

1 Introduction

1.1 The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program

The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) is a joint Commonwealth, State and Territory program. Non-government and local government organisations are funded to provide assistance to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, including families escaping domestic violence. In 1995, the Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services (now the Department of Family and Community Services), on behalf of all funding departments, contracted the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) to develop and manage the SAAP National Data Collection—ensuring nationally consistent information about the clients of SAAP services.

To date, the National Data Collection has not provided detailed information about children accompanying adults to SAAP services. In order to fill this gap, a special collection on accompanying children at SAAP services took place from 21 May to 30 June 1998. This report presents the findings of that collection.

1.2 Background to the Accompanying Children Collection

The Accompanying Children Collection was designed to better inform policy makers and service providers about the needs and circumstances of children in SAAP, and of the resources available and required by SAAP agencies to assist clients with children more effectively.

The subject for the special collection was chosen in response to proposals from service providers, peak organisations and program administrators. Once this decision was made, the Data and Research Advisory Committee (DRAC) formally sought comments and suggestions from the peak organisations, providing a list of possible items to be included for their consideration. Specifications for the Accompanying Children Collection were subsequently provided to the National Data Collection Agency (NDCA) by the DRAC and the data collection form was designed in consultation with the DRAC children's working group. This group included two SAAP service provider representatives.

The collection was then trialed with a number of SAAP agencies in Victoria and New South Wales and the child form was substantially revised in response to feedback from those agencies.

1.3 The Accompanying Children Collection

The Accompanying Children Collection is comprised of two distinct components: the Accompanying Child Form; and the Accompanying Children Agency Profile.

The Accompanying Child Form provided information related to children. Each form represents an accompanying child who obtained support, accommodation or assistance from a SAAP agency during the collection period. Part A provides a discussion of data items collected, including demographics of the accompanying children—their age, gender and family composition; information about issues and circumstances the children had experienced; and the type of support they required, and were provided with by the agencies.

The agency profile form provided details of resources, facilities, and staffing levels and expertise available at SAAP-funded agencies for children in homeless and crisis situations. Part B is dedicated to the discussion of the results from the agency profile.

1.4 Participation in the Accompanying Children Collection

In order to put the statistics in the following chapters into context, it is necessary to assess the level of participation and the distribution of accompanying children across various category types. Nationally, 1,103 SAAP agencies were considered to be 'in scope' and were provided with data forms for the Accompanying Children Collection. 'In scope' agencies were those that indicated that they had had at least one accompanying child attend their agency according to the NDCA database records for the previous calendar year (not necessarily during the collection period). It did not include high-volume agencies due to the difficulty in collecting detailed data from highly transient populations. 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 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 did not have accompanying children during the collection period, therefore obscuring the true extent of non-participation. Of the 603, one hundred and eighty (180) only 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 as outlined in the paragraph below. As such, 423 agencies returned information to the NDCA on accompanying children out of the possible 1,103 in-scope agencies.

Full participation in the Accompanying Children Collection was affected by a number of factors including:

- the timing of the collection;
- concern from some members in the field about the appropriateness of the collection; and
- a large number of agencies without accompanying children.

Of the reasons given by the 180 agencies who did not provide information on the returned forms, 89 had not dealt with any accompanying children during 21 May–30 June 1998; 39 agencies were not in the target group or did not accept children; 15 agencies described their services as relating to youth aged 12–18 years and therefore did not provide services for accompanying children; nine agencies cited concerns about legal implications of releasing information; five agencies offered a number of other reasons including those relating to staffing arrangements; and 23 agencies provided no reasons for not completing child forms. Overall, 143 out of 180 agencies did not provide information in their

forms as they did not have any accompanying children during the Collection period.

The following is a brief discussion of the participation rates for a number of key categories, based on the detailed statistics contained in Table 1.1. These categories are used to describe key areas in the provision of SAAP services based on:

- State and Territory;
- location of agency;
- primary target group of agency; and
- service delivery model of agency.

