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for better health and wellbeing*

People turned away from government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation 2009–10

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Acknowledgments

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Summary

In Australia, homelessness agencies accommodate a large number of people every day. However, they cannot always meet requests for accommodation. When a valid request for accommodation cannot be met, the requestor is referred to as having been 'turned away'.

This report presents data on the people turned away from government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation in 2009–10. The data indicate that government-funded specialist homelessness agencies are operating to capacity and are unable to completely meet the demand for their accommodation. Some groups, such as families, experience more difficulty than others in obtaining accommodation.

When new requests for accommodation are considered on any given day, 58% of all people who sought immediate accommodation were turned away. New requests, however, comprise only 4% of the total demand for accommodation. When new requests plus all people currently in accommodation are considered, 2% of all people who sought immediate accommodation were newly accommodated on any given day and 2% were turned away.

The rate of turn-away was similar to that reported in recent years.

There are several caveats surrounding the data presented in this report (see Box 1.1). These are related to policy and service delivery arrangements; agency coverage; the period surveyed; and the exclusion of data from Victoria.

1 Introduction

This national report presents data on the people turned away from government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation in 2009–10. It is accompanied by an appendix containing statistical tables and further information on the data (AIHW 2011b).

The 2009–10 data from government-funded specialist homelessness agencies was collected in the SAAP National Data Collection (SAAP NDC) (see the appendix to this report for more detail). A new data collection reflecting the changed arrangements under the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA) and the national partnership agreements is planned to replace the SAAP NDC on 1 July 2011.

The government response to homelessness

The government response to homelessness has been shaped by the Homelessness White Paper – *The road home: a national approach to reducing homelessness* (Australian Government 2008). The response is administered under the NAHA and the national partnership agreements. These agreements cover people who are homeless and those who are at risk of homelessness, with a focus on the reduction and prevention of homelessness.

National Affordable Housing Agreement

The NAHA is designed to provide a framework for all levels of governments to work together to reduce homelessness and improve housing affordability. The objective of the NAHA is to ensure that all Australians have access to affordable, safe and sustainable housing that contributes to social and economic participation. Funding for the NAHA commenced on 1 January 2009.

National partnership agreements

The NAHA is supported by the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH), which outlines the roles and responsibilities of the Australian Government and the state and territory governments specifically in relation to reducing homelessness. It contributes to the NAHA outcome that ‘people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness achieve sustainable housing and social inclusion’. The NPAH was signed in December 2008 and funding commenced 1 July 2009.

The NPAH is complemented by other partnership agreements, designed to respond to a range of housing needs including homelessness. These include the National Partnership Agreement on Social Housing and the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing.

Box 1.1: Interpreting data in this report

Government-funded specialist homelessness services are only part of the picture

Currently there is no accurate measure of the proportion of people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness who make contact with a specialist homelessness agency. While the SAAP NDC provides reliable estimates of those using homelessness services, it should not be interpreted as representing the entire population of those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness (for example, see Chamberlain & MacKenzie 2008).

The SAAP NDC is designed to capture the government response to homelessness and therefore service providers who do not receive government funding are excluded. Further, the collection is focused on services provided by 'specialist homelessness agencies' – those that specifically target and provide services to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness – and more general service providers are not included.

The model of service delivery and client target groups vary by jurisdiction

The approaches to delivering homelessness services vary between jurisdictions. In particular, accommodation related data in Victoria has not been recorded in the SAAP NDC in a basis consistent with other states and territories (see AIHW 2011a:Box 1.1). It is therefore not possible to derive turn-away rates for Victoria that are comparable with those reported by other states and territories. For this reason, Victorian data has been excluded from the analysis in this report.

The states and territories also have a different mix of client focus ('primary target group') for service delivery. For example: Western Australia has a high proportion of agencies primarily focused on delivering services to women escaping domestic violence; and the Australian Capital Territory has a high proportion of agencies primarily focused on delivering services to young people.

Policy and service delivery arrangements have changed over recent years

There have been changes in arrangements for determining homelessness policy and service delivery in recent years. For example, midway through the 2008–09 financial year, the SAAP agreement was discontinued and replaced by the NAHA. Then, in 2009–10, the national partnership funding commenced. Although data collection has continued under the new arrangements, it may have been affected by the changes. In particular, the inclusion of agencies in the collection is determined by the state and territory departments responsible for administering the government response to homelessness. The addition of agencies funded under the revised arrangements has not been uniform across jurisdictions nor across years.

Agency coverage and period surveyed

While the measures of turn-away and other Demand for Accommodation data included in this report provide an indication of the overall experience of people seeking specialist homelessness accommodation, such measures:

- include only data from agencies that responded to both the Client Collection and the Demand for Accommodation Collection. These agencies represented 65% (604) of all participating agencies (932) (Table A1; excludes Victorian data). However, many of the non-responding agencies were those that provided support services only, rather than accommodation. It is not known to what extent the activities of any non-responding agencies differ from those that did respond
- relate to 2 weeks in the year. It is not known to what extent seasonal and other factors may result in different rates being experienced at other times of the year.

2 What was the level of turn-away?

This chapter presents two measures of turn-away from government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation – the turn-away for people requiring new and immediate accommodation; and the turn-away in relation to the total expressed demand for immediate accommodation (which includes those already in accommodation) (see Box 2.1).

Box 2.1: Measuring turn-away

This chapter uses data from the SAAP NDC Demand for Accommodation Collection and the SAAP NDC Client Collection. See the appendix to this report for more information (AIHW 2011b).

Data are reported in terms of individual people. People covered in this chapter:

- made a valid unmet request for immediate accommodation at a government-funded specialist homelessness agency
- did not receive accommodation later that same day.

