Making Them All Count: Issues to consider when enumerating homelessness in Australia

An Evidence Based Policy Paper

April 2011

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Introduction

2011 is an important year for stakeholders with an interest in ending homelessness in Australia. It will be the first Census year since the release of the Australian Government’s White Paper on homelessness, *The Road Home* which set an ambitious interim target of reducing overall homelessness by 20% by 2013 and halving it by 2020.

The 2011 Census will provide us with the first national, state/territory and region by region indicator of whether or not the new investments in homelessness programs and housing for people experiencing homelessness, as outlined in the White Paper, have resulted in an overall reduction between 2006 and 2011.

In September 2009, less than twelve months after the release of the White Paper, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) announced that it was conducting a review of the methodology used to enumerate homelessness in Australia. Homelessness Australia participated in the ABS workshop.

In October of 2009, the ABS produced a paper entitled *Issues in estimating the number of homeless in Australia* which was intended to inform a review of the *Counting the Homeless* methodology. The paper briefly set out the methodology that has been used by Chris Chamberlain and David MacKenzie to construct their homelessness counts after the 1996, 2001 and 2006 Censuses. It described the definitions and assumptions employed, the calculations made and “as far as possible”, the processes and procedures that impact on the figures used. Against each of the elements the ABS raised issues for consideration in the review.

Submissions were sought in response to the issues paper and a total of fourteen organisations responded to the issues raised in the ABS paper including Homelessness Australia.

The issues paper reiterated the importance of the Census night homelessness counts as representing our best published national counts of homelessness but asserted that:

“...There is widespread agreement that the numbers reported in Counting the Homeless are indicative rather than necessarily being entirely appropriate for performance indicator construction and may well overestimate the count of homeless people in Australia in general and that of homeless youth in particular...”

This assertion was not supported by Homelessness Australia’s Board, Councils or Members who provided numerous examples of people who would meet the ABS cultural definition of homeless on Census night but who for a number of reasons would not be identified as such.

These examples were included in our detailed response to the issues paper that was submitted to the ABS in November 2009. Between November 2009 and March 2011 Homelessness Australia eagerly awaited the release of a follow-up paper outlining the findings of the review. We were pleased to receive that paper on 31 March.
This paper will canvass Homelessness Australia’s views on the issues that we believe are important to consider when seeking to strengthen the reliability and validity of the strategy employed to enumerate homelessness in Australia. It will seek to inform the ABS review and to provide the sector with an opportunity to contribute to the evidence base necessary to conduct a thorough investigation into the factors affecting the enumeration of homelessness in Australia.

At the same time as producing the paper, Homelessness Australia has committed to actively engaging with the homelessness sector, the ABS, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, FaHCSIA, Centrelink and other stakeholders with an interest in the enumeration of homelessness in Australia. It is vitally important that all partners in the new approach to homelessness are afforded with an opportunity to contribute their expertise to the outcomes of this review. We hope that this paper provides practitioners and peak bodies representing the homelessness sector with an opportunity to share their considerable expertise with other stakeholders.

**Background**

The release of the White Paper in December 2008 with clearly defined goals and targets for reducing homelessness, notably the headline goal of halving homelessness and the interim targets of reducing overall homelessness by 20% and primary homelessness by 25% by 2013 appears to have been the catalysts for the decision by the ABS to review the methodology used to enumerate homelessness via the *Counting the Homeless* reports.

As was stated in the 2009 Issues Paper, the ABS is not convinced the figures contained in the *Counting the Homeless* reports are necessarily entirely appropriate for performance indicator construction. We interpret this to mean that the ABS does not believe that the Government should use the national homelessness figure or the national primary homelessness count arrived at in 2006 as the baseline against which to measure progress towards meeting the 2013 interim targets or the headline goal of halving overall homelessness by 2020.

This raises the immediate question: If the detailed national, state/territory and regional counts established through the *Counting the Homeless* reports are not appropriate sources of baseline data, what alternative sources of data are there against which progress towards meeting the interim targets and headline goals in the White Paper can be measured?

