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Australian Institute of
Health and Welfare



Exploring transitions between
homelessness
and
public housing



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Health and Welfare**

*Authoritative information and statistics
to promote better health and wellbeing*

Exploring transitions between homelessness and public housing

1 July 2011 to 30 June 2013

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
Canberra

Cat. no. HOU 277

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare is a major national agency which provides reliable, regular and relevant information and statistics on Australia's health and welfare. The Institute's mission is authoritative information and statistics to promote better health and wellbeing.

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Abbreviations

AHURI	Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
FHOG	First Home Owners Grant
HPA	Home Purchase Assistance
NAHA	National Affordable Housing Agreement
NPAH	National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness
NSW	New South Wales
SHA	State Housing Authority
SHS	Specialist Homelessness Services
SHSC	Specialist Homelessness Services Collection
SLK	Statistical Linkage Key
SOMIH	State owned and managed Indigenous housing
STEP	Support and Tenancy Education Program
TA	Temporary Accommodation
WA	Western Australia

Symbols

–	nil or rounded to zero
..	not applicable
n.a.	not available
n.p.	not publishable because of small numbers, confidentiality, or other concerns about the quality of the data

Summary

Public housing policy in Australia has been guided by three overarching objectives: prioritising vulnerable tenants in the allocation of property; sustaining stable tenancies by linking households to welfare services; and reducing the pressure on government budgets by enhancing service delivery (Jacobs et al. 2010).

At 30 June 2013, 331,000 Australian households were living in public housing. At the same time, there were also 159,000 households on public housing waiting lists.

Specialist homelessness services play a key role in helping vulnerable people to obtain or maintain public housing. In 2012–13, these services assisted an estimated 244,000 clients. This report looks at the intersection between specialist homelessness services clients and public housing tenants in New South Wales and Western Australia.

By linking data from specialist homelessness agencies and public housing authorities in these states, AIHW identified 18,688 public housing tenants who sought support from specialist homelessness agencies between 1 July 2011 and 30 June 2013. Some of these people were supported prior to obtaining public housing, some were supported while they were in public housing, and others had lost their public housing and subsequently sought assistance from a homelessness agency. The study found that:

- **Specialist homelessness agencies were very successful in helping people to sustain public housing tenancies.**
 - Over 85% of the public housing tenants in the study who received assistance from a specialist homelessness agency had an ongoing tenancy at the end of June 2013.
 - For tenants seeking to maintain their tenancies, the more days of specialist homelessness support received, the greater the likelihood that a tenancy would continue.
 - The more days of support received from an SHS agency prior to commencing a public housing tenancy, the more likely that the tenancy was ongoing at the end of June 2013.
- **Most of those assisted into public housing were women.**
 - Proportionally they were more likely than men to sustain their tenancies.
- **Women and their children experiencing family and domestic violence were the largest group assisted in public housing**
- **Of those assisted into public housing who go on to lose their tenancy, 17% do so within 3 months of it commencing and a further 19% exit public housing within 3 to 6 months of their tenancy commencing.**
- **Income support receipt was very high and employment levels very low among the study group.** Almost all clients studied (91%) were receiving a government payment or pension, and employment rates across all clients were around 5%.
- **Tenants who exited public housing during the study period were more likely to have complex and multiple needs.** Non-ongoing public housing tenants reported a greater need for mental health, psychological, drug and alcohol, gambling and legal/court support services.

1 Introduction

Housing plays a pivotal role in the health and wellbeing of Australians by providing shelter, safety, security and privacy. The availability of affordable, sustainable and appropriate housing enables people to participate in the social, economic and community aspects of life.

While access to safe, secure housing is considered one of the most basic of human rights, for various reasons many Australian households are not able to afford to buy their own homes or rent in the private market.

Both government and non-government sectors provide housing support services to those in need. Services range from those designed to respond to homelessness, through to assistance in overcoming barriers to home ownership.

Against a backdrop where low-income households compete for housing with those on higher incomes (Jacobs et al. 2010), social housing programs assume greater importance in reducing housing affordability issues experienced by low-income households and other vulnerable people. At 30 June 2013, there were around 421,000 social housing dwellings in Australia (Productivity Commission 2015) with the number of community housing dwellings increasing each year. Over 331,000 households nationally were living in public housing (housing owned and managed by state housing authorities), with a further 66,000 living in community housing (housing owned and or managed by not for profit community housing organisations).

For those who find themselves without adequate housing of any kind, or are at imminent risk of losing their housing, Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) delivered by non-government organisations on behalf of government, provide crisis and emergency accommodation, assistance to maintain tenancies, connection with social housing providers, income support, specialised support or referrals to specialist providers (as drug and alcohol treatment and mental health services) and programs targeted to specific groups (such as young people or people escaping domestic and family violence).

These homelessness agencies play a key role in liaising with both public and community housing providers to assist people into these more stable housing situations. For example, in New South Wales, SHS agencies are expanding their advocacy role to form partnerships with local real estate agents in order to help clients obtain and maintain long term tenancies (Housing NSW 2014). Western Australia funds the Support and Tenancy Education Program which assists public housing tenants with issues such as rent payment and conflict or dispute resolution.

Homelessness agencies record information required to case manage clients who seek assistance. This information not only ensures an appropriate service response, but also allows governments to monitor the success of housing and homelessness programs. However, these data are only collected while clients are receiving support. When a person is no longer being supported by a specialist homelessness agency or does not return for support, it is difficult to know whether or not a stable housing situation has been sustained. Similarly, there is little data available on the circumstances of an individual prior to their seeking assistance from a specialist homelessness agency.

To gain a better understanding of longer term outcomes and the intersection of homelessness services and public housing programs, AIHW collaborated with the New South Wales Department of Family and Community Services, the Western Australia Department for Child Protection and Family Support, and the Western Australia Department of Housing to link data from the Specialist Homelessness Services Collection (SHSC) to public housing data in these states.

Housing programs in the two study states can be represented as follows:



Through identifying clients who were in public housing and who also sought assistance from an SHS agency, and analysing their characteristics and associated information, we sought to answer the following questions:

- What are the characteristics of those assisted into public housing and are these tenancies ongoing at the end of the study period? Are there differences between those whose tenancy is ongoing and those whose tenancies end? Do particular tenant characteristics indicate a higher risk of tenancy cessation?
- Why do existing public housing tenants seek assistance from SHS agencies? Does this intervention help prevent tenancy cessation?
- Do multiple and complex needs contribute to housing instability? Do the data support or add to the existing research about vulnerable tenancies and tenants?
- What role do SHS agencies play in assisting those public housing tenants who are at risk of homelessness? How much support does it take for these clients to remain in their tenancy?

2 How SHSC and public housing data were linked

The AIHW is an international leader in data linkage (also called data integration), and is one of only two accredited Commonwealth Integrating Authorities in Australia.

In order to analyse the circumstances of clients of homelessness agencies, the AIHW linked data from the SHSC database to public housing data held by New South Wales and Western Australia. Specifically, the SHSC database (July 2011 to June 2013) was matched to:

- New South Wales public housing datasets, including State owned and managed Indigenous housing (SOMIH) and Temporary Accommodation (TA) datasets (July 2011 to June 2013); and
- the Western Australia public housing dataset (July 2011 to June 2013).

Linkage was carried out between the New South Wales and Western Australian data sets, respectively, and the SHSC, by using a statistical linkage key called an SLK-581.

Box 1: What is an SLK?

An SLK-581 is a code which uses some letters from a person's first and last names together with sex and date of birth to produce a statistical linkage key or SLK, unique to that person. We can then use this SLK to link an individual's data across data sources without ever having to see their personal details. AIHW operates under strict privacy obligations under section 29 of the *Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Act 1987*. To ensure the privacy of individuals, AIHW does not obtain access to the underlying data from which the statistical linkage key is created. All data in this project have had personal identifying details removed to ensure that no individual can be identified by their circumstances or characteristics.

Creation of an SLK is not always possible, for example when data fields required to construct the SLK are missing. In the New South Wales dataset, 5.8% of records had no data on sex, and overall, 6% of records had an incomplete SLK-581. In the Western Australian dataset only 0.01% of records had incomplete data for SLK-581. The table below presents the number of records successfully linked for this study.

