

# Indigenous Housing Need and Mainstream Public Housing Responses\*

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## Abstract

*Indigenous people are significantly over-represented in conditions of homelessness and other forms of marginal housing, in housing affordability and tenancy access and sustainability problems and in terms of overcrowded and sub-standard accommodation. It is the coincidence of these forces which drives the Indigenous housing reform agenda. Mainstream public housing provides a critical pathway through which secure and affordable accommodation can be made available to Indigenous people in housing need. This paper examines mainstream public housing responses to the position of Indigenous people in housing need. It shows that gains have been made in improving access outcomes in mainstream public housing for Indigenous people. The high levels of continuing unmet housing need in the Indigenous population indicate, however, that more needs to be done to improve housing outcomes in this area. The case study evidence presented in the paper further supports this contention. We need to continue to develop programs designed to ensure that vulnerable households in public housing at risk of losing their tenancy are*

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*supported through difficult times so that a cycle of eviction/vacant possession and churning through crisis and emergency housing and other tenuous accommodation options can be avoided.*

## **1. Introduction**

Mainstream public housing provides a critical pathway toward making secure, affordable accommodation available to Indigenous people in housing need. Indigenous people are significantly over-represented in conditions of homelessness and other forms of marginal housing, housing affordability, tenancy access and sustainability problems, and in terms of overcrowded and sub-standard accommodation. Given the prevailing extent of unmet Indigenous housing need, removing barriers to Indigenous access to such housing is imperative; particularly when the stock of mainstream public housing dwellings is declining. It is also imperative that improved sustainability of Indigenous tenancies goes hand-in-hand with improved access.

This study aims to provide evidence on, and assess levels of, Indigenous representation in mainstream public housing and determine the extent to which Indigenous people, particularly those with unmet housing needs, face access barriers and experience difficulties in sustaining their tenancies. The paper examines what is currently being done by Federal, State and Territory public Housing Authorities to facilitate access to mainstream public housing by Indigenous people and how their policies and programs act to influence Indigenous mainstream public housing access and tenancy sustainability outcomes. Mainstream public housing is defined in this study as Commonwealth State Housing Agreement (CSHA) public housing administered by States and Territories. This excludes the CSHA Aboriginal Rental Housing Program (ARHP) which in most states funds government owned and managed Indigenous-specific housing (referred to in this paper as State Owned and Managed Indigenous Housing (SOMIH)). SOMIH provides roughly half of all public housing provided to Indigenous tenants across Australia.

The issue of mainstream public housing access and tenancy sustainability outcomes is an important issue within the context of Indigenous housing policy in Australia. In response to high levels of Indigenous housing need, Federal, State and Territory Housing Ministers approved, in May 2001, a landmark document, *Building a Better Future: Indigenous Housing to 2010* (BBF), which affirmed a commitment to improving housing outcomes for Indigenous people. BBF contains a number of implementation strategies designed to achieve this. Critical in this respect is Strategy 1.4 which aims to ‘continue to improve Indigenous access to mainstream public housing programs’.<sup>1</sup> This study assesses the extent to which Strategy 1.4 is being realised. It examines responses from the mainstream public housing sector to facilitate Indigenous access to mainstream public housing assistance programs and to improve tenancy sustainability outcomes in mainstream public housing.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 briefly outlines barriers to housing access faced by Indigenous people. In section 3, we present findings on Indigenous access

<sup>1</sup> Housing Ministers’ Advisory Committee (HMAC), Standing Committee on Indigenous Housing (SCIH) (2001), *Building a Better Future: Indigenous Housing to 2010*, p. 7.

and tenancy sustainability outcomes derived from our analysis of mainstream public housing. In section 4 we review mainstream public housing policies and programs. The analysis includes a presentation of public housing authority perspectives on access and tenancy sustainability outcomes based on responses received to a short questionnaire presented to them as part of the present research. Finally, in section 5 we provide summary findings from case study evidence of Indigenous people in housing need and the impediments they experience in accessing housing. The case study evidence points to the impact that access difficulties have on the lived experiences of Indigenous households in housing need. Similar evidence was presented in the Western Australian Equal Opportunity Commission report *Finding a Place*. The paper's conclusion draws together the various findings and discusses the implications of these findings from a policy perspective.

## 2. Barriers to Accessing Public housing and the Sustainability of Tenancies

A range of barriers face Indigenous people in accessing and sustaining tenancies in mainstream public housing.<sup>2</sup>

**Discrimination:** Discrimination represents the most obvious 'direct' barrier.<sup>3</sup> State/Territory Housing Authorities have universally adopted a non-discriminatory position with respect to Indigenous access to mainstream housing services, in line with their social justice objectives. However, the question of 'indirect' discrimination among public housing providers and/or housing client officers must be addressed. Such forms of indirect discrimination may result in longer waiting times, higher rates of eviction and/or higher rates of application rejection for Indigenous people. Indigenous perceptions of discrimination by Housing Authorities and agencies also are likely to lead to underutilization of services. Where Indigenous people in need cannot access secure public housing options, they often seek accommodation with other Indigenous families, exacerbating overcrowding, housing quality and rent arrears problems—primary risk factors driving future evictions—thus perpetuating a cycle of eviction.

**Cultural and historical forces:** Indigenous people are traditionally more mobile than the non-Indigenous population, have large extended family structures and emphasise family obligations. This often results in severe overcrowding which, in turn, places extra demands on housing structures and equipment, and may result in large maintenance bills,

<sup>2</sup> See Flatau et al., 2004 for a detailed summary. For recent reviews of the Indigenous housing literature see, Neutze, 2000; Read, 2000; Burke, 2004; Memmott, Long, Chambers and Spring, 2003; and Memmott, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> The issue of discriminatory practices in relation to public housing has recently been examined in Western Australia. In December 2004, the Western Australian Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC) released a report entitled *Finding a Place An Inquiry into the Existence of Discriminatory Practices in Relation to the Provision of Public Housing and Related Services to Aboriginal People in Western Australia* (Equal Opportunity Commission, 2004). The *Finding a Place* report provides significant evidence from past, present and prospective Indigenous public housing tenants of perceived unfavourable treatment by Homeswest in respect of access to public housing and the housing services provided by Homeswest.

neighbourhood complaints and possible eviction. Another cultural and historical factor Memmott et al. (2003 p.14) point to is the spiritual and psychological homelessness of Indigenous people who have been removed from their traditional land and families (the stolen generation). This distress—grief, anger, frustration, and depression—persists through generations, creating a deep distrust and avoidance of services.

Some Indigenous people may also not have the home management and urban living skills which are often required to maintain mainstream public tenancies and housing in addition to living alongside non-Indigenous neighbours (see, Cooper and Morris, 2005). Indigenous people may be reluctant or refuse to come to public housing offices because they are ashamed of previous debts or bad behaviour. Feelings of shame, shyness and fear of prejudice are likely to lead to an underutilisation of services (see, House of Representatives, 2001).

European style housing is often inappropriate for Indigenous cultural, social and traditional requirements. It is inflexible, suited to immobility, and isolating relative to communal Indigenous camp environments. These problems are exacerbated when an Indigenous family is further isolated within non-Indigenous neighbourhoods, as may occur within mainstream public housing accommodation (see, Neutze, 2000). Inappropriate allocations can create problems, for example when feuding families are placed within close proximity, resulting in vandalism and maintenance issues, or when Indigenous people are marginalised from their support networks and other relevant services and opportunities, including employment (see, Berry et al., 2001a, 2001b).

**Disadvantage and risk factors:** The Indigenous population has a much higher prevalence than the non-Indigenous population of inter-related problems of poverty, homelessness, domestic and family violence, incarceration, drug and alcohol abuse and mental illness. While this leads to higher representation in housing systems designed to support those in need—namely public and community housing—the same forces represent risk factors in sustaining tenancies in mainstream public and community housing, and gaining re-entry to housing when tenancies are not sustained. Indigenous people may also suffer from higher rates of breaching of income support payments, which results in payments being withdrawn or reduced, resulting in loss of income for rental, food and other basic essentials. Welfare reform measures that increase the likelihood of income support breaches will exacerbate such problems.

Women who have been assaulted as a result of domestic violence or family violence are difficult to re-house. In remote communities, it may be difficult to re-house women at a safe distance from their perpetrator/s. In urban communities women and their families are often forced to leave homes to be re-housed in other locations.

Indigenous people make up a much larger percentage of prisoners than their proportion of the total population and generally serve shorter sentences. Offences are related to family violence, assaults, alcohol abuse and non-payment of fines. Access to public housing options on discharge can be difficult; homelessness is a likely outcome. Prisoner re-entry and support programs can help reduce the prevalence of homelessness and recidivism in the ex-prisoner population.

