

# 12

Indigenous young people are more likely to experience homelessness than non-Indigenous youth. Although in many ways the drivers of homelessness are similar, there are some significant differences. Indigenous Australians have been described as suffering 'spiritual homelessness' which stems from dispossession and forced removal from homelands and family. A major cultural difference with the mainstream of the community and other groups is the extended family network and the obligations that belonging to such a kinship network implies. Overcrowding is common, leading to stressful conflicts. There is an increased transience as a result of moving from more remote locations to urban centres and to visit extended family members. Drug and alcohol abuse-fuelled violence on young people is a driver for both Indigenous youth homelessness and early school leaving. Indigenous young people are over-represented in the justice system and they have difficulty accessing appropriate services. Their health outcomes are poor and they experience educational and employment disadvantage. The NYC calls for explicit attention to the needs of Indigenous young people in all national initiatives directed to Indigenous communities. Indigenous youth workers and 'boarding school' settings connected to Indigenous communities are two practical measures for consideration.



## Chapter 12 | Indigenous Homelessness

### Introduction

12.1 The Inquiry has heard evidence from many parts of Australia that the homelessness among Indigenous young people is far worse in comparison to non-Indigenous young people. The current homelessness crisis amongst Indigenous young people has many of the same characteristics as those generally faced by non-Indigenous young people. Drugs and alcohol, mental illness, lack of affordable housing, issues with the care and protection, family breakdown and domestic violence are all causes of Indigenous youth homelessness as well as non-Indigenous youth homelessness. However, there are some significant differences, which this chapter briefly explores.

### Defining Indigenous Homelessness

12.2 Earlier in this report, homelessness was defined using a cultural definition based on a minimum standard of housing. Some witnesses to the Inquiry considered that this definition does not necessarily apply to Indigenous people in Australia. The context and cultural norms of Indigenous Australians requires an alternative approach to homelessness. This issue is discussed in this section.

12.3 Tangentyere Council, an Indigenous organisation representing eighteen Town Camps in Alice Springs, considered that five types of homelessness identified by the research consultants Keys Young were appropriate for Indigenous young people (at least in Central Australia)<sup>1</sup>. The five distinct types of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

homelessness identified by Keys Young, after extensive consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agencies and individuals, were:

- spiritual homelessness
- overcrowding
- relocation and transient homelessness
- escaping from an unsafe or unstable home
- lack of access to any stable shelter.<sup>2</sup>

### *Spiritual homelessness*

12.4 The Keys Young report suggested that whole communities of Indigenous people suffer from spiritual homelessness. This stems from their dispossession and forced removal from their homeland or their family.<sup>3</sup> The government policies that removed children from families (the stolen generations) and the struggle for recognition of native title have clearly contributed to homelessness in Indigenous communities. Waltja Tjutanku Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation concurred suggesting that Indigenous homelessness include:

*... anyone without family or anyone who cannot access country.*<sup>4</sup>

12.5 The Burdekin Report took into account the way in which Indigenous Australians view the concept of the extended family network:

*Aborigines have repeatedly stressed that, for them, home is wherever a family member extends sustenance, whether emotional or physical ... Moreover, the extended family network and family obligations and expectations mean that a person even temporarily living with relatives is not 'homeless' ... This system, which operates in traditionally oriented communities, in urban camps and to varying degrees in other Aboriginal modes of social organisation, is often not recognised as valid by non-Aboriginal welfare officers.*<sup>5</sup>

12.6 The 2007 Inquiry heard from a range of Indigenous-specific and mainstream services, government departments, and researchers, who made it clear that recognition of the Indigenous concept of family appears to be broadly accepted. However, the extent to which it is adopted in policy and programs varies. Further, whether Indigenous young people are homeless if they are living with extended family (however defined) depends on the conditions in which they are living, as it would for non-Indigenous young people.

### *Overcrowding*

12.7 Overcrowding results from the limited options available to Indigenous people or families to secure their own housing. Indigenous people who live in a large extended family situation are usually living in housing which is inadequate to meet their needs. Overcrowding leads to a range of social, health and other problems that flow from having large numbers of people living in a single dwelling.<sup>6</sup>

12.8 A Reconnect worker, from Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation, told the Inquiry that:

*There are too many people trying to live in the one house. Houses are overcrowded with old people, couples, children, grandchildren all living together.*<sup>7</sup>

12.9 The Northern Territory Department of Health and Community Services recognised that overcrowding is a form of homelessness and a serious issue in many Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory.<sup>8</sup> They wrote that people living in such housing conditions experience:

