

Submission

The extent and nature of  
Poverty in Australia  
2023

ANTAR



## About ANTAR

**ANTAR is a national advocacy organisation working for Justice, Rights and Respect for Australia's First Nations Peoples. We do this primarily through campaigns, advocacy, and lobbying.**

ANTAR is working to mobilise Australians to vote YES at the referendum for a First Nations Voice to Parliament enshrined in the Constitution, and for this to be complemented with a Makarrata Commission to drive agreement making and truth-telling processes across Australia.

We also engage in national advocacy across various policy and social justice issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, including cultural heritage protection; justice reinvestment, over-incarceration and raising the age of criminal responsibility; anti-racism campaigns, native title and land rights, and closing the life equality gap.

ANTAR is a foundational member of both the Close the Gap Campaign and Change the Record Campaign Steering Committee, and an organisational and executive committee member of Just Reinvest NSW. ANTAR has been working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, organisations and leaders on rights and reconciliation issues since 1997. ANTAR is a non-government, not-for-profit, independently funded and community-based organisation.

# Introduction

**Thank you for the opportunity to provide commentary on the extent of poverty in Australia with a particular focus on housing issues faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.**

First Nations Peoples experience significant disadvantages compared to non-Indigenous Australians, particularly in respect of housing, health, life expectancy, education, employment, and imprisonment (largely a social determinants issue). Historically, First Nations Peoples have been over represented among those experiencing homelessness, insecure housing, and those seeking assistance with housing. By not having access to affordable, secure and appropriate housing, the disadvantage and ensuing social exclusion suffered by First Nations Peoples only compounds further.<sup>1</sup>

Addressing the disparity in housing affordability, homelessness, and accessibility between First Nations Peoples and non-Indigenous people is a critical aspect to closing the gap. The Government therefore has a responsibility to provide meaningful and effective housing support to First Nations communities. To date, goals for achieving equality in life expectancy, child mortality rates, and employment between non-Indigenous and First Nations Peoples are not on track, with rates considerably worse for remote areas. These changes are greatly dependent on health and the social determinants factors of education, income and housing.<sup>2</sup>

Housing is a fundamental right of Indigenous peoples as per Article 21 of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) which states:

**21.1. Indigenous peoples have the right, without discrimination, to the improvement of their economic and social conditions, including,**

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<sup>1</sup> Closing the Gap Report 2022

<sup>2</sup> Closing the Gap Campaign Report 2021

**inter alia, in the areas of education, employment, vocational training and retraining, housing, sanitation, health and social security.<sup>3</sup>**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to live in healthy, safe environments in communities with adequate housing and suitable services so that the gap may ultimately be closed and they can enjoy all rights.

## **Relationship between Poverty & Housing**

Poverty is inextricably linked to housing circumstances for First Nations Peoples. Further, inadequate housing can be considered to be a key determinant of their poor health status, with factors such as tenure, affordability, size of living spaces, location and accessibility all influencing poor housing circumstances.<sup>4</sup> Without access to a suitable housing environment, a person can experience detrimental impacts to their health, productivity and wellbeing, which can last a lifetime.

This is why housing has been a prominent focus (with far too limited success) of the Closing the Gap Frameworks since 2009. Target 9 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2020) is 'People can secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their priorities and need', with a 2031 target of achieving overcrowding in housing to 88 percent of non-Indigenous peoples.<sup>5</sup> This is not ambitious enough for one of the building blocks of good health and wellbeing.

Housing disadvantage can take many forms including poor physical dwelling conditions, crowding, instability, and unaffordability which cause detrimental consequences. For example, dampness is associated with respiratory illnesses; frequent residential moves can lead to poor child education outcomes; unaffordability can impact mental health; and crowding is associated with stress and infectious diseases.

