



HOW MANY HOMELESS YOUTH IN 2001?

The homeless population in Australia between the ages of 12 and 18 can be divided into four categories: school students, TAFE students, teenagers who are unemployed (or marginally attached to the labour force), and young people in full-time work who are temporarily homeless. This article estimates, by State and Territory, the number of young people in each segment in August 2001.

Our analysis uses information from the second national census of homeless school students, which we carried out in August 2001 – at the same time as the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) conducted the fourteenth National Census of Population and Housing. We also use information from the National Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) Data Collection to estimate the overall homeless population aged 12 to 18. This data collection records

information on persons using accommodation funded under the joint Commonwealth and State funded SAAP. It provides information on the proportion of SAAP clients aged 12 to 18 who are school students, TAFE students, unemployed or in full-time work.

Two research questions informed the project. First, we set out to investigate whether the youth homeless population was spread evenly across the country. We refer to this as the “even spread hypothesis”. Second, we investigated the “differential school effectiveness hypothesis”, which is concerned with how schools provide assistance to young people who are at the earliest stages of homelessness. Many people have argued that it is easier to help homeless teenagers before they have made a “permanent break” from home and family (MacKenzie & Chamberlain 1995; House of Representatives 1995; Prime

Ministerial Youth Homelessness Taskforce 1996; Crane & Brannock 1996; Chamberlain & MacKenzie 1998; Queensland Department of Families, Youth & Community Care 1999). When homeless students drop out of school, they usually leave their local community and become involved in the homeless subculture. Some make the transition to chronic homelessness. Testing the differential school effectiveness hypothesis involved investigating whether schools in some States were better at early intervention than others.

Definition of homelessness

Following the precedent established by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) at the 1996 census, we used the cultural definition of homelessness to enumerate the youth homeless population (Chamberlain 1999). There has been a long debate about the definition of homelessness in Western countries



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In the December 2002 issue of *Youth Studies Australia*, **David MacKenzie and Chris Chamberlain** presented the main findings from the second national census of homeless school students. In this follow-up paper, they investigate whether youth homelessness is spread evenly across Australian States and whether some States are better at intervening early to prevent youth homelessness.

(e.g. Neil & Fopp 1992; House of Representatives 1995; Avramov 1995; Hopper 1997). However, towards the end of the 1990s there was an emerging consensus among policy-makers and researchers in Australia about the utility of the cultural definition (Burke 1993; House of Representatives 1995; Charman et al. 1997; Driscoll & Wood 1998). This definition identifies three types of homelessness – primary, secondary and tertiary.

Primary homelessness accords with the common sense assumption that homelessness is the same as “rooflessness”. It encompasses all people without conventional shelter, such as people living on the streets, sleeping in parks, squatting in derelict buildings, or using cars or improvised dwellings for shelter.

People in any form of temporary accommodation who are without other secure housing are categorised as the

secondary homeless. It is common for young people who lose their accommodation to stay temporarily with other households (usually friends or relatives) or to go to youth refuges for accommodation. If they remain homeless for any significant period of time, they usually move frequently from one form of temporary accommodation to another. Some young people spend occasional nights on the streets.

Long-term (three months or more) occupants of single rooms in private boarding houses comprise the tertiary homeless. They do not have their own bathroom and kitchen, separate rooms for eating and sleeping or the security of tenure provided by a lease. Homeless people often live in boarding houses as they get older because they do not have the financial resources to access the private rental market. There are few teenagers in the tertiary population.

Methodology

All state and Catholic secondary schools (N=1,937) were approached to participate in the second national census of homeless school students. A small sector of other private schools was excluded. Permission to conduct the research was sought through the various departments of education and directly from the schools.

On 30 July 2001, using Telstra's Faxstream service, we sent a letter to all the school principals. It gave them details about the proposed research and asked for their cooperation. Schools were told that they would receive two forms. One will “ask for your best estimate of the number of homeless students in your school and some brief details about these young people”. The second will “provide space for two case studies which will inform a deeper understanding of what is happening to homeless students”. Each principal was asked to nominate

one person to oversee the data collection in his or her school. It was suggested that the school counsellor or student welfare coordinator was “probably the best person”.

