

Indigenous

The building block

Indigenous housing and homelessness issues are occupying a prime position on the current national policy agenda.

At its March 2008 meeting, the Council of Australian Governments reaffirmed its commitment to close the gap on Indigenous disadvantage via a range of specific actions across health, education, water supply and affordable housing.

This follows closely on the heels of the announcement made by Prime Minister Rudd as part of the Apology to the Stolen Generation: a new five-year housing strategy for remote Indigenous communities under the bipartisan Joint Policy Commission announced in February.

The current Commonwealth State Housing Agreement (CSHA) is also due to expire in June of this year. Governments have recognised that declining housing affordability is a pressing issue for Australians and improving it is critical to addressing financial stress and disadvantage, including for Indigenous Australians. The new National Affordable Housing Agreement will seek to address these problems. The new agreement is likely to include the major program supporting people experiencing homelessness in Australia, the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP).

A Homelessness discussion (Green) paper was tabled in Parliament and issued for formal consultation in May. This will be followed by the policy direction (White) paper that

will provide a plan of action by September 2008. Indigenous homelessness will be addressed in both these papers.

Underpinning the latest flurry of policy activity is the recognition among policy makers and the community alike that housing plays a major role in the health and wellbeing of all Australians—poor housing can put people's health and safety at risk. Beyond the physical bricks and mortar, adequate housing is essential for decent outcomes in health, education, employment, safety, autonomy and social cohesion.

Policy makers also recognise the need for a firm foundation of evidence. In her speech on Indigenous housing to the National Press Club in February, Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin highlighted that: 'Inevitably there will be difficult decisions but all these decisions will be driven by one single criterion—evidence...All our policy decision making will be based on a thorough, forensic analysis of all the facts and all the evidence. Once implemented, all programs will be rigorously and regularly evaluated.'

With so much policy activity, and the desire to improve the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians in particular, reliable and relevant data and analysis are crucial.

This is where the information, experience and expertise offered by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare comes in.



Housing

Blocks for change

According to the Head of the AIHW's Housing Assistance Unit, Ms Tracie Ennis, the Institute has a great deal of data useful to those working on Indigenous housing and homelessness.

'We have a lot of information to share, to inform the current policy agenda', she said.

In the past six months alone, the Institute has released a range of new reports (see recent releases at right) presenting the latest data and analyses on housing, health and welfare issues, for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

They confirm that compared to the non-Indigenous population, a higher proportion of Indigenous Australians live in substandard and overcrowded housing and are homeless. Importantly, these analyses reveal to the current policy debate that Indigenous people (representing 2.5% of the Australian population) are:

- substantially over-represented among the homeless
 - the rate of homelessness for Indigenous Australians (8.5%) is 3.5 times higher than the rate for non-Indigenous Australians
 - 17% of Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) clients are Indigenous Australians
 - 72% of Indigenous SAAP clients are women (compared to 57% of non-Indigenous clients) and the most common reason for seeking support is domestic violence and family breakdown

Recent releases

- *The health and welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples 2008*, April 2008, Australian Bureau of Statistics and Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
- *Housing assistance in Australia 2008*, February 2008, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
- *State owned and managed Indigenous housing 2006–07*, January 2008, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
- *Australia's welfare 2007*, November 2007, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
- *Indigenous housing indicators 2005–06*, October 2007, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

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- 27% of all accompanying children in SAAP are Indigenous. One in every 11 Indigenous children under 5 years of age attended a SAAP agency in 2005–2006, compared to 1 in every 88 non-Indigenous children.
- under-represented as homeowners
 - 34% of Indigenous households were homeowners or purchasers in 2006, up from 31% in 2001 but in comparison to 69% of all Australians
- over-represented in all forms of government assistance provided under the CSHA, except home purchase assistance:
 - the proportion of new recipients of mainstream CSHA housing assistance in 2005–2006 who were Indigenous ranged from 14% for public rental housing to 7.5% for community housing
- subject to high rates of overcrowding and poor dwelling conditions
 - Overall, 14% of Indigenous households were at least one bedroom short in 2006, with the worst overcrowding in Indigenous Community Housing (ICH) where 40% were overcrowded
 - 30% (6,674) of ICH dwellings were in poor condition in 2006; 51 dwellings had no organised sewerage system; and 85 dwellings had no organised electricity supply. A recent report (by Torzillo et al.) from the Fixing Houses for Better Health program showed that only 11% of Indigenous community houses met electrical safety criteria and half did not have the facilities to wash a child. In addition, less than 10% met the criteria for functioning nutritional hardware such as space to safely prepare and store food. Data collected as part of this program is currently available on the AIHW website: <http://www.aihw.gov.au/indigenous/datacubes/fhbm.cfm>

