Coordination of Services for Aboriginal Homelessness in the Western Australian Mid-West Region

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# List of Acronyms

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<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDEP</td>
<td>Community Development and Employment Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CUCRH</td>
<td>Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCP(WA)</td>
<td>Department of Child Protection of Western Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DoH (WA)</td>
<td>Department of Housing, Western Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAHCSIA</td>
<td>Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Aboriginal Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIFO</td>
<td>Fly in fly out, referring to the work pattern of employment on mines in the WA north</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSS</td>
<td>Family Support Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GP</td>
<td>General Practitioner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HRPA</td>
<td>Homelessness Research Partnership Agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISSR</td>
<td>Institute for Social Science Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAOA</td>
<td>Midwest Aboriginal Organisation Alliance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Government Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NILS</td>
<td>No Interest Loans Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTSS</td>
<td>Public Tenancy Support Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA</td>
<td>Western Australia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

I thank FaHSCIA for providing the funds to study this crucially neglected housing region. I also thank Dr. Sarah Prout of the Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health, Geraldton, for introducing me to Geraldton. I thank Ms Rosyln Sedgewick, then of the Department of Housing, Carnarvon, for her continued and unflagging support of my many years of study in Carnarvon. I thank Trevor Gregory, regional manager of the Mid-West Housing Region (DoHWA) and Colin Bayman, then of the Geraldton office of the Department of housing for providing their insights into the ways in which these towns related to one another regionally. Finally, I sincerely thank those Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people of Meekatharra, Geraldton and Carnarvon who provided their time and insights so generously in the course of this study.
Executive Summary

The objective of this research was to examine as a case study the response to Aboriginal homelessness in the context of a designated state housing region. The case study was the Midwest Region of the Department of Housing of Western Australia (DoH(WA)). The researcher undertook a program of interviews in three towns within this region. The towns were Carnarvon, Meekatharra and Geraldton, which is the regional centre. Interviews were conducted with key practitioners in each town with the view to discovering three things:

1. According to age and gender, what group in the town presented the highest profile of homelessness;
2. What was the response of the relevant practitioners in the town to the needs of homeless Aboriginal people, and;
3. To what extent could the response of the relevant agencies be said to provide a coordinated response to the needs of homeless Aboriginal people with the goal of moving them out of the homeless state and into housing that would meet the standards of the DoH(WA)?

While the study topic ostensibly falls within the rubric of housing research, it became clear very early on that the problems thrown up by participants to the study were not solely matters of housing. They were also matters of community structure and development, child welfare, drug and alcohol rehabilitation and community education.

Three models of response to Aboriginal homelessness were apparent. In Meekatharra, there appeared to be a “silo” approach. That is, government agencies, non-government organisations (NGO) and the community apparently had not developed a coordinated approach toward delivering effective, targeted measures to the ways in which Aboriginal homelessness manifested itself in the town.

In Carnarvon, there exists a relatively loose alliance organisation which includes the various agencies along with the Aboriginal community, the shire and the police. It is a loose confederation but it seems to suit a small town such as Carnarvon in which people can expect to see each other quite regularly in the normal course of life, exchange views and by this means keep one another informed of the latest developments according to their relevance to their professional interests. The Alliance meets irregularly, according to whether or not the members judge there to be an issue that needs attention.
In Geraldton there is a similar sort of alliance which has been formalised through a memorandum of understanding between Aboriginal community organisations, state and federal agencies, NGOs and the Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health (CUCRH). This alliance of organisations is called the Midwest Aboriginal Organisations Association (MAOA). Because the City of Greater Geraldton is the regional centre the regional offices of the state and federal departments are represented. Each member of MAOA has a portfolio, such as Aboriginal men’s health, Aboriginal housing, culture and so forth. It is the responsibility of each portfolio holder to advance the interests of the portfolio through lobbying, applying for funding, research and so forth. Given the size of Geraldton, and the authority represented there, this is an appropriate model for the city.

There is, however, not a great deal of evidence that the region as a whole is presenting a coordinated response to the matter of Aboriginal homelessness. Further community development work is required in this regard. This development of better coordination among the towns in the region is necessary in view of the fact that the DoH(WA) has undergone an important organisational shift through the alignment of Aboriginal housing policy and practice with the mainstream. This means that the lines of administration and communication with and within the department must go through the regional office. All aspects of Aboriginal housing including repairs, maintenance, tenant management and so forth are now directly managed at the regional office level.

While there is now a coordinated inter-departmental administrative response to this in Geraldton, there does not appear to be an inter-departmental response to Aboriginal affairs among the various towns and communities within the region, nor is there, as yet, evidence of a coordinated response between the regional capital city of Geraldton and the towns of the region.

This is with the partial exception of Carnarvon, where a culture of shared understanding appears to exist among various practitioners and between the practitioners and the Aboriginal community. However, Carnarvon does not appear to share links of this kind with Geraldton.

With regard to Meekatharra, it is difficult to know what model of coordinated response would best serve the needs of the town and its Aboriginal Community. If a loose confederation of government and NGO services could be developed, this would
certainly be a start. However, it must be said that community development of this nature takes time, and effort. Whether or not it comes to fruition depends largely on what Meekatharra is willing and able to accept, and its ability to develop better lines of communication within the town itself.
Figure 1 Western Australia State Map (WA Department of Land Administration)
Figure 2. DoH(WA) Mid-West Region (DoH(WA))
1. The Western Australian Mid-West Housing Region

1.1 Background

This report represents part of the larger FaHCSIA funded project, Developing Better Service Responses to Homeless and Public Place Dwelling Aboriginal People. The first report (Memmott, Birdsall-Jones and Greenop 2012) set out categories of homelessness among Indigenous people, current policy responses and canvased the importance of accounting for culture in Aboriginal homelessness. This report adds to the first report by providing a regional case study of the responses of service organisations to the way(s) in which Aboriginal homelessness presents itself in selected towns within a region defined by the DoH(WA).

This case study seeks to evaluate the degree to which and the way that agencies within the study area are taking a coordinated approach to the issue of Aboriginal homelessness in Western Australia’s (WA) Mid-West housing region. As well, the study is focused on whether or not there are organisations adequate to the task of dealing with the Aboriginal homeless people in their area of operation. The intent of taking a regional approach to this research task is to take a broad view of an administrative region, in an attempt to take account of the administrative structure of the DoH(WA). The provision of public housing tenancies and associated services is organised across ten regional offices of which the Mid-West is one (see figure 2).

The Mid-West Housing Region of Western Australia encompasses the area from Carnarvon in the north, Meekatharra in the east and Geraldton in the south (see map, figure 2). In terms of Aboriginal housing and related issues such as homelessness, this is not a well known, or well studied region, although it should be pointed out here that although Carnarvon has received some attention from this researcher over the last five years, it has never been considered in the regional context (Birdsall-Jones and Corunna 2008; Birdsall-Jones, Corunna et al. 2010; Habibis, Birdsall-Jones et al. 2011; Morphy 2010; Prout 2011).

Probably the best studied region in WA is the Kimberley, the towns of Broome, Fitzroy Crossing, the Fitzroy Valley region in general and Halls Creek in particular (Birdsall-Jones & Corunna 2008; Morphy 2010; Habibis et al. 2011). It is both timely and important to redress the balance of our research efforts across the state.
1.2 The homelessness situation according to the 2011 Census

Table 1. 2011 Census homelessness figures for the study region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statistical Area Level 3</th>
<th>Persons who are in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out</th>
<th>Persons in supported accommodation for the homeless</th>
<th>Persons staying temporarily with other households</th>
<th>Persons staying in boarding houses</th>
<th>Persons in other temporary lodging</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gascoyne, W.A.</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest, W.A.</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statistical Area Level 3</th>
<th>Persons living in ‘severely’ crowded dwellings</th>
<th>All homeless persons (Total)</th>
<th>Persons living in other crowded dwellings</th>
<th>Persons in other improvised dwellings</th>
<th>Persons who are marginally housed in caravan parks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gascoyne, W.A.</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>159</td>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest, W.A.</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of Population and Housing 2011

The table above concerns the homelessness population for regions that include the study sites. This data is not entirely satisfactory for several reasons. The regions shown are census statistical areas. They do not reflect the DoH(WA) administrative regions, and cover a larger area than the DoH(WA) Midwest region. Only numbers for statistical areas up to Level 3 (statistical sub-division) have been released thus far. The available homelessness numbers reflect all homelessness in the statistical subdivisions. ABS has not yet released statistics specifically regarding Aboriginal homelessness in the research sites. There is no other source which has extrapolated relevant data from the latest Census.

This said, we can see that the number of homeless people is greater in the Midwest than in the Gascoyne. This reflects the fact that the total population of the Midwest is
greater than that of the Gascoyne. Of concern is information regarding type of accommodation for the homeless population of the Gascoyne. On the basis of earlier research (Birdsall-Jones and Corunna 2008; Birdsall et al. 2010; Memmott et al. 2009; Habiis et al. 2011) and the experience of service providers in this region, we know that there are a very large number of Aboriginal people sheltering with kinfolk and have no homes of their own. According to the Census figures above there are no homeless people living in this circumstance anywhere in the Gascoyne, which is not a true or accurate reflection of the actual situation.

1.3 Town Geography and Services

Geraldton

Geraldton was opened for settlement in 1849 and, at first its main industry was as a port for the lead mines and smelter near the Murchison River. For many years, the town was dependent on the world price of lead and suffered a recession each time the price of lead dropped. In later years the economy stabilised as the grain and wool industries expanded and a fishing industry developed (UBD 1988).

In the present, Geraldton is the hub city, or regional capital (WA Regional Capitals Alliance). It is the largest urban/town location in the region and regional office of the DoH WA, DCP(WA) and other WA regional government offices are located here. The city is formally known as the City of Greater Geraldton, having amalgamated with the neighbouring shires of Greenough and Mullewa in 2007 and 2011 respectively.

The City of Greater Geraldton (Geraldton) is located 424 kilometres along the coast north of Perth. It was founded in 1855 and is best characterised as a small city rather than a town. It has all the medical and allied health facilities, both public and private schools, as well as the large shopping districts that one would expect of a city culture. For the surrounding country towns, Geraldton is the primary source of these kinds of resources. Geraldton has been making a major effort to produce more inclusiveness among the people, the Council, service providers, business and ultimately investors in the city. It has also put in place environmental sustainability plans. An examination of Geraldton’s website demonstrates its dominance of the Mid-West Region [http://www.cgg.wa.gov.au/](http://www.cgg.wa.gov.au/).

Geraldton is currently undergoing major growth largely through amalgamation with the Shires of Greenough and Mullewa. The population is projected to grow from 35,000 people to approximately 70,000 by 2030 due largely to several significant
projects currently in development or planning-proposal stages. These include mining expansion, the Oakajee port and industrial centre, the Global Square Kilometre Array telescope project and CSIRO sub-centre, national first-rollout superfast broadband access etc. (Haratsis 2010, 2011). If comparison with the towns of Broome, Roebourne and Carnarvon are any indication, such drivers of development have the potential to further marginalise and exclude Aboriginal people because of the greater demand on housing, resulting in the reduction of the affordable housing supply in favour of the ongoing rise in property values (Birdsall-Jones and Corunna 2008; McKenzie et al. 2009; Birdsall-Jones et al. 2010; Memmott et al. 2008).

