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Homelessness is not 'rooflessness'. In Australia, it is widely accepted that homelessness should be broadly defined as being without shelter, in an improvised dwelling, in any form of temporary shelter including SAAP services or a temporary stay with a friend or acquaintance and residence in single rooms in boarding houses without facilities or security of tenure. In the ABS Census 2001, there were 100,000 homeless people - men, women and children – one third (36,173) were young people aged from 12 – 24 years of age. There were another 9,941 children under the age of 12. Both structural and individual factors cause homelessness for young people. The latest statistics in 2006 reveal 21,940 homeless teenagers aged 12-18, a decline from 26,060 in 2001. This drop has been attributed to the totality of early intervention between 2001 and 2006, not the decline in youth unemployment since the early nineties. On the other hand, the crisis in housing affordability and increased pressure on state care systems are factors that tend to drive homelessness upwards. In 2005-06, in terms of homeless people using SAAP services, 35.5 per cent of clients or 36,700 young Australians were young people. There was also an additional 54,700 children accompanying an adult(s). Turnaway rates as measured by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare show that about half of the of potential clients of SAAP are not able to be accommodated on any night.

Chapter 4 | Incidence of homelessness

4.1 For a long time, the homelessness field was awash with a plethora of different definitions. There appeared to be little agreement in conceptual terms and narrow ‘literal’ definitions of rough sleepers and shelter users were used when it came to constructing statistical data on homelessness. From 1985 onwards, the National Youth Coalition for Housing and the definition embedded in the legislation covering the provision of the Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program which referred to homeless and at-risk’ individuals, have been major points of reference. The definition in the Supported Accommodation and Assistance Act (1994) was primarily about who could be eligible for SAAP services¹:

A person is homeless if, and only if he/she has inadequate access to safe and secure housing. A person is taken to have inadequate access to safe and secure housing if the only housing to which a person has access:

- (a) damages or is likely to damage a person’s health; or*
- (b) threatens a person’s safety; or*
- (c) marginalises the person by failing to provide:*
 - (i) adequate personal amenities; or*
 - (ii) economic and social support that a home normally affords; or*
- (d) places the person in circumstances which threaten or adversely affect the adequacy, safety, security and affordability of that housing.*

This definition involves a degree of subjectivity on the part of the presenting individual, but gives scope for services to work with people at-risk of homelessness as well as people who are actually homeless.

4.2 An alternative definition by researchers Chamberlain and Mackenzie² uses categories that describe settings and circumstances in which people should be considered homeless.

Primary homelessness: people without conventional accommodation such as those who 'sleep out', or use derelict buildings, cars, railway stations for shelter.

Secondary homelessness: people who frequently move from temporary accommodation such as emergency accommodation, refuges, and temporary shelters. People may use boarding houses or family accommodation just on a temporary basis.

Tertiary homelessness: people who live in rooming houses, boarding houses on medium or long-term where they do not have their own bathroom and kitchen facilities and tenure is not secured by a lease.

The definition is referred to as a 'cultural' definition because it uses a putative cultural standard as to what most Australians expect as a bottom line of acceptable accommodation in contemporary society. This is socially inter-subjective but also sufficiently objective to be used for collecting quantitative data on homelessness. As such, this definition has been adopted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics³, and is widely quoted for policy purposes.

4.3 The 1989 HREOC Inquiry faced a problem because the size of the homeless youth population had not been established. The difficulties of quantifying such a transient population were well recognized but little had been done since the 1983 Senate Inquiry⁴. Many homeless young people were essentially 'hidden' from statistical counting and it was difficult to distinguish long-term homeless young people from those experiencing a temporary crisis that might be resolved in a relatively short period of time with little or no intervention by a service. The report commented that:

There are no reliable measures, in fact very few measures at all, of the incidence of child and youth homelessness ... (and) ... due to the lack of government and other data, however, it is very difficult to assess how many children and young people are homeless⁵.