Two measures of turn-away are presented. The first measure is the turn-away for people requiring new and immediate accommodation. It is calculated as the daily average percentage of people who were turned away relative to all people who required new and immediate accommodation. This provides an indication of a person's likelihood of obtaining government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation.

However, government-funded specialist homelessness agencies accommodate large numbers of people on any given day, including people who are continuing their accommodation from a previous day. For this reason, simply examining the daily request turn-away without acknowledging the number of people already in accommodation may provide an incomplete picture. It is therefore important to consider those turned away in relation to the total expressed demand for accommodation. This second measure is calculated as the daily average percentage of people who were turned away relative to all people who required new and immediate accommodation plus those who were continuing their accommodation from the previous day. It provides an indication of the overall ability of government-funded specialist homelessness agencies to meet the demand for their accommodation.

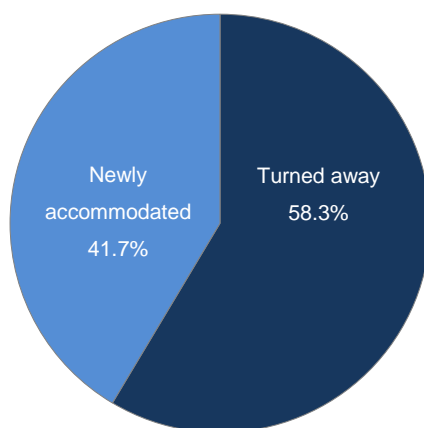
It is important to note that neither of these measures provide an indication of the additional capacity required to meet the expressed demand for accommodation, only a measure of the undersupply of accommodation (in terms of people) on an average day during the Demand for Accommodation Collection period.

Data reported in this chapter exclude Victorian data. See Box 1.1 for more detail.

Turn-away as a percentage of people requiring new and immediate accommodation

This measure provides an indication of a person's likelihood of obtaining government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation on a given day. It excludes people already in accommodation.

On an average day, 58% of all people who sought immediate accommodation were turned away (Figure 2.1).



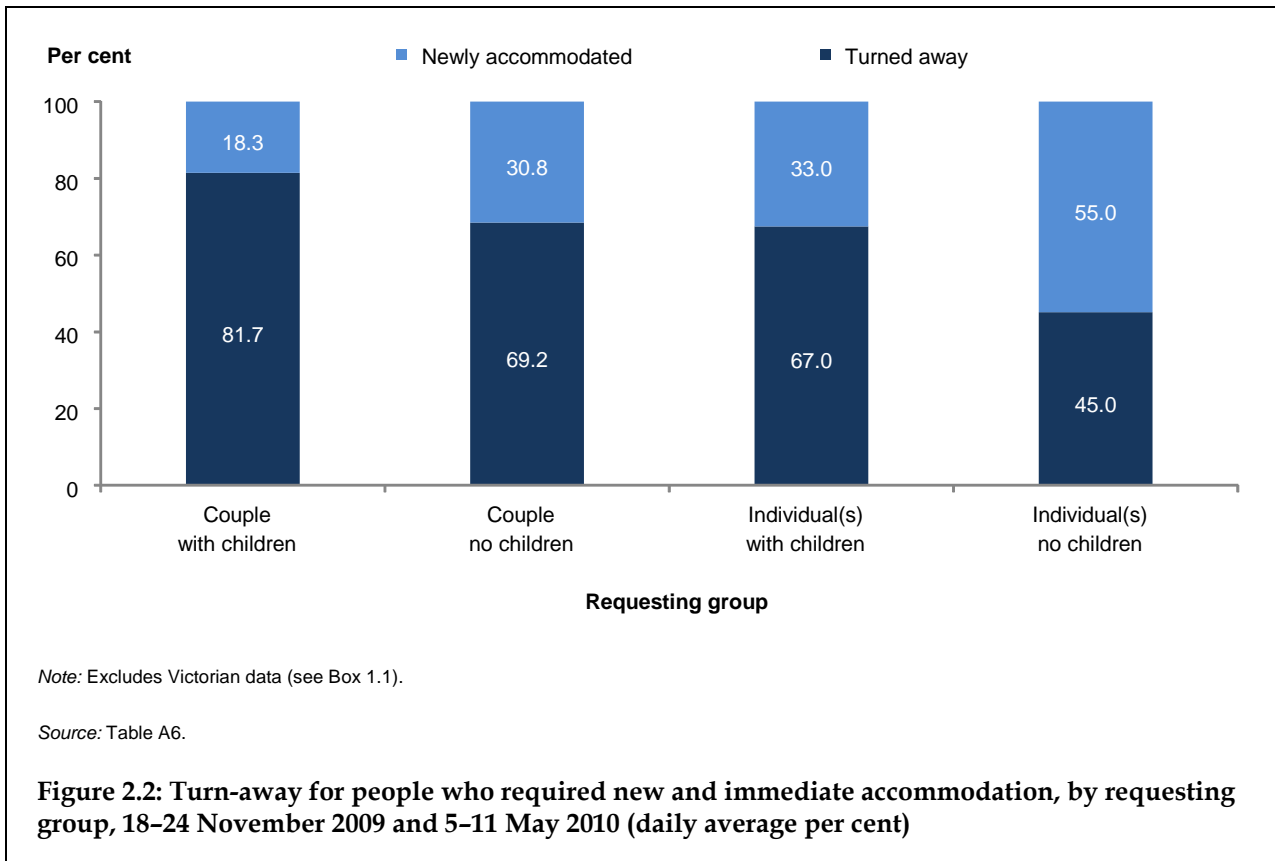
Note: Excludes Victorian data (see Box 1.1).

Source: Table A5.

