



Australian Government

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# Bulletin 49

# Homeless children in SAAP 2004–05: summary findings

## Introduction

The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) is a major part of Australia's overall response to homelessness and represents a broader social safety net designed to help people in crisis in the community. Each day SAAP supports a diverse range of people, including parent(s) or guardian(s) with children accompanying them (accompanied children) and children who present independently of a parent or guardian (unaccompanied children).

This report contains summary information on accompanied and unaccompanied children in SAAP and is drawn from a more detailed bulletin on this topic (AIHW 2006b). The bulletin and the tables from which the data in this summary are drawn, are available on request or via the AIHW website <[www.aihw.gov.au](http://www.aihw.gov.au)>. For more information on the definitions used, please refer to the publication *Homeless people in SAAP: SAAP National Data Collection annual report 2004–05 Australia* (AIHW 2006a).

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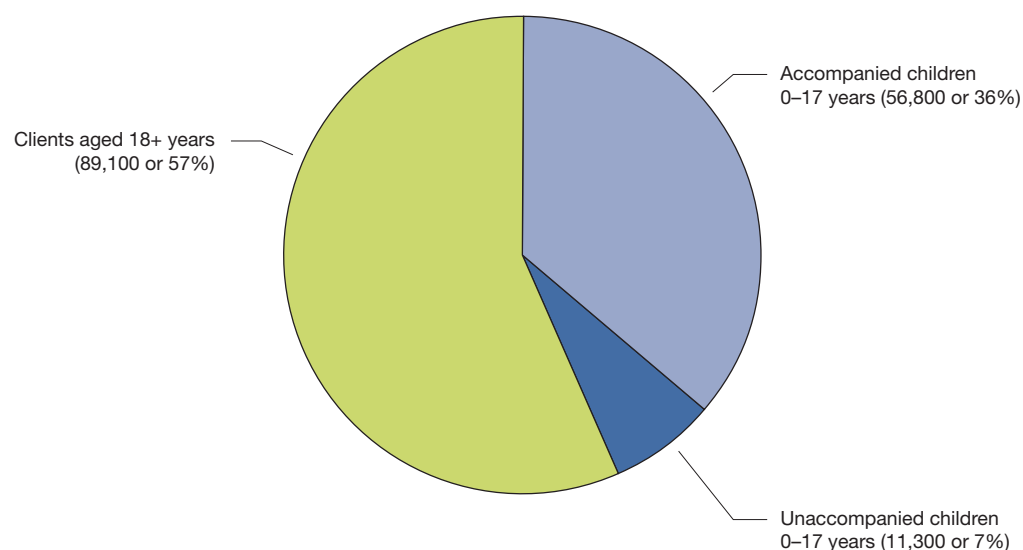
# Homeless children in SAAP 2004–05: summary findings

## How many children are in SAAP?

A large number of children access SAAP services. Children accounted for over two-fifths (43% or 68,100) of the 157,200 people who accessed a SAAP service in 2004–05, either as children accompanying a parent or guardian who was being supported (36% or 56,800 were accompanied children) or directly as clients independently of a parent or guardian (7% or 11,300 were unaccompanied children aged 17 years and under) (Figure 1).

The majority of children in SAAP were children who accompanied a parent or guardian who was a client of a SAAP agency (83% of children in SAAP were accompanied children). Many of these accompanied children were in SAAP because their female parent or guardian was escaping domestic violence.

When looked at in terms of how many accompanied children were in SAAP compared with children in the general Australian population, 1 in every 85 children aged 0–17 years accompanied a parent or guardian to a SAAP agency in 2004–05.



Source: AIHW 2006b.

**Figure 1: People in SAAP, Australia, 2004–05 (number and per cent)**

## Age and gender

The majority of accompanied children were aged 12 years and under (88%) and there was little difference in gender. In contrast, the majority of unaccompanied children were aged 14–17 years (92%) and there were more females than males (62% were female).

The highest rate of SAAP use by children was by accompanied children aged 0–4 years—around 1 in every 51 children (or almost 2% of Australian children) in this age bracket accompanied a SAAP client during 2004–05.

