Return to country—addressing Indigenous health and homelessness in far north Queensland

Bronwyn Honorato1, Bernadette Rogerson1, Michelle Coleman1
1James Cook University

Compared to the whole of Queensland, Cairns has a very high number of homeless people (6.3% versus 11.6%), 10% of whom are from remote areas of Cape York. Many of the Indigenous homeless people become stranded in Cairns following visits to health services or upon release from local prisons. Financial constraints, such as low incomes and overpriced flights (up to $550 one way), prevent them returning to their home communities. Many also suffer from substance abuse, chronic health problems and mental health disorders, compounded by homelessness. The response to homelessness is also a drain on medical resources, due to high numbers of hospital admissions, and on police resources, due to many public nuisance calls.

At present, there are 28 service providers in Cairns to assist the homeless population in securing adequate housing and related services. To date, however, there has been no meaningful engagement in order to determine the health, social and economic needs of Indigenous homeless people. Indigenous concepts and understandings of homelessness, health and illness are decidedly different to that of other Australians, and the individual’s perspective is critical to service delivery and outcomes. Only through the voice of these Indigenous itinerants, using ‘an Aboriginal lens’ to establish histories and current social and economic situations, will appropriate services be developed to address the cyclic, ongoing difficulties experienced by these individuals.

This research will follow-up participants (n=75) who were returned to their remote communities in 2012 under a pilot program offered by the Cairns police, the Return to Country project. The project assists homeless individuals who want to return to their communities by providing advances from Centrelink, booking flights subsidised by the local airline, undertaking medical heath checks, obtaining clothes/hygiene packs, transport to airport and ensuring the individual is on board the aircraft. Participants who have consented to participate in a follow-up study will be interviewed to ascertain their satisfaction with the Return to Country project, to determine their trajectories to homelessness, their health and housing needs, engagement with services, and current situation in their home community. The interviews will provide information on how the program can be improved and how services may be delivered within their home communities.

The outcome of this study will be to develop and implement a revised, sustainable Return to Country project, by collaborating with the 28 homelessness service agencies, Indigenous health services, Qld Health and the Qld Police Service.