

THE GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF HOMELESS PEOPLE

■ **Chris Chamberlain**

The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) is Australia's flagship program to assist homeless people. In 1996-97, it funded just under 1,200 non-government services across the country to provide accommodation and support services for homeless people. The dominant assumption underpinning current funding arrangements is that the homeless population is distributed in the same way as the general population, and funding is allocated on a population pro rata basis. This paper argues that the assumption is incorrect.

There were 105,000 homeless people across the country on census night 1996. However, there were between 40 and 50 homeless people per 10,000 of the population in the four 'Southern States' (New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania). In Western Australia and Queensland, there were between 70 and 80 homeless people per 10,000 of the population. In the Northern Territory, there were 520 per 10,000, mainly due to indigenous people living in improvised dwellings. These findings raise major policy and planning issues for SAAP.

The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) is Australia's flagship program to assist homeless people. It is jointly funded by the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments. The SAAP program funds non-government organisations to provide accommodation and related support services for homeless

people. The recurrent allocation was \$220 million in the 1996-97 financial year, and there were just under 1,200 SAAP services across the country.

It is usually assumed by policy makers that the homeless population is distributed in the same way as the general population, and SAAP funding is

allocated on a population pro rata basis. Table 1 shows that in 1996-97, 59 per cent of people lived in New South Wales and Victoria and those states received 58 per cent of SAAP funding. Similarly, 17 per cent of the population were in South Australia and Western Australia and those states received 18 per cent of SAAP funds. Tasmania, the ACT and the Northern Territory did slightly better than other states, and Queensland did slightly worse. Nonetheless, the dominant assumption underpinning current funding arrangements is that the homeless population is distributed in the same way as the general population. This article argues that this assumption is incorrect.

CONTEXT

The 1996 Census targeted Australia's homeless population with a special enumeration strategy, using the cultural definition of homelessness proposed by Chamberlain and MacKenzie.² This definition identifies three segments in the homeless population:

(1) Primary homelessness: people without conventional accommodation, such as people living on the streets, sleeping in parks, squatting in derelict buildings, or using cars or railway carriages for temporary shelter.

Table 1: Australian population, SAAP agencies and SAAP funding (\$), state and territory comparisons, 1996-97

	Australian population (N=18,300,000)		SAAP agencies (N=1,183)		SAAP funding (recurrent) (\$220 million)	
	%		%		%	
NSW	34	} 59	33	} 60	36	} 58
Vic	25		27		22	
Qld	18	} 17	16	} 15	14	} 18
WA	9		9		9	
SA	8		6		9	
Tas	3	} 6	4	} 9	5	} 10
ACT	2		3		3	
NT	1		2		2	
Total	100		100		100	

Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.¹

(2) Secondary homelessness: people who move frequently from one form of temporary accommodation to another, including: staying in hostels, night shelters, refuges etc; residing temporarily with other households; or staying in boarding houses for short periods of time.
(3) Tertiary homelessness: people who live in boarding houses on a medium to long-term basis.

In practice, it was necessary to operationalise this definition using four census categories: people in boarding houses; individuals staying with other households who report 'no usual address'; people in SAAP accommodation (hostels, refuges, night shelters etc); and those in 'improvised dwellings, tents and sleeping out'. These categories do not correspond exactly with primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness. Men and women staying in boarding houses approximate to the tertiary segment of the population. People staying with other families ('no usual address') and those using SAAP accommodation equate with 'secondary homelessness'. The census category 'improvised dwellings, tents, sleepers out' fits less neatly with primary homelessness. The estimate of homelessness was carried out by Chamberlain³ who found that there were 105,300 homeless people on census night 1996 (Table 2). Nearly half (48,500 people) were staying temporarily with other households; one-fifth (20,600) were in improvised dwellings (including tents and sleepers out); another one-fifth (23,300) were staying in boarding houses; and 12 per cent (12,900 people) were in SAAP accommodation (hostels, refuges etc).