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<sup>3</sup> United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples 2007

<sup>4</sup> [Housing conditions of urban households with Aboriginal children in NSW Australia: tenure type matters](#), 2018, Melanie Andersen, Anna Williamson, Peter Fernando, Darryl Wright and Sally Redman:

<sup>5</sup> [National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2020 - Targets](#)

These diseases include, but are not limited to, meningococcal, tuberculosis, rheumatic fever, respiratory diseases, diarrhoeal diseases, and skin, eye and ear infections, which have the greatest impact on Indigenous children.<sup>6</sup>

Lack of access to essential services and poor housing conditions are a problem for many First Nations families and communities, particularly those in remote and regional areas. This is highlighted by the long running dispute between the Northern Territory Government and residents of Ltyentye Apurte (Santa Teresa community) over claims of inadequate and dilapidated homes located south east of Alice Springs; or in Western Australia, where the former State government threatened to cut off essential services to hundreds of remote homeland communities after Commonwealth funding was cut in 2015.<sup>7</sup>

In 2018-19, the Australian Institute for Health and Wellbeing (AIHW) and the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) estimated that of 486,293 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults living in Indigenous households:

- 34% rented through social housing, 33% rented privately through a real estate agent or another arrangement, and only 31% lived in households that were owned or being purchased;
- The proportion of First Nations peoples living in overcrowded households was 18% (145,340), compared to 27% in 2004;
- The proportion of First Nations adults living in overcrowded households was highest in *very remote* areas (51%) and lowest in *inner regional* areas (8%);
- First Nations peoples accounted for 20% of homeless; and
- Over 1 in 4 specialist homelessness services clients were First Nations peoples, with 61% being females, and 22% children between 0 and 9 years.<sup>8</sup>

Data has shown that many Aboriginal communities in the more remote parts of Australia experience higher rates of severe overcrowding, homelessness and very poor dwelling conditions. In these remote communities, basic amenities required to engage in healthy living practices including, but not limited to, flushing toilets, bathing facilities, washers or goods to help prepare and store food adequately, have been

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<sup>6</sup> [Housing conditions of urban households with Aboriginal children in NSW Australia: tenure type matters](#), 2018, Melanie Andersen, Anna Williamson, Peter Fernando, Darryl Wright and Sally Redman

<sup>7</sup> [Closing the Gap: states and territories pledge to lift First Nations housing standards](#), Sarah Collard, August 2022

<sup>8</sup> [Tier 2 – Determinants of health: 2.01 Housing](#):

found missing or non-functional in a substantial proportion of those households surveyed.<sup>9</sup> The National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) has shown that these disparities create flow-on effects into poor mental and physical health, lack of employment opportunities, inadequate income to cover living expenses, and amplify family and domestic violence.<sup>10</sup>

In respect of overcrowding, the NACCHO defines such households as not meeting the following requirements:

- No more than two persons per bedroom;
- Children aged under 5 years of different sexes may reasonably share a bedroom;
- Children aged over 5 years of opposite sex should have separate bedrooms;
- Children aged under 18 years and the same sex may reasonably share a bedroom;
- Single household members aged over 18 years should have a separate bedroom, as should parents or couples.

Overcrowding is caused by a lack of housing availability, particularly public and community housing, and a shortage of affordable private rental properties in the community, which has particularly harmful consequences on health. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families living in overcrowded situations are more susceptible to contracting infections through lack of hygiene from poor sanitation. Chronic ear infections, eye infections, skin conditions, gastroenteritis, and respiratory infections, as well as causing psychological stress and exacerbation of family violence and mental health issues, are all potential outcomes from overcrowded environments.<sup>11</sup> These infections have the greatest impact on Indigenous children and are directly related to factors such as inadequate water supplies, sanitation and overcrowding.

There are also circumstances where strong family connections and cultural obligations to share resources can cause overcrowding in that available dwellings may not be able to accommodate large households and so would be deemed unsuitable.