*... a lack of security, low environmental health conditions, poor mental health, poor educational and employment outcomes, substance misuse, exposure to violence, etc. Additionally, if one consistently applies a 'cultural' definition of homelessness that is based on a minimum community standard of housing (such as access to functional kitchen, toilet and private living room facilities, and a degree of privacy), it is apparent that housing conditions in many remote Indigenous communities do not meet this standard.*<sup>9</sup>

12.10 The Aboriginal and Cultural Diversity Officer, Port Adelaide-Enfield Council (SA), explained that family groups will travel to Adelaide to access services and stay with a family member resulting in overcrowding, if only on a temporary basis. She cited an example of a '... three bedroom house with between 30 to 40 people staying.'<sup>10</sup>

### *Relocation and transient homelessness*

12.11 The Keys Young report identified a number of factors leading to relocation or transient homelessness including the necessity of travelling to obtain services or the wish to relocate either back to traditional country or to larger regional centres.<sup>11</sup> A study of Indigenous mobility in two remote communities, one in the Northern Territory and the other in Queensland, reported that the study participants were highly mobile and travelled to visit one or more places for short periods of time before returning to their home community.<sup>12</sup>

12.12 The Northern Territory Department of Health and Community Services highlighted the need for policy makers to understand the diverse and complex reasons why Indigenous people from remote communities live 'rough'.<sup>13</sup>

### *Escape from an unstable or unsafe home*

12.13 The Keys Young report highlighted that Indigenous young people are often forced out of their family or home situation because they are at direct physical risk. However, this risk may be temporary, depending on the time of the week or on who happens to be staying in their home at the time.<sup>14</sup>

12.14 The manager of the Alice Springs Youth Accommodation and Support Service (NT) told the Inquiry that Indigenous young people will seek accommodation for one night because they expect alcohol fuelled violence in the Alice Springs Town Camps.<sup>15</sup>

12.15 The extent and nature of child abuse and neglect in Aboriginal communities, documented in a recent Northern Territory report into the protection of Indigenous children<sup>16</sup>, highlights the need for sustainable solutions for young people, their families and the communities need permanent solutions.

12.16 The manager of the St Vincent de Paul Society services in Deniliquin (NSW) told the Inquiry that domestic violence in Indigenous families was a significant contributor to Indigenous youth homelessness.<sup>17</sup>

### *Lack of access to stable shelter*

12.17 The Keys Young report suggested that some Indigenous people:  
*... are living on the streets, in parks or river-beds, in fringe camps, or at railway stations because they literally have no place to go.*<sup>18</sup>

12.18 In Alice Springs, the Inquiry was told that Indigenous people often camp in the dry Todd River bed despite local by-laws banning this practice. The manager of Family and Youth Services, Tangentyere Council, told the Inquiry that the by-law was enforced by local authorities burning people's bedding after they have spent the night camping.<sup>19</sup> The same witness observed that 'there is no lawful place for homeless people to be homeless in Alice Springs'.

12.19 There are many similarities between the cultural definition of homelessness for all people and the Keys Young definition for Indigenous people. However, a national report on Indigenous Homelessness warned that:

*... while there may appear to be similarities between certain forms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous homelessness, the causes and contexts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's experience of homelessness are fundamentally different.*<sup>20</sup>

## **The incidence of Indigenous youth homelessness**

12.20 The incidence of Indigenous youth homelessness in remote, rural, regional and urban communities was discussed in the Burdekin Report in 1989. In terms of housing need:

*In 1987, the estimated outstanding need for housing for Aboriginal households in Australia was 16,179 houses (Aboriginal Development Commission and Department of Aboriginal Affairs, 1987, Housing Needs Survey)*

That report found that homelessness affects many Indigenous young people and it pointed

to clear evidence that homelessness in urban centres was made up of a disproportionate number of Indigenous young people.<sup>21</sup>

12.21 Indigenous people comprise 17 per cent of Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) clients<sup>22</sup> but are only around 2 per cent of the Australian population<sup>23</sup>. That is, Indigenous people are over-represented in the SAAP statistics.

