

## 'When will they listen to us?' Town camps on the fringe of Alice, but at the heart of Indigenous debate

*Nearly a decade after the Northern Territory intervention, residents of Indigenous town camps in Alice Springs are fighting to regain control of their lives as they wrestle with longstanding social problems*



*Geoff Shaw, former president of Tangentyere council and resident of Mount Nancy town camp on the outskirts of Alice Springs. Shaw wants control of town camp life returned to their housing associations by the government.*

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Sitting with cups of tea, cigarettes and a cat named Meow Meow on the veranda of a tidy pink house in central Australia, Geoff Shaw interrupts his wife to check I'm recording what she has to say.

The interview is meant to be with Shaw, the former president of a council representing more than a dozen Aboriginal town camps near Alice Springs, to talk about issues of violence, alcohol, housing and the intervention by the Australian government.

But Eileen Hoosan has started speaking first, describing the love she has for Mount Nancy, one of the smallest of the Alice Springs town camps, and Shaw wants it noted.

Alice's camps – they are called camps, but residents live in houses – have historically been places of dysfunction, violence and poverty, and although there have been improvements over recent years, many remain dangerous. But this one is still home.

Hoosan, a traditional landowner for Uluru, grew up in the remote community of Finke, down near the border with South Australia.

“I love being a town camper,” says the older woman with short curly hair and a cheeky smile. “When I first moved to Mount Nancy I got a culture shock, because I never seen a community like a town camp ... This house wasn't here. We lived in a tin house and a caravan,” she laughs, remembering her shock at first seeing people drink alcohol.

For several decades she and Shaw have raised their children and grandchildren in their public housing home with a wide yard and a carefully tended garden.

The street is quiet – it's a Monday morning. Unlike some camps the cul-de-sac is paved and kerbed, but they haven't had streetlights for 15 years. The houses, all brightly coloured single-level public housing, are in varying states of repair behind their cyclone fences. A dry river bed, dotted with tall ghost gums, runs by the back fence below one of Alice Springs' famous red rocky hills.

Mount Nancy is officially home to fewer than 100 people from four language groups. Population estimates across all the town camps range from fewer than 2,000 to about 5,000 at times of big events, such as the Lightning carnival of Australian rules football at Easter.

These are not the kind of communities most people expect to exist in Australia.

First off, they're about race. Town camps are Aboriginal communities scattered around the fringes of the central desert town of Alice Springs by the expansive McDonnell Ranges. The dry Todd river cuts through it, and locals proudly warn: if you see the Todd flow three times, you'll never leave.

Alice is home to about 28,000 people, of whom nearly 80% are non-Indigenous. These people live – on average – in much better socioeconomic conditions than their black neighbours in the camps. Indeed the town is distinguished from other Northern Territory urban areas by a lack of general interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents, an Australian Institute of Criminology report noted last year. One resident described Alice as a “dual town”.



*The Larapinta Valley town camp is one of the largest and best equipped in Alice Springs, Australia, but is still not up to subdivision standard, says Walter Shaw, the chief executive of Tangentyere council*

Aboriginal people first began moving to the camps around the 1960s, for various reasons including forced removal from remote rural locations.

“A lot of Aboriginal people were either pushed or moved off their own traditional lands around central Australia,” Hoosan and Shaw’s son and the current chief executive of Tangentyere council, Walter Shaw, had earlier told Guardian Australia.

“A lot of them were set up at the old bungalow, which was one of the original stolen generation sites as well. You’ve had a congregation of all these Aboriginal people within central Australia.

“There was a curfew, and Aboriginal people were still subject to the old dog-tag days.”

Over the next two decades Aboriginal groups won tenure over 16 parcels of land, and by the early 90s 18 town camps had established representative housing associations. Each elects a president to sit on the executive of Tangentyere council, the town camps’ Indigenous-owned and -run peak body. In Mount Nancy it’s Geoff Shaw.

