

The Impact of Lost Data on Indigenous Australian Housing Trajectories

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The historical experience of dispossession and displacement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) people has affected and influenced their housing trajectories. While Australians have the option to self-identify as 'Indigenous', including ATSI, this can cause challenges with accurate data collection aiming to measure disparities.¹ The experiences of ATSI people also makes it difficult to collect data prior to 40 years ago because they were unaccounted for in the Census.

In Australia, there are three criteria that prove Indigeneity. These are that a person must:

1. be of ATSI descent
2. identify as ATSI
3. be accepted as such by the community that the person lives in, or has lived in.²

However, the three-step identification process is not applied when information is collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in censuses or surveys, by health, social or educational service providers. It is common for community housing providers (CHPs) to use data from the ABS to substantiate areas for funding. This can be challenging as many ATSI people do not know of their cultural identity, which results in an under-enumerated population count that lacks accurate data for CHPs to justify additional support for homeless ATSI people.

Additionally, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) reports that some people who self-identified as ATSI in 2016 did not do so in 2011. The AIHW points out that there may be inaccurate measures of decline in socio-economic status if newly self-identified ATSI people have a higher status than the previous Census.³ Further, extracting data which

aims to identify ATSI peoples housing status can be difficult because of the ABS's definition of homelessness, as well as the cultural definition of home that vary between ATSI communities and non-indigenous people.⁴ An ATSI person who chooses to stay with extended family or live on the land may not view themselves as homeless.

There are also challenges related to access housing, grants, education and employment (ATSI identified positions) services that should be considered.⁵ For instance, it can be difficult for organisations to measure demographics that require assistance through social housing.⁶

In 2018, the Council of Australian Governments reaffirmed its commitment to improving life outcomes for ATSI people. The *Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap 2019-29*,⁷ includes a continued responsibility to fund various services including areas of housing for ATSI people. This positive approach includes an aspiration to 'increase the proportion of ATSI population living in appropriately sized (not overcrowded) housing to 82 per cent by 2028'.⁸ However, limitations of data collection and reporting currently hinder the design and delivery of culturally appropriate housing solutions. Evidently, lost data has made it challenging for ATSI people to benefit from certain services, such as culturally appropriate housing. The inconsistency with data collection across the various platforms needs to be addressed to form a cross-sector platform approach that is homogenous.

A proposed solution to the above mentioned data issues may be to have various definitions, applicable to different groups. It would seem reasonable that if a group of people

have different meanings to a word and are being accounted for in the same data then their answers should be distinguishable from one another.

Future research may aim to identify how the different terminology in questions may result in similar answers, and thus be filtered into the same data pool. Lost ATSI data has impacted their housing trajectories greatly as there are inaccuracies in the true urgency of their housing needs. It is important to understand ATSI people's needs where issues of cultural disparity come into play, and to work collaboratively with them to improve data collection through action research. Unless this critical gap is addressed, it will be challenging for policy makers and the community to understand if Indigenous Australian housing trajectories have been positively improved in a meaningful way.

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Endnotes

1. Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2018, *Proof of Aboriginality*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.
2. Ibid.
3. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: a focus report on housing and homelessness*, The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.
4. The Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018, *2049.0 Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness 2016*, Australian Bureau of Statistics.
5. Parliament of Australia 2017, *The 1967 Referendum*, Parliament of Australia.
6. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2014, *Indigenous Status Standard*, Australian Bureau of Statistics.
7. Council of Australian Governments 2018, *COAG Statement on the Closing The Gap Refresh*, Council of Australian Governments.
8. Ibid.