Carnarvon

Carnarvon is located on the coast, 904 kilometres north of Perth at the mouth of the Gascoyne River. Most of the river ordinarily flows underground and so, the Gascoyne region is arid desert country. On the ABS remoteness index, Carnarvon is classified as very remote. It is an old town, founded in 1839 and up until recently had the characteristic broad main street in the town centre, originally constructed to accommodate the turning circle of carters’ teams of bullocks. The street is currently being redeveloped to accommodate the greater need for parking. The climate is subtropical but temperate.

With regard to services, Carnarvon appears to be well provided for within the confines of being a country town. Education facilities run K through to year 12. Medical and ancillary services include the Regional Hospital, Dental Clinic, Medical Centre, St John’s Ambulance and an Aboriginal medical service. Carnarvon also has the usual services of churches, a telecentre, swimming pool and a veterinary practice. There is also a Family Support Service (FSS) which provides family and marriage counselling, financial counselling and a no-interest loan service for low income earners. FSS is responsible for the Gascoyne Women’s Refuge and also runs a sexual assault response service.

The town’s economy would appear to be well supported through tourism, horticulture, salt and gypsum mining, fishing and a pastoral industry which seeks to diversify pastoral and horticultural lands industries. This is partly due to climate change, recent flooding and the need for pastoralists and horticulturalists to keep an eye on changes in their industry and which of those changes appear to be economically viable at the time. For a variety of services, Carnarvon people must undertake the
4.5 to 5 hour drive to Geraldton. These include old age care homes, and complications with various medical conditions. The standard of shopping is a useful indicator of the population and economic standard of a town. In Carnarvon, the only suppliers of retail clothing or electronic goods are two of the large discount retailers. For a higher standard or more variety, Carnarvon people must go to Geraldton. This is an indication that while Carnarvon is an economically well off and secure town, it does not have the population to support higher end retail shops.

Meekatharra

The town of Meekatharra in Western Australia lies roughly on the centre border of the DoH (WA) midwest region, 760 kilometres northeast of the state capital Perth, on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert. The town was first settled in 1896 as a result of the discovery of gold which created a small, short lived rush. Following this, the town was unlikely to have survived had it not been for a second gold discovery in 1899. Meekatharra was finally gazetted in 1903 (Heritage Council 2009).

Meekatharra has a history of gold mining locally, and the evidence of this is still in the landscape near the town where there are old worked out open cut mines. (See Fig. 3) The mines closed principally because the readily extractable ore was gone and there are higher costs involved in extracting the deeper ore. In the mid-1980s however, the mines reopened for a time as the price of gold rose and then closed again in 2008. Gold is, once again, worth a lot more now; around $1600 an ounce and up depending on whether you’re a buyer or a seller etc.; and so some of the old mines have re-opened because it is now worth the more expensive extraction processes. There is a mine currently in preparation for going into operation and a FIFO workforce has been brought on to accomplish this. The FIFO quarters would appear to be a sign of improvement in the town economy, however this is deceptive owing to the nature of FIFO. The workers fly in, are provided for within the mining camp and have little contact within the town.

Meekatharra Shire also has a pastoral industry. Pastoralists currently run beef cattle almost exclusively. There was until recently a sheep industry as well, however, during the last drought sheep were destocked because their grazing habit takes the root of the plant, preventing the pasturage from recovering in better times.

In summary, Meekatharra has a small, somewhat fragile economy which appears to be dependent on the mining industry. Two years ago, the town was in the doldrums.
and over the period 2004 – 2008, more businesses had closed than had opened (Beer et al. 2011)

With regard to services, Meekatharra has pre-primary programs for ages 4 and 5. The High School takes children years 1 – 10. The Meekatharra Women’s Service deals with crisis accommodation, advocacy, and counselling. The Women’s service itself does not provide crisis accommodation but undertakes only to find crisis accommodation if it is available. The town has a play centre, Jundar Mudar Mia which operates when staff are available. In addition, the town has a swimming pool, a small library, telecentre, and churches, and a pastoral industry. A veterinary service operates out of Newman and provides monthly visits. Churches are serviced in a similar way. None has its own pastor and all rely on ‘patrol ministry’ which organises pastors on a circuit that covers several small remote towns.

There were indications that the economy of Meekatharra had improved somewhat since 2010. The attitude of some participants toward the town was much more positive and for the first time in eight years, a new business, a chemist’s shop, has opened.

It is interesting to note that, while Geraldton has the largest number of Aboriginal people, it has the lowest proportion of Aboriginal people of any of the three towns. Meekatharra, with the smallest population of the three study sites, has the highest proportion of Aboriginal people. This relationship between the overall population size of a town/city and the proportion of Aboriginal people within that population appears to be a common phenomenon in WA (ABS 2007a, b, c).\footnote{Not all results of the 2011 Census are available in particular for some of the smaller towns like Meekatharra. In addition, there is a problem regarding the Census data for Geraldton. Geraldton has amalgamated with the two adjoining shires of Mullewa and Greenough, but this is not taken up in the Census 2011 data collection. This combined local government entity is now called the City of Greater Geraldton. The Census 2011 does not reflect the new local government boundaries. It is not safe to simply combine the results for all three former local government areas because of possible differences between the actual area constituting different types of Census districts and the newly established local government boundaries. For these reasons, it seemed safest to go with the 2006 Census.}
2. Recruitment of Participants, Data Gathering, and Analysis

Participants were recruited to this study on the basis of their involvement in agencies relevant to work with the Aboriginal homeless in the study sites. This means that the focus was on interviewing key people rather than a particular number of people. In all cases the participant was asked who else would be relevant to interview for this study.

According to ethics requirements, these professionals were assured that their anonymity would be protected. Therefore, with few exceptions, the organisations where participants were working are not named in this report. This concern with anonymity is of comparatively little importance on the national scale to which reports such as these are submitted. However, it must be borne in mind that these towns, Meekatharra in particular, are so small that merely naming the agency at which the informant works will readily identify him/her. The organisations whose staff members acted as participants in this research represented a fair mix of government and non-government organisations. The services provided included financial counseling, health, age- and gender-specific legal and mental health needs, aged care, housing, emergency housing and community development.

There is a caveat on interview data collected in Meekatharra. The Aboriginal practice of ‘payback’ in Meekatharra has become entrenched. Unlike other communities where the social institution of payback operates only as part of the traditional Aboriginal justice system. In Meekatharra, some Aboriginal people will seek to settle their grievances with members of the non-Aboriginal through ‘payback’ as well. This makes it dangerous to expose too clearly the identity of participants there. In addition to the usual anthropological ethic of ensuring the anonymity of informants as far as possible, extra care has been taken to provide a certain vagueness regarding the source of information gathered in that town. The reader should understand, however, that no license has been taken in the reporting of the situation in Meekatharra in the writing of this report. Rather, the analysis stays strictly within the bounds of the data.

The data were gathered using qualitative interviews (Kvale 2007; Steinman 1998). In this context, the qualitative interview means an unstructured or semi-structured interview focused on eliciting information which constitutes the participant’s views on
a subject with the objective of eliciting descriptions and meanings of a particular field of the participant’s life world, in this case, the management of Aboriginal homelessness. (Kvale 1996; Seidman, 1996). This method is uniquely suited to the task of collecting data appropriate for the development of typologies as a means of understanding socio-cultural phenomena.

The Interview

All interviews were conducted at the participant’s choice of place and time, within the confines of the research schedule. The interview always started with the same question; how do you see the shape of Aboriginal homelessness in (this) town? From there questioning became specifically oriented toward the particular expertise of the participant regarding the issue of Aboriginal homelessness in the town and among the towns of the region.

The fact that the researcher has worked in Carnarvon and Meekatharra was an advantage to the research in that it was possible to see changes in the towns and to ask questions aimed at discovering any changes in service provisions for the Indigenous homeless of the town. This was not the case in Geraldton, however, extra time had been allowed in the research period to make it possible to pay extra attention to Geraldton.

Data Analysis

All interview data was reconstituted into a series of matrices. The process began with a line by line subject analysis using a colour coded technique to identify all possible themes. This was done largely to commit the data to deep analysis which has the effect of permitting a mental categorisation of themes. At this point, the researcher had come to know the data well enough to begin to create matrices according to the commonalities of the work done by the informant within the community. In order to do this, the data was de-identified eliminating personal names and re-identified to create generalities of identities such as child support worker, family support worker, and community development officer. Having done this, a matrix was constructed according to categories of data attaching to the role the participant played. This matrix was used as the final tool of analysis in order to ensure that what was being compared was largely the town and its relationship to the region. It is not possible to de-individualise the data completely however, and it must always be remembered that ultimately, however it is manipulated, the data originates
with individuals, in specific places, with specific roles, and that the study takes place during a certain period of time.
3. Aboriginal Homelessness around the Region

This discussion begins with responses to the trigger question participants were asked; what is the shape of homelessness in this town? Responses varied widely, as might be expected. At one end of the continuum was the simple factual statement identifying certain groups on the basis of age and, sometimes, gender. At the other end of the continuum was the equally simple statement that the participant simply did not know. As I will go on to show, each of these responses is indicative of the highly varied, place specific nature of the management of Aboriginal homelessness.

**Meekatharra**

In Meekatharra responses to the trigger question displayed a lack of conformity. From the community development perspective it was apparently not part of the brief to consider the nature of the Aboriginal community or its particular difficulties. Rather, community development was oriented towards the economic development of the town largely as a mining community.

Housing specialists in Meekatharra displayed a particular picture of Aboriginal homelessness in the town. Their understanding of Aboriginal homelessness was that:

Rough sleeping isn’t just people sleeping in the open. Some people sleep in cars, and sometimes the circumstances are pretty unusual. There was one old couple who had a house but they slept out the back in their car. Their visitors had crowded them out of their own house. That situation had gone on for at least a year (Interview, Meekatharra, July 2012).

Their principle concern was elderly people who were imposed upon by their younger relations in the style known as ‘humbugging’, which is basically using menace and threatening behaviour to induce someone to give up whatever the humbugger is demanding. In the experience of these housing specialists, the major problem consisted of more or less elderly Aboriginal people who were forced to give up their housing in response to such threats.

The solution applied to these situations was to obtain the agreement of the elderly to give up their large, family homes and move into small two bedroom pensioners’ flats located in special developments of such units. Sometimes this was a solution to the problem, but sometimes it was not.
Unfortunately, removing the elderly victims of humbugging to the pensioners’ flats does not always work. In the six cases in which this remedy was applied, most were successful but one was not. The reasons for this are uncertain, but the participant in this case cited a combination of the firm attitude of the successful elderly couples and the acquiescent attitude of their children and grandchildren. In contrast, one of the elderly couples “were the kind who just can’t say no.” Clearly some sort of support is needed in this situation.

In the view of a women’s resource worker the shape of homelessness was determined by violence fuelled by drug and alcohol use in the home.

There is no rough sleeping per se. The problem is kids roaming the street to evade drug and alcohol affected adults who most often are their parents. It's related to the pattern/cycle of government payments.

That is to say, when government pensions arrive, many Meekatharra Aboriginal people use their income largely to purchase alcohol and drugs. They then congregate for parties which can go on for days. This view is confirmed by GP Dr. Teresa Tierney who has worked in Meekatharra on FIFO for four years.

Although she does not specifically mention homelessness, Dr. Tierney notes the effects of alcohol and drug problems on children in Meekatharra.

...there were many cases of neglected children, foetal alcohol spectrum disorder because mothers continued to drink heavily while pregnant, mental health and suicide issues (Cutler, I, 2012).

