



Rough Sleeping in Greater Darwin

Final Report

**Liam Grealy, Sophie Pascoe, Taquila Derrington, Trepina Sultan,
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Acknowledgment of Country

We would like to acknowledge the Larrakia people, on whose Country this research was conducted. We extend our respect to Larrakia elders past and present, and our gratitude to all the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who participated in this research project. This always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

Title

Rough Sleeping in Greater Darwin – Final Report

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Disclaimer

The opinions in this report reflect the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the members of the Project Reference Group, or other individuals or organisations who have contributed to the research.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations Used in this Report

ABS - Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACCO - Aboriginal community controlled organisation
AHVTT - Australian Housing Vulnerability Triage Tool
AIHW - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
CAAPS - Council for Aboriginal Alcohol Program Services Aboriginal Corporation
CNOS - Canadian National Occupancy Standard
DCC - Darwin City Council
DCF - Department of Children and Families
DHLGCD - Department of Housing, Local Government and Community Development
DDHS - Danila Dilba Health Services
DSS - Department of Social Services
HEAL - Healthy Engagement and Assistance in the Long Grass
HREC - Human Research Ethics Committee
IHAS - Industry Housing Assistance Scheme
IHSAP - Integrated Homelessness Supported Accommodation Program
LEAG - Lived Experience Advisory Group
LNAC - Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation
NASHH - *National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness*
NHHA - *National Housing and Homelessness Agreement*
NT - Northern Territory
NTG - Northern Territory Government
PAG - Priority Advisory Group
PATs - Patient Assisted Travel Scheme
RAA - Remote Area Allowance
RoGS - Report on Government Services
SAG - Strategic Advisory Group
SHS - Specialist Homelessness Services
SHSC - Specialist Homelessness Services Collection
SHSRG - Specialist Homelessness Services Reform Group
YRHAC - Yilli Rreung Housing Aboriginal Corporation

Executive Summary

Rough Sleeping in Greater Darwin

The Northern Territory (NT) is in a long-term housing and homelessness crisis. Ambition and investment to date have been inadequate to meet the basic accommodation needs of all Territorians. In Greater Darwin, the most visible evidence of a need to provide adequate support is the presence of people who are sleeping rough.

The issue of rough sleeping in Greater Darwin is not new, and nor are government responses to it. Responses range from law-and-order interventions that police public space by moving people to urban peripheries, to the provision of social services and resources that attempt to mitigate the challenges and harms of rough sleeping. These responses are often pursued simultaneously and with contradictory impacts, in contrast to the necessary whole-of-government approach needed to reduce homelessness.

This report examines the drivers for rough sleeping and the engagement of people who are sleeping rough with various support services. We engaged with people who were sleeping rough from a diverse range of backgrounds, ages, and communities. These participants have rich lives, talents, and interests – some are artists, musicians, and have worked in health, childcare, construction, for the police, on cattle stations, and as rangers caring for Country. They have knowledge of language, culture, and Lore. People sleeping rough continually emphasised how they look after each other, ‘caring and sharing’.

Relevant specialist homelessness services (SHS) and social supports for people sleeping rough vary from person to person. One participant described, ‘I don’t like aircon. I like to [be] out in the fresh air.’ Another stated, ‘I want my own place. They’ve got accommodation, but it’s always full.’ While the demand for accommodation varies – between individuals, over time, and depending on the season – the general scarcity of available accommodation exposes the rough sleeper cohort to significant health, safety, and social risks.

The NT Housing System

The NT has a high proportion of renters, compared to other Australian states and territories, that is not adequately serviced by the private rental market. There is also a severe shortage of social housing relative to need. In June 2025 there were 5,463 applications for housing on the NT social housing wait list (excluding applications made directly to community housing providers). In Darwin, the estimated wait time for general applicants ranged from 6-8 years to 8-10 years depending on the property size, while for priority applicants the estimated wait time ranged from 4-6 years to 6-8 years. The total number of housing allocations across the NT for the 2025 calendar year was 167, equivalent to 3 per cent of the total applications.

The failure of the housing system is evident in the NT's homelessness crisis, where crowding is a symptom of housing scarcity. At the 2021 Census, the NT had a total 13,104 people experiencing homelessness at a rate of 564 people per 10,000. The next highest rate across Australian states and territories was Victoria, with 47 people per 10,000. In the NT, high rates of severe overcrowding in both remote community and urban social housing contribute to the prevalence of homelessness. Severe overcrowding across Australia is 21.8 people per 10,000, as compared to the NT proportion of 483.5 people per 10,000, with severe overcrowding accounting for about 80 per cent of the NT's homelessness rate. Severe overcrowding puts increased pressure on housing health hardware, can contribute to the spread of infections and chronic disease, is a risk factor for child removal, and increases the risk of complaints about anti-social behaviour. As a result of housing scarcity, non-tenant visitors experience high housing insecurity and forced mobility, and tenants risk landlord intervention leading to eviction and rough sleeping.

The impacts of the housing and homelessness crisis are disproportionately experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. First Nations people are less likely to own their own home than non-Indigenous Australians, and more likely to rent private market or social housing. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people constitute 87 per cent of the people experiencing homelessness in the NT, and 80 per cent of the people who are sleeping rough (defined by the ABS as 'People living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out'). 2021 Census data indicates that the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the NT living in appropriately sized (not overcrowded) housing is 43.4 per cent, as compared to 81.4 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia.

Census data on people sleeping rough in the NT indicates the issue is more proportionally in line with other Australian state and territory jurisdictions. In 2021, there were 669 persons living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out in the NT, 327 of whom were located in Greater Darwin. However, these figures are likely to represent a significant undercount of the prevalence of rough sleeping, given the difficulties of accessing this cohort. Service providers offer much higher estimates. The prevalence of rough sleeping in Greater Darwin is also impacted by major weather events – such as flooding in remote communities – and its mainstream visibility varies across the seasons, depending on the areas available for camping.

To address the housing and homelessness crisis, a major program of urban social housing development is required. The need to support public housing construction in remote communities has been recognised by the Commonwealth Government through consecutive long-term funding agreements. Equivalent specified investment, supported by a bilateral agreement between the Commonwealth and NT Governments, is required for urban social housing in the NT. Only with more social housing stock is it realistic to aspire to a Housing First approach to homelessness.

The Homelessness Sector

The most effective way to reduce homelessness is to increase access to safe and secure housing. However, in Greater Darwin, the need to accommodate visitors who are unable to afford mainstream accommodation options is likely to continue indefinitely, as is the need to support visitors who prefer to camp elsewhere than formal accommodation. Remote community residents travel to Greater Darwin for a range of reasons including visiting kin, accessing health services, attending funerals and other cultural ceremonies, attending leisure activities, and leaving remote communities to grieve relatives or to escape conflict. Sleeping rough is often an outcome of this travel. Alongside public housing and community housing providers, the specialist homelessness services sector continues to play an important accommodation role, alongside the provision of many other homelessness services.

In 2024-25, there was a significant increase in the amount of Commonwealth Government funding for NT homelessness services 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 homelessness services in the NT increased seven-fold.

This increased funding has underpinned significant investment in contracts for tenancy sustainment and assertive outreach programs, including within Aboriginal community controlled organisations that did not previously have such teams. It was a privilege in this project to engage with and learn from many specialist homelessness services workers who advocate tirelessly for the complex needs of people sleeping rough in Greater Darwin. However, the funding increase under the needs-based NASHH regime also highlights the prior inadequate resourcing of the NT homelessness sector. This means that any new policy, service, or program and the workers responsible for its implementation must contend with the effects of the prior funding shortfall.

This project was not charged with evaluating new or existing programs in terms of their impacts on the experiences of people sleeping rough in Greater Darwin. However, based on our engagement, there are opportunities for greater coordination between organisations across the sector contracted to deliver similar programs. This relates to information sharing, case management, resource sharing, workforce planning, and the establishment of best practice guidelines. Within organisations, there are opportunities to review the supports provided to frontline homelessness workers, to ensure they are able to participate in the sector long-term.

At the system level, there remains a shortage of crisis and short-term accommodation. Waitlists for social housing are preceded by waitlists for short-stay accommodation, from which the best outcome for most people is graduating into a longer-term supported accommodation program. Historical debts to services and various eligibility criteria exclude prospective clients from accessing existing services – a collective rationing under conditions of generalised scarcity. Overall, there is a need to expand services and shift from an acute

crisis management response to one that can simultaneously prevent and reduce chronic rough sleeping.

Report Structure

This report is structured by chapters and section headings to allow readers to access content most relevant to their interests. The Introduction builds on this Executive Summary and 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 broadly and rough sleeping specifically, contextualising the situation in the NT in relation to other Australian state and territory jurisdictions. 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. The Report concludes with 28 recommendations drawn from the project. These are addressed to specific stakeholders and are organised by the categories: the housing and homelessness system; existing services, funding, and policy arrangements; additional service needs; workforce; specialist homelessness services organisations; and research and evaluation.

1. Introduction

1.1 Housing for All

Homelessness is first and foremost a housing problem. Put another way, the most effective way to reduce homelessness is to increase access to safe and secure housing.

To address homelessness, increasing housing supply is necessary but not sufficient. This is because homelessness is also an effect of the unequal distribution of access to existing housing stock. The commodification of housing in Australia has prioritised the exchange value of properties over their use value as homes. Both the current *National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness* (NASHH) and the former *National Housing and Homelessness Agreement* (NHHA) explicitly acknowledge that there are a range of factors outside the scope of those agreements which impact the needs for social housing and homelessness services, 'including Commonwealth and State tax settings, financial sector regulation, immigration, income support and rental subsidies' (NHAA, 5). Nonetheless, for reform to homelessness policies to be effective, the commodification (and increasing financialisation) of housing must also, always, be contested.

Relatedly, the 2021 Census estimated over one million private dwellings (1,043,776), or 10.1 per cent of Australia's total private dwellings, were unoccupied, with a rate of 12.8 per cent of private dwellings in the Northern Territory (AHURI 2022). While there are a range of reasons that dwellings are unoccupied on Census night, the availability of a proportion of the dwellings that are holiday homes¹, owned by people currently living overseas, or being land banked would provide adequate accommodation for the approximately 122,000 people in Australia experiencing homelessness. Homelessness is not simply a housing problem but a housing distribution and access problem.²

¹ Research by SGS Economics (2017) following the 2016 Census estimated that while 43.6 per cent of unoccupied properties were empty because the residents were not at home, 22.8 per cent of dwellings were empty holiday homes (about 237,000 dwellings). The other point that commentators like to make about the 'inflation' of this unoccupied dwelling figure is that the geographic distribution of such properties (weighted towards regional areas, including vacation towns and declining regional towns) is not consistent with population demand for properties. Even accounting for this, there is a significant proportion of housing stock that is simply not being utilised because it is not evenly distributed across the population (Baker et al. 2022). Experimental data released by the ABS in 2023 estimated there are between 100,000 and 150,000 empty or abandoned properties in Australia (Miles 2024).

² Equity Economics undertook housing needs that found 'a conservative estimate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing need is an additional 18,342 houses nationally – of which 3,248 houses (around 18%) are required to house people experiencing homelessness and 15,094 houses (around 82%) are required to house those living in overcrowded dwellings (see Figure 1). Of these, 5,261 are needed in remote and very remote areas' (2024, 14).

When housed people see people sleeping rough, they should also see holiday homes, land banked properties, and tax concessions for wealthy citizens. When housed people see rough sleepers in Greater Darwin, they should also see inadequate investment in remote communities and homelands, in housing but also in the other amenities required to support vibrant communities. Greater public education about the drivers for rough sleeping is required to build understanding between people in urban spaces. This includes understanding that poverty is not simply a risk factor for homelessness – poverty is compounded by homelessness. The presence of people sleeping rough in the urban and suburban contexts of Greater Darwin is an index of society's willingness to invest in the infrastructures necessary to support safe and secure housing and communities for everyone.

1.2 Research Questions

This research has examined the social, economic, and cultural drivers influencing rough sleeping, with a particular focus on the experiences of First Nations people. Our research foci have been based on engagement with the commissioning organisation Yilli Rreung Housing Aboriginal Corporation (YRHAC) and the Project Advisory Group (PAG), including YRHAC, Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation (LNAC), the Council for Aboriginal Alcohol Program Services (CAAPS) Aboriginal Corporation, and Danila Dilba Health Services (DDHS). The project's key research questions are:

- What are the factors (social, economic, cultural) underpinning rough sleeping in the Greater Darwin area?
- What are the service gaps in the homelessness sector for rough sleepers?
- What are the barriers preventing rough sleepers from accessing support services?
- How might policy, investment, and program interventions be reformed to support greater engagement of rough sleepers with support services?

To remain grounded in lived experience, answers to each of these key questions have been informed by feedback from current and former rough sleepers.

The project has 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 in the NT, especially in the Greater Darwin region.

2. Literature Review

Key Points

- The most effective way to reduce homelessness is to increase access to safe and secure housing.
- There are competing definitions for measuring homelessness in Australia, including the inclusion or exclusion of severe overcrowding, which are operationalised by governments and non-government actors for various purposes.
- Indigenous definitions of homelessness highlight the importance of connections to culture and Country beyond accommodation needs.
- A range of typologies have been established to represent the forms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness, which can be useful for understanding different forms of public-place dwelling and remote-urban mobility.
- Rough sleeping is a form of homelessness, which in Greater Darwin is often experienced by people who at other times also experience other forms of homelessness, such as living in severely crowded dwellings or temporarily in supported accommodation.
- Practical challenges mean that statistics on homelessness, and in particular on rough sleeping, are likely under-enumerated.
- A range of factors drive rough sleeping in the Greater Darwin region, including a lack of access to suitable housing, mobility between remote and urban communities, and the health and wellbeing effects of ongoing marginalisation grounded in settler colonialism.
- There is a high level of unmet housing need in the Northern Territory (NT), which contributes to the high rate of overcrowding and long wait times for social housing.
- Remote community residents' travel to Darwin for a range of reasons including visiting kin, accessing health services, attending funerals and other cultural ceremonies, attending leisure activities, and leaving remote communities to grieve relatives or to escape conflict.
- The discourse of choice is sometimes used to frame rough sleeping, or long grassing, in Greater Darwin, but it should be carefully contextualised in relation to individuals' available accommodation and social services options.
- Moving people on who are sleeping rough shifts the social issue to contexts less visible to mainstream society, while increasing the vulnerability of homeless people to various risks.
- The difference in seasons is an important factor in determining the extent and direction of remote-urban mobility, the locations of rough sleepers, and the required social supports.
- Rough sleeping is an outcome of various health and wellbeing disadvantages while also exacerbating those issues, such as domestic violence and alcohol and other drug use.
- Hospital and prison discharge processes, alongside the shortage of short-stay and transitional accommodation, contribute to rough sleeping in Greater Darwin.

2.1 Definitions of Homelessness and Rough Sleeping

2.1.1 Governmental Definitions of Homelessness

The Northern Territory (NT) has the highest rate of homelessness among Australian states and territories. On the night of the 2021 Census, the NT had 13,104 people experiencing homelessness at a rate of 564 people per 10,000 in the NT population. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people made up 87 per cent of the individuals recorded homeless in the NT (ABS 2021).

Homelessness is a measure of adequate accommodation that includes overcrowded housing. Chapter 3 of this report provides detailed analysis of homelessness data in the NT. In this chapter, it is sufficient to identify that the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) definition considers an individual to be experiencing homelessness 'if their current living arrangement:

- Is in a dwelling that is inadequate; or
 - Has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable; or
 - Does not allow them to have control of, and access to, space for social relations.'
- (ABS 2012a)

In the NT, high rates of overcrowding in both remote community and urban social housing contribute to the prevalence of homelessness (Thompson 2024).

Rough sleeping is a subset of homelessness, referring to the situation of living in an improvised dwelling, tent, or sleeping out.³ It is important to recognise rough sleeping as a social phenomenon which requires particular social service supports, without circumscribing people sleeping rough from other people experiencing homelessness. This is necessary because funding arrangements address various homelessness demographics (or, in ABS terminology, operational groups). Also, and more importantly, it is important to recognise that

³ The other dominant governmental definition of homelessness in Australia is from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) for the purpose of its Specialist Homelessness Services Collection. The AIHW definition does not include household crowding. For the AIHW, a person is homeless if they are living in either:

- Non-conventional accommodation or sleeping rough (such as living on the street, sleeping in parks, squatting, staying in cars or railway carriages, living in improvised dwellings and "living in the long grass"
- Short-term of emergency accommodation due to a lack of other options (such as refuges, crisis shelters, couch surfing, living temporarily with friends and relatives, insecure accommodation on a short-term basis and emergency accommodation arranged by a specialist homelessness agency. (AIHW 2021)

Chamberlain and Johnson (2020) are critical of the inclusion of overcrowding in the ABS definition, including the arbitrary distinction between severe overcrowding as constituted by the requirement of four additional bedrooms and constituting homelessness, and the requirement of three additional bedrooms not constituting homelessness.

people who are sleeping rough often also experience other forms of homelessness, such as staying in severely overcrowded dwellings or temporarily in supported accommodation.

The current ABS definition of homelessness was preceded by a range of prior versions as homelessness became recognised as a significant social problem. An Australian Department of Social Security Report in 1973 recognised youth homelessness only in relation to 'hippie' and 'surfie' subcultures through which young people were 'passing through a phase of detachment from normal social relationships' (1973, 8). In 1986, the Census introduced the category 'improvised dwelling' to identify people without formal housing, which was revised in 1991 to 'improvised home, campers out', without providing any distinction between individuals experiencing homelessness and those camping for leisure (ABS 2018).⁴ In 1992, Chris Chamberlain and David MacKenzie (1992, 291) proposed a cultural model of homelessness that was subsequently developed into a framework involving three categories of homelessness (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2009). According to this framework published by the Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness (2001), primary homelessness was characterised by a lack of conventional accommodation, such as individuals sleeping rough; secondary homelessness was characterised by frequent movement between temporary accommodation situations, such as emergency accommodation or couch surfing; and tertiary homelessness included living in accommodation below community standards, such as some boarding houses. A related distinction was drawn between absolute homelessness (primary), characterising people without conventional accommodation, and relative homelessness, including people living in insecure accommodation. Chamberlain and MacKenzie's 'cultural' understanding of homelessness underpinned experimental estimates for homelessness published for the 1996, 2001, and 2006 Censuses, prior to the establishment of the current ABS statistical definition in 2012.⁵

Along with the ABS definition and Chamberlain and MacKenzie's 'cultural' definition of homelessness, there are a range of governmental definitions for homelessness that have contemporary force. The United Nations definition distinguishes between primary homelessness (or rooflessness) and secondary homelessness, where the latter group may include people with no usual place of residence who move between types of accommodation. The European Federation of National Organisations (FEANTSAO) identifies four homelessness categories, including rooflessness, houselessness, living in insecure housing, and living in inadequate housing.

⁴ On the history of Australian definitions of homelessness, also see Coleman (2001).

⁵ The 'cultural' understanding of homelessness has been criticised by some scholars for its attempt to render objective standards for homelessness, even while acknowledging their cultural specificity, but especially given the existence of dramatically different cultural experiences and interpretations of crowding. As Paul Memmott et al. write, 'it is vital to recognise that the needs of many Indigenous Australians will not be met by applying a "community standard" drawn from the broader non-Indigenous community' (2003, 28). In Peter Marcuse's (1990) well-known distinction between shelter and a home, he suggests that the notion of a home implies the availability of minimum housing conditions that a community believes its members have a right to expect.

The purpose of identifying the range of definitions of homelessness is not to advocate for one over another, but to highlight that these are both culturally and historically specific – expectations for adequate accommodation are dynamic and contested. Further, particular definitions are operationalised for various practical purposes – for research, for a Census, for determining access to social services, and so on. How people understand the issue of rough sleeping in Greater Darwin in relation to dominant conceptions of homelessness is important to the policy and program interventions that are promoted.



Figure 1. A bush camp in Palmerston

2.1.2 Indigenous Definitions of Homelessness

Indigenous definitions of homelessness typically emphasise that the situation is not necessarily equivalent to houselessness and that homelessness can include various considerations related to Indigenous people's connection to culture and Country.

As far back as 2014, the ABS acknowledged the importance of investigating potential differences between the objective statistical measure for homelessness, and subjective experiences, noting that

some people classified as homeless under the ABS statistical definition may in fact report being satisfied with their housing circumstances. Conversely, some people who have adequate shelter, secure tenure and control of, and access to space may feel homeless if living "off country" due to being disconnected from family and/or their community. (ABS 2014, 5)

The consideration given to subjective perspectives on home and homelessness should be contextualised in relation to the history and ongoing practices of settler colonialism in Australia.⁶

In this vein, Quandamooka scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues that Australia's settler-colonial state has acted to 'define [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people], the original owners, as not belonging, but as homeless and out of place' (2003, 24). Similarly, former CEO of Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation, Ilana Eldridge, emphasised the settler colonial basis of Indigenous homelessness, arguing that homelessness in the NT 'is better described as internal displacement' (2013, 13). A Keys Young study of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) in 1998 identified that the effects of colonisation, dispossession, and disempowerment 'often transcend generations and continue to impair the capacities of some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to live independent, secure and fulfilling lives' (1998, iii). Selina Tually et al. identified three ways that the perspectives of Indigenous Australians differ from the ABS definition of homelessness, highlighting the relevance of connection to Country, family and kinship responsibilities, and mobility (2020, 26-27; also see Thredgold et al. 2019). Collectively, these perspectives highlight that homelessness is not simply about exclusion from the housing and labour markets, but a lack of social legitimacy, space, and control over space (Coleman 2001).

Métis-Cree scholar Jesse Thistle developed a definition of Indigenous homelessness in Canada that sought to contextualise homelessness as an 'outcome of historically constructed and ongoing settler colonization and racism that have displaced and dispossessed First Nations, Métis and Inuit Peoples from their traditional governance systems and laws, territories, histories, worldviews, ancestors and stories' (2017, 6). Drawing on Indigenous conceptions of home that emphasise networks of relationships and responsibilities (14) - 'a holistic metaphysical understanding of emplacement' (15) - Thistle describes Indigenous homelessness as having the following 12 dimensions:

- Historic displacement homelessness
- Contemporary geographic separation homelessness

⁶ The prioritisation of subjective experience is consistent with second-wave feminist arguments for homelessness, which highlighted that different individuals can have different opinions about what constitutes a home, including in domestic and family violence situations (Watson 1984). An early example of a definition for homelessness that emphasised its subjective components was developed by the National Youth Coalition for Housing in 1985, which defined homelessness as:

- The absence of secure, adequate and satisfactory shelter as perceived by the young person and for homelessness to exist, at least one of the following conditions, or any combination of conditions should be operative:
- a) an absence of shelter
 - b) the threat of loss of shelter
 - c) very high mobility between places of abode
 - d) existing accommodation considered inadequate by the resident for such reasons as overcrowding, the physical state of the residence, lack of security of occupancy, of lack of emotional support and stability in the place of residence
 - e) unreasonable restrictions in terms of alternative forms of accommodation. (National Youth Coalition for Housing in 1985, 1)

- Spiritual disconnection homelessness
- Mental disruption and imbalance homelessness
- Cultural disintegration and loss homelessness
- Overcrowding homelessness
- Relocation and mobility homelessness
- Going home homelessness
- Nowhere to go homelessness
- Escaping or evading harm homelessness
- Emerging crisis homelessness
- Climate refugee homelessness

Only a small number of these dimensions are captured by dominant statistical definitions of homelessness. As Thistle argues, 'Being without a physical structure is only a symptom of the root causes of Indigenous homelessness, which are being without healthy social, cultural, spiritual, emotional and physical relationships' (2017, 16).

2.1.3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Homelessness Typologies

Academic research has also developed typologies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness. Such typologies are useful for understanding the demographic range of people experiencing homelessness, beyond the ABS's operational groups, and the ways that specific individuals may experience multiple types of homelessness across the life course. Research by Paul Memmott et al. (2003) considered 'the phenomenon of small groups of Indigenous people living in public settings' who might be considered homeless but who might also consider themselves to be 'placed' and 'homed'. They identified 'public place dwelling' as their preferred terminology to 'homeless' or 'itinerants' (2003, i), and distinguished public place dwelling as one of five Indigenous homelessness categories, alongside transient homelessness, spiritual forms of homelessness, crowding, and individuals escaping an unsafe or unstable family circumstance, noting that such categories are not mutually exclusive (2003, iii-iv, 22-23, 29-31; Keys Young 1998; Christensen 2015). This terminology suggests that some individuals will feel a connection to home to the public places in which they reside.

Paul Memmott and Daphne Nash argue that Indigenous public place dwelling or rough sleeping, in particular, 'remains under-recognized and therefore misunderstood' (2016, 213). They suggest that through the 1990s, the population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people residing in public places increased, despite the existence of by-then formalised town camps, and they often saw themselves as being both placed and homed rather than homeless, identifying with a range of 'regionally preferred names, such as parkies, goomies, ditchies, long grassers, or river campers' (2016, 215). Memmott and Nash describe three broad categories of Indigenous homeless people, including:

- i. public place dwellers (comparable to the category of "absolute homelessness"...)
 - ii. housed people who are nevertheless at risk of homelessness ... and
 - iii. spiritually homeless people. (2015, 217)

Public place dwellers can be considered in terms of where they are located and how they are perceived by other community members. Such public places include parks, beaches, car parks, vacant lots, creek and river banks, and so on. Individuals dwelling in such places are likely to have few possessions, and often become visible to the wider community via their encampments and 'private' activities performed in public spaces.

Memmott and Nash (2016) outline four subcategories of public place dwellers, distinguished by the length of time individuals are homeless in this way, and the relative agency of their situation. (1) Voluntary, short-term, and intermittent public place dwellers have often travelled from remote to urban locations for social reasons with an intention to return. (2) Voluntary and medium-term public place dwellers reside continually in public places but have a place of residence elsewhere, without a specific plan to return to it. (3) Voluntary and long-term public place dwellers are aligned with the chronically homeless and are likely to have cut ties with their home communities, accepting that their lifestyle is likely to persist.⁷ Such chronic homelessness is evident when individuals have accepted or adapted to an ongoing state of homelessness. (4) Finally, the fourth subcategory is public place dwellers by necessity, who may wish to return to home communities but are otherwise 'stuck', due to a lack of funds or obligations in town, such as medical or family obligations. The issues of temporality and agency that differentiate Memmott and Nash's subcategories are important considerations for policy makers and the specialist homelessness services (SHS) sector to consider when designing appropriate service responses.

A 1998 study of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program by consultancy Keys Young also identified five distinct types of Indigenous homelessness, including spiritual homelessness, overcrowding, relocation and transient homelessness, escaping an unsafe or unstable home, and a lack of access to any stable shelter or accommodation (1998, iv). In a 2001 profile of 'long grassers' in Greater Darwin, Memmott and Shaneen Fantin provide a list of characteristics that are often, though variously, present for such individuals, who may fit with any of the categories of public place dwellers above. These include:

- People who do not pay for accommodation;
 - People who have a visible public profile: they socialise, shelter, drink, and argue/fight in public;
 - Perceived by some to exhibit anti-social behaviour at times;
 - Perceived by some to be at risk and needy;
 - Have low incomes, a substantial part of which is spent on alcohol;
 - Generally have few possessions, minimal clothes and bedding;
 - Generally conform to a "beat" of camping, socialising and resource places; and
 - Most do not have any immediate intentions of returning to home communities.
- (Memmott and Fantin 2001, 38)

Other research argues that the practice of 'camping out' should be distinguished from sleeping rough, where the former can signal a preference for camping over available shelter

⁷ The AIHW uses the terminology of 'persistent homelessness'. Its Specialist Homelessness Services Collection (SHSC) defines an individual as experiencing persistent homelessness if they are receiving SHS support and their housing situation is considered homeless for more than 7 months of a 24-month period.

options, should not be equated with homelessness, and is located in longer traditions of Indigenous practice (Grant et al. 2017).

As the descriptions of public place dwellers above suggest, some of these individuals may sleep rough, for short or long periods, while also having access to housing in another location. While potentially waiting for public housing in an urban centre, such individuals may have access to housing in a remote community, albeit likely housing that is overcrowded. Cameron Parsell writes that given this situation, 'Many people sleeping in the long grass are therefore not homeless, in that they have a home and a usual address outside of Darwin. When they are in Darwin, however, they are without shelter' (2010, 16). Carole Zufferey and Donna Chung (2015) note in their study on 'red dust homelessness' that 'Aboriginal people in particular did not identify as "homeless" if they were "houseless" or "rough sleeping" and were not referred to as "being homeless" by service providers because "everyone comes from somewhere"' (2015, 21). Given the prevalence of severe crowding in remote community housing, it is possible, even likely, that the individuals described by these scholars would be counted as experiencing homelessness were they located in their remote community housing at the time of a Census. However, the broad point that matters is that such visitors may not be captured by official homelessness statistics.