To date, the *Counting the Homeless* reports have provided the only comprehensive national counts of homelessness we have available to us in Australia. We are not yet aware of any alternative data sources that would be more appropriate for performance indicator construction. That said, it is clear that the ABS believes that the revised estimates in the Discussion Paper will provide an appropriate baseline against which to measure progress.
The figures quoted in the *Counting the Homeless* reports have now been in the public domain for some time. Homelessness Australia is concerned that changes to the methodology and strategies employed to adjust for over counting and under counting may create confusion within the homelessness sector, the media and the Australian community.

Homelessness Australia has consulted widely over the past eighteen months on the broader issues pertaining to the enumeration of people who are experiencing homelessness. We did this during the period in which the ABS was conducting its internal methodological review of *Counting the Homeless*.

Homelessness Australia believes the 2011 Census is critically important to stakeholders with an interest in addressing homelessness. It is vital that the 2011 Census count is as accurate as possible. We need an accurate count to ensure that we can measure the progress we are making towards the achievement of the 2013 interim goals as we look forward to 2020.

November 2009: Homelessness Australia’s Response to the Issues Paper

Homelessness Australia was one of fourteen organisations to forward a submission to the ABS in response to the release of its Issues Paper entitled *Review of Counting the Homeless 2006 Methodology* in October 2009. At the time we welcomed the opportunity to contribute the views of the homelessness sector which reflected many decades of experience as practitioners working with men, women, young people and children experiencing homelessness in Australia.

The ABS commenced its Issues Paper with the following statement that immediately caught the attention of Homelessness Australia and practitioners within the homelessness sector:

“...There is widespread agreement that the numbers reported in Counting the Homeless are indicative rather than necessarily appropriate for performance indicator construction and may well over-estimate the count of homeless people in Australia in general and that of homeless youth in particular…”

From the outset we stated that the conclusion reached by the homelessness sector was that this statement contained in the Issues Paper did not accurately reflect what practitioners understand to be the reality of the circumstances and/or extent of homelessness in Australia. We remain unsure about where or what “widespread agreement” the ABS are referring to.

In our submission we cited a number of examples in which people who would in fact meet the ABS cultural definition of homeless on Census night but who are not actually counted as homeless. These are listed below:

**Example #1: Women escaping domestic violence who are unable to be accommodated in a refuge or motel and who are turned away and either sleep in a vehicle in a concealed location or are accommodated by a friend or relative for the night.**

Due to the nature of domestic and family violence, women who escape violence but are unable to be accommodated by a domestic violence service on Census night are for reasons of safety likely to be accommodated in circumstances that are not amenable to them being identified on a Census form. This includes women who are forced to sleep in a vehicle and
may do so in a concealed location and people who are accommodated anonymously by a friend or relative for short periods that include Census night itself.

Due to the nature of domestic and family violence and the fact that perpetrators of that violence often go to great lengths to find their ex-partners when they do summon the courage to leave the situation in which violence is occurring, they are likely to specifically ask that they are not recorded on a Census form even though the Census collection is not likely to lead to their location being uncovered.

For women forced to shelter in a vehicle on Census night, it is likely to that they will do so in a concealed location that will not be identifiable to a Census collector even if they are assisted by workers from homelessness services. This is particularly true if the woman leaves on the day of the Census.

There may also be other living situations, many of them tenuous and unsafe, that women end up living in, in order to put a roof over their head away from violence. Examples provided by our members included; women taking housekeeping/live-in domestic jobs in return for accommodation and younger women ‘couch surfing’ after escaping violence.

Essentially, Homelessness Australia believes that there are many women who are experiencing homelessness on Census night who would not identify themselves on a Census form and would thus not be counted as homeless on Census night. It is a form of homelessness affecting large numbers of women and children who are not likely to be easily identifiable on a Census form.

