

AUGUST 2021



WHY ABORIGINAL HOMELESSNESS NEEDS A CULTURAL APPROACH



INTRODUCTION

While many Australians feel passionately about ending Aboriginal homelessness, they may not understand how our experiences of homelessness are different, and why the solutions are too. This report aims to change that by sharing knowledge on Aboriginal homelessness in the context of Noongar country (south-west Western Australia), identifying why mainstream solutions are falling short of meeting the needs of our community, and the critical importance of a community-led, cultural approach.

Firstly, we acknowledge that Aboriginal cultures are far from monolithic, spanning across Australia. The cultural approach we discuss here is contextualised to Noongar country; however, we share experiences of colonisation, displacement and dispossession, and we are stronger together as we learn from each other in our shared struggle for justice and to have our voices heard.

As Australia's most marginalised group and one of the most poverty-stricken First Nations peoples worldwide, the housing market continues to leave Aboriginal Australia out in the cold (figuratively and literally). Across the country, 1 in 28 of us are homeless, and we're 10 times more likely to be homeless than non-Aboriginal Australians; here in WA, the gap is even wider. We have the second-highest rates of Aboriginal homelessness and rough sleeping in the country, yet the lowest rate of non-Aboriginal homelessness.

Homelessness is a crisis that has been facing our mob for generations, and our people cannot afford to wait another generation for inclusion and justice. Both State and Federal Government have acknowledged that mainstream solutions are not effective in the long-term. Aboriginal homelessness is different, and the solutions must come from within, by building self-determination and cultural competency in the homeless and housing sectors.

We ask readers to help us make Aboriginal homelessness part of the conversation in their own networks, to raise awareness and help our voices to be heard.

WHO WE ARE

Noongar Mia Mia is an Aboriginal-owned NFP Housing Provider in Perth, Western Australia, recognised as the peak housing body for Aboriginal people on Noongar country.

Our integrated, intergenerational model of cultural tenancy incorporates culturally-appropriate housing provision, property management and tenancy support, holistically addressing homelessness risk factors from a place of cultural understanding and respect,

We support and advocate for our tenants through a whole-of-person, strengths-based approach, so that they can manage their tenancy obligations and look after the properties, while offering them the supports to thrive in their homes and their lives.

Noongar Mia Mia has 20 years of experience in providing housing to our people; with the 2021 launch of the 100-bed homelessness facility Boorloo Bidee Mia for rough sleepers, and the Moorditj Mia Aboriginal Housing First Support Service, we also provide one of the world's scant few Aboriginal-led Housing First services.

We are committed to building self-determination in the housing and homelessness sectors, and growing cultural competency among mainstream organisations to better serve our mob.



DEFINING HOMELESSNESS

To understand Aboriginal homelessness, let's start by exploring how mainstream Australia defines homelessness - one of the deepest expressions of social exclusion and extreme poverty. At its core, Australia considers homelessness to be a housing issue, representing the lack of permanent, secure housing (shelter). Persons with the following living arrangements are considered homeless:

- Persons living in improvised dwellings, tents, or sleeping out
- Persons in supported accommodation for the homeless
- Persons staying temporarily with other households
- Persons living in boarding houses
- Persons in other temporary lodgings
- Persons living in severely crowded houses
- People living in housing that does not meet minimum standards (i.e. lodges where kitchen and bathroom facilities are shared).



SLEEPING OUT



SUPPORTED ACCOMMODATION



TEMPORARY STAYS



CROWDED HOUSES



TEMPORARY LODGINGS



BOARDING HOUSES

Australia recognises three types of homelessness: **primary** (rough sleeping), **secondary** (changing from one temporary shelter to another; including temporarily living with another family), and **tertiary** (medium-to-long term tenure, but with shared facilities (kitchen, bathroom, etc.) and without the security of a lease)).

It's important to note that this conceptualisation is a mainstream construct, and does not neatly align with how Aboriginal Australians may define homelessness; for example, a person who is living in a crowded house with extended family may feel strongly that they are not homeless, even when statistics suggest otherwise.

A WESTERN AUSTRALIAN SNAPSHOT

As of 2016 (latest Census), 9,005 people were experiencing homelessness in WA, 3,871 of which lived in severely crowded houses. The Outback (North) and Perth (South East and North West) are the regions with the highest number of homeless people in WA.

Census data finds WA has the lowest rate (0.2%) of non-Aboriginal homelessness in Australia, and the second-highest rate (3.4%) of Aboriginal homelessness; comparatively, NSW's non-Aboriginal homelessness rate is 2x of WA (0.4%), yet their Aboriginal homelessness rate is 1% (one-third of WA's).

Despite Aboriginal people comprising only 3.7% of WA's total population, 29.1% of the homeless population identified as Aboriginal.



Aboriginal Australians experience very high homelessness rates, and particularly high rates of rough sleeping across major cities, regional and remote areas. Any response to homelessness in Western Australia has to be strongly centred on addressing Aboriginal homelessness.

