

21. Housing and homelessness

Leaving the family home is a major transition for young people. Despite a recent trend for young people to live with their parents for longer, many will move out of the family home between the ages of 15 and 24 years, even if such a move does not signal total financial independence. In fact, young people move back into the family home for a number of reasons (see Chapter 18).

Moving from the family home is usually associated with decisions about education and employment. But regardless of whether a young person is engaged in study or work, or a combination of these activities, they tend to be on low incomes. One of the greatest barriers to young people moving away from the family home is locating affordable housing. In a survey of young Commonwealth Rent Assistance clients conducted in 1999, 42% of recipients stated that the high cost of housing was a major problem in their most recent search for accommodation (Burke et al. 2002).

A number of links between health and housing are especially relevant to young people. Because of financial constraints, they are more likely to live in substandard or overcrowded dwellings and therefore be more at risk of poor health outcomes. Waters (2001a) showed that people living in rented accommodation in Australia were significantly more likely to report fair or poor health status, to be smokers, to have recently visited a doctor or to have a higher than average number of serious health conditions than people living in accommodation they owned. Overcrowded houses and houses that are damp or cold pose greater risks of infectious diseases, respiratory conditions and meningococcal infection (Waters 2001b).

Various forms of housing assistance are available to young people who have difficulty achieving housing independence because of financial hardship. Young people under 25 who receive Youth Allowance and who live permanently or indefinitely apart from their parents or guardians are also eligible to receive Commonwealth Rent Assistance, which provides additional financial help to young people who rent privately. Housing assistance for young people is also provided through the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement (CSHA), the purpose of which is to provide appropriate, affordable and secure housing to those who most need it, for the duration of their need (AIHW 2001b).

Moving out of the family home is not always voluntary and may be forced on a young person due to family conflict, domestic violence or parental abuse and neglect. When this situation arises, the potential for the young person to become homeless or housed under poor conditions increases. Structural factors such as poverty, unemployment and lack of affordable housing are also important determinants of youth homelessness. Thus, leaving home early does not necessarily lead to homelessness per se, but home leavers who have a number of family risk factors and are also faced with issues of housing affordability and other financial considerations may quickly find themselves homeless or housed under poor conditions.

Homeless young people are more likely to have a mental health problem, a psychiatric disorder or a mood or anxiety disorder than non-homeless young people (Kamieniecki 2001). They are also more likely to already have, or to develop, a substance use disorder and to have experienced at least one traumatic event (Burhich et al. 2000). In addition to mental health and substance use problems, homeless people often suffer from health problems such as asthma, bronchitis, HIV infection and tuberculosis (Martens 2001), and have a higher likelihood of being the victim of crime (especially assault and other types of violence).

Access to health services is an important concern for homeless young people. Failure to seek appropriate treatment can exacerbate existing health problems, making overcoming homelessness even more difficult. For example, it is generally observed in

the community that people with drug use disorders do not readily seek treatment, but due to their marginalisation, people who are drug dependent *and* homeless are even less likely to use treatment services than other substance users (Teesson et al. 2000).

Homeless young people may be supported in a number of ways. Some receive assistance from community services such as family support programs or programs for the mentally ill. Others may receive assistance from programs or agencies funded mainly to support those who are homeless. The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) is the major government response to homelessness.

This chapter covers information on the housing of young people aged 15–24 years, using overcrowding and housing mobility as measures of disadvantage. In addition, an estimate of the number of homeless young people and the number who access SAAP services is also presented. For more details on young people accessing SAAP services, see *Young Homeless People in Australia 2001–02* (2003). The main sources of data are the ABS Census of Population and Housing, AIHW SAAP data collection and the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey.

Dwelling types

Young people in Australia live in a variety of private and non-private dwelling types. The proportion living in different types of private dwellings is shown in Table 21.1.