Table 1: Summary of matched data

Data set matched to SHSC	Public Housing clients over study period	Clients identified and linked	%
NSW public housing/SOMIH/TA	259,982	11,689	4.5%
WA public housing	82,032	6,999	8.5%

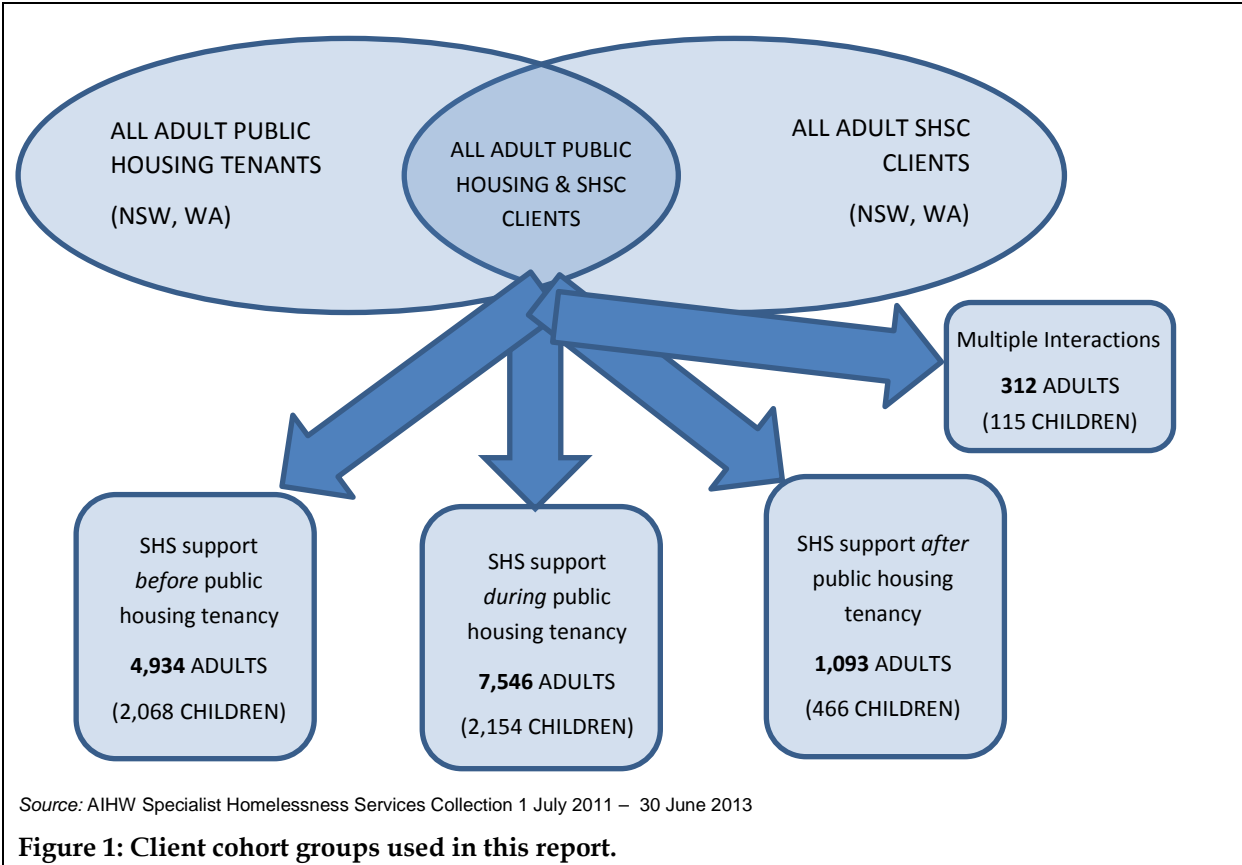
Sources: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection 1 July 2011 – 30 June 2013; public housing data NSW & WA (unpublished).

3 Overview of client groups

During the period 1 July 2011 to 30 June 2013, 18,688 adults and children were identified in both public housing and homelessness data in New South Wales and Western Australia. Of these people (see Figure 1):

- 4,934 adults and 2,068 children were assisted by an SHS agency prior to commencing a public housing tenancy.
- 7,546 adults and 2,154 children sought assistance while they were public housing tenants.
- 1,093 adults and 466 children sought assistance after their public housing tenancy had ceased.
- 312 adults and 115 children had multiple interactions between specialist homelessness agencies and public housing that were unable to be simply classified into one of the groups above.

For the purposes of this study, people identified as being assisted into public housing were those who had not been in public housing as at 1 July 2011 and their first interaction during the study period was with an SHS agency. However it is possible that some of these clients may have had one or more episodes of public housing before 1 July 2011.



The analysis in this report focuses on housing outcomes for clients (homeless service clients and public housing tenants). While some parts of the analysis take family composition into consideration, in general comparisons exclude children under 15. This is because children’s outcomes, as recorded by SHS agencies, largely reflect those of the client adults they accompany, and numbers of children per adult vary across the client cohort groups.

Therefore, to count children in the analysis could result in a biased comparison of housing outcomes across these cohorts.

The adults referred to here are from various household types. That is, for each of the three major cohort groups, adults may be in single person households, family households, couple households or other family groups. Household breakdowns of each cohort are given in tables in the relevant chapter (Chapters 4-6).

People whose tenancy was current at the end of the study period (30 June 2013) have been classified as 'ongoing' tenants, including those whose tenancies began late in the study period.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 of this report cover the three cohort groups mentioned above. These are followed by a discussion in Chapter 7 on public housing tenancies and people with multiple and complex needs, before a final concluding chapter.

4 SHS support prior to public housing tenancy

Between 1 July 2011 and 30 June 2013, 4,934 clients were identified as receiving SHS support prior to obtaining public housing tenancies in New South Wales and Western Australia.

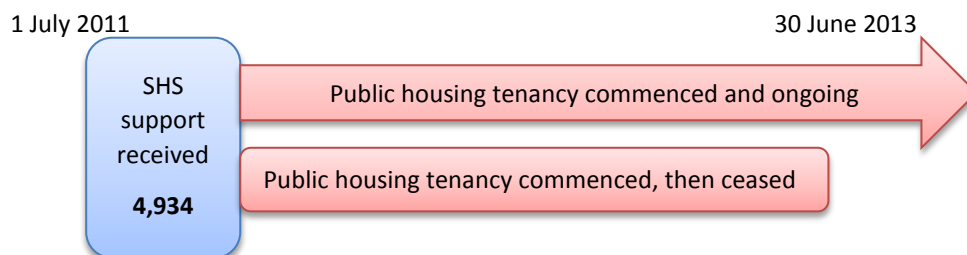


Figure 2: SHS support received prior to public housing tenancy commencement

Table 2: Clients supported prior to public housing tenancy

	Supported before public housing tenancy	Ongoing public housing tenancy at 30 June 2013 (number, proportion ^(a))
Number	4,934	4,276 (87%)
Sex		
Female	2,987 (61%)	2,659 (89%)
Male	1,947 (39%)	1,617 (83%)
Age		
24 and under	1,142 (23%)	970 (85%)
25 to 54 years	3,272 (66%)	2,842 (87%)
55 and over	520 (11%)	464 (89%)
Indigenous status (where known)		
Indigenous	1,516 (33%)	1,294 (85%)
Non-Indigenous	3,114 (67%)	2,722 (87%)
Females experiencing domestic and family violence		
Yes	1,604 (54%)	1,399 (87%)
No	1,383 (46%)	1,260 (91%)
Family type (based on living arrangement)		
Single person	1,659 (34%)	1,395 (84%)
Couple	184 (4%)	155 (84%)
Single with child/ren	1,188 (24%)	1,063 (89%)
Couple with child/ren	330 (7%)	297 (90%)
Other family	418 (8%)	367 (88%)
Group	384 (8%)	330 (86%)
Missing/unknown/unable to be determined	771 (16%)	669 (87%)

