



Providing a Voice for Housing Consumers

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A Profile of Households Experiencing Homelessness in Western Australia

Survey 5

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Introduction

The objective of Shelter is to implement programmes, develop policy, and provide education directed towards the elimination of homelessness and housing related poverty

Shelter WA Constitution August 1990

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 5 in this series; reports on previous surveys are still available from www.shelterwa.org.au.

In the next few months, Shelter WA hopes to release an overview report of developments in homelessness over the last three years. This report will summarise the findings of all five surveys, and highlight trends and developments in this area.

Methodology

For Survey 5, *Shelter WA: Counting the Homeless* surveys and information packages were distributed to 304 community agencies in February 2004.

Participating agencies were asked to complete 1 survey form only for each homeless household requesting accommodation assistance but not housed on the night of Tuesday 2 March 2004. 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. 115 surveys were completed, including 16 by agencies that participated in

the research but did not receive any requests for assistance. The response rate was 38%.

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's 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.¹

In this report, the term 'household' refers to households coming within the ABS definition of homelessness.

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

Results: Survey 5

Method Used to Contact Agency

Respondents were asked to identify the method used by households requesting accommodation assistance. There was an increase in the proportion of households that made contact by telephone, from 34% in Survey 4 (February 2003) to 55% in Survey 5 (March 2004).

There was a corresponding fall in the proportion of households that made contact in person, from 41% in Survey 4 to 34% in Survey 5. The proportion of requests made by a third party also declined, from 25% in February 2003 to 11% in March 2004.

Housing and Support Needs

Respondents were asked to identify the type of service households approached their agency to provide. Survey 5 identified an increase in the proportion of households that required both housing and support, which rose from 51% in Survey 4 required to 67% in Survey 5.

There was a corresponding fall in the proportion of households that required housing only, from 42% in February 2003 to 26% in March 2004.

Urgency of Request for Assistance

Respondents were asked to rate the level of urgency of the request for assistance. Survey 5 data indicates that 72% of households required assistance within 24 hours, up from 68% in Survey 4. A further 9% of homeless households in Survey 5 required assistance within 14 days.

Type of Housing Required

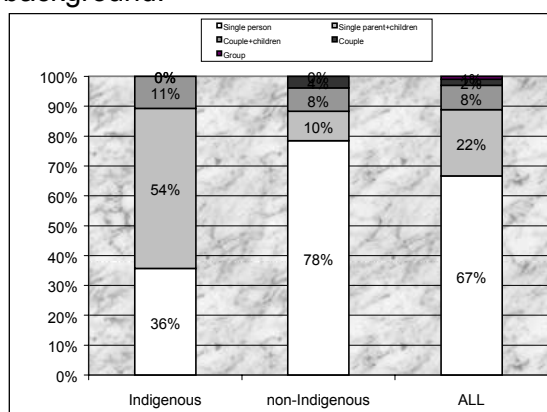
Respondents were asked to identify the type of housing assistance required. Demand for crisis / short-term accommodation remained around the 60% mark (59% in Survey 4 compared to 63% in Survey 5). 32% of households in Survey 5 required long-term rental (community, public & private).

Homeless by Household Type and Size

Respondents were asked to identify households by household type. Survey 5 data indicate that single parents with children continue to represent around 1 in 5 households.

Interestingly, this family type accounted for more than half of the Indigenous households in Survey 5, but only for around 1 in 10 non-Indigenous households. Another difference is that nearly 80% of non-Indigenous homeless households in Survey 5 were single persons, while this group only accounted for just over one third of Indigenous households.

Figure 1: Household type by cultural background.



Households in Survey 5 ranged in size from 1 to 6 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 2004.

Household type	Median size	Range
Couple + children	4	3-6
Couple only	2	2-2
Single parent + children	3	2-6
Single person	1	1-1

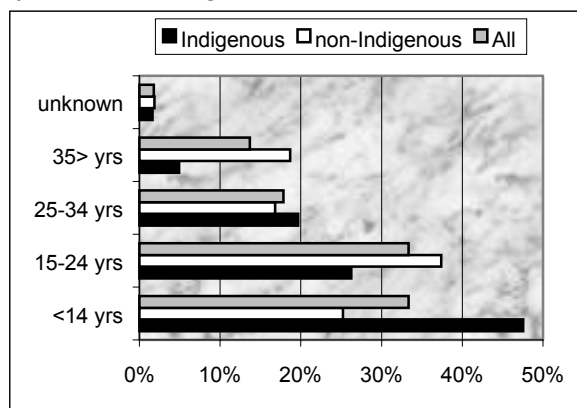
Source: SWA: Counting the Homeless (March 2004)

Homeless People by Age

Homelessness amongst children under the age of 14 years remains one of the most disturbing findings of *Profile*. Respondents provided details on 168 homeless people (61 Indigenous and 107 non-Indigenous).

