Indigenous-specific services. Constant moving means they fail to meet social security requirements, and also makes it difficult for interventions to prevent homelessness. The women and their children moved great distances from both regional urban centres and Aboriginal Communities; this involved several moves and nearly half of the women reported itinerancy as a lifestyle, drifting from place to place with few possessions:

At the moment I have nowhere to go. I have been touring Queensland for the last 13 months.

'Shame' also prevents women from seeking help, reporting family violence, accessing services and attending training programs. Service providers identified Indigenous women's lack of confidence to speak and/or lack of knowledge about how to speak to housing providers, as well as poor literacy skills, as barriers to accessing services.

The Indigenous women interviewed reported racial discrimination when trying to access housing, particularly in the private rental market, but not confined to private real estate agents. One woman believed that people in mainstream agencies do not want to assist Indigenous women:

...they don't like working with Indigenous people. Sometimes I think they don't want to help, don't want to or can't, can't relate to who we are and the way we are.

PERCEPTIONS OF 'HOMELESSNESS' BY INDIGENOUS WOMEN

Poor service access is compounded by the differences between current homelessness and related programs and the perceptions of 'homelessness' by Indigenous women.

Service providers identified women's lifestyles as a 'cycle of homelessness' that included sleeping out and sleeping rough, frequent moving from place to place, and using various forms of temporary accommodation and substandard accommodation. They noted that more than half of the women had been homeless for more than six months and nearly two-thirds had experienced homelessness two or more times.

But most women did not describe their current housing situation as 'homeless' even though their housing situations were transient and insecure. They saw homelessness as 'rooflessness'. This may mean that women in these circumstances are less likely to access services to help with their current insecure housing.

NEED FOR SUPPORT

While the women relied on their friends and family for support, there was a lack of formal support for them in areas such as accessing information about services, financial assistance, transport, urban living skills and skills to access services.

But support services are required since homelessness leads to women living in a state of perpetual fear and chronic stress, and this affects their physical and mental wellbeing. Transient homelessness has a negative effect on children, especially their care, education and health. A further factor was the effect of violence; nearly all the children witnessed at least two violent incidents against their mother, as reported by the Indigenous women interviewed.

HOUSING ASPIRATIONS

Providing stable housing relies on an alignment of service interventions and the particular aspirations and understandings of house and home by Indigenous women. Services providers should not presume there is a common, homogeneous, response.

For example, the study reveals gender difference in the sense of home, with Indigenous men tending to emphasise ownership, while women stress a place of safety to raise their children. Women in this study identified that they wanted their housing to be

appropriate, safe, secure, stable and close to services, particularly because they wanted to remove their children from family violence and sexual abuse, and to avoid having to move constantly.

To achieve this the study suggests responses to family violence that do not require women to leave their housing. Men who perpetrate domestic violence or sexual abuse stay in the houses, forcing the women and children to leave to seek somewhere safe to live:

There are men around here living in five bedroom homes by themselves. The women move and the blokes stay in the house.

Men believe they have the right to stay because the rent is deducted from their wages:

Even if there are two names on the tenancy agreement, but because the deduction is being taken out of his wage, he thinks he has got all the say.

There is a need to provide support services for men, such as 'cooling-off rooms' to remove them from their families when violent, so allowing women to stay in their homes. As noted by service providers, in one instance:

It would be easier for a woman and children to stay in the house than the man himself stay. Maybe the man himself could go and move in with a family member because that is only taking up one space, and that's his, but when you are throwing a woman and five kids out, and yet they are going to live with family, there are a lot of spaces that have to be made for them.

Further, the study showed that most of the women did not want to either have to stay with relatives in overcrowded conditions, or have relatives staying with them when they have housing, as this led to problems with alcohol abuse, and males perpetrating family violence, sexual abuse and damage to the women's housing and possessions. Women live with families in overcrowded situations because there is nowhere else to go:

You feel better when you are living on your own, instead of staying with other people, the kids can do their own thing too, you know. Your own house.

BROADER DRIVERS OF HOMELESSNESS

Understanding the particular factors contributing to homelessness can help to target interventions to sustain tenancies of Indigenous women and children.

