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OF QUEENSLAND  
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Institute for Social Science Research

# Why are special services needed to address Indigenous homelessness?

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Institute for Social Science Research  
The University of Queensland

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Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

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# List of Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
CBD	Central Business District
DATSIP	Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy (Qld)
FAHCSIA	Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Aboriginal Affairs (Commonwealth)
HRPA	Homelessness Research Partnership Agreement
ISSR	Institute for Social Science Research (University of Queensland)
NGO	Non-government organisation
PPD	public place dweller
WADoH	Western Australian Department of Housing

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# Executive Summary

This research report addresses the question ‘why is it at times necessary to engage special service delivery responses to effectively address Aboriginal homelessness?’ The project is funded by the Australian Department of Family, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) and speaks to the concerns of government policy makers in this field generally as well as relevant administrators and non-government organisations (NGOs) engaged in designing programmes and services for Aboriginal homeless and public place dwelling people.

We begin with a discussion of the policy context and relevance of the report including a discussion of recent trends in policy towards mainstreaming of services provided for Indigenous homeless people. This section includes an historical contextualisation of Indigenous homelessness which aims to demonstrate how it is different to homelessness in other sectors of the community and has culturally specific drivers and solutions, and a unique demographic profile. Aboriginal people moved from hunter-gatherer camping on their own lands to the situation of pauperised squatting on the outskirts of cities and towns, sometimes within their former lands. This and other identified historical camping lifestyles provide a historical background to the reasons for the currency within Aboriginal living memory of the practice of camping which enables contemporary Aboriginal people to engage in camping in public places when no other housing option is accessible.

Section 2 contains an analysis of recent studies of Indigenous homeless people which bring forth some of the specific causes, conditions and implications of Indigenous homelessness. This leads to the development of a set of categories to define the specific conditions of Indigenous homelessness that we argue is more relevant and useful for policy makers. The categorisation differentiates between (i) public place dwelling persons, (ii) housed people but who are at risk of homelessness; and (iii) spiritually homeless persons. This categorisation differentiates among homeless people according to whether their situation is voluntary or involuntary, and whether their situation is short term or long term. These categorisations are then amplified to enable an analysis of the presence or absence of cultural justifications for mobility practices that result in various forms of homelessness and/or public place dwelling.

In Section 3 we discuss Indigenous public place dwellers and develop a more nuanced understanding of this little understood phenomenon, based on fieldwork and

studies over the past several decades. This is linked to the discussion in section 4 which outlines the risks faces by rough sleepers.

Section 5 is an analysis of conditions of people who are at risk of homelessness which we argue is a second category of homelessness which is often overlooked by both survey data and therefore policy making. By so doing, it becomes clear that Aboriginal patterns of mobility are central to understanding the nature of Aboriginal homelessness. Aboriginal mobility can be categorised as being either supported by Aboriginal cultural values or not supported by such values. However, a nuanced understanding is necessary in this regard. In Section 6 we define a special category of homelessness that we term *spiritual homelessness*, a complex personal and social phenomenon stemming from the conditions of colonisation and its continuing aftermaths of institutionalisation, forced removals and their resulting social and psychological deprivations. This can lead to dysfunctional relationships with both family and country, having significant consequences for people's ability to find and maintain housing and family relationships.

We conclude with some discussion on the nature of practice responses to Indigenous homelessness and public place dwelling including the context of current legislative approaches such as a 'law and order' approach, outreach and night patrol services and strategies which address anti-social behaviour. This section also discusses regional strategies which are being used with some success but which require further analysis and evaluation to ensure appropriate policy development based on evidence. We discuss the cultural specificity of Aboriginal homelessness and the need for holistic approaches based on community education and development as a means of preventing homelessness.

This report provides the basis for an ongoing programme of field research in urban and regional town centre settings by the current authors. This research programme, will be reported through a number of future research reports during 2011-13.



# 1. Policy context and relevance

The rate of homelessness for Indigenous Australians is significantly higher than for non-Indigenous Australians. The Australian Government's White Paper on homelessness (Aust, FaHCSIA 2008:2) reported that Indigenous people comprise an especially high proportion of the homeless population in regional and rural centres. Developing effective responses to homelessness in the Indigenous population is of central importance to the national approach to reducing homelessness. Many local and state governments have attempted to remove Aboriginal people from occupation of public places in Australian towns and cities over the last 30 years as well as in earlier historical times, but despite the use of physical force and various 'law and order' approaches, attempts at solutions have been temporary at best, and a failure at worst, notwithstanding the violations of civil and human rights necessary to achieve them (Memmott 1994, 2006). A key issue requiring discussion and analysis is the extent and means by which, effective and humane responses to Indigenous homelessness require a culturally distinctive practice approach and understanding.

This research report therefore asks the question 'why is it at times necessary to engage special service delivery responses to effectively address Indigenous homelessness?' It is particularly addressed to government policy makers, administrators and to NGO designers of homelessness programmes for Indigenous people.

## Current Policy Approaches in Homelessness

According to the National Shelter Indigenous Round Table briefing document

"The need remains for more specialist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness services, better place-based integration of services and better policy coherence across departments and organisations."  
(National Shelter 2011a.)

This highlights the tendency of both state and federal governments over recent decades to incorporate services for homeless Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into mainstream bureaucracies.

The anthropologist David Martin (2011) also argues that there is a tendency for a policy approach that imagines policy is able to perform feats of alchemy, able to transform Aboriginal lives through policy alone, without engaging Aboriginal people themselves, and their contemporary cultural forms as a basis for these policy

strategies. The social scientist Will Sanders reflects that this is possibly motivated by a desire for equality, and an even hand in approaching policy issues regardless of race or cultural traits. He argues however, that in many housing circumstances this is a misguided approach and instead that a recognition of difference, rather than a race-blind desire for equality is required (Sanders 2008).

Increasingly since 2000, definitions of Australian Indigenous homelessness in the social science literature have become culturally specific, yet this has not been reflected in many policy decisions, which have tended to move towards mainstreaming. Pathways into homelessness for contemporary Indigenous Australians can involve longitudinal factors, including those having an impact from early childhood in for example Indigenous settlements and communities that have institutionalized and marginalized histories. They can also involve situational factors acting upon the lives of individuals, but which also arise from colonial contact histories and directed cultural change such as the 'Stolen Generation'. To comprehend the definitions of, and pathways into homelessness, some understanding of the cultural and historical backgrounds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is necessary. Thus, a brief overview follows.

## Historical and Cultural Context to Indigenous Homelessness in Australia

Approximately 300,000 Indigenous people occupied the entire Australian continent when British colonisation was imposed in 1788. The most common local Aboriginal land-holding group (also referred to as a 'traditional owner' group) was the patriclan, which held religious, hunting and food-collecting rights over its estate. Such localised groups were organized into larger regional groupings whose members intermarried according to strict rules. These larger regional groupings shared some aspects of social organization, beliefs and customs. Altogether there were about 200 distinct languages spoken on the continent, many having numerous dialects. Religion, social organization and language were three of the more elaborate cognitive domains of Aboriginal cultures. (Memmott 2007.)

Groups of Aborigines were nomadic in the sense that they moved between a number of contiguous ecological systems to effectively exploit seasonal foods and resources; their travel patterns were most often restricted by various territorial rules, as well as by the need for individuals to meet local religious obligations at sacred sites in their

land estate (and on the coast, their sea estate as well), and sometimes those estates of their grandparents and spouse(s). So, according to the season, small local groups or bands were spread throughout their respective countries engaged in hunting, gathering and fishing, as well as social and ritual activities. People were conscious of their place within their own local territory, intimate with its geography, and spiritually attached to its sacred sites and sacred histories.

From the commencement of colonization in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century until the 1890s, the colonial frontier gradually moved inland from coastal settlements, and was largely characterised by the wholesale slaughter of Aboriginal people and the seizure of their land and waterholes. This was met with sporadic resistance in the form of guerrilla warfare in many regions. The British colony expanded slowly inland for 150 years having widespread impact on Aboriginal cultures. Disease, raids on camps and removal from traditional land sources meant a large loss of Aboriginal lives. Many of the unique, ecologically-adaptive lifeways of the Aboriginal language groups were lost.

By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, traditional styles of Aboriginal camping and land use were no longer found in the eastern and southern parts of the continent. Within its interior, displaced tribespeople camped near newly-formed towns and pastoral stations in makeshift shelters. Here the devastation of life and culture continued through alcoholism, prostitution, disease, rape, economic exploitation and further violence. A collapse in numbers of the Indigenous population occurred, falling to about 31,000 people. They were spoken of as a 'doomed race' which would inevitably become extinct. This sentiment was widely held and most poignantly expounded by the anthropologist Daisy Bates who, in her other role as a journalist, regularly referred to the Aboriginal people as 'derelicts', and to the 'passing of the race' (Bates 1924, 1938). It should be remembered at this time that only Aboriginal people of direct and solely Aboriginal descent were considered 'real' Aborigines and indeed their numbers were in decline. The balance of the Aboriginal population was descended from parentage of at least one white or Asian ancestor and an Aboriginal woman. This portion of the population was rapidly expanding. However, they were not considered by anyone at the time to be 'really' Aboriginal. (Birdsall 1990.) Their status was unclear to colonisers but these people were included into Aboriginal systems of kinship, landholding and broader culture, where such systems themselves were able to continue.

These destructive forces culminated in the enactment of various pieces of Aboriginal protection legislation between 1897 and 1915 in each state of Australia, which empowered government officials and police to control the movements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families and whole communities within and between settlements on newly established Aboriginal and Islander Reserves. Individuals of mixed parentage were particularly vulnerable to removal and control by the state. However this directed movement of people was as often enforced for punitive as for protection reasons. For example, in the south west of WA, the white townsfolk of a number of the Wheatbelt towns, including Beverley, Katanning, Narrogin and others, successfully applied for the removal of the entire Aboriginal populations of the towns (Haebich 1998; Biskup 1973). Similarly in Queensland, if Aboriginal people did not provide effective labour, the Local Protectors (the police) had then, and at times entire fringe camp communities, removed to government settlements such as Cherbourg and Palm Island (Memmott 1991:13,14.) Many people became disconnected from both their land and kin through these removals resulting in loss of social, psychological and spiritual well-being. This was exacerbated by the implementation of an assimilation policy in the middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was not completely abandoned until the 1970s. Only then were most Indigenous people able to travel of their own free will again.

By the 1980s, small groups of Indigenous people had come to live in public places in the regional towns and metropolitan cities of Australia, residing in these places despite, in many cases, the existence of formal Indigenous town camps and an increasing range of other Indigenous housing options. Their numbers gradually increased in the 1990s and early 2000s. Although these people were often categorised as homeless, a number of them saw themselves as being both placed and homed, and in many regions, they preferred instead to refer to themselves by such names as parkies, goomies, ditchies, long grassers, or river campers. With the exception of 'ditchies' (a Geraldton term), WA Aboriginal people in general seem not to have referred to themselves by anything other than their language group name, e.g. Nyungar, Yamatji, Wongai etc (Toussaint 1987; Birdsall 1990). However right across Australia these people and their camps were largely seen by local government authorities, politicians and members of various business communities as a public eyesore and nuisance. They were stereotyped as displaying anti-social behaviour and discouraging tourism and general town trading. (Memmott 1996.)