Table 21.1: Young people aged 12–24 years living in private and non private dwellings on census night 2001, by dwelling type (per cent)

	Age (years)		
	12–17	18–24	12–24
Private dwellings			
Separate house	87.9	71.8	79.4
Semi-detached, row/terrace, townhouse, flat, apartment etc.	8.2	21.6	15.3
Caravan, cabin, houseboat	0.3	0.5	0.4
House or flat attached to a shop, office, etc.	0.3	0.4	0.4
Flat, unit or apartment attached to a house	0.1	0.2	0.2
Improvised home, tent, sleepers out	0.1	0.1	0.1
Non-private dwellings	2.6	4.7	3.7
Not stated^(b)	0.5	0.6	0.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total number			
Private dwellings	1,566,233	1,712,588	3,278,821
Non-private dwellings	42,220	84,816	127,036
Not stated	8,629	11,189	19,818
Total	1,617,082	1,808,593	3,425,675

Notes

(1) Cells in this table have been randomly adjusted to avoid the release of confidential data.

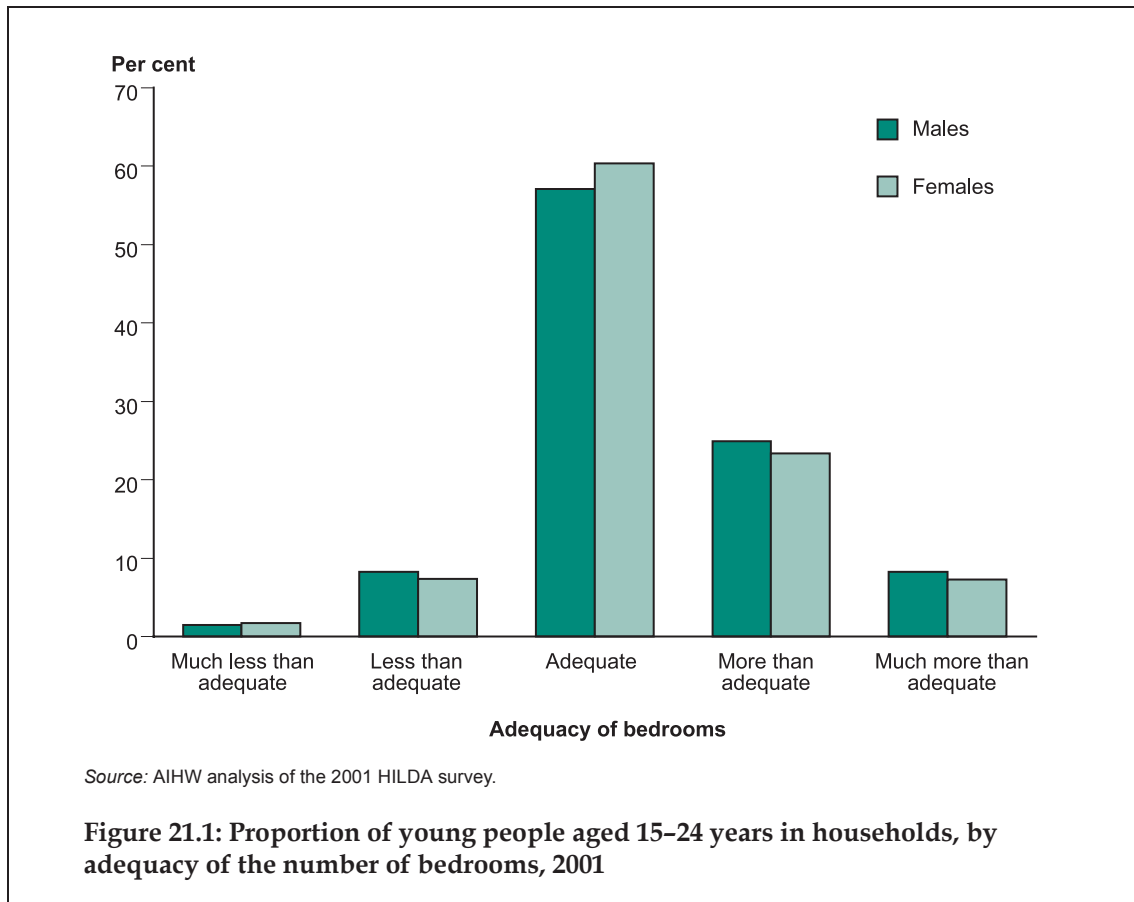
(2) A private dwelling is normally a house, flat, or even a room. It can also be a caravan, houseboat, tent, or a house attached to an office, or rooms above a shop. Non-private dwellings include hotels, motels, guest houses, prisons, religious and charitable institutions, defence establishments, hospitals and other communal dwellings.

Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing 2001 unpublished data.

- In 2001, there were approximately 3.4 million young people living in private and non-private dwellings. Of these, the majority (96%) lived in private dwellings.
- Of those living in private dwellings, 79% (2.7 million young people) were living in a separate house, with a further 16% living in flats, apartments or townhouses.
- Young people aged 18–24 years are less likely to live in separate houses and more likely to live in flats, apartments or townhouses than those aged 12–17 years. For example, the proportion of young people aged 18–24 years living in a semi-detached, row/terrace, townhouse, a flat or apartment was more than twice that of young people aged 12–17 years (22%, compared with 8%). Presumably, this reflects a higher proportion of younger people living in their parents' houses.
- Less than 5% of young people were living in accommodation that could be considered temporary, including caravans, cabins or houseboats, improvised homes or tents.
- The age distribution of young people in non-private dwellings reflects the different life cycle stages of young people aged less than 18 years and those aged 18–24 years. Older young people were more highly represented in the category of staff quarters, residential college or corrective institutions, whereas a much higher proportion of young people aged 12–17 years lived in boarding schools than those aged 18–24 years.

Housing and overcrowding

As stated earlier, living in overcrowded houses can be associated with higher rates of infectious diseases and respiratory conditions. The adequacy of the number of bedrooms in the homes of young people is used as an indicator of overcrowding. The following data based on perception of overcrowding, are derived from the HILDA survey.¹



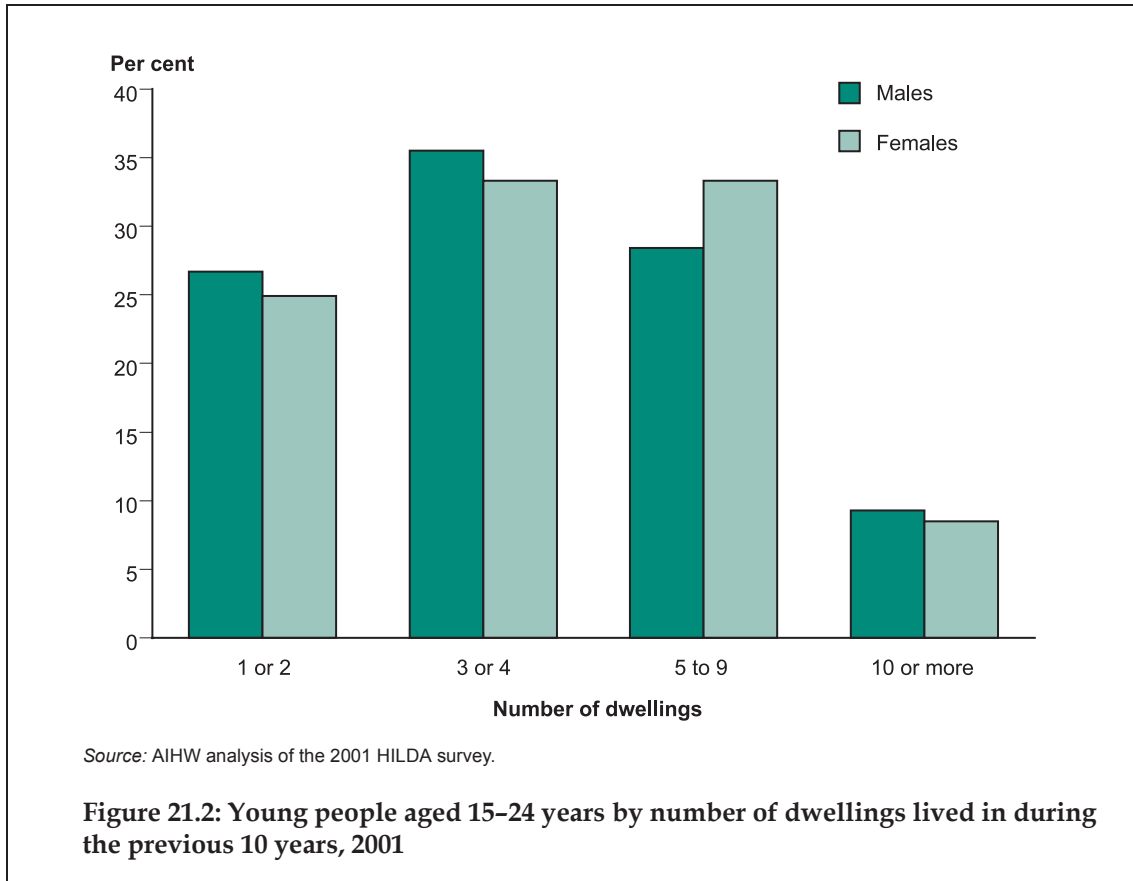
- Around 1 in 10 young people lived in homes where they considered the number of bedrooms was less than adequate (8%) or much less than adequate (2%).
- The majority of young people were in households where the number of bedrooms was adequate (around 60%).
- Over 30% of young people were in households where the number of bedrooms was more than adequate or much more than adequate.