## Cultural and linguistic diversity

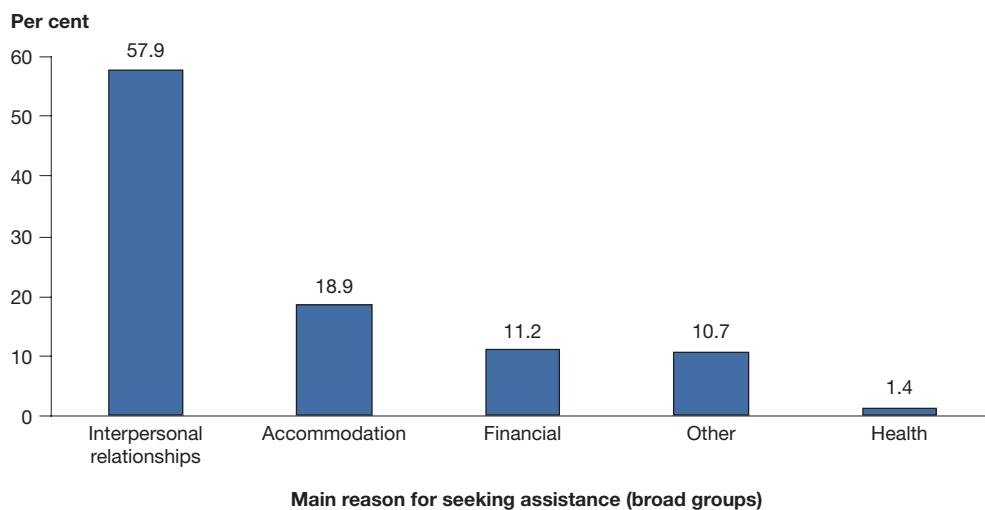
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples made up a relatively large proportion of the children in SAAP. Nearly a quarter (23%) of accompanied children presented with a parent or guardian who identified as being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and 18% of unaccompanied children were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

## Why are children in SAAP?

Children, whether on their own or in a family group, were often in SAAP because of difficulties with their interpersonal relationships.

## Clients with children

Clients with children most commonly presented at SAAP agencies because of difficulties in their interpersonal relationships (in 58% of their support periods) (Figure 2). In particular, domestic violence was reported as the main reason that clients with children sought support (in 41% of support periods). The majority of these were women. Male clients with children, on the other hand, were more likely to seek assistance because of financial difficulty (in 23% of their support periods).



Source: AIHW 2006b:Table 3.

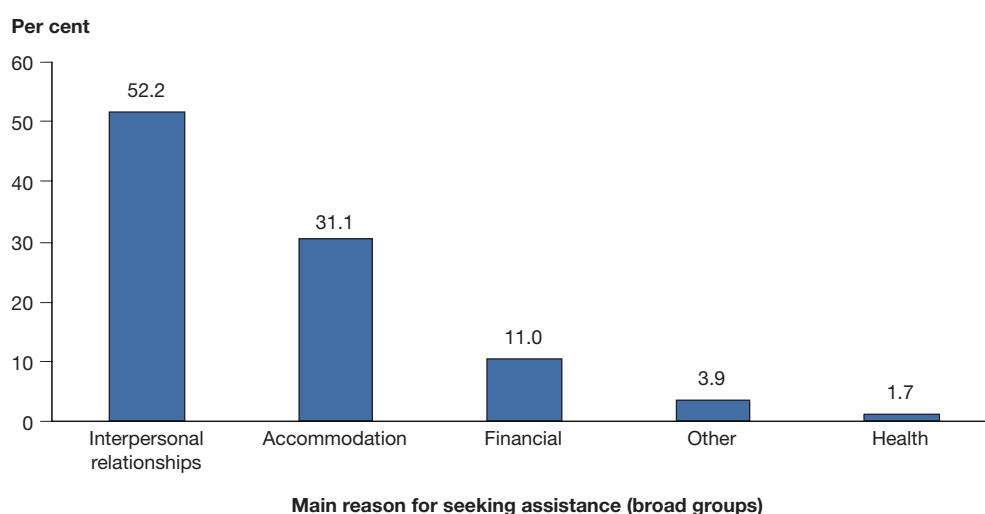
**Figure 2: SAAP support periods: main reason clients with children sought support, Australia, 2004–05 (per cent)**

## Unaccompanied children

The majority of unaccompanied children were in SAAP because of difficulties in their interpersonal relationships (in 52% of their support periods) (Figure 3). Within this broad group of reasons, unaccompanied children commonly sought support because of relationship or family breakdown (24%) or timeout from a family or other situation (13%).

