

6 April 2018

Submission to the Closing the Gap Refresh, Prime Minister and Cabinet

Our extensive research in the field of housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples suggests the effectiveness of Closing the Gap would be improved if housing was included as one of its core targets.

In making this submission, we wish to emphasise the following points:

- Affordable, secure and safe housing is fundamental to individual well-being and prosperity and affects virtually all other areas of life, including health, education and employment. Given the high levels of housing exclusion experienced by Indigenous peoples in Australia we argue indicators relating to levels of crowding and homelessness should be included in Closing the Gap targets.
- There is strong evidence that Indigenous housing outcomes are improved when it is provided in a culturally appropriate way. Housing delivery should be compatible with the aspirations, values and traditions of Indigenous peoples.
- Housing services are a significant source of employment but there are relatively few Indigenous housing employees or Indigenous community organisations in the sector. Closing the Gap employment targets should be established that target the employment of Indigenous people within the social housing system. This would improve Indigenous labour market participation rates, support culturally appropriate services delivery, and enhance the sustainability of Indigenous communities, especially in remote locations.

Our submission addresses the last three questions posed in the Closing the Gap Refresh Discussion paper.

What indicators should governments focus on to best support the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples? Should governments focus on indicators such as prosperity, wellbeing or other areas?

Despite the importance of safe, adequate and affordable housing to prosperity and well-being, improving housing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has received limited attention within Closing the Gap. Inadequate and unstable housing and homelessness are implicated in poor health and low levels of education, training and employment participation and outcomes, as well as the safety of children and adults. Closing the Gap emphasises the need for a holistic policy approach, but despite the contribution of housing to other areas of the policy framework, there are no indicators relating to improvements in housing outcomes.

Indigenous households experience unacceptably high levels of crowding. Our AHURI research reported severe levels of overcrowding in remote communities (Habibis et al 2016), whilst the recent results from the 2016 census showed that the proportion of dwellings that required an additional bedroom (using the Canadian occupancy standard) was 10.4% for Indigenous households compared to 3.6% for non-Indigenous households (ABS 2017). Crowding inadequate and unsafe housing and difficulties sustaining tenancies have contributed to rates of homelessness that are over seven times higher than those prevailing in the general population (ABS 2018). There is a strong link between homelessness, chronic disease and death (Phibbs and Thompson 2011). High rates of homelessness are therefore likely to be an important contributor to the early mortality of Indigenous peoples in Australia.

The significance of housing to health and well-being is recognised by Indigenous people with submissions and statements to government regularly identifying improved housing outcomes as a core aspiration and concern.

The COAG Partnership Agreements have resulted in a reduction in crowding in some remote communities, and improved the quality and management of housing (Habibis et al 2016). In NSW and Victoria, the management of housing by Indigenous people has moved forward. But there is much more to be done to achieve acceptable housing outcomes for Indigenous individuals and households. A refreshed Closing the Gap initiative that establishes achievable and measurable housing targets will provide a stronger foundation for the achievement of other policy goals, including a reduction in mortality rates. Improved housing outcomes should also result in significant whole of government savings through benefits such as reduced hospital admissions (NSW Health 2010).

Should Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture be incorporated in the Closing the Gap framework? How?

There is evidence that Indigenous housing outcomes are improved when services are delivered in a culturally appropriate way (Habibis et al 2016; Milligan et al 2011). Large, multi-family households, cultural obligations to family and community, and different orientations towards home and place, including frequent travel, are just some of the cultural factors that affect access to housing and the sustainability of tenancies. Despite this, Indigenous housing is overwhelmingly mainstreamed, creating barriers to housing access and tenancy sustainment as a result of a centralised, one-size fits all policy approach. These barriers would be reduced if more Indigenous people were employed within the housing system, and if more effort was put into supporting Indigenous community organisations to become housing providers and managers.

The housing system provides many opportunities for the employment of Indigenous people, including in remote locations where employment opportunities are limited. Our research on the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing found that although the states and the Northern Territory met the Commonwealth's Indigenous employment targets, little employment was provided to local Indigenous populations and local economies (Habibis et al 2016).

Increasing levels of employment within the housing system, and increasing the participation of Indigenous community organisations as housing managers and providers would support culturally appropriate service delivery, improve the sustainability of Aboriginal communities and increase Indigenous labour market participation.

What do you think are the key targets or commitments that should be measured in a refreshed Closing the Gap agenda?

On the basis of the points above, some of the targets that could be considered for measurement in a refreshed Closing the Gap agenda include:

- A reduction in levels of crowding amongst Indigenous households using a culturally sensitive measure that takes into account Indigenous multi-family living.
- A reduction in levels of Indigenous homelessness.
- An increase in the employment of Indigenous people within housing services.
- An increase in the number of Indigenous community organisations providing housing (and other) services to Indigenous people.

We are available for further input and discussion as required.

Yours,



on behalf of Assoc Prof Daphne Habibis (University of Tasmania), Prof Peter Phibbs (University of Sydney) and Rhonda Phillips (University of Queensland).

References

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