Finding the hidden details

Addressing the AIHW 'Australia's Welfare 2007' conference last December, the South Australian Commissioner for Social Inclusion, Monsignor David Cappel, emphasised the significance of collecting an evidence base to successfully implement social policy reform, and the importance of having the 'persistence and creativity to find the hidden and forgotten details'.

For the Institute, these characteristics are at the heart of its ongoing efforts to improve data collection and analysis of Indigenous health and welfare issues.

There has been significant progress in the quality and availability of statistical information on Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander peoples over the last decade in Australia, due to a coordinated approach to information on health, community services and housing sectors and improved data quality and availability in survey, Census and administrative data.

Despite these achievements, many challenges remain. The varying levels of Indigenous identification between different data collections, within each data collection over time, and between regions, make it difficult to assess changes over time and between different regions.

This challenge for organisations such as the AIHW means that work to

improve data collection and analysis is an ongoing priority.

Regardless of the future directions of Indigenous housing policy, Head of the AIHW's Housing Assistance Unit, Ms Tracie Ennis, said there are some 'basic building blocks' that will always be needed to understand the housing outcomes for Indigenous Australians. These include information on dwellings, the people living in them and those who are missing out. Other factors such as housing infrastructure and access to services are also important. The AIHW, in conjunction with governments and service providers, will continue work on improving this information.



Indigenous housing

The building blocks for change

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Simon Parker

But while the disadvantages of Indigenous people are increasingly well documented, the important questions about whether improvements are occurring are not easily answered because there are limited time series data of sufficient quality and frequency to show real trends as they emerge.

The ability to answer these questions becomes increasingly important as new policies and programs develop to deal with this inequality. The AIHW's efforts to improve the available data are ongoing (see story, below).

'Now is the time to take stock of what data we are collecting, and to ensure that it best meets the need of measuring outcomes in a timely manner and informs future policy development', Ms Ennis said.

'For example, we are getting ready to review the National Social Housing Surveys, which include surveys of Indigenous families. We expect to review the scope,

content and methodology of these surveys to ensure they meet the needs of the new National Affordable Housing Agreement, as well as the needs of other important initiatives such as the Joint Policy Commission.'

With so many opportunities offered by the current level of policy activity on Indigenous housing issues, the ability to measure and evaluate what is working, and how, will be crucial to making real improvements in the lives of Indigenous Australians in the future. ■

Reference:

Torzillo Paul J et al. 2008. The state of health hardware in Aboriginal communities in rural and remote Australia. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health Vol. 32 No.1, 2008.

For example, as a result of an agreement by Housing Ministers in 2005, all states and territories have annually-updated plans to improve the identification of Indigenous households receiving housing assistance. Plans include such tasks as improvements to data collection forms and housing management software. Progress against these plans is reported to Housing Ministers each year, along with an analysis by the AIHW of access by Indigenous households to mainstream housing assistance.

Other work currently being undertaken by the AIHW in conjunction with states and territories includes the development

and testing of a national indicator for dwelling condition. 'When fully implemented, this measure will provide a valuable addition to our understanding of the needs of Indigenous families and of the investment that is required to bring all dwellings up to accepted standards', Ms Ennis said.

The AIHW is in a unique position in that it has extensive data holdings across a wide range of health and welfare areas. There is considerable scope to bring these data together in a way that provides much more information than any one data set on its own. For example, questions such as the pathways of Indigenous households through homelessness

and social housing, or the factors that lead to 'successful' tenancies could be explored.

At the same time, work is underway at the AIHW to update the data collection manuals and information it provides to Indigenous community housing organisations to inform and support their data collection activities.

Through these and other activities and partnerships, the AIHW will continue to work with 'persistence and creativity to find the hidden and forgotten details' that will help inform policy reform. ■