

**Positioning Paper**

# **Sustainable Tenancy for Indigenous Families: What Services and Policy Supports are Needed?**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Positioning Paper describes the background to, aims and methodology for a research project being undertaken throughout 2003 to identify the major factors that initiate and sustain iterative homelessness among Indigenous families in both urban and remote areas, especially Indigenous women and children.

The research involves: (1) interviews with key stakeholders and service providers to identify key issues; (2) an extensive literature review; (3) a policy and best practice review; (4) interviews with Indigenous women who are currently in temporary accommodation (40 women will be interviewed in Brisbane and 80 in Darwin and other places in the Northern Territory) to give them a voice to be heard in recommending policy change and best practice initiatives; (5) a questionnaire to elicit economic and cultural factors that are understood as initiating and sustaining homelessness; and (6) semi-structured interviews with a range of service providers to identify barriers to accessing housing services for Indigenous women and families. The first two of these research actions have been completed and are discussed in this paper.

The research is grounded in the experiences of a prominent Brisbane Aboriginal Elder and those of other Indigenous women and workers in Darwin and Katherine, acknowledging their practice wisdom and tacit knowledge, and their identification of a cycle of homelessness among Indigenous women. The extensive literature review has identified a gap in that Indigenous women's understanding of patterns of homelessness is missing from the academic literature, and is a vital missing link in helping to address their problems. In saying this, the researchers point out that Indigenous women belong to many different Indigenous communities, and each community may have different cultural characteristics. Hence the need to adopt a 'between-within focus group design' to enable comparisons to be made between naturally occurring groups within the participant sample, as well as within the total participant group.

Indigenous women participating in this research are included as co-researchers whose first-hand knowledge is invaluable. Aboriginal research assistants are playing an important role in speaking with the Indigenous women. Findings from successful programs and best practice examples highlighted in this paper indicate that programs set up and run by Indigenous communities, with high levels of cooperation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff, have a high success rate. Thus, this research aims to incorporate this collaborative practice.

For the purposes of this research, Chamberlain and Mackenzie's (1992) standard definition of homelessness has not been used. Instead, the concepts of home and homelessness have been viewed from an Indigenous perspective, which is very different. The importance of the historical (colonisation, separation and marginalisation) and cultural contexts within which homelessness among Indigenous people needs to be explored, as identified in the literature review, initial consultation with stakeholders and stories from Indigenous women, has led the researchers to focus on Keys Young (1998) and the National Youth Coalition definitions of homelessness among Indigenous people. These include spiritual homelessness, overcrowding, relocation or transient homelessness, escaping an unsafe or unstable home, and lack of access to any stable shelter.

The literature review has identified the following issues around pathways into and between Indigenous homelessness and sustainable tenancy, especially in relation to how they affect women. The literature discusses cultural marginalisation in: the incompatibility between Indigenous concepts of 'home' and cultural norms such as sleeping, cooking and eating outdoors in public spaces, and legislation that prohibits this; the need for culturally appropriate housing that does not demand abandoning traditions and provides for a large, fluctuating population under one roof; lack of urban living skills; lack of skills to access services; unemployment; intergenerational poverty; problems associated with alcohol-related violence and damage in overcrowded extended family situations, leading to eviction; and mobility.

Structural and personal factors forming barriers to sustainable tenancy for Indigenous women have also been identified. These include: racial discrimination; higher than average rates of incarceration; lower rates of employment; low education levels; problems meeting social security requirements; mental illness; the cost of providing suitable, safe housing in remote areas; temporary housing; lack of long-term affordable housing; lack of appropriate crisis accommodation for women and their children; long waiting lists for public housing; and family violence, which is a particular problem for Indigenous women, who rarely report it to police. The issue of disempowerment, with its roots in colonisation, is identified as a major factor in family violence, which is one of the main reasons for the cycle of homelessness among Indigenous women and their children

Disempowerment has been shown to directly affect Indigenous women's use of services due to many years of 'unfulfilled promises', shyness, shame and inability to understand the system. Thus, an Indigenous woman is more likely to accept an eviction order than to fight it in court, indicating that culturally appropriate and 'friendly' support services are needed. Similarly, health becomes an issue due to the system of 'fixed appointments', which do not fit in with Indigenous time and the necessity to keep moving either for family reasons or due to other accommodation problems.

It has been shown that all of the above issues impact on one another to exacerbate Indigenous families' cycles of homelessness and unsustainable tenancy. Cultural norms (such as staying with extended family, leading to overcrowding) and lack of education, information about services and skills lead to unemployment, poverty and marginalisation from mainstream services. The links between this situation, and family violence and alcohol abuse are inferred in the literature review.

A review of policy identifies the need for a change in attitude, values and power structures. One suggestion is that initiatives directed towards job skills might be valuable, while most focus on the need for inter-agency links and providing culturally sensitive and friendly service delivery, which does not appear to exist currently. A whole of government/service integration has been recommended to deal with access to accommodation, substance addiction, and anti-social behaviour in public spaces.

Strategies for improving access, providing culturally appropriate services and models of service delivery are also discussed. Some suggestions include: cross-cultural training for non-Indigenous employees and flexibility of appointments; employing Elders and Indigenous counsellors, and other trained Aboriginal staff; providing education programs to police, victims and perpetrators of crime; providing mediation rooms which allow support to male partners and other family members; and giving 'ownership' of services and delivery to Indigenous communities who have local knowledge resulting in services targeting local need. Other initiatives suggested are: education programs for women that include general education, financial counselling, assertiveness training and health; and outreach services operating 24 hours a day.

The findings of this research so far have identified many of the issues contributing to the cyclical nature of homelessness for Indigenous women – social, political, economic and psychological factors – together with factors that may facilitate Indigenous women to attain sustainable tenancy. Examples of successful programs indicate that where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people work together, guided by the Aboriginal community, it is possible to address effectively the issues of homelessness and sustainable tenancy.

These findings provide solid information about previous research, together with the stories of Indigenous women about their pathways into and between sustainable tenancy. They will be used to inform the development of the questionnaire to be used in conjunction with the interviews of Indigenous women currently in temporary accommodation. Overall, it is intended to use the current findings as a basis on which to continue this research with the aim of identifying the services and policy supports needed to achieve sustainable tenancy for Indigenous families.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Aims

While there is an extensive literature on Indigenous people, few enquiries have addressed the specific issue of homelessness among Indigenous women. This research focuses on Indigenous women and their children who are not able to sustain tenancy. It aims to:

- Examine pathways into and between homelessness and sustainable tenancy for Indigenous women
- Determine what structural and service barriers in the housing and welfare system hinder sustainable tenancy
- Establish the best practice models to ensure service coordination and linkages between service providers and Indigenous people.
- Specify what specific policy initiatives would enable Indigenous women to maintain sustainable tenancy.

## 1.2 Background

The idea for this research was grounded in the experiences of Aunty Honor Cleary, an Aboriginal Elder who works at Yelangi Pre-School in Indooroopilly, Brisbane, and similar but different experiences of other Indigenous women told to the researchers in Darwin and Katherine during preliminary planning for this research. A cycle of homelessness affecting Indigenous women was identified in both the urban and remote settings (see Figure 1 on p. 26).

Consistent throughout the current research methodology, at no time did the researchers view the Indigenous women as subjects. The research methodology includes the women as co-researchers whose voices provide first hand experiences to complement the academic literature, which does not reflect Indigenous women's understanding of patterns of homelessness. An Indigenous research assistant will interview Indigenous women who are currently in temporary accommodation.

In telling this story the researchers want to acknowledge the practice wisdom and tacit knowledge of Aboriginal people. Their stories have shaped both the research aims and the literature review.

## 1.3 Honouring the knowledge of Indigenous women – listening to their voices

Indigenous workers have identified a cycle of homelessness amongst Indigenous women in Brisbane and Darwin. An example cited by Auntie Honor Cleary relates to Yelangi Pre-School, which buses children daily from West End, Musgrave Park, and the Northside and Southside of Brisbane to attend the centre. Staff from Yelangi go on the bus run to collect the children and take them home. During the bus runs staff talk to the women waiting to collect their children and observe the families' living arrangements. A child might be collected from their mother residing in public housing on the Northside on one day. In following days mother and children may have moved to other forms of accommodation with the child being collected at a new place.

Patterns of homelessness were apparent. Aunty Honor noticed that women subjected to family violence and alcohol abuse move from housing at Cherbourg to crisis accommodation in Cherbourg (see Figure 1 on p. 26). From there they may move to various forms of temporary accommodation including Aboriginal Housing on the outskirts of Brisbane, public housing, crisis accommodation, living with relatives, hostels or perhaps Musgrave Park, a meeting place for Indigenous people in West End, Brisbane. At some of these transition points Yelangi staff are asked to assist in making connections with service providers and advocating for women. Their frustrations in dealing with some of these mainstream service providers indicate systemic discrimination against Aboriginal women

and children, barriers to service delivery and poor service coordination, all of which compound the difficulties these women and children face in sustaining tenancy.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people such as Aunty Honor are aware of the factors that contribute to homelessness, how the organisation of the system maintains disadvantage, the consequences of this homelessness and the profound educational disadvantages for children. This research examines the links between the different factors identified, and seeks to make recommendations about best practice and policy to improve sustainable tenancy for Indigenous women and their children.

## **1.4 Literature review**

### *Concepts of home and homelessness*

Concepts of home and homelessness are discussed in Section 2. The historical and cultural context, especially dispossession of land and colonisation, provides an understanding of why homelessness is such an important issue for Indigenous people. This section critically examines the Indigenous household with attention to composition and tenure. It concludes with discussion of the Long grass people of Darwin and the range of problems manifest in this Darwin community.

### *Pathways into and between homelessness and sustainable tenancy*

In Section 3, pathways into and between homelessness and sustainable tenancy for Indigenous people are discussed. These multiple pathways are presented in Figure 1 (see p. 26). It is evident that homelessness is related to structural factors. Intergenerational poverty and unemployment provide the biggest single contribution to household insecurity. In these situations Indigenous household units are larger and more multi-generational, and include a substantial flow of visitors and itinerants. It is not surprising that in these situations overcrowding, when combined with consumption of drugs and alcohol, sets the scene for family violence and abuse of children. When such factors as anti-social behaviour and mental illness are added the result is a highly volatile housing environment. These structural and personal factors form barriers to sustainable tenancy.

Other factors identified as contributing to homelessness and inability to sustain tenancy include racial discrimination and incarceration. Racial discrimination is widely reported, especially in the private rental market, while some of the previously described factors of alcohol abuse and anti-social behaviour lead to incarceration. The number of Indigenous women serving prison sentences has increased in both Queensland and the Northern Territory. It has been well documented that women may easily become homeless on discharge from prison.

Other factors influence the ability of Indigenous women to maintain tenancy. Lack of necessary urban living or home management skills to cope effectively, and lack of skills in accessing available services are areas of concern. This applies especially to women who have come from remote communities to urban settings. Indigenous women suffer from the double inheritance of racism and sexism, leading to disempowerment and marginalisation. Similar cycles of homelessness are implied in the literature, although this has not been specifically identified amongst Indigenous people.

Structural problems and service barriers within the housing and welfare systems that magnify social and personal factors are discussed in Section 4. One relevant issue for this research is the lack of safe housing, coupled with long waiting lists for public housing, for women and children wanting to escape family violence. The standards and suitability of housing in remote areas are of major concern if the health of women and children is to be maintained. Structural barriers that hinder the delivery of many services to Indigenous women and families include lack of sufficient information to help women access existing services, and agencies, particularly mainstream ones, not delivering culturally appropriate services. Where this is the case, the agencies may be regarded as hostile to Indigenous people, who will not use them.

If Indigenous women are to be enabled to sustain their tenancy, government and non-government agencies will need to examine their current policies and service delivery, and

seek to implement best practice models for service delivery to Indigenous people. Section 5 looks at models of best practice. It examines programs with successful outcomes, innovative programs and specific policy initiatives. Service delivery is addressed including broad service delivery frameworks, a whole of government approach and the importance of access points to services. Various models of service delivery such as community development, healing frameworks, case management and outreach services are addressed. Self-determination is seen as an overarching principle of the service delivery system.

## **1.5 Methodology**

The methodology is outlined in Section 6. It comprises three stages. In Stage 1, key stakeholders and those providing support to Indigenous people have been identified. Researchers have consulted these people to gain an overview of policy, practice and practical issues associated with sustainable tenancy.

In Stage 2 an Indigenous research assistant will interview Indigenous women who are currently in temporary accommodation. Forty women will be interviewed in Brisbane and eighty in Darwin and other places in the Northern Territory. This will take place between mid-June and the end of August 2003. A questionnaire will be administered to elicit economic and cultural factors that are understood as initiating and sustaining homelessness. These factors will include personal demographic data, knowledge of, and access to support services, employment history, income security, cultural identity, accommodation history, community support, physical health and well-being including drug and alcohol abuse, psychological well-being including cognitive functioning, legal issues and incarcerations, isolation and marginalisation, education and family violence. In addition to this formal questionnaire the women will be asked to describe their own housing histories, highlighting their pathways through homelessness and tenancy.

Stage 3, the final stage of the research, involves semi-structured interviews with service providers. The purpose of these interviews is to identify service system factors that may initiate or sustain the cycle of homelessness evident in the Indigenous community.

All data gathered will be collated and summarised, and links between the factors identified as contributing to homelessness will be made. Recommendations for policy and best practice will then be made from the findings.

## 2 HOME AND HOMELESSNESS

The key aim of this section is to explore the concept of homelessness of Indigenous women and to specify some of the characteristics of Indigenous housing arrangements. Until recently, the image of homelessness was based on itinerant males who slept on the park bench. These views of homelessness excluded not only women's (and children's) experiences of not having a home but more importantly ignored the situation of Indigenous women living in urban and remote environments.

