



## **Sector Briefing: ABS Methodological Review of Counting the Homeless Position Paper**

On Friday 5<sup>th</sup> of August the ABS released the second and final version of the Position Paper on the methodological review of Counting the Homeless 2006 which was conducted between October 2009 and March 2011. The ABS has embarked on a consultation process with Homelessness Australia and practitioners from the homelessness sector over the past six months. Some of the findings from the consultation and submissions process are documented in the *position paper*.

### **Summary**

The *position paper*:

- Summarises many of the key issues identified thus far in the consultation process (both private and public) and submissions received.
- Goes some way towards addressing many of the key issues raised.
- Reiterates and further articulates the concerns about underestimation of particular groups of people experiencing homelessness.
- Confirms the establishment of a *Homelessness Statistics Reference Group* comprised of Homelessness Australia and sector reps, Australian and State/Territory Government reps and academics/researchers.
- Describes future developments in homelessness estimation, including but not limited to a proposed quality study about secondary school students who are experiencing homelessness.
- Provides some additional analysis undertaken on a range of key issues identified in the paper.

### **Key issues identified in consultations/submissions**

- The ABS received a total of 35 submissions from homelessness peak bodies, homelessness service providers, local and state Government, researchers and Unions.
- Overall, the themes in the submissions were consistent with those raised in the discussion forums.
- The ABS believes that the submissions supported rigorous quality estimation of homelessness and highlighted the importance of consistent, repeatable and transparent estimates.

- A number of submissions supported the extension of the methodological review to allow for the Homelessness Statistics Reference Group to convene and effectively contribute on-going advice to the ABS.
- Some submissions requested that a continuous quality assurance plan be implemented to continue to improve and maintain high quality estimates.
- No submissions put forward the view that the ABS should not provide homelessness estimates from the Census.
- Many submissions commented that the Review had been too focused on identifying the possible overestimates in the former methodology and the majority of submissions sought a clearer articulation and a possible scaling of areas of greatest underestimation (namely youth, women and children fleeing domestic and family violence and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people).
- A number of submissions supported the inclusion of marginal residents of caravan parks in the tertiary homelessness count.
- Some submissions called for the definition of homelessness to be reviewed having regard for international definitions.
- Some submissions supported continuing to use the cultural definition of homelessness as the framework in which to estimate homelessness within Australia.
- There was strong support for the continuation of the existing 'list' and 'green sticker' systems.
- Submissions also urged the ABS to continue to confront the Census data with data generated from administrative systems on the use of supported accommodation by the homeless.
- There was support for the creation of a new category of 'persons staying temporarily in other lodgings'.
- Many submissions welcomed the 'quality study' of secondary school students but some cautioned that alone it would not be enough to understand the extent of youth who were experiencing homelessness on Census night.
- A number of submissions wanted Chamberlain and Mackenzie's National Census of Homeless Secondary School Students re-instated. The ABS has had any role in the conduct, design, development or funding of the NHCSS. It will not be re-instated by FaHCSIA.

### **Stock versus flow measures**

- The ABS position paper again discusses the difference between stock versus flow measures of homelessness.
- Stock refers to the estimated prevalence of homelessness with prevalence measuring the overall level of homelessness at a single point in time (in this case on Census night).
- Flow measures the overall incidence of homelessness over the course of a defined period of time.
- In the paper the ABS uses 2006/07 SAAP data which showed that 87,100 people were accommodated in SAAP over the course of that financial year compared with 14,517 on Census night in 2006 to derive a figure of 6 times as many people experiencing homelessness over the course of a year than on Census night. The ABS

has used this to arrive at an estimated incidence of between 340,000 and 440,000 people experiencing homelessness over the course of a year.

- The ABS will use the results of the General Social Survey (GSS) due to be released in September 2011 to provide further insight into this estimate. There are limitations to the GSS due to the acknowledged undercount and the fact that it does not capture people in non-private dwellings.

### **Definition of homelessness**

- Some submissions suggested that a review of the cultural definition should take place.
- Other submissions suggested that the cultural definition be applied uniformly to all persons.
- Some submissions wanted the cultural definition broadened to include marginal residents of caravan parks and to take into account overcrowding as a form of homelessness.
- Homelessness Australia DOES NOT SUPPORT narrowing the application of the cultural definition.

### **International definitions of homelessness**

- The paper states that there is *no internationally agreed definition of homelessness*.
- It canvasses definitions used in the UK, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act in the US and the definition adopted by the EU homelessness organisations FEANTSA.