Figure 2.1: Turn-away for people who required new and immediate accommodation, 18–24 November 2009 and 5–11 May 2010 (daily average per cent)

Requesting group

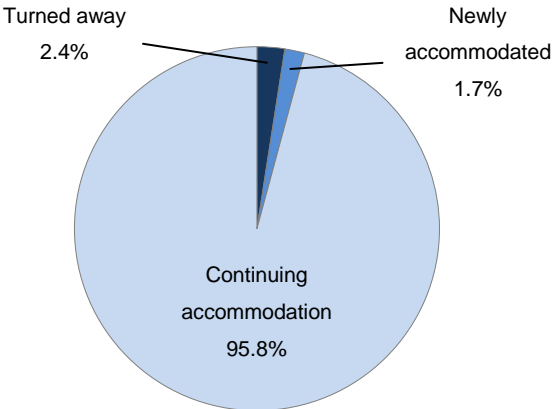
For people who required new and immediate accommodation, the requesting groups most likely to be turned away were family groups – 82% of couples with children, 69% of couples without children and 67% of individuals with children were turned away, compared with 45% of individuals without children (Figure 2.2). This indicates that individuals who present without children are more likely to obtain accommodation than those who present in family groups.



Turn-away as a percentage of the total expressed demand for immediate accommodation

This measure provides an indication of the ability of agencies to meet the total expressed demand for government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation. It includes people already accommodated by these agencies.

People needing new and immediate accommodation account for a relatively small proportion of the total demand for accommodation on an average day (4%) (Figure 2.3). When considered in this light, 2% of all people who had a demand for government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation were newly accommodated and 2% were turned away.



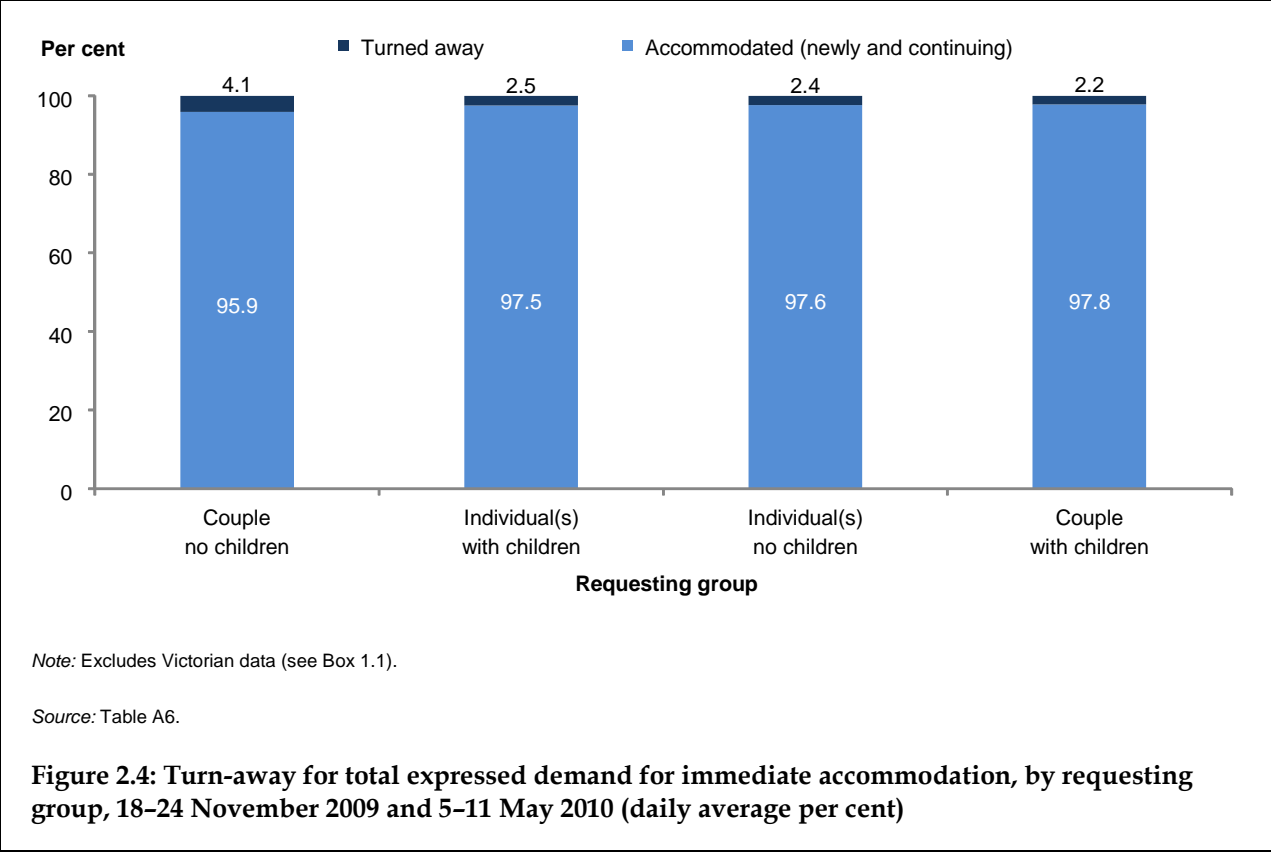
Note: Excludes Victorian data (see Box 1.1).

Source: Table A5.

Figure 2.3: Turn-away for total expressed demand for immediate accommodation, 18–24 November 2009 and 5–11 May 2010 (daily average per cent)

Requesting group

Agencies were less able to meet the demand for accommodation from couples without children than for other groups (Figure 2.4 and Table A6). Four per cent of couples without children were turned away, compared with around 2% for the other groups. Couples without children, however, represented the smallest number of people requiring accommodation on an average day.



Changes over time

The level of turn-away in 2009–10 was consistent with that reported in recent years (tables A8 and A9).

Caution should be exercised when analysing changes in turn-away over time. This is largely because of changes in the participation of agencies between years and small population sizes (see Table A1). This particularly affects the smaller jurisdictions in which a small change in numbers can have a dramatic effect.

