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A Profile of Households Experiencing Homelessness in Western Australia

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Introduction

Homelessness is an issue of growing concern within the Western Australian community. The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated that there were 12,000 Western Australians homeless on Census night 1996. In response to growing pressure for a response to homelessness, the Department of Housing and Works established the Homelessness Helpline in May 2001. This service received 459 calls in its first 2 months of operation.

Rather than trying to place a definitive figure on the number of homeless, this report provides **a Profile of Households Experiencing Homeless in Western Australia**. The information contained in this report is primarily based on the results of **Shelter WA: Counting the Homeless survey** undertaken in June 2001. The aims of the survey were to further develop Shelter WA's: knowledge of homelessness; inform its policy development work; and resourcing of agencies concerned about homelessness.

Method

Shelter WA: Counting the Homeless surveys and information packages were distributed to 320 community, local government and state government service providers including: financial counsellors; community legal centres; disability service providers; Aboriginal corporations; and supported accommodation providers.

Participating agencies were asked to complete 1 survey form for each homeless household requesting accommodation assistance on **Tuesday 19 June 2001**.

NB: Due to a problem with the mailing list some agencies dealing with homeless people were not included in this research. However, Shelter WA is planing on running this survey again in

Summer 2002 with an improved mailing list.

Completed surveys were returned to Shelter WA either by fax or post.

74 surveys were returned including: 6 by agencies who participated but received no request for assistance; and 68 completed forms providing information on homeless households who requested accommodation assistance.

Agency workers completed the surveys on behalf of the homeless household. The surveys contained 10 questions designed to collect information on:

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

Definition of Homelessness

There are several different definitions of homelessness. For the purpose of the survey, participants were asked to apply the Australian Bureau of Statistic's definition of homelessness. This definition describes 3 levels of homelessness and includes:

- θ **Primary homelessness:** people without conventional accommodation;
- θ **Secondary homelessness:** people who move frequently from one form of temporary shelter to another; and,
- θ **Tertiary homelessness:** People who live in boarding houses on a medium to long-term basis (ABS Cat. No. 2041.0).

Survey Results: Profile of Households Experiencing Homelessness

About Participating Agencies

Surveys were completed and returned by 33 agencies, a response rate of 10.3%.

63% of participating agencies provided services funded under the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP). The remaining 37% of participating agencies provided services including: women's health; financial counselling; disability support, information and advocacy; community support; and financial assistance. Further information is detailed under participating agencies.

66% of participating agencies were from the Perth Metro Area and 33% from Rural WA. 54% of Rural agencies were funded under SAAP compared to 64% from the Perth Metro.

Of the non-SAAP agencies in Rural WA, financial counsellors had most contact with homeless households. By contrast, in the Metro area there was a broader range of non-SAAP agencies including: community support, information and counselling services; disability support services; financial counsellors; and legal information services (participating agencies are listed in Appendix I)

Method Used to Contact Agency

Respondents were asked to identify the method used by homeless households to request accommodation assistance. 38% of homeless households made contact with the agency in person and 38% made

contact by phone. 16% of requests were made by a third party. (More details Table 3)

Housing and Support Needs

Respondents were asked to identify the type of service homeless households approached their agency to provide. 34% of homeless households required access to housing only and 60% required both housing and support. (More details Table 4)

Urgency of Request for Assistance

Respondents were asked to rate the level of urgency of the request for assistance by identifying how soon housing is required. 45% of homeless households required housing within 24 hours, 27% within 7 days and 24% within 14 days. (More details Table 5)

Type of Housing Required

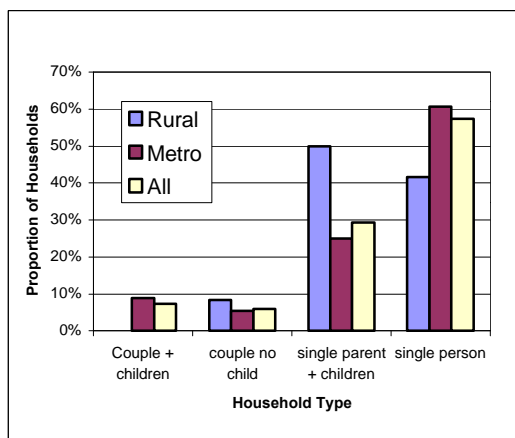
Respondents were asked to identify the type of housing assistance required. 55% of homeless households required short-term supported accommodation. While 31% required medium to long accommodation and 15% required access to independent public or private rental. (More details Table 6)

Homeless by Household Type and Size

Respondents were asked to identify homeless households by household type. Overall, 57% were single person households, 29% single parents with children and a further 7% couples with children.