**#2: Young people ‘couch surfing’ with friends and relatives who do not consider themselves homeless or who are not considered to be homeless by the ‘householder’ filling in the form**

Despite what the ABS Issues Paper and Discussion Paper implies, it is widely known and well documented that significant numbers of young people, if not the majority of young people experience homelessness in the form of ‘couch surfing’, staying temporarily with friends and relatives but with no formal occupancy or tenancy rights to the property viii.

Many of these young people would not consider themselves to be homeless and/or would identify the place in which they are staying as the place that they “usually live”. This would likely be because the householder (be they friend or relative) would genuinely consider the young person to be a usual resident of the household if they had nowhere else to go.

Similarly, young people who do not consider themselves to be homeless are likely to indicate (if they fill out the Census form at all), that they ‘usually live’ at that address, especially if it is unsafe or unviable for them to return to the home of a parent or guardian or for various reasons they are unable or unwilling to do so.

Homelessness Australia believes it would be very difficult to determine simply by cross-tabulating Census data which young people are “sleeping over” at friends or relatives places with permission and which young people are ‘couch surfing’ because they have nowhere
else to go. We believe that a significant number of young people are not likely to be counted as homeless by Census collectors but who are, on Census night, living in circumstances that would enable them to meet the cultural definition of homelessness. After consulting extensively with practitioners and peak bodies in the youth sector, we have formed the view that the youth homelessness count drawn directly from Census night data would significantly understate the prevalence of youth homelessness in Australia.

Example #3: Indigenous people living in overcrowded households

Homelessness Australia believes that the number of Indigenous Australians counted as “secondary homeless- staying with friends and relatives” on Census night significantly understates the problem of Indigenous homelessness that is masked by overcrowding. Chamberlain and Mackenzie have acknowledged that the numbers arrived at in the Counting the Homeless reports do not accurately capture the totality of overcrowding.

We have discussed this issue with members in the Northern Territory in relation to Indigenous households and we believe that a large number of Indigenous people who are accommodated by relatives/ people from their kinship groups on Census night would in fact meet the definition of secondary homelessness but are not identified as homeless because of a cultural obligation to accommodate relatives that is of paramount importance in Indigenous communities.

The massive discrepancy between the non-Indigenous and Indigenous count of those identified as secondary homeless, ‘staying with friends/relatives’ on Census night in the NT provides evidence that this may in fact result in a significant undercount of Indigenous people in this category of homelessness. On Census night in 2006, over 2000 non-Indigenous people were identified as secondary homeless, staying with friends and relatives compared with just 157 Indigenous Territorians.

Given that Indigenous people make up more than one third of the population identified as homeless on Census night in the NT, it would seem plausible that Indigenous people with no fixed address of their own who are staying with family/kin are not identifying/identified as homelessness for the cultural reasons outlined above.

The potential for undercounting of secondary homelessness within Indigenous households is of course not confined to the Northern Territory but will exist wherever Indigenous people live, including within Indigenous households in regional centres and capital cities.

According to the ABS:

“...there were around 20,700 overcrowded Indigenous households (14%) and 102,400 Indigenous people (27%) living in overcrowded conditions in 2006. There has been some improvement in rates of overcrowding, with the proportion of Indigenous households that were overcrowded decreasing from 16% in 2001 to 14% in 2006...”

Based on our consultation with Indigenous workers in the housing and homelessness sector and members in the Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia, Homelessness Australia believes that a significant proportion of this group would meet the cultural definition of secondary homeless- staying with friends and relatives on
Census night but would not be counted as such, largely because of the cultural reasons outlined above. In the view of Indigenous people in this housing situation, they are not homeless and would therefore not identify as such on a Census household form.

Homelessness Australia recommends that the ABS consult relevant Indigenous agencies to determine how homelessness disguised as overcrowding can be more easily identified. We would support the allocation of a proportion of the ABS funding to facilitate the development of strategies that more easily enable Indigenous people living in overcrowded households (with no conventional occupancy or tenancy rights to the dwellings in which they are staying on Census night) to be identified and counted as experiencing homelessness.

