



Homeless: in the City?

A brief overview of *Counting the Homeless 2001: Western Australia*
by Paul Pendergast

The Department for Community Development recently released *Counting the Homeless 2001: Western Australia*. The report, written by Chris Chamberlain and David MacKenzie, reveals that on Census night 2001, there were 99,900 homeless people in Australia and 11.7% (11,697) lived in Western Australia.

The Report uses the cultural definition of homelessness to measure the extent and nature of homeless in Western Australia. This definition describes three levels of homelessness and includes:

- **Primary homelessness:** people without conventional accommodation;
- **Secondary homelessness:** people who move frequently from one form of temporary shelter to another; and,
- **Tertiary homelessness:** People who live in boarding houses on a medium to long-term basis.¹

Homelessness by region

Shelter WA, through our regional housing forums has highlighted that while Perth has a very significant population of homeless people, homelessness is also a major issue outside the metropolitan area. Chamberlain and MacKenzie's latest analysis of the 2001 Census adds weight to these concerns. Table 1 below demonstrates that about two thirds of homeless people in Western Australia live in rural and remote areas.

Perth: On Census night 2001 the Perth metropolitan area had 5,637 homeless people, a rate of 42 homeless people per 10,000 of the population. But contrary to popular images of homelessness only a fifth of Perth's homeless were located in the Central City area (1,262). The largest number of homeless (1,349) was located in the Fremantle / Rockingham area, with 1,112 were in the south east (Victoria Park to Armadale) and 1,082 in the north metropolitan area.

South West: Participants at Shelter WA's recent Busselton and Margaret River housing forums expressed their belief that there was a hidden homelessness problem in the South West.² The Report confirms that at a rate of 52 per 10,000 of population, the South West has a higher proportional rate of homelessness than the Perth metropolitan area.

South Eastern: Shelter WA's preliminary investigations into housing issues affecting low-income housing consumers in Kalgoorlie have revealed widespread concern over the extent of Indigenous homelessness in the area.³ The Report confirms a homelessness rate of 88 per 10,000 of population and 116 per 10,000 for the region.

¹ Australian Bureau Of Statistics, 2041.0 Occasional Paper: Census Of Population & Housing – Counting The Homeless 1999.

² Shelter WA, But where will the cleaner live? Final Report on the Busselton and Margaret River Housing Forums, Paul Pendergast, Samantha Lambert and Karel Eringa, January 2004

³ Shelter WA, Kalgoorlie-Boulder Housing Forum, Tuesday 3 August 2004: Discussion Paper, Prepared by Karel Eringa, 21 July 2004

The Report also confirms a distinctive pattern identified by Shelter WA at the recent Housing Indigenous People in Regional WA Forum, namely that the rate of homelessness increases with remoteness from Perth.⁴

Central: Overall the region has a rate of 221 per 10,000 or five times the rate for Perth, increasing dramatically to 527 in Gasgoyne and 590 in Carnegie.

Pilbara: Has a rate of 169 or four times the rate for Perth.

Kimberley: The Kimberley is not only W A's most northern region but it also has its highest homelessness rate at 555 per 10,000 or thirteen times the rate for Perth.

