YOUTH HOMELESSNESS 2001

A research program funded by all state and territory governments and the Salvation Army

July 2002

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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive Summary</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Context</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This Report</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 1 Issues of Definition and Counting</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Definition</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homelessness is a Process</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding Service Delivery Definitions</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Ways of Counting</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 2 Methodology</strong></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Census</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Histories</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 3 Census of Homeless School Students</strong></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Many Homeless School Students?</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Accommodation</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Characteristics</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State and Catholic Schools</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 4 How Many Homeless Youth?</strong></td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Hypotheses</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Many Homeless Youth?</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Effectiveness</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 5 Discussion</strong></td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Picture</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is Youth Homelessness Increasing?</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argument for Early Intervention</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Developments since 1995</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools as Sites for Early Intervention</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State and Territory Variation</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>References</strong></td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This is the first report from the project, Counting the Homeless in 2001, a research program focusing on Australia’s homeless population at the time of the 2001 Census of Population and Housing. This report presents the main findings from the second national census of homeless school students, and estimates the total number of homeless young people aged 12 to 18, using information from the school census combined with SAAP data.

The research program is funded by: the Salvation Army; the Department of Community Services (NSW); the Department of Human Services (Vic); the Department of Families (Qld); the Department of Human Services (SA); the Department for Community Development (WA); the Department of Health and Human Services (Tas); Youth and Community Services (ACT); and in the Northern Territory by the Departments of Health and Community Services and Community Development, Sport and Cultural Affairs. We thank the funding bodies for their support.

The project is a major undertaking and thanks are due to many people who helped make it happen or have provided information. First, we would like to acknowledge the contribution of Martin Butterfield, formerly with the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). In the early 1990s, he proposed the crucial innovation in the Census data collection which made it possible to enumerate the homeless population. Despite the formidable practical and technical difficulties, Martin and his colleagues at the ABS thought that it should be attempted. The ABS refined their strategy to enumerate homeless people for the 2001 census.

Tony Newman, who led the Victorian Homelessness Strategy in Victoria, was an early supporter of this research and he facilitated Victoria’s support. His colleagues in other states also worked through the discussions with departmental stakeholders to gain Government commitment and funding. We are grateful for their support and the work they did on our behalf. We should like to mention: Alan Raison (New South Wales); Carol MacKay (Queensland); Nancy Rogers (South Australia); Pauline Bogdanovic (Western Australia); Bruce Kemp and Diane Hayward-Stears (Tasmania); Rob Long (ACT); and Anthony Burton in the Northern Territory. Since Anthony shifted to a more senior position, Ms Jill Rechner has ably looked after support from the NT.
Additional information was sought from all State and Territory Education Departments on the welfare support to school students. Gathering this information required some effort because of the devolved structure of many state systems. We appreciate the work done by: Jane Hazelberry (WA); Greg Cox (SA); Helen Kerr-Roubicek (NSW); Colleen Murphy and Rachel Crellin (Vic); and Lyn James, the state manager of district support services (Tas), and her district colleagues Robyn Tate, Toni Douglas, Bernard Knight, Wendy Burrows, Mark Edwards and Margaret Ridge. In Queensland, Hugh Wackwitz, the project officer for the Guidance Review 2000, was very helpful.

At RMIT, Professor Mike Berry encouraged the project’s development and advised us on the raising of research funds. David Eldridge and John Dalziel from the Salvation Army were important supporters of the project from the beginning.

Our report uses data from the National SAAP Data Collection, which is coordinated by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) in Canberra. We are grateful for the support of Justin Griffin from AIHW and the work of Qasim Shah was greatly appreciated.

We established a call-centre at RMIT to carry out the second national census of homeless school students. This was ably managed by Ms Lauren Kelly. The following people worked on the project: Rosalie Hand, Yee Man Louie, Leanne Schneider, Julie-Anne Lefarnara, Revi Bose, Venessa Pellone, Linda Petrovski and Beth Kimber. We thank them for all their hard work.

Finally, and most importantly, we thank the staff in secondary schools across the country who made the second national census of homeless school students possible. We are grateful for their input and the time they spent identifying homeless students in their schools.

C. C.

D. M.
Purpose
1 This report presents the main findings from the second national census of homeless school students, which was carried out in August 2001. The report also estimates the total number of homeless young people aged 12 to 18, using information from the school census combined with SAAP data.

Definition
2 The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) enumerates the homeless population using the cultural definition of homelessness (Chamberlain 1999). This identifies ‘primary’, ‘secondary’ and ‘tertiary’ homelessness. Primary homelessness is the same as literal homelessness or ‘roolessness’. Secondary homelessness includes people who are staying in any form temporary accommodation, with no other secure housing elsewhere. Many homeless people move frequently from one form of temporary accommodation to another. Tertiary homelessness refers to the occupants of single rooms in private boarding houses who live there on a long-term basis (three months or longer).
3 This research used a broader definition of homelessness when carrying out the national census of homeless school students. Young people were defined as homeless using the categories in the cultural definition (primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness), but schools were asked to include students who ‘had been homeless within the last three months, if they are in need of continuing support’. The report applies the cultural definition when enumerating the overall population, following ABS conventions.

Methodology
4 The National Census of Homeless school students was carried out in the second week of August 2001, at the same time as the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) was conducting the fourteenth National Census of Population and Housing on August 7th. Ninety-nine per cent of secondary schools completed a census return (1,930 schools out of 1,937).
Findings

5 Table 1 shows the final figures from the school census using the broader definition. Schools reported 12,230 homeless school students in census week. The numbers are similar in New South Wales (3,060), Victoria (2,890) and Queensland (3,070), but the rate of homelessness varies significantly. There were 1,020 homeless students in South Australia, 830 in Western Australia, 570 in Tasmania, 320 in the ACT and 460 in the Northern Territory, once again with variation in the rate of homelessness.

6 Sixty-nine per cent of state schools reported small numbers of homeless students in census week, as did 41 per cent of Catholic schools. However, 93 per cent of homeless teenagers were in the state system. There were 11,370 homeless students in state schools and 860 homeless teenagers in the Catholic system.

7 Table 2 shows the total number of homeless young people aged 12 to 18, using the cultural definition of homelessness. Overall there were 26,060 homeless young people in census week, and the rate of homelessness was 14 per 1,000.

8 There are three patterns. First, there were between 10 and 12.5 homeless young people per 1,000 of the youth population in New South Wales, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory. This is the ‘low cluster’. There were between 17 and 21 homeless young people per 1,000 in Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania. This is the ‘high cluster’. In the Northern Territory, there were 69 homeless young people per 1,000. This is much higher than in any other state.
One indicator of the effectiveness of the education system to assist homeless students is to examine the number of school students and TAFE students as a proportion of the homeless population. Table 3 shows that in the ACT 58 per cent of homeless teenagers were still in the education system, the highest percentage in any state. In Victoria and Tasmania, it was about 50 per cent. About 40 per cent of the homeless are still in education in New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia. It was 36 per cent in the Northern Territory, and 27 per cent in Western Australia.

When homeless teenagers drop out of the education system, many become long-term unemployed. Most of these young people remain homeless for a period, and some make the transition to chronic homelessness. Table 3 shows that 40 per cent of homeless youth in the ACT were unemployed. This rises to about 50 per cent in Victoria and Tasmania, to 60 per cent in South Australia and Queensland, and to 71 per cent in Western Australia.

Policy

Since 1995, there has been an explicit turn in youth policy towards building an early intervention capacity in schools and local communities. Early intervention focuses on assisting young people who are ‘at risk’ of homelessness, or who have become homeless recently. In some communities there is a high level of awareness about the need to develop links between schools and local services. In these communities, there is the development of incipient coordination structures. In other communities, there is little evidence of this happening. The youth support infrastructure has been partly constructed, but there is still a long way to go.
A lot of innovative small-scale local initiatives exist on the ground to support at risk and homeless youth. There have been several Commonwealth and State based early intervention initiatives. The Commonwealth Reconnect program is the most well known. Of the state based initiatives, the Victorian School Focused Youth Service model deserves to be considered for national implementation. The evaluation described it as ‘ground breaking, innovative and broadly successful’. A national program of this type would ensure that a coordination capacity was developed in all communities. The Youth Pathways Action Taskforce recommended a program of transition officers in all communities to work with young people leaving school early, including homeless students dropping out of school. Such an initiative would address a largely unmet need, and further strengthen the youth support infrastructure.

In previous policy debate, it has been assumed that the homeless population is distributed in the same way as the general population. SAAP funding is allocated on a broadly pro rata basis, with smaller states and territories getting a slightly larger share. Our most important finding is that this assumption is not correct with regard to young people. However, the policy and funding implications of this finding will only become clearer when the data on the overall homeless population is available from the 2001 census.
Research Context

National policy decisions in response to any social problem require reliable statistical information on the target population. Information on the size of the homeless population is particularly crucial for policy and planning purposes. Before the early 1990s, data on homelessness was gathered by local agencies providing services to homeless people.

The first attempt to collect national data began in 1991, when it was decided to introduce biannual censuses of all persons accommodated in services funded under the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP). These censuses typically showed between 12,000 and 14,000 people in SAAP accommodation on census night.

