

parity

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Understanding and Responding to Indigenous Homelessness



SUPPORT FROM THE HEART

Understanding and Responding to Indigenous Homelessness in Tennant Creek

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Tennant Creek (Warumungu: *Jurnkkurakurr*) sits at a crossroads both literally and figuratively. The town of roughly 3,500 people represents only 2.4 per cent of the Northern Territory's (NT) population but accounts for 4.6 per cent of its homeless population. There are no short- or medium-term accommodation providers in Tennant Creek, yet 80 per cent of the people who seek assistance from the support-only services that do exist, need secure accommodation. In the NT, repeat homelessness by regional centre is highest in Tennant Creek (33.3 per cent) because there is simply nowhere to go.

Make the short drive around town and you won't necessarily see people sleeping on collapsed cardboard boxes or pitching a tent by the side of the road, although you would notice the occasional 'bush camp'. Homelessness looks different here. It looks like a public house where 20 people share three bedrooms; communal areas repurposed to accommodate beds, a single toilet, and a yard that the leaseholders struggle to keep tidy. It looks like overcrowding.

In the NT, overcrowding accounts for 81 per cent of homelessness and it impacts Aboriginal people more than any other group (in 2018-19, almost 18 per cent of Indigenous Australians were living in overcrowded dwellings, compared with five per cent of non-Indigenous Australians). In 2019/20, Julalikari Council Aboriginal Corporation ran a survey of every household in Tennant Creek's Community

Living Areas (CLAs) and confirmed that there was serious overcrowding with some houses sheltering more than 20 people. A separate survey found that almost all houses needed urgent repairs and maintenance.

There are some houses that have simply been forgotten and are now lean-to shacks with caved in tin roofs and tarpaulins for walls. Despite being serviced by neither water nor power, these shacks provide necessary shelter for some individuals for whom overcrowded houses are too hard to live in.

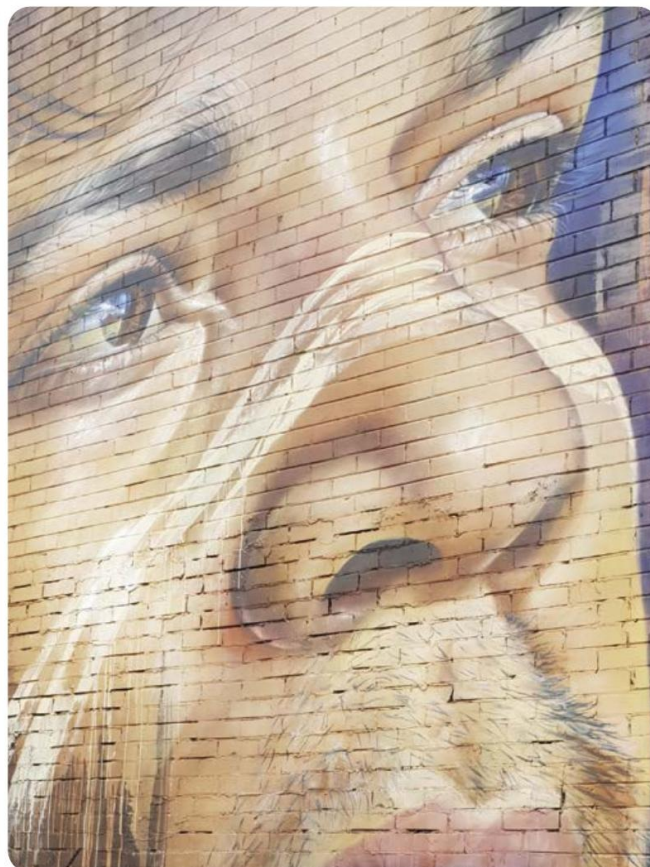
Understanding why overcrowding happens can be complicated. Cultural and social factors are often cited, such as a strong connection to family and a culture of mutual care, but in Tennant Creek, structural drivers need

to be considered, simply the lack of affordable and appropriate housing. According to the NT's submission to the Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia, overcrowding in remote NT households is not usually a culturally sanctioned environment, but an uncontrolled situation that is detrimental to the health of occupants.

The individuals who live in these shacks, or those that live in the yards or on the couches of friends and family in public housing, are waiting for their name to get to the top of the public housing waitlist. The estimated wait time for public housing in Tennant Creek is six to eight years. If you are on the priority list, it's not much quicker at two to six years. At the time of writing (October 2021), there are 219 applications for public housing in Tennant Creek. From 1 July 2020 to 30 June 2021, only four houses were allocated.

There is now plenty of empirical evidence showing how overcrowding impacts social and economic outcomes. Overcrowding is linked to domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV); women and children are pushed further into homelessness if they leave their aggressor to face a sector that, in Tennant Creek, is limited to crisis response or stay with their abuser because of the lack of alternative accommodation options.

Children also are disproportionately impacted by overcrowding, with strong evidence showing that it contributes to poor developmental outcomes. Forty two per cent of those



living in severely overcrowded conditions in the NT are children.

With the scale of the crisis in Tennant Creek, it can be hard to fathom a response but there may be hope ahead.

Julalikari (English: everyone) Council Aboriginal Corporation is one of the largest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander corporations in Australia and Tennant Creek's biggest employer. Julalikari's aim is to alleviate poverty and improve the wellbeing of the Aboriginal people of Tennant Creek and surrounding communities. With its more than 40-year history, Julalikari is embedded in the Tennant Creek community; currently it runs disability services, night patrol, a child and family centre, land management, a bustling café and more. Julalikari's hope is that in 2022, it will also become Tennant Creek's registered community housing provider.

Once registered, Julalikari aims to take over the management of a portion of public housing assets that are currently managed by the Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities (TFHC).

According to Chairperson Linda (LT) Turner, *'Safe and secure housing is of critical importance to Aboriginal people in every facet of their lives, it is vital Aboriginal people have a voice and manage their own community housing within a local decision-making council. Locally Representative Councils can be responsive to overcrowding and advocate planning growth demand, develop culturally appropriate partnered healthy home/tenancy support services and determine strategies to make sustainable change.'*

It is concerning that so many of our people live homeless and in poverty due to lack of this basic need, a roof over their head. Housing is a crucial element to success in Closing the Gap targets for all age groups and sadly homelessness appears to continue to grow with no concentrated efforts to address it.'

The housing crisis in Tennant Creek has been at boiling point for a long time. From this crossroads, the only way must be up.