This article was published a few days prior to the field research in Meekatharra, and closely resembles the data provided by participants. A youth worker in the town described children as having become transient. This youth worker expressed some frustration with the situation because her remit was limited to 10 to 18 year olds, whereas the transient children of the town includes children under the age of 10. As far as this participant knew, there was no agency excepting the DCP(WA) that could deal with these younger children. Despite this, her observation was that the under 10s were not engaged with any agency in the town. In part this is due to the problem of payback, and so it is very rare for a child to be taken into care as a ward of the state.
The elements which make up the community of Meekatharra; the Shire Council, the various agencies, the non-Aboriginal residents and the Aboriginal residents; are distinct and detached from one another. There would appear to be only one practitioner who has initiated an effort to bring some unified effort to the situation and that is a practitioner who has successfully established a number of pre-employment groups for Aboriginal women. One of these was a discussion group for women elders.

The small women’s action group made up of women elders took it upon themselves to operate an ad hoc pickup service for the children they find wandering the streets at night. They attempted to return the children to their homes, but often the children refused to go there. They left their houses because alcohol and drug consumption among the adults had made the house too dangerous. In these cases, the women took the children to their grandmothers. This has problems as well because of the ad hoc nature of the group. They have no funding and could not supply the grandmothers with resources such as blankets and food for the extra children they were asked to take in.

The ‘silo’ nature of the disparate parts of the Meekatharra community may not be the cause of its troubles however, it is certainly the major barrier to any solution. Homelessness is by no means always a matter of a lack of housing. As I will go on to show, the case of homeless children is a complex and multi-faceted problem which can only be approached by a high level of quality cooperation within the community.

**Carnarvon**

Carnarvon’s strength lies in the lesson the practitioners and the community have learned through hard experience and the passage of time. This is the need for consultation. In Carnarvon this means a whole of community approach including the service providers at all levels, the non-Aboriginal communities and the Aboriginal community. The town has found that those proposed new services or remedial measures that are subjected to the degree of consultation necessary to reach community consensus become successful in that they then are used by the group they are aimed at. Without this, a project can languish for years without progress (Jones and Birdsall-Jones forthcoming).

As in Meekatharra, responses to the trigger question varied. Unlike in Meekatharra, the key participants possessed detailed knowledge of the Aboriginal community. This finding mirrors the experience of this researcher over the last three years of...
work in Carnarvon (Memmott, Birdsall-Jones and Greenop 2012; Habibis et al. 2011; Birdsall-Jones et al. 2010).

The agencies that deal with Aboriginal homelessness in Carnarvon are the Shire, through its Office of Community Development and the Family Support Agency which is funded by FaHCSIA. These two agencies deal with non-Aboriginal people as well, but both have a strong focus on Aboriginal homelessness. They are fully aware of secondary homelessness, youth abandoning the family home, domestic violence, problems of alcohol and drug abuse, and child abuse. In 2008 (Birdsall-Jones et al. 2010), Birdsall-Jones and Corunna conducted field research in Carnarvon. The problems relating to homelessness were itinerancy and Aboriginal children exiting the family home. For these children, leaving home for the street was an iterative process which began when the child was as young as 6 years. The impetus was drug and alcohol use within the family home by the parents and their friends. This created a frightening situation for the young children and so, with the help of older siblings and relations, they began to leave the house when drug and alcohol use was in train.

The observation of youth workers in the town suggested that the young children became more adept at leaving home during the night and living a street life until the house became safer in the morning. As they approached teenaged years however, they became less and less tolerant of the situation in the home and went to live by day with other family members. Street life through the night had become a habit by then, and this became the pattern of their lives.

According to practitioners this was a relatively small but unspecified number of children and they had been hardened by street life. They committed crimes of property regularly and faced incarceration without fear because they were assured of safety, a clean bed and regular meals. At this time, along with itinerancy the problems associated with these children included teenaged pregnancy, their relative powerlessness in the community and a culture of bullying among the itinerant children.

The problem was not a lack of funding. There was, according to practitioners a great deal of money being spent on various programs, none of which worked. Sometimes they understood what the problem was. For example, although the town had an alcohol and drug facility it was located within the hospital. Entering the hospital was very difficult for Aboriginal people because it was a Non-Aboriginal domain and it resulted in the labelling of the individual within the Aboriginal community. The result...
was that very few Aboriginal drug and alcohol abusers came to the facility and those that did tended to drop out of the program after a short time.

The ray of hope in this situation was the beginning of an interagency and community group to combat the major problem as they saw it, which was alcohol and drugs. This was called the Shire of Carnarvon Safety Alliance.

By the next field season in 2009 (Habibis et al. 2011), measures had been found aimed at keeping children in school. The primary school had had a breakfast program for some years, and in and of itself it was successful in that it provided breakfast primarily to Aboriginal children who were unable to find provisions in the family home. It did not stop those children from becoming itinerant because it could not do anything about the drug and alcohol abuse within the Aboriginal community.

However, the gazetted Aboriginal community of Mungullah began a breakfast and lunch program of its own. As well, the community agreed that it was focused on reducing alcohol use in the community. They made rules, such as no loud parties past 11pm and a number of other bans and measures which included applying for alcohol free community status. The state minister responsible was amenable but the measure was opposed by the town and therefore failed.

Despite this, school attendance at Mungullah rose in one year from 47% to 90% (Habibis et al. 2011). This is indicative of a reduction in child itinerancy and improved home life. Through this course of events, Mungullah demonstrated what could be done if effective consultation occurred within the community and between the community and its governing board. The situation could not hold, however, because the community lacked crucial support from local and state government. Without legal restrictions on alcohol in the community and ongoing funding for programs which served to support community efforts, alcohol consumption returned to its prior patterns. This community disorder opens it to a number of problems including child itinerancy, and ongoing household crowding. This crowding is in part indicative of the need to house relations who have lost their own housing.

In 2011 (Memmott, Birdsall-Jones and Greenop 2012), research was undertaken into the question of Aboriginal household crowding. The metropolitan locality of Swan and the town of Carnarvon were compared in this study and the phenomenon of circular mobility as a hedge against outright homelessness was among the resulting findings. Circular mobility involved primarily younger adults under the age of 40 with no homes of their own. Some were single and some were partnered. They moved
around twice a year between towns in order to avoid placing undue pressure on any one household of their relations.

As of 2011 therefore, the shape of homelessness in Carnarvon covered the broad spectrum of age and gender groups. These included itinerant children avoiding troubled home lives, aged between 6 and 18, young adult couples experiencing secondary homelessness as a hedge against outright street life, and young men who similarly circulated among the homes of their relations. In Carnarvon there have always been a small number of very old men who have homes to go to, but who suffer old age related mental health problems and on occasion spend all of their time living and sleeping out of doors around the town. There have never been more than nine of these elderly men (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2003b). Their relatives look after them as best they can, but they are regarded as a problem of old age care rather than as a part of the general homeless situation in Carnarvon.

There was a consensus in Carnarvon regarding itinerancy among children aged 4 to 15 years. Fieldwork from other projects suggests that the reason for the presence of such young children in this group is the older children taking their younger brothers and sisters with them when they leave the family home to escape the dangers presented by alcohol and drug affected adults. The definition of homelessness used in describing these children as homeless was:

   ...by homelessness I mean they have no secure, safe place of occupation
   (Interview, Carnarvon, July 2012).

As in Meekatharra therefore, children who, on paper have homes, have deserted unsafe family households for the street on an intermittent basis. (In the course of participant observation for my PhD fieldwork, I was part of these occasional escapes (Birdsall 1990).) The process of leaving while a party is in process in the public part of the house entails the older children making the decision that it’s time to go before the situation worsens. They put the very young children in fresh nappies, pack a couple of bags with essential provisions for the night out including a couple of extra nappies, baby feeding bottles, any clothes for themselves and all the money that between them they possess. Then they walk rapidly through the party space with aggressive determination and disappear into the night. With luck, as when I was there, they had a car to live in and to shelter in until morning.

The management of these problems tends to follow a two pronged approach. The Shire Council has an established expertise in youth work, whereas the FaHCSIA funded facility has an established expertise in family work. The nature of the
cooperation between these two organisations is based on the view that while someone must be working for solutions for the children, someone else must be working toward solutions for the family. The children require both activity and safety. The family requires remedial help in the way of alcohol and drug counselling, and support programs which will enable them to retain their tenancy.

The Alcohol and Drug Alliance is continuing and they have had some success. Several more pensioners’ flats and some family homes have been declared alcohol free zones by law. At first, this made life much better for the pensioners in particular, whose old age makes them more vulnerable to home invasion by younger relations who wish to use the flat for ongoing partying. Local reports obtained by the author in the course of this research however, are that the initial good effect has ‘worn off’, so to speak, and the situation is approaching its former levels of social disorder.

Geraldton

The viewpoints of service providers in Geraldton were highly various and were more a reflection of the participant’s particular line of work rather than there being evidence of a shared agenda, as was observed in Carnarvon. However Geraldton is a city and size makes a difference when it come to the facility with which it is possible for practitioners to share knowledge, information and experience. The question is whether this separateness among practitioners is detrimental to the situation of the homeless Aboriginal people of Geraldton or not.

The DoH(WA) housing officer had a particular question that he wanted an answer to and therefore his interview revolved around this question. In sum, he wanted to know about the phenomenon of itinerancy which is certainly a factor in homelessness. In his opinion, Geraldton had made no proper provision for Aboriginal itinerants and in this participant’s view this forms the major problem of homelessness in the city. In order to begin to redress this situation he wanted to know who the itinerants were and where they were coming from. Interestingly, there are other practitioners who have at least partial answers to these questions.

The Aboriginal homeless support worker noted that there were ‘a lot of Mullewa people living in town.’ This relates to the pattern of Aboriginal mobility investigated by Prout (2008). In this paper she discovered the Aboriginal mobility region which encompasses Geraldton, Mullewa, Mt. Magnet, Meekatharra and Wiluna. The Aboriginal homeless support worker’s comment provides further confirmation of this mobility region.
This Aboriginal support worker noted as well that a fair number of people were coming down from Carnarvon. Her objection to the latter was that these were the people whose lifestyles had made them unwelcome in Carnarvon. In order to escape Carnarvon’s efforts to restrict illegal activities and harmful behaviour they had come south to Geraldton and brought the trouble with them. These troubles include drug dealing and production, child abuse and general domestic violence. This results in a cascade of troubles which breaks up households, rendering women and their children homeless, driven to live with their relations in order to escape dangerous and harmful lifestyles. Be this as it may, certain Carnarvon Aboriginal families travel in a mobility region that covers Carnarvon and Geraldton. While this much is known, further research is required to identify the whole of that particular mobility range.

Gambling is another problem this participant identified. While alcoholic beverages may be available at gambling is the primary object of interest and activity. The problem with gambling itself is that it takes so much of the gambler’s attention that the children are not fed, are not put to bed and cannot sleep on account of the noise. Some proportion of these children spend the night on the street committing crimes of property.

I take children home sometimes on a Thursday night [pension day] that don’t want to go home because of what’s there. And that really does concern me, and I mean when I see a woman with three kids sleeping in the back of a car that has major issues (Interview, community support worker, Geraldton, July 2012).

A community housing officer agreed with this:

You know, why would you want to sit around in, even though they might be good kids, they don’t want to be at home because of all the other issues, social issues, whether it’s you know, parents drinking, playing cards, into the drugs, all that sort of stuff. They don’t want to be in that environment so where do they go (Interview, Geraldton, July 2012)?

The housing support worker agreed that children were a major problem in homelessness, however she saw bigger problems for young men.