HOME: OUR HEART-COUNTRY

Aboriginal notions of "home" are different from those of mainstream Australia. Mainstream housing provision is based on European ideas focused on a nuclear family household, and they don't take into account our housing needs. Australians strongly associate home with a house providing shelter from the elements, with walls enclosing their home - keeping the outside, outside. But for our mob, home is a therapeutic space spanning inside and out.

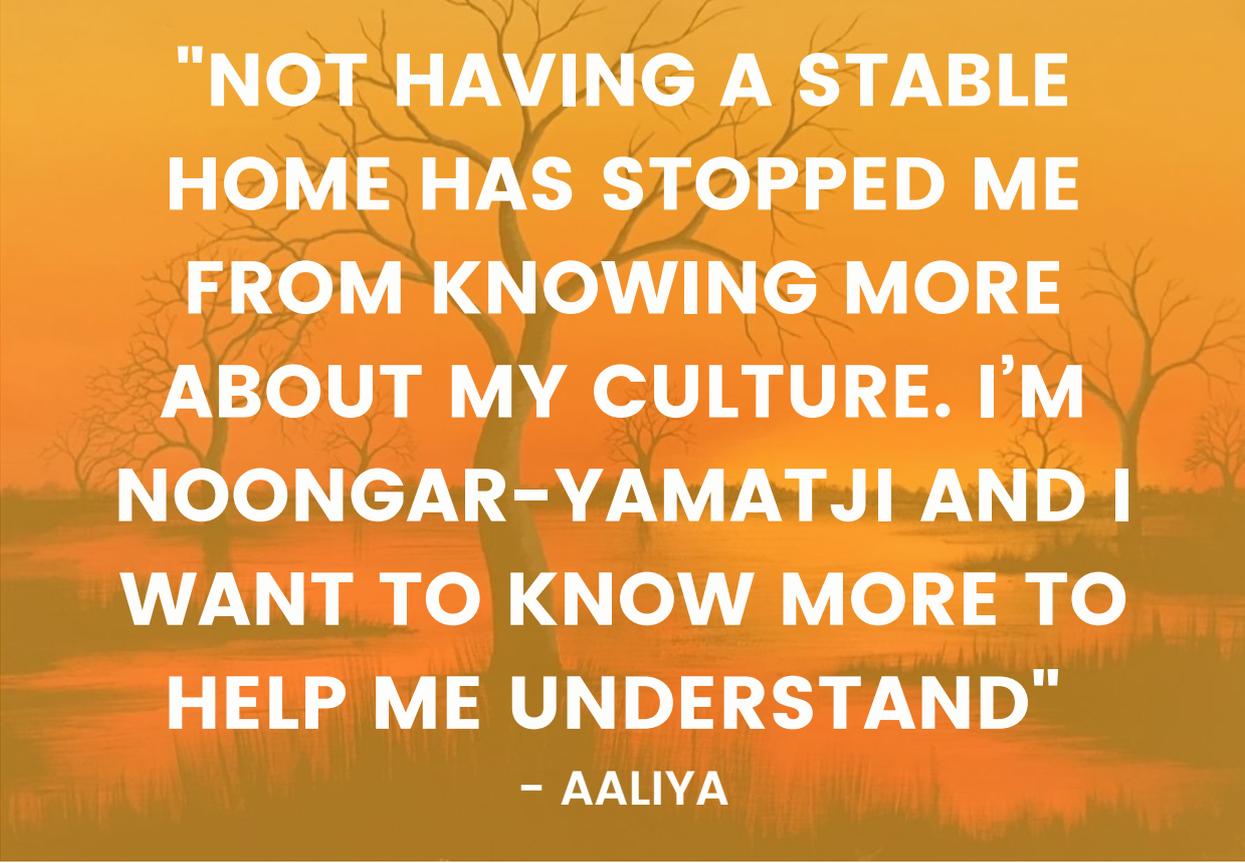
In Noongar, our word for home is Kalil/koolark - that means our "heart-country". We're deeply connected both physically and spiritually to the place we call home, which intrinsically relate to our beliefs about creation, life, death and spirits. This guides the way we understand, navigate and use our boodjar (land), which is core to our cultural identity and practices. We understand home as being on-country: home is the land we call home, a place of spiritual connection for us and our mob.



HOME MEANS BEING ON-COUNTRY. IT'S THE LAND WE CALL HOME, A PLACE OF SPIRITUAL CONNECTION FOR US AND OUR MOB.

Colonisation has displaced many of us from our heart-country, and many of us still have to choose between housing and home, kin and culture. Housing provision for our mob needs to be grounded in culture, because what's adequate housing for mainstream Australia can mean spiritual homelessness for us: being asked to compromise our connection to home and country in order to be safely and securely homed.

SPIRITUAL HOMELESSNESS



"NOT HAVING A STABLE HOME HAS STOPPED ME FROM KNOWING MORE ABOUT MY CULTURE. I'M NOONGAR-YAMATJI AND I WANT TO KNOW MORE TO HELP ME UNDERSTAND"

- AALIYA

When we're denied access to our land, spiritual homes and families, we can experience a type of homelessness called "spiritual homelessness". Assimilationist policies and practices like forced family separation have caused widespread harm through spiritual homelessness.

