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Regional variation in assistance to homeless Indigenous Australians

6. Regional variation in assistance to homeless Indigenous Australians

Housing circumstances can have a big and long-lasting impact on health and wellbeing (Foster et al. 2011; Marsh et al. 2000). Australians who do not have access to stable and secure housing often face substantial challenges related to domestic violence, mental and other ill health, disability, substance misuse, employment and other social or economic circumstances (AIHW 2020b, 2020c; Davies & Wood 2018; Zaretsky et al. 2013). These challenges can be both the causes of homelessness and the consequences of homelessness.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are over-represented among the people experiencing homelessness in Australia. Despite making up only about 3.3% of the overall population, 20% – or 23,437 – of the estimated number of people who were homeless on the night of the Census of Population and Housing (the Census) in 2016 were Indigenous Australians (ABS 2018a).

Box 6.1 shows the categories of housing circumstances that the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) uses to estimate the number of people who are homeless on each Census night. It is important to note that the circumstances under which many Indigenous Australians would consider themselves homeless do not always match this definition (ABS 2018a).

Box 6.1: Census homelessness categories

- Persons living in improvised dwellings, tents, or sleeping out
- Persons in supported accommodation for the homeless
- Persons staying temporarily with other households
- Persons living in boarding houses
- Persons in other temporary lodgings
- Persons living in 'severely' crowded dwellings

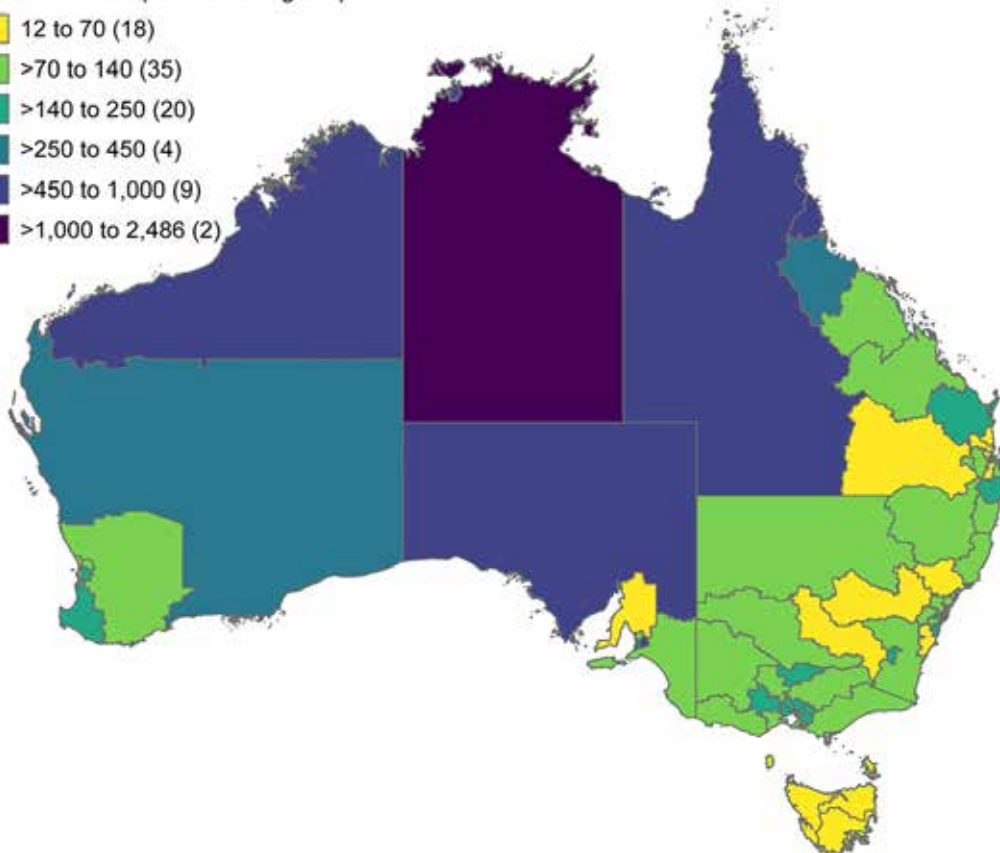
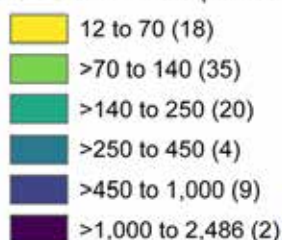
Among Indigenous Australians, homelessness is most prevalent in the Northern Territory, where about 1 in 5 (21%) were homeless on Census night in 2016. To a large degree, this is due to a high proportion of Indigenous Australians in the Northern Territory (18% of the total population, or 88% of those reported to be homeless) living in severely crowded dwellings (ABS 2018a). A 'severely' crowded dwelling is defined as one that needs 4 or more extra bedrooms to accommodate the people who usually live there, according to the Canadian National Occupancy Standard, which is widely used in Australia and internationally to define overcrowding.

