



Discussion Paper

**Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander Peoples
Perspectives on
Homelessness**

Australia

2013

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AUSTRALIAN BUREAU OF STATISTICS

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INTRODUCTION

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The ABS would like to thank all who have assisted in the consultation process to date. The ABS is especially grateful to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have participated. Their knowledge and experiences have provided invaluable insights, and their contributions to this project form part of an essential dialogue towards greater understanding of home and homelessness within an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community context.

INTRODUCTION

In September 2012, after a significant period of consultation, the ABS released a statistical definition of homelessness. The ABS *Information Paper – A Statistical Definition of Homelessness* (cat. no. 4922.0) provides the context for the development of the definition, as well as describing elements of the statistical definition of homelessness in detail.

Broadly, under the ABS definition, when a person does not have suitable accommodation alternatives they are considered homeless if their current living arrangement:

- is in a dwelling that is inadequate, or
- has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable, or
- does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations.

The ABS definition of homelessness has been developed for application to the general population in Australia. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are over-represented in estimates of homelessness, there are likely to be additional aspects to homelessness from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective that the definition does not adequately capture. For more information see *FACTSHEET: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Homelessness*.

In recognition of the differences in understanding concepts of home and homelessness, the ABS is undertaking further engagement to inform estimation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness. The outcomes of consultation will inform statistical collections, including the development of a culturally appropriate module on previous experiences of homelessness in the ABS 2014 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS).

This discussion paper outlines some of the key themes identified through engagement that has taken place with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and service providers from March to June 2013, and provides a basis for further stakeholder consultation. Detailed information on the engagement to date, including the discussion guide can be found in Appendix 1. The next step in the consultation process includes calling for written submissions from interested parties, as well as undertaking further community based face to face engagement, with the final Information Paper to be released in late 2013.

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES PERSPECTIVES

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES PERSPECTIVES

Discussions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people about concepts of 'home' and 'homelessness' were held in communities and with service providers across the Northern Territory (NT), New South Wales (NSW) and Queensland (Qld). Multiple understandings of home and homelessness were reported and these are presented with the aim of stimulating discussion on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives on homelessness.

Interpretation of findings

The ABS engagement strategy utilised a semi-structured discussion guide, with open-ended questions to seek out people's personal perspectives. In this paper the ABS has endeavoured to report the information as heard without bias.

Whilst findings of this engagement are valuable to inform discussions on meanings of home and homelessness to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the views presented should not be interpreted as being representative of any one group of people.

CONCEPTS OF HOME

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES CONCEPTS OF HOME

The ABS statistical definition of homelessness has been constructed from a conceptual framework centred around three key elements of home: adequacy of dwelling; security of tenure of dwelling; and control of, and access to space for social relations. These elements were used in the engagement when discussing concepts of home for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Most responses to questions concerning the meaning of home could generally be related to one or more of the following concepts:

- *Home as more than a shelter*: Often talked about as a medium that should be a place of safety and security, and for young people a place of autonomy and freedom.
- *Home is family and/or community*: Includes the notion of family as home. Family includes immediate family, and extended kinship ties.
- *Connection to country*: Includes concepts of ancestral ties to landscape. Refers to land that people may or may not currently reside on.

Home as more than a shelter

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who spoke about home, indicated their perception that it was more than just a roof over head, and noted important factors that made a place a home which were consistent with the ABS statistical definition.

Particularly in remote NSW and in Qld, home was described as a place that provides a physical structure, with a bed to sleep in, adequate facilities, and is safe. Young people in particular noted that home should be a place that provides safety and freedom of choice. For people in precarious housing situations, the importance of having secure tenure to stay for as long as needed was highlighted as fundamental to them feeling at home.

FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION:

1. What elements of safety should be considered when measuring or researching homelessness?

Home is family and/or community

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia noted the importance of family in connection to home. Staying near family provides a connection to culture and ensures having access to resources when needed. Home was spoken about as a family unit where both social and financial support is provided. It was reported as ideally being a sanctuary and a facility for housing and nurturing children and grandchildren.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the NT who described being mobile and shifting from place to place visiting family on their ancestral lands, and those living across multiple dwellings, considered home to be where family is located. People largely reported feeling at home when staying away from their usual place of residence if they are with family.