## Demographic extent of Indigenous homelessness

According to the 2006 census, some 105,000 Australian people were identified as homeless, of whom at least 16,000 were categorized as rough sleepers or experiencing primary homelessness. The remainder were described as experiencing secondary or tertiary homelessness, meaning they moved frequently between temporary forms of shelter, and lived in boarding houses for periods of three months or more, respectively. Indigenous people, who formed 2.3% of the total Australian population in the 2006 Census (517,043 in 20.7million), were overrepresented in these homelessness figures, constituting 9.1% of the homeless population according to the census (Aust, FaHCSIA 2008:4-6). Nevertheless the Australian Bureau of Statistics which conducts the five-yearly census, has conceded that there was a likely undercount of the number of Indigenous homeless people because of difficulties in locating them, particularly those in the rough sleeper category (ABS 2005:47). This under-count, which results from the mobility of people camping in public places as well as their hiding from census collectors, has been confirmed by independent field researchers, most notably Morphy (2004, 2007, 2010).

### **Box 1: Indigenous Homelessness 2006 – Official ABS data**

Total Australian population: 20,697,880\* people

Total Australian homeless population: 104,676 people<sup>#</sup>

% of Australian population who are homeless: 0.51%

Estimated Total Indigenous population        = 517,043\*  
   = 2.5% of total population<sup>#</sup>

Total Indigenous homeless population:        9,525

% of Indigenous population who are homeless:        9.1%<sup>#</sup>

(But academic demographic view is that Indigenous  
population grossly under counted.)

Sources:        <sup>#</sup>Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2008

   \*ABS 3238.0.55.001 – Experimental Estimates of Aboriginal and  
Torres Strait Islander Australians, June 2006 (2008).

## Indigenous homelessness and an Aboriginal history of camping

One might well ask to what extent is Indigenous public-place dwelling or rough sleeping a continuity of Aboriginal tradition? Let us briefly consider the history of camping in or beside towns. In 1788 at the time of arrival of the British first fleet, traditional Indigenous camping practices were occurring across the entire continent involving sociospatial rules and Aboriginal land tenure rights (Memmott 2007). As the colonial frontier spread, townships, rural farms and pastoral stations were established on perennial waterholes or rivers which were already Aboriginal campsites. Aboriginal camps at these locations often became semi-sedentarized during the 1800s, continuing into the mid-1900s; unless contact was violent, in which case people were displaced or killed (often the case unfortunately).

Some early fringe camps occurred as far back as 200 years ago (Memmott 1996). The introduction of the Aboriginal Acts in every state in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries legitimized institutional control over Aboriginal camps. Such camps were consolidated during the early 1900s to mid-1900s. By the 1970s it was possible to classify sedentary and semi-sedentary camps into pastoral camps, mission camps and town camps, depending partly on their location and partly on their circumstances of directed or imposed cultural change.

Some of the town camps were formalized in the 1950s as 'compounds' with steel sheds and very basic services (Memmott 1996) to ensure a controlled supply of labour. In some states where people were subject to removalism policies and moved to Mission or Government reserve settlements, those people often travelled to bush campsites on weekends or during holidays when traditional camping practices and bush food consumption were maintained.

Despite stringent government controls, some illicit informal camping persisted in cities during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, until the lifting of the various State 'Acts' in the 1970s and 1980s. This was paralleled by the establishment of Indigenous rental housing policies in cities, as well as outstation policies in remote parts of Australia. The outstation or homeland movement involved small groups returning to homeland estates and resuming camping practices. Eventually government funding trickled through for 'tin sheds' and eventually for some conventional housing in these outstations.

We can see from this short history that there was a continuity of camping by Aboriginal people in many missions, government settlements, outstations and fringe settlements well into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. It should not be a surprise then that many Aboriginal people who travel into regional cities and even metropolitan areas today, are able to camp with minimal resources (firewood, water, blanket) if no other shelter opportunities are available to them. The mild climates of northern Australia particularly facilitate this disposition. The re-emergence of informal camping has thus been occurring in many cities over the last few decades. However, as we have discussed, this occurrence is not simply due to a preference for camping, but involves a complex of other causal factors.

## 2. Recent empirical studies on Indigenous homeless

A detailed model is outlined later in this paper which elicits fine-grained categories of Indigenous homelessness and public place dwelling. It is largely based on a number of recent (post 2000) empirical studies by the authors in Darwin, Sydney and Broome, as well as earlier work in Alice Springs (Memmott 1990), Halls Creek W.A. (Memmott 1991,1992) and Redfern (Memmott 1994). A brief summary of the most recent empirical studies follows.

### *(i) Long Grassers Survey in Darwin, 2001*

Indigenous community organisations have been concerned for many years with issues related in Indigenous 'itinerants and homelessness' throughout the NT. In the Darwin and Palmerston region, there are a number of people, many of them Indigenous, originally from remote communities, living 'an itinerant lifestyle' otherwise known as 'living in the long grass'. The survey was catalysed by concerns about both alcohol use and the health, well-being and anti-social behaviour of certain 'itinerants'; also concern about the effect of this group's behaviour on themselves and on the lives of their relatives and acquaintances who reside in the Darwin and Palmerston area. (Memmott and Fantin 2001.)

The general aim of this project was to conduct a study of the issues facing Indigenous 'itinerants' and service providers in the Darwin and Palmerston region. A total of 50 interviews were carried out with Darwin and Palmerston itinerants using 14 questions, during January-April 2001 in the wet season. 26 of the interviewees said they had been 'sleeping out', leading their 'long-grass' lifestyle for five years or less, whilst 22 had been leading it for 5 to 20+ years. Chronic or lifetime itinerancy/homelessness was a reality and a norm. The 52 interviewees gave details of the membership of their itinerant groups, giving a total of 227 people in the 'long-grass' lifestyle. Group structures were quite variable, ranging from individuals who preferred to 'stick on their own' with limited social interaction, to couples and family groups, and ranging up to larger groups. These 227 persons, had their community of origin in a diversity of places across the NT; whilst 16 people had interstate origins (WA, Qld, NSW). Most respondents were aged in their 30s or 40s (36 out of 51), but there were seven in their 50s and one in his 60s. Of the 52 respondents, 34 were male and 18 were female (a ratio of about 2:1).



Many of the itinerants were from outlying communities who were in town for a variety of purposes. While some people were focused on recreational drinking and seeking a change from daily life in their home communities, others were in town to attend sporting fixtures, visiting relations in health care facilities, to conduct 'sorry business' and so on. Additionally there was a core of Aboriginal people who did not intend to return to their home communities, partly composed of a number of groups which formed on the basis of a common community of origin. Others were local people from Darwin and Palmerston who came out to the 'long grass' camps to drink alcohol, seeking comradeship, or because their behaviour when drunk was unacceptable in their neighbourhoods and households.

The largest category of responses from the 'Long Grassers' on what were their biggest problems living in Darwin, dealt with housing and accommodation problems; and the second largest category were difficulties arising from patrols by authorities, either the NT Police Public Patrol, the Aboriginal Night Patrol or the Darwin City Council Public Place Patrol. Other problems associated with life in the long grass camps included a lack of facilities for washing oneself and one's clothes, violence associated with drinking, 'humbugging', that is, being harassed for money, and clashes with local authorities.

The itinerants could be categorised for the purposes of accommodation and/or transport into sizable groupings as follows:-

- i) Those who only wanted to stay in Darwin on a short-term basis but may need special assistance in getting home, due to their lifestyle circumstances.
- ii) Those who only wanted to stay for a short-term and need some form of appropriate accommodation; and
- iii) Those who had no intention of returning to their community of origin, and who required long-term accommodation, but due to their chronic itinerant lifestyle would also require special support to be maintained in such accommodation.

Based on proposals from over 30 Indigenous organizations, government departments and other agencies in Darwin, an Indigenous Itinerants Strategy was designed, being divided into the following components: 1. Patrolling Strategy, 2. Education and Regional Strategy, 3. Alcohol Strategy, and 4. Accommodation Strategy. The Project Management Committee implemented the Itinerants Strategy using a number of Working Parties, with bi-partisan support from within the N.T. Government. (Mommott and Fantin 2001.)

*(ii) Long Grassers Survey in Darwin, 2007-2008*

This second empirical study of Darwin's 'Long Grassers' was by Holmes & McRae-Williams (2008) who responded to the rapid growth of Aboriginal public place dwellers following the Australian Government's mid-2007 Northern Territory Emergency Response (or Intervention) implementation. The aim was to find out what these people required "to attain an acceptable level of health and life quality and to be law abiding citizens" (2008:v). Some 122 Long Grassers were originally interviewed in mid-2008, of whom 60 then responded to a Trauma Questionnaire. In addition, the views about the Long Grassers of 368 non-indigenous residents of Darwin were collected in early 2009 as a second study group.

The most common reason given by the Aboriginal interviewees for being in the 'long grass' was family problems, generally involving violence and exacerbated by lack of housing access in home communities, and additionally combined with the desire to access alcohol. Once in the 'long grass' the main stressor was again violence as well as a perceived "lack of rights and autonomy and concern for family left in communities". Another finding was a widespread set of stressors characterizing post-traumatic stress disorder, including being constantly on guard, expecting trouble, insecure and alone.

Non-Indigenous interviewees perceived 'Long Grassers' to be there by choice, deviant and an annoying social problem, but they were unable to distinguish between homeless Long Grassers and public place visitors. The researchers concluded that the success of service interventions on behalf of the Long Grassers would be impeded by the differences in perception between the two study groups. They make 25 recommendations which include legalised (safe) camping. (Holmes & McRae-Williams 2008:v-vii)

*(iii) Public Place Dwellers Survey in Inner Sydney, 2004*

The Inner-City Sydney Aboriginal Homeless Research Project was commissioned by the New South Wales Government's Aboriginal Housing Office as part of the Partnership Against Homelessness initiative, which was established to co-ordinate and improve a wide range of housing and support services for homeless people. Its detailed aims were to:

- 1) To investigate types of inner-city Aboriginal homelessness;
- 2) To map pathways for Aboriginal persons/families/groups in the inner-city into, within and out of homelessness;
- 3) To provide strategies to address immediate and on-going accommodation, support or other needs expressed by participants;
- 4) To identify effects of government policies on Aboriginal person experiencing homelessness in the inner-city;
- 5) To train Aboriginal researchers so as to build research capacity; and
- 6) To inform the Partnership Against Homelessness to support the implementation of targeted projects to address the needs of homeless men and women and to inform the homeless service system generally.

Field research conducted in 2004 revealed that approximately six distinct Aboriginal homeless groups or 'mobs' operated in the public and semi-public places of the inner city area (CBD) of Sydney. The six groups profiled in this survey during mid 2004 were:- (1) Redfern/Waterloo dwellers; (2) Newton dwellers; (3) Central Railway Station dwellers; (4) City/Town Hall dwellers; (5) Kings Cross/Darlinghurst dwellers; and (6) Broadway/Glebe dwellers. A total of 53 homeless persons were interviewed. Informal interviewing also occurred to aid the development of the homeless group profiles, addressing such issues as group identity, territory ('beat'), accessed services and perceived lifestyle issues.

