

## CHAPTER 15

# Indigenous Homelessness: New Zealand Context

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In New Zealand many Māori live in impoverished and overcrowded conditions and, as such, are overrepresented in the homeless population (Groot et al. 2011a). In this chapter, we argue that homelessness is endemic to experiences of colonialism, not only at the personal, but also at the *hapu* (subtribe), *iwi* (tribe), and national level where many Māori have experienced over 150 years of being rendered out of place in their *hau kainga* (ancestral homelands). We consider colonialism and societal developments that have impacted *whānau* (extended family) economically, culturally, and socially, contributing to high rates of homelessness among Māori today.

This chapter begins with a brief historical overview, followed by a discussion of the definitions of homelessness unique to the socio-political context of New Zealand, and is supplemented by lived understandings. Particular attention is given to the contributing health, policy, and relational consequences of rapid urbanization for Māori. Homelessness as a human rights issue and treaty obligations are also considered. Contributing chapters in this section will extend the arguments placed here through a consideration of how Māori cultural practices shape people's efforts to retain a positive sense of self and place, and to engage in homemaking while dwelling on the streets.

### **The Experiences of *Tangata Whenua* (People of the Land)**

New Zealand or Aotearoa (as it is often referred to by many *iwi*/tribal groups) is a relatively remote island country in the southwestern Pacific Ocean. Geographically, New Zealand encompasses two main landmasses—that of the North Island, or Te Ika-a-Māui (the fish of Maui), and the South Island,

or Te Waipounamu (the water[s] of greenstone)—as well as a number of smaller surrounding islands. Throughout history, the Māori population has been concentrated on the North Island. In 1996, 87.5 percent of the Māori people lived on the North Island, and over half of this population resided in either Auckland, Waikato, or the Bay of Plenty regional council areas. Māori comprise 14.6 percent of the population of New Zealand, and the largest Māori *iwi* (tribe) is Ngāpuhi with 24 percent of the Māori population (Statistics New Zealand 2013). The collective name Māori, for Indigenous New Zealanders, began with the arrival of the first colonialist ships and by 1850 the term was in common usage in order to differentiate them from Pākehā (European) settlers (Williams 1973). *Mā* denotes brightness, freshness, and purity. It accompanies specific word groupings to convey illumination, whereas *ori* is vibration. If we are vibrating the *Mā*, we are being in truth with what is (Hāweatea Bryson 2015). Māori then is the essence of our human possibility. Although dialectal and cultural differences most certainly exist(ed) between Māori, a common language allowed them to mount a quicker response to European contact. Further, the relatively small size of New Zealand compared to Australia or Canada meant that Māori could more easily coordinate plans and share information.

In the 1790s, when Europeans began to settle in New Zealand, they were highly dependent on Māori goodwill and economic and social support. The 1840 Treaty of Waitangi signed between the British and many tribal leaders “had the potential to deliver benefits to all parties” (Durie 2005, 15). This was unique; even at the height of British imperialism fuelled by greed and pseudo-scientific racism, the colonial government was unable to dismiss the Indigenous right to political recognition. The 1840 Treaty of Waitangi recognized distinctive rights that stemmed from notions of the doctrine of Indigenous title, and went beyond a simple acknowledgement to prescribing a relationship between Māori and the Crown (Durie 2002). While it would appear that the development of New Zealand was firmly grounded in egalitarian values, we know this was not always so in practice (see Brown for a comprehensive historical overview, in this book). The settler government quickly imposed British concepts of title and ownership, and the resulting alienation from and the confiscation of land from Māori, who resisted, meant that by the mid-1800s the Crown and the New Zealand Company had purchased nearly 99 percent of the South Island and 20 percent of the North Island (Durie 2005, Ministry for Culture and Heritage 2015). The settler government failed to recognize Māori fishing, subsurface, and water rights. Māori dispossession, impoverishment, and illness due to the introduced diseases led to massive population decline. Expectations

of extinction were popularly expressed through ostentatious memorials and commissioned art fare-welling the “noble savage.”