In order to address this informational deficit, the Inquiry commissioned Dr Rodney Fopp⁶ to provide an estimate of the size of the homeless youth population.

4.4 Dr Rodney Fopp's estimation of the size of the homeless youth population was the first serious attempt to establish the size of the problem. After receiving Dr Fopp's report and conducting hearings throughout Australia, the Inquiry concluded that:

Sufficient research has now been compiled, however, to enable the inquiry to estimate that there are at least 20,000 – 25,000 homeless children and young people across the country. We stress that we consider this to be a conservative estimate. Dr Fopp's considered conclusion, based on the all the evidence available, was that the likely figure is actually 50,000 to 70,000 children and young people who are homeless or at serious risk.⁷

There was some initial confusion about the two estimates, however, the media responded

expansively to the findings of the HREOC Inquiry that ‘youth homelessness’ was a significant social problem in Australia that required urgent remedial Government action. The larger 50-70,000 estimate was frequently quoted in media stories about youth homelessness at the time, despite the more cautious position stated by Commissioner Burdekin and his colleagues.

4.5 A critique of the 50,000 – 70,000 estimate of 12-14 year old homeless youth by researchers Mackenzie and Chamberlain pointed out the fact that the estimate conflated ‘actually homeless’ and ‘at-risk’ young people. Mackenzie and Chamberlain suggested a more conservative estimate of 15-19,000 homeless young people aged 12-24 years of age on an average night⁸.

4.6 In 1994, Mackenzie and Chamberlain undertook a national census of homeless school students. A large sample frame of 2000 state and Catholic secondary schools were contacted by fax and asked, on the basis of their local knowledge of students in the school, to find out how many homeless students were still at school. Homelessness was defined according to the categories of primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness and enumerated young people who had run away from home and were ‘couch surfing with friends as well as young people who had been homeless for weeks and months. The research revealed 11,000 homeless students (aged 12-18 years). This data produced interest in the possibilities for early intervention but enabled an overall estimate of homelessness in Australia⁹.

4.7 In 1999, these researchers estimated the homeless population in Australia using ABS census data combined with other data on young people and people using SAAP services. This work known as Counting The Homeless has since 2001 produced detailed information on each state and territory, as well as regional area data on the homeless population. Since 1999, the Australian Bureau of Statistics has produced a paper on the homeless population (Counting The Homeless, 1999; Counting The Homeless 2001, Counting The Homeless 2003 and Counting The Homeless 2006, forthcoming) in Australia following each national census.

4.8 In conjunction with the 2001 ABS census, Mackenzie and Chamberlain determined that there were 12,227 homeless students aged 12-18 years and using information from the SAAP data, they estimated that the population of homeless youth was 26,060 Australia-wide in the age group 12-18 years on Census night 2001¹⁰. The pattern was not evenly spread across jurisdictions.

Table 1: No. & rate of youth homelessness (12 to 18 yrs), by state and territory, 2001

	NSW	Vic	ACT	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	All
Estimated number	6,242	4,663	400	6,381	2,394	3,508	1,008	1,464	26,060
Rate	10	10	12.5	18	17	18	21	69	14

Source: National Census of Homeless School Students and SAAP Client Collection.

Victoria along with new South Wales and the ACT cluster with 10 homeless youth per 1000, while the other states of Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania have higher rates of homelessness. In the Northern Territory the rate of youth homelessness was found to be significantly higher than elsewhere – 69 per 1000. This pattern was broadly congruent with the distribution of the homeless population overall by state and territory.

4.9 In *Counting The Homeless 2001*, Mackenzie and Chamberlain provided an estimate of the homelessness population in Australia – a total of 99,900 individuals on Census night – men, women and children.

Table 2: Age breakdown of homeless population, 2001

	N	%
Under 12	9,941	10
12 - 18	26,060	26
19 – 24	10,113	10
25 – 65 or older	53,786	54
	99,900	100

Source: Census of Population and Housing 2001, SAAP Client Collection in 2001

National Census of Homeless School Students 2001.