The majority of these public place dwellers were males aged between 25 and 45 years. Most mobs comprised a network of individuals who shared a common rural region of origin in New South Wales, although some were from elsewhere in Australia. The members of each mob frequently moved between a set of regularly visited places, but despite their local mobility, each mob largely operated within a clearly designated territory of up to two square kilometres. These individual groups often functioned like a family unit, looking after one another's safety and personal possessions. Each individual identified strongly with his or her mob, conforming to its political norms of membership rights, leadership loyalty and resource sharing. Certain behavioural protocols had to be observed when entering or engaging with the different groups. Hard drug abuse (e.g. heroin) and mental health problems were relatively common.

Often these people were drawn to inner city Sydney by positive factors, because of a desire to better themselves through education or improved employment opportunities, or because of an ambition to live in a more exciting place. But various

people also left their home communities for negative reasons such as the lack of opportunities and services, or the levels of violence and social upheaval being experienced there. Once in Sydney they found their housing situation tenuous for a number of reasons. Sometimes a lack of pre-planning was involved or racism on the part of the rental market. And when congregating in Redfern where problems such as drug and alcohol abuse are severe, people could be drawn into these lifestyles. Once engaged, people could find it very difficult to find a way out of their predicament. Mental illness could drive people into homelessness as it severely destabilised families and lives. Domestic and family violence was also a factor that directly brought most often women and children into homelessness. Unsupported prison release was another factor.

All of the interviewees had been eager to find a solution to their homeless situation and none identified as voluntarily dwelling in public places. However, some of the respondents said that they might still choose to spend time socialising in the public place dwelling group with whom they affiliated, even if they were to obtain stable accommodation.

The research team discovered that Aboriginal homeless people did not use the mainstream accommodation services, such as those run by the major charitable organisations, to a great extent. They accessed day services such as health clinics and meals, and to an extent used overnight accommodation facilities, but they did not participate in their longer-term accommodation and rehabilitation services or programmes. The field researchers revealed a number of instances where the practices of government departments formed barriers to people exiting their homeless situations.

This study recommended that a coordination team be assembled to ensure that holistic approaches, relying heavily on partnerships between existing service providers and agencies, be enacted to assist the Aboriginal homeless population of inner city Sydney. This coordination team was to comprise an overarching Partnerships Committee that included all the relevant State and Commonwealth government agencies, and a Steering Committee comprised of the relevant Aboriginal organisations operating in the area, as well as other mainstream services. It was recommended the Steering Committee be led by the Aboriginal agencies to found it in the concerns of the local community. This coordination team was to supervise the creating of a number of culturally appropriate services, such as a range of accommodation options and a number of drop-in centres. Such facilities could

serve as the bases from which the other elements of a homelessness strategy could operate. These other elements include a trained team of outreach workers, and in-house case management and counselling staff. It had to be ensured that when people moved between steps in the overall process, for example when they move from crisis accommodation into a drug rehabilitation programme, they were not forced to return to the streets. Services for women and children escaping family violence also had to be improved, as should those targeting transgender individuals, sex workers, and gay and lesbian people. The effects of mental illness required more expert attention. (Memmott et al 2005; Memmott & Chambers 2008.)

*(iv) Broome Survey, 2010*

Field research by Birdsall-Jones et al. (2010) found a range of campsite types located not far from the Broome town centre occupied by at least 300 Aboriginal campers from the Western Kimberley region. There was considerable movement of Aboriginal people from outlying towns and communities in the Kimberley to and from Broome. This movement was affected by seasonality, occasional service related needs such as health, education and justice, and issues related to governance in the home community. The greatest reported amount of movement into Broome was during the wet season and the lowest is in the middle of the dry season in July (Birdsall-Jones et al. 2010). The visibility of Aboriginal mobility in Broome was relatively high, on account of the local practice of incoming Aboriginal visitors from the outlying towns and communities to establish temporary camps around Broome. This meant that many visitors and homeless Aboriginal people in Broome lived in public view, which created the perception that there were a great many of them. In fact, those living rough in and around Broome accounted for an unknown proportion of the actual number of homeless on account of the fact that there were many Aboriginal people in Broome who lived with their housed relations. It is common practice in Aboriginal society for household composition to be characterized by higher density and more variety in kin relationships than mainstream Australia. However, an unknown proportion of Broome Aboriginal households were providing shelter to otherwise homeless relations whose only other recourse would be to live rough.

Relevant services for homeless people in Broome included a community based NGO service provider, that offered financial, drug and alcohol counselling, family counselling, and men's counselling; Broome also had a dedicated Men's Outreach

Service, two dedicated youth services, and an Aboriginal Patrol that ran a pickup service for intoxicated Aboriginal people, transporting them home, to a nominated safe place or, provided that there was bed space, to a sobering-up shelter. (Birdsall-Jones et al. 2010.)

## **Defining Aboriginal homelessness**

Categorisation of homelessness is problematic when certain mainstream definitions are applied. The composition of Indigenous groups dwelling in public spaces are oversimplified, and their needs may be at best misunderstood and minimally serviced, or at worst overlooked entirely. While government policy statements during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century frequently recognised that many structural factors can cause and perpetuate homelessness, they largely adopted a relatively limited or narrow definition of homelessness, one based on a lack of housing and accommodation rather than factors which cause homelessness. The result of this was that responses to Indigenous homelessness focused on finding accommodation as a pivotal intervention, to which other interventions were subordinate. However for many Indigenous homeless people, finding accommodation was not necessarily their most crucial support need. Homelessness was not always simply created by a lack of housing, nor simply addressed by its provision. This was particularly true of many Aboriginal public place dwellers who had chosen to sleep out in the open, but who did not see themselves as homeless. Definitions and categories of Indigenous homelessness have thus influenced the types of response strategies that have been implemented by government and non-government agencies.

This realization has prompted us to develop a more refined set of definitions of Indigenous homeless people in Australia. Three useful, broad categories can be identified from the limited empirical and literature research available on the subject: (i) public place dwellers, (ii) housed people who are nevertheless at risk of homelessness, and (iii) spiritually homeless people. These are further divided into sub-categories, each of which will be described in turn. (After Memmott et al 2004.)

The descriptions of these sub-categories take into account the ways in which each sub-category arises out of an Aboriginal cultural basis or a non-Aboriginal cultural basis, which will be referred to for brevity's sake as cultural versus non-cultural causal factors. We are interested in considering the extent to which Indigenous homelessness derives from Aboriginal cultural traits such as Indigenous mobility and

high-density household structures, as opposed to factors that derive from post-colonial society including substance abuse and alcohol-fuelled violence (after Birdsall-Jones & Corunna et al. 2010). It is these particular Aboriginal cultural traits which contribute to a distinct set of characteristics of Indigenous public place dwelling and homelessness. By amalgamating these two causal perspectives we can arrive at a more sophisticated, nuanced understanding of the drivers of Indigenous homelessness including those that might be sanctioned and non-sanctioned in Aboriginal cultural norms, as well as some understanding of why some services are less successful than might be hoped and why others are more effective. This analysis should also explain why, although a service may be outstandingly successful in its own local context, it does not wholly constitute a model to be followed for homelessness service provision in a broader context.

The table below defines and explains these nuanced categories of homelessness, outlining their characteristics. We then go on to describe these categories in more detail and give examples of how particular characteristics may come into effect, and what the consequences may be using examples and case studies.

**Table 1: Summary of Indigenous Public Place Dwelling and Homelessness Categories.<sup>1</sup>**

<b>Category/Sub-Category</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>
<b>1. Public Place Dwellers (PPD)</b>	Living in a mix of public or semi-public places (as well as some private places, which are entered illegally to gain overnight shelter, e.g. parks, churches, verandahs, car parks, car sale yards (under cars), beaches, drains, riverbanks, vacant lots and disused buildings.
1.1 PPD Voluntary, short-term intermittent	Often staying in conventional accommodation (e.g. a relative's house), may have their own residence in a rural or remote settlement. When socialising in public urban places, they may or may not decide to camp out overnight, usually with others, despite the availability of accommodation. These people are not actually homeless but may be co-resident with other public place dwellers in the following categories.
1.2 PPD Voluntary, medium-term	Reside continually in public places (including overnight); acknowledge they have another place of residence in a home community but uncertain if or when they will return. These people are not actually homeless but may be co-resident with other public place dwellers in the following categories.
1.3 PPD Long-term (or chronic homeless)	Reside continually in public places (including overnight); unclear whether it is possible for them to readily reconcile with their home community/family due to a range of emotional and behavioural barriers; they have come to regard a beat of public places as their 'home'.
1.4 PPD Reluctant and by necessity	Residing continually in public places, and who (a) wish to return home but need to remain in urban area due to a service need (e.g. health, housing) or to support a hospitalised relative or similar; or (b) wish to return home but no funds for and/or capacity to organise travel (including substance abusers).
<b>2.0 At risk of homelessness</b>	At risk of losing one's house or the amenity of one's house.
2.1 At risk Insecurely housed people	Residing in adequate housing but under threat of loss of housing; lack of security of

<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of this table adapted from earlier versions – e.g. see AHURI Final Report No. 49 (Memmott et al 2003).



	occupancy; possibly due to circumstances of poverty.
2.2 At risk people in sub-standard housing	People whose housing is of a sub-standard architectural quality; possibly unsafe or unhealthy housing.
2.3 At risk – experiencing crowded housing	People whose house is crowded, resulting in considerable stress to occupants. Residents may be divided into (a) core householders; (b) visitors who have a home, elsewhere; (c) visitors who would otherwise be homeless.
2.4 At risk – dysfunctionally mobile persons	In a state of continual or intermittent residential mobility, including temporary residence (e.g. crisis accommodation), that is a result of personal and/or social problems (e.g. violence, alcohol and substance abuse; lack of safety or security in a social sense; personality or 'identity crisis'; lack of emotional support and security). These persons may be divided into: (a) Perpetrators of social problems where mobility arises from their social rejection; (b) Victims of a social problem whose mobility is aimed at escaping the source of their problem (often a perpetrator); (c) Individuals in complex state of both being a victim and a perpetrator.
<b>3. Spiritually homeless people</b>	A state arising from either: (a) separation from traditional land; (b) forced removal from one's communal places of attachment; (c) separation from family and kinship networks. This results in a crisis of personal identity wherein one's understanding or knowledge of how one relates to country, family and Aboriginal identity systems is confused, or known but unable to be fulfilled.

### 3. Indigenous Public Place Dwellers

Category 1 in the above classification is 'public place dwellers'. Public place dwellers live in a mix of public or semi-public places (including some private places that are entered illegally to gain shelter overnight), for example: parks, churches, verandahs, car parks, beaches, drains, riverbanks, vacant lots, dilapidated buildings, and even under vehicles in car sale yards on rainy nights. Public place dwellers can be further characterized as people who do not usually pay for their accommodation, are highly visible in a public setting (sheltering, drinking, rejoicing, arguing, partying and fighting in public), have low incomes of which a substantial part is often spent on alcohol or other substances, have generally few possessions (minimal clothes and bedding), and usually frequent a beat of places where they camp and socialize. Because many Aboriginal people have maintained a tradition of open-air camping, it is not necessarily stressful for them to adopt this style of living for a while, particularly in towns with mild climates. So the customary Aboriginal practice of camping without any roofed shelters in fine weather contributes to the ease with which such people can readily fall into a public-place dwelling lifestyle in regional centres. Although such a lifestyle may be acceptable to more tolerant citizens, such broad-mindedness may be quickly eroded by regular alcohol consumption, subsequent intoxication and other anti-social behaviour.