A cursory reading of the literature reveals that homelessness does not exist in isolation from other factors, and that its antecedents and correlates are complex and interconnected. Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and writers across a range of disciplines provide a context for homelessness and, in recent years, a number of significant studies of Indigenous homelessness have been conducted. This review draws upon information from a wide range of sources, and attempts to give prominence to the work and experiences of Indigenous women. It is acknowledged that there is considerable diversity within and between Indigenous communities (Westbury & Sanders, 2000), and that Indigenous homeless people have diverse needs (Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy, 2002). In fact, there are more than 200 Aboriginal languages, 20 of which remain strong (although endangered), while other communities are reviving theirs (Nathan, 2003). Commonalities amongst Indigenous people are sought here as a means of compiling a useful framework for this discussion of Indigenous women's homelessness and ways of ameliorating their circumstances.

### 2.1 Home – what is it?

Before describing Indigenous homelessness, it is important to consider the meaning of 'home' to Indigenous people. Non-Indigenous definitions of home do not capture the complexity of the Indigenous concept. Indeed, Stanner (cited in Berry, MacKenzie, Briskman & Ngwenya, 2001, p. 34) argues that the English language lacks the vocabulary to convey the Indigenous cultural sense of home. Indigenous people point out that homelessness has a spiritual and physical dimension, and they may not see themselves as homeless if their connections to their home place and community are intact (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001, p. 41). Berry and colleagues (Berry et al., 2001), in their study of Indigenous homelessness in Victoria, discuss the complexity of the Indigenous concept of 'home', which is influenced by tradition and values to a greater extent than the non-Indigenous understandings, and an element of mobility (moving between residences), while cooking and sleeping outdoors may not be a symptom of homelessness, but in line with cultural norms.

The meaning of home to Indigenous people encompasses obligations to extended family and attitudes towards ownership, possessions and disposal of income. It may also differ between and within communities. Many Indigenous people experience psychological and spiritual homelessness as a consequence of dispossession or forced removal from homelands. This is the most fundamental form of homelessness for Indigenous people, and one unparalleled in any other Australian group (Keys Young, 1998). A concise and evocative explanation of the meaning of home is expressed in the credo of the Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria, 'Our Home is our Land, our Land is our Home' (Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria web site).

### 2.2 Homelessness – what is it?

The work of Chamberlain and Mackenzie (1992) provides a standard definition of homelessness. It is a three-level classification that includes *primary homelessness*, where people do not have a roof over their head, and covers sleeping out and sleeping rough; *secondary homelessness*, where people frequently move from place to place using various forms of temporary accommodation; and *tertiary homelessness*, where people live in a range of substandard accommodation such as caravan parks and boarding houses. More recently, Chamberlain and Johnson (2001) have re-entered the debate, arguing that homelessness is a concept like poverty, having absolute and relative dimensions. *Absolute homelessness* refers to situations where people are literally homeless. *Relative*

*homelessness* means that Australians are expected to have 'particular types of accommodation in order to live according to the conventions and cultural expectations of a particular community' (p 44). People then become homeless when they lose this accepted standard of accommodation and move into a variety of temporary arrangements that includes crisis accommodation, hostels and boarding houses, and living with relatives.

Definitions of homelessness have been revisited by Watson (2000). She argues that definitions of homelessness have a gendered terrain in which women's needs are marginalised and therefore women's homelessness is more hidden. She says:

If it is invisible it is not counted and therefore it is underestimated. Research and political action in the area of women's homelessness have had to grapple with this problem for a long time. The issue of homelessness has to be identified as existing, and then drawn out of the shadows and illuminated before anything can be done to address it. (Watson 2000:161)

In another study using Watson's work, Adkins, Barnett, Jerome, Heffernan and Minnery (2003) express the view that women's homelessness is part of the new homelessness. Changing economic and labour market policies that impact on women have exacerbated this homelessness. If this is true for women in general, the plight of Indigenous women's homelessness is even more hidden, underestimated and in the shadows as a result of racism and associated marginalisation.

In order to understand the demographic and structural factors operating to cause homelessness, the policies, programs and services that assist women who are homeless and the housing opportunities that are available to them need to be reviewed.

### **2.3 Indigenous homelessness**

Given the complexity of the concept of home, it is perhaps not surprising that homelessness cannot be reduced to a simple definition or to a classification system provided by Chamberlain and MacKenzie. In a discussion paper on Indigenous homelessness in Victoria, Berry et al. (2001) point out that the element of mobility is a contemporary cultural norm for Indigenous people who, on important occasions, may move from their place of residence to an area which they call 'home': this may be where their relatives live or where their forebears lived and going 'home' may entail a prolonged stay, with family expectations and responsibilities.

Because Indigenous homelessness is often found in close conjunction with a range of adverse outcomes, it is perhaps more useful to view it as a highly visible manifestation of entrenched disadvantage and discrimination, as summarised in the Gordon Report on Aboriginal housing in Western Australia:

In remote and some regional areas the primary issue is a lack of sufficient housing and associated services, exacerbated by poverty and geographic isolation. The resulting and inevitable overcrowding leads to increased wear and maintenance needs, which are often not met, health problems and further overcrowding as homes become unliveable. In urban areas, Aboriginal people have difficulty obtaining housing in the private rental market because of poverty and discrimination, even though only a very small proportion of Aboriginal families could be described as problematic tenants. (Gordon, Hallahan, & Henry, 2002, p. 195)

Similarly, Myles and Naden (2002) refer to the 'soul destroying' conditions imposed on Indigenous people on Cape York in the earlier part of this century. They cite Indigenous unemployment, sub-standard housing, poor health and educational status and extreme overcrowding as factors resulting in dysfunction of individuals and their communities.

Keys Young (1998, p. 4) identified five types of homelessness among Indigenous people:

Spiritual forms of homelessness, which relate to separation from traditional land or from family

Overcrowding, a hidden form of homelessness which is said to be causing considerable stress and distress to many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities

Relocation and transient homelessness, which results in temporary, intermittent and often cyclical patterns of homelessness due to transient and mobile lifestyles, but also to the necessity of a larger proportion of the Indigenous population (relative to the non-Indigenous population) having to travel to obtain services

Escaping an unsafe or unstable home for their own safety or survival is another form of homelessness affecting large numbers of Indigenous people, especially women and young people

Lack of access to any stable shelter, accommodation or housing - literally having 'nowhere to go' - is regarded as the worst form of homelessness by many of those consulted.

The views proposed by Keys Young (1998) are similar to practical definitions of homelessness by the National Youth Coalition and cited by Memmott and Fantin (2001, p. 34):

Homelessness, according to the National Youth Coalition, is an absence of shelter, threat of loss of shelter, high mobility between places of abode, existing accommodation considered inadequate because of overcrowding, lack of security of occupancy or inadequate support and unreasonable restrictions in terms of access to alternative accommodation.

Definitions of homelessness are dynamic, changing according to the prevailing social policy arrangements. Early definitions of homelessness are based on the subjective experiences of itinerant men. This view of homelessness excluded other groups of people including that of women and Indigenous people. As a result the experiences of women were invisible, not counted and underestimated. If this is the experience of women, it is even more relevant for Indigenous women who have been marginalised on the basis of their gender and race. Indigenous people have begun to address their concept of home and homelessness, including spiritual homelessness, overcrowding, lack of access to stable shelter and transient homelessness within their particular framework.

The practical definitions taken by Keys Young and the National Youth Coalition for Housing in defining homelessness will be used in this study. Although homelessness has now been defined from a practical and Indigenous perspective, it is also necessary to explore the cultural norms surrounding homelessness, noting how culture can influence perceptions of home and homelessness. This serves as a reminder for white researchers and readers to reflect on our assumptions when we seek to enter and research in this area.

## **2.4 Cultural norms, practices, values**

Perceptions of homelessness can be influenced by cultural norms, practices and values. Berry and colleagues (2001) draw attention to some of the incompatibilities between Indigenous cultural norms and the laws of mainstream society. For example, cooking and sleeping outdoors may be a matter of choice rather than homelessness, but these practices may conflict with laws that prohibit drinking and sleeping in public areas. Indigenous values associated with extended family may result in acceptance by an Aboriginal housing agency of three families living in one house, whereas a generic housing agency might classify such an arrangement as overcrowding (Also, see *Overcrowding* below).

The futility of attempting to impose non-Indigenous norms and values onto Indigenous people is illustrated in Morgan's (2000) account of the Aboriginal Resettlement Scheme that operated in New South Wales in the 1970s. Morgan writes of the ambivalence of Indigenous applicants for public housing when, although wanting adequate housing and better living conditions, they were not necessarily prepared to meet expectations that they would completely abandon their traditions to comply with non-Indigenous norms of nuclear family, hygiene, child-rearing, education and what it means to be 'a good neighbour'. The

Resettlement Scheme saw Aboriginal families moved from small towns to larger centres where employment prospects were higher. They received 'intensive counselling', which included referrals to Aboriginal agencies, but which also 'extended and complemented the assimilation social control regimes which formed part of the operation of the Housing Commission' (p. 6). Scheme participants also received priority on housing waiting lists and financial assistance for furniture. This concerted coercion notwithstanding, large numbers returned to their 'homeplaces', many were unable to find employment, and the scheme closed in the early 1980s because it was not meeting its objectives. Morgan points out that what was taken to be Indigenous people's non-conformity had a hidden cultural logic not apparent to outsiders.

## **2.5 Historical context**

It is frequently observed that Indigenous homelessness and associated problems can only be understood in the context of the history of Indigenous peoples. For example, Walker, Ballard and Taylor (2002) point out:

Contemporary housing programs and priorities for Indigenous people need to be understood within a historical context that involves the dispossession of land and the forced break up of families and communities. (p. 10)

Non-Indigenous policies and practices have contributed substantially to the disadvantage experienced by Indigenous people. Fitzgerald (2002) summarises these in the introduction to his report on problems in Cape York communities:

Until relatively recently the State's bureaucracy controlled all aspects of personal and social life: the right to marry, care of children, place of living, employment, supply of food, safety of water, provision of medical attention, schooling, housing, community amenities, policing and justice. When Europeans moved into Queensland ... countless families fell to starvation and disease as they were driven off fertile areas and denied access to water ... payment [for work] was commonly in cast-off clothes, food scraps, or alcohol or opium dregs, with dependency ensuring a captive, malleable workforce. (p. 10)

Cultural norms, history and our values inform our understanding of homelessness. It is futile and perhaps dangerous to impose non-Indigenous norms onto Indigenous people. If Indigenous homelessness is to be addressed effectively, it must be understood in an historical and cultural context that takes account of past injustices as described by Fitzgerald. Without taking this historical perspective into account, and the sustained marginalised treatment of Indigenous people by the State, it is not possible to fully identify and address the barriers to Indigenous people, and women in particular, accessing appropriate support services.

## **2.6 Other factors contributing to the housing disadvantage of Indigenous people**

Large numbers of Indigenous people live in remote communities in which the costs of basic services are high and many services are limited. Indigenous townships, which may have underlying social and economic problems as well as problems of poverty and unemployment, have developed from missions or reserves where Indigenous people were placed after removal from their traditional country. People removed to these townships suffered dislocation and displacement. In response to displacement and relocation, some Indigenous people returned to their traditional country (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, 2002). Further, it has been noted that, 'Causal factors do not tend to operate in isolation; rather, they reinforce and complement each other' (Department of Family and Community Services 1999, SAAP III report, p. VIII.)

Whilst there is a diversity of antecedents to homelessness, it has an equal diversity of adverse consequences. For example, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence (Robertson, 2000) reported that community members repeatedly stressed the importance of safe and serviceable housing to raising health standards and lowering levels of violence. The inter-relatedness of the correlates of homelessness was

illustrated in a submission to the Federal Government's Department of Family and Community Services report on responses to homeless people with high and complex needs (Bisset, Campbell & Goodall, 1999). The submission was from an agency, the majority of whose clients are traditional Aboriginal women and children escaping domestic violence. In the submission, factors associated with cultural marginalisation were listed: kinship and family relationships, lack of urban living skills and nutritious diet, different health and hygiene standards, and communication skills. The report's authors summarised the problems of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as lack of access to SAAP services, lack of appropriate services, and agencies' lack of understanding or capacity to provide for Indigenous people with high need (p. 106).

## 2.7 Household characteristics

Indigenous people live in a variety of private dwellings, public housing and temporary housing arrangements. The Australian Bureau of Statistics conducted the Australian Housing Survey between September and December 1999. For the purposes of the survey, an Indigenous household was any private dwelling with at least one person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin aged 15 years or over. The survey did not include households in remote or sparsely settled areas. If this data had been included, the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous households would be skewed even further. Data which provide a snapshot of Indigenous housing circumstances are summarised in Table 1 below. Non-Indigenous data are included for comparison.

**Table 1 Characteristics of Indigenous and non-Indigenous households**

<b>Household characteristic</b>	<b>Indigenous (%)</b>	<b>Non-Indigenous (%)</b>
In rented accommodation	58	27
Own or buying home	39	71
Spend more than 25% of income on housing costs	23	18
Need for essential and/or urgent house repairs – exterior	10	5
Need for essential and/or urgent house repairs – interior	14	4
Need one or more additional bedrooms	13	4
In current accommodation less than 9 years	79	61
(Of those in rental accommodation) moved 3 times or more in the last 5 years	61	49

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics Australian Housing Survey – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Results. Cat No. 4712.0 (2001).

These survey findings indicate that Indigenous people are more likely than non-Indigenous people to be in inadequate and lower standard accommodation, to have less security of tenure and to move more often. Readers are reminded that these survey results present an optimistic view of housing as they do not take in account households from remote and sparsely settled areas.

