



Address: 33 Moore St, East Perth, WA 6004  
Phone: (08) 9325 6660  
Fax: (08) 9325 8113  
Email: [shelterwa@shelterwa.org.au](mailto:shelterwa@shelterwa.org.au)  
Website: [www.shelterwa.org.au](http://www.shelterwa.org.au)

## **A Profile of Households Experiencing Homelessness in Western Australia**

### **Survey 6**

Prepared by:  
Jim Anthony  
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# Introduction

*A home is 'where I feel secure, and have control over my environment'. A home is 'where I can relax...where people are not telling you what to do...'<sup>1</sup>*

This report is part of a project called *A Profile of Households Experiencing Homeless in Western Australia (Profile)*, which has been running since early 2001. The project aims to provide a series of snapshots highlighting changes in the nature of homelessness in WA. *Profile* focuses on the needs and composition of the State's homeless population.

As part of *Profile*, Shelter WA has conducted regular surveys aimed at identifying the nature of homelessness in Western Australia. The current study details the findings of Survey 6 in this series; reports on previous surveys are still available from [www.shelterwa.org.au](http://www.shelterwa.org.au).

Shelter WA released an overview report of developments in homelessness over the last three years in December 2004. Named *No Place Like Home: Homelessness in Western Australia*, this report summarised the findings of Surveys 1 through 5, and highlighted trends and developments in this area. It is available from [www.shelterwa.org.au/publications.htm](http://www.shelterwa.org.au/publications.htm).

## Methodology

For Survey 6 of *Shelter WA: Counting the Homeless*, surveys and information packages were distributed to 304 community agencies in February 2005.

Participating agencies were asked to complete 1 survey form for each homeless household requesting accommodation assistance but not housed on the night of Tuesday 8 March 2005. Agency workers completed the surveys on behalf of the household requesting assistance.

Completed surveys were returned to Shelter WA by participating agencies via fax or

post. 104 surveys were completed with information on 146 homeless people. 18 of the surveys were completed by agencies that participated in the research but did not receive any requests for assistance.

The response rate was 40%. This response rate was the highest figure for all the surveys completed to date. This was partly due to the participation of a new agency in the project from the Kimberley region of WA. This region has a significant population of Indigenous households.

The survey form contained 10 questions, which collected information on:

- ▶ Method of contact;
- ▶ Type of assistance requested;
- ▶ Urgency of request;
- ▶ Type of accommodation required;
- ▶ Household type making request;
- ▶ Age and sex of household members;
- ▶ Type of accommodation utilised on the previous night
- ▶ Who the household stayed with on the previous night;
- ▶ Combined household income; and
- ▶ The household's cultural background.

## Definition of Homelessness

There are several different definitions of homelessness. For the purpose of this survey, participants were asked to apply the Australian Bureau of Statistics' definition of homelessness. The definition describes 3 levels of homelessness that 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.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Neil et al, 1994. *Homelessness in Australia: Causes and Consequences*. AHURI, Melbourne.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999. *Census of Population & Housing: Counting the Homeless, 1999*, Occasional Paper 2041.0, ABS, Canberra.

# Results: Survey 6

## Method Used to Contact Agency

Respondents were asked to identify the method used by households requesting accommodation assistance.

The proportion of households that made contact by telephone in Survey 6 mirrored the previous five surveys with just under half contacting by phone and around a third presenting at the agency in person. However, the proportion of requests made by a third party did show a significant increase, up from 11% in March 2004, to 22% in March 2005.

## Housing and Support Needs

Respondents were asked to identify the type of service households approached their agency to provide. Survey 6 identified a significant decrease in the proportion of households that required both housing and support. Demand for crisis/short-term accommodation accounted for two thirds of requests across all the previous five surveys; however this figure reduced to less than one third in Survey 6.

In contrast, there was an increase in the proportion of households that required housing only, up from 1 in 4 in *Profile 5*, to greater than 1 in every two households in *Profile 6*. Homeless households requesting accommodation only, varied widely across all the six surveys with a high of just over two thirds to a low of one quarter.

## Urgency of Request for Assistance

Respondents were asked to rate the level of urgency of the request for assistance. Survey 6 data indicates that 9 out of 10 households required assistance within 24 hours. This figure is considerably higher than that quantified in Survey's 1 through to 4. In these surveys households requiring accommodation within 24 hours accounted for two thirds of the requests.

