

## Improving housing and mental health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Findings from the [Trajectories Report from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Consultations](#) demonstrate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should have access to safe, secure, appropriate and affordable housing, along with culturally safe tenancy support and mental health services.

Aboriginal people experience higher rates of psychosocial distress than non-indigenous people<sup>i</sup>. They are 10 times as likely to live in social housing and three times as likely to live in overcrowded dwellings.<sup>ii</sup>

***“We’ve been told that we love to live in overcrowded housing conditions. It’s a cultural thing. And it’s not. It’s only cultural because we’ve got four walls around us. We can’t spread out. We’ve got to be stuck in the house. We were used to living with each other, but in open space.”***

The *Trajectories* research sought to understand the interplay of people’s housing and mental health pathways, with this report specifically seeking out the voices and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Fifty-seven interviews with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were conducted in four areas of Australia: Alice Springs, Darwin, Melbourne and Port Hedland. These consultations informed the Report, and recommendations for change.

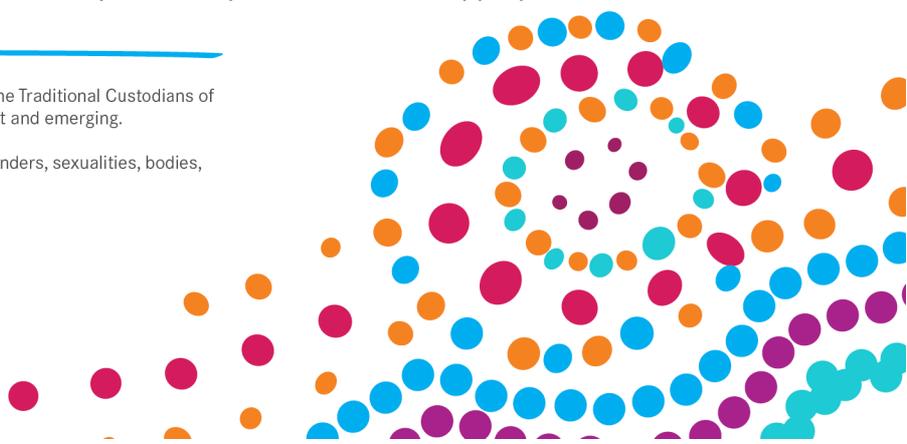
### Key findings

- There is a complex and intersecting relationship between housing and mental health, with forced moves, and removal from country negatively impacting mental health.
- Housing and mental health are interrelated. Housing is essential for mental health recovery.
- Overcrowding was reported as having a negative impact on mental wellbeing, and stymied people’s progress toward mental health recovery.
- People’s talk about their housing and mental health experiences exposed deep levels of distress, often prolonged over many years.
- The significant distress experienced by participants was exacerbated by lengthy waiting lists for public housing, living in unsafe or precarious housing, financial constraints, family obligations and encountering racism and discrimination.
- Choice and control over mental health supports was limited, with trauma often going unacknowledged and unaddressed.
- Housing policies and programs designed by and for mainstream populations may not fit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of understanding and being.
- Mental health and housing supports are not always culturally safe, secure and appropriate.

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Both the [Productivity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health](#), and [Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System](#) have acknowledged the relationship between mental health and housing, and the need for mental health services tailored to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that are culturally safe and support social and emotional wellbeing. However, these findings and recommendations regarding housing and mental health and the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aren't well-linked through the proposed design of service infrastructure.

Significant shifts in policy and practice are required if the housing and mental health service systems are to become more responsive and relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with mental ill-health.

This much needed reform must take place in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, so policymakers consider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander understandings of housing and mental health.

## Recommendations for Reform

### What's needed for people to have better outcomes?

The *Trajectories Report from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Consultations* highlights the pressing need for meaningful and appropriate mental health and housing support which aligns with the principles and values of Aboriginal kinship and ways of being. Recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concepts of social and emotional wellbeing, mental health and healing is also a key element of the [Gayaa Dhuwi \(Proud Spirit\) Declaration](#). These findings suggest that policymakers and service providers should:

#### 1. Pay greater attention to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language and meaning in relation to people's values and how they live, so that mainstream policies better respond to the needs as expressed by people and build on their strengths

- Work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations, including housing and mental health service providers, to develop policies and services.

#### 2. Provide culturally safe therapy and trauma counselling

Both the Productivity Commission (Action 8.3) and Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System (Recommendation 33, Interim Report Recommendation 4) have made recommendations on how the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal people could be better supported. Further, Australia has a commitment within the Closing the Gap Agreement to ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience higher levels of social and emotional wellbeing ([Outcome 14](#)).