Using data from various sources, the Housing Ministers Advisory Committee (2002) reported half of all those living in improvised dwellings in the 1996 census were identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Ten percent of Indigenous households in major urban areas, 15% in other urban areas, and 27% in rural areas were overcrowded: figures for non-Indigenous households were 4% in major urban areas and 3% for urban and rural areas. Weekly expenditure on housing is higher among Indigenous households than non-Indigenous households, and more Indigenous than non-Indigenous households report a high need for house repairs. In summary, the report showed that Indigenous people are more likely than non-Indigenous people to live in improvised, overcrowded and/or lower standard accommodation, to pay more for housing and to rent rather than buy. Of those renting, Indigenous people are more likely to be in the public housing sector.

A survey of community housing found that approximately 13% of Indigenous people in remote communities live in temporary dwellings such as tin sheds, caravans or 'humpies'. It was reported that 21% of community dwellings require major repair and an additional 9% need to be replaced (Bailey et al., 2002, p. 14). Data from an interview survey conducted in 1994 by the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996) indicated that 77% of respondents were living in dwellings that satisfied their housing needs. Reasons given for unsatisfactory housing were that the dwelling was in need of repair or did not have enough bedrooms.

Rowse (2002, pp. 130-151) has challenged the concept of a household that forms the basis of the data above. The central social arrangements of an Indigenous family do not necessarily consist of one income unit (perhaps none at all) and may not comprise mother, father and children. A household can include multi family units, inter-generational groups, and a range of transient residents who may be boarders, visitors, or individual family members. There may be a stable core of people with a highly mobile fringe of people who are most likely transient. Whatever the definition of a household, Rowse (2002) argues that it is apparent that there are:

...relatively rapid changes in the size and composition of 'households' (co-residents of a dwelling), the strength of kin-based associations between 'households' (occasioning flows of money and goods), the relatively large proportion of people (visitors and transients) who claim membership of more than one 'household', the ease with which responsibility for children passes amongst adults and between households. (p.149)

## **2.8 Tenure**

As noted above, Indigenous people have less secure tenure than non-Indigenous people. In a study of the general population in Queensland, Mullins and Western (2001) conducted a telephone survey to identify associations between tenure and quality of housing and nine non-housing outcomes: community, crime, poverty, social exclusion, perceived well-being, anomie, health, education, and employment. Respondents in public housing and low-income private tenants receiving government assistance were the most disadvantaged with respect to almost all of the variables examined.

Minnery and colleagues (Minnery et al., 2003) conducted a telephone survey of 1000 inner-city Brisbane and Ipswich (mostly) low and moderate income private renters to examine their perceptions of security of tenure. Commonly reported reasons for moving were the need for a bigger home, the home no longer being available, and moving for reasons of employment. The majority of respondents who had moved during the past two years reported that the decision to move had been their own or made by a family member. The factors nominated by respondents as important or very important in their choice of current home were whether they could stay as long as they wanted (84%), whether the rent was cheap (77%), satisfaction with lease or tenancy conditions (76%), whether the home would suit future requirements (72%), whether the property was available quickly (71%), friendliness of landlord or agent (70%), and the affordability of the bond (67%). Short-term extendable leases were preferred over long-term arrangements. A good relationship with the landlord gave tenants a sense of control over their tenancy. Certain non-housing factors, notably employment, contributed to respondents' confidence in meeting rental costs and therefore to their sense of security of tenure.

## **2.9 Itinerants**

Camping or living outdoors is a way of life for many Indigenous people, and not all Indigenous people necessarily want to live in a house at all times. They live in fringe camps or town camps, and have been given different names in different places. In the Northern Territory, Aboriginal people who live outdoors are known as 'Long grass people' or 'Long Grassers'. In Queensland they are known as 'park people' or 'Parkies'.

As part of a study reporting on Itinerants in Darwin, Memmott and Fantin (2001) examined several case studies of itinerant people living in town camps in places such as Alice Springs, Ceduna, Port Headland, Rockhampton, Cairns and Brisbane. The purpose in

examining these case studies was to observe the practical and policy approaches taken to Itinerants. Memmott and Fantin outlined two opposite approaches – the reactive and proactive. The reactive approach involves policing, removal of people, low tolerance of anti-social behaviour, apprehension and arrest, and the targeting of Itinerants in public places. A proactive approach on the other hand acknowledges human rights and rights to shelter and public housing. This strategy addresses residential needs, meals and clothes, tolerance of the use of public space and use of public facilities. Supporting this is provision of health, welfare and education services that are culturally sensitive.

Darwin and Brisbane both have itinerant populations. The Longgrass Association representing Itinerants in Darwin has called for respect for their way of life, and advocates for changes to council and government policies that discriminate against Long grass people. As they explain:

Since Darwin and Palmerston were established Indigenous people from remote communities in the Northern Territory and throughout Australia have been coming to town to camp and will continue to do so. It is part of our culture to camp out – we have grown up living this way and at times prefer this to staying in a house. (Longgrass Association, 2003, p. 2)

Writing of substantial numbers of Indigenous people living in public spaces in and around Darwin or camping on the outskirts of the town, on beaches and on Crown land, Goldie (2002) notes that some people have lived that way for most of their lives and consider those places to be their rightful home. This aspect of Indigenous culture has been the subject of heated controversy. Goldie charges that, rather than investigating why housing programs have failed to meet the needs of Indigenous people, the primary response of the Darwin City Council has been to enforce regulations prohibiting certain activities, for example sleeping, in public places. These strategies, she notes, have been educational and punitive, encouraging Indigenous people to live in a 'European way' (p. 5).

Toohy (1999) highlighted the different perceptions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people when he interviewed Long grass people in Darwin and Darwin's Lord Mayor. The Long grass people reported being woken in the early hours of the morning, issued with a \$50 infringement notice and having their bedding confiscated. If the fine is not paid, they serve several days or weeks in prison. As one Long grass person explained, they are not drifters – they are where they belong. The Mayor, on the other hand, denied that Long grass people have a legitimate place in Darwin, saying that they have alternatives and that they can go back to their communities. The Mayor was also reported to have said that Aboriginal drifters and white trash would be harassed and driven from the city (Bartlett Day, nd). Queensland's park people are no less controversial, with recent discussion centring on Parkies, excessive drinking, and accusations of exploitation by hoteliers (Raggatt, 2003).

Memmott and Fantin (2001) conducted a comprehensive study of the issues facing Long grassers in the Darwin and Palmerston area. Long grassers were categorised as 'Visitors' (those who intended returning home at some time) and 'Itinerants' (those who have severed ties with their home community and accept that their lifestyle will not change). The researchers interviewed Itinerants and agencies providing them with services, including Indigenous Councils administering formal Town Camps, government departments, companies and charitable organisations. The Itinerants interviewed came from various regions in the Territory and from interstate. They nominated accommodation as their primary problem. While a minority said they had never had a house and were content to camp out, most expressed a preference for a house, flat or hostel accommodation. Problems they identified in securing accommodation were high rents and long waiting times, as well as problems that arise when family visit: alcohol-related violence, loud noise and property damage that would result in eviction. From the perspective of the general community, problems arise when members of the Long grass community visit family members when intoxicated, with consequent excessive noise, conflict and house damage.

There is evidence that some homeless women prefer to sleep in a group outside rather than use sheltered accommodation. Coleman (2000) reported that while some women who sleep out want accommodation, others see accommodation as less important than maintaining area or community ties. Indigenous women who live in Cairns were interviewed

for a newspaper article on racism in that city (Zlotkowski, 2002). They expressed a preference for fresh air and 'sleeping under the stars'. But some have questioned the extent to which sleeping under the stars is a matter of choice. It is argued that the decision may be governed or influenced by their beliefs about their prospects of securing and paying for accommodation, running a household, finding culturally appropriate accommodation and finding employment. Because of past experiences, homeless people may have very low expectations (Keys Young, 1998).

## **2.10 Summary**

In this section, the concepts of home and homelessness have been explored from a general, gendered and Indigenous perspective, with homelessness defined by Keys Young and the National Youth Coalition for Housing.

Several aspects of homelessness discussed here and depicted in Figure 1 (see p. 26) are particularly relevant to this research and include spiritual homelessness, absence of shelter or threat of loss of shelter, overcrowding, relocation and transient homelessness, and the importance of safety and lack of access to stable shelter. Cultural and historical factors that influence concepts of home and homelessness have also been discussed, together with other linked factors that exacerbate inability to sustain tenancy such as unemployment.

Special consideration has been given to both Itinerants and women. Living outdoors is a way of life for many Indigenous people although there are different views about how this should be managed by policy makers and helpers who work directly with Indigenous people. Women, especially Indigenous women, have been historically neglected as part of research into homelessness. Indigenous women's views of home and homelessness, the causes and reasons for homelessness, factors that determine where they live, and their views on community and home are all critical to the current research, but their views are invisible. Thus, the voices of Indigenous women such as Aunty Honor Cleary and studies targeted at Indigenous women are very important. These understandings of home, homelessness and the views of Indigenous women provide the background for understanding sustainable tenancy.

### **3 PATHWAYS INTO AND BETWEEN HOMELESSNESS AND SUSTAINABLE TENANCY FOR INDIGENOUS WOMEN**

In the previous section homelessness was discussed from a general, cultural and historical perspective. The stories from Aunty Honor and our preliminary discussions with Indigenous women and service providers illustrate the impediments for Indigenous women in finding accommodation and making that place their home. Moving from homelessness to sustainable tenancy is a huge step for individuals and families.

As the focus of this research is on sustainable tenancy, we start from the assumption that sustaining tenancy is not just about finding a place to live and turning that place into a home. Sustaining tenancy is having the necessary personal skills, and social and economic circumstances to ensure that tenancy can be accessed and, once achieved, will be sustained and maintained. Finding rental accommodation or facilitating re-housing is a relatively easy task but it is only one small aspect of the work necessary to prevent homelessness and to resettle people. Housing Indigenous people cannot be separated from social and family relationships, community networks, services to people, historical treatment by the State in the settlement of Australia, health, education, life skills, employment, economic circumstances, race relationships and Indigenous culture.

Many individuals and families who find themselves homeless frequently have a range of problems that need to be addressed before successful tenancy can be sustained. These problems may relate to any number of serious social problems or cultural issues. In saying this, we are not inferring that causes for these difficulties lie with individuals but rather with systemic social and economic circumstances. In the following sections, social, cultural and economic circumstances associated with homelessness will be discussed. Pathways into and between homelessness and sustainable tenancy will be explored, as will the perpetuation of homelessness, which is referred to as the 'cycle of homelessness'.

A number of variables, including those depicted in Figure 1 (see p. 26) and described below, have been associated with homelessness in Indigenous women. Taken in isolation or combination, these variables create an environment that fails to sustain tenancy and leads to homelessness. When these variables are combined with the dynamic nature of household composition and visitor-induced economic stress, it is not surprising that tenancy is not sustained. Although research into these factors suggests a cycle from tenancy, overcrowding, emergency accommodation, temporary accommodation, transient homelessness and back to tenancy, this dynamic feature of Indigenous homelessness has not been addressed in the literature.

#### **3.1 Poverty**

The Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness (2001) states that 'the biggest single contributor to housing insecurity in Indigenous communities is undoubtedly poverty' (p. 42). Linking poverty with unemployment, they go on to note that 1996 census data show that 40.7% of Indigenous people were employed, compared with 56.4% of the total population. Ross and Mikalauskus (1996) also make the point that unemployment is the major reason for Indigenous poverty. The Gordon report (Gordon et al., 2002) noted that 'debt is a significant contributor to the homelessness of Aboriginal people' (p. 194).

Smith and Daly (1996) noted that Indigenous households are complex social and economic units, and that they experience higher levels of poverty than other Australian households. They comprise more people, are more likely to be multi-generational, to include more than one resident family, and to include a substantial flow of visitors and absent household members. While these household arrangements have the advantage of offering family members security and stability, housing can deteriorate quickly, there may be environmental health problems, social relations may be strained, and these factors can reinforce poverty. In 1991, income per Indigenous household member was 61% of the figure for the general population.

A recent report from the Reserve Bank noted that low interest rates have not resulted in higher levels of home ownership. Instead, increased availability of credit has resulted in higher house prices rather than more people owning or buying their homes. In their study of affordable housing in Australia, the Affordable Housing National Research Consortium (2001) found that, overall, housing is becoming less affordable, renting is becoming a permanent form of tenure for an increasingly significant proportion of the population, the number of low-income households is rising, and the stock of low-rental housing is diminishing. Unaffordable housing can lead families into overcrowded living arrangements, which, in turn, can lead to homelessness (Affordable Housing National Research Consortium, 2001). One study of affordability found that, of Indigenous households, 7.6% of owners, 19.4% of buyers, 33.6% in private and community rental, and 42.5% in public rental could not afford their dwelling (Neutze, Sanders and Jones, 2000, p. 11).

The primary income source for nine in ten Indigenous clients of SAAP was a government benefit or allowance. Although male and female income sources were not disaggregated, it was noted that labour force participation by women is generally lower than by men (Lai, 2001). Indigenous people are disadvantaged in the labour market because of their relatively low education levels, with education alone explaining most of the difference in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Hunter, 1996). Other factors influencing poverty may be the higher number of children in Indigenous families, the large number of Indigenous children in sole parent families, and the large number of children per sole Indigenous parent (relative to non-Indigenous sole parents) (Ross & Mikalauskus, 1996).

Sanders (1999) found that Indigenous Australians are penalised for breaching social security requirements at twice the rate of non-Indigenous Australians. A recent study (Moses & Sharpels, 2001) found that in some centres almost one in two people incur penalties. Also, nearly half of the Aboriginal women in prison in Western Australia were there for non-payment of fines (Loh & Ferrante, 2000).

