Assistance to people experiencing homelessness

13. Assistance to people experiencing homelessness

People experiencing homelessness are among Australia's most socially and economically disadvantaged. According to the most recent accepted estimate, at least 100,000 Australians were homeless on census night 2001. This estimate was developed according to a cultural definition of what most Australians would regard as a minimum standard of dwelling; that is, having different rooms to sleep and live in, a private kitchen and a private, working bath or shower and toilet, as well as having some security of tenure.

Homelessness in Australia

The Counting the Homeless project, which compiled these estimates, categorised people experiencing homelessness according to three groups: primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness. In general, primary homelessness covers people without any conventional housing. Secondary homelessness includes people who were staying with friends or relatives short-term or who were in supported accommodation on census night. Tertiary homelessness counts people living in boarding houses (Chamberlain & McKenzie 2003; Table 13.1). There is another category that could also be included in estimates of the homeless population; people whose usual accommodation is a rented caravan in a caravan park, with no-one in the household having full-time employment. This group has very similar socio-economic circumstances to people living in boarding houses, and, consistent with the cultural definition, they mostly do not have different rooms to sleep

in, a separate kitchen or their own working bath or shower and toilet. If they are included in the count, the number of people experiencing homelessness on census night 2001 is conservatively estimated at 123,000 (AIHW 2007a).

While the above counts estimate the number of Australians without shelter or those living below the minimum societal standard of a house, they do not include people at risk of homelessness. The census cannot identify people in conflict with their families, women experiencing domestic violence not accommodated in SAAP or other people at risk of losing their home (for example, people in severe financial difficulty). This implies that the number of Australians who are homeless and at risk of homelessness is significantly greater than the 123,000 mentioned above.

Government responses to homelessness

Government responses to homelessness recognise both people experiencing homelessness and people at risk. The types of assistance offered vary greatly depending on the clients' circumstances. Some of these forms of help clearly constitute housing assistance as their aim is to improve the security of tenure for their clients.

There are many Australian and state and territory government programs aimed at assisting homeless people in different ways. Two important national programs are Reconnnect and the Household

Table 13.1: The whereabouts of homeless people on census night, 2001

| | Females | Males | Total | |
	Per cent	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Sleeping rough/improvised	39	61	14,158	14.2
Friends/relatives	47	53	48,614	48.6
Supported Accommodation (SAAP)	53	47	14,251	14.3
Boarding houses	28	72	22,877	22.9
Total homeless	**58**	**42**	**99,900**	**100.0**
Caravan parks	n.a.	n.a.	22,868	
Total homeless, including caravan parks	**n.a.**	**n.a.**	**122,768**	

Source: Chamberlain & MacKenzie 2003.

Organisational Management Expenses Advice Program (HOME). Reconnect aims to re-establish links between young homeless people and their families as well as engage them with work, education and training and family. There is a housing assistance component to Reconnect, where the program aims to re-establish stable housing for their clients with their families. HOME is an early intervention program for families at risk of becoming homeless. It helps families stabilise their housing and financial circumstances, and assists them with access to community services, labour market programs and employment.

The two largest national programs to assist the homeless are, however, the Crisis Accommodation Program (CAP), funded under the 2003 CSHA, and the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP).

Crisis Accommodation Program and Supported Accommodation Assistance Program

CAP provides the capital funding for dwellings used by governments, churches and other welfare organisations to assist people in actual or impending crisis or homelessness. At 30 June 2006, CAP provided more than 7,300 dwellings for emergency accommodation (FaCSIA 2007). Approximately $55.7 million was spent on new dwellings or on renovating, maintaining and leasing existing dwellings. CAP assisted almost 62,400 households (AIHW 2007d). The number of CAP properties has increased by 24% since 2000–01 (FaCSIA 2007).