People from Indigenous homelands to the north of Alice Springs live in the northern camps such as Mount Nancy, people from the south live in the southern camps, and so on. It’s uncommon for English to be a first language in any of the camps, and they are governed by laws and regulations which do not apply to their non-Indigenous neighbours.

Hoosan is a long-term advocate for Mount Nancy and the other camps. She laughingly refers to herself as “the sheriff” but the antisocial problems and violence cause her despair.

“My grandkids [say] nanna is a good old girl, because I’ve got nanna’s rules you see,” says Hoosan. “Nobody goes into the house drinking or smoking.”

“Nanna’s rules” may have worked for Hoosan’s house but there were bigger problems across the communities, and in 2007 they were made redundant as the federal government launched its unprecedented intervention into the Northern Territory off the back of the Little Children Are Sacred report on child neglect.

The federal Racial Discrimination Act had to be suspended to enact the policy, and Aboriginal people across the NT saw draconian legislation imposed almost overnight, including welfare changes, income management, and bans on alcohol, gambling and pornography in “proscribed communities” – which all Alice Springs town camps became.

In 2009 the town camps lost more self management rights when they signed 40-year leases over to the government in return for \$150m in public housing and social services funding. Five years on, the agreement has sparked its own complaints.

Larapinta Valley, which Guardian Australia also visited, is rebuilding a community centre and is a “top of the range” camp, says Walter Shaw, but is still missing services.

A bus stop sits outside the gate, and a community centre worker laughs while telling Guardian Australia to look up a short film by Alistair Splinter. The stop was built, he says, in the hope it would prompt a service one day.

The intervention has since been widely criticised for holding little to no consultation with Aboriginal communities, lacking an evaluation framework, and applying discriminatory measures to people based on race. Even a co-author of the Little Children Are Sacred report later blasted the intervention as being “based on ignorance and prejudice”.

“They haven’t moved away from those [intervention] strategies yet,” says Hoosan. “Town camps and remote communities know what needs to be done, but government doesn’t listen.”



*A youth centre operated by Tangentyere council for Indigenous children in Alice Springs*

But after eight years many have become “accustomed to living under intervention laws”, says Walter Shaw.

Tangentyere council has been surveying residents about intervention laws and their views of alcohol management plans, he later tells Guardian Australia. About 66% are against or uncertain about alcohol management plans such as those advocated by his parents.

Alcohol management is hugely contentious in the hard-drinking Northern Territory, especially among its Aboriginal population. Indigenous Australians are almost twice as likely to abstain from alcohol than non-Indigenous Australians, but also twice as likely to binge drink. A major aspect of federal and NT government policy targets alcohol use among Indigenous populations.

“There’s a lot of Aboriginal people that work in permanent employment, and they, like everybody else, like to get a beer on the way home and drink in their front yard or have a barbecue in the back yard. But we can’t do that,” Walter Shaw tells Guardian Australia.

One afternoon Geoff Shaw – a former president of Tangentyere council, an officer of the Order of Australia, and a veteran of the Indonesian confrontation and the Vietnam war – had come back from the local returned servicemen’s league club (RSL) with a six-pack of beer.

“There was an altercation down the creek there with visitors who had come in from the north-east,” he says.

“They were all down there fighting amongst each other, and husbands beating their wives with sticks and so on. I told Walter he better ring up the police.”

The police arrived at Shaw’s house and saw his beer.

“You know you’re not allowed to drink here,” Shaw recounts the police officer saying.

“I said, ‘No look, I’m a Vietnam veteran. I feel like having a beer. I’ve just come back from the RSL.’ But they said, ‘No, you can’t do that. Go back to the RSL.’ So this policeman got the beer off me, tipped it out on my veranda and threw the can on the lawn and then took my five full cans and put them in the van.”

Shaw said the police officers gave him a warning before they left, leaving the group in the riverbed – a regular stage for such scenes – uninterrupted. “I was really pissed off,” he says, jabbing the table. “I contributed to this society; I contributed to Alice Springs. I’ve done two tours of Vietnam and I served in Malaya Borneo in the Indonesian confrontation.

