

Calling Australia Home:

Homelessness amongst Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders and people from other culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

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As the MY Address- Diversity in Homelessness campaign continues, the focus of the second issue of HA News for 2011 is on homelessness amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and people from other culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CaLD).

We know from the Counting the Homeless reports and the data collected by specialist homelessness services that homelessness is yet another social indicator in which people who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander are overrepresented.

The evidence base that we have available to us about homelessness amongst Australians from other culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is less extensive and much of it is focused on refugees, although there is strong interest from the multicultural services sector on the need for funding for research that enables us to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of homelessness in Australia for this group.

Clearly there will be commonalities between the experiences of homelessness shared by all Australians who lack a safe and secure place to call home. For the two groups that this issue of HA News focuses on however, these will be mediated by different cultural experiences and understandings of concepts like home, security and homelessness.

I still call Australia home: 'Terra Nullius' and the experience of homelessness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

There is one group of people whose experience of homelessness can be traced right back to the arrival of the first fleet and before that, officially to the date on

which the British declared Australia Terra Nullius. Equating to 'no people', this legal fiction effectively made all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people homeless for the first time as they were denied their very existence let alone their rights to occupy their respective 'clan nations' that existed within the larger nation we now call Australia.

Since that initial displacement, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been frequently dispossessed of their "country" and made homeless in their own lands. The experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has been one of dispossession and exclusion from the lands they are deeply connected to and it is this deep disconnection to the ancestral beings, customary laws, landforms and practices associated with "country" that lends itself to the definition of "spiritual homelessness"ⁱ. In an Anglo-Saxon context, spiritual homelessness might be expressed as the separation from land and family but is arguably more complex than that. Spiritual homelessness can also be characterised a crisis of identity, whereby a person's understanding or knowledge of how they relate to country, family or Aboriginal systems of identity is confused or lackingⁱⁱ.

Homeland insecurity: 'protection' and 'assimilation'

Casting our minds forward now to the late nineteenth century, we have the appointment by the States and Territories of "protectors" whose supposed role was to protect the rights, needs and aspirations of Indigenous people. In reality, the "protectors" were vested with the authority to remove Indigenous children from their families. This policy led to the displacement of Aboriginal people from

both their "country" and skin groups as they were placed on Government reserves and Christian missions arguably deepening the experience of spiritual homelessness.

By the 1940s, the policy of so-called 'protection' was replaced by a policy of 'assimilation' whereby Governments believed that Aboriginal children could be successfully 'assimilated' into mainstream society. Again this was to be achieved by forcible removal. The policy was based on the erroneous presupposition that Aboriginal people were a dying race and that children with "some white blood" could be 'assimilated' into society by teaching them skills that could be harnessed by employers and would, so the theory held, result in them being 'absorbed' into the dominant culture.

The policies of "protection" and "assimilation" created the 'stolen generations' that were the subject of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Inquiry. Many children who were removed were abused for continuing to speak their language or practice cultural traditions. This created a further sense of alienation from culture which had already been severed because of the inherent connection of the land to other aspects of life. The consequences of this are intergenerational and Indigenous experiences of homelessness in Australia must be understood in the context of dispossession, protection and assimilation.

Bringing them home? Self-determination and homelessness

In 1997, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission tabled the report from the inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

entitled: Bringing Them Home. The report noted:

“...The overwhelming evidence is that the impact does not stop with the children removed. It is inherited by their own children in complex and sometimes heightened ways... Psychological and emotional damage renders many people less able to learn social skills and survival skills. Their ability to operate successfully in the world is impaired causing low educational achievement, unemployment and consequent poverty...”ⁱⁱⁱ

Despite having an official policy of self-determination in place since the 1970s, it is clear that the policies and practices of the past are still determining factors in the life outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today. The Indigenous experience of homelessness may differ from that of other Australians in important ways, for example:

- A person may not meet the ABS cultural definition of homelessness because they may be housed in a conventional dwelling. If that person is not in the company of kin however, they may consider themselves or be considered by their kin to be spiritually homeless.
- A person may meet the ABS cultural definition of primary homelessness but if they are staying on country surrounded by members of their skin group, they may consider themselves to be home.
- A young person may leave the home of a non-Aboriginal family who has been awarded custody because they are unable to cope with the experiences of prejudice and racism. Conversely, the family may not cope with their reaction to experiences of racism.
- Young Aboriginal people leaving dysfunctional home situations that result from being raised by parents who were removed, institutionalised and subject to abuse.
- Older Aboriginal people who were themselves removed, with culturally specific care needs who are no longer able to rely on their children because that generation continues to be affected by removal policies. The mainstream aged care system may itself be culturally inappropriate^{iv}.
- Women and children forced to flee family violence in rural and remote localities where there is often no refuge or in cases where there is refuge, the perpetrator(s) know exactly where to find them.

- “Public space dwellers” who usually do not pay for accommodation and are highly visible in urban and regional centres.