The accommodation and service response complementing CAP is SAAP. Of all the programs supporting people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, SAAP provides the most diverse response, delivering accommodation and a range of support services to families, young people, single men and women, and women and children escaping domestic violence. Not all services provided by SAAP relate to housing assistance. Many aim to resolve the immediate crisis of people experiencing homelessness. For example, the provision of meals, assistance with immigration issues or court support would not often constitute housing assistance. Other help provided by government programs, such as assistance to obtain or maintain independent housing is almost always housing assistance. Generally, however, it is difficult to split the housing assistance in SAAP from other kinds of assistance, as it is often the individual circumstances of the client rather than the assistance offered which determines whether housing assistance is provided.

SAAP is jointly funded by the Australian and state and territory governments. In 2005–06, the program received about $349 million in funding, which helped support over 161,000 people, of whom over 54,000 were children accompanying adults to SAAP services. Of all people (including accompanying children) supported by SAAP, 43% were male and 57% female. SAAP also supported a disproportionately large number of Indigenous clients (17%) in relation to their representation in the Australian population (2% of people aged over 10 years), and a relatively small percentage of people of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (11%) compared to their representation in the Australian population (16%) (AIHW 2007g).

On an average day in 2005–06, about 23,000 adults and unaccompanied children were supported by services in SAAP including financial/employment assistance, general support or advocacy, specialist services, personal support (such as family relationship support), basic support (such as meals), accommodation and accommodation assistance. Of these, approximately 8,400 were accommodated in SAAP on an average night (AIHW 2007g; Figure 13.1).

The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program and Homelessness

The Counting the Homeless project reported that, on census night 2001, SAAP only accommodated 14% of people defined as homeless. On this basis it would appear that 86% of people experiencing homelessness were not receiving any help. However, while accurate data are not available to precisely explain the difference, it is almost certainly not the case that the other 86% are not receiving assistance. As reported above, SAAP provides many types of support and would be assisting some of those homeless people not accommodated in SAAP. As well, the other national, state and territory programs, such as Reconnect and HOME, also support homeless people. Some people defined as homeless according to the previously mentioned definition would also not regard themselves as homeless and would not seek support through any program aimed at this population.

There are, however, some people who ask for supported accommodation and do not receive it. There are also likely to be some people experiencing homelessness who need accommodation assistance but are not asking for it. While virtually no information is available for the latter group, the AIHW collects data on people who request immediate accommodation from SAAP and are turned away.

Number
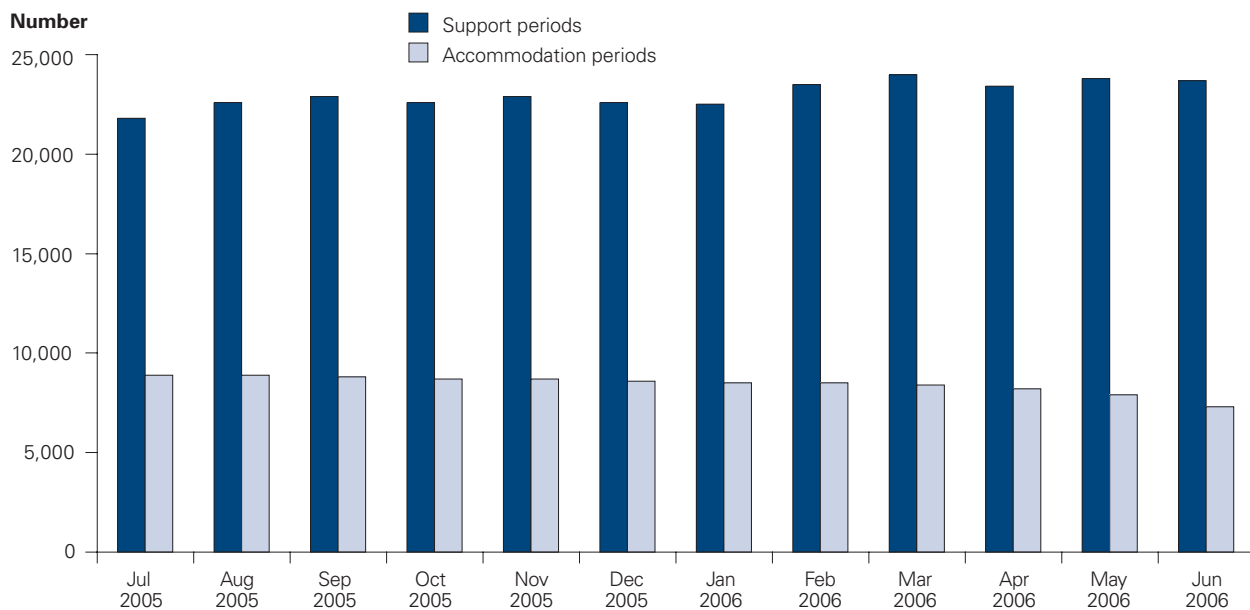
Source: Table A13.1.