**Service Delivery:** Indigenous people are more likely to experience health problems (see, ABS and Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2003). Australian health and welfare service providers aim to provide coordinated responses to such needs but inevitably difficulties arise, resulting in greater stresses on Indigenous families in accessing and sustaining mainstream health and related services.

The precise ways in which the above barriers work their way through into Indigenous housing outcomes is difficult to assess using existing quantitative sources. A quantitative analysis, to which we turn in the following section, however, can play an important role in highlighting end-point public housing outcomes for Indigenous people. It is in this area that quantitative analyses are fundamentally important. To understand better the *processes* through which these barriers feed through to outcomes and to appreciate more fully the *impact* these barriers have on the lives of Indigenous people we subsequently turn, in section 5, to qualitative research evidence.

### **3. Indigenous mainstream public housing: a quantitative profile**

This section provides a quantitative profile and an accompanying discussion of access and tenancy sustainability outcomes for Indigenous households in mainstream public housing.<sup>4</sup> There are two key questions we pose:

- Are trends in Indigenous representation in mainstream public housing since the implementation of BBF consistent with improving access outcomes?
- Does the quantitative evidence highlight particular areas of concern in terms of Indigenous people accessing mainstream public housing and sustaining tenancies in mainstream public housing?

We utilise the following six quantitative indicators to measure access and sustainability outcomes in mainstream public housing:<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The analysis of mainstream public housing outcomes has been derived from a range of quantitative sources, including the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement (CSHA) National Data Reports for mainstream public rental housing (see [www.aihw.au](http://www.aihw.au) for these reports); a set of customised tables for the 2002-03 year produced by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) Housing Assistance Unit in response to a request from the research team. The analysis in this section also draws on a range of other data sources, including the 2001 Census and data supplied directly to the researchers by State/Territory Housing Authorities. We would especially like to thank Hongyan Wang and David Wilson from the AIHW for producing the set of tables for the research team.

<sup>5</sup> A number of limitations reduce the confidence with which findings on Indigenous access and tenancy sustainability can be put forward but do not obviate these findings. First, only administrative data is available to examine the issue of mainstream public housing as all other data does not differentiate between the mainstream and Indigenous-specific components of public housing. Second, major ambiguities exist in analysing Indigenous mainstream public housing outcomes over time and between jurisdictions, resulting from: (a) past inadequacies in jurisdictional business systems in capturing Indigenous household data; (b) changes in the way business systems have recorded household Indigenous status over time (in particular the movement from voluntary to mandatory recording of Indigenous status); (c) movements in the extent to which households identify themselves as Indigenous; and (d) considerable variation in the way community housing operates in each jurisdiction.

- Overall Access: Representation of Indigenous households in the mainstream public housing stock, and in the flow of new households into mainstream public housing.
- Access to Suitable Accommodation: Indigenous and non-Indigenous rates of overcrowding in public housing.
- Access According to Need: The proportion of Indigenous households entering mainstream public housing in the AIHW 'greatest need' category relative to non-Indigenous households.
- Access to Accommodation in a Timely Fashion by those in Need: Median mainstream public housing waiting times experienced by Indigenous and non-Indigenous households in 'greatest need' and 'non-greatest need' categories.
- Sustainability of Tenancies: Measured on the basis of the median duration of Indigenous and non-Indigenous mainstream public housing tenancies.
- Involuntary Tenancy Termination: Termination notice and eviction rates from public housing dwellings (WA only).

### ***Profile of Indigenous housing outcomes***

The housing tenure profile of the Indigenous population (see, Table 1 below) differs significantly from the non-Indigenous population. Indigenous households are under-represented, relative to the non-Indigenous population, in the home ownership sector, but over-represented in public housing (combining both Indigenous-specific and mainstream community housing). Indigenous over-representation in public housing programs reflects this population's significant levels of disadvantage and the targeted nature of such programs (see, Altman and Hunter, 2003; ABS and AIHW, 2003).

Table 1: Private Dwellings by Tenure and Indigenous Status, 2001 Census

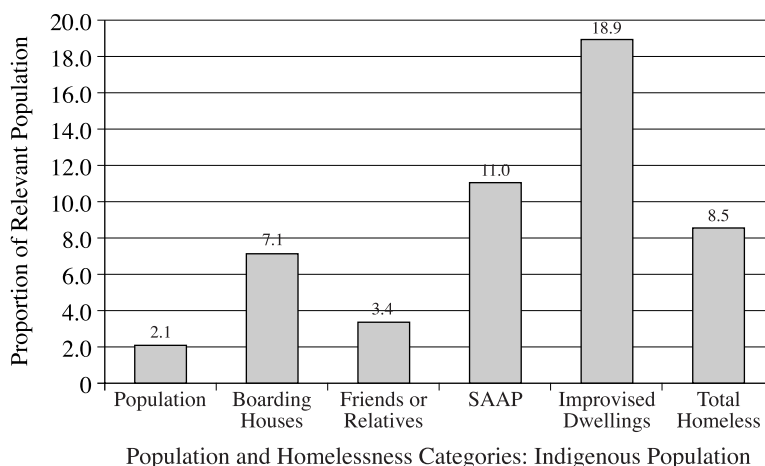
	Dwellings Containing Indigenous Households		Other Dwellings	
	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent
<i>Owned</i>				
Fully Owned	14,712	12.8	2,732,152	42.9
Being Purchased	22,419	19.4	1,799,445	28.3
<i>Rental Properties</i>				
Private Landlord not in the Same Household	11,332	9.8	464,764	7.3
Real Estate Agent	16,184	14.0	678,316	10.7
State/Territory Housing Authority	23,974	20.8	284,502	4.5
Community/Co-Op Housing Group	14,628	12.7	27,103	0.4
Employer- Government	1,136	1.0	27,333	0.4
Employer- Other	776	0.7	24,517	0.4
Other Landlord Type	1,587	1.4	38,536	0.6
Not Stated	1,027	0.9	17,849	0.3
<i>Other Tenure Types</i>	3,399	2.9	140,158	2.2
Not Stated	4,181	3.6	132,210	2.1
<i>Total</i>	115,355	100.0	6,366,885	100.0

Source: ABS (2002).

The high level of housing need among Indigenous households is of more direct interest to this study.<sup>6</sup> National, State and Territory housing agencies currently measure Indigenous housing need by assessing five dimensions of need: homelessness; overcrowding; affordability; stock condition; and connection to essential services (i.e., water, electricity and sewerage).<sup>7</sup>

Recent estimates of Indigenous homelessness based on the 2001 Census confirm that high levels of severe housing need continue. Indigenous people made up 2.1 per cent of the population at the 2001 Census, but comprised 18.9 per cent of those in ‘primary homelessness’. This category is comprised of people living on the streets, sleeping in parks, squatting and so on. It is operationalised using the ABS category ‘improvised homes, tents and sleepers out’. Indigenous people are also significantly over-represented in the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP), a key component of secondary homelessness, which provides supported accommodation and other services to homeless people. The Indigenous share of the SAAP client base continues to grow. In 2003-04, Indigenous clients comprised 16.5 per cent of all clients. These recent estimates indicate one of two things (it is difficult to determine which applies more forcefully), namely that the problem of unmet housing need among Indigenous people is increasing rather than decreasing, relative to the non-Indigenous population and/or that the outcomes are the result of specific targeting of support to Indigenous homeless people.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 1: Indigenous Shares of Categories of Homelessness, 2001



Source: AIHW (2005).

<sup>6</sup> The first detailed examination of housing need among Indigenous people in Australia was undertaken by Jones (1994) who estimated that the proportion of Indigenous people in housing need was four times that of the non-Indigenous population.

<sup>7</sup> See AIHW (2005).

<sup>8</sup> See Durkay, Roberts, and Burgess (2003) for a further discussion of Indigenous homelessness.

Overcrowding is a second important dimension of Indigenous housing need. The *Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 2003* (ABS and AIHW, 2003) study estimated that 15 per cent of Indigenous households were living in dwellings requiring at least one additional bedroom, compared with 4 per cent for other households. A further indicator of housing need is the standard of accommodation experienced by Indigenous and non-Indigenous households. ABS and AIHW (2003) reported that Indigenous households were three times more likely than others to report their homes in high need of repair, while 19 per cent of dwellings covered in the Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey (CHINS) were found to need major repair. A further 10 per cent of dwellings required replacement.