Example #4: Long-grassers in the Kimberley and Pilbara regions of WA and the Darwin-Daly district in the NT

A number of members have raised concerns with Homelessness Australia about the likelihood that high numbers of people often referred to as “long grassers”. According to a 2001 report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare:

“...in the Darwin and Palmerston region of the Northern Territory, there are a number of people, many of them Indigenous, originally from remote communities, living ‘an itinerant lifestyle’ otherwise known as ‘living in the long grass’...”

After speaking with service providers in Western Australia, Homelessness Australia became aware that there were locations in the north-west of that state with groups of people who share similar characteristics to those in Darwin and Palmerston. Given the fact that the Census is conducted in August (dry season), the total number of people living in this circumstance is likely to be significant and owing to the itinerant nature of this group, it is highly unlikely that people in this circumstance would be easily identifiable to Census collectors.

“Long grassers” are typically thought of as being Indigenous but information provided to Homelessness Australia indicates that a significant proportion of people living in this circumstance do not identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander but may in fact be itinerant or seasonal workers or people seeking work in the mining industry. A number of Homelessness Australia’s members have indicated that they believe that a high proportion of people “living in the long grass” would not be counted as homeless on Census night because of the nature of their accommodation circumstances, transience and the geographic difficulties of reaching them on Census night. We believe they should be counted as homeless because their circumstances clearly meet the cultural definition of primary homelessness and it is not clear that people staying in the ‘long-grass’ have an alternative usual place of residence which they occupy continuously for more than six months.

Example #5: People in hotels/motels paid for by either brokerage funds from homelessness services or by state housing vouchers

People who are unable to be accommodated by homelessness services or state/territory housing Departments are frequently provided with brokerage funds or vouchers to enable
them to secure temporary accommodation in hotels or motels. Often they are families, including women and children escaping domestic and family violence and given the fact that they are often staying in hotels/motels frequented by holiday makers they are likely to be excluded from the homelessness count.

While Homelessness Australia is aware that both the ABS and Chamberlain and Mackenzie have developed strategies to enable them to differentiate between those staying in hotels/motels as a form of emergency accommodation and people who are travelling, it is likely that a number of this group would not be identified as homeless on Census night.

**Example #6: People staying with friends/relatives in public housing who are not named on the lease (due to rules prohibiting sub-letting)**

Homelessness Australia has raised this issue with a number of our members. There is broad agreement among our members that a significant number of highly disadvantaged people are accommodated by friends or relatives who are tenants in public housing dwellings.

There are rules in residential tenancy agreements entered into with state/territory housing authorities that specifically prohibit tenants from “sub-letting” (allowing people to occupy the premises who are not named on the lease, often in return for payment not disclosed to the landlord/housing manager). This means that if people are living in public housing under “sub-letting” arrangements, the ‘householder’ who is named on the lease is unlikely to disclose this on the Census form because if they are discovered it may jeopardise their tenancy.

It is unclear how many people are likely to be in this situation but a survey of our members conducted over the course of researching for this paper revealed it was commonplace for clients to reveal this living circumstance to support workers. Often these living situations break down and people move from here into other sectors of homelessness.

**Example #7: People ‘sleeping rough’ in rural and remote locations**

In our submission to the ABS review we drew attention to this in relation to Indigenous people in the Northern Territory however we have consulted with service providers in regional, rural and remote locations and determined that is likely to be more difficult to locate people who are sleeping rough outside of cities and regional centres regardless of their cultural background. This is because it is likely that while service providers assist Census collectors to locate people who are sleeping rough as a component of the ABS’ homeless enumeration strategy, it is not going to be possible to locate all of the people in rural and remote areas who are living in this circumstance on Census night.