The cost of hostel accommodation and the requirement for up-front payment are barriers to service use (Coleman, 2000; Keys Young, 1998; Memmott & Fantin, 2001). This is a particular issue for Aboriginal hostels. A prior debt to a housing authority may be an insurmountable barrier to obtaining future housing through the service (Tenants Advice Service, 2001; Memmott & Fantin, 2001). In most situations, tenants are not able to return to public housing until the debt has been repaid. Debts often accrue because of damage to the dwelling. Given the intergenerational and family network composition of many households, the person causing the damage may not be responsible for the debt. Women who are legal tenants may suffer the consequences.

### **3.2 Family violence / domestic violence**

It is noted that Indigenous women prefer the term 'family violence' to the term 'domestic violence' because it is more appropriate to their experience (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit, 2000; Oberin, Sinnappan & Tamanisau, 2001). Although Indigenous women prefer this term, research described below uses the term 'domestic violence'.

Family violence is a major factor associated with homelessness. Forty four percent of Indigenous female SAAP clients gave domestic violence as their reason for seeking assistance (compared with 37% of non-Indigenous female clients). In rural centres, the figures were 46.5% and 38.5% respectively, and in remote centres the figures were 49.6% and 27.1% respectively (Lai, 2001). Initial findings from a study of 60 homeless Indigenous families in the Perth metropolitan area were that 14% had left their home because of domestic violence (Durkay et al., 2003).

In their study of Western Australian crime statistics, Loh & Ferrante (2000) found that the assault rate for Aboriginal people was 55.2 per 1000, compared with 10.7 per 1,000 non-Aboriginal people. Seventy two percent of Aboriginal victims were women, compared with 42% of non-Aboriginal victims. Aboriginal women are five times more likely than non-Aboriginal women to be the victim of homicide. In the non-Indigenous community, men are more likely to be the victim of assault than women, but the reverse is true for Indigenous women. In half of the assault cases against women, the relationship between offender and

victim is not recorded. However, Loh & Ferrante (2000) found that in cases where it is recorded, 73% of offenders were the victim's partner or spouse.

In focus groups on Indigenous family violence conducted by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Task Force on Violence (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit, 2000), participants had a broad understanding of family violence as any violence occurring within any type of family relationship or kinship tie, and involving all types of violence or intimidation. Most respondents placed family violence within the context of white settlement, and colonisation was central to discussions in both urban and rural settings. The most frequently identified Indigenous social issues were the loss of men's status and the changing of their role, racism, family violence, poverty, and lack of supports and services. Participants were clear that a holistic response is necessary, and some requested family violence programs, but it appeared that more women than men wanted to address the problem. The view from one regional focus group was that when violence is endemic, there may be more tolerance of it and it may be perceived as less problematic. Most participants believed that family violence was 'very prevalent and had been institutionalised in Indigenous communities across generations' (p. 26), and may be seen as acceptable in some communities. Some victims may feel sympathy for the perpetrator and minimise the behaviour or excuse him. As family violence may be viewed as a private matter that is not easily discussed, participants suggested that victims or trained counsellors should instigate community discussion. Barriers to disclosure were identified as: fear of perpetrator or his family; fear of being ostracised for causing trouble; shame; a wish to maintain the relationship (love the man but hate the violence); reluctance to go to police (not wanting partner jailed because of deaths in custody); few female officers; and lack of access to culturally appropriate services.

In his report on Cape York Aboriginal communities, Fitzgerald observed that 'individuals and families live in a world marked by violence, injury and chronic poor health, and the situation appears to be deteriorating' (p. 16). In Western Australia, the Gordon report (Gordon et al., 2002) noted the difficulty of re-housing women leaving domestic violence if they repeatedly allow perpetrators to move into their new tenancy. In remote communities, it is not possible for somebody leaving family violence to be re-housed at a safe distance from the perpetrator, and it is usually the victim and family who leave the community. Bearing in mind the complex Indigenous concept of home ('our Home is our Land, our Land is our Home'), an Indigenous person leaving family violence may become homeless in both practical and spiritual terms.

### **3.3 Overcrowding**

The average Indigenous household comprises 3.7 people, compared with 2.7 for non-Indigenous households. Almost 7% of Indigenous people live in households that comprise 10 or more people, 50 times the proportion for non-Indigenous people (Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness, 2001). As Durkay and colleagues point out, 'Living with family, no matter how crowded, is acceptable; because it provides everyone with a place to sleep, call their own or gives a sense of belonging' (Durkay et al., 2003, p. 2). On the other hand, Paulson (1999) states that if four families are living in one house, three of them should be regarded as homeless. Why? By white Australian standards, one house, one family. This may not, of course, be the perception of Indigenous inhabitants. The prevalence of the custom of providing accommodation was reported by Taylor (1997), who drew upon household survey data for a Darwin Indigenous community that showed that half of the dwellings had temporary visitors, and 80% regularly provided for temporary visitors.

In a discussion paper on Indigenous homelessness in Victoria (Berry et al., 2001), it was reported that, while it may be acceptable and common for large numbers of family members to share accommodation, this could lead to breakdown of relationships and a consequent transient lifestyle. Paulson (1999) observes that overcrowding can set off a chain reaction of disagreements, which can lead to emotional, financial and physical abuse and, ultimately, to an absence of any shelter at all. It also has deleterious effects upon occupants' health, as any communicable disease spreads rapidly through the household. Paulson notes a direct link between overcrowding and homelessness. She reports that in

conditions of overcrowding, children of adults who are not coping well have a propensity to band together to create their own 'safety zone' (p. 2). In order to escape arguments, drinking or abuse, the children may leave home and eventually end up streetwise and homeless.

Gordon and colleagues (Gordon et al., 2002) reported that homelessness causes severe overcrowding in rural and remote areas. A snowball effect exists. When a family is evicted, a family member who has a home takes in homeless relatives. This causes overcrowding, extra wear and tear on the home, and household tensions. An eviction order on the grounds that the family is a nuisance may follow, supported by evidence of neighbours who keep written records of the family's activities and call the police to each incident.

It should be noted that much Aboriginal homelessness is disguised in that many people who would otherwise be homeless are housed by extended family (Olive, cited in Memmott & Fantin, 2001, p. 34). One writer commented on the connection between kinship obligations (or 'overcrowding') and homelessness:

It seems that aboriginal people overwhelmingly value their family and look after each other in their own ways. And they are kicked out of their home for this? Then back to the long grass, where at least they can be together. (Longgrass, 2003, p. 9)

### **3.4 Racial discrimination**

Discrimination against Indigenous people is widely reported (for example Berry et al., 2001; Coleman, 2000; DATSIP, 2000; Gordon et al., 2002; Keys Young, 1998; Paulson, 1999) and has long been a factor influencing where they live (Morgan, 1999). In a discussion paper on Indigenous homelessness in Victoria, Berry and colleagues (Berry et al., 2001) noted a high level of racism and discrimination affecting access to the private rental market, with anecdotal evidence of landlords unwilling to rent to someone with dark skin, and neighbours exaggerating small incidents (p. 15). This is supported by personal comments to researchers from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in both Brisbane and Darwin. Racism in the property market is noted as a factor in overcrowding and homelessness by a national Aboriginal Health agency (National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, 2001). One prominent Aboriginal woman summarised the situation when she wrote:

.... we are free to move around our country and live where we wish – provided the landlord says its okay to have Blacks there ... It doesn't matter how educated you are, how you speak, how you dress, what car you drive, what house you live in, or what suburb you live in, by nature of being visibly Aboriginal you are an instant target. (Huggins, 1998, p. 136)

Beresford (2001) examined the much-publicised controversy surrounding evictions of Aboriginal people by the West Australian housing agency Homeswest during the 1990s. He noted that eviction of an Aboriginal family may not be discriminatory in intent, but it may produce inequitable outcomes. For example, an evicted Aboriginal family is likely to obtain shelter with another Aboriginal family, thus creating or exacerbating problems of overcrowding, and perpetuating the cycle of eviction. He also noted that problems that result in eviction have their origins in historical factors, for example forced removal of children and assimilation.

White (2001) contrasted the treatment of a Long grass family, drinking quietly in a park, who were told to move on and whose bottles were emptied, and a non-Indigenous family who were also enjoying a few drinks some 200 metres away who were not required to move. No doubt compounding problems arising from racial discrimination is the widespread perception by non-Indigenous Australians that Indigenous Australians are not disadvantaged (Australian Council of Social Service, 2002). This perception is illustrated in a report on racial discrimination in Kalgoorlie-Boulder, a mining town in Western Australia. Toohey (2003) listed a number of commonly believed myths about Aboriginal people:

- They (but not non-Aboriginal people) receive a \$40 allowance to attend the annual Kalgoorlie fair

- Per capita spending on Aboriginal health is greater than for non-Indigenous people
- Kalgoorlie Aborigines are alcoholics
- Aborigines receive a vehicle from a government warehouse
- Aborigines live rent-free in public housing.

In fact, there is no \$40 allowance, spending on Aboriginal health is less than non-Aboriginal health, fewer Aborigines than non-Aborigines drink alcohol (but Kalgoorlie has the highest rate of intravenous drug use in Western Australia, mainly in the non-Indigenous community), the vehicle warehouse does not exist but cars are provided to people with jobs, and Aborigines pay the same rent as everybody else.

### **3.5 Criminal justice system**

Aboriginal people are disproportionately represented in jails and in the criminal justice system. A NSW study of bail and remand decisions for Aboriginal defendants (Aboriginal Justice Advisory Council, nd) reported that inconsistency between decisions, heavy reliance by magistrates upon police reports, lack of independent information presented, unrealistic bail conditions imposed, magistrates' lack of local knowledge and defendants' lack of understanding of the system create an inequitable and discriminatory system.

### **3.6 Incarceration**

Overcrowding, family violence, violence in general, misdemeanours and alcohol abuse may lead to incarceration. Once a prison sentence has been served, discharge with probation and parole is often followed by homelessness. During the 1990s, the number of Indigenous women serving prison sentences increased from 104 in 1991, to 273 in 1999. The rate over the same period increased from 103.9 per 100,000 to 206.5 per 100,000. In 1999, in the Northern Territory, there were 15 sentenced Indigenous women for every 7 non-Indigenous women. In Queensland the figures were 171 and 62 respectively. Approximately 70% of all Indigenous women prisoners had previously been incarcerated (Cameron, 2001).

Figures from a Victorian report link lack of education and employment to incarceration of women. It found that in the year ended June 1999, only 20% of all female prisoners had completed secondary or post-secondary education, and approximately 80% were not in the paid work force prior to incarceration (Office of the Correctional Services Commissioner, cited in Cameron, 2001). These figures infer a high probability of return to incarceration after release, due to lack of employment opportunities and related problems, which include inability to sustain tenancy due to economic distress.

An open learning program for Indigenous prisoners (gender breakdown not reported) was conducted in five South Australian prisons with a view to examining the feasibility of delivering education programs for Indigenous people in correctional facilities and post-release, and determining whether such programs affect rates of recidivism. Although numbers in this study were small and findings therefore limited, several important recommendations arose from the research. Low levels of literacy among most Indigenous prisoners, and the (possibly unsurprising) requirement that prisoners find the program interesting, necessitated changes to the course material. A 'small percentage' (numbers not given) of participants completed the program and, after controlling for background variables, the recidivism rate of participants was lower than the rate for non-participants. It was recommended that the program continue, and that either Indigenous tutors or non-Indigenous people with substantial expertise in Indigenous education be employed (Kinneer, 2000).

### **3.7 Lack of skills in accessing formal services**

Queensland research on Indigenous homelessness found that:

Many Indigenous clients have multiple and complex needs. Yet they face a double disadvantage: those who need the services most, have the least skill at negotiating their way through a complex service delivery system that currently

operates in silos. (Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy, 2000, p. 12)

The same research found that Indigenous people tend to accept eviction without question because they are not aware of their rights as tenants. Similarly, Paulson (1999) noted that Aboriginal tenants may not know their rights and may be exploited by real estate agents. Aboriginal people who cannot read or write will not access mainstream services because this necessitates filling in forms (Keys Young, 1998). Although not highlighted in this research, mainstream services may not welcome Indigenous people because they demand specialist skills, extra time and are seen as 'difficult'.

### **3.8 Home management and urban living skills**

A major factor jeopardising Indigenous people's capacity to live independently is their lack of the skills required to maintain tenancy, a problem more marked among people who have not lived in an urban environment. Those who have lived on stations or missions, or who have spent long periods in institutions, have not had the responsibility of budgeting and paying bills, or of running a home on their own. People from rural or remote areas may not have had experience with modern home amenities. Systems of automatic deductions from pension or benefit make keeping track of spending, and therefore budgeting, difficult. Attempting to cope without assistance in an arena outside their experience can lead to drug or alcohol misuse as a coping mechanism, property damage and eviction (Keys Young, 1998). Skills development was taken up in the Gordon report, which endorsed a government initiative to develop services to assist Aboriginal and migrant communities to gain skills in managing a home (Gordon et al., 2002, p. 193).

Urban living skills programs are currently being developed in the Northern Territory. Indigenous families are being taught how to clean, do household repairs, budget, eat sensibly and demonstrate awareness of environmental health issues. Although these programs are designed to teach basic competencies, they have not been subject to a rigorous evaluation. In remote parts of Australia, women may obtain public housing and attend urban living skills courses, but ironically have no access to equipment such as mops, brooms and buckets, refrigerators, washing machines, cleaning products or bedding that would enable them to apply the skills learnt on an urban living skills program.

### **3.9 Disempowerment**

Lucashenko (2002) writes of Aboriginal women's double inheritance of racism and sexism, which can lead them to believe that they are ugly, bad, poor and stupid. She also refers to their loss of hope, the short-term comfort and long-term pain which some find in addictions or abusive partners, and the incorporation by some of materialism and the belief that possessions will change their lives. She describes these Aboriginal women as living in a 'Prison of Disempowerment' built from the lies of colonisation. Others have referred to 'cultural depression' in describing the despair experienced by Aboriginal people, particularly the young (Keys Young, 1998, p. 60).