1. Perception of overcrowding as reported in the HILDA survey may differ from measures based on using occupancy standards that relate the number and type of occupants to the number of bedrooms available.

Mobility

National data show that young people are more likely to move and change their living arrangements than Australians in other age groups. One-quarter of young adults whose living arrangements changed during 1999 had moved out of their parents' home; 1 in 10 had moved back in with their parents (ABS 2002g).

Data from the HILDA survey provide information on the number of dwellings lived in by young people over the previous 10 years (Figure 21.2).



- Around 1 in 4 young people had lived in 1 or 2 dwellings during the previous 10 years (27% of males and 25% of females)
- One-third of young people had lived in 3 or 4 dwellings over the same period.
- Nearly 40% of young people had lived in 5 or more dwellings in the previous 10 years.

Homelessness

Central to the information presented in this section is the concept that being homeless is not limited to whether a young person lives in a dwelling or not. Homeless youth can range from young people who leave their family home for a short period of time as a result of a family issue or dispute or problems at school which leads them to being vulnerably housed (i.e. staying in temporary accommodation such as caravan parks or hostels), to those young people who are permanently without a place to live or take shelter.

The precise number of homeless young people in Australia is difficult to ascertain. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, estimates ranged from 11,000 to more than 25,000 homeless young people, depending on the survey methods used and when surveys were undertaken (National Crime Prevention 1999). High estimates of youth homelessness generated a large amount of controversy during this period, and a consensus was formed that the level of youth homeless in Australian society was unacceptably high.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics used data from the 1996 Census to generate a comparison with the estimate of homelessness produced by Chamberlain and MacKenzie in 1994 (ABS 1996a). These figures for young people aged 19–24 years are close – between 15,000 and 16,000 homeless young people at these two points in time, as shown in Table 21.2. The ABS suggests that the discrepancy between the two estimates for this age group may have occurred because young people who were sleeping out on Census night were not identified by census collectors.

The number of homeless young people aged 12–18 years, however, presents a more complex comparison. According to the ABS, it is probable that the Census 'missed' 13,000 homeless young people aged 12–18 years who were 'hidden' in the 'visitors' category on the census form and thus the Chamberlain and MacKenzie estimate is probably still comparable to the ABS figure. More details about the differences in the homelessness estimates calculated by Chamberlain and MacKenzie and the ABS are discussed in *Counting the Homeless* (ABS 1996a).

Chamberlain and MacKenzie estimated the number of homeless young people aged 12–18 years again in August 2001. The 2001 methodology differed from 1994 as remote area Indigenous communities were included in the 2001 estimates. After adjustments were made for these differences, Chamberlain and MacKenzie estimated that the number of young homeless people aged 12–18 years had increased by 8.4% since 1994.