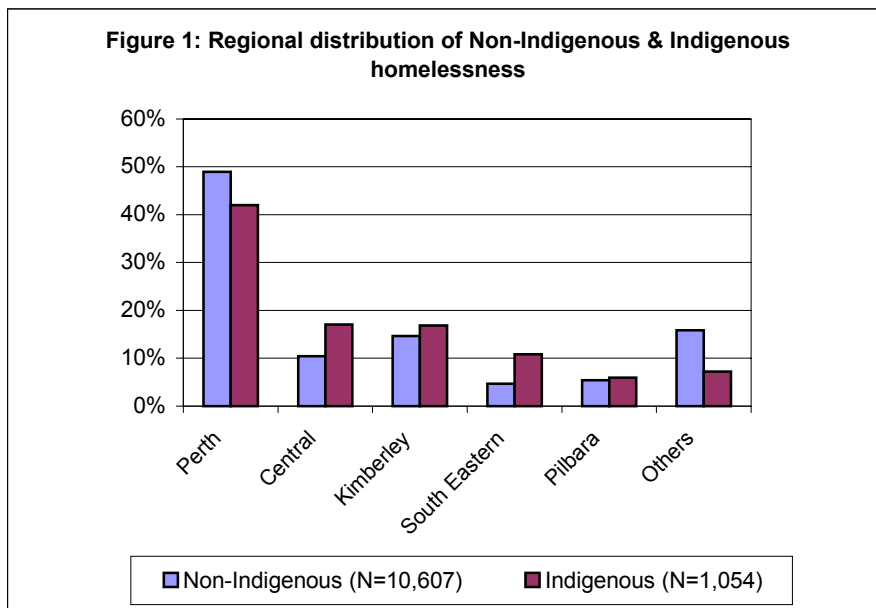
Table 1: Number and rate of homelessness per 10,000 of the population by region Western Australia						
Perth						
	Central	East	North	Sth West	Sth East	Total
Number	1,262	832	1,082	1,349	1,112	5,637
Rate	109	36	27	48	36	42
South West						
	Mandurah	Bunbury	Preston	Vasse	Blackwood	Total
Number	243	218	174	204	119	958
Rate	43	46	54	65	72	52
Great Southern and Midlands						
	Lower Gt Sth	Upper Gt Sth	Midlands			
Number	299	106	394			
Rate	59	59	77			
South Eastern						
	Kalgoorlie/ Boulder	Lefroy	Johnston			Total
Number	248	213	152			613
Rate	88	228	99			116
Central						
	Geraldton	Gasgoyne	Carnegie	Greenough River	Total	
Number	262	521	248	255	1,286	
Rate	88	527	590	180	221	
Pilbara						
	De Grey	Fortesque				Total
Number	275	362				637
Rate	156	180				169
Kimberley						
	Halls Creek	East Kimberley	Broome	Derby-West Kimberley	Total	
Number	74	549	873	237	1,733	
Rate	203	772	689	304	555	
Source: Chris Chamberlain, David Mackenzie, Counting the Homeless 2001: Western Australia, Mebouné, 2004						

⁴ Shelter WA, Community Forum: Housing Indigenous People in Regional WA, October 2003

Regional Distribution of Homeless People

There are some apparent differences in the distribution of non-Indigenous and Indigenous homeless people, as demonstrated in Figure 1 below. About half of homeless non-Indigenous live in Perth (5,194) while the other half are located in smaller concentrations ranging from 15% (1,555) in the Kimberley to 5% (497) in the South Eastern.

With regard to Indigenous homeless people, on the other hand, just over a third are located in Perth (443), with two thirds located in regional areas. 17% (180) are located in the Central region (which includes Kalgoorlie) and 17% (178) are in the Kimberley.



Homelessness Responses

The Report also reveals some serious structural problems with Western Australia's main program aimed at addressing homelessness the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP). These include:

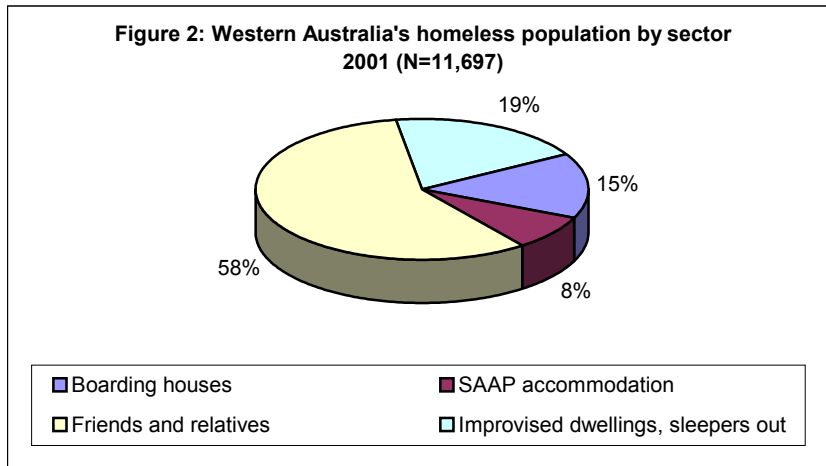
Limited supply: The SAAP is only scratching the surface of our homelessness problem. Figure 1 reveals that 58% of homeless people are staying with friends and relatives on a temporary basis, 19% in improvised dwellings or sleeping rough, 15% in boarding houses and finally, 8% in SAAP services.