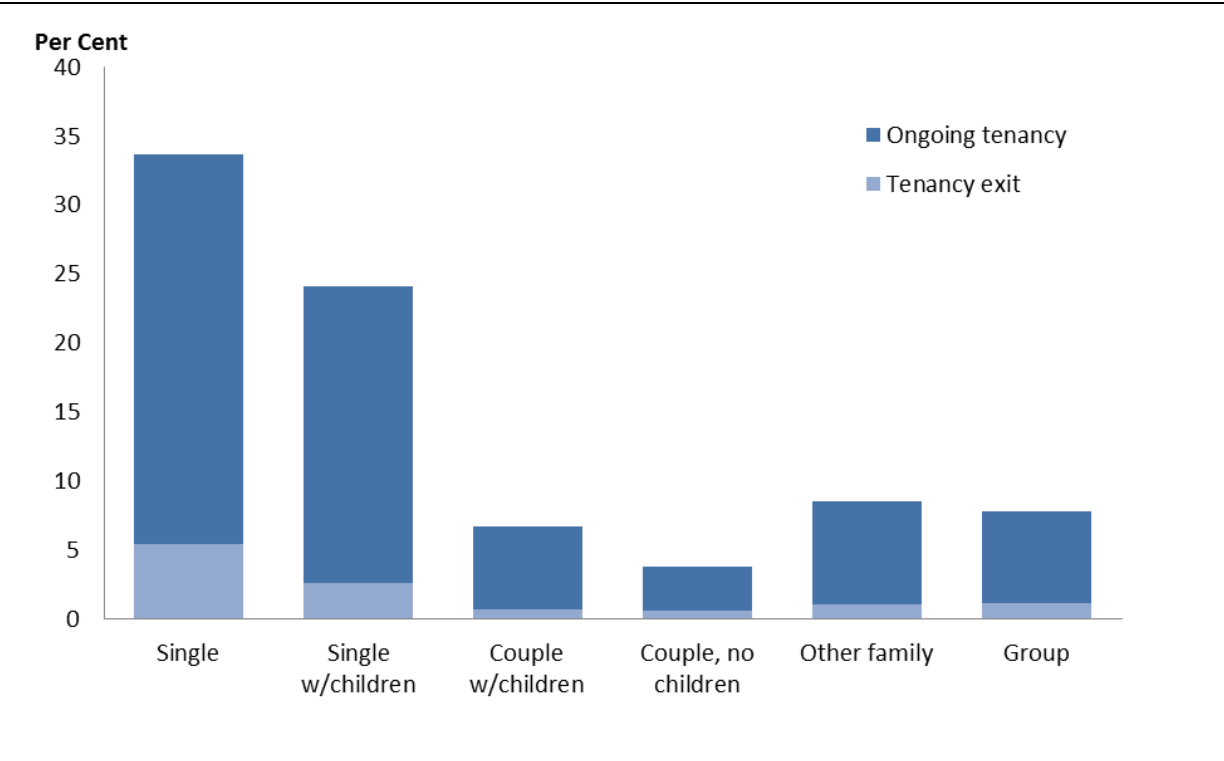
(a) Proportion of total number supported within each category.

Sources: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection 1 July 2011 – 30 June 2013; public housing data NSW & WA (unpublished)

Who were assisted into public housing?

The majority of clients assisted into public housing were female (61%). This is consistent with the greater proportion of females in general who seek support from SHS agencies. An equal proportion of females sought help from SHS agencies in New South Wales and Western Australia during the 1 July 2011 – 30 June 2013 period.

Of those who were assisted into public housing, the biggest family type was a single person at 34%. A further 24% were a single adult with children and 7% were couples with children. Those with children were slightly more likely to remain in public housing compared to those without children (90% compared to 84%). Single person families made up more of this cohort than in the general SHSC population. Overall, 30% of the SHS client population were classified as single during 2013–14, yet they account for 37% of this cohort (AIHW 2014a).



Source: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection 1 July 2011—30 June 2013.

Figure 3: Family type, as reported by living arrangement, and tenancy status, as a percentage of the 'assisted prior to public tenancy' cohort

Almost half of this group (46%) were considered to be homeless when they presented for assistance at an SHS agency. A further 17% indicated that they were living in private housing, either as a renter or owner. The level of homelessness among this group is consistent with the proportion of those homeless in the broader SHSC in 2012–13, which was 46% (AIHW 2013). This group also had the highest proportion among the 3 cohorts who reported being housed in an institution prior to seeking assistance, at 5%.

Around one-third of people who were assisted into public housing in New South Wales (30%) and Western Australia (38%) were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This is higher than the proportion of those who identified as Indigenous Australians in the broader SHS population during the same period (24% for New South Wales and 35% for Western Australia). Research undertaken by AIHW in 2014 found that in 2013, Indigenous households were 6 times as likely as other Australian households to live in social housing (31% compared to 5%). Public housing is the largest provider of social housing to Indigenous

households across Australia, with about 30,800 Indigenous households living in public housing at 30 June 2013 – 14% of all Indigenous households (AIHW 2014b). Indigenous clients are a priority group for public housing assistance in all states and territories.

More than half of all the women assisted into public housing in this study were experiencing domestic and family violence (54%). This was the highest rate among the 3 groups studied. It was also higher than the overall rate for women who sought support from specialist homelessness agencies in New South Wales and Western Australia during this period (45% in both New South Wales and Western Australia). In addition, it was a higher rate than for other groups assisted by both public housing programs and SHS. These results confirm that women experiencing domestic violence are considered a priority group for public housing placement.

Other priority groups who were assisted into public housing during the study period included those already homeless and those who are living in an unsuitable or unstable situation. Among people presenting to SHS agencies, almost one-half (46%) were considered homeless when they sought support. More than 1 in 4 (27%) came from either private or community housing rentals. This may indicate that their housing was inadequate or unsuitable for their needs.

Are there differences among clients whose tenancies end?

Overall 87% (4,276) of adults assisted by SHS agencies into public housing had an ongoing tenancy at the end of June 2013. Of the remaining 13% who exited public housing (658 adults), just under one-half later returned to an SHS agency for support during the study period.

Adults who exited public housing were more likely than those whose tenancies were ongoing to:

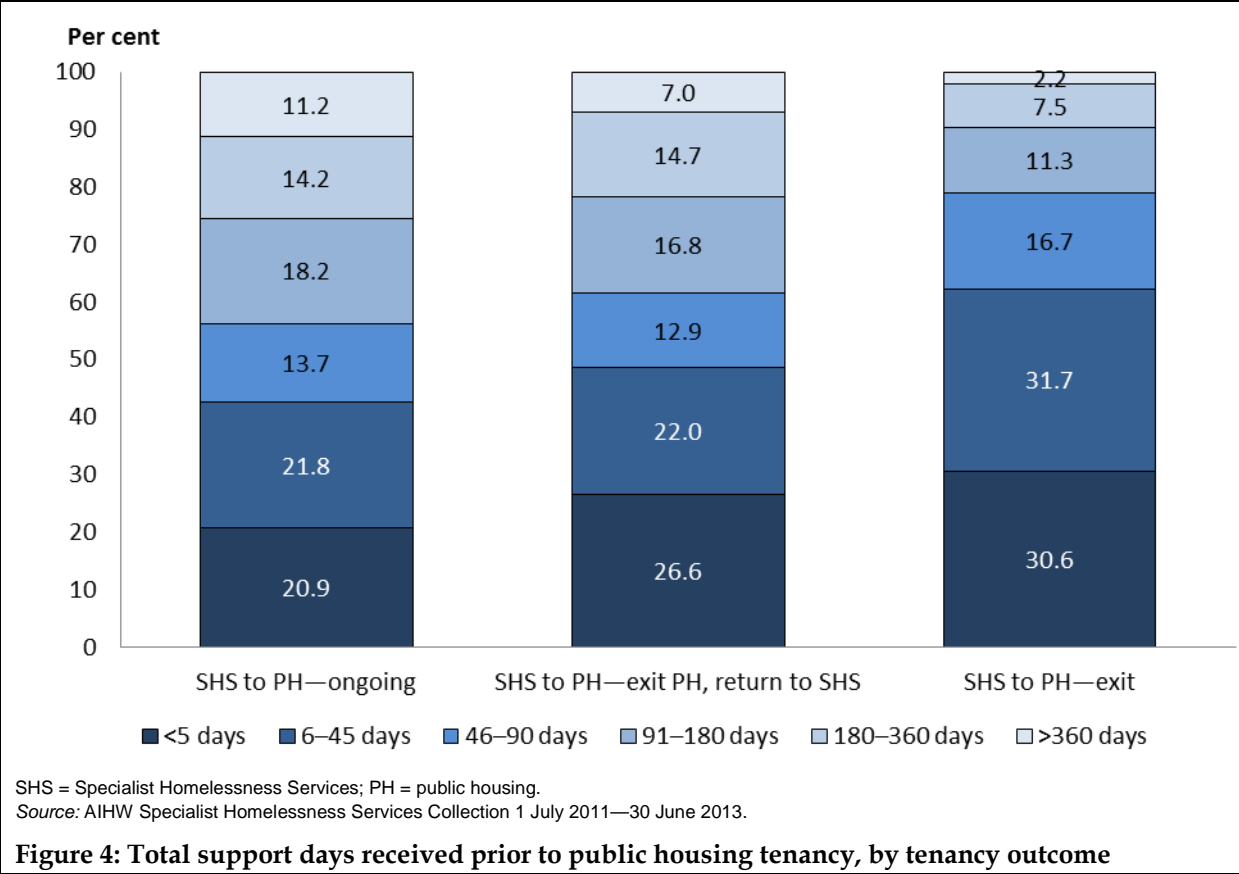
- be in the first 12 months of their public housing tenancy (70% compared to 51%)
- be male; over the study period, tenancy retention rates were lower among men (83%) than women (89%)
- be a single person family, without children (48% compared to 39%)
- be aged 24 or under (26% compared to 23%)
- need legal information (34% compared to 29%) or court support (17% compared to 15%)
- be seeking assistance after release from custodial arrangements (5% compared to 2%)
- need drug/alcohol counselling (23% compared to 16%)
- need assistance with behavioural issues (33% compared to 29%).

What role did SHS agencies play in tenancy retention?