The rate of homelessness also varies within states and territories. Figure 6.1 shows how the rate of homelessness among Indigenous Australians on Census night in 2016 varied between the ABS's Statistical Areas Level 4 (SA4s).

Nationwide, the estimated proportion of Indigenous Australians who were homeless on Census night dropped over the last 3 Censuses, from 5.7% in 2006 to 3.6% in 2016 (ABS 2018a). This was mostly due to a decline in the proportion of people living in severely crowded conditions. Increasing the proportion of Indigenous Australians who live in appropriately sized housing – that is, housing that is not overcrowded (including severely crowded and other overcrowded categories) – from 79% at the time of the 2016 Census to 88% by 2031 is Target 9 in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (PM&C 2020).

Figure 6.1: Rate of Indigenous Australians (per 10,000 population) who were homelessness on Census night in 2016, by SA4

ASGS SA4 – Rate (number of regions)



Note: ASGS = Australian Statistical Geography Standard.

Source: AIHW analysis of ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2016.

Specialist Homelessness Services

The Australian Government provides funding for homelessness services to the state and territory governments in accordance with the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA) (DSS 2020). State and territory governments fund non-government organisations to support people currently experiencing homelessness and people at risk of becoming homeless. The current funding arrangements are set out in the NHHA, which came into effect on 1 July 2018. Indigenous Australians are a national priority cohort in this agreement.

State and territory departments identify agencies that are expected to provide data to the Specialist Homelessness Services Collection (SHSC). Participating agencies vary in size and in the types of services they deliver, but all receive government funding to assist with accommodation and/or to provide personal services aimed at preventing people at risk of homelessness from becoming homeless, or to provide crisis and post-crisis assistance. The *Specialist homelessness services annual report* contains a full list of the services provided and is available at www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/contents/summary. Box 6.2 shows the different accommodation circumstances that can apply for people considered to be homeless or at risk of homelessness in the SHSC.

Since it started in July 2011, the SHSC has recorded services provided to 1.3 million clients by more than 1,600 participating agencies (AIHW 2020c). Other organisations not funded under the SHSC (and whose data are therefore not captured) also assist substantial numbers of Australians who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Box 6.2: Clients who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in the SHSC

A client is considered to be homeless if they live in any of the following circumstances:

- no shelter or improvised dwelling
- short-term temporary accommodation
- couch surfing or living with no tenure.

Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) are also provided to clients considered to be at risk of homelessness. Their accommodation circumstances can include:

- public or community housing
- private or other housing
- institutional settings.

Around 3 in 5 clients of SHS agencies are females. This proportion, which is about the same for Indigenous and non-Indigenous clients, shows little variation between jurisdictions and has remained relatively constant since the SHSC started. A sizeable proportion of SHS clients are children aged 0–14, who represented nearly one-quarter (23%) of SHS clients in 2017–18 (AIHW 2020a). That year, about 1 in 14 (7.1%) Indigenous children aged 0–14 were SHS clients. People aged 55 or over constituted close to 1 in 12 (8.1%) SHS clients in 2017–18 (AIHW 2019).