2.1.4 Counting Homelessness

The related issues of severe overcrowding and movement between remote and urban communities makes quantifying the prevalence of homelessness, and specifically rough sleeping, an ongoing challenge. Commentators have highlighted that the ABS data is likely to undercount homelessness for specific groups or types of homelessness, such as younger people, people displaced due to domestic and family violence, and people staying with other households. Regarding people sleeping rough, the Census relies on the identification of hot spots by service providers and field staff to undertake counts on Census night. Chamberlain and Johnson (2020) highlight that rough sleepers are likely to be significantly undercounted because:

- Rough sleepers may hide away to escape the cold or because they fear being attacked
- Street count volunteers do not enter empty buildings where people might be squatting
- There are many places where it is difficult to count rough sleepers, including large parks, back laneways and alleys, stairwells in private buildings, and behind buildings, houses or shops.

The number of people enumerated by the Census to be living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out in the NT has varied over time, declining from 1209 people in 2006 to 662 people in 2021. In 2012, 327 of those people were located in the Darwin and Palmerston

local government areas.⁸ Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2009) suggest that such figures for rough sleeping are likely to represent a significant undercount. Parsell notes that service providers estimated about 2,000 people sleeping rough in Greater Darwin in 2010 (as compared to the ABS Census estimate in 2011 of 848 people across the NT). Priscilla Lavery noted in 2014 that ‘each night, around 1,000 people sleep out in the long grass around Darwin.’ Elsewhere, Parsell and Rhonda Phillips describe that stakeholders from the not-for-profit service delivery sector ‘provided estimates of the [Darwin rough sleeping] population as low as 2000 and as high as 5000 of people sleeping rough on a given night’ (2013, 190), while noting they are cautious of the validity of those figures.

2.2. Drivers for Homelessness and Rough Sleeping in Greater Darwin

This section examines the drivers influencing rough sleeping in the Greater Darwin region. Reasons for this prevalence include a lack of access to suitable housing, mobility between remote and urban communities, and the health and wellbeing effects of ongoing marginalisation grounded in settler colonialism. These factors contribute to high rates of rough sleeping.

At the broadest level, homelessness advocates sometimes differentiate between individual and structural factors as drivers for homelessness. NT Shelter (2023) refers to the categories of structural factors, system failures, and individual and relational factors. In practice, most researchers recognise that homelessness is caused by the interaction of individual risk factors and adverse structural conditions (Fitzpatrick and Christian 2006; Lee et al. 2010). Structural factors contributing to homelessness include the inadequate provision of housing, including the increasing cost of rent and systemic racism in the housing market, as well as weak labour markets, and, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, settler colonialism and disproportionate poverty. The NT Council of Social Services (NTCOSS 2025) recommends that the Commonwealth Government increase all income support to at least \$82 per day, including to address the rising cost of housing. In order to address poverty in the NT, the Central Land Council and other organisations have highlighted a need for the Commonwealth Government to increase the Remote Area Allowance (RAA) in recognition of the increasing cost of living in remote communities (CLC 2026). Increasing income support and the RAA will support residents to live at remote communities and homelands where it is their preference.

Individual factors contributing to homelessness include mental health and disability status, domestic and family violence, drug and alcohol use, child protection, and engagement with police and custodial institutions. In their study of the structural drivers of homelessness,

⁸ In this project, references to ‘Greater Darwin’ include the Darwin and Palmerston local government areas. This is distinct from some references to Greater Darwin that also include the Litchfield local government area.

Wood et al. (2015) found that the socio-economic characteristics of weak labour markets, concentrations of poverty (proxied by the proportion of public housing and unskilled labourers) and income inequality were present in regions with relative high levels of homelessness. They describe that 'Regions with higher shares of males, Indigenous persons and sole parents had elevated rates of homelessness' (3; also see Batterham et al. 2020, 4).

Of course, while individual factors such as mental health status or illicit substance use may provide some explanatory force in specific individuals' homelessness biographies, their basis is deeply embedded in structural factors, evidenced by the racialisation of poverty, the differential governance and policing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and the Indigenisation of mass incarceration.

Acknowledging such bases as drivers for homelessness, the Productivity Commission (2022) identifies a range of demographic categories more vulnerable to homelessness, including:

- People in the LGBTIQ+ community, 34 per cent of whom reported experiencing homelessness in their lifetime
- People experiencing family and domestic violence – 42 per cent of specialist homelessness services (SHS) clients experienced family and domestic violence
- People with mental ill-health – 32 per cent of SHS clients had a current mental health issue
- People exiting institutions and care – 5.5 per cent of SHS clients exited custodial arrangements or care
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who make up 20 percent of the homeless population
- People born overseas, who make up 46 per cent of the homeless population, and only 28.5 per cent of the general population
- People with substance abuse disorders – 10 per cent of SHS clients had problematic drug and/or alcohol use
- Veterans, 5.3 per cent of recently transitioned veterans experienced homelessness over a 12-month period.

Specific individuals may have a range of identified 'risk factors' for homelessness but not ever experience homelessness. The capacity of services to properly meet the needs of individuals in a particular region may also serve as a protective factor against homelessness (Batterham et al. 2020).

2.2.1 Unmet Housing Need

Housing undersupply and unmet need

There is a high level of unmet housing need in the NT and especially for Aboriginal people. This is a major cause of homelessness, including rough sleeping. There are a total 85,000 occupied dwellings across the NT, including 15,255 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander households (ABS 2021b). A total 69.4 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the NT are renters. Common tenure types for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the NT include rented through a state or territory housing provider (35.4%), rented through

a community housing provider (13%), and rented through a real estate agent (11.8%). AHURI research by Megan Moskos et al. calculated the proportion of Indigenous households with unmet housing need (based on core minimum standards for housing adequacy, suitability, and affordability) to be 42.5 per cent of households in regional NT, and 8.4 per cent of households in Darwin (2025, 57).

In the NT Government's (2019) housing strategy for the period 2020-2025, 'A Home for All Territorians', its modelling estimated that 8,000 to 12,000 additional dwellings are required to relieve existing overcrowding and meet population growth. The modelling estimated that about 75 per cent of the projected housing demand is required across the social housing system. The peak body NT Shelter (2023; 2024) also undertook modelling and concluded that the NT requires an almost 50 per cent increase on the current number of total dwellings to accommodate projected housing needs by 2030, including 19,000 social and affordable dwellings (see NT Shelter 2023, 24).⁹

Crowding

The shortfall of available properties and the high rate of crowding are interlinked with the prevalence of homelessness in the NT, at 12 times the national rate. Severe overcrowding across Australia is 21.8 people per 10,000, as compared to the NT rate of 483.5 people per 10,000, with severe overcrowding accounting for 81 per cent of the NT's homelessness rate (NTG 2019, 9).

In June 2019, the portfolio of housing managed by the then Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities (TFHC) included 11,247 dwellings (NTG Housing Strategy 2019). This was comprised of 10,852 social housing dwellings and 395 affordable rental dwellings. Of these, 4,854 houses were located in remote communities and 385 houses in leased town camps. As of December 2022, TFHC data represented 5,498 dwellings (houses and units) that were subject to the Healthy Homes program – the repairs and maintenance program for remote community and leased town camp housing. Of these dwellings, 5,084 dwellings were located in remote communities, 298 in Alice Springs town camps, and 116 in Tennant Creek community living areas (Greal et al. 2023).

The rate of severe overcrowding in the NT – which constitutes homelessness under the ABS's statistical definition – is substantially higher than in any other Australian state or territory jurisdiction. 2021 Census data indicates that the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the NT living in appropriately sized (not overcrowded) housing is 43.4 per cent, as compared to 81.4 per cent across the country. In 2017, at the commencement of significant NT remote housing investment, the proportion of overcrowded houses in the NT's

⁹ The shortage of social housing is an Australia-wide problem. Hal Pawson et al. describe that 'The period 2018-2023 saw social housing expanding by 2.3%. However, since Australia's population rose by 6.8%, the sector's share of all housing has continued to fall, as it has for most of the past 25 years. A more direct measure of long-term contraction of social housing supply is the reduction in annual new lettings by social housing providers from 52,000 to 32,000 1991-2023, a reduction of 38%. Proportionate to population, this equates to a decline of 60%' (2024, 9).

73 remote communities, Alice Springs town camps, and Tennant Creek community living areas (or dwellings where the CEO Housing is the landlord of public housing) was 55 per cent. In 2022, the proportion of overcrowded houses at remote community and town camp houses was 52.9 per cent (Grealy et al. 2023). Similarly, in the NT's urban centres, people living in severely crowded dwellings account for 65 per cent of total homelessness (NT Shelter 2023), though this rate is inconsistent across regions, and much higher in Nhulunbuy than in Darwin (see Figure 2). As Skye Thompson, former CEO of Aboriginal Housing NT, notes, 'The levels of homelessness, due to unavailable housing that is safe and secure, means families often have no choice but to tolerate overcrowding and unacceptable housing conditions' (2024, 10).

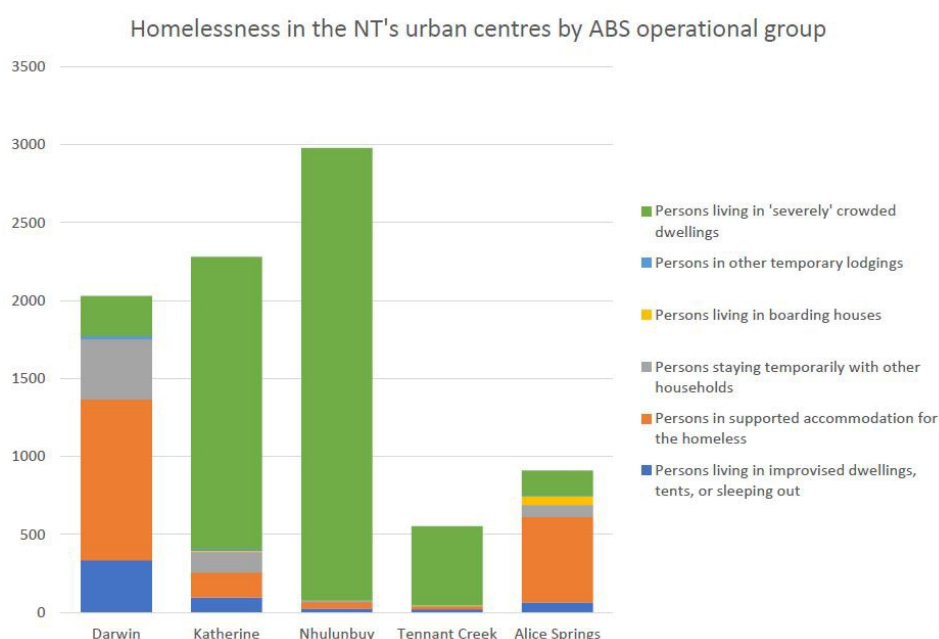


Figure 2. NT urban homelessness by ABS operational group. NT Shelter 2023

The prevalence of severe overcrowding provides the chief basis for ongoing Australian Government investment in NT remote housing. The 'Northern Territory Remote Housing' Federation Funding Agreement Schedule outlines the current remote community housing investment package from the Australian Government, matched by the NT Government to provide a total \$3.98 billion across ten years (2024-34). The FFA Schedule states as a purpose to halve overcrowding in NT remote communities and town camps by 2034, including by delivering up to 2,700 houses across the 10-year agreement. There is no equivalent agreement for urban social housing construction, for which Australian Government investment is more ad hoc. Given the severe need, there is a strong basis for a specific Commonwealth Government funding package to support social housing construction in NT regional towns. Beyond this, the Commonwealth Government's Housing Support Program includes \$11 million for infrastructure upgrades in Palmerston East to facilitate the opening of around 290 residential lots, though these will be zoned for mixed use. The NT Government received \$50 million in 2024 as a Social Housing Accelerator Program (SHAP) payment to

support the construction of up to 100 new social housing properties, with 50 social and affordable homes to be developed by Venture Housing (Venture Housing 2025).

2.2.2 Rental Housing Challenges

Aboriginal people also face significant challenges accessing affordable housing in the private rental markets of the NT's major towns, such as Darwin, Nhulunbuy, Katherine, Tennant Creek, and Alice Springs. Jonathon Louth and Kim Burns describe the significant barriers in private rental housing as including 'access, no rental history, lack of security due to short-term leases and lack of knowledge in regard to understanding and negotiating the private market' (2018, 52). They also highlight 'the prevalence of negative attitudes towards Aboriginal people by some real estate agencies and landlords' (52), which can contribute to failed tenancies and the ongoing record of this on the Tenant Information Centre Australia list (Tually et al. 2022). The NT is one of the least affordable Australian jurisdictions for rental properties and it has the weakest protections for renters, including legal no-grounds evictions, few protections against rent increases, and the absence of an independent bond board. Prospective Aboriginal tenants face this competitive housing market often burdened by additional barriers to accessing housing, including a lack of identity documents, low incomes, limited tenancy history, and a lack of stable address (Tually et al. 2022, 3).

Collectively, this means that there is little opportunity for current rough sleepers to enter housing that is not overcrowded, and in which they would not also be categorised as homeless, albeit according to a different operational group. For those seeking rental tenancies in social housing, wait lists are extensive and individuals are likely to remain on wait lists for long periods. The current wait lists would likely be significantly longer if individuals in prison did not often have their applications cancelled for failing to respond to requests from the department for periodic status updates.¹⁰ Access to social housing in Australia is highly competitive, rationed according to relative disadvantage, and often dependent on substantial work undertaken by advocates with the skills required to meet extensive documentary requirements (Morris et al. 2023). The NT has more than double the proportion of people per capita on the social housing waitlist than any other state or territory jurisdiction, at over 2 per cent of the total population (NTCOSS 2025).

The NT Government distinguishes between applicants on housing waitlists as general applicants and priority applicants. Figure 3 provides an overview of the total number of current applications for urban social housing as of 30 June 2025. In Darwin, the estimated wait time for general applicants ranges from 6-8 years to 8-10 years depending on the property size, while for priority applicants the estimated wait time ranges from 4-6 years to 6-8 years depending on the property size. Estimated wait times for Palmerston are similar, with the shortest wait times for priority applicants and 2- and 3-bedroom properties at 4-6 years. In the financial year 2024-25, a total of only 67 social housing allocations were made in the Darwin region, and 41 allocations were made in the Palmerston region (NT Government

¹⁰ See section 5.7.1 of the NT Government (2024) Social Housing Wait Lists Policy.

2025a). Figure 3 shows that as of June 2025, there were 1,161 general applications and 1,119 priority applications in the Darwin region alone.

Applications for social housing								
Region	General applications				Priority applications			
	1 bedroom	2 bedroom	≥3 bedroom	Total	1 bedroom	2 bedroom	≥3 bedroom	Total
Darwin region	896	145	120	1,161	719	185	215	1,119
Palmerston	338	80	60	478	267	71	101	439
Katherine	245	81	67	393	78	45	58	181
Nhulunbuy	54	36	52	142	11	11	19	41
Tennant Creek	56	23	35	114	20	14	39	73
Alice Springs	483	210	203	896	162	132	132	426
Total	2,072	575	537	3,184	1,257	458	564	2,279

Figure 3. Current applications for NT urban social housing. NT Government 2025

2.2.3 Mobility and the Contestation of Urban Space

Interpreting remote to urban mobility

While the literature often frames the mobility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into and out of urban communities in explicitly cultural and/or racialised terms, the reasons for such travel are largely consistent with the broader Australian population. Parsell and Phillips describe that in and around Darwin, 'Indigenous people are constructed as out of place in urban environments and rather than housing and welfare, the focus is directed towards moving the problem' (2013, 185). They use the frame of 'culture' to distinguish homelessness in this context from presumptions in the literature that generalise homelessness experiences from global cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and London, where culture is supposed to index 'cultural practices such as mobility' (186). Parsell and Phillips distinguish their use of culture to characterise Indigenous mobility as 'a complex, dynamic and contingent phenomenon but it is not a "product of an inherently Indigenous predisposition to wander"' (Prout 2008, 5; Day 2006). Following Prout (2008), rather than being an endogenous phenomenon, temporary Indigenous mobility is explained by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's engagement with the Australian economy and mainstream service system. Parsell and Phillips conclude that, nonetheless, 'Policy documents and government informants afforded cultural practices much more explanatory power than

racism and poverty when framing the disproportionate incidence of rough sleeping among Indigenous Australians' (2013, 200).

Reasons for travelling to Darwin include visiting kin, accessing hospital and health services, attending funerals and other cultural ceremonies, attending leisure activities including festivals and sports carnivals, and leaving remote communities to grieve relatives following a death or to escape conflict (Prout 2008; Young and Doohan 1989; Christie et al. 2004). A number of push factors that encourage remote to urban mobility are grounded in the specific circumstances of remote communities, such as overcrowding in remote housing, challenges accessing health services, a lack of leisure and entertainment activities, restrictive policies governing alcohol consumption, community conflict, and seasonal changes impacting access to remote communities and homelands (see Appendix 1).

In addition, Bill Day (2007) argues that the Northern Territory National Emergency Response (NTNER, 'The Intervention') and the introduction of income management propelled remote residents into urban centres in search of stable employment (also see Holmes and McRae Williams 2008). Day writes that 'Aboriginal people are migrating to the city in an enforced search for "real jobs", only to live with relatives in overcrowded houses in the suburbs or to find refuge of sorts in designated town camps' (2007, 16). Zufferey and Chung (2015) highlight the lack of diversity in accommodation options in many remote communities as driving individuals into towns with more holistic service delivery and accommodation options, such as one-bedroom dwellings, supported aged care, and crisis accommodation for victim-survivors escaping domestic and family violence.

The freedom of the long grass

For a small proportion of people experiencing homelessness, the situation of sleeping rough, or camping, may be understood as a preference, especially when compared to visiting the overcrowded urban housing of their kin or the pressures associated with managing an urban tenancy (including pressures placed on them by servicing cultural obligations or accommodating family and kin). Michael Christie et al. describe that 'Many people say they enjoy the freedom of living in the long-grass' (2004, 4). In a 2004 ABC documentary, the founder of the Longgrass Association argued the following:

Well, for a start, they really need to look very closely at human rights issues. The right for our people to move about the country. At the moment, they're treating people like cattle, dumb animals that are just wandering around aimlessly and don't know what they're doing. And they're moving them on. We must, as a national voice, take up the initial thing, which is, as Indigenous people to this country, we have a right to live the way we want to live. And if we choose not to live in a box. Well, then, that's our choice. (in Day 2006, 15)

This quote demands that commentators and policy makers consider the agency of rough sleepers in determining their living situations rather than presuming that existing housing models are necessarily the right or only solution.

Recognising this, we should also be careful to frame rough sleeping, camping, or long grassing through a simplistic discourse of 'choice', without simultaneously interrogating how choices are constrained (Parsell and Parsell 2012). Day (2015) also quotes an elderly man sleeping rough who stated:

We like to live in the bushes, we don't like to live in the town. Like, when we get a house, all the young boys and young girls, they break everything. I was get three times house in Palmerston, and the Housing Commission kick me out - me and my wife. And I said, "No more". (15)

The choice to camp, in this description, is clearly underpinned by a broader shortage of available housing stock that places pressure on head tenants to accommodate extended family networks and makes them vulnerable to elder abuse. The requirements of urban public housing tenancies can present a challenge to tenants with conflicting obligations to visitors, and shelter accommodation can also have rules related to visitors, curfews, and the separation of family groups that are not culturally appropriate (Rechner 2003).

In the quote above, the choice to camp is the preferred of multiple undesirable options. Reflecting on their own engagement with people experiencing homelessness, Parsell and Parsell describe that 'Research participants did not want to be seen as passive and deficient "homeless people" who had been made homeless by others. By constructing homelessness as a choice, they were highlighting their autonomy and normality' (429). People sleeping rough were found to identify with the notion of personal choice to convey their agency or sense of self, and to assume control over their lives. Acknowledging the importance of understanding framings of rough sleeping based in lived experience, Parsell and Phillips add that 'The positive dimensions or benefits to living in the long grass were not synonymous with a desire to continue sleeping rough' (2013, 195). As the discourse of choice travels beyond rough sleepers themselves into the interpretations of SHS workers and policy makers, it can also work to depoliticise the issue of rough sleeping, shifting attention from the failures of social support systems (Dannatt 2024). Stepping back, such circumstances should also be examined with regard given to the relationship between this conception of choice and a discursive history of liberal individualism that prioritises individual rights over communal obligations. The so-called choice to camp should be understood in relation to its impacts for kin, both positive (for example, choosing to remain with a partner or vulnerable family member where short-term accommodation would separate them) and negative (for example, the insecurity experienced by children sleeping rough).

In this way, it is important to emphasise that key drivers for Indigenous rough sleeping include settler colonialism and poverty. For Patrick Wolfe (2006), settler colonialism is a structure rather than an event, which is reproduced through governance arrangements that continue to contest the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to live on their country on their terms. European colonisation, and the ensuing dispossession and displacement (Rosenman 2006), has rendered the landscape of the Northern Territory into its current arrangements, including the relationships between urban regional centres and remote communities and homelands. Referring to the emergence of the land rights movement and its appearance in relation to Darwin's camps, Day argues that as Aboriginal people asserted their rights to land, the mainstream media framed homeless Aboriginal

people as itinerants, transients, and long grassers, while non-Indigenous homeless people were framed in the public imagination as hippies. The dispossession of land, its extension into various exclusions from the housing market, alongside the long-term exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from the labour rights held by white Australian men, has undermined inter-generational wealth accrual and transmission for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and contributes to the contemporary racialisation of poverty. In this sense, settler colonialism and its ongoing effects is not simply a driver of remote to urban mobility but a reason it is conceived as a social problem. It is the public visibility of poverty, and the associated inability of campers to access a mainstream system of short-stay accommodation, that contributes to rough sleeping in Greater Darwin.

Being moved on

In the Greater Darwin region, there is a long history of regulating where Aboriginal people could live that continues to inform the geography and practice of rough sleeping practices today (Day 1994; 2006). Since colonisation, a range of policies have sought to reduce mobility and promote sedentisation as a precursor to Indigenous assimilation (Young 1990), however the particular spaces to which Indigenous people have been granted access has been variously constrained, such as through the establishment of missions, reserves, ration stations, and town camps (Memmott and Fantin 2001). The contestation over appropriate ways to be in racialised 'public' spaces has often resulted in police-led responses to rough sleepers, in particular attempts to 'move on' rough sleepers or public place dwellers (Lea et al. 2012; Kowal 2008). As Memmott and Fantin write, 'The "law-and-order" approach generally involves acting with the support of government legislation (usually State and/or Local Council in origin) that empowers the Police to remove Itinerant people for a range of offences including: sleeping in a public place; drinking alcohol in a public place; drunkenness, noise nuisance; vagrancy; loitering; fighting; and assault etc.' (2001, 40). Such legislative powers include the criminalisation of loitering under sections 47A and 47B of the *Summary Offences Act* (NT) and the establishment of paperless arrests provisions (Goldie 2008; Goddard et al. 2012; Grealy 2017).

Most recently, private security companies such as Neptune NT and Territory Protective Services have assumed a greater role in policing public and commercial spaces in Darwin and Palmerston, on the pretence that crime has increased and to ensure public safety. Despite this, there is a lack of legislation regulating the conduct of private security and their use of force and weapons – the existing *Private Security Act 1995* (NT) relates to licences rather than the powers exercised by private security guards (Anthony 2023). Reporting by the ABC described accounts by Aboriginal people of assaults at the hands of private security in Darwin's CBD and elsewhere (Fryer et al. 2023). Harold Bara Bara, from Groote Eylandt, described that 'I need to sleep in the street so cameras can see me', but that 'Security is telling people ... [to go] over down in the darkness, in the bushes ... that's not right' (in Fryer et al. 2023).



Figure 4. Benches locked up and shade cloth removed, Palmerston GP Super Clinic

Moving people on in this way is about sanctioning the intended meanings of place (Cresswell 1996), prioritising the commercial and private home ownership prerogatives of contemporary urban space. Writing in 2012, Phillips and Parsell suggested that assertive outreach in Darwin was primarily 'about either returning people to country or responding to "antisocial" behaviour by immediately moving people on', given broader accommodation constraints (2012, 50). This is a relevant characterisation for contemporary outreach programs to reflect upon, in relation to how these define their missions or goals.

Approaches to moving people on may take the form of responding to acute situations through police or similar powers, or the Return to Country program delivered by Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation that facilitates individuals to return to remote communities. In order to justify the first type of response in particular, homelessness is often framed in terms of anti-social behaviour (Eldridge 2013), highlighting the out-of-place activities of public alcohol consumption, intoxication, urination, and sexual activity. As Parsell notes, such 'day-to-day behaviours threaten the "proper" meaning of public places, and challenge the idea of a discrete family unit and the ordering of the public realm' (2010, 18). In this way, moving people on is part of a broader public safety strategy where the primary concern is not with those being moved on but with the protection of the wider community from them. This has resulted in practices such as the demolition or locking of public ablution blocks in Darwin's public spaces (Day 2007), and the locking up of other amenities that are important to people experiencing homelessness (Figure 4). For rough sleepers themselves, the constant requirement to move on can undermine their connections to relevant support services, increase their exposure to violence and health risks, and contribute to cyclical and entrenched disadvantage. As Daniel Fisher notes in relation to one of his research informants, LM, who was camping in Darwin,

Rather than remove a person like LM from Darwin, one might consider the web of relations and social institutions that keep her there. Sending people "home" evaded tackling what, in fact, troubled campers by framing camping solely as the result of individual choice, an aberrant practice to be corrected by forms of proper, Aboriginal (re)emplacement. (2012, 181)

Mobility typologies

Given the range of reasons driving remote to urban mobility and its contribution to rough sleeping (noting that not all rough sleepers in Greater Darwin have travelled from elsewhere), researchers have sought to distinguish between various categories of rough sleepers and travellers.

Memmott et al. (2003) describe a broad distinction drawn between two categories of mobility, 'firstly that which is an expression of individual autonomy and reflects enduring social and cultural practices and values, and secondly that which is problematic and expressive of instability and lack of support' (iv). This distinction highlights the extent to which mobility might reflect an individual's agency or their lack of options grounded in the absence of relevant social services and amenities. They make the important observation that any group of rough sleepers in Darwin is likely to include diversity among its members in terms of their biographies and their reasons for camping, 'often comprised of a core of permanent public place dwellers and a number of visitors who are temporarily attached' (24). Similarly, Mike Dockery and Simon Colquhoun (2012) distinguish temporary mobility from other forms of mobility such as migration and micro-mobility. For Dockery and Colquhoun, drawing on Prout (2008), temporary mobility 'does not involve a change in place (or places) of "usual residence"; it may involve visits to multiple destinations in the one trip; and such trips are of short duration' (1). Migration is contrasted with temporary mobility as typically involving a change in an individual's usual place of residence.

Mobility is also distinguished in terms of its spatial aspects, in terms of characterisations such as circular mobility, chain or line mobility, and micro-mobility (Dockery and Colquhoun 2012). Daphne Habibis et al. characterise circular mobility as 'frequent, short-term movement across an identifiable mobility region that often involves a circuit of temporary stopping places before the return home' (2010, 16). Chain or line mobility is relatively similar, involving stops while travelling across an area, usually based in kinship connections and where a traveller can expect to obtain hospitality and economic support. Dockery and Colquhoun describe micro-mobility as 'intra-settlement mobility in which household composition changes from day to day or night to night as a result of individuals changing residencies' (2012, 2).

Daphne Habibis examines the contribution of temporary mobility to homelessness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, especially in relation to regional and remote communities. Habibis establishes seven categories to capture a range of situations in which temporary mobility and homelessness intersect, including: temporary visitors; migrants; boarders (including those moved from home for predictable periods, such as related to education and training); between place dwellers (or those with a home or residence in more than one place); transients (or those who enact their autonomy by resisting community expectations about residence); involuntary travellers; and the chronically homeless (2011, 409-412). Figure 5 is reproduced from Habibis (2011) and it locates these seven categories in terms of the relative period of absence from 'home' and the relative voluntary nature of an individual's mobility. These categories are useful for understanding why and how individuals move into and between situations that would constitute homelessness. Aside from the category of 'boarders', the categories are concerned with motivations and duration rather

than accommodation situation, and in this sense individuals who are sleeping rough could fit any one of the remaining categories.