“My friends can’t even come visit me with a six-pack. A lot of veterans come visit me over the years. They find out where I live and come say g’day. But even mates in town, they can’t come over here and have a beer with me.”

Alcohol policies in the NT – which are either huge successes or abject failures depending on who you ask – change with the government, and neither Hoosan nor Shaw advocates total freedom.

Hoosan, chair of the central Australia Aboriginal alcohol program (Caaapu), is the lone advocate at the Mount Nancy table for mandatory alcohol treatment orders, given to problem drinkers after three strikes, imposing three months in rehab at Caaapu.

She doesn’t like the banned drinkers register – a now-scraped policy of refusing service to designated problem drinkers at the point of sale – because she says it was ineffective, but Walter Shaw and Tangentyere council have supported it.

Temporary beat locations, where police are stationed outside bottle shops to check IDs for addresses to ensure no grog goes back to town camps – are also divisive.

What is agreed is town camps should be allowed to manage alcohol problems themselves. Two proposals are put forward by Shaw and Hoosan: one has the housing association, with the community, designating houses allowed to drink. The other proposes bans on houses with demonstrated problems.



*Part of an Aboriginal town camp on the outskirts of Alice Springs*

There are issues with that, too – a house with a drinking permit becomes an easy target for break-and-enters. But discussion is what Hoosan and Geoff Shaw want first.

“Town campers are strong people, and they looked at government policy and developed their own plan. But do you think the government would be responsive to us? They haven’t acknowledged our [plan],” said Hoosan.

“We’re still waiting,” says Shaw. “The gate is open; my gate is open. But we’ve had no response from government.”

The Tony Abbott-led federal government focused heavily on Indigenous affairs, describing policy in the soundbite: “Kids to school, adults to work and communities safe.”

Shaw scoffs: “That’s the three major points we’re relating to and we’re trying to do that as town campers! They’ve taken over that role but it’s not working as it should be.

“We’re concerned about kids staying here for long periods of time. They should go back [to their communities] and go to school. But what happens is the income their parents receive goes not only to food but access to alcohol. They get in the rut of consuming alcohol which leads towards domestic violence and other forms of violence.”

Does Mount Nancy have those problems? “Yes of course we have. We’re just like any other camp,” Shaw says. Hoosan jumps in: “Yeah, but I’m the sheriff around here!”

Alcohol abuse and violence often go hand in hand in the town camps, as they do elsewhere. Incidents of rock throwing, domestic violence, deaths and assaults are also frequently reported.

This month the NT government said its \$6m domestic violence safety strategy had in its first year referred 301 high-risk victims to family safety meetings, and the Northern Territory police had referred 331 domestic violence victims to specialist support services in the last financial year.

In March town campers were horrified when a six-year-old girl was allegedly raped by a man staying at the Hidden Valley town camp, one of Alice Springs' largest and most notorious.

The NT chief minister, Adam Giles, responded with the announcement of an audit of the camps and their service providers, a move welcomed by Tangentyere council, although it expressed frustration that it was left out of a closed meeting.

Giles said at the time: "The alleged rape of a young child at an Alice Springs town camp is just the latest incident that's left me deeply concerned about safety and living conditions in these areas.

"Whilst I believe there have been huge improvements in community safety in the main centres of Alice Springs and Tennant Creek over the past year, I fear there remain issues in town camps that need to be confronted head on.

Walter Shaw hit back: "If [Giles] took the time to meet and talk with the Tangentyere council executive, who are all town camp residents working to improve the lives of their fellow town campers, he would find we have been putting forward solutions around community safety for years but they have fallen on deaf ears."

Many town campers Guardian Australia meet say it is primarily visitors coming in from remote communities who cause problems. The iInstitute of Criminology survey quoted several non-Indigenous residents who saw visitors as the main instigators, but noted "it was not easy to draw clear distinctions between 'bush mob' and urban residents".