Indigenous focus groups on Indigenous family violence in Queensland frequently referred to boredom and loss of hope among Aboriginal men, with unemployment, low income and lack of affordable housing being significant stressors. Male perpetrators of family violence were often seen as victims too, with abuse being a result of their sense of powerlessness stemming from institutionalised disadvantage, and loss of traditional roles and values (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit, 2000).

Some women in Coleman's (2000) study spoke of choosing to opt out of formal processes, feeling these were pointless in light of their experience of years of unfulfilled promises and money expended on Indigenous services which were set up in such a way that Indigenous people would not use them. Paulson (1999) reported that Aboriginal people tend to feel shy and intimidated at the prospect of entering a real estate office. It has been reported that in Western Australia:

Indigenous tenants live in constant fear of homelessness, often unable to access limited services for advice, often unable to decipher the correspondence

they receive. Many are too frightened or humiliated to attend court and Homeswest secures their order uncontested. (p. 5)

Those Indigenous people who defend eviction orders are inevitably bewildered and humiliated by the experience. If these are the feelings of Indigenous people, workers are similarly crushed under the weight of hopelessness.

A study of Indigenous homelessness found that the Indigenous community in Cairns had largely withdrawn from involvement in addressing homelessness because previous attempts had achieved little (Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy, 2002). This sense of disempowerment was captured by one group of participants in the ATSI Women's Task Force on Violence who commented, 'If you're an Aboriginal woman nobody listens' (DATSIP, 2000, p. 288).

Discussing the worsening epidemic of kidney disease among Indigenous people in the Northern Territory, Snelling, a Darwin nephrologist (cited in Rothwell, 2003) stated:

I believe that a large part of this chronic disease situation is directly related to the socio-economic disparities between Indigenous communities and the rest of society ... all the health-related causes in renal disease will repeat themselves until those things change. What we do, here in this hospital, makes no difference in the long term.

Rothwell goes on to extrapolate from research that has associated a sense of control and mastery with good health, and suggests that poor health in the Aboriginal community is a metaphor for Aboriginal people's relative poverty, changing lifestyles, disempowerment and sense of spiritual crisis.

### **3.10 Anti-social behaviour**

Homelessness is often associated with public disorder or anti-social behaviour. In Cairns, it was seen as a problem by all sections of the community, including Indigenous people (Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy, 2002). Many Long grass people reported that alcohol and related violence were associated with their inability to retain housing. Public housing tenants reported problems with noise levels when Itinerants visit, and with being unable to remove relatives who get drunk. The end result can be eviction (Memmott & Fantin, 2001).

### **3.11 Alcohol dependence**

Alcohol dependence is a major issue and is detrimental to health. A discussion of Indigenous homelessness in Mt Isa in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy (2002, p. 14), it was stated that:

The major issue is that most homeless people and those that use public spaces are alcohol dependent. There is a need to establish a site where such people can safely congregate, where services can be provided and where alternatives to drinking can be provided.

Memmott and Fantin (2002, pp. 95-98) noted the widespread problems of alcohol abuse, binge drinking and homelessness, and the range of anti-social behaviours associated with public drunkenness. In addition they outlined particular strategies, including:

- case management for people caught up in cycles of alcoholism and offensive behavior so that they can be targeted for treatment and sent home to their home community;
- sobering up shelter with an increased number of beds and better day facilities;
- amending retail practices regarding the supply of alcohol;
- new long term alcohol treatment;
- acceptable drinking venues including exempt public places;
- alcohol free days;
- diversionary activities; and

- networking and coordinated alcohol strategy.

### **3.12 Mental Illness**

There is a close association between mental illness and homelessness. A significant proportion of Indigenous homeless people are affected by mental health and general well-being problems. Indigenous people with a psychiatric disability have particular problems with securing and maintaining tenancy, and their demanding behaviours can be difficult for landlords and other tenants to manage. Mental illness and treatment regimes are not well understood in the Indigenous community. Non-compliance is common. Many Indigenous people fear contact with mental health services and express concern about deprivation of their liberties. In addition, mainstream mental health services may not be regarded as culturally appropriate (Keys Young, 1998).

### **3.13 Cycle of homelessness and tenancy**

The previous review of factors leading to homelessness fails to capture both the interrelated nature of these factors and the cycle of homelessness. The literature on housing suggests a high degree of mobility amongst some Indigenous groups. Robinson (2003), in her proposed study of iterative homelessness amongst the mentally ill, discusses tenuous housing trajectories, noting the constant movement through various forms of mainstream and marginal housing. She argues that both processes and dynamics in relation to housing careers need to be considered, and notes that there is very little mainstream research into pathways through and within homelessness, and even less research on pathways out of homelessness.

The cycle of homelessness is implied in the work of Memmott and Fantin (2002). There is a sense in which people come to Darwin from outside communities because of some incident in their community, to visit relatives or for medical reasons. Once in Darwin, drunkenness may lead to periods in the lock up or sobering up facility. From this facility, Indigenous people may find some temporary rental accommodation, but this is short lived with the pattern of drinking commencing again. This cycle was also present in discussion with practitioners in Brisbane, Darwin and Katherine. In Brisbane, for example, the Aboriginal Elder noted that if emergency housing is not available, women will rotate through Cherbourg housing, Aboriginal Housing in outer Brisbane, hostel housing in the inner city, safe crisis shelters and parks. Their attempts to secure accommodation highlight the limited availability of safe houses and the risk of longer-term homelessness. The risks associated with this destabilising environment are risks to children, poor health, inadequate nutrition, lack of social or family supports, poor educational outcomes, and social and emotional dysfunction (Cleary, personal communication).

A similar pattern was evident in preliminary discussion about sustainable tenancy in Darwin and Katherine. In Darwin, the hostel manager reported to us that women come in from the communities, move from the Women's Shelter, Aboriginal Hostels, Christian Outreach, Longgrass, and then back to the Women's Shelter. A similar pattern is evident in Katherine although the range of accommodation options is limited. This cycle of homelessness will be explored in depth when Indigenous women are asked to tell their stories about homelessness.

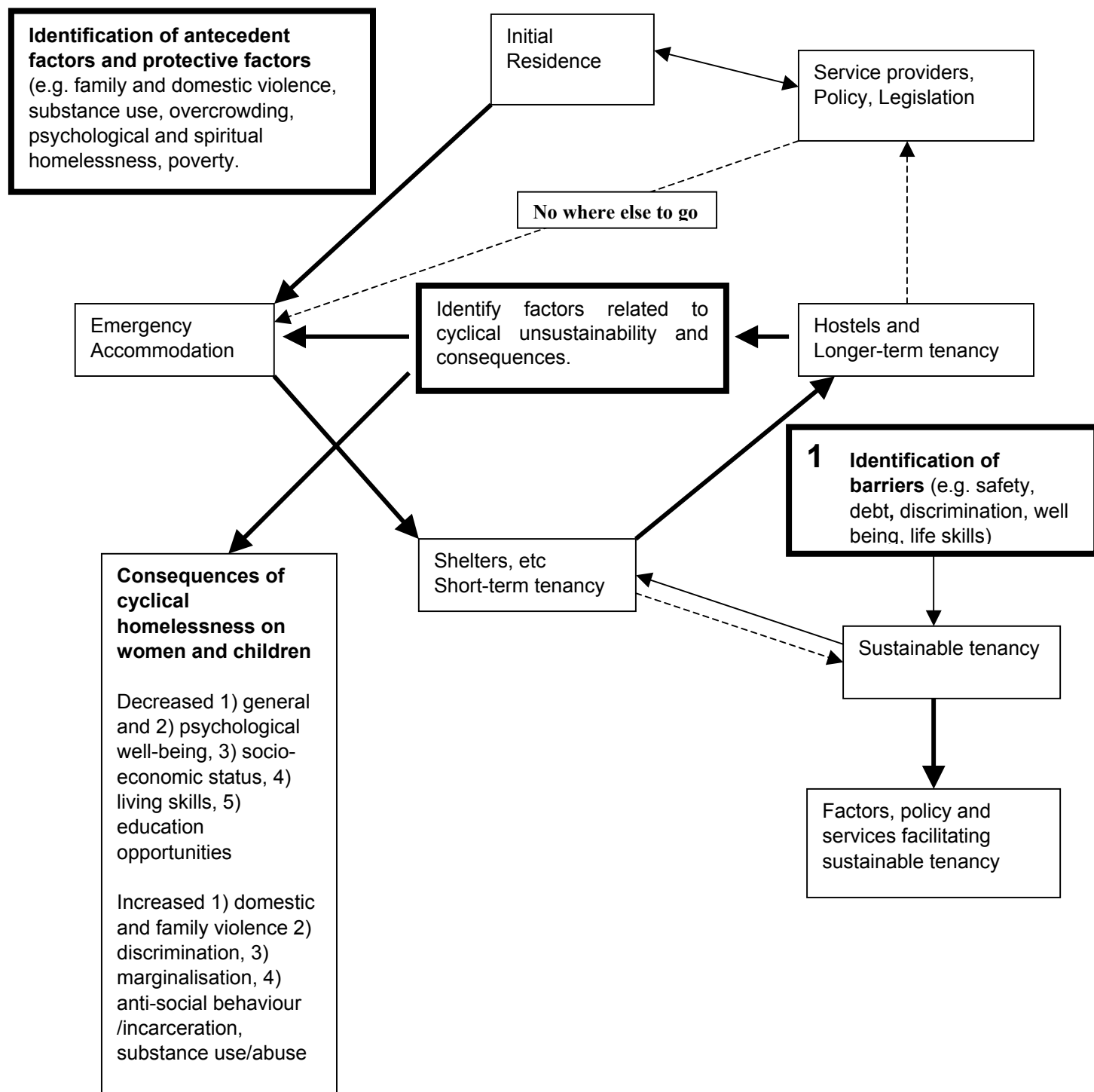
### **3.14 Summary**

This section began with a definition of sustainable tenancy, that is, having the necessary personal skills and social and economic circumstances to ensure that tenancy can be accessed and once achieved will be sustained and maintained. Factors impeding sustainable tenancy include: poverty and in particular debts to Centrelink and housing providers; re-housing after family violence; instability associated with overcrowding; and disruptions of relationships following release from jail. Personal factors that inhibit sustainable tenancy are lack of personal skills needed to live in an urban environment, and particular anti-social behaviours associated with mental illness and alcohol and drug abuse. Any of these factors alone may prevent sustainable tenancy but these factors are often found together and in combination may block pathways to tenancy. In this research, these factors and the stories of Indigenous women about their pathways into and between

sustainable tenancy will be considered as part of the structured and semi-structured questionnaires. Figure 1 summarises in model form the pathways to unsustainable tenancy for Indigenous women that have been identified.

The next section looks at structural and service barriers that hinder sustainable tenancy.

**Figure 1 Model of pathways to unsustainable tenancy for Indigenous women**



## **4 STRUCTURAL AND SERVICE BARRIERS IN THE HOUSING AND WELFARE SYSTEM THAT HINDER SUSTAINABLE TENANCY**

In the previous section sustainable tenancy was conceptualised not just as finding a place to live but having the right set of circumstances to access and then sustain the tenancy. Within the housing system, there are structural problems and service barriers that magnify social and personal factors that affect the ability to sustain tenancy. The limited supply of, and demand for housing are particular barriers. One relevant issue for this research is the lack of safe housing for women and children wanting to escape family violence and the long waiting lists for public housing. In remote areas the standard and suitability of housing is also of major concern.

Structural barriers exist in the delivery of many services to Indigenous women and families. Women may not have sufficient information to access existing services. Agencies particularly mainstream ones maybe regarded as hostile to Indigenous people and if not hostile may not deliver culturally appropriate services. This is particularly difficult when women are subject to various forms of family violence, and need protection and safety. Indigenous women therefore miss out on whatever limited assistance is available.

### **4.1 Supply and demand**

The under-supply of housing is frequently reported. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission reports that:

Despite real progress since 1991, at the current rate of funding it will take more than 20 years to clear the backlog of housing and infrastructure needs, currently estimated as requiring \$3.5 billion in new capital works. (ATSIC, nd)

One Victorian study found that there is insufficient affordable housing, that housing may not be available in the areas in which people wish to live, and housing design may not be appropriate for Indigenous people and their lifestyle (Berry et al., 2001). Indigenous people are over-represented among clients of the Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP) in every State and Territory, and 70% of Indigenous clients are women, ranging from 80% in remote areas to 64% in urban centres (Lai, 2001).

Neutze, Sanders and Jones (2000) drew upon various studies to analyse Indigenous housing needs as part of the Department of Social Security's funding allocation. The authors noted a significant limitation of their analysis – the standards they used were drawn from the non-Indigenous community and the Indigenous community may not aspire to these standards. An Australia-wide multi-measure approach was used as a compromise between acknowledging differences between and within Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, and setting Indigenous people apart or treating them differently. The occupancy standard used in the analysis was one bedroom for each couple and single non-dependent adult, and no more than two dependent children sharing a bedroom. On this measure, the total number of additional bedrooms needed to house Indigenous family-households was 7.47 per 100. It was estimated that 17.8% of Australian Indigenous families lived in overcrowded accommodation (range 5.6% in Tasmanian urban areas to 64% in the Northern Territory rural areas), and that 37% of Australian Indigenous housing need is in the Northern Territory.

In Queensland the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence noted that scarcity of suitable housing was a problem in all regions. Demand for housing in remote areas far outstrips supply, and the condition of many older homes is such that they would be condemned if they were in the city (Robertson, 2000). It has been reported in Queensland that there is a lack of affordable long-term accommodation, a lack of crisis accommodation where children are accepted, and long waiting lists for public housing (Coleman, 2000). In Western Australia, applicants for Aboriginal housing have an average waiting time of 425 days, or 61 days in urgent cases. Waiting times reflect lack of housing

(Gordon et al., 2002). Similar anecdotal evidence was provided to the researchers in Darwin and Katherine.