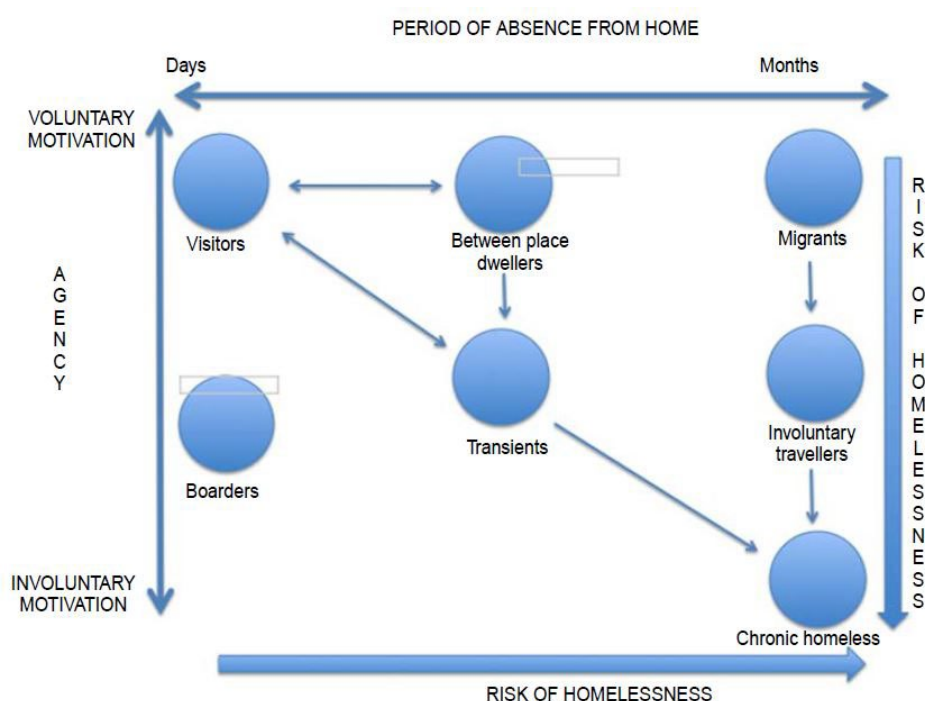


Figure 5. A framework for conceptualising Indigenous temporary mobility, migration and homelessness. Habibis 2011

Seasonal and climate mobility

Remote to urban mobility and its contribution to rough sleeping in Darwin is also impacted by seasonal weather changes and one-off climate events or disasters. During the northern Australian wet season, approximately November to April, many homelands access roads become inaccessible. Residents will travel to remote communities or urban centres, to have more consistent access to urban amenities, including basics like food and medicines.

The change in season will also impact where rough sleepers are most visible, as people may shift from camps in public parks, on beaches, and in the bush into public shelters or crowded housing. A 2016 study by Charles Darwin University (Spencer et al. 2016) considered the experiences of town camp residents and 'long grassers' in relation to bad weather and cyclones. Drawing on that study, Michael Christie and Michaela Spencer describe that

People on Casuarina Beach, for example, were often there because of proximity to relatives in hospital, and were clear that the hospital was always open, cool, had 24-hour television and Indigenous workers who kept them informed.

On Mindil Beach, we were told the solidly constructed public toilets were useful in a severe storm, for men in one side, women in the other. If worse comes to worst, they would head up the hill to Darwin High School. (2024, 23)

Spencer et al. (2016) described that rough sleepers preferred to be informed about impending weather events and procedures by in-person representatives of particular organisations, such as Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation, and its First Nations night patrol and HEAL officers. Natural disasters, such as flooding at Nitjpurru (Pigeon Hole) in 2023 and 2024 and at Nauiyu (Daly River) in 2026, contributes to damage to remote community housing and the short-term migration of residents to urban centres like Katherine and Darwin (Garrick and Dick 2024).

This rough sleeping project has been undertaken across a wet season involving significant rainfall. At the beginning of March, with two months of the wet season remaining, Darwin had already passed its seasonal rainfall average (Smith 2026). Beyond the Greater Darwin region, heavy rains resulting in flooding forced the evacuation of Nauiyu (Daly River) residents to Darwin in early February 2026, with residents returning in late February (Ferguson 2026). Nauiyu residents, along with residents of Palumpa were again evacuated from their communities to Darwin in mid-March after more extensive flooding (Torre 2026), with significant impacts to community housing stock. This event also flooded the regional town of Katherine, making transport up the Stuart Highway north of Katherine impossible. Similarly, the road west of Katherine to communities such as Wadeye was impassable. In addition to evacuees housed in Darwin evacuation shelters, residents of Katherine, Mataranka, and other communities are unable to return home, including individuals who have been released from prison over this period. Following Cyclone Fina in November 2025, Cyclone Narelle in March 2026 forced the evacuation of residents of Numbulwar to Darwin. Collectively, these events placed significant strain on Darwin-based homelessness services.

2.2.4 Health and Wellbeing

In addition to unmet housing need and Indigenous mobility and the contestation of urban space, rough sleeping is an outcome of a range of health and wellbeing factors that are disproportionately experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Homelessness is also a cause of various health issues, and people who experience homelessness have higher mortality rates and lower life expectancy (Productivity Commission 2022). The likelihood of experiencing homelessness, and the difficulty of leaving homelessness for secure housing, is exacerbated by disability, mental and physical illness, care responsibilities, drug and alcohol use, domestic and family violence, and interactions with healthcare and custodial institutions. NT Shelter (2023, 10) describes that, compared with other Australian state and territory jurisdictions,

Specialist Homelessness Services in the Northern Territory also support the highest rates per 10,000 of clients with disabilities (7.7 compared to 2.8 nationally), young people presenting alone (56.7 compared to 15.3 nationally), children on care and protection orders (12.7 compared to 3.1 nationally), clients aged 55 and over (33.9 compared to 9.9 nationally), clients with problematic drug and/or alcohol use (26.4 compared to 9.1 nationally) and clients exiting custodial arrangements (8.5 compared to 3.5 nationally).

It is not appropriate to frame these factors such as mental health status, disability, and so on, as individual drivers of homelessness or rough sleeping, even if their presence for specific individuals increase their risk of experiencing homelessness. For many of these factors, it is the systemic failure of social provisioning that transforms an individual's vulnerability into an episode of homelessness.

Short-stay accommodation shortage

Acknowledging the range of drivers for remote to urban mobility in the section above, various in their motivations and temporalities, an obvious contributing factor to the prevalence of rough sleeping is the lack of short-stay accommodation in the Greater Darwin region (alongside the poverty that undermines access to existing short-stay accommodation) (Studt 2024). Hostels, shelters, or transitional accommodation provides an immediate and low-barrier alternative to rough sleeping. Many of the existing facilities are relatively small, for example family violence refuges with a few units (such as the Family Violence Refuge Service at Palmerston which has 10 units), and unable to meet community need, including during periods of high demand. Existing services also have eligibility restrictions, such as relate to age limits, sobriety requirements, or the requirement that someone must be fleeing violent domestic situations, which restrict access to some individuals rough sleeping. When individuals are able to access temporary accommodation options such as hostels, these may be located far from other amenities, or have behavioural restrictions (such as relate to smoking or visitors) that are unsuitable for some residents, who in turn prefer to sleep rough (Christie et al. 2004).

Hospital and prison discharge

The lack of crisis, transitional, and short-stay accommodation is especially evident in relation to hospital discharge and prison release practices for individuals who have travelled to Darwin for health services or their incarceration.

Many remote community residents visit Darwin to support relatives in hospital or for ongoing treatment such as dialysis. For those receiving hospital treatments directly, the NT has few medical-respite beds for individuals recovering from surgery or illness. In the case of hospital or psychiatric discharge, individuals can be discharged following a clinical episode without secure housing or a coordinated planning process including a housing referral (AIHW 2025a), or they can be delayed in accessing approved aged-care placements or NDIS packages, leading them to sleep rough in the meantime (Treacy 2024). Where mental health issues are involved, such processes can be broadly contextualised within a longer Australian history of the deinstitutionalisation of mental health services, involving the shift from psychiatric hospitals to community-based care regimes from the 1970s onward, and the contribution of this to an increased prevalence of homelessness (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1993). The Burdekin Report (1993) famously found that this process of deinstitutionalisation was not met with appropriate investment in community mental health services, supported accommodation, social support networks, and so on. Such issues could be reduced by systematised housing screening on admission to such hospitals and other in-stay medical facilities, as well as increasing funding for medical-respite and short-term

accommodation, and the establishment of integrated discharge coordinators or case managers (AIHW 2025a, 'Clients leaving care').

Similarly, the mass incarceration of Aboriginal people in the NT means many individuals are released from prison with the immediate options of returning to overcrowded housing in remote communities or sleeping rough in Darwin or Alice Springs. This approach to mass incarceration undermines the potential achievements of remedial interventions pursued by other arms of government. The Productivity Commission writes that 'more than half of the people leaving prison (54 per cent) expect to be homeless when released' (2022, 175). The NT has the highest rate of incarceration among all Australian states and territories by a wide margin. The national rate of adult incarceration is 200.9 people per 100,000, while the rate of incarceration in the NT is five times higher, at 1,026.7 people per 100,000. Kirsten Wilson and Rocket Bretherton identify that 'Many adults entering prison had previous experiences of homelessness, with more than two in five (43 per cent) homeless in the four weeks before prison' (2024, 90). Figure 6 shows the distribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across non-private dwelling types on Census night in 2021, while Table 1 compares the number and proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in non-private dwelling types in the NT and Australia.

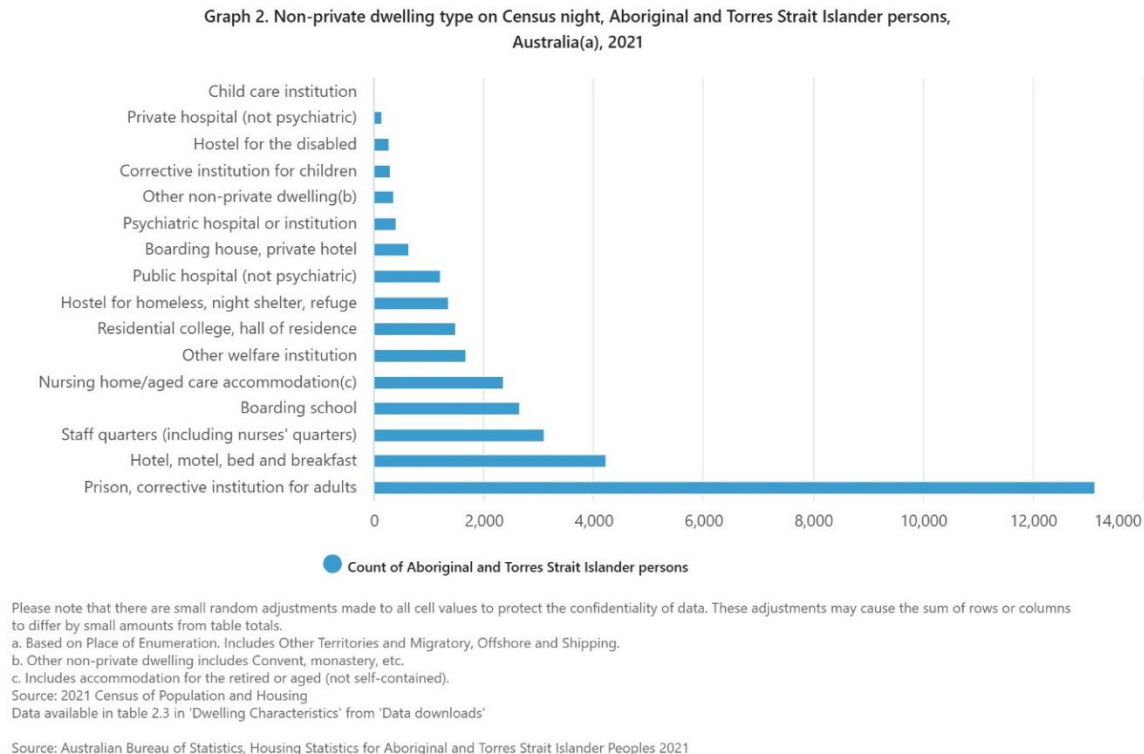


Figure 6. Non-private dwelling type on Census night, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons, Australia in 2021. ABS 2022

	NT (number)	Australia (number)	NT (per cent)	Australia (per cent)
Hotel, motel, bed and breakfast	219	4,237	5.7	12.7
Staff quarters (including Nurses' quarters)	327	3,093	8.4	9.3
Boarding house, private hotel	55	633	1.4	1.9
Boarding school	308	2,648	7.9	7.9
Residential college, hall of residence	111	1,496	2.9	4.5
Public hospital (not psychiatric)	99	1,217	2.6	3.6
Private hospital (not psychiatric)	4	156	0.1	0.5
Psychiatric hospital or institution	7	409	0.2	1.2
Hostel for the disabled	18	271	0.5	0.8
Nursing home and aged care accommodation(c)	264	2,351	6.8	7.0
Hostel for homeless, night shelter, refuge	455	1,365	11.7	4.1
Childcare institution	0	29	0.0	0.1
Corrective institution for children	33	300	0.9	0.9
Other welfare institution	371	1,676	9.6	5.0
Prison, corrective institution for adults	1,544	13,131	39.8	39.3
Immigration detention centre	0	0	0.0	0.0
Other and non-classifiable(d)	53	371	1.4	1.1
Total(e)	3,876	33,391	100.0	100.0

Table 1. Number and proportion of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in non-private dwelling by type in 2021, in the NT and Australia¹¹

People can be released from prison without secure housing or case management involving pre-release housing planning. Release from remand in particular involves little case management that might facilitate transition into short-term accommodation or return to Country where desired. Where such efforts are made through pre-release assessments, an absence of coordination between health, corrections, housing, and disability services can contribute to individuals failing to secure accommodation (AIHW 2025b), alongside the shortage of transitional and supported housing such as boarding houses and supported bail accommodation. This is exacerbated in the NT by high rates of prisoners held on remand – where Throughcare case management services are not available to adults – and the prevalence of short sentences of imprisonment. As prison abolitionist Rocket Bretherton notes, highlighting the relevance of existing social networks following incarceration, ‘The only way to get a house is to get back on drugs’ (Wilson and Bretherton 2024, 90). As Wilson and Bretherton write, ‘Ensuring safe, stable and affordable accommodation is central to the project of decarceration’ (2024, 90).

Domestic family and sexual violence

While the prevalence of homelessness in the NT far exceeds the prevalence in other Australian state and territory jurisdictions, this is also the case for domestic, family, and sexual violence (DFSV). In the year 2023-24, 49 per cent of people that received homelessness assistance did so for reasons related to family and domestic violence (compared to 37 per cent nationally) (AIHW 2025b). Kate Whittle and Rachel Uebergang write that ‘In 2022-23, homelessness services supported over 3,000 women and children who had experienced DFV

¹¹ Based on Housing Statistics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Dwelling Characteristics, 2.3 Type of Non-Private Dwelling, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander persons.

in the NT. Over 1,300 of these women and children continued to experience homelessness even after seeking assistance, highlighting a lack of safe, secure, and affordable housing options for women and children fleeing DFV' (34). Harley Dannatt writes that in the NT 'Domestic and family violence homicide is seven times the national average (per capita), assaults are three times, and sexual assault is 12 times – and these numbers are increasing' (2024, 32).

Episodes of domestic and family violence undermine consistency of address, circumstance, and access to support services, all of which increase an individual's chances of progressing through a social housing waitlist into stable accommodation. Access in such situations to stable housing is undermined by bureaucratic requirements such as the department's periodic confirmation of housing need through a posted letter (Dannatt 2024; Atkinson 2024), or through a lack of investment in early intervention, culturally safe service provision, and service coordination. Victim-survivors of DFSV, predominantly women, children, and gender diverse people are often compelled to leave unsafe homes to escape such violence, with short-stay crisis accommodation their main option, despite its scarcity (Cripps & Habibis 2019). When stable housing is unavailable, the risk of rough sleeping is exacerbated and prolonged. For women in relationships with abusive partners who are also rough sleeping, the arrest of their partner can expose them to alternate sources of violence. As Dannatt writes, 'Many women who would be left alone in a bush camp if a perpetrator is taken into custody see *reporting* DFSV as a threat to the safety of their living arrangement' (original emphasis, 2024, 32).

Alcohol consumption

Alcohol consumption is a feature of rough sleeping in Darwin, but this is not consistent across all individuals. Where it is present, it can exacerbate existing health issues for people sleeping rough. As Angela Spinney et al. write, 'Many people living in the long grass have health conditions, ranging from minor injuries to chronic conditions such as diabetes, kidney failure, liver failure and melioidosis' (2016, 46). Day provides an historical basis for the overlap between alcohol consumption and homelessness, stating that 'Since drinking rights were granted to NT Aboriginal people, drunkenness decriminalised and vagrancy laws abolished, the "long grassers" have moved into the parks, beaches, scrub thickets and neglected buildings around the town' (2012, 1).

As Christie et al. highlighted in a 2004 study of Yolŋu people sleeping rough on Larrakia Country, 'for most people drinking alcohol was not their reason for living in the long-grass. Rather, it was the consequence of deeper problems, which had not been addressed or resolved' (2004, 3). Christie et al. highlighted that the main reason the Yolŋu people they interviewed had for coming to Darwin was 'fear – fear of violence, including suicide, mental illness, aggressive behaviour and *galka* (sorcery)' (3).

2.3 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a review of literature related to the drivers of homelessness, in particular rough sleeping, in the NT. It begins with consideration of definitions and typologies of homelessness, highlighting that governmental categories – important for dominant modes of statistical collection and funding distribution – can differ from Indigenous conceptions of homelessness. This is especially evident in the NT, where the mobility of remote community residents can mean that individuals are either over- or under-counted in homelessness statistics because they lack reliable accommodation in urban centres while having some access to housing elsewhere. Similarly, some individuals who are sleeping rough – including for long periods – may not frame their situation through dominant conceptions of homelessness, because camping is preferential to available accommodation options. This has implications for what might be culturally appropriate specialist homelessness services.

The chapter considered how homelessness, broadly conceived, is fundamentally a symptom of the housing system to provide accommodation to those who require it, evident in high rates of household crowding and extensive waitlists for social housing. For those who are unable or unwilling to access housing or other accommodation in urban centres, they face significant contestation over their presence in public spaces. There are a broad range of reasons for Aboriginal people's mobility in the NT, which are consistent with the reasons non-Indigenous people travel (such as to visit family, and for medical and leisure reasons), but also relate to the relative amenity and vulnerability of remote communities and homelands, including to major climate events. The chapter also provided an overview of some of the health and wellbeing impacts of rough sleeping, as they intersect with the shortage of short-stay accommodation, hospital and prison discharge practices, domestic family and sexual violence, and alcohol consumption. The following chapter explores the data story related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness in the NT.

3. The Data Story

Key Points

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are significantly over-represented in Australian statistics on people experiencing homelessness.
- The rate of homelessness in the NT for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is 1,865 people per 10,000 in the population, as compared to the Australian rate of 307 per 10,000 people.
- The NT has the highest proportion of people experiencing homelessness across all Australian states and territories, underpinned by the significant proportion of individuals living in severely overcrowded dwellings.
- Statistics on rough sleeping and on homelessness experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are likely to be significantly under-enumerated.
- This rough sleeping project is focused on the ABS operational group of people living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out, but the other operational groups are relevant to understanding funding arrangements and the specialist homelessness services sector.
- Based on ABS statistics, the proportion of the NT's homeless population that is sleeping rough is relatively consistent with the national average (5.05 per cent and 6.23 per cent respectively).
- A significant majority of individuals who are sleeping rough are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people and about half of the NT total is located in Greater Darwin.
- Based on RoGS data, the NT is performing relatively well in relation to the proportion of clients with unmet need for accommodation or services other than accommodation.
- Compared to Australian national averages, specialist homelessness services in the NT provide a lower proportion of assistance to sustain housing tenure and a higher proportion of family and domestic violence assistance.
- As elsewhere, of the total population experiencing homelessness, only some will access specialist homelessness services, and a small proportion of those are housed at the end of a reporting period.
- A Productivity Commission review of the former *National Housing and Homelessness Agreement* made recommendations about relevant funding agreement targets and indicators related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness.

3.1 Counting Homelessness

This chapter provides an overview of homelessness data relevant to rough sleeping in Greater Darwin. It proceeds from a broad perspective on Australian homelessness data to focus more specifically on homelessness in the Northern Territory (NT) and rough sleeping within that cohort. It highlights the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

people in both the general homeless and specific rough sleeping cohorts and considers changes in the homelessness statistics across the past four Census periods.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) operates according to a statistical definition for homelessness under which 'When a person does not have suitable accommodation alternatives, they are considered homeless if their current living arrangement:

- Is in a dwelling that is inadequate; or
- Has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable; or
- Does not allow them to have control of, and access to, space for social relations.¹²

The statistical definition combines considerations of dwelling adequacy, security of tenure, and control of space for social relations. In this way, the ABS definition builds on conceptions of home, rather than more narrow definitions of housing, and draws on characteristics of home that include a sense of security, stability, privacy, safety, and control.

The ABS uses six 'operational groups' for presenting its estimates of people experiencing homelessness. These groups include:

- People living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out
- People living in supported accommodation for the homeless
- People staying temporarily with other households
- People living in boarding houses
- People in other temporary lodgings
- People living in 'severely' overcrowded dwellings.

This study on rough sleeping in Greater Darwin is focused on the first operational group - people living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out - also referred to by the shorthand 'sleeping rough'.

Much of the focus on housing and homelessness in the NT relates to overcrowding. For the ABS, 'severely' crowded dwellings are defined as dwellings that need four or more additional bedrooms under the Canadian National Occupancy Standard (CNOS) to provide adequate accommodation for residents.¹³ However, the ABS also collects data for the following groups of people who may be marginally housed but not classified as homeless:

- People living in other crowded dwellings
- People in other improvised dwellings

¹² See ABS (2012a) 'Information Paper - A Statistical Definition of Homelessness'.

¹³ The CNOS is a standardised measure of housing utilisation and overcrowding. It assesses a household's bedroom requirements by specifying that:

- there should be no more than two people per bedroom
- a household of one unattached individual may reasonably occupy a bed-sit (i.e. have no bedroom)
- couples and parents should have a separate bedroom
- children less than five years of age, of different sexes, may reasonably share a bedroom
- children five years of age or over, of the opposite sex, should not share a bedroom
- children less than 18 years of age and of the same sex may reasonably share a bedroom; and
- single household members aged 18 years or over should have a separate bedroom.

- People marginally housed in caravan parks.

The ABS category of 'Other crowded dwellings' includes usual residents in dwellings needing three extra bedrooms under the Canadian National Occupancy Standard (CNOS); in other words, an overcrowded situation differentiated by degree to 'severely' crowded dwellings, where only severely crowded dwellings are captured in ABS homelessness statistics.

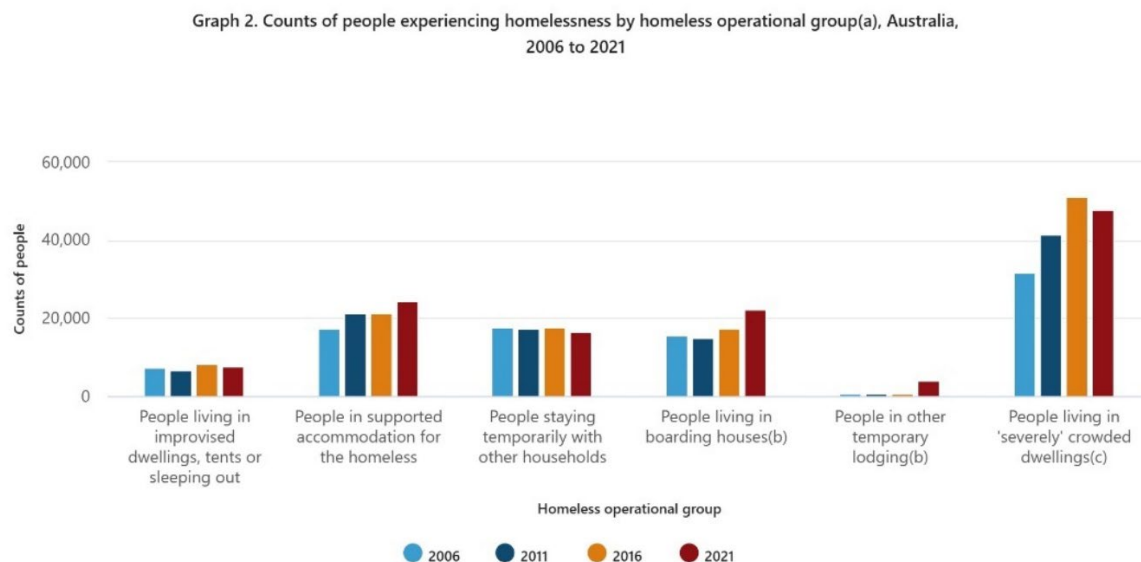
3.1.1 ABS Homelessness Statistics

The ABS 'Estimating Homelessness: Census' data provides information on estimates¹⁴ of people who were experiencing homelessness or who were marginally housed as calculated from the Census of Population and Housing. On 10 August 2021, when the most recent Census was conducted, there were 122,494 people estimated to be experiencing homelessness in Australia. The rate of homelessness decreased marginally over the period since the prior Census, from 50 per 10,000 people in 2016 to 48 per 10,000 people in 2021.

In 2021, there were 47,895 people living in severely crowded dwellings, constituting 39.1 per cent of the total estimated homeless population. In 2021, there were also 81,026 persons estimated to be living in other crowded dwellings, 2,783 persons in other improvised dwellings, and 9,377 persons marginally housed in caravan parks (collectively 'marginally housed'). The statistical counts in the categories for marginally housed people are mutually exclusive to people classified as experiencing homelessness.

Figure 7 is reproduced from the ABS. It shows the number of estimated homeless people by operational group across the previous four Censuses, dating back to 2006. It shows that people living in 'severely' crowded dwellings constitute a major proportion of the homeless population (39.1 per cent in 2021), as compared to people living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out (6.2 per cent in 2021).

¹⁴ The ABS describes its data on homelessness as estimates, signalling the likelihood that figures represent the under-enumeration of the actual homeless population. The ABS (2012a) notes that 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are more likely to be both under enumerated and over-represented in the homeless population. ABS has developed strategies for each Census aimed at maximising the enumeration of Indigenous persons. So called rough sleepers and people staying in supported accommodation for the homeless are also at risk of being under enumerated in the Census. The ABS develops a homeless enumeration strategy for each Census, and works with homeless service providers to maximise the enumeration of these groups on Census night.' Elsewhere, the ABS (2022) highlights that 'The 2021 Post Enumeration Survey estimated that 983,257 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should have been counted in the Census, compared with 812,505 persons who were counted. This is equivalent to a net undercount of 170,752 persons, or a rate of 17.4%'.



Please note that there are small random adjustments made to all cell values to protect the confidentiality of data. These adjustments may cause the sum of rows or columns to differ by small amounts from table totals.

a. Categories are mutually exclusive; therefore, people will only appear in one category.

b. Data for 2021 is not directly comparable with previous Censuses due to improvements in data quality through greater use of administrative data.

c. Usual residents in dwellings needing 4 or more extra bedrooms under the Canadian National Occupancy Standard (CNOS). See the 'Methodology' section of this publication for more information.

Source: Census of Population and Housing 2006, 2011, 2016, 2021.