Visitor management used to be ruled by the housing associations. Someone coming in from out of town – usually remote communities – could stay for only two weeks, and if they misbehaved or were violent or drunk the housing association could evict them, with police assistance.

But since the 40-year leases were signed and the NT government took control, town camps can't kick the troublemakers out as easily as they could before.

Under the current regime individuals can be issued trespass notices only for specific dwellings. Stays were lengthened to six weeks, but the NT government recently reset them back to two after community feedback.





*A community centre at Trucky's. It has been refurbished but there is no funding to operate it, says Walter Shaw, chief executive of Tangentyere council*

“We need that trespass notice so we can say to people, ‘You are not a member of this town camp, you are not registered, you don’t live here,’ ” says Hoosan. The defunding of a return-to-country program which gave financial assistance to get people back to their remote communities had added to the problem.

Hoosan is not the only town camper to talk about trespass notices with Guardian Australia. Visitors from remote and other communities are a constant presence, and not always welcome.

“Some of these men we don’t know from a bar of soap, and we send them across the road, but then they are in their family’s yard and abusing you for nothing,” an older town camper named Marlene Hayes says.

The Tangentyere family safety group, of which Hayes is a member, is a grassroots women’s committee working to end family violence in the communities. Indigenous women are 34 times more likely to be admitted to hospital due to domestic violence, and about 10 times more likely to be killed by their partners than non-Indigenous women.

The group formed last year as one part of the Alice Springs integrated response to family and domestic violence. The women are implementing in-community programs to educate residents about the taboo topic of family violence, and practical solutions such as a direct-to-police phone line. They have also met police and hospitals and shelters to work on best practice operations in dealing with town camp violence.

“[Our group is] talking to each other and giving each other support, and talking about the violence in our town camps,” Marlene says.

“We didn’t have a voice then; now we’ve got a voice and we’re going to keep on going with our strong voice.”

Shirleen Campbell, another group member and president of Hoppy’s town camp, says violence and drugs – particularly ice – have been a “major” problem at Hoppy’s.

“I’ve put my foot down, and spoken to families and visitors and got to the point where I was so frustrated and said enough is enough,” she says.

Campbell, whose aunt was killed by her partner last year, got a public phone installed with a direct line to police, and has noticed a drop in violence as both perpetrators and victims become aware of it.

“Not only that, but it’s teaching the kids, too. If there’s a violence happening we always have a couple of kids alert and run to the phone box. Instead of dialing triple-0 you just press the red button and it goes straight to the police station.”

Chris Forbes, Campbell’s husband and coordinator of a men’s anti-violence program, says Hoppy’s was “really violent” not much more than a decade ago.

“People were getting stabbed constantly, people were getting bashed constantly,” says Forbes. Now I feel real safe. It’s quietened down. We got all the troublemakers out; we turned it into a nice quiet camp where you can walk around and you don’t have to worry about drunks humbugging you or worry about getting run over by drunks in a car.”

Forbes is a graduate and now coordinator of the Four Corners men’s group, which is working with town camp men to end family violence. The attitude towards Aboriginal men ran parallel with those towards the town camps.

“It’s like an apple tree. You get one rotten apple on a tree you don’t throw the whole tree away,” he says.

“We can’t all be painted by the one brush saying one town camp is bad so you’re all bad. We’re all individuals. It’s wrong how the government thinks we’re all the same.”

Back at Mount Nancy, Shaw says he’d like to see the intervention – now known as “stronger futures” – repealed and then rebuilt in some form after wide consultation with Indigenous people and groups about which aspects of it were working, or could work better.

“If you still maintain the intervention we’re not going to see a way forward, not until such time as we revisit the intervention – hopefully maybe scrap it,” he says.

Hoosan says: “Very few people know what town campers are subject to. No other people have to live like that in Alice Springs.”