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The Living Conditions of Aboriginal People in Victoria

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Abstract

Since the home forms a central and prominent component of our lives, the quality of the housing structure and appliances within the home will thus partly reflect the quality of our lives. To this end, this paper presents information collected as part of a broader project, the Koorie Energy Efficiency Project (KEEP) which was one of 20 piloted national projects funded by the Department of Industry, Innovation and Science Low Income Energy Efficiency Program.

Based on data collected from 867 Aboriginal households in Victoria from 2013–2015, it is revealed that most homes are rented (86%) and constructed more than 20 years ago (67%). Housing constructed more than 10 years ago is at risk of not being energy efficient and typically requires extra work to be done on the home itself to ensure it is more energy efficient. However, this appears to be rarely practiced by landlords. For example, 36% of Aboriginal householders report having no insulation in their homes, and although 60% report having ceiling insulation, only 19% report having wall insulation. Adequate insulation ensures heat is retained during winter, and coolness is retained during summer, thus reducing the heating/cooling energy burden. With low insulation levels, Aboriginal tenants have little choice but to increase their energy use, or live in sub-optimal thermal comfort conditions.

Furthermore, fixed appliances that typically come with the home also impact on the quality of home life possible. For example, 12% of Aboriginal households report having no cooking appliance (no oven and no stove), while 13% report having no fixed heating appliance. Since Victoria is one of the coldest states in Australia in terms of external temperatures, having no heating appliance is problematic and could be linked to subsequent health issues.

These findings attest to the limited capacity of Aboriginal householders to genuinely improve their energy efficiency when they struggle by living in inefficient housing structures, where being tenants, they are unable to make many improvements to the home itself, and are invariably stuck with low energy efficient fixed appliances or worse, none at all, so that running small energy hungry appliances becomes the only viable alternative.

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1. Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (hereafter referred to as Aboriginal Peoples) represent less than 3% of the Australian population [1] and yet are known to struggle with many social and health issues in proportions much higher than the rest of the Australian population. Numerous reports, including the latest *Closing the Gap* report [2], attest to the discrepancies in mortality, health, employment and education, with little progress towards improving the situation. For many, their quality of life and well-being are constantly threatened. For example, in Australia, Aboriginal youth, particularly male, commit suicide at a higher rate than any other youth in the world [3]; an Aboriginal woman is 34 times more likely to be hospitalised from domestic violence than a non-Aboriginal woman [4]; an Aboriginal person is 15 times more likely to be imprisoned than a non-Aboriginal person, and Aboriginal youth are 25 times more likely to be imprisoned compared with non-Aboriginal youth [5]. Since most targets for *Closing the Gap* remain unmet, and that some outcomes are worsening, the situation has been described as a ‘national crisis’ [3,4,5]. The gulf between the living standards of Aboriginal Peoples and the rest of Australia is uncomfortably wide and growing larger. It is evident from these figures that what is being done, by and large, is not working well enough or not working at all.

In the context of residential energy, further hardships and disadvantage are being experienced by Aboriginal people. In 2012, the Consumer Utilities Advocacy Centre (CUAC) identified a number of barriers that exclude Aboriginal participation in the energy market, creating disadvantage and adversely affecting Aboriginal health and wellbeing [6]. This includes issues of debt and affordability, household energy consumption, navigating an increasingly complex energy market and the causal link between energy usage and living standards. Continually rising fuel prices, coupled with a highly complex energy sector in Victoria, amplifies their financial struggles; discomfort at home; inability to care for children and the elderly; poor health and general lower quality of life creating energy-related disadvantage. CUAC’s research revealed that Aboriginal consumers in Victoria were being disconnected and restricted from energy and water services in higher numbers than the rest of the population [6].

In an effort to understand some of the reasons behind the energy-related disadvantage experienced by many Aboriginal Victorians, and as part of a broader project to improve their plight, the Koorie Energy Efficiency Project (KEEP) was formed, funded by the Department of Industry, Innovation and Science as part of the national Low Income Energy Efficiency Program (LIEEP). KEEP involved the collaboration between six not-for-profit organisations, three of which were Aboriginal. The purpose of this paper is to report on part of the findings of KEEP as they relate to the home. Since the home forms a central and prominent component of our lives, the quality of the housing structure and appliances used within the home may shed light on the reasons why many Aboriginal Victorians struggle with energy bills and energy efficiency.

2. Methodology

At the start of the project, KEEP project partners decided that a direct approach to the home would be needed to provide proper support. It was important that the Aboriginal householder felt comfortable and were in a position to learn more about energy usage in the home and how to lower their bills. Partners decided to train several Aboriginal people on household energy efficiency and on how to deal with the energy sector (*e.g.*, consumer rights, hardship programs, advocacy, *etc.*). These trainees became the project’s Community Development Officers (CDOs) so that Aboriginal people were visiting the homes of Aboriginal households to have a 1-2 hour one-on-one exchange. During each household visit, CDOs provided tips on how to lower energy use in the home (*e.g.*, lower the heating thermostat, turn off lights when leaving a room, minimise the use of dryers, and so on). Invariably, the CDO was asked to help the householder with their current bill or disconnection notice. In those cases, CDOs would contact the

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