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Unaccompanied children also commonly sought support because of accommodation-related reasons (31%), particularly because their usual accommodation was temporarily unavailable (16%) or because they were evicted or asked to leave the accommodation they were staying in (13%).



Source: AIHW 2006b: Table 3.

**Figure 3: SAAP support periods: main reason unaccompanied children aged 12–17 years sought support, Australia, 2004–05 (per cent)**

Unaccompanied male children were less likely than unaccompanied female children to report interpersonal-related reasons for seeking assistance (45% compared with 57%) and more likely to report accommodation-related reasons (36% compared with 28%).

### Is SAAP able to meet the needs of children?

SAAP agencies play an important role in securing accommodation and providing other support services to families and children in crisis. In general, SAAP does a good job of meeting the support needs of both groups of children, with requested services able to be provided directly in almost all cases overall (in 94% of cases for accompanied children and in 90% for unaccompanied children).

However, unaccompanied children reported a relatively high level of unmet need for some services when compared with accompanied children and SAAP clients overall. For example, requests for accommodation remained unmet in 1% of cases for accompanied children, in 6% of cases for all SAAP clients, and in 11% of cases for unaccompanied children. Similarly, requests for specialist services remained unmet in 2% of cases for accompanied children, in 7% of cases for clients overall, and in 11% of cases for unaccompanied children.

Requests for specialist services by unaccompanied children aged 12–17 years who had a mental health problem remained unmet in a relatively high proportion of cases (15%), had the highest level of referrals made (32%), and had the lowest proportion of direct service provision (52%) out of all the unaccompanied children examined in the bulletin.

## What are the circumstances of children on entry to and exit from SAAP?

The stated goals of SAAP are to resolve crisis, to re-establish family links, and to re-establish a capacity to live independently of SAAP. Within these goals, SAAP agencies aim to ensure that children exit SAAP support to live in a safe and secure environment.

### Accommodation

SAAP does help people with children to obtain or maintain independent housing such as private rental accommodation and public or community housing. Around half of clients with children were living in public or community housing or private rental accommodation on entry to and exit from SAAP support (in 49% of closed support periods before support and 55% after).

The most common accommodation type occupied by unaccompanied children aged 12–17 years on entry to and exit from SAAP support was living rent-free in a house or flat (in 40% of closed support periods before support and 35% after). The next most common accommodation type was living in SAAP or other emergency housing, with over one-fifth reporting this type of accommodation before and after support (22% before and 23% after). This, combined with the small amount of change in circumstance after support, may indicate that unaccompanied children have few other accommodation options and are moving between SAAP services to maintain a roof over their heads.

### Living situation of unaccompanied children

Lower proportions of unaccompanied children who were living with their parent(s) before entering SAAP returned to live with their parent(s) after receiving SAAP support, particularly in the older age groups. This appears to indicate that the opportunity to re-establish family ties reduces as unaccompanied children get older. The data show decreasing proportions living with their parent(s) immediately before seeking support and a high proportion living instead with friends or other unrelated people.

### Income and employment

The vast majority of SAAP clients with accompanying children and unaccompanied children were not in the labour force, and hence not actively seeking employment, before receiving SAAP support (80% and 63%, respectively). They reported a government pension or benefit as their main source of income (90% and 55%). These proportions were relatively unchanged after exiting SAAP support for clients with accompanying children but a higher proportion of unaccompanied children reported being on a government pension or benefit after support (61%).

### Education status of unaccompanied children

Education plays an important role in the development of children, however, homeless children can experience particular difficulty participating in education. The majority of unaccompanied 12–13 year-olds who accessed SAAP entered and exited as primary or secondary school students (in 85% of their closed support periods) (AIHW 2006b). However,

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around one-third of unaccompanied 14–15 year-olds and over half of unaccompanied 16–17 year-olds who accessed SAAP were not in the education system. These proportions were relatively unchanged after support. The educational status of children accompanying SAAP clients is not collected.