Four sub-categories of public place dwellers have been defined, although they are not mutually exclusive and one often provides a pathway into the next. The first includes those who are voluntary and short-term intermittent public place dwellers. They often comprise visitors who have come to town from rural or remote communities to enjoy themselves socializing and drinking, but who intend to return home at some time. These people do not necessarily have a strong sense of attachment to the town. The sub-category include individuals who stay in conventional accommodation (such as a relative's house) and have their own residence in a rural or remote settlement, but who socialise in public urban places, and may or may not decide to camp out overnight, usually with others, despite the availability of accommodation.

Within this public place dwelling category we thus recognise a subtlety in the voluntary and short length of time their rough sleeping experience. The sub-category of voluntary, short-term homelessness is described below in Table 2 with examples of cultural and non-cultural factors which could cause this kind of homelessness.

**Table 2: Category 1.1 of Public place dwelling; voluntary and short-term intermittent.**

Characteristics	Cultural Justification	Non-Cultural Justification
Often staying in conventional accommodation (e.g. a relative's house), may have their own residence in a rural or remote settlement. When socialising in public urban places, they may or may not decide to camp out overnight, usually with others, despite the availability of accommodation. These people are not actually homeless but may be co-resident with other public place dwellers in the following categories.	A) Boys leaving community shortly before law time to avoid circumcision; B) Visiting kin in town in order to maintain traditional kin based links; C) To visit kin in hospital or diabetes hostel; D) To visit kin in prison.	Visiting town: A) To shop after receipt of a large cheque, e.g. a tax cheque; B) For medical services, including outpatient treatment; C) To attend court.

Any of these visitors might find shelter with householder relations or in a hostel but in all these situations, if the visitors get into too much partying they may be kicked out and forced to live rough for a night or two until they seek out and obtain new accommodation. Additionally there can be other problems with staying with relations, which are unconnected with substance abuse that can cause them to leave. Outpatients visiting the larger regional centres or cities to receive outpatient treatment will generally be able to access some kind of hostel accommodation, and in the capital cities this is most usually the case. However, the degree to which people from remote communities experience loneliness away from their country and their people is extreme, and it is not easy for non-Aboriginal people to understand given the differences in sociality, norms of being with family and attachment to place. Not unusually, the result is that such visitors to the city leave a hostel and go out into the city to find people to be with. Because people can become so lonely, they tend to drink and party a lot in order to achieve a sense of unity with the people they find and if they have fallen into depression, it is common to self-medicate using alcohol and other substances to attempt to relieve their feelings. None of these responses to

isolation in an unfamiliar urban environment helps people to overcome their condition.

The second sub-category of public place dwellers is those who voluntarily adopt a homeless lifestyle over the medium-term, residing continually in public places (including overnight) without having alternative accommodation as shown in Table 3, again using examples from the cultural and non-cultural categories.

**Table 3: Category 1.2 of public place dwelling; voluntary and medium-term.**

Characteristics	Cultural Justification	Non-Cultural Justification
Reside continually in public places (including overnight); acknowledge they have another place of residence in a home community but uncertain if and when they will return. These people are not actually homeless but may be co-resident with other public place dwellers in the following categories.	<p>A) Sorry business</p> <p>i) Came with sorry business kin to keep them company;</p> <p>ii) Too sad to live in their home because of death of centrally significant kinsperson;</p> <p>iii) Sad, because well-loved or high status kinsperson has died, but they will return home after a time.</p> <p>B) Law Business – goes on for up to 3 – 4 months and may include a trip to town.</p> <p>C) The boys' "grand tour".</p>	Came to town partly with a legitimate cultural justification, but then they get into partying habit in the process. At this point, they may run out of money and become "stuck", that is, without the means to access transport home.

This category of people acknowledge that they have another place of residence in a home community, but may be uncertain if or when they will return. Some of them have been pursuing this lifestyle for some months or even years.

Many people in this category may start off their stay in town with housed kinfolk, but if they engage in excessive partying, the householder may tell all visitors to go and the people may decide to reside in a public place. This category often includes people visiting on account of 'sorry business' in response to the death of a relative or a

householder which has caused them to leave their house and to live elsewhere for a while (Table 3A). Some of these people may eventually return to their home community and find accommodation with a relative or they may go on the state government housing waiting list, eventually obtain housing, deserting the original home entirely, along with the homeless lifestyle, as in the example described below in Box 2.

The boys' 'grand tour' is an institutionalised mode of behaviour or lifestyle, that is commonly expected once an adolescent boy reaches the stage at which he "can't be told" by his parents how to behave, or in other words no longer wishes to be under the authority of his parents, aunties, uncles and Elders of the community. He leaves his home community for a period of some years and travels about the wider geographical region within which his home country lies (Habibis, Birdsall-Jones et al. 2011).

This is not ritual behaviour and should be distinguished from the Law Travellers described in Young and Doohan (1989). It would appear to be related to, but distinct from, the circular mobility patterns practiced by Australian Aboriginal kin groups generally, in the course of culturally based visiting patterns founded in the requirement to maintain and enact kin relationships (Birdsall 1990; Peterson 2000; Memmott et al 2006; Birdsall-Jones & Corunna et al. 2010; Habibas and Birdsall-Jones et al. 2011).

The cultural basis of this kind of mobility appears to be related to the time around which boys are initiated into manhood. According to Bates (1985) the manhood initiation rites of many groups included a more or less lengthy period of travel undertaken by boys ranging in age (depending on the group) from pubescent to early adolescent years. Among Nyungar people for example, this period might last for up to seven years. While the manhood ceremonies are no longer practiced in many groups, the tradition of travel over the wider region of affiliated groups remains widespread, but by no means universal. One exception is the Fitzroy Valley region where according to informants, the practice is unknown. In other areas, the grand tour may include the young man's first contact with Aboriginal Law Business, and sometimes, during the course of his travels he finds his first conjugal partner. (Habibis, Birdsall-Jones et al. 2011.)

Eventually, most of these young men return to their home community, but during the course of their travels they will often live a homeless lifestyle. Occasionally they find accommodation with their housed relations. They appear to be granted exceptional licence during the period of their travels, but there are limits. In particular, if they drink too much and disturb the household beyond what the householder is willing to tolerate, they will be asked to leave, and may end up residing in a public place for a time. As well, there is a rough age limit involved in this practice. It is firmly regarded as a young man's lifestyle and by the time a man is regarded as being fully mature in a cultural and social sense, he should have given up this lifestyle. Men in their thirties and older who continue in such a lifestyle tend to experience negative sanction within their family communities. This point will be taken up again under the next heading.

**Box 2: A Broome Case Study, public place dwelling precipitated by a death, 2008**

*A man from a Kimberley community had been brought up from a very young age by his older sister who was like a mother to him. When she died, he said that he simply could not go on living in the home he and his partner and children had shared with her. They decided to leave their jobs in their community and go to live in Broome. Some of the 'boys', that is the man's cousins and brothers, came along so that the man would not be too sad while he was getting over the death of his sister.*

*They went first to the woman's aunt's house. The boys wanted to get drunk and have parties. When this started, the aunt requested the man and his wife to make the boys leave. Because the boys had come with them especially to be with their cousin-brother, the man and his wife felt obliged to leave the house with them. They had nowhere else to go and so they arranged with the aunt that the children could remain with her, took the boys with them and they all made a camp together in the sand hills across the road from the big hotels along Roebuck Bay.*

*Who is actually homeless among this group? Superficially, the man and his family along with his cousin-brothers are all homeless, and would probably be counted as such in a survey of the Broome campers and rough sleepers. However, only the man and his family are homeless; his cousin-brothers are not in this case. The man has taken the decision to give up his house in his home community and to live permanently in Broome because it will make him 'too sad' to go back to where he*

*was brought up by his much loved older sister. He has applied to the Western Australian Department of Housing (WADoH) for public housing and until he is offered a home, he and his family are indeed homeless, but they are not all homeless in the same way. He and his partner are primary homeless, living in improvised shelter in the sand dunes and his children are secondary homeless living with their mother's aunt in her house. The cousin-brothers are not homeless at all because they have homes of their own back in their home community. They are visiting in Broome only to keep the man company and will eventually return to their home community.*

*(Birdsall-Jones et al. 2010.)*

The use of the term 'voluntary homelessness' in relation to this category may be taken to imply that some Indigenous people highly value living on the streets. Care needs to be exercised in assuming people are satisfied with their lifestyle or are making an informed choice. With little money and many complex problems (e.g. substance abuse) people have limited choices available to them. People are unlikely to have the necessary lifeskills to live a conventional lifestyle. (Qld, DATSIP 2003B:6 with reference to consultations conducted in Cairns.)

This is similar to the situation of boys and young men who are in the course of the 'grand tour'. They have chosen to leave home but the evidence from Broome, Carnarvon and other WA research sites strongly suggests that if they can live housed with their relations, this would be their first preference. Sometimes a man fails to end the grand tour and goes on with a drinking and/or substance abuse lifestyle for longer than is the usual norm. There are Aboriginal homeless men aged in their mid-30s and older who are rather sad about the way their lives have gone because they cannot find a home and they are simply too old to carry on with what is essentially a young man's lifestyle. Sometimes they characterise their homeless state as a matter of choice, but at other times will express their regrets that they can rarely find any of their housed relations who are willing to take them in (Birdsall-Jones & Corunna et al. 2010).

**Box 3 – Sydney Case Study, public place dwelling precipitated by marriage breakdown, 2004.**

Christine was a twenty-seven year old woman who came from Sydney, possibly the South Sydney area. She claimed that the failure of her marriage and her subsequent abandonment had left her destitute. She believed she had been a public place dweller, particularly in the suburbs of Redfern, South Sydney and Glebe, for five years or more. Christine had frequented a safe squat in Glebe for the year prior to the interview, being very careful about revealing her whereabouts to other people for fear of violence being directed at her. In the past, homeless men had moved in on her secret camping spots and threatened and assaulted her for her meagre possessions and sexual favours. The interviewer identified a number of untreated injuries on her arms at the time of the interview.

Aside from her physical ailments Christine also suffered from some form of mental illness as evidenced by her bouts of "talking to the ether and the elements". She had received a diagnosis in the past but did not take her prescribed medication. Some commercial or retail premises in the areas she frequented gave her food, however others were hostile to her presence. Christine claimed to make her money by 'bludging' or begging. She also said that she had approached many people for help with her situation but had always been turned away.

Apart from having the obvious difficulties in finding housing or a good place to camp, Christine also experienced a number of the other problems associated with street life. She was hassled or moved on by the police or security officers and had trouble getting food. The fact that she cited difficulty in obtaining clean needles and too much heavy drug taking as problems suggested that she abused heroin. Getting work and violence were further problems that she encountered when living rough. (Source: Memmott et al 2005.)