### ***Indigenous access and tenancy sustainability in mainstream public housing***

Estimates of the level of representation of Indigenous households in mainstream public housing for the last three financial years and the representation of Indigenous people in the inflow of newly assisted households to mainstream public housing are set out in Tables 2 to 4. Table 2 presents findings on the representation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous households in the stock of mainstream public housing households at 30 June 2002, 2003 and 2004. Table 3 does likewise in terms of the inflow into mainstream public housing of newly assisted households.

As shown in Table 2, the stock of mainstream public housing households fell from 342,467 in June 2002 to 338,035 households in June 2004 — a decline of around 1.8 per cent. The average yearly decline in the stock of mainstream public housing households is 0.7 per cent in recent years. This contraction in mainstream public housing places greater pressures on jurisdictions in providing long-term accommodation for Indigenous households in housing need.

Severe under-reporting problems with respect to the identification of medium and long-term Indigenous housing tenants in New South Wales (NSW) makes it impossible to provide similar estimates of the total number of Indigenous households in mainstream public housing at a national level over this time period. However, in jurisdictions other than NSW, the number of (reported) Indigenous households in mainstream public housing rose dramatically from 6,339 in June 2000 to 11,087 in June 2004; an increase of around 75 per cent. Over the corresponding time period the number of non-Indigenous households in jurisdictions other than NSW fell from 215,693 in June 2000 to 202,062 in June 2004, a drop of 6.3 per cent. The consequence of these two trends was a significant rise in the Indigenous household share of mainstream public housing.

Changes in business reporting systems over the 1999-00 to 2003-04 time period affect the interpretation of findings in WA (structural breaks in 1999 and 2003-04) and SA, and Victoria (2002-03). Improved business systems in SA and Victoria in 2002-03 and WA in 2003-04 led to better recording of Indigenous status, resulting in a very large increase in the stock of Indigenous households in mainstream public housing for the years concerned. However, Indigenous representation outcomes for these States also show relatively strong positive growth in the stock of Indigenous households in mainstream public housing for those years *not* influenced by business system changes to the reporting of Indigenous status of households.

It is noteworthy that States and Territories that have not experienced major structural breaks in their Indigenous household series exhibit trends in the rate of growth of Indigenous households in the mainstream public housing stock similar to those evident for Victoria, SA and WA for those years unaffected by business system changes. In Queensland, the number of Indigenous households in mainstream public housing grew by 45 per cent over the period 1999-00 to 2003-04—an average annual growth rate of around 10 per cent. Both Tasmania and the ACT had similar average annual growth rates, while the NT experienced more modest growth. In all three jurisdictions the number of non-Indigenous households fell, with the NT recording the greatest fall of 5.2 per cent between 1999-00 and 2003-04.

Table 3 shows a large fall in the number of newly assisted mainstream public housing households for the three year period 2001-02 to 2003-04, from 36,894 to 30,962. This represents a decline of around 19 per cent over this period. However, the number of reported newly assisted Indigenous households in mainstream public housing rose over the same period, from 3,492 in 2001-02 to 3,641 in 2003-04, representing a rise of 4.3 per cent. The number of non-Indigenous mainstream public housing tenants fell by 18.2 per cent over the same period. As a consequence, a large increase in the share of newly assisted mainstream public housing taken by Indigenous households is evident, rising from 9.5 per cent in 2001-02 to 11.8 per cent in 2003-04.

Table 4 below presents trends, using index series, from 1999-2000 to 2003-04 in the representation of Indigenous households and the number of newly assisted Indigenous and non-Indigenous tenants for each jurisdiction in Australia. It is evident that there has been a significant compositional shift towards Indigenous households in terms of newly assisted mainstream public households across all jurisdictions. Indigenous status reporting changes have, however, inflated the size of the shift.

The number of newly assisted mainstream public housing Indigenous households grew by over 225 per cent in WA over the 1999-2000 to 2003-04 periods. No other State or Territory experienced such a dramatic increase. However, positive growth in the number of newly assisted Indigenous households was evident for the ACT (31 per cent); the NT (12.1 per cent); South Australia (4.4 per cent); and NSW (1.2 per cent). In WA and for each of the above jurisdictions, the number of newly assisted non-Indigenous households fell. In Victoria, while the number of newly assisted Indigenous households fell by 11.4 per cent over 1999-2000 to 2003-04, the number of newly assisted non-Indigenous households also fell, and by an even greater amount (33.2 per cent). A similar pattern is evident for Queensland and Tasmania.

Table 2: Households Occupying Mainstream Public Housing at 30 June 2002, 2003 and 2004

	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	Total
<i>30 June 2002</i>									
Indigenous households		771	2,311	2,098	812	463	142	1,377	
Total households	125,315	62,425	48,908	30,780	46,291	12,116	11,008	5,624	342,467
<i>30 June 2003</i>									
Indigenous households		1,006	2,491	2,363	1,118	447	185	1,451	
Total households	123,088	62,598	48,582	30,420	45,351	11,624	10,896	5,476	338,035
<i>30 June 2004</i>									
Indigenous households		1,078	2,633	4,041	1,171	494	172	1,498	
Total households	123,106	62,647	48,490	30,016	44,529	11,375	10,823	5,269	336,255
<i>Indigenous Households in Mainstream Public Housing as a Share of All Mainstream Public Housing Tenant Households</i>									
At June 2002		1.24	4.73	6.82	1.75	3.82	1.29	24.48	
At June 2003		1.61	5.13	7.77	2.47	3.85	1.70	26.50	
At June 2004		1.72	5.43	13.46	2.63	4.34	1.59	28.43	

Source: Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement National Data Reports Public Rental Housing.

Table 3: Newly Assisted Households Occupying Mainstream Public Housing 2001-02, 2002-03, 2003-04

	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	Total
<i>2001-02</i>									
Indigenous households	888	218	830	750	233	163	28	382	3492
Total households	10,836	6,993	6,563	4,639	3,755	1,940	1,182	986	36,894
<i>2002-03</i>									
Indigenous households	888	221	737	822	321	114	49	405	3557
Total households	10,129	6670	5251	4411	3776	1355	946	827	33,365
<i>2003-04</i>									
Indigenous households	877	225	657	1045	306	96	38	397	3641
Total households	9,943	5,939	4,590	4,103	3,634	1,170	790	793	30,962
<i>Newly Assisted Indigenous Households in Mainstream Public Housing as a Share of All Newly Assisted Mainstream Public Housing Tenant Households</i>									
At June 2002	8.19	3.12	12.65	16.17	6.21	8.40	2.37	38.74	9.46
At June 2003	8.77	3.31	14.04	18.64	8.50	8.41	5.18	48.97	10.66
At June 2004	8.82	3.79	14.31	25.47	8.42	8.21	4.81	50.06	11.76

Source: Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement National Data Reports Public Rental Housing.

Table 4: Households Occupying Mainstream Public Housing and SOMIH, Index Series

	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT
<i>Mainstream Public Housing (Indigenous Households at 30 June)</i>								
1999-00		100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2000-01		102.0	113.4	145.5	106.0	117.0	153.3	102.7
2001-02		105.2	127.6	162.2	109.9	129.3	103.6	108.2
2002-03		137.2	137.5	183.5	151.3	124.9	135.0	114.0
2003-04		147.1	145.4	313.7	158.5	138.0	125.5	117.7
<i>Mainstream Public Housing (Non-Indigenous Households at 30 June)</i>								
1999-00		100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2000-01		99.6	99.3	101.3	96.3	97.1	96.8	95.2
2001-02		99.4	98.7	100.2	91.7	94.2	97.3	90.8
2002-03		99.3	97.6	97.9	89.2	90.4	95.9	86.1
2003-04		99.2	97.1	90.7	87.5	88.0	95.4	80.6
<i>Mainstream Public Housing (Newly Assisted Indigenous Households Year Ending 30 June)</i>								
1999-00		100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2000-01	100.0	89.4	87.9	164.2	82.6	121.5	89.7	93.5
2001-02	102.4	85.8	86.3	233.6	79.5	100.0	96.6	107.9
2002-03	102.4	87.0	76.6	256.1	109.6	69.9	169.0	114.4
2003-04	101.2	88.6	68.3	325.5	104.4	58.9	131.0	112.1
<i>Mainstream Public Housing (Newly Assisted Non-Indigenous Households Year Ending 30 June)</i>								
1999-00		100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2000-01	100.0	81.4	84.6	113.1	97.3	87.7	110.5	83.8
2001-02	93.1	79.2	73.0	107.5	76.6	84.7	108.8	87.9
2002-03	86.5	75.4	57.5	99.2	75.2	59.2	84.5	61.4
2003-04	84.8	66.8	50.1	84.5	72.4	51.2	70.9	57.6