The census used a method based on collating “local knowledge”. This is a diverse body of everyday knowledge, which emerges naturally in communities such as schools. In most schools at least a few people will know if a young person is homeless often because he or she will tell a friend or approach a welfare coordinator for help. It is also common for other students to convey information about the homelessness of fellow students to staff. The census asked one person in each school to bring together this disparate knowledge into a quantified estimate of the number of homeless students.

On 6 August 2001 we faxed the census forms to all schools and asked them to return them one week later. We also carried out follow-up interviews by telephone with about 500 schools. Table 1 shows that 99% of schools completed a census return (1,930 schools out of 1,937). In general, we think that the information from the schools was reliable, and that most schools had in mind actual individuals when they provided the information.

Is youth homelessness evenly spread?

First, we investigated the “even spread” hypothesis. Using the cultural definition of homelessness, Table 2 records the number of homeless school students in each State and Territory and nationally. The numbers were similar in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland.

As we have pointed out, the homeless population aged 12 to 18 includes school students, TAFE students, unemployed teenagers and a small number of young people who have full-time work. If the proportion

Table 1: Response rate for all States and Territories, Australia (%)

NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	ACT	NT	Australia
100	100	99	99	99	100	100	100	99

Table 2: Number of homeless school students, using the cultural definition of homelessness

NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	ACT	NT	Australia
2,116	1,898	2,029	778	635	385	212	432	8,485

of school students in the homeless youth population is known, then the number of homeless young people in each State and Territory can be estimated. For example, if school students comprised 70% of the young homeless in New South Wales, then the homeless youth population in that State would be 3,023 ($2,116 \times 100/70 = 3,023$). In the first youth homelessness census, we used data from the National SAAP Census (May 1994) to estimate the proportion of school students in the youth homeless population. However, SAAP censuses were discontinued in 1996 when the National SAAP Data Collection began.

The National SAAP Data Collection records information on all persons using SAAP services from 1 July each year to 30 June the following year. The main advantage of the annual data collection is that it is a much larger database than a census count. In the year preceding the 2001 census (from 1 July 2000 to 30 June 2001), young people aged 12 to 18

were accommodated in SAAP services on 17,800 occasions (unweighted SAAP data). These are known as “support periods” and they can be for differing lengths of time. In 82% of cases ($N = 14,600$), there was sufficient information to establish whether the young person was a school student, TAFE student, unemployed or not in the labour force. This is the best indicator of the proportion of school students in the homeless population.

Table 3 shows that school students used 34.8% of support periods in SAAP in the year preceding the 2001 census. Table 3 also demonstrates that there is marked variation by State and Territory in the number of support periods for school students. ACT, Victoria and Tasmania have the highest proportion of school student support periods followed by New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland, with the lowest proportions recorded in the Northern Territory and Western Australia. We used these figures to calculate the overall number of homeless

Table 3: School student support periods expressed as a percentage of all support periods for SAAP clients, aged 12 to 18, by State and Territory, 1 July 2000 – 30 June 2001

ACT	Vic	Tas	NSW	SA	Qld	NT	WA	Australia
53.0%	40.7%	38.2%	33.9%	32.5%	31.8%	29.5%	18.1%	34.8%

Table 4: Estimated number of homeless young people aged 12 to 18 and rate of homelessness per 1,000 of the youth population, by State and Territory

	NSW	Vic	ACT	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	Australia
Number	6,242	4,663	400	6,381	2,394	3,508	1,008	1,464	26,060
Rate per 1,000	10	10	12.5	18	17	18	21	69	14

people in Australia aged 12 to 18 in census week 2001.

The even-spread hypothesis predicts that the rate of youth homelessness will be similar in all States and Territories. Table 4 shows that this is not the case. Three patterns were evident. The first, referred to as the “lower cluster”, consisted of New South Wales and Victoria, which each had 10 homeless young people per 1,000 of the youth population, and the ACT, which had 12.5 per 1,000.