It is not uncommon for single mothers and grandmothers with the care of children to be unable to find safe accommodation when escaping domestic violence. Submissions from all areas to the Task Force on Violence noted the serious shortage of safe houses for Indigenous women and children escaping violence. Some women are turned away, other shelters admit beyond their capacity and the consequent overcrowding often results in tension between residents. Further problems occur where boys aged 12 and over cannot be admitted with their mothers. Some women will elect to stay with their children in an unsafe environment rather than be separated (Robertson, 2000).

Lucashenko (2002) points to the direct connection between the serious housing crisis in Aboriginal communities, and women and children remaining with violent men. She writes that cyclical sexual abuse of children goes hand in hand with the lack of safe, affordable housing. Sexual abuse of children is exacerbated when drunken parents and overcrowding mean that parents are not able to maintain their children's safety.

Child abuse has been associated with homelessness. A United States study (Bassuk, Perloff, & Dawson, 2001) followed 436 homeless women to determine the characteristics of women homeless for the first-time and those who had multiple episodes of homelessness, and to identify predictors of multiple homelessness. Baseline, and retrospective childhood and pre-homelessness data, as well as prospective data were obtained. Being abused as a child was a strong predictor of multiple episodes of homelessness, as was partner violence after being re-housed. Drawing comparisons between this study and the findings on Indigenous overcrowding and 'family violence', it could be concluded that the cycle of homelessness will be perpetuated unless effective solutions can be found to the current problems.

## **4.2 Standard and suitability of housing**

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (nd) highlights the fact that too many Indigenous Australians still live in unacceptably bad conditions and suffer sub-standard health.

Many remote communities do not have access to hot water and flushing toilets (Donald, McGlashan & Leisser, 2001). Baillie and Runcie (2001) reported on a survey data collection on IHANT (Indigenous Housing Authority of the Northern Territory) properties in the Northern Territory. The aim of the survey was to determine the status of the accommodation on six key indicators of healthy living related to hygiene, waste removal, and food storage and preparation. Complete data were collected for 79% of the housing stock. The proportion of houses with the components required for each of the six healthy living practices varied between communities and ranged from 38% to 69%. It was noted that the survey covered permanent dwellings only, and the housing conditions of the 4,000 Indigenous people who live in caravans and improvised dwellings were not included. As noted by the Northern Territory Housing Minister, there have been serious deficiencies in Aboriginal housing programs in the Territory and elsewhere. There were no economies of scale, houses were often built where there were no services or built where there was no identifiable need, housing design did not take into account residents' needs, and construction standards were not always enforced.

Toohy (2003) reported on the living conditions of the original inhabitants of the land on which the huge Kalgoorlie-Boulder mine complex is now situated. The owners now live in fringe camps, under the flight path. The camps lack electricity, there are no refrigerators for food storage, and no washing machines. Clothes are washed once a week by a washing service. There is one long drop toilet and a cold-water shower for 30 to 40 people. The camp's perimeter is marked by a ring of discarded mining truck tyres. Needless to say, there is a critical need for additional public housing.

It is not only physical housing requirements that must be met. Housing for Indigenous people must accommodate their cultural needs and obligations, for example room to house

extended family for long periods of time, sitting outside, making fires and cooking 'bush tucker' (Goldie, 2002, p. 2). Manicaros and colleagues (1997) observe that:

...it is widely recognised that the design of Indigenous housing must be culturally appropriate and is important for spiritual and mental harmony and general well-being. (p. 19)

As cultural practices vary among Indigenous groups, the 'cultural adequacy' of housing must be specific to each cultural group (Walker, Ballard, & Taylor, 2002, p. 18).

The location of housing is also important. In their study of Indigenous homelessness in Victoria, Berry and colleagues (Berry et al., 2001) drew attention to problems which arise from shortages of housing in particular areas, which force people to live where housing is available and therefore to move away from their family and other networks, and to accept unsuitable or unsafe accommodation.

Durkay et al. (2003) report that when families are allocated to housing in areas without established public facilities, employment opportunities, or social and support networks, children may refuse to move in with their parents, the house remains empty, and the tenants continue to live with other family members. They note that location is important to avoiding repeated requests for transfers and a return to homelessness.

### **4.3 Barriers to accessing services**

Submissions to Fitzgerald's study indicated that there are a number of barriers to accessing services, and that these barriers do not operate in isolation. On domestic violence, Fitzgerald summarises:

Indigenous women do not use support services for fear of what will happen to the perpetrator in custody and are more likely to use refuges as respite and then return to the violent partner. (p. 19)

Further, they do not know about legal process and are unwilling to seek legal advice. Geographic isolation can make it 'nearly impossible for a woman to leave a violent relationship' (Fitzgerald, 2001, p. 19). In the section that follows, barriers to service access are categorised and considered separately, but some overlap is unavoidable.

### **4.4 Lack of information about services**

Access to services depends initially upon having information about them. Preliminary findings from Durkay et al.'s (2003) study of Indigenous homelessness in Perth were that over half of the participants were unaware of the existence of community support services. A Queensland study of regional Indigenous homelessness found that many Indigenous people are not aware of support schemes which might assist them to return to their community of origin, and that 'many service providers lack the range of knowledge necessary to be able to access all relevant services' (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy, 2002, p. 14).

### **4.5 Agency characteristics**

Lucashenko makes the general observation that non-Aboriginal environments are mostly hostile to Aboriginal people, and that to work or live in them requires denying part of the natural 'psyche'. In doing so, racism remains unchecked.

More specifically, Coleman (2000) nominated a number of reasons why Indigenous women do not access services, even those that target their needs. These included the look and feel of an agency, its model of service, whether it employs Indigenous people, judgemental attitudes and insensitive behaviour, the perception that the service is 'owned' by another family or area group, concerns about confidentiality, lack of female staff, women's safety concerns, their reading difficulties and their low self-worth. In a study of women's attitudes to cancer diagnosis and treatment, respondents saw the fixed appointment system as a major barrier to Indigenous women attending screening, because fixed appointments conflict with 'Aboriginal time' and preclude the possibility of women 'dropping in' for screening. In the same study, women with experience of tertiary care centres reported

being treated in inappropriate, racist or disrespectful ways by hospital staff (McMichael et al., 2000).

Lessons may be drawn from reports on Indigenous women's use of other formal services. For example, police responses to Aboriginal women experiencing domestic violence may not encourage reporting (Australian Domestic & Family Violence Clearinghouse, 2001). And, for women who do seek formal protection, court processes may be forbidding. A New South Wales study (New South Wales Department for Women, 1996) examined sexual assault hearings in which the complainant was an adult female. The study included all sound-recorded sexual assault hearings in the District Court of New South Wales over a one-year period – a total of 150 hearings. The aim of the study was to examine the way in which sexual assault victims are treated in their role as witnesses in the criminal justice system. Among the findings were that, 'Myths and stereotypes of Aboriginal women as unsophisticated, vengeful and morally corrupt are also evident in the court room', and that 'language barriers and the use of jargon present particular difficulties for Aboriginal women' (p. 4). Proceedings were interrupted because of complainants' distress more often in hearings involving Aboriginal women than in hearings involving non-Aboriginal women.

#### **4.6 Culturally inappropriate service**

The reluctance or refusal of Indigenous people to use formal services if they are not culturally appropriate has been documented repeatedly. Cultural misunderstanding has been reported to discourage access to hospital services by Indigenous clients. Specifically, it was noted that reluctance to talk about personal issues with non-Indigenous staff, fear of police involvement, not understanding protocols, not knowing their rights, and being afraid to assert their rights were offered by women as reasons for not seeking medical treatment for injuries received during violence (Robertson, 2000). An important aspect of culturally appropriate service is allowing time to build trust with Indigenous people. They cannot be pushed into programs or interventions, and an agency policy of quick client turnover is inimical to working with Indigenous people (Keys Young, 1998).

In their study of appropriate responses to homeless people with high needs, Bisset, Campbell and Goodall (1999) reported that SAAP services lacked the understanding and capacity to respond appropriately to Indigenous clients. Consultations with women in remote Queensland communities found that services were few, and that people were too ashamed or scared to use them (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence). It has been found that Indigenous people may not attend health services because they feel frightened or 'shamed' (Grundy, Tyrell & Wakerman, 2001; Keys Young, 1998). Indigenous women interviewed by Coleman (2000) reported that mainstream hostels may not understand or respect them as having different needs from other women, and counsellors may not work with women in a culturally appropriate manner. Coleman also gave the example of Indigenous people not using an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service because it is sited near the watch house and police headquarters. This situation again highlights the importance of understanding the Indigenous historical context.

Finlayson (1997) conducted an ethnographic study of service provision in a remote Queensland community. The service providers she interviewed were non-Indigenous. She observed that few:

...had any idea of the community's Indigenous history or the countless reports, assessments and evaluations of programs and policies and community development projects that had started and failed there. (p. 13)

She noted an 'acceptance of the hopelessness of the Aboriginal situation and probability that nothing will ever change for the better' (p. 13). Staff who saw the potential for change and improvements, or who were keen to train or employ Indigenous staff, were unlikely to receive support from colleagues or their parent agency, and 'inevitably' they left. On the other hand, it has been reported that Indigenous people may refuse to use an Indigenous-managed or staffed agency because of concern that someone from their community or family may be employed there and gain access to confidential information (Keys Young, 1998).

## 4.7 Summary

Thus far, research into Indigenous homelessness suggests that women have personal, social and economic circumstances that prevent sustainable tenancy. Barriers to sustainable tenancy exist as a structural factor in the housing, health and welfare systems of service delivery. In housing these structural factors include the supply of, and demand for housing, and the standard and suitability of housing for Indigenous women. In Australia, health and welfare agencies are mandated to support people in need. Many of these mainstream agencies employ Indigenous staff to provide services to Indigenous people. Despite this mandate and the efforts made to employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, Indigenous women may still not be able to access these services. Particular barriers exist in relation to domestic violence, lack of access to, and knowledge about services, the 'look and feel' of agencies, and perceptions about themselves. The most significant barrier in supporting women to access and maintain tenancy is that of cultural misunderstandings and culturally inappropriate services in the health and welfare system. These issues will be addressed in the research as part of the qualitative study and in focus group discussions with service providers. It is hoped that recommendations for best practice will result from this research. Identification of innovative programs and current best practice models is discussed in the next section.

## 5 BEST PRACTICE: MODELS AND POLICY

If Indigenous women are to be enabled to sustain their tenancy, governments, non-government organisations and self-help groups, programs, policy, models for service delivery and actual service delivery approaches need to be examined. Whilst there are innovative programs that are accepted by Indigenous communities and which achieve excellent outcomes, there is a limited number of demonstration projects and best practice models. In this section, successful programs and service delivery systems that contribute to prevention of homelessness and sustaining tenancy are described. Factors contributing to success are noted.

### 5.1 Programs with successful outcomes

Success, in terms of formal evaluation in accordance with dominant research methodologies, is difficult to ascertain as few programs have been assessed in that way. There are, however, a number of program descriptions indicating that objectives are being achieved. Some examples are summarised below.

As a way of controlling violence, the Julalikari Council Aboriginal Corporation operates the Julalikari Night Patrol, a violence prevention strategy that works with the Aboriginal Community of Tennant Creek. The volunteer staff, mostly female community elders, work in conjunction with police. They pick up intoxicated and/or disruptive people and take them to a sobering up shelter where they are cared for without police intervention. The matter is mediated the following morning at a community meeting. After two years of operation, protective custody figures were reduced by 50%, and after three years police reported that there had not been any marked increase in the number of night patrol reports, and alcohol-related crime had decreased significantly. Memmott and Fantin (2001) report that the Julalikari Night Patrol has become a model for Aboriginal night patrols. Key elements of service delivery are (1) resolution of behavioural problems through culturally appropriate procedures, (2) assertion of community-based authority and (3) observation of cultural protocols with respect to who speaks to whom in terms of status in Aboriginal social structure (p. 86).

Atunypa Wiru Minyma Uwankaraku, Good Protection for All Women, operates in the border areas of the Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia. The program has developed strategies and service models to assist women who experience violence in these remote communities to access services and to understand available options. Workers support women who wish to report domestic violence and they have developed protocols for police response to women who have been assaulted. Indigenous and non-Indigenous women assist each other to understand different cultural approaches. Among other outcomes, it is reported that the number of domestic violence reports to police has increased, and that violence legislation is useful to women in the region.

Alvares (nd) describes the development of a women's refuge in Bourke. After a decade of fruitless attempts to procure funding for a refuge, the community took advantage of the offer of a long lease on a large heritage-listed home in the town centre in return for maintaining it. They raised funds for repairs and essential services for the home, and attracted a large team of volunteers. The project is staffed and supported by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous women. Since its inception, all but one of the women using the refuge has been Indigenous. Alvares reports that a great strength of the project is its non-judgemental stance. The shelter provides a safe place for as long as needed, and women (and their children) are supported in whatever decision they make about police involvement, returning to their partner, applying for orders etc. One measure of the success of the project is that the premises have not been threatened by any men, possibly because a large number of the volunteer staff are older Aboriginal women with standing in the community.

Several programs delivering health information and services to Indigenous communities were reportedly successful, at least in part, because of high levels of cooperation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff. Agreement on participating in the projects came from within the communities, programs were adapted to the individual needs and circumstances

of the communities, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous project staff valued each other's culture and learned from each other. This success was reported by Indigenous people in the Northern Territory. On a practical note, Paulson (1999) reports that the employment of a prominent community person to support Indigenous people in their dealings with real estate agents has been a useful intervention.