In communities where participants were related and family lineage was established and respected, home was described as community. This was particularly evident in urban NSW, where most people spoken to noted that home was the community, irrespective of place of usual residence. It was also reported that home for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people consisted of dwellings that were inherited through family succession, despite families currently living elsewhere.

CONCEPTS OF HOME *continued*

Home is family and/or community continued

Further consultation will support understanding the relationship between feeling 'at home' and the concept of 'usual residence' as implemented in the Census of Population and Housing and household surveys.

FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION:

2. Should family connection be more clearly considered when measuring or researching homelessness among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?
3. What features of social and community life are important in relation to measuring or understanding homelessness?

Connection to country

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people often reported that home is considered to be more than just a dwelling. Home was understood through the connection an individual or group has to country and their ties to the spirituality of the land through the connection a person has with their ancestry. This was reported by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia, but particularly in the NT.

Generally, younger people were less likely to report connection to country as a key characteristic of the concept of home, with young people in remote NSW and Qld emphasising concepts such as family and community as being fundamental to their understanding of home.

FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION:

4. Should connection to country be considered when measuring or researching homelessness among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?
5. To what extent does the significance of connection to country vary across different population groups?

CONCEPTS OF HOMELESSNESS

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES CONCEPTS OF HOMELESSNESS

The statistical definition of homelessness is informed by an understanding of homelessness as 'home'lessness, not roof-lessness.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples perceptions of homelessness are diverse, and whilst some relate their perception of homelessness to broader concepts of home as discussed above, and not roof-lessness, other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people perceived being homeless as not having a shelter or dwelling. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, when asked to discuss stories of homelessness, broadly perceived homelessness as:

- *House-lessness*: Inability to obtain shelter.
- *Family disconnection*: Includes concept of 'choice' in being homeless.
- *Having a dwelling, but not on country or in community*: Separation of dwelling from concept of home.

House-lessness

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who spoke about home as shelter mostly reported homelessness as having no dwelling that they considered their own. Being house-less was described by some people as a largely invisible problem because of family and cultural responsibilities and expectations to provide shelter for family members needing a place to stay.

People who had experienced or witnessed house-lessness reported the following situations as occurring in their community:

- *Sleeping rough*: On the street or in other public places, squatting, or being admitted into hospital for a place to sleep.
- *Crowded dwellings*: Many people, often family members, in a house.
- *Couch surfing*: People with no fixed address staying temporarily with other households.

Several Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reported crowding in houses in their community. People living in these houses were sometimes considered to be house-less but not necessarily homeless, although this was dependent on the occupant's relationships to the community.

Several Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reported having visitors, often transient family members, and indicated that they would encourage family to make themselves at home. Some expressed that refusing visitors is culturally inappropriate. In the NT and urban NSW, many people reported that they would never be without a place to stay because home is family.

Having control of and access to space for social relations is one of the conceptual elements used to determine if a person is considered homeless. Included in perceptions of crowding was the reported need for space when visitors were staying, particularly if it was unknown how long visitors might stay for.

FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

6. How should family and cultural responsibilities to provide accommodation be considered when measuring or researching homelessness among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?

CONCEPTS OF HOMELESSNESS *continued*

Family disconnection

In communities where cultural ties and family kinship were strong, homelessness was reported as family disconnection. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the NT, NSW and Qld who reported family as home noted that homelessness was experienced by people who have no family or have become disconnected from family.

Having a dwelling, but not on country, or in community

Some older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people felt that if you were living in a dwelling on country or in community then there was no such concept as being homeless, largely because of family responsibility and cultural shared practices.

A number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly those from the NT and urban NSW noted home as connection to country or community, therefore if their usual dwelling was not located on country or in their community, they considered themselves to be homeless.

In the NT, it was reported by some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that not everyone can go back to country or community, for example some go into town and cannot afford to get home, or some people may not be welcomed back. These people were considered to be homeless, despite potentially having access to a dwelling.

FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

7. How important is it to consider whether a dwelling is 'on country' or 'in community' when measuring or researching homelessness?

NEXT STEPS

FURTHER CONSULTATION

This discussion paper incorporates valued perspectives about home and homelessness from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from engagement conducted in the NT, NSW and Qld during March to June 2013.

Consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on their views about the meanings of home and homelessness will continue during the second half of 2013. Interested parties can contact ABS using the contact details below to register their interest.

The findings from the consultation process will be used to inform on estimation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness, both in the Census of Population and Housing and ABS household surveys, including the development of a culturally appropriate survey module on previous experiences of homelessness in the 2014 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS).

SUBMISSIONS INVITED

Specifically, the ABS encourages Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to express their views about:

- The meanings of home and homelessness and the information presented in this paper.
- The meaning of usual residence and how it relates to home.
- Aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture that may impact on measures of homelessness (especially those that may mask 'homelessness' or the need for additional accommodation).

Submissions and further consultation will be used to inform the content and recommendations included in an Information Paper to be released late in 2013 to provide an enhanced understanding of homelessness in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context, leading to improvements in the estimation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homeless population.

Submissions will be welcome until September 20th, 2013 and can be forwarded electronically or in hard copy using the contact details below.

Email: NCATSIS@abs.gov.au

Or by post to:

Director

NCATSIS

Locked Bag 10

Belconnen ACT 2616

APPENDIX 1 ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

OVERVIEW OF ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

From March to June 2013, the ABS engaged with a range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and service providers at the 'grass roots' level to capture views and experiences of homelessness within an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context.

Engagement was conducted in a culturally appropriate manner, and with due consideration of the burden of research and time already placed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The ABS' National Centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics (NCATSIS) sought advice from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and groups to determine suitable methodological approaches and question wording to translate complex homelessness concepts into meaningful and understandable questions that were culturally appropriate.

Key concepts ABS wanted to explore with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people included:

- home, including concepts of spiritual home, my country,
- definition of resident / visitor,
- accommodation alternatives,
- adequacy of the dwelling,
- security of tenure in the dwelling,
- crowding.

A workshop was held with the research consultancy group: 'Ninti One' to provide expert insight into the cultural appropriateness of these research concepts. Advice was provided on question wording and methodological approaches in the field. Members of the ABS Round Table on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics, and ABS Indigenous Engagement Managers were also consulted. A discussion guide was developed and used as a framework for engagement.

The discussion guide comprised the following questions:

1. *Talking about home...*

- Can you tell me what home means to you?
 - What makes it a home?
 - How important is a home to you?

2. *Talking about where you usually live...*

- Do you feel comfortable there?

3. *Do you have people visiting you?*

- Why? For how long usually?
- Would people staying or visiting consider it as their home?
- Do you like people staying with you?

4. *Talking about homelessness...*

- What do you think being homeless is?
- Do you have a story you would like to tell about homelessness?
- Do you have any thoughts about why people are homeless?

5. *Talking about what makes a good place to stay...*

- What is the most and least important?
 - Family/kinship?
 - Country/homeland?
 - Bathroom/kitchen?[working, access to]
 - Stability of living in a place? (tenancy arrangement)
 - Space for living?
 - Privacy for talking?
 - Having control over your place?

6. *Talking about (if you were stuck for) a place to stay...*

APPENDIX 1 ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY *continued*

OVERVIEW OF ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY *continued*

- Do you always have family you can stay with? - If answer is "no" then...
 - If you were stuck for a place to stay, could you find another place?
 - Who could you stay with?
 - Where would you stay?
 - How long could you stay there?
 - Would you consider it home? If not what would you call it?
 - If you had to leave, would you go back home?

APPENDIX 2 REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

LITERATURE REVIEW

To complement the qualitative research undertaken, a brief literature review was conducted. Research into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness includes discussion of themes such as kinship, mobility, overcrowding and spiritual homelessness.

The literature states that the notion of homelessness as understood today was virtually non-existent in traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations, where the realities of kinship and tribal networks facilitated the natural transient mobility of these groups¹. The research tells of the cyclical nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people moving through different forms of 'homelessness', either staying with family or sleeping rough².

In the literature reviewed there is reference to the extended family structure that exists in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. An element deeply embedded in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, is a person that would otherwise be homeless will usually have family with whom they can stay. However, while this may be viewed by some as a culturally appropriate way of living, by others it is viewed as crowding³. In this context, researchers discussed the strain placed on living arrangements, relationships and tenancy agreements by the overcrowding experienced in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households⁴.