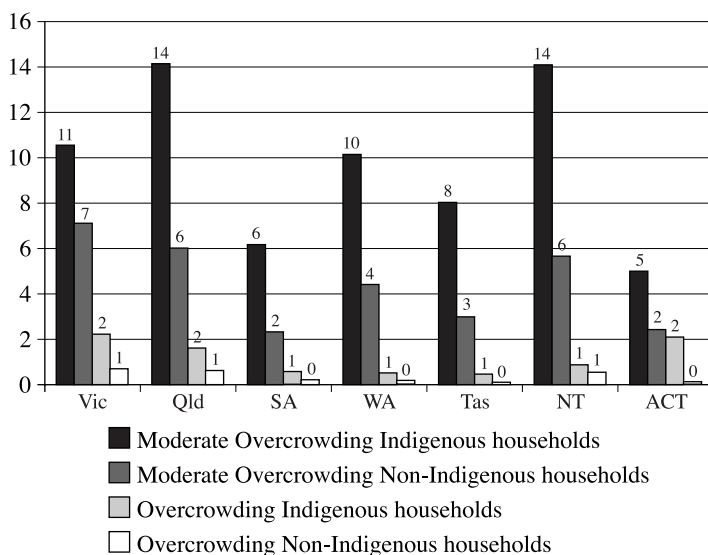
Source: Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement National Data Reports Public Rental Housing.

### ***Access to suitable accommodation***

In the public housing National Minimum Data Set (NMDS) classifications, ‘overcrowding’ occurs when two or more bedrooms are required to meet the proxy national occupancy standard. ‘Moderate overcrowding’ occurs where one additional bedroom is required to satisfy the proxy occupancy standard. Figure 2 presents estimates of the moderate and overcrowding rates for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous mainstream public housing populations. The moderate overcrowding rate is defined as the number of Indigenous or non-Indigenous households in moderate overcrowding divided by the number of Indigenous or non-Indigenous households; similarly for the overcrowding rate. The overcrowding and moderate overcrowding rates are under-estimates for all jurisdictions other than Victoria and Queensland because multi-family households have been excluded from their analysis.

The estimates suggest that the moderate overcrowding rate for Indigenous households is over twice that of non-Indigenous households, and is greatest in the NT and Queensland (around 14 per cent).

Figure 2: Households Assisted with Mainstream Public Housing at 30 June 2003, Overcrowding Rates by Indigenous Household Status – AIHW (exc. NSW)



Source: AIHW, 2002-03 Public Housing Unit Record File held in the National Housing Data Repository.

### *Access according to need*

It is important to determine the extent to which the growth in Indigenous households in mainstream public housing reflects the provision of assistance to those in a position of significant housing need, and the role of priority access as a means of entry to public housing relative to wait-turn entry. A decline in public housing stock, coupled with large numbers of households in primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness demands reorientation of the public housing system to one even more focussed on public housing acting in the central role of a long-term, secure exit point for those in need.

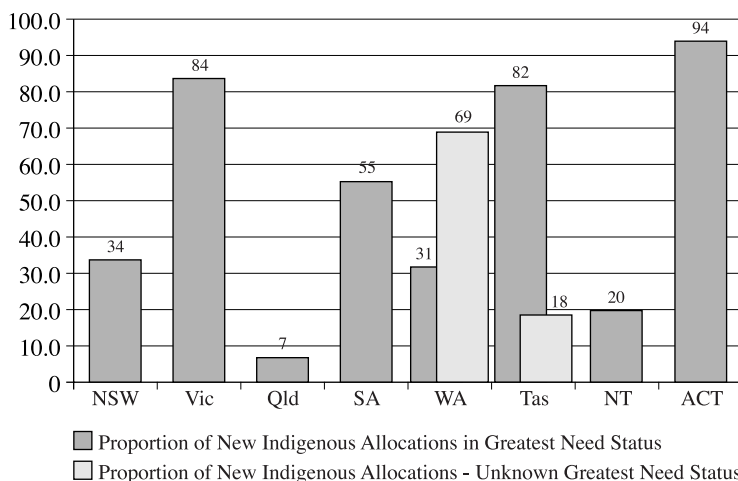
Figure 3 provides estimates of the proportion of newly assisted mainstream public housing tenants who entered under a greatest need criteria in each jurisdiction. The most striking figures are those for Queensland. Only 7 per cent of newly assisted Queensland Indigenous mainstream public housing tenant households entered on this basis in 2002-03. It should be noted that recent figures available from the Department of Housing in Queensland to end-May 2005 suggest the rate of entry into public housing through the priority access channel in Queensland has more than doubled since 2002-03.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to the case of Queensland, a very high proportion of Indigenous people enter in the greatest need category in the ACT, Victoria and Tasmania (over 80 per cent in each case). NSW, SA, WA and the NT exhibit lower greatest need entry.

<sup>9</sup> As noted by a referee, Queensland has a much less targeted allocations system than other jurisdictions. This impacts on both Indigenous and non-Indigenous applicants.

***Access to accommodation in a timely fashion by those in need***

Our fourth indicator of mainstream public housing access is the time spent waiting to be housed. Households assessed as in greatest need are given priority access to public housing accommodation in the Australian system. The evidence confirms the expectation that median waiting times for those in greatest need (who subsequently gain access to mainstream public housing) are much shorter than waiting times for other newly assisted tenant households. In 2002-03, the median waiting time was 78 days for non-Indigenous newly assisted tenant households in the greatest need category and 61 days for Indigenous tenants in this category. In terms of those on wait-turn lists, the median waiting time for non-Indigenous public housing tenants was estimated as 517 days compared with 236 days for Indigenous households.

**Figure 3: Indigenous Households Newly Allocated in the Financial Year of 2002-03 in Mainstream Public Housing, by Greatest Need Status– AIHW**



Source: 2002-03 Public Housing Unit Record File held in the National Housing Data Repository.

These results indicate that households in greatest need are accessing mainstream public housing much faster than those who are not in this category, and Indigenous households who gain access to mainstream public housing do so faster than non-Indigenous households. This latter result may reflect higher levels of severe need among Indigenous applicants. If this is the case, it suggests that mainstream public Housing Authorities have acted positively with respect to those in need gaining access to public housing.

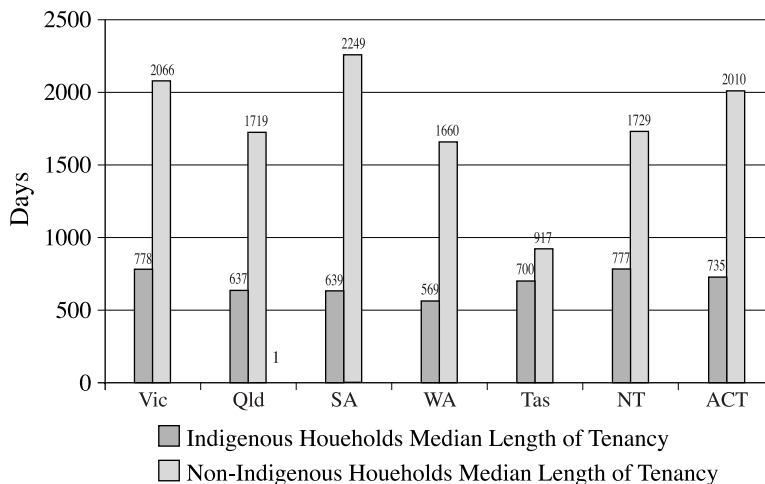
***Sustainability of tenancies***

We now turn to an analysis of the sustainability of tenancies. Ideally, the analysis of the duration of tenancies needs to account for what is referred to as ‘censoring bias’. Over

any given ‘window’ of time (say the 2002-03 financial year) some tenancies will end and some will persist past the window date (say 30 June 2003). ‘Completed tenancies’ end during the data window; ‘uncompleted tenancies’ or ‘right censored tenancies’ (so-called because the censoring of the tenancy is at the right hand side of the data window) remain open at the end of the data window. It is not possible to determine precisely the final duration of such uncompleted right censored tenancies. A range of techniques have been developed to deal with this issue.