For those who have been homeless, the establishment of a public housing tenancy represents an entry into safe, secure and sustainable housing, possibly for the first time. However, maintaining this tenancy often requires support as those who have been homeless may have vulnerabilities and circumstances that pose a challenge for housing stability. SHS agencies play an important role in helping to maintain tenancies that have recently begun, particularly for the formerly homeless. This support may include working with schools to support students at risk of homelessness; coordinating referrals for a client to address the issues that are putting them at risk of homelessness; and linking a client to financial counselling, financial support and/or legal support (Housing NSW 2014).

Specialist homelessness agencies also play a role in preparing and supporting clients prior to their public housing tenancy. Public housing wait times may vary depending on availability of suitable housing. According to housing authorities, in most cases the wait time for public housing is between 2 and 10 years. In New South Wales, the average wait time, that is the average time a newly housed tenant waited before they were housed, is almost 4 years or 208 weeks. Clients housed in 2013–14 in Western Australia waited an average of 146 weeks. Those who are identified as falling into one of the ‘greatest need’ categories, such as those fleeing domestic and family violence, those who are homeless, and those whose housing is inadequate/inappropriate are likely to have been housed in less than the average time across the states.

Support received from SHS agencies by newly-housed public housing tenants prior to the start of their tenancies is shown in Figure 4. Support is shown for three tenancy outcome sub-groups – those who had ongoing tenancies at the end of the study period, those who exited public housing then returned to SHS during the period, and those who exited public housing and did not return to SHS.



While the three groups in Figure 4 are of different sizes, they serve to highlight some differences in service use histories among the groups.

Those whose tenancy was ongoing at the end of the study period were more likely to have received over 360 days of support from specialist homelessness agencies prior to being placed in public housing (Figure 4). Conversely, those whose tenancy was not ongoing at the end of the study period were the most likely to have received fewer than 5 days of support from an agency prior to commencement of their tenancy. What this indicates is that high levels of SHS support prior to a tenancy commencement could be a predictor of the likelihood of that tenancy being ongoing. This is consistent with AIHW research that found that it takes considerable effort by SHS agencies, often over a long period to assist a person who is already homeless into housing (AIHW 2014c).

5 SHS support received during public housing tenancy

SHS agencies play a key role in supporting public housing tenants to remain in their housing. Between July 2011 and 30 June 2013, SHS agencies assisted 7,546 clients to remain in their public housing tenancies in New South Wales and Western Australia.

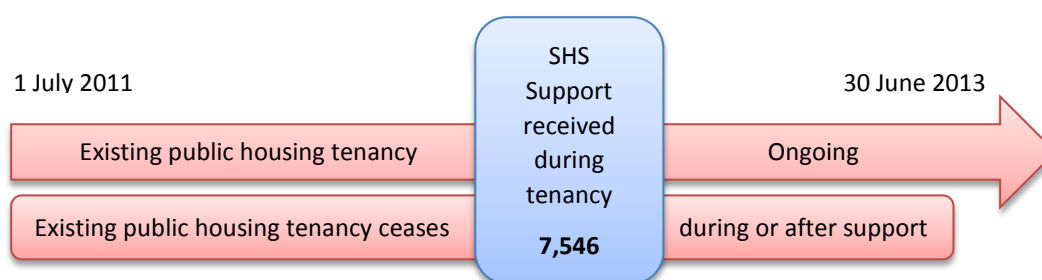


Figure 5: SHS support received while during public housing tenancy

Table 3: Clients supported during a public housing tenancy

	SHS support during public housing tenancy	Ongoing public housing at 30 June 2013 (number, proportion ^(a))
Number	7,546	6,402 (85%)
Sex		
Female	4,976 (66%)	4,267 (86%)
Male	2,570 (34%)	2,135 (83%)
Age		
24 and under	2,011 (27%)	1,754 (87%)
25 to 54	4,627 (61%)	3,853 (83%)
55 and over	908 (12%)	795 (88%)
Indigenous status (where known)		
Indigenous	2,668 (40%)	2,197 (82%)
Non-Indigenous	4,089 (61%)	3,491 (88%)
Females experiencing domestic and family violence		
Yes	2,025 (41%)	1,668 (82%)
No	2,952 (59%)	2,599 (88%)
Family type on SHS presentation		
Single person	2,389 (32%)	1,984 (83%)
Couple	311 (4%)	261 (84%)
Single with child/ren	1,617 (21%)	1,376 (85%)
Couple with child/ren	595 (8%)	502 (84%)
Other family	606 (8%)	518 (85%)
Group	263 (3%)	224 (85%)
Missing/unknown/unable to be determined	1,766 (23%)	1,537 (87%)

(a) Proportion of total number supported within each category.

Sources: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection 1 July 2011 – 30 June 2013; public housing data NSW & WA (unpublished)

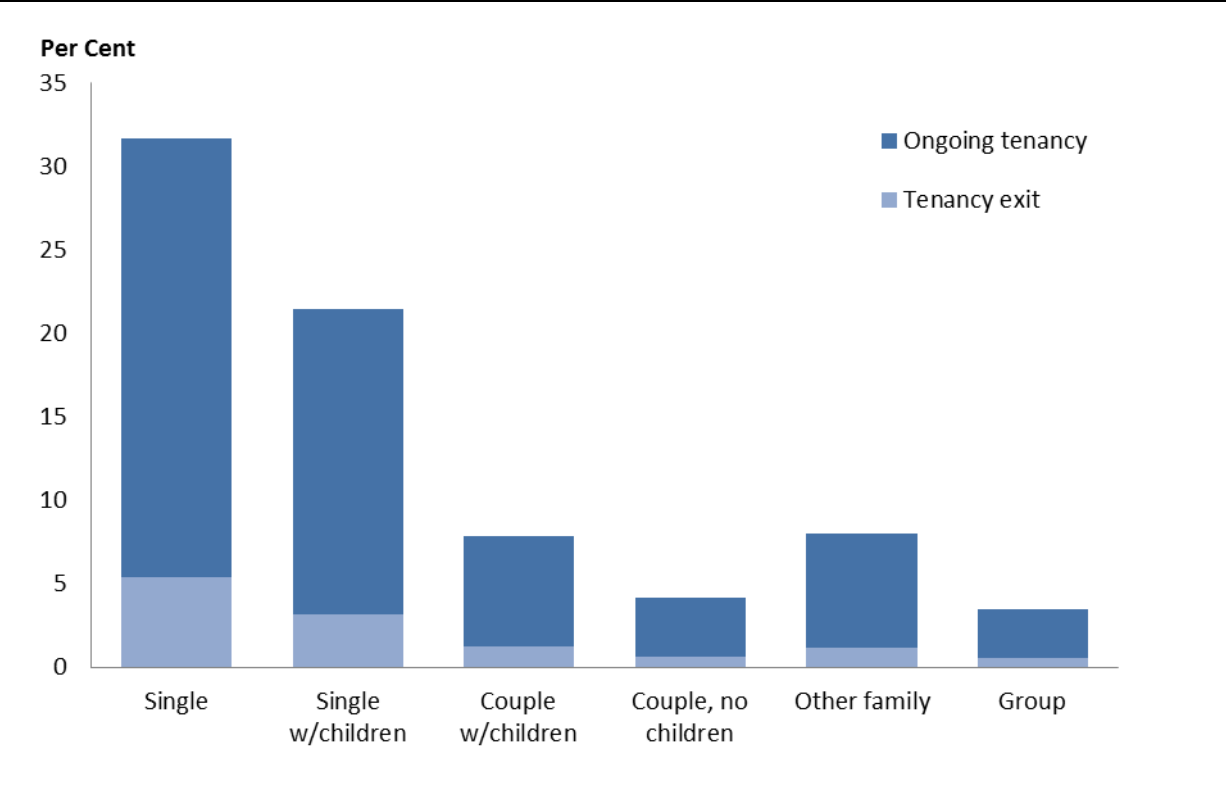
Who were supported to maintain their tenancy?

During the study period 7,546 public housing tenants sought assistance from a homelessness agency to maintain their existing tenancies. Of the clients assisted, two-thirds (66%) were female. Indigenous Australians made up 40% of clients assisted.

Clients assisted by SHS agencies during their public housing tenancies were the most likely of the 3 groups examined to be under 24 at the time they sought assistance (27%). This coincides with the proportion of people in this age range in the 2013–14 SHSC population, after children have been excluded (AIHW 2014a).

Family and domestic violence was again a major reason among this group for seeking support. However, of the 3 groups examined, females in this group were the least likely to have experienced family and domestic violence (41%).

Family type for this group was broadly consistent with the other groups examined. Around one-third of all tenants were single with no children (32%), with a further 21% being single parents. Of all groups examined, this group had the lowest proportion of single adults with children. In contrast, this group had the highest rate of clients aged over 55 (12%) among the groups examined. This is not surprising considering that older tenants (over 55) made up just over half (51%) of all public housing tenants as at June 2013 (AIHW 2014d).