The second or “higher cluster” consisted of Western Australia and Queensland, where the rate of homelessness was 18 per 1,000, South Australia (17 per 1,000) and Tasmania (21 per 1,000). The rate was highest in the Northern Territory at 69 per 1,000.

We established that there were 26,000 homeless young people in census week. We also established that youth homelessness is unevenly spread. Next we investigated whether there was any truth in the “differential school effectiveness” hypothesis.

School effectiveness

According to the National SAAP Data Collection Agency (NDCA), SAAP services can identify school and TAFE students, as well as those in full-time employment. According to ABS definitions, the “unemployed” have “looked for work in the preceding four weeks”, whereas those “not in the labour force” have not been looking for work. SAAP services find it difficult to operationalise this definition, as many

of their clients are disillusioned teenagers who have dropped out of the labour force. We treated both ABS groups as part of the “unemployed”. Our unemployed category also included a small number of homeless young people who were marginally attached to the labour force, reporting either casual or part-time work.

We used the SAAP data to estimate the number of homeless young people in different segments of the population. The analysis involves a comparison of States in the “low” and “high” clusters, and a commentary on the Northern Territory figures.

Pattern 1: NSW, Vic and the ACT

We have established that the overall rate of youth homelessness was similar in New South Wales, Victoria and the ACT (10 to 12 cases per 1,000

of the youth population). Table 5 shows that although these States had similar rates of youth homelessness, students who became homeless in New South Wales were more likely to drop out of school.

The 1994 census found that between two-thirds and three-quarters of all schools in major urban areas reported homeless school students (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 1998, p.78). Table 6 shows the 2001 figures for homeless students in major urban areas in New South Wales, Victoria and the ACT. In all but one urban area the proportion of schools reporting homeless students ranged from 76%–82%. The exception was Sydney where the figure was 62%.

Most young people who experience homelessness are at school at the time of their first episode of homelessness. If schools are unaware of these students – or do not provide assistance – then the students drop through the early intervention net. In Sydney, a smaller proportion of schools reported homeless students, yet the rate of youth homelessness was no different in New South Wales, Victoria or the ACT. This suggests that homeless teenagers are more likely to drop out of schools in Sydney, compared with

Table 5: Estimated number of homeless young people in different segments of the homeless youth population, New South Wales, Victoria and the ACT*

	NSW N	Vic N	ACT N	NSW %	Vic %	ACT %
School student	2,116	1,898	212	34	41	53
TAFE student	512	462	20	8	10	5
Unemployed	3,508	2,215	161	56	47	40
Full-time work	106	88	7	2	2	2
	6,242	4,663	400	100	100	100

* Percentages to one decimal place were used to make the calculations. However, percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number in the table.

Table 6: Proportion of schools reporting homeless students in major urban areas in New South Wales, Victoria and the ACT

	<i>Newcastle, Wollongong, Central Coast</i>	<i>Melbourne</i>	<i>Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong</i>	<i>Canberra</i>	<i>Sydney</i>
% of schools with homeless students	79	81	76	82	62

schools in Melbourne, Canberra and regional centres in New South Wales and Victoria.

Pattern 2: WA, SA, Qld and Tas

In Western Australia, Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania the rates of youth homelessness averaged 18.5 per 1,000. This is about 80% higher than in New South Wales and Victoria.

It is more difficult for schools to assist homeless teenagers when they have high numbers of homeless students. Table 7 shows that proportion of homeless teenagers still at school ranged from 32%–38% for Tasmania, Queensland and South Australia, while in Western Australia it was 18% (Table 7). Conversely, the proportion of homeless teenagers who were unemployed ranged from 50%–60% in Tasmania, South Australia and Queensland, while in Western Australia it was 71%. These States have similar problems with youth homelessness but homeless teenagers are more likely to remain in school in Tasmania, and most likely to leave school in Western Australia.