4.10 About 36 per cent or one third of the homeless population were young people 12-24 years of age. Approximately two-thirds of the homeless youth aged 12-18 years of age are outside the education system despite being of school age. Many students who become homeless whilst at school must eventually leave the school system. Homeless young people aged 19-24 years are mostly not in education or training and either unemployed or not in the labour force. There were an additional 9,941 children under the age of 12 years who were homeless, in nearly all cases accompanying their parent(s) or other adult carers. If children under 12 years of age are included, some 46 per cent or almost half of the homeless population are children and young people under the age of 25.

Youth homelessness in 2006

4.11 The most recent determination of youth homelessness for 12-18 year olds as part of *Counting The Homeless 2006* was available to this Inquiry¹¹. The main finding was that the number of homeless youth had decreased between 2001 and 2006 from 26,060 to 21,940.

Table 3: No. & rate of youth homelessness (12 to 18 yrs), by state and territory, 2006

	NSW	Vic	ACT	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	All
Estimated number	4,987	3,896	307	4,469	2,129	4,280	770	1,102	21,940
Rate	8	8	10	11	15	21	16	50	11

Source: National Census of Homeless School Students 2006 and SAAP Client Collection, 2006.

The eastern seaboard states of New South Wales and the ACT, Victoria and now Queensland had the lowest cluster of homeless rates. Queensland was 18 per 1000 in 2001 but down to 11 per 1000 in 2006. While not exactly reproductive of 2001, the distribution across jurisdictions was broadly similar. Again the Northern Territory had the highest rate of 50 per 1000 in 2006. The researcher's caveat for the Northern Territory was to point out that many Indigenous youth are outside of secondary education.

4.12 Explanations for homelessness tend to be constructed either in terms of micro 'individual' issues or macro 'structural' factors, although most sociological accounts draw on both individual and structural factors to explain homelessness.

4.13 Individual factors include sexual, physical or emotional abuse, conflict within families, mental health and drug and alcohol problems, a disability or the personality issues of a particular individual can impact on their relationships at home and school. Welfare professionals frequently express concerns that focusing on individual factors leads to attributing homelessness entirely to the individual and ignores the larger issues in society.

4.14 Structural factors are macro-factors such as the state of the local labour market which determines the extent to which young people can access employment (unemployment rate) and earn sufficient income to pay their rent and other living costs; or the availability and affordability of housing which affects how much young people have to pay out of their income to rent independent accommodation or share households in the private market or in public and community housing; income support benefits and legal determinations which affect what is available to young people. Other macro-level factors include the operation of government programs, services and institutions such as care and protection, juvenile justice and the area of drug and alcohol treatment.

4.15 The NYC Inquiry accepts that both levels affect the lives of young people and policy must address larger structural issues while at the same time provide support and assistance to individual homeless youth with attention to how much needs to be done to make a significant difference.

4.16 MacKenzie and Chamberlain examine the relationship between unemployment and employment for young people and youth homelessness. Their earliest research on the extent of youth homelessness was undertaken in the early 1990s when there was a period of deep economic recession. Overall, unemployment rose from 5 per cent in 1990 to 11.5 per cent in 1993 and youth unemployment peaked at about 30 per cent. This sudden rise in unemployment correlated with an increase in the number of homeless youth from 10,000 in 1991 to 21,000 in 1994.

4.17 After 1994, youth unemployment gradually dropped to 18 per cent in 2001. This is still a high rate of unemployment and leaves some young people highly marginalised in an improving labour market. Over the same period, youth homelessness continued to increase to 26,060 in August 2001. This suggests that there is no simple relationship between unemployment and youth homelessness, if reducing unemployment is associated with increasing homelessness.

4.18 Youth unemployment continued to decline. In June 2001, the youth unemployment rate was 18 per cent but had declined to 15 per cent by June 2006. Between 2001 and 2006 the relationship between homelessness and youth unemployment reverses. During the same period youth homelessness came down by 16 per cent from 26,060 to 21,940.