Source: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection 1 July 2011—30 June 2013.

Figure 6: Family type as reported in SHSC on presentation, and tenancy status, as a percentage of the ‘assisted during public tenancy’ cohort

Almost half of the clients in this group (45%) reported living in public or community housing prior to seeking SHS assistance. However, there were 17% considered to be homeless on presentation to a specialist homelessness service. This would seem to indicate that at least some clients had already informally left their public housing.

Are there differences among clients whose tenancies end?

The vast majority (85%, 6,402 clients) of those tenants who sought support from an SHS agency during their tenancy, were still public housing tenants at 30 June 2013. This is consistent with findings from the AIHW in 2014 showing that the vast majority of clients who were housed when they received support were able to maintain that housing (AIHW 2014c).

The remaining 15% of tenants (1,144) had exited public housing by the end of the study period.

In comparison to tenants who had an ongoing tenancy at the end of the study period, those whose tenancies ended were more likely to:

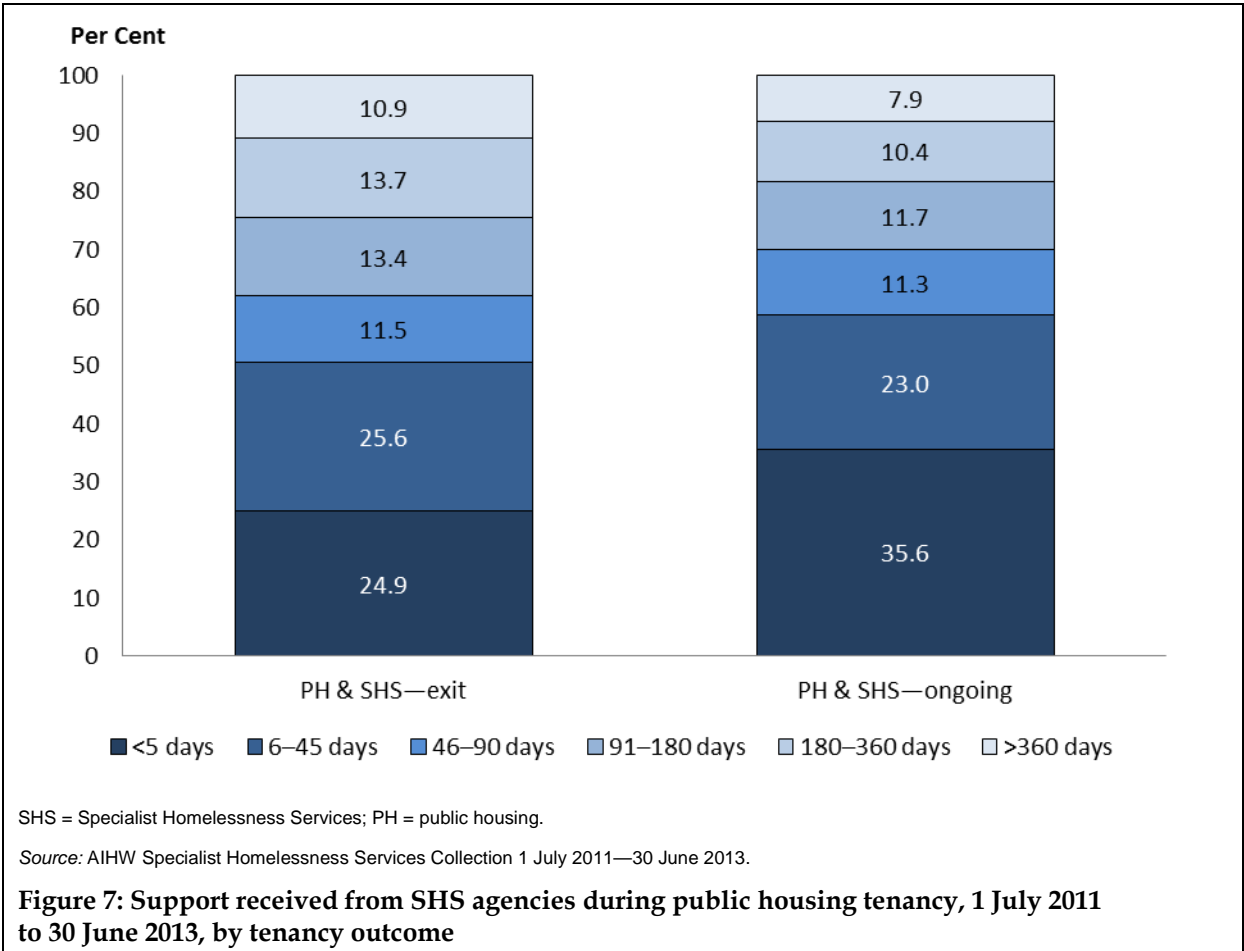
- be male; tenancy retention rates were lower for men (83%) than women (86%)
- be aged 25–54 (68% compared to 60%)
- present alone, without children (44% compared to 41%).
- have an identified need for mental health services (16% compared to 8%)
- have an identified need for drug and alcohol counselling (12% compared to 7%)
- need court support (14% compared to 8%) and legal information (23% compared to 15%).

What role did SHS agencies play in tenancy retention?

State housing authorities provide a variety of tenancy support services, designed to assist tenants to remain their tenancies. A recent evaluation of three such tenant support services in New South Wales revealed that they achieved ‘a 97% or higher success rate in assisting their clients to sustain their tenancy’ (Housing NSW 2013). In Western Australia, the STEP program and brokerage funds operate to support tenants to manage their tenancies (but do not provide tenants with funds to pay off their debts).

Despite the availability of such services, some tenants still seek assistance from SHS agencies. This may be instead of, or in addition to approaching a state tenancy support service. Some 46% of existing public housing tenants who sought support from SHS specified a need for advocacy and liaison on their behalf, perhaps with a state housing authority, bank, legal services, police, Centrelink or other such service.

For some existing tenants, despite high levels of support, their public housing tenancy does cease. Figure 7 shows the differing levels of SHS support received by public housing tenants whose tenancies ceased before the end of the study period and those whose tenancies remained ongoing. Where tenancies had ceased before the end of the study period, one quarter (25%) received over 180 days of support. For those whose tenancies were ongoing, the proportion was 18%. This aligns with previous AIHW research findings that a small proportion of clients become homeless despite receiving very high levels of support (AIHW 2014c).



6 SHS support received after public housing tenancy

While some public housing tenants sought support from SHS agencies during their tenancies, others did not seek assistance until after they had left their public housing. There were 1,093 people in New South Wales and Western Australia who exited public housing during the study period and subsequently sought assistance from SHS agencies.