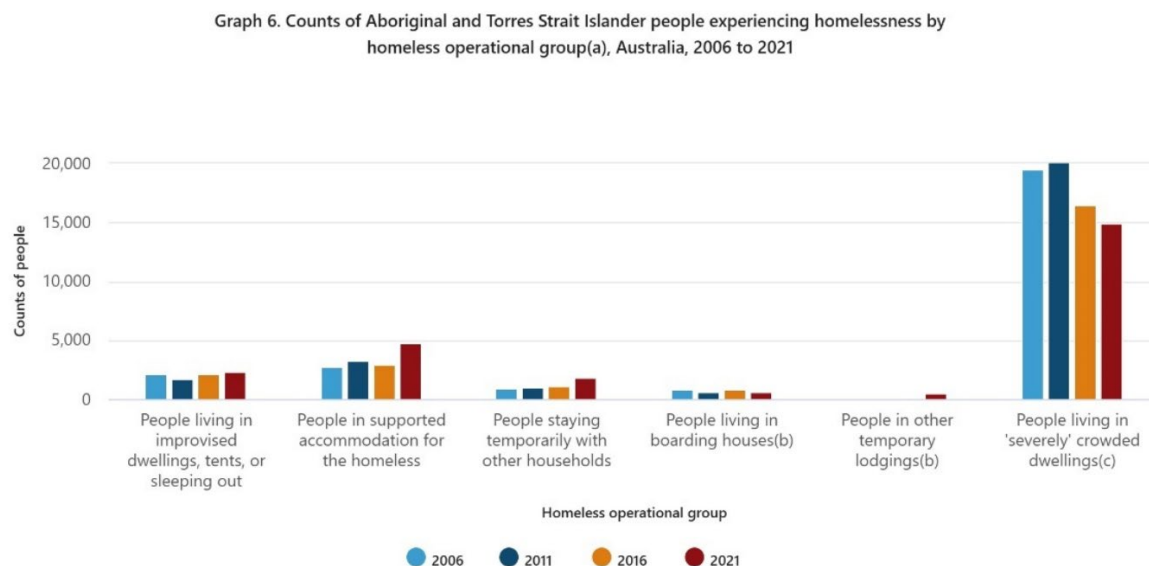
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Estimating Homelessness: Census 2021

Figure 7. Counts of people experiencing homelessness by homeless operational group, Australia, 2006 to 2021. ABS 2021

As of 2021, there were an estimated 24,930 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing homelessness across Australia.¹⁵ This count constitutes 20.4 per cent of the total homeless population in Australia (122,494), as compared to the proportion of Australia's population that identifies as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (3.8 per cent). The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were homeless in 2021 was 8.8 times higher than the proportion of non-Indigenous Australians, 307 and 35 per 10,000 people respectively.

Figure 8 is reproduced from the ABS and shows the distribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homeless persons by operational group across the period of the four most recent Censuses. It highlights that the operational group for people living in 'severely' crowded dwellings constitutes a significant majority of the total homeless population.

¹⁵ The ABS acknowledges the under-enumeration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Census and its impact on homelessness statistics: 'An overarching issue impacting the estimates of homelessness derived from the Census, is the under-enumeration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Because of this, the estimates of homelessness based on Census data for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is likely to be an underestimation. In the 2011 Census, the under-enumeration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was 17.2%. Some of those who were not counted in the Census may have been homeless at the time of the Census' (ABS 2014, 10).



Please note that there are small random adjustments made to all cell values to protect the confidentiality of data. These adjustments may cause the sum of rows or columns to differ by small amounts from table totals.

a. Categories are mutually exclusive; therefore, people will only appear in one category.

b. Data for 2021 is not directly comparable with previous Censuses due to improvements in data quality through greater use of administrative data.

c. Usual residents in dwellings needing 4 or more extra bedrooms under the Canadian National Occupancy Standard (CNOS). See the 'Methodology' section of this publication for more information.

Source: Census of Population and Housing 2006, 2011, 2016, 2021.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Estimating Homelessness: Census 2021

Figure 8. Counts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing homelessness by homeless operational groups, Australia 2006 to 2021. ABS 2021

In 2021, the NT had a population of 232,509 persons, including 61,111 people that identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (26.3 per cent).¹⁶ The NT has the highest rate of people experiencing homelessness among all Australian states and territories. As of 2021, the NT had a total 13,104 people experiencing homelessness at a rate of 564 people per 10,000 in the NT population. This rate decreased at each Census from 2006, where the rate was 792 people per 10,000. In 2021, the next highest rate across all states and territories was Victoria, with 47 people per 10,000.¹⁷

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons, the NT has the highest counts of people experiencing homelessness, in both absolute and proportional terms. In 2021, 11,394 of the total 24,930 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing homelessness across Australia were located in the NT, equivalent to 46.7 per cent. The rate of homelessness in the NT for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is 1,865 people per 10,000 in the population, as compared to the Australian rate of 307 per 10,000 people.¹⁸ The next highest

¹⁶ Based on 20490DO002_2021 Table 2.1. It is notable that the NT experienced the highest net undercount of the Census in 2021, at 6 per cent (ABS 2022). Nationally, the net undercount for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was 17.4 per cent (ABS 2022). Together, these undercounts may hide the extent of Indigenous homelessness in the NT.

¹⁷ Based on 20290DO001_2021 Table 1.5.

¹⁸ Based on 20290DO001_2021 Table 1.5

comparable jurisdictional rate is 381 people per 10,000 in Western Australia. In other words, in 2021 the rate of homelessness in the NT for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was six times higher than the Australian rate and almost five times higher than the jurisdiction with the second highest rate.

A significant proportion of the NT's homelessness rate (75.6 per cent) is attributable to people living in severely crowded dwellings. This is comparable to 39.1 per cent of all homeless persons across Australia and, more generally, the significant majority of people experiencing homelessness in remote and very remote areas were living in severely crowded dwellings, at 62.4 per cent and 96.3 per cent respectively (see Figure 9).

Table 2 shows the estimated number of people living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out in Australia in 2021 across each state and territory jurisdiction, and the proportion of that jurisdiction's homeless population that was living in this situation on Census night.¹⁹ It highlights that the proportion of the NT's homeless population that is sleeping rough is relatively consistent with the national average (5.05 per cent and 6.23 per cent respectively).

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Aust
People living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out (i.e. sleeping rough)	963	1,023	2,050	323	2,315	231	662	59	7,636
Total homeless persons	35,011	30,660	22,428	7,428	9,729	2,350	13,104	1,777	122,494
Proportion (%) of the jurisdiction's homeless population sleeping rough	2.75	3.34	9.14	4.39	23.79	9.82	5.05	0.37	6.23

Table 2. People sleeping rough as a proportion of the total homeless population

Table 3 shows the estimated number of people living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out in Australia and the NT across the 2006 to 2021 Censuses.²⁰ The number of people sleeping rough is also represented as the rate per 10,000 people of the population and as a proportion of the jurisdiction's homeless population. Table 3 highlights a relatively consistent number of people sleeping rough across Australia over the period (7,252 in 2006 to 7,636 in 2021) compared with a reduction in the number of people sleeping rough in the NT across the same period (1,209 in 2006 to 662 in 2021).

¹⁹ Based on 20490DO001_2021, Table 1.3 People living in improvised dwellings, tents, or sleeping out, Total homeless persons, and People living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out over Total homeless persons.

²⁰ Based on 20490DO001_2021, Table 1.3 People living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out for 2006, 2011, 2016, 2021 for Australia and the NT, people living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out over total homeless population, and Table 1.5 People living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out as rate of homeless persons per 10,000 of the population.

	2006	2011	2016	2021
Australia				
People living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out (Australia)	7,252	6,810	8,200	7,636
Proportion (%) of total homeless population (Australia)	8	7	7	6
Rate per 10,000 of the population living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out (Australia)	3.7	3.2	3.5	3.0
Northern Territory				
People living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out	1209	848	1097	662
Proportion (%) of total homeless population	7.92	5.53	8.00	5.05
Rate per 10,000 of the population living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out	62.7	40	48	28.5

Table 3. Comparison between Australia and the NT of people sleeping rough

Table 4 shows the distribution by age of people living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out in the NT in 2021. It indicates that a significant majority of people sleeping rough in the NT (80.4 per cent) are adults aged 25 to 64 years old.

	Under 12	12-18	19-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75 and over
Number of people	41	18	26	109	137	170	116	40	10
Proportion (%) of total people sleeping rough	6.19	0.27	3.93	16.5	20.69	25.68	17.5	6.04	1.5

Table 4. Distribution of people sleeping rough in the NT by age

Table 5 shows the gender breakdown of people living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out in the NT in 2021.

	Total	Male	Female
Number of people sleeping rough ²¹	662	369	303

Table 5. Gender breakdown for individuals sleeping rough in the NT in 2021

Table 6 shows the proportion of homeless persons in each jurisdiction in 2021 that identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.²² In 2021, 3.8 per cent of the Australian population, and 26.3 per cent of the NT population, identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. The table shows that there is significant over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia experiencing homelessness (20.4 per cent) and that this is especially high in the NT (87.0 per cent).

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Aust
Total homeless persons	35,011	30,660	22,428	7,428	9,729	2,350	13,104	1,777	122,494
Proportion (%) of homeless persons Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	7.2	3.6	21.3	18.7	34.7	10.5	87.0	7.1	20.4
Rate per 10,000 of the population	90.2	168.9	201.0	326.8	380.9	81.8	1,864.5	140.8	306.8

Table 6. Proportion of total homeless persons that identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander

Table 7 shows the number of people living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out per 10,000 of the population in the NT in 2021 as compared to other Australian jurisdictions, and the proportion of that population that is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.²³ In the NT in 2021, 531 of the total 662 individuals (80.2 per cent) living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Aust
Number of persons sleeping rough per 10,000 of the population	1.2	1.6	4.0	1.8	8.7	4.1	28.5	1.3	3.0
Proportion (%) of persons sleeping	13.8	7.0	26.0	38.1	38.6	13.9	80.2	6.8	30.4

²¹ Based on 202490DO002_2021 Table 2.8. Note that the total persons specified as living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out in Table 2.8 is 662 but the figures listed for gender breakdown and reproduced in the table total 672.

²² Based on 202490DO001_2021 Table 1.3 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander over Total homeless persons. Also see 20490DO007_2021, Table 7.1 and Table 7.2 State and Territory Usual Residence, Homeless persons, by Indigenous status

²³ Based on 202490DO001_2021 Table 1.6. People living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Status over Total Homeless Persons for this operational group, and Table 1.5 People living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out as rate of homeless persons per 10,000 of the population.

rough who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander									
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Table 7. Rate of persons sleeping rough and proportion of persons sleeping rough who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

As discussed above, the ABS definition for homelessness excludes other marginal housing situations, including people living in other (i.e. not 'severely') crowded situations. Table 8 provides an overview of the distribution of people by the ABS's homeless operational groups as well as the other marginal housing groups, for the NT and Australia in 2021.²⁴ In the NT, the difference between the number of total persons experiencing homelessness (13,104) and the number of precariously housed persons (total homeless persons plus persons in other marginal housing (18,538) is substantial (5,434 people). There is limited practical difference between a 'severely' crowded dwelling that requires four additional bedrooms to meet the CNOS and constitute homelessness and an 'other' crowded dwelling that requires three additional bedrooms to meet the CNOS. Similarly, persons in 'other improvised dwellings' include those who were living in an "improvised home, tent, sleepers-out" who reported being "at home" on Census night or having "no usual address" but not classified as homeless according to the definition' (AIHW 2025b). While this cohort is not included in the ABS definition of homelessness, it is arguable that they might be counted as such, in particular for the purpose of providing appropriate investment and services.

		Australia	NT
Homeless operational group	People living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out	7,636	662
	People in supported accommodation for the homeless	24,291	1,769
	People staying temporarily with other households	16,597	653
	People living in boarding houses	22,137	62
	People in other temporary lodgings	3,934	44
	People living in 'severely' crowded dwellings	47,895	9,904
	All homeless persons	122,494	13,104
Other marginal housing	People living in other crowded dwellings	81,026	5,060
	People in other improvised dwellings	2,783	156
	People who are marginally housed in caravan parks	9,377	218
	All other marginal housing	93,186	5,434

²⁴ Based on 202490DO001_2021 Table 1.8, combining figures for homeless operational groups and other marginal housing groups.

	Combined total all homeless persons and all marginal housing	215,680	18,538
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Table 8. Combining homelessness and other marginal housing data, Australia and the NT

Of the 669²⁵ persons living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out in the NT in 2021, 327 were located in Greater Darwin and 342 were located in 'Rest of NT'. Of the 531 people living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out in the NT who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, 291 were located in Greater Darwin and 245 were located in 'Rest of NT'.²⁶ Table 9 shows the distribution of people living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out in 2021 across NT Local Government Areas.²⁷ It shows a combined 310 persons sleeping rough in the Darwin and Palmerston local government areas in 2021. In 2016, there were 385 and 78 people living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out in the Darwin and Palmerston local government areas respectively (a total 463).

Local Government Area	Number of persons
Alice Springs	64
Barkly	41
Belyuen	0
Central Desert	14
Coomalie	5
Darwin	273
Darwin Waterfront Precinct	0
East Arnhem	27
Katherine	71
Litchfield	20
MacDonnell	17
Palmerston	37
Roper Gulf	26
Tiwi Islands	0
Victoria Daly	3
Wagait	0
West Arnhem	48
West Daly	0
Unincorporated NT	23
Total	666

Table 9. People sleeping rough by NT local government area

²⁵ This figure is taken from 20490DO007_2021 Table 7.7. This figure is inconsistent with its listed components in Table 7.7 (Greater Darwin 327 + Rest of NT 342 = 669), with data across Table 7.7 (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons 531 + Non-Indigenous persons 116 + Persons not stated 20 = 667) and the 662 persons figure quoted elsewhere in ABS Census data (for example in 20490DO001_2021, Table 1.3).

²⁶ Based on 20490DO007_2021 Table 7.7.

²⁷ Based on 20490DO006_2021 Table 6.1. 2016 figures drawn from Table 6.2

In addition to the above, the ABS National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health survey is a component of the Intergenerational Health and Mental Health Study (IHMHS). It is undertaken approximately every five to six years, most recently from August 2022 to March 2024 involving about 4,900 households across Australia and includes some relevant information to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing homelessness and precarious housing situations (ABS 2024). For example, Figure 9 is reproduced from the ABS and shows the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander householders by the number of bedrooms required in the dwelling and remoteness in 2022-23. Beyond this, it holds limited relevance to the issue of rough sleeping in Greater Darwin.

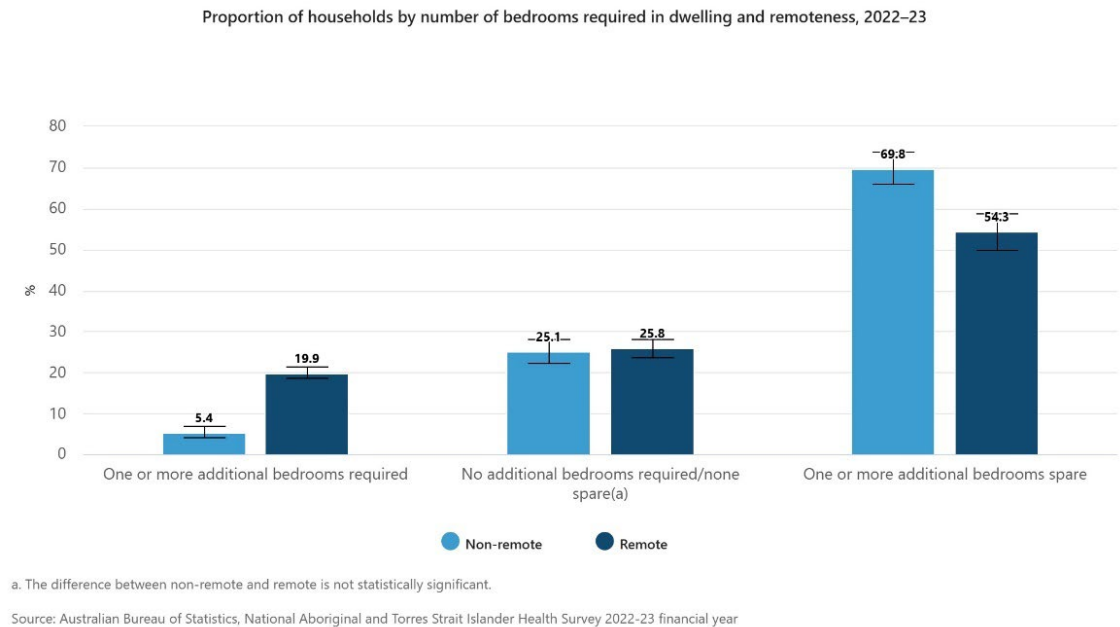


Figure 9. Proportion of householders by the number of bedrooms required in the dwelling and remoteness in 2022-23. ABS 2024

3.1.2 RoGS Homelessness and Homelessness Services Statistics

The Productivity Commission’s Report on Government Services (RoGS) is the other main source of relevant data on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing and homelessness. The focus of this data is on the housing and homelessness services sectors, including the provision of subsidised rental housing and of direct assistance to people who are experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness. A total \$1.52 billion in government recurrent expenditure was spent in 2023-24 on specialist homelessness services and specialist homelessness services provided support to an estimated 280,078 people. Based on 2023-24 data, the RoGS summarises that of all clients at risk of homelessness, 80.9 per cent avoided homelessness, with a similar rate (79 per cent) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In the same year, about 10 per cent of clients returned to homelessness after

accessing housing and 26.3 per cent of clients experienced persistent homelessness (more than seven months over a 24-month reporting period).²⁸

Chapter 4 provides an overview of the specialist homelessness services system. In the NT in 2023-24, specialist homelessness services provided support to an estimated 10,080 people. This includes support from the following categories of specialist homeless services:

- Accommodation/accommodation related assistance
- Assistance to sustain housing tenure
- Family and domestic violence assistance
- Other specialist services
- General services

Figure 10 is reproduced from the RoGS and represents the support provided in each Australian state and territory jurisdiction by each category of specialist homelessness service.

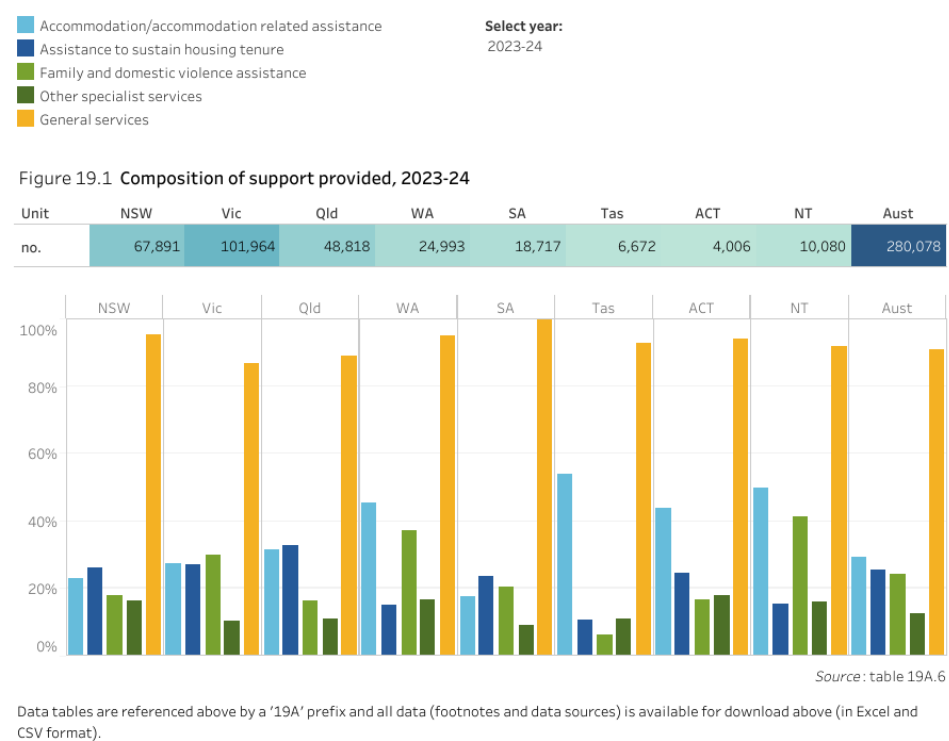


Figure 10. Composition of homelessness support provided in 2023-24. RoGS 2024

One of the notable RoGS 'Indicator results' is the unmet demand for homelessness services. This indicator represents the proportion of people who do not receive the homelessness services they need, drawing on a proxy measure for the service types: accommodation services and services other than accommodation. This measure only captures clients of

²⁸ The RoGS provides data for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households living in overcrowded situations, distinguished by public housing, state owned and managed Indigenous housing, and community housing.

specialist homelessness services rather than all people in the population who may need such services. Figure 11 compares the proportion of clients with an unmet need for accommodation services and for services other than accommodation across Australian jurisdictions. It suggests that the NT is doing better than other state and territory jurisdictions in meeting the needs of people experiencing homelessness.

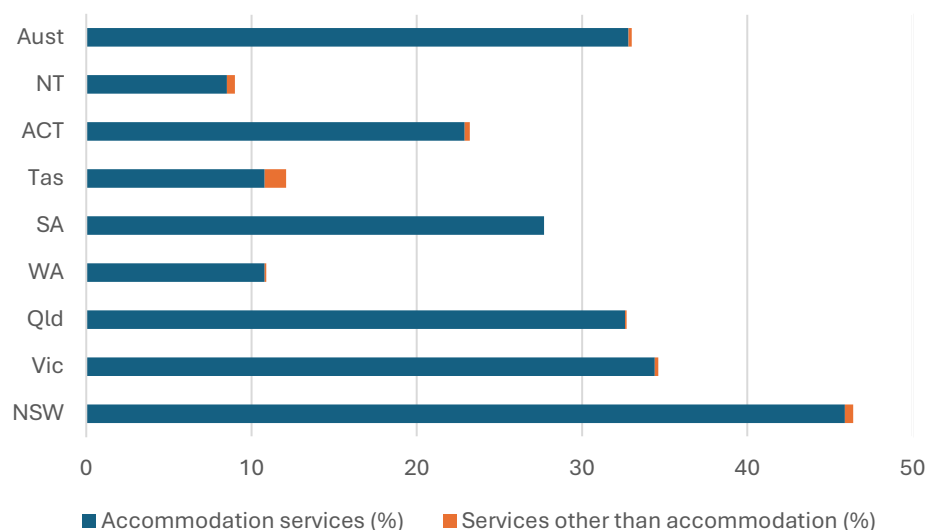


Figure 11. Proportion of clients with unmet need for accommodation or services other than accommodation

*Data for services other than accommodation exclude clients who also have an identified need for accommodation services.

Specialist homelessness services provide a range of different supports. Table 10 shows the proportional distribution of support types provided by specialist homelessness services in the NT in 2023-24.²⁹

In the year 2024-25, four per cent of the NT population accessed SHS, compared to one per cent nationally (AIHW 2025). NT Shelter summarises the relative high rates in the NT, as compared to other state and territory jurisdictions, of various demographic categories of people seeking specialist homelessness services:

Specialist Homelessness Services in the Northern Territory also support the highest rates per 10,000 of clients with disabilities (7.7 compared to 2.8 nationally), young people presenting alone (56.7 compared to 15.3 nationally), children on care and protection orders (12.7 compared to 3.1 nationally), clients aged 55 and over (33.9 compared to 9.9 nationally), clients with problematic drug and/or alcohol use (26.4 compared to 9.1 nationally) and clients exiting custodial arrangements (8.5 compared to 3.5 nationally). (NT Shelter 2023, 10)

²⁹ Based on RoGS 19A, Table 19A.6

	Unit		NT	Aust
Clients receiving support services	%	Accommodation/accommodation related assistance	49.7	29.3
	%	Assistance to sustain housing tenure	15.3	25.5
	%	Mental health services	3.3	4.2
	%	Family services	5.2	3.8
	%	Disability services	0.3	0.6
	%	Drug/alcohol services	0.8	1.3
	%	Legal/financial services	3.1	2.3
	%	Immigration/cultural services	6.3	5.6
	%	Family and domestic violence assistance	41.4	24.3
	%	Other specialist services	15.9	12.5
	%	General services	91.6	90.9
Total clients	No.		10,080	280,078
Total support days	'000 days		949	29,078
Total support periods ³⁰	No.		15,651	485,620
Total closed support periods	No.		12,970	404,011

Table 10. Composition of supports provided 2023-24

A high proportion of clients with accommodation and services other than accommodation needs that were met were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients. Table 11 shows the proportion of clients of specialist homelessness services whose service needs were met in the NT in 2023-24, including the proportion of those clients that identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.³¹

	Unit	NT	Aust
Clients with met demand for accommodation services	%	89.4	33.9
Clients with met demand for services other than accommodation	%	82.5	23.7
SHS clients	%	88.0	28.8
Total number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients with met demand	No.	8,765	78,046
Total number of clients with met demand	No.	9,933	272,689

Table 11. Proportion of clients whose homelessness services needs were met

³⁰ The period of time a client receives services from an agency is referred to as a support period. A support period starts on the day the client first receives a service from an agency and ends when:

- the relationship between the client and the agency ends
- the client has reached the maximum amount of support the agency can offer
- a client has not received any services from the agency for a whole calendar month and does not have an appointment booked with the agency.

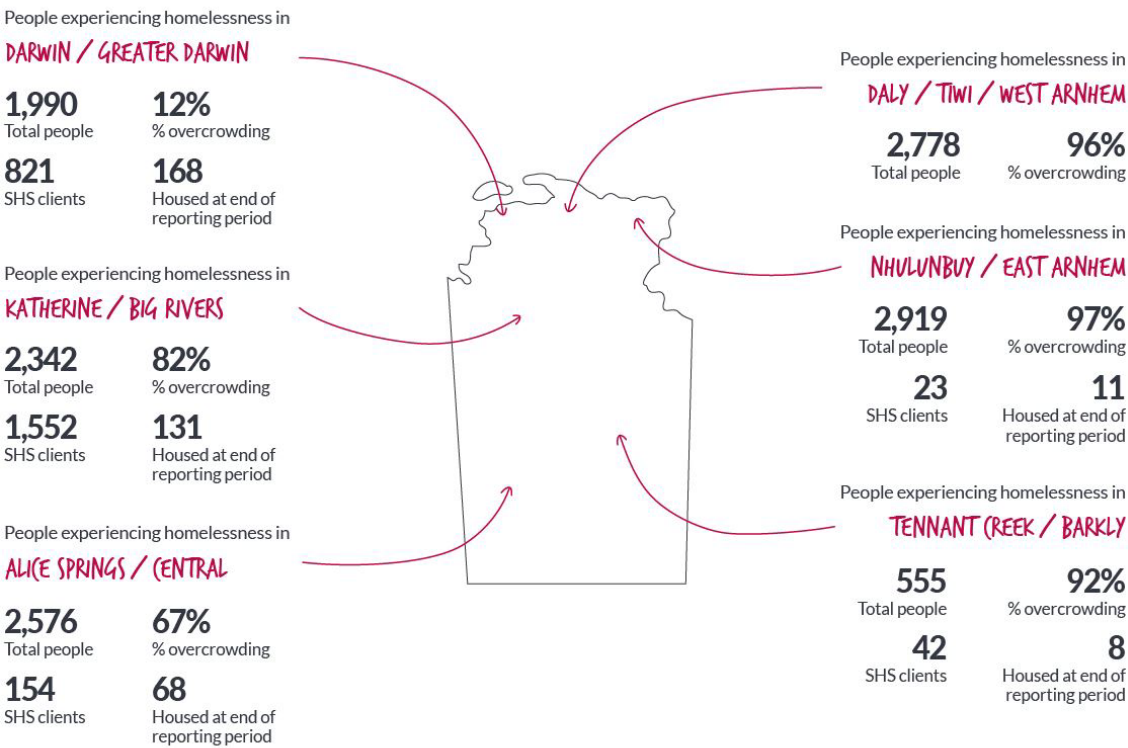
The end of the support period is the day the client last received services from the agency.

³¹ Based on RoGS 19A, Table 19A.7

Conversely, in 2023-24 in the NT, the average daily number of unassisted requests to specialist homelessness services providers for accommodation services was 10.8 and for services other than accommodation was 9.8.³²

Figure 12 is reproduced from the Background Paper to the *Northern Territory Homelessness Strategy 2025-2030*. It represents the number of people experiencing homelessness across NT ABS regions in 2021, including the number of people who accessed specialist homelessness services and the number of people who were housed at the end of that reporting period.

Figure 4 | A snapshot of homelessness in the NT (2021)³³



Source: Demand data is sourced from the Australian Bureau of Statistics Census of Population and Housing (2021). Supply data is sourced from Australian Institute of Health and Welfare microdata. SHS collection, annual client and support period CURFS 2023-24 (unpublished).

Percentage overcrowding is the percentage of people experiencing homelessness living in 'severely' crowded dwellings.

SHS clients is the number of people who received a homelessness service. These figures do not include people at risk of experiencing homelessness. Number housed at the end of reporting period is the number of people who presented as experiencing homelessness to the SHS and exited as housed at the end of the reporting period.

Number of SHS clients in Big Rivers appears high relative to other regions due to the high service volume of the Day Centre in Katherine.

Daly / Tiwi / West Arnhem does not have a homelessness service system, so SHS numbers are unavailable.

Note regions used in this diagram do not match the Northern Territory's 6 defined regional areas as the data is drawn from ABS data which is split by region and cannot be disaggregated to match.