3 Who was turned away?

This chapter presents data on the sex, age, country of birth and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status of people who made a valid unmet request for government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation (see Box 3.1).

Box 3.1: Who is included in this chapter?

This chapter uses data from the SAAP NDC Demand for Accommodation Collection. See the appendix to this report for more information (AIHW 2011b).

Data are reported in terms of individual people. People covered in this chapter:

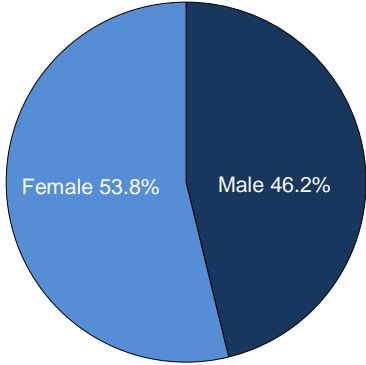
- made a valid unmet request for immediate accommodation at a government-funded specialist homelessness agency
- may have received accommodation later that same day.

The SAAP NDC does not allow the measures of turn-away presented in Chapter 2 to be broken down by sex, age, country of birth or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status (see Chapter 2:Box 2.1; and AIHW 2011b:Appendix 2). The people analysed in this chapter include the small number of people who subsequently received accommodation later that same day (see AIHW 2011b:Figure A3.1).

Data reported in this chapter exclude Victorian data. See Box 1.1 for more detail.

Sex

Over half (54%) of all people with a valid unmet request for immediate accommodation were female, 46% were male (Figure 3.1).



Note: Excludes Victorian data (see Box 1.1).

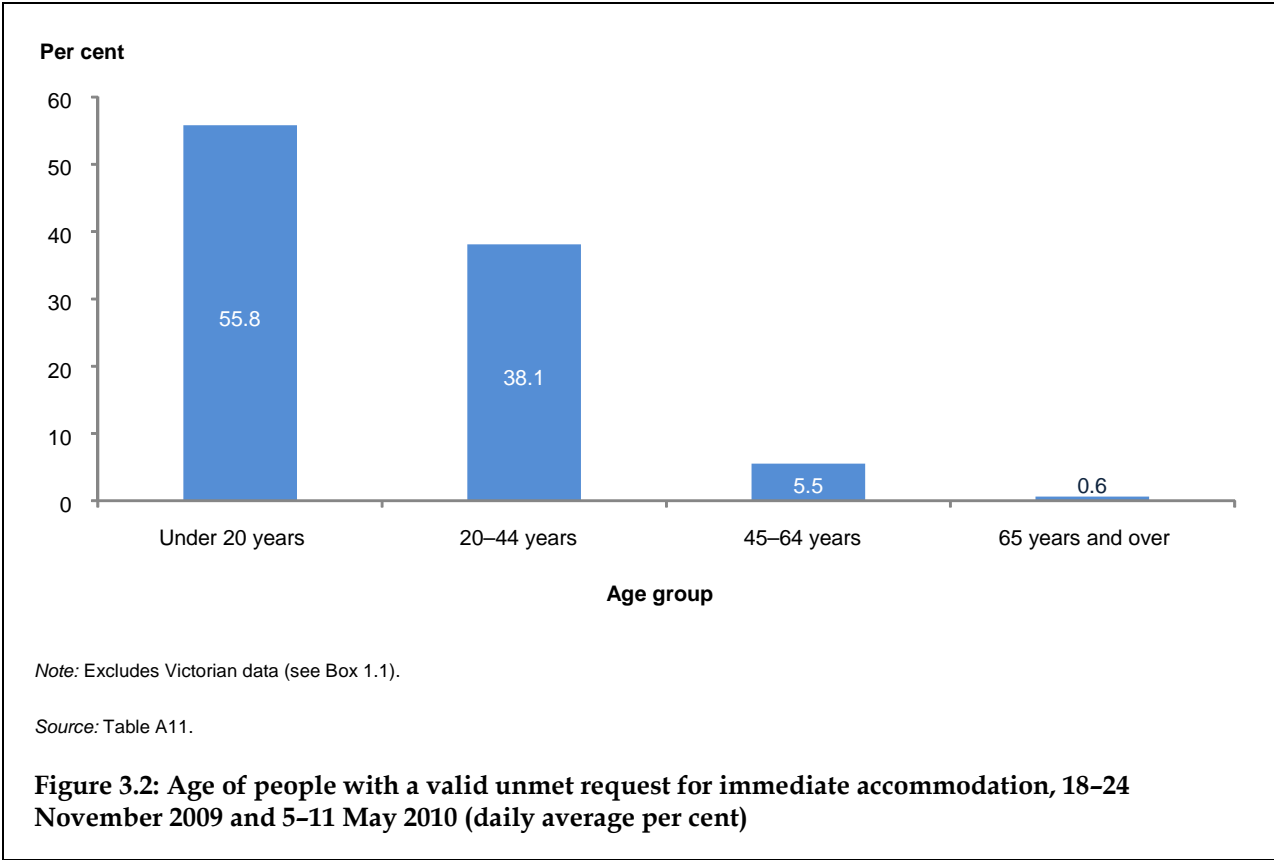
Source: Table A10.

Figure 3.1: Sex of people with a valid unmet request for immediate accommodation, 18-24 November 2009 and 5-11 May 2010 (daily average percentage)

Age

Over half of the people with a valid unmet request for immediate accommodation were under 20 years of age (56%) (Figure 3.2). A further 38% were aged 20–44 years, 6% were aged 45–64 years, and less than 1% were aged 65 years and over.