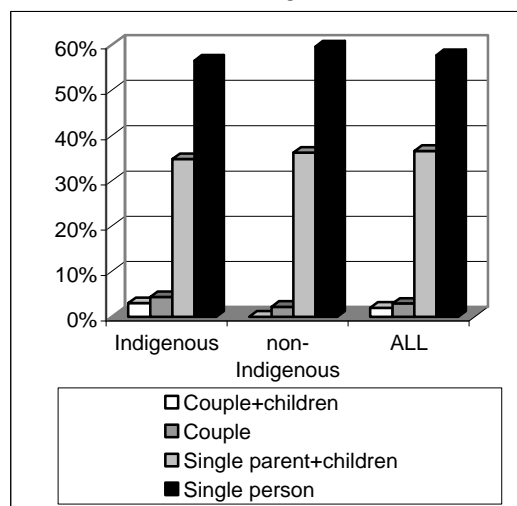
## Type of Housing Required

Respondents were asked to identify the type of housing assistance required. Demand for crisis/short-term accommodation increased from 2 out of 3 in Survey 5, to 4 out of 5 in Survey 6. Only a small proportion of households required long-term accommodation in Survey 6. The previous five surveys registered requests for long-term rental [community, public & private housing], ranging from one tenth to one third of total requests.

## Homeless by Household Type and Size

Survey 6 participants were asked to identify households by household type. Figure 1 highlights that single parents with children represent over one third of all households. Homeless single parents with children have remained fairly constant in numbers throughout all the surveys, fluctuating between one quarter and one third of homeless households.

**Figure 1:** Homeless households by type, size and cultural background.



**Source:** SWA Counting the Homeless Survey [March 2005]

Single parents with children accounted for more than half of the Indigenous households in Survey 5, but declined to just over 1 in 3 households in Survey 6. At the same time the number of single indigenous persons showed a marked increase, up from one third in Survey 5 to two thirds in Survey 6.

Figure 1 reveals that singles make up approximately two thirds of the homeless households counted. The high number of homeless singles and single parents with children has been a common feature of the annual surveys since their inception in June 2001.

Households in Survey 6 ranged in size from 1 to 7 people and included 30 families with between 1 and 5 children. Table 1 demonstrates the median number of people by household type.

**Table 1:** Homeless household types by median number of persons and size, March 2005.

Household type	Median size	Range
Couple + children	3	3-3 <sup>3</sup>
Couple only	2	2-2
Single parent + children	2	2-7
Single person	1	1-1

Source: SWA: Counting the Homeless (March 2005)

## Homeless People by Age

Homelessness amongst children under the age of 14 years remains one of the most disturbing findings of the surveys. Respondents provided details on 179 homeless people [78 Indigenous and 101 non-Indigenous].

In Survey 5, children accounted for about a third of homeless people. Survey 6 correlated with these figures, but showed a slight decrease in the percentage of Indigenous children registered as homeless compared to Survey 5, declining from half of all homeless Indigenous persons, to just over 1 in 3.

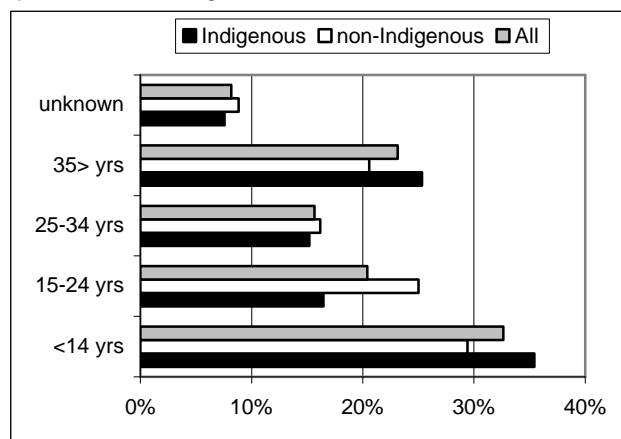
<sup>3</sup> Two couples with children were registered as part of *Profile 6*. The first couple had one child, while the other couple did not provide details on the number of children to the responding agency.

Figure 2 highlights that persons aged over 35 represent the second largest group of homeless Indigenous persons. In the previous survey this age group accounted for less than 5% of Indigenous homelessness. These new figures are possibly due to the participation of a new agency in this survey from the East Kimberley region of WA, which has a considerable Indigenous population

Homeless persons aged less than 14 years has been a defining feature of all the surveys carried out to date. The proportion of homelessness for this age group has remained consistent throughout the surveys [approximately one third]. In addition, Indigenous children aged less than 14 years have represented between one third and one half of all homeless Indigenous persons participating in the surveys.