Patterns of use

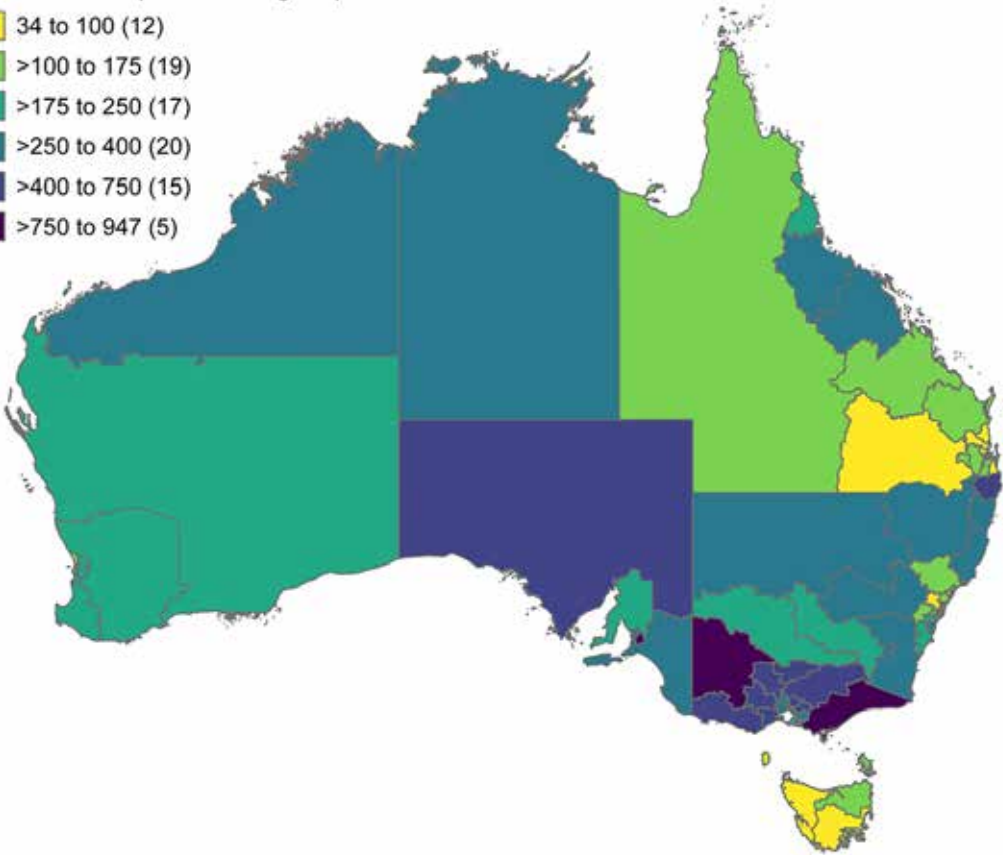
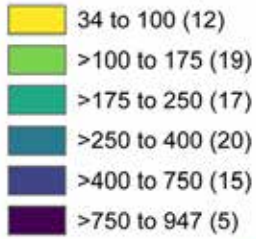
The number of people who receive assistance from SHS agencies each year has grown since the SHSC started in 2011. To some degree, this likely reflects the increased availability and funding of these services. Between 2011–12 and 2019–20, the number of SHS agencies increased from 1,486 to 1,625 Australia wide (AIHW 2020c). However, many organisations continue to report that they are unable to meet the demand for their services. Survey results published by Flatau and others (2016) suggested that 67.5% of all agencies and 61.6% of agencies with a focus on Indigenous clients were able to meet more than 75% of the demand. This means that any increase in available resources is likely to lead to an increase in the number of clients as more of the unmet demand can be met.

The proportion of people who were clients of SHS agencies between 2011–12 and 2019–20 rose from 5.4% to 8.0% for Indigenous Australians and from 0.76% to 0.85% for non-Indigenous people. The state or territory with the highest proportion of Indigenous Australians who receive assistance from SHS agencies was Victoria, where more than 1 in 6 Indigenous Australians (16.8% or 10,398 people) were clients in 2019–20 (AIHW 2020c).

Figure 6.2 shows the average monthly rate at which Indigenous Australians were clients of SHS agencies in each SA4 between July 2017 and November 2020. Many of the areas with the highest rates are in regional Victoria, where more than 1 in 25 (400 per 10,000) Indigenous Australians received assistance from SHS agencies in most SA4s (ABS 2018b). The rate of Indigenous SHS clients is generally lowest in Tasmania and Queensland, and in a small number of SA4s in New South Wales.

Figure 6.2: Average monthly rate of SHS clients (per 10,000 population) between July 2017 and November 2020, by SA4

ASGS SA4 – Rate (number of regions)