And the reason why you have so many young men homeless is because the Government and agencies do help out young mums with children, they are priority and that’s understandable. So if you’ve got a young couple that’s split up, she can go into a refuge, she can get accommodation. He is left roaming and helpless or if they did have a place in the first place she is priority, she gets it. So he’s left homeless, so where does he go?...They go back to mum.

All informants agreed that it was proper for the DoH(WA) to prioritise young women with children, but noted that single young men appeared to be at the end of the list of housing priorities. Something, they felt, needed to be done for the single young men.
An objection to these observations came from a FaHCSIA employee interviewed for this study. In his interview, he noted that there are no statistics on any of this, children in particular. Children roaming the streets at night may simply be children going from one place to another, without any particular problems in the home, excepting that their parents ought really to exercise a degree more control over the hours their children are keeping.

Adolescent children thought to be homeless could be ‘couch surfing’, but not because they are homeless or because their homes are dangerous. They may simply be sleeping over at their relations’ homes. These factors make it difficult to make an accurate statement on the numbers of young people of all ages who have become homeless.

This said, there are some Aboriginal parents who believe that departmental policies which limit corporal punishment have disempowered Aboriginal parent,s who have come to feel that because of this, they have no authority over their children. Their concern is that without the capacity to exercise a realisable threat over a child, that child can simply refuse to obey and may come and go as they please. The parents fear that their children will become devoted to street life and render themselves homeless by this means. Family counselling on ways to overcome this conundrum is indicated as being necessary, but there was no opinion among informants as to whether Aboriginal families were taking advantage of this available option. Aboriginal families with young children filled the waiting room on the day I interviewed the DCP(WA) officer, but there were no adolescent children among them. However the DCP(WA) officer interviewed stated that the problem of administering effective discipline was a problem for Aboriginal parents of adolescents, and that specialist officers of the local DCP(WA) office were working to find a solution to this problem.\(^2\)

However, it is the case that the DCP(WA) holds information on adolescent children who have come to their attention and who have indeed become homeless. It seems as though it must be possible to make a limited estimate of the numbers of these children from this body of information. It is essential to track and it is recommended that FaHCSIA address this in the future.

What can we say about the shape of homelessness in Geraldton on the basis of this information from practitioners whose work takes them into the field of Aboriginal

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\(^2\) It was pointed out by this participant that the DCP(WA) should hold information on adolescent children with whom the Department has had dealings, and wondered whether or not this information might make it possible to make a limited estimate of the number of homeless Aboriginal children.
homelessness? Clearly Aboriginal homeless people of Geraldton are, as a group, composed of people of all ages and social circumstances. However, there are two common threads in all of this data. One is that there are children at risk, though the reasons given for this vary to a greater or lesser extent. The second is the dilemma faced by single men and the lack of priority given to their housing needs. There is also some concern about itinerants from other towns, but this is of less concern across the range of participants. Finally, there is a general agreement that the lack of hostels providing both long term and short term accommodation makes the management of homeless Aboriginal people of Geraldton very difficult.

The situation regarding short and long term hostel style homeless accommodation in Geraldton has deteriorated over the last four years. One major source of homeless accommodation was the Batavia Motor Lodge which shut down in 2008. This represented a loss of 150 beds. The Foreshore Backpackers, with 52 beds, was also shut down during this period. These were low cost backpackers’ accommodation rather than dedicated homeless hostels, however, they were regularly used by WADCP as emergency and short term accommodation for the homeless people of Geraldton. The only other option available to the department is to issue tents to homeless families and individuals and send them to a licensed camp ground.

There are plans which have been approved to build more hostel accommodation. The Bundiyarra Aboriginal Corporation has applied for funding to build a hostel with 100 beds specifically for Aboriginal people. Fusion Australia, a Christian youth and community organisation, has committed to provide funding for a 52 bed hostel. These are very positive developments, however, even with these projected developments, it is still the case that Geraldton will have 50 fewer beds for the homeless than it did four years ago.

Summary

In Meekatharra there is a problem of a lack of coordination or cooperation among the shire together with the agencies regarding Aboriginal affairs in general. It is perhaps this lack of coordination which, in part, results in the problems within the Aboriginal community escalating, and thereby permitting some aspects, notably payback in Meekatharra, to develop into a dangerous situation.

In contrast, Carnarvon has developed a practice of regular contact among the agencies, the shire, Aboriginal organisations and the Aboriginal community. The result of this is a shared understanding of the primary issues facing the Aboriginal
community. This has permitted the development of a capacity for efficiently dealing with some problems and an understanding (and acceptance) that other problems and developments may take years to achieve.

Geraldton, like Carnarvon has developed a system of coordination and cooperation among the shire, the agencies, Aboriginal organisations and the Aboriginal community. Because it is a small city rather than a small town, they have developed a more formal, structured approach to the task of dealing with the problems of the Aboriginal community. The shire, CUCHR and MAOA meet on a regular basis and have categorised the various problem areas as ‘portfolios’ to be managed by the relevant agency or field of local government.

With regard to the profile of concern regarding Aboriginal homelessness, there is agreement among the three research sites. It seems clear that among the three research sites, children are regarded as the priority group, although they are not the only homeless group. It would appear that there are clear problems in a variety of areas and the next chapter discusses these as specialist fields of homeless management.
4. Management of Specialist Fields

Often the problem people face is not the lack of a house, but the lack of a suitable home. First and foremost, this means a home that provides a sense of safety. Members of every age group can be affected by this problem. It is difficult for small towns and even the regional city to provide solutions to problems that are so specific and so various. This will become clearer as the results of the data analysis proceeds.

Meekatharra

Meekatharra has no Aboriginal organisation excepting Yulella. Although Yulella has until recently devoted itself to the needs of men and particularly young men, it has also begun to move into the needs of women in the town.

Men

Yulella is only facility available for young men in Meekatharra. It was the CDEP provider, however it no longer appears in the FaHCSIA listing of CDEP providers (FaHCSIA 2012). Job seekers in Meekatharra must now approach Centrelink in order to access both unemployment allowances and their choice of training program which is obligatory. This change is not necessarily unwelcome to Yulella, but they do point out that on CDEP the paperwork associated with the program was all done for the trainees by Yulella, whereas at Centrelink, they must complete all forms, log books and any associated documentation themselves. Centrelink undoubtedly provides some support in this regard. Despite this support, it cannot equal the service Yulella offered in this regard and the fear is that the attrition rate in the training programs will rise as young men find it too difficult to cope with the new requirement for self-administration. It is possible that this will result in more young men spending days with little to occupy their minds and they will take up a pattern of behaviour that not unusually results in them losing access to the family home. That is, they may take up substance abuse with the result that their behaviour becomes violent at worst and simply unpleasant at best. This is what has happened at other communities, and also among analogous situations in the Non-Aboriginal community (Arthuson 2002, 2004; Birdsall-Jones 2012).

Yulella has successfully developed several businesses, mostly in the building trade, but has found difficulty in obtaining placements for its newly qualified trainees in the open employment market. As the manager stated in 2011, ‘we’ve got more tickets in
here than Ansett and Qantas’ (Ansett was a now defunct national airline). The 2007 website ad for the manager’s position (Pigs will Fly 2007) makes interesting reading with regard to its psychological description of Meekatharra clients and the situation the new manager would be dealing with:

Applicants MUST also be able to suspend any expectations they might have of people in this area. Having expectations based on previous experiences in a built up area such as Melbourne or Sydney, simply ‘won’t cut it’ here, nor will basing expectations upon successful business ventures in environments where everybody knows their key tasks, and performs as a well oiled machine. Most of our participants struggle to relate to the term ‘expectation’ – let alone understand the notion of why such a term exists in the first place. Their experiences don’t – for the most part – come from positive places where people are encouraged to explore their potential, and build or hone their skills. The community people here are simply living day to day. Anyone taking up a position here needs to be able to understand that THIS is what the situation is like for most of the people who are unemployed here in Meekatharra.

The challenge of providing services which will occupy young Aboriginal men in a small town cannot be overstated. Many social problems can be sourced to disaffected young men with problems of substance abuse and the low self-esteem that accompanies the lack of a defining place in their social world. These problems include humbugging the elderly and domestic violence both of which may result in homelessness for their victims.

**Girls and Women**

The viewpoint of the Women’s Program Officer, not unnaturally, focuses on women.

...we have noticed with them young ladies, and we did have a meeting with them, like how can we solve this problem? Because it’s all because of drug and alcohol abuse, sniffing and stuff. So they tend to go around because they have friends they are looking for to go and sniff with. Also because some of them they are really young to sniff and go back home. So when they sniff they tend to stay away from home, to stay away from home. In some cases it is also because their parents they will be like, they will be drunk to look after the kids and the kids don’t feel safe and yeah they want to go out and you know. Sometimes there is fight, the families are fighting and the kids can’t stand it. They want to go out and ...”

There is a clear concern for children who choose to leave the house and roam the streets in order to wait out the unsafe conditions at home. Occasionally, they get together with children in the same situation and sniff.³ Some of the women elders of the town have tried to come up with a solution to this problem.

They have come up with a women’s action group that seems to be looking forward in addressing these issues by taking these kids home when they find them. Or to take them to their grandparents to look after them if the

³ For detailed studies of sniffing in Aboriginal communities see any of a number of publications by Maggie Brady, eg. Brady (2011).
mothers are drunk or if they are fighting then they think it’s a good idea to take them to their grandmothers. But then there was also an issue whether these grandmothers haven’t got enough to look after the kids, they haven’t, because they need blankets, they need food.

The women elders have considered other solutions to the problem of children walking the streets at night.

So they don’t think it’s a good idea to take them to the Department of Child Protection because, you know, and also they know when they, Department of Child Protection starts to intervene, it means there is something wrong in the family and there is also stigma around, you know, for not looking after your kids or stuff. So they all tend to be protective. However in some cases I have had some ladies threatening others that if you keep on doing this I will report you to the Department of Child Protection and stuff.

Each of these solutions have problems attached to them therefore. As well, although these women are elders and well respected in the town, the Women’s Program Officer has taken note of the fact that there are limitations on the ways and the extent to which these women can exercise their authority.

… I think it’s a very positive thing happening in the community to have. Because these ladies that are coming together are influential ladies. If you talk to anyone I work with. But however from my experience when I was attending meetings with them I have learnt and realised that in some cases they have no power. They can do so much but sometimes they don’t have power, they don’t have resources, they don’t have, you know, they can say things and whatever they do but they haven’t got enough resources to put things into place and yeah.

One of the things that the women’s program officer has probably realised is that in Meekatharra, there exists an institutionalised practice of ‘payback’. Payback means that if a person feels sufficiently offended, he/she will enact varying degrees of violence on the individual felt to be the source of the offense. This was confirmed by another participant who operated another women’s resource in Meekatharra.⁴

The payback is very serious in Meekatharra and so there is no dog catcher or any other public employee who might put themselves in danger of payback.

Clearly the act of reporting a child in danger to the DCP(WA) is an action that very likely will initiate payback which is why, relatively speaking, few reports are made in relation to the purported size of the problem of children in danger.

⁴ An example of a situation that if reported could involve serious payback is that there have been reports of children committing acts of extreme animal cruelty. Apart from the fact that this is an anathema in Australian culture that the children are able to behave in this way toward animals indicates that they will, as they grow older, find that they are able to perpetrate physical abuse and cruelty on people as well. This family is considered extremely likely to exact payback if their activities are reported. Altogether, this is a very dangerous situation (Wright & Hensley 2003; Lockwood & Ascione; Becker et al. 2004).
Boys

There appear to be no special programs or facilities for Aboriginal boys in Meekatharra.