The highly mobile nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may help in reinforcing kinship connections, where travel is undertaken to visit family in different locations⁵. There are reports of differing mobility types according to why and where people move, and distinguishing between these is vital to understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness⁶.

A view represented in the literature is the distinction between house and home⁷, and the possibility that while a person may not have a dwelling to occupy, they will not necessarily identify as homeless. In the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context, the absence of housing does not necessarily define homelessness, just as the provision of housing does not necessarily alleviate homelessness⁸. According to research, home for some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is identified more with a connection to land and family than to an actual dwelling⁹. Although there are Aboriginal and Torres

1 Keys Young 1998, *Homelessness in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context and its possible implications for the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program*, May, accessed April 2013, http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2012/keysyoung_0.pdf.

2 Keys Young 1998, *Homelessness in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context and its possible implications for the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program*, May, accessed April 2013, http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2012/keysyoung_0.pdf.

3 Sutton P 2009, *The Politics of Suffering*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

4 Flatau P, Cooper, L, Edwards, D, McGrath N, & Marinova D, 2005, *Indigenous Housing Need and Mainstream Public and Community Housing Responses*, Western Australian Housing and Urban research Institute (AHURI) Research Centre, 4th National Housing Conference, 26-28 October, Perth, accessed March 2013, http://nhc.ahuri.ddsn.net/downloads/2005/DayOne/FlatauP_Paper.pdf.

5 Birdsall-Jones, C Corunna, V, Turner, N, Smart, G & Shaw, W 2010, *Indigenous Homelessness*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, AHURI Final Report No.143, March, accessed March 2013, <http://www.ahuri.edu.au/publications/p80368/>.

6 Habibis D 2011, "A Framework for Reimagining Indigenous Mobility and Homelessness", *Urban Policy and Research*, Vol.29 No.4, pp.401-414, accessed March 2013, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/08111146.2011.613146>.

7 Keys Young 1998, *Homelessness in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context and its possible implications for the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program*, May, accessed April 2013, http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2012/keysyoung_0.pdf.

8 Memmott P, Birdsall-Jones C & Greenop K 2012, *Why are special services needed to address Indigenous homelessness?*, Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland, June, accessed March 2013, <http://homelessnessclearinghouse.govspace.gov.au/files/2012/06/Report-10-special-services-for-Indigenous-homelessness.pdf>.

9 Keys Young 1998, *Homelessness in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context and its possible implications for the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program*, May, accessed April 2013, http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2012/keysyoung_0.pdf.

APPENDIX 2 REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE *continued*

LITERATURE REVIEW *continued*

Strait Islander people whose expectations and aspirations of home are similar to those of the wider community¹⁰.

There is debate in the literature about the concept of 'no usual address', the difficulty in understanding and defining a 'usual resident' and 'visitor', and the appropriateness of these terms in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context. For example, it may be considered culturally inappropriate to identify as having 'no usual address' in the Census, particularly when staying with extended family, with the consequence that 'no usual address' may be under-reported by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people¹¹.

Spiritual homelessness is the term given to describe a person being without identity and having no connection to country or the spirituality of their homeland¹². Spiritual homelessness is an important concept in the understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness, and provides a perspective which does not easily fit with the wider community's concept of homelessness.

The review of literature provides a snapshot of some of the research into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concepts of homelessness. It is clear that the complexity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness demands further exploration¹³.

10 Keys Young 1998, *Homelessness in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context and its possible implications for the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program*, May, accessed April 2013, http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2012/keysyoung_0.pdf.

11 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2012, *Factsheet: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Homelessness*, accessed July 2013, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4922.0Main%20Features82012?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4922.0&issue=2012&num=&view=>

12 Memmott P, Long S, Chambers C & Spring F, 2003, *Categories of Indigenous 'Homeless' People and Good Practice responses to Their Needs*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, November, accessed 26 March 2013,

http://www.housing.infoxchange.net.au/library/ahin/social_housing/items/2004/03/00100-upload-00001.pdf

13 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) 2008, *Submission of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) to the Green Paper on Homelessness - Which Way Home?*, HREOC, 4 July, accessed March 2013, http://humanrights.gov.au/legal/submissions/2008/20080704_homelessness.pdf.

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