Our cultural norms are central to our wellbeing. They include high levels of mobility; duties to care, share and welcome kin; and our strong sense of connection to land. Our cultural practices can lead to "overcrowding", neighbour complaints, higher maintenance expenses, and strain on homes and amenities; but they also keep us strong and connected, and help us pass on our ways to the next generation.

Our culture is a source of strength and serves as a shield for our children and families. Kinship, interdependence, group cohesiveness, and community loyalty are fundamental characteristics of our family and community life, and they must be at the heart of homelessness solutions.

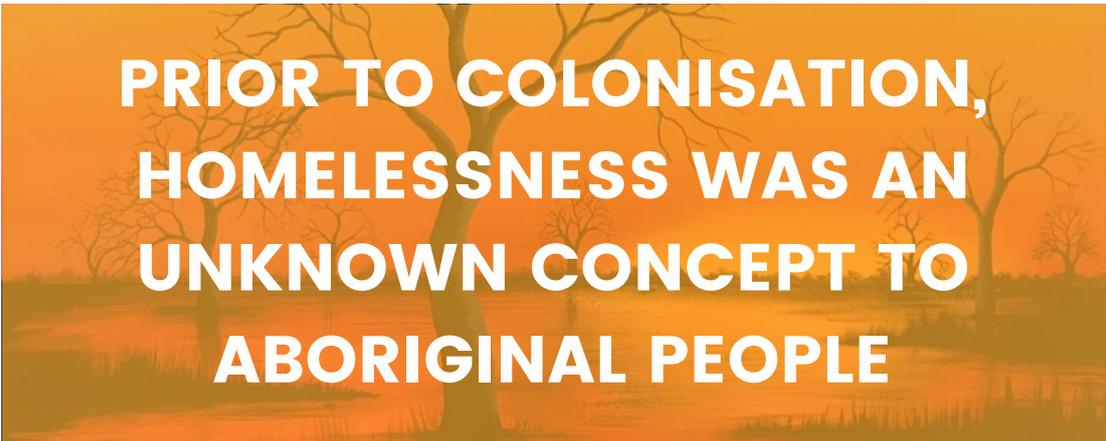
HOMELESSNESS: A NEW CONCEPT

Before colonisation, there was no concept of "homelessness" here. Everyone had a place to call home, and home was with your kin, on country, practicing your ways. But today, many of us are homeless on our own land - at far higher rates than non-Aboriginal people.

Colonialism's long-term effects have had a profound influence on Aboriginal housing and homelessness. Displacement from native lands and traditional ways of life; children separated from families; and centuries of harmful, assimilationist policies and practices have resulted in a loss of cultural knowledge and detachment from home, family, culture, land, language, tradition, customs, and spiritual beliefs.

The aftermath of colonialism is still felt acutely today, taking the forms of socioeconomic exclusion; low self-esteem; poor physical, mental, and social and emotional well-being; domestic violence and substance abuse, as well as low educational achievement. Communities and kinship networks that once offered protection have been eroded.

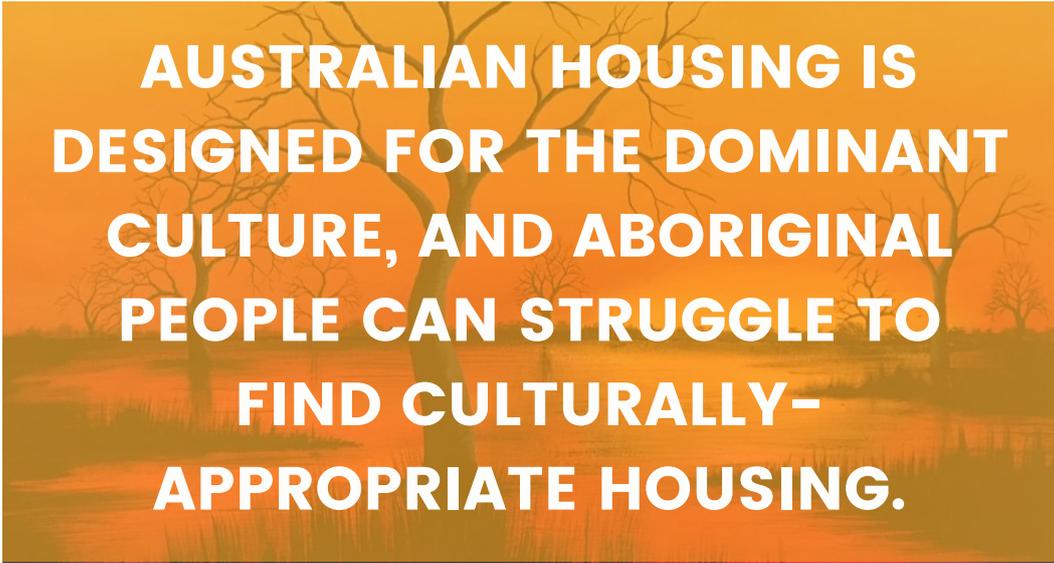
Research shows 3/4 of non-Aboriginal Australians harbour negative bias towards us. Many don't understand intergenerational trauma, even blaming us for our high levels of homelessness and pressuring us to "fit in" (assimilate). But expecting assimilation as prerequisite to inclusion is a violation of our human rights; instead, meaningful reconciliation needs to involve housing solutions that work for (rather than against) our people, and don't question the legitimacy of our priorities and experiences.