Children

There is a Parkerville group house for four children, however as of July 2012 when this field research was undertaken, it had never been occupied because the children of Meekatharra all have high needs and therefore fall outside the Parkerville guidelines for admission. The town also has a play centre for young children, Jundar Mudar Mia Playcentre, which is said to provide a good atmosphere and activities for the children (Meekatharra Website, n.d.). The problem is that it is irregularly staffed and parents find it difficult to use because of this (Interview, Meekatharra, July 2012).

Families

With regard to specialist family support services in Meekatharra, there is the Meekatharra Family and Domestic Violence Service which deals only with domestic violence, and there is a financial advocate who operates as an outreach agency

One problem that was mentioned by several participants was the situation in which a family attains a public housing lease and not long after they move in, many of their relations from other towns come to visit, and some of these turn into transients who continue to go to the housed family for shelter. This puts them over the limits agreed in their lease, and the family is put in danger of losing their home. It must be said this is a common problem nationwide.

Community Consultation

One participant discussed a town meeting, held in the last year, aimed at tackling the problems of general disorder within the Aboriginal community. The meeting was attended by the police and the school in particular as well as most of the other agencies already mentioned. The object of the meeting was to try and persuade the Aboriginal community to accept liquor restrictions and income management. The response of the Aboriginal community was apparently vociferously negative. At the time during which field research took place, no other town meeting has been held since then. There appeared to be no evidence of ongoing, effective community consultation in Meekatharra.
Summary of Meekatharra

The primary concerns of the practitioners of Meekatharra are a reflection of the particular focus of their agency.

The focused vandalism perpetrated by older children on vacant properties reduces the number available homes in Meekatharra and also makes the town very unattractive. In a situation of seeking to expand the economic base of the town, this cannot be helpful.

Children in need of care seem to go for some length of time in this state before any agency takes action on their behalf. It must be said that it is difficult to intervene between parent and child because of the institutionalised payback in the Aboriginal community which is a very serious consideration for practitioners. Many of the children’s problems may be sourced in crowded homes where the parents lose their capacity to keep track of where their children are, what they are doing and what is happening to them.

Carnarvon

*Boys and Young Men*

Like Meekatharra, Carnarvon has limited programs for young men. In Carnarvon Emu Services is the CDEP provider. Like Yulella, it is not intended to be a means of managing homelessness, however, it is hypothesised that young men who have a designated place to go where they will find activities that may lead to a better future and where they will find their kinsmen and their friends, will be better able to avoid the anti-social behaviour that so often leads to homelessness among young Aboriginal men. The town based Aboriginal community of Mungullah has a similar program which is not connected with CDEP, but which is connected with a building and maintenance company which the community has built up over time. The job training programs at Emu Services and Mungullah are the only sources of occupation for young men between 19 and 24.

For both younger boys and older adolescents, the Shire operates a drop-in centre patronised almost wholly by Aboriginal boys. It is staffed on a volunteer basis with the volunteers coming mostly from the Aboriginal community. Although it is open only on Saturday nights, it is nonetheless an important element of the boys’ lives. According to a youth worker, ‘they get very angry if that program is not running’. Around 40 – 50 boys attend the Saturday session.
The Shire also provides transport home and this is where the degree of family dysfunction is revealed.

...because we try and drop them off rather than walking home. And they get to certain places and they say oh no, such and such is there, don’t drop me here. And so they are going from place to place to try and drop some of these young people off. And to the extent where sometimes they run out of places. So you know, the youth worker is then saying well where, you know, where can we drop you?

The Shire is hoping to deal with this by establishing a short term stay hostel for these boys. Providing shelter for boys experiencing problems within the family is important because currently one of their responses to staying away from home is to commit burglary in search of food, money and goods they can sell to obtain money. As a result, many boys and some girls are in and out of incarceration. Clearly this is not a good way to embark on adulthood.

**Men’s Problems**

Men aged 25 years and up have two options in terms of structured services aimed at improving their quality of life. One is a Men’s Shed which is intended for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal men. It is a place the men can congregate, pick up practical skills and engage in mutual support. Although the Men’s Shed is a nationwide program funded by the federal Department of Health and Aging, the Men’s Shed in Carnarvon is unaffiliated and receives no outside funding. It is currently coordinated by an Aboriginal man of high repute in the town.

The second option is the Carnarvon Community Men’s Group which runs a program called Dare to Dream which concentrates primarily on the development of entrepreneurial skills in individuals. The coordinator of the Carnarvon Community Men’s Group, who is also an Aboriginal man of high repute, has high hopes of this program as a life changing experience for Aboriginal men in Carnarvon.

One of the difficult problems for Aboriginal single men is how to find accommodation as they grow older, and where to go when they have been denied access to the family home because they have perpetrated violence on their families. Short term accommodation in Carnarvon is limited to the Gascoyne Women’s Refuge. There is no corresponding venue for men.

Formerly, the older hotels in Carnarvon used to rent out rooms to single men, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike. Now, these hotels have found a way to “go up-market” by turning their accommodation to the international back packers’ market and transforming their bars into alfresco dining establishments. This has been very
successful and certainly contributes to the town economy. However it has left a hole in the solutions available to men in need of accommodation. This is one reason that the service providers of the town are beginning to work toward the establishment of a hostel devoted to the needs of single men who, having failed to establish a family, or who have been denied access to their families, have no current housing options apart from living with their extended kin group.

The second problem is the change in the policy of response to domestic violence perpetrators. Formerly, if the woman and her children wanted to escape these situations they fled precipitately to the Gascoyne Women’s Refuge. This is an important option and the service offered is vital to the needs of the victims of domestic violence. There are problems however. The refuge, cannot take boys 12 years and older. This means the older boys must go to relations in order to find shelter in these circumstances. It also means that the perpetrator is left in possession of the family home.

The preferred practice in Carnarvon now is to remove the perpetrator from the family home. Women still escape initially to the Refuge, but they do not stay there for the weeks and months it may take to either remove the perpetrator or to counsel him to the point that he agrees to change his behaviour. Neither of these strategies is good for the welfare of the family itself, but they are the best available in the short term. It means that the children’s schooling and their daily routine is interrupted. It also means that their mother must find them clothes and provisions to replace what had to be left behind when they went into the refuge. The policy in Carnarvon is now to induce the man to leave the house as soon as may be arranged. The Carnarvon police provide support in these instances. While this means that the man may either be arrested on charges related to domestic violence or that he may need to arrange to stay with his own relations, it does make more sense that the family should spend as little time as possible in the refuge before returning home (Interview with family support worker, Carnarvon, July 2012). This contributes materially to the welfare of the children, the older boys in particular who heretofore had been left with relations (Birdsall-Jones and Corunna 2008; Birdsall-Jones et al. 2010; Habibis et al. 2010).

The problem for men in this situation is obvious. Now, they are the ones with nowhere to go. Having displayed violence toward their own family, they are not an attractive prospect to their relations who, nonetheless, often take them in. The human services practitioners in the town are seeking to remedy this by establishing a
purpose built men’s hostel, where perpetrators can find accommodation, counselling, and develop an understanding of the consequences of what they have done.

At this point, these hostels are only ideas, but with the Carnarvon practitioners’ experience of successfully developing solutions to some of the problems within the Aboriginal community, and the support of local government, the chances tend toward success. This is not to say that all the solutions applied currently are wholly successful. They require ongoing work and further development which means more funding.

The need for these programs and facilities is to help the men and older boys to avoid embarking on pathways into homelessness (Birdsall-Jones et al. 2010). It is significant that both practitioners and Aboriginal people agree that alcohol and violence combine to place men and older boys on a pathway to homelessness. In Carnarvon this will mean secondary homeless, but the men and older boys will be unlikely to be able to establish stable residence anywhere and will embark on a lifestyle of moving from household to household and town to town among their extended family. Once this development occurs, it is difficult to impossible to escape (Birdsall 1990; Birdsall-Jones and Corunna 2008; Birdsall-Jones et al. 2010; Habibis et al. 2010).

**Girls**

Girls in their teenaged years tend to be interested in boys, and this is as true for Carnarvon as it is for the rest of the world. In Carnarvon Aboriginal society however, this means early age pregnancy. In the course of my research career the age of early age pregnancy has dropped from around 14 in 1982 to 12 in 2012. These are infrequent occurrences, of course, with most of the girls of my acquaintance becoming pregnant between 16 and 18. The problem for mothers this young is that they are ineligible to apply for public housing until they turn 18. They must live with relations (usually parents) until they turn 18 and can make their own applications for housing. Although girls in this situation are placed in a preferential waiting list which reduces the time they would normally wait for housing, it is still some years before they are granted a home. Until this time, they live in a condition of secondary homelessness.

There is ‘nothing much’ for girls in Carnarvon, apart from a drop in teenaged girls centre. The town provides youth outreach through its youth centre. This service operates five days a week. Young mothers receive support from this service such as
advice on pensions that, as mothers, they can apply for, their entitlement to the yearly family payments and so forth. These things help, but a place to congregate and meet with each other would also be of benefit because it may help them cope with the difficulties involved in living with a baby in secondary homelessness.

Girls who are not necessarily either pregnant or mothers have other problems and very occasionally, cyber bullying is one of them. Many if not most Aboriginal adolescents have a ‘pay as you go’ mobile phone. Text message bullying comes from both their peers among the girls as well as from the boys. Apart from the threat of expulsion from school, there is little that can be done to control this, and its danger lies in the attack on the self-esteem of the victim and the incitement to violence. This can lead to depression. Suicide appears to be less common among the girls than the boys and young men, but depression is a real and present danger in reaction to the victimisation to which the girls are subjected.

**Families**

Support for families as a whole comes primarily from the Carnarvon Family Support Service that provides a number of services, many aimed at preventing homelessness. It caters for the whole community not only Aboriginal people, however, many of its clients are Aboriginal people and their families. Services include financial counselling, no-interest loans (NILS), Sexual Assault Response Service, and the Gascoyne Women’s Refuge. While NILS does not really play a great part in the prevention of homelessness, the financial counselling that goes with it may be of help to families to organise their income in ways that enable them to pay their rent, thereby retaining the family home.

**Retaining the family home**

Support for retaining the family home is primarily the province of the Family Support Service which houses the Public Tenancy Support Service. They run this program at the behest of Centrecare.

Tenancies can be threatened in a number of ways such as problems with maintaining the required property standards, debt from failure to pay utilities bills, and miscellaneous problems with repairs which are the tenant’s responsibility, damage to the property, and most crucially, failure to pay the rent and anti-social behaviour. The PTSS operates as an outreach service. As one support worker has said:

So [you] go to the properties that are referred from DoH(WA) and on numerous occasions the people aren’t there, many phone calls are made
and then all of a sudden an eviction notice comes and they come running in. But sometimes it’s too late. Because it’s going to court.

Not all eviction notices result in court action if the tenant moves quickly enough, but there comes a point at which it’s all too late, the PTSS can no longer help because the matter is in the hands of the court.

Not all Aboriginal tenants respond in this way and the PTSS has had success in helping many Aboriginal tenants retain their homes. One important piece of information that many people only hear for the first time from the PTSS is the DoH(WA)’s Debt Reduction Scheme. The tenant can arrange with the DoH(WA) to repay a negotiated portion of the debt and save their tenancy this way. The mechanism by which the debt is repaid is through regular payments by direct debit out of their pension which is automatically deposited in the tenant’s bank account.5

Sometimes however, there is no recourse and the court orders eviction. At this point, the tenant and her family must go to live with relations in conditions of secondary homelessness. The exigencies of the living conditions in these circumstances are covered in Birdsall-Jones et al. 2010 (see appendix A). As noted in that report, much depends on whether the homeless family finds shelter with a non-drinking household or a drinking household.