Table 21.2: Estimates of the homeless population aged 12–24 years, 1994, 1996 and 2001

	Chamberlain and MacKenzie (May 1994)	ABS (August 1996)	Chamberlain and MacKenzie (August 2001)
Number of persons 12–18 years	21,000	7,100 ^(a)	26,060 ^(b)
Number of persons 19–24 years	16,000	14,710	not estimated

(a) The discrepancy between the Chamberlain and ABS estimate of the number of homeless young people aged 12–18 years is discussed in detail in *Counting the Homeless* (ABS 1996a).

(b) After adjustment for comparison with 1994, the figure is 24,230.

Sources: ABS 1996a; Chamberlain & MacKenzie 2002.

The definition of homelessness in the National Community Services Data Dictionary (NCSDD) states ‘a person is homeless if he or she does not have access to safe, secure and stable housing’ (AIHW 2000). This means that even if a person has a physical home, they would be considered homeless if it were not safe at home, if there were no legal right to continued occupation of the home or the home lacked the amenities or resources necessary for safe and secure living. Using this definition, at least some of those young people residing in the ‘separate house’ or similar categories in Table 21.1 may have been ‘homeless’.

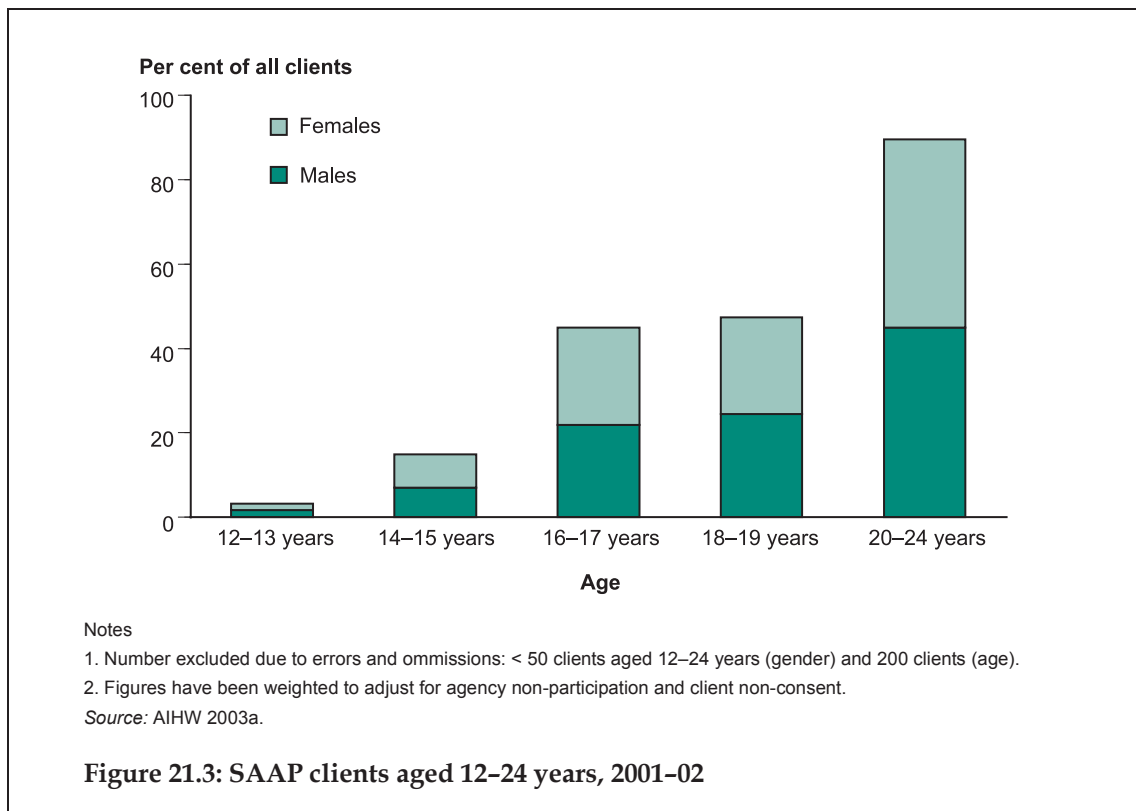
This definition essentially encompasses those people in Australia for whom support and accommodation services are required to help them become safe, secure and adequately housed. Service delivery definitions such as those in the NCSDD and which govern the SAAP data collections recognise that people at risk of homelessness should be included among the homeless. In addition, the delivery of programs providing services to improve social wellbeing often encompass preventive and early intervention strategies and establish eligibility criteria for assistance. As such, persons enumerated using a service delivery definition may not be counted in a cultural definition such as that used by Chamberlain and MacKenzie to count the homeless population for the 1996 Census of Population and Housing. It should therefore be noted that the service delivery definition may result in counts of people in the homeless population that differ from those obtained using a cultural definition (AIHW 2001b).