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<sup>9</sup> [Housing conditions of urban households with Aboriginal children in NSW Australia: tenure type matters](#), 2018, Melanie Andersen, Anna Williamson, Peter Fernando, Darryl Wright and Sally Redman:

<sup>10</sup> National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), *Inquiry into regional inequality in Australia: Senate Standing Committee on Economics*, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> [Overcrowding leads to poorer health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples](#), Morgan Liotta, 2018

Further, where individuals and families have the absence of secure, safe, and affordable housing, they may rely on extended kin to provide accommodation, which further exacerbates this issue.<sup>12</sup>

In the context of urban areas, a Study of Environment on Aboriginal Resilience and Child Health prepared a cross-sectional survey where 600 caregivers of 1406 Aboriginal children aged between 0 to 17 years old in NSW were recruited between 2008 and 2010 to provide data to be followed over twenty years, and collected every 5 years.

The majority of households lived in social housing (60%), around 21% rented privately and 19% either owned their home outright or had mortgage obligations. Housing problems were common among the study, particularly structural problems, damp and mildew, vermin, crowding and unaffordability. Physical dwelling problems were most common for those living in social housing. Those in private rental moved home most frequently, with children in private rental more than three times as likely to have lived in four or more homes since birth than those in owned homes.<sup>13</sup> The ensuing instability caused by these housing market conditions are exacerbating the negative outcomes already outlined.

In more extreme, but not uncommon, circumstances, low housing affordability or unavailable housing can lead to homelessness. Notwithstanding how unsafe and frightening those circumstances can be to an individual or family, the flow on effects that this can cause health outcomes is substantial.

At the least, providing medical treatment when someone does not have accommodation has challenges as the person has no control over their environment, and can be vulnerable to sickness and violence.<sup>14</sup> Secure housing with access to appropriate services would assist with the management and recovery of a range of health issues.<sup>15</sup>

Ultimately, good environmental health, and especially housing, has the ability to influence the health of First Nations peoples holistically in terms of life expectancy,

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<sup>12</sup> Housing and Homelessness, Allen & Clarke 2022, Institute of health and wellness

<sup>13</sup> [Housing conditions of urban households with Aboriginal children in NSW Australia: tenure type matters](#), 2018, Melanie Andersen, Anna Williamson, Peter Fernando, Darryl Wright and Sally Redman

<sup>14</sup> National Agreement on Closing the Gap, July 2020

<sup>15</sup> Housing and Homelessness, Allen & Clarke 2022, Institute of health and wellness

child mortality, disability, chronic disease, psychological stresses, and family and community violence.<sup>16</sup>

## Support during Covid-19

From the outset of the pandemic, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders were highly aware of the significant risks the COVID-19 outbreak posed to their communities. Increased levels of chronic disease and other pre-existing health conditions, coupled with poor infrastructure, overcrowding, and lack of income would not only contribute to a higher likelihood of transmission, but created conditions for a potential health disaster for First Nations communities.<sup>17</sup>

Epidemiologist Professor Fiona Stanley, a public health expert and former Australian of the Year, reflected that:

**“The extremely low rate of COVID-19 among Australia's First Nations peoples was the best result for any Indigenous population in the world. It is not just a reversal of the gap but an outstanding result,” Professor Stanley further said, “It was supposed to be a disaster, but because they acted so responsibly, it was a model of how to prevent an epidemic in a high risk population. This extraordinary result just shows what happens when Aboriginal leadership is listened to.”<sup>18</sup>**

However, an aspect that was able to create some comfort and ease during such a potential disaster was the Australian Government’s economic response to provide a large increase in the receipt of government income support payments, with the number of recipients of unemployment payments almost doubling between March and May 2020.

This increase resulted in reductions to the Nation’s general poverty rate at the height of the pandemic up to 32%. It was found that the increase in government payments

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<sup>16</sup> Closing the Gap report 2022

<sup>17</sup> Closing the Gap Campaign Report 2021

<sup>18</sup> [When it came to COVID-19, Indigenous Australians sent it packing, Julie Power, November 2020](#)



was the key reason for this reduction, and that poverty levels would have likely increased dramatically without these additional payments, let alone what this could have meant for remote and very remote Indigenous communities.