In 1996, the National Data Collection commenced on all persons using SAAP services on an ongoing basis. This effort is coordinated by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) which publishes annual reports on the data set. In 2000-2001, the AIHW estimated that 91,000 adults, excluding accompanying children, were provided with 168,000 periods of support or supported accommodation (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2001, pxv). This is important information on service users, but the main limitation of National SAAP Data is that it only counts one section of the homeless population. Many homeless people do not attempt to use SAAP services, and others are turned away because services are full (Horn 2002).

In 1996, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) attempted to count all homeless people at a point in time, using a special strategy for the thirteenth National Census of Population and Housing. The strategy was developed by Martin Butterfield, a senior officer with the ABS who proposed the idea in 1993. The count revealed 105,300 homeless people on census night, but only 13,000 people were in SAAP accommodation (Chamberlain 1999). Another 48,500 were staying temporarily with other households; 23,000 were in boarding houses; and 20,500 were in ‘improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out’.

Census counts are important because they indicate the size of the problem at a point in time. The census provides the best data for policy decisions about the number of services that are needed in different communities.

The current project, Counting the Homeless in 2001, will replicate the 1996 analysis with some improvements to provide an historic second count of the homeless population. Alongside the enumeration, we collected an extensive archive of qualitative data on homeless people who were in contact with schools and SAAP agencies at the time of the census.

INTRODUCTION
The aims of Counting the Homeless in 2001 are:
Core aim:
– To enumerate the size of the homeless population in Australia
Secondary aims:
– To determine the characteristics of the homeless population
– To enumerate the extent of youth homelessness
– To establish the geographical patterns of homelessness
– To develop models of pathways in and out of homelessness

This Report
This report presents the main findings from the second national census of homeless school students, which was carried out at the same time as the ABS National Census in August, 2001. The report also estimates the total number of homeless young people aged 12 to 18, using information from the school census combined with SAAP data. These findings will attract some interest in their own right, but the main purpose of the research was to produce data necessary for the ABS analysis of the homeless population.

Chapter 1 argues that it is necessary to have an operational definition of homelessness that can be used to enumerate the homeless population. This report uses the ‘cultural definition of homelessness’ adopted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) to enumerate the homeless population at the 1996 and 2001 censuses. It identifies ‘primary’, ‘secondary’ and ‘tertiary’ homelessness. Chapter 1 also explains that the homeless population can be enumerated at a point in time (a ‘census’ count) or over a year (an ‘annual’ count).

Chapter 2 describes how the second national census of homeless school students was carried out, including the collection of 2,000 case histories from schools and SAAP services.

Chapter 3 presents the main finding from the second national census of homeless school students. This includes: the number of homeless young people in schools; where they were staying in census week; their social characteristics; and the numbers in state and Catholic schools.

Chapter 4 estimates the total number of homeless young people aged 12 to 18, using information from the school census combined with SAAP data. The estimate is 26,000.

Chapter 5 investigates whether youth homelessness is increasing, before reviewing policy developments since 1995.
There is continuing debate about the definition of ‘homelessness’ in Western countries (e.g. Neil and Fopp 1992; House of Representatives 1995; Avramov 1995; Hopper 1997). This debate is more than just a semantic exercise because without agreement on definition it is not possible to produce statistics on the homeless population, and without reliable statistics it is impossible to allocate resources on a rational basis.

It is readily accepted that people who sleep in public places or squat in derelict buildings are homeless, but how should we classify people who have no accommodation of their own, and are temporarily staying with other households? Is this ‘homelessness’? Are people in institutions ‘homeless’ if they have nowhere to go when they leave? How about a young woman staying temporarily in a youth refuge or living in a boarding house? Is she ‘homeless’? These questions have been answered differently, depending on the broader perspectives of the authors concerned (e.g. Watson 1986; Rossi 1989; Jencks 1994; Nunan and Johns 1996; National Youth Coalition for Housing 1997; Jacobs, Kemeny and Manzi 1999).

Some commentators have concluded that it is impossible to define ‘homelessness’. For example, when Sackville prepared the report Homeless People and the Law for Professor Henderson’s Inquiry into Poverty, he stated that there was ‘no universally accepted definition of the homeless population’ (Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, 1976, p.5). A decade later, Field (1988, p.11) noted: ‘The questions – What is Homelessness? Who are the Homeless? – are I think simply unanswerable’. Another ten years on, Burke (1998, p.205) expressed the same point: ‘Homelessness continues to escape precise definition, because of its complexity and increasing diversification’. The problem with such ‘theoretical despair’ is that it undermines the development of sound policy.

Cultural Definition

Nevertheless, towards the end of the 1990s, there was an emerging consensus amongst policy makers and researchers about an operational definition of homelessness in an Australian context (Burke 1993; House of Representatives 1995; Northwood 1997; Department of Health and Family Services 1997; Charman, McClelland, Montague and Sully 1997; Driscoll and Wood 1998). The definition has been called the ‘cultural definition of homelessness’, following arguments first articulated by Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1992). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) used the cultural definition for enumerating the homeless population at the 1996 census (Chamberlain 1999). Adoption by the ABS
significantly raised the profile of the definition, and it established an important precedent for how homeless people will be enumerated in the future. The same definition is used in this report.

The cultural definition asserts that ‘homelessness’ and ‘inadequate housing’ are socially constructed, cultural concepts that only make sense in a particular community at a given historical period (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1992). As Watson (1986, p. 10) pointed out, in a society where the vast majority of people live in mud huts, the community standard will be that mud huts constitute adequate accommodation. Once this concept is accepted, then it becomes possible to define ‘homelessness’. The shared community standards are not official regulations, but refer to the minimum housing that people believe they have a right to expect in order to live according to the conventions and expectations of a particular culture.

Community standards are culturally embedded in the housing practices of a society. These identify the cultural expectations of a community in an objective sense, and they are recognised by most people because they accord with what they see around them. The vast majority of Australians live in suburban houses or self-contained flats. There is a widespread view – sometimes referred to as the ‘Australian dream’ – that home ownership is the most desirable form of tenure (Kemeny 1983, p. 1; Hayward 1992, p. 1; Badcock and Beer 2000, p. 1). This is the culturally desired housing option which underpins the minimum community standard.

In Australia, minimum community standard relates to the minimum that people can expect if they rent in the private market. This is a small flat with a bedroom, living room, kitchen and bathroom, and an element of security of tenure, provided by a lease. The ‘standard’ is embedded in the housing practices that are all around us. It provides a benchmark for assessing ‘homelessness’ and ‘inadequate housing’ in the contemporary context.

However, the benchmark cannot be used in a purely mechanistic way, and its application must be sensitive to cultural meaning systems. For example, there are a number of institutional settings where people do not have the minimum level of accommodation identified by the community standard, but in cultural terms they would not be considered part of the homeless population. This includes people living in seminaries, elderly people in nursing homes, students in university halls of residence, people in prison, and so forth.

There will always be some individuals who are difficult to classify, but in broad terms the cultural definition leads to the identification of ‘primary’, ‘secondary’ and ‘tertiary’ categories of homelessness. Primary homelessness is the least contentious category because it accords with the common sense assumption that homelessness is the same as
‘rooflessness’. It includes 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.

Secondary homelessness includes people who are staying in any form temporary accommodation with no other secure housing elsewhere. It is common for people who lose their accommodation to stay temporarily with other households (usually friends or relatives); others stay in boarding houses on a short-term basis; some go to government funded emergency accommodation, such as youth refuges, hostels for the homeless, night shelters and so on. People who remain homeless for any significant period of time usually move frequently from one form of temporary accommodation to another, some spending occasional nights on the streets.

Tertiary homelessness is probably the most contentious category. Tertiary homelessness refers to the occupants of single rooms in private boarding houses who live there on a long-term basis (three months or more). They are homeless because their accommodation does not have the characteristics identified in the minimum community standard — they do not have their own bathroom and kitchen, a separate room for eating and sleeping, and 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 two main reasons why living long-term in cheap private boarding houses should be classified as ‘homeless’. First, a single room in a boarding house is below the culturally accepted norm. Second there is a substantial body of research in the 1960s and 70s that recognized people living in single rooms without private facilities as homeless (Caplow, Bahr and Sternberg 1968; De Hoog 1972; Bahr and Caplow 1972; Jordan 1973/1994; Hoch and Slayton 1989). Living standards have risen over the past 40 years, so it would be incongruous to redefine this accommodation as ‘adequate housing’.

**Homelessness is a Process**

Homelessness is best understood as a ‘process’, rather than an ‘event’. In order to think about this issue, we have developed the idea of the ‘homeless career’ (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1998). This draws attention to the fact that young people go through various stages before they develop a self-identity as a homeless person.

**Schools as Sites for Early Intervention**

Most teenagers have their first experience of homelessness while they are still at school. In a study of 100 homeless young people prepared for the Burdekin Report (1989), Ian O’Connor (1989, p.14) found that 82 per cent were 15 or younger when they had their first experience of homelessness. Similarly, Crane and Brannock (1996, p.40) found that 92 per cent of their respondents were 15 or younger when they first left
home. The first national census of homeless school students (in May 1994) reported that there were 11,000 homeless secondary students in census week, and estimated that 25,000 to 30,000 students experience a period of homelessness each year (MacKenzie and Chamberlain 1995).

In a number of publications (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1996 and 1998), we have argued that schools are sites for early intervention. This is because it is easier to help homeless teenagers when they are still at school and located in their local community. It is only when they drop out of school and leave behind their local ties that they are likely to become deeply involved in the homeless subculture. At this stage, some make the transition to chronic homelessness.