Figure 13.1: Supported Accommodation Assistance Program support periods active each day and accommodation periods active each night, average by month, 2005–06

On an average day during the collection period in 2005–06, about 356 (58%), of the 619 people, including accompanying children, requesting immediate accommodation were turned away. The data therefore indicate that a person's chances of receiving SAAP accommodation when requested are less than 1 in 2. Part of the reason for the relatively high proportion of people who are turned away is that few spare beds become available in SAAP each night. On an average night only 2%, or 263 out of about 12,400 people accommodated, are newly accommodated in SAAP. Some limited information is collected about referrals to other accommodation for people who are turned away, but other than this, no data are available on whether people can find alternative accommodation on the night it was requested (AIHW 2007k).

Further reading

Chamberlain C & MacKenzie D 2003. Counting the homeless 2001, Australian Census analytic program. Cat. no. 2050.0. Canberra: ABS.

FaCSIA 2007. Housing Assistance Act 1996 annual report 2005–06. Canberra: FaCSIA.

AIHW 2007. Demand for SAAP accommodation by homeless people 2005–06: a report from the SAAP National Data Collection. SAAP NDCA report series 11. Cat. no. HOU 169. Canberra: AIHW.

AIHW 2007g. Homeless people in SAAP: SAAP National Data Collection annual report 2005–06 Australia. SAAP NDCA report series 11. Cat. no. HOU 156. Canberra: AIHW.

14. Supported Accommodation Assistance Program

As mentioned under Topic 13, SAAP is the major government response to people experiencing homelessness. The *Supported Accommodation Assistance Act 1994* describes SAAP's overall aim as being 'to provide transitional supported accommodation and related support services, in order to help people who are homeless to achieve the maximum possible degree of self-reliance and independence'. The Act further states:

> 'Within this aim the goals are to:
>
> a) resolve crisis;
>
> b) re-establish family links where appropriate; and
>
> c) re-establish a capacity to live independently of SAAP.'

These goals need to have both short-term and long-term strategies. For example, the provision of meals and overnight accommodation will often resolve the immediate crisis of hunger and shelter but it will not re-establish a capacity to live independently. Other types of assistance, such as specialist counselling or psychiatric services and follow-up support in clients' homes, are often incorporated into a 'case plan', and facilitate these longer-term goals. These goals are challenging, as the SAAP client population is very diverse requiring a variety of responses.

Reasons for seeking assistance

The diversity of the response required by SAAP is illustrated by the reasons people seek assistance from the program. For example, young men seek assistance most often because of relationship or family breakdown and housing or accommodation difficulties and young women because of relationship or family breakdown and domestic violence. Older men seek SAAP assistance more often because of financial difficulties and problematic drug, alcohol or substance use and older women due to domestic violence and financial difficulties. Couples are more likely to cite eviction as a reason for seeking assistance. The diversity of reasons given for seeking assistance therefore requires a program that provides varied types of assistance (AIHW 2007g).

Types of assistance provided

SAAP assists over 161,000 people each year, including over 54,000 children accompanying adult clients (see Topic 13). The assistance varies considerably, from accommodation, to specialist support such as psychiatric services, personal support such as domestic violence support, financial and employment assistance, general support and advocacy such as court support, and provision of basic support such as meals, transport and laundry or showers. As mentioned in Topic 13, some of the assistance would constitute housing assistance and some is directed at resolving other needs. It is not as simple as identifying the form of assistance, however, as, for example, the same type of counselling may on one occasion help the client develop the esteem to manage their home affairs, while on another occasion it might resolve an immediate personal crisis for someone sleeping rough. Therefore, it is impossible to separate the housing assistance component of SAAP when describing the program.

