

Understanding the housing careers and aspirations of urban Indigenous households

THE STRONGEST FORCES SHAPING THE HOUSING CAREERS OF URBAN INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS ARE LONG-TERM POVERTY, FAMILY AND NEIGHBOURHOOD VIOLENCE, AND SOCIAL HOUSING ACCESSIBILITY AND MANAGEMENT PRACTICES.

KEY POINTS

- The strongest influences in the structuring of Indigenous housing careers are entrenched poverty, accessibility of social housing, and the management practices of social housing providers.
- The ideal housing career was viewed as a Homeswest¹ (public rental) home. This was in preference to all other rental options with the objective of achieving security and longevity of leasing arrangements aimed at ensuring that the household would have a home for the whole term of its life cycle.
- Anxiety resulting from the current crisis in affordability and vacancy rates produced strong feelings of attachment and ownership towards rental homes.
- Overcrowding is another outcome of the crisis in affordability and vacancy rates, as individuals and families are forced to choose between homelessness and living with often large numbers of kinfolk.
- Where a family history of home ownership existed, this was found to shape housing aspirations by creating the possibility of home ownership for younger generations.

*This bulletin is based on research by **Dr Christina Birdsall-Jones** and **Vanessa Corunna** of the AHURI Western Australia Research Centre, which involved an ethnographic study of the housing careers of extended kin groups of Indigenous Australians in Perth, Camarvon and Broome. It relates housing moves to housing aspirations and examines how factors such as life stage, employment, family/ community responsibilities and housing assistance have affected Indigenous housing careers in Western Australia.*

¹ Homeswest is the Western Australian social housing provider. For information see the Department of Housing and Works website; <http://www.dhw.wa.gov.au/>

BACKGROUND

In Western Australia, 76.6 per cent of Indigenous people rent their homes and 18.4 per cent are home owners or are purchasing their homes. More than half of all Indigenous people in Western Australia rent their homes either from Homeswest (32 per cent) or from a community housing agency (23 per cent). This is the highest proportion of Indigenous people renting from the state housing authority nationally

Governments have consistently expressed concern about the recent housing boom and the impact of house price increases for low-income housing, in particular the impact of these on Indigenous people. This concern is expressed in 'Building a Better Future: Indigenous Housing to 2010', the governments' vision for the development of solutions to the housing needs of Indigenous people. In particular, the policy seeks ways to identify and address the unmet housing needs of Indigenous people through the identification of housing needs according to long-term requirements as well as emergent situations. This research aims to inform policy development regarding the mix of housing type, tenure and location, the desire for home ownership, cultural, social and environmental factors and people's life stages and special needs.

RESEARCH METHOD

Data for this project was gathered in the course of ethnographic interviews. In this study, the ethnographic interview means an unstructured interview focused on eliciting information that constitutes a cultural interpretation by the participant for the interviewer of his or her own story of housing. Interviews were conducted with Indigenous informants identified as 'householders', meaning the individual in the household group who exercises responsibilities that include the acquisition of housing for the household group. As was anticipated in the project design, most householders were women and therefore most participants were women.

In all, 51 interviews were conducted. These produced a body of textual data that was then subjected to systematic sociological analysis. This process of analysis revealed three sets of relating to differing aspects of Indigenous housing careers: the agency/tenant relationship, the housing experience itself, and issues specific to the town of current residence.

KEY FINDINGS

Poverty

The strongest influence in the structuring of Indigenous housing careers is entrenched poverty.

Harriet, Carnarvon

Everybody hates going in for food vouchers. No one likes doing it. I went there once and they wanted me to wait until tomorrow. I asked them what're these kids supposed to eat 'til then. They wanted to give me \$20 for four kids. They got snappy with me when I complained about it. I only went back there once. I hate going for food vouchers.

This poverty means that most Indigenous people seek housing from a social housing provider and few are able to engage in the purchase of their own homes. Most Indigenous housing careers involved a culture of renting.

Social housing providers

The course of Indigenous housing careers in social housing tenancy tended to be a function of the relationship between Indigenous people as tenants and the social housing agency, in this case the Western Australian social housing provider, Homeswest. More particularly, relationships are often characterised by conflict between the tenant and the social housing agency. The key aspects of this conflict are housing-related debt, wait listing (both ordinary and priority), maintenance and repairs, and the degree to which administrative processes (principally application and provision) are transparent to Indigenous people. Where the resolution of these issues remains the current concern of the individual's life, the housing career is subsumed in the constant effort to obtain a resolution.

Sherry, Perth

In all my time renting, I would say that I have never had a clean sheet with Homeswest. I've always had a debt. I've paid the rent okay, but they always charge for every small repair to the walls, the doors and so on. They don't bill you on the spot; they just add it up at the office and then present you with it when you leave the premises. I moved in here with a \$4,000 bill. I tried to scrub the walls and clean the yard and all, but the letter came last week. I tried to get help from MIDLAS (Midland Information/Debt and Legal Advice Service) to appeal the bill. I went to see them anyway down in Midland there and they knocked a bit off ... But no, I never had a clean sheet, with just the rent. There was always bills.