## Does a longer length of support affect the outcomes of children in SAAP?

Generally, longer lengths of support resulted in more positive outcomes for both groups of children in SAAP.

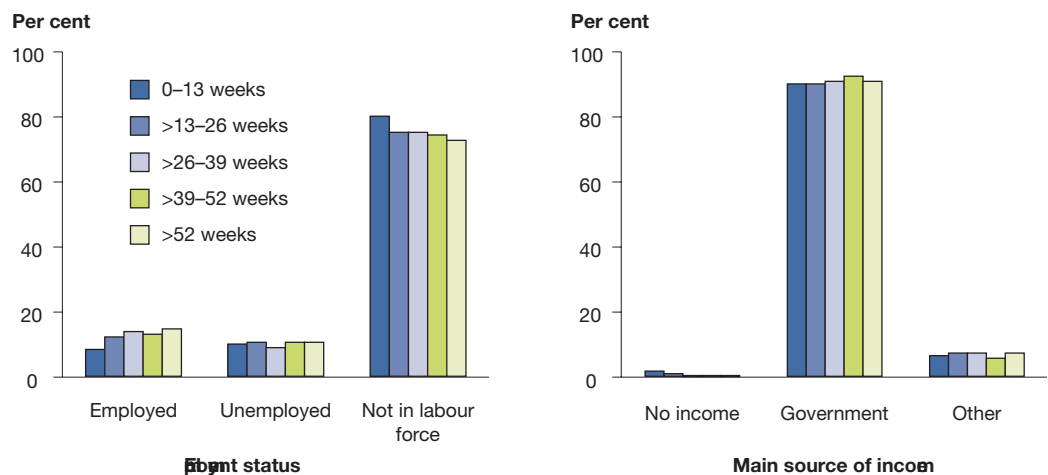
### Accommodation

A longer length of support generally improved the independent housing outcomes for both groups of children. For example, both clients with children and unaccompanied children aged 12–17 years were more likely to exit to public or community housing if they were supported for a longer period, and the proportions exiting SAAP support to live in other SAAP funded accommodation or other emergency accommodation decreased.

### Income and employment

Figure 4 shows the increase in employment for clients with children after support as length of support increased. Conversely, the proportion of clients with children who were not in the labour force decreased. In line with this, the proportion who had no income on exiting support decreased slightly the longer a client with children was supported.

Generally, a longer length of support also improved income and employment outcomes for unaccompanied children aged 12–17 years, although there were some slight fluctuations.



Source: Derived from AIHW 2006b:Table 8.

**Figure 4: SAAP closed support periods: employment status and main source of income after support for clients with accompanying children, by length of support, Australia, 2004–05 (per cent)**

## Are children being turned away from SAAP accommodation?

Data on people who request SAAP accommodation but are turned away are collected via the Demand for Accommodation Collection for a two-week period each year. Data from the 2003–04 collection showed that family groups and accompanied children were the most likely groups to be turned away from SAAP accommodation that they required within the next 24 hours (AIHW 2006c). Therefore, although many children were supported by SAAP, the demand for SAAP accommodation for children and families was not able to be completely met.

## Conclusion

In summary, children represent a significant proportion of people in SAAP. They predominantly present at SAAP because of interpersonal relationship difficulties or accommodation problems, although the individual reasons for presenting differ according to whether they presented with a parent or guardian or alone. SAAP generally provided the support that children required and there was some improvement in outcomes on exiting SAAP. Outcomes were more likely to improve if children were supported for longer periods.

## References

- AIHW (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare) 2006a. Homeless people in SAAP: SAAP National Data Collection annual report 2004–05 Australia. SAAP NDCA report Series 10. Cat. no. HOU 126. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW 2006b. Homeless children in SAAP 2004–05. Bulletin no. 48. Cat. no. HOU 85. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW 2006c. Demand for SAAP accommodation by homeless people 2003–04: a report from the SAAP National Data Collection. SAAP NDCA report Series 9. Cat. no. HOU 142. Canberra: AIHW.

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