"Research has shown that after a period of time those who are homeless will come to accept their situation as the norm and often justify it as being one of choice" (Qld, DATSIP 2003B:7). The third sub-category of public place-dwellers thus contains those who have come to adopt a permanent public place dwelling lifestyle over the long-term. Having cut off their ties with their home community many years previously, they accept that their homeless lifestyle will persist and retain a sense of belonging to the town and to their camping group. This seems to be the situation of 'Christine'



whose situation is detailed in Box 3. It is unclear whether a reconciliation between such individuals and their home community and family is possible, for a range of reasons including that they have come to regard a beat of public places as their home. This category corresponds with the definition of long-term or 'chronic homelessness', whereby homelessness has ceased to be a crisis event and has become an accepted way of life (Coleman 2001). Their circumstances are often also compounded by a state of 'spiritual homelessness', which is the third category of homelessness described herein (see later). 'Noel', the homeless man in Sydney whose case is described in Box 4 is an example of a person who has come to accept the homeless state as his preferred way of life. These people include the sub-categories summarized in Table 4.

**Table 4: Category 1.3 of Public place dwelling; long-term chronic homelessness.**

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Cultural Justification</b>	<b>Non-Cultural Justification</b>
Reside continually in public places (including overnight); unclear whether it is possible for them to readily reconcile with their home community/family due to a range of emotional barriers; they have come to regard a beat of public places as their 'home'.	Because of: i) Loss of access to land; ii) Absence of knowledge of kin connections and/or place connections; iii) In exile due to threats on life; iv) In exile due to sorcery threats or fears.	i) Through loss of children taken by the "Welfare"; ii) Older substance abusers whose parental and sibling generations have largely passed on and who are not close enough kin (by blood or by practice) to younger generations of family.

Older substance abusers (see non-cultural B in Table 4 above) have often failed to perform kin-based roles involved in meeting obligations to 'give back' to the kin group. They become seen as those who take and give nothing back to the family. Sometimes, they are referred to as 'that old nuisance' or similar.

**Box 4 – Sydney Case Study, example of chronically homeless person, 2004.**

Noel, a 44 year old Bunjalung pensioner from Coffs Harbour, had been living on the streets since he was 15 years old. He had been adopted twice since the age of four years. When his step-parents passed away during his teenage years he started drinking methylated spirits and lived on the streets of Coffs Harbour. Noel then came to Sydney to attend the Bennelong Haven Rehabilitation Centre in Marrickville, a drug and alcohol rehabilitation facility that catered specifically for Aboriginal addicts. He also worked for the Centre as a bus driver, taking people to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings all over the city. When Bennelong Haven closed down he returned to the streets, where he has lived ever since. With the exception of a couple of years when he was married, Noel had been a public place dweller in Sydney for fifteen years. He was separated from his wife and had five teenage children.

Noel was well known and respected among the inner Sydney homeless people and was looked up to because of his knowledge of the streets and the longevity of his surviving rough in the inner city. He looked out for younger homeless people and made sure they had a safe place to sleep at night. He said that he used to counsel kids on the street. Noel had been unable to get out of his situation because of his chronic alcoholism, for which he felt there was no cure. He stated that he had spent 'half his life' in rehabilitation centres, having attended such facilities as Bennelong Haven and Campbell Park Manor, as well as centres in Lismore, Ashfield, and Kempsey.

Noel identified himself as belonging to the 'Newtown mob', normally sleeping in empty squats in either Newtown or the Broadway area. He described the situation as follows:

"I'm used to sleeping on the streets ... when there's a spare mattress, you jump on it before anyone else comes and jumps on it. If it is pissy, who cares, it's better than sleeping on the ground. When it was real cold, Night Beat brings blankets around. A friend of mine would go up to a shop window and smash it so he could spend a few months in jail until winter finishes."

When asked why he hung out in Newtown as opposed to Central Station or the City, he responded that it was busy, people were nicer there and that he felt safe: "Newtown is my town. You know that you won't get hit over the head with a bottle or bashed." The Newtown street dwellers lived like a very tight family unit. Noel said, "if they see me lying out on the street, asleep or whatever, they pick me up and take

me to the squat or to a mattress.” When asked if there was a real sense of cohesion and solidarity among the group, he responded:

“Yeah, not everyone, just a certain mob that drinks together. See, down at Central Station, we don’t mix with them mob. Oxford Street, we don’t mix with them mob. Kings Cross we don’t mix with them mob. Or Surry Hills mob. Cause when you get drunk and lay down to have a sleep, they go through your pockets, you wake up in the morning and oh shit thought I had enough for a bottle of Metho or a bottle of Moselle or whatever, and thought I had a few smokes and they’re gone.”

When asked if he experienced any problems or was concerned about being assaulted, he responded: “No, I carry a knife all the time, plus I’m with the boys, my mob.” Noel said, “Yeah, that’s why I sleep on the streets, I don’t want to sleep in the empties. I sleep out on the streets where there is light and the shops are open and there are people around. I sleep on the street its safer.”

The Newtown mob shared all their resources, as well as exhausting the social security/pension allowances of its members. Noel recounted that, “if you live in a squat and you have about eight or nine people around, by the time you shout a feed or a drink you’re broke and I don’t like to say no too much - I wasn’t brought up that way.” When asked if he has any problems getting food, he responded that he would walk into a shop and they would give him a free pie. He mentioned that he has been to ‘the Tank’ where the homeless could get a spare bed for the night and a meal. However, he did not use any of the hostels for a free meal, saying, “they’re shit, I wouldn’t go nowhere near Mathew Talbot.”

When asked where he preferred to live if he got a house, Noel stated that he wanted to live in Newtown. He did not want a lot of people to visit and mess up his new place. He mentioned that he did not want a house on the Redfern ‘Block’: “on the Block, they steal off each other, they rob each other. I don’t want that life.”

(Memmott et al. 2005:63-65.)

The fourth sub-category of public place-dwellers include those who are reluctantly homeless but living as they do out of necessity. Although residing continually in public places, they wish to return to their home community where they may well have a house, but are obligated to remain in an urban area for some particular reason. An example may be that they have a service need that can only be met in that location, or because they are obligated to support a hospitalized relative or friend. Additionally they may wish to return home but have no funds for travel and/or the capacity to

organize it. They may also be on a waiting list for public rental housing elsewhere in the city. Table 5 outlines examples of cultural and non-cultural drivers of such situations.

**Table 5: Category 1.4 of public place dwelling; reluctant and by necessity.**

Characteristics	Cultural Justification	Non-Cultural Justification
Residing continually in public places, and who (a) wish to return home but need to remain in urban area due to a service need (eg. health, housing) or to support a hospitalised relative or similar; or (b) wish to return home but no funds for and/or capacity to organise travel.	Must visit and stay near kin (a) Who are hospitalized; (b) Who are receiving regular medical treatment e.g. dialysis.	Started off short term but: (a) Car troubles too expensive to get fixed; (b) Haven't got the fare home; (c) Just released from prison or rehab with money for the fare home, but while waiting for the plane or bus, they find mates, spend the money partying and cannot get home.

Sometimes people get 'stuck', unwillingly residing in the public spaces of a town, that is, they run out of money, become burdened with local obligations and therefore lack both the capacity for, and opportunity to, return to their home community. They might try to live with relations initially but as time goes on, relatives may say 'we can't keep you anymore' so they go and live rough. There are also chronically ill people who prefer living rough as it is safer for them than the housing they are able to access through friends or family. Box 5 describes such a situation. Yet others may be living rough in a town while they visit a sick relative in hospital, but if such a relative remains in hospital, experiencing a prolonged and eventually fatal illness, the attendant family may gradually become chronically homeless and undergo poor health themselves.

**Box 5 – Broome Case Study, a street dweller who needed regular medical treatment, 2007.**

"I can't go to my partner's house. There's no power and the water is very hot. And he's drinking.... Drinking, drinking real heavy. I don't want to be with my partner, because that place is just disgusting. He told me to stay with him, but when I went

over there, he didn't hardly have a feed. When we come back from dialysis we got to have something to eat, just some good plain food."

[Re domestic violence]: "He used to fight me. Last week he wanted to fight me. He wanted to grab me here [indicating the dialysis connection on her chest]. I can't stay there, I can't be with him. I ran away."

(Birdsall-Jones, Field Notes, 2007.)

It is the practice at some prisons and drug/alcohol rehabilitation centres to release inmates first thing on the morning of their release date (see Table 5, non-cultural, category 'c'). If their home is actually within the town or city where they have been released, this is a logical practice. However, in facilities located in regional areas (e.g. such as Roebourne Prison, Broome Prison and the Broome Rehabilitation Centre), and the released inmate lives elsewhere, this practice is contra-indicated. What often happens is that with their release money and travel fare in their pocket, the newly released inmate goes into town and looks for amusement and friends to occupy the hours until the bus or plane leaves which goes to their home community. In these circumstances, they will likely spend all the money they have on alcohol, ending up with no money to pay for their transport home. Once intoxicated they will likely re-offend, thereby come to the attention of the police, and be jailed once again. (Birdsall-Jones & Corunna et al. 2010.) It should be noted that this situation is another demonstration that these categories are not hard and fast. The situation of the released inmate could initially be included under category 1.2, voluntary and medium term, seeing as some aspects of the situation correspond to both categories. However often spending all his or her money the person moves into category 1.4. back.

## 4. Risks in rough sleeping

A note with regard to the term 'rough sleeping' is worth making at this point. Primary homeless people, those who are engaged in rough sleeping could be in one of two situations either in the streets having no shelter whatsoever or having a temporary shelter of some sort. They may actually be sleeping out in the open with no roof and no bedding, or they could be camping more comfortably in a tent with a tarpaulin or in a disused house or shed, but nevertheless residing illegally around the town. The following table is derived from Birdsall-Jones, Corunna et al.'s (2010) study of Broome, but it can also be generalised to other urban settings. It examines the risks incurred by people in those two categories of 'street dwellers' and 'campers'.