Figure 1 demonstrates marked differences between the profile of rural and metro homeless households, with single parent families accounting for 50% and singles 40% of homeless households in rural areas. This compares to single parent families 25% and single persons 61% in the Perth metro.
(More details Table 7)

Figure 1: Proportion of homeless households by household type and location.



NB: No surveys were completed on couples + children in Rural WA.

Homeless households ranged in size from 1 to 7 people including families with as many as 6 children. Table 1 provides the median number of people by household type.

Table 1: Homeless household types by median number of persons and range.

Household type	Median size	Range
Couple + children	4	3-7
Couple only	2	2-2
Single parent + children	3	2-7
Single person	1	1-1

Homeless People by Age

Respondents provided details on 68 households, which included 138 homeless people. Perhaps the most disturbing outcome of this report is that 33% of homeless people were children under the age of 14 years. A further 34% were aged between 15 and 24 years, 12% between 25 and 34 years and 9% 35 years or over.
(More details Table 8)

Degrees of Homelessness

Respondents were asked to identify the type of accommodation utilised by the homeless household on the night before the survey date. 13% came within the definition of primary homelessness, 59% secondary and 7% tertiary (21% were undefined).
(More details Table 9)

Who did the Homeless Stay With?

Respondents were asked to identify who the household stayed with on the night prior to the survey. 35% of homeless households stayed temporarily with friends or relatives, 28% were alone and 21% stayed with unrelated persons.
(More details Table 10)

Household Incomes of the Homelessness

Respondents were asked to record the gross weekly income of homeless households requesting assistance. 73% of households fell within the bottom quintile of income (\$408 per week in July 2000) and all households whose weekly income was known came within the bottom 30% of incomes (\$576 p.w. July 2000).

Access to Rental Housing

The proportion of income required to access median priced rental housing in Perth for homeless households ranges between 41% and 71%. This clearly exceeds the NHS housing stress benchmark (See Table 2).

Table 2: Proportion of homeless households income required to rent median priced private rental housing.

	Ave wkly income	No. Rms	Median Wkly Rent Perth	Rent as % of income
Couple + children	339	3	164	48%
Couple only	299	2	137	46%
single parent + children	399	3	164	41%
single person	192	2	137	71%

Source: Counting the Homeless Survey; Social Housing Occupancy Standard & West Australian 25 July 2001, Median Rents Perth June 2000.

NB: Family housing based on 3 bed single detached and couple and single based on 2 bed flat.

(More details Table 11)

Cultural Background of the Homeless

Respondents were asked to identify the cultural background homeless people requesting assistance. 41% were Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders, 10 times their representation in the general community. 43% were Australian born and 5% had a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background.

(More details Table 12)

Additional Information: Homelessness Helpline

In May 2001 the Department of Housing and Works established a telephone service called the **Homelessness Helpline**. Between 1 May and 27 June the Hotline provided services to 408 homeless households. 33% of these households were experiencing primary homelessness and 67% either secondary homelessness.

Assistance Provided by Helpline Staff

234 households were advised to apply for Bond Assistance Loans. Of these 12% were issued with loans, 27% had applications that were still outstanding and 60% had not lodged their loan application at the time of writing.

The Hotline has housed 103 households in rental accommodation. 76% of these were housed by Homeswest and 24% in private rental housing.

Key Findings and Recommendations

One out of three responses were received from services other than those funded under the SAAP.

When undertaking research into homelessness a broad range of agencies should be included, this is particularly the case in rural areas.

As many homeless households made contact with participating agencies in person as by phone.

Telephone helplines such as the Homelessness Helpline will be able to significantly increase access to their service by offering a shop front service.

60% of homeless households require support services as well as housing.

The provision of housing to homeless households must also include an assessment of the need for support services to be provided.

45% of homeless households required assistance within 24 hrs and 46% within 14 days.

Any assessment of the system of provision to homeless households must include an assessment of the balance between emergency and medium/long-term housing options.