**PRIOR TO COLONISATION,
HOMELESSNESS WAS AN
UNKNOWN CONCEPT TO
ABORIGINAL PEOPLE**

RETHINKING OVERCROWDING

From an Aboriginal perspective, homelessness is not only caused by the lack of houses: it also stems from a lack of houses that are suitable for larger, multigenerational extended families.



**AUSTRALIAN HOUSING IS
DESIGNED FOR THE DOMINANT
CULTURE, AND ABORIGINAL
PEOPLE CAN STRUGGLE TO
FIND CULTURALLY-
APPROPRIATE HOUSING.**

There is no universally accepted standard of overcrowding; the ABS definition includes no more than 2 persons per bedroom. Many Aboriginal people consider these definitions to be intrusive constructs grounded on mainstream nuclear family norms, standing in the way of cultural practices such as kinship obligations and cultural transmission.

When we let kin stay with us in our private rental or social housing we can end up getting evicted and become homeless ourselves. This forces us to choose between obligations to kin and a roof over our heads. Letting kin in need stay acts as a hedge for a housing market in crisis, without which rough sleeping figures would be even higher.

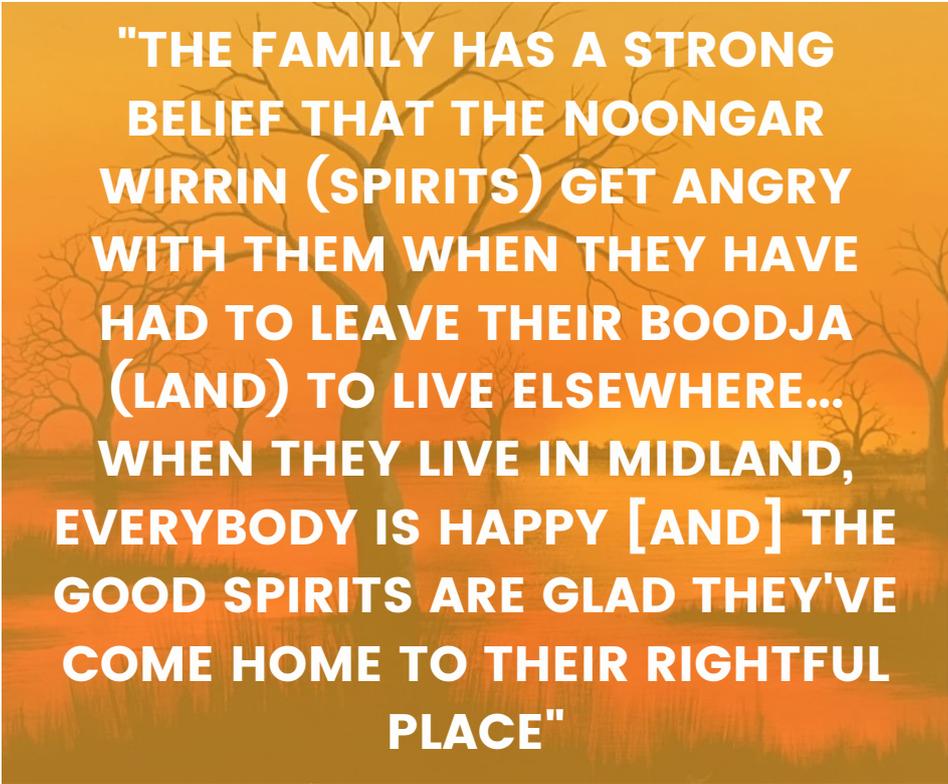
But "overcrowding" isn't just a crisis response. For many families, extended family under one roof is a source of joy and strength. Their ideal solution isn't sleeping less people: it's a bigger house.

Rather than evicting "overcrowded" households, Australia must address market failures that put our kin into crisis in the first place, and provide culturally-appropriate housing suitable for larger families.

AUSTRALIAN HOUSING EXCLUDES US

Australian housing is designed for the dominant majority, and is appropriate to its cultural norms, but not ours. Staying on-country and around family brings us so much wellbeing – but when we're struggling with socioeconomic exclusion, we may have no choice but to leave for social housing far from heart-country and kin. We have kinship obligations, and given the choice, many of us would choose to live in larger, multigenerational homes – but Australian housing is built for nuclear families.

We've faced generations of discrimination and disadvantage, and through it all we've kept our culture strong. We shouldn't still be asked to make cultural compromises, and that's why mainstream homelessness solutions won't work for us. Australia needs to empower our mob so we can harness our strengths, and where we're working with mainstream providers, they need to come to their work from a place of cultural understanding, respect and yarning with us – not at us. Ask us what we need, don't tell us; and leave your biases at the door.