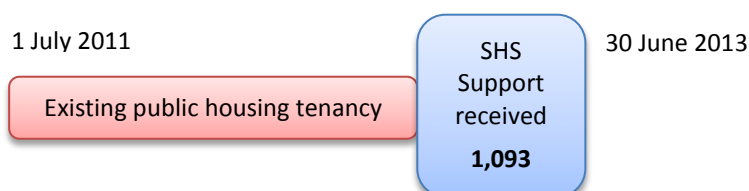


Figure 8: SHS support received after public housing tenancy ceases

Table 4: Clients supported after a public housing tenancy

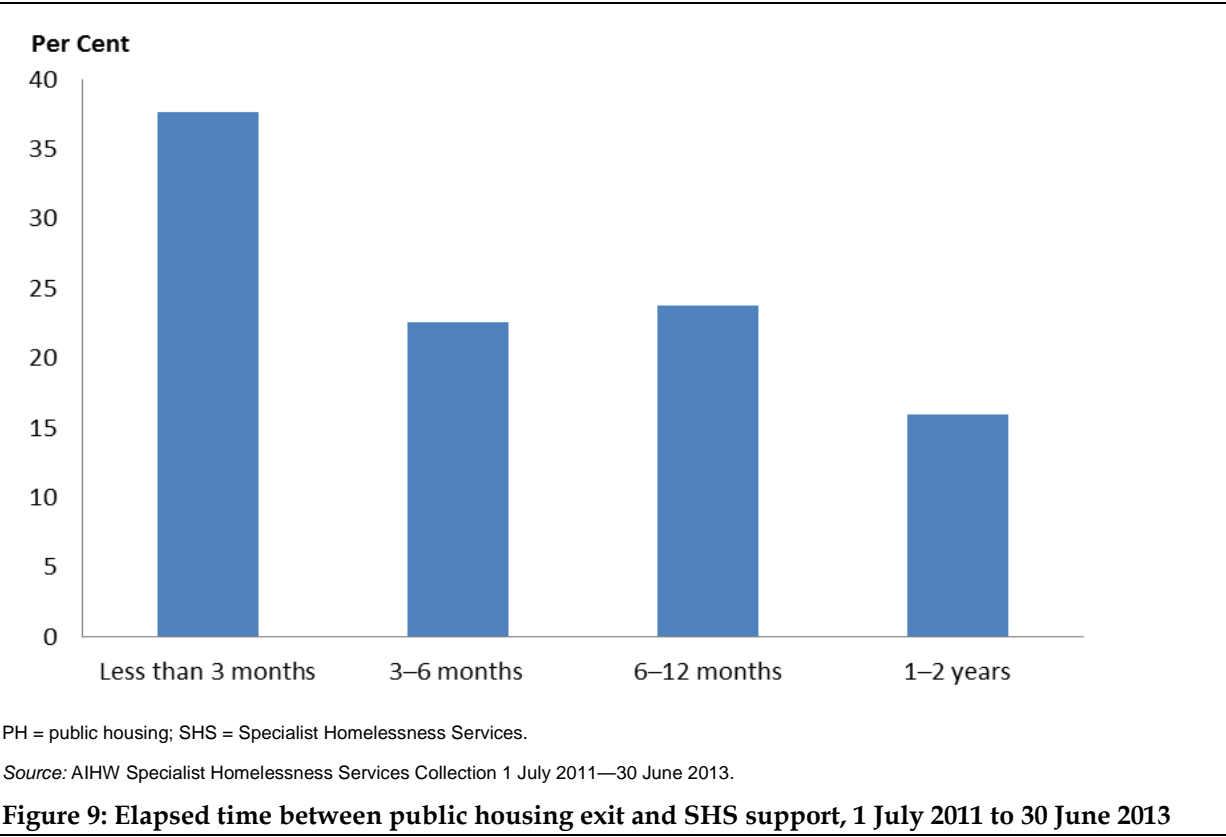
Total		1,093
Sex		
	Females	732 (67%)
	Males	361 (33%)
Age		
	24 and under	229 (21%)
	25–54 years	788 (72%)
	55 and over	76 (7%)
Indigenous status (where status is known)		
	Indigenous	460 (45%)
	Non-Indigenous	553 (55%)
Females who experienced domestic/family violence		
	Yes	331 (45%)
	No	401 (55%)
Family type on SHS presentation		
	Single person	343 (31%)
	Couple	70 (6%)
	Single person with children	250 (23%)
	Couple with children	59 (5%)
	Other family	115 (11%)
	Group	62(6%)
	Missing/unknown/unable to be determined	194 (18%)

Sources: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection 1 July 2011 – 30 June 2013; public housing data NSW & WA (unpublished)

Overall, this group was the smallest of the 3 cohorts, with 1,093 adult clients. It had the largest proportion of females at around two-thirds (67%) of the group. It also had the highest proportion of clients aged 25–54 (72%) and the highest proportion of Indigenous clients (45%).

Almost half (47%) were identified as homeless at the time they sought assistance. This is higher than the proportion of homeless SHSC clients in 2013–14 (42%) (AIHW 2014a). A further 17% reported that their prior housing type was private rental, with just 9% of clients reporting that they formerly lived in public housing. This could indicate that people who leave their public housing do not seek assistance straight away, or that they in fact explore and exhaust other housing options before seeking assistance (Short et al. 2015).

The time between a person leaving public housing and seeking assistance from SHS agencies varied from less than 3 months to between 1 and 2 years. Over one-third of people in the study sought assistance less than 3 months after they had left public housing (Figure 9).



The high proportion of clients who were homeless on presentation (47%, almost identical to those assisted into public housing tenancies) highlights the risk of falling into homelessness for those who lose their public housing.

For those people who sought assistance after leaving public housing, just over one-third presented for financial or housing affordability issues, and a further 21% needed assistance for domestic and family violence or family breakdown.

The data show that females were more likely to present to an SHS agency for assistance following the loss of a public housing tenancy compared to males (67% female to 33% male).

7 Public housing tenancies and clients with multiple and complex needs

This analysis shows that homelessness services are successful in assisting people to both obtain and maintain their public housing tenancies. However, where people, who despite SHS support and assistance, exited public housing, the analysis showed that they were more likely to have multiple and complex needs in comparison to people who maintained their public housing.

Many people living in public housing experience underlying issues which contribute to them being vulnerable, disadvantaged and in need of housing assistance. Public housing has increasingly become the accommodation of last resort (Atkinson et al. 2007), with tenancies more frequently drawn from vulnerable social groups. In 2012–13 about 66% of all new tenancies in New South Wales and 58% in Western Australia were allocated to households in 'greatest need'. People in 'greatest need' include those who at the time of their tenancy application are:

- currently homeless
- living with safety risks in their current accommodation – for example domestic and family violence
- suffering a health condition exacerbated by their current housing
- living in housing inappropriate for their needs
- experiencing very high housing costs.

Research into tenant vulnerability found that there is substantial overlap between people in 'greatest need' and tenants at risk of losing their public housing (Beer et al. 2006, Habibis et al. 2007a).

Rent arrears, property maintenance and neighbour complaints were identified as the direct causes of tenancy cessations (Beer et al. 2006). However, there were many other underlying factors that also contributed to cessations. These included:

- domestic and family violence
- low income/inability to pay rent
- mental health issues
- problematic drug and alcohol use.

Research also identified key population groups at risk of falling out of their public housing tenancies. Groups that find themselves particularly at risk include: single parent families; Indigenous families/households; people with mental health issues; those with problematic drug and alcohol use; people living alone; and women escaping domestic and family violence (Beer et al. 2006, Habibis et al. 2007a).

These findings, characteristics and vulnerabilities experienced by tenants at risk of losing their public housing were broadly reflected in the study data.

Economic participation

Employment levels across all groups were very low. Only around 5% of all clients identified as being employed; 41% identified themselves as unemployed and a further 54% as not in the labour force. Virtually all of the group were reliant on government pensions and

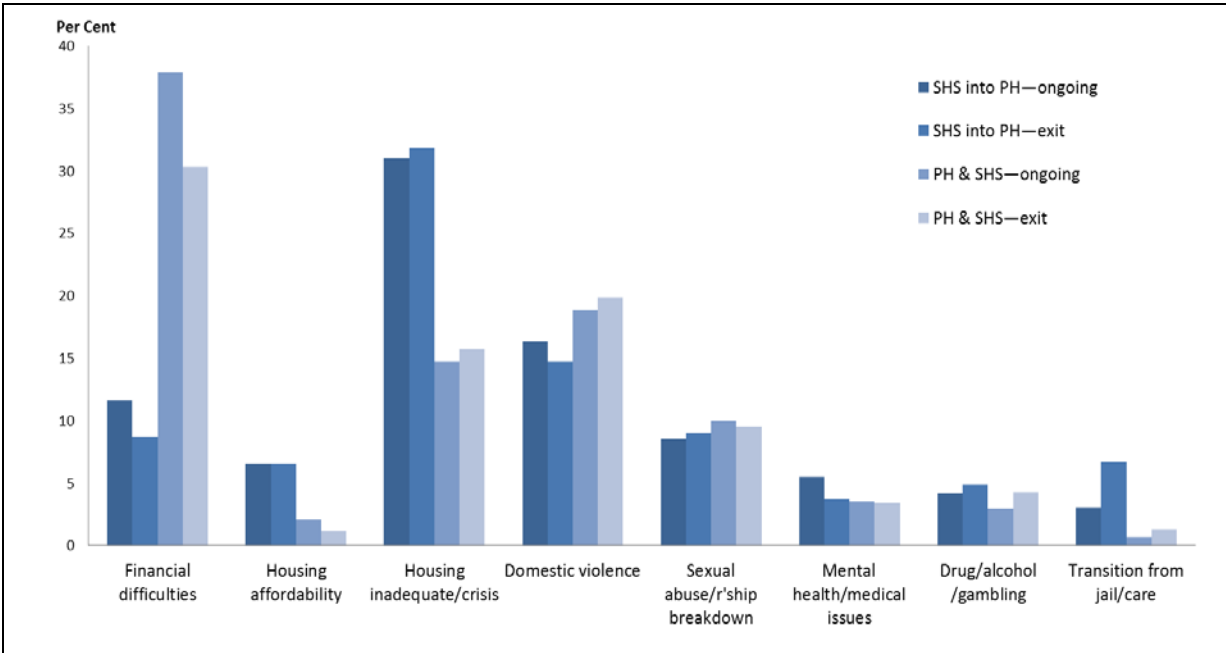
allowances. Over 90% of clients whose income source was known were in receipt of a government payment or pension.

Reasons for seeking assistance

The ‘main reason for seeking assistance’ from a specialist homelessness service is determined and recorded by the case worker and captures why the client most needed assistance. For existing public housing tenants, financial difficulties factored strongly as the main reason for seeking assistance. This reason is identified where a client doesn’t have the means to pay their rent or bills, or to pay for food or other essentials. While all state housing authorities provide and fund tenancy support programs to assist where a tenant is unable to pay their rent, a homelessness agency is able to provide this support directly to the tenant.

