

# Homelessness and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

Concepts of home and homelessness may vary across different communities in Australia. Homelessness in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities cannot be understood without reference to the legacy of colonisation and dispossession. A history of physical and cultural displacement places many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at increased risk of homelessness. Concepts of country are fundamental to the culture and identity of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Some may not identify as being homeless if they have a spiritual connection to the land they live on, regardless of the type of shelter they live in. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may experience separation from their traditional land, family or kinship groups as spiritual homelessness.

## Rates of homelessness

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are over represented in the homeless service system. While they comprise two to three percent of the total population in Australia, they represent sixteen percent of people using homeless assistance services. Rates of homelessness are much higher in rural areas where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are sixty-nine percent of service users and in remote areas, where they are eighty-eight percent of service users.

## Public places in towns and cities

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in remote areas and have to travel to regional centres to access basic services. People who are in town temporarily may stay with family in overcrowded houses or in public places.

Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in public places in urban areas. Some choose to live in these places either temporarily or permanently. Some may wish to return to country but require services that are only available in urban areas; others lack the means to travel home. Connection to country may mean some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience lack of access or a loss of control over their use of public places as homelessness. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are also disproportionately affected by laws that govern public space.

## What needs to happen?

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities must be supported to engage directly with local, state and territory and national government on culturally appropriate ways to effectively support and accommodate that community.
2. The supply of long-term, affordable and culturally appropriate housing must be increased, particularly in rural and remote areas of Australia.
3. More homeless assistance services must be managed and staffed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
4. Government policies must focus on restoring traditional connection to country and reconnecting the Stolen Generation with family and culture in order to address the spiritual element of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness.

## Overcrowding and adequate housing

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in housing that does not meet their needs. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are six times more likely to live in overcrowded conditions than non indigenous Australians. Overcrowding due to a shortage of housing is more severe in rural and remote areas. Living in overcrowded conditions can lead to ill health, family violence and disruption to education and work. Overcrowding constitutes a high percentage of the hidden homelessness among people who are from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background.

## Family and domestic violence

- Family violence is the primary cause of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness.
- Forty percent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in homeless assistance services are women escaping domestic violence.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are more likely to be victims of domestic violence and to sustain more serious injuries than non indigenous women.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women living in rural and remote areas are more likely to be affected by domestic violence than the non indigenous population.