Violence

Another strong influence on Indigenous housing careers comes from family violence and neighbourhood violence. Violence narrows the individual's focus to the management of the crisis and day-to-day necessities. Bills tend to go unnoticed, and if the management of the crisis calls for a sudden departure from the home, then the rent will also go unpaid. With the household debt mounting into the thousands of dollars, women and children in particular are threatened with homelessness.

Neighbourhood violence was an important topic for Indigenous people in Carnarvon and Broome. They pointed to the effect of neighbourhood violence on particular areas of their towns, which they referred to as 'the Bronx'. They related the Bronx to overcrowding, substance abuse and transients. In their view, the problem of the Bronx was largely caused by the crisis in low-cost rental housing.

Mary, Broome

My sister is renting privately in the Bronx ... It's just lots of little units and the drink, the drugs and the backpackers in the tourist season, coming and going, you don't know who these people are. A couple of days ago someone was smashing up the cars in front, and then the other day they were trying to light up a car. It's not safe.

Stability and affordability

The current crisis in affordability and vacancy rates produces feelings of insecurity as Indigenous people worry about retaining their rental homes. This anxiety is expressed in strong feelings of ownership regarding rental homes.

Jason, Carnarvon

You live in a place for around 10 years and you don't want to move, that's home. You get a good job and you don't want to move towns, you want to stay in that job.

Amelia, Perth

The advantage of Homeswest housing is that it's long-term rental. Once you've got it you know you've got a home. Private rentals are all six to twelve months. This one, for example, we were on a six-month lease with a three-month probation period ... With private rentals, it's always the same thing. The owners want to sell up. They're not allowed to kick you out just because of your children, but if they want to sell all you get is 28 days notice.

Participants also expressed the worry that Indigenous people might no longer be able to afford to live in their 'own' towns. This leads to another outcome of the crisis in affordability and vacancy rates – overcrowding.

Overcrowding

Overcrowding increases as families are forced to choose between homelessness and living with kinfolk. Householders are under pressure to house kinfolk in varying numbers and for varying periods of time.

Hannah, Broome

So we were living with [her husband's] cousin, now, and they got four kids – no, six kids – and two adults, and plus us two, with our kids, that's ten kids and four adults. We lived there from August, September, October, November. I couldn't live like that no more. I went to Welfare, I went to Homeswest, and they all said to wait. I went back to Welfare [DCD], and I'm saying, look here, I got a sick man and all these kids. You want us to live on the beach? Or we'll go sleep in the Homeswest office. We was going to do that, you know. In the Homeswest office.

Yvonne, Carnarvon

We've got an old aunty there and she's got her son's grandson, his missus and their three kids, and her granddaughter and her three kids ... it's a three-bedroom house. She's been there for four or five years. She's old and sick, she's got heart trouble. We've been trying to tell Aunty [---] to get her to move out to a pensioner's flat but she won't. She feels sorry for all those little ones. She also carries a lot of money with her and we tell her not to, but she just doesn't listen.

Home ownership

With regard to home ownership, very few participants in this research were purchasing their own homes, or even hoped to do so. In part, this clearly results from the limitations of life on a low income. However, among those who were purchasing their own homes or who hoped one day to do so, it was discovered that previous generations of the family had owned homes or farming properties and that the current generation of the family viewed home ownership as an achievable and necessary goal. Among these families, having a home of one's own meant owning, not renting, resulting in a family ideology of home ownership as opposed to rental.

Marcia, Perth

I was sick of renting. All my sisters have their own houses, they're all buying ... There are eight in our family and the only one not buying is my younger brother. I'll help him, and he should go and see [the mortgage broker she went to].

Further research is necessary to make clear statements of associated ideologies, such as education and employment, which go to establish the reality of home ownership among Indigenous people.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This ethnographic research identified the challenges that face many urban Indigenous households in obtaining and maintaining appropriate long-term housing. It also identified the key challenges that face mainstream social housing providers when housing Indigenous clients, including cultural differences, long-term poverty, kinship roles and expectations, and the prevalence of family and neighbourhood violence.

Many of these issues are beyond the direct control or responsibility of social housing providers, and require a much broader and integrated whole-of-government response. However, they are issues that social housing providers must actively address in their allocation and management practices, particularly given the policy drive to increasingly 'mainstream' Indigenous housing.

The research showed that typically the first housing move in urban Indigenous housing careers is an application to the social housing provider. In Western Australia, at present, the ordinary waiting time for housing from Homeswest is from two to five years. For young adults there was a hiatus of housing of at least two years, during which time they remained with their parents in a Homeswest home. Consequently, they established their first marriage/partnership in that home, and their first child and often their second spent their early years in the grandparental home.

Indigenous people's desire for social housing was found to be an expression of the need for stability in founding a home. The need for low-cost housing is coupled with the need for long-term tenure in order to progress towards achieving better educational and health outcomes for their children. Stabilising the housing situations of more Indigenous people requires addressing problems of social control in relation to substance abuse and the ensuing family and community violence, which can drive some Indigenous families out of their homes.

Finally, the long-term situation of poverty must be recognised as the major structural force determining the nature of urban Indigenous housing careers.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 80317, *The housing careers of Indigenous urban households*.

Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website: www.ahuri.edu.au

The following documents are available:

- Positioning Paper
- Final Report

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



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