Family violence was identified by two-thirds of the Indigenous women as a factor for leaving 'home'. Substance abuse by many of the women's partners and by some of the women themselves was an accompanying factor. Nearly one quarter of women interviewed reported drug abuse and one third, alcohol abuse, as contributing to family violence and homelessness:

Yes, domestic violence and also I had a drinking problem and violence. When he used to leave I used to go and drink in my house. The neighbours complained about the noise and that young people came into my house. They wrote to the council and the council gave me a warning, the warning ended up turning into an eviction, a breach.

Overcrowding is a particular problem, exacerbating family violence, sexual abuse and property damage, often leading to women and/or children leaving 'home', or eviction. There were numerous examples of overcrowding.

I was living with my friend and her husband and their seven children. I came with my four children and this made 11 living in a four bedroom house.

At the time of the study, a quarter of the women were living in substandard housing and others had been living in substandard housing but were unable to remain because of the effect on their health or their children. Some women experienced insecure tenancies, with a third evicted and over a fifth were unable to access temporary accommodation when required.

Access to housing is exacerbated by long waiting lists for public housing with women and children staying with friends and family, or staying in often substandard, temporary accommodation. Women left temporary housing because it was substandard and bad for their children's health, such as a lack of hot water and holes in walls.

Debt, particularly 'inherited debt', was one of the most common problems for women trying to find stable housing and sustain a tenancy because they are barred from accessing public housing until debt had been paid. Debts included unpaid rental and/or property damage, as one women interviewed noted:

I owe money (to Cherbourg Council). I would not have a clue about how much money I owe them. I have been out of a house for a year and a half now.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Increasing the supply of culturally appropriate crisis, temporary and long-term affordable housing is necessary, but this alone will not be enough to provide stable housing and sustainable tenancies for Indigenous women. A crucial initial stage is finding and retaining contact with homeless Indigenous women and their children.

OUTREACH SERVICE

The provision of outreach services would enhance access by women and their families to services, with workers going to places where women and children are likely to be, such as parks, caravan parks, boarding houses, Aboriginal hostels and various other forms of temporary accommodation, rather than waiting for women to come to them.

ENHANCE SERVICE ACCESS

Steps are needed to remove barriers to service access. Services need to be culturally appropriate and designed to overcome Indigenous women's lack of confidence to speak and/or lack of knowledge about how to speak to housing providers. This includes service providers understanding the sense of 'shame' experienced by Indigenous women. There is also a need to develop education strategies to reduce discrimination and develop culturally appropriate practices.

PROVISION OF PRACTICAL SUPPORT

Practical and ongoing support is also needed to foster sustainable tenancies. This support involves such matters as personal, social and family matters, including the development of life skills (i.e. budgeting, cooking, accessing services, child care and parenting skills, and accessing community services, including using a telephone directory), obtaining household items and taking women to services and providing advice about where to go for help.

SERVICE COLLABORATION

Local strategies could be developed to foster service collaboration, such as agreed principles of the roles and responsibilities of partner agencies, and improving information between agencies about their work and staffing. Better service collaboration could also include the development of one-stop service centres, incorporating all services (such as housing, finance, social security, legal, medical, and education).

Working with women who are highly mobile presents enormous challenges for service providers. The current capacity of specialist and Indigenous staff to work across health, welfare, housing and legal domains means that additional and specialist training is required to support workforce competencies.

Further, strategies to sustain tenancies for Indigenous women and their children will benefit by taking into account gender distinctions. There is a need for support services for men, such as 'cooling-off rooms' to remove them from their families when violent, thus allowing women to stay in their homes. Services are needed to assist men to deal with their violence, such as health, substance abuse, mental health services.

CASE MANAGEMENT

A case management approach is identified in the study as an appropriate support model. This allows ongoing contact with the women and entails working actively with them on a longer-term basis to assist in setting goals and providing the necessary services and supports. A core feature of a case management approach is a detailed assessment of their health, welfare and housing situation, and the development of housing plan, so providing a wholistic approach of Indigenous women's problems.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 40158 entitled *Sustainable Tenancy for Indigenous Families: What Services and Policy Supports are Needed?* 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:
• Final Report
• Positioning Paper

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

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