For non-Indigenous persons, Figure 2 highlights that the largest homeless group in *Profile 6* were situated in the 15 to 24 years age cohort. This has been a constant feature of non-Indigenous homeless households. They have consistently accounted for between one in three and one in five of all Indigenous households in the surveys.

**Figure 2:** Age profile of homeless persons by cultural background March 2005.



Source: SWA Counting the Homeless Survey [March 2005]

## Degrees of Homelessness

The survey participants were asked to identify the type of accommodation utilised by the household on the night before the survey date. In Survey 5 approximately 1 in 10 households were grouped in the primary homeless category, with two thirds classified as secondary homeless. In the previous five surveys the proportion of persons registering as primary homeless remained constant at around one fifth of all households.

A significant difference between Survey 5 and Survey 6 is that over one third of the respondents in *Profile 6* registered as primary homeless, with households categorised as secondary homelessness amounting to just under one in three. The growth in primary homelessness in Survey 6 is significant and may be related to Indigenous households responding to a new homeless provider, from the Kimberley region of WA.

## Who did the Homeless Stay With?

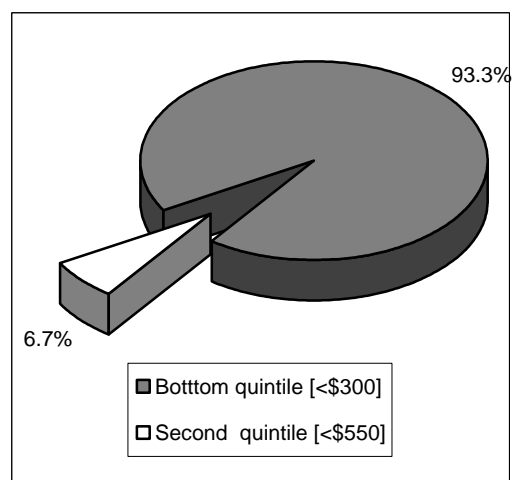
Respondents were asked to identify whom the household stayed with on the night prior to the survey. Survey 6 figures mirror Survey 5, with slightly less than a quarter of households living temporarily with friends or relatives and over a third living alone.

*Profile 6* identified an interesting divergence to *Profile 5* data in relation to Indigenous homelessness. For example, only one in ten Indigenous households were identified as living alone in Survey 5, but one in two Indigenous households showed up in Survey 6 as living alone. In all the other surveys completed, more than half of Indigenous households stayed with friends or relatives, prior to the night of the survey. In this respect the cultural differences in this survey were not as stark as previous surveys, with approximately one third of non-Indigenous households identified as living alone.

## Household Incomes of the Homelessness

Respondents were asked to record the gross weekly income of homeless households requesting assistance. The findings in Survey 6 matched those of Survey 5 in the following areas. Of the households whose weekly income was known, 9 out of 10 households fell within the lowest income quintile, i.e. their total household income was less than \$300 per week. Less than 1 in 10 of these households had incomes within the second income quintile bracket of between \$408 and \$550 per week. However, the median income for households in Survey 5 was \$276 per week, whereas in Survey 6, two thirds of the respondents submitted markedly lower incomes of \$100 to \$199.

**Figure 3:** Income of homeless households requesting assistance March 2005



**Source:** SWA Counting the Homeless Survey [March 2005]; ABS [2005]<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005. 1998-1999 Government Benefits, Taxes and Household Income, Cat. No. 6537.0, ABS, Canberra.

## Access to Rental Housing

Table 2 highlights that the median weekly income of the majority of households in Survey 6 is \$169. The median priced rental housing, based on a two bedroom unit in Perth, is \$170. Based on these figures all the households in this survey would be unable to afford private rental. The majority of respondents would also be seen to be suffering from housing stress.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 2:** Proportion of homeless household's income required to rent median priced private rental housing.

	Median Wkly Income.	Median Wkly Rent Perth	Rent as % of income	Year
Households	\$ 169	\$ 170	101%	Mar-05

**Source:** SWA Counting the Homeless Survey (March 2004, March 2005) & REIWA Property Market Indicators March Quarter 2004 and March Quarter 2005.<sup>6</sup>

The high proportion of rent as a percentage of income highlighted in Table 2 could also be partly explained by the fact that most of the respondents in Survey 6 were single persons, situated in the lowest income quintile [less than \$300].

<sup>5</sup> The National Housing Strategy [1992] stated that those in the lowest two income quintiles, who spent more than 30% of their income on housing, can be said to be suffering from housing stress [[ABS CAT. No. 4102.0].