### **Key Issues: Homelessness and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples**

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians were under-enumerated in both the 2001 and 2006 Censuses.
- This is likely to contribute to an underestimation of the level of homelessness within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.
- The ABS recognises that cultural interpretations of the “usual address” question by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the use of different collection forms in enumerating some Indigenous people will affect the capacity of analysts to classify as homeless some Indigenous people who may have been experiencing primary homelessness or staying temporarily with other households on Census night because they had nowhere else to live.
- The ABS activities for the 2011 Census include aiming to improve the enumeration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through closer involvement with Indigenous communities and services, improved awareness and education strategies and the application of new procedures to improve the enumeration of Census forms.

- The ABS will investigate including through community focus groups, later this year, the development of a culturally appropriate module to collect information on previous experiences of homelessness in the 2014 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, in line with what has been collected in the 2010 General Social Survey. Expert input will be sought from both the Homelessness Statistics Reference Group and the Advisory Group on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics. To ensure that the module is appropriate to the context of homelessness amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

### **Key Issues: Homelessness and young people**

The ABS has acknowledged in its Position Paper that the significant difference between the number of young people estimated to have been homeless on Census night 2006 (32,000\*) in the Counting the Homeless reports and the review estimate (14,000\*) caused a great deal of interest from the homelessness sector and was a main focus of the submissions.

- The ABS Discussion Paper published in March 2011 noted that 'homeless youth' staying with other households on Census night (such as those 'couch surfing') are not classified as homeless in the reviewed estimates if the household in which they are staying records a usual address for the visitor.
- The ABS has undertaken additional analysis of Census data for young people and the details of this are presented in the paper along with an acknowledgement of the difficulties of determining whether or not cohorts of young people are experiencing homelessness based on information provided on the Census form.
- The ABS has committed to undertaking further additional analysis in an effort to develop a final methodology that can be used to estimate the level of homelessness amongst persons aged 12-18 on Census night.
- The ABS will draw on the expertise of the Homelessness Statistics Reference Group when working towards the development of a final methodology.
- The numbers of 18 year olds regularly staying with their parent living elsewhere, or the number of 12-18 year olds staying regularly with grandparents or other relatives are not known.
- The ABS has provided supplementary tables providing a breakdown of the labour force and student status of 12-14 and 15-18 year olds counted on Census night 2006.
- Their analysis shows that 70% of the youth identified as homeless are either unemployed or 'not in the labour force' compared with 32% for all young people.
- By expanding the analysis to person aged 12-24 years the ABS has determined that 13,116 people in this age group can be identified as experiencing homelessness on Census night in 2006 or 21% of the review estimate total. This compares with 33% of the Counting the Homeless estimate.

## **Key issues: Homelessness and domestic and family violence**

- The Position Paper acknowledges the ‘complex nature’ of the domestic and family violence and the difficulties with accurately enumerating women (and children) who may be experiencing homelessness on Census night as a result of leaving a situation involving violence.
- The ABS will continue using the “green sticker” practice involving jurisdictional lists for supported accommodation arrangements. This ensures that people who are seeking refuge from domestic and family violence and are staying in supported accommodation on Census night are enumerated.
- The ABS has been working closely with women’s services to ensure that people who are experiencing homelessness as a result of leaving violence are correctly identified as homeless on the Census form.
- The next personal safety survey to be conducted in 2012 is currently testing the inclusion of questions on housing arrangements on separation from their partner. While this will have the same limitations as the General Social Survey (i.e. It will not likely interview anyone who is experiencing homelessness) it will provide some insight into the housing arrangements and circumstances of those who leave home due to violence.
- The ABS will draw on the experience of members of the Homelessness Statistics Reference Group to further understand homelessness that results from domestic and family violence.

## **Key issues: People in marginal housing**

- There is no agreed definition of marginal housing.
- Counting the Homeless identifies and quantifies a population described as marginal residents of caravan parks.
- The ABS will undertake further analysis of this group and other characteristics that could be used to identify and understand people in marginal housing tenures.
- Homelessness Australia recommends including ‘marginal residents of caravan parks’ in the tertiary homelessness count.

## **Key issues: Overcrowding**

- The ABS will consider adjusting the definition of overcrowding to ensure that it sits alongside homelessness.
- Aboriginal people, people from African nations and Pacific Island communities and international students were more likely to live in overcrowded housing than other people.
- Homelessness Australia believes that many occupants of ‘overcrowded dwellings’ meet the definition of secondary homelessness and should be counted as such.