12.22 Indigenous people are over-represented in other homelessness statistics. Researchers Chamberlain and MacKenzie, using 2001 Census and other data, found that 9 per cent of homeless people were Indigenous.<sup>24</sup> Homeless Indigenous people comprised 3 per cent of people staying with other households, 7 per cent of those in boarding houses, and 19 per cent of people in the primary homeless population (i.e. sleeping rough).<sup>25</sup>

12.23 Evidence to the 2007 Inquiry confirmed that Indigenous young people are over-represented in the homeless population. Mainstream (i.e. not Indigenous specific) services told the Inquiry that Indigenous young people comprise a significant proportion of their client base. For example, Brophy Family Services, Warrnambool (Vic), told the Inquiry that Indigenous young people represented between 7 per cent and 10 per cent of their client group.<sup>26</sup>

12.24 The limited research available on the extent of Indigenous homelessness supports the evidence presented to the Inquiry. Mission Australia, in their 2006 survey of Young Australians, found that 32 per cent of the homelessness young people surveyed were Indigenous Australians.<sup>27</sup> MacKenzie and Chamberlain in the recently released Youth Homelessness 2006 report found that one in five of the homeless school students identified in the national census of homeless school students were Indigenous.

12.25 It is clear that Indigenous young people are over-represented in the homelessness statistics. However, since many Indigenous young people particularly in northern Australia seem to be in school sporadically or not at school at all, the problems of homelessness for Indigenous young people may be much underestimated. More research is needed to accurately measure the incidence of Indigenous youth homelessness and understand the social dynamics of their homelessness experience.

## **Experiences of homelessness by Indigenous young people**

12.26 Homeless Indigenous young people face the same general problems experienced by homeless non-Indigenous young people. However, just as the incidence of homelessness amongst Indigenous young people is greater than non-Indigenous young people, homeless Indigenous young people tended to have more frequent and more intense trouble with:

- the justice system (e.g. Indigenous young people are over-represented in the juvenile justice systems);
- accessing services (e.g. there are few Indigenous specific services in some areas and mainstream services are not always appropriate for Indigenous young people);

- keeping in good health (e.g. petrol sniffing has been a significant problem in remote communities);
- educational disadvantage and unemployment (e.g. Indigenous young people are excluded from school at greater rates and have lower school retention rates).
- unsuitable housing stock (e.g. overcrowded and poorly maintained houses).

### *The justice system*

12.27 Around 38 per cent of young people under juvenile justice supervision during 2005–06 were identified as being of Indigenous origin.<sup>28</sup> These include young people in both community and detention supervision.

12.28 The reasons for the over-representation of Indigenous young people in the juvenile justice system are many and complex. However a major contributor is that Indigenous young people come into contact with the police more often than non-Indigenous young people; they are arrested more frequently and a higher proportion of Indigenous youth are incarcerated, compared with other young people. The following case study, submitted by Shopfront Youth Legal Centre, illustrates how often some Indigenous young people have ‘run ins’ with the police. The events took place over a number of days:

Danny was 17, unemployed, and Aboriginal. He had been homeless for some time and was staying at a local youth refuge. Danny has been subjected to police searches on numerous occasions, including:

*Search 1: At 11:00pm officers of DOCS attended the Kings Cross police station expressing concern about Danny, who was then aged 15. He had been spotted in a park, “frequented and used by drug users and suppliers.” Danny was told he would be taken to the Kings Cross police station so that inquiries could be made about the whereabouts of his parents. There was nothing in the police statement of facts to indicate Danny was suspected of carrying drugs, offensive implements, or anything else. Nevertheless, Danny was physically searched and placed in the back of a caged vehicle for conveyance to the police station.*

*Search 2: At 9:50pm Danny was observed walking across the street in Kings Cross. Police kept a close eye on Danny because he was, “fiddling with his beanie”, and looking at police. He was then observed making a phone call, apparently “without being engaged in a conversation”, whilst at the same time fiddling with his beanie and hurrying past the police. Danny was stopped and searched, being described in the police statement of facts as “aggressive”.*

*Search 3: At 10:40pm, Danny was walking in Darlinghurst where he was stopped and searched because he “matched a description given over the police radio of a suspect for drug activity.” The police discovered a picnic set down Danny’s left sock: this was a fold-up set which comprised a fork, spoon and knife. Danny was homeless at the time and*



*had been using the set for eating takeaway food. Danny had hidden the set as he had been charged with being in possession of a knife four weeks earlier. Danny was again charged with having custody of a knife in a public place. The picnic set was described in the charge sheet as having a “silver coloured 2.5 inches bladed knife.”*

*Search 4: At 2:15am, Danny was walking along a street in Marrickville with a friend. There was no suggestion in the police brief that he was committing a crime, or that he was in any way disruptive or offensive. The police decided to stop and search Danny “due to the recent spate of break and enters in the Marrickville CBD that have been conducted by juveniles” (it is questionable just how police would know that “juveniles” committed the said offences). Danny was therefore going to be stopped and searched for no reason other than his age and the location in which he was walking. There is no record of what was said to the boys, however, Danny ran when approached by police.*