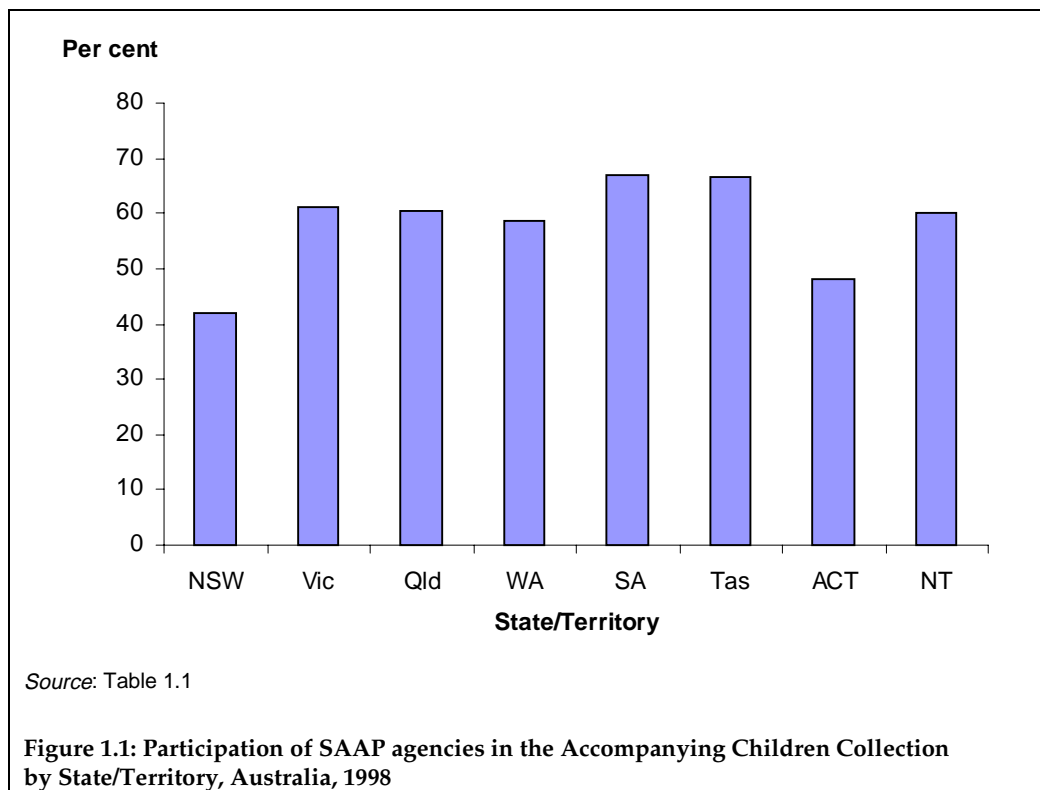
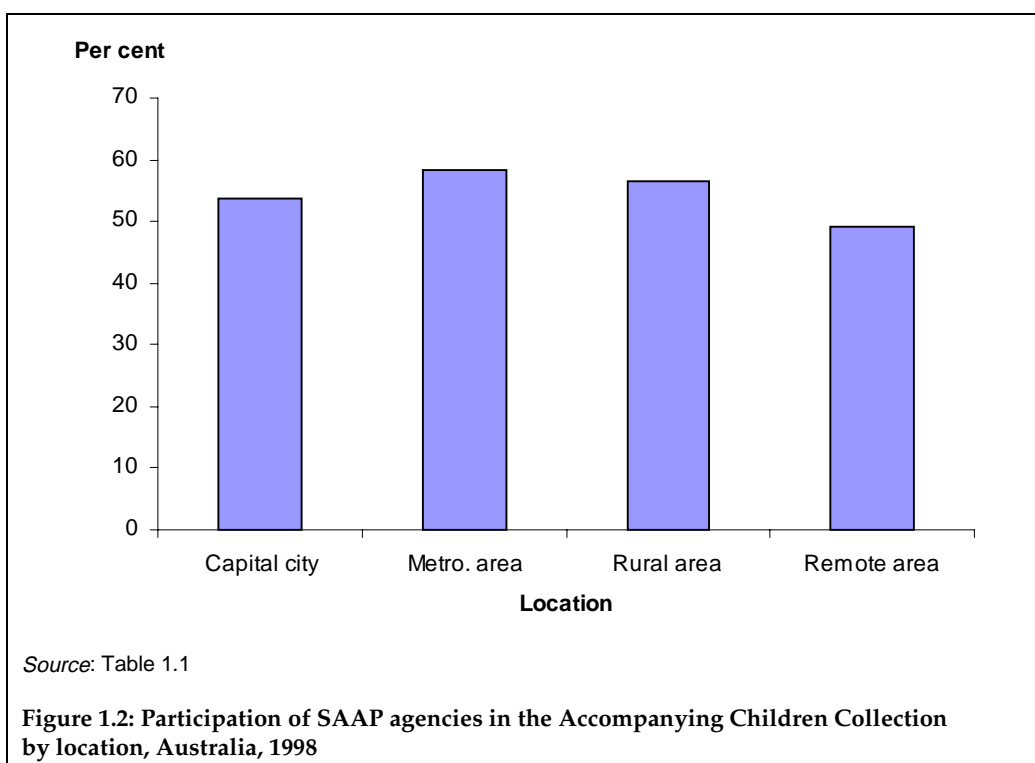