SAAP clients

As the major program response to homelessness in Australia, SAAP supports a large number of young Australians. In 2001-02, 34,100 young people presenting on their own were supported and/or accommodated by SAAP agencies (AIHW 2003a).

The age distribution of young SAAP clients aged 12-24 years in 2001-02 is shown in Figure 21.3. Importantly, the data represent only young people who present to SAAP alone. There were around 100 clients aged under 12 years in 2001-02 who were assisted independently of a parent or guardian, but these clients are not included in this report. There were also more than 5,300 children aged 12-17 years who accompanied a parent or guardian to a SAAP agency in 2001-02 (AIHW 2002a).

The proportion of young people in Australia aged 12-24 years who were SAAP clients in 2001-02 was 1.0%.



- Young people are overrepresented in SAAP compared with the proportion of young people in the total Australian population. Young people aged 12-24 years accounted for around 36% of the estimated 94,600 SAAP clients aged 12 years and over in 2001-02 (AIHW 2003a), even though young people account for only 18% of the total Australian population.
- Females were more highly represented within SAAP than males. For young people aged 12-24 years, there were 1.4 times as many female clients as males. Young people aged 18-19 years had the highest rate of SAAP use of all clients, with 14.7 people in this age bracket using SAAP services per 1,000 people in the general population. Females in this age group had a high rate of 17.4 per 1,000, whereas males had a rate of 12.2 per 1,000.

Of young SAAP clients in 2001–02, the highest proportions were aged 20–24 years (45%, or 15,300 clients). Interestingly, there were more clients aged 16–19 years (46%, or 15,700) than 20–24 years, despite the difference in the number of years in each category. Clients aged 12–15 years made up just under 9% (3,200) of young clients (AIHW 2003a).

Table 21.3: SAAP support periods for clients aged 12–24 years: main reasons for seeking assistance, 2001–02