The police called in the dog squad to assist in the search for Danny. Danny was found later that evening by police: he explained that he had run away because he thought there were warrants out for his arrest. The police told him he was to be searched but Danny was not informed of what (if anything) he was suspected of carrying. A struggle ensued when police tried to search Danny: he was charged with offensive language, assault police, resisting arrest, and having custody of an offensive implement in a public place. The “offensive implement” was in fact a laser pointer (i.e., a device used by lecturers to highlight information to their students).<sup>29</sup>

12.29 The Indigenous young person in the above case study was stopped on five occasions within twenty-four hours. On the last occasion, Danny who had run away from the fourth attempt to search him, was apprehended. In the ensuing ‘struggle’ he was charged because of behaviour such as ‘offensive language’, ‘assault’ (he made physical contact with officers during the struggle) and finally he was charged with having an ‘offensive implement’. He was stopped and searched because it was thought he may have been involved in more serious crimes. No arrest on any of these accounts was made. In the end, he was charged with offensives related to his behaviour while being apprehended by police some time after 2.15 am. Whether this is typical cannot be judged but the case is perhaps ideal-typical in that it illustrates the kind of dynamics that can go on between police officers on the beat and Indigenous young people frequenting public spaces.

### *Accessing services*

12.30 The Inquiry heard from both mainstream services and Indigenous-specific services about current service delivery, including suggestions for extending and deepening the models on offer.

12.31 Indigenous specific services argued for services run by and for Indigenous people. As one worker told the Inquiry in Townsville:

*... they want to stay with their own Indigenous people because they have an understanding of each other.<sup>30</sup>*

12.32 On the other hand, mainstream services argued that Indigenous young people sometimes:

*... feel they have more confidentiality in a non-Indigenous service.*<sup>31</sup>

12.33 Advocates for both approaches offered anecdotal evidence for their positions.

12.34 The Aboriginal hostel system was highlighted as an Indigenous specific service delivery model suitable for some Indigenous young people that had the capacity to be extended. Youth-specific hostels focussed on 16 to 24 year olds. Recent additions to the Aboriginal Hostels stock included youth-specific hostels associated with schools for younger Indigenous people aged 14 to 16 years.<sup>32</sup>

12.35 The Inquiry heard that those mainstream services which had a track record of success in working with young Indigenous young people observed more than one of the following:

- a commitment to be inclusive/culturally sensitive<sup>33</sup>; and/or
- employed Indigenous workers<sup>34</sup>; and/or
- links with an Indigenous organisation<sup>35</sup>; and/or
- a whole family or family inclusive approach<sup>36</sup>.

12.36 It appears that all of these approaches have merit. New Indigenous specific services need to be developed and existing ones strengthened while mainstream services need to ensure they can work effectively with Indigenous young people (as well as young people from all backgrounds).

### *Keeping in good health*

12.37 Indigenous young people suffer poorer health than their non-Indigenous counterparts. They have higher rates of death, injury and disability than other young Australians, and are more likely to live with certain chronic diseases.<sup>37</sup> The use of damaging substances such as tobacco, alcohol, illicit drugs and petrol (sniffing) have all been reported as higher among Indigenous young people than non-Indigenous young people.<sup>38</sup>

12.37 Homeless Indigenous young people are likely to be in worse health than their non-homeless counterparts. Rural and remote communities have very limited access to health services and where they exist are not always able meet the needs of homeless Indigenous young people. This latter point is also true in urban areas. Alternative approaches are needed. The Western Australian Innovative Health Service for Homeless Youth (IHSHY) is particularly successful at reaching Indigenous homeless young people because of its emphasis on:

*.... mobile and outreach models of service provision and their emphasis on culturally appropriate, non-judgmental service delivery that is responsive to clients' needs and priorities.*<sup>39</sup>

### *Educational disadvantage and unemployment*

12.39 Chapter 8 Labour Market Marginalisation pointed out that a major barrier to employment for homeless young people is their lack of education including basic literacy and numeracy. For Indigenous young people the situation is particularly bad. The retention rate to Year 12 for Indigenous young people is only 40 per cent compared to 76 per cent for non-Indigenous young people.<sup>40</sup>

12.40 Bama Ngappi Ngappi Aboriginal Corporation (QLD), believed that the high school drop out rates amongst Indigenous young people is caused by their disengagement from school at an early age:

*I find more and more of them are dropping out. They are losing that interest in school, and I think that is lost in the earlier years, not just now. It's just the results of not learning back then.*<sup>41</sup>