Figure 12. People experiencing homelessness, accessing specialist homelessness services, and housed at the end of a reporting period. NTG 2025b.

³² Based on RoGS 19A.12

3.2 National Agreement Reporting

The *National Housing and Homelessness Agreement* (NHHA) was established in 2018 and was in operation until 30 June 2024 (including a one-year extension) when it was replaced by the *National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness* (NASHH). The purpose of the NHHA was to ‘contribute to improving access to affordable, safe and sustainable housing across the housing spectrum, including to prevent and address homelessness, and to support social and economic participation’ (s5). ‘Indigenous Australians’ were specified as one of six priority homelessness cohorts in the NHHA. Table 12 shows the funding allocated to the NT by category for the first year of the NHHA.

	General	General (SACS)	Homelessness	Homelessness (SACS)
2018-19 Funding (\$m)	13.5	0.6	5.4	0.2

Table 12. NHHA funding by category for the NT, 2018-19³³

Part 4 of the NHHA outlined the agreement’s performance monitoring and reporting requirements. Table 13 represents the 14 national performance indicators specified under the NHHA alongside the performance indicators specified within the bilateral agreement established between the Australian and NT Governments (Schedule E8 to the NHHA).

National performance indicators (NHHA)	NT performance indicators	
(a) The total number of dwellings relative to the population	A well-functioning social housing system that operates efficiently, sustainably and is effective in assisting low income households and vulnerable groups to manage their needs	• Number of public housing dwellings
(b) The stock of affordable rental housing relative to the population		• Number on waitlist
(c) The stock of social housing dwellings relative to the target population for social housing		• % of dwellings underutilised
(d) An increase in the proportion of social housing occupants that are housed in homes that match their needs		• % of dwellings overcrowded
(e) An increase in the proportion of social housing occupants with greatest need as a proportion of all new allocations		• % of greatest needs applicants that are housed into social housing
(f) An increase in the proportion of social housing occupants		• % of social housing households on low

³³ SACS funding referred to a government initiative, which ceased in 2021, that supported wage increased for social and community services workers.

whose needs are met and are satisfied with serviced provided by their housing organisation		incomes in housing stress (>30%)
(g) A decrease in the number of people experiencing homelessness		Proportion of social housing occupied by Aboriginal people
(h) A decrease in the number of people that experience repeat homelessness		Net recurrent cost for public housing
(i) An increase in the proportion of people who are at risk of homelessness that receive assistance to avoid homelessness		Total number of new households provided with financial assistance (loans)
(j) An increase in the proportion of people who are homeless that are assisted to achieve housing		Average duration of tenancies living in public housing
(k) An increase in the number of dwellings that are permitted by zoning in cities or urban areas*		Number of homelands and town camps funded
(l) A reduction in the average time taken to decide the outcome of a development application or residential building permit (as applicable) in cities or urban areas	An effective homelessness service system, which responds to and supports people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to achieve and maintain housing, and addresses the incidence and prevalence of homelessness	% unmet demand for accommodation and other services
(m) A decrease in the proportion of rental households with household income in the bottom two quintiles that spend more than 30 per cent of their income on rent		% of people who receive assistance to maintain stable housing who do not become homeless
(n) An increase in the proportion of Indigenous Australians purchasing or owning their own home.		% of assisted people who remain in stable housing after episode of support
		% of assisted people experiencing repeat periods of homelessness - Number accessing special [sic] homelessness services

Table 13. Performance indicators in the NHHA and NT bilateral agreement

*The measurement of this indicator will be considered as part of the operation of the Housing and Homelessness Data Working Group (established by Schedule C), with measurement to commence from 1 July 2021 subject to the development of a reliable measure.

The Housing and Homelessness Data Working Group established under section C of the NHHA established the Housing and Homelessness Data Improvement Plan 2019-2023 (Schedule E), which summarises the data improvements, timelines, and responsible parties for agreed data improvements. For example, for NHHA indicator '(a) The total number of dwellings relative to the population' in Table 13, the agreed outcome was that 'From 1 July 2018, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) will explore the collection of additional data on dwelling demolitions and completions in order to comprehensively measure and classify total dwelling stock in Australia, in between each 5-yearly Census of Population and Housing. Stock measures will be available at low levels of geography (LGA/SA2) and classified according to relevant dwelling characteristics' (1).

From 1 July 2024 the NHHA was superseded by the *National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness*, the overarching objective of which is 'to help people who are experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness and support the effective operation of Australia's social housing and homelessness services sectors' (s16). The NASHH includes a national outcomes framework (Schedule A) that revises the indicators used in the NHHA and situates these in relation to specific measures, possible data sources, and relevant objectives and outcomes. This is reproduced in this report as Appendix 2. Schedule D is an 'Initial Data Improvement Work Plan', which lists a number of agreed data improvements, such as 'Establish a research data set for the Social Housing sector, similar to the SHSC', 'Investigate the suitability of the Canadian National Occupancy Standard (CNOS) in the Australian context', and 'Improve measurement of people experiencing homelessness'.

A 2022 Productivity Commission review of the NHHA found that some of the NHHA performance indicators had limited value (for example in relation to zoning reform), while there is not available data to report against other indicators (for example in relation to the stock of affordable rental housing relative to the population). It states that:

The NHHA requires the Australian Government to publish an independent, annual report on national performance indicators. The Productivity Commission's Performance Reporting Dashboard was developed to fulfil this function. However, the Dashboard only reports on four of the 14 indicators and, for some of these indicators, data are collected infrequently. (10)

The four indicators were the number of people experiencing homelessness; the proportion of rental households with household income in the bottom two quintiles that spend more than 30 per cent of their income on rent; the number of social housing occupants with greatest need as a proportion of all new allocations; and, the proportion of Indigenous Australians purchasing or owning their own home.

Similarly, while states and territories have annual reporting obligations, the Productivity Commission found that 'There is no agency or body responsible for ensuring that performance reporting is meeting the intent of the performance framework' (2022, 10). Published prior to the establishment of the NASHH, the review recommended that under the next agreement 'governments should commit to agreed targets for improving homelessness support and outcomes, including reducing the prevalence of homelessness and the number

of people exiting health and correctional facilities and out-of-home care into homelessness' (27).

Recommendation 11.6 of the Productivity Commission's review of the NHHA specifies various reforms to data collection on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing and homelessness that should be sought:

Areas where indicators and targets should be considered in the next NHHA include:

- overcrowding in remote areas
- homelessness outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- transitions from social housing into private housing markets for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- the proportion of housing and homelessness services delivered (to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households) by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing supply
- housing quality, reflecting suitability of housing to climate under the anticipated impacts of climate change.

In the NASHH, a National Outcomes Framework (Schedule A, reproduced as Appendix 2) specifies indicators, measures, and possible data sources associated with particular objectives and outcomes. The measures are not specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, however a number of measures and their data sources could be used to highlight relevant data on the items above.

3.3 Discussion and Conclusion

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are significantly over-represented in Australian statistics on people experiencing homelessness. This is also true for the ABS operational group of people living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out, which this study takes as equivalent to rough sleeping. The ABS notes that it is likely that persons experiencing homelessness, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within this group, are both under enumerated and under-estimated. Relatedly, ABS data for people who are marginally housed, including people in other improvised dwellings, is not counted in homelessness statistics. Collectively, this suggests that the actual number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are sleeping rough is likely to be substantially higher than ABS estimates.

A significant proportion of people experiencing homelessness in Australia are people living in 'severely' crowded dwellings (39.1 per cent), as compared to people in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out (6.2 per cent). This is also the case for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing homelessness (75.6 per cent). Based on the ABS data, the NT has a substantially higher proportion of its population experiencing homelessness with a rate of 564 people per 10,000 in 2021. This is higher than any other state or territory jurisdiction with the next highest rate being 47 people per 10,000 in Victoria. In 2021, the NT

also had the highest total number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing homelessness, despite its small population. The rate of homelessness in the NT for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is 1,865 people per 10,000 in the population, as compared to the Australian rate of 307 people per 10,000.

An estimated 662 people, or about five per cent of the homeless population in the NT, are people living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out. This has decreased across the past four Census periods, and the proportion is marginally below the Australian average. Most (80.4 per cent) of this cohort are aged between 25 and 64 years old and a slight majority are male. Approximately 87 per cent of individuals experiencing homelessness in the NT identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, including 80 per cent of the rough sleeping cohort. Over half of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out are located in the Darwin and Palmerston local government areas.

In the NT in 2023-24, specialist homelessness services provided support to an estimated 10,080 people. In the NT in 2023-24, as compared to Australia-wide data, significantly higher proportions of NT clients who were receiving support services received support for accommodation/accommodation related services (49.7 per cent vs 29.3 per cent) and for family and domestic violence services (41.4 per cent vs 24.3 per cent). In the NT in 2023-24, as compared to Australia-wide data, there were significantly higher proportions of clients with met demand for accommodation services (89.4 per cent vs 33.9 per cent) and for services other than accommodation (82.5 per cent vs 23.7 per cent). This was also true for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients of homelessness services. However, in 2023-24 in the NT, the average daily number of unassisted requests to specialist homelessness services providers for accommodation services was 10.8 and for services other than accommodation was 9.8.

Data on homelessness is also underpinned in Australia by state and territory reporting obligations under the *National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness* (NASHH) and formerly the *National Housing and Homelessness Agreement* (NHHA). Efforts have been made since the establishment of the NHHA in 2018 to improve the specification and collection of relevant data on social housing and homelessness. The NASHH involved a revised approach to the distribution of funding to states and territories, shifting from a per capita to a needs-based model. This increased sevenfold the total Australian Government contribution to specified homelessness funding to the NT, from \$5.9m in 2023-24 to \$42.8m in 2024-25 (see Chapter 4). The NASHH obliges the NT Government to match the Australian Government contribution, meaning there is an estimated total financial contribution of \$98.4m to the NT under the NASHH in 2024-25. There is thus substantively more funding available to invest in services for rough sleepers.

4. NT Homelessness Funding, Policy, and Services Overview

Key Points

- The *National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness (NASHH)*, commencing in July 2024, has seen a seven-fold increase in specified homelessness funding in the NT.
- The increased funding available under the NASHH is necessary and welcome, but any new policy, program or service must contend with the effects of long-term under-funding of specialist homelessness services in the NT.
- Increased funding for an expanded specialist homelessness services sector ultimately contends with the ongoing shortage of social housing in the NT.
- The Report on Government Services (RoGS) distinguishes between homelessness services as those relating to accommodation, including crisis accommodation and transitional housing, and services other than accommodation, including health, substance misuse, education and job support, and family support services.
- The NT Government's Homelessness Strategy 2025-2030 characterises the homelessness service system as including: short-term accommodation services, medium-term accommodation services, tenancy sustainability services, and other access and support services.
- Increased funding under the NASHH has seen an increase in specialist homelessness services grants in the NT, with a particular expansion of tenancy sustainment services.
- From the perspective of those who are sleeping rough, the services that they access are not limited to those classified as homelessness services, but relate to health, housing, income support, employment services, transport, and so on.

4.1 Homelessness Funding

4.1.1 Funding Overview

A 2022 Productivity Commission review of the *National Housing and Homelessness Agreement* (NHHA) found it to be 'ineffective. It does not foster collaboration between governments or hold governments to account' (2022, 2). The review characterised the NHHA as 'more of a funding agreement on homelessness and housing services than an agreement for coordinated policy action. . . it does not foster intergovernmental collaboration nor set out a national reform agenda' (9).

The Productivity Commission describes that the specialist homelessness services sector is a crisis-oriented system that means few resources can be dedicated to prevention and early intervention (2022, 186). As a challenge to the continuity of service provision, the presence of homelessness programs, or even the presence of service organisations, is subject to change over time as an effect of government funding arrangements. As Angela Spinney et al. note 'funding uncertainty is a major issue for services; funding from governments is at the mercy of the priorities those governments give to homelessness, and affected by the changing economies of jurisdictions' (2016, 2). The uncertainty of funding has a range of organisational impacts, such as operational inefficiencies, service gaps, the inability of organisations to innovate, and the undermining of staff recruitment and retention (Spinney et al. 2016, 4).

NT Shelter (2024) highlights that the impact of efficiency dividends and the absence of funding compensation for National Wage Case decisions have undermined the financial status of the NT homelessness services in recent years. The NT Government has applied efficiency dividends to grant-funded homelessness services since 2019, with exclusions granted for 'front line' services related to youth justice, domestic violence, family support, and out-of-home care services. In 2024, NT Shelter argued that 'The Northern Territory homelessness sector has arrived at the point where funding for services has fallen so far behind 2018 levels that the financial sustainability of several programs and organisational staffing levels is under threat' (2024, 8).

There are a range of Commonwealth Government initiatives that contribute funds to social housing and homelessness and which, broadly, promise to address homelessness in the NT. The \$10 billion Housing Australia Future Fund (HAFF) is a program to subsidise the construction of 20,000 social housing units and 10,000 affordable rental units by 2029. The \$2 billion Social Housing Accelerator Program was a one-off payment to states and territories to increase social housing stock, with \$50 million committed to the NT to deliver up to 100 new social and accessible homes. Construction is underway and planned across the NT regions, and as at 30 June 2025, 13.8 million of the NT allocation had been spent, and \$33.9 million had been committed but not spent (Australian Government 2026).

The National Housing Accord, underpinned by matched Australian and state and territory government funding, aims to fund 10,000 affordable rental dwellings. The Federation Funding Agreement (FFA) Schedule for NT Remote Housing is jointly funded by the Australian and NT Governments to provide \$4 billion for housing at remote communities from 2024-34. This is supplemented by the FFA Schedule for Restoring Funding for Northern Territory Homelands, which provides \$120 million across 2024-27 for refurbishments of houses and community infrastructure at NT homelands. The National Housing Infrastructure Facility includes \$1 billion in low-cost finance and grants to support transitional housing projects targeted at young people and at women and children fleeing domestic violence. This report is primarily concerned with specified homelessness funding, rather than funding for social and affordable housing, though increased housing provision obviously impacts on the pressures on homelessness services.

4.1.2 The National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness

From 1 July 2024, the NHHA was superseded by the *National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness* (NASHH), the overarching objective of which is 'to help people who are experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness and support the effective operation of Australia's social housing and homelessness services sectors' (s16). The NASHH includes the Closing the Gap priority reforms, identifies Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a priority cohort, and acknowledges that 'decisions that predominantly affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will be decided by Partnership Bodies in each jurisdiction' (s30). However, no specific funding is allocated for this and other priority cohorts.

Under the NASHH, a new approach to funding homelessness services significantly increased the allocation of funding to the NT (NT Shelter 2023a). Under the old NHHA calculations, whereby homelessness funding was based on total population rather than homelessness prevalence, NT Shelter demonstrated that the NT received 1.3 per cent of all funding despite having 10.7 per cent of Australia's estimated homeless population. This equated to \$1,486 per person experiencing homelessness per annum in the NT, compared to \$27,522 per person experiencing homelessness per annum in WA (NT Shelter 2023a, 5). Using RoGS data, NT Shelter showed that under the NHHA the NT Government spent \$2.64 for every Commonwealth Government dollar received, as compared to the next highest state or territory jurisdiction, Victoria, which spent \$1.27.

The NASHH adopted a formula for calculating funds to be distributed to each jurisdiction based on the prevalence of homelessness (rather than total population). This resulted in a sevenfold increase in specified homelessness funding in the NT. Table 14 compares the funding allocations for the NT under the final year of the NHHA and the first year of the NASHH. Across the life of the five-year NASHH, between \$42.8m and \$46.5m per annum is allocated to the NT for specified homelessness funding, to a total value of \$223.5m. This does not include funding for capital investment. S62 of the NASHH specifies that states and territories agree to spend specified homelessness funding on the homelessness services sector and that they match the amount provided by the Commonwealth Government in funding to the homelessness services sector. This means that in 2024-25, there is an estimated total financial contribution of \$98.4m to the NT under the NASHH, including \$42.8m from the NT Government.

While this increase in funding allocation to the NT is necessary, the change in the basis for distributing funding among state and territory jurisdictions should also prompt reflection about funding provision to date. In other words, the increase in funding under the needs-based regime highlights the prior inadequate resourcing of the specialist homelessness services sector in the NT. Any new policy, service, or program supported by the recent funding increase must contend with the effects of this prior funding shortfall.

	General funding*	Specified Homelessness funding	Total funding
NHHA funding 2023-24 (\$m)	16.0	5.9	21.9
NASHH funding 2024-25 (\$m)	12.8	42.8	55.6

Table 14. Australian Government homelessness funding for the NT, 2023-24 and 2024-25

*General Funding can be spent on initiatives that address the objective or outcomes in the National Outcomes Framework (Schedule A), including homelessness initiatives. In addition, General Funding can be spent on projects that involve mixed models of social and affordable housing.

The NT Industry Housing Assistance Scheme (IHAS) provides properties to the non-government sector to support the delivery of essential services and other community-benefitting initiatives. It allocates about 280 dwellings to support the delivery of services under the Homelessness Program. Where service providers use an IHAS property, they maintain a tenancy with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Community Development (DHLGCD).

4.2 Homelessness Policy and Governance

In recent years following a 2022 election commitment, there has been an expectation across the housing and homelessness sectors for the Commonwealth Government to develop a National Housing and Homelessness Plan. A ten-year strategy is supported to 'set out a shared vision to inform future housing and homelessness policy' (Australian Government 2024). A nation-wide consultation process was undertaken in 2023-24, summarised in a paper by the Commonwealth Department of Social Services (DSS) that found stakeholders prioritising the need to shift from managing homelessness to preventing and eventually eliminating it (DSS 2024, 2). The Australian Homelessness Monitor was highly critical of the Issues Paper directing the consultation, writing:

Not only was the Paper lacking in any analysis of housing system performance, but it failed to propose any overarching goals, objectives or missions for the Plan. While listing current government initiatives it left undiscussed vast areas of policy directly relevant to housing and homelessness, including, migration and settlement policy, income support, and financial regulation, the role of urban development and city growth, and the intersection of outcomes in homelessness with policy developments in domestic and family violence, disability and mental health. (Pawson et al. 2024, 41)

After significant delay, *Homes for Australia: A National Plan* was published on 28 May 2026. It included six priorities, among them:

4. Growing the social and affordable housing sector so more Australians have a stable place to call home
5. Closing the housing gap in genuine partnership with First Nations Australians, and

6. Supporting people experiencing homelessness, crisis, and family violence with a strengthened system.

In relation to 6, the actions listed include: delivering more crisis and transitional housing; addressing barriers for young people at risk of homelessness; intervening early to prevent youth homelessness; coordinating efforts across government to reduce homelessness; and evaluating and renegotiating national homelessness funding. Pawson and Martin (2026) argue that despite this publication and the recent capital gains tax and negative gearing reforms, 'Australia still lacks the long-term national housing strategy needed to address social housing, rental security, energy efficiency and supply failures'.

Prior to machinery of government changes following the 2024 NT election, the homelessness section was located within the then-Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities. This large department was subsequently split and restructured into the Department of Housing, Local Government and Community Development (DHLGCD) and the Department of Children and Families (DCF). In 2026, the NT Government funds homelessness services through the DCF, predominantly through grants and contracts to non-government organisations.

The *Northern Territory Homelessness Strategy 2025-2030* was launched in June 2025. It superseded the former *Pathways Out of Homelessness. Northern Territory Homelessness Strategy 2018-2023*. It includes a stated vision for 'A Territory committed to ending homelessness through culturally safe and dignified support' and the objective to 'Strengthen the homelessness sector to deliver improved outcomes for Territorians who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness'. Four outcomes are included and intend to direct work under the strategy, as follows:

- People at risk of homelessness can access and maintain stable housing through early intervention with access to appropriate services, increased access to income, greater self-reliance and community connections.
- People experiencing homelessness can rapidly access appropriate services, accommodation and housing, with ongoing support suited to their needs and choices.
- The homelessness system is preventive with fewer people becoming homeless, and responsive to people who experience homelessness.
- The homelessness system is more efficient, effective, better coordinated and integrated.

Three strategic priorities are specified with between four and seven associated actions (Appendix 3), including:

1. Intervene early to prevent homelessness.
2. Deliver culturally safe services that focus on people experiencing homelessness.
3. Strengthen the homelessness system.

In practice, the Specialist Homelessness Services Reform Group (SHSRG) is a homelessness sector-led membership group that provides advice and oversight to the homelessness service system. The SHSRG reports to the DCF Programs Subcommittee and is supported by

a SHSRG Working Group comprised of representatives from various NT Government departments.

The Homelessness Strategy describes that its implementation will involve contributions from each of a Strategic Advisory Group (SAG), Priority Action Group (PAG), and Lived Experience Advisory Group (LEAG). The intention was to establish these groups in late 2025, which would continue to work with the SHSRG as the responsible mechanism for leading the service system and for program reform. The SAG will support delivery of the Strategy across government departments, with emphasis on Strategic Priority 1 goals to progress early intervention and cross-agency actions. SAG membership includes a range of NT Government departments as well as representation from non-government organisations. The PAG will be comprised of selected members from the SAG and will develop regional plans for each of the NT Government regions to guide future investment, based on information about service delivery, gaps, and homelessness trends. A Lived Experience Advisory Group (LEAG) is a formal mechanism that will advise and guide the SAG and the PAG. Figure 13 is reproduced from the Action Plan to the *Northern Territory Homelessness Strategy 2025-2030* and provides a visual representation of the proposed relationships between the SAG, PAG, and LEAG.

Figure 1 | Governance of the NT Homelessness Strategy



Figure 13. NT Homelessness Strategy governance arrangements. NTG 2025c

4.3 Homelessness Services

4.3.1 Social Housing Overview

To understand the work of homelessness services, it is important to understand the housing system that such services operate in relation to. The NT housing system has a high proportion of renters, relative to other Australian state and territory jurisdictions. The 2021 Census found that 47.6 per cent of occupied private dwellings in the NT were rented, as compared to 30.6

per cent across Australia (ABS 2021c). For the Darwin and Palmerston local government areas (LGAs), 40.8 per cent of occupied dwellings were rented (see Table 15). In 2024, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2025) data characterised social housing dwellings in the NT as comprised of 4566 public housing dwellings, 731 community housing dwellings, 5705 state owned and managed Indigenous housing (SOMIH) dwellings, and 1878 Indigenous community housing dwellings – a total 12,880 social housing dwellings (AIHW 2025c).

ABS 2021 Census data summarises that in the Darwin and Palmerston LGAs there are 2615 dwellings rented by a state or territory housing authority and 271 dwellings rented by a community housing provider. This equates to a total of 2886 social housing dwellings or 5.8 per cent of the total housing stock (Table 15). This is likely to be an undercount of available social housing dwellings, given the high proportion of dwellings classified as tenure type not stated (7.5 per cent) and tenure type not applicable (8.5 per cent). Since 2021, a number of NT Government-owned properties in Darwin and Palmerston have had management responsibilities transferred to community housing providers, including Venture Housing, Mission Australia, and Yilli Rreung Housing Aboriginal Corporation (CHIA NT 2023).

Tenure and Landlord Type	Darwin	Palmerston	Total	Proportion (%)
Owned outright	5711	1189	6900	14
Owned with a mortgage	8483	5292	13,775	27.9
Rented: Real estate agent	8273	3396	11,669	23.6
Rented: State or territory housing authority	1742	873	2,615	5.3
Rented: Community housing provider	224	47	271	0.5
Rented: Person not in same household	2784	883	3667	7.4
Rented: Other landlord type	1400	386	1786	3.6
Rented: Landlord type not stated	91	30	121	0.2
Other tenure type	472	136	608	1.2
Tenure type not stated	2535	1184	3719	7.5
Tenure type not applicable	3091	1126	4217	8.5
Total	34,806	14,542	49,348	100

Table 15. Tenure and landlord type for Darwin and Palmerston, at 2021 Census³⁴

In Chapter 2, Figure 3 provides an overview of the social housing waitlist, or the number of current applications for social housing and the average wait times for individuals on that wait list to access a social housing property. That data shows a severe shortage of social housing relative to need. This shortage places significant constraints on the potential efficacy of the specialist homelessness services system, if one of its chief outcomes is to support people to access and maintain stable housing.

³⁴ This table is produced using the ABS's Table Builder.

The shortage of social housing places increased expectations on the private rental system. The residential vacancy rate in Darwin is incredibly tight, at 0.6 per cent of stock in February 2026, as compared to Australia's rate of 1.1 per cent. Combined (houses and units) rents rose 1.9 per cent for the month of February 2026, or 12.7 per cent over the prior year (Christopher 2026). NTCOSS (2025) describe that based on average prices for a three-bedroom rental property, low-income households would be placed in rental stress (more than 30 per cent of the household income is paid to rent) in all NT regions. NTCOSS (2025) describes that across the year to June 2025, 'the largest price increase was in Palmerston where median rent for a 1-bedroom unit has increased by \$90 per week'.

4.3.2 The Homelessness Services System

Given the focus of this project on both the drivers of rough sleeping and the engagement of rough sleepers with homelessness services, it is important to understand the homelessness services system. This system, including individual organisations, their programs, and the relationships between them, has been an importance focus for this research.

The NT Homelessness Strategy identifies that the homelessness services system exists in relation to 'the broader system', which includes funding, policy, programs, and governance arrangements related to housing, domestic family and sexual violence, youth, health, and corrections. Local government also invests in services that support people experiencing homelessness, such as through rangers and library and customer support officers with relevant training. This is an important point, also made by NT Shelter in its argument that homelessness is not only the concern of the homelessness sector (2024, 5). From the lived experience perspective of people experiencing homelessness, and rough sleeping in particular, there is no strong distinction between what might be classified as a specialist homelessness service and another service or resource that provides support in the context of their homelessness. In this sense, addressing homelessness requires a whole-of-government approach.

The homelessness services sector involves many providers – there are about 1800 specialist homelessness services (SHSs) in Australia (AIHW 2025b) – offering a range of housing and homelessness services. State and Territory governments are primarily responsible for administering and delivering homelessness services. Catherine Holmes (2006) identifies that responsibilities for homelessness have tended to fall to social and community services departments rather than to environmental health practitioners, despite the health implications for people experiencing homelessness and the importance of environmental health interventions to support individuals sleeping rough.

Spinney et al. (2023) argue that homelessness requires a 'more cross-sectorial response, involving mainstream systems and specialist services' (1). They suggest that a redesigned homelessness services system should prioritise prevention over crisis response, ensure assistance via a 'duty to assist' protocol, incorporate a Housing First response, and develop long-term plans for the supply of social and affordable housing (1-2). Figure 14 is reproduced

from Spinney et al. (2020) and visually represents their blueprint for a reconfigured homelessness service system detailing actors and lever points.

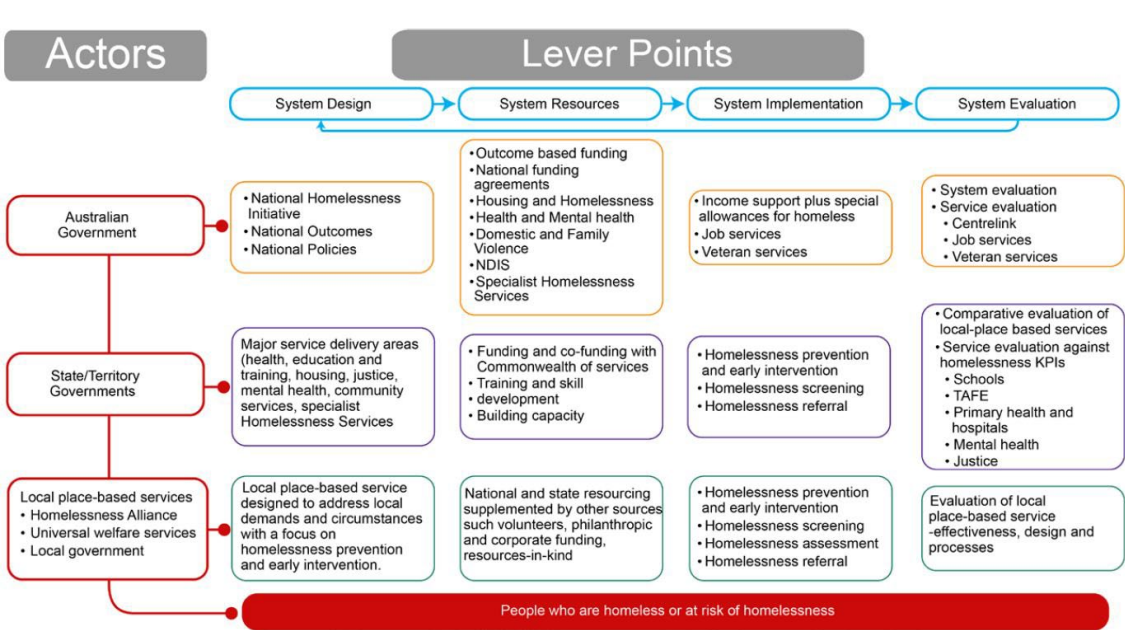


Figure 14. A blueprint for a reconfigured homelessness service system detailing actors and lever points. Spinney et al. 2020

There are various ways to categorise the services within the homelessness sector. Figure 15 is reproduced from the Report on Government Services (RoGS) and provides a visual overview of the relationship between housing and homelessness services, which underpins how data is collected and curated. It distinguishes homelessness services as those relating to accommodation, including crisis accommodation (see Batterham et al. 2023) and transitional housing, and services other than accommodation, including health, substance misuse, education and job support, and family support services.

