

Indigenous Access to Mainstream Public and Community Housing

ACCESS BY INDIGENOUS PEOPLE TO MAINSTREAM PUBLIC HOUSING HAS INCREASED IN THE PAST FOUR YEARS WITH THE NUMBER OF NEWLY ASSISTED INDIGENOUS TENANTS GROWING BY 11.6 PER CENT OVER THE PERIOD 2000-01 TO 2003-04. THERE IS A NEED TO FURTHER BOOST THE STOCK OF LARGER DWELLINGS TO REDUCE OVERCROWDING FOR INDIGENOUS HOUSEHOLDS IN MAINSTREAM PUBLIC HOUSING, AND TO CONTINUE TO IMPROVE THE SUSTAINABILITY OF TENANCIES.

KEY POINTS

- The proportion of Indigenous households in public housing administered by States and Territories, but excluding public housing funded under the Aboriginal Rental Housing Program (ARHP), has increased from 3.4 per cent of households in 2001 to 5.2 per cent of households in 2004 (estimates exclude NSW where data on the Indigenous status of existing tenants are incomplete).
- The increase in the representation of Indigenous households from around 75 per cent between June 2000 and June 2004 (up from 6,339 to 11,087 households respectively) reflects improvements in data collection by a number of jurisdictions and a drop in the number of non-Indigenous households (in line with the overall decline in the mainstream public housing stock).
- Overcrowding problems in mainstream public housing are more prevalent among Indigenous tenants and Indigenous tenancies are shorter in duration than non-Indigenous tenancies. While the data is incomplete, Indigenous households are more likely to be served termination and final eviction notices than non-Indigenous households.
- There is an urgent need to arrest recent declines in the overall supply of mainstream public housing dwellings if levels of housing need among Indigenous people are to be further reduce. In particular, State and Territory Housing Authorities could boost the stock of dwellings, especially larger dwellings, through the ongoing sale of smaller units and the purchase or building of larger dwellings, to overcome overcrowding. Supported tenancy programs to improve the sustainability of tenancies must be high on the agendas of State Housing Authorities.

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*This research led by **Paul Flatau** of the AHURI Western Australia Research Centre in collaboration with **Lesley Cooper** and others from the Southern Research Centre¹, examines access of Indigenous households to mainstream public and community housing, and the extent to which Indigenous people particularly those with unmet housing needs, face access barriers and experience difficulties in sustaining their tenancies.*

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CONTEXT

Indigenous households are much more likely to experience a range of housing difficulties such as severe housing affordability, private tenancy access overcrowding and sub-standard accommodation. There is also a significantly over representation among the homelessness and those living in other forms of marginal housing.

Mainstream public housing (public housing administered by States and Territories but excluding that funded under the ARHP) and long-term community housing (rental housing provided or managed by local government, religious and charity organisations and non-affiliated community cooperatives that is not of a crisis or transitional housing form) provides secure and affordable accommodation for Indigenous people in housing need. The research examines access of Indigenous households to mainstream public and community housing, and the extent to which Indigenous people particularly those with unmet housing needs, face access barriers and experience difficulties in sustaining their tenancies.

RESEARCH METHOD

Given the national context of the research and the broad nature of the issues examined, a multi-jurisdictional and transdisciplinary research approach was adopted.

The research analysed mainstream public and community housing administrative data held by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) against six quantitative indicators: overall access, access to suitable accommodation, access by need, timeliness of access, sustainability of tenancies, and involuntary tenancy termination. It must be noted that there was incomplete data on the Indigenous status of tenants for NSW.

The analysis of the administrative data was complemented by consultations (through a formal survey) with Federal, State and Territory Housing Authorities about mainstream public housing policies and programs and perspectives on access and tenancy sustainability outcomes of Indigenous people. Similar consultations were held with peak mainstream community housing agencies.

Case studies were undertaken in Geraldton (Western Australia, North-West Adelaide (South Australia) and Inala (South-East Queensland). The case study data provided important insights into impediments and problems experienced by Indigenous people in accessing mainstream public housing and in sustaining those tenancies. In addition, a detailed quantitative study was undertaken in Katherine Northern Territory that sought to ascertain the impact that housing-related experiences relevant to the present study (such as access and overcrowding) had on individual wellbeing.

FINDINGS

ACCESS

The number of Indigenous households - In mainstream public housing the number of Indigenous households increased by about 50 per cent between June 2001 and June 2004 (up from 7,394 to 11,087 households respectively). Over the same period, the number of non-Indigenous households in mainstream public housing fell by 6.3 per cent (from 212,695 to 202,062 households respectively).