The emptying of rural tribal homelands through the flooding of Māori people to towns and cities, which began in the 1930s, has been described as rapid (Durie 1998; King 2003; Metge 1964). Metge (1964) records that, in 1936, about 13 percent of the Māori population lived in urban areas. In 1951 the percentage rose to 23 percent. By 1981, 80 percent of Māori were living in urban regions (Metge 1995). Along with the socio-economic marginalization brought upon Māori by continued colonization, such migrations have contributed to the overrepresentation of Māori among homeless populations in urban centres. Although structural intrusions have clearly posed challenges to Māori wellness, it is crucial to note that Māori are not passive in the face of socio-political upheavals. Māori are resilient and adaptive (Nikora, Rua, and Te Awekōtuku 2007). Claims to, and the affirmations of, cultural identities and practices by Indigenous peoples are common responses to histories of oppression, and offer authenticity, a sense of belonging, and the basis for gaining human rights (Dudgeon and Fielder 2006; Smith 1999).

### **Problem Definition: Homelessness in New Zealand**

Homelessness has been a feature of urban life in New Zealand for over a century, inciting public deliberation as government officials and service providers contend with sourcing an adequate definition to respond effectively to the needs of those affected. No existing definition is fully adequate due to the complexities of homelessness and differing views on causes and solutions (Moore 2007; Roche 2004). Most agree that a continuum of housing situations, ranging from street life (the absence of a dwelling) to inadequate and insecure housing is useful (Laurenson 2005; O'Brien and de Haan 2002). Kearns, Smith, and Abbott (1992) argue that although New Zealand may experience low proportions of primary or street homelessness in comparison to what is experienced internationally, there is striking evidence of a large proportion of people in insecure living situations, inadequate housing, and approaching the agencies with serious housing needs. In light of this, they argued: “Absolute [primary] homelessness represents only the tip of the iceberg ... there are many thousands more who represent the incipient homeless ... the plight of the currently homeless is desperate, but just around the corner is a potentially vast population of ill-housed people, many of whom are little more than one additional domestic crisis away from being on the streets” (369). In 2009 Statistics New Zealand formulated a report with the aim of producing an official definition of homelessness. This national development reflected an

acknowledgement of a gap in official statistics that needed to be addressed so that the government and the community groups could better respond to homelessness. The concepts and definitions utilized were adapted from the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS), while also attempting to recognize the societal, cultural, and environmental contexts particular to New Zealand. The Statistics New Zealand definition constitutes an *attempt* to capture some of the complexity of homelessness. It also constitutes an acknowledgement of movement between the different forms of homelessness including living rough, staying in temporary shelter, and depending on the generosity of others.

The intersections of the social, physical, and legal domains within the housing sector are used as the basis for the Statistics New Zealand framework. The social domain encompasses people being able to enact “normal social relations,” maintain privacy and a personal space, and have safe accommodation. The physical domain refers to the structural aspect of housing and involves people residing in habitable housing. The legal domain extends to having exclusive possession or security of occupation or tenure. It is with reference to the intersections between these domains that a more complex conceptualization of homelessness emerges. The resulting conceptual categories are: “without shelter” (living on the streets and inhabiting improvised shelters, including shacks and cars); “temporary accommodation” (hostels for homeless people, transitional supported housing, women’s refuges, and long-term motor camps and boarding houses); “sharing accommodation” (temporary accommodation for people sharing someone else’s private dwelling); and “uninhabitable housing” (people residing in dilapidated dwellings).

Such official definitions are produced for administrative and governance purposes (Roche 2004; Whiteford 2010). If complemented by lived understandings and everyday cultural practices we can develop a more contextualized understanding that supports the needs of Māori homeless people (Groot et al. 2011b). The situations in which many Māori find themselves require us to extend such official definitions of homelessness (Groot et al. 2011b). Memmott and colleagues (2003) refer to “spiritual homelessness” in an effort to explain situations in which Indigenous people are displaced from ancestral lands, knowledge, rituals, and kinship relationships. Māori often experience homelessness as a loss of physical connection with *whanau* (family), *hapu* (subtribe), and *iwi* (tribe) which results in cultural and spiritual disconnection to varying degrees (see King, Hodgetts, Rua, and Te Whetu, in this book). In reaching an agreed definition of homelessness, it is necessary to seek Māori input and acknowledge its cultural, spiritual, and experiential dimensions.

