

Rough Sleeping in Greater Darwin Project - September 2026

THE PROJECT

Background

In 2024-25, there was a significant increase in the amount of Commonwealth Government funding for homelessness services in the Northern Territory (NT) under the *National Social Housing and Homelessness Agreement* (NASHH). Following strong advocacy from the NT homelessness sector, the former per capita funding calculation was revised to account for the jurisdictional prevalence of homelessness. Funding for NT homelessness services increased seven-fold.

In this project, Yilli Rreung Housing Aboriginal Corporation commissioned Menzies School of Health Research to examine the drivers for rough sleeping in Greater Darwin and the service engagement experiences of people sleeping rough. The priority of the project was to investigate the lived experiences of people sleeping rough in Greater Darwin. Menzies and Yilli Rreung partnered with Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation's HEAL (Healthy Engagement and Assistance in the Long Grass) Team to undertake research engagement.

Project Purpose

The Rough Sleeping in Greater Darwin Project aimed to:

- Engage with people sleeping rough in Darwin, Palmerston, and the surrounding areas regarding the drivers for homelessness and their interaction with existing services
- Provide an overview of government policy and programs relating to homelessness in the NT
- Inform government policy development and investment in specialist homelessness services (SHS) in the NT, especially in the Greater Darwin region.

Final Report

The Final Report is the major output of the Rough Sleeping in Greater Darwin Project. The Executive Summary summarises the Final Report, describing the long-term housing and homelessness crisis in the NT, and making the case that substantial social housing and support service responses are required to mitigate the harms of rough sleeping. The Introduction provides an overview of the project's key research questions and aims. Chapter 2 provides a literature review focused on definitions of

homelessness and rough sleeping, and drivers for rough sleeping. Chapter 3 explores the data story related to homelessness and rough sleeping, contextualising the NT situation in relation to other Australian states and territories. Chapter 4 provides an overview of NT homelessness funding, policy, and services, including example services identified by project participants. Chapter 5 summarises the project methodology, including the fieldwork approach and data analysis. Chapter 6 represents the lived experience accounts of people sleeping rough in Greater Darwin. Drawing on those accounts, it examines the drivers for rough sleeping, the services accessed, and the factors impacting service access and experience. A short conclusion summarises the individual chapters and is followed by the Final Report Recommendations.

FINDINGS

As outlined in Chapter 6, the fundamental driver for rough sleeping in Greater Darwin is the lack of housing availability. This relates to lengthy waitlists for social housing, limited housing in remote communities leading to urban migration, overcrowding in town and in community, and lack of capacity in short-term and/or emergency accommodation. Trauma, grief, and violence are drivers of rough sleeping and intertwined with experiences of rough sleeping. Prison release and medical treatment are common triggers for sleeping rough. Factors enabling service engagement include relationships with frontline workers, availability of coordinated outreach services, and accessibility of service locations. Barriers include difficulties navigating complex systems, limited case management, and a lack of coordination between and across services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Final Report includes 28 recommendations addressed to specific stakeholders with the power to adopt and implement them. These are organised in relation to six thematic areas.

The Housing and Homelessness System

Addressing homelessness, and rough sleeping in particular, requires significant additional investment in social housing. The Commonwealth Government should establish a funding agreement for the construction of social housing in NT regional towns and raise income support to combat severe poverty. Reducing

homelessness requires a whole-of-NT Government response and greater understanding from the broader community about the drivers of rough sleeping.

Existing Services, Funding, and Policy

Existing services supporting people sleeping rough require secure funding and increased investment. The Commonwealth and NT Government should continue to invest in diversionary services as alternatives to apprehension and arrest for alcohol-related offences, while expanding short-term accommodation options in Greater Darwin and constructing a permanent sobering up shelter. City Councils should ensure that existing public amenities remain accessible to people sleeping rough.

Additional Service Needs

The existing service sector is not adequate to the needs of the rough sleeper and broader homeless population in Greater Darwin. Additional services that are required include the establishment of a day centre in Palmerston, on-site alcohol treatment services at the sobering up shelter, wet weather accommodation, and accommodation and case management following imprisonment on remand. The NT Government and SHS sector should also investigate the establishment of a youth foyer, open-air accommodation facilities in Darwin, and leisure activities for remote community visitors sleeping rough.

Workforce

Increased investment in the NT homelessness sector via the NASHH requires concomitant workforce development to ensure that service provision is expanded effectively. A workforce development plan is needed that highlights expanded opportunities for Aboriginal community controlled organisations and Aboriginal employees in the SHS sector, and which identifies relevant training and required roles to support frontline homelessness workers.

Specialist Homelessness Services Organisations

SHS organisations should ensure that frontline workers who interact with people experiencing homelessness are provided with appropriate training to deliver trauma-informed and culturally appropriate care, while ensuring the availability of mental health and wellbeing supports to those workers. There are opportunities to establish shared standards and

approaches for assertive outreach and tenancy support in the sector.

Research and Evaluation

This project has provided insights regarding the drivers for rough sleeping in Greater Darwin and the service engagement experiences of people who are sleeping rough. There is an opportunity to build on this project with more targeted research, related to service mapping, tenancy sustainment services, and accommodation and related social supports post imprisonment.

METHODOLOGY

This research followed a qualitative and participatory approach that centered First Nations ways of being and knowing and the lived experiences and perspectives of people sleeping rough. First Nations field researchers from Yilli Rreung and Larrakia Nation led data collection with support from Menzies researchers. The methods included yarning, listening, and reflecting, alongside stakeholder interviews and analysis of policy and program documents. A total of 59 yarning sessions were completed with people sleeping rough, alongside broader engagement with the cohort and service providers captured in field notes and reflections. A further 31 interviews with 39 people working in the SHS sector were conducted to inform the project. As described in the Final Report, data collection took place at multiple sites across the Greater Darwin region. A Project Reference Group comprised of Aboriginal community controlled organisations oversaw the research, which was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the NT Department of Health and Menzies School of Health Research.

NEXT STEPS

Based on this research and contextualised in the wider policy landscape, the Final Report provides 28 recommendations that are concrete and actionable. These recommendations are framed to address the structural factors that contribute to rough sleeping in Greater Darwin and improve the services to support people who are sleeping rough. Recognising the diversity of people's experiences and perspectives, the recommendations respond to people's accounts of what they need while they are sleeping rough and in order to support their access to safe and stable accommodation. The implementation of these recommendations should be undertaken in consultation with and with input from people who are sleeping rough.

For more information, contact: Liam Grealy | Principal Investigator, liam.grealy@menzies.edu.au
The Final Report is available [here](#).