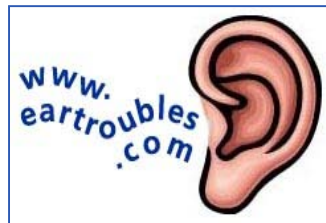


Indigenous housing, hearing loss and social problems

Dr Damien Howard



There are many factors involved in the social problems of Indigenous communities. One factor that has received little attention is how the combination of widespread hearing loss and crowded, noisy housing conditions contribute to social problems.

Conductive hearing loss is widespread among children and adults who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Children who live in crowded housing, have poor nutrition and limited access to health care often experience repeated severe episodes of middle ear disease (otitis media).

Middle ear disease often leaves a legacy of conductive hearing loss. Studies have found that 60% of Indigenous adults in remote communities have some degree of hearing loss that influences communication in some situations. This does not mean most people are 'deaf' (have a severe to profound hearing loss). The majority have a mild to moderate level of hearing loss that impacts on communication typically when it is noisy or they have to understand unfamiliar non-Indigenous English speakers.

Research carried out in schools has shown that children with hearing loss are more likely to demonstrate anti-social behaviour when there are high levels of background noise.

The crowded, noisy housing experienced by many Indigenous people is also likely to contribute to increased social problems among the high proportion of people with hearing loss.

Those with hearing loss experience greater frustration and stress during communication in noisy contexts which can contribute to family violence and reduced social and emo-

tional wellbeing. The following anecdotes from my work as a psychologist working with Indigenous people illustrate this relationship.



One woman with hearing loss accused her husband of 'mumbling' when she could not understand him at a time when there was lots of noise at home because of many visitors. She got angry with him and threw something at him, in response he retaliated and hit her, which led to him being arrested and jailed.



A young husband with hearing loss described how the birth of a new baby made it harder for him to hear. Communication demands on him were greater because his wife wanted more support from him to look after their new baby, but she got angry when he had trouble understanding her above the baby's crying. On one occasion he had to go to hospital after she got angry and hit him after she asked him to get something from the shop and he misunderstood and bought the wrong thing.



A grandmother with hearing loss described that when her family came together to socialise she became upset that she could not hear them properly because of the combination of her hearing loss and the high noise levels from everyone talking.



A woman with hearing loss who was depressed described how she had recently been thinking about hurting herself. When asked when she started thinking this way, she said it was after lots of visitors came to stay. She said it was really hard when other people did not help out and she became frustrated and angry trying to talk to people at home with increased noise levels.

It has been demonstrated that crowded, poor quality housing contributes to higher levels of middle ear disease among Indigenous children. This middle ear disease contributes to widespread hearing loss among children and adults that creates communication problems, especially in crowded, noisy houses.

There is evidence that the combination of hearing loss and crowded housing can result in reduced social and emotional wellbeing, exacerbated mental health problems and family violence.

This paper highlights links between many Indigenous people with hearing loss, often living in crowded housing and widespread Indigenous social problems.

There are of course many other factors involved in Indigenous social problems. However, the role of hearing loss, especially in difficult listening environments, is an issue that deserves consideration by all concerned to address the appalling levels of Indigenous disadvantage in Australia.

As well as more Indigenous housing there is also a need for better acoustics in this housing. Additionally, there is a need for research in this area to better understand the issues.

For more information contact damien@phoenixconsulting.com.au

There is more information on the social and communication outcomes of conductive hearing loss available at www.eartroubles.com