Research indicated that the additional payments were used to meet basic needs, improved the physical and mental health of recipients, and allowed people to engage in unpaid productive work including care and community work.<sup>19</sup>

During that time, the poverty gap and the number of persons in poverty was not only lower if no such course was taken, but was also much lower than pre-COVID-19 times. If this increase in support payments did not occur, the number of persons experiencing poverty would have likely increased from around 1.6 million to 3.8 million.

Unfortunately, the 2020 July policy change pushed a large number of people back into poverty and further increased the poverty gap and housing stresses.<sup>20</sup>

UNSW Social Policy Research Centre Director Scientia Professor, Carla Treloar, advised that the federal government's decisions to end the coronavirus supplement and JobKeeper without adequate substitutes had actually locked more people into poverty. Treloar further said:

**“Despite remarkable early progress in reducing poverty and income inequality during the COVID-19 recession, they are both likely to be higher now than before the pandemic. That’s the legacy of the policy response to the COVID pandemic.”**

The Australian Council of Social Services Chief Executive, Cassandra Goldie, also asserted that, “COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that poverty and inequality are not an inevitable state of being. They grow because government policies allow them to, and in many cases, directly increase them.”<sup>21</sup>

Although not specifically in respect of support payments made at that time, Australian

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<sup>19</sup> Social Security and time using during Covid-19 Report Treating Families Fairly 2021

<sup>20</sup> Impact of Covid-19 Job keeper and job seeker measures on poverty and financial stress, ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods, 29 August 2020

<sup>21</sup> [Poverty fell during first year of COVID but has now increased](#), Shane Wright, Sydney Morning Herald, 2 March 2022

Governments did open other lines of communication and collaboration for First Nations community members to contribute during the pandemic, as iterated by June Oscar AO, Co-Chair, Close the Gap Campaign & Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner:

**“At the onset of COVID Australian governments finally put their trust in us — those with on the ground local insights and expertise to keep our people healthy. As we have all said, time and again, we know what is best for our own health and wellbeing, and that of our families and wider communities. When control is in our hands, when we can exercise autonomy, we succeed.”<sup>22</sup>**

This line of thought should be applied across all matters that have the capacity to impact the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, including the support funds needed by individuals, families and communities to live above the poverty line and have access to adequate housing.

## **Proposed Solutions**

For First Nations Australians, housing must be suitable for physical, social, cultural and special needs, while also being adaptable for various life stages. While some improvements in overcrowding, home ownership and a reduction in homelessness have been made over the years, there is a continued need for community based strategies that aim to provide access to affordable, safe and sustainable housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Pursuant to this, it remains essential for First Nations Peoples to always be consulted about housing and community issues to ensure their needs are met.

Aboriginal people are less likely to own their own homes largely due to the ongoing effects of colonisation and dispossession, which includes intergenerational poverty, marginalisation, and ongoing racial discrimination in employment and housing markets. Thus efforts to improve housing disadvantage for Aboriginal people will also likely require cross-sectoral collaboration with the education, employment, justice and

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<sup>22</sup> Closing the Gap Campaign Report 2021

health sectors, relevant professionals from those areas, along with programs to actively address racial discrimination.<sup>23</sup>

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap's Outcome 9 aims to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in appropriately sized (not overcrowded) housing to 88% by 2031.<sup>24</sup> To this end, investment in the programs that have been designed and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is the most effective way to achieve better housing solutions and health outcomes. Closing the gap aims to deliver a community-led, strengths-based approach with Aboriginal people as the centre of strategies.

Self-determination is critical, and to ensure that change occurs, governments at every level of society must hear their voices.<sup>25</sup> The Closing the Gap strategy, negotiated in partnership with the First Nations Coalition of Peaks, is a good road map with milestone targets but these good intentions must be met with real investment and be followed through by Federal and State governments.