Another consequence of eviction and going to live with relations is the loss of household furnishings and whitegoods. It is difficult to impossible to find relations with the room to store the entire contents of another household, and so these often are simply left to be cleared away by the DoH(WA). The former tenant is billed for this service.

For all of these reasons, the PTSS will do all it can to aid public housing tenants in retaining their tenancies, and often, this management strategy is successful.

### Community Consultation

Of all of the measures which were discussed by Carnarvon practitioners, both for this study and others conducted by this researcher, the most important underlying factor determining the success or failure of any program is whole of community consultation. Carnarvon has learned from past mistakes in this field. One of the pitfalls of conducting a consultation process is that although one might believe that one is consulting with the right people to represent the various parts of a town

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5 The Mid-West Office of the DoH(WA) in fact advertises the debt reduction scheme at intervals in the Mulga Times (WA’s only Aboriginal newspaper), pamphlets available in its offices, on Aboriginal radio and on mainstream commercial TV.
population, it is possible to be mistaken in this regard. When this happens, the situation is not irretrievable, and things can be put right and begin to function properly by bringing in the people who in fact do have the imprimatur of their communities to conduct negotiations (Jones and Birdsall-Jones forthcoming).

One of the points that must be gotten right is the location of a service. It was pointed out that the Family Support Centre services have been successful in part because of where the centre is located. It is in Camel Lane, opposite the Post Office and next to the Tourist Information Centre. It is therefore not associated physically with the DoH(WA) or the hospital, the shire, the police and so forth. Because so many programs operate within the centre, patrons may be entering the building for any one of a number of reasons and cannot be labelled by anyone they know who may have observed them. This kind of privacy is important, considering the sensitive issues for which people seek help and advice.

An example of a problem that may be developing is the establishment of a sobering up shelter. While Carnarvon has always had an Alcohol and Drug facility, it is located in the hospital and Aboriginal people object to going there if they are not in need of hospitalisation. Uncomfortable questions may be asked which would be difficult for the individual to answer and it is undeniably a Non-Aboriginal environment. There was some consultation about the location of the sobering up shelter, but this was not taken into account when the site for the shelter was chosen. It will be built near or next to the hospital. The misgivings surrounding this issue are that because the Aboriginal community’s opinions have been discounted they will engage in the kind of passive resistance at which Aboriginal people are adept and simply not patronise the shelter. A sound example of the problem of the location is that if they are taken there for the night, they must leave that place in the morning and it is a very public location. Their community will soon be aware that the individual has spent the night in the shelter. This is something they wish to avoid.

In addition to all this, there was a conflict of opinion in the town as to whether what the town really needed was an alcohol and drug rehabilitation centre that was physically not associated with the hospital or whether it needed this sobering up shelter. Given the many points of controversy surrounding the establishment of the shelter, this is a situation to be watched.
Geraldton

**Men**

There is concern for men who through the breakdown of their relationships, though not through domestic violence, are barred from the family home, thereby becoming homeless. As one participant noted, the men have only one certain option when this happens and that is “back to mum’s”. While this option is certainly better than the street, it still results in the erosion of a man’s self-esteem.

Men suffer from several knowledge and status deficits in the area of housing. They tend not to understand the DoH(WA) housing application process. Faced with a form, they feel daunted. On being told that everyone else is before them in the cue according to gender and family status, they feel hopeless. They usually fail to understand that they must respond to all the correspondence they receive from the DoH(WA) or they will be removed from the waiting list. Should they happen to obtain housing, they have very little expertise in managing a home. (Birdsall-Jones et al. 2010).

...the biggest problem in Geraldton is our single people, mainly our males between the age of 16 to 30. We have got so many single men that are living in family’s pockets. It does the family no good, it does this young person no good, they feel as if they’re intruding. They’ve got no privacy, they’ve got no life of their own. They can’t come and go as they please. It impacts on their entire life. And not only the young person, it impacts on the family who takes them in. So it’s just a vicious circle. (Interview, Geraldton, 24 July 2012, emergency housing practitioner).

Older men have their own problems. Among the age group from around 40 and up there is a type of man who has spent too much of his life chasing drink, women, and travelling around the family circuit of towns and points beyond. These men have failed to establish a family and therefore have failed to establish a home. As they have grown older, the generations of the family that knew them as children and valued them; their grandparents, parents, aunties, uncles, siblings and cousins; begin to pass on. Because they lack a knowledge of the older man’s life history, the younger generations of the kin group have become less and less tolerant of their aging kinsman, and more and more these men are finding themselves unwelcome in the homes of any of their kinfolk except on a strictly short term basis. They have many regrets, very little to recommend them as household residents and as was put by one housing provider, “he’s done his dash”. This is almost a “universal type” in Aboriginal society, and all these aging men who have devoted too much of their life to drinking are in the same predicament (Birdsall 1990; Birdsall-Jones et al. 2010;) and there are two facilities for housing these men. One is the Boomerang Hostel.
The hostel is well situated, well kept, but it is a small eight room facility. There is also the Camaliers Guest House, mentioned earlier.

There are support services which can provide some aid to these older men, both funded through the DCP (WA). One is the Homeless Accommodation Support worker and the second is the Homeless Support Worker Corrective Services Initiative.

There are therefore very limited resources for men in any area, but this may improve. An example of this is that Geraldton has no Aboriginal men’s health program, and so there are no particular counselling opportunities which might in time make them acceptable as residents in the home of one or another of their relations. However there is interest in the community and the relevant government departments in establishing a men’s health program or facility. Men’s health is also one of the MAOA portfolios.

**Boys**

Close analysis of the data revealed that boys, as a specific group of children aged 18 and under, were mentioned very rarely by Geraldton participants. This corresponds to the lack of service programs or facilities in Geraldton that specifically target boys. In discussions of the problems of children, people generally referred to them using the collective noun ‘kids’, meaning both girls and boys. It is possible that when they talked about kids they were speaking more about boys than girls, but there is nothing in the data that clearly supports this impression.

There was some mention of sexual assault on children in general being a problem and this is the only point on which a differentiation was made between the experiences of boys versus girls:

> The other thing is with, it’s only in recent years that it’s come out, there is a police unit set up. And I don’t know the exact name of it or what it is but there is an investigation unit around the state which is very, very good. And it’s actually followed up on a lot of information where under age activity as in you know, both boys and girls, particularly girls. And with the home environment and all of that. People are being charged (Housing worker 23 July 2012).

**Girls and Women**

All participants expressed concern regarding women and girls. The first was the high rate of sexual assault and sexual abuse within the family.

> This region [the Mid-West] is the most prolific in….in alleged [sexual] assaults…
It’s that vicious cycle. An advantage, or taken advantage of the good will of family and they you go and abuse that by doing something like that. And then the girl turns and doesn’t say anything because they are too afraid. Who is going to believe her? You know, they are putting their own cousin…….[Housing worker, 23 July 2012]

The second was the disruption of girls’ education either by early pregnancy or other circumstances such as family commitments:

...because I know two young girls that were taken off their parents put in under their grandmothers care and then the grandmother picked up a six months old baby and these girls become like babysitters, full time babysitters and they weren’t getting any freedom. They weren’t able to turn up to school which they loved. They ended up in the criminal system at the age of 12. (Community worker, 7July 2012)

As with Carnarvon and Meekatharra it appears that there are very few services which target Aboriginal teenaged girls. There are women’s services offered under the auspices of the Geraldton Family Resource Centre. These services include a ten bed women’s shelter. This presumably would be of help to girls who come into the shelter with their mothers, or those who come in as young mothers with their babies. However, under aged girls, on their own, present the problem of certification to work with or care for minors. Unless the refuge itself is certified as well as the workers to provide services to minors, underage girls on their own seeking refuge would have to be referred elsewhere.

The problems of girls appear to be well understood; early pregnancy, the extreme difficulty of accessing housing, taking up the transient lifestyle thus exposing themselves to dangers of assault, alcohol use during pregnancy and so forth. However, services seem to somewhat limited. Yamatji Patrol and the Departments of Health and Child Protection make an effort to focus on the needs of girls as distinct from boys, but these are both generalist services.

In the main, it would appear that there is no agency offering help and support to girls past the stage of being a very young child. In sum, while there are various services specifically targeting women, there seems to be a distinct lack of services targeting girls in their later pubescent and adolescent years. There is therefore no particular service or program that can identify triggers for potential homelessness among girls, although a great deal of anecdotal evidence exists. However, there is as yet no focussed interest in services and programs for pubescent and adolescent girls.

**Children**

The interesting thing about the understanding of young boys and girls is that practitioners habitually combined them into the collective category of children. There
are some references to the specialist needs of boys versus girls, as discussed above, but mostly, in interviews, one would have to decide by subjective impression whether it was boys or girls that was being discussed.

Services for very young children and babies include the child health program offered by the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services. There is also a kindergarten, Meekawaya, and a specialist maternal and child health program at the Geraldton Regional Aboriginal Medical Service. These services target babies and young children (McHugh, Bradley and Hornbuckle 2011).

The Geraldton Yamatji Patrol has a particular focus on children and young people and runs a pickup service for children and young people found roaming the town at night. There is a sobering up shelter associated with the patrol, but it is run as a separate concern and it is not for children. The patrol seeks to build mutual understanding and respect within the Aboriginal community of Geraldton and also between the Aboriginal community and the non-Aboriginal community in an effort to increase support for children in general and in particular provides support that is designed to serve the differentiated needs of boys versus girls.

_Families and Retaining the family home_

You know, all those issues we talk about. The bottom line is … bottom line is housing. Because if you can put a family in each of their own houses you won’t have some of these problems. But once you start putting them all, you have got two families, or whether it be three families. It’s a recipe for disaster, it’s a recipe for all those other social issues to be brought to head. And it’s just, just … just completely wrong. (Housing worker 23 July 2012)

Probably the most common threat to retaining the family home is crowding. There has been a great deal said about this and it is difficult to find what more there is to say on the subject (Birdsall-Jones and Corunna 2008; Birdsall-Jones et al. 2010; Habibis et al. 2011; Memmott, Birdsall-Jones and Greenop 2012). Clearly household crowding is a force that drives Aboriginal homelessness.

Drivers of homelessness

There are other forces which drive homelessness as well; rent arrears, leaving the home unattended for months while the family is away visiting, failure to keep up with house repair, and failure to keep the yard clean and safe. There is also the relationship between the tenant and the neighbours. There may be a violent argument at the house or neighbours threatened by visitors and this will result in serious complaints to the DoH(WA). Any of these, or any combination of these that
provoke the neighbours complaint to the Department three times in one twelve month period will result in eviction, according to WA’s ‘three strikes’ policy.

There are other forces at work which drive Aboriginal homelessness from the wider Australian society. One of these is WA’s ‘three strikes policy’, but there are many others, for example a lack of employment opportunities. For those who are in employment, whose income makes them ineligible for public housing, the expense and scarcity of private rental makes it almost impossible to find housing. Gaol time often results in the individual’s loss of their public housing home. There are pre-release programs which are supposed to commence six months prior to the end of the prison term, but there is some evidence that the content of the program is not uniform across all prisons. Some prisoners are not informed of the process involved in obtaining a public housing home. These are problems across the state and are not unique to the Mid-West DoH(WA) housing region. (Birdsall-Jones et al.2010).