12.41 Lack of education and employment leads to other problems:

*If I look at the young men that we work with ... they want meaningful work. Without it, problems occur.*<sup>42</sup>

### *Unsuitable housing stock*

12.41 Earlier in this chapter overcrowding was discussed as a form of Indigenous homelessness. The other major issue with Indigenous housing is its poor state and what is available is in short supply. The Central Australian Policy Officer for NT Council of Social Service and NT Shelter told the Inquiry:

*There's massive housing disadvantage across the whole of the NT and remote community settings, particularly for indigenous families.*<sup>43</sup>

12.42 A Reconnect Worker at Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation concurred and added that of the houses available:

*Most need repairs and maintenance. Major renovations are needed.*<sup>44</sup>

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

12.43 While it might appear that Indigenous young people's homelessness is significantly different in nature to non-Indigenous young people. While there are differences, there are more similarities. However, Indigenous young people do face significantly greater personal as well as structural difficulties finding supports and pathways to a better life. This partly stems from cultural difference, but also from discrimination and the historical dispossession of land, but it mostly arises because a higher proportion of Indigenous young people:

- are living in poverty (see Chapter 7);
- are living in overcrowded and run down houses;

- have poorer health; and
- have lower educational attainment.

A long-term community development approach is required. Young people in many Indigenous communities are too often involved in unsafe behaviours and petty crime, and exist in a situation where there is little else to do and few adults with any responsibility to supervise and assist them to participate in creative programs. The NYC proposes the development of a youth work corp in Indigenous communities. The proposed positions would meet a community need, involve education and training for selected Indigenous young men and women, and represent real jobs. These ideas were suggested by some Indigenous community members, however there should be a broader consultation prior to any decision to implement.

**Recommendation 12.1:**

**The NYC Inquiry recommends that Indigenous young peoples' needs and issues be an explicit component in all national responses for improving the social and economic conditions of Indigenous communities.**

**Recommendation 12.2:**

**The NYC Inquiry recommends that the Federal Government fund Indigenous youth workers in Indigenous communities, especially in rural and remote Australia. Funding should cover access to training and education that leads to a youth work certificate or diploma, networking and professional supervision, as well as opportunities for ongoing skills development.**

12.44 Apart from home-schoolings supported by a curriculum delivered by correspondence and the School of the Air, many farming families in rural and remote areas send their children to boarding schools that are a long distance from their homes. The cost of this type of private schooling is borne by the families who have the financial means. At the same time, going elsewhere for schooling is seen as a necessity. A relatively small number of Indigenous students have received scholarships to attend these same schools. Several Indigenous communities in northern Australia have proposed an alternative model for a boarding school that is closer to where the student's families live and connected with the Indigenous communities. Their argument is that students would live-in during the week and would be able to concentrate on their studies, while at the same time being safe, secure and well fed. On weekends they would rejoin their families in nearby communities. However, aunties and elders from the communities would be involved in the management and operations of the boarding school and have access to students during the week.

**Recommendation 12.3:**

**The NYC Inquiry recommends that the Federal government develop 'boarding school' options for Indigenous young people, located near to Indigenous communities, where this is supported and sought by the community.**

12.45 The issue of whether to have Indigenous specific services or mainstream services has generated debate at times. Both approaches can work. The adoption of one or the other model will largely depend on whether there are appropriate services available, whether the Indigenous community organisations have the capacity to extend their service provision. Lastly, it would depend on the general attitude in a particular community.

#### **Recommendation 12.4**

**The NYC Inquiry recommends that Australian governments commit to effective consultation with Indigenous communities to determine whether services delivered into a region can be managed locally or require collaboration with an external service provider. If the second option for a service for at-risk young people and their families is chosen, a strategy for local community capacity building should be specifically part of the service model.**

12.46 These problems must be addressed before homelessness amongst Indigenous young people declines to the same levels as non-Indigenous young people. The priority in Indigenous communities is urgent and practical action that respects the Indigenous people being helped and involves them centrally in the process of helping themselves and their communities. However, the myriad of specific problems faced by Indigenous young people in Australia probably needs a whole other inquiry at some point to independently monitor the Commonwealth intervention commenced under the Liberal Government, but continued under a modified form by the new Labour Government, and to inform the under-developed area of Indigenous youth policy more generally.

## **ENDNOTES**

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- 5 HREOC (1989), Our Homeless Children, AGPS, Canberra, p.129.
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- 7 S. Holder, Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation, Alice Springs Day 21, 25-06-2007.
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- 25 Ibid, p.5.
- 26 Supplementary material submitted by Brophy Family Services, Warrnambool Day 2, 12-03-2007.
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