In 2005–06, over 158,000 periods of support for adults and unaccompanied children were completed (including errors and omissions not included in Table 14.1) and about another 24,000 were ongoing on 30 June 2006 (AIHW 2007g). Within these 'closed' support periods, over 759,000 types of support were provided, many of which may have been provided on a regular basis (for example, meals given every day during a period of support) (Table 14.1).

Table 14.1 also shows that for 88% of closed support periods where a particular service was requested, the service could be provided or referred for provision elsewhere at least once during the support period. Basic support services could be provided in 97% of cases, general support and advocacy in 95% of cases and personal support in 91% of cases. Accommodation support, including accommodation at SAAP agencies and assistance to obtain or maintain short- and long-term housing, was provided in 81% of cases, as was financial and employment assistance. Not surprisingly, specialist services which are relatively expensive and sometimes require relatively scarce and expert skills were provided least often, for 65% of closed periods.

Table 14.1: Broad types of SAAP services required in closed support periods, by provision (per cent distinct services required), 2005–06

Broad type of service	Not provided			Provided				Distinct services required (number)	Assoc. closed support periods (number)
	Neither provided nor referred	Referred only	Subtotal	Provided only	Provided and referred	Subtotal	Total		
Housing/ accommodation	7.6	11.0	18.6	71.8	9.6	81.4	100.0	151,600	103,400
Financial/ employment	6.0	13.0	19.0	69.5	11.5	81.0	100.0	90,400	65,700
Personal support	4.6	4.2	8.8	85.2	5.9	91.1	100.0	128,900	81,700
General support/ advocacy	2.4	2.8	5.2	88.5	6.3	94.8	100.0	223,700	115,200
Specialist services	10.0	24.9	34.9	51.1	14.0	65.1	100.0	74,800	46,700
Basic support	1.5	1.3	2.8	95.2	2.0	97.2	100.0	189,500	78,000
Total (per cent)	**4.5**	**7.1**	**11.6**	**81.3**	**7.1**	**88.4**	**100.0**	**. .**	**. .**
Total (number)	**38,400**	**61,200**	**99,600**	**698,300**	**60,900**	**759,200**	**. .**	**858,900**	**154,200**

Notes

1. Number excluded due to errors and omissions (weighted): 3,631 closed support periods with no information on service requirements or provision.
2. In groups of service types, a client may require more than one type of service within the group. Percentages for broad groups relate to all needs and not to support periods. For individual types of services, a need can be recorded only once within a support period, so percentages relate to support periods.
3. Figures have been weighted to adjust for agency non-participation.

Source: AIHW 2007g.

On the basis of these statistics, SAAP appears to be relatively successful in resolving people's immediate needs, as agencies are able to provide the vast majority of services requested by their clients.

Case management

Case management assists clients of SAAP set goals and work towards a satisfactory exit from the program. In this sense, case management is attempting to facilitate the longer-term goal of achieving the maximum possible degree of independence and self–reliance. In 2005–06, case management plans were in place in 59% of closed support periods by the end of the period. In 93% of these support periods, some or all of the goals agreed between the client and the agency were met (AIHW 2007g).

Repeat use of services

The impact of case management can also be measured to some extent by the rate of repeat use of the program over the financial year. In 2005–06, a significant majority of clients of the program (over 74%) only had 1 period of support, 14% of clients had 2 periods of support, and 3% used the program 6 or more times (AIHW 2007g).

On average, each SAAP client had 1.7 support periods in 2005–06. Men had more support periods per client than women (1.8 support periods per client compared to 1.6). Australian-born non-Indigenous clients (1.8 support periods per clients) had more support periods per client than English-speaking people born overseas (1.7), Indigenous clients (1.6) and people born overseas from non-English-speaking countries (1.5) (AIHW 2007g).

Housing outcomes

The SAAP National Data Collection reports on the immediate housing outcomes of SAAP clients after they leave the program.