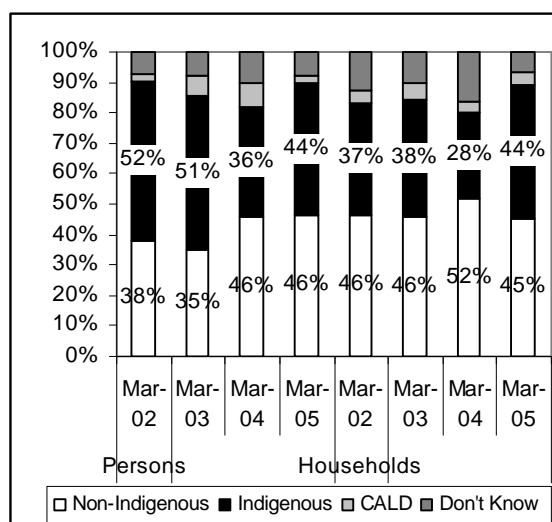
<sup>6</sup> The majority of the homeless households were single persons; as a result the survey used the median private rental price for a two bedroom unit in Perth. It should be noted that the median private rental price for Perth in general was \$169

## Cultural Background

Respondents were asked to identify the cultural background of people requesting housing assistance.

Figure 4 indicates that Indigenous persons continue to be over represented amongst homeless people. In all six *Profile* surveys, Indigenous people have accounted for more than a third of persons and more than a quarter of households. Non-Indigenous households account for around 4 out of 10 persons and half the homeless households.

**Figure 4:** Cultural background of homeless persons and households March 2001 through to March 2005



**Source:** SWA Counting the Homeless Survey [March 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005].

## Key Findings

- ▶ In regards to methods used to contact the agency, Survey 6 mirrored the previous five surveys with just under half-contacting by phone and a third presenting at the agency in person.
- ▶ A significant decrease in the proportion of households that required both housing and support, reducing from over two thirds in Survey 5 to less than one in three in Survey 6. There was a corresponding increase in housing only requests, up from 1 in 4 in Survey 5 to greater than 1 in every 2 households in Survey 6.
- ▶ Nearly all the respondents [90%] required assistance within 24 hours, with a similar amount requiring crisis/short-term accommodation
- ▶ Single parents represented around 1 in 3 households in Survey 6. Homeless single parents with children have remained a constant feature throughout all the surveys, and their numbers have remained fairly consistent, ranging between one quarter and one third.
- ▶ Children aged 14 years and below have represented around one third of homeless people in all six surveys conducted since 2001. These children also formed part of all the households participating in the survey
- ▶ Over 1 in 3 Indigenous homeless persons were aged over 35.
- ▶ In all six *Profiles* Indigenous people accounted for more than a third of homeless persons and more than a quarter of homeless households
- ▶ In the previous five surveys, around two thirds of households fell in the category 'secondary homeless' [people who move frequently from one form of temporary shelter to another]. In Survey 6, there was a disturbing divergence from this trend with nearly half of the respondents registering as 'primary homeless' [people without conventional accommodation].
- ▶ A quarter of all households stayed with friends or relatives on a temporary basis on the night prior to the survey, whilst just over a third registered as living alone.
- ▶ A considerable increase in Indigenous households identified as living alone; up from one in ten in Survey 5 to one in two Indigenous households in Survey 6.
- ▶ Low income continues to be a principal feature of the homeless population, with around 90% falling within the bottom quintile of incomes.
- ▶ All the households in Survey 6 showed a significant reduction in median weekly incomes compared to Survey 5, down from \$276 to \$169. All households in Survey 6 pay all their income on rental payments
- ▶ Affordability continues as a major barrier to homeless households accessing rental housing.

## Analysis

In analysing the results of *Profile 6*, it needs to be recognised that the survey did not achieve a 100% response rate, and that the sample by no means covered all service providers in the State. Caution should therefore be exercised when interpreting the results.

Nevertheless, *Profile 6* has yielded some interesting new developments worthy of analysis. This section discusses some of the key homeless issues in more detail makes recommendations that Shelter WA believe, if implemented, will reduce the rate of homelessness in Western Australia.

### Housing and Support Needs

One of the key findings in Survey 6 was the significant reduction in demand for accommodation and support services compared to Survey 5. This survey had a comparatively high proportion of single Indigenous household's and this may be impacting on the type of service demanded. For example, the decline in demand for accommodation and support services was met with a corresponding increase in the demand for housing only [approximately one in every two households in *Profile 6* compared to 1 in 4 in *Profile 5*].