The AIHW advises that the National Minimum Data Set (NMDS) system cannot currently accommodate an analysis that accounts for right censoring bias. An intermediate approach adopted by the AIHW in the present analysis is to assume completion of all right censored tenancy spells at 30 June 2003. The adoption of this assumption induces some bias into the results. Given that the flow of Indigenous households into mainstream public housing in 2002-03 was proportionately greater than that for non-Indigenous households, the adoption of the assumption that right censored spells are complete is likely to reduce recorded Indigenous spell lengths more than non-Indigenous spell lengths. Bearing these qualifications in mind, Figure 4 presents estimates for each jurisdiction of the duration of Indigenous and non-Indigenous tenancies (on the basis of the conversion of all right-censored tenancies into completed tenancies as at 30 June 2003).

Figure 4: Households Who Were Assisted in the Financial Year of 2002-03 in Mainstream Public Housing, Median Length of Tenancy (Days), by Indigenous Status



Source: AIHW, 2002-03 Public Housing Unit Record File held in the National Housing Data Repository, AIHW.

Across all States and Territories, Indigenous tenancies display much shorter median durations compared to non-Indigenous tenancies, for example in SA the median duration

of Indigenous tenancies is 639 days compared with 2249 days for non-Indigenous tenancies. In the NT the median duration of Indigenous tenancies is 777 days compared with 1729 days for non-Indigenous tenancies. In short, the mainstream public housing tenancy duration findings point to significant tenancy sustainability outcomes for Indigenous households but the caveat noted above—the limitations of the method adopted to estimate the duration of tenancy spells—must be borne in mind. Moreover, shorter median duration of tenancies among Indigenous tenants may reflect a range of factors (e.g., higher rates of mobility) which may result in higher voluntary exits from tenancies.

### ***Involuntary tenancy termination***

To our knowledge, only WA provides detailed, publicly available data on involuntary tenancy termination in public housing on an Indigenous household status basis. The WA statistics do not separately identify the mainstream and SOMIH sectors, thus the following analysis is for their entire public rental housing program.<sup>10</sup>

In WA, Homeswest may take a decision to terminate a tenancy due to a breach under the Residential Tenancies Act 1987. It issues a Termination Notice stating that the tenant has only seven days to vacate the premises. Homeswest may apply to the Local Court nearest to the rental premises for Court Orders to evict a tenant if they do not comply. A Warrant of Possession can be obtained once Court Orders have been obtained. However, under Homeswest's policy, final bailiff eviction action should only proceed if the tenant has not made a genuine attempt to resolve the problem underlying the original Termination Notice. A restored tenancy is one where a Court Order for Termination and Possession has been granted and the Warrant of Possession is not executed.

The estimated Indigenous Termination Notice rate for 2004 was 2.19 per cent compared with 0.54 for non-Indigenous households in public housing. In other words, termination notices are issued to Indigenous households at four times the rate for non-Indigenous households. On average, around one-fifth of Termination Notices result in obtaining Court Orders. The Court Order rate for Indigenous households (0.40 per cent) remains roughly four times that for non-Indigenous households (0.11 per cent).

Around a third of households receiving Court Orders have their tenancies restored, while a further quarter abandon or vacate their dwellings on receipt of Court Orders. Bailiff evictions occur in around a quarter of the remaining cases in which Court Orders are obtained. The estimated average bailiff eviction rate for Indigenous households in public housing was 0.06 per cent in 2004 (6 in every ten thousand Indigenous households are evicted in any one month) compared with 0.02 per cent for non-Indigenous households (2 in every ten thousand Indigenous households are evicted in any one month). Relative to the size of the tenant population, Indigenous households are evicted at roughly three times the rate of non-Indigenous households. Rent arrears and anti-social behaviour reasons account for the majority of evictions in the records.

<sup>10</sup> The Queensland Department of Housing provided summary statistics on evictions from public housing for the financial years 2001-2002, 2002-2003 and 2003-2004. Indigenous evictions represented between 24.4 per cent of all evictions in 2001-02, 13.5 per cent of evictions in 2002-03 and 15.0 per cent of evictions in 2003-04.

In short our findings on tenancy sustainability outcomes indicate that Indigenous households experience significantly shorter tenancies than non-Indigenous households and exhibit much higher involuntary termination notice rates than non-Indigenous households.

#### **4. Mainstream public housing policies and programs**

What has been the response of State and Territory public Housing Authorities to the housing needs of Indigenous people? How have rental policies and programs acted to influence Indigenous mainstream public housing access and tenancy sustainability outcomes? In this section we review State and Territory housing authority responses and examine how programs and policies have acted to improve or impede access and tenancy sustainability outcomes. Our review is based both on responses to a survey we administered to State/Territory Housing Authorities (hereafter the *State/Territory Housing Authority Survey*) and our own analysis of existing jurisdictional policies and programs.

The *State/Territory Housing Authority Survey* was designed to capture information on a range of topics relevant to this study. It was sent to peak State/Territory Housing Authorities (See Appendix A for a list of submissions). Information was sought in six main areas: (1) State/Territory Housing Authority perspectives on difficulties or barriers faced by Indigenous people in accessing mainstream public housing programs and sustaining tenancies in public housing; (2) policies, programs and practices that may affect Indigenous access to mainstream public housing and sustainability of Indigenous tenancies; (3) State/Territory Housing Authority views on current policy and program effectiveness; (4) specific actions taken by State/Territory Housing Authorities to improve Indigenous access to mainstream public housing over the last two years; (5) level of Indigenous representation in mainstream public housing decision making; and (6) State/Territory Housing Authority recommendations for policy action that might improve Indigenous people's access to mainstream public housing in the future, and help sustain tenancies in mainstream public housing.

##### ***The supply of dwellings, and policies and programs that affect access to mainstream public housing***

There has been a decline in the number of households assisted by mainstream public housing over the last decade. The decline in the stock of mainstream public housing occupied dwellings reduces the State/Territory Housing Authorities' ability to provide accommodation to households in need, leaving such households with fewer opportunities to secure affordable long-term accommodation. The rate of growth in Indigenous households in mainstream public housing may have been even greater had more opportunities for access been available. Access opportunities remain significantly more limited in Queensland, WA and Victoria, and to a lesser extent NSW, than in SA, Tasmania and the NT. However, it is SA where the greatest cutback in available funds and therefore the supply of public housing has recently taken place.

An inadequate supply of public housing was cited by a number of jurisdictions in their survey responses as a major factor limiting mainstream public housing options for

Indigenous households in need. A limited supply of mainstream public housing dwellings manifests itself in long waiting times experienced by public housing applicants and in high levels of ‘churning’ of those in housing need through various forms of crisis and emergency housing and unstable housing situations in the private rental market.

In addition to the overall problem of an inadequate supply of mainstream public housing dwellings, jurisdictions cited three additional supply-side forces further impeding Indigenous mainstream public housing opportunities. The first is a low turnover of dwellings in public housing (more accurately a low exit rate from public housing). A second supply-side limitation to Indigenous access to mainstream public housing options is the configuration of the available housing stock relative to the needs of Indigenous households. As noted by a number of jurisdictions, the mismatch between the profile of the stock of public housing and household structures is particularly pertinent in the case of Indigenous households because of the greater prevalence of large and multi-family households among Indigenous people and the shortage of larger sized dwellings in mainstream public housing. Third, jurisdictions indicated that Indigenous access to mainstream public housing is impeded when shortages of mainstream public housing options exist in geographical areas exhibiting high rates of housing need.

Jurisdictions are responding to these supply-side impediments in various ways. For example, the Western Australian Department of Housing and Works (DHW) has recently begun a significant large dwelling building program that will help to ensure that mainstream public housing can better meet the needs of larger Indigenous households (Submission 6, 2004). In New South Wales (NSW), the Department of Housing recently introduced a range of measures (including limiting the length of leases) that were aimed at increasing the turnover of properties for those households who are better able to sustain tenancies in private markets.

Access to mainstream housing is not simply a function of the available supply of dwellings. Importantly, access is strongly influenced by knowledge and information flows, eligibility criteria, application processes and wait-turn and priority access policies and procedures. Poor channels of communication between Housing Authorities and the Indigenous community and a lack of knowledge about housing options by Indigenous households who are eligible to receive assistance in public housing were cited as factors limiting access to mainstream public housing by Indigenous people in submissions made to the study by State and Territory Housing Authorities. The application process can be a complicated one for households with limited experience in formal application processes and with poor literacy backgrounds. Housing offices may also be intimidating places for some applicants. In this environment it is important that application processes are made as streamlined as possible. It is also important that Indigenous households seeking accommodation do so in a supportive, culturally appropriate environment.

Developing community-based channels by which Indigenous people can be provided with information on housing options is also important in improving access outcomes for Indigenous people. The NSW Department of Housing is presently increasing the number of services delivered by organisations that are either managed by Indigenous people or have staff who are Indigenous. This is being done with the aim of improving communication channels and the understanding of Indigenous needs.