**Table 6: Primary homelessness risks and affects identified by research participants in Broome.**

	Street dwellers	Campers
Risk to person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fighting, being mobbed (double-banked).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Likely to be sheltering with kinfolk, some protection</li> </ul>
Risk to property	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Easily robbed of clothing, belongings, particularly when asleep or intoxicated.</li> <li>Difficult to do laundry, clothes become ruined</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shelter liable to be dismantled, removed or burned by council authorities or police.</li> <li>Difficult to do laundry, clothes become ruined.</li> </ul>
Health risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No way to bathe, wash clothes regularly;</li> <li>Exposure to weather;</li> <li>Unlikely to see doctor, undiagnosed physical, mental illness.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Known camps visited by health workers, who inform campers of access to bathing, medical and laundry facilities.</li> <li>Moderate protection from weather.</li> </ul>
Drinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Humbugging often leading to assault;</li> <li>Health risk rises over time;</li> <li>If drunk or drug affected to the point of unconsciousness, the person may be stripped of all the clothes he/she is wearing. There is also the risk of assault of a more serious nature in this circumstance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Humbugging, but not as dangerous;</li> <li>Health risk rises over time.</li> </ul>
Conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May increase through short temper brought on through stress, drinking, drugs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May arise through short temper brought on by stress, drinking, drugs</li> </ul>

Effect on children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No children in this situation in participant group;</li> <li>• Reports of children being removed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Illness through exposure;</li> <li>• At risk of any violence occurring in the camp;</li> <li>• May be removed by Department of Child Protection;</li> <li>• Children may live separately from parents, with housed kinfolk.</li> </ul>
Effect on self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tired of feeling/smelling dirty;</li> <li>• Ongoing sickness;</li> <li>• Depression;</li> <li>• Suicidal thoughts.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nowhere to go when you get off work;</li> <li>• Shame, feel as if not in control;</li> <li>• Spending too much to replace spoiled clothing, food;</li> <li>• Depression.</li> </ul>

The experience of rough sleeping is altered according to whether or not the individual has access to some kind of shelter, such as a camp, or no shelter at all as when people sleep in shop fronts, under bushes and so forth. There is also the issue of alcohol and drug abuse, which in our experience is almost universal among Aboriginal rough sleepers whether in camps or on the street. The effects on the individual in terms of self-perception and mental health are somewhat mitigated by having camping facilities, as shown in Table 6, but clearly there are some things that are common to both street dwellers and campers. After varying periods of time in the condition of living without proper housing, people not unusually show signs of being depressed, and loss of hope for a change in their situation.

Interestingly, there is a small number of employed people among the campers in Perth. With housing so scarce, the income eligibility requirements for subsidised WADoH housing, and the expense of private rental, there are a few people holding onto employment among Perth campers. The threat to employment is obvious, given the difficulty of arriving at work in a suitable condition with regard to personal hygiene and dress standards.

## 5. Those Indigenous people at risk of homelessness – a second category

The second broad category of Indigenous homeless people encompass those at risk of homelessness. They reside in some sort of housing but are at risk of losing it or its amenity. This category is sometimes referred to as 'hidden homelessness'. It can also be broken down into four distinct sub-categories (but again, not mutually exclusive ones).

The first sub-category is that of insecurely housed people, or those residing in adequate housing but under threat of losing it, through a lack of secure tenure or due to circumstances of poverty. The cultural and non-cultural factors precipitating these circumstances are shown in Table 7.

**Table 7: Category 2.1 at risk of homelessness; insecurely housed people.**

Characteristics	Cultural Justification	Non-Cultural Justification
Residing in adequate housing but under threat of loss of such; lack of security of occupancy; possibly due to circumstances of poverty.	Obligated to give rent money to kin who are perceived as having a greater need e.g. for medical expenses.	Cannot pay utilities so no water, lights and gas.  A private rental and owners refuse to renew the lease.  Earns too much to qualify for public rental housing

While the justifications for this category are predominantly non-cultural (i.e. not derived from traditional norms), the way Aboriginal people respond to the situation is often along cultural lines. That is, they will use the same kin relationships involving reciprocal obligations as they would if they were engaging in culturally based visiting patterns. Therefore, they go to live with certain of their relatives in order to save up enough money, or arrange to pay in instalments until the bills are paid (Birdsall-Jones & Corunna 2008). Sometimes it happens that the person everyone depends on; most often one of the senior women, will take on so many needy relations, who either cannot or do not contribute to the running costs of the house, that the repairs and maintenance fall behind, and the house becomes uninhabitable. In this situation one response is for the entire household to walk away and not go back. This also happens to Aboriginal people who own their own homes. They can keep up with the



mortgage repayments, but have no money for repairs and maintenance. As the health hardware of the home breaks down, the house becomes unfit to reside in, yet nevertheless people may choose to remain there (McKenzie et al. 2009; Birdsall-Jones & Corunna 2011).

In the situation of public housing, any of these circumstances; crowding, loss of amenity, failure to pay the rent; may result in the loss of the lease and subsequent eviction of the leaseholder and her household. Their only obvious solution is to go to live with relatives. This situation will result in debt to the public housing authority making the former leaseholder ineligible to apply for public housing until the debt is paid.

Other issues can create problems of eligibility. The applicant may be in employment and earn too much, thus becoming ineligible for public housing. This is not a problem that can be readily solved by going into the private rental market because the vacancy rate is often low in many centres (National Shelter 2011). At this stage, the household becomes homeless and must go and live with relatives back and forth, in inadequate living space, resulting in stress. Crucially it is very difficult in these circumstances to organise household finances. This makes it extremely difficult to set up a regular pattern of savings aimed at building up the funds to secure a mortgage. The worst case scenario is that the household resorts to public place dwelling, the parents lose capacity for work-readiness, and lose their jobs.

**Box 6 – Broome Case Study, a couple at risk of losing their house despite wage income, 2008.**

He's working for the shire, main roads and that. It's decent money, but they don't supply housing to the ordinary workers, just the professional staff. They don't seem to care about the operators like him (Broome participant, July 2008).

The problem for this woman's partner is that the man's income makes them ineligible for public housing. In Broome and Carnarvon, the cost of private rental is very high and for most Aboriginal people it would be difficult to afford. However, it is within this family's means for them to meet the cost of private rental. Their problem is that they cannot gain approval for tenancy from real estate agents.

I got kids in Derby, with their mum. I can't have them to stay with me because I got no place for them. Me and [his partner] have been together 4 years but we don't live together. I sleep here [at his mother's] on the back verandah behind the fridge. She stays with the kids over at her dad's. We want to get priority listing for her and her baby. Can't. We been two years just on the wait turn list. HomesWest does a survey every six months to see if people still want a place. What are they, simple? What

do they think, we want to keep living like this? Course we still want a house. Every three months we have to put a letter in to stay on the list. We live split up because we're homeless. It's too cold for the kids outside at night time, they couldn't stay with me here. [His son], he's 4 years old. Maybe put him on the list when he's 12, maybe he'll get a house when he's 18 and we can go live with him (Broome, July 2008).

This young man's mother has tried to arrange her house as best she can to fit in those of her children, cousins, siblings and their children who are homeless. She has filled every room in her house with beds and bunk beds. Her carport and her back verandah have also been pressed into service. Her sons are employed, but the very expensive nature of the real estate market in Broome prevents them from obtaining housing for their own partners and children.

I came up here to work, they want Aboriginal people to work, I kept my part of the bargain. Why can't they keep theirs?

(Birdsall-Jones Interview, Broome, July 2008).

A second sub-category includes people whose housing is architecturally sub-standard, making it unsafe or unhealthy. However, what constitutes an acceptable quality of building needs to be carefully defined as there are issues of cross-cultural variation in such standards. Table 8 gives examples of how such housing can occur in both cultural and non-cultural ways.

**Table 8: Category 2.2 at risk, people in sub-standard housing.**

Characteristics	Cultural Justification	Non-Cultural Justification
People whose housing is of a sub-standard architectural quality; possibly unsafe or unhealthy housing.	Say 'yes' to accommodating too many needy relations, crowding results. Household services break down due to wear and tear.	(a) House poorly built, with hazardous features, e.g. electrics or plumbing inadequate. (b) Repairs and maintenance not performed or are inadequate.

Overuse of the facilities leads to failure of function, health issues ensue, in that it becomes difficult to impossible to wash one's self or clothes, and children go to school ill-prepared. Often, people cannot organise food and finances in these situations because the householders follow a partying lifestyle. In this situation, because it is not their own home, people cannot control party behaviour, neighbours complain, and the lease may be cancelled, resulting in all the residents of the home becoming homeless. This kind of crowding can lead to serious issues of repairs and

maintenance. Examples of the kinds of problems that may occur in these situations include:

- Holes in the floor allowing access to insects, rodents, snakes.
- Holes in wall may be made, sometimes for fairly innocuous reasons, such as children playing with a broom or similar with which they accidentally hit the wall, or through more serious affairs of violence during which someone punches a hole in the wall. This results in exposing electrical wiring, which sometimes are so large that small children can climb between the external cladding of the house and the internal plaster board, exposing themselves to the danger of injury or death due to contact with the exposed wiring, exposed nails etc.
- The septic tank may need emptying, and so it smells, making everyday life in the home increasingly unpleasant and, more importantly, it constitutes a health hazard.

There are situations in which a house was built so long ago that the electrical capacity available to the house is insufficient and the wiring no longer conforms to current safety standards. In these situations, people might attempt to boost power to a house by running one or more extension cords from the neighbours. In the event of rain, or the makeshift power arrangements being overloaded, there is a likelihood of electrocution to residents.

The third sub-category of 'at risk of homelessness' constitutes those people experiencing crowded housing, however again it needs to be noted that the construct of crowding also varies culturally. Crowding, as we have discussed (Memmott et al 2011), is a state of stress that may result from a level of proximity between dwelling occupants whom, under normal Aboriginal cultural conditions should maintain a certain distance from one another. This stress can be exacerbated if the housing infrastructure is malfunctioning and/or inadequate for this size of the household; then there is very little that the household membership can do to alleviate the problem.

In all of these circumstances crowding ought not to be ascertained by density measures alone on the grounds that cultural factors such as the desire for company or sleeping intimacy may increase density but not cause stress (Musharbash 2008). Culturally determined avoidance relationships may also mean that relatively low density houses are still 'crowded' because proper avoidance protocols cannot be maintained within the house's design (Fantin 2003). Table 9 describes these cultural and non-cultural factors influencing crowding.

**Table 9: Category 2.3 of at risk of homelessness – experiencing crowded housing.**

Characteristics	Cultural Justification	Non-Cultural Justification
People whose house is crowded, resulting in considerable stress to occupants. Residents may be divided into: (a) core householders; (b) visitors who have a home, elsewhere; (c) visitors who would otherwise be homeless.	Allow too many needy relatives to live there and/or combinations of people who nevertheless produce unsanctioned relations.  House design conflicts with Aboriginal avoidance protocols.	Housing shortage; - needy relations who cannot pay bills; - unwelcome visitors who cannot be refused and who will not leave.

Residents in large households may be divided into: (a) core householders; (b) visitors who have a home elsewhere; and (c) visitors who would otherwise be homeless.

Core householders can be compelled to provide accommodation and hospitality for kin, and others, to whom a reciprocal relationship is ascribed. This can include those who have a need to be in that place for a relatively short period of time for a variety of reasons, but have their own accommodation elsewhere, and those who have no other place to go.

The results of this situation can include violence, excessive partying, loud behaviour, the complaints of neighbours, and property damage, resulting in the lease being revoked, and the household rendered homeless.

The visitors who already have a home elsewhere may be of the sort that are visiting for cultural reasons, but if this is so, they will generally leave immediately when it becomes clear to them that their presence is overburdening the household. Those who persist in staying on in the face of a deteriorating situation of crowding should be distinguished from the cultural visitors. This leads us to the next sub-category, dysfunctionally mobile persons.