*Start and Finish of the Career*
Although schools are sites for early intervention, it is sometimes difficult for welfare staff to ascertain when homelessness ‘begins’ and ‘ends’. This is because homelessness is a ‘process’, rather than an ‘event’. This means that the ‘start’ and ‘finish’ of homeless career are sometimes hard to pin down.

Young people are usually in crisis prior to becoming homeless, and it is important to provide teenagers (and their families) with assistance to see if family breakdown can be avoided. This is the ‘at risk’ population. Many service providers intuitively know what this means, but it will always be difficult to specify the parameters of the at risk population, because any definition based on risk factors will vary from ‘low’ to ‘high’ risk.

The end of the ‘career’ is also hard to pin down. It is common for service providers to offer assistance to teenagers who are attempting to live independently, after a period of homelessness. In many cases, the young person’s hold on accommodation is tenuous, because they are either unemployed or still at school. In other cases they need assistance with living skills (shopping, cooking, budgets etc.). Another group need counselling and emotional support. Many need multiple forms of assistance, as they make the transition to independent living.

One consequence of the fact that the beginning and end of the career are blurred is that service providers often favour definitions of homelessness that are broader than the cultural definition. We refer to these as ‘service delivery definitions’.
Understanding Service Delivery Definitions

One example of a service delivery definition is contained in the Supported Accommodation Assistance Act (1994):

A person is homeless if, and only if, he or she has inadequate access to safe and secure housing. A person is taken to have inadequate access to safe and secure housing if the only housing to which the person has access:

a) damages, or is likely to damage, the person’s health; or
b) threatens the person’s safety; or

c) marginalises the person through failing to provide access to:
   i) adequate personal amenities; or
   ii) the economic and social support that a home normally affords; or

d) places the person in circumstances which threaten or adversely affect the adequacy, safety, security and affordability of that housing.

This definition includes: people who are unhappy with their accommodation (because it might damage their health or is too expensive); people who are at risk of homelessness (because of domestic violence or threat of eviction); as well as people who are actually homeless. It is a service delivery definition because it recognises that SAAP services have to assist those who are about to become homeless (or believe they are ‘at risk’), as well as those who are actually homeless.

It is common for governments and service providers to formulate operational definitions that they believe are needed in particular contexts, but this does not mean that all definitions are equally plausible, or that ‘homelessness’ is just a matter of opinion. The purpose of theorising the cultural definition of homelessness was to provide a ‘higher order’ definition that is grounded in the housing practices of the community. It provides a benchmark for thinking about the utility of operational definitions used in particular contexts. In the case of the SAAP definition of homelessness, it lacks conceptual rigour for research purposes because it fails to distinguish people who are at risk from people who are actually homeless. However, as an operational definition it ‘makes sense’—because SAAP services are mandated under legislation to deal with both groups.

We used a service delivery definition when carrying out the national census of homeless school students. For the purposes of the census, young people were defined as homeless using the core categories in the cultural definition (primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness). However, schools were also asked to include young people in their return ‘if they have been homeless within the last three months and are in need of continuing support’. This takes into account that school welfare staff often assist these young people. It is a service delivery definition of homelessness, based on the cultural
definition. In Chapters 3 we analyse the data from the national census of homeless school students using the service delivery definition.

In Chapter 4, we estimate the overall homeless population aged 12 to 18. Then we revert to the cultural definition of homelessness, following the precedents established by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) at the 1996 census (Chamberlain 1999). The ABS counts the homeless population at a point in time (census night). It does not include people who are ‘at risk’, or formerly homeless people who need continuing assistance. The ABS counts only those who were homeless on census night, using the cultural definition.

Two Ways of Counting
There are two ways of counting the homeless population, and the relationship between them is not widely understood (Freeman and Hall 1987; Jencks 1994, Ch.2). The first is a census count that gives the number of homeless people on a given night. These are also known as ‘point in time’ estimates. The second method examines the number of people who become homeless over a year. These are called ‘cumulative annual totals’ or ‘annual counts’, and welfare agencies usually gather data in this way.

A cumulative annual total will always be larger than a census figure because there will be more homeless people over a year than there are at any point in time. It may be much larger if most people remain homeless for a fairly short period of time. For example, if 120,000 people become homeless over a year and each person is homeless for one month, then a census count will reveal 10,000 homeless people on a typical night (120,000 x 1/12 = 10,000).

Many advocates prefer big numbers because they assume that a higher figure puts more pressure on those in power to provide more resources. They are consequently attracted to annual figures. However, it is the census figure which is important for policy and planning purposes. Two examples will illustrate this point.

Let us suppose that 20,000 young Australians become homeless this year and all of them are homeless for 12 months. The cumulative annual total will be 20,000, and the census count will be 20,000 (20,000 x 12/12 = 20,000). This would be a desperate situation where there are 20,000 homeless young people who are part of an ‘underclass’ from which they have little chance of escaping.
Now suppose that 260,000 teenagers become homeless during a year, but each one returns to secure accommodation after two weeks. The cumulative annual total is 260,000, but the census count would be 10,000 homeless teenagers (260,000 x 2/52 = 10,000), because all of them experience a short period of homelessness. The fact that the cumulative annual total is 260,000 in this example should have no bearing on policy decisions. On a typical night, there will be fewer people requiring assistance than in the previous example (10,000 compared with 20,000), and it will be much easier to help them – because no-one has an intractable problem.

From the point of view of policy makers as well as service providers, the most important figure is always the census count combined with information on the length of time that young people have been homeless. The cumulative annual total is of little intrinsic significance. The census figure will be lower than the annual figure, but it is the census figure that is important. This is a fundamental point informing the analysis which follows.

Conclusion
This chapter has established five points. First, there has been a long-standing debate about the definition of homelessness in Western countries, but there is an emergent consensus in Australia that the cultural definition of homelessness is appropriate for enumerating the population. Second, we have indicated that homelessness is best understood as a career process, and it is often difficult to specify exactly when homelessness begins and ends. Our analysis will move between the cultural definition and a service delivery definition when discussing homeless school students. This is because the service delivery definition reflects who service providers work with, but the cultural definition is used for enumerating the population, following ABS conventions. Fourth, we have argued that schools are sites for early intervention. Finally, it has been established that census counts are more important than annual counts for the purposes of policy and planning.
National Census

The national census of homeless school students was carried out in the second week of August 2001, at the same time as the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) was conducting the fourteenth National Census of Population and Housing on August 7th. On July 30th we sent a letter (by fax) to the Principals of all government and Catholic secondary school across Australia (N=1,937). It gave them details about the proposed research, explained who supported the project, and asked for their cooperation. The letter indicated that the ABS was implementing a special strategy to count homeless people at the 2001 census, and that the census of homeless school students was part of this strategy. Following the precedent established in the first census (1994), we did not include non-Catholic (Anglican, Jewish etc.) private schools in the research.

Principals were told that their school would receive two forms. One will ‘ask for your best estimate of the number of homeless youth in your school, based on your local knowledge, and some brief details about these young people’. The second form 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 is ‘probably the best person’. Alternatively, we suggested it ‘could be the Vice-Principal responsible for student welfare’.

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. Teachers and students rarely quantify this experiential knowledge, but in most schools at least a few people will know if a young person is homeless. The young person may tell a friend, confide in their favourite teacher, or approach a welfare coordinator for help. It is also common for other students to convey this information 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 August 6th, we faxed the census forms to all schools, asking them to return them one week later. We also carried out follow up interviews by telephone with about 500 schools. Table 2.1 shows that 99 per cent of schools completed a census return (1,930 schools out of 1,937).
Table 2.1: Response rate for all states and territories, Australia (%)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Response rate</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In general, we think that the information from schools is reliable, and that most schools had in mind actual individuals when they provided the information. However, it is more difficult to estimate the number of homeless students in large schools and some welfare staff in these schools were worried that ‘there could be other cases that I don’t know about’.

In the first national census of homeless school students, we estimated that there was an undercount of between five per cent and 10 per cent overall, and adjusted our final figures accordingly. In Chapter 3 we adjust for undercounting again. However, this time we stratified schools by size, to take into account that undercounting is more likely to occur in large schools.

Case Histories
Schools were also asked to provide two case studies of homeless students where they had detailed knowledge of what had happened. They were asked to ‘tell the story of why the young person left home’, what has happened since, and how they are managing at school. We also asked for details about age, gender, family structure and length of time homeless. Schools returned 1,220 case histories.

At the same time as we were conducting the census, we contacted all SAAP services across the country (N=1,238). Most of them were aware that the ABS was implementing a special strategy to enumerate the homeless population, and we invited them to take part in a Case Study Project. ‘The purpose … is to gather qualitative data about the experiences of homeless people that is not collected by the Census … (This) will allow us to interpret the census data more effectively’. We asked them to provide accounts of homeless people, couples or family groups who were homeless in census week. They provided 821 case histories. Half (55 per cent) were single person households, eight per cent were couples, 34 per cent were families (with children), and three per cent were extended families. There were 1,500 people in these households.

Overall, we gathered 2,040 case histories, containing information on just over 2,700 people. This is a large data base, but it is not a random sample of the homeless population. In this report, we use a small amount of qualitative data to illustrate various points. We have changed some personal details to protect people’s privacy and all names are fictitious.

