

1 Introduction

This report provides an overview of the assistance provided to homeless people and those at risk of homelessness by the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program. It also provides data on unmet requests for SAAP assistance and the number of people who made those requests. In addition, an improved collection methodology has allowed a more accurate estimate of the number of people who made requests for accommodation at a SAAP agency and could not be provided with it.

SAAP was established in 1985 to consolidate a number of Commonwealth, state and territory government programs designed to assist homeless people and people at risk of being homeless, including women and children escaping domestic violence. The current program, SAAP IV, is governed by the *Supported Accommodation Assistance Act 1994*. The Act specifies that the overall aim of SAAP is to provide transitional supported accommodation and related support services to help homeless people achieve the maximum possible degree of self-reliance and independence.

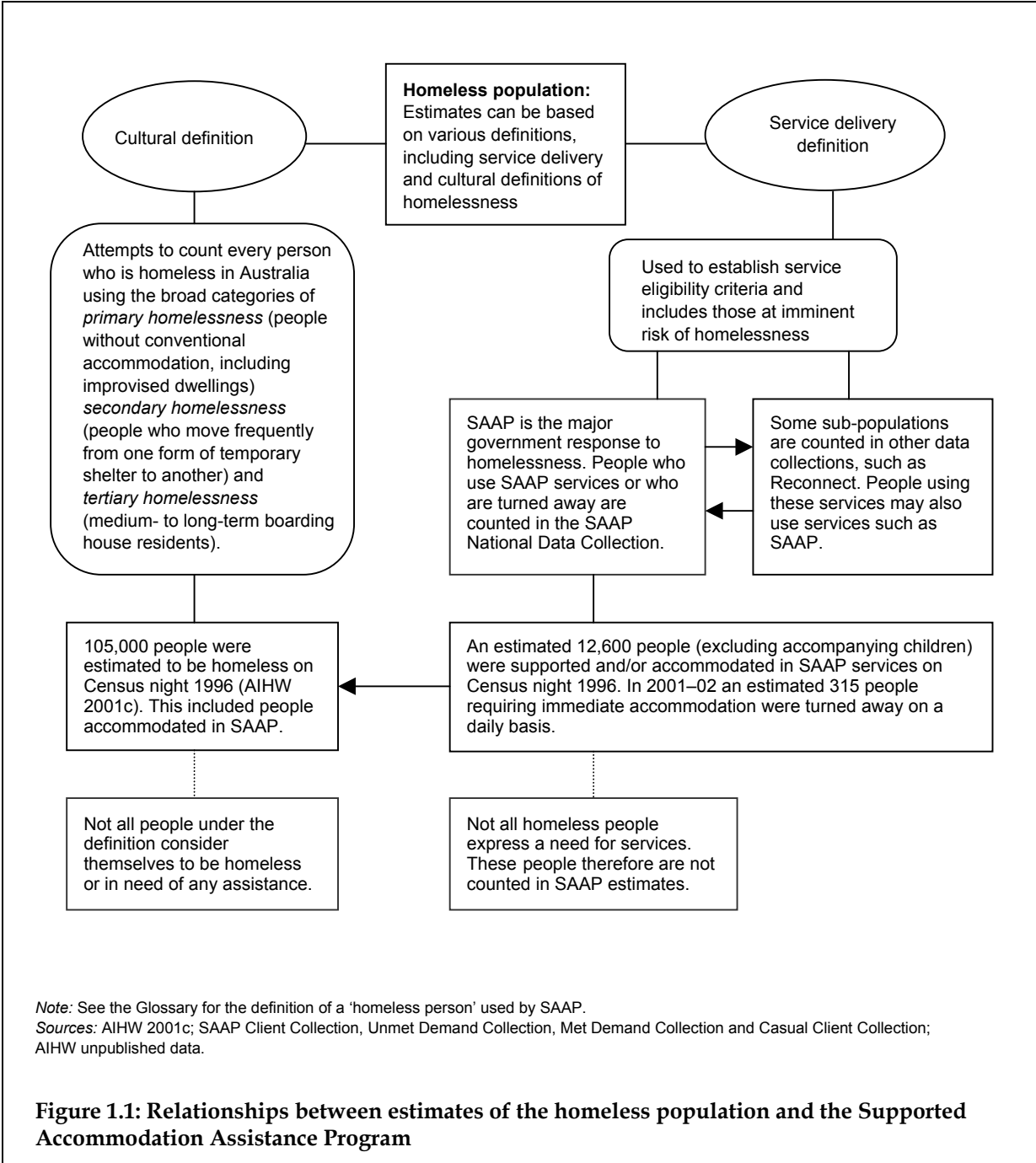
In 2001–02, 1,286 non-government, community and local government organisations were funded nationally under SAAP (AIHW 2002c:6). These organisations range from small stand-alone agencies with single outlets to larger auspice bodies with multiple outlets.