As expected, and as shown in Figure 10, for those with an existing public housing tenancy, financial reasons for seeking assistance were the most commonly reported. For those who were not existing public housing tenants upon presentation, the main reasons for seeking assistance were a housing crisis or inadequate dwelling conditions. A housing crisis may include situations where a tenant has been living in an overcrowded dwelling, where the dwelling was unsafe, or where they had been asked to leave their accommodation.

Domestic and family violence appears to be slightly more prevalent among existing public housing tenants. For around 1 in 10 clients, domestic and family violence was the *main* reason for seeking assistance.



SHS = Specialist Homelessness Services; PH = public housing.

Source: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection 1 July 2011—30 June 2013.

Figure 10: Main reason for seeking assistance from Specialist Homelessness Services agencies, by SHS/public housing tenancy group

Client need for services

In addition to recording the main reason for seeking assistance, agencies also assess and record all services the client is assessed as needing. While general levels of need across all groups were highest among those whose tenancy was not ongoing at the end of the study

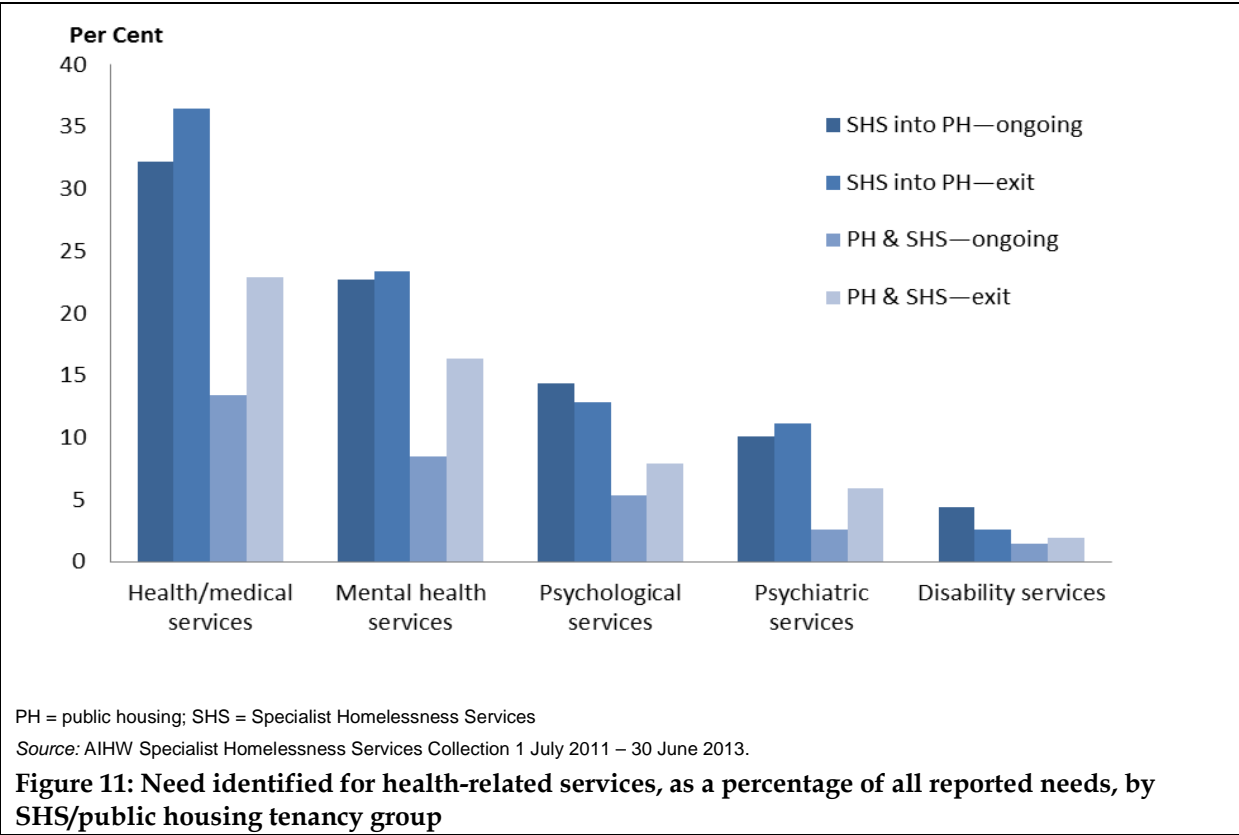
period, there were certain areas where there were significant differences in the level of need recorded.

Health-related services

In relation to health, those whose tenancy was not ongoing showed a higher level of need for general health services and mental health services than those who tenancy was ongoing (see Figure 11). For those who had received SHS support prior to their tenancy and then exited public housing the need for health and medical related services were highest of all.

This higher reporting of health-related needs among tenants who exit public housing supports research undertaken by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) in 2008, which found that around 38% of tenants referred to WA tenant support services indicated that they had ‘health issues’ (Flatau et al. 2008). People suffering with mental illness often experience a number of other difficulties that can threaten their ability to maintain stable housing (O’Brien et al. 2002). This can often manifest in poor physical health which may impact their ability to maintain their property, which is one of the direct reasons a tenancy may be ended by a state housing authority (SHA).

There was also a clear increased need for mental health services among those whose tenancies were not ongoing at the end of the study period when compared to those who were ongoing. Much research points to mental health issues being more prevalent among the homeless and those in unstable housing situations. A 2008 report from SANE Australia found that 94% of respondents with a mental illness had at some point been homeless or without suitable housing (SANE Australia 2008).



Specialist services

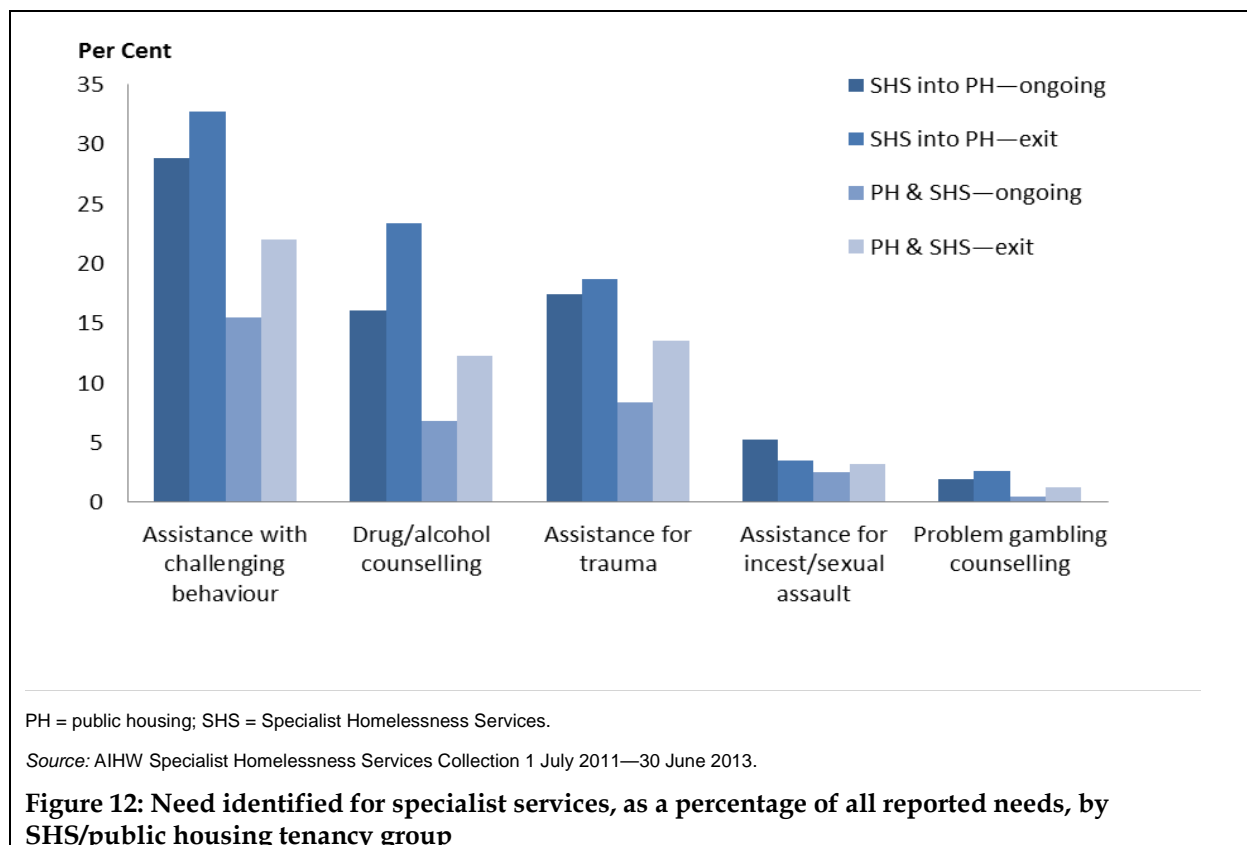
Tenants with a high level of need identified for specialist services related to challenging behaviour, drugs/alcohol, trauma, incest/sexual assault and problem gambling were more likely to exit their public housing tenancy than other tenants. Clients assisted into their public housing tenancies by an SHS agency had the highest levels of specialist services need identified, with those unable to maintain those tenancies, highest of all. This is particularly evident for problematic drug and alcohol use, assistance with trauma and problematic behaviour.