1 Names were not recorded on the case histories.
This study used the ABS definition of homelessness, but instructions to schools explained the definition in plain language, without reference to ‘primary’, ‘secondary’ and ‘tertiary’ categories. The census instructions stated:

Young people are homeless if they have left their family home and are living in any form of temporary accommodation. Homelessness is not ... (just) a lack of shelter. Thus a young person is homeless in any of the following situations:
- No conventional accommodation (e.g. streets, squat, car tent etc.)
- Temporary accommodation with friends or relatives or moving frequently between various forms of temporary accommodation
- Emergency accommodation in refuges or other crisis accommodation
- Other medium to longer term accommodation for people who have experienced homelessness (e.g. hostels and youth housing programs)
- Living in a single room in a boarding house.

We knew that welfare staff defined homelessness more broadly than this. In our 1994 pilot study, many schools provided returns indicating that they had homeless students who were living in shared households. Welfare staff would say that it was necessary to know that a young person has ‘settled’, before they should be regarded as no longer homeless. As one experienced counsellor said, ‘Often, you think you’ve got a young person settled, and a week later you find that they’ve moved again’. Welfare staff report that shared households can break down quickly, and independent students often require continuing support.

The first census took this into account and the same protocol was followed in 2001. The instructions stated:

It is not always easy to decide when homelessness begins or ends, and sometimes schools have to provide assistance to young people after they have ceased to be homeless. Include these young people in your return if they:
- have been homeless within the last three months; and
- need continuing support.
This is a ‘service delivery’ definition of homelessness. It is based on the cultural definition, but it includes students who have been homeless within the last three months, if they are receiving continuing support. This definition makes good sense to school welfare teams, because they work with both groups.

In this chapter we use the service delivery definition, following the protocols established at the first census. In Chapter 4 we use the cultural definition, following the ABS protocols for enumerating the population.

**How Many Homeless School Students?**
The census used a method of collating local knowledge that exists in small communities such as schools. When a young person ‘runs away’ or is ‘thrown out’ of home, it is likely that someone will know. The student may approach a teacher for help, confide in their best friend, or go to see a member of the welfare staff. It is common for students to tell staff that someone has been ‘kicked out’.

Schools went about collecting the census information in different ways, but we are certain that welfare staff took the issue seriously. We had telephone conversations with about 500 schools in the weeks following the census. It was common for a staff member to have gone around the school consulting key people (pastoral care teachers, year coordinators, the school counsellor, staff in the school office, and so on). In other schools, the issue was discussed at a staff meeting, and in some schools the Deputy Principal and the welfare coordinator sat down and made a list of all the cases they were aware of. In one school, two teachers prepared independent estimates and forwarded them to the research centre. One estimated 19 homeless students and the other 20.

Nonetheless, a minority of schools were worried about their estimates. They were concerned that there could be homeless students that they did not know about. Significant undercounting is more likely to occur in schools with large enrolments and only a small number of welfare staff. We encountered this problem when we carried out the first census in 1994. On that occasion, we estimated the undercount at between five and 10 per cent, based on fieldwork.

This time we propose to make the adjustment based on information gleaned from telephone interviews after the census. One-third of secondary schools have an enrolment of less than 400. In these ‘small schools’, the welfare teacher is likely to know if a student becomes homeless. Another one-third have an enrolment of between 400 and 799 (‘medium schools’). The final one-third have an enrolment of 800 or more (‘large schools’). In these schools the risk of undercounting is greater.

Last time we made a uniform adjustment of between five and 10 per cent. This time we make an adjustment of 10 per cent for large schools, five per cent for medium schools, and
no adjustment for small schools. This takes into account that the risk of undercounting is greater in large schools. It also means that the adjustment is not uniform across the country, because there are more large schools in some states.

Table 3.1 presents four sets of figures. First, there is the raw data from the census assuming 100 per cent response rate. It shows 11,461 homeless students in census week.

Second, there is the percentage adjustment for undercounting following the procedures outlined. It varies between the states, but the overall adjustment is 6.7 per cent.

Third, Table 3.1 shows the final figures from the census. There were 12,230 homeless school students in census week. The numbers are similar in New South Wales (3,060), Victoria (2,890) and Queensland (3,070). There were 1,020 homeless students in South Australia, 830 in Western Australia, 570 in Tasmania, 320 in the ACT and 460 in the Northern Territory.

Finally, the table shows the rate of homelessness per 1,000 of the school population. This allows us to compare states and territories with different population sizes:

- The rate is highest in the Northern Territory where there were 37 cases per 1,000 of the school population. We comment on this in the next section.
- The rate is lowest in New South Wales and Western Australia where there were seven cases per 1,000 of the school population - in a typical school with 1,000 students, there were seven homeless teenagers.
- The rate is higher in Queensland (15 per 1,000), the ACT (14 per 1,000) and Tasmania (14 per 1,000) - double the rate in New South Wales and Western Australia.
- In Victoria and South Australia, the rate is somewhere in between (10 and 11 cases per 1,000 respectively).

### Table 3.1: Number of homeless secondary students and rate of homelessness per 1,000 of the school population, by state and territory

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<th>ACT</th>
<th>NT</th>
<th>Aust</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of homeless</td>
<td>2,862</td>
<td>2,698</td>
<td>2,870</td>
<td>961</td>
<td>783</td>
<td>537</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>449</td>
<td>11,461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(raw data)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Adjustment for</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>undercount (%)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of homeless</td>
<td>3,063</td>
<td>2,886</td>
<td>3,073</td>
<td>1,018</td>
<td>829</td>
<td>574</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>460</td>
<td>12,227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(final figures)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Rate per 1,000</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of the school</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>population</td>
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</table>
The rate of student homelessness clearly varies by state. However, the overall homeless population aged 12 to 18 comprises four groups: school students, TAFE students, unemployed teenagers, and a small number of young people who have full-time work. Can we infer from the findings on school students that the overall rate of youth homelessness is lower in New South Wales and Western Australia - and roughly double in Queensland, Tasmania and the ACT? The ‘uneven spread hypothesis’ will be investigated in Chapter 4.

Northern Territory

The high rate of homelessness in the Northern Territory can be explained, in part, because there was a subtle change in how we operationalised the definition of homelessness. During the first school census in 1994, many schools in remote indigenous communities contacted us to discuss the definition. Teachers told us that it was common for young people to stay with members of their extended family for either long or short periods of time, but this was not considered ‘homelessness’. However, a minority reported that all their students were ‘homeless’, recording them as ‘moving around’. In response to these different assessments, we made a technical decision to treat all remote Indigenous communities as zero returns.

In the 2001 census, we asked remote schools to include Indigenous young people who were moving frequently between members of their extended families. This time the research team had telephone conversations with Principals in nearly all the remote schools. In the course of those conversations, teachers distinguished between ‘normal’ moving around and young people who were not receiving adequate care.

Indigenous teenagers often stay with members of their extended families, under widely accepted obligations that operate within Aboriginal communities. Their whereabouts are ‘known’ and they are ‘supervised’. These young people are engaged in culturally appropriate behaviour in Indigenous communities, and no-one regards them as ‘homeless’. School Principals generally took the same view as the community in which they worked.

However, there were other young people moving around the community who were ‘fending for themselves’ and not receiving adequate care. These students were described as drifting between households, with little supervision and irregular school attendance. Principals identified them as ‘homeless’.

Table 3.2: Percentage of homeless students who were in remote, Indigenous communities, by state and territory

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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage in remote communities</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.2 shows that 56 per cent of homeless students in the Northern Territory were in remote communities. If homeless students in remote schools are removed from the state total, then the rate of homelessness in the Northern territory is 16 per 1,000, or about the same as in Queensland (15 per 1,000), Tasmania and the ACT (14 per 1,000).

**Current Accommodation**

Young people who leave home permanently often move frequently from one form of temporary accommodation to another. Jemma, 17, attends a state school in Western Sydney. She had been out of home for six month at the time of the census. Her mother suffers from depression and Jemma was asked to leave. Jemma went to her father’s place for six weeks, but she was ejected after an altercation with her step mother. Then she spent a couple of weeks at her older brother’s place, but this was a temporary arrangement. From there she moved into a bungalow, but she felt unsafe because the man in the house ‘watched her’. This was followed by a three-week stay in a youth refuge. After that, she boarded with a friend’s older sister, but they had a young family and it was hard to do school work. In census week, she had been boarding with another family for two months and this was providing some stability. ‘After some very difficult times, she is now doing well at school and will complete Year 12.’

Jemma’s case illustrates that homeless students often move frequently from one form of temporary arrangement to another. However, Jemma would have been classified as ‘recently homeless’ (in need of continuing support) in census week because she was now boarding with another family on a relatively permanent basis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.3: Number of currently homeless and recently homeless students, by state and territory (percentages)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Currently homeless</td>
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<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Recently homeless</td>
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</table>

Table 3.3 shows that about one-third of the homeless students in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Tasmania and the ACT were classified as ‘recently homeless’ and approximately two-thirds were classified as ‘currently homeless’. In Western Australia and South Australia, about three-quarters of the students were reported as ‘currently homeless’ and one-quarter were ‘recently homeless’. In the Northern Territory nearly all were currently homeless.
Table 3.4 provides details on where the recently homeless students were in census week. About 70 per cent of these students were attempting to live independently. They were either boarding with other households or attempting to maintain private rental accommodation, usually in shared households. Fourteen per cent had ‘returned home’, but the school was providing continuing support or concerned that the arrangement would breakdown. Another 14 per cent were in foster care arrangement, but again the school was either providing support or sceptical that the placement would succeed.