### **Key issues: Construction workers, owner-builders and renters of improvised dwellings**

- The methodological review analysed the characteristics of 'persons living in an improvised dwelling' and based on the characteristics of a significant number of persons in this category, it was determined that some people were residing in sheds and other partially constructed dwellings on land that they were purchasing or they were construction workers. As a result approximated 50% of the people included in the "primary homelessness" category in Counting the Homeless have been excluded from the review estimate.
- Submissions identified that consideration needs to be given to people living on their own properties as a result of natural disasters.
- The ABS has committed to developing a strategy to analyse areas affected by recent disaster events in the 2011 Census.
- There were differing views about the classification of persons in improvised dwellings. Homelessness Australia does not support arbitrary exclusions but is broadly satisfied with the distinctions made in the review between people 'sleeping rough' and people in improvised dwellings that are not in fact homeless.
- The ABS will seek advice from the Homelessness Statistics Reference Group and explore the groups discussed in more detail.

### **Key issues: Travellers and 'grey nomads'**

- The ABS has provided further analysis and explanation of the number of people aged 55 and over who were excluded from the review estimate and described 'grey nomads'.
- The ABS will work with the Homelessness Statistics Reference Group to better understand patterns of mobility among older people who are marginalised and on fixed incomes.

### **Key issues: Homelessness and recently arrived migrants and culturally and linguistically diverse populations**

- The ABS has a strategy for the 2011 Census to enumerate those from CaLD backgrounds, recognising the challenges of enumerating some people from new migrant communities.
- The ABS will further consider activities to improve enumeration and identification of homeless persons, particularly for identified new population groups where Census populations where Census enumeration efforts have been initiated to foster collaboration and engagement between the community and the ABS
- The ABS will continue to analyse the characteristics of 'new migrants' as identified in the decision rules for each of the homeless groups, to determine if there are any other characteristics that enable us to distinguish those who are likely to be homeless from those who are not.

## **Key issues: Homelessness and other non-private dwellings**

- The ABS proposed in the Review of CTH to create a new category 'Persons in other temporary lodgings'.
- Submissions revealed overwhelming support for the new category and the ABS will include this new category in the final methodology.
- The ABS will continue to analyse people in this group with the view to refine this group, with advice from the Homelessness Statistics Reference Group.
- The ABS will look at ways to improve the accurate identification of boarding houses in the 2016 Census.

## **Using the Census to identify persons in other temporary lodgings**

Hotel, motel, bed and breakfast	544
Staff quarters	391
Residential college, hall of residence	239
Public hospital (not psychiatric)	302
Private hospital (not psychiatric)	79
Psychiatric hospital or institution	128
Hostel for the disabled	18
Corrective institution for children	30
Other welfare institution	191
Prison, corrective institution for adults	36
Convent, monastery, etc.	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,971</b>

(a) Cells in this table have been randomly adjusted to avoid the release of confidential data.

## **Future directions**

- The ABS is developing a broad program of homelessness measurement.
- The ABS now wants to foster 'collaborative engagement' with the homelessness sector, academic stakeholders and data producers and identify current research and additional sources of data that may influence the development of homelessness statistics.

## **Homelessness Statistics Reference Group**

The ABS is convening a Homelessness Statistics Reference Group (HSRG), with members from the sector, from academia, and from government, which will first meet in mid August 2011. The role of HSRG is to advise the ABS on the development, collection, compilation, production and dissemination of robust statistics for use in analysing, understanding and reporting on homelessness in Australia. Its advice will be key to improvements in Census data for analysis as well as in the better approaches to analysis.

The operation of the HSRG is expected to:

- Foster collaborative engagement of sector, policy and academic stakeholders and key data producers to identify current research, policy and sector advances that may influence the development of homelessness statistics;

- Utilise expert members to identify statistical requirements, priorities and possible trade-offs in developing homeless statistics to inform the forward work program;
- Provide technical expertise on current and proposed new data sources used in the development and production of homelessness statistics;
- Facilitate sector-wide involvement to build and sustain partnerships for improving homeless enumeration in identified sub-populations e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, youth, and people who experience domestic violence.

The HSRG advice in regard to the Census aspects of the forward work program would be sought on each of the future activities briefly listed below.

The group met for the first time on Friday 19<sup>th</sup> of August 2011 and will meet again in November.

### **Gender balance**

- The review estimate changes the gender balance of people found to be experiencing homelessness on Census night from 56% male 44% female in Counting the Homeless to 61% male 39% female in the review estimate.