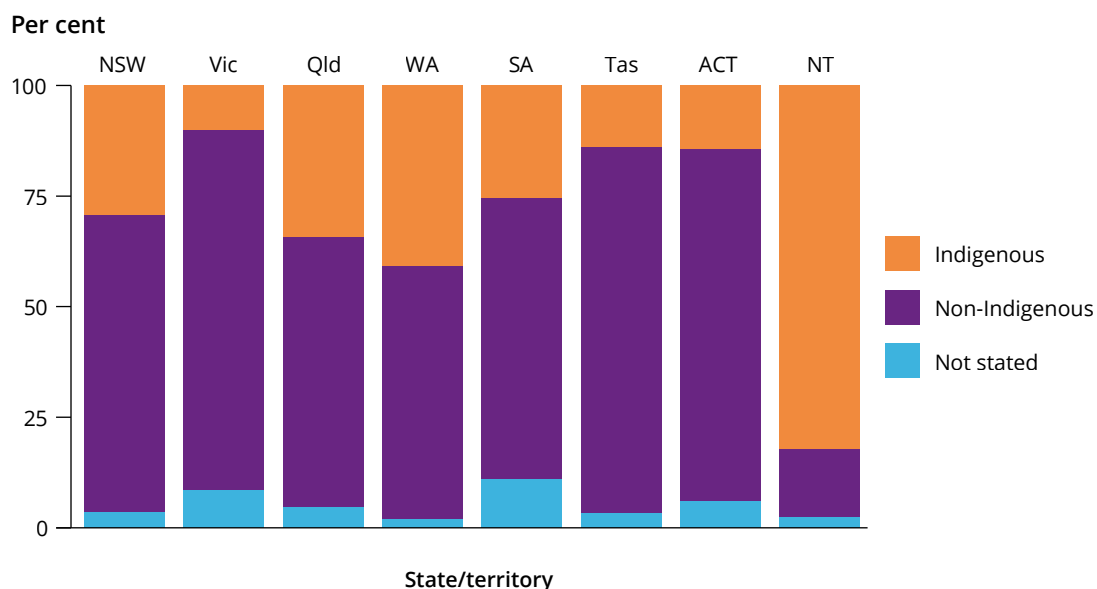


Source: AIHW analysis of SHSC and ABS Estimated Resident Population, 2016.

Patterns by state and territory

Nationwide, Indigenous Australians constituted one-quarter (25%) of the clients receiving assistance from SHS agencies in mid-2020. Between July 2017 and November 2020, the Northern Territory had the highest proportion of Indigenous clients (84% on average) and Victoria the lowest (11% on average), as shown in Figure 6.3.

Figure 6.3: Average monthly percentage of SHS requests made by Indigenous and non-Indigenous clients between July 2017 and November 2020, by state and territory



Source: AIHW analysis of SHSC.

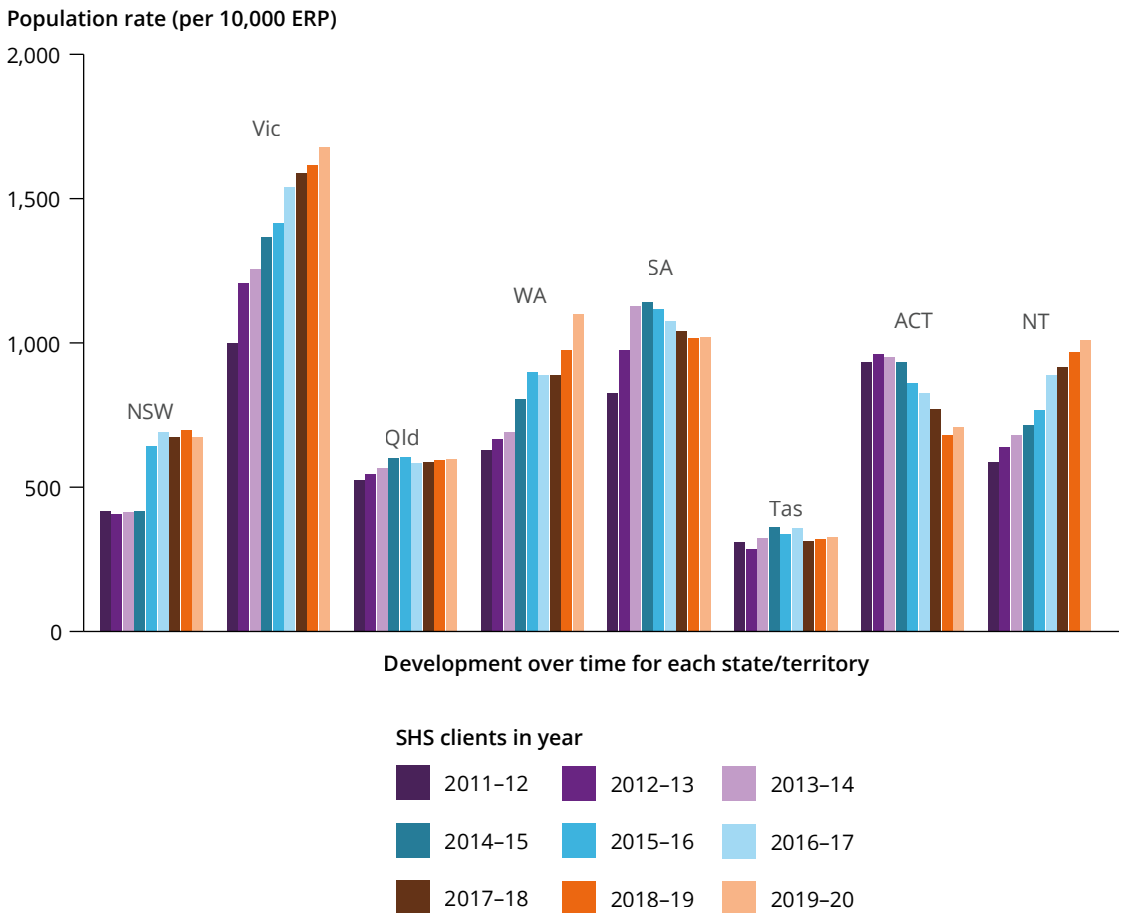
Figure 6.4 shows the rate of Indigenous Australians (clients per 10,000 population) who received assistance from SHS agencies in each state or territory in each financial year since 2011–12. For reference, the rate of Indigenous Australians who were homeless on Census night in 2016 is shown in Figure 6.5.