4.19 The researchers argued that:

The small drop in the unemployment rate probably enabled some homeless teenagers, including school students, to obtain either casual or part-time work. However, it seems unlikely that the decline in unemployment was either large enough, or sudden enough, to explain much of the decline in youth homelessness.

They conclude that:

The major change that did occur after 2001 was the increase in early intervention services targeting homeless and at risk teenagers.

4.20 The early intervention capacity referred to includes the establishment of the Reconnect program between 1999 and 2003 by the Australian Government specifically targeted to youth aged 12 to 18 to achieve 'family reconciliation, wherever practicable, between homeless young people or those at risk of homelessness and their families', and to improve the engagement of homeless and at-risk youth in employment, education and training Reconnect was a major initiative designed to reduce youth homelessness¹².

4.21 However, school welfare resources have been substantially improved and extended, particularly in some jurisdictions. Victoria rebuilt its complement of Student Welfare Coordinators in secondary schools and South Australia has been steadily increasing the number of Student Welfare Coordinators in both primary and secondary schools. The ACT has created youth work positions attached to ACT schools. Schools now typically work more closely with local youth agencies whereas in the mid-nineties this was relatively rare.

4.22 Several jurisdictions have developed other programs. In Queensland, the Youth Support Coordinators program has deployed 113 workers throughout the State to facilitate early intervention with at-risk young people especially secondary students. In Victoria, beginning in 1998 the School Focused Youth Service provided 41 workers throughout Victoria to assist the building of local area networks between schools and community agencies. Also in Victoria, the Family Reconciliation and Mediation Program (FRMP) is mandated to undertake Reconnect-type early intervention where there is no access to Reconnect as a way of filling gaps.

4.23 Finally, SAAP youth services also are more aware of the opportunities for early intervention than in the early 1990s. Some SAAP services also provide a Reconnect service and cooperation between services and schools have become more widely established than it was in the mid-1990s.

4.24 The totality of the 'early intervention' effort has evidently had some effect and Mackenzie and Chamberlain conclude:

The two factors most likely to be associated with the decrease in youth homelessness are early intervention and the improved labour market for young people. The labour market has improved and it is easier for school students to find part-time or casual employment. However, the small decline in youth unemployment between 2001 and 2006 cannot explain most of the decrease in youth homelessness. On the other hand, Australia's early intervention capacity has developed considerably over the past 10 years, and particularly over the past five years ... early intervention appears to account for most of the decrease in youth homelessness since 2001.

This is an encouraging result whereby there is statistical evidence and a plausible argument based on evidence that a policy is having some effect.

4.25 While the NYC Inquiry accepts this positive result, the breakout of the housing affordability crisis, particularly evident over the past two years, is a sobering caveat to an otherwise optimistic prognosis. It should be noted that in the early nineties, youth homelessness doubled under conditions of high unemployment and recession, and while economic conditions are different – close to full employment in a growth economy - the pressure on housing costs and rents is likely to affect homeless young people and homeless people generally, more than other groups in the community. Many witnesses expressed concern about the escalating cost of rental housing.

Using SAAP services

4.26 ABS Counting The Homeless reports provide estimates for the number of people on Census night using the ABS definition. The other statistics on youth homelessness are the number of young people entering and leaving SAAP services who require supported accommodation.

4.27 Since the 1989 Inquiry, a world-class data collection of the Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program has been developed which provides state and territory annual reports as well more detailed agency level reports¹³. This commenced in 1996 and continues to the present day. This has been a major achievement and it sets a standard for the development of data collections for other youth programs.

4.28 The SAAP Annual report for 2005-06 reported that 161,200 individuals in total were assisted through SAAP, and of these 106,500 were adults and 54,700 were children accompanying an adult parent(s). Altogether these people received help on 180,000 occasions and the average was 1.7 periods of support. A support period is the period of time that a person is receiving assistance from a SAAP service as a client. Some SAAP clients receive help on multiple occasions. Apart from accompanying children, 35.5 per cent or 36,700 of SAAP clients were young people, some 2000 were under 15 years of age, 19,100 were 15-19 years and 15,600 were 20-24 years. This means that in 2005-06 a total of 91,400 children and young people received support and/or supported accommodation from SAAP services in Australia¹⁴.