The programs summarised above illustrate the importance of Indigenous communities being fully involved in program development and service delivery, and for non-Indigenous personnel to respect the culture within which they work. These programs prevent violence and contribute to the prevention of homelessness, which is essential, but they do not impact directly on sustainable tenancy.

## **5.2 Innovative programs**

Wevers (1999) reports on remote community programs that include mediation rooms which allow support to male partners and other family members. This broad approach is based upon the premise that:

Aboriginal people recognise that we need to work with the whole family, the whole community and within Aboriginal culture to improve the quality of family life. (p. 12)

The Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria has adopted a preventive strategy using a pamphlet entitled *Neighbours* to advise tenants to ensure that they not to disturb their neighbours, and that 'a peaceful neighbourhood means less stress, more relaxation and a happier, healthier environment for everyone'. Informal and formal dispute resolution procedures are also outlined.

A practical response to overcrowding is available in Victoria through the Aboriginal Housing Board, which offers tenants the opportunity to rent a 'movable unit'. This is a self-contained, one-bedroom, separately metered unit that is installed in the back yard of a friend or relative, allowing the occupant to live independently but close to friends or family. The scheme applies to the agency's tenants, and the unit rental cost is 25% of the occupant's income. Eligibility criteria are that the occupant has assets of less than \$30,000, is over the age of 55, and receives an Australian Disability Support Pension (Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria, 2002). Similar to programs with successful outcomes, these innovative programs improve the quality of family life and of communities, and contribute to the prevention of homelessness. However, they may not directly impact on sustainable tenancy.

## **5.3 Specific policy initiatives to enable Indigenous women to maintain sustainable tenancy**

### *Macro-level factors*

Oberin and colleagues observed that:

Massive changes are required in gender relations, in race relations and in class relations. For real social change to occur, there needs to be a realisation that many of the structural changes needed require more than just government policy changes. They require changes to attitudes, values and power imbalances. (Oberin et al., 2001, p. 45)

Similarly, Mullins and Western (2001), in their study of non-Indigenous housing and social correlates, found an association between public housing and perceived quality of life and health, and unemployment. They found that public housing tenants were more likely than respondents in other forms of tenure to have strong local ties, possibly because disadvantage may promote 'localisation of life' (p. 27). Referring to social capital and community organisation literatures, they go on to posit that if public housing tenants already have cohesive communities, strong communities may not be a critical factor in solving key problems – policy initiatives directed towards job skills might be more apposite than policies aimed at strengthening communities. This may be a particularly pertinent

observation with respect to Indigenous communities, whose strong sense of community has been well documented.

Chung and colleagues (Chung, Kennedy, O'Brien & Wendt, 2000) argue that homelessness for women escaping domestic violence results from the failure of society to accept fully, and deal with the criminality of the perpetrator's behaviour. From their consultations with users and providers of domestic violence services across Australia, they report that the most common response to the question of preventing homelessness relating to domestic violence was to prevent the violence (p. 2). Similarly, one group consulted by The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Task Force on Violence recommended that a helpful response to domestic violence incidents would be to remove the man and allow the woman to stay in the home.

These macro-level factors are acknowledged, but changes at this level are likely to take longer to implement and sustain. The immediate challenge is to develop specific short- to medium-term strategies that address presenting problems adequately and appropriately.

## **5.4 Service delivery**

### *The broad framework*

The Queensland *Safer Places with New Opportunities* report (cited in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy, 2002) drew up a framework for action comprising the following five principles:

1. Establishment of partnerships
2. Rigorous accountability mechanisms
3. Indigenous community and individuals take responsibility for resolving the issues of homeless people who drink in public places
4. Evidence based approach to investment
5. Tailored responses to individuals. (p. 16)

These principles involve comprehensive assessment of people with complex needs, effective and appropriate referrals to other agencies, community-based or community and government organisations responding to particular issues, programs having annual plans and performance measures, and frameworks and standards for services, access to counselling and substance abuse treatment, and travel schemes for people who need to travel to and from larger regional centres (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy, 2002, p. 17).

Queensland research on Indigenous homelessness found that because a range of government agencies fund a large number of services, extensive inter-agency cooperation is required to ensure access to services. The researchers noted, however, that there was 'little evidence of effective inter-agency coordination' (Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy, 2002, p. 12).

The SAAP program evaluation (Department of Family and Community Services, 1999) included recommendations for improving client outcomes. Among their proposals were: local area needs reviews; learning from other countries where 'continuum of care' services have been piloted; a continuum of care service to include central referral agencies supported by a crisis telephone line; further development of case management; and the development of performance indicators for assessment of client outcomes, and, as a priority, for development of criteria for good practice.

### *Whole-of-government / service integration*

It is widely acknowledged that strengthening Indigenous communities requires integrated strategies and a 'whole of government' approach (Walker et al., 2002). Keys Young (1998) noted that, 'if any issue requires a "whole of government" approach, Indigenous homelessness does' (p. xi). Berry and colleagues observed that 'Single-purpose agencies cannot respond to the range and complexity of presenting issues' (Berry et al., 2001, p.61).

The SAAP review notes that, because of the complex nature of homelessness and its inter-relationships with other variables:

... dealing with homelessness requires policy and program responses in a whole-of-government context with cross-agency and cross-program linkages and intergeneration being of paramount importance. (p. XII)

In Queensland, research on Indigenous homelessness in three regions found that the problem has three dimensions: access to accommodation; substance addiction; and behaviour in public spaces. It is where the three dimensions intersect that Indigenous homelessness becomes a significant issue for the general community. The recommendation is, therefore, that all three aspects must be dealt with concurrently. As the researchers conclude:

No single agency can solve homelessness. Each relevant agency needs to develop innovative responses within their specific responsibilities, but within an overall framework. (Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy, 2002, p. 14)

### *Access points*

A multiplicity of agencies, programs and ministerial portfolios are involved in policy, planning and service delivery to Indigenous people. While some argue against this heterogeneity, Sanders (1993) argues in favour of a multiplicity of agencies and for a strong mainstream element in service delivery on four grounds. First, he refers to 'maneuverability' (p. 10), that is, if funding is not available through one source, it may be available through another. Second, expenditure through Aboriginal affairs portfolios and Aboriginal program elements within mainstream portfolios is largely invisible. This avoids the controversy that often arises with respect to what is seen as special funding for Aboriginal people. Third, more funding is available through large mainstream social policy organisations than through smaller Aboriginal-specific agencies. Finally, a diversity of support services is better able to cater to the diversity of the circumstances and aspirations of Aboriginal people.

On the other hand, as has been noted above, many Indigenous people do not have the skills, confidence, or experience necessary to access mainstream services. The Taskforce on Domestic Violence (Robertson 2000) recommends a single access point for services for women experiencing domestic violence. They suggest that multi-agency service centres would allow users to access all services needed by themselves and their family, would enhance service coordination and facilitate case management (p. 114.)

### *Strategies for improving access*

Recently conducted reviews on, or relevant to Indigenous homelessness have included a number of service delivery recommendations. These include strategies for dissemination of information about agencies and their services (DATSIP, 2000), increased financial counselling (Gordon et al., 2002), a homelessness helpline (Gordon et al., 2002), flexibility with respect to appointments and cross-cultural training for non-Indigenous employees (Keys Young, 1998).

### *Culturally appropriate service*

As demonstrated above, there is ample evidence that Indigenous people will be reluctant, or will refuse to use services that are not culturally appropriate. Some will only use a service if it is operated by an Indigenous community organisation, and employment of Indigenous staff may be essential to maintaining the client in the service (Keys Young, 1998). Participants in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence (DATSIP, 2000) suggested ways in which services can be made culturally appropriate. Specifically, they recommended that Elders and Indigenous counsellors be employed, and that education programs be provided to police, victims and perpetrators.

On working with Aboriginal women escaping violence, Anders (2001) emphasises that women must be given the opportunity and avenues to address the violence in their own way, that they have particular ways of dealing with violence, and that new and more

effective ways can be developed, but mainstream standards should not be forced upon them.

## **5.5 Service frameworks / models of service delivery**

### *Community development*

In their study of three South Australian regional cities, Beer and Maude (2002) found that Indigenous people are among the most socially excluded. They propose that because many public and private tenants have low income, limited formal education and employment experience, and poor access to information sources, community development must be the starting point of strategies to redress disadvantage. Further, they propose that for public housing regeneration initiatives to achieve their goals, they must include community development. Memmott and Fantin (2001) note that the approach that best encapsulates a commitment to changing the life circumstances of Itinerants and park people is community development.

In the area of Indigenous health, the advantages of community controlled programs are flexibility and responsiveness (this often means outreach services), employment of Indigenous or culturally aware non-Indigenous people, care delivery in a sensitive and inclusive manner, local knowledge resulting in services targeted to local need, an opportunity for education and training, and achievement and pride for Indigenous people. Overall, the end result is significantly improved access (National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, 2001).

### *A healing framework*

Coleman (2000) points out the discrepancy between the long-standing and deep-seated nature of many Indigenous women's problems, and current service frameworks based on brief interventions. She proposes a 'healing framework' to encompass policies and programs at all levels of government. This framework would view presenting problems as symptomatic of deeper issues stemming from dispossession and loss, and policy and service delivery would be based upon acknowledgment of the unique experience of Indigenous people. Responses would be integrated across all levels of government, and ownership and responsibility would rest with Indigenous people.

### *Case management*

Case management models are not necessarily suitable for Indigenous programs. Their formal structure, short-term interventions, fixed appointment system, and case closure philosophy are inimical to best practice with Indigenous people who prefer flexibility and informality, and who need a longer time to form a trusting relationship with a professional and to decide whether and how to make life changes (Keys Young, 1998). On the other hand, Memmott and Fantin (2001) recommend a case management model as a way of monitoring Itinerants who need long-term treatment to manage the alcohol abuse associated with their lifestyle.

### *Medium- to long-term interventions*

A participant in Berry et al.'s (2001) study of Indigenous housing in Victoria called for a holistic approach to redressing the disadvantage experienced by Indigenous women who are also contending with mental illness, drug and alcohol dependence, and family violence. She envisaged an intensive six-month program that would incorporate such aspects as assertiveness training, financial counselling, education and health. The effectiveness of on-going monitoring is being shown in a longitudinal study of Indigenous families. Durkay and colleagues reported that through their project work and the involvement of participating agencies, they have 'almost daily been able to prevent people falling through [the] gaps or to help them back' (Durkay et al., 2003, p. 9).

### *Outreach services*

Coleman (2002) investigated agencies providing services to inner city Indigenous women who frequented parks and public spaces. She described an outreach service that effectively engages Indigenous women who have difficulty in accessing accommodation

and other services. She noted that centre-based services that offer facilities such as showers or telephones may be used by Indigenous women, who may then access other services via the centre. Central to her report were the views of Indigenous women whom she consulted about their needs, available services and service gaps. They identified the need for flexible outreach services that would obviate the need for them to go somewhere to keep an appointment. Particularly useful would be 24-hour services that would respond when others do not. Coleman concluded that a characteristic of effective services is a flexible pro-active approach.

Drawing on her many years of working in refuges, Paulson (1999) emphasised that support/outreach workers are vital for women leaving shelter accommodation and starting to live independently. She notes that 'it often means the difference between making a person succeed/cope or slowly crumbling' (p. 2).

## **5.6 Self-determination**

Referring to the Commonwealth government's policy of self-determination for Indigenous people which was introduced in the 1970s, DATSIP notes that it was meant to allow Indigenous people to control their lives and shape their futures. Shortly after this commitment, the Queensland government introduced a policy of 'self-management' that had similar goals. It is pointed out that if governments overlook the difficulties of implementing these principles in the face of the persisting influence of past institutional and social controls, the long history of abuse and destruction of Aboriginal systems cannot be quickly redressed (DATSIP, 1999).

Despite the huge disadvantages of this part of recent Indigenous heritage, there is ample evidence that Indigenous people want to solve problems in their own way within their own communities (for example, DATSIP, 1999), and there are outstanding examples of highly successful Indigenous-run programs such as tourism ventures (Australian and Torres Strait Islander Commission, 1997: Western Australian Indigenous Tourism Operators Committee web site), broadcasting (Buchtman, 2001) and care for Indigenous children and families through the Cape/Gulf Remote Area and Torres Strait Island Child Care (RAATSICC) network (Cape/Gulf RAATSICC web site).

In identifying barriers to Indigenous women's access to services, Coleman (2000) pointed out the importance of grounded knowledge, noting that it:

...allowed insights into what was frequently common knowledge in the Indigenous community but rarely spoken outside the community, particularly at official consultations. (p. 3)

Ivanitz (2000) observed that:

If policy developed by non-Indigenous governments is not relevant to Indigenous circumstances at the local level, meaning that local Indigenous politics and collective obligations are not accounted for, policy failure is the likely result. (p. 131)

Underlining this point, she cites the example of a Canadian First Nation which, when given policy, program and service delivery responsibility, achieved improved outcomes across a range of social measures.

The policy options suggested by Finlayson (1997) after her study of service provision in a remote Queensland community included realistic orientation programs for non-Indigenous staff, professional and personal support, and performance monitoring specific to cross-cultural service delivery. She emphasised that there must be an end to the non-Indigenous monopoly of full-time paid employment in remote communities. Also in Queensland, the study of Indigenous homelessness in regional areas noted 'a clear need to reaffirm the importance of Indigenous leadership on [homelessness]' (Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy, 2002, p. 14). The Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria's guidelines for Aboriginal Housing Cross-Cultural Awareness Programs emphasise the importance of Indigenous people's role with respect to cultural awareness in the workplace. They stress that Aboriginal culture belongs to Aboriginal people, and that no one else has

the right to decide what information can be used in cross-cultural awareness programs, which are about 'non-Aboriginal people learning from Aboriginal people'.