Help in retaining the family home

In Geraldton there are several programs designed specifically to aid the tenant in retaining the house, and these are also available in country town centres. The Geraldton Resource Centre offers an Aboriginal Tenant Advocacy Service, a Tenant Advocacy Service, Private Rental Accommodation Casework and the supported Housing Assistance Program. The Aboriginal Tenant Advocacy Service is funded by the WA Department of Consumer and Employment Protection and offers information and assistance with a tenant’s rights and responsibilities in the management of a tenancy. This service’s active role is supplying people whose tenancy is at risk with help in understanding the correspondence they receive and then formulating a response and management plan aimed at retaining their tenancy.

Private Rental Accommodation Casework is an outreach program funded by the WA Department for Communities, providing a counsellor to discuss ways of solving those things the landlord has problems with and with the tenant formulate a plan to resolve those problems. The counsellor continues to visit the tenant for some months after the initial visit to offer any further aid in retaining the tenancy.

The Supported Housing Assistance Program is aimed at public housing tenants and is funded by the DoH(WA). It provides its services according to the other services (above) but it specialises in public housing. This service seeks to identify and provide assistance to DoH(WA) tenants who are struggling to manage their tenancy. It is an outreach program which goes to the client to discuss possible solutions and assistance over the range of issues which constitute the threat to the tenancy.

All of these services are housed within the Geraldton Resource Centre which, as in Carnarvon is lodged at Lotteries House. Also like Carnarvon, Lotteries House is
physically unassociated with other services such as police, the DoH(WA). It is quite apparent from their website that the Geraldton Resource Centre is concerned with protecting the privacy of their clients. There is a page devoted to instructing people how to remove the cookies left in a computer’s operating system after the user logs out of the site.

**Community Consultation**

In Geraldton an alliance was formed in 2008 that included twelve Aboriginal organisations which agreed to meet on a monthly basis for the purpose of working in partnership on what they saw as priority community issues. The alliance, the Midwest Aboriginal Organisations Association (MAOA), began with an approach by the Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health (CUCRH) to these organisations suggesting that perhaps more could be accomplished by working together rather than separately.

The group met and settled on five key issues that needed ongoing, dedicated effort with some kind of weight behind that effort. The weight behind the effort was MAOA. The issues identified were housing, health, education, justice/safe communities, and culture. Some of these are further broken down into sub-projects. Health, for example, has a sub-project for men’s health attached to it.

The alliance is currently alive and well, and according to one member:

> You know I admit I wasn’t one initially who was responsive to the thing. Because there is all, there we that mistrust as in what do you want us involved, you know, do you want to take over our organisation, you know, fear of losing control….if you are fighting for the same piece of cake well I want at least half of it if not the whole bloody lot or two thirds of it at least, you know. I want more than them because we have got more people here or whatever. And that’s…what the mind set was. But it’s [MAOA] is not like that. You know I am sitting here whitting away and it’s because of the personalities within that group, you know. As I say some of us have worked together 25 years ago…

The alliance includes representatives from 15 organisations including NGOs, state and federal departments, Aboriginal organisations and includes both Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal people in its membership. The strength of this model of consultation comes from the commitment of its membership and their acceptance that some of its goals will take years to achieve.

The latter is a major stumbling block to many consultation processes. If the participants in the consultation become jaded because nothing seems to be
changing, those people will drop out of the consultation process. This serves to subvert, and possibly break a consultation process. MAOA was founded in 2008 and is still working strongly at the time of writing.
5. Conclusion

The purpose of this report was firstly to evaluate the ways in which the relevant service providers in each of the study locations responded to the issue of Aboriginal homelessness; secondly to evaluate whether or not there existed a coordinated approach to Aboriginal homelessness within each town, and between the towns; and thirdly to assess whether or not each town both recognised and had the resources to deal with the complex nature of Aboriginal homelessness.

In this research, this complexity has been addressed through commencing interviews by pointing to the fact that the experience and the needs of Aboriginal homeless people differ according age and gender. Thus the triggers that set an Aboriginal individual on a pathway to homelessness change according to age and gender. For example, pathways to homelessness for adolescent boys are not the same as those for adolescent girls. Participants were asked, in view of these contrasting groups, what measures had been taken to respond to the needs of each age and gender group.

Meekatharra

In some ways, Meekatharra seems to be a town set against itself in that there appeared to be no accord among the various services, either formal or informal. Some participants had an understanding of one particular age and gender group but it was noted that relations between agencies was somewhat strained. Indications were found that the Non-Aboriginal population had very little knowledge of the Aboriginal people of the town. Meekatharra is a very small town. Its total population as of the Census in 2006 was 798. 351 of the total population is Aboriginal (ABS 2006). It was surprising to find, in certain sectors, so little understanding among the non-Aboriginal residents of the Aboriginal residents.

This may be due to a lack of trust among the various agencies. In the Meekatharra Council minutes for 17 October 2009 there are indications of this. The minutes of that meeting reflect an ongoing problem of the relationship between the shire and the youth organisation, Kids after Dark. Consideration was given to whether or not the Shire should continue funding the program (Meekatharra Shire Council 2009). It is not clear whether this problem was ever resolved, but as of 2011, the program was still in operation and still providing reports of its activities to the council on a monthly
basis. At the time of the field work there were still some rumblings regarding the lack of transparency in what goes on in Kids after Dark.

This lack of trust between the shire council and some service providers is further complicated by a lack of regard between the service providers themselves, and there are various outright statements of this in the data which will not be quoted here for reasons of preserving the anonymity of participants. There seem also to be barriers to Aboriginal community development. I refer here to the town meeting described above. I was not told of any further town meetings.

In sum, Meekatharra cannot offer a coordinated approach or response to the homelessness needs of the Aboriginal community because the agencies do not appear to work together with an agreed approach to Aboriginal pathways to homelessness. As Dr. Tierney noted, “The situation reached a crisis point a long time ago.” (Cutler 2012).

This does not mean that any of these agencies are unaware of the nature, or shape, of Aboriginal homelessness in the town. Most of the participants in this research cited Aboriginal children as the most significant issue in this regard, but with a certain caveat. Many of the Aboriginal children who wander the streets well into the night have homes that they could go to, so in that sense, they are not homeless. However, many of these children are escaping from their own homes because of adult drinking and drug abuse which go on very late into the night, and the children find these situations unbearable and/or perceive that their parents are either drunk or drugged, and are therefore incapable of protecting their children from adults who attend these parties.

The primary recommendation for Meekatharra is to seek ways to control the problem of substance abuse among the Aboriginal community of the town. There are several options for this as demonstrated in the report by Memmott, and Nash (2012). A consideration of drinking styles leads to the view that those who control their own drinking style without the aid of any program tend to practice total abstinence. As in many Aboriginal communities, there are those who practice binge drinking until their money runs out (see Memmott, Birdsall-Jones and Greenop). In Meekatharra this would appear to be the dominant drinking style.

For a variety of reasons, but chiefly for the sake of the Aboriginal children of Meekatharra, the of resources of the shire, the police, the agencies, NGOs and the Aboriginal community must work to come together. Meekatharra could look to
Carnarvon and Geraldton for models which have worked in those places and which might help them to arrive at their own model of community cooperation.

Carnarvon

Carnarvon has this problem of home abandonment among the Aboriginal children as well. This is a difficult problem to tackle unless a coordinated approach is taken. Concentrating only on the child cannot change the situation in the home. Clearly, an approach that takes in the whole family is necessary in these circumstances. The agencies currently in place seem to be working to capacity and insofar as they can, practitioners are taking a coordinated approach which, depending on the issue involved, may include the police, the shire council, the NGOs, the Gascoyne Development Commission, the Aboriginal community and lately, the DoH(WA). They also have the support and active involvement of key elders from the Carnarvon Aboriginal community. The impetus behind this quite extraordinary degree of consultation is that practitioners in Carnarvon have learned that unless a proposed service aimed at the needs of the Aboriginal people is opened to a whole of community consultation that service is likely to fail.

Geraldton

This concern for children abandoning the family home also concerns participants in Geraldton. However, there has also been expressed great concern for young men who have no home of their own, and older men whose situation is all the more dire. Younger men can still go back to their parents’ home, whereas the parents of the older men mostly have passed on.

Because it is the regional hub city, Geraldton has more resources aimed at ameliorating the situation of Aboriginal people than anywhere else in the Midwest Murchison region. In the past, the approach of the various agencies has not been coordinated, and resources have perhaps not been employed to their best advantage therefore. This has changed in recent years with the establishment of MAOA.

Housing is a major issue in the problem of Aboriginal homelessness, however it is only one of a cascade of problems which take in welfare, child protection, nutrition, psychological health, substance abuse and what would appear to be the failure of both the Non-Aboriginal world and the Aboriginal world to enable young Aboriginal people to develop a positive view of the future. MAOA has established a set of priorities with the responsibility for advancing each of these priorities taken on as a ‘portfolio’ by the relevant MAOA member. Those participants who were involved in
MAOA revealed an ongoing sense of firm commitment and enthusiasm for the organisation as well as their own particular portfolio. This said, housing is a major issue among Aboriginal people, and also among practitioners.

There are not now and never have been enough public and low cost homes which would satisfy the need. This shortage of housing is therefore chronic and ongoing and there are no indications that the situation will change. However, the housing situation can be improved through a variety of ameliorative measures that would improve tenants’ capacity to retain the tenancy of their houses.

What are the policy and practice reasons for these contrasting situations of Aboriginal homelessness?

It is often the case in an area as full of problems as Aboriginal homelessness everyone, it seems, is aware of the problems that constitute pathways to homelessness, but as this study has demonstrated they see these pathways only within the limits of their perspectives, as matters of their own service or community, and what they can or cannot do within the terms of the service provider which employs them. Therefore, drug and alcohol counsellors see the problem as matters of addiction and rehabilitation; child health and welfare practitioners see the problem as one of child safety, nutrition, quality of parenting, housing standards; and so forth. In these circumstances, agencies tend to ‘atomise’, or isolate themselves from other services which may be attempting to tackle the same general set of problems. In order to resolve the issue of Aboriginal homelessness it is necessary to take a more holistic approach, or perhaps one might say a more cooperative approach.

Carnarvon and Geraldton represent best case examples, although for different reasons. In Carnarvon, the mutual respect among practitioners and the community encourages the coordinated approach which this researcher has observed in the town over a period of five years. The approach is largely informal, but its central theme is respect for each other across the boundaries between agencies and between the agencies and the Aboriginal community. Crucially, there is also an acceptance of the fact that some things take years to come to fruition. There have been projects which were stalled for years because of agency competition and ongoing conflicts based on kin group membership (Jones and Birdsall-Jones, forthcoming).

Geraldton has taken a more formalised approach than Carnarvon, which reflects the fact that it is not a country town, but a small city. As such, finding solutions to the
forces which act on Aboriginal people are more complex than in towns like Carnarvon and Meekatharra. The elements of solving problems such as homeless, housing and related concerns will be different simply as a matter of the size of the town. In any case, perhaps the most important accomplishment of a coordinated approach to the problems besetting many Aboriginal town communities is the achievement of transparency between Aboriginal community and the various agencies present in the town.