This is likely to be particularly true if they are staying in National Parks or bushland settings where you would not reasonably expect Census collectors to visit unless they contained camping grounds. Homelessness Australia believes it is logical to expect that given the vast geographical size of Australia, it will not be possible for Census collectors to reach every person staying in sparsely populated areas of Australia on Census night. We therefore believe that this needs to be considered as another example of people who may not be
counted as homeless on Census night but who would in fact meet the definition of primary homelessness. It provides further evidence in our view of the need to adjust for potential undercounting.

Example #8: Primary Homelessness and Indigenous People

Homelessness Australia has some concerns about the accuracy of primary homelessness counts in the Northern Territory. Our contacts from member services and peak bodies in that jurisdiction have expressed concerns about the accuracy of the homelessness count in the Northern Territory. Homelessness Australia notes that in the two territories, the count was conducted on Census night only. In the ACT where the population is concentrated in a very small geographical area, this is not likely to be too problematic. In the Northern Territory, where the population is spread over more than 1,000,000 square kilometres and where there are perhaps more remote communities than in any other jurisdiction, it could be argued that identifying all people who are homeless would not be possible because the count is confined to a single night. Between 2001 and 2006 the number of rough sleepers in the NT declined by 26%. Service providers in the NT have informed Homelessness Australia that no significant expansion of services to accommodate rough sleepers was embarked on over that period and it is therefore highly unlikely that such a significant decline in the number of rough sleepers counted on Census night in the NT can be explained by them having secured stable accommodation.

We believe that this may also contribute to undercounting of homelessness in the Northern Territory. Many Indigenous people don’t see themselves as homeless if they are living on country and there are familial and kinship connections all around them, they are therefore not going to identify as homeless to Census collectors, even though they may meet the ABS cultural definition. While our focus is the Northern Territory because this is where members who have conveyed these concerns to us are located, it is highly likely that a proportion Indigenous people who are sleeping rough ‘on country’ in other jurisdictions are also not going to identify as homeless because they are “spiritually housed” on the land to which they have cultural and spiritual connections.

We support greater efforts being made to identify all Australians whose living circumstances on Census night mean that they meet the ABS cultural definition of homelessness being identified as such on Census night. Homelessness Australia acknowledges the importance of the concepts of ‘spiritual homelessness’ and conversely being ‘spiritually housed’ on country.

That said, we also believe it is important that we ensure that as many Australians as possible who are living in circumstances that meet the ABS cultural definition of primary homelessness on Census night are counted as homeless on Census night.

The ABS Methodological Review of Counting the Homeless 2006

As noted earlier, the ABS conducted a methodological review of Counting the Homeless 2006 between September 2009 and March 2011.
After releasing its Issues Paper in October 2009, the ABS initially indicated that it anticipated it would complete its review of the methodology used to enumerate homelessness by the end of that year.

Over the course of 2010, it became apparent that the review process was taking significantly longer than the ABS had anticipated. No information was filtering down to the homelessness sector from any of the stakeholders who were directly involved in the review process and no one from the non-Government sector was invited to be briefed about the progress of the review or participate in any meetings or workshops that Homelessness Australia later learned were hosted by the ABS in 2010.

The workshops did however involve representatives from Australian Government Departments and Agencies, researchers Chris Chamberlain and David Mackenzie and representatives from State and Territory Governments.

Not being privy to any of the discussions about the progress of the methodological review resulted in concerns about the potential directions the ABS may have been taking escalating in the second half of 2010.

In late 2010, following the time-lines set out in its Homeless Enumeration Strategy, the ABS began contacting service providers in each jurisdiction and homelessness networkers in Victoria to seek their cooperation in assisting the ABS with the conduct of the 2011 Census.

Both the ABS and service providers have enjoyed a cooperative and constructive relationship which has been a key feature of the ABS Homeless Enumeration Strategy since its inception in 1996\textsuperscript{iv}. In early 2011, Homelessness Australia was contacted by a number of members who expressed significant concerns about the 2011 Census count.