The age group ‘under 20 years’ presented above and in Figure 3.2 includes children accompanying a parent or guardian. If accompanying children are excluded from this calculation: 24% of people with a valid unmet request for immediate accommodation were aged under 20 years; 65% were aged 20–44 years; 10% were aged 45–64 years; and 1% were aged 65 years and over (Table A11).



Country of birth

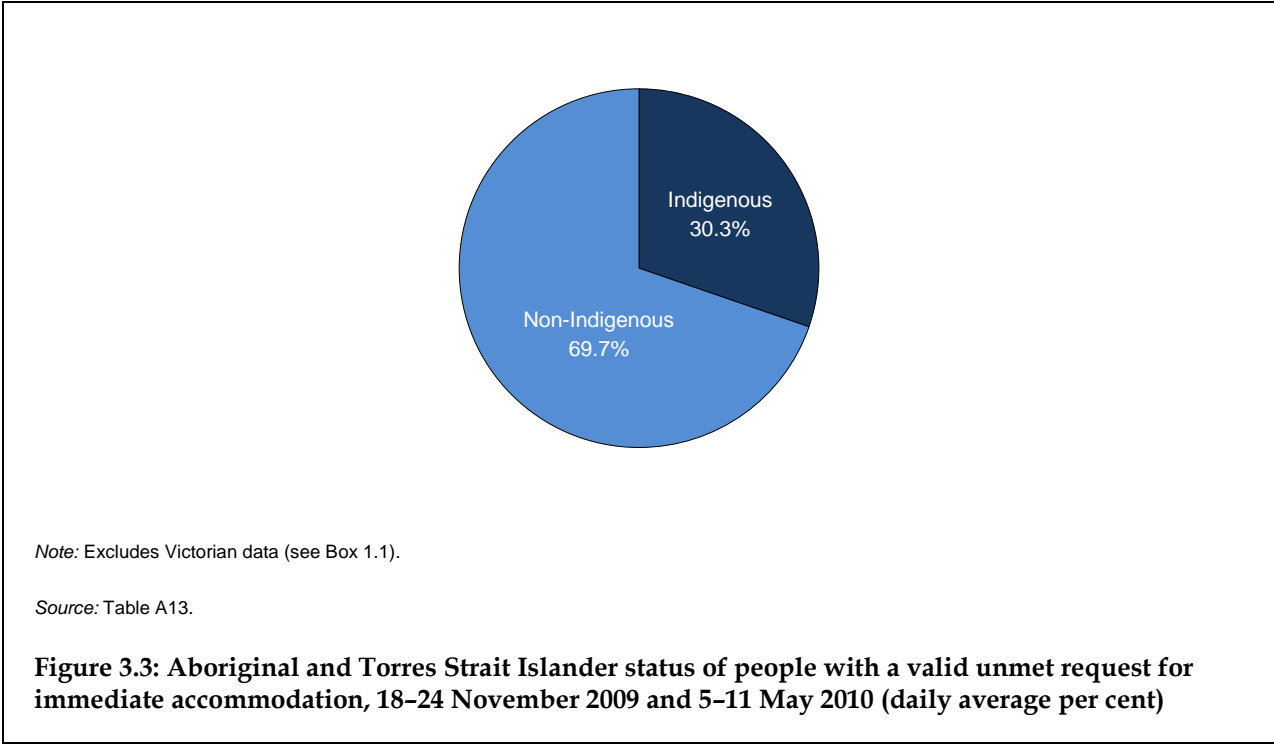
The majority of people with a valid unmet request for immediate accommodation were born in Australia (89%) (Table A12). This was higher than in the general Australian population, of which around 73% were Australian-born (ABS 2010b:45).

Six per cent of people with a valid unmet request for immediate accommodation were born overseas in countries in which English is not the main language and 5% were born overseas in predominantly English-speaking countries.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Most people with a valid unmet request for immediate accommodation were non-Indigenous (70%) (Figure 3.3).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were, however, highly over-represented relative to their population size – 30% of people with a valid unmet request for immediate accommodation identified as Indigenous compared with around 2% of the general Australian population and around 21% of people using specialist homelessness services (ABS 2010a; derived from AIHW 2011a:tables 10 and 11).



4 Why were they turned away?

This chapter presents data on the reasons why people were turned away from government funded specialist homelessness accommodation.

Box 4.1: Who is included in this chapter?

This chapter uses data from the SAAP NDC Demand for Accommodation Collection. See the appendix to this report for more information (AIHW 2011b).

Data are reported in terms of valid unmet requests. A valid unmet request for accommodation occurs when a person approaches a government-funded specialist homelessness agency for accommodation but is turned away. A request may include more than one person and a person may make more than one request in a day.

Data are reported in terms of requests, rather than people, because the reason a person is turned away may vary with each request.

Data reported in this chapter exclude Victorian data. See Box 1.1 for more detail.

