



Creating a framework for ending homelessness

Homelessness and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders



Concepts of home and homelessness may vary across different communities in Australia. Homelessness in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities cannot be understood without reference to the legacy of colonisation and dispossession. A history of physical and cultural displacement leaves many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at increased risk of homelessness. Concepts of country are fundamental to the culture and identity of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Some may not identify as being homeless if they have a spiritual connection to the land they live on, regardless of the type of shelter they live in. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may experience separation from their traditional land, family or kinship groups as spiritual homelessness. This may be true even if they are living in a structure that other Australians may perceive to be a conventional dwelling. In addition many Indigenous people live in dwellings that meet the Canadian Occupancy Standard Definition of 'overcrowded'. Many people in this situation meet the definition of secondary homelessness as they have no tenancy rights to the property

Rates of homelessness

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are over represented among Australia's homeless population. While they comprise 2.4 percent of the population, they represent 10 percent of people counted as experiencing homelessness on Census night 2006. Rates of homelessness are higher in rural areas where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are sixty-nine percent of service users and in remote areas, where they are eighty-eight percent of service users.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are over-represented in every category of homelessness. They represent:

- 3.8 per cent of people staying temporarily with friends or family (this would appear to be an undercount)
- 6 percent of people living in insecure boarding house accommodation;
- 16% of rough sleepers; and
- 20% of people living temporarily in homeless services. In WA, 34% of people in the homeless service system are Indigenous or Torres Strait Islander: in NT they represent 66% of homeless service users.

Specialist Homelessness Services

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are overrepresented in specialist homelessness services data. Just over 18% of people who received support from specialist homelessness services in 2009/10 while they represent just 2.5% of the Australian population. 26.1% of children who received support identified as Indigenous, they represent just over 4% of Australian children aged 0-12.

Overcrowding and adequate housing

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in housing that does not meet their needs. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are six times more likely to live in overcrowded conditions than non indigenous Australians. According to a 2008 report by the ABS, 1 in 7 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in housing that meets the Canadian National Occupancy Standard Definition (CNOS) of overcrowded. Overcrowding due to a shortage of housing is more severe in rural and remote areas. Living in overcrowded conditions can contribute to ill health and increase exposure to and the risk of family violence and can disrupt education and work. Overcrowding is one of the biggest causes of "hidden homelessness" among people who are from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background.

Domestic and Family Violence

- Family violence is a common cause of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness.
- Forty percent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in homeless assistance services are women escaping domestic violence (compared to 35.5 for the general population).
- Almost a quarter (24%) of women seeking help from a homeless service as a result of domestic violence, are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander women.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are more likely to be victims of domestic violence and to sustain more serious injuries than non indigenous women.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women living in rural and remote areas are more likely to be affected by domestic violence than the non indigenous population.



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Public places in towns and cities

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in remote areas and have to travel to regional centres to access basic services. People who are in town temporarily may stay with family in overcrowded houses or in public places. Some Aboriginal people may engage in seasonal mobility and this may mean that populations in some areas rise and fall at different times during the year. This can place pressure on accommodation providers and local government.

Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in public places in urban areas. Some choose to live in these places either temporarily or permanently. Some may wish to return to country but require services that are only available in urban areas; others lack the means to travel home.

Connection to country may mean some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience lack of access or a loss of control over their use of public places as homelessness. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are also disproportionately affected by laws that govern public spaces.

What needs to happen?

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness must be addressed as a central aspect of a holistic, comprehensive national action plan on homelessness.
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities must be supported to engage directly with local, state and territory and national government about culturally appropriate ways to effectively support and accommodate that community.
3. The supply of long-term, affordable and culturally appropriate housing must be increased, particularly in rural and remote areas of Australia.
4. More specialist homelessness services must be managed and staffed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
5. Government policies must focus on restoring traditional connection to country and reconnecting the Stolen Generation with family and culture in order to address the spiritual element of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness.
6. Aboriginal Controlled Housing Organisations (ACHOs) must be supported and encouraged to expand in the same way that mainstream not for profit providers are being encouraged to.

References

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