The fourth sub-category of at-risk homelessness involves dysfunctionally mobile persons; those in a state of continual or intermittent residential mobility including temporary residence (e.g. crisis accommodation) that is a result of personal and/or social problems (e.g. violence, alcohol and substance abuse, lack of safety or security in a social sense, personality or identity crisis, lack of emotional support and security). High rates of circular mobility is a dominant trait and an integral part of Aboriginal culture throughout Aboriginal Australia as has been shown by Memmott et

al. (2002, 2003, 2006), Foster et al (2005), Birdsall-Jones et al. (2008, 2010) and others (Peterson 2000; Taylor & Bell 1999).

However mobility can also become a form of homelessness (Memmott, Long, & Thomson 2006 [Indigenous Mobility in Rural and Remote Australia]; Birdsall-Jones and Corunna 2008; Birdsall-Jones & Corunna et al. 2010). Moving from house to house can be as a result of inadequate security of tenure; social problems and violence in the home, inadequate or unsuitable housing in the primary residence, and other problems which contribute to both homelessness, for those fleeing particular social or environmental circumstances, and crowding for those who receive them into their homes. Persons in this category may be divided into: (a) perpetrators of social problems where mobility arises from their social rejection; (b) victims of a social problem whose mobility is aimed at escaping the source of their problem (often a perpetrator); and (c) individuals in a complex state of being both a victim and a perpetrator. An example in this last category would be a spouse who has experienced a long and violent relationship with acts of aggression being committed by both parties, but which nevertheless repeatedly re-forms when both partners are sober and in a remorseful mood.

**Table 10: Category 2.4 of at risk of homelessness – dysfunctionally mobile persons.**

Characteristics	Cultural Justification	Non-Cultural Justification
In a state of continual or intermittent residential mobility, including temporary residence (e.g. crisis accommodation), that is a result of personal and/or social problems (e.g. violence, alcohol and substance abuse, lack of safety or security in a social sense, personality or 'identity crisis', lack of emotional support and security). These persons may be divided into: (a) Perpetrators of social problems where mobility arises from their social rejection (b) Victims of a social problem whose mobility is aimed at escaping the source of their problem (often a perpetrator) (c) Individuals in complex state of both being a victim and a perpetrator	- Escaping from a spouse or relative who has enacted unacceptable violence according to Aboriginal norms.	- Alcohol and drug abusers who refuse to leave when asked/told. - Escaping domestic/ family violence, feuding or neighbourhood violence. - Boys on grand tour who party too much.

The boys' 'grand tour' has already been discussed, but we might add that there is a fine line the young men walk in the course of their 'grand tour'. It is a culturally accepted part of achieving full adulthood among many Western Australian and Central Australian Aboriginal groups, and they are granted a fairly wide license in the behaviour in which they may acceptably engage. But they can cross that line if they cause too much strain over too long a period of time, at which point their behaviour becomes culturally unacceptable. They may be asked to leave and go somewhere else altogether, or their access to the house may be subjected to strict limitations such as they may be allowed to shelter there for sleep and for no other purpose. If they can be managed in such a way, their tenure as visitors may extend for a longer period of time. But there are those young men, and also a few women, who "have no respect" and refuse either to be subjected to restricted access or will not leave even if they are told outright. There are practically no options left to householders who cannot get rid of such unwanted guests and they may take the ultimate solution of

walking away from their own house, take their own household dependents with them and go to live with other relations or in public places. (Birdsall-Jones & Corunna 2008).

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

## 6. Spiritual homelessness

A third broad category of Indigenous homelessness has been identified as spiritual homelessness, a state arising from separation from traditional land, and from family and kinship networks (noted earlier as a result of historical governmental policies), and involving a crisis of personal identity wherein a person's understanding or knowledge of how they relate to country, family and Aboriginal identity systems is confused or lacking. Such feelings add to the already depressed emotional state in which Aboriginal people, either public place dwellers or those at risk of homelessness, often find themselves. The separation from family and community connections that these individuals experience can have serious effects on their mental health, sometimes resulting in self-injury or suicide. The rates of suicide in Australia are disproportionately high among the Indigenous population.

The importance of feeling a connection to related people also explains why Indigenous Australians from a common cultural group or region congregate together in public places. The two basic points of introduction for a newly arrived Indigenous person are where they come from and to which 'mob' they belong. People thus tend to join public place dwelling groups to be near people who are known to them and to feel secure. However if they are interstate and a very long way from their home community and traditional country or estate, there may be no such people with whom they can identify, resulting in marginalization, depression and a state of spiritual homelessness, as outlined in Table 11.

**Table 11: Category 3 of homelessness – spiritually homeless people.**

Characteristics	Cultural Justification	Non-Cultural Justification
<p>A state arising from either:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) separation from traditional land;</li> <li>(b) forced removal from one's communal places of attachment;</li> <li>(c) separation from family and kinship networks.</li> </ul> <p>This results in a crisis of personal identity wherein one's understanding or knowledge of how one relates to country, family and Aboriginal identity</p>	<p>Response takes its theme from the causal nature of the condition. Where it concerns land, individuals may seek ways to remain as close as possible to the land to which they no longer have access, or in locations which symbolise the land to which they have lost access.</p> <p>Where the state arises from lack of knowledge of family and kinship networks, the individual may take up homelessness</p>	<p>Rough sleeping in urban areas, resulting in a general state of depression about physical and health circumstances.</p>



systems is confused, or known but unable to be fulfilled.	with groups that have a 'family like' appeal to them. This will usually involve abuse of one or more kinds of substances.	
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Those who are unable to answer the frequently asked questions of where their home country is and what kin group they are part of, can suffer as a result of being reminded of a lack of connection to kin and country. These two things, one's people and one's place are the most significant general features of self and other identification in the Aboriginal world. To be constantly asked this, from childhood to adulthood and never have an answer wears away on a person's sense of whom they are within the Aboriginal world. Similarly, the loss of access to one's land can lead to profound depression, causing the person to lose interest in a conventionally housed lifestyle and to take up homelessness instead.

Spiritual homelessness caused by the loss of children taken by a state Department of Child Protection, predisposes parents to an inability to accept or live equitably in conventional housing. Sometimes this behaviour is best understood as a form of mourning behaviour. They are bereft in much the same way and on account of the history of the 'stolen generations' of mission times when parents and children never saw each other again; they do indeed tend to mourn their children as though they were dead, and react in the customary way of abandoning the house.

**Box 7 – Perth Case Study, funeral of a spiritually homeless person, 2011**

The situation of the Swan Valley Noongar Community received wide and extensive coverage in both the WA state and the national press on account of the arrest of the Aboriginal community leader on charges related to the abuse of minors. What has received very little coverage is the fallout from the closure of the community in June 2003 which followed on the arrest of the community leader (Robert Bropho). It was the task of the WA Department of Housing (DoH) to supply the former residents with alternative housing. Although a majority of the former community residents were and continue to be housed in WA DoH accommodation, a significant minority of the former community members left the housing they were given and have lived on the street more or less constantly ever since. Interviews with the housed portion of the family indicate that their relations took to the street as a direct result of losing their home community. Descriptions of their state correspond to the condition of spiritual homelessness. The following press extract pertains to the funeral of one of these

spiritually homeless persons.

**Press Headline: “A mother: same as any other”**

Aboriginal Elder Robert Bropho was last week led into Guildford church in handcuffs to say his last goodbyes to Karri, his daughter, who died at just 42 – homeless.

Karri, first named Kerry Anne, was not alone when she died. The pews of St Mathews Church, in Guildford, were packed with mourners who travelled from as far as Cairns to honour her.

Archbishop of Perth Barry Hickey conducted the service.

He told the congregation he first met Karri after the closure of the Swan Valley Nyungah Community in Caversham, in 2003, when so many of its residents became displaced.

Archbishop Hickey said Karri was one of the many who were forced to find shelter on the streets or wherever they could.

“I was living in a house with two verandas and a carport and so many of the displaced found shelter there,” Archbishop Hickey said.

“I would give them blankets and coffee, and sometimes food...and I soon came to love all the people who were homeless.

“I think God made this happen to me because I had lived a privileged life and had to confront those who had nothing...I treated them as I would treat Jesus.”

Archbishop Hickey said that Karri was supported to the end, and when she was in hospital and had many visitors. He said that when she died, 35 people were in the room with her.

Karri’s father Robert Bropho, a convicted serial child sex offender, then addressed the congregation.

Standing with hands handcuffed in front of him and another set attached to a Corrective Services officer he looked tired, but resolute.

“Karri was a mother – the same as any other mother,” he said.

He then spoke about multiculturalism, but told the gathered not to forget that Aboriginal people were the first on this land and asked people to respect one another.

He was not the only one at the church in handcuffs. Three women also attended the service in manacles. They too were shackled to guards.

A friend of Karri’s – Les – who lived on the streets until three months ago, spoke and thanked Karri for giving him a blanket and coffee when he needed it.

(Advocate: In My Community, 6 April 2011)

In cases of spiritual homelessness we argue that a psychiatric condition results, which has, as yet not been thoroughly investigated by the psychological or psychiatric community. In some individuals the condition gives a distinct impression of depression ranging from moderate to suicidal, but which is also complicated in some sufferers by other culturally-specific conditions which require analysis by suitably qualified practitioners.

## 7. Practice responses to Indigenous public place dwelling and homelessness

Although there is an increasing comprehension of the need to ally housing responses with other policy areas such as health, welfare and the justice system, previously unrelated policy areas such as Indigenous governance, education, regional and urban planning and native title can also be significant in addressing the full spectrum of needs presented by homeless Indigenous Australians. The term response types refers to a broad range of initiatives including philosophies, policies, programmes, services, strategies, methodologies, legislations and activities that are aimed at addressing the needs of Indigenous people who are homeless and/or residing in public places. Four practice response categories that have emerged as having culturally distinct ramifications in relation to Indigenous people will be briefly described. (These will be expanded in later research which we plan to undertake as part of our current project for FaHCSIA.)

### *(1) Legislative Approaches*

The law-and-order approach to homelessness employs reactive policing, supported by various forms of legislation, in order to forcefully remove Indigenous people from public places. Experience in a number of urban centres demonstrates that such law-and-order approaches may only be partly successful and even totally unsuccessful in eliminating Indigenous public place dwelling. They are likely to result in temporary or local displacement, whilst overall cycles of incarceration, alcohol abuse and public place dwelling continue, and such approaches also risk breaching anti-discrimination legislation. Forced physical removal to distant remote settlements is also equally repugnant and a violation of civil liberties. As a general principle, any movement of Indigenous people from the public spaces they occupy due to conflicting public needs should be carried out through a process of negotiation no matter how protracted, and supported by a planned set of alternate accommodation and servicing options acceptable to all parties. (Memmott 2006.)

Implementation of such a law-and-order approach has often been the result of a law-and-order crisis as perceived by politicians and the local media. However a key

finding of several studies is that the blame for such a crisis has at times been erroneously directed at Aboriginal public place dwellers. When people, whose codes of behaviour are little understood by the general public, are leading a culturally different lifestyle, and simultaneously enacting some visible anti-social behaviour, they are only too readily made the scapegoats for all local crime. Many Anglo Australians believe people camping in public places is unacceptable behaviour and seem to have forgotten, or do not know of, the Great Depression of the 1930s when the drastic economic downturn of the period forced many white Australian people to camp in public places while searching for work in whatever location they could find it. (Eastgate 2001, Coleman 2001:166, Memmott 2006.)

