

Section for Indigenous Homeless book: Australian Summary Overview  
[Draft only]

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Indigenous homelessness in Australia is a complex and multi-dimensional social issue recognisable from the shared histories between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous settlers; statistical over-representation in the national homeless population; and, certain unrecognised or hidden cultural aspects. The dispossession of Aboriginal people and their survival history has been a significant force underpinning Indigenous homelessness and one which marks Aboriginal experiences of homelessness as qualitatively different from non-Indigenous lifeworlds. Compared to non-Indigenous Australians the number of homeless Indigenous people is disproportionately high. Although not fully explored for all Indigenous groups across Australia, research suggests that Indigenous homelessness differs from other Australian groups across a range of socio-demographic characteristics. In particular, Indigenous public place dwelling or rough sleeping remains under-recognised and therefore misunderstood. Altogether the need for services for homeless Indigenous people hinges on recognition for establishing good policy to enable effective services.

### **Historical and Cultural Context to Indigenous Homelessness in Australia**

In the order of 300,000 Indigenous people occupied the entire Australian continent when the British colonisation was imposed in 1788. The most common local Aboriginal land-holding group (also referred to as a 'traditional owner' group) was the patriclan which held religious, hunting and food-collecting rights in its estate. Such local groups were organized into larger regional groupings whose members intermarried according to strict rules, and shared some common aspects of social organization, beliefs and customs. Altogether there were about 200 different languages spoken on the continent, but many of these had numerous dialects. People were conscious of their place within their own local territory, intimate with its geography, and spiritually attached to its sacred sites and sacred histories, from which their totemic identities derived.

From the commencement of colonization in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century until the 1890s, the inward moving frontier was largely characterised by the wholesale slaughter of Aboriginal people, the spread of fatal diseases and the taking of their land and waterholes. Sporadic guerrilla warfare occurred in many regions. The frontier expanded inland slowly for 150 years with widespread impact on Aboriginal cultures. Many of the unique ecologically-adapted lifestyles of the Aboriginal language groups were lost.

By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, traditional styles of Aboriginal camping and land use were no longer found in the eastern and southern parts of the continent. In the interior, displaced tribespeople camped near newly-formed towns and pastoral stations in makeshift shelters. Here the social disruption continued in the form of alcoholism, prostitution, disease, rape, economic exploitation and further violence. A demographic collapse of the Indigenous population occurred with the population falling by at least 80 per cent, and they were spoken of as a 'doomed race' which would inevitably become extinct.

This destruction culminated in a set of Aboriginal protection legislations enacted between 1897 and 1915 in each State of Australia. Government officials and police were empowered to control the movements of indigenous individuals, families and

whole communities within and between settlements on newly established Aboriginal and Islander Reserves. However the directed movements of people were as often for punitive reasons as for protection. Many people became disconnected from both their land and kin resulting in losses of social, psychological and spiritual well-being. This was exacerbated by the implementation of an assimilation policy in the middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was not abandoned until the mid-1970s. Only then were most Indigenous people able to travel of their own free will again.

By the 1980s, small groups of Indigenous people came to live in public places in the regional towns and metropolitan cities of Australia. In many cases these people resided in public places despite the existence of formal Indigenous town camps and an increasing range of other Indigenous housing options. Their numbers gradually increased in the 1990s and early 2000s. Although often categorised as homeless, some of these people saw themselves as being both placed and homed, and referred to themselves by regionally preferred names, such as parkies, goomies, ditchies, long grassers, or river campers. Unfortunately local government authorities, politicians and members of the city business communities saw them as a public eyesore and nuisance. They were stereotyped as displaying anti-social behaviour and causing a deterrent to general town business, particularly to tourism.

Pathways into Indigenous homelessness for contemporary Indigenous people involve longitudinal factors that have impacted on them from early childhood in their Indigenous settlements, as well as communities which have institutionalized and separatist histories. Pathways into Indigenous homelessness also involve the immediate situational factors of those individuals which can also arise from colonial contact histories and directed cultural change.