Minnery, Manicaros and Lindfield (2000) developed a best practice model for remote Indigenous housing. Theirs is a four-stage model: assessment of housing need; development and design of appropriate housing; construction; and maintenance and improvement. At each stage, six components must be considered: funding; availability of skills; technology; organisational structure; cultural context; supporting hard and soft infrastructure. Analysing several housing projects, they concluded that a more flexible approach to funding would allow communities to direct funds where they are most needed (instead of according to funding agency prescriptions). They also noted that there should be more opportunity for communities to devise and implement appropriate building technologies, and that considerable effort is needed with respect to communities' carrying out and paying for home maintenance.

## **5.7 Qualified Aboriginal staff**

The need for more trained Aboriginal staff has been identified in a number of studies (for example, DATSIP, 2000). One group of women speaking to the ATSI Task Force on Violence commented that projects are not funded for long enough for programs to be established. Their summary was, 'People need training at the Community level. We got buildings yet people don't have skills' (DATSIP, 2000, p. 293).

On the other hand, Anders (2001), writing of responses to domestic violence, expresses the view that despite increasing numbers of Indigenous women with tertiary qualifications, the requirement that refuge workers have formal qualifications is contributing to the lack of Indigenous workers in refuges. She postulates that many qualified women elect not to work with domestic violence because they are dealing with it in their homes and communities on a daily basis. Similarly, it is reported that there is a high turnover of Aboriginal SAAP workers because of worker isolation, lack of management support and lack of appreciation by colleagues of community demands upon Aboriginal workers (Keys Young, 1998).

In their study of Queensland urban and remote Aboriginal women's attitudes to breast cancer diagnosis and treatment, McMichael et al. (2000) reported that women saw Aboriginal Health Workers (AHW) as important for promoting a 'culturally safe' environment.

## **5.8 How this literature review will inform the research**

The tacit knowledge of Indigenous workers about cycles of homelessness and sustainable tenancy provides a testable proposition.

The literature review implies cycles of homelessness. Although cycles are assumed for people with mental health problems, they have not been researched in Indigenous rural, remote or urban communities. This research will attempt to elicit these cycles in various urban, remote and rural situations.

Indigenous households are dynamic environments that may comprise several family units and visitors. These environments and visitor-induced stress may lead to homelessness and difficulty with tenancy. This knowledge of cycles of homelessness will inform the semi-structured interviews with Indigenous women.

Homelessness is sustained by a multitude of social, personal and structural factors. These factors will be incorporated into the questionnaire and structured interviews.

There is little material available on the subjective experiences of Indigenous women with respect to their homelessness and various forms of tenancy. Racism and discrimination are present in the health, welfare and housing system and present major barriers to the use of mainstream services by Indigenous people. Women suffer a double jeopardy because of their gender and colour. These subjective dimensions will be explored in the semi-structured interviews.

A range of successful and innovative programs and policy initiatives has been implemented but much remains to be done. Although these programs are necessary for their support of

tenancy, when taken in isolation they are insufficient to maintain it. Best practice models provide the starting point for exploration of barriers and constraints in the service delivery system, and our research will use knowledge of these to help inform the semi-structured interview questionnaire.

The research methodology for this project will now be explained.

## 6 RESEARCHING THE BARRIERS TO SUSTAINABLE TENANCY FOR INDIGENOUS WOMEN

### 6.1 Methodology and rationale

This research project runs from January to December 2003. Table 2 illustrates the projected timeline and Table 3 summarises the research method.

**Table 2 Timeline**

January – February 2003	Literature review, finalise discussions with indigenous organisations
March – May 2003	Appoint RAs in Darwin and Brisbane and prepare semi-structured questionnaires
June – August 2003	Conduct interviews and arrange focus group meetings with service providers, present work in progress report and provide preliminary feedback to local indigenous organisations
September – October 2003	Code data, undertake data analysis and preliminary writing
November – December 2003	Writing, feedback to participants, service providers and indigenous people; submit position paper and prepare material for publication.

**Table 3 Summary of research method**

	Literature and Policy Review	Stakeholder Interviews	Interviews - Indigenous Women	Interviews - Service providers and agencies
Identify the pathways into and between homelessness and sustainable tenancy for Indigenous women?	✓	✓	✓	✓
What structural and service barriers in the housing and welfare system hinder sustainable tenancy?		✓	✓	✓
What are the best practice models to ensure service coordination and linkages between service providers and Indigenous people?		✓	✓	✓
What specific policy initiatives would enable Indigenous women to maintain sustainable tenancy?	✓	✓	✓	✓

As is evident from literature reviewed in the previous sections, a myriad of multi-faceted psycho-social barriers contribute to unsustainable tenancy. Accordingly, the approach adopted in this project was to identify the major factors that initiate and sustain iterative homelessness, which Robinson (2003) describes as the cyclical process of losing and acquiring accommodation predominantly, but not solely, within the marginal housing sector. This project will attempt to examine a range of factors that prevent and/or obstruct Indigenous women from establishing and maintaining permanent or semi-permanent housing and, subsequently, suggest strategic policy recommendations to address this issue. This research will occur in two major capital cities (Brisbane and Darwin) and in more remote areas (Katherine and Alice Springs) in order to determine if a common causal pathway to homelessness is evident for Indigenous women. Importantly, this research seeks to give a voice to Indigenous women who are without sustainable tenancy – to ask them first hand about their experiences and to value these experiences as building blocks toward sustainable tenancies in the future.

As noted by Fry (2001), homelessness is related to structural factors including unemployment, low income and lack of access to affordable, safe, secure housing. While these factors will be empirically assessed within the current project, they are unlikely to explain or address the reasons why some Indigenous women meet these challenges less well than others. It is likely that family and community support, psychological and physical well-being, age, cultural identity, substance use, gambling and marginalisation are significant contributors that interact with the structural factors to produce cyclical long-term homelessness for some, but not all, Indigenous women. While a substantial body of research has attempted to examine and explain pathways to homelessness, a paucity of data exists on the cyclical nature of Indigenous homelessness. In addition, little research has made an attempt to quantify what, if any, positive benefits are derived from this type of dynamic housing arrangement.

While a number of studies have stressed that homelessness is not so much a state of affairs but a process involving constant changes (Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy, Safer Places with New Opportunities, 2002), the factors that contribute to Indigenous women's capacity to change and adapt to their specific circumstances – some of which are beneficial to them – have not been explored adequately. The current research will examine if Indigenous women are active and empowered participants in determining their housing arrangements. It will do this by exploring the social, political, economic and psychological factors that contribute to the cyclical nature of homelessness. It is envisaged an insight will also be gained as to factors that may facilitate Indigenous women to embrace an alternate pathway – that is, to sustainable tenancy.

This type of study is best informed by what happens 'on the ground' in the day to day experiences of Indigenous women and children, and in the experiences of service providers and agencies who attempt to access services with, or on behalf of these Indigenous families. This study will draw on the insights of clients, service providers and Indigenous organisations using quantitative (questionnaire responses) and qualitative (open-ended questions, free dialogue) approaches, focus groups and semi structured interviews. Given the diversity and complexity of the issues identified in the literature review, a cross-sectional, between-within group design will be employed. A between-within design will enable comparisons to be made between naturally occurring groups within the participant sample (e.g. women who do/do not perceive themselves as homeless, women with and without dependent children) as well as within the total participant group (e.g. the relationship between substance use, domestic violence, discrimination and homelessness). This particular design was considered superior due to the non-homogeneity of the participant sample. This form of methodology will allow an exploration of the multiplicity of pathways to homelessness by examining the relative importance of individual difference characteristics (domestic violence, health, economic, substance use, cultural identity) and the socio-political factors that contribute to and/or sustain homelessness.

## **6.2 Stage 1: Identifying the issues: interviews with key stakeholders and support service providers**

This research clearly acknowledges the difficulty accessing homeless Indigenous women. As noted by Robinson (2003), there are a multitude of marginal housing options available to homeless people. In addition to these options, Indigenous women in the Northern Territory may choose to 'live in the long grass'. The capacity to obtain a representative sample of all homeless Indigenous women is beyond the scope of the current research. As the focus of the research was to identify barriers to sustainable tenancy, key stakeholders, Aboriginal Hostels Ltd and SAAP were approached to obtain support for the project. These organisations were considered the most appropriate and efficient access points to meet the research goals, as many of the women who are currently in hostel accommodation are likely to have also experienced additional forms of non-sustainable accommodation such as crisis accommodation, long grassing, refuges, family and women's shelters. Hostel accommodation was also considered a safe and supported environment for these marginalised and socially isolated women, thereby decreasing any perceived fear or risk of retribution for participating in the current project. As such, the experiences of the

Indigenous women in hostel accommodation will provide a clearer, albeit still incomplete picture of the pathways to homelessness. Of equal importance, the experiences and data derived from these women will inform service providers and policy of the nature and extent of barriers that prevent Indigenous women from entering and sustaining more permanent residential accommodation.

### *Consultation already undertaken*

At present, consultation has occurred in Brisbane, Katherine and Darwin. The purpose of the meetings with key stakeholders and service providers was to develop a clear and focused understanding of the barriers to sustainable tenancy as identified by the stakeholders, to gain support and input from the various hostels and agencies, and to engage in dialogue with policy officers and field managers to outline the nature and purpose of the present study. These consultative meetings provided valuable insight into the accommodation and welfare facilities currently available and factors perceived to be antecedents to homelessness. Fourteen accommodation and support services from these areas have indicated strong support for the project.

## **6.3 Stage 2: Interviewing Indigenous women**

As a key aim of the project is to identify factors that contribute to, and maintain unsustainable tenancy, it is necessary to develop a semi-structured questionnaire that is culturally relevant for Indigenous women from traditional, rural and urban areas. In order to achieve this outcome, an Indigenous research assistant is currently co-developing this research instrument, which will examine a range of social, economic, cultural and psychological factors that are predicted to interact to initiate and sustain homelessness. These factors will include, but are not restricted to personal demographic data, knowledge of, and access to support services, employment history, income security, cultural identity, accommodation history including access and affordability, community support, physical health and well-being including drug and alcohol use, psychological well-being including cognitive functioning, legal issues and incarcerations, isolation and marginalisation, education and domestic violence.

### *Structured interviews*

Once developed the questionnaire will form the basis of semi-structured face-to-face interviews with Indigenous women residing in hostels in Brisbane, Darwin and Katherine, and Aboriginal Communities outside the metropolitan areas of both Darwin and Brisbane. It is anticipated researchers will interview 40 women in Brisbane/Cherbourg and 80 women in the Northern Territory. The purpose of these interviews will be to enable and facilitate Indigenous women to describe their pattern of housing history, pathways to homelessness, factors that precipitate housing crises, barriers and constraints in accessing services, and the impact of unsustainable tenancy on their children. While the interviews will be guided by the questionnaire, the women will be encouraged to self-disclose additional information by the use of open-ended questions and to engage in general dialogue with an Indigenous interviewer trained in interviewing techniques. It must be stressed here that these Indigenous women are not research subjects, but co-researchers whose voice will provide valuable data in considering policy and best practice in relation to homelessness and sustainable in their communities.

## **6.4 Stage 3: Conducting semi-structured interviews with a range of service providers to identify barriers for Indigenous women and families to accessing housing services**

A range of service providers, including Aboriginal Hostels, Women's Shelters, Crisis Shelters, Aboriginal Housing, State Indigenous Housing Officers and Centrelink will be interviewed to identify service system barriers that may initiate and/or sustain the cycle of homelessness evident in the Indigenous community. Specifically, the interviews will explore: income support and rent assistance payment options for women in domestic violence situations; examine the impact on women and families of breaching income support regulations and the value of automatic rent deductions from income support

payments through Centrelink; inform housing providers of the specific structural and policy barriers that destabilize housing; and discuss State Housing Authorities Policy options such as coordination of service delivery (e.g. tenancy management plans, strategies to address unmet needs and management of Indigenous housing.)

In addition, both government and non-government organisations, agencies and service providers that provide a wide range of services to address the complex needs of homeless Indigenous women will be approached and a representative from the organisation will be interviewed. These agencies and service providers will include, but are not exclusive to Anglicare, Christian Outreach, SARS, Night Patrol, medical services (Darwin and Katherine Hospital - in particular the Renal Unit), Drug and Alcohol Services, Family and Community Services, Tamarind Centre, Child Protection Services and Aged Care providers.

## **6.5 Achievement to date**

At present, as is evident from this Positioning Paper, the literature review has identified a number of issues and factors associated with, but not restricted to, homelessness in Indigenous women. As few research studies have focused on homeless women, some extrapolation of factors has been necessary as these factors and issues were not considered gender-specific (e.g. poverty, discrimination, education). The literature has clearly identified a probable cycle of homelessness and has suggested antecedents to homelessness and barriers to sustainable housing. These issues and factors will form the basis of the investigation.

At present, key stakeholders and service providers have been interviewed and support for the project has been obtained from a variety of government and non-government organisations. An Indigenous research assistant has been appointed and is developing the semi-structured interview questionnaires in consultation with the Principal researchers, traditional women and stakeholders. It is anticipated the interviewing process will commence in mid-June and be completed by late August. All going according to plan, the final report will be written up at the end of December 2003.

## **7 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

Aunty Honor Cleary provided the insights into homelessness of Indigenous women that led to the formulation of this research proposal. The research problem is also identified in the academic and policy literature, and the unique experiences of Indigenous women. The literature review has highlighted the complexity and difficulties in developing services and initiating policy and programs that will make a difference to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The research approach combines qualitative and quantitative methods, and seeks the views of Indigenous women, key stakeholders and service providers in exploring effective ways of ensuring sustainable tenancy.

It is intended that by undertaking such an extensive literature and policy review, and involving such a broad range of stakeholders in this research into the issues affecting Indigenous women's cycles of homelessness, we will be able to make recommendations for policy change and best practice to help reduce the barriers to sustainable tenancy.

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