

# Chapter 5

## Women and Homelessness

### Definition of homelessness

The most widely accepted definition of homelessness in Australia describes three kinds of homelessness:

- Primary homelessness, such as sleeping rough or living in an improvised dwelling
- Secondary homelessness, which includes staying with friends or relatives and with no other usual address, and people in specialised homelessness services
- Tertiary homelessness includes people living in boarding houses or caravan parks with no secure lease and no private facilities, both short and long-term.<sup>1</sup>

### Data on homeless women

The two main sources of national data on homeless women is the Chamberlain and Mackenzie 'Counting the Homeless' report<sup>2</sup> and the reports published by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare on the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) national data collection.<sup>3</sup>

The 2006 'Counting the Homeless' report showed that in 2006 104,676 people were identified as homeless. Women comprised 44 per cent of the homeless population, which is slightly higher than the proportion in 2001 (42 per cent).

Table 5.1 shows that when both men and women become homeless, they tend to stay with friends and relatives. When this option is not appropriate, women are more likely than men to seek out crisis accommodation such as that provided by the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP), than sleep rough or try to find a bed in a boarding house.

**Table 5.1: Different segments of the homeless population by gender, 2006**

	Boarding house (N=21,596)	Friends or relatives (N=46,856)	SAAP (N=19,849)	Improved dwellings (N=16,375)	All (N=104,676)
	%	%	%	%	%
Women	28	48	53	40	44
Men	72	52	47	60	56
Total	100	100	100	100	100

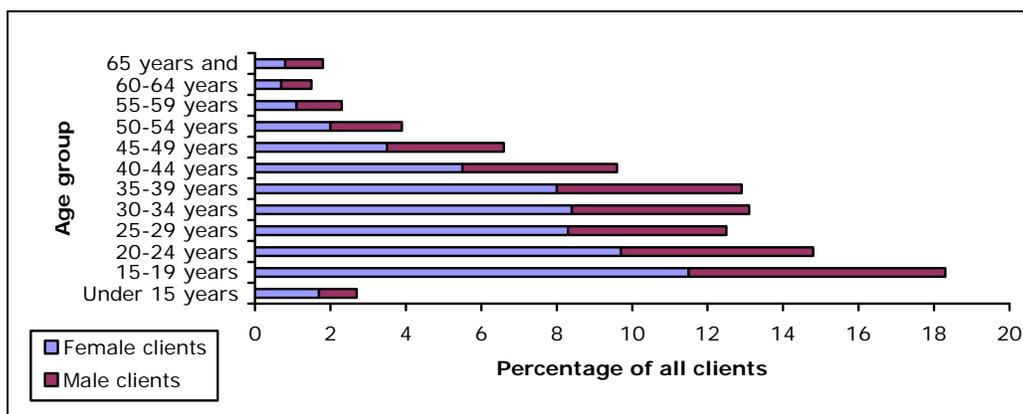
*Source: Chamberlain, C. & MacKenzie, D. 2008, Australian Census Analytic Program: Counting the Homeless 2006, Catalogue No. 2050.0, ABS, Canberra, Table 4.*

The SAAP National Data Collection is the main source of data on the provision of specialist homelessness services. SAAP data do not capture information about homeless people who do not approach a SAAP service, only use mainstream services, or receive homelessness services other than those funded under SAAP. On Census night in 2006, 19,849 of the 104,676 homeless people (19.0 per cent) were accommodated in SAAP services.<sup>4</sup>

In 2006-07, an estimated 187,900 people received substantial SAAP support. This included 118,800 clients consisting of 103,000 adults, 15,800 unaccompanied children aged between 0-17 years and 69,100 accompanying children. Female clients (61 per cent) outnumbered male clients (39 per cent).<sup>5</sup>

As shown by Figure 5.1, the largest groups of clients were those in the age groups ranging between 15 and 39 years, with women comprising the majority of clients in each age group. Indeed, until the age of 54 years, there were more female than male clients in every age group. From the age of 55 onwards, there were slightly more men than women.

**Figure 5.1: SAAP clients by age and gender, 2006-07**



Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2008, *Homeless people in SAAP: SAAP National Data Collection annual report 2006-07 Australia*, Catalogue No. HOU 185, AIHW, Canberra, Table 4.1.