### **Demography of Indigenous homelessness**

From the 2011 census, 105,237 Australian people were identified as homeless, including 26,744 Indigenous Australians. As 2.5% of the total Australian population, Indigenous people are over-represented since they comprise 25% of the homeless with a rate nearly 14 times that of non-Indigenous Australians.<sup>1</sup>

The high rate of homelessness for Indigenous Australians is exacerbated by the current shortage of affordable housing (National Shelter 2011) but also by the lack of housing that is culturally and socially appropriate. In particular, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are large in comparison to mainstream Australian families. Cultural obligations to kin require that Aboriginal people need to accommodate visiting members of their wider family group for extended periods. Visiting relatives are indicative of high rates of mobility by many Aboriginal people as they travel for social and cultural reasons as well as to access services. Frequently these social and cultural practices result in crowding and associated tenancy problems. Aspects of family violence (FV) often associated with substance abuse also contribute to homelessness and Indigenous women experience an extraordinarily high rate of FV (requiring hospitalisation) compared to non-Indigenous women (AIHW 2006).

Considerable evidence now points to the problem of definitions used for categorising Indigenous homelessness especially when viewed in terms of service needs. When the needs are not identified through careful identification and robust measuring of the

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<sup>1</sup> Rate of Indigenous homelessness is 487.9 per 10,000 compared to 35.2 per 10,000 of non-Indigenous homelessness (ABS 2012a p. 12).

number of such needy homeless people, then policies and programs cannot be effectively implemented.

### **Defining Indigenous homelessness**

Since 2000, definitions of Australian Indigenous homelessness in the social science literature have become increasingly culturally specific (e.g. ABS 2013), and necessitate some understanding of the cultural and historical backgrounds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. One of the problems of categorisation is that when applying certain mainstream definitions of 'homelessness', the compositions of Indigenous groups dwelling in public spaces have been oversimplified and thus their needs may be at best, misunderstood and minimally serviced, or at worst, overlooked and not addressed. This realization has prompted a process of refining the definitions of Indigenous homeless people in Australia. Three useful broad categories can be identified from the limited empirical and literature research - (i) public place dwellers, (ii) housed people who are nevertheless at risk of homelessness, and (iii) spiritually homeless people. These can be further divided into subcategories and each will be briefly described in turn, but the reader is referred to Memmott et al (2012) for more detailed discussion.

Public place dwellers live in a mix of public or semi-public places (as well as some private places, which are entered illegally at night to gain overnight shelter) eg parks, churches, verandahs, carparks, beaches, drains, riverbanks, vacant lots, dilapidated buildings. Public place dwellers can be further characterized as people who do not usually pay for accommodation, have a visible public profile (sheltering, drinking, rejoicing, arguing, partying and fighting in public), have low incomes of which a substantial part is often spent on alcohol, have generally few possessions (minimal clothes and bedding), and usually conform to a beat of places where they camp and socialize in public or semi-public areas. Four sub-categories of public place dwellers have been defined, although they are not mutually exclusive and one is often a pathway into the next.

The first sub-category is those who are voluntary and short-term intermittent public place dwellers. They often comprise visitors who have come to town from rural or remote communities to have a good time socializing and drinking, but who intend to eventually return home.

The second sub-category of public place dwellers are those who are voluntary and medium-term and who reside continually in public places (including overnight). They acknowledge they have another place of residence in a home community, but are uncertain if and when they will return. They have usually been pursuing this lifestyle for quite some months or years.

The third sub-category of public place-dwellers contains those who are voluntary and long-term. They live a permanent public place dwelling lifestyle, having cut off their ties with home communities many years previous, and who accept that their lifestyle will persist and have a sense of belonging to the town and to their group. It is unclear whether it is possible for such individuals to readily reconcile with their original community and family due to a range of emotional barriers. This category fits with definition of long-term or chronic homelessness, whereby homelessness has ceased to be a life crisis event and has become an accepted way of life.

