

Executive summary

This report summarises the findings from data relating to children who accompanied an adult and received supported accommodation or assistance under the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) agencies in the period 21 May to 30 June 1998. Discussion centres on:

- participating SAAP agencies Australia-wide;
- background of the accompanying children;
- circumstances of accompanying children as at 21 May-30 June 1998;
- support and services provided to accompanying children and unmet need; and
- discussion of the results from the agency profile component of the collection.

The SAAP National Data Collection Agency (NDCA) at the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) prepared the report.

PART A: Accompanying children

Six hundred and three (603) out of a possible 1,103 agencies Australia-wide responded to the Accompanying Children Collection in 1998. This was a participation rate of 55% which is relatively low compared to the 95% participation rate currently (1998-1999) being achieved for the general Client Collection. However, it is possible that some of the agencies that did not respond to the collection did not have accompanying children, therefore obscuring the true extent of non-participation (for a more detailed explanation of reasons for non-participation, refer to section 1.4). Of the 603, one hundred and eighty (180) returned a form stating that they had not had any accompanying children attend their agency during the collection period or had chosen not to take part in the collection for various reasons. Therefore, 423 agencies returned survey forms to the NDCA on accompanying children out of the possible 1,103 'in scope' agencies.

During the collection period 8,827 forms detailing the background, circumstances and support provided to accompanying children by SAAP service providers were returned to the NDCA. The majority of the data came from accompanying children who had attended agencies assisting women escaping domestic violence (40%), families (24%) and agencies with cross target, general or multiple targets (23%). As expected, much smaller proportions of forms were returned from agencies targeting young people (10%), single men only (1%) and single women only (2%).

The majority of accompanying children came from one-child families (48%). The highest proportion of accompanying children from one-child families were found in other metropolitan areas (58%), whereas rural areas reported the highest proportion of three- and four-child families (16% and 9% respectively). Accompanying children from families of five children or more were most common in remote areas of Australia (8%).

Most accompanying children came from single-parent families (54%). This proportion is higher in non-capital city metropolitan (57%) and capital city (56%) areas. The second most common living situation for accompanying children was with both parents in the same household (38%). Only in remote areas of Australia was it more common for accompanying children to live with both parents in the same household (57%) than it was for them to live in a single-parent household. Further to this, a considerable proportion of accompanying children reported that they also lived with their siblings (31%).

More than 60% of accompanying children across Australia had two or more homes in the year prior to attending a SAAP agency. Those living in non-capital city metropolitan areas reported having moved most frequently (40% had moved three or more times during the year), whereas the majority living in remote areas reported having had just one home throughout the year (51%). On average across Australia, 37% of accompanying children had one home in the year prior to SAAP assistance. Two per cent of accompanying children (117 children) reported having been completely homeless during the year prior to presenting to a SAAP agency. This pattern of home occupation is somewhat different when looking at the number of homes in the month prior to attending a SAAP agency. More than half (58%) of accompanying children reported having had one home in the month prior to receiving assistance, though a sizeable proportion of children (23%) reported having had two, three or more homes over the space of one month. Nineteen per cent reported they had been without a home in the month prior to SAAP support.

The majority of accompanying children were involved in some sort of legal process when they attended a SAAP agency, only 4% reported no legal process, whilst 5% provided no information. In most instances this related to protection or guardianship orders (68%). In terms of service delivery models, 80% of accompanying children who attended a day support agency were subject to a protection or guardianship order. The next most common legal process for accompanying children to be involved in related to immigration matters (18%). Of all the primary target groups, those agencies that target women escaping domestic violence had by far the highest level of accompanying children involved in immigration matters at 27% (12% higher than any other primary target group).

More than 50% of accompanying children were less than six years of age (54%), where proportionately two- to five-year-olds presented to SAAP agencies most frequently (in 35% of cases). Accompanying children were least likely to be aged over 11 years—only 14% of accompanying children were aged 12 to 17.

Nationally, the sex ratio of accompanying children was approximately fifty-fifty. There were slightly more female accompanying children in remote and rural areas of Australia (55% and 53% respectively) than males.