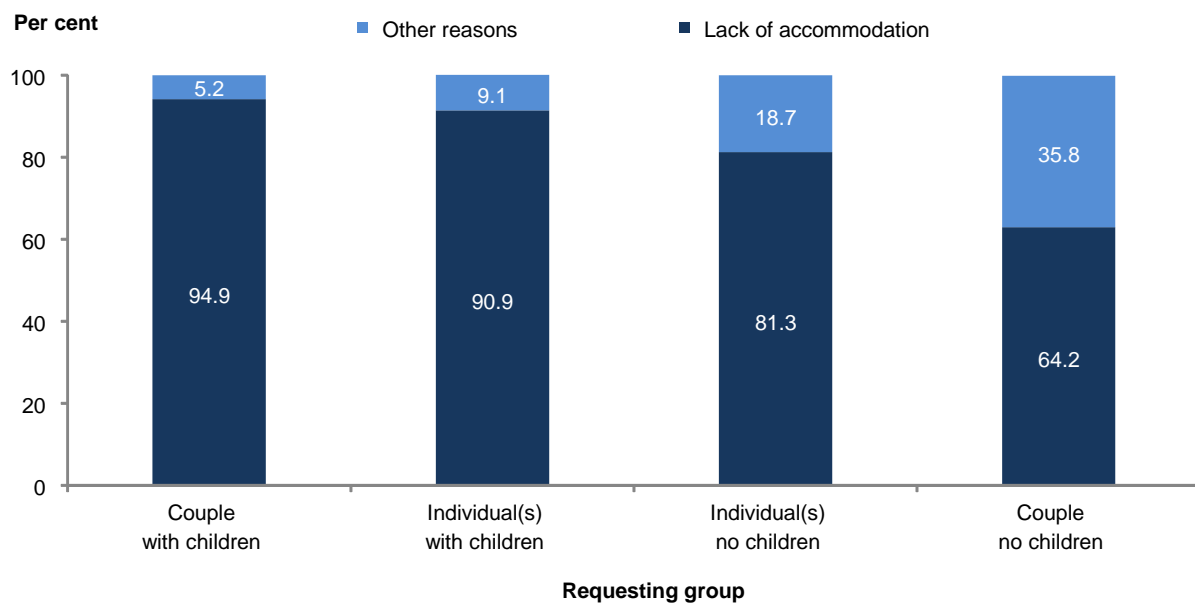
The majority of valid unmet requests for immediate accommodation occurred because there was a lack of accommodation (85%) – either because insufficient accommodation was available at the agency itself (59%) or because a referral agency was unable to refer the group on because they had no vacancies on their books (26%) (Table A14).

The remainder of valid unmet requests for immediate accommodation were for other reasons (15%). These other reasons include situations where the agency could not offer the type of accommodation the person was seeking (6%). For example, the agency might be set up to provide refuge or dormitory-style crisis accommodation only when longer term or independent accommodation was the type of accommodation being sought.

Requesting group

Across all requesting groups, the predominant reason why valid requests for immediate accommodation could not be met was because of a lack of accommodation (Figure 4.1). This was highest for family groups with children – in 95% of cases for couples with children and 91% of cases for individuals with children compared with 81% for individuals without children and 64% for couples without children.

Couples without children had a relatively high proportion of valid requests for immediate accommodation remain unmet because the type of accommodation they requested was not able to be provided by the agency – 10% compared with between 4% and 6% for the other requesting groups.



Note: Excludes Victorian data (see Box 1.1).

Source: Table A15.

Figure 4.1: Valid unmet requests for immediate accommodation: main reason why request was not met, by requesting group, 18–24 November 2009 and 5–11 May 2010 (daily average per cent)

5 Were people referred on to other accommodation when turned-away?

Formal referrals on to other accommodation were not always obtained when a person was turned away. On an average day, agencies were able to formally refer those turned away on to other accommodation in 56% of valid unmet requests for immediate accommodation (Table A16). This means around half of the people who were turned away from specialist homelessness accommodation were directed to another source of potentially available accommodation (for example, in another agency, a hostel, a motel, a caravan park, etc.).

Box 5.1: Who is included in this chapter?

This chapter uses data from the SAAP NDC Demand for Accommodation Collection. See the appendix to this report for more information (AIHW 2011b).

Data are reported in terms of valid unmet requests. A valid unmet request for accommodation occurs when a person approaches a government-funded specialist homelessness agency for accommodation but is turned away. A request may include more than one person and a person may make more than one request in a day.

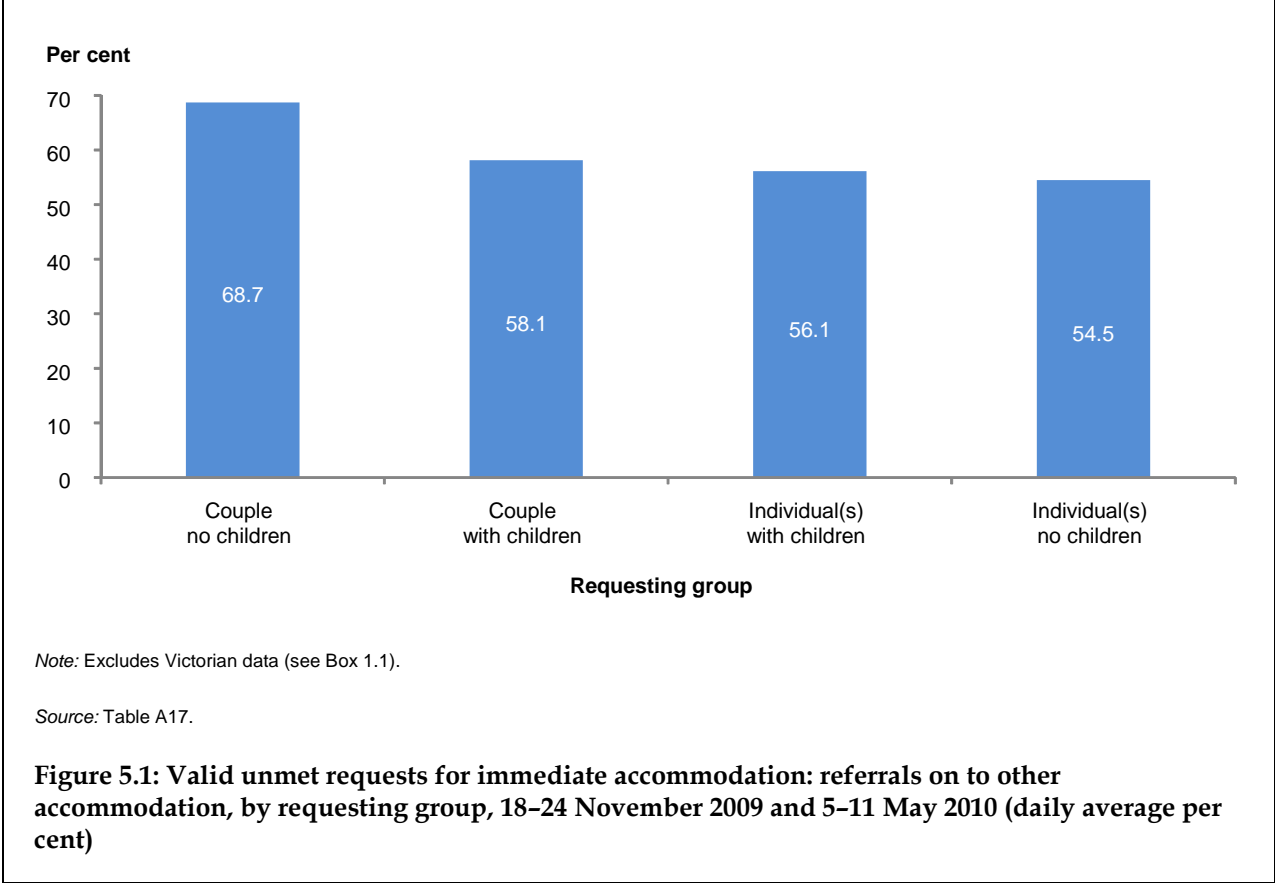
Data are reported in terms of requests, rather than people, because whether a person was able to be referred on to other accommodation may vary with each request.