"THE FAMILY HAS A STRONG BELIEF THAT THE NOONGAR WIRRIN (SPIRITS) GET ANGRY WITH THEM WHEN THEY HAVE HAD TO LEAVE THEIR BOODJA (LAND) TO LIVE ELSEWHERE... WHEN THEY LIVE IN MIDLAND, EVERYBODY IS HAPPY [AND] THE GOOD SPIRITS ARE GLAD THEY'VE COME HOME TO THEIR RIGHTFUL PLACE"

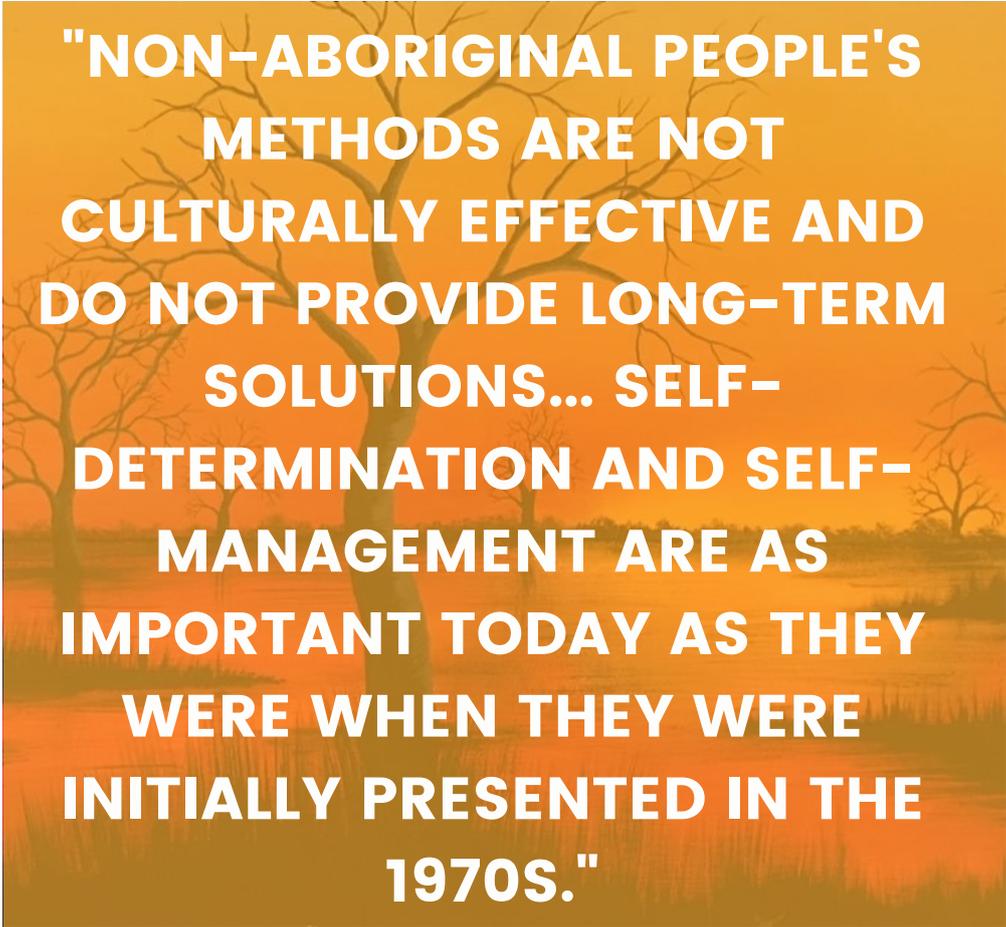
- Excerpt, Wirrin case study,

Noongar Cultural Framework and Noongar Housing First Principles
(pending publication)

SELF-DETERMINATION IN HOUSING

Research here in Perth shows that Aboriginal people face twice as long a wait on the priority list; they're also more likely to be evicted than non-Aboriginal tenants, and it's believed over half of evictions are Aboriginal.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to homelessness, but we know that mainstream solutions do not work for our people, and Australia knows that too.



**"NON-ABORIGINAL PEOPLE'S
METHODS ARE NOT
CULTURALLY EFFECTIVE AND
DO NOT PROVIDE LONG-TERM
SOLUTIONS... SELF-
DETERMINATION AND SELF-
MANAGEMENT ARE AS
IMPORTANT TODAY AS THEY
WERE WHEN THEY WERE
INITIALLY PRESENTED IN THE
1970S."**