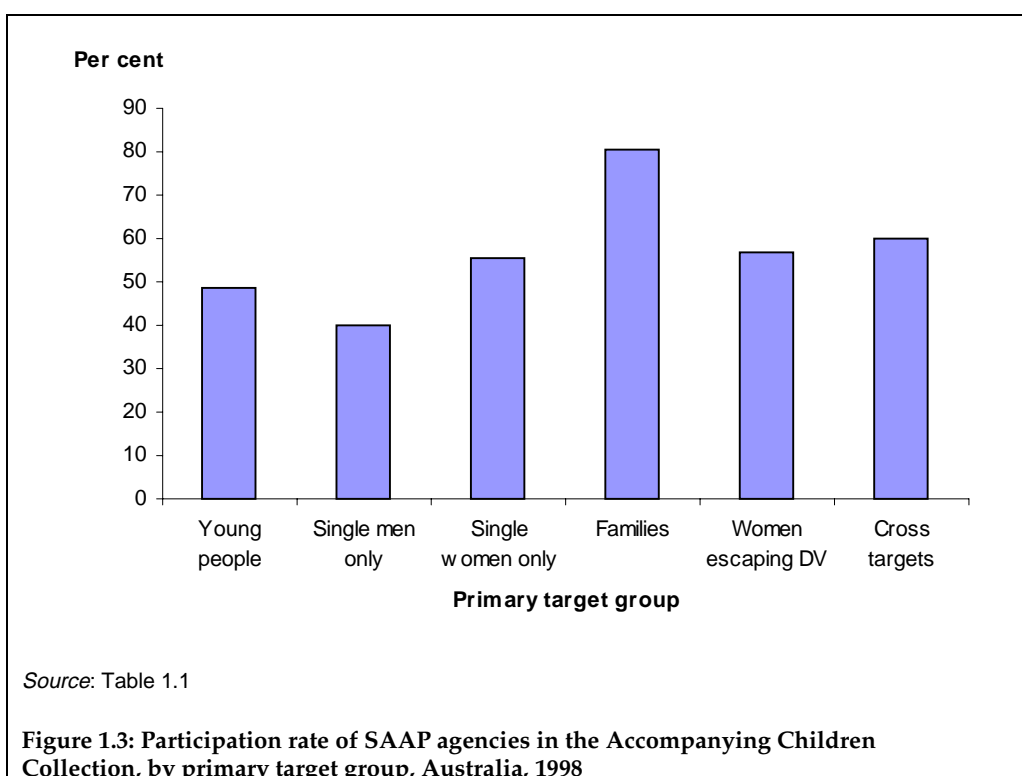