A key finding of recent research is that social problems impact differently on a range of cultural and ethnic sectors and require analyses and solutions that incorporate the social values of all groups. Cross-culturally, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups are likely to see one another's positions quite differently and a definition of homelessness, if it is to be complete, must incorporate both perspectives. Similarly, if there is to be a solution to the problem, it must be articulated from opposite sides incorporating values that are at least tolerable to both. Failure to take such a cross-cultural position in approaching social problems is likely to fuel existing racial tensions.

## *(2) Patrols and Outreach Services*

In the mid-1980s a Central Australian Indigenous community in Tennant Creek invented the Night Patrol, where a group of responsible volunteer community members drove around their city intervening in alcohol-fuelled situations and caring for at-risk people. The concept quickly spread across the continent and today there are a range of Indigenous Night Patrols, Wardens and Outreach Workers operating, although the precise nature of their services varies. The functions of Aboriginal Night Patrols have included intervention in situations of substance abuse (especially alcohol) and violence, mediation and dispute resolution between people in conflict, and the removal of disruptive or potentially violent persons from public or private social environments. (Blagg 2003:7)

Outreach workers tend to take a stronger 'case file' approach, attempting to establish links to relevant service agencies in response to the needs of their clients. Night Patrols take intoxicated, and possibly aggressive or otherwise at-risk persons, and

place them in managed accommodation until they can become sober, and have a sleep and meal. The service aims to keep at-risk, intoxicated individuals out of the watch-house (where they may be susceptible to suicide). The managed accommodation to which they are taken may be, a Sobering-Up Shelter, a Refuge or other such facility. In the case of such facilities being full (which is regularly the situation), the person may be taken to a relative's house. Sometimes this works well, but in other circumstances, this relative has taken in so many inebriated kinfolk night after night that they refuse to take any of them in anymore (Birdsall-Jones & Turner 2009).

A variety of complementary strategies can be incorporated into this service, including follow-up 'shaming' sessions between offenders and aggrieved members of the community, the use of a detox centre within a residential alcohol treatment centre, and a day centre providing diversionary recreational or entertainment facilities.

### *(3) Addressing anti-social behaviour*

Local Indigenous traditional owners may take exception to the anti-social behaviour of certain public place dwellers (intoxication, begging, violence, etc); seeing it as 'shaming' their own people as well as their law and custom, and they may be adamant about asserting their authority in an effort to prevent it. In the few places where this has been tried, an effective approach has emerged involving the establishment of models of appropriate versus anti-social behaviour (in terms of Aboriginal value systems) to be adhered to by public place dwellers, as well as territorial rules concerning where particular individuals or groups should camp. The public place dwelling people involved in these instances have acknowledged their respect for Aboriginal Law and Native Title. This approach also involves the empowerment of an Indigenous authority structure reflecting the need to create new, as well as to reaffirm old, standards of behaviour; to acculturate public place dwellers with new behavioural norms; and to somehow maintain these standards in an active process of social reform. One of the initial challenges has been finding the membership to form such an authority group, who would be respected and exert leadership, and thereby legitimised and empowered by Aboriginal people to act in situations where anti-social behaviour was causing conflict.

A useful example to illustrate these points is that of the Four Corners Council of Elders, which was established in the early 1990s to address the offensive behaviour

of public place dwellers in Alice Springs in Central Arrernte country. Aboriginal social authority in pre-contact Central Australia had been based in totemic geography with power being vested in a network of elders (Strehlow 1965). So the Four Corners Council was based on the sacred site of Emily Gap or Ntherrke, to which five groups of travelling Caterpillar Beings travelled from different directions in the Dreamtime, thus linking a large number of surrounding language groups in Central Australia. The name Four Corners symbolised pan-tribal unity founded in the geography of Aboriginal Law. This construct gave the Council a capacity to communicate with Elders from other tribes or language groups in the outer parts of the region, and to ask for their support and assistance, particularly in dealing with their own people when they came to Alice Springs. This capacity was increased by reciprocal behavioural responsibilities or obligations operating between the Central Arrernte and other surrounding tribes, which were based on ceremonial ties created through the travels of Dreamtime ancestors. The adherence to Aboriginal Law and the recovery of influence over young men through the revitalisation of ceremony and initiation culture was one of a number of methods used by the Council to strengthen leadership and social cohesion. (Memmott 1993.)

Though this programme was well received at the time, there is a lack of evidence about, or evaluation of, programmes such as this, leading to a deficit of information about what constitutes a successful programmes or what aspects may require improvement. Research consisting of such evaluations should be encouraged to build a body of knowledge that will lead to broader improvements and an accumulation of best practice principles.

Through the valuing of appropriate social behaviour as a distinct aspect of culture, the process of social reform can be characterized primarily as one of cultural maintenance and development and can thereby draw upon traditional Aboriginal concepts for application to contemporary problems.

#### *(4) Regional strategies*

Regional strategies must be founded in an understanding of the cultural blocs made up of multiple language or tribal groups relevant to the communities in question, and must examine Indigenous migration and residential mobility patterns in order to anticipate why people leave their home communities, and what prevents them from returning. Such strategies would necessitate a common set of values being in place

for the regional centre's service providers, as well as the communities of the outer parts of the region, so as to facilitate shared decision-making in addressing clients' needs. This in turn may be accompanied by a regional education programme concerning urban lifestyles and values, and what might be expected of Indigenous people when visiting cities, both in terms of mainstream and Aboriginal laws, and behavioural values. The migration of Indigenous people to urban centres generates serious political questions concerning the quality of life in remote and rural Aboriginal communities, as well as the distribution and licensing of alcohol outlets throughout such a region. This response category has seldom been implemented in Australia.

In addition to the four responses or strategies outlined above, other more conventional approaches to Indigenous homelessness, which are embedded in mainstream Australian practice and reported in the literature, can prove useful. They include: (a) alcohol and drug strategies including diversionary responses for intoxicated individuals, (b) accommodation strategies and options, (c) dedicated service centres and gathering places, (d) the design of public places to enhance public place dwelling, (e) public education strategies, (f) telephone information and help services, (g) skills and training for outreach workers, (h) intensive case management, (i) charismatic mentors, (j) philosophies of client interaction that involve empowerment of clients, and (k) partnerships between government and non-government agencies. (Memmott et al. 2003.)

Collectively these responses address a wide range of needs reflecting the complex circumstances of Indigenous public place dwellers and homeless people. Which combination of responses is relevant to a particular place or group will vary across the continent depending on the local environmental and socio-economic context, and the particular history of regional culture contact between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Holistic approaches to Indigenous homelessness combine a significant number of these response types and address both immediate problems, and other underlying issues and causal factors, which may not necessarily be identified by the clients themselves. This involves reactive and proactive components that are both short- and long-term in their duration.



## 8. Accounting for culture in Aboriginal homelessness

Our approach to the analysis of homelessness in general and public place dwelling (including rough sleeping) in particular is guided by a particular theoretical perspective which consists of an amalgam of the approaches outlined above and presented in more detail elsewhere (Memmott et al. 2003, 2004, 2006 and Birdsall-Jones et al. 2008, 2010). We contend that the problems of homelessness are not explicable without also considering patterns of Indigenous culture and are not resolvable without considering the ways in which Aboriginal culture shapes homelessness. As well, we need to consider the ways in which the wider Australian society drives homelessness among Aboriginal people. This holistic view is expressed in the following diagram.

**Table 12: Urban Aboriginal mobility processes and their consequences, including those that result in forms of homelessness, and highlighting cross-cultural value alignment or conflict.**

Behavioural justifications, values and consequences	Aboriginal Cultural Processes involved	Non-Aboriginal Cultural Processes involved	
Justification for behaviour by potentially 'homeless' person	<p>An Aboriginal cultural justification for (a) Public Place Dwelling, or (b) High-density house dwelling, e.g. funeral, caring for needy relations, ongoing visiting among kinfolk.</p> <p>Results in:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p>	<p>A non-Aboriginal cultural justification for (a) Public Place Dwelling, or (b) High-density house dwelling, e.g. for drinking parties or to escape violence.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">will result in either:-</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <span>(1)</span> <span>or</span> <span>(2)</span> </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> </div>	
Value basis of behaviours	Legitimated urban presence in the Aboriginal value system, but not necessarily in the eyes of government authorities.	Non -legitimated urban presence in the Aboriginal value system, as well as in the eyes of government departments.	
Consequence of behaviours	If visitors are sanctioned by Aboriginal hosts (either householders or traditional owners), they do not require removal. But government authorities may insist on intervention in which case destabilisation of Aboriginal social order. Alternatively government authority may support Aboriginal hosts, e.g. through policy relaxation.	Intervention in relation to visitors is essential under both Aboriginal values and government authorities' values.	

At a more broad scale, preventative programmes aiming to support families to raise their children with healthy skills and social abilities, such as the Pathways to

Prevention programme (Freiberg et al 2006) should be studied for long term policy implications. As Mallett et al (2005) and others note, homeless people, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, typically share backgrounds of family conflict, drug use and other forms of dysfunction. We would argue that preventative strategies to increase protective factors in the Indigenous community must be part of the raft of policy moves to address these issues.

From the various studies reviewed in this research report, we can see that there is a close relationship between Aboriginal mobility patterns and Aboriginal homelessness. If we consider the cultural drivers of mobility alone, there are both Aboriginal cultural and non-Aboriginal cultural drivers of this phenomenon. Cultural drivers include visiting family for funerals, at ceremony times, and in order to maintain the currency of kin links within the family. All of these are legitimised by Aboriginal culture. Non-cultural drivers of mobility include the pursuit of the drinking lifestyle, and in the case of the victims affected by this lifestyle, women and their children fleeing from violence which is the result of alcohol and substance abuse, and sometimes children on their own fleeing from the violence. These drivers of Aboriginal mobility are not legitimised within Aboriginal culture.

However, we need to accept the nuanced nature of the Aboriginal reckoning of these processes of legitimisation versus non-legitimation and we can do this by “plugging” homelessness into our model. While there are no legitimised causes of homelessness within Aboriginal culture, the response of women and children in need of housing and protection from the effects of alcohol and substance induced violence is indeed culturally legitimised. These victims utilise the kin links that have built up over long periods of time in the course of visiting, specifically to maintain kin links. In times of need, they call upon these kinfolk who, almost always without question, provide aid and shelter.

Holistic approaches to homelessness empower Aboriginal people with effective self-help strategies and problem-solving skills, thereby enhancing Aboriginal social capital and strengthening leadership.

## **Community education and development priorities**

A key component of any approach or strategy must be to promote a safer and more controlled style of drinking, if not complete abstinence, as alcohol consumption is a consistent factor in the anti-social behaviour of public place-dwelling Indigenous

people. Such projects should also involve the development of rules and norms concerning preferred behaviour and styles of occupying residences, sustained education between town and bush communities about such appropriate behaviours and lifestyles, development of leadership and support within communities, and the strengthening of the bonds between parts of the extended family to serve as a mechanism to enforce such norms. Wherever possible governments should seek to support Aboriginal community efforts to control or eliminate alcohol consumption within their communities.

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