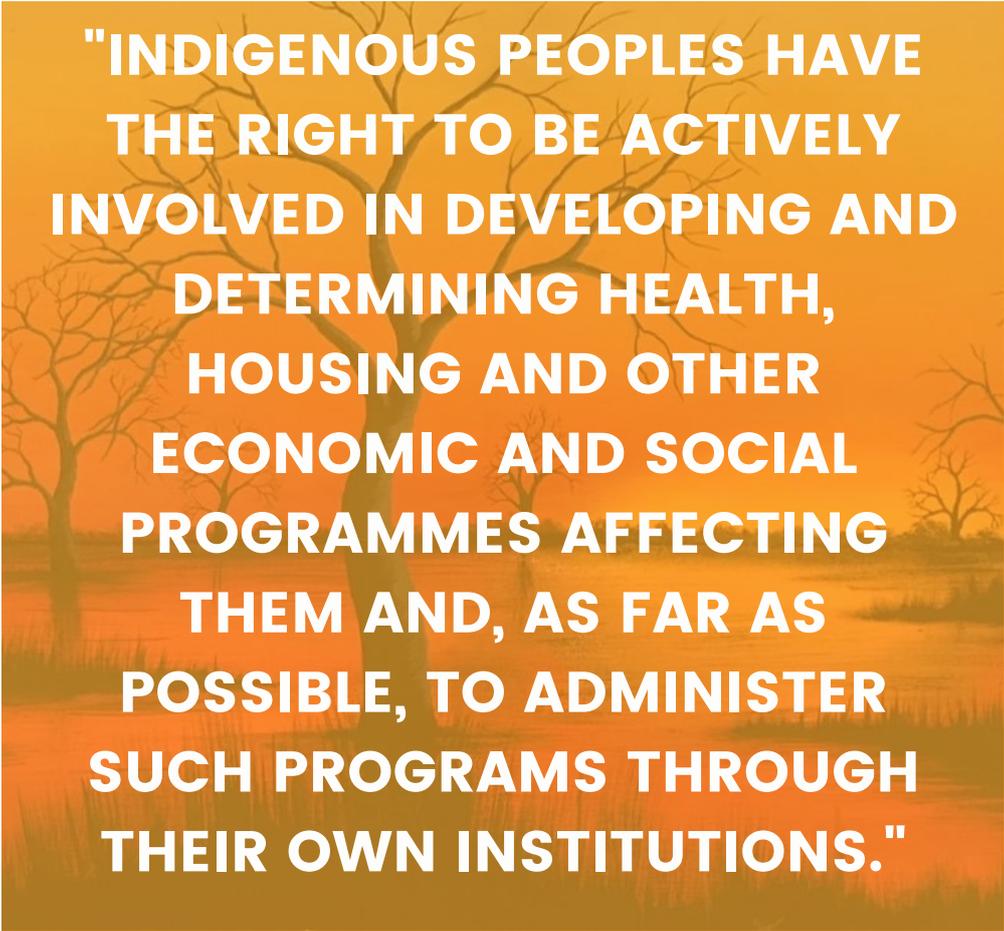
All Paths Lead to a Home

(Western Australia's 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness)

Housing is an identified Closing the Gap priority, with Aboriginal Australians being half as likely to own a home, and twice as likely to be in rental stress. But closing the gap isn't just about providing appropriate houses; it's about the right supports, too. Cultural factors needs to be considered across housing provision, property management and tenancy support, and homelessness solutions must be designed with and delivered with our mob.

SELF-DETERMINATION IN HOUSING

Even though almost half of Specialist Homelessness Services clients in WA are Aboriginal, our community housing sector has very little Aboriginal-led housing presence. This is despite Australia being a signatory to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples:



"INDIGENOUS PEOPLES HAVE THE RIGHT TO BE ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN DEVELOPING AND DETERMINING HEALTH, HOUSING AND OTHER ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL PROGRAMMES AFFECTING THEM AND, AS FAR AS POSSIBLE, TO ADMINISTER SUCH PROGRAMS THROUGH THEIR OWN INSTITUTIONS."

Why do self-determination and self-management matter?

Because we know our people, and we've cared for each other for tens of thousands of years. Because the wounds of colonialism are still fresh; so many of us had at least one parent taken away from their own parents, or one grandparent. Our mob have good reason to be mistrustful of mainstream Australia, because in living memory, it tried to extinguish our culture. Trust has to be earned, and healing takes time.

So, it's understandable that many of our people would prefer to work with Aboriginal organisations and workers, and have trouble letting their guard down and opening up to "wadjelas" (the Noongar term for "whitefellas").

TAKING A CULTURAL APPROACH

People transitioning from homelessness to housing will, in many cases, require tenancy and social support to maintain that housing; broadly speaking, the longer a person is homeless the more likely they are to be exposed to factors that keep them entrenched in homelessness, and the more difficult a successful transition out of homelessness becomes.

Mainstream tenancy support services often fall flat because of a lack of cultural awareness or competence. Even when mainstream organisations and people have the best of intentions, they may struggle to serve Aboriginal people effectively, because they are often not equipped with an understanding of culture and can operate from a deficits-based approach which can be condescending.

There's a certain sense of safety and belonging that comes with yarning with someone from your mob, who understands context without you having to explain it all (and often, again and again to new support workers).



**"IT'S GOOD WE HAVE AN
ABORIGINAL WORKER WHO
UNDERSTANDS OUR WAYS
AND IS UP WITH OUR MOB."**

- JUSTINE

Here at Noongar Mia Mia, our clients value being able to talk to someone who understands cultural context, understands the nature of Aboriginal wellbeing and the factors that contribute to and/or detract from it, and understand that the nature of Aboriginal homelessness and housing insecurity is not one-and-the-same as that of non-Aboriginal people.