In the context of the Demand for Accommodation Collection, a referral is a formal referral. That is, contact was made with another organisation who then accepted the person for an appointment or interview. Outcomes from referrals are not recorded so it is not known how many of the people who were referred on for accommodation actually secured that accommodation or whether the quality of the referred accommodation was comparable to that offered by specialist homelessness agencies.

Data reported in this chapter exclude Victorian data. See Box 1.1 for more detail.

Requesting group

Family groups had a higher level of referral than individuals who presented without children (Figure 5.1).



6 Factors affecting turn-away

This chapter discusses several factors that may affect the level of unmet demand for specialist homelessness accommodation.

It is clear from the data presented in this report that specialist homelessness agencies are operating to capacity and are unable to meet all the requests for accommodation they receive. In particular, the high turn-away of people who required new and immediate accommodation (58%), the low daily turnover of people already in accommodation, and the modest referral rate when accommodation cannot be provided (56%) suggest that obtaining specialist homelessness accommodation is difficult for some, particularly for families (Figure 6.2; tables A5, A7 and A16).

In contrast, the small number of people not accommodated (2%) relative to the total demand for accommodation suggests that even a relatively small increase in the number of places available on an average day could have a major impact on the level of unmet demand (Table A5). This, however, takes no account of how long people stay once they do get accommodation, of their barriers to exiting to other accommodation, or of the unknown number of people who need accommodation but do not approach agencies.

Data reported in this chapter exclude Victorian data (see Box 1.1 for more detail).

Undersupply of specialist homelessness accommodation

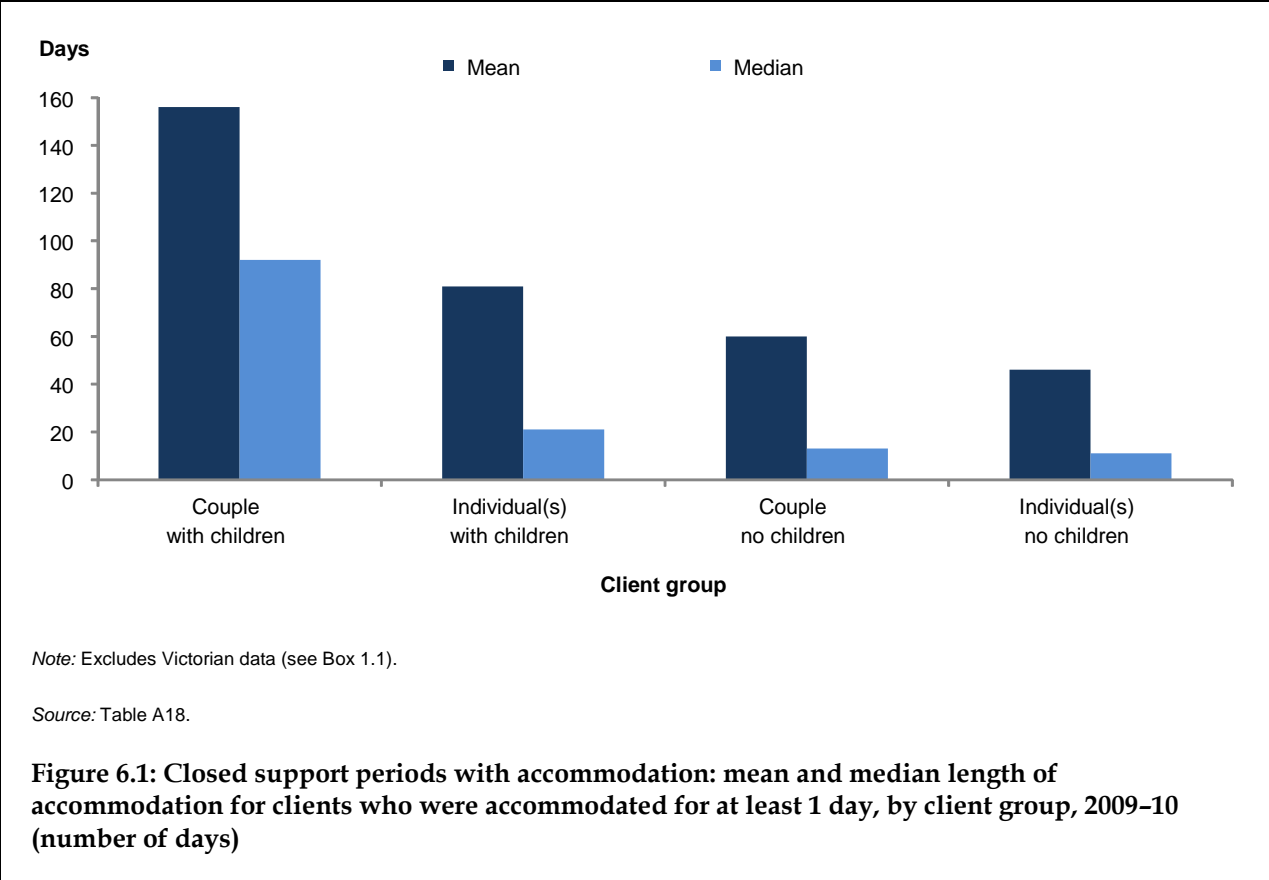
An undersupply of accommodation appears to be the key reason why people are turned away from government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation – in 85% of valid unmet requests for immediate accommodation people were turned away for this reason (Table A15). While this was the case overall, it was particularly evident for family groups with children.