Table 3.4: Current accommodation (census week) of students who had been homeless recently, by state and territory (percentages)

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rent flat or house.</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board with friends</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster parents</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back with parents</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
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</table>

Overall, seventy per cent of the students were ‘currently homeless’. Gwen, 15, was born in Vietnam. Her father is unknown and her mother committed suicide when she was three. Gwen was brought up by her grandparents in the Northern suburbs of Adelaide. As she reached adolescence, there was increasing conflict with her grandparents about ‘appropriate’ behaviour for a young woman:

Grandparents say she can’t have an Australian boyfriend and they don’t like her going out in mixed groups ... told her that she has ‘bad blood’ because she is illegitimate ... student suffers from depression ... also self harming behaviour ... left home three weeks ago ... has been staying at different friends’ places

Richie, 16, attends a State High School in Southern Brisbane. He has been homeless for ten weeks:

After his parents divorced, Richie moved to Brisbane to be with his father. The relationship has been volatile, particularly since his father met a new partner. Once she moved in the clashes became more frequent. Richie has left home on several occasions in the last year. About two and a half months ago, his father hit him with a cricket bat, fracturing his nose ... Richie hasn’t been back.

Richie stays at various friends’ and relatives’ places. According to the school he ‘moves all the time’.
Table 3.5 shows that most of the students were in the secondary population. Just over 80 percent were staying temporarily with other households or moving around. Another 16 percent were in SAAP accommodation, such as refuges, hostels, medium to long-term housing or community placements. Only two percent were ‘on the streets’ (primary homelessness).

In the ACT, schools reported that 29 percent of their homeless students were in SAAP accommodation. The equivalent figure for Victoria is 24 percent and for New South Wales 18 percent. In Queensland, 11 percent were in SAAP, and in Western Australia it was eight percent. It is difficult to interpret these patterns. The figures may indicate variation in the supply of SAAP beds across the country, or be a function of young people’s access to SAAP. If a young person becomes homeless in the ACT, all the SAAP services will be nearby and they are more likely to access SAAP. If someone becomes homeless in a small regional centre in Queensland or Western Australia, there may be no SAAP service in their community.

### Social Characteristics
The first census of homeless school students found that 56 percent of the students were young women and 44 percent were young men. Table 3.6 shows that the gender composition of the population has remained the same. There are some differences between the states, but overall 45 percent of students were male and 55 percent were female.
Most students are young when they have their first experience of homelessness and some move in and out of home a number of times before making a ‘permanent break’. The case notes on Gwen indicate that she had been out of home a number of times prior to the current dispute. Richie had also left home previously. Table 3.7 shows that a quarter (23 per cent) of the young people were 14 or younger, 44 per cent were 15 or 16, and one-third (31 per cent) were 17 to 18.

There were three patterns. Over 40 per cent of the homeless students in Victoria, Tasmania and the ACT were aged 17 to 18; about 30 per cent were in the same age group in New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia; and less than 20 per cent were in the older age group in Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

The mean age in Western Australia and the Northern Territory was 15.1 and 14.5 years respectively. In South Australia, New South Wales and Queensland it was 15.9, 15.7 and 15.4 years. In Victoria, Tasmania, the ACT it was 16.1, 16.3 and 16.4 years. On average, homeless students are older in some states.

One possible explanation for this variation is that when schools are effective at early intervention, homeless students are more likely to stay on at school. This causes the age profile of the homeless population to rise, because more of them complete Years 11 and 12. This will be called the ‘differential school effectiveness’ hypothesis. It will be investigated in Chapter 4.
State and Catholic Schools

About three-quarters (77 per cent) of all secondary schools in the study were in the state system and one quarter (23 per cent) were Catholic. Table 3.8 shows 93 per cent of homeless teenagers are in the state system. There were 11,370 homeless students in state schools and 860 homeless teenagers in the Catholic system.

Nonetheless, 41 per cent of Catholic schools reported homeless students in census week, and another 14 per cent reported cases in the preceding 12 months. However, the numbers are usually small in Catholic schools. In contrast, 69 per cent of State schools reported homeless students in census week and another 10 per cent knew of cases in the preceding 12 months. The numbers are relatively low in most state schools as well - 15 per cent reported 10 or more cases – but the problem of homelessness is more widespread in the state system.

Table 3.8: Proportion of homeless students in state and Catholic schools, by state and territory (percentages)

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Summary

This chapter has reviewed the main findings from the second national census of homeless school students in August 2001, using a service delivery definition of homelessness. There were 12,230 homeless students in census week, spread thinly across the country. One quarter (23 per cent) were 14 or younger, 44 per cent were 15 or 16, and one-third (31 per cent) were 17 or 18. There were slightly more girls than boys (55 per cent to 45 per cent).

Sixty-nine per cent of state schools reported homeless students in census week, as did 41 per cent of Catholic schools. However, 93 per cent of homeless students were in the state system.

There were marked differences in the rate of homelessness across the country. It was lowest in New South Wales and Western Australia where there were seven cases per 1,000 of the school population. It was higher in Victoria and South Australia where there were 10 and 11 cases per 1,000 respectively. In Tasmania, Queensland and the ACT the rate doubled to either 14 or 15 cases per 1,000. In Chapter 4 we examine two hypotheses that attempt to explain why student homelessness is higher in some states.

2 As indicated on page 13, we did not include non-Catholic private schools in the census.
Two Hypotheses

This chapter investigates the total number of homeless young people aged 12 to 18. It uses the cultural definition of homelessness, following the precedents established at the 1996 census (Chamberlain 1999). The overall homeless population includes school students, TAFE students, unemployed teenagers, and a small number of young people who have full-time work.

The chapter also attempts to explain why the rate of student homelessness is higher in Queensland, Tasmania and the ACT, and lower in New South Wales and Western Australia. Victoria and South Australia are somewhere in between. The Northern Territory will be discussed separately. We developed two working hypotheses to guide our investigations.

First, the ‘uneven spread hypothesis’ contends that the overall youth homeless population is distributed unevenly, following the patterns identified in the school census. It argues that the overall number of homeless young people is lower in New South Wales and Western Australia, and higher in Queensland, Tasmania and the ACT. The argument assumes that the proportion of school students in the homeless population is about the same in all states.

In 1995, we attended a public forum in New South Wales, which discussed the results from the 1994 census. New South Wales had recorded seven homeless students per 1,000 (the same as in 2001), and this was significantly lower than in other states. An official from the Department of Education explained that this was because homelessness is lower in New South Wales. He was articulating the ‘uneven spread hypothesis’.

Our alternative hunch was the ‘differential school effectiveness hypothesis’. This draws attention to the fact that ‘schools are sites for early intervention’, where it is possible to provide assistance to young people (and their families) if they are experiencing major conflicts at home. Schools can also support students to remain at school, even if they cannot live at home. The differential school effectiveness hypotheses predicts that schools in some states are doing better at early intervention than others. It predicts that these states will have more homeless school students and fewer homeless unemployed teenagers.

We use the two working hypotheses to order our analysis. The first task is to establish the overall homeless population aged 12 to 18.
How Many Homeless Youth?
In order to estimate the overall homeless population aged 12 to 18, we revert to the cultural definition of homelessness, following the precedents established by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) at the 1996 census (Chamberlain 1999). The ABS counts people in the primary, secondary and tertiary population. It does not count people who are ‘at risk’, or formerly homeless people who need continuing assistance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NSW</th>
<th>Vic</th>
<th>Qld</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>WA</th>
<th>Tas</th>
<th>ACT</th>
<th>NT</th>
<th>Aust</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of homeless school students</td>
<td>2,116</td>
<td>1,898</td>
<td>2,029</td>
<td>778</td>
<td>635</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>432</td>
<td>8,485</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1 shows the number of homeless school students, using the cultural definition of homelessness. The numbers were similar in New South Wales (2,116), Victoria (1,898) and Queensland (2,029). In South Australia, the figure was just below 800; in Western Australia it was 635; in Tasmania it was 385. In the ACT there were 212 homeless students and in the Northern Territory it was 432.

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 we could establish the proportion of school students in the homeless population, then it would be possible to estimate the number of homeless young people in each state and territory. For example, if we knew that school students were 70 per cent of the homeless in New South Wales, then the homeless population in that state would be 3,023 (2,116 x 100/70 = 3,023).

At the first census, we used data from the National SAAP Census (May 1994) to estimate the proportion of school students in the youth homeless population. It was 36.5 per cent. 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 data base 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. These are known as ‘support periods’ and they can be for differing lengths of time. In 82 per cent 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.

3 This is unweighted SAAP data.
Table 4.2: 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ACT</th>
<th>Vic</th>
<th>Tas</th>
<th>NSW</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>Qld</th>
<th>NT</th>
<th>WA</th>
<th>Aust</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of students</td>
<td>53.0</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>33.9</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>34.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2 shows that school students utilised 34.8 per cent of support periods in SAAP in the year preceding the 2001 census. Table 4.2 also demonstrates that there is marked variation in the number of support periods for school students by state and territory. In the ACT, it was 53.0 per cent. In Victoria it was 40.7 per cent and in Tasmania it was 38.2 per cent. The figures are similar in New South Wales (33.9 per cent), South Australia (32.5 per cent) and Queensland (31.8 per cent). The percentage drops to 29.5 in the Northern Territory and to 18.1 in Western Australia. We use these figures to calculate the overall number of homeless people aged 12 to 18 in census week 2001.