When comparing these rates, it is important to note:

- the estimated rate of people experiencing homelessness in the 2016 Census reflects the situation on a single night and not the rate of people who experienced homelessness at any time throughout the year, a figure that is likely to be substantially higher (Pawson et al. 2020)
- people who received assistance from SHS agencies include those who are homeless and those at risk of homelessness

- the SHSC and the Census use different methodologies to capture and define homelessness and the risk thereof; for example, the Census definition of homelessness includes people living in severely crowded dwellings and the SHSC definition does not
- not everyone recorded as homeless in the Census would consider themselves in need of, or be eligible for, assistance from SHS agencies, and vice versa
- organisations participating in the SHSC are not the only agencies in Australia assisting people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Figure 6.4: Annual population rates (per 10,000 persons) of Indigenous SHS clients (2011–12 to 2019–20), by state and territory



Source: AIHW analysis of SHSC and ABS Estimated Resident Population, 2016.

Figure 6.5: Rate of Indigenous Australians experiencing homelessness on Census night in 2016 (per 10,000 persons), by state and territory



Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2016.

Except for the Northern Territory, the number of Indigenous Australians who were SHS clients in a year exceeded the ABS's estimated number of homeless Indigenous Australians on Census night in 2016 in all states and territories. The Northern Territory had the highest rate of homeless Indigenous Australians – the majority of whom were recorded as homeless because they lived in severely crowded dwellings (requiring 4 extra bedrooms or more). It is clear that many of the Indigenous Australians in the Northern Territory who lived in severely crowded dwellings were not being assisted by the agencies participating in the SHSC. When considering only people recorded as homeless for other reasons, the Northern Territory still had the highest rate of homelessness among Indigenous Australians; however, the difference was much smaller and the rate did not exceed the rate of Indigenous Australians who were SHS clients in a year (figures 6.4, 6.5).

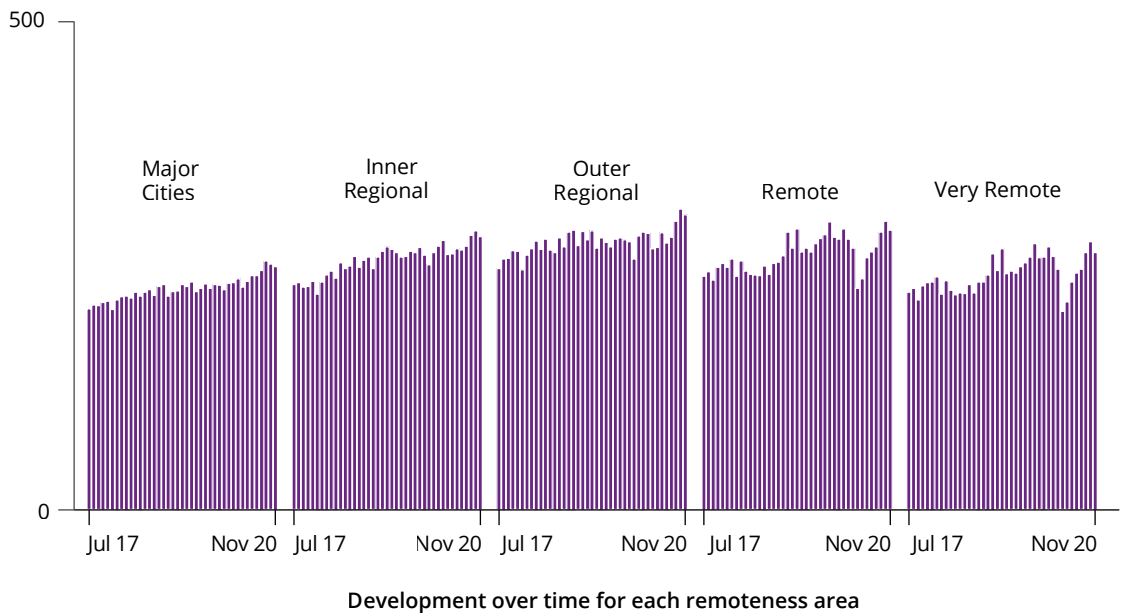
Patterns by remoteness area

Considering monthly SHS use (Figure 6.6) and homelessness (Figure 6.7) by the ABS's remoteness classification, some striking patterns emerge.

First, the proportion of Indigenous Australians who are clients of SHS agencies in a month is similar across all remoteness areas. This means that, overall, SHS agencies assist a largely similar proportion of Indigenous Australians in urban, regional and remote parts of Australia each month.

