

# The Impacts of Overcrowding on Victoria's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children, Young People and Adults

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In Victoria in 2016, 7.6 per cent of Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> and Torres Strait Islander households were considered to be overcrowded compared to 3.6 per cent of non-Aboriginal households.<sup>1</sup> In general, the definition of overcrowded is considered when more than two additional rooms are required, whereas the Australian Bureau of Statistics state that severe overcrowding is when an additional four bedrooms are needed.

Australia's Aboriginal people experience higher rates of housing insecurity and homelessness than other Australians. This is contributed to by a series of complex and intersecting issues relating back to colonisation, dispossession of land, loss of lore and culture and systemic racism.<sup>2</sup> The lack of accessible, affordable and appropriate accommodation often results in individuals and families forced to rely on extended family to accommodate them for an unknown period of time.

The compounding negative impacts of living in overcrowded accommodation are well documented. Due to a lack of resources, children may be forced to share beds, pillows and towels. Reduced hygiene levels due to limited access to showering and clothes washing, as well as close contact with others results in increased rates of skin, ear, nose and throat infections.<sup>3</sup> A loss of personal space and privacy can often inhibit a child's feeling of security and negatively impact on their every daily routine such as sleep and homework.

The easy spread of disease and infection and loss of sleep due to overcrowding can often lead to decreased attendance at school<sup>4</sup> and possibly even extend to

developing behavioural issues. Extended periods of residing in overcrowded accommodation can impact on the bonds between immediate family members and can contribute to the intergenerational transmission of social inequality.<sup>5</sup>

Overcrowding can also result in higher rates of family violence and other violent interactions between household members. Levels of family violence are also connected to an increase in consumption of drugs and alcohol, which we often see in crowded houses where there are multiple adults. The consequences of family violence in the home are extensive and can range from injuries, illness and property damage, through to higher instances of depression and anxiety in all residents, including the children. The safety of all residents in the home may also be compromised when a perpetrator of violence attends the home seeking another who has sought refuge there.

The constant pressures and impacts of overcrowded accommodation can place great stress on relationships, and in many instances, escalating conflicts can result in living arrangements being no longer feasible after a relationship breaks down.

Aboriginal culture identifies family as broader than the nuclear family unit identified in western culture. The bonds between Aboriginal people are strong and members have family and kinship responsibilities that are not familiar to non-Aboriginal people. The inherent understanding and commitment to these obligations form part of what binds and connects the community together. This responsibility and connection

to community and culture may result in families taking in other kin or families in need of accommodation.

Overcrowding has a damaging impact on the Aboriginal community — the breaking up of families. In multiple instances when a home has been declared unsuitable to accommodate a whole family unit, Elizabeth Morgan House Aboriginal Women's Services (EMH) has witnessed siblings be separated from each other or their parents and accommodated in different houses.

Moves and relocations often result in changes of school and childcare arrangements. This interruption of their education can cause children to fall behind at school. This disruption, along with the breakup of their friendship networks and social structure can further contribute to anxiety and depression in Aboriginal children.

Initially organised as a temporary arrangement, these separations can unfortunately extend for years, fracturing families and negatively impacting on the bond between parent and child, as well as between siblings. Often located suburbs apart and sometimes separated by great distances, Aboriginal families become increasingly disconnected, with individuals seeing their siblings or parents infrequently. The uncertainty of living arrangements and separation from their extended family and kin is an overwhelming burden for Aboriginal children.

Placing children in overcrowded accommodation is often seen to be unacceptable to Child Protection Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). For affected family members (often grandparents or

Aunties and Uncles) attempting to address overcrowding to comply with DHHS requirements is a stressful, time-sensitive ordeal. Due to the urgency of the situation, the original residents may have to ask family members currently living with them to leave the home, in order to 'make space' for the Aboriginal child or children. This in turn forces the exiting family members into almost certain homelessness, due to the limited availability and often non-existent appropriate housing options we are currently experiencing.

We can see from the impacts that the ripple effect of overcrowding is pervasive and smothering. Aboriginal families are often placed in an unwinnable position when trying to support family and friends that need accommodation. For many providing accommodation and support to family and kin in need, means they struggle to juggle cultural and family responsibility and needs as well as the expectations of DHHS. For residents to request that family leave can also bring great shame to both parties and cause lasting fractures to relationships.

In the Children's Court EMH has witnessed loving and capable Aboriginal family members denied the right to be a carer for children in their extended family. The justification for this denial of an Aboriginal child's right to be with family is the DHHS or Children Courts assessment that their accommodation is either already overcrowded or will become overcrowded.

When accommodation is deemed to be inappropriate, and no other appropriate kin can be located, Aboriginal children are then placed in out-of-home and possibly out-of-community care. This placement determination goes against the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle which seeks to enhance and preserve Aboriginal children's connection to family and community. The principle seeks to prioritise placement in descending order of:

- within family and kinship networks
- non-related carers in the child's community; then

- carers in another Aboriginal community.

Aboriginal children are to be placed with non-Indigenous carers as a last resort and only when no appropriate Aboriginal carer can be located.

Residents in overcrowded rented housing may also have to respond to increased noise or anti-social complaints made to landlords. Cancellation of social housing rental rebates occurs as the primary occupant may be unable to satisfy the landlord's demands for information that relates to fluctuating household members and this then leads to rental arrears. The financial burden of maintaining a home that is overcrowded can be overwhelming. Feeding, clothing and caring for large numbers of people in a small space is immensely difficult. Logistics often make it impossible to shop and cook for a large number of people. Consequently, meals consist of nutritionally lacking takeaways whilst many loads of washing and drying need to be done at laundromats. Large energy and water bills from excessive usage place occupants under great financial stress. These factors can plummet residents into disabling debt, which can take many years to rectify.

Issues with landlords can result in evictions, causing more Aboriginal families to be homeless. The Aboriginal community will then take in the newly homeless families, highlighting the relentless cycle of our broken homelessness system.

Aboriginal people are less likely to own their own home than their non-Aboriginal counterparts.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, they are more likely to be dependent on the social housing system and live either in transitional accommodation where they wait to be allocated long term housing, or in long term public or social housing. In 2016, 21 per cent of Aboriginal households were renting in social housing, compared with four per cent of other households, however this gap has been narrowing over time.<sup>7</sup>

Aboriginal Australians continue to face critical housing shortages. Services can assist affected

households by supporting the implementation of solution focused and innovative strategies in an attempt to mitigate some of the impacts of overcrowding such as laundry services, ongoing financial planning and advocacy with landlords. The Aboriginal community requires a multi-faceted response that extends further than just a dramatic injection of all property sizes into social housing stock. Social housing eligibility and allocation policies need to be reviewed to allow for families living in overcrowded accommodation to be able to apply for separate residence under priority and reunification. Greater consideration in policy also needs to be given by social housing landlords when renting families have kin temporarily stay with them during times such as funerals. Until broad systemic changes are introduced that provide the Aboriginal community with additional culturally appropriate choices, families will continue to be affected by overcrowded accommodation.

\* Aboriginal is inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

#### Endnotes

1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: a focus report on housing and homelessness*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Cat. no. HOU 301, Canberra. <<https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/1654e011-dccb-49d4-bf5b-09c4607eccc8/aihw-hou-301.pdf.aspx?inline=true>>
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3. Liotta M 2018, *Overcrowding leads to poorer health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples*, <<https://www.1.racgp.org.au/news/gp/racgp/overcrowding-a-key-determinant-of-poor-health-outc>>
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5. <<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0049089X11001694?via=ihub>>
6. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019, op. cit.
7. Ibid.