PART B: Agency Profile

Of the 603 agencies that participated in the Accompanying Children Collection Australia-wide, 518 provided the NDCA with a profile of their agency's ability to support accompanying children.

The greatest number of agency profiles were returned from Victoria (30%), New South Wales (26%) and Queensland (19%). Smaller numbers of agencies provided profile information in South Australia (8%), Western Australia (8%), Tasmania (3%), Northern Territory (3%) and the Australian Capital Territory (3%).

Of those agencies that returned profiles, most were located in capital cities (54%) and rural areas (33%). Lesser numbers of profiles were returned from agencies in other metropolitan (8%) and remote areas (5%). Most provided crisis or short-term (36%) and medium- to long-term accommodation (43%) to their clients. Eighteen per cent of agencies were providing 'other' forms of accommodation, whilst 3% of participating agencies provided outreach services.

The majority of agencies who participated in the collection were able to provide clients and accompanying children at SAAP services with information on children's services (68%), motor vehicles with appropriate restraints (63%), and a quiet, private indoor space (54%). Nearly half of the agencies that participated were able to provide accompanying children with indoor (40%) and outdoor (41%) play areas and equipment for babies (cots and change tables) (40%). A much smaller number of agencies had access to information available on children's services in other languages (12%), study areas (25%), covered outdoor areas (26%) or safe and appropriate outdoor play equipment (26%).

The greatest level of need for particular facilities and services across agencies was reported to be the ability to provide accompanying children with a covered outdoor area (45%) and safe and appropriate outdoor play equipment (38%). Further to this, approximately one-third of agencies report that they need access to safe and appropriate indoor play equipment (33%), a quiet or private outdoor space (32%), a study area (33%), areas suitable for teenagers (33%) and information on children's services in languages other than English (37%).

Eighty per cent or more of agencies had links with other service providers such as counselling services (88%), health services (83%), social security (84%) and child welfare or protective services (88%). Sixty to seventy per cent of agencies reported having links to service providers such as a childcare centre or child minding (64%), kindergarten, preschool, school (62%), mental health services (77%) and legal services (73%). A much smaller proportion of agencies had links with a migrant resource centre (41%).

The majority of agencies were fully accessible to prams (60%). Thirty-three per cent reported that their facilities were partially accessible to people with children in a pram, whilst only a small number reported that they were completely inaccessible (7%). This compares to disabled persons' access where a much larger proportion of agencies reported that their facilities were inaccessible to families with a parent or child who had a physical disability (19%). The majority of agencies (51%) reported that their facilities were partially accessible to families who had a member with a physical disability, whilst 30% reported that their facilities were fully accessible.

The vast majority (85%) of SAAP agencies reported that they had less than one SAAP-funded specific or targeted child support worker (full-time equivalent) working in their agency. This figure was arrived at by agencies calculating how many hours each worker worked each week, based on the assumption that a full-time worker would spend 40 hours a week in the office. Eleven per cent of agencies had one to two workers, 1% had two to three, 1% had three to four workers and 2% of agencies had four or more full-time equivalent child support workers.

The number of 'other' SAAP-funded workers at agencies (who were not child support workers) is quite different and more evenly distributed. Twenty-two per cent of agencies had less than one full-time worker, 19% had one to two, 16% had two to three, 15% had three to four and 29% had four or more SAAP-funded workers.

One-third or more of the child support workers at SAAP agencies had qualifications in child development (47%), childcare (36%), early education development (30%) or child and family counselling (33%). In conjunction to qualifications, more than half of these child support workers indicated that they had also had experience in child development (73%), childcare (68%), early education development (52%) and child or family counselling (64%).

'Other' SAAP-funded workers had a different pattern of qualifications and experience compared to SAAP-funded child-targeted support workers. Almost one-third or more of 'other' workers had qualifications in child or family counselling (34%), social work (43%) and psychology (28%). Comparatively few had formal qualifications in childcare (13%), child or family counselling (13%) or 'other' qualifications (13%). One-third or more did however indicate that they had first hand experience in child development (47%), childcare (44%), early education development (30%), child or family counselling (49%) and teaching (32%).