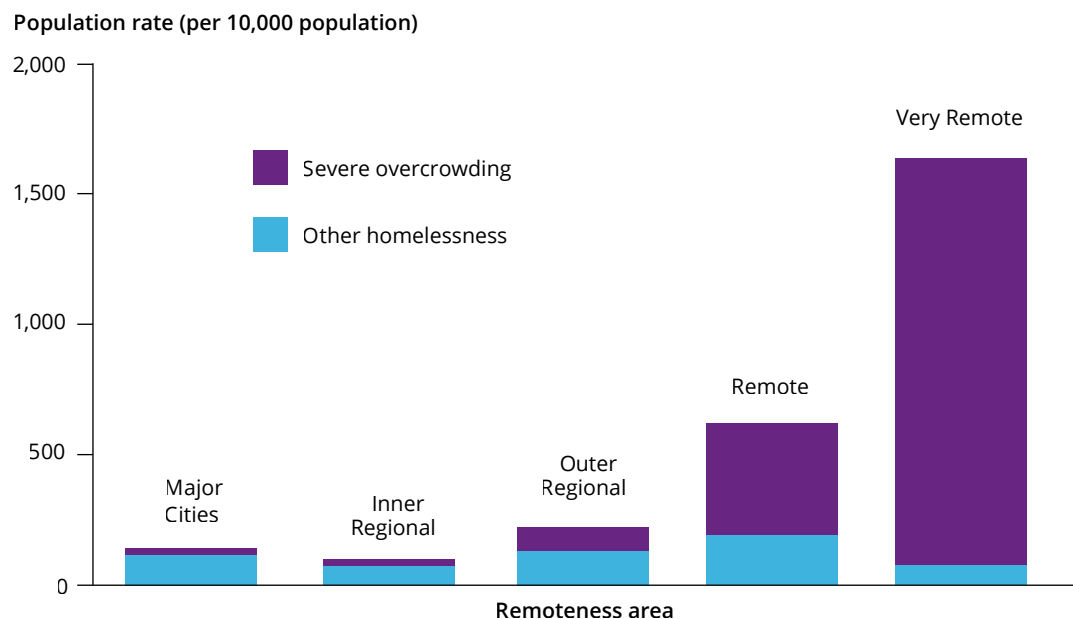
Figure 6.6: Monthly rate of Indigenous SHS clients (per 10,000 persons) between July 2017 and November 2020, by remoteness area

Population rate (per 10,000 ERP)



Source: AIHW analysis of SHSC and ABS Estimated Resident Population, 2016.

Figure 6.7: Rate of Indigenous Australians (per 10,000 persons) experiencing homelessness on Census night in 2016, by remoteness area



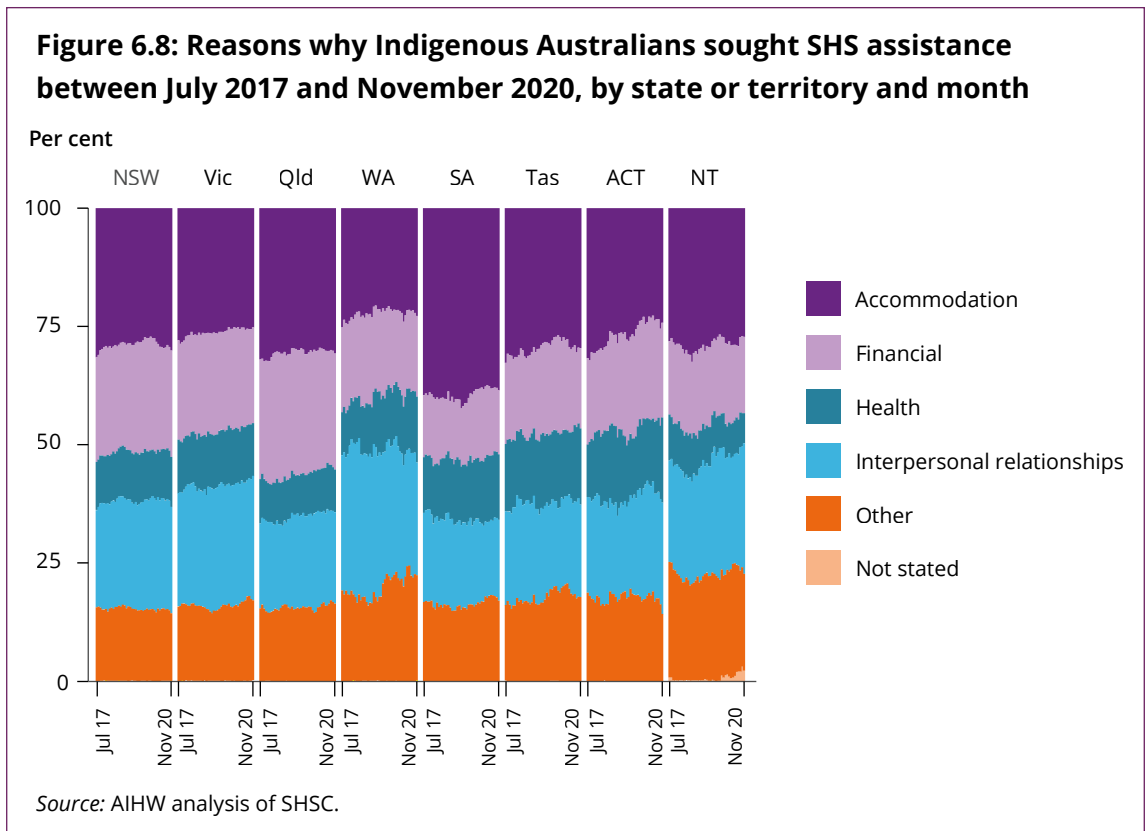
Source: ABS Estimated Resident Population 2016 and ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2016.