The share of Indigenous households - In mainstream public housing (excluding NSW) the share of Indigenous households has increased from 3.4 per cent in 2000-01 to 5.2 per cent in 2003-04. The national Indigenous population share, at the time of the 2001 Census, was 2.2 per cent. These gains are partly due to the range of public housing authority programs that have emerged to assist access and support the sustainability of tenancies for Indigenous households. The improved representation of Indigenous people has helped to reduce levels of homelessness and housing need.

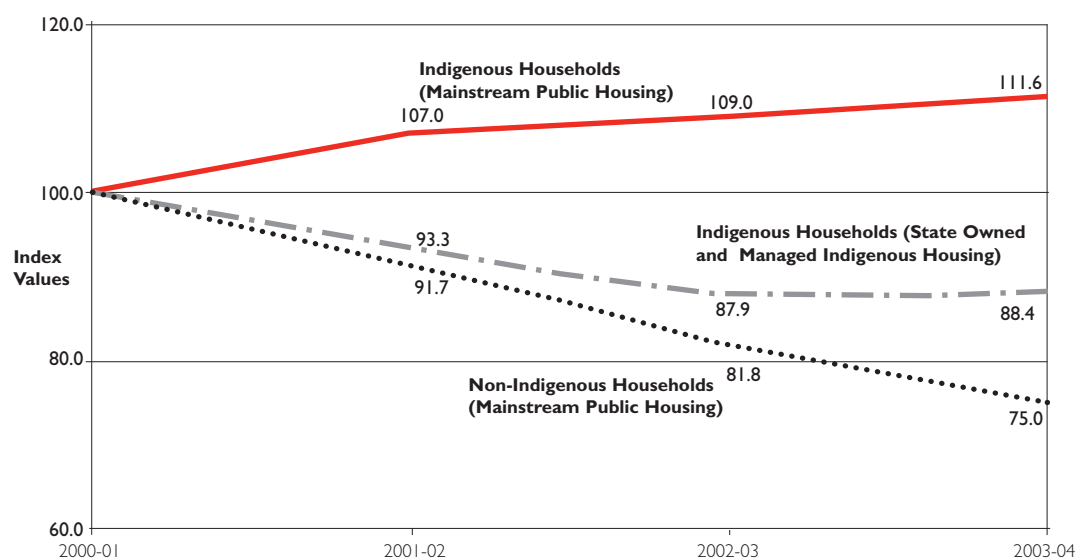
Mainstream long-term community housing - Indigenous representation in long-term mainstream community housing is generally lower than it is in mainstream public housing². In Queensland the reverse is true. Indigenous households comprised 8.1 per cent of long-term community housing dwellings in Queensland in June 2004 whereas they comprised 5.4 per cent of mainstream public housing households at the same time point. The trend in New South Wales is towards an increasing share of Indigenous people in mainstream community housing with a spread of Indigenous people between targeted and non-targeted long-term community housing providers. This trend has yet to appear in most other jurisdictions.

DRIVERS

Growth in newly assisted tenants - An important factor contributing to the increasing number of Indigenous people in mainstream public housing is the growth in newly assisted tenants. As indicated in figure 1, the number of newly assisted Indigenous households grew by 11.6 per cent over the period 2000-01 to 2003-04, with the growth in Western Australia being particularly strong. At the same time, the number of non-Indigenous households in mainstream public housing fell by 25 per cent. The growth in Indigenous households in mainstream public housing over the period 2000-01 to 2003-04 contrasts with the decline (11.6 per cent) in newly assisted tenants in State Owned and Managed Indigenous Housing.

Indigenous access by need - Indigenous households are more likely to enter mainstream public housing as 'greatest need' tenant households than non-Indigenous households and experience lower income levels while in public housing. This outcome is probably a reflection of the higher levels of severe housing need among Indigenous applicants compared with non-Indigenous applicants.

FIGURE I NEWLY ASSISTED TENANTS IN PUBLIC HOUSING AUSTRALIA



The timeliness of access - Indigenous people, who are successful in accessing mainstream public housing, experience waiting times no longer than non-Indigenous public housing applicants. The median waiting time for non-Indigenous newly assisted tenant households in the greatest need category in 2002-03 is 78 days. For Indigenous tenants in the greatest need category, the median waiting time was 61 days.

ACCESS BARRIERS

The case studies reveal histories of discrimination in housing experienced by Indigenous people in need. Discrimination experienced by Indigenous people in housing leads to its own negative outcomes including a lack of dignity, self-worth and feelings of shame.

The case studies provide evidence that a lack of permanent long-term housing and the high use of emergency accommodation helps to perpetuate the social circumstances which conspire against good housing outcomes for Indigenous people in housing need. The high levels of use of emergency accommodation illustrate the 'stop gap' housing history of unstable accommodation and homelessness. The case studies also point to concerns regarding the quality of public housing available to tenants and to its suitability for Indigenous households.