Table 8 shows that the proportion of schools in urban areas of Western Australia, Tasmania, Queensland and South Australia that reported homeless students ranged from 73% in Hobart and Brisbane to 88% in cities on Tasmania’s north coast. This time the exception was Perth (61%). The same point applies as for the findings in Table 6. These States all had similar

rates of youth homelessness, yet in Perth a significantly lower proportion of schools reported homeless students. The inference is that homeless students leave Perth schools at a faster rate than they leave schools in urban centres in Tasmania, Queensland and South Australia.

Pattern 3: Northern Territory

Table 9 shows that 30% of homeless young people in the Northern Territory were still at school and 62% were unemployed. This was similar to the pattern found in South Australia and Queensland (Table 7). The number at school in the Territory was significantly higher than in Western Australia (30% compared with 18%) and the number who were unemployed was lower (62% compared with 71%). However, the rate of youth homelessness was higher in the Territory because schools have a large number of homeless students, and do not “hold on” to them.

There are a number of factors in the Territory that are associated with

Table 7: Estimated number of homeless young people aged 12 to 18 and rate of homelessness per 1,000 of the youth population, by State and Territory*

	<i>WA N</i>	<i>SA N</i>	<i>Qld N</i>	<i>Tas N</i>	<i>WA %</i>	<i>Qld %</i>	<i>SA %</i>	<i>Tas %</i>
School student	635	778	2,029	385	18	32	32	38
TAFE student	337	182	427	117	9	7	8	12
Unemployed	2,480	1,417	3,848	503	71	60	59	50
Full-time work	56	17	77	3	2	1	1	**
	3,508	2,394	6,381	1,008	100	100	100	100

* Percentages to one decimal place were used to make the calculations. However, percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number in the table.

** Less than 0.5%

Table 8: Proportion of schools reporting homeless students in major urban areas in New South Wales, Victoria and the ACT

	<i>Hobart</i>	<i>Launceston Devonport</i>	<i>Brisbane</i>	<i>Gold Coast Sunshine Coast Coastal cities*</i>	<i>Adelaide</i>	<i>Perth</i>
% of schools with homeless students	73	88	73	77	77	61

* Cairns, Townsville, Rockhampton, Mackay, Bundaberg and Gladstone

Table 9: Estimated number of homeless young people in different segments of the homeless youth population, Northern Territory*

	N	%
School student	432	30
TAFE student	91	6
Unemployed	906	62
Full-time work	35	2
	1,464	100

* Percentages to one decimal place were used to make the calculations. However, percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number in the table.

homelessness, including high levels of domestic violence and family breakdown. It is also known that Indigenous people are more likely to experience homelessness than other Australians. Two per cent of the population identified as Indigenous in the ABS national census, but 16% of SAAP clients were Aboriginal in 2000–2001 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2001, p.xvi). In the Northern Territory about one-quarter of the population is Indigenous. Indigenous people live in urban centres such as Darwin, Alice Springs, Tenant Creek and Katherine, in camps close to these centres, and in remote communities. Three-quarters (78%) of the homeless school students in the Territory were Indigenous, and about 70% of those students lived in remote communities. In policy terms, responding to issues in remote communities may require a whole-of-community development approach rather than SAAP services. Schools reported that domestic violence, alcohol abuse and petrol sniffing were major factors contributing to Indigenous young people's detachment and transience.

Table 10: Estimated number of young people aged 12 to 18 in different segments of the homeless population, by State and Territory

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	ACT	NT	Australia
School student	2,116	1,898	2,029	778	635	385	212	432	8,485
TAFE student	512	462	427	182	337	117	20	91	2,148
Unemployed	3,508	2,215	3,848	1,417	2,480	503	161	906	15,038
Full-time work	106	88	77	17	56	3	7	35	389
Total	6,242	4,663	6,381	2,394	3,508	1,008	400	1,464	26,060

Table 11: Percentage of homeless young people in education (school and TAFE), unemployed or in full-time work, by State and Territory

	ACT	Vic	Tas	NSW	SA	Qld	NT	WA	Australia
Education	58	51	50	42	40	39	36	27	41
Unemployed	40	47	50	56	59	60	62	71	58
Full-time work	2	2	*	2	1	1	2	2	1
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

* Less than 0.5%.