TAKING A CULTURAL APPROACH

Noongar Mia Mia works with our tenants, not against them. We respect, empower and support them - and with our extremely low eviction rate (1 tenancy in 3 years), we can say confidently that what we do works.

To provide culturally-appropriate property management, we practice empathy and understanding. We recognise personal situations can vary greatly, and that we must manage the property based on the situation of the people within it and their wellbeing.

Other organisations are often fast to issue a strike or breach, making tenants in crisis even more stressed. We work with them to understand what's caused the crisis, and work with tenants and kin to prevent eviction and return them to better wellbeing. We work from a baseline of respect both for culture and for individuals.

Evictions are bad for everyone. The outcomes are generally a damaged property, a huge bill and a homeless family. We've found evictions to be very preventable when the right supports are in place and have found the intensive support and yarning sessions we provide to be very effective at addressing key homelessness risk factors (mental health, overcrowding, etc.)

By understanding cultural factors which can lead to evictions (which are often overlooked by mainstream providers), we maintain an extremely low rate of evictions while ensuring tenants feel valued, respected and supported to thrive. Where mainstream solutions fall flat, our cultural, community-led approach is self-determination and self-management in action.



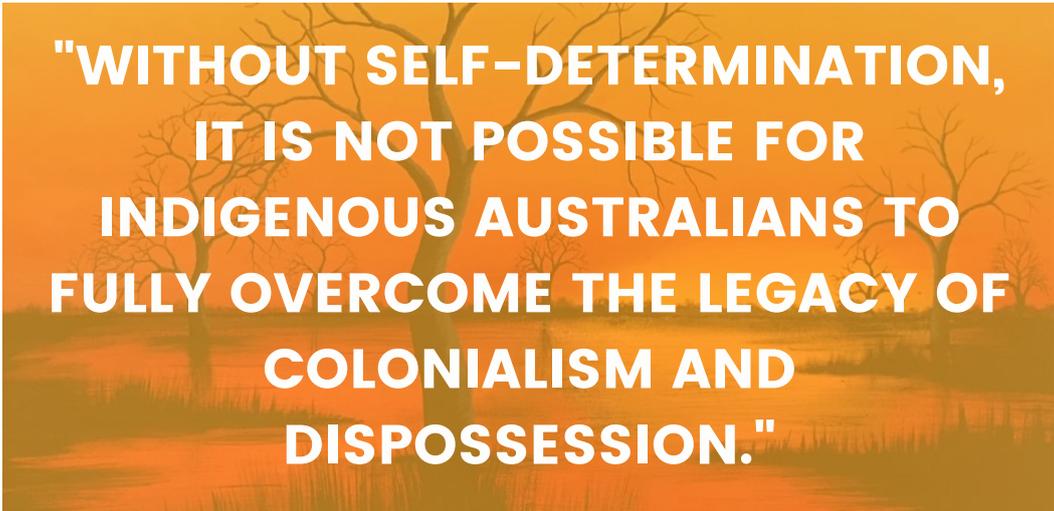
**OUR MOB HAVE THE
STRENGTHS AND THE
SOLUTIONS WITHIN.**

TAKING A CULTURAL APPROACH

Because Noongar Mia Mia is part of their community, is well-respected by that community, is built on Noongar cultural values and is there to support them and advocate for them, it means that we can overcome barriers and build trust.

Where mainstream housing providers and property managers can be prescriptive, rigid and more focused on the property than the people living with it, we look through a cultural lens and so we see things very differently. We recognise that Aboriginal culture is collectivist and comes with specific rules, roles and responsibilities, particularly around kin. We don't try to change that; we understand it, it's part of who we are and what we value, we think it's beautiful, and we understand that where it's not working, there's many factors at play that generally stem from systemic disadvantage and trauma.

We embed Aboriginal culture into all we do, and amplify the voices of our mob – nothing for us, without us. We conduct research to understand what works and what doesn't for our mob, and we share our findings with mainstream service providers, training them to understand and better support us.

A quote by the Australian Human Rights Commission about self-determination and colonialism. The text is white and centered on a background of a sunset over a landscape with trees and water.

**"WITHOUT SELF-DETERMINATION,
IT IS NOT POSSIBLE FOR
INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS TO
FULLY OVERCOME THE LEGACY OF
COLONIALISM AND
DISPOSSESSION."**

- Right to Self-Determination
(Australian Human Rights Commission)

Culture is priceless to our mob; it's our birthright, and our human right. Without a cultural approach, housing and homelessness solutions will not work. It's time for the Australian housing sector to build cultural competency, empower Aboriginal organisations, and listen to Aboriginal voices.