Those Indigenous people in greatest housing need are homeless people. The most important program directed to those who are homeless is the *Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP)*. Mainstream public housing plays a vital role in providing an end-point long-term accommodation option for those who leave SAAP accommodation. Co-ordinated Federal and State/Territory-based Homelessness Strategies that bring together homelessness prevention, transition and support services in an integrated fashion at points of greatest stress and which are linked to mainstream public housing options offer the greatest hope for improved outcomes for Indigenous homeless people. State/Territory-based Homelessness Strategies have been implemented in a number of jurisdictions in the last 5 years including in WA, Victoria and SA.

Across all jurisdictions, eligibility for mainstream public housing is conditional on the meeting of a number of criteria whose principal aim is to target accommodation to low income households. Access to mainstream public housing can be denied to households on the basis of breaches of the terms of a prior public housing tenancy or the non-repayment of Housing Authority debts. Jurisdictions differ with respect to the strictness with which this condition is applied. However, when strictly applied, such eligibility criteria can act to prevent some of the neediest households from re-entering public housing and securing long-term low-cost accommodation.

An adverse tenancy history was a factor thought to limit access to State/Territory Housing Authorities by a number of jurisdictions in their submissions to the project team including the NT and Western Australia (WA). Key components of an adverse tenancy history include debts, abandonment, eviction, excessive repairs, and noise and nuisance complaints. Jurisdictions have generally moved away from a hard bar to re-entry on the part of tenants with adverse tenancy histories (particularly those with an existing debt history). Nevertheless, as pointed out by the Queensland Housing Authority, a perception exists that access to public housing is denied if households have existing debts with the Authority (Submission 5, 2004).<sup>11</sup> Developing ways in which past histories do not act as a bar to re-entry must be one of the key points of focus of policy makers in improving access to mainstream public housing among Indigenous households. WA's *Debt Discount Scheme* provides former tenants with outstanding debts the opportunity to get half of their debt waived. This occurs when half the debt is paid through a process of regular repayments.

Finally, a fear of discrimination against Indigenous households by State/Territory Housing Authorities and a mistrust of Housing Authorities were also considered important potential factors reducing the likelihood of eligible Indigenous households seeking access to mainstream public housing options by NSW, Queensland and the NT. Victoria also noted the problem of the lack of understanding or awareness of Indigenous culture by mainstream public housing staff as an impediment to Indigenous access to mainstream public housing (Submission 8, 2005). Low literacy and numeracy levels, family and cultural obligations and the limited understanding of urban by-laws were also presented as factors impinging on Indigenous access outcomes by the NT.

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<sup>11</sup> Queensland's policy is that those with existing debts may re-enter public housing if an appropriate repayment plan can be established.

### ***Policies and programs which affect the sustainability of tenancies***

Notwithstanding data quality issues, it is clear that the duration of Indigenous tenancies in mainstream public housing are considerably shorter than for non-Indigenous tenancies and that, based on WA evidence, eviction and termination notice rates are higher among Indigenous households than non-Indigenous households. These findings underline the need for Housing Authorities to develop programs to assist households that may prematurely exit from public housing or face eviction.

A number of jurisdictions have developed supported tenancy programs. In SA, seven supported tenancy programs have been established which are designed to support families and individuals with complex needs to maintain their tenancies. Perhaps the strongest and best integrated tenant support programs exist in WA. The *Supported Housing Assistance Program (SHAP)* aims to provide tenants with appropriate skills to fulfil their obligations and responsibilities as tenants. This support includes regular property visits, financial counselling, family and child support, home skills and help in dealing with drug and alcohol abuse problems. One of the important features of WA's SHAP program is the important role played by non-government agencies in delivering services under the program. Linkages between community housing providers and support agencies and mainstream public housing is a feature of the SHAP program but also of Queensland's Same House Different Landlord program which was introduced in pilot form in 2000. Under the program, tenants at risk of eviction may have their tenancy transferred to a community housing provider that provides a supported tenancy management program for tenants for a period of time.<sup>12</sup>

In summary, jurisdictions have taken the initiative in recent years to support tenants at risk of eviction maintain their tenancies. This is, of course, vital in the context of high relative Indigenous termination notice and eviction rates from public housing. There is room for further extension of these programs.

### ***Indigenous representation in housing offices and in decision making roles***

Increasing the representation of Indigenous people in mainstream public housing offices and in decision-making roles in mainstream public housing provides a positive environment for improved Indigenous access and sustainability outcomes. It is important in this regard that increased Indigenous representation is not simply confined to SOMIH directorates or Authorities but is evident throughout the administrative arm of mainstream public housing.

A number of jurisdictions have recently taken steps to increase the number of Indigenous people working in Public Housing Authorities most notably in WA where the goal of the DHW is to achieve 10 per cent Indigenous representation across the organisation. Most jurisdictions have, in recent years, taken steps to increase the representation of Indigenous people in decision-making bodies. In Victoria there exists

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<sup>12</sup> Our emphasis in the above has been on tenant support programs but the role of more general support programs needs to also be acknowledged reflecting the fact that failed tenancies reflect ultimately the level of disadvantage experienced by Indigenous tenants – an example of such a program is the WA *Strong Families Program*.

Indigenous representation on the Ministerial Housing Council and the Office of Housing is seeking to increase the participation and decision-making role of the Aboriginal Housing Board in relation to the management of Aboriginal Housing Rental Program properties. The Indigenous Housing Authority of the NT (IHANT) integrated public housing system offers a model of deep Indigenous community involvement in the construction, maintenance and management of public housing. The fundamental objective of IHANT is that better housing for Indigenous people will be achieved if Indigenous people make decisions about Indigenous housing, all levels of government cooperate and funding is pooled to achieve the best results (Submission 3, 2004).

At a broader level, the Queensland Department of Housing's *Statement of Reconciliation* provides an overarching commitment to address the concerns and issues of Indigenous people and commitments in a number of areas to create a positive environment for existing and prospective Indigenous tenants. NSW is working together with key Aboriginal bodies (Two Ways Together) to develop an Aboriginal Affairs Plan, with commitment for all Departments. The commitment includes improving the social, economic cultural and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal people in NSW.

## 5. Case study findings

In previous sections we focussed on policy-related questions concerning mainstream public housing access issues. In this section we examine the public housing experiences and perceptions of Indigenous people as expressed through case study interviews with public housing tenants, with those in marginalised housing positions who have not gained access to long-term public housing tenancies and with officers in public housing and from various community support agencies. Case study evidence was based on a semi-structured interview approach based around an interview schedule. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Participants were not paid for their time.

Before presenting the results of our qualitative research it is important to highlight a number of features of the research that set it apart from our previous analyses of the mainstream public housing administrative data and our policy review set out in the previous section. First, the information presented is based on the responses of Indigenous people (in the main) to questions around their experiences with public housing. As such the responses from those interviewed illustrate the lived experience of those in housing need. Second, the expressed experiences, perceptions and views of the case study participants may not necessarily correspond with the policies and practices of the relevant public housing authority. The existence of a discrepancy between what a respondent reports and the terms of policies and programs does not necessarily invalidate what respondents have said. Indeed, it provides valuable information for policy makers. Third, it is important to recognise that lying behind respondent views may be a history of failure to achieve access to long-term housing options in public housing or elsewhere, and to a lifetime of discrimination and severe disadvantage and hence frustration. Fourth, it is important to recognise that people in the general community, are not generally aware of, or do not always distinguish adequately between, or may misunderstand the distinction between, 'mainstream' and 'Indigenous-specific' public housing. Indeed, respondents invariably

referred to public housing and not to mainstream (or Indigenous-specific) public housing.

The case study evidence presented in this section is taken from Inala a large residential area in the western suburbs of Brisbane. Inala is a large public housing area with a significant number of Indigenous people. The Inala Housing Office is responsible for the provision of housing for people recently discharged from local prisons including Wolston Corrections Centre, Arthur Gorrie Correctional Centre, Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre and David Longland Centre. The Inala case study, therefore, provided an opportunity to investigate the research questions relating to formerly incarcerated Indigenous people directed to the mainstream and Indigenous specific housing offices in the area.

Ethics approval for the case study was obtained from Flinders University. Following ethics approval, contact was made with the Queensland Department of Housing's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Housing Service Area and the Department of Housing Inala area office. Both offices provided information about local housing organisations and contacts of Indigenous organisations. At the beginning of the project, contact was made with Inala Elders, and with the Aboriginal Health Service located in close proximity to the local shopping centre. Both groups of organisations offered to make personal contact with Indigenous people and this offer was accepted. They were provided with the appropriate introductory letter describing the research. Inala Elders allowed their premises to be used for individual interviews and for focus group meetings.