The ‘uneven spread hypothesis’ predicts that the rate of homelessness will be lower in New South Wales and Western Australia, and roughly double in Queensland and Tasmania. Table 4.2 follows the patterns in the school census. Table 4.3 shows that the population is unevenly spread, but it does not follow the patterns in the school student census.

Table 4.3: 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NSW</th>
<th>Vic</th>
<th>ACT</th>
<th>Qld</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>WA</th>
<th>Tas</th>
<th>NT</th>
<th>Aust</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of homeless</td>
<td>6,242</td>
<td>4,663</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>6,381</td>
<td>2,394</td>
<td>3,508</td>
<td>1,008</td>
<td>1,464</td>
<td>26,060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate per 1,000</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, there were 26,060 homeless young people in census week, and the rate of homelessness was 14 per 1,000 of the youth population. There are three patterns. First, there were 10 homeless young people per 1,000 of the youth population in New South Wales and Victoria. In the ACT it was 12.5 per 1,000. We will refer to this as the ‘lower cluster’. There were 6,240 homeless young people in New South Wales, 4,660 in Victoria, and 400 in the ACT (11,300 young people or 43 per cent of the homeless).

In Western Australia and Queensland, the rate of homelessness was 18 per 1,000; in South Australia it was 17 per 1,000, and in Tasmania it was 21 per 1,000. We will refer to this as the ‘higher cluster’. There were 6,380 homeless young people in
Queensland, 3,500 in Western Australia, 2,400 in South Australia, and 1,000 in Tasmania. Altogether, there were 13,290 homeless teenagers in these states (51 per cent of the homeless).

Third, there is the Northern Territory pattern, where the rate of homelessness was 69 per 1,000. In Chapter 3, it was pointed out that 56 per cent of the homeless school students in the Territory were in remote Indigenous communities. If these teenagers are excluded from the calculation, then the rate is 32 per 1,000. This is still three times the rate in Victoria and New South Wales. The overall number of homeless teenagers in the Territory was 1,460 (including remote communities in the calculation). This is 5.6 per cent of the homeless population.

We have established that there were 26,000 homeless young people in census week. We have also established that youth homelessness is unevenly spread. Next we investigate whether there is any truth in the ‘differential school effectiveness hypothesis’.

School Effectiveness
There are three groups in the homeless population, besides school students. First, there are TAFE student aged 15 to 18. They are also likely to be in the earlier stages of the homeless career, although this group is probably more diverse than the school student population.

Second, there are unemployed teenagers aged 15 to 18. They are more likely to have made the transition to chronicity. In the National SAAP Data Collection, young people are recorded as ‘unemployed’ if they have ‘looked for work in the preceding four weeks’, following ABS conventions about the definition of unemployment (ABS, The Labour Force, Catalogue No. 6203.0). Another sizeable group are classified as ‘not in the labour force’ because they have not looked for work in the preceding four weeks. In the main they are disillusioned teenagers who have dropped out of the labour force. We will treat them as part of the unemployed.

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. However, they have difficulty distinguishing between those who are unemployed and those who are not in the labour force, using strict ABS definitions. Thus, our category of ‘unemployed’ includes those classified as unemployed and not in the labour force. It also includes a small number of homeless young people who are marginally attached to the labour force, reporting either casual or part-time work.

Third, there are homeless young people who report that they have full-time work. In most cases, these teenagers experience a temporary crisis and return to secure accommodation quickly.
We focus on the number of young people in different segments of the population, comparing states in the ‘low’ and ‘high’ clusters, as well as making some brief comments on the Northern Territory.

**Pattern 1: NSW, Vic and the ACT**

We have just 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 4.4 shows that 53 per cent of homeless young people in the ACT were still at school and 40 per cent were unemployed. In New South Wales, 34 per cent were still at school and 56 per cent were unemployed. Schools in Victoria have a higher percentage at school than in New South Wales (41 per cent compared with 34 per cent), but less than in the ACT (41 per cent compared with 53 per cent). New South Wales, Victoria and the ACT have a similar rate of youth homelessness, but students who become homeless in New South Wales are more likely to drop out of school.

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

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

The 1994 census found that between two-thirds and three-quarters of all schools in major urban areas reported homeless school students (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1998, p.78). Table 4.5 shows the figures for New South Wales, Victoria and the ACT in 2001: 79 per cent of schools in Newcastle, Wollongong and the Central Coast reported homeless students; in Melbourne it was 81 per cent; in Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong it was 76 per cent; and in Canberra it was 82 per cent. The exception is Sydney where it was 62 per cent.
Yet the rate of youth homelessness in New South Wales, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory is about the same. We know that most young people have their first experience of homelessness when they are at school. If schools are unaware of these students – or do not provide assistance – then they drop through the early intervention net. Most join the ranks of the homeless unemployed and some make the ‘transition to chronicity’. In Sydney, a smaller proportion of schools reported homeless students, yet the rate of homelessness is 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 schools in Melbourne, Canberra or other regional centres.

**Pattern 2: WA, SA,Qld and Tas**

In Western Australia and Queensland, the rate of homelessness was 18 per 1,000; in South Australia it was 17 per 1,000; and in Tasmania it was 21 per 1,000. This is about 80 per cent higher than in New South Wales and Victoria.

An example will put this in perspective. There were 6,380 homeless teenagers in Queensland (18 cases per 1,000) and 6,240 homeless teenagers in New South Wales (10 cases per 1,000). New South Wales had 617,500 young people aged 12 to 18, whereas Queensland had 362,600. The difference between the ‘low cluster’ and the ‘high cluster’ is substantial.

### Table 4.5: Proportion of schools reporting homeless students in major urban areas in New South Wales, Victoria and the ACT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newcastle, Wollongong, Central Coast</th>
<th>Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong</th>
<th>Canberra</th>
<th>Sydney</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of schools with homeless students</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Yet the rate of youth homelessness in New South Wales, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory is about the same. We know that most young people have their first experience of homelessness when they are at school. If schools are unaware of these students – or do not provide assistance – then they drop through the early intervention net. Most join the ranks of the homeless unemployed and some make the ‘transition to chronicity’. In Sydney, a smaller proportion of schools reported homeless students, yet the rate of homelessness is 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 schools in Melbourne, Canberra or other regional centres.

**Pattern 2: WA, SA,Qld and Tas**

In Western Australia and Queensland, the rate of homelessness was 18 per 1,000; in South Australia it was 17 per 1,000; and in Tasmania it was 21 per 1,000. This is about 80 per cent higher than in New South Wales and Victoria.

An example will put this in perspective. There were 6,380 homeless teenagers in Queensland (18 cases per 1,000) and 6,240 homeless teenagers in New South Wales (10 cases per 1,000). New South Wales had 617,500 young people aged 12 to 18, whereas Queensland had 362,600. The difference between the ‘low cluster’ and the ‘high cluster’ is substantial.
It is more difficult for schools to assist homeless teenagers when they have high numbers of homeless students. There is a tendency for schools to become ‘overwhelmed’ if the problem is large. However, this can be moderated if there are effective early intervention policies in place. Tasmania had 21 homeless young people per 1,000 of the youth population, double the rate in Victoria (10 per 1,000) and New South Wales (10 per 1,000). Table 4.6 shows that 38 per cent of young people in Tasmania were still at school, only slightly behind Victoria (41 per cent), and ahead of New South Wales (34 per cent) (Table 4.4).

As we have just seen, in Tasmania 38 per cent of homeless teenagers were still at school; in Queensland and South Australia it was 32 per cent; and in Western Australia it was 18 per cent (Table 4.6). Conversely, 50 per cent of the homeless teenagers in Tasmania were unemployed; in South Australia and Queensland it was 60 per cent; and in Western Australia it was 71 per cent. These states have a similar problem with youth homelessness. However, homeless teenagers are more likely to remain in school in Tasmania, and most likely to leave school in Western Australia.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.6: Estimated number of young people in different segments of the homeless youth population, Western Australia, South Australia, Queensland and Tasmania **</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAFE student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Less than 0.5 per cent
** Percentages to one decimal place were used to make the calculations. However, percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number in the table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.7: Proportion of schools reporting homeless students in major urban areas in Tasmania, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hobart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of schools with homeless students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Cairns, Townsville, Rockhampton, Mackay, Bundaberg and Gladstone
Table 4.7 shows that 73 per cent of schools in Hobart reported homeless students; the figure was 88 per cent in the cities on Tasmania’s North coast. In Brisbane, 73 per cent of schools had cases; the figure was 77 per cent in schools on the Sunshine Coast, the Gold Coast, and in the six major coastal cities from Bundaberg to Cairns. In Adelaide, 77 per cent of schools reported homeless students. This time the exception is Perth, where it was 61 per cent. The same point applies as for the findings in Table 4.5. Tasmania, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia had a similar rate of youth homelessness. Yet in Perth a significantly lower proportion of schools reported homeless students. The inference is that homeless students leave West Australian schools at a faster rate than in other states.