Homelessness that is masked by chronic overcrowding. According to the ABS, one in seven Indigenous people live in overcrowded households. This may include household which are overcrowded during different periods as a result of patterns of mobility but it may also be permanent overcrowding resulting from insufficient adequate housing and/or the cultural obligation to accommodate extended family/kin.

Homelessness: another indicator of disadvantage

Having explored the historical and cultural context of Indigenous homelessness to some degree, I now want to turn to some of the present day statistics that underscore the significance of homelessness amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. These statistics demonstrate that while there are unique characteristics to the Indigenous experience of homelessness in Australia, many of the effects and challenges share common characteristics homelessness in Australia generally.

Homelessness is yet another social indicator of disadvantage in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may find themselves overrepresented.

On Census night 2006 in Australia, approximately one in every eleven Australians who were counted as homeless identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander^v. At the time, 2.3% of the population counted in the Census identified as Indigenous, adjusted upwards to 2.5% after undercounting was factored in^{vi}.

Of the 517,174 people who identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander^{vii} on 2006 Census night, 9526 were counted as homeless^{viii}. This indicates that nearly one in fifty Indigenous Australians were experiencing homelessness on Census night. This means that Indigenous people are officially four times more likely to experience homelessness on any given night than other Australians, a figure likely to be much higher when homelessness that is masked by overcrowding and Indigenous people sleeping rough who are missed by Census collectors are taken into account.

Indigenous Australians are also dramatically overrepresented in the data from our specialist homelessness services as well, with 37,800 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians being supported in 2006/07^{ix}. In 2008/09, just over

eighteen percent of clients and twenty-five percent of accompanying children supported by specialist homelessness services identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander^x.

By contrast, specialist homelessness services supported just under one percent of the Australian population and just over one and a half percent of Australian children during the same period of the time^{xi}. The data demonstrates that Indigenous people are between fifteen and twenty times more likely to be supported by specialist homelessness services than other Australians.

Housing is another area in which some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face disadvantage.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (and an Anglo-Saxon context):

- One in seven Indigenous households is overcrowded
- 102,364 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in overcrowded housing
- One in six Indigenous children live in housing that is ‘poor quality’
- The rate of Indigenous home ownership/home purchase is thirty-four percent compared with sixty-eight percent for non-Indigenous people.^{xii}

Another major issue at present is the loss of self-determination over Aboriginal and Torres Strait housing by Indigenous Community Housing Organisations who it would appear are not being granted the same ‘capacity building’ opportunities as other community housing providers. There has been a trend in recent years away from allowing community control over housing and a shift towards the Australian Government attempting to assert control over Aboriginal housing, particularly in the Northern Territory.

Homelessness Australia participated in a National Shelter forum on Indigenous housing in May.

This has provided an important opportunity for us to learn from Indigenous housing workers about both the challenges and opportunities for Indigenous people in housing and homelessness.

At our face to face meeting in Alice Springs in 2009, Indigenous workers identified the following as key issues in Indigenous homelessness:

- Lack of housing, particularly housing that is amenable to need

- Overcrowding and its effects on health and safety
- Getting to and from country
- Domestic, family and random violence
- Discrimination by landlords and property managers
- Accommodation is unaffordable
- The Northern Territory Emergency Response is causing homelessness related to mobility between 'designated communities' and major centres.

I will call Australia home: homelessness and housing challenges facing Australians from CaLD backgrounds

The literature on the experiences of homelessness amongst Australians from other CaLD backgrounds is less extensive. A number of our members have called for greater attention to be paid to the collection of better quality data in this area and for funding for research into the experiences and prevalence of homelessness amongst Australians from CaLD backgrounds.

While the data from specialist homelessness services does tell us about the country of origin of both clients and accompanying children, there is little in the way of qualitative data that provides rich insights into the experiences of homelessness amongst Australians from CaLD communities. Likewise, Census data may be able to provide information about the country of birth of people counted as homeless on Census night but there is a need for qualitative research that can inform decision making in both policy and practice.

By their very definition, the experiences of people from CaLD backgrounds are diverse and will vary according to a range of factors both individual and cultural, including:

- Housing history prior to arrival in Australia
- Housing (and immigration) status upon and post-arrival to Australia
- Cultural background and different understandings of housing security and homelessness
- Whether the person has arrived in Australia after escaping a life that had been characterised by experiences or war, torture, violence and trauma
- Past experiences of exclusion/isolation
- The level of social support available

- The level of economic/material resources available to a person
- Knowledge of the English language
- Knowledge of the Australian service delivery system
- Experiences of domestic and family violence pre and post-arrival
- The extent of discrimination a person incurs/experiences when applying for housing and other services.

Unlocking the door: service use and barriers to access

People born overseas and in particular, people from CaLD backgrounds are less likely to access specialist homelessness services than people who are born in Australia. This is probably true of other social services and there are number of reasons for this some of which have been identified by some of our members whose services provide accommodation and support to people from CaLD communities.

They include:

- Insufficient knowledge of the service delivery system
- Inability to navigate the service delivery system
- Being discouraged from accessing services because they are culturally unfriendly
- Insufficient literacy in English, making administrative forms difficult to comprehend
- Lack of access to interpreter and other multicultural services
- An aversion to accessing external help and support
- Discouragement from accessing support services by members of their cultural community
- Experiences of discrimination
- Services not appropriately tailored to cultural needs.