KEY FINDINGS

- We need homes that are large enough; we need homes that are near our family members; we need to live places where our kids can learn culture from their grandparents; we need to live in the places that we call home; we need to be able to offer a roof over the head when a loved one desperately needs it. We need our homes to be affordable, stable and safe.
- We deserve agency and choice, particularly in whom we choose to live with. Many of us want to live with kin, and the best solution lies in housing that is suitable for extended families. We shouldn't be made to turn kin away, especially when they're in crisis; at the same time, we urgently need socioeconomic inclusion, so that our kin aren't in crisis in the first place.
- Many of us want to be supported by organisations and individuals that come from within our community, but all-too-often that choice is not available to us. We may not always be able to put our cultural needs into words, but it's not the job of people in crisis to explain their cultural needs and make them understood; mainstream service providers need to build that competency, and the best way to do that is by working with Aboriginal people and organisations.
- Kinship is central to our society, and a happy family is a source of great strength. Effective approaches to Aboriginal homelessness will be centred around extended families, not just individuals.
- Organisations and individuals claiming to "protect" us and help us have often done quite the opposite: taking us away from our families, practicing coercive control and trying to extinguish our culture. This is all very recent. Understandably, many of our mob don't trust wadjela (whitefella) systems, so it's often easier for Aboriginal organisations to build trust and get a foot in the door; we understand our community, its culture, history and stories, and that feels safe and familiar, particularly to people in crisis.
- Non-Aboriginal organisations and service providers need to come to their work from a place of cultural understanding, respect and yarning with us - not at us. Ask us what we need, don't tell us; and leave your biases at the door.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

You know mainstream methods are failing Aboriginal Australia, and you know a bit of the "why". So, how can you help?

01

Break the silence

Many Australians hold bias towards us, and many don't understand the nature of Aboriginal disadvantage. Cultural change doesn't happen in a vacuum; the conversations you're having with your friends, family and colleagues matter.

02

Amplify our voices

You'll find us talking about Aboriginal homelessness on Facebook [@noongarmiamia](#). Help us reach more people and amplify Aboriginal voices by sharing our stories and inviting your friends.

03

Time, talent and treasure

Keeping people housed is expensive, and we aren't government-funded, so your donations mean the world to us. Consider donating to us ([link](#)) or hosting a fundraiser ([link](#)).

We're also often looking for skilled volunteers to help with projects - find out how you can get involved ([link](#)).



MESSAGE FROM OUR CHAIRPERSON

“Our Moort (Family), Boodjar (Land) & Kaatitjin (Cultural Knowledge) are our greatest strength, they’re central to everything we do.”



**GORDON COLE
CHAIRPERSON**

According to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People; "Indigenous people's have the right, without discrimination, to the improvement of their economic and social conditions, including, inter Alia, in the areas of education, employment, vocational training, and retraining, housing, sanitation, health and social security".

That's why we strive to implement the culturally-grounded Noongar Mia Bidi (Noongar Housing Pathway) whereby people living on our country are fully able to exercise their fundamental human rights, with housing at the very foundations.

Underpinned by our respect for Noongar culture, we lead from where we stand through respect, collaboration, innovative spirit and good governance.

Our pathway to success is built on 5 strategic pillars; Our Noongar Culture, Economic Participation, Quality Housing, Noongar Employment Pathways and Enriching our Noongar Voice!

MESSAGE FROM OUR MANAGING DIRECTOR

Noongar Mia Mia has the unique knowledge, skills and experience to make a real difference in the lives of Aboriginal people on Noongar country facing crisis on a daily basis.

Every night, we sleep up to 490 people across 84 tenancies in secure, culturally-appropriate housing, as well as working in partnership to manage a 100-bed transitional accommodation and support service for Perth's rough sleepers. We embed culture and respect in everything that we do, and it works.

With a 800-strong waitlist of Aboriginal people wanting to be housed by NMM, our community wants and needs what we do. We understand their story, because it's our story too: our cultural values are fundamental to who we are as a people.

We love our mob, and we look after them, where other organisations may demand that they change to fit in. Australia needs to deliver on its national commitments to self-determination, rather than assimilation, by supporting organisations like NMM to deliver culturally-appropriate services.

We're part of a community that is strong, and continues to overcome, to ensure our families are strong and healthy, both emotionally and culturally.

From our mob, by our mob, for our mob: the solutions lie within. What's still missing is the resources.

I am a strong believer that decent, affordable housing should be a basic right for everybody in this country. The reason is simple, without stable shelter, everything else falls apart.

"Decent, affordable housing should be a basic right for everybody in this country."



TINA PICKETT

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & FURTHER INFORMATION

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF TRADITIONAL OWNERS

We would like to acknowledge the Noongar people as the traditional custodians of the southwest of Western Australia and acknowledge Elders past and present.

ABORIGINAL TERMS OF REFERENCE

Noongar Mia Mia uses the term Aboriginal to acknowledge all terminologies describing the First Nations people, Aboriginal people of Australia and the people of the Torres Strait Islands. We use the term Noongar to include all Noongar people of the Noongar Nation.

DESIGN & ARTWORK

Thank you to Noongar artist Ruben Ugle for the artwork used in this report, and our intern Ines Alvarez-Cascos Gil for her design work.



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