Alleviating the current level of unmet demand, however, is not simply a matter of providing the same number of places as the number of people turned away. The length of accommodation of existing clients suggests that many people who are turned away are likely to require accommodation for more than one night, with an average (mean) stay of 57 days (Table A18; Griffin 2008). On this basis, if all people turned away on an average day were provided with accommodation, these beds would be unavailable for other people who require accommodation for however long those people stay.

Patterns of accommodation use

One reason why it may be more difficult for family groups to secure accommodation from government-funded specialist homelessness agencies is that these groups tend to stay longer once they are accommodated (Figure 6.1). The turnover of beds, therefore, is less for family groups than for other clients. This, combined with the higher turn-away and the higher percentage where lack of accommodation was the main reason they were not offered

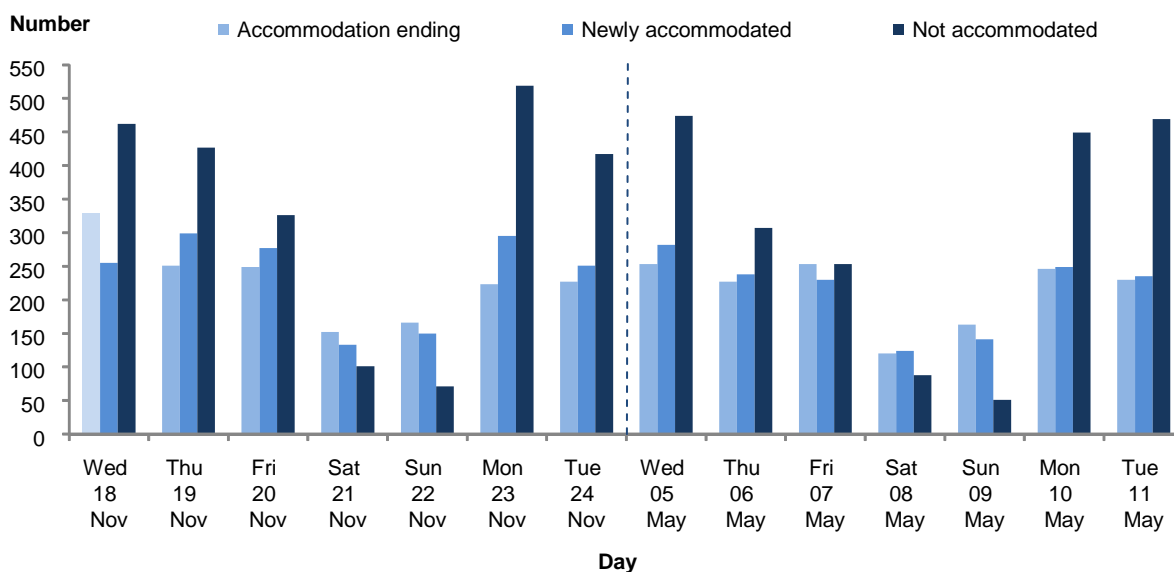
accommodation, suggests that much of the accommodation that is available for family groups is already occupied each day (tables A6 and A15).



Rate of turnover

Figure 6.2 presents the daily expressed demand for immediate accommodation. It shows that, on any given day, there was generally not a lot of variation between the number of people starting accommodation and those ending it. This suggests that accommodation is generally taken up when it becomes vacant and that agencies are operating to capacity.

It is also interesting to note that weekends – when some agencies are closed or have reduced staffing and hence there are fewer opportunities available to obtain accommodation – are the only days on which the number of people turned away is less than the number starting or leaving accommodation.



Note: Excludes Victorian data (see Box 1.1).

Source: Table A7.

Figure 6.2: Daily demand for immediate accommodation, 18–24 November 2009 and 5–11 May 2010 (number)

Lack of exit points

External barriers to obtaining accommodation in both the social and private housing sectors – such as the length of social housing waiting lists, the availability of affordable housing, and the need to provide additional support to help people maintain their tenancies – need to be considered in order to understand the demand for specialist homelessness accommodation. These factors affect the ability of people to leave specialist homelessness accommodation and move into other housing options (AIHW 2009).

Hidden need for accommodation

There is a ‘hidden need’ for accommodation caused by people not seeking assistance when they need it. The data presented in this report relate to people who were actively seeking accommodation from government-funded specialist homelessness agencies. There is, however, evidence to suggest that not everyone who requires such accommodation is seeking it. For example, the large number of homeless people enumerated in the 2006 Census of Population and Housing homeless enumeration strategy, of which only a small percentage were accommodated in SAAP (see Chamberlain & MacKenzie 2008), suggests there may be a significant level of hidden need for government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation.

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