4.29 The other information provided by the National Data Collection Agency at the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare is the demand for SAAP services and

accommodation. Measuring turn-away rates or demand for services is a technically complex issue. The Demand for Accommodation Collection is conducted twice a year over a two-week period. Not all requests for assistance are valid since some of the people making requests are not eligible under the SAAP Act or agency operational guidelines¹⁵.

4.30 During the two weeks of the Demand for Accommodation Collection, a daily average of 251 valid requests for immediate accommodation that could not be provided (valid unmet requests for accommodation) were recorded. Requests were made by 332 people (212 potential clients and 120 accompanying children) -after allowing for people who made a valid unmet request for accommodation but were accommodated later in the day, some 304 people (193 potential clients and 111 accompanying children) could not be accommodated. Altogether, 7,409 people were accommodated in SAAP – 7,242 were already in SAAP and continuing their accommodation from the previous day, while there were 166 clients were newly accommodated.¹⁶

4.31 Turnaway rates are a third measure of unmet need or expressed demand. On average about half (54%) of the people who turn up seeking help from SAAP services are turned away each night.

Table 4: Adults and unaccompanied children: daily request for accommodation turn-away rate and unmet demand to total demand for accommodation ratio, by state and territory, Australia, 1–7 December 2004 and 11–17 May 2005 (daily average number of people)

	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	All
Total daily requests (no)	105	61	81	44	29	16	11	13	360
Turn-away rate from youth services (%)	65	66	51	76	51	32	44	54	33
Total turn-away rate (%)	55	59	53	49	47	57	71	36	54

The turnaway from youth services are those services specifically targeted for young people. The high turnaway rate for Western Australia suggests a lower proportion of available youth services in SAAP in that state and in the ACT, the turn-over rate is the highest in Australia given that the ACT is a city-state but access to youth services is somewhat better than for some other groups in the homeless population.

4.32 Information about demand however measured is the link between a large homeless population of about 100,000 individuals, of whom 46 per cent are children and young people, while 35.5 per cent are young people from 12-24 years of age and the relative small scale of available supported accommodation. The inferences that might be made about SAAP are complex judgements. One inference may be that people do not approach SAAP accommodation because of the known difficulty of obtaining access.

*The low percentage of new requests for SAAP accommodation on a daily basis suggests that people in need of accommodation may not be approaching SAAP agencies because they are aware of the difficulty of obtaining SAAP accommodation.*¹⁷

4.33 A second inference is that people who do approach SAAP may not be making repeat requests.

That the number of valid unmet requests for immediate accommodation is not considerably larger than the number of people seeking such accommodation suggests that people seeking SAAP accommodation do not make repeated attempts if they fail initially.¹⁸

4.34 Finally, there is the issue of expressed demand and increased capacity.

... few potential clients seeking immediate accommodation make more than one attempt at appropriate SAAP agencies (251 valid unmet requests for immediate accommodation divided by the 212 potential clients who made those requests = 1.18). However, unsuccessful groups may split up and retry in other combinations and the extent to which this happens is not known. Furthermore, referrals for other accommodation are not always obtained once a person has been unsuccessful. Each day, on average, only just over half (52%) of the valid unmet requests for SAAP accommodation were formally referred on to accommodation at another source (derived from Tables 5.2 and 6.4). This may be telling many potential clients that SAAP accommodation is difficult to obtain and that trying at another agency is unlikely to prove successful on that day. They might, however, try again on subsequent days. For these reasons, it is important to note that increasing the capacity of SAAP to accommodate more people may not necessarily mean that the rate of people turned away would decrease. It may be that once more space becomes available those people who have previously not sought or who have given up seeking accommodation may try to obtain accommodation.¹⁹

Summary

4.35 The HREOC Inquiry in 1989 expressed grave concern about the lack of statistical data on youth homelessness in Australia²⁰. That position has changed over nearly twenty years. The collection of data on people using SAAP services began in the early 1990s and since 1996 has evolved into the most sophisticated data collection of its type internationally. Researchers have produced statistical data on the broader homeless population in conjunction with the Australian Bureau of Statistics. This work in the form of Counting The Homeless 2006 has been supported and funded by the Australian Government and all state and territory jurisdictions.