People of non-English speaking backgrounds are no less likely than others to become homeless or to suffer the poverty, ill-health and violence that are among its causes. However they may be unaware of the support services that are available. Due to funding restrictions homelessness services are not always able to provide culturally appropriate support such as translation services and bilingual staff.

Sixteen percent of people who were supported by specialist homelessness services were born outside of Australia.

A higher proportion of female clients were born overseas than males, seventeen percent of women and fourteen percent of men who received support from specialist homelessness services in 2008/09 were born outside Australia^{xiii}. People born outside Australia are less likely than the Australian-born population to use homeless services: while twenty-seven percent of Australia's population hail from countries that are mostly non-English speaking, just eleven percent of the people seeking help from homeless services are from these countries. While people born in Australia are 73% of the country's population, they were 84% of the users of homeless services in 2006-07^{xiv}.

Landscapes of exclusion: asylum seekers & refugees

While the data is not yet conclusive, it appears that some groups of new migrants are more vulnerable to homelessness, poverty and social exclusion than others.

This is particularly true of people who arrive via Australia's humanitarian program who have often experienced persecution, torture, trauma, violence and wars in their countries of origin and who may arrive with significantly less economic and material resources than other new migrants^{xv}.

Ensuring that programs and service providers can intervene early to prevent homelessness and social exclusion amongst this group of new migrants should form part of the broader homelessness strategy, particularly in relation to youth homelessness. The Centre for Multicultural Youth reported that in 2008/09, two thirds of people arriving on humanitarian visas were under the age of thirty^{xvi}.

Researchers have also found that young people from refugee backgrounds often felt unable to access homelessness services. Like other new migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds, people arriving on humanitarian visas may have difficulty navigating what is, for most people, a complex social service delivery system. Many will require access to interpreter services and assistance with interpreting and completing administrative forms^{xvii}, an issue not limited to arrivals on humanitarian visas.

For some migrants, aspects of stable housing that Australians may take for granted could be completely new challenges as was noted in the follow-up report to a Homelessness Australia workshop on housing challenges facing refugee women:

"...Women, who have been in a refugee camp, might have never

rented a house, paid a bill, gone to work or have had any concept of engaging with institutions such as banks, real estate agents or government departments...”^{xviii}

Like Indigenous people, some new migrants will also face discrimination in the housing market. In a rental market characterised by low vacancy rates and historical high median weekly rates, landlords and property managers can afford to discriminate in favour of people with histories of successful tenancy and verifiable rental referees. This is also a problem for people seeking to exit homelessness who have no recent rental references.

Researchers overseas have identified the crucial role that housing plays in easing the transition into a new society for new migrants, particularly those granted refugee status pointing out that it is as important as economic well-being^{xix}. It has also been argued that without appropriate and affordable housing, some refugees will remain on the periphery of society^{xx}.

While much of the literature looks specifically at the housing challenges facing refugees, practitioners point out that there is a cohort of older migrants who are either experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of becoming homeless, particularly older women who are survivors of domestic and family violence^{xxi}.

Homeland security: improving our response

Our member services who provide accommodation and support to people experiencing homeless from CaLD backgrounds have identified a number of challenges facing their clients as well as suggestions that they believe can improve our response to homelessness within CaLD communities.

The challenges:

- Often need more in-depth knowledge of tenant’s rights and responsibilities
- Increasing rate of rental excludes migrants with less resources
- Inequity in the selection process for tenancy
- Lack of suitable accommodation for large families
- Not able to show stable and long employment history
- Difficulty comprehending and completing application forms

- Histories of trauma and abuse.

Potential solutions:

- Making the service system more accessible/friendly/welcoming for people from CaLD backgrounds
- Improving access to interpreter services
- Implementing policies and strategies to combat discrimination
- Acknowledging that housing is a human right
- Improving the understanding of homelessness in the Australian context by people from CaLD communities
- Improving the dissemination of information about the housing and homelessness services available
- Increase the provision of affordable housing, especially dwellings that can accommodate large families.

It seems apparent that practitioners working with Australians from CaLD backgrounds who are experiencing homelessness have a good understanding of the challenges facing the people accessing their services. They have also proposed a number of suggestions for improving Australia’s response to homelessness. These should be given due consideration.

Filling the void: the need for better data & research

Much of the literature focuses heavily on homelessness and housing challenges facing asylum seekers and refugees. While they are an important group and evidently more vulnerable to homelessness and economic and social exclusion than other migrant groups there is an urgent need for better data and research that can provide us with insights into the experiences of homelessness for other Australians from CaLD backgrounds. We need to identify appropriate sets of data that may enable us to determine the estimated prevalence and incidence of homelessness amongst people from CaLD backgrounds in Australia. We need targeted research that can enable us to investigate the risk factors, causes of and solutions to homelessness for Australians from CaLD communities.

ENDNOTES

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