ASSUMPTIONS AND APPROACHES

There is information on the geographical spread of the population for all persons

Table 2 : Number of persons in different sectors of the homeless population, census night 1996 (final figures)

	Enumerated	Estimated	Total	Percentage
Boarding houses	23,299		23,299	22
SAAP accommodation	12,926		12,926	12
Friends and relatives	35,500	13,000	48,500	46
Improvised dwellings, sleepers out	19,579	1,000	20,579	20
Total	91,304	14,000	105,304	100

Source: Chamberlain.⁴

identified using census and SAAP data (91,300 people). However, Chamberlain⁵ estimated that 14,000 people were missed by the census, including 13,000 people staying temporarily with other families, and 1,000 who were 'sleeping rough'. This paper assumes that they were distributed across different states and territories in the same way as other persons identified in similar categories in the census.

There are two ways of approaching the geographical spread of the homeless population. First, there is the actual number of homeless people in different states and territories on census night. Second, one can think about the number of people expressed as a rate per 10,000 of the population. This enables us to compare states and territories of different sizes.

TYPICAL PATTERN: FOUR 'SOUTHERN STATES'

The first pattern (Table 3) is that there were between 40 and 50 homeless people per 10,000 of the population in the four 'Southern States': Victoria (41.0 per 10,000), Tasmania (43.9), South Australia (48.1) and New South Wales (49.4). However, the actual number

was just over 2,000 in Tasmania, but almost 15 times higher in New South Wales (29,600). Similarly, South Australia had just over 6,800 homeless people whereas Victoria had 17,800.

In each state about half of the homeless were staying with other families (Table 4). There were more people in boarding houses in New South Wales and Victoria (29 and 26 per cent respectively), compared with 16 and 19 per cent in Tasmania and South Australia. In all states, only a minority were recorded in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out, although people 'sleeping rough' are more likely to have been missed than

Table 3: Number of homeless people and rate of homelessness per 10,000 of the population in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania

	NSW	Vic	SA	Tas
Number of homeless people	29,608	17,840	6,837	2,014
Rate per 10,000 of the population	49.4	41.0	48.1	43.9

Table 4: Percentage of homeless people in different sectors of the population in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania

	NSW (N=29,608)	Vic (N=17,840)	SA (N=6,837)	Tas (N=2,014)
	%	%	%	%
Boarding house	29	26	19	16
SAAP	11	19	22	19
Friends/relatives	47	48	48	53
Imp. dwelling	13	7	11	12
Total	100	100	100	100

Table 5: Number of homeless people and rate of homelessness per 10,000 of the population in Western Australia and Queensland

	WA	Qld
Number of homeless people	12,252	25,649
Rate per 10,000 of the population	71.5	77.3

other groups.

Finally, in Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania about 20 per cent of homeless people were in SAAP accommodation, but this drops to 11 per cent in New South Wales. This is surprising given that SAAP funding is allocated on a population pro rata basis. On census night, there were 3,371 people accommodated in SAAP in Victoria and there were 3,324 accommodated in New South Wales. However, Victoria received 22 per cent of SAAP funding in 1996-97 whereas New South Wales received 36 per cent (Table 1).

‘GROWTH STATES’: WESTERN AUSTRALIA AND QUEENSLAND

The second pattern is in Western Australia and Queensland. Table 5 shows that there were between 70 and 80 homeless people per 10,000 of the population in both states. There were 25,649 homeless people in Queensland and 12,252 in Western Australia. It is instructive to compare Queensland with Victoria, and Western Australia with South Australia.

The population of Western Australia is slightly larger than the population of South Australia (1.7 million compared with 1.4 million). However, Western Australia had almost twice as many homeless people: 12,250 compared with 6,840 in South Australia. There were more people in boarding houses in WA (1,923 compared with 1,332); more people staying with other families (6,498 versus 3,253); and more people in improvised dwellings (2,461 compared with 734). The only category where South Australia had slightly higher numbers was amongst those accommodated in SAAP: 1,518 versus

Table 6: Percentage of homeless people in different sectors of the population in Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory

	Qld (N=25,649) %	WA (N= 12,252) %	NT (N=9,906) %
Boarding house	23	16	9
SAAP	9	11	2
Friends/relatives	49	53	18
Imp. dwelling	19	20	71
Total	100	100	100

1,370. Both states received nine per cent of SAAP funding in 1996-97 (Table 1), but Western Australia had many more homeless people.