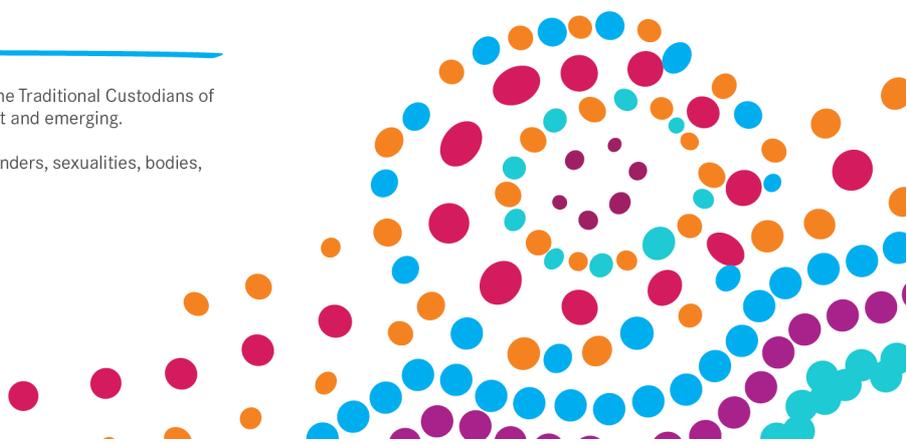
- Ensure mainstream mental health services develop culturally safe services in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Increase the availability of culturally safe and appropriate therapy and trauma counselling.

#### 3. Significantly reduce wait times to access public housing as housing insecurity impacts mental health

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- Increase the supply of public, community and affordable housing, including Aboriginal controlled housing stock, that is safe and secure for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, to reduce wait times for public housing given housing insecurity impacts on mental health.
- Develop the capability of non-Aboriginal tenancy management organisations and personnel so they are able to intervene early and in ways that are culturally appropriate.

#### 4. Provide more safe, secure housing to allow people to have space to focus on their mental health

Australia has an obligation under the Closing the Gap agreement to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their priorities and needs ([Outcome 9](#)). Governments should undertake further action to meet the Closing the Gap target of increasing the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in appropriately designed (not overcrowded) housing to 88 per cent by 2031.

- Invest to develop more public, community and affordable housing, with development undertaken in collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Enhance Productivity Commission Recommendation 20.3 by working with housing support providers and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to address the shortfall in the number of supported housing places for people with severe mental illness.

#### 5. Access to housing should be flexible, comprehensive and responsive to people's circumstances, especially where forced moves are necessary.

The voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in our report speaks loudly and clearly that governments have an obligation to ensure quality housing and streamlined access to mental health and housing services. They should commit to:

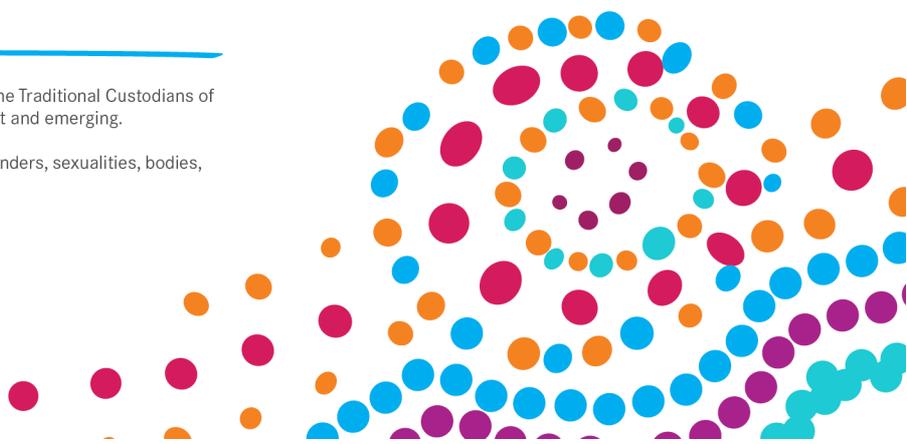
- No discharges into homelessness, as per Productivity Commission Action 20.2. This should include supporting people with mental illness with comprehensive discharge plans and boosting levels of supported housing.
- Working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, public and social housing providers to implement culturally safe tenancy management with an emphasis on mental health, so that people can be supported to maintain their tenancies, particularly after episodes of hospitalisation.
- Adapting Productivity Recommendation 20.1 to ensure mental health training and resources for housing services incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander understandings of housing, social and emotional wellbeing and mental illness, to enhance cultural safety
- Supporting the lived experience workforce, so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are supported to use their lived experience of the housing and mental health sectors if they choose to work in these roles.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and being must be central to the design of additional housing stock, and the development of mental health and tenancy support services.

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<sup>i</sup> Jorm, A. F., Bourchier, S. J., Cvetkovski, S., & Stewart, G. (2012). Mental health of Indigenous Australians: a review of findings from community surveys. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 196(2), 118-121.

<sup>ii</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW] (2019) Indigenous Housing, AIHW, Canberra, accessed 22 December 2020, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/indigenous-housing>.

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