Figure 1.1 shows that participation rates across the States and Territories varied quite significantly. The highest rate of participation was 67% in South Australia and Tasmania, the lowest was 42% in New South Wales. The actual number of forms returned also varied quite significantly, from 3,182 forms from Victoria, to 183 in the Australian Capital Territory. In total 8,827 forms were returned to the National Data Collection Agency (refer to Table 1.1 for greater detail). Due to these variations in participation rates and counts, comparisons of one State to another are difficult and, in some instances, misleading. For example, because Victoria returned the greatest number of forms, turning this into a percentage of the total number of forms returned will always suggest that Victoria had a higher percentage of occurrences of support to accompanying children compared to other States and Territories. This, however, may not be the case. Hence, examining distributions across States and Territories will be avoided within the report. Comparisons of distributions within jurisdictions, however, can be made.

In terms of location, the majority of 'in scope' agencies were located in capital cities (56%) or rural areas (31%), as opposed to other metropolitan (8%) and remote (5%) areas. However, approximately only half of the total number of 'in scope' agencies in each location participated in the collection as can be seen in Figure 1.2.

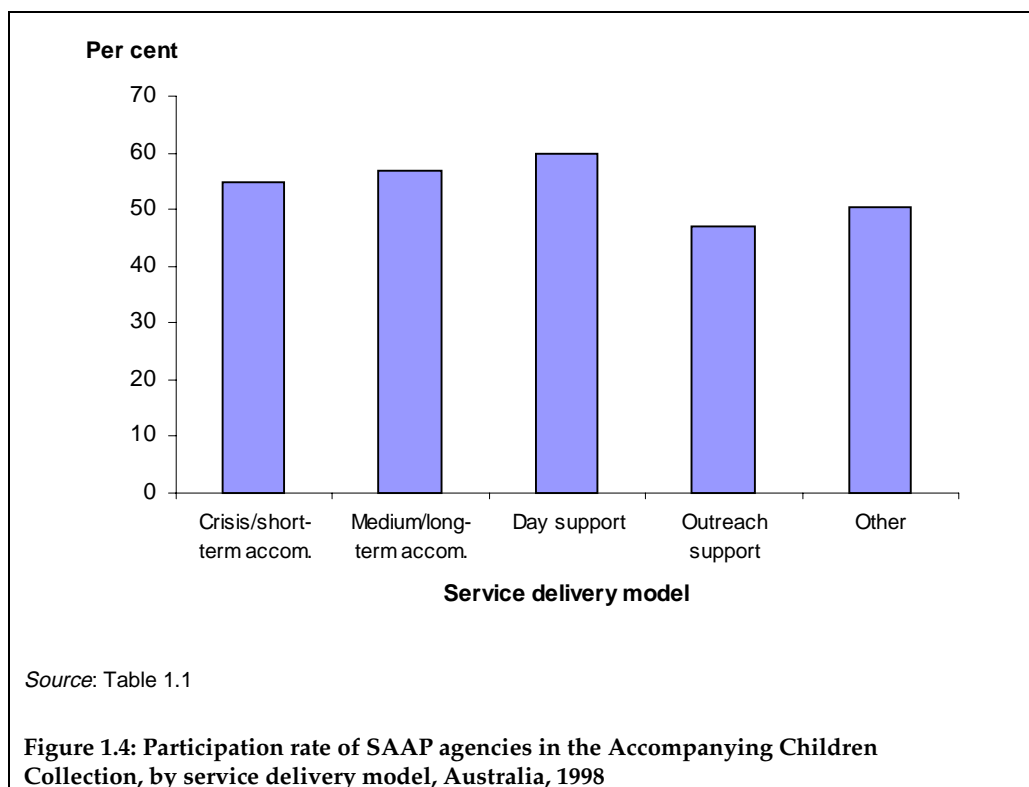


Of the six primary target groups, the biggest potential 'in scope' populations amongst the agencies targeted their services to young people (38%), women escaping domestic violence (22%) and those with cross target, multiple target or general client groups (18%) (Table 1.1).



As expected, the highest participation rate amongst the primary target groups came from those agencies targeting families, where 81% (2,120 forms returned) of such agencies participated. Participation from all other primary target groups ranged from the lowest of 40% (95 forms returned) at single men-only agencies to 60% (2,001 forms returned) participation at cross target, multiple target and general client groups (Figure 1.3).

Looking at the service delivery model classification, the majority of 'in-scope' agencies provided either crisis or short-term accommodation (36%) or medium- to long-term accommodation (49%). Only 1% of in-scope agencies provided day support services. They recorded the highest participation rate of all the service delivery models (60%). For the remaining service models, participation ranged from 47% for outreach services to 57% participation for medium- to long-term service providers (Figure 1.4).



1.5 Completeness of data

In assessing the quality of data in any collection, it is important to consider not only participation rates but also accuracy in filling out data collection forms and the degree to which the forms returned are complete. All data collections and surveys invariably have some 'missing data' which may not undermine the validity or reliability of information obtained; however, high levels of non-response to particular questions mean that some caution should be taken when interpreting data. Further, in some cases significant errors in filling out accompanying child forms were made so that these forms were discarded and not entered onto the database.

In this context it should be noted that the protocols established for the National Data Collection and the Accompanying Children Collection require that 'SAAP clients provide information in a climate of informed consent...' (SAAP 1996). If

consent is not obtained, only a limited number of questions may be completed on data collection forms therefore affecting the degree of representativeness of the data. Hence, consent is one of the variables that affects the proportion of missing data, reference to which can be seen often footnoted at the bottom of tables. For the Accompanying Children Collection, consent could be obtained from either the child or their parent or guardian. On average the national consent level was 71%. Some variation in consent can be seen across the States and Territories, ranging from 64% in the Northern Territory to 78% in South Australia. A more significant variance in the level of consent can be seen by location, primary target group and service delivery model. In terms of location, more accompanying children in other metropolitan (80%) and rural areas (75%) provided consent for details of their support period to be recorded than in capital cities (69%) and remote areas (60%). Whilst in most primary target groups accompanying children provided consent between 70% to 75% of the time, those attending agencies targeting single women only provided consent in 51% of cases. Those who received day support under the SAAP only gave consent 55% of the time.