In Survey 5, children accounted for about a third of the homeless people. Figure 2 demonstrates that the findings for Indigenous children are even worse, as children constitute nearly half of all homeless Indigenous persons. For non-Indigenous persons the largest age grouping was 15 to 24 year olds, which accounted for about a third of non-Indigenous homeless people in the survey.

Figure 2: Age profile of homeless persons by cultural background March 2004.



Source: SWA: Counting the Homeless (March 2004)

Degrees of Homelessness

Respondents were asked to identify the type of accommodation utilised by the household on the night before the survey date. Survey 5 indicates that 1 in 10 came within the definition of primary homeless, and two thirds were secondary homeless.

Who did the Homeless Stay With?

Respondents were asked to identify whom the household stayed with on the night prior to the survey. A quarter of households stayed temporarily with friends or relatives and a third stayed alone.

This question identified significant cultural differences. More than a half of Indigenous households in Survey 5 stayed with friends or relatives, compared to about one in ten for non-Indigenous. In addition, a third of non-Indigenous households stayed alone, compared to less than one in ten Indigenous households in the survey.

Household Incomes of the Homelessness

Respondents were asked to record the gross weekly income of homeless households requesting assistance. Of the households whose weekly income was known, 9 out of 10 households fell within the bottom quintile of income, ie. their total household income was less than \$408 per week.

Just under 1 out of 10 had incomes within the second quintile of incomes (between \$408 and \$576 per week). The median income for households in this survey was \$276 per week.

Access to Rental Housing

Table 2 indicates that homeless households in Survey 5 needed to spend 60% of their income to access a median priced rental housing in Perth (\$165 in March 2004). This is double the generally accepted benchmark for housing stress of 30% of income.²

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
All households	\$276	\$165	60%

Source: SWA Counting the Homeless Survey (March 2004) & REIWA Property Market Indicators March Quarter 2004.³

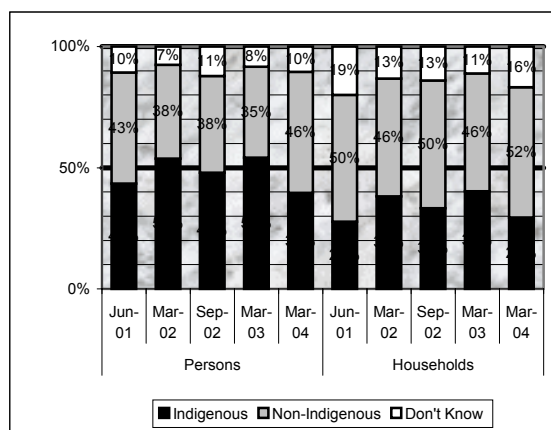
² The National Housing Strategy (1992) stated that those in the lowest two income quintiles who spent more than 30% of their income on housing, can be said to be suffering from housing stress (ABS CAT. No. 4102.0).

Cultural Background

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

Figure 3 indicates that Indigenous persons continue to be over represented amongst homeless people. In all five Profile surveys, Indigenous people have represented more than a third of person and more than a quarter of households. Non-Indigenous households account for around 4 out of 10 persons and half the homeless households.

Figure 3: Cultural background of homeless persons and households June 2001 and March 2004.



Source: SWA Counting the Homeless Survey (June 2001, March 2002, Sep 2002, February 2003 and March 2004).

Key Findings

- ▶ More than half of homeless households in the survey requested assistance by telephone; just over one third contacted the agency in person.
- ▶ Over two thirds of households required accommodation within 24 hours and eight out of ten required accommodation within 14 days.
- ▶ More than half of Indigenous households in Survey 5 were single parents with children
- ▶ Nearly 80% of non-Indigenous households in Survey 5 were single persons
- ▶ Children aged 14 years and below have represented around one third of homeless people in all five surveys conducted since 2001.
- ▶ As has been the case throughout the 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).
- ▶ Households that stayed with friends or relatives on a temporary basis were predominately Indigenous, whilst households that stayed alone were mainly non-Indigenous.
- ▶ Low income continues to be a principal feature of the homeless population, with around 90% falling within the bottom quintile of incomes.
- ▶ Affordability continues as a major barrier to homeless households accessing rental housing.