### Cultural and linguistic diversity of female SAAP clients

As shown by Table 5.2, the majority of SAAP clients were born in Australia and did not identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people accounted for 18 per cent of all SAAP clients in 2006-07. This group was overrepresented in SAAP when compared to its population size. On the other hand, women born overseas were underrepresented in SAAP relative to their population size. A greater proportion of female clients than male clients identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or was born overseas.

**Table 5.2: SAAP clients by gender and cultural and linguistic diversity, 2006-07**

Cultural and linguistic diversity	Men (%)	Women (%)	Total (%)	Australian population (%)
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	13.3	21.6	18.4	2.2
Other Australian-born	73.9	62.9	67.1	70.9
Born overseas	12.9	15.5	14.5	26.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

*Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2008, Homeless people in SAAP: SAAP National Data Collection annual report 2006-07 Australia, Catalogue No. HOU 185, AIHW, Canberra, Table 4.7.*

### **Level of support**

Clients may seek homelessness assistance on more than one occasion throughout any year. In 2006-07, the 118,000 SAAP clients were provided with 207,700 periods of support at an average of 1.75 support periods per client. However, the majority of clients (73 per cent) had only one occasion of support.<sup>6</sup>

Men averaged 1.9 periods of support compared to an average of 1.65 support periods for each woman.<sup>7</sup>

### **Women with accompanying children**

In 2006-07, women with accompanying children accounted for 22.3 per cent of all SAAP support periods, whereas men with accompanying children sought assistance in 1.3 per cent of all support periods.<sup>8</sup>

### **Domestic and family violence related homelessness**

#### *Extent of domestic and family violence related homelessness*

It is difficult to estimate the total number of women who experience domestic and family violence related homelessness (see Women in Australia 2007, Chapter 7, Women and Crime for the most recent estimates of the incidence of violence against Australian women [hyperlink]).

We do know that domestic or family violence is one of the major reasons for women seeking SAAP assistance. This is especially the case for women with children, who reported domestic or family violence as the main reason for seeking assistance in 55 per cent of their support periods in 2006-07. Sexual, physical or emotional abuse was the main reason given in a further 2.6 per cent of support periods for women accompanied by children.

Unaccompanied women aged 25 years and over also most commonly gave domestic or family violence as the main reason for

seeking assistance (in 37 per cent of their support periods). Unaccompanied women aged younger than 25 years cited domestic or family violence as the second most frequently reported reason for seeking assistance (16 per cent of their support periods) after relationship breakdown.<sup>9</sup>

*Demographic profile of female SAAP clients escaping domestic violence*

As shown by Table 5.3, 24 per cent of female SAAP clients escaping domestic violence in 2003-04 were Indigenous and 57 per cent were born in Australian but did not identify as Indigenous. A further 15 per cent were born in predominantly non-English speaking countries (English proficiency group 2) and 4 per cent were born in predominantly English speaking countries (English proficiency group 1).

On average, Indigenous Australian women were younger than other SAAP clients escaping domestic violence and overseas born clients were, on average, older than Australian born clients.

**Table 5.3: Demographic profile of female SAAP clients escaping domestic violence, 2003-04 (per cent)**

	Indigenous Australians	Australian born non-Indigenous	English proficiency group 1	English proficiency group 2	Total	
					%	Number
<b>Age</b>						
• <15	0.8	1.1	0.4	0.3	0.9	300
• 15-19	10.8	9.2	2.9	3.1	8.4	2,700
• 20-24	17.2	15.0	8.3	9.1	14.4	4,500
• 25-29	19.7	16.1	11.5	15.9	16.7	5,300
• 30-34	19.2	18.8	19.2	17.7	18.8	5,900
• 35-44	22.9	26.7	35.0	32.8	27.0	8,500
• 45-64	8.7	12.2	21.0	19.2	12.7	4,000
• 65+	0.6	1.0	1.7	1.9	1.1	300
<i>Total</i>	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	...
<b>Total (%)</b>	<b>24.4</b>	<b>56.9</b>	<b>4.2</b>	<b>14.5</b>	<b>100</b>	...
<b>Total (number)</b>	<b>7,700</b>	<b>17,900</b>	<b>1,300</b>	<b>4,600</b>	...	<b>31,400</b>
<b>Mean age (years)</b>	<b>30.9</b>	<b>32.7</b>	<b>37.5</b>	<b>36.6</b>	...	<b>33.1</b>
<b>Median age (years)</b>	<b>30.0</b>	<b>32.0</b>	<b>36.0</b>	<b>35.0</b>	...	<b>32.0</b>