It is insightful to compare this small survey with the results from a much larger survey of homeless persons undertaken by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare in Western Australia in 2003-2004.<sup>7</sup> This larger survey supports the suggestion that changes in household composition may affect the level of demand for accommodation only or accommodation plus support. The AIHW research project found that a significant number of SAAP users were single homeless persons, most of whom indicated accommodation as the only service required.

<sup>7</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2004. *Homeless People in SAAP: Annual Report 2003-04*, AIHW, Canberra

## Homeless by Household Type and Size

Perhaps one of the most interesting developments to emerge out of Survey 6 was the high proportion of single person Indigenous households. Up from one third in Survey 5 to nearly two-thirds in Survey 6. The main reason for this increase appears to be related to the location of a new agency involved in this survey, based in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia. This agency registered a significant increase in demand for accommodation and support, coming from single Indigenous households. It is also important to note the East Kimberley region of WA has a much higher population of Indigenous households, compared to some other regions in Western Australia

### Degrees of Homelessness

For the first time in the 3 years that this project has been in operation, the proportion of households categorised as primary homelessness was greater than the proportion of households categorised as secondary homelessness.

The consistently high proportion of single non-Indigenous participants in all the surveys to date also implies there are some long-term homeless trends, by household type, that need some policy attention. Non-Indigenous and Indigenous single households make up the major proportion of survey participants in Survey 6, [approximately two thirds]. From this it is reasonable to assume that these relatively high figures may have more longer lasting social effects on this large group of lone households, for example household isolation. Culminating, in less opportunity for regular contact with friends and family and limited choices for alternative accommodation.

It is worth noting that the high proportion of primary homelessness in Survey 6 does not match the degrees of homelessness in all the other surveys completed. As a result, further data is necessary to ascertain the significance of primary homelessness in WA.

## Geographical locations of Homelessness

One in every two Indigenous households participating in Survey 6 was from Kununurra which is situated in the East Kimberley region of WA. All of those respondents were single male and female households.

This is a significant regional cluster of Indigenous homelessness, which clearly demands further examination. For that reason alone, it is worth comparing Survey 6 data with the more comprehensive overview of homelessness undertaken by Chamberlain and Mackenzie in WA in 2001. Their survey revealed that the Kimberley, located in WA's most northern region, had the States highest homelessness rate at 555 per 10,000, more than 13 times the rate for Perth. Significantly the East Kimberley location recorded the highest sub-regional homeless rate at 772 people per 10,000.

## Solutions to Homelessness

Homeless households participating in this project varied in terms of family composition and cultural backgrounds. This suggests that they require a variety of housing assistance and SAAP services to match their different needs. This also indicates that housing policy in WA should take account of the apparent need for integration and linkages between housing services. The development of exit point strategies may improve the opportunity for households to better match their needs to housing assistance programmes.

For young people of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural background in the age bracket [15-24], an increase in the amount of transitional housing could help reduce the persistently high proportion of young homeless person's aged less than 24.

An increase in transitional housing stock and services could also help alleviate the homeless trends of single Indigenous and non-Indigenous parents with children.

Expanding the provision of transitional housing and support services could help to combat one of the key findings of all the homeless surveys to date. That is the high proportion of homeless Indigenous households accompanied with children aged less than 14 years.

In addition to increasing the supply of transitional housing, improving affordable housing strategies could enable some households to break the cycle of homelessness and tenure insecurity. However, given that most of the homeless households in the surveys have registered with incomes in the lowest quintiles, it is difficult to see affordable housing strategies or private rental as a viable tenure option.

Addressing homelessness requires both the provision of support services and accommodation options. It is clear both require significant increases in Government funding. While it is beyond the scope of *Profile* to produce exact costings, previous work by Shelter WA suggests that there is a shortage of funding in the order of tens of millions of dollars per year for support services, and hundreds of millions of dollars per year to build affordable housing.<sup>8</sup>

## Recommendations

By and large, the findings of Survey 6 confirm the issues presented in Shelter WA's *No Place Like Home* report, which was released in late 2004. In particular, Shelter WA repeats two of the recommendations made in that report:

1. Increase funding under the CSHA for the provision of social housing: Social housing to be increased to a target of 6% of all housing in WA.
2. Increase the capacity of SAAP by 50% and provide services in areas where the need is located: SAAP to achieve a target of accommodating 12% of the States homeless population.

<sup>8</sup> See Karel Eringa, *The State of Affordable Housing in WA*, Shelter WA Occasional Paper 2003-2, August 2003