The Productivity Commission identifies that accommodation services also include assistance to sustain tenancies and to prevent foreclosures for mortgage arrears and non-housing services including ‘care coordination, counselling, advocacy, health, education and employment services, outreach support, brokerage and meals services’ (2022,181). The NT Homelessness Strategy describes that the homelessness service system includes: short-term accommodation services, medium-term accommodation services, tenancy sustainability services, and other access and support services.

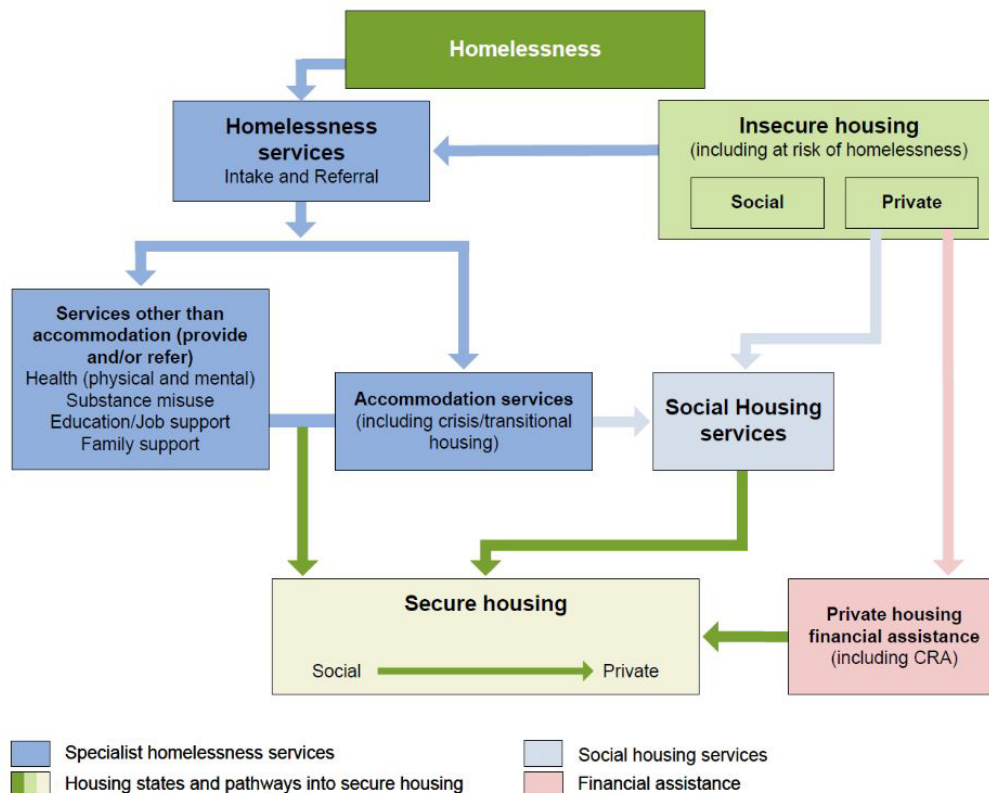


Figure 15. Role of housing and homelessness sector services in pathways to secure housing. RoGS 2025

The RoGS provides the following comprehensive list of homelessness services (Table 16), which are distinguished as housing/accommodation services, specialised services, and general assistance and support services.

Housing/accommodation services	Specialised services	General assistance and support services
• short-term or emergency accommodation • medium-term/transitional housing • long-term housing • assistance to sustain tenancy or prevent tenancy failure or eviction • assistance to prevent foreclosures or for mortgage arrears.	• child protection services • parenting skills education • child-specific specialist counselling services • psychological services • psychiatric services • mental health services • pregnancy assistance • family planning support • physical disability services • intellectual disability services • health/medical services • professional legal services	• assertive outreach for rough sleepers • assistance to obtain/maintain government allowance • employment assistance • training assistance • educational assistance • financial information • material aid/brokerage • assistance for incest/sexual assault • assistance for domestic and family violence • family/relationship assistance • assistance for trauma

	• financial advice and counselling • counselling for problem gambling • drug/alcohol counselling • specialist counselling services • interpreter services • assistance with immigration services • culturally specific services • assistance to connect culturally • other specialised services.	• assistance with challenging social/behavioural problems • living skills/personal development • legal information • court support • advice/information • retrieval/storage/removal of personal belongings • advocacy/liaison on behalf of client • school liaison • child care • structured play/skills development • child contact and residence arrangements • meals • laundry/shower facilities • recreation • transport • other basic assistance.
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Table 16. Specialist homelessness services by category

4.3.3 Specialist Homelessness Services in the NT

Specialist homelessness services provide a range of different supports. Table 17 shows the proportional distribution of support types provided by specialist homelessness services in the NT in 2023-24, as compared to the proportions Australia-wide for the same year.³⁵ It shows the relative high proportion of 'accommodation/accommodation related assistance' and 'family and domestic violence assistance' provided in the NT, as compared to Australia in general.

	Unit		NT	Aust
Clients receiving support services	%	Accommodation/accommodation related assistance	49.7	29.3
	%	Assistance to sustain housing tenure	15.3	25.5
	%	Mental health services	3.3	4.2
	%	Family services	5.2	3.8
	%	Disability services	0.3	0.6
	%	Drug/alcohol services	0.8	1.3
	%	Legal/financial services	3.1	2.3
	%	Immigration/cultural services	6.3	5.6
	%	Family and domestic violence assistance	41.4	24.3
	%	Other specialist services	15.9	12.5
	%	General services	91.6	90.9
Total clients	No.		10,080	280,078

³⁵ Based on RoGS 19A, Table 19A.6

Total support days	'000 days		949	29,078
Total support periods	No.		15,651	485,620
Total closed support periods	No.		12,970	404,011

Table 17. Composition of supports provided 2023-24

Crisis, or short-term, accommodation, is one of the major service areas relevant to rough sleepers. Crisis accommodation takes a range of forms, including general homelessness crisis accommodation services such as shelters or crisis supported accommodation services, family and domestic violence refuges, and youth refuges, as well as purchased crisis accommodation options such as boarding and rooming houses, hostels, motels and backpackers, and caravan parks (Batterham et al. 2023). The Background Paper to the NT Government's Homelessness Strategy 2025-2030 provides an overview by category of specialist homelessness services. Short-term accommodation services include refuges, boarding houses, and emergency or crisis shelters. Medium-term accommodation services include transitional and supported housing. Tenancy sustainability services assist people in sustaining public or community housing tenancies, including through counselling, mediation, advocacy and referrals. Other support services relate to life skills, financial and legal services, alcohol and other drugs services, family and sexual violence, and so on. Information for Greater Darwin drawn from the Background Paper is reproduced in Table 18 below.

Region	Short-term accommodation service	Medium-term accommodation service	Tenancy sustainability services	Other support services
Greater Darwin	7	10	5	6

Table 18. Summary of Greater Darwin specialist homelessness services

The Homelessness Program guidelines provide an overview of four service categories and ten service types. This is reproduced as Table 19 below. Service subtypes that are specified in grant agreements include: advice, information and referral; intake services; waitlist support; case management; outreach; post program / crisis support; dignity services; visitor management; overcrowding management; tenancy skills; life skills; travel assistance; material assistance / brokerage; vacancy management; training and education; evaluation; stand alone / bespoke; and, provision of food/meals.

Service Category Code	Service Categories	Service Type Code	Service Types
1.	Access	1.1	Central intake services (NT wide)
		1.2	Hubs and day centres
2.	Support	2.1	Tenancy sustainability services
		2.2	Assertive outreach
		2.3	Integrated tenancy sustainability services
3.	Supported accommodation and housing	3.1	Supported crisis accommodation
		3.2	Supported transitional accommodation
		3.3	Integrated supported homelessness accommodation

4.	Service system support and development	4.1	Innovation / Pilot programs
		4.2	Peak bodies

Table 19. Service categories and service types

For the 2025-26 financial year, there were 56 grants or contracts funded through the NT Government Homelessness Program that operate in the Greater Darwin region (n=46) or NT Wide (n=10). A significant proportion of the grants classified as operating NT Wide relate to Peak Body / Sector Initiatives or Sector Capacity Building and Training, while an example of a service operating NT Wide is the NT Central Intake Service. Table 20 shows the distribution of grants or contracts awarded for the 2025-26 financial year that relate to Greater Darwin and NT Wide distinguished by service type.

Service Type	Number
Assertive Outreach	8
Central Intake	1
Hub / Day Centre	2
Integrated Homelessness Supported Accommodation Service	3
Integrated Tenancy Sustainability	1
Peak Body / Sector Initiatives	4
Sector Capacity Building and Training	3
Supported Crisis Accommodation	5
Supported Transitional Accommodation	18
Tenancy Sustainability	10
Visitor Accommodation	1
Total	56

Table 20. Homelessness services funded by service type 2025-26

Beyond existing services in the NT, there are a range of policy approaches and services that advocates have argued should be integrated into the NT's specialist homelessness services system. Chief among these is a 'Housing First' approach to homelessness, which is an internationally regarded best practice approach to addressing chronic homelessness (see Homelessness Australia 2026). Broadly, Housing First shifts away from a staircase model of supports - wherein individuals are provided with various services in preparation for the provision of stable housing - to provide housing as soon as possible. Access to such housing is not conditional on participation in other services, such as alcohol and other drugs rehabilitation, and individuals have the same rights and obligations as any other tenancy. The obvious obstacle to implementing a Housing First approach in the NT is the severe shortage of social housing, the scarcity of which allows for a rationing according to various eligibility criteria and service participation requirements.

Beyond this approach, NT Shelter has long advocated for a Youth Foyer, which is an accommodation facility for young people (usually 16-24 years of age) that supports independent living along with education and training opportunities, including in partnership with the TAFE system, community housing providers, and other service organisations. There are currently 18 accredited youth foyers across Australia in all jurisdictions but the NT (Foyer

Foundation 2026). Similarly, advocates have called for a Common Ground model where housing is provided to people experiencing chronic homelessness with on-site tailored support services (see Alves et al. 2019).

4.3.4 Example Services

This chapter has provided an overview of the types of services within the specialist homelessness services system and the way these are categorised in the NT. This project has not been tasked with mapping the services of this system. However, in our engagement with people who were sleeping rough, various services were often highlighted. The following list is not exhaustive but provides a description of some of the services often highlighted by research participants.

YiSSA

YiSSA is a short-stay accommodation facility located on Batten Rd at Marrara, comprised of approximately 50 ensuite rooms. It provides accommodation to people for up to 28 days at a rate of \$35 (one person) to \$45 (two people) per night. The fee includes three meals per day, weekly cleaning of the room, on-site security, laundry facilities, and other sport and recreational services. YiSSA is operated by Yilli Rreung Housing Aboriginal Corporation and its residents are predominantly visitors from NT remote communities, but also include Darwin residents, and visitors from NT towns and interstate. YiSSA case managers support guests to access various social services and can also provide referrals to Mission Australia's Integrated Homelessness Supported Accommodation Program (IHSAP).

The IHSAP operates adjacent to the YiSSA short-stay accommodation on the same site and is comprised of approximately 140 rooms. It is designed to provide accommodation for people for up to 12 months, but in practice many residents remain there for around two years. Case managers work with residents and can provide a rental reference to support an application for social housing, while also supporting residents into transitional and longer-term housing.

There are typically extensive wait lists to access both of YiSSA and the IHSAP. However, there is additional accommodation located on the Batten Rd site that is reserved as crisis accommodation for victim-survivors of domestic and family violence. Similarly, there is accommodation reserved for use during wet weather events. Access to such accommodation is restricted by the total budget allocated to opening these rooms, resulting in them often remaining closed during heavy or ongoing rain to reserve funds for more serious weather events or emergencies.

In July 2026, the NT Government announced that it would not be renewing the lease with Ausco Modular, which owns the accommodation infrastructure on the site, providing 90 days' notice for the vacation of the site by YiSSA and the IHSAP. At the time, there were 383 residents, including 145 children (Averill 2026). The NT Government stated that there is a plan to transition residents to alternative accommodation, however at the time of writing key sector stakeholders are unaware of any details of such a plan.

Sobering Up Shelter

The Sobering Up Shelter (Figure 16) is located at Berrimah and is managed by Mission Australia. The current site was established in 2024, when its former location in the Stringybark Centre was repurposed for a women's prison. This relocation process ended the presence of on-site detoxification beds (NT Health Alcohol and Other Drugs Withdrawal Services), which are now located at Royal Darwin Hospital, and discontinued the 40-bed Mission Australia Residential Rehabilitation Service (MARRTS) for parolees working on overcoming substance addiction, which had also been located in the Stringybark Centre (Brennan 2024). There has been no replacement of this coordinated addiction service (Dick 2024).

The Sobering Up Shelter provides accommodation to people experiencing homelessness who are under the influence of alcohol or other drugs and are at risk of harm. In practice, it also provides accommodation people experiencing homelessness who are sober. Clients attend the Sobering Up Shelter by self-referral as walk-ins or are referred and transported by the Larrakia Nation patrol team or NT Police. The facility has a capacity of approximately 40 beds and it reaches capacity almost every day, often by early or mid-afternoon. While at the Sobering Up Shelter, clients are offered a bed, lunch and dinner, and are assisted with referrals to other health and wellbeing services. Transport services are provided each morning from the Sobering Up Shelter to Darwin city centre, Palmerston, and Casuarina.



Figure 16. Darwin Sobering Up Shelter

Ozanam House

Ozanam House is Darwin's largest homelessness support day centre. It is operated by St Vincent de Paul Society and is located on Dick Ward Drive in Coconut Grove. The centre is open on weekdays to walk-ins from 7:30am until midday and provides essential services to people who are sleeping rough, including hot meals, showers and hygiene products, and laundry services. A range of other services operate at Ozanam House, including Services Australia (Centrelink), Darwin Community Legal Service, and Danila Dilba Health Services.

Between September 2024 and October 2025, Ozanam House had provided 'more than 6500 showers, 3500 loads of washing, 43,000 breakfasts and 17,000 lunches' (Smith 2025).

Ozanam House moved to its Coconut Grove site in 2024 after being relocated from a long-term site on Westralia St in Stuart Park. In late 2025, the two-year lease for the Coconut Grove site, due to expire in September 2026, was renewed for a further three years until September 2029. This occurred despite opposition from some NT Government Members of the Legislative Assembly, following objections lodged in relation to an application with the Development Consent Authority. Many people who are rough sleeping reported travelling to Ozanam House from Palmerston, which required bus trips into and out of the city in the early morning.

Central Intake Service

The Central Intake Service was established in late 2025 and is delivered by Lutheran Care, in partnership with the Salvation Army, Yilli Rreung Housing Aboriginal Corporation, and Lhere Artepe. The service responds to the duplication of labour in the specialist homelessness services system, whereby individual case workers and others would contact many relevant service providers in order to make a referral to an organisation with the capacity to support a client. In contrast, the Central Intake Service is designed to operate as a single Territory-wide hotline and triage system for people at risk of or experiencing homelessness, centralising the work of providing clients with warm referrals to services with capacity. This aims to reduce the likelihood that clients are required to re-narrate their circumstances to many homelessness services, as well as reducing the labour of specialist homelessness workers. The Central Intake Service has been adapted from the 'Access' model developed under the Toward Home Alliance in South Australia.

At the time of writing, there is not yet a physical hub for prospective clients to access the Central Intake Service in Greater Darwin. Access is thus subject to clients being able to call the hotline or seek assistance from a homelessness services worker. To be referred to relevant services by the Central Intake System, clients are required to complete the detailed Australian Homelessness Vulnerability Triage Tool (AHVTT). While the Central Intake System reduces the number of times a client might tell their story and the referral labour of case workers, its broader efficacy is undermined by the ongoing capacity shortage of short-term and other accommodation services to refer people into.

Arts in the Grass

Arts in the Grass is a community-focused outreach program run by Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation and associated with its Healthy Engagement and Assistance in the Long Grass (HEAL) team. It operates in the parkland behind Mindil Beach most Wednesday mornings throughout the year, ceasing with the arrival of regular rain at the commencement of the wet season. Many people who are sleeping rough or otherwise precariously housed visit Arts in the Grass for a barbeque breakfast. Larrakia Nation also supports participants to make art, providing a welcoming space undercover for people to paint. The event also attracts a range of other authorities and service providers, such as NT Police, Centrelink, Darwin City Council, Orange Sky, and CAAPS, among others (Figure 17).



Figure 17. Attending Arts in the Grass

4.4 Conclusion

The NT is benefitting from a significant increase in Commonwealth and NT Government funding for specialist homelessness services under the NASHH. This is complemented by various Commonwealth Government commitments for social and affordable housing, including at remote communities and homelands. However, this situation follows the long-term under-funding of specialist homelessness services in the NT relative to need. The NT also has a severe shortage of social housing, providing a significant challenge to a service sector that aims to transition people out of homelessness and into stable housing. Any new programs or services are introduced into this context. The new NT Homelessness Strategy provides a path to shift from crisis responses to prioritise preventive interventions in homelessness, in particular in relation to assertive outreach and tenancy support services. New governance arrangements promise to provide greater sector involvement and shared decision making regarding homelessness policy and programming. The increased funding and the establishment of the strategy are too recent to meaningfully evaluate their impacts on the service sector and on homelessness, including rough sleeping.

5. Methodology

Key Points

- This research project was approved by the Northern Territory Department of Health and Menzies Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).
- A Project Reference Group comprised of ACCOs provided guidance around the methodology for this project.
- A qualitative and participatory approach was taken with a focus on centering First Nations ways of being and knowing and foregrounding the lived experiences and perspectives of people who are sleeping rough.
- First Nations field researchers from Yilli Rreung and Larrakia Nation led data collection with people sleeping rough, with support from Menzies researchers.
- Data collection methods included yarning, listening, and reflecting, alongside stakeholder interviews and analysis of policy and program documents.
- Field researchers undertook yarning sessions with 59 people who were sleeping rough and conducted broader engagement with the rough sleeping cohort and service providers, captured in their participant observation notes and reflections.
- Menzies researchers undertook 31 interviews with 39 people to inform understanding of the specialist homelessness services sector.
- Data collection took place at multiple sites across the Greater Darwin and Palmerston regions.
- Iterative, inductive thematic coding was used to analyse the data, and emerging themes were cross checked and validated with field researchers.

5.1 Methodology

5.1.1 Approach

The Rough Sleeping in Greater Darwin Project was granted full approval by the HREC on 12 September 2025. This process included assessment by the Qualitative Ethics Subcommittee and the Aboriginal Ethics Subcommittee, which advises the main committee on issues relating to research specifically involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Documentation submitted to the HREC included a study protocol, participant information sheets and consent forms, a recruitment letter, a project flyer, sample questions for interviews with sector stakeholders, and a yarning guide for engagement with current and former rough sleepers.

This project adopted a qualitative approach, engaging multiple stakeholders in the research process, the interpretation of findings, and the translation of findings into policy recommendations. The approach was informed by the establishment of, and ongoing consultation with, the Project Reference Group (PRG). Interviews and fieldwork were supplemented by analysis of policy and program documents, and academic literature related to homelessness and rough sleeping. This holistic approach enabled the research to explore connections between the lived experiences of rough sleeping and service engagement with broader homelessness and housing policies and programs (Bengtsson 2015; Puszka 2022).

This project drew on and engaged with research on Aboriginal ways of being, knowing, and doing (Martin and Mirraboopu 2003), best-practice approaches to culturally safe research (Long et al. 2024), and 'Both Ways' philosophy for respectful knowledge sharing in the First Nations homelessness field (Holmes and McRae-Williams 2008). As one outreach worker noted, 'Learning needs to be two-ways. Learning from lived experience, ways of working respectfully. People [who are sleeping rough] are tired of "tick and flick" research'. Other research has demonstrated that engaging and partnering with Aboriginal-led organisations and Aboriginal peoples throughout the research process contributes to high quality research that addresses community needs and fosters translation of findings into improved policy and practice (Long et al. 2024). Through a partnership approach and in collaboration with ACCOs, this project fosters community ownership over research outcomes by positioning Aboriginal people as experts in their own lives (Dudgeon et al. 2020) and actively engaging them in informing policy and service delivery agendas for rough sleeping. This includes recognising the experience of outreach workers to lead engagement with Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness, while remaining attuned to the diversity of Indigenous experience and other intersectional differences.

5.1.2 Fieldwork

In recognition of the most culturally appropriate way to undertake research involving people sleeping rough, this project engaged field researchers with experience in service delivery and established connections with the rough sleeping cohort. Yilli Rreung contracted Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation (LNAC) to second interested members of the HEAL and patrol teams to participate as field researchers (one of whom subsequently became employed by Yilli Rreung). LNAC have a long history of service delivery with the rough sleeping cohort and building on their relationships and established trust to facilitate research related to homelessness (Holmes and McRae-Williams 2008). Research in this context requires deep understanding and careful navigation of the sensitivities and vulnerabilities of people who are rough sleeping (Holmes and McRae-Williams, 2008, p 13).

Menzies provided training, support, and guidance to the field researchers on qualitative methods. In-person sessions with field researchers at the start of the project introduced qualitative approaches, types of data, ethics, consent and cultural safety in research practice, as well as more specific training on participatory action research, and Aboriginal scholarship on yarning, deep listening, and reflection. Field-based training supported researchers to

develop skills around using participant information sheets, consent forms, yarning and reflecting guides, as well as note taking, data storage, and management.

Menzies researchers accompanied the field researchers for both methodological and pragmatic reasons. Drawing on ethnographic approaches (Parsell 2010), it is important to participate in field research and understand the lived realities of people who are sleeping rough – this could not be done by reading the notes of field researchers alone. Menzies researchers were able to take detailed fieldnotes about the contexts in which data collection took place and the ways that service providers engage with clients. Pragmatically, Menzies researchers also accompanied field researchers to ensure that there were always two or more people undertaking engagement work. Part of our ethics application and risk management was for the research to be undertaken in pairs. Following other studies with people sleeping rough in Darwin (Spencer and Christie 2016), field researchers were always the first to engage with participants and to explain the purpose of the project; Menzies researchers played a more observational and note taking role, sometimes asking follow-up questions or clarifying key points.

5.2 Project Reference Group

Yilli Rreung established terms of reference for and managed a Project Reference Group (PRG), to guide the project, including the following organisations:

- CAAPS Aboriginal Corporation (formerly the Council for Aboriginal Alcohol Program Services);
- Danila Dilba Health Services;
- Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation; and
- Yilli Rreung Housing Aboriginal Corporation.

Membership was limited to Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs), with organisations selected based on their roles in delivering assertive outreach and other specialist homelessness services to homeless clients.

Across the course of the project, Yilli Rreung convened two formal meetings of the PRG, in May 2025 and February 2026. In this forum, members provided advice on the project methodology, in particular the methods employed to engage with people sleeping rough, to ensure the physical and cultural safety of those individuals and the field researchers. Beyond formal PRG meetings, the Menzies researchers engaged regularly with staff at PRG member organisations, to provide updates on project progress and milestones, and for advice and logistical support related to data collection. Representatives from each of the member organisations participated in stakeholder interviews.

5.3 Documents and Data

The project was informed by a review of policies, reviews, historical reports, and academic literature related to homelessness in the NT and Australia. This included but was not limited to the following key sources:

- Australian Bureau of Statistics 'Estimating homelessness: Census' releases
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 'Homelessness and homelessness services' reports
- Productivity Commission 'Report on Government Services' (RoGS) reports
- NT Government. 2019. *A home for all Territorians. Northern Territory housing strategy 2020-2025*. Department of Local Government, Housing and Community Development: Darwin.
- NT Government. 2025. *Northern Territory homelessness strategy 2025-2030*.
- Submissions to various consultation processes, such as relate to the National Housing and Homeless Plan and the NT Homelessness Strategy
- Keys Young. 1998. *Homelessness in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context and its possible implications for the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP)*. Prepared for Department of Family and Community Services: Sydney.
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- Specialist homelessness services program information and data shared by the NT Government and NT Shelter.

5.4 Data Collection

5.4.1 Methods

This project engaged with methods like yarning, deep listening, and reflecting to foreground First Nations worldviews and knowledge-sharing practices. Sharmil et al. (2021) demonstrate how Indigenous methods like yarning (consulting), Dadirri (deep listening, from the Ngangikurungkurr people, Daly River) and Ganma (reflection/two-way knowledge sharing, from the Yolngu people, Arnhem Land) can be used together. In contrast to structured interviews, yarning allowed for culturally appropriate, open-ended dialogue facilitating richer, more inclusive discussions that respect the autonomy and lived experiences of people who are sleeping rough. As Bessarab (2010) describes, yarning involves participants and researchers sharing stories to build relationships; yarns unfold as a conversation that fosters

reciprocity, trust and respect, rather than extracting knowledge through questions and answers. We engaged with listening as a method alongside yarning. The work by Ungunmerr-Baumann et al. (2022) details how Dadirri has been co-developed in the NT as 'a deep contemplative process of listening to one another' through reflective practice.

In this project, First Nations field researchers led yarning and deep listening with people who have lived experience of sleeping rough in Darwin and Palmerston. Menzies researchers joined some yarning sessions, where appropriate and with consent, to provide support and enhance their understandings. However, prior to any yarning taking place, extensive engagement was undertaken by the field researchers to make prospective participants aware that the project was taking place. This allowed for participants to become aware of the project prior to any solicitation to participate and for field researchers to build relationships through those interactions. The project also benefitted from the prior experience of the field researchers in assertive outreach positions in Greater Darwin, and their ongoing participation in those roles alongside part-time commitments to the research project.

Given the dual commitments to the research project and outreach, field researchers were sometimes drawn away from research activities to provide direct assistance to prospective research participants, such as transporting individuals to medical or other appointments, providing referrals or facilitating engagement with other homelessness services, and so on. This was aligned with a 'no research without action' approach and recognition that service delivery and immediate needs take priority over data collection (Holmes and McRae-Williams 2008, 13). It was important that there was flexibility in the data collection process to allow for this, for the wellbeing of people sleeping rough, for the ongoing participation of the field researchers, and for ethical research engagement more generally. That said, it is worth highlighting that such an approach requires a flexible timeline and adequate budget.

The yarning process aimed to foster respectful, trustful, and reciprocal research relationships, guided by the positionalities of the field researchers; for example, making connections through family, kinship, and knowledge of communities. Insights from yarning and listening were captured by researchers through written notes, made either during or immediately after talking with rough sleepers, and audio-recordings (with consent and where appropriate, though requests from field researchers to audio-record yarning sessions were rare). While yarning was story-based and unstructured, a yarning guide provided a proforma for fieldnotes capturing key points related to the project aims and research questions. The yarning guide was developed with the field researchers, as the researchers for whom it was most directly relevant, and an amendment was sought from the HREC in January 2026 to revise the yarning guide to incorporate additional questions that emerged as relevant. Yarning was undertaken with individuals and small groups, with consideration of language group, age, and gender dynamics amongst participants and researchers.

Overall, 59 people participated in formalised yarning sessions as part of the project. Some of these people participated in more than one session, for example an initial yarn about their life and housing situation was followed up with a session focused on service engagement. A larger cohort of people sleeping rough was engaged in the project through awareness and

socialisation efforts led by the field researchers. Regular planning sessions and debriefs were undertaken between the field researchers and the Menzies researchers. In addition to yarning with people sleeping rough, Menzies researchers undertook 31 interviews with 39 people from 19 different organisations focused on service provision in the homelessness sector. The purpose of these interviews was to provide a more detailed understanding of the services identified by people who were sleeping rough in their accounts of service engagement. Interviewees included public servants, peak body staff, and staff from specialist homelessness services providers, including CEOs, program managers, social workers, and outreach workers.