Second, the total rate of homelessness, as recorded by the Census, is much higher among Indigenous Australians in *Remote* and *Very remote* areas than in other parts of Australia; in these regions, it also far exceeds the rate of Indigenous Australians who are clients of SHS agencies. In *Major cities* and *Inner regional* areas, the proportion of Indigenous Australians who were homeless on Census night in 2016 was lower than the proportion of Indigenous Australians who were clients of SHS. However, it should be noted that SHS clients can be either homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Third, a higher proportion of Indigenous Australians recorded as homeless in the 2016 Census were living in severely crowded dwellings in *Remote* and *Very remote* areas than in non-remote areas. There is far less variation in homelessness between remoteness areas when considering only Indigenous Australians recorded as homeless for reasons other than living in severely crowded dwellings. In this case, the rate of homelessness among Indigenous Australians does not increase with increasing remoteness and is lower than the proportion of Indigenous Australians who were clients of SHS agencies each month.

Reasons for seeking assistance

The SHSC records the reasons clients receive assistance from SHS agencies, which can be summarised by the following categories: accommodation, finances, health, and interpersonal relationships (including domestic violence). Reasons not covered by these categories are categorised as 'Other' in this article. Figure 6.8 shows the distribution of reasons why clients accessed SHS agencies in each state or territory. It should be noted that clients can list multiple reasons for why they need assistance.



The proportions of recorded reasons within each category have remained relatively constant over time. Again, this will not only reflect the need for assistance but also the availability of different types of services. There has been a slight trend towards an increased proportion of recorded reasons in the interpersonal relationships category (including domestic violence) in Victoria and the Northern Territory. This trend is not evident in Western Australia; however, the proportion of Indigenous clients who list interpersonal relationships as a reason remains the highest in this state, accounting for nearly 1 in 3 (28%) of all recorded reasons. South Australian Indigenous clients list accommodation as a reason for seeking SHS assistance more often than anywhere else in the country, with 2 in 5 (39%) reasons recorded in this category.

Impact of COVID-19

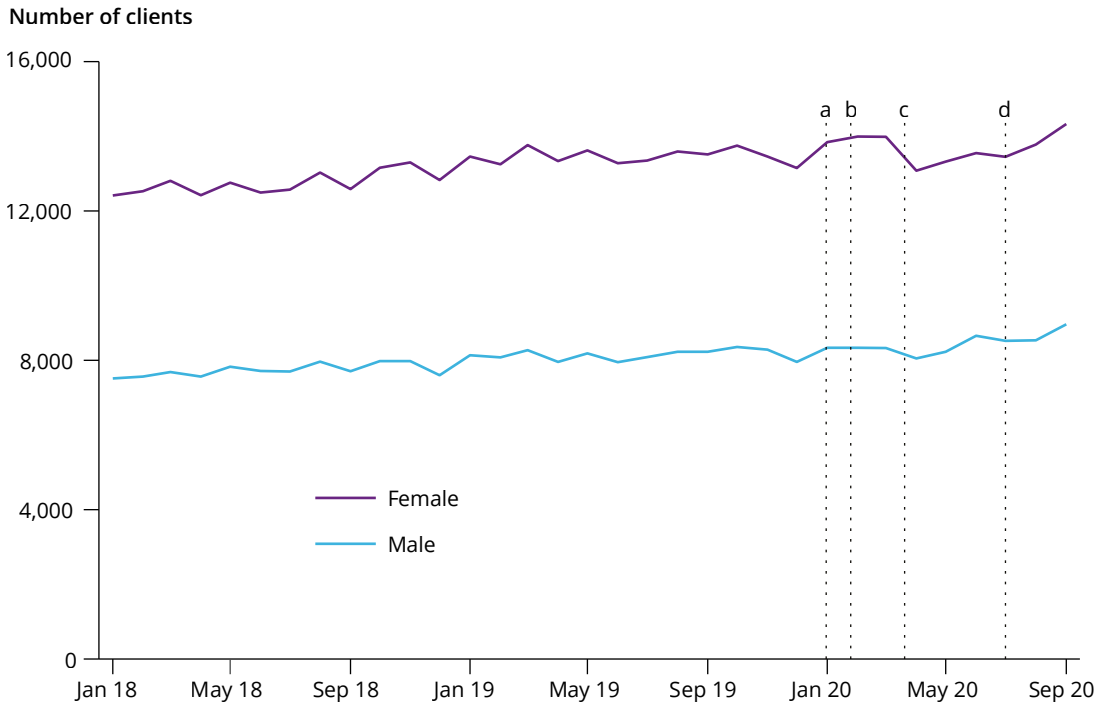
Reduced use of key services has been a major concern in countries where shutdowns and other measures restricting the movement of people have been implemented in response to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. A fear of contracting COVID-19 may also have made some people actively avoid using certain services even when the services have still been available (Biddle et al. 2020; Wong et al. 2020). Another possibility was that the need for many services – including SHS – would increase because the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic would increase the risk of financial hardship, domestic violence and mental health issues.

