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An innovative approach to address homelessness in regional Australia: Participant evaluation of a co-payment model

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Homelessness is not only about lack of secure housing, it is sometimes caused by simple reasons such as lack of money to travel home. The purpose of this study was to investigate whether the participant co-funded assistance program ('Return to Country' [R2C]), when offered to low socio-economic individuals experiencing homelessness, represented an effective use of scarce resources.

Study design: In northern Australia, a remote and sparsely populated area, Indigenous persons who travel to regional centres cannot always afford airfares home; they therefore become stranded away from their 'country' leading to rapidly deteriorating health, isolation and separation from family and kin. The R2C program was designed to facilitate travel for persons who were temporarily stranded and were voluntarily seeking to return home. The program provided operational support and funding (participants co-funded AU\$99) to participants to return home.

Methods: Using a descriptive, case series research design, university researchers independently evaluated the R2C program using semi-structured interviews with 37 participants. **Results:** An investment of AU\$970 per participant in the program with partial co-payment was associated with high participant acceptability and satisfaction in-line with harms reduction around substance and criminal abuse, which is suggestive of long-term success for the model.

Conclusions: Findings from this study can contribute to the development of best practice guidelines and policies that specifically address the needs of this unique population of stranded persons, who are seeking to return home. The acceptance of the co-payment

Abbreviation: R2C, Return to country – program name.

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model can be adopted by policy makers involved in homelessness prevention in other locations in Australia or internationally as an add-on service provision to mainstream housing support.

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Introduction

Homelessness is increasing globally as are the health and social burdens associated with high numbers of ‘rough sleepers’.^{1–4} Homelessness is strongly linked to poverty and is increasingly viewed as a component of social exclusion and disempowerment.⁵ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (hereafter respectfully, Indigenous people) experience homelessness at a rate of three to ten times higher than non-Indigenous Australians.^{6,7} This is echoed in Canadian Indigenous people experiencing homelessness.⁸ This higher rate of homelessness is likely to be consequential of the complex history associated with disempowerment and social exclusion.⁷ Since colonisation, indigenous people have endured enforced displacement from homelands, with subsequent discriminatory government policies including human rights inequalities and forced child relocation, the children from this policy are known today as ‘The Stolen Generation’.⁹ The effects of colonisation within the history of indigenous people have resulted in powerlessness, trans-generational grief and despair, with subsequent poor health.^{10,7,11}

Indigenous peoples from remote localities are frequent travellers to rural or urban centres: temporarily or permanently, this migration from rural to urban areas is often referred to as ‘urban drift’.¹² With insufficient temporary accommodation available, there is an increased risk of temporary homelessness within this group. This is further exacerbated by a lack of financial means to be able to return to home communities because of the significant costs.

In the tropical north of Australia, Indigenous people may become homeless when they are involuntarily stranded in regional centres such as Cairns (Queensland) and Darwin (Northern Territory).^{13,14} Indigenous movements from remote communities to regional or urban centres have been documented to include factors such as family-related reasons (visiting friends and relatives), service-related reasons (accessing health or legal services), leisure-related reasons (shopping, attending sports or entertainment events), climate-related reasons (avoiding extreme weather conditions) and safety-related reasons (escaping interpersonal violence in remote communities).^{12,13,15} Indigenous movements are often described as ‘unbounded’ or ‘nodal’ as they regularly engage in short-term trips, but many then choose to return to their home communities.^{13,16} What is notable is that many temporarily homeless indigenous persons living in regional or urban centres have available accommodation back in their remote community.¹⁶

While the exact number of people experiencing homelessness is unknown, according to the Counting the Homeless Queensland (2009)⁶, the tropical north of Australia has a higher proportion of people experiencing homelessness than

Queensland as a whole, with 11.6% of Queensland's people experiencing homelessness.⁶ Public response to homelessness has led to the implementation of several safety management strategies. More than 17 homelessness services function in the Cairns city alone, most of which are accommodation support services (76%; $n = 13$).¹⁷ However, housing provision is not the only solution to address homelessness.

In 2012, the Queensland Police Service (Queensland Police) implemented a voluntary ‘Return to Country’ (R2C) program.¹⁸ Indigenous people who share spiritual ties with the same tribal lands are locally referred to as ‘country-men’ as they share the same ‘country’: referring to their tribal homelands. The R2C model was based on an Alice Springs service¹⁹ and applied the theoretical basis of ‘Intensive Assertive Outreach’ to homelessness around the Cairns city. Intensive Assertive Outreach involved service providers engaging with homeless persons, not the other way around. This method of engagement has been argued to have a positive impact on homeless clients. Previous research with the same population established the total R2C program cost of AU\$ 970 per participant with potential savings of more than AU\$ 2.7 million in lesser health and justice services utilisation.¹⁸

Although a few previous studies have evaluated homelessness support programs,^{3,20–23} and some authors have evaluated programs from the participant's perspective,^{13,24–26} of these, only one study examined Australian Indigenous responses,¹³ and one study identified willingness to pay, in the context of housing.²⁷ However, no previously published study evaluated the success or failure of a participant co-funded model of transport assistance program when offered to low socio-economic individuals experiencing homelessness.

The aims of this study were to (1) characterise the demography of a sample of the stranded persons, who were seeking to return home, their trajectory into homelessness; and, (2) assess the model acceptability by evaluating participants' satisfaction with the service and engagement processes as conducted by the Queensland Police.

Methods

Qualitative methodologies were utilised to provide in-depth insight into individual experiences with R2C program.²⁸ To meet the aims of this study, the researcher adopted a descriptive, case series design³⁰ to examine the acceptability of a user-pays (contribution) model for homeless person return to home community from urban or regional areas, without bias and while enable participants to speak freely about their experience of this assistance program. Semi-structured interview schedule guided collection of the data and involved answering questions in conversation to elicit responses that answer the research questions.²⁸

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