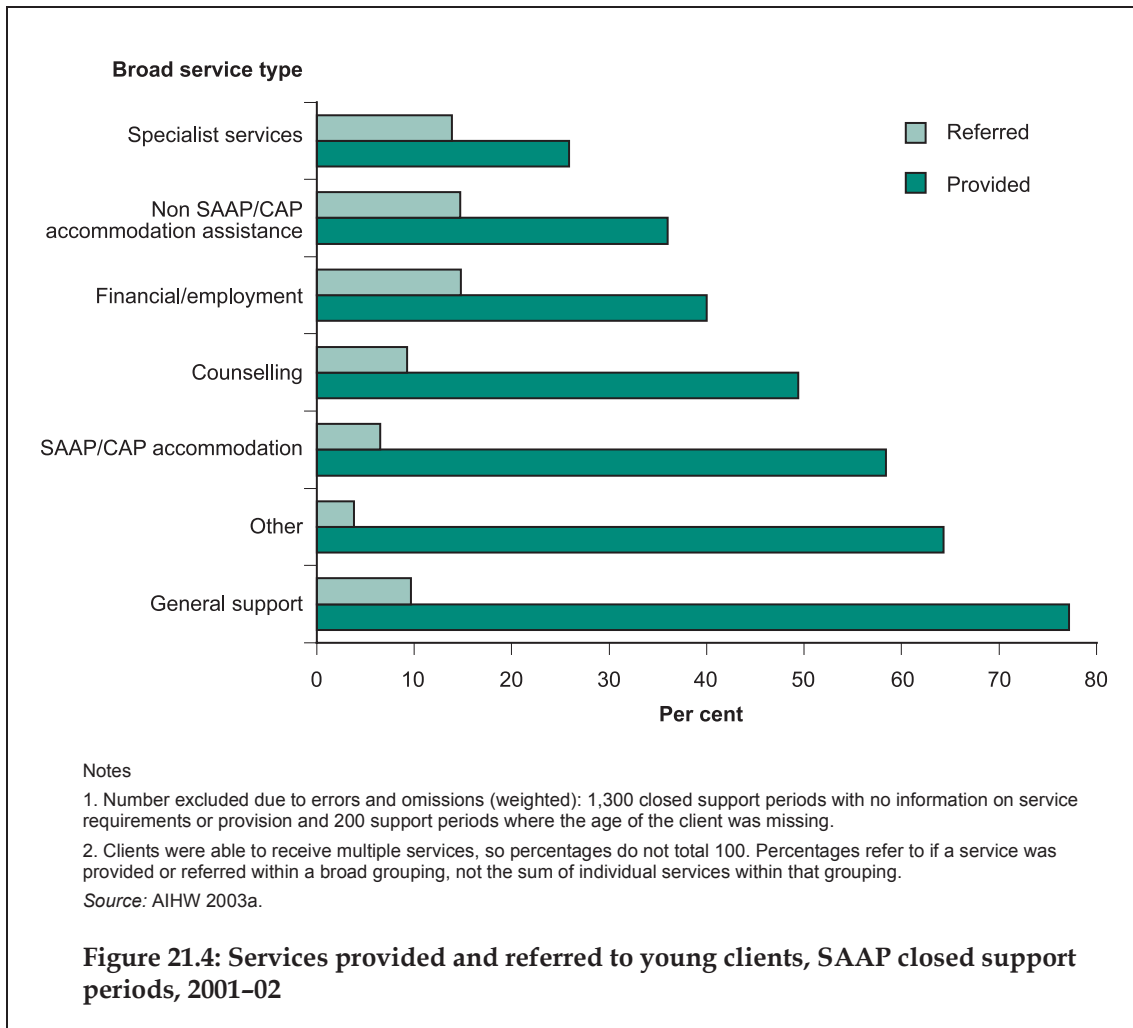
Main reason for seeking assistance	Males		Females	
	Per cent	Number	Per cent	Number
Accommodation-related reasons	34.6	6,800	25.2	7,200
Family-related reasons	24.5	4,900	25.3	7,200
Interpersonal conflicts	3.7	700	3.6	1,000
Physical/emotional abuse	1.5	300	4.0	1,100
Recent arrival to area with no means of support	5.7	1,100	3.2	900
Domestic violence	0.9	200	18.7	5,300
Financial difficulty	9.7	1,900	6.5	1,900
Drug/alcohol/substance abuse	4.9	1,000	2.1	600
Itinerant	3.9	800	2.7	800
Other reasons	10.5	2,100	8.6	2,500
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>..</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>..</i>
Total number	..	19,800	..	28,500