These concerns centred around being asked to cooperate with the ABS in the conduct of the 2011 Census and being asked to assist ABS collectors with the identification of people experiencing homelessness when the sector was not aware of the directions that the ABS were taking with the review of the methodology used to enumerate homelessness in Australia via the \textit{Counting the Homeless} reports. Some members expressed concern that if they were to actively assist the ABS with the 2011 Census night count, they may find themselves:

“...inadvertently complicit in the conduct of a Census count that artificially reduces the number of people identified as experiencing homelessness in Australia...” (Homelessness Australia member)

The lack of information about the progress of the review meant that rumours about its findings gained currency within the sector and the view expressed to Homelessness Australia by a number of member services was that the opinions of the sector were not valued by the ABS.

It was in this context that Homelessness Australia again contacted the ABS urging the Bureau to release the findings of the review as soon as possible. Again, because of the lack of concrete information provided to the sector, there was a belief that the Discussion Paper
outlining the findings of the methodological review would not be released until after the 2011 Census had been conducted.

After contacting the ABS on several occasions, we were informed that we would receive the Discussion Paper outlining the findings of the review on 31 March 2011. The paper was publicly released on that date and the findings contained therein as well as Homelessness Australia’s responses to those findings are the focus of the next section of this paper. Homelessness Australia welcomes the decision taken by the ABS to engage in a consultation process with the homelessness sector, we trust that the concerns raised by practitioners and representatives of homelessness and domestic and family violence peak bodies during that process will be taken into account when the ABS makes its final considerations about the most appropriate methods that could be employed to ensure that the homelessness count in Australia is as accurate as possible.

The ABS has announced a series of consultation meetings which are being held in state and territory capital cities in April and May 2011.

The initial feedback we have received from our councils and members about the consultation forums held by the ABS to date has not been encouraging. We have been informed that participants have found their queries and questions have been easily dismissed and they have reported to us that their views were not given due consideration or taken seriously.

This does not augur well for the remainder of the review process. Homelessness Australia remains hopeful that the consultation process is a genuine one and that the views of the sector attendees, many of whom have decades of practitioner experience working with people experiencing homelessness will be properly valued and taken into consideration.

Finally, participants in the forum have a right to be treated with respect and have their concerns taken seriously. A number of participants have indicated that they felt their views were denigrated and that they were not taken seriously because they did not have a background in statistics. Given the lack of engagement with the sector during the first eighteen months of the review process this is not encouraging.

Summary of the main findings from the ABS Methodological Review of Counting the Homeless 2006 and Homelessness Australia’s Response

**Difference between Counting the Homeless Estimate and ABS Estimate**

- The ABS has revised the 2001 and 2006 national homelessness counts downwards by approximately 40% from 104,676 people (Counting the Homeless 2006) to 63,472 people (ABS Discussion Paper, 2011, p.4).

Table 1.1 below summarises the new estimates for each sector of the homeless population that have been arrived at by the ABS following their methodological review of *Counting the Homeless 2006*. Members should note that the ABS review has determined that there has been an over-count in all categories of homelessness previously adopted but that the ABS has developed a fifth category of homelessness called ‘persons in other temporary lodgings’
comprised of 1,970 people it does not believe meet the definition of primary, secondary or tertiary homelessness.

Table 1.1: Overview of proposed review changes to homeless estimates, 2006:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>2006 CTH estimate</th>
<th>ABS Review estimate (a)</th>
<th>Difference (n)</th>
<th>Difference (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boarding Houses</td>
<td>21 596</td>
<td>16 828</td>
<td>-4 768</td>
<td>-22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAAP</td>
<td>(b) 19 849</td>
<td>17 331</td>
<td>-2 518</td>
<td>-12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends/Relatives</td>
<td>(c) 46 856</td>
<td>19 579</td>
<td>-27 277</td>
<td>-58.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvised Dwellings/Rough Sleepers</td>
<td>16 375</td>
<td>7 764(d)</td>
<td>-8 611</td>
<td>-52.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons in other temporary lodging</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1 970</td>
<td>+1 970</td>
<td>+1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>104 676</strong></td>
<td><strong>63 472</strong></td>
<td><strong>-41 204</strong></td>
<td><strong>-39.3</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a) This is the mid-point of the likely range of the new estimate
(b) This number is derived from AIHW SAAP Collections except for Victoria.
(c) Includes Analysis from non-Census sources.
(d) Also includes a reduction of 200 because of a Census collector error because of inclusion in CTH of system generated records.