During consulting on the design of the data collection a small number of agencies expressed concern about the intrusive nature of Question 12 on the Accompanying Child Form. This question asked agencies to indicate issues that accompanying children may have been dealing with at the commencement of support or at any time during the support period. Because of this concern, the DRAC agreed that response to this question was optional. Only in 4% of the forms was this question considered to be inappropriate with the participating agencies indicating that they had either opted not to answer it, or did not want their responses to that question entered onto the database. All agencies that participated in the collection in South Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory completed Question 12. There were low levels of non-completion of Question 12 in the Australian Capital Territory and New South Wales (1%), Queensland (4%) and Western Australia (3%). Agencies in Victoria recorded the highest proportion of non-completion of this question (7%), compared to the national average of 4%. Across target groups, figures reported by agencies targeting women escaping domestic violence and single women showed non-response rates of 10% and 4% respectively. Among service delivery models, other service agencies and crisis or short-term accommodation agencies showed non-response rates of 10% and 6% respectively.

1.6 Interpretation of analyses

As well as participation rates and the completeness of the data, accurate interpretation of the analyses presented here requires an understanding of the particular definitions of concepts and terms used in the National Data Collection. A glossary of terms has been included at the beginning of this report, and important information about the measurement of concepts and the counting rules used in the analyses contained in this report is presented in Appendix A. The Accompanying Children Collection collectors' manual contains additional useful information for the use and interpretation of the data presented here.

1.7 Structure and content of the report

This report summarises the information collected from SAAP agencies, between 21 May and 30 June 1998, about the children accompanying clients at their agency. Data contained in the tables and figures describe the background and circumstances of accompanying children along with details of the services and support that they accessed.

The report is comprised of four chapters. Following this introductory chapter, an analysis of accompanying children's demographics and family composition is presented in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 provides information about various facets of accompanying children's lives when they sought SAAP agency help. Included in Chapter 3 is information relating to their usual living situation, homes and schools. Chapter 4 is divided into two sections. The first part outlines the assistance measures accessed by accompanying children along with their amenability to support plans and case management strategies. As well, information on duration of support periods is given. The latter part of Chapter 4 examines instances when accompanying children were unable to obtain a number of SAAP support services or assistance measures (unmet demand). Chapter 5 examines the results from the agency profile. Detailed tables follow the discussion in each chapter and the appendices contain the counting rules used in this report, as well as a copy of the Accompanying Child Form and agency profile.

1.8 Detailed tables

Table 1.1: Accompanying Children Collection, completeness of the data, Australia

	Number of 'in scope' agencies	Number of agencies that responded	Participation rate (%)	Number of accompanying child forms	Consent (%)	Question 12 not completed (%)
State/Territory						
New South Wales	373	157	42.1	1,198	70.7	0.7
Victoria	289	177	61.2	3,182	70.8	7.4
Queensland	177	107	60.5	1,731	69.6	4.2
Western Australia	97	57	58.8	920	71.0	3.2
South Australia	70	47	67.1	1,066	78.5	0.0
Tasmania	39	26	66.7	220	74.5	0.0
Australian Capital Territory	29	14	48.3	183	68.3	0.5
Northern Territory	30	18	60.0	326	64.4	0.0
Location						
Capital city	623	334	53.6	5,239	69.7	6.1
Other metropolitan area	79	46	58.2	423	80.1	1.4
Rural area	344	195	56.5	2,743	74.8	0.1
Remote area	57	28	49.1	422	60.7	4.7
Primary target group						
Young people	422	205	48.6	922	75.6	0.3
Single men only	100	40	40.0	95	75.8	0.0
Single women only	45	25	55.6	186	51.6	4.3
Families	92	75	80.6	2,120	73.5	0.0
Women escaping DV	247	140	56.7	3,503	70.3	9.6
Cross target/multiple/general	197	118	59.9	2,001	70.5	0.0
Service delivery model						
Crisis/short-term accommodation	402	220	54.7	3,483	71.8	5.5
Medium/long-term accommodation	454	258	56.8	3,749	70.9	1.1
Day support	15	9	60.0	163	55.2	0.0
Outreach support	49	23	46.9	315	67.6	1.0
Other	183	93	50.5	1,117	74.4	9.8
Total	1,103	603	54.6	8,827	71.3	3.9

Notes

1. Based on forms returned from agencies 'in scope' for the Accompanying Children Collection in 1998.
2. 'Agencies' refers to the number of agencies that should have been participating in the reference period.

Source: SAAP NDCA Accompanying Children Collection