Conclusion

Using a combination of information from the second national census of homeless students and SAAP data, we were able to calculate the number of young people aged 12 to 18 in different segments of the homeless population by State and Territory. Table 10 summarises the national pattern – there were 26,000 homeless young people aged 12 to 18 in Australia in census week including 15,000 unemployed youth, 8,500 school students and 2,100 TAFE students. The numbers of homeless youth were highest in Queensland and New South Wales, followed by Victoria, Western Australia and South Australia.

We also investigated whether the youth homeless population was evenly spread across the States and Territories and found this was not the case. There were 10 to 12 homeless

young people per 1,000 of the youth population in New South Wales, Victoria and the ACT – the low cluster. There were 18 to 21 cases per 1,000 in Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania – the high cluster. The Northern Territory figure, at 69 cases per 1,000, was much higher again.

Finally, we investigated the “differential school effectiveness” hypothesis, which is concerned with the fact that schools, as sites for early intervention, assist young people and their families to reconcile their differences or help young people to remain at school as independent students. One indicator of the effectiveness of the education system in assisting homeless youth is the number of homeless school students and TAFE students as a proportion of the homeless population aged 12 to 18.

Table 11 shows that the ACT's pro-

portion of homeless teenagers still in education (58%) was the highest of any State. Victoria and Tasmania both with about 50% were next with New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia following at around 40%. The Northern Territory (36%) and Western Australia (27%) had the lowest proportions.

When homeless teenagers drop out of the education system many become long-term unemployed. Most of these young people remain homeless and some make the transition to chronicity. Table 11 shows that in the ACT, 40% of homeless youth were unemployed with the proportion rising to about 50% in Victoria and Tasmania; to 60% in South Australia, Queensland, New South Wales and the Northern Territory; and to 71% in Western Australia.

Since 1995, there has been an explicit move in youth policy towards building an early intervention capacity in schools and local communities. The Commonwealth Government, as well as State and Territory governments, have produced important initiatives in this area (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 2002, ch.5). It is important to acknowledge the good work that has been done, but also to recognise that we still have a lot to learn about early intervention.

Note: The second national census of homeless school students is part of a research program known as 'Counting the Homeless, 2001'. It is funded by all State and Territory governments and the Salvation Army. The research program is being carried out in conjunction with the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

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Chris Chamberlain is Associate Professor, School of Social Science and Planning at RMIT University, Melbourne. David MacKenzie is the Director of the Centre for Youth Affairs Research and Development at RMIT University.

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- Youth Homelessness 2001 is a research program funded by all State and Territory governments and the Salvation Army (July 2002). Web: www.rmit.edu.au/tce/ssp/yh and www.salvationarmy.org.au
- 'Project i is a five-year study of homeless young people in Melbourne and Los Angeles. The research focuses on young people between 12 and 20 years of age who have recently become homeless. Funded by the National Institute of Mental Health in the USA, Project i is a collaborative project

between the Australian Research Centre in Sex Health and Society at La Trobe University and the Center for Community Health at the University of California.'

The project has just released a report titled *Living well? Homeless young people in Melbourne* by Ben Rossiter, Shelley Mallett, Paul Myers and Doreen Rosenthal that can be downloaded, along with other Project i research papers and reports, from the web site at: <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/projecti/research/research.html>

- For more information about the Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce, including access to the Taskforce's report Footprints to the Future see the web site at: <http://www.youthpathways.gov.au/> http://www.families.qld.gov.au/youth/youth_support_coordinators.html
- Parity is the Council to Homeless Persons' journal and is published 10 times a year. It covers a wide range of issues concerning homelessness and the provision of housing and services to homeless people. Web: www.parity.infoxchange.net.au/