

The Importance of Elders in Guiding Research and Findings for Aboriginal People Experiencing Homelessness

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Abstract : Western Australia has recently adopted a 10-year plan to end homelessness across its State, with sections of the plan focused particularly on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. In 2022, we engaged with 70-90 Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness in Perth, Western Australia, through qualitative interviews and creative methods, listening to their experiences of homelessness and their views on how services, State plans, and policies could better support them. This research was driven by the Aboriginal community through a Community Ownership Group of 16 Aboriginal Elders, elected by Elders' groups, from across the Perth metropolitan area. The Community Ownership Group met every six weeks across the 15-month project timeline to guide the research team, endorse methods chosen, and provide richer context to research findings to ensure they adequately represent the experiences of Aboriginal people. These meetings were audio-recorded when possible and documented through meeting notes, verbal and visual minutes, and film, providing insights into homelessness from the perspective of Aboriginal Elders. In this paper, we compare the views of those experiencing homelessness with the views of the Aboriginal Elders -many of whom have experienced homelessness firsthand- and literature regarding how those experiencing homelessness can be better supported. We detail the 'survival-directed thinking' of those we engaged with who was in the throes of homelessness, leading them to focus more on immediate solutions such as food and housing. We then compare these narratives to Elders' views that have been more regularly focused on connection to culture and long-term plans for healing homelessness, alongside immediate outreach -views also reflected in the literature. Through these comparisons, we highlight the importance of engaging both with those currently experiencing homelessness as well as with Aboriginal Elders as important cultural caretakers and authorities. We demonstrate how these varied voices uncover both long and short-term perspectives on how homelessness can be better managed in policy and service provision. We also highlight the potential role Aboriginal Elders can play in supporting the Aboriginal homeless community and their transition into housing.

Keywords : Aboriginal and Torres strait islander peoples, aboriginal elders, homelessness, community-led research

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