Pursuant to the National Agreement, building the capacity of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled housing sector (the Sector) under Priority Reform Two is a key pillar to achieving this housing target. The three year Housing Sector Strengthening Plan (HSSP) is to provide a pathway forward to build on efforts to broaden and elevate the capacity of the Sector, which includes sustainably growing the size of the sector, creating fair and equitable access to integrated services contracts and associated funding, and considering the Sector holistically within the housing continuum. This will provide a platform for governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Housing Organisations to continue to implement measures and to increase the proportion of services delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations.

All governments and the community-controlled sector will report on progress against actions in the Plan in their Closing the Gap implementation plans and associated annual reporting.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> [Housing conditions of urban households with Aboriginal children in NSW Australia: tenure type matters](#), 2018, Melanie Andersen, Anna Williamson, Peter Fernando, Darryl Wright and Sally Redman:

<sup>24</sup> National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2020

<sup>25</sup> Closing the Gap Campaign Report 2021

<sup>26</sup> Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Housing Sector Strengthening Plan, approved by Joint Council on 26 August 2022

The HSSP, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing Association (NATSIHA - a new First Nations Peak body for housing nationally) and the Commonwealth Department of Social Services includes actions for all Parties to build a viable, culturally appropriate community-controlled housing sector that meets the ongoing needs of tenants, families and communities through improved housing services, and contributes to better life outcomes in health, disability, mental health, crisis support services, education, and employment.<sup>27</sup>

Successful and thriving housing programs must always involve First Nations communities, usually through Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, in design and implementation.

At this stage, in the Federal Labor Government's October 2022 Budget, \$100 million was committed to improving remote housing, particularly in the Northern Territory Homelands, and \$81 million in up to 30 community-led justice reinvestment initiatives to divert Indigenous young people from the criminal justice system. The Commonwealth has a modest housing agenda that has potential to be scaled up and rhetorically recognises that working with First Nations stakeholders will be a key component to the success of the National Housing and Homelessness Plan.

The Albanese Government's housing agenda is aimed to be implemented over the next year, which also includes \$200 million of returns from the Housing Australia Future Fund for the repair and maintenance of housing in remote First Nations communities, and a new remote housing agreement with the Northern Territory.

A Housing Policy Partnership will hopefully identify opportunities to work more effectively across governments, reduce gaps and duplication, and provide advice on policy and implementation, as well as strengthen the sector to address Outcome 9 of the Closing the Gap.<sup>28</sup>

ANTAR proposes that further strategies be developed with clear direction and input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from and for their communities. Housing is a crucial and foundational element to addressing poverty and improvements for First Nations communities must be built on self-determination,

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<sup>27</sup> [Closing the Gap: states and territories pledge to lift First Nations housing standards](#), Sarah Collard, August 2022

<sup>28</sup> Closing the Gap report 2022

cultural safety, a commitment to value adding to the community, and a shift away from outdated approaches that are not fit for purpose or understanding of cultural and community needs.

## **Conclusion**

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide a submission in respect of these important issues. ANTAR offers our ongoing support that meets the expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We would also welcome the opportunity to meet with the Government to discuss any points raised in this submission.

Sincerely

**Paul Wright**

National Director, ANTAR

**Paul Wright**  
**ANTAR National Director**

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Email: [hello@antar.org.au](mailto:hello@antar.org.au)

Phone: 02 9280 0060

PO Box 77  
Strawberry Hills NSW 2012

**With thanks:**

This submission was authored by  
Mr Paul Wright, ANTAR National Director, and  
Ms Gemma McGreal, ANTAR volunteer (Lawyer, Researcher)

**ANTAR is proud to acknowledge and pay our respects  
to First Nations Peoples as the traditional owners  
of the lands on which we work across the continent.**