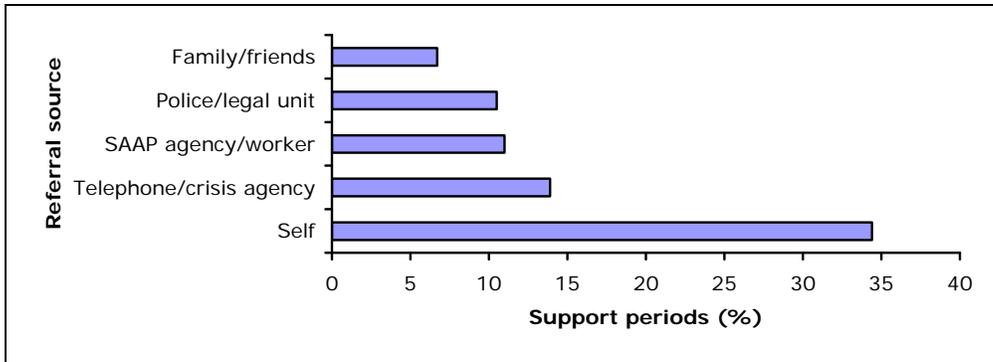
*Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2005, Female SAAP clients and children escaping domestic and family violence 2003-04, Bulletin no. 30, AIHW, Canberra, Table A1.*

*Referral source*

Women escaping domestic violence were referred to SAAP agencies by a telephone or crisis referral agency in around 14 per cent of support periods (Figure 5.2). In around 11 per cent of support periods, women escaping domestic violence were referred by the

police or another legal unit. The most common source of referral to a SAAP agency was self-referral (34 per cent of support periods).

**Figure 5.2: Selected sources of SAAP referral for women escaping domestic violence, 2003-04**



Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2005, *Female SAAP clients and children escaping domestic and family violence 2003-04*, Bulletin no. 30, AIHW, Canberra, Table A3.

#### *Economic circumstances of women escaping domestic violence*

In 2003-04, 71.5 per cent of women affected by domestic and family violence in closed SAAP support periods were not in the labour force. A further 16.7 per cent presented as unemployed. A small proportion were employed (3.8 per cent employed full-time and 8 per cent employed part-time).

Table 5.4 shows that the main source of income for female SAAP clients escaping domestic violence in 2003-04 was a Government pension or benefit, with 82.8 per cent of female SAAP clients affected by domestic violence in this category, with a further 0.6 per cent awaiting a government pension or benefit and 5.7 per cent presenting with no income at all.

Table 5.4 further shows there was almost no change in employment status before and after support for female SAAP clients escaping domestic violence. After SAAP support, a government pension or benefit continued to be the main source of income for women escaping domestic violence. The proportion of all women in the SAAP domestic violence group receiving a government pension or benefit increased after support and the proportion of women affected by domestic violence with no income decreased.

**Table 5.4: Economic circumstances of female SAAP clients escaping domestic violence before and after support (% of closed support periods)**

	Before	After
<b>Employment status</b>		
• Employed full-time	3.8	3.8
• Employed part-time/casual	8.0	8.2
• Unemployed (looking for work)	16.7	16.4
• Not in the labour force	71.5	71.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Main source of income</b>		
• No income	5.7	3.6
• No income, awaiting pension/benefit	0.6	0.6
• Government pension/benefit	82.8	86.3
• Other	10.9	9.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

*Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2005, Female SAAP clients and children escaping domestic and family violence 2003-04, Bulletin no. 30, AIHW, Canberra, Table A9.*

## References

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- <sup>1</sup> Chamberlain, C. & MacKenzie, D., Understanding Contemporary Homelessness: Issues of Definition and Meaning, *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 27(4), 1992, pp. 274-97.
- <sup>2</sup> Chamberlain, C. & MacKenzie, D., *Australian Census Analytic Program: Counting the Homeless 2006*, Catalogue No. 2050.0, ABS, Canberra, 2008.
- <sup>3</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Homeless people in SAAP: SAAP National Data Collection annual report 2006-07 Australia*, Catalogue No. HOU 185, AIHW, Canberra, 2008.
- <sup>4</sup> Chamberlain, C. & MacKenzie, D., *Australian Census Analytic Program: Counting the Homeless 2006*, Catalogue No. 2050.0, ABS, Canberra, 2008, Table 4.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid, Tables 3.1, 3.2 and 4.1.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid, Table 3.1.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid, Table 4.3.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid, Table 5.1.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid, Table 5.5.