

3 Assistance for housing

3.1 Introduction

This chapter examines current information on housing assistance: household types, characteristics of the recipients of housing assistance, the nature of assistance, and government expenditure. The aim of housing assistance is to overcome the problems that households face in obtaining or retaining suitable accommodation whether due to cost, availability or adequacy and to provide households with the flexibility to meet changing demand.

Housing assistance is an important element of Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments social policy and welfare frameworks. The Commonwealth and the States and Territories have developed and implemented strategies aimed at providing housing assistance to people on low incomes or with special needs, and at preventing and reducing homelessness. These include the Commonwealth–State Housing Agreement, the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, the National Homelessness Strategy, and the Building a Better Future: Indigenous Housing to 2010 statement.

Governments provide a broad range of assistance across tenure types (see Table 3.1). All States and Territories provide assistance across all tenure types, although because of different social or economic needs, there is great variation between jurisdictions in the composition and range of assistance. Currently, the major forms of direct assistance are rent assistance in the private rental market, rent rebates in public housing and deposit assistance schemes for first home buyers. The major forms of indirect assistance are concessions to owner–occupiers. The non-taxation of capital gains on the family home is an example of a tax expenditure or tax concession. Changes to housing assistance in Australia in recent years have been characterised by growth in the extent of government assistance for households renting in the private market and reforms to public and community housing assistance.

Home ownership has been seen as an integral component of Australia's welfare system. Tax concessions to owner–occupiers have greatly contributed to home ownership rates at the later stages of the life-cycle, and hence to the affordability of housing for older people. As a result, considerable pressure has been taken off the age pension system and Commonwealth rent assistance payments.

The cost of housing is seen as an important issue in relation to poverty and social exclusion. In 1999, over 40% of Australians perceived poverty to be not having enough to buy basics like food, housing and clothing (Saunders 2001). Housing assistance can play an important role in addressing basic living costs by reducing the proportion of a household's budget that has to be spent on housing.

- 10% of communities had no electricity supply (including generators); and
- 5% of communities had no sewerage system, and 59% of communities with a population of 50 or more experienced overflows or leakages of sewerage systems. Forty-one of these communities were found to have a method of grey-water disposal that was undesirable to Australian public health authorities (ABS 2000c:20).

Table 3.25: Condition of dwellings managed by Indigenous housing organisations, by location, 1999

	Discrete community		Town or other location		Total	
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Minor or no repair	9,696	65.6	4,568	80.9	14,264	69.8
Major repairs	3,468	23.5	783	13.9	4,251	20.8
Replacement	1,407	9.5	233	4.1	1,640	8.0
All dwellings^(a)	14,777	100.0	5,647	100.0	20,424	100.0

(a) Includes 'not stated'.

Source: ABS 2000c.

Addressing Indigenous housing need

The diversity of circumstances of Indigenous Australians has led to a range of policies and programs to address their housing need. At the Commonwealth level, in addition to the provision of Commonwealth Rent Assistance and Aboriginal Rental Housing Program funds administered by FaCS, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) provides housing funds. ATSIC provided \$116.5 million in 1999–00 in housing output disbursements (ATSIC 2000:96). The majority of this funding was spent through the National Aboriginal Health Strategy and Regional Council components of the Community Housing and Infrastructure Program (CHIP). From this funding, 403 houses were constructed or purchased and 1,036 houses were renovated or upgraded (ATSIC 2000:100). The ATSIC Community Development Employment Program has over 1,600 individuals employed or contracted in housing construction and/or maintenance.

Large environmental health projects are funded under the National Aboriginal Health Strategy. Between 1996 and 2000, approximately \$260 million was provided for housing and environmental infrastructure, resulting in improved health conditions in Indigenous communities. The new triennium for the health strategy began in July 2000, with approximately \$200 million allocated to assist approximately 95 communities (ATSIC 2000:106, 108).

The ATSIC—Army Community Assistance Program was initiated in late 1996 and targets communities with an urgent need for upgrading of both housing and infrastructure. In 1996–97, \$11.6 million was allocated across six communities and this program was extended for 4 years from late 1998, with \$40 million allocated from both the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care and ATSIC (ATSIC 2000:109).

The Fixing Houses for Better Health Project was established in 1999 and involves assessment of the state of repair of houses and immediate provision of urgently

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