The fourth sub-category of public place-dwellers are those who are reluctant place-dwellers and there by necessity. Although residing continually in public places, they either wish to return to their home community where they may well have a house, but

are obligated to remain in an urban area due to a service need or to support a hospitalized relative or similar; or secondly, they may wish to return home but have no funds for travel and/or capacity to organize travel; or thirdly, they are on a waiting list for public rental housing to become available elsewhere in the city.

The second broad category of Indigenous homeless people are those at risk of homelessness. They reside in some sort of physical housing but are at risk of losing their house or of losing the amenity of their house. This category is sometimes referred to as 'hidden homelessness'. They can also be broken down into four distinct sub-categories (not mutually exclusive): insecurely housed people; sub-standard architectural quality, possibly unsafe or unhealthy housing; crowded housing; and, dysfunctionally mobile persons who are in a state of continual or intermittent residential mobility including temporary residence (eg crisis accommodation).

A third broad category of Indigenous homelessness has been identified as spiritual homelessness, a state arising from separation from traditional land, separation from family and kinship networks (noted earlier as a result of historical government policies), and involving a crisis of personal identity wherein one's understanding or knowledge of how one relates to country, family and Aboriginal identity systems is confused or lacking. Such feelings add to the already depressed emotional state in which Aboriginal people either public place dwellers or those at risk of homelessness, find themselves.

The above three broad categories of Indigenous homelessness are not mutually exclusive. In the case of those categorised as at risk of homelessness, individuals may experience multiple stints of living on the streets, in rental housing and in insecure accommodation, ie moving back and forth between insecure housing circumstances and public place-dwelling. In either case, individuals may be suffering from spiritual homelessness.

### **Conclusion**

It is not possible to effectively address the needs of Indigenous people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness without acknowledging the distinctive aspects of their homeless experiences in comparison to other social groups. Indigenous public place dwellers are a significant example of hidden homelessness in the Australian community where lack of understanding about their life circumstances and the choices available to them limits their opportunities for assistance particularly in terms of shelter and other needs. The best responses to Indigenous homelessness will be based on recognition of past histories together with culturally aware research and broad community engagement.

[Word count excluding title & content below: **1,939** (1,959 inc footnotes)]

## Further Reading

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005). *The health and welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, 2005*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, ABS Cat. No. 4704.0, p.47. Web: <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/4704.02005?OpenDocument>, viewed 30/5/09.
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- Memcott, P. (2006). Public-place dwelling indigenous people: alternative strategies to the law and order approach. *Parity* 19/1, 71-73.
- Memcott, P., Birdsall-Jones, C. & Greenop, K. (2012). "Why are special services needed to address Indigenous homelessness?", Report 10, Australian Homelessness Clearing house, Dept of FaHCSIA, Canberra. Web: <http://homelessnessclearinghouse.govspace.gov.au/about-homelessness/agreements-and-initiatives/commonwealth-initiatives/national-homelessness-research/why-are-special-services-needed-to-address-indigenous-homelessness/>, viewed 14/05/2013.
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- Memcott, P., Long, S. & Chambers, C. (2003). Practice responses to indigenous public place dwelling and homelessness. *Parity* 16/9, 11-13.
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## MISCELLANEOUS

Whereas government policy statements during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century frequently recognised that many structural factors can cause and perpetuate homelessness, they largely adopted a limited or narrow definition of homelessness, one based on a lack of housing and accommodation. The result was that responses to Indigenous homelessness focused on finding accommodation as a pivotal intervention, to which other interventions were subordinate. However for many Indigenous homeless people, finding accommodation was not necessarily their most crucial support need. Homelessness was not always simply created by a lack of housing, nor simply addressed by its provision. This was particularly true of many Aboriginal public place dwellers who had chosen to sleep out in the open, but who did not see themselves as homeless. The way Indigenous homelessness has been defined or categorised has thus influenced the types of response strategies that have been implemented by Indigenous organisations, government and non-government agencies.