Such complexities surrounding homelessness, home, and place are particularly apparent in research on Māori homelessness. For example, Groot and colleagues (2011b) have demonstrated through the accounts of Māori who are homeless that there are tensions between the profound sense of *whakamā* (shame and humiliation) at being dislocated from *whanau* (family) and *hau kāinga* (ancestral homeland), wanting to reconnect back with such places and relationships, and affiliating with life somewhere new.

### Responding to Homelessness

Interest in homelessness and housing affordability from academics, researchers, and government leaders has been sporadic (Groot et al., 2011b). With the exception of a few, even Māori and Iwi authorities appear to hesitate when responding to inquiries about homelessness. Perhaps this situation reflects the increasing social and economic stratification of Māori society, or the position that homelessness is a government responsibility. Such a stance ignores the critical importance of differential access to economic and political power within and across Māori society. Whatever the argument, there is undeniably a “Māori underclass” that comprises a large proportion of the homeless population in New Zealand. It emerges from economic and social deprivation and encompasses substance misusers, mental health clients, and long-term recipients of welfare, also known as the permanent poor (Auletta 1999; Kelso 1994; Zelle, 1995).

Despite this situation there is no coordinated response to homelessness or nationally funded program of research and action in New Zealand. Further, in housing initiatives, Walker and Barcham (2010) have argued that New Zealand has lagged behind Canada and Australia in supporting initiatives that recognize Indigenous self-determination in the design and delivery of social housing. No single government department has a statutory responsibility for homeless people or for coordinating services. As a result, service provision has developed in a fragmentary manner in New Zealand. Alongside private charities and faith-based social services, government agencies such as Ministry of Social Development, Housing New Zealand Corporation, The Department of Corrections, Child, Youth and Family Services, and District Health Boards are involved in addressing the complex needs of homeless people.

In the framework of the Treaty of Waitangi, relating to *karwanatanga* or governance, Article 1 requires the Crown to provide services that meet the needs of Māori people. Māori service users and providers need to be included in the research, definition, planning, implementation, and evaluation of homelessness prevention services to ensure that they are informed by Māori values.

Government agencies and many non-Māori service providers are frequently not well equipped to offer a culturally sensitive service due to an undersupply of speakers in *te reo* Māori, staff trained in bicultural protocols, and referral processes that allow for working constructively with Māori service providers. This often leads to short-term solutions that result in many Māori homeless people re-entering the cycle of homelessness on multiple occasions.

Article 3 of the Treaty refers to *oritetanga* or equity of health outcomes for Māori. Māori are overrepresented in the areas that compound the risk of becoming homeless. It is important that people have access to Māori specific services to reduce the negative impact of homelessness on health and to assist in their reintegration long term. For example, marae-based programs are doing preventative work to address problems that create and put people at increased risk of homelessness (see King, Hodgetts, Rua. and Te Whetu in this book). This typifies the type of partnerships that need to be formed with service providers as a means of integrating Indigenous homeless supports and organizations into a broader service mix.

## Conclusion

Despite a lack of official statistics or national recognition, homelessness is a serious issue in New Zealand. Like many Indigenous peoples, Māori people are overrepresented among New Zealand's homeless populations. Māori homelessness also exhibits some unique features including the role of cultural frameworks in supporting kin and family, which often results in crowding and hidden homelessness. The colonial legacy of dispossession and exclusion also plays a role in exacerbating and maintaining Māori homelessness. These particular aspects emphasize the need for culturally appropriate initiatives with respect to Māori homelessness and the involvement of Māori organizations in designing and delivering responses.

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