In Australia, a range of temporary policies aimed at protecting public health and assisting the homeless population and people at risk of becoming homeless during the pandemic were implemented in the states and territories (AIHW 2020c; Parsell et al. 2020). Efforts differed between jurisdictions, but a main focus was on emergency accommodation for rough sleepers. Non-government organisations played a key role in this response, with specific practices again varying between states (Pawson et al. 2020). For example, the South Australian Government focused primarily on housing rough sleepers by offering longer temporary accommodation. New South Wales offered shorter temporary accommodation, with extensions made on a case-by-case basis. In Brisbane, initiatives were taken to provide safer short-term accommodation for vulnerable women and their children and, in the Australian Capital Territory, funding was increased to meet an increased demand for services related to domestic violence or sexual assault (AIHW 2020c).

The nationwide statistics of the recipients of the homelessness response to COVID-19 are not available and the extent to which they will be reflected by the SHSC varies between states and territories. Pawson et al. (2020) estimated that more than 7 in 10 (71%) recipients of the COVID-19 response by SHS in Melbourne were male. In comparison, about 3 in 5 of the usual clients of SHS agencies are female. The proportion of Indigenous recipients of the SHS response to COVID-19 in Melbourne was about 12%, which is close to the 11% usually observed in the SHSC.

As some of the additional funding provided in response to COVID-19 was delivered through services outside the scope of the SHSC, SHSC data covering the COVID-19 period may not be representative of the demand in Australia (AIHW 2020c). In general, the monthly SHSC data for 2020 did not reveal any dramatic changes in the use of SHS services that can be linked to the development of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia or to the measures governments put in place. The numbers of male and female SHS clients nationwide up to September 2020 are shown in Figure 6.9 along with some of the key dates of relevance to the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia.

Figure 6.9: Number of Indigenous SHS clients nationwide between January 2018 and September 2020, by sex



- a) Summer 2019 fires, announcement of COVID-19.
- b) First COVID-19 case in Australia.
- c) Limitations on gatherings across Australia, announcement of funding for homeless providers.
- d) Victorian second wave.

Note: The inclusion of an 'Other' category for sex was introduced for support periods starting from 1 July 2019. Clients identifying as 'Other' have been included in the 'Female' category from 2019-20 due to data quality and confidentiality concerns.

Source: AIHW analysis of SHSC.

Conclusion

Indigenous Australians are most likely to be homeless in remote parts of Australia. There is variation between remote regions, however, driven in part by the proportion of people living in severely crowded conditions. In terms of clients per capita, assistance provided to Indigenous Australians by the agencies that participate in the SHSC is fairly uniform across remoteness areas, but there is some regional variation.

Because the proportion of Indigenous Australians who are homeless is higher in remote than in non-remote areas, a lower proportion of homeless Indigenous Australians are clients of the SHS agencies in remote areas than in non-remote areas. However, this pattern disappears if Indigenous Australians living in severely crowded dwellings are not included in the counts of homeless people.

The COVID-19 pandemic does not appear to have resulted in substantial changes to the monthly number of Indigenous Australians who are clients of SHS agencies. A range of measures to assist homeless people, including temporary accommodation, have been put in place in the states and territories in response to the pandemic. This has not yet had a big effect on the assistance to Indigenous clients reported through the SHSC; however, future changes to the measures will likely have an impact on Indigenous Australians who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and on the demand on SHS agencies.

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