The perceptions and experiences of the field researchers form part of the data for this project, so a shared reflective practice was central to both data collection, interpretation and synthesis. A reflecting guide provided a proforma for ongoing, reflective practice. Reflection topics included challenges and opportunities for improvement in data collection processes, identification of emerging themes, planning for future engagement, and areas for further training. Ongoing reflection enabled iterative training and development in research practices, including refining consent processes, asking open questions, avoiding leading questions, and finding appropriate ways to talk about service engagement.

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with stakeholders and service providers. With consent, these interviews were audio-recorded and/or notes were taken. Interview guides provided key topics, and specific questions were tailored to people's roles and organisations. We asked people about how long they had worked in the sector and in what capacity, and their views on the drivers and experiences of rough sleeping as a starting point. Interview topics then focused on the service sector – availability and accessibility of services, strengths, gaps – changes over time, and visions for the future. These interviews also provided an opportunity ask questions related to points raised during yarning and to improve our understanding of specialist homelessness services.

5.4.2 Sites

Data was collected at a range of sites across Darwin, Palmerston, and the surrounding areas, including but not limited to:

- Ozanam House in Coconut Grove
- Arts in the Grass – Mindil Beach
- Darwin Esplanade
- Civic and State Square
- Park at the Fannie Bay Shops
- Palmerston Library
- Palmerston Bus Depot
- Bunnings Palmerston
- Gateway at Palmerston
- Stuart Highway in Palmerston near the Ampol Service Station
- Bush camp on the corner of Yarrawonga Rd and Stuart Highway

- YiSSA outreach office

5.4.3 Analysis

Recordings from yarning, reflections, and interviews were transcribed, checked for accuracy and edited by the Menzies researchers. Iterative data analysis, interpretation, and reflection were collaboratively conducted between field researchers and Menzies researchers. Transcripts and field notes from yarning and reflection proformas were inductively coded by Menzies researchers to identify emerging themes (Srivastava and Hopwood 2009). Coding was done manually and codes and themes were cross checked by Menzies researchers. Emerging themes were presented back to field researchers for further reflection and validation.

5.5 Conclusion

Drawing on established literature and best practices for culturally safe research in the homelessness and health sectors, the methodology for this project focused on working in the most appropriate and respectful ways. Like past research into long grassing commissioned by Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation (Holmes and McRae-Williams 2008), this project relied on the expertise and relationships of patrol and HEAL officers. Data collection tools and approaches were iteratively refined throughout the process to reflect the practicalities and challenges of engaging with the rough sleeping cohort. Extensive awareness about the project and repeated interactions with participants helped to develop a rich and nuanced data set. The methodology was underpinned by working in partnership with ACCOs and building field researcher capacity in qualitative approaches.

6. Rough Sleeping in Greater Darwin

Key Points

- People who are sleeping rough in Darwin and Palmerston have varied backgrounds, skills, talents, and experiences that cannot, and should not, be reduced to their housing status or to generalisations.
- This research centres the voices and lived experiences of people who are sleeping rough, and the reflections of frontline workers in the specialist homelessness sector.
- The fundamental driver for rough sleeping in the greater Darwin area is lack of housing availability. This encompasses lengthy waitlists for social housing, challenges accessing housing in remote communities leading to urban migration, overcrowding in town and in community, and lack of capacity and difficulties accessing short-term and/or emergency accommodation.
- Trauma, grief, and violence are drivers of rough sleeping and also intertwined with experiences of rough sleeping and alcohol and drug use.
- Prison release and remand were common intersections when people ended up rough sleeping, and some family members were rough sleeping in town to see relatives in prison or youth detention.
- Some people indicated that rough sleeping was a 'lifestyle choice' as they liked freedom and being outside, but people simultaneously expressed a desire for safe housing.
- Many people came into Darwin for medical reasons, either for themselves or family members, and ended up sleeping rough. Further, rough sleeping exacerbated health conditions, particularly during the wet season.
- Factors enabling service engagement included relationships between frontline workers and people sleeping rough, availability of coordinated outreach services and accessibility/location of services.
- Barriers to accessing services included difficulties navigating complex systems, including understanding what services were available, accommodation options and pathways, follow up processes, limited case management and lack of coordination between and across specialist homelessness services and health services.
- Poverty is both a driver of rough sleeping and a barrier for people to access services. Feelings of shame about asking for help and despair around the lack of help available stopped people from engaging with services.
- The experiences and movements of people sleeping rough are shaped by the seasons – the wet season and natural disasters pose significant risk for people who are sleeping rough.

6.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a summary and synthesis of our engagement with people who are sleeping rough in Darwin and Palmerston to describe the key drivers for rough sleeping and barriers and enablers to engagement with services. We draw on yarns that First Nations field researchers had with people who are rough sleeping and researcher reflections and accounts, as well as observations and field notes. Twenty years ago, Parker and Fopp (2004) noted that ‘much of the Australian literature regarding homelessness to date omits the perspective of people who are homeless ... particularly in the academic literature, qualitative analysis remains relatively undeveloped’ (145). Subsequent research into homelessness has responded to this critique and this project centres the voices of people sleeping rough.

As expressed by a field researcher, ‘homeless mob are forgotten people. The world is moving forward, and they’re being left behind.’ In this chapter, we foreground the stories shared by people who are sleeping rough, as well as front line workers. To ensure anonymity, some details have been obscured or changed, but we have ensured that this does not alter the meaning of individual accounts. We present a series of case studies to provide some specific examples of how lived experiences of rough sleeping coalesce in ways that reflect and complicate the broader themes identified. These case studies are necessarily temporally and geographically specific and limited in their ability to capture the complexities of peoples’ lives. However, they are a window into the stories we heard in this research and the broader experienced of the individuals who narrated them.

Wilson’s* Story

Wilson is from the Big Rivers region. He grew up on Country and has memories of swimming in billabongs and collecting bush tucker – mussels, long neck turtle and water file snake – with his siblings. He speaks a lot of languages and knows a lot of people. Wilson has been sleeping rough in Palmerston for over ten years. He was released from prison and stayed in town to avoid violence and trouble in community. During the dry season, Wilson was moved from his bush camp by the Crown Land Estate, and since then, he has been ‘moving here, moving there.’

Wilson is unwell. He needs specialist medical care but recently missed an important appointment. He did not know about the appointment and had no way of getting there. The Larrakia Nation Healthy Engagement and Assistance in the Long Grass (HEAL) team help Wilson to see a general practitioner (GP). The GP provides another specialist referral. Wilson is on JobSeeker payments, but he cannot fulfil the mutual obligations to apply for jobs because of his health and being homeless. HEAL staff act as advocates for him to get a medical certificate relieving him of these Services Australia obligations for three months.

It has been raining for the last four weeks, and Wilson has decided he ‘wants to get into housing’. With the support of a Larrakia Nation patrol officer, he completes the Central Intake Service questionnaire (the Australian Housing Vulnerability Triage Tool, AHVTT), providing information about who he is and what he needs. At the end of this process, there is no male accommodation available. He is put on a waitlist. The HEAL team reflects, ‘The process, the system, it’s so hard. It’s a hard system.’

Wilson's hope for the future is to be 'living on the earth.' He suggests there should be a place where 'Aboriginal's can stay, gas stove, showers, big shelter.'

6.2 Who is Sleeping Rough

As part of this project, we engaged with people from a diverse range of backgrounds, ages, and communities. These participants have rich lives, talents, and interests – some are artists, musicians, and have worked in health, childcare, construction, for the police, on cattle stations, and as rangers caring for Country. They have knowledge of language, culture, and Lore. People sleeping rough continually emphasised how they look after each other, 'caring and sharing' (RS08). 'We walk around together, us country men, look after each other. We share food, money, clothes, grog.' (RS44). When describing the profile of rough sleepers and the drivers for this, it is important to remember that these are people, not numbers. We provide some quantitative qualifiers in this chapter, where appropriate, but mostly draw themes from the stories and perspectives of people who are sleeping rough.

An NT Shelter paper (2024b) states that 'Data provided by outreach services indicates Wadeye, Oenpelli/Gunbalanya, Maningrida, Groote Eylandt, Katherine Region, and Lajamanu are the main communities from which Darwin and Palmerston rough sleepers originate.' While people from these communities were represented in the data collection for this project, there was no strong pattern in terms of community of origin. Overall, there were over 30 communities of origin identified, including people from interstate (Queensland and Western Australia). This is consistent with the accounts of providers of accommodation and rehabilitation services who identified interstate clients. Alice Springs, Groote Eylandt, Beswick, and Maningrida were the most common places that people said they came from. Participants made distinctions between where they were born, where they grew up, and where they went to school. We spoke to slightly more women (~57 per cent) than men (~43 per cent), potentially due to the gender make-up of the field research team. The length of time that people had been sleeping rough in the Greater Darwin region ranged from one month to over 30 years.

6.3 Drivers for Rough Sleeping

6.3.1 Housing Availability and Accessibility

Overwhelmingly, housing availability and accessibility were cited as key reasons why people were sleeping rough (see Chapter 2). Most people we spoke with were on the public housing waitlist or in the process of applying. One person who had been waiting since 2014 to get a unit in town said, 'housing wait list too long' (RS05). Another person applied for a unit three years ago but was told they would have to wait another five to six years (RS50). Multiple

people said they had been waiting for over five years to get a house. While lack of housing was acute in Darwin and Palmerston, people also mentioned the challenge of accessing housing in remote communities, as a contributing factor to crowding and rough sleeping.

Overcrowding in town was a significant issue influencing rough sleeping. As one person explained, 'Family come in . . . overcrowding, problem with fighting and drinking, then I sleep anywhere' (RS30). Likewise, overcrowding in community was identified as a driver for rough sleeping; one man reported that houses in Wadeye had 10-20 people living there (RS56). Some people shared stories of when they did have a house in the past, and how their tenancy was jeopardised by conflict with other people in public housing, anti-social behaviour, humbug, and visitors. One person described, 'I had a house in Palmerston. I was away for funeral in Alice Springs. [Upon returning] I saw my unit had been used by people who use needles. I was afraid and chose to live in long grass' (RS11).

In addition to the limited availability of public housing, people also talked about difficulties accessing short term accommodation. Throughout data collection for this project, most services in Darwin and Palmerston were at capacity and had waitlists. Some people explained they would prefer to sleep rough than use 'pay to stay' services like YiSSA, Christian Outreach at Crerar Rd, and Aboriginal Hostels. Further, if people had debts with service providers, this typically precluded them accessing those services. One woman who was on the waitlist for YiSSA short term accommodation expressed worries about her safety and other people staying there, including people from different Nations (RS06). Another person said simply, 'Yeah I want my own place. They've got accommodation, but it's always full.' (RS41).

Sharon and Mike's* Story

Sharon and her partner Mike are from Arnhem Land. They described that 15 years ago, there was a major housing construction project in their community, 'we thought we could get a house, but we couldn't.' Because of overcrowding and not having their own house, they moved to Darwin in 2010 and got on the public housing wait list. In 2013, they missed out on a house because the housing department 'made no contact with me or Red Shield [where they were staying].' The couple reapplied in 2014 and have been waiting ever since.

Sharon recounted that she had an interview with Yilli Rreung in relation to the availability of community housing in 2014: 'they told us anytime they will contact us, but they haven't.' The couple don't have a mobile phone. Sharon and Mike have a debt with YiSSA, which means they can't get short term accommodation there either. They were evicted from an Aboriginal Hostel for having two file snakes in the room, which were found by the cleaner. They didn't know you weren't allowed to have bush tucker in the rooms.

Mike is unwell, Sharon pushes him on a mobility walker to get around, 'we look after each other if we sick.' They go to the Salvation Army's House 49 for breakfast, sometimes family drop them food. They don't like staying with family in Darwin because it's 'too much drama' – fighting and drinking. Sharon and Mike just want a house.

6.3.2 Trauma

Trauma was a strong theme that emerged when talking with people who were sleeping rough, as well as with those who worked in the sector. First Nations field researchers were often able to sensitively ask about events that may have triggered people to become homeless. In sharing parts of their life stories, people spoke of losing grandparents, parents, partners, children, siblings and cousins as traumatic events contributing to sleeping rough. One participant shared that her father passed away in an accident and the family did not want to stay in community after this 'in our ways' (RS22), respecting cultural norms around not staying in places where loved ones have passed. Similarly, a cultural man with respect for Lore had to leave Alice Springs when his wife passed away and cannot stay with family as he 'can't fit in with them and their ways [i.e. not respecting culture]' (RS08). Other participants mentioned that they cannot go back to community because it is too sad.

Trauma was a driver of rough sleeping but also a lived experience of sleeping rough. People who we spoke with often wore the hallmarks of violence – cuts, lacerations, bruising. One morning at Ozanam House, a client observed, 'It's very angry here this morning. I don't feel safe here'. Another morning, two women were fighting, one screaming, 'You only care about ICE, you're an ICE addict' before being physically escorted out by security. People often described having their belongings and money stolen: 'Had all my stuff stolen' (RS40), 'People steal out stuff when we sleep' (RS26), and 'We had mobile phone. We put it on the charger at the library. Somebody pinched it.' (RS41). Losing phones, documents, and belongings made it harder for people to keep in touch with service providers, perpetuating the cycle of rough sleeping.

Trauma was also linked with alcohol use, which influenced if and how people engaged with services. A participant said 'I haven't been there [the housing department], because I've been drinking a lot with a broken heart. Suffering a lot of stress' (RS20). Conversely, another person stated, 'I'll stop drinking when I get in there [housing]' (RS53).

Trauma has a cyclical and far-reaching influence on rough sleeping, including in terms of impacts on frontline workers. The trauma and vicarious trauma experienced by frontline staff contributes to burnout, absenteeism and staff turnover, which have consequences for service delivery and continuity of care for people who are rough sleeping.

6.3.3 Violence

Related to trauma, violence was another reason why people are sleeping rough in Darwin and Palmerston. Multiple people raised fighting, jealousy, and family disagreements in community as reasons why they were in town and sleeping rough. As one person said, 'Came to Darwin to escape violence . . . lot of house[s] there [in community have] been damaged from violence' (RS56). Some indicated that they chose not to stay with family in town because of crowding, fighting, and humbug.

Domestic violence was a key driver of rough sleeping, both for survivors and perpetrators, and linked to experiences of rough sleeping. Survivors of domestic violence had complex reasons for sleeping rough, including trauma, alcohol use, and safety concerns. Domestic violence extended beyond intimate partner violence and one participant described leaving a house where there was violence between another couple because they did not feel safe there with their child, 'I feel like on edge all the time' (RS54).

The experience of sleeping rough was also marked with violence. One survivor whose perpetrator was in prison for domestic violence described sleeping rough in public spaces around Darwin city as 'scary', 'frightening', 'I don't want to close my eyes' (RS06). Others, especially women, identified their vulnerability while camping - '[It's] scary. Someone can come do something to me' (RS2). Men also recounted experiences of violence while being homeless. Some participants perceived that Palmerston was more violent than Darwin city (RS51, RS23). Participants also described being moved on by police, private security, and council workers, despite the reality that 'People need rest in the day' and that 'there is no more places to go' (RS18).

6.3.4 Prison

The intersections between prison and rough sleeping were strong themes from our engagement with people who were rough sleeping. After being released to a relative's house in Darwin, one woman made the choice to sleep rough because of family fighting. She 'would have liked to stay somewhere after release from prison' (RS44). Similarly, men shared stories of rough sleeping in Darwin for two to four weeks after being released from prison (RS40, RS47). Participants described that their release from prison, in particular from remand, would simply entail the Department of Corrections dropping them at a Palmerston bus stop. Perpetrators of domestic violence described being released from prison and then rough sleeping in Darwin to avoid getting into trouble at home.

During fieldwork, we observed people who had just been released from prison walking to the nearest bus stop on the Stuart Highway carrying a garbage bag with their belongings. We also heard stories of people leaving prison and going to the proximate Sobering Up Shelter because they had nowhere to sleep for the night. Field researchers described the cycle of people being homeless, committing crime, going to prison and being released into homelessness. Horton (2024) describes the reliability of prison as accommodation, stating, 'for many Aboriginal people in the NT, the only form of secure accommodation is in a prison.' Further, three participants were sleeping rough in Darwin so they could visit their children in youth detention or prison.

Troy's* Story

Troy is in his fifties and worked as a stockman across the NT and Queensland. He had to stop working about 10 years ago because of his health; he was in the Intensive Care Unit at Royal Darwin Hospital for a month. When he was discharged from hospital, he stayed with his cousin in Darwin. He has been in and out of prison for domestic violence convictions, related to alcohol, and rough sleeping in between.

When he is sleeping rough, Troy prefers to stay near the office buildings in Palmerston, where there is some protection from rain and wind. It is getting harder to find undercover places to sleep due to the number of people sleeping rough and also the enclosure of places where people previously sought shelter, for example the Bunnings Palmerston carpark. He would like to have accommodation but has not made any enquiries or approached service providers. Troy has to travel to Katherine for a funeral soon and out to community for a royalties meeting. He prioritises these obligations and freedom to move around over securing housing.

Sometimes Troy goes to the Sobering Up Shelter at Berrimah, and he attends the Community Church for a hot meal. He likes to have a drink 'only on pay days'. When he gets paid, he does a grocery shop and leaves his food with family for safe keeping. Sometimes he will stay with family, but when they keep asking for money he returns to rough sleeping.



Figure 18. Vacant property provides temporary shelter for rough sleepers

6.3.5 'Lifestyle Choice'

The term 'lifestyle choice' was used by participants as a reason why they were rough sleeping. Some people described wanting the freedom to move around, to be with family, and to be outside, also identifying that there was more to do in Darwin than in remote communities - 'Too boring back home' (RS3). One person stated that they, 'don't like to stay accommodation' and were happy living near the sea doing what they want to do (RS04). Another said, 'I don't like aircon. I like to [be] out in the fresh air. Sit down and watch the tide. It's a good life. I tell you, I love it. We don't want to live under a roof. We like to live where we want to live' (RS07). Notably, this comment came before the wet season started and later in the conversation the participant described a desire to get a house in town, 'I don't know how

long to go on the waitlist, but most people are scraped off. It might be next year - then I'll move there. I'll be set' (RS07). The dichotomy of wanting freedom to live on one's own terms but also wanting safe housing is a contradiction inherent to the 'lifestyle choice' framing. A First Nations field researcher reflected, 'They never really had a choice.'

Explicitly and implicitly 'lifestyle choice' was related to alcohol consumption. People talked about coming into town to access alcohol and sleeping rough to be able to afford it - 'No alcohol allowed on community back home' (RS1). Rough sleeping was also a way to avoid responsibility when drinking. While drinking may be a choice, people also noted it was hard to get into detox and rehabilitation programs. In addition to the over-subscription of such programs relative to need, one reason for this is the exclusion of participants with criminal records from certain programs, on the grounds of the safety of other participants. One man who wanted to get into the detox program said, 'I just want my future, my life. I just try to cut that thing away [alcohol]. I don't want to go back to the same place. I got to do something a new way. Hunting, fishing' (RS52). This man explained that had not been able to get a bed in the detox program. He went to the Sobering Up Shelter on a weekend but was told the detox program would only take new patients during the week, 'Sometimes they told me at spin dry, not today, not weekend. Monday [go to detox to try and get a bed]' (RS52). Similarly, a woman who went through the CAAPS rehabilitation program for 12 weeks described that she had no secure accommodation at its conclusion. While accommodation options like YiSSA were discussed, this woman did not want to pursue short-term options because she wanted her own place and had been 'waiting long time for housing' (RS51).

6.3.6 Health

Some people described that they needed to be in Darwin for medical reasons and were sleeping rough because of this. Others were sleeping rough due to overcrowding and the associated health implications, such as scabies and the spread of infections. One participant stated, 'I choose to be long grass because no-one wants us around or take on our health problem. We don't want to put burden on anyone anyway' (RS26). Many people we spoke with had health conditions that were exacerbated by rough sleeping or were not being addressed because they did not have stable housing. As one man expressed:

I been in rough place. Couldn't breathe you know [lung condition]. No water [dehydrated]. Cold weather. [ALO said] stay out of rough place [rough sleeping]. They just talked about it [didn't provide any referral for housing]. Just talk. Just come bitch at me. (RS52)

The health impacts of sleeping rough were described in relation to the seasons, with particular concerns during the wet season. People mentioned 'big mob mosquitoes' (RS28), which also pose health risks. Health conditions and disabilities also limited some of the services that could be accessed, for example people with mobility issues reported not being able to travel to the food bank or to walk up steps to offices. Further, if a service does not have clinical staff on-site, then people with health conditions may be turned away.

The obligation to care for relatives was also a contributing factor to rough sleeping. One participant describes coming to Darwin to look after their partner who was on dialysis (RS18), and another described moving to support their daughter who was pregnant (RS49). A woman came into Darwin to support her partner accessing medical care and has been stuck in town since: 'Waiting for the operation because he [my partner] was stubborn with the doctors, [I] had to make him talk to the doctors. . . . I want to get out of Darwin. I don't really like it here' (RS48). A man from community who has been sleeping rough in Darwin for twenty years on and off talked about moving around due to family members being sick and deaths (RS28).

Stories from frontline workers

A Larrakia Nation patrol team start their shift on a Friday afternoon. They get a call out to help a woman who needs assistance. The woman is intoxicated so they take her to the Sobering Up Shelter. Due to an underlying medical condition, and the absence of health staff at the facility, the woman cannot be admitted to the Sobering Up Shelter. Police say she is too drunk to go into the Watch House.

The patrol team take her to Royal Darwin Hospital, the line for the Emergency Department is long. The patrol officer assists the woman into a wheelchair and does a handover with the reception staff. The patrol officer returns to their shift.

The next morning, the same patrol team get dispatched to check on a woman sleeping out the front of a school. They approach and try to wake her. She has passed away. It was the same lady that had been supported the previous afternoon. She had left the hospital without receiving medical care.

The patrol officer questions, 'Where are vulnerable people with health conditions going? There is no safe place for them to go. If they die, they die. They should be first in line for care.'

6.4 Services Accessed

Participants in this study identified over 30 services that they access while sleeping rough. Overwhelmingly, Centrelink (Services Australia), Ozanam House (St Vincent de Paul), and the Sobering up Shelter (Mission Australia) were named as key services. Most people rough sleeping said they accessed Danila Dilba Health Services for health care, and many also mentioned going to Royal Darwin Hospital. Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation was identified in relation to multiple services, including day and night patrol, HEAL, and the Return to Country program. Red Shield and House 49 (Salvation Army) were also identified. Some people mentioned CAAPS and YiSSA. Other faith-based organisations were named, including Parap Church, Anglicare, Community Church, Christian Outreach, and Catholic Care. Job service providers included Ironbark Employment and APM. Darwin Community Legal Service, Legal Aid, and NAAJA were also mentioned, in relation to general legal services, tenancy support, and Throughcare support. While most people talked about being on the public housing wait list, only three participants identified 'Territory Housing' as a

service they access. Other services mentioned once or twice included: Mission Australia, the Yilli food van, banks, Sunset Soup Kitchen, Stolen Generation, Purple House, Remote Laundry, Orange Sky, YWCA/Women's Shelter, Department of Children and Families, and Aboriginal Hostels. This is not indicative of the relative importance of those services but simply a summary of the services identified by participants in the project.

6.5 Enablers and Barriers to Service Engagement

The drivers for rough sleeping and barriers to accessing services intersect and overlap in compounding ways. The reasons people may be sleeping rough are complex and multifaceted, underpinned by a critical lack of affordable and accessible housing and accommodation in Darwin and Palmerston. These factors also influence the ways people engage with services and the challenges they face in doing so. Initially, asking people about the services they accessed and their experiences elicited general responses like 'it's good'. Through repeated engagement with participants and explanation of the project, field researchers began to get more detailed accounts of service engagement. As the field researchers held dual roles with Larrakia Nation and Yilli Rreung, people may also have been hesitant to raise issues. However, the field researchers were able to build trust and enable people to feel comfortable to share their experiences.

6.5.1 Enablers

During fieldwork for this project, Menzies researchers had the opportunity to learn from frontline workers and from specialist homelessness services. We saw the challenges they face, including dealing with trauma and systemic factors preventing individual workers and service providers from addressing clients' unmet needs (see also Batterham et al. 2026). Relationships between frontline workers and the accessibility of services were key enablers to people engaging with services. Outreach services at Ozanam House by Centrelink, Darwin Community Legal Service, and Danila Dilba Health Services were seen to be meeting people where they are at and making services accessible. One man said, 'more easy to go there [Centrelink at Ozanam House]' and 'need more people [outreach services] coming out, have a yarn, talking' (RS52). The Sobering Up Shelter was also frequently described as a good place where people go to shower, get clean clothes, a meal and a good sleep (RS14). One lady said, 'I love it' and they were 'nice people' at the Sobering Up Shelter (RS32). Good experiences with services can support and foster engagement across homelessness, housing, and health systems.

6.5.2 Difficulties Navigating Services

When talking with people sleeping rough about their engagement with services, the strongest theme that came through was around difficulties navigating systems. This included

challenges understanding what services were available, how to find information about them, and how to physically access them. This was highlighted in terms of accommodation and housing options and pathways; a person sleeping rough said, 'government should make it easier and with less obstacles for people to access housing' (RS19). Some people indicated there were limited follow up processes and case management for people who would like to access services but do not know how. This was also linked to a lack of information and contact details for different services. As expressed, 'I got this person telling me this, and another person telling me that. I don't know who to believe' (RS45).

The need for outreach services across Darwin and Palmerston was highlighted. One person stated they, 'never got to see them [services providers], I'm just waiting for the services. I want more help' (RS35). Another emphasised that service providers should 'come to us' to share what services are available (RS28). While some service providers have outreach teams, these may not always be operational due to workforce and resource challenges. This has been exacerbated by the otherwise welcome increase in specialist homelessness services funding to the NT under the NASHH from 2024-25 onwards. This increased funding underpinned the establishment of new assertive outreach and tenancy sustainment programs without related investment into workforce development. Relatedly, the expansion in the number of funded outreach teams means that people who are sleeping rough may be engaged by more outreach workers without any coordination across services, resulting in the duplication of engagement and inconsistency in service levels. This problem is exacerbated further where there has been no concomitant increase in accommodation services for people sleeping rough to be referred into. Rather than signalling the shortcomings of any individual outreach worker, this is a systemic issue that requires collective reflection on the purpose of these programs and investment into the services to which people are referred.

Navigating services was particularly difficult at the health and homelessness intersection. While many people attended Danila Dilba Health Services for medical care, the gaps between primary and tertiary care were clear. People missed specialist appointments because they did not receive the letters, had no way of being contacted or had to make their own way to appointments. People wanted more support from health teams with housing referrals, Disability Support Pension claims and NDIS applications.

Beth's* Story

Beth is from Central Australia and grew up playing basketball and netball. She was good and won some trophies. She speaks Arrernte and English. She has been in Darwin for around eight years and left Alice Springs because of fighting in town camps. Initially she stayed with family here, but her aunty was tragically killed, and she couldn't stay at that house anymore. It was too traumatic.

For the past five years Beth has been sleeping rough. She usually stays around the city area with other people from Central Australia. She talks about 'blue shirt mob' [private security providers] and how they 'tell us to move along in the city.' Sometimes she goes to the 'spin dry' [Sobering Up Shelter].

She is seeking assistance from Darwin Community Legal Service to apply for housing. Beth has never had a birth certificate. She has no rental references and has never been on a lease. These are barriers to her applying for accommodation and getting on the public housing waitlist. Beth states, 'I just want housing.'

6.5.3 Requirements and Resources

Other barriers to accessing services related to requirements and resources, and administrative processes. Not having a phone was a key challenge for people to stay in touch with service providers. Similarly, not having photo identification or a birth certificate prevented people from completing applications for housing and other services. The requirement for a tenancy reference to secure a place on the public housing waitlist is a significant barrier, particularly for people who have never been on a lease. One participant questioned that while his New Start payment is conditional on applying for work, 'where do I keep my stuff to work? I am long grassing' (RS29).

Poverty was both a driver of rough sleeping and a barrier for people to access services. People who had debts at short-stay accommodation may be excluded from accessing accommodation. The requirement to have funds available for 'pay to stay' accommodation services was also a barrier. Some people did not want to go into short term housing because they preferred to save their money or use it for other things (RS32). Others thought some services were too expensive (RS48). Similarly, if people did not have money for Return to Country services or travel, they may get stuck in Darwin. Some people described wanting to go home to community but being unable to because they had a debt with Larrakia Nation from previous travel and could not afford the flights.