Notes

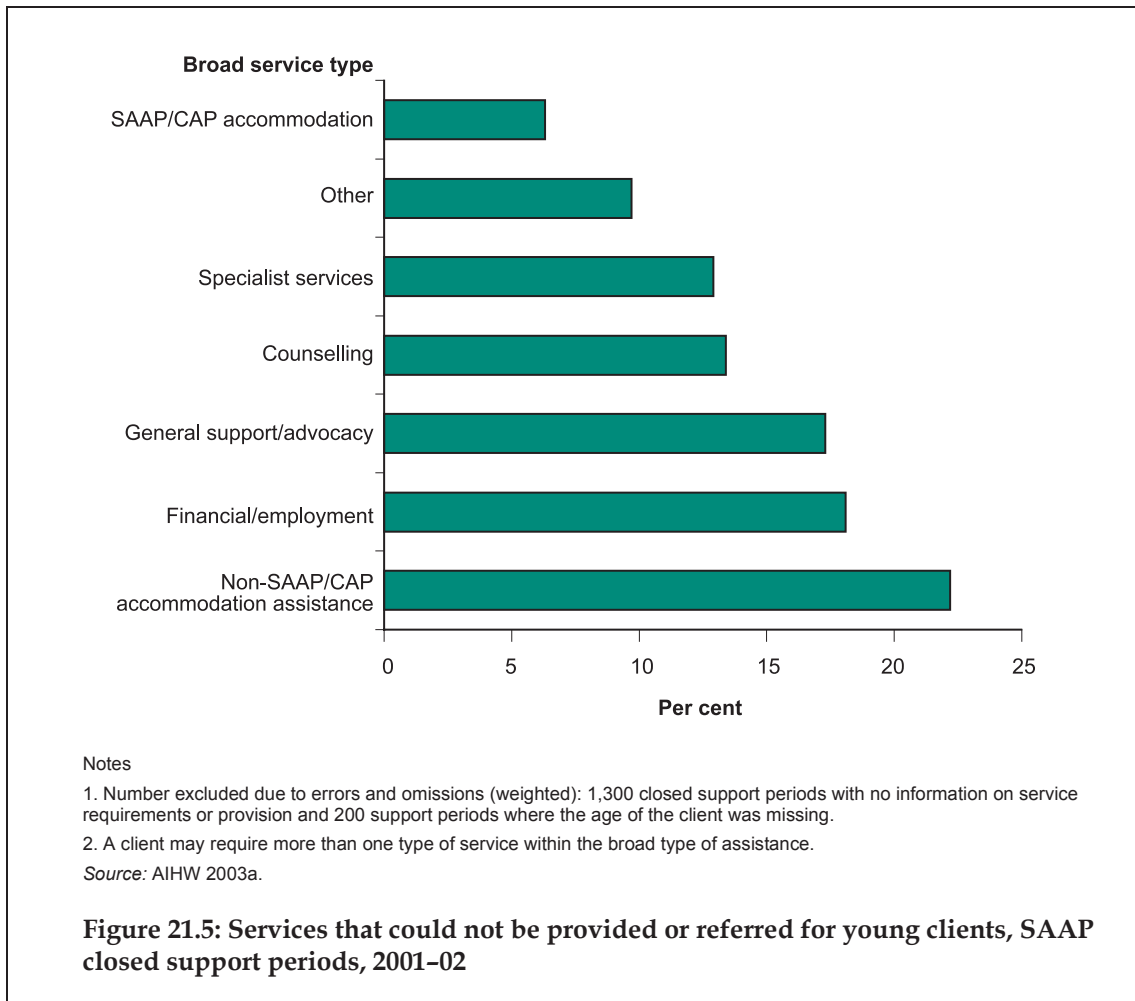
1. Number excluded due to errors and omissions (weighted): 2,500 support periods (main reason, gender and age).
2. Table excludes high-volume records (7,500) because not all items were included on the high-volume form.
3. Figures have been weighted to adjust for agency non-participation and client non-consent.
4. 'Other reasons' include recently left institution, psychiatric illness, sexual abuse and gambling.

Source: SAAP Client Collection, unpublished data.

- Young females sought SAAP assistance most frequently because of accommodation-related reasons and family-related reasons, which were both reported in 25% of support periods. Domestic violence was also a common main reason for seeking assistance (19%).
- Accommodation and family reasons were also the most common main reasons for seeking assistance for young male clients (35%). Accommodation-related reasons were reported in a higher proportion of support periods than for females (25%). Family-related reasons were reported in the same proportion as females (25%).



- The most frequently provided service to young SAAP clients aged 12-24 years was general support or advocacy (in 77% of support periods). 'Other' services, including meals, laundry or shower facilities, recreation, transport and other support not elsewhere specified, were also provided in a high proportion of support periods (64%).
- SAAP or CAP accommodation was provided in 58% of support periods and formal referrals to other agencies were made in 7% of support periods.
- In general, there was a higher proportion of referrals for those broad service groups where the rate of provision was relatively low. For example, specialist services were provided in 26% of support periods for young clients but referred in 14%.



- The most frequent unmet need of young SAAP clients aged 12-24 years was for help in obtaining or maintaining non-SAAP or non-CAP accommodation. This assistance was unable to be provided after being requested by clients in 22% of closed support periods.
- In contrast, the fewest unmet requests for accommodation among young SAAP clients was for SAAP or CAP accommodation. This identified need was unmet in 6% of closed support periods.