With the exception of SAAP, CAP and Reconnect, there are very few programs directed specifically at homeless people (AIHW 2001c:327). SAAP is an important part of Australia's overall response to homelessness and represents a broader social safety net designed to assist people in crisis in the community (AIHW 2001c:330). It is important to note, however, that the estimates provided on people accessing and turned away from SAAP do not represent the total homeless population. Figure 1.1 shows where SAAP fits into the bigger picture of homelessness, and the different ways of estimating the homeless population.

Estimating the number of homeless people

Homelessness is a complex phenomenon and encompasses more than the absence of adequate shelter. A key issue for estimating its extent lies in defining it. This is problematic because of the range of circumstances people may find themselves in – from having no shelter at all, to having shelter that places them at risk of homelessness. Furthermore, there is a temporal dimension to homelessness, with experiences ranging from brief, one-off episodes to long-term transience. Such problems are not easily solved, and an all-encompassing definition of homelessness is therefore difficult to achieve (AIHW 2001c:322–3).

Estimates of the size of the homeless population and its different sub-populations are important for the development of effective policies and programs to assist homeless people. There are numerous difficulties associated with collecting quality data – the diverse circumstances of homeless people; locating and counting itinerant populations, who often wish to remain undetected and anonymous (resulting in under-counting or double-counting); lack of an agreed methodology for data collection; and inconsistent definitions of homelessness (AIHW 2001c:323).



The definition of a 'homeless person' underpinning the SAAP National Data Collection (see Glossary) is a 'service delivery' definition that establishes criteria for the provision of assistance. The estimates of the number of homeless people or people at imminent risk of homelessness accessing SAAP services are an important indicator of the performance of SAAP as the major program assisting those people. In contrast, some estimates of the total homeless population have used a 'cultural definition', such as that devised by Chamberlain and Mackenzie (AIHW 2001c:326) (see Figure 1.1).

The Australian Bureau of Statistics applied the Chamberlain and MacKenzie definition of homelessness in the 1996 Census of Population and Housing homeless enumeration strategy. The final results showed that there were 105,000 homeless people in Australia on Census

night 1996. The Census used a household-based collection methodology, which would under-count highly mobile people with no permanent residence, but includes in its count people who are inadequately housed but have not sought assistance from a homelessness program. The ABS count of the homeless includes a total of 12,600 people (adults or unaccompanied children) in SAAP accommodation on Census night 1996 (AIHW unpublished data).

There are difficulties with directly comparing the number of people in SAAP accommodation with the 1996 census because of the different definitions. The major service delivery count (that is, SAAP clients) will be smaller than the cultural definition because, as noted, there are people who need services but do not seek them. It is also not possible to give an estimate of the number of accompanying children in SAAP on a daily basis. In addition, there are people who are defined as homeless under the cultural definition but do not consider themselves as such (for example, people living in boarding houses).

Structure of this report

The analysis in the remainder of this report is divided into 7 sections. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the number of people who received SAAP assistance and the number of people with unmet requests for SAAP assistance in 2001–02. Chapter 3 discusses the level of service provision to clients and accompanying children. Chapter 4 focuses on one-off assistance – that is, assistance provided to casual clients.

Chapter 5 discusses the number of unmet requests made by individuals and groups presenting at SAAP agencies in search of substantial assistance. In Chapter 6, an estimate of the number of people making these unmet requests is provided, along with demographic information about these people.

Chapter 7 provides an analysis of the daily assistance provided by SAAP agencies in the context of the level of unmet demand for SAAP accommodation. An estimate is given of the number of people unable to be accommodated by SAAP each day and the rates of turn-away.

A number of key terms used throughout this report are defined in the Glossary. Appendix 1 provides state and territory versions of selected tables included in the main chapters of the report.

Appendix 2 provides an overview of the 4 national data collections on which this report is based; it also provides a guide to interpreting the tables, which are grouped at the end of each chapter. Specific rules used when deriving a particular table in this report are described in the notes to each table. Appendix 3 shows the data-collection forms used.