**Pattern 3: Northern Territory**

Table 4.8 shows that 30 per cent of homeless young people in the Northern Territory were still at school and 62 per cent were unemployed. This is similar to the pattern found in South Australia and Queensland (Table 5.6). The number at school in the Territory is significantly higher than in Western Australia (30 per cent compared with 18 per cent) and the number who are unemployed is lower (62 per cent compared with 71 per cent). However, the rate of youth homelessness is higher in the Territory because schools have a large number of homeless students, but do not ‘hold on’ to them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School student</td>
<td>432</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAFE student</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>906</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time work</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1,464</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Percentages to one decimal place were used to make the calculations. However, percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number in the table.
There are a number of factors in the Territory that are associated with 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. In the Northern Territory about one-quarter (25 per cent) of the population is Indigenous. Some Indigenous people live in the urban centres such as Darwin, Alice Springs, Tenant Creek and Katherine. Others live in camps close to those centres, while some live in remote communities. Three-quarters (78 per cent) of the homeless school students in the Territory were Indigenous, and about 70 per cent of those students were 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 are major contributing factors to Indigenous young people becoming detached and transient.

Conclusion
This chapter set out to investigate two questions. First, it aimed to establish the overall number of homeless young people aged 12 to 18, using the cultural definition of homelessness. We combined information from the national census of homeless students with SAAP data to make the calculation. The final estimate is 26,000 homeless young people aged 12 to 18.

Second, we wanted to explain why the rate of school student homelessness was higher in Queensland, Tasmania and the ACT and lower in New South Wales and Western Australia. We had two hypotheses to guide our investigation.

First, the uneven spread hypothesis claimed that the overall youth homeless population is distributed unevenly, following the patterns identified in the school student census. In fact, we found three patterns. There were 10 to 12 homeless young people per 1,000 of the youth population in New South Wales, Victoria and the ACT. This is the low cluster. There were 18 to 20 cases per 1,000 in Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania. This is the high cluster. The Northern Territory was much higher again.

Our alternative argument was the ‘differential school effectiveness hypothesis’. This draws attention to the fact that schools are sites for early intervention where it is possible to assist to young people and their families to reconcile their differences, or to help young people remain at school as independent students. We found evidence in both the lower and the higher cluster to support the contention that schools in some states are probably doing better at early intervention than others.

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4 Two per cent of the population identify as Indigenous in the census, but 16 per cent of SAAP clients were Aboriginal in 2000-2001 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2001, p.xvi).
This chapter begins by summarising the overall picture, drawing attention to important methodological and conceptual issues. Then we investigate whether youth homelessness is increasing. After that, we restate the argument for early intervention, before reviewing policy developments since 1995. Finally, we summarise the key empirical findings which have bearing on policy.

**Overall Picture**

There is continuing debate about the definition of homelessness in Western countries. However, in Australia there is an emerging consensus about an operational definition that is appropriate in an Australian context. It is termed the ‘cultural definition’ of homelessness. Three segments in the homeless population are identified:

- **Primary homelessness**: people without conventional accommodation - living on the streets, in deserted buildings, in cars, under bridges, in improvised dwellings etc.
- **Secondary homelessness**: people moving between various forms of temporary shelter, including friends, relatives, emergency accommodation and boarding houses.
- **Tertiary homelessness**: people living in single rooms in private boarding houses on a long-term basis – without their own bathroom, kitchen or security of tenure.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics used this definition for enumerating the homeless population at the 1996 census (Chamberlain 1999). The same definition has been used in this report.

Table 5.1 summarises the number of young people in different segments of the homeless population on census night, by state and territory, using the cultural definition of homelessness. Overall, there were 26,000 homeless young people aged 12 to 18, including 15,000 unemployed youth, 8,500 school students, and 2,100 TAFE students. The numbers were highest in Queensland (6,380) and New South Wales (6,240), followed by Victoria (4,660) Western Australia (3,508), and South Australia (2,400).
Homelessness is best understood as a process, and it is often difficult for welfare staff in schools to know exactly when homelessness ‘begins’ and ‘ends’. One consequence is that service providers often favour definitions of homelessness that are broader than the cultural definition. These are referred to as ‘service delivery’ definitions, and they often include people who are at risk, as well as people who are attempting to return to secure accommodation after a period of homelessness.

In Chapter 3 we utilised a service delivery definition of homelessness. This was based on the cultural definition, but it asked schools to include students who had been ‘homeless within the preceding three months, if they were in need of continuing support’. Schools identified 3,742 in this category, an increase of 44 per cent on the number identified as ‘actually homeless’ (3,742/8,485 x 100 = 44 per cent). If there were similar numbers of TAFE students and unemployed youth in the same situation, it would add 11,300 to the baseline figure of 26,000 homeless youth.

### Is Youth Homelessness Increasing?

Following the first national census of youth homeless in 1994, we used the methodology outlined in Chapter 4 to estimate the number of homeless young people aged 12 to 18. Table 5.2 shows that there were 21,000 homeless young people in 1994, compared with 26,000 in 2001. This is an increase of 24 per cent (26,060 – 21,000/21,000 x 100 = 24 per cent). However, we have to take into account both how we operationalised the definition of homelessness in 2001, as well as the increase in the youth population over time.

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

Table 5.1: Estimated number of young people aged 12 to 18 in different segments of the homeless population, by state and territory.
There was a subtle difference in how we operationalised the cultural definition in 2001. In 1994 we made a technical decision to treat all schools in remote indigenous communities as zero returns, because teachers were inconsistent in how they applied the definition of homelessness. However, in 2001 we had telephone conversations with the Principal in most remote schools, and estimates were made that operationalised the definition more consistently. This time we included their returns.

Table 5.2: Estimated number of homeless youth aged 12 to 18 and rate of homelessness, 1994 and 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1994</th>
<th>2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of homeless aged 12 to 18</td>
<td>21,000</td>
<td>26,060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of homeless aged 12 to 18, adjusted using 1994 protocols</td>
<td>21,000</td>
<td>24,230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate per 1,000</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.2 includes an adjusted calculation for 2001 which treats schools in remote communities as zero returns, before estimating up to the overall population. This is a fairer way to compare over time. It means that the 1994 and 2001 figures are calculated in the same way, although it underestimates the total number of homeless young people identified in 2001. Using this method, Table 5.2 shows that the number of homeless young people rose from 21,000 to 24,230.

Second, in order to quantify the change in the number of homeless over time, we also have to take into account that the youth population increased between 1994 and 2001 (from 1.77m to 1.88m). For comparative purposes, the number of homeless young people needs to be expressed as a 'number per 1,000 of the youth population'. This controls for changes in population size. Table 5.2 shows that the rate of homelessness increased from 11.9 cases per 1,000 in 1994 to 12.9 per 1,000 in 2001, an increase of 8.4 per cent (12.9 – 11.9 / 11.9 x 100 = 8.4 per cent).

Overall, we confirm that our final estimate is 26,060 homeless young people aged 12 to 18. The number of homeless teenagers has increased by 8.4 per cent between 1994 and 2001.
Argument for Early Intervention

Most young people have their first experience of homelessness while they are still at school. The findings from the national census of homeless school students confirm this interpretation.

Our core argument is that schools are sites for early intervention where it is possible to provide young people with assistance at the earliest stages of the ‘homeless career’. The first tangible indicator of ‘homelessness’ is when a young person leaves home for at least one night without their parent’s permission. This is the ‘tentative break’. In some cases it is a once only experience. In other cases, the underlying family problems are not resolved, and some teenagers begin to move in and out of home. Some students move through the ‘in and out’ stage quickly, whereas others remain in it for a sustained period of time. This is a critical time for early intervention where it is possible to facilitate family reconciliation.

The ‘permanent break’ is the next biographical transition. It signifies that the young person no longer thinks of himself or herself as belonging to the family unit, and that he or she is unlikely to return ‘home’ on a continuing basis. This concept is used in a metaphorical sense to denote a major transformation in a young person’s sense of personal identity. Once young people have made a permanent break, the opportunity for ‘early intervention’ has passed.

However, schools still have a critical role to play because they can support young people who want to remain at school and make the transition to independent living. Some young people experience an emotional roller-coaster ride as they come to terms with family breakdown and need ongoing counselling. Others need practical assistance with applications for income support, help with accommodation, and assistance with budgeting. This is ‘early intervention’ in a broader sense of the term. It is equally important.

Students who drop out become involved in the homeless sub-culture. Some become immersed in the sub-culture quickly, although others remain on the margins. Those who become immersed in the sub-culture often make the ‘transition to chronicity’. This denotes the acceptance of homelessness as a ‘way of life’. These teenagers have come to accept crime, substance abuse, drug dealing and prostitution as a normal part of everyday life (O’Connor 1989; HREOC 1989; Hirst 1989). Experienced youth workers know that it is difficult to help young people who have made the transition to chronicity, because they no longer express a strong disposition to change their lifestyle.
Policy Developments since 1995
Since 1995, there has been an explicit turn in youth policy towards building an early intervention capacity in schools and local communities. The House of Representatives (1995) Report on Aspects of Youth Homelessness (the Morris Report) stated that ‘early intervention is probably the one area of public policy which could deliver the greatest returns in terms of increased social cohesion through the reduction in the levels of family breakdown and long term welfare dependency’. The report gave particular attention to improved family support services and an early intervention strategy in schools.