4.36 In the 2001 ABS Census, approximately one third or 36 per cent of the homeless population of 99,900 individuals were children and young people under the age of 25 years. There were 9941 children under the age of 12 years, mostly accompanying their parent(s), 26,060 youth aged 12 to 18 years and 10,113 young people aged 19 to 24 years. Youth homelessness increased during the 1990s. In 1991, researchers estimated about 10,000 homeless youth aged 12 to 18 years, which had increased to 26,060 in 2001.

4.37 Between, 2001 and 2006 the number of homeless youth aged 12 to 18 years of age has dropped from 26,060 to 21,940. The inference for why this decrease in the number of homeless young people is that 'early intervention' has been the primary driver for this improvement. However, this conclusion was tempered by reference to the steep

rise in private rental – the crisis of affordable housing – which has received a great deal of attention in the media since early in 2007. The increase in reported cases of child abuse and neglect is another factor that would tend to drive up the number of young people becoming homeless.

ENDNOTES

- 1 On-line text of Supported Accommodation Assistance Act 1994 at www.infoxchange.net.au/SAAP/saap3.htm.
- 2 Chamberlain, C. & MacKenzie, D. (1992) 'Understanding contemporary homelessness: issues of definition and meaning, *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 27(4): 274-97
- 3 Chamberlain, C. & Mackenzie, D. (2003) *Counting The Homeless 2001*, Australian Census Analytic Program. Cat. No. 2050.0 Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- 4 Chamberlain, C. & MacKenzie, D. (1992) 'Understanding contemporary homelessness: issues of definition and meaning, *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 27(4): 274-97
- 5 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1989) *Our Homeless Children*, Report of the National Inquiry into homeless children by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney: HREOC.
- 6 *Ibid*, Appendix D, p.349.
- 7 *Ibid*, p.69.
- 8 MacKenzie, D. & Chamberlain, C. (1992) 'How Many Homeless Youth?' *Youth Studies Australia*, 11(4),14-22.
- 9 Mackenzie, D. & Chamberlain, C. (1995) 'The National Census Of Homeless School Students', *Youth Studies Australia*, 14(1), 22-28.
- 10 Chamberlain, C. & Mackenzie, D. (2003) *Counting The Homeless 2001*, Australian Census Analytic Program. Cat. No. 2050.0 Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, p..
- 11 Chamberlain, C. & Mackenzie, D. (2008) *Youth Homelessness in Australia 2006*, Melbourne: Counting The Homeless 2006 project.
- 12 RPR Consultants (2003) *I'm Looking at the Future: Evaluation Report of Reconnect – Final Report*, Canberra: FaCSIA.
- 13 Information on National Data Collection Agency on FaHCSIA website: <http://www.aihw.gov.au/housing/sacs/ndca/index.cfm>
- 14 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2006) *Homeless People in SAAP: Australia: SAAP National Data Collection annual report 2005-06*, Canberra: AIHW
- 15 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2006) *Demand for SAAP assistance by homeless people 2004-05: SAAP National Data Collection Agency (NDCA) report series 9*, Canberra: AIHW
- 16 *Ibid*, p.63 and Table 9.1 on p.68
- 17 *Ibid*, p.66.
- 18 *Ibid*, p.67
- 19 *Ibid*, p.67
- 20 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1989) *Our Homeless Children*, Report of the National Inquiry into homeless children by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney: HREOC, p.65.