Geographic mismatch: Early intervention is an affective way of short-circuiting homelessness, ensuring that temporary episodes aren't allowed to develop into chronic homelessness. The correct location of homelessness services is critical to affective early intervention, as highlighted by the authors:

"There were 945 people accommodated in SAAP in WA [on Census night 2001], and one-third (33 per cent) were in Central Perth. Yet most people become homeless in outer suburbs, regional centers and country towns. The provision of early intervention services in these areas assists people in the early stages of homelessness, including those at risk, and reduces the move to the inner city".

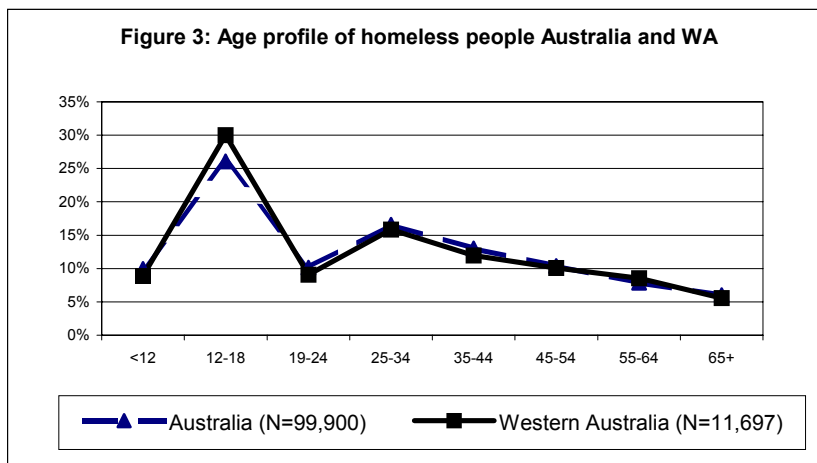
Length of homelessness: The shorter the period of time people experience homelessness the more effective the invention will be. The Report's finding that two

thirds of SAAP clients remain homeless for more than six months (exceeding the chronic homelessness threshold) is therefore alarming. Rather than take resources away from the most disadvantaged, the authors stress the need for additional resources and that these should be directed toward early intervention.



Age Profile of the Homeless

Perhaps one of the most disturbing aspects of Chamberlain and MacKenzie's findings is the age of the people experiencing homelessness. Figure 3 below provides an age comparison between the homeless in Western Australia and Australia. Children account for over a third of the homeless, with 9% (1,040) aged under 12 years and 30% (3,508) are between 12 and 18 years and finally 48% (5,610) are under 25 years. This confirms the findings of Shelter WA's series of surveys on homelessness.



Conclusion

Counting the Homeless 2001: Western Australia shows that a significant proportion of the state's population is denied the basic human right of housing. The SAAP is currently being redesigned to make it responsive to the needs of homeless the population, and clearly it needs to increase its focus on early intervention and to address the geographic inequities of the program. However, SAAP alone cannot resolve homelessness. Significant investment in social housing is also required, so that the people experiencing homelessness can establish themselves in independent housing before crossing the line into chronic homelessness. *Counting the Homeless 2001: Western Australia* is available at: www.countingthehomeless.com.au/