Editors' Brief: The section for Australia will be introduced by a summary of the colonial and neoliberal context of Indigenous homelessness, which shaped the place of Indigenous people in these societies and created the social and economic conditions under which homelessness occurs. The introduction will also address the Australian terminology.

### Topics

- Social structure at time of contact (kinship, class systems, local groups, language groups/tribes)
- Contact history summary (inc. language change, removalism, migration).
- Contemporary community types.
- Rights, freedom and cultural revitalization
- Homelessness terminology used by policy makers and alternative terminology.

(Total: 1500 words)

### Ex PM's Parity May? 2013 editorial

Re Indigenous homelessness

Not contested:

- Indigenous Australians are the 'most disadvantaged socio-demographic sector in Australia' in which homelessness is a factor
- Current policy on homelessness is driven by the Australian Government's 2008 White Paper on homelessness – The Road Home, 'which identified several priority groups for attention including Indigenous Australians'
- 'the causes of Indigenous homelessness are multi-dimensional'

Contested issues:

- counting of Indigenous homeless; extent of undercount (not so much contested as unknown)
- policies/strategies to reduce homelessness

eg the removal of Aboriginal homeless people/ rough sleepers from public places - [NT govt revitalising; Qld govt ? and local councils eg Mt Isa ]

- definitions of homelessness; more nuanced categories by Memmott et al 2012 – ppds and those at risk; spiritually homeless
- need for special services & to what extent
- effectiveness of service integration; what does it mean (see Philips, Head, Jones... 2011)

The separation from family and community connections that these individuals experience can have serious effects on their mental health which at times results in suicides. Suicide rates are disproportionately high for the Australian Indigenous population. This also explains why people from a common cultural region congregate together in public places. The two basic points of introduction for a newly arriving Indigenous person are where they are from and which 'mob' they belong to. People thus tend to join public place dwelling groups to be near people who are known to them and to feel secure.

According to the 2006 census, some 105,000 Australian people were identified as homeless, of whom at least 16,000 were categorized as rough sleepers or being in primary homelessness. The remainder were described as being in secondary or tertiary homelessness, meaning people moving frequently between temporary forms of shelter, and people living in boarding houses for periods of three months or more, respectively. Indigenous people, who formed 2.3% of the total Australian population in the 2006 Census (455,028 in 20.7mill), were overrepresented in these homelessness figures, making up 9% of the homeless population according to the census enumeration (Aust, FaHCSIA 2008:4-6). Nevertheless the Australian Bureau of Statistics who conducts the triennial census, has conceded that there is a likely undercount of the number of Indigenous homeless people because of the difficulties in locating them, particularly the rough sleeper category (ABS 2005:47). This undercount, which results from both the mobility and at times self-concealment of people camping in public places, has been confirmed by independent field researchers.

#### Ex PPD section

Because Aboriginal people have a tradition of open-air camping, it may not necessarily be stressful to adopt this style of living for a while, particularly in towns with mild climates. The customary Aboriginal practice of camping without any roofed shelters in fine weather, contributes to the ease with which such people can readily fall into the public-place dweller lifestyle in regional centres. Although such a lifestyle may be acceptable to more tolerant citizens, such tolerance may be quickly eroded by regular alcohol consumption, subsequent intoxication and other anti-social behaviour

The high rate of Indigenous homelessness is not uniform across the country. There are significant demographic, economic and geographic features which influence the rate of Indigenous homelessness in different locations, including age structure, population change, structural ageing, housing and labour market access, mobility, geography and urbanisation of the Australian Indigenous population. The Indigenous population of Australia is quite urban with 28.8% living in the coastal regions between Brisbane and Sydney (Biddle 2012 p.18). It is significant therefore, that of all the

'severely' crowded dwellings, the majority with one or more ATSI persons, were located in very remote Australia (71%), based on the 2006 remoteness classification and only 10% in major cities (ABS 2012b).