6.5.4 Despair and Shame

Linked to challenges navigating systems, people expressed a sense of despair about trying to seek help. People sleeping rough voiced that they had repeatedly tried to access housing and other services but 'they are still waiting' and feel like 'no help comes' (RS09). 'Everybody say "yes" [they will help] and it's [accommodation] full. Say they will help, but no help, pretend to help' (RS18). Other participants described that they have previously sought assistance but felt ignored, 'that's why we don't ask for help' (RS49). People conveyed a sense that you cannot go to places like Ozanam House and House 49 all the time to ask for food vouchers or assistance (RS10). The fundamental lack of accommodation availability underscores this barrier to service engagement.

In addition to despair, some rough sleepers expressed that shame may stop people from accessing services. This shame may be associated with being homeless, drinking alcohol, or the shame of asking for help or feeling judged or looked down upon. For example, one young woman who had been sleeping rough in Darwin for a few months said, 'Sometimes I feel shame or people look at me wrong way, like I'm not good enough for them' (RS10).

Others mentioned not wanting to go to service providers when they are under the influence of alcohol.

6.5.5 Location and Capacity of Services

The location and capacity of different services were described as barriers to rough sleepers using them. The lack of services in Palmerston, namely a homeless day centre, Sobering Up Shelter and laundry services, was highlighted by participants. Visitors to Ozanam House in Coconut Grove often described that they had travelled there from Palmerston for breakfast, requiring two bus trips into and out of the city. Some people preferred to stay in Darwin city due to the proximity to services and concerns about violence in Palmerston. There was a perception that YiSSA in Berrimah was 'too far' away and hard to get to (RS51). A lot of people highlighted the need for transport to access services.

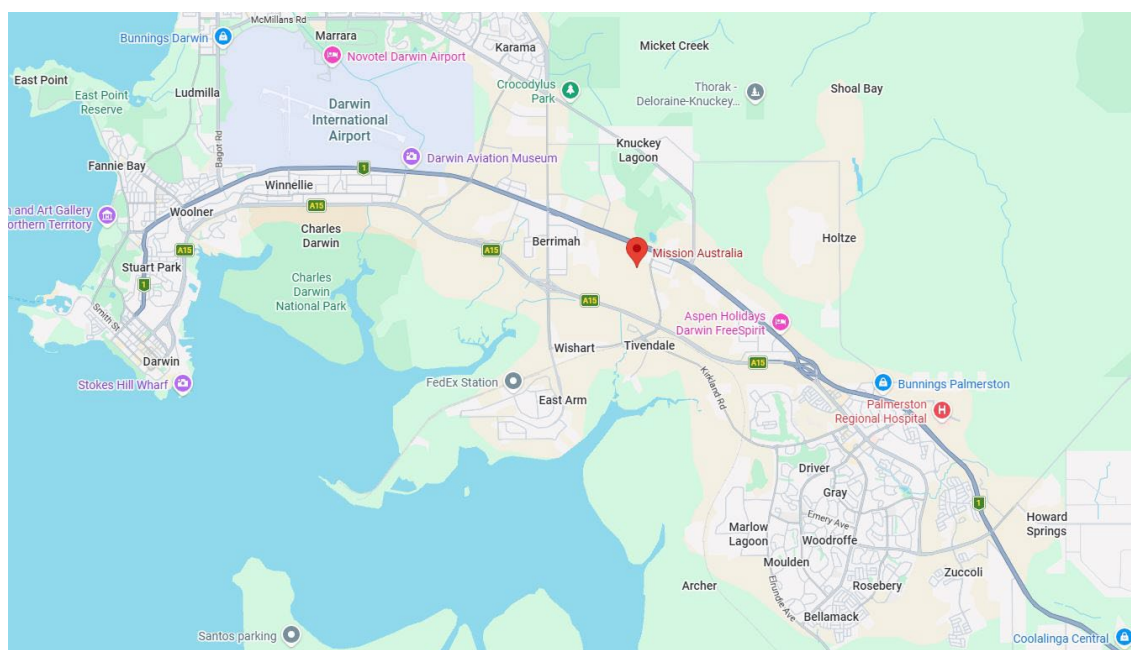


Figure 19. The Sobering Up Shelter is located between Darwin and Palmerston

While many people accessed the Sobering Up Shelter, they also commented that you need 'to get there by two, three or it is full' (RS35). In such instances, prospective clients found themselves without accommodation and out at Berrimah, with few alternative options nearby (Figure 19). If the Sobering Up Shelter has no beds available another person said they will 'sleep anywhere, somewhere dry.' (RS56). Participants emphasised the need for more beds and workers at the Sobering Up Shelter (RS45).

Stories from frontline workers

In February 2026, we were advised that Palmerston City Council workers disposed of the belongings of people who were sleeping rough near the library. One of the people was an

elderly lady with a heart condition. She had her medication in the bags that were thrown out. In the five days following, frontline workers were looking for this client to check on her. They finally found her near the shops, but she did not have her walker or blankets. She was slumped over, visibly unwell. The team helped her into the car and took her to a Danila Dilba Health Services clinic.

At the clinic, a frontline worker explained what happened with the client and provided her name and date of birth. The receptionist was able to get her an appointment. The frontline staff left their mobile number as a contact point. Later in the day, they received a call that the client was transferred to hospital.

The next day, the frontline workers saw the client again. She didn't want to stay in hospital. She was dressed in the same clothes. They helped her to get her medications from a pharmacy. After calling around short-stay accommodation services, there was no accommodation available for her to have a place to sleep for the night. Despite the efforts of the frontline workers and health staff, the lady was still discharged into homelessness. Even with her pre-existing medical conditions, combined with the health impacts of rough sleeping, she was not able to get accommodation.



Figure 20. Storing belongings while remaining mobile

6.5.6 Negative Experiences with Service Providers

When asked about engagement with services, rough sleepers shared stories about negative experiences they have had, sometimes generally and sometimes in relation to specific service providers or staff. Active targeting of rough sleepers and practices of 'moving people on' were common negative experiences. One person said police and council workers tell them, 'to get out, [but] there is no more places to go' (RS18). 'When we sit here [parkland area], police come along and check every bag for alcohol and tip it out' (RS31). Some people

recounted negative experiences of Darwin City Council confiscating items (RS07) and Palmerston Council taking 'everything, billycan, frypan, gas stove, food, even tent and throw it' (RS28). People who were sleeping rough reported that they were not given prior notice from councils that this would occur. Others said council officers were good and 'talk to us everyday, they just give us garbage bags' for belongings when moving people on (RS36). Many reported encounters with private security firms who were heavy handed, including towards women; 'Blue shirt mob, they push us around, throw us away, old people too. . . . We tell them that we live here for a long time' (RS39). These shared and cumulative experiences contribute to distrust and feelings of shame and despair described above.

Another example of this related to Larrakia Nation patrols. One person shared their perception that 'they just drive past. If they are night patrol, they should help drunk people. They just cruising around. The only time they help people is when police or security call them' (RS49). While this perception of the patrol service may not recognise the funded function of the patrols, nor the capacity limitation to attend to every request on the client's timetable, this participant linked their experience to why they do not ask for help more broadly.

Other experiences at key homelessness services, such as Ozanam House, also shape engagement. The high usage of Ozanam House means it is both a complex workplace and a confronting place for people to come and have a meal and access services. Based on observations, the reception and laundry services at Ozanam House were sometimes sites of friction, particularly when there were communication barriers or challenges between staff and clients. Many people emphasised the need for services like Ozanam House and wanted more homeless centres with longer hours and more staff.

6.6 Seasonal Changes

Data collection for this project was undertaken between October 2025 and June 2026, encompassing Dalirrgang (build up), Balnba (rainy season), Dalay (monsoon season), Mayilema and Damibila (dry seasons) in Darwin and Palmerston. This period included both wet and dry season data collection, but not Dinidjanggama (heavy dew time – June, July) or Gurrulwa guligi (big wind time – July, August, September) (Williams et al. 2012). There were notable differences in lived experiences and perspectives of rough sleeping across the seasons. During the dry, people reflected, 'We need to get prepared [for the wet]. There's heaps of us [sleeping rough]' (RS07).

The 2025-2026 monsoon was the fourth wettest on record and extended for a longer period than recent years. During the wet season, many people struggled with health problems from sleeping rough; existing and chronic conditions were exacerbated (RS09, RS36). People suffered from the flu and pneumonia and some were hospitalised for this (RS51). Rough sleepers were facing cold and wet nights outside, and some didn't have blankets. 'Blankets and personal property got wet from rain . . . lost it all' (RS29). Dry spots, like undercover

awnings near offices and vacant properties, were overcrowded (RS22). Mosquitoes were also a nuisance and a health risk (RS26).

Cyclone Fina made landfall near Darwin on 21 November 2025. Some people sleeping rough had limited awareness or information about the cyclone. Larrakia Nation patrols transported people sleeping rough to wet weather crisis accommodation at YiSSA and to the Sobering Up Shelter. However, people had to be evacuated from the Sobering Up Shelter as the temporary buildings were not cyclone coded. One man expressed, 'sobering shelter should act as a cyclone shelter . . . instead of moving people out. People got stuck and don't know where to stay' (RS19). This man and his partner caught public transport to Casuarina Square and stayed in the carpark where 'a man dropped off tucker, and the food was really good' (RS19). Other groups sought refuge in underground carparks in the city. Here they received cups of tea, but no food, and they reported there were no mattresses to sleep on (RS31).

Flooding across the Top End and Big Rivers Regions and evacuations of entire communities for extended periods, including Nauiyu and Palumpa, put pressure on services in Darwin and Palmerston, as well as Batchelor. The influx of people in town was noted by long-term rough sleepers who commented on how busy Ozanam House and the Sobering Up Shelter were during this period. The flooding also meant that people who were sleeping rough in Greater Darwin after being released from prison and remand were unable to return to their communities because roads were closed.

6.7 Suggestions from Rough Sleepers

People who are rough sleeping can see opportunities for change and improvement in their lives and the services they access. One participant said, 'I hope everything changes. We just don't want to see forty years we are living in the same trap. The way things are going, people coming here [to Ozanam House] for breakfast in forty years' (RS45). Another person expressed, 'Hope everything works, hope the government listen to us' and suggested community meetings with Aboriginal people to discuss strategies together (RS56).

People frequently returned to the need for more housing and accommodation options as a fundamental requirement to address rough sleeping. Some also proposed the idea of having large undercover structures where people can camp, 'I reckon Darwin needs a big homeless shelter. Everyone needs their peaceful and quiet place. That way I can hear the birds and not the drunkards' (RS45). Another person said, 'They should have more rehabs instead of prisons. For women as well' (RS35).

To help people navigate services, one suggestion was to put a free phone at Ozanam House with numbers for different agencies so people can contact service providers and follow up on their housing applications. In relation to some of the negative experiences with specific services, people suggested more Aboriginal workers should be employed in the homelessness sector. Having people from different communities, who can speak Indigenous

languages, may help clients to access services but also staff to understand cultural norms and communicate more appropriately.

Multiple people raised the boredom that comes with rough sleeping and the desire for recreational activities, including fishing, art, weaving, sewing and cultural activities. Centring the voices and lived experiences of rough sleepers is central to making recommendations around specialist homelessness services in Darwin and Palmerston.

7. Conclusion

This report is the outcome of sustained fieldwork with people sleeping rough in Greater Darwin. It has attempted to represent lived experience accounts of rough sleeping with an emphasis on the drivers of homelessness and service engagement. These accounts have been provided to frontline homelessness workers, and they are augmented by the experiences of those workers. In the report, lived experience accounts of rough sleeping are contextualised by engagement with related prior research and description of the specialist homelessness services sector in relation to the policies and funding arrangements that underpin it. Rough sleeping in Greater Darwin is not a new issue and nor is its examination by researchers. Contextualisation of lived experience accounts in prior research and the policy landscape is important for informing and situating the project's recommendations.

This report is structured by chapters and section headings to allow readers to access content most relevant to their purposes. An Executive Summary describes the report's approach to engagement, the context of homelessness in the NT, and the sector charged with responding to the housing and homelessness crisis. The Introduction builds on the Executive Summary to highlight the challenge of responding to the manufactured scarcity of accommodation for people on low incomes and outlines the project's research questions and aims. Chapter 2 provides a literature review focused on definitions of homelessness and rough sleeping and drivers for rough sleeping. This literature review examines the relevance of dominant conceptions of homelessness for understanding rough sleeping in Greater Darwin, and in particular the role of remote-urban mobility in the NT. This is followed by detailed analysis of public data on homelessness in the NT in Chapter 3. This chapter identifies the prevalence of severe overcrowding in the NT, and describes available data related to persons living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out - 'sleeping rough'. It highlights the complexity of collecting accurate data on the dynamic situation of severe housing insecurity and the likelihood that official data sources undercount the prevalence of rough sleeping in Greater Darwin. Chapter 4 describes the policy and funding landscape underpinning the specialist homelessness services sector responsible for supporting people who are sleeping rough. It highlights that a revised approach to calculating the distribution of funding under the *National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness* has resulted in significantly increased investment in NT homelessness services, with particular investment in tenancy sustainment services. We describe that while policy and funding arrangements necessarily relate to specific services, the accounts from people sleeping rough described a more expansive web of social services.

Chapter 5 summarises the project methodology, including the project governance arrangement, fieldwork approach, and methods for data collection and analysis. It emphasises the importance in this project of the involvement of First Nations frontline homelessness workers to engage with people sleeping rough, and the role of Menzies researchers to support those workers in the data collection. 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. Short case studies aim to convey the specific scenarios that individuals contend with while they are sleeping rough, characterised by forced mobility, the administrative violence of bureaucratic systems, conditional welfare, and chronic health challenges. Following this Conclusion, the report concludes with 28 recommendations drawn from the project. These are addressed to specific stakeholders and are organised by the categories: the housing and homelessness system; existing services, funding, and policy arrangements; additional service needs; workforce; specialist homelessness services organisations; and research and evaluation. Our intent is that these recommendations are concrete and actionable. They are offered with a view to address the structural factors that contribute to rough sleeping in Greater Darwin and improve the services to support people who are sleeping rough.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been developed from the basis of the project's engagement with people who are sleeping rough. Prioritising lived experience, the recommendations respond to people's accounts of what they need while they are sleeping rough and in order to access safe and stable accommodation, where this is desired. People's accounts were diverse and wide-ranging and could inform recommendations on a number of institutions and social service systems, such as income support, health care, and the governance of remote communities. For the most part, the recommendations in this report limit their focus to the concerns of the specialist homelessness services sector.

The recommendations are organised in relation to the broad categories: the housing and homelessness system; existing services, funding, and policy arrangements; additional service needs; workforce; specialist homelessness services; and research and evaluation. Recommendations are addressed to specific parties with the power and position to adopt them. The implementation of these recommendations should be undertaken in consultation with and with input from people who are sleeping rough. This should include but also extend beyond the newly established Lived Experience Advisory Group.

The Housing and Homelessness System

1. The social housing stock in Darwin and Palmerston must be drastically increased to reduce household crowding and the prevalence of rough sleeping. The Commonwealth Government should establish a Federation Funding Agreement for the construction of social housing in NT regional towns – including supported housing tailored to people who have experienced chronic rough sleeping – akin to the agreements that support remote community housing and homelands.
2. Poverty is a major driver of rough sleeping in Greater Darwin. The Commonwealth Government should raise all income support to at least \$82 per day and increase the Remote Area Allowance.
3. Reducing homelessness and supporting people sleeping rough requires a whole-of-NT Government response. The objective to reduce homelessness should be established as a key priority across NT Government departments, with strategies, policies, and programs required to account for their likely impact on homelessness.
4. The NT Government should fund a public education campaign regarding rough sleeping in Greater Darwin, to increase understanding of the drivers of rough sleeping.

Existing Services, Funding, and Policy Arrangements

5. The Commonwealth and NT Governments should continue to invest in diversionary services, such as day and night patrols, sobering up shelters, and detoxification and

rehabilitation programs, as alternatives to apprehension and arrest for alcohol-related offences.

6. The NT Government should fund the expansion of short-term accommodation options in Greater Darwin for low-income visitors from remote communities, homelands, and interstate.
7. The NT Government should fund the construction of a permanent Sobering Up Shelter facility. The existing facility is unable to accommodate people during serious weather events when its amenity is needed most.
8. Darwin and Palmerston City Councils should ensure that amenities such as public ablutions remain open, clean, and safe, especially in areas proximate to temporary camps.
9. Darwin and Palmerston City Councils should review their communications with people who are sleeping rough, in relation to the removal of belongings under the Darwin City by-laws and the Abandoned Personal Effects Policy, to ensure people understand the notice of intent and impounding requirements.
10. Outreach services and day centres should increase and improve their provision of basic bedding supplies, such as blankets and swags, as well as access to laundry and storage facilities, for people who are sleeping rough.
11. The review of the new Central Intake Service should examine how it can prioritise accommodation access over data collection, aspiring to the implementation of a Housing First approach to prospective clients. This should include review of the cultural appropriateness of the AHVTT in its standard form.

Additional Service Needs

12. The NT Government and City of Palmerston Council should work in partnership with Yilli Rreung Housing Aboriginal Corporation to fast-track the establishment of a day centre at Palmerston, drawing on similar models across the NT and interstate.
13. In the construction of a permanent sobering up shelter facility, the NT Government should ensure the re-establishment of an on-site detoxification unit and rehabilitation program, to provide a pathway for clients seeking to reduce their alcohol use.
14. The NT Government should provide additional funding for wet weather accommodation at YiSSA to address the need across the wet season.
15. The NT Government should provide greater investment in programs for individuals leaving prison, including supported accommodation, and case management facilitating access to education, employment, and counselling. Such support should be available to individuals held in prison on remand.

16. The NT Government, in consultation with the specialist homelessness services sector, should consider the establishment of an open-air facility in Greater Darwin where individuals can camp, while cooking their own food and consuming alcohol under supported supervision.
17. The Specialist Homelessness Services sector should investigate the establishment of a Youth Foyer in Darwin to address youth homelessness, including rough sleeping but also living in crowded and unsafe homes.
18. The Specialist Homelessness Services sector should establish additional leisure activities for people visiting Darwin who are sleeping rough, akin but in addition to Arts in the Grass.

Workforce

19. The specialist homelessness services reform group (SHSRG) should develop a homelessness workforce development plan, given the increased investment in NT homelessness services under the *National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness*.
20. Within the drafting of a homelessness workforce development plan, measures should be established to increase the proportion of Aboriginal people in tenancy sustainment and assertive outreach positions.
21. The SHSRG should procure or commission the development of training for frontline homelessness workers, to support the safety and wellbeing of workers and to improve the culturally appropriate provision of services.
22. The SHSRG should review options for increasing the roles played by Aboriginal community controlled organisations (ACCOs) in the SHS sector, including through priority procurement for service delivery contracts.

Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) Organisations

23. 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.
24. SHS organisations should review their existing supervision and support arrangements for frontline workers, to ensure the availability of appropriate mental health and wellbeing support.
25. Supported by the SHSRG, specialist homelessness services in Greater Darwin should collaborate to develop shared standards and approaches for assertive outreach and to coordinate their service delivery to reduce the duplication of service provision.

Research and Evaluation

26. The NT Government should undertake or commission detailed service mapping of specialist homelessness services in Greater Darwin to identify gaps in service type and capacity.
27. The NT Government should commission an independent evaluation of tenancy sustainment services.
28. The NT Government should commission research into accommodation and related social service supports provided to people existing prison.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Dockery and Colquhoun (2012). Table 2: Cultural, social and economic drivers of mobility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

Reason	Reference
Country and ceremony	
Visiting country	Smith 2004 p. 243; Long & Memmott 2007 p. 4
Looking after country and customary responsibilities	Young & Doohan 1989 p. 20; Smith 2004 p. 243
Visiting outstations	Peterson 2004 p. 230; Smith 2004
Succession to country	Veth 2003 p. 3
Returning home to community/settlement	Peterson 2004 p. 234
Access to country for native title, land rights and cultural heritage	Smith 2004 pp. 246-247
Avoidance of places/ moving around places/ places of non-visitation	Veth 2003 pp. 2-5; Long 2005
Planning and attending ceremony	Peterson 2004; Memmott & Moran 2001; Altman 1987; Veth 2003 p. 2; Smith 2004; Young & Doohan 1989 pp. 92-115
Kindship and social interaction	
Kinship networks and the maintenance of relatedness and autonomy; the movement (including dispersal) of kind; reuniting with family	Memmott & Moran 2001; Peterson 2004 pp. 224-230; Smith 2004 pp. 243, 250-252; Taylor & Bell 1999 p. 10; Young & Doohan 1989 pp. 108-120; Long & Memmott 2007 p. 3; Memmott et al. 2006 p. 93; Foster et al. 2005 p. 38; Taylor & Kinfu 2006 p. 65.
Marriage, responsibility to in-laws	Smith 2004 p. 243
Interdependence and independence from family and extended family households	Taylor & Bell 1996 pp. 400, 408
Maintenance of social networks	Young & Doohan 1989, pp. 108-120; Memmott & Moran 2001; Peterson 2004 pp. 224, 299; Smith 2004 p. 248; Taylor & Bell 1999 p. 16; Memmott et al. 2006, p.93
Birthdays and other celebrations	Long 2005; Maddigan & Finnilla 2004 pp. 1, 4
Funerals and Sorry Business	Peterson 2004; Smith 2004 p. 248; Memmott et al. 2006 p. 93; Foster et al. 2005 p. 38; Morphy 2007 p. 35
Tombstone opening	Torres Stire Council 2002; Howie-Willis 1994 pp. 1082-1083
Payback and square up, social responsibilities	Memmott & Moran 2001; Altman 1987; Smith 2004 p. 252
Social tensions, conflict, violence and shame	Memmott & Moran 2001; Peterson 2004 p. 224; Smith 2004 pp. 25-253

Exchange and carrying of goods and resources	National Native Title Tribunal 1999; Beckett 1994 p. 1092; Howie-Wills 1994 p. 963; Maddigan & Finnila 2004 p. 1; Smith 2004 p. 252
Attending meetings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations	Smith 2004 pp. 246-247; Young & Doohan 1989 pp.187-192
Travel for recreation, entertainment, sport, etc	Young & Doohan 1989 pp.192-197; Memmott 1979; Memmott & Moran 2001; Peterson 2004 pp. 231-233; Smith 2004 p. 248; Long 2005; Memmott et al. 2006; Long & Memmott 2007 p. 4; Foster et al. 2005 p.38
Shopping and business	Young & Doohan 1989 pp.177-185; Smith 2004 p. 252; Memmott et al. 2006; Long & Memmott 2007 p. 4; Foster et al. 2005 p. 38; Habibis et al. 2011
Employment, training, social security, income	
Employment participation and employment practices	Taylor & Bell 1996 pp. 400-404; Taylor & Bell 1999 pp. 13, 14, 33; Beckett 1994 p. 1092; Memmott & Moran 2001; Smith 2004 p. 252; Taylor & Kinfu 2006 p. 65
Employment that promotes mobility (with major infrastructure projects, seasonal work)	Taylor & Bell 1999 pp. 10, 14, 16
CDEP	Taylor & Bell 1996 p. 400; Taylor & Bell 1999 pp. 9, 13-14
Obtaining social security/Centrelink payments	Altman 1987; Memmott & Moran 2001; Smith 2004 p. 252; Taylor & Bell 1999 p. 35
Seeking reduced cost of living	Gray 2004 p. 209
Accommodation and settlement	
Seeking housing or temporary accommodation (single men, single women, young people and families)	Taylor & Bell 1999 pp.8, 36; Taylor & Bell 2004 p. 7; Gray 2004; Taylor & Kinfu 2006 p. 65
Leaving poor living conditions at home community (poor housing, services, noise)	Smith 2004 p. 250

Appendix 2

SCHEDULE A – National Outcomes Framework

Social Housing

*** Compulsory measures.** They must be included in states' reporting.

All social housing measures will be disaggregated by program type: public housing, SOMIH, community housing and Indigenous community housing.

Objective	Outcomes	Indicators	Measures	Possible Data Source
To support people who are experiencing, or at risk of, long-term homelessness or are otherwise unable to sustain housing in the private rental market to obtain and sustain social housing	People in need of social housing are able to obtain a tenancy	Stock of social housing dwellings	Number of social housing dwellings at 30 June* Change in the number of social housing dwellings from previous year*	RoGS Table 18A.3 Housing Assistance in Australia, AIHW, Table DWELLINGS.2
		Efficient use of social housing stock	Proportion of underutilised social housing households	Housing Assistance in Australia, AIHW, Table SUITABILITY.1 RoGS Table 18A.37
		Priority access to those in greatest need	Percentage of greatest need allocations as a proportion of all new allocations	RoGS Table 18A.16-18
	People in social housing live in quality homes appropriate to their needs	Match of dwelling to household size	Proportion of overcrowded households*	RoGS Table 18A.30-33 Housing Assistance in Australia, AIHW, Table SUITABILITY.1
		Dwelling condition	Number of upgrades to social housing dwellings (capital expenditure only) Proportion of households with at least four working facilities and not	Not currently publicly available RoGS Table 18A.41-44

			more than two major structural problems* Proportion of tenants satisfied or very satisfied with day-to-day maintenance services provided by their housing organisation	National Social Housing Survey (NSHS), AIHW, Table S5.1
		Customer satisfaction	Proportion of tenants satisfied or very satisfied with overall services provided by the housing organisation	National Social Housing Survey (NSHS), AIHW, Table S1.1 RoGS Table 18A.45-47

Homelessness

* **Compulsory measures.** They must be included in states' reporting.

Objective	Outcomes	Indicators	Measures	Possible Data Source
Effective support services contribute to preventing and reducing homelessness	People at risk of or experiencing homelessness receive effective support	Unmet demand for homelessness services	Number of unassisted requests for services, split by accommodation and other services* Number and proportion of clients with an identified need for services who were not provided or referred to those services, split by accommodation and other services*	Specialist Homelessness Services Collection (SHSC), AIHW, Table UNASSISTED.2 RoGS 19A.8 Specialist Homelessness Services Collection (SHSC), AIHW, Table CLIENTS.24 RoGS, Table 19A.7
		Supported requests for services	Number and proportion of clients who were homeless at the first presentation who are in stable housing at the end of support Number and proportion of clients at risk of homelessness who receive assistance and avoid homelessness*	SHSC, AIHW, table CLIENTS.31 NHHa Indicator (i) SHSC, AIHW, Table I_CLIENT_1
		Satisfaction with homelessness services	Number and proportion of clients who are satisfied with the service they receive from homelessness service providers	Data currently unavailable for this measure
		Rental stress	Proportion of renting households in the bottom two income quintiles paying more than 30% of income on rent	RoGS Table GA.2 Survey of Income and Housing, ABS
	People rarely experience or enter into homelessness and when they do	Return to homelessness	Number and proportion of clients who return to homelessness after achieving housing*	NHHa Indicator (h) SHSC, AIHW, Table H_RETURN RoGS 19A.38 (includes disaggregation for

	it is brief and non-recurring			Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people) This is currently measured over 24-months
		Prevalence of homelessness	Number of people experiencing homelessness who present to homelessness services	SHSC, AIHW, CLIENTS.11
			Number of people experiencing homelessness per 10,000 people in the population	Census of Population and Housing, ABS (5-yearly) RoGS Table 19A.2

Appendix 3

Northern Territory Homelessness Strategy 2025-2030

Strategic Priority 1 – Intervene early to prevent homelessness

Action 1A – Keep people housed through targeted housing policies

Action 1B – Develop culturally led pre-tenancy and tenancy sustainability programs

Action 1C – Identify at-risk tenants early to prevent homelessness

Action 1D – Provide supports to people with complex needs

Action 1E – Implement transitional planning from state care

Action 1F – Establish a Strategic Advisory Group to oversee delivery of the Strategy and support innovation and partnerships

Action 1G – Establish a Lived Experience Advisory Group to advise, shape and guide the work of the SAG and Strategic delivery

Strategic Priority 2 – Deliver culturally safe services that focus on people experiencing homelessness

Action 2A – Establish a Priority Action Group

Action 2B – Develop Regional Plans to deliver place-based responses

Action 2C – Increase participation of ACCOs in the homelessness system

Action 2D – Support the delivery of capital and operational funding

Action 2E – Provide place-based interagency care coordination

Strategic Priority 3 – Strengthen the homelessness system

Action 3A – Establish a contract outcomes reporting framework

Action 3B – Develop and implement a central intake and referral system

Action 3C – Establish service guidelines and accreditation for all SHS

Action 3D – Create a new workforce development strategy for the homelessness system.