One of the first initiatives taken by the new Liberal-National Party Government in 1996 was on youth homelessness, with an expressed focus on ‘early intervention’. A Prime Ministerial Taskforce was set up to oversee a large pilot program:

The Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme signals the Government’s intention to increase the service emphasis on early intervention strategies – that is, before the first key transition, a permanent break from home and family, is reached. This will … assist family reconciliation through early intervention. (Prime Ministerial Youth Homeless Taskforce 1996, p.10)

The Taskforce funded 26 pilot projects at a cost of $8 million over two years. There was an ongoing action research program, and an extensive evaluation. The Taskforce’s report was launched in December 1998. It reported encouraging results from the pilot projects and led to the establishment of the Reconnect Program.

The Reconnect Program provides support for homeless teenagers and young people ‘at risk’. The target was 100 services across Australia, and there was recurrent funding of $22 million for four years. In 2002 there are 93 services around Australia with about 190 early intervention workers. This was a significant programmatic response.

In the first 18 months of Reconnect, just over 6,000 young people were assisted and about three-quarters (77 per cent) of these cases had been finalised (Reconnect Data Report, 2001). About 85 per cent of the young people were between 14 and 18, and two-thirds were in full-time education or training. Three-quarters were residing with their parents at the time of their first contact, but one-third had previously left home on at least one occasion. About 85 per cent of this group were still at home after support. The remaining 25 per cent were homeless, but nearly half had reconciled with their family by the end of the support period. The program has about a 75 per cent success rate. There seems to be a capacity for this program to increase its client base significantly as the full complement of services become operational.
The Prime Minister’s Youth Homeless Taskforce also recommended a further inquiry into the transition from school to work and/or further training. This inquiry is known as the ‘Youth Pathways Action Taskforce’ and it has tabled its recommendations. Some of the recommendations on ‘transition support’ may be implemented in the 2002-3 budget.

There are several other important developments that have contributed to the national early intervention capacity. The Full Service Schools program was a one-off initiative of $22m that accompanied the implementation of the Youth Allowance. The funds went to 65 clusters, with most projects involving several schools. This program funded a wide range of support activities, usually supporting young people at risk. The evaluation of this program concluded that early intervention had become widely embedded in many schools and communities.

Some states have also made a significant investment in early intervention. In Victoria, a comprehensive student support policy is contained in the Framework for Student Support in Victorian Government Schools. This policy framework is probably the most comprehensive in Australia. Some $34m is allocated to schools for 300 student welfare coordinators. They are trained teachers who also take on welfare responsibilities. Every secondary school has a student welfare coordinator, and larger schools have more than one, or several people on different campuses. In addition, $43m is allocated for social workers, guidance officers and psychologists. Following the Victorian Task Force Report on Suicide Prevention report in 1997, the government increased spending for school counsellors by $8m a year and initiated the School Focused Youth Service (SFYS) program. This program deployed 41 community workers to lead the development of improved coordination between schools and community agencies.

In New South Wales secondary schools, student welfare is typically coordinated by a head teacher or designated coordinator and the welfare team involves several teachers as well as the school counsellor(s) responsible for supporting students in that school. School counsellors are teachers with post-graduate training in psychology. In 1996, the number of school counsellors was increased by 200 and there are currently about 790 school counsellors and guidance officers. Other student support services include 84 home-school liaison officers with 12 working specifically with aboriginal students, 300 behaviour support teachers as well as drug education, and aboriginal and multicultural education consultants. District level support is coordinated by 40 equity and student welfare consultants. There are several initiatives for developing a more integrated community support for young people such as the School-Link Program, and a large scale in-service education for counsellors on adolescent mental health issues.
In Queensland, there are 165 guidance officers located in secondary schools. These people are school based and every medium to large secondary school has at least one guidance officer. In July 1997 a Youth Support Coordinator Initiative was established as a three year pilot program to address issues of student homelessness and early school leaving. A budget of $1.9m was approved in 1996/97 and allocated to 13 services around the state with a target of 35 participating schools. The evaluation concluded that:

The initiative has been successful and should be maintained as a key program for the prevention of, and early intervention in, early school leaving and student homelessness. (Department of Families, Youth and Community Care, 1999, p.1)

The Youth Support Coordinators Initiative has subsequently been funded as an ongoing program.

In Tasmania, there has been a lot of activity in recent years to strengthen the welfare infrastructure in schools, especially in the eight senior secondary colleges. Tasmania has social workers and guidance officers located in schools but they are managed through district offices. There are 70 such positions and districts will often find ways to achieve a more generous provision than warranted under the official formula. Senior colleges organise their own welfare support and typically this is a small team of about three counsellors and support workers in each senior college.

South Australia’s system for student support is similar in many ways to Victoria. It is strongly school based. There are 186.5 equivalent full-time student welfare coordinators who are in schools across the state and 135 generic welfare officers located in regional and district offices. There are two alternative schools for at risk students, and 32 personnel supporting alternative pathways for students under 15 years of age, who are having difficulty in mainstream schools.

Western Australia has 166 welfare officers but they are located in district offices following a restructure in 1998 which moved these staff from school based locations. They move between different schools, as needed. All schools are responsible for deciding the profile of student support staff. A senior high school with 500 or more students will typically have: a school nurse who spends 0.3 of her time in feeder primary schools; a psychologist; a school-based police officer; and, sometimes, a part-time chaplain. Smaller schools have less resources.
The ACT has high schools and senior colleges, similar to Tasmania. High schools typically have at least one full-time counsellor, while senior colleges have a welfare team. In the ACT, secondary schools are well resourced—probably better than in any other state.

Schools in the Northern Territory are well provided with welfare support in Darwin and other regional centres. There is a counselling position in every secondary school, a school nurse, a home-school liaison officer, and in many cases a community-based police officer. However, there are many small schools in remote communities and they do not have these resources. The Northern Territory also has the biggest problem with homelessness, and school retention rates from Year 7/8 to Year 12 are lower in the Territory, compared with other states.

In summary, there has been an increase in early intervention capacity around the country, but how well the various initiatives cohere on the ground is unknown. In some communities there is a high level of awareness about the need to develop links between schools and local services. In those communities, there is the development of incipient coordination structures. In other communities, there is little evidence of this happening. The youth support infrastructure has been partly constructed, but there is a long way to go.

The School Focused Youth Service model deserves to be considered for national implementation. The evaluation described it as ‘ground breaking, innovative and broadly successful.’ It would ensure that a coordination function exists in all communities. The Youth Pathways Action Taskforce recommended a program of transition officers in all communities to work with young people leaving school early, including homeless students dropping out of school. This initiative would address a largely unmet need and further strengthen the youth support infrastructure.

Schools as Sites for Early Intervention

The youth homeless population includes school students, TAFE students, unemployed youth, and a small number of teenagers in full-time employment. It is easier to provide homeless young people (and their families) with assistance when they are still at school, before they have become deeply involved in the homeless sub-culture. As we have seen, there has been an explicit turn in youth policy towards building an early intervention capacity in schools and local communities in recent years.
It is not possible to make a definitive assessment of the effectiveness of welfare support in schools. It seems reasonable to suggest that homeless teenagers and at risk students are more likely to stay at school if there is a strong welfare infrastructure. However, there are other issues that enter into the equation. These include the dominant culture of the school, the broad character of relations between students and teachers, the school curriculum, and whether the school is linked into local services.

| Table 5.3: 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 | Aust |
| 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 per cent.

One indicator of the effectiveness of the education system to assist homeless youth is to examine the number of school students and TAFE students as a proportion of the homeless population. Table 5.3 shows in the ACT 58 per cent of homeless teenagers were still in the education system, the highest percentage in any state. In Victoria and Tasmania it was about 50 per cent. About 40 per cent of the homeless are still in education in New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia. It was 36 per cent in the Northern Territory, and 27 per cent in Western Australia. In every state and territory, the proportion of homeless young people aged 12 to 18 in school (the participation rate for homeless youth) is lower than the school participation rate for all young people in the same age group. Homeless young people drop out of school faster than other students.

When homeless teenagers drop out of the education system they do not all become long-term unemployed, but this is the destination of the largest group. Many of these young people remain homeless and some make the transition to chronicity. Table 5.3 also shows that 40 per cent of homeless youth in the ACT were unemployed. This rises to about 50 per cent in Victoria and Tasmania, to 60 per cent in South Australia and Queensland, and to 71 per cent in Western Australia.
State and Territory Variation

In much policy discussion, it is usually assumed that the homeless population is distributed in the same way as the general population. This is a reasonable assumption and it is similar to assumptions made in other policy areas.

Our most important finding is that this assumption is not accurate for homeless young people. Table 5.4 shows that there were three patterns. In the more populous eastern seaboard states of New South Wales and Victoria, as well as in the Australian Capital Territory, there were between 10 and 12.5 homeless young people per 1,000 of the population. This is the ‘low cluster.’ There were 6,240 homeless young people in New South Wales, 4,660 in Victoria and 400 in the ACT.

In Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania, there were between 17 and 21 homeless young people per 1,000 of the population. This is the ‘high cluster.’ There were 6,380 homeless young people in Queensland, 3,500 in Western Australia, 2,400 in South Australia, and 1,000 in Tasmania. The figures are about 80 per cent higher in these states.

The third pattern is in the Northern Territory where there were 1,460 homeless young people (or 69 cases per 1,000 of the population). This is the highest rate of youth homelessness in Australia, and much higher than in any other state.

In the longer term, these findings may have implications for the amount of funding apportioned to services for homeless youth in different states and territories. The implications will become clearer when the data on the homeless population is available from the 2001 census.
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