The population of Victoria is significantly larger than Queensland (4.4 million compared with 3.3 million), but Queensland had more homeless people than Victoria (25,650 versus 17,840). There were more people in boarding houses (5,774 compared with 4,557); more people staying with other families (12,665 compared with 8,648); and more people in improvised dwellings (4,946 versus 1,264). The only category where Victoria had higher numbers was amongst those staying in SAAP (3,370 compared to 2,260). This is because Victoria got 22 per cent of SAAP funding in 1996-97 whereas Queensland got 14 per cent (Table 1).

The comparison with New South Wales is instructive. New South Wales had 29,600 homeless people and Queensland had 25,650. New South Wales got 36 per cent of SAAP funding and Queensland got 14 per cent. In Queensland there were 2,260 people in SAAP on census night, whereas in New South Wales there were 3,320.

WORLDS APART: CANBERRA AND THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

The population of the Australian Capital Territory was 297,000 at the 1996 census

and the population of the Northern Territory was 189,000. There were 1,200 home-

less people in the ACT and there were 9,900 in the Northern Territory. The rate in the ACT was 40.3 per 10,000 of the population — similar to the other Southern States. The rate in the Northern Territory was 523.1 per 10,000. This is roughly seven times higher than the rate in Western Australia or Queensland, largely due to Indigenous people living in improvised dwellings in the Territory.⁶

Table 6 compares the percentages in different sectors of the population in Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. The number in improvised dwellings in the Territory is much higher (71 per cent compared with about 20 per cent). Almost 90 per cent of people in improvised dwellings in the Territory are Indigenous Australians, and the policy implications of this are complex.⁷ The number in all other groups is lower in the Territory.

BIG PICTURE

The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program is widely recognised as Australia's flagship program to assist homeless people. It is jointly funded by the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments. The dominant assumption underpinning current funding arrangements is that the homeless population is distributed in the same way as the general population.

The prevalence of homelessness is similar in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and the ACT (40 to 50 per 10,000 of the population). However, it is significantly higher in Queensland and Western Australia (70 to 80 per 10,000). It is also much higher in

Table 7: Percentage of the homeless population in SAAP accommodation, state and territory comparisons

	ACT	Vic	SA	Tas	NSW	Qld	WA	NT
Percentage in SAAP	40	19	22	19	11	9	11	2

the Northern Territory where there are many Indigenous people living in improvised dwellings.

The Australian Capital Territory had the lowest rate of homelessness in the country (40.3 per 10,000 of the population). This covered one per cent of homeless people, but the ACT received three per cent of SAAP funding. In Canberra, 40 per cent of homeless people were in SAAP on census night (Table 7).

In Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia the rate of homelessness was between 40 and 50 per 10,000 of the population. Table 7 shows that one-fifth (20 per cent) of the homeless were in SAAP in these states.

In Queensland, Western Australia and New South Wales the proportion in SAAP drops to 10 per cent. Queensland had 24 per cent of all homeless people, but it attracted only 14 per cent of SAAP funds. Western Australia had 12 per cent of homeless people, but it received nine per cent of SAAP funds.

However, the situation in New South Wales is different. The state had a similar rate of homelessness to Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and the ACT. Moreover, NSW attracted 36 per cent of SAAP funds. However, in NSW only 11 per cent of homeless people were in SAAP on census night. The SAAP program in NSW appears to be working less effectively than in other states. This is worrying because Sydney will host the 2000 Olympics, and many inner city boarding houses are being converted into 'up market' tourist accommodation. Almost one-third of the homeless in NSW were boarding house residents at

the time of the last census (Table 4), and some of these people are likely to be displaced. This will place additional pressure on a system that is not working well.

CONCLUSION

The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) is Australia's main program to assist homeless people. In 1999, there was a National Evaluation of SAAP⁸ to prepare for a new funding agreement between the Commonwealth and State/Territory governments. The new agreement will commence in 2000. Unfortunately, the research team carrying out the National Evaluation was unaware that the homeless population is unevenly spread. The findings from the census raise major policy and planning issues for SAAP.

THE END

Following article begins here in print journal.

References

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- ³ C. Chamberlain, *Counting the Homeless: Implications for Policy Development*, Canberra, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999 (available <http://www.abs.gov.au>)
- ⁴ Table 2 is from *ibid* Ch.3, and Tables 3 to 6 are from *ibid.*, Ch.6.
- ⁵ *ibid.*, Ch.3.
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