The role of prior debts to housing authorities and poor housing histories in impeding access to public housing was an important theme of the case studies. In most jurisdictions, prior debt does not act as a hard bar to prevent people in housing need from taking out a public tenancy. Nevertheless, prior debt and a tenant's past history were considered by respondents to be a key barrier to public housing access for households. When strictly applied, such eligibility criteria may act to prevent households in greatest need from re-entering public housing and securing long-term low-cost accommodation.

OUTCOMES

Overcrowding - Once in public housing Indigenous households face particular problems. The rate of moderate overcrowding is twice that for non-Indigenous households and remains of critical policy concern. The 'moderate overcrowding' rate (where one additional bedroom is required to satisfy the proxy occupancy standard used by the AIHW) is twice that for Indigenous households

The sustainability of tenancies - The data suggests that Indigenous tenancies have much shorter median durations as compared to non-Indigenous tenancies. Overcrowding can be an important factor in affecting the long-term sustainability of a tenancy. Further, the available administrative data does not include items related to tenancy termination but at least on the one available set of relevant data from Western Australia, Indigenous households are significantly more likely to be served termination and final eviction notices than non-Indigenous households. It is unlikely that the experience in Western Australia is different to other jurisdictions.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

While Indigenous access to mainstream public housing has improved, high levels of unmet housing need continue to exist in the Indigenous population and underscore the need to continue to ensure an adequate overall supply of mainstream public housing dwellings, to reduce barriers inhibiting Indigenous access and to improve the sustainability of mainstream public housing tenancies.

³Mainstream community housing developed in parallel with Indigenous-specific community housing. The policy objective for the mainstream community housing sector has been to remove barriers to housing Indigenous applicants but more generally work with, support and complement the Indigenous community housing sector. This has meant that mainstream community housing has not fully developed the structures, programs and cultural practices that might enable it to quickly increase its intake of Indigenous people.

REDUCING BARRIERS TO INDIGENOUS ACCESS

Public and community housing policies need to focus on reducing the impact of barriers and impediments to access for Indigenous people.

There is a need to place even greater emphasis on priority access channels of entry if the current high levels of unmet housing need among Indigenous households are to be reduced. This may be assisted by even greater targeting of existing stock and programs that encourages higher rates of exit from public housing of those households more able to cope in the private market.

Developing ways in which past tenancy histories do not inadvertently act as a barrier for those households in greatest need attempting to re-enter public housing must also be a particular focus. Public housing authorities need to build on current recognition of the history of Indigenous disadvantage and discrimination. The Queensland Department of Housing's Statement of Reconciliation, provides an overarching commitment to address the concerns and issues of Indigenous people and commitments in a number of areas to create a positive environment for existing and prospective Indigenous tenants. Options to consider include increasing the representation of Indigenous people in mainstream public housing offices and in decision-making roles in mainstream public housing (also throughout the administrative arm) to provide a positive environment for Indigenous clients.

For community housing, meeting the housing needs of Indigenous clients requires culturally appropriate service delivery mechanisms, realistic debt management processes, appropriate training for staff and volunteers in the community housing sector; and the establishment and maintenance of links with the local community and with support services. There is need to consider further the development of priority access mechanisms in long-term community housing.

Reducing overcrowding - To reduce overcrowding outcomes for Indigenous households, State and Territory Housing Authorities could consider boosting the stock of larger dwellings through the ongoing sale of smaller units and the purchase or building of larger dwellings. The need for greater efficiency in matching household types to dwelling type is a further key area for policy action and adjustments in housing stock would assist in this task.

Sustaining tenancies - Evidence that Indigenous households have shorter tenancies and higher eviction and termination notice rates than non-Indigenous households underlines the need for Housing Authorities to develop supported tenancy programs to assist households that may prematurely exit from public housing or face eviction. Such programs can help avoid a cycle of eviction/vacant possession and churning through crisis and emergency housing and other tenuous accommodation options. These programs have worked successfully in a number of jurisdictions (e.g., Western Australia's Supported Housing Assistance Program) and their development and further extension are a high priority for mainstream public and community housing.

Unmet housing need - High levels of unmet housing need continues to exist in the Indigenous population, especially those at risk of homelessness. State and Territory based Homelessness Strategies that bring together support services in an integrated fashion at points of greatest stress offer the greatest hope for improved outcomes for Indigenous homeless people. Better integration of the mainstream public and community housing sector with the Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP) and other elements of the crisis and emergency accommodation sector are also critical elements in an integrated program response designed to reduce housing need levels in the Indigenous population.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 80234 entitled *Indigenous Access to Mainstream Public and Community Housing*. Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website by typing the project number into the search function www.ahuri.edu.au

The following documents are available:

- Positioning Paper
- Final Report

Or Contact the AHURI National Office on
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