61% of homeless households in the Perth Metro were singles and 25% single parents with children. Singles accounted for 40% of homeless households and single parents with children 50% in rural areas.

Responses to homelessness in Western Australia must consider the different needs of the metro and rural areas.

Median household sizes for homeless households ranged from 1 to 4 people.

Housing directed toward homeless households must take into consideration the number of people per household.

33% of homeless people are children under the age of 14 years.

The right of children to safe, secure and appropriate housing must be given top priority in any strategy to address the needs of homeless households.

59% of homeless households are experiencing secondary homelessness which involves households moving frequently from one form of temporary shelter to another.

Responses to secondary homelessness must be treated with equal priority to those of the primary homeless.

73% of homeless households received incomes that placed them in the bottom quintile of incomes and all fell within the bottom 30% of incomes.

Responses to homelessness must also include strategies directed toward reducing poverty.

Homeless households require between 40% and 70% of their gross weekly income to pay private rents, this is well in excess of the NHS 25% housing stress benchmark.

Public rental housing responses are required to ensure the provision of affordable housing to homeless households.

41% of the homeless are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, this figure is 10 times their representation in the general community.

Increased provision of housing for Aboriginal people is urgently required.

Statistical Summary of Results.

Table 3: Proportion of homeless households by method of contact with agency.

in person	38%
by phone	38%
by third party	16%
no requests	8%
Total	100%

Number of Respondents = 74

NB: Responses from participating agencies who received no request for assistance included.

Table 4: Proportion of homeless households by type of assistance requested.

accommodation only	34%
accommodation and support	60%
support only	6%
other/undefined	0%
Total	100%

Number of Respondents = 68

NB: Respondents who received no request for assistance not included.

Table 5: Proportion of homeless households by urgency of request for accommodation assistance.

within 24 hrs	45%
within 7 days	27%
within 14 days	24%
more than 14 days	3%
Total	100%

Number of Respondents = 64

NB: Requests for support only not included.

Table 6: Proportion of homeless households by accommodation type required.

crisis/short-term accommodation	55%
medium/long-term accommodation	31%
community housing	0%
public housing	13%
private rental	2%
other/undefined	0%
Total	100%

Number of Respondents = 64

NB: Requests for "support only" not included.

Table 7: Proportion of homeless households by household type.

Couple with children	7%
Couple no children	6%
Single parent with children	29%
Single person	57%
Group	0%
other/undefined	0%
Total	100%

Number of Respondents = 68

Table 8: Proportion of homeless persons by age and sex.

	Male	Female	All
under 14 years	30%	42%	33%
15 to 24 years	41%	33%	34%
25 to 34 years	10%	16%	12%
35 to 44 years	6%	8%	7%
45 to 54 years	3%	0%	1%
55 to 64 years	0%	0%	0%
65 years plus	2%	2%	1%
don't know	8%	0%	*12%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Number	63	64	138

Number of Respondents = 68

NB: *includes 11 persons whose age and sex were unknown.

Table 9: Proportion of homeless households by type of accommodation on the night before the survey.

a car/ tent/park/street/squat	13%
emergency accommodation/refuge	12%
other supported accommodation	4%
own home owned/being purchased	4%
rented private/public/community	26%
caravan	6%
rooming house/hostel	7%
hotel/motel	0%
institution	6%
other/undefined	21%
Total	100%

Number of Respondents = 68

Table 10: Proportion of homeless households by who they stayed with on the night before the survey.

alone	21%
alone with child(ren)	7%
with parent(s)/ guardian	7%
with foster family	0%
temporarily with friend(s)/ relatives	35%
with spouse/ partner	1%
with spouse partner and child(ren))	1%
living with other unrelated persons	21%
other	6%
Total	100%

Number of Respondents = 68

Table 11: Proportion of homeless households by combined weekly income.

\$0 to 99	10%
\$100 to 199	34%
\$200 to 299	9%
\$300 to 399	19%
\$400 to 499	4%
\$500 plus	0%
nil income	1%
don't know	22%
Total	100%

Number of Respondents = 68

Table 12: Proportion of homeless households by cultural background.

Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander	41%
Culturally & Linguistically Diverse	5%
not ATSI or CALD	43%
don't know	10%
Total	100%

Number of Respondents = 68