Problematic drug and alcohol use can compromise the ability of tenants to manage their accommodation (Beer et al. 2006) which may in turn lead to a public housing tenancy being lost.

AIHW research into groups vulnerable to homelessness showed a similar pattern (AIHW 2014c). Those with problematic drug or alcohol use experienced the poorest housing outcomes among the cohorts examined. Less than one-third of clients were housed prior to SHS support and only 41% were housed at the end of their support (AIHW 2014c).

Research undertaken by AHURI showed that anti-social behaviour by tenants is often displayed through socially intrusive practices such as excessive noise and verbal abuse, which disturbs the peace and is disruptive to other residents (Habibis et al. 2007b).

This was reflected in the data as an elevated need for assistance with challenging social behaviours being reported more frequently for those who exited public housing than those whose tenancy was ongoing. People who lost their public housing tenancies were more likely to be identified as needing assistance with social and behavioural problems. About 1 in 4 (26%) of those who lost their public housing tenancies had a need for assistance with social and behavioural problems compared to 21% who had an ongoing tenancy.



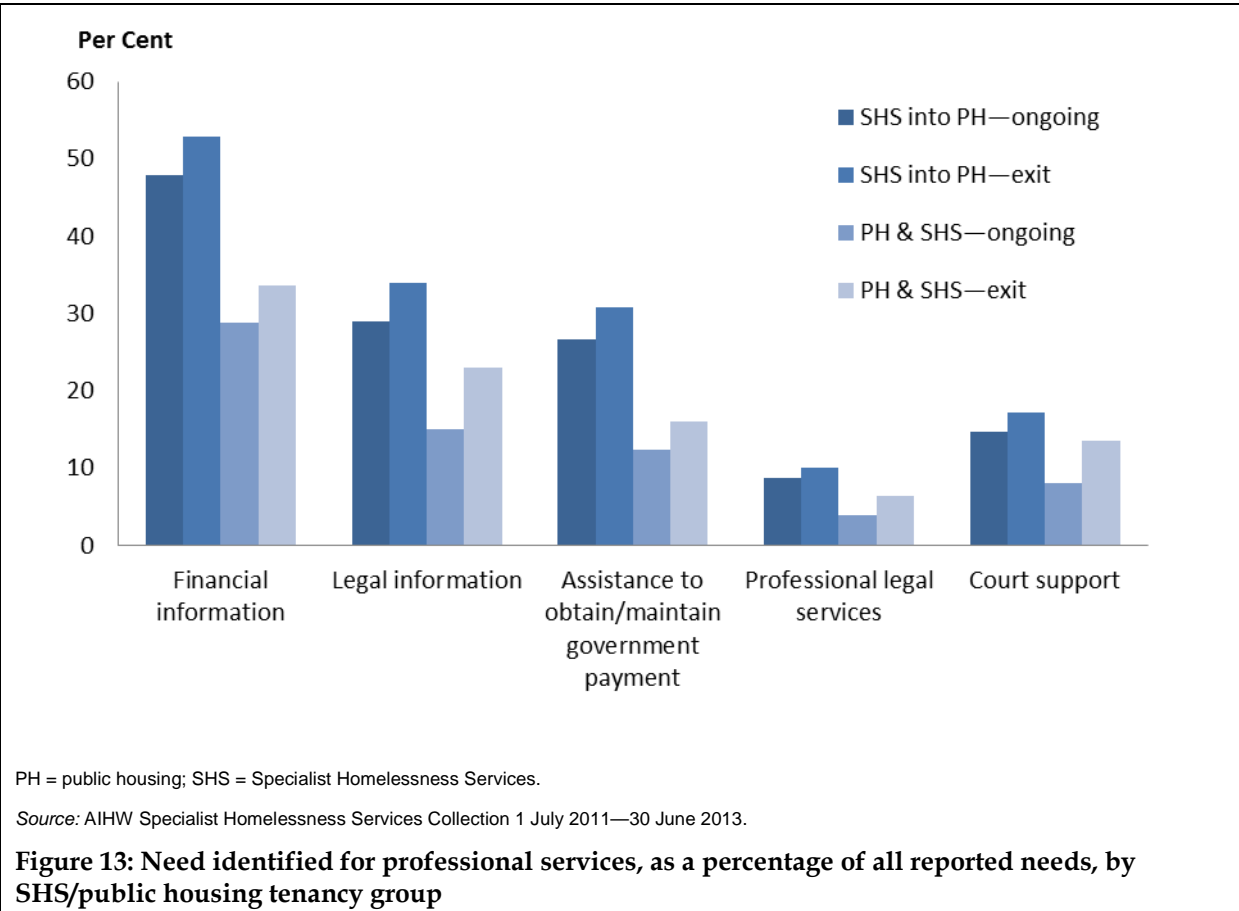
Professional services

People who received SHS support before their public housing tenancy needed financial information services in about 50% of cases (see Figure 13). About 30% of people who received SHS support before their public housing tenancy needed legal information, and over 25% of these clients needed assistance with obtaining or maintaining government payments.

People who received SHS support before their public housing tenancy, and exited their public housing tenancy before the end of the study period, generally had higher needs for these forms of assistance than those in this group whose tenancies were ongoing, as well as higher needs for professional legal services and court support.

People who had not received SHS assistance before starting their tenancies, but who had exited their tenancies, also had comparatively higher needs for legal services and court support compared to those in this group whose tenancies were ongoing.

The need for court support and legal information among all those who had exited tenancies, whether originally supported by SHS into tenancies or not, could indicate an increased level of contact with the justice system. This contact may have been in relation to attempting to prevent eviction and/or associated matters.



8 Conclusion

In the two years between 1 July 2011 and 30 June 2013, almost 14,000 adults in New South Wales and Western Australia were assisted by both public housing programs and specialist homelessness services. Some were supported while they were existing tenants in public housing, some were supported to commence public housing tenancies and some had exited their public housing and subsequently sought assistance from a homelessness agency.

Overall, we found that:

- Tenancies supported by specialist homelessness agencies were very successful.
- Where a tenancy was non-ongoing, the tenant was more likely to have a need identified for drug and alcohol counselling and mental health services.
- The presence of children appears to be a protective factor for a vulnerable tenancy. Tenancy retention rates for households with children are higher than those without.
- The number of days of support received from a specialist homelessness agency was higher among those whose tenancy was ongoing.

This analysis has highlighted the role that specialist homelessness agencies play in assisting people into public housing as well as supporting existing tenants to remain in their public housing. Without this effort, many of those who are housed would become homeless.

While the primary aim of this report was to explore and answer the research questions outlined in the introduction, the report also demonstrates the value of data linkage techniques – it has added another dimension to existing research in both housing and homelessness. The success of this linkage exercise opens up the prospect of similar projects using other datasets held within the AIHW, using the SLK-581 linkage key.

Glossary

Community Housing: Housing provided for low- to moderate-income or special needs households, which community-based organisations manage. Community housing models vary across jurisdictions, and a variety of groups – including governments – own the housing stock.

Couch surfer: A person who is homeless and who typically moves from household to household intermittently, who is not regarded as being part of those households and who does not have any form of leased tenure over any accommodation.

Greatest need: A descriptor applying to a low-income household if, at the time of allocation, household members were subject to one or more of the following circumstances:

- they were homeless
- their life or safety was at risk in their accommodation
- their health condition was aggravated by their housing
- their housing was inappropriate to their needs
- they had very high rental housing costs.

A low-income household for the greatest need definition is a household that satisfies an eligibility test to receive housing assistance.

Public Housing: Rental housing that state and territory governments provide and manage. Included are households residing in public rental dwellings where the dwelling is either:

- owned by the housing authority
- leased from the private sector or other housing program areas and used to provide public rental housing
- leased to public housing tenants.

This includes State owned and managed Indigenous housing (SOMIH) dwellings in New South Wales.

Priority allocation: A new tenancy that is provided to individuals classified as being in greatest need.

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This report is the first of its kind produced by the AIHW linking homelessness and public housing data in order to better understand the clients of both. The report shows that specialist homelessness agencies were very successful in assisting clients to sustain their public housing tenancies.