Generally, positive housing outcomes were reported for clients following support. For example, in 2005–06, the most common type of house or dwelling occupied both before and after support was a house or flat, increasing from 65% of closed support periods immediately before support to 71% of closed support periods following support (Figure 14.1). There was also a shift away from living in an improvised dwelling or sleeping rough, with the proportion living in an improvised dwelling, car, tent or squat dropping from 6% of closed support periods before support to 2% after support, and the proportion living in the street, park or in the open decreasing from 5% to 2%.
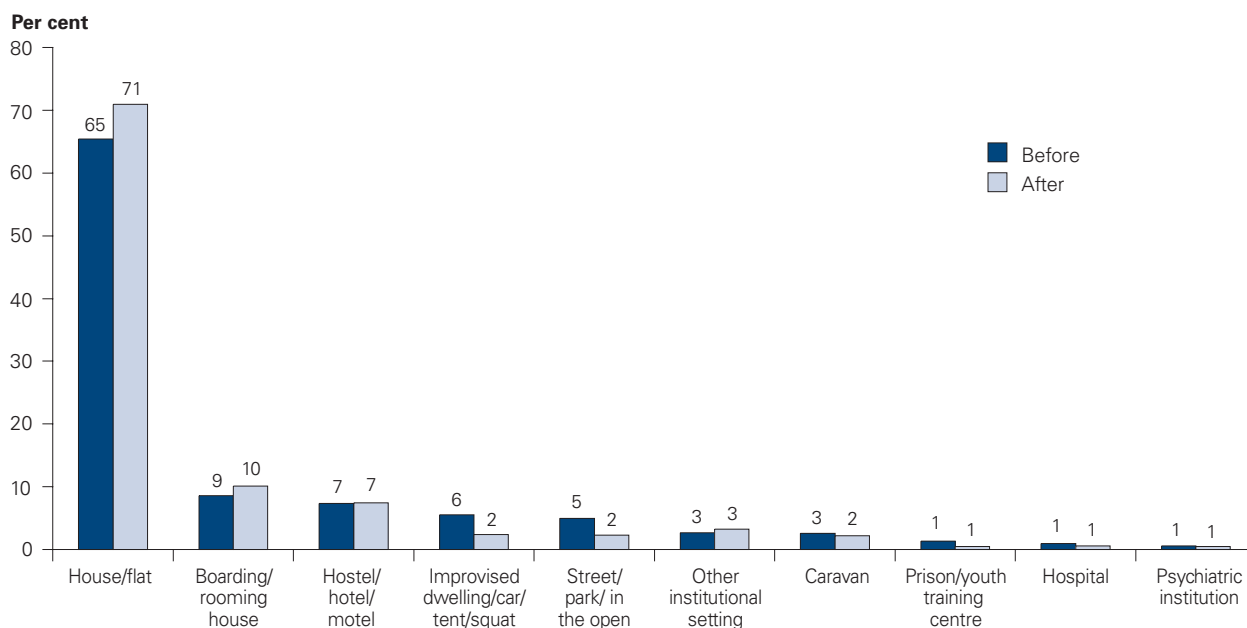
Per cent

Source: Table A14.1.

Figure 14.1: Type of house/dwelling immediately before and after a support period, 2005–06 (per cent closed support periods)

For clients who required assistance to obtain or maintain independent housing, more marked improvements were seen in the type of house or dwelling occupied after support. In particular, accommodation in a house or flat rose from 68% before support to 79% after support. The proportion of closed support periods in which clients were living in an improvised dwelling, car, tent or squat decreased from 6% to 2%, and the proportion living in a hostel, hotel or motel decreased from 7% to 5% (AIHW 2007g).

Further reading

AIHW 2007g. Homeless people in SAAP: SAAP National Data Collection annual report 2005–06 Australia. SAAP NDCA report Series 11. Cat. no. HOU 156. Canberra: AIHW.

AIHW 2007h. Homeless SAAP clients with mental health and substance use problems 2004–05: a report from the SAAP National Data Collection. AIHW cat. no. AUS 89. Canberra: AIHW.