**Managing Homelessness in the context of Aboriginal culture**

In our first report the authors sought to explain the various facets of Aboriginal homelessness (Memmott, Birdsall-Jones and Greenop 2012). We identified various categories of homelessness among Aboriginal people according to each category’s characteristics, its cultural justification and its non-cultural justification according to type. In this report the author has sought to demonstrate that (a) Aboriginal homelessness varies from place to place and the way(s) in which it varies, (b) to differentiate between pathways to homelessness and the state of homelessness itself and (c) to note the commonalities among the research sites regarding the shape, or demographical characteristics of the Aboriginal homeless. These concerns are not mutually exclusive. For example, the presence of children roaming the streets at night is a common concern for all three research sites, and these children must be distinguished as being on a pathway to homelessness as opposed to being homeless *per se*. They are at risk of homelessness and have become dysfunctionally mobile (see Memmott, Birdsall-Jones and Greenop 2012 at Table 10, p.45) in a way that has previously been unaccounted for.

In the smaller towns of Carnarvon and Meekatharra, these children were firmly identified as having left the family home to avoid adults who were engaged in substance abuse. In Geraldton, participants also discussed children on the street but because Geraldton is so much larger than the country towns, some participants found it difficult to say whether at least some of them were simply on their way from one place to another, on their way home, or had been driven out of their homes by objectionable adult activities.

In Geraldton, those who spoke with certainty about children night-roaming were those whose work was on a neighbourhood basis as opposed to the larger field covered by government agencies and service providers. Those participants who worked on a neighbourhood basis were all Aboriginal and the researcher discussed
the situation of night-roaming children in Meekatharra in particular. In the understanding of these Aboriginal participants, the problems faced by the Meekatharra children constituted a worrying example either of cultural breakdown or the breakdown of the family structure.

Generally speaking, one of the most important purposes of Aboriginal family structure is to provide avenues of help for children whose parents are known to be failing to look after their children properly (Birdsall 1988, 1990; Birdsall-Jones and Corunna 2008; Birdsall-Jones et al. 2010). It is evident from the data gathered in Meekatharra that this extended family structure was not serving the needs of the children in this particular way.

It has been noted already that Meekatharra lacks the consultative, cooperative, culturally based structures that both practitioners and Aboriginal elders have worked hard to develop in Carnarvon and Geraldton. However, it should be well noted that this is not for lack of trying. The women’s program officer whose work is discussed above (see Chapter 4, sub-section Girls and Women) has sought to foster a culturally based solution to the problem of the night-roaming children by bringing together a number of the Aboriginal women elders of the town. For a time, they were successful in taking children off the street by sending them to their grandmother’s or their aunts’ homes. Ultimately however, this effort failed but that is not because of a failure of Aboriginal culture but a failure to obtain funding to support the elders’ efforts. Were funding to have been available, (a) it would have given the women more of a chance both to provide support to the grandmothers who were asked to take on the short term care of children and (b) it would have provided more of an opportunity to increase the involvement of other elders of the community in their work.

This latter point is crucial, because elders, both men and women, have great authority and universal respect among the extended family groups of their towns. However, the power that accrues to their authority refers only to their own extended kin group. Within that group, they have both the power and authority to remonstrate with people about their behaviour and they also have the power to tell the children of the family where they should be and how they should behave. However, they cannot exercise their authority outside their own extended kin group. Not every woman elder in Meekatharra chose to participate in the effort, and so not every extended kin group in Meekatharra was represented within the women elder’s action group. Some people, therefore, would not be told what to do by these women. The second reason for the failure of the group’s effort for the children. the lack of funding, was always
going to be difficult as a matter of local politics. It is possible that they could have enlisted the support of the DCP(WA), but this would be taken as a very hostile action on their part by the Aboriginal community of the town, and the consequences for the women could be serious.

Groups of Concern in Aboriginal Homelessness

In Meekatharra, concern was expressed regarding home abandonment among children on account of a dangerous environment at home. As one practitioner put it:

> It’s not that they are homeless, it’s why would be at home (Interview, Women’s Service Officer, Meekatharra, July 2012)?

Child home abandonment was, generally speaking, the primary concern of all agencies at which interviews were conducted. Child home abandonment is certainly not new as a phenomenon, nor is this the first time it has been discussed in the Western Australian context (Birdsall-Jones et al. 2010). However, we have previously seen this problem discussed under the heading of ‘Aboriginal (or Indigenous) youth homelessness’. Identifying child home abandonment as a phenomenon allows us to be more specific about the drivers of the larger phenomenon of Aboriginal youth homelessness in that child home abandonment is one pathway to homelessness. While it has not been identified specifically as such, it is clear from the literature that it occurs in other states of Australia (Allwood and Rogers 2001; Evans and Shaver 2001; Hunter 2006). As a general phenomenon, child home abandonment occurs internationally and for much the same reasons as in the Australian Aboriginal context (Rukmana 2008).

However, child home abandonment has not before been considered as a common problem across an entire region. If this problem is not addressed properly and with dispatch, WA looks forward to a lost generation of human potential among the Aboriginal population of the state. If the problem continues to go unaddressed, then WA will face the cost of significant mental health and welfare expenditure on behalf of this generation many of whom are unlikely to become contributing members of Aboriginal society and society in general. It is emphasised that the lessons of consultation and the acceptance of dedication to a problem for the long term will provide the only viable solutions to Aboriginal child home abandonment.

Meekatharra has already been discussed on this matter (see above).
In Carnarvon, child home abandonment was also of concern. The recommendation was to establish a children’s hostel as first step. Concern was also expressed regarding cyber-bullying among the adolescents, however, Carnarvon needs support in order to put in place procedures for dealing with this.

In Geraldton, some concern was expressed about the flow-on effects of better policing of drug use and child abuse in Carnarvon. The point being made was that while Carnarvon was now in much better heart than it had been, these offenders have now come to Geraldton. The greater proportion of concern however, focussed on child home abandonment and the plight of single men. Single men are the lowest priority for public housing, and no one questioned this. Participants did however point to the current crisis in affordable housing for single men. Funding has been granted to the Bundiyarra organisation to build hostel accommodation, but seeing as the funding was only recently granted, it will be several years before the hostel is established and ready for use.

**Policy and Practice responses**

This section provides empirical support for the contention that appears in the first report for this project (Memmott, Birdsall-Jones and Greenop 2012) where we note that:

> The emergent recommendation then is that housing managers, town authorities (Council, police etc.) Should ... seek ways to work with Aboriginal leaders to deal with homelessness issues...[p.57]

The policy and practice related reasons for the contrasting situations of Aboriginal homelessness in the WA Mid-West region arise out of the degree to which coordination exists among the various agencies and government structures in the town and their willingness to involve the Aboriginal community of the town in the process. This approach can take a relatively long time to establish, and bringing the community into the decision making process must be an integral component in the design of community consultation. As noted by Simmons and Birchall (2005):

> More and more, public service providers have begun to abandon their previous attempts to "bolt" user participation on to existing administrative practices, and to adopt a more collaborative approach (page 262).

Carnarvon is an example of good practice in service delivery because local government, state and federal agencies, NGOs and the Aboriginal community have learned that in order to accomplish a productive, usable product, they must engage with one another actively from the start. Geraldton has formalised this practice with a Memorandum of Understanding between MAOA and the Combined Universities...
Centre for Rural Health (CUCRH), which is supported by federal and local governments and by CUCRH (MAOA 2012).

The presence of rough sleepers varies among towns and according to season. There are practically no rough sleepers in Carnarvon, but there are young people of all ages roaming the town at night, either as a matter of recreation or because their homes have become too dangerous for children due to adult drug and alcohol abuse in the home. Secondary homelessness is the most prevalent expression of homelessness in Carnarvon. This is owing to loss of the public housing home for any of a number of reasons, or visitors from the north or from the inland Aboriginal community of Burringurrah. Participants expressed the need for short term hostel type accommodation in order to relieve household crowding due to visitors.

Geraldton did at one time have an identifiable group of homeless men, but neither this particular group nor any other has been seen for some time. Geraldton has the same kind of secondary homelessness as Carnarvon, and has insufficient short term low cost accommodation to alleviate the household crowding that results from this. Like Carnarvon, Geraldton has children on the streets at night. Unlike Carnarvon however, the size of the city prevents practitioners from finding out why they are on the streets and thus can come to no informed decision that would enable the children to stay home in the evening. For Geraldton, therefore, some in depth research is required involving youth workers in order to find out who among the night time street children are actually homeless, which have abandoned the family home, and those who are simply out for the sake of amusement.

Regarding Meekatharra, the data reveals a grim picture of child home abandonment owing to an unsafe home environment caused by drink and drug parties. The lack of coordination among the various services in town does not cause this problem but it does prevent a coordinated, effective solution being developed to bring this problem under control.

With regard to the question of the application of the findings made in this study to other regional centres, the key message lies in a coordinated response of the relevant agencies in the town that includes the Aboriginal community as an integral part of the decision making process, and not as an ‘add-on’ to a pre-existing process. Finally, all parties must be prepared to remain committed to the process for the long term. None of the problems of any kind of homelessness will be solved by one single measure. Rough sleepers need accommodation, but they also need ongoing support and counselling in order to retain that accommodation. Children who have
abandoned the family home may need to be made wards of the state but this will not solve the problems of their parents who would vehemently obstruct their children from becoming state wards. Both the children and their parents need to have the realistic hope of being reunited as a family.

The worst case scenario and the approach which offers the least chance of success is the ‘silo’ approach, in which agencies remain apart and uncommunicative among one another although they are likely to be addressing the same problems, with the result that the problems in particular cases become a cascade of problems that overwhelms the situation with the result that it becomes virtually unresolvable.
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Appendix

Table 2: Secondary homelessness risks, drinking versus non-drinking household [From Birdsall-Jones et al. 2010: 37 – 38]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-drinking household</th>
<th>Drinking household</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Risk to person</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>Possible physical conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk to property</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>Possible loss of clothing, goods through ‘borrowing’ and outright theft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health risk</td>
<td>Normal for Indigenous population</td>
<td>Exacerbated through increased risk of violence, failure of domestic economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Visitors coming and going through the night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Food gets stolen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Room density</td>
<td>• Although parents and children may all have to share one bedroom, their space is respected</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• May be able to put older boys to sleep in lounge room if in a non-drinking house</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Parents and children may have a room for themselves, but alcohol-affected people don’t respect privacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cannot allow children to sleep in lounge room because of party behaviour at odd hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal autonomy</td>
<td>• Householder makes the rules, you have no say</td>
<td>Householder makes the rules, you have no say</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• If important family members come to visit, you have to shift to someone else’s place, give them the room</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Limited privacy</td>
<td>Very little privacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect on kids</td>
<td>• Insufficient privacy for adolescents, girls in particular</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Lack of focused parental attention because parents often stressed in this situation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Risk of behaviour problems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Behaviour problems can cause conflict among children and adults</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Often no breakfast</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• No privacy</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Older kids may take up drinking</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Younger kids stressed, behaviour changes for worse, trouble at school</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• May leave school because parent(s) unable to provide enough support</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Very little chance of protecting children from abuse</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Children likely to stay away for increasing periods of time until they take up primary homelessness, occasionally living with other kin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect on self in drinking household</td>
<td>• Shame, sharing room if kids too old</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Depression</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Get short-tempered, try not to hit kids</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Overcrowding, lack of personal autonomy lead to feeling of resentment toward host</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Guilt because cannot provide family with own home</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Shame, not being able to provide basic safety, privacy for family</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Shame, have to hide food away in order to guarantee supply</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Spend too much money replacing stolen goods, eating out for every meal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Depression</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Short tempered, risk of family violence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>