A total of 20 Indigenous people were interviewed. These people were already living in public housing or wanted to gain access to mainstream public housing. Twelve people were interviewed alone and another eight were interviewed as part of a focus group. All interviewees were over 18 years. Many participants were in their early twenties thus fitting with the general characteristics of the overall population. Some were older with long standing connections to the Inala area. Interviews were held with people who were currently living in Department of Housing accommodation in Inala; homeless people with no address but a shelter in a local park; women in short term emergency housing, families in long term emergency housing and people who had managed to obtain private rentals. A total of 9 representatives of local organisations were interviewed.

### ***Key themes***

#### **Waiting lists and supply-side issues**

Respondents frequently raised the issue of long waiting lists for public housing as a key housing problem. As one young mother related:

*I have been on waiting lists in probably seven different places since my daughter was born...but there is nothing available I reckon. Not emergency accommodation or something even for the night. Nothing around this area anyway. It is always the other side of town.*

Several respondents interviewed made note of the number of public rental houses they believed were lying vacant in Inala:

*I always see houses that no-one is in and I know they are departmental houses and there are so many everywhere. Why have blank (sic) houses when there are so many that need houses instead of being on the street. It is pretty stupid.*

When the researcher canvassed examples of Indigenous people's experiences of attempts to procure housing she was told:

*People tell you it is out there, and it is not to my experience. Availability is not always there. It is not there when you need it. That is why we have such a great need for crisis accommodation.*

### **Housing quality**

The quality or nature of the Department of Housing stock was an issue raised in many of the interviews with Indigenous people, most importantly in respect of safety.

*...the front porch – an electrical fault there is that water comes through the light-bulb, and the security box (power board) goes off quite a few times so it is lucky that it is installed there...They told me that it is because of the trees. I have to get up on the roof and clean the gutters out of all the leaves. This has been done but when it rains the light-bulb fills with water. And they have not done anything about it.*

Arguably the quality of housing is also measured by whether or not there are requisite white goods and other basic furnishings which are often provided by charitable organisations. It may also be judged by the initial presentation of a house to new residents. One member of the focus group recounted an appalling stench on moving in which was traced to garbage, including nappy waste, dumped in a trapdoor located near the house.

The focus group suggested that many of the houses let to Indigenous people are of a style that has downstairs outside toilets, even if it is a high-set property. Another focus group member recounted having to lift his injured daughter downstairs and outside to use the facility. An ageing housing stock is also a problem, for although still in use, these homes were thought to not be repaired because of the expense that would be required.

Both the design and the size of homes provided in mainstream housing are key issues for Indigenous households. 'Bed sit' units that do not have a separate bedroom may be appropriate for single people but the provision of such dwellings to Indigenous people can be problematic as it doesn't recognise that Indigenous people have extended families. When families come in from the remote regions, where they have larger updated accommodation, it is difficult to live in urban areas with smaller homes and longer waiting lists. One member of the focus group stated that it was not only that there were insufficient bedrooms for the average Indigenous family, but that the bedrooms were all very small. This was confirmed directly by the researcher who interviewed many people in their own dwellings in the Inala area.

### **Housing need and homelessness**

Access to and the sustainability of mainstream public housing tenancies for Indigenous people in housing need are a focal point of the present research. Therefore, the views of respondents as to the operation of emergency or temporary accommodation in the local area provide important insights into this key research question. The large number of people living in emergency and crisis accommodation in the local area was seen as being indicative of high levels of unmet housing demand on the part of local Indigenous people.

Homelessness is both visible and invisible. A tenant advice and advocacy service acknowledges the extent of homelessness and its various hidden forms:

*I have a hunch that we have a lot of couch surfing happening out here. I have a hunch that we have a lot of families living in garages of friends and families. We have the hidden homelessness.*

An Indigenous man explained:

*That is just our culture, Indigenous culture. You get an aunt or an uncle come and stay. We don't say after two or three days that you have to move on. That is why there is overcrowding in Aboriginal families because people are waiting for houses but they have to stay with families until they get one.*

An Aboriginal Elder sometimes offers even strangers accommodation in his own home because there are no other options. However, he claims he is not the only one and other families do the same thing.

One form of tenuous housing that many in housing need find themselves in is caravan park accommodation. Interestingly, all Indigenous participants in the research had lived in caravans at some time in the past. Many had lived in them only because of the lack of access to mainstream housing. However, problems arise due to the need to accept this form of accommodation even when unsuitable for the purpose.

The provision of permanent affordable and sustainable housing to those in housing need creates a positive virtuous circle; it helps to reduce the effect of negative social risk factors which act to impede entry to mainstream housing and which also represent a threat to the sustainability of tenancies. In contrast, it is the lack of permanent housing and the high use of emergency accommodation which helps to perpetuate the social circumstances which conspire against good housing outcomes for Indigenous people in housing need. The high use of emergency accommodation, therefore, illustrates the 'stop gap' housing history of unstable accommodation and homelessness.

### **Past records**

A pervading theme expressed by a range of the research respondents, both Indigenous people and practitioners, was the impact that the use of past records has on the lives of people seeking accommodation both in the private sector and in public housing. While arguably an important business tool for property risk management, the use of past tenancy

records creates enormous difficulties for Indigenous people in housing need (who often have poor housing records) accessing housing (Cooper and Morris, 2005). Being marked by public housing tenancy history records created a sense of hopelessness among affected respondents.

Debt is an overarching problem for many Indigenous people in housing need which compounds the difficulty in securing and then maintaining affordable tenancies both in public housing and in the private rental market. A Prison Chaplain, assisting in the transition of prisoners to the community, stated that between 80 and 90 per cent of prisoners had a debt to the Department of Housing. Debts are seen as a barrier to accessing both public and private housing. This was a re-occurring view presented by both the Indigenous people interviewed and by service providers. Barriers to access are also highlighted by the size and extent of indebtedness. One respondent had a debt of over \$1500 to which she was making occasional payments of \$20. Other amounts of \$1200 and \$800 were also cited. Debts were assumed to prohibit people from accessing public housing and there was little awareness of Department of Housing mechanisms through which this debt could be managed so as to still gain entry. People with prior debts can still apply and list for housing assistance despite the widespread understanding (expressed by Indigenous people) that they cannot. Not one Indigenous person or group interviewed was aware that this was the current policy. Indigenous people believe that they will not be provided with a house until they have repaid all their debts to the Department of Housing.

### **Discrimination**

Discrimination can be expressed across a range of dimensions including gender, age, disabilities, race, and sexuality. In the case of Indigenous people, all forms of discrimination are exacerbated by the race dimension. This points to the inevitable difficulties for Indigenous people in seeking affordable housing. Much of the case study evidence in relation to discrimination in housing was from the private sector, but issues about public housing were also raised.

One group of Indigenous women reflected on more specific aspects of this wide-ranging discrimination, saying:

*They think we are all dirty and lazy.  
We can't keep our house I suppose.  
Or we can't keep our rent up and things like that.  
Or blacks just drink and have parties.*

### **Stereotyping**

The difficulties in terms of discrimination for all prisoners on release are compounded if they are Indigenous. A Prison Chaplain explains:

*It is a barrier. Especially if you are dealing with real estates it is really difficult. If you are a prisoner it doesn't really matter if you are black, white or brindle you are a criminal...They just don't want to have anything to do with them.*

Some prisoners leave gaol with no formal identity, a loss of life skills and a dysfunctional relationship with society. There is also a high level of debt for many. While these are not necessarily always race-related problems, arguably they are more severe for many Indigenous people.

Discrimination leads to negative outcomes including a lack of dignity, self-worth and feelings of shame. This shame may relate to the need to ‘front’ an agency asking for assistance for housing, or get help in completing application forms due to illiteracy.

### **Domestic violence**

Domestic violence is both a precursor to tenancy risk, but also a result of the tensions around gaining sustainable and affordable mainstream housing. It also includes child and sexual abuse which one worker says is ‘rife out there’:

*I have worked in child care and I have done domestic violence also. I have been working for both those situations. And the sexual abuse out there, be it on children, or be it on the adults, that is another problem. Some will say ‘don’t talk about it. We don’t want anyone outside the family to talk about it and we’ll sort out our own problems here.’ There could be one person in the family who will say ‘I’m not going to sort it out here, we are going to take it to court. We are going to make sure that these things come to the fore.’ That person then gets beaten up, thrown out of the home, and these things go on.*

A recurring issue throughout the case study research is the dilemma facing women experiencing domestic violence. Often the house they have been forced to flee has been provided in their own name, and they are legally responsible for the rental payments and ensuring good management of the property. Yet these women may have no other choice but to flee the violent situation while retaining responsibility for the premises.

### **Drug and alcohol substance abuse and other risk factors**

Drug and alcohol abuse is also a precursor to tenancy risk. An Aboriginal welfare worker stated that the drug and alcohol issue is ‘getting out of hand’. Alcohol is seen as a greater problem because it is not illegal. A welfare worker described how the older Indigenous generation tends to maintain links with clan so that ‘someone else’s pain is their pain’. However, younger Indigenous people are less likely to have strong clan bonds and seek substitutes for emotional and psychological needs. The welfare worker was aware of three deaths in twelve months from drug and substance abuse.

Gambling is a risk factor to Indigenous tenancies in the mainstream housing sector as it is in the wider housing market. There are obvious threats to tenancies when there is insufficient money for rent. As one agency worker noted:

*Gambling seems to be an issue for younger Indigenous women. ‘Kara’s’ (a local woman) grand-daughter had six children and the week after she got her \$2600 cheque she was down here the next week for assistance with food. I said to ‘Kara’ ‘where is the money going?’ She said the pokies.*

### **Leaving prison**

One service provider points to the difficulty facing young Indigenous women leaving prison, especially with newborn babies. They have nowhere to go and do not qualify for any particular occupation. However, they would benefit from parenting and life skills programs:

*Because if we get these girls when they first come out, there is less chance of re-offending. And as we get our mandate a lot more of these girls will come to us. It is specific to girls who have been in detention. We want them to come.*

A Prison Chaplain explains the negative effects of institutionalisation through incarceration:

*A lot of guys get out and they have no skills at all because they have been so ingrained in what the system is that they have no idea of how the outside world functions. And pretty much it is the case that they are pretty dysfunctional with the outside world in the first place before they went to gaol.*

Low levels of literacy and numeracy and the general lack of education have both social and economic precursors and outcomes. Low levels of literacy also result in shame:

*They do not want to go and get their driver's licence because they have to get their 'Learners'. Soon as they walk in it is the way they are looked at. These kids crumble. They are twenty one and twenty two. And as one of the kids remarked 'it is not that we can't drive.'*

There are also implications for Indigenous people being able to become more aware of their rights and responsibilities and navigate the range of information necessary to be informed citizens.

### **Other issues**

Indigenous people from more remote areas come to Brisbane for medical treatment. If they do not come with their family they may face social disintegration. Moving from rural and remote to urban areas was seen as creating an enormous toll on many Indigenous people. When separated from family, newly arrived Indigenous people may turn to a familial substitute found in alcohol and drugs. There can also be a reduction in housing size and longer waiting lists on moving to an urban environment. A 'clash of cultures' between traditional and more urbanised Indigenous people was also an issue that arose in the case study interviews.

There were also views put by youth service workers interviewed of a legacy of program failures in the local area, with one stating that none of the Indigenous-related

programs instigated in the local area over the last fourteen years, in their experience, had survived, except for one Indigenous kindergarten. The economic and political difficulties surrounding the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), most obviously over 2004 (now abolished) was seen as compounding the problem.

There is a link between transport access and the ability to sustain tenancies. Financial difficulties result in a low level of private car ownership for Indigenous people in need who are largely reliant on public transport. The location of housing options away from public transport is a barrier to the 'leg work' required to visit a range of agencies including Centrelink, housing and welfare agencies, as well as accessing employment opportunities, shopping and socialising.

## 6. Conclusion

This multi-faceted study provides an assessment of the extent to which the BBF strategy of improving Indigenous access to mainstream public housing for those in housing need is being realised. The evidence presented in this study indicates that Indigenous people now comprise a larger share of those entering mainstream public housing than they did when governments made their BBF commitment in 2001. Indigenous access to mainstream public housing has improved in an environment where the mainstream public housing sector is shrinking. Furthermore, Indigenous people, who are successful in accessing mainstream public housing, experience waiting times no longer than non-Indigenous public housing applicants.

Nevertheless, the quantitative evidence also indicates that significant problems remain in respect to the sustainability of tenancies. Indigenous people exhibit shorter tenancies and, at least on the one available set of relevant data we have available to us from Western Australia (WA), are significantly more likely to be served termination and final eviction notices than their non-Indigenous counterparts. Furthermore, Indigenous overcrowding rates, within mainstream public housing, lie well above corresponding rates for the non-Indigenous tenant population. Most importantly, the level of severe housing need among Indigenous people, the factor that drives much of the interest in public housing access and tenancy sustainability issues, remains at very high levels.

The continued existence of high levels of unmet housing need in the Indigenous population suggests that a strong focus of policy must be on reducing supply-side impediments to access. There is an urgent need to arrest recent declines in the overall supply of mainstream public housing dwellings if levels of housing need among Indigenous people and in the non-Indigenous population are to be reduced.

Better targeting of the existing public housing stock must also be high on the agenda if the present tightening of public housing supply continues. Priority access now represents the dominant form of entry to public housing in most jurisdictions, but consideration must be given to further increasing its role. In a similar vein, the issue of developing mechanisms that facilitate higher rates of exit from public housing for those who can adequately cope in the private market must be further considered. Any reform agenda in terms of increasing tenant turnover in public housing must, of course, be very carefully managed so that only those with a sufficiently strong income position and with

necessary tenancy management capabilities to cope with a transition to the private sector are considered in any transition program. There are neighbourhood effects to be considered in relation to improved targeting of public housing in cases where public housing is highly concentrated.

The issue of the sustainability of public housing tenancies of those who would otherwise be in housing need is also one of fundamental concern. The average duration of Indigenous tenancies in mainstream public housing lies well below that for non-Indigenous tenancies and yet Indigenous tenants are more likely to be drawn from greatest need categories. The maintenance of long-term secure accommodation is a key objective for those in such categories. These findings underline the need for Housing Authorities to continue to develop supported tenancy programs to assist households that may prematurely exit from public housing or face eviction.

Increasing the representation of Indigenous people in mainstream public housing offices and in decision-making roles in mainstream public housing provides a positive environment for improved Indigenous access and sustainability outcomes. It is important in this regard that increased Indigenous representation is not simply confined to Indigenous-specific public directorates or Authorities but is evident throughout the administrative arm of mainstream public housing. At a broader level, public Housing Authorities need to recognise a history of disadvantage and discrimination in housing affecting Indigenous people and the deep need for reconciliation.

Our findings from the administrative data and from a review of State/Territory Housing Authority programs and policies suggest that significant gains are being made in terms of an increasing access of Indigenous people to mainstream public housing and the development of new programs designed to support Indigenous people access and sustain tenancies. However, the Inala case study points to the need to push the reform process much further in order to find solutions to the problems confronting Indigenous people in housing need accessing sustainable and affordable mainstream housing. The crucial insight arising from the case studies, through the voices of those interviewed, are that the multiplicity of factors around race, discrimination, lack of housing stock and supports and a wide range of risk factors all conspire to deny many Indigenous people access to mainstream housing.

Australian governments have made a landmark commitment to improving housing outcomes for Indigenous people in the *Building a Better Future: Indigenous Housing to 2010* (BBF) agreement. It is through the implementation strategies in BBF that a co-ordinated response to Indigenous housing outcomes can be maintained and enhanced and it is in terms of the success in achieving better housing-related outcomes for Indigenous Australians that Australian governments can be judged over the remaining five years of the agreement.

## Appendix A: List of submissions and survey questions

- Submission 1 Community Housing Federation of Australia (March 2005)
- Submission 2 Community Housing Coalition of WA (2005)
- Submission 3. Department of Community Development, Sport and Cultural Affairs, NT (October 2004)
- Submission 4 Department of Housing, NSW (November 2004)
- Submission 5 Department of Housing, Queensland, (October 2004 plus supplementary material provided at a later date)
- Submission 6 Department of Housing and Works, WA (September 2004)
- Submission 7 Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services, Housing and Community Services, ACT (October 2004)
- Submission 8 Department of Human Services, Housing and Community Building, VIC (April 2005)
- Submission 9 Housing Tasmania (September 2004)
- Submission 10 NSW Federation of Housing Associations (March 2005)
- Submission 11 South Australian Housing Trust, (September 2004)
- Submission 12 Tenants Advice Shelter, SA (September 2004)
- Submission 13 Tenants Union of Victoria (September 2005)
- Submission 14 Tasmanian Co-operative Housing Development Service (March 2005)

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