Note: The above estimates are median estimates (mid-point data between the ABS lowest and highest estimates).

As readers will note, all of the reductions in estimates produced in the above table are statistically significant.

The ABS claims to have adjusted the 2006 Census figures for each of the homelessness categories after conducting a series of cross-tabulations of Census night data which the Discussion Paper claims excludes large numbers of people when other information provided is taken into account. A component of the research we conducted to inform the content of this paper was a survey of our members that ascertained their views on whether or not demand for their services as well as overall homelessness in the localities in which their services are based had increased. The results of these are discussed in the appendix.

A summary of the reasons provided by the ABS for removing large numbers of people from each category is provided in the Discussion Paper and re-produced below:

**Boarding Houses**
Accurate to the ABS review, 5300 people were added by Chamberlain and Mackenzie to the raw Census night data on the number of people counted as staying in boarding/rooming houses by Census collectors (ABS Discussion Paper, p.33). The ABS review position is to remove 3000 of these people because the review has determined that their inclusion is inconsistent with the methods stated in *Counting the Homeless*. The ABS acknowledges that there will be a consequence for the ability to measure changes in the data as a time series. That said, the review concludes that by adding new rules to boarding house definitions in the counting the homeless process without examining the consequences of the change in terms of the people it classifies as homeless breaks the time series and includes people that the ABS does not believe share the characteristics of the boarding house population.

The ABS excluded 2,243 people who were added by Chamberlain and Mackenzie because:

- They reported having a ‘real estate agent’ or ‘landlord’ which is more suggestive of living in a group house than a boarding house.
- They indicated that they were paying mortgage repayments.
- They were in a rent to buy scheme.
- They were paying rent to the parent of one of the group members.
- They were a group reporting themselves as ‘religious volunteers’ (e.g. nuns or monks) (ABS Discussion Paper, p.31).

The ABS also removed people from the tertiary homeless count because they were deemed to be in student accommodation or on the basis that their income was too high.

- Overall the ABS review removes 4768 people from the Counting the Homeless tertiary homelessness count of 21,596 but reallocates 1970 people to a new category of homelessness (ABS Discussion Paper, p.32).

**New Trends in tertiary homelessness: 2001-2006**

- In 2001, the ABS Review estimates that 23,749 people were accommodated in boarding houses on Census night
- In 2006, the ABS review estimates that this number had declined to 16,828. This represents a reduction of 29% between 2001 and 2006.
- The ABS has determined that they have confidence in their estimate set arbitrarily within a margin of +/-10% putting the revised boarding house figure between 15,000 and 19,000 (ABS Discussion Paper, p.33)

Even accounting for the fact that the boarding house sector is believed to be in decline, the ABS must be asked to explain why if their new methodology is appropriate for performance indicator construction, the boarding house population declined by 29%.

Even accounting for the improved economic conditions described in the ABS paper this is a significant reduction and it warrants further exploration.
Persons staying in SAAP Accommodation

- The ABS review has removed 2518 people from the SAAP estimate reached by Chamberlain and Mackenzie in *Counting the Homeless 2006* (ABS Discussion Paper, p.36).
- The ABS review does not believe that counting ‘support periods’ that cover a period of time beyond merely Census night is appropriate when seeking to enumerate a point in time count of the number of people accommodated in specialist homelessness services.
- The ABS believes that it has corrected estimates to align with the stated methodology in the *Counting the Homeless* reports. The ABS believes that this correction will eliminate the possibility of double counting of people whose support periods include Census night but who were not staying in a homelessness service on Census night and hence may have already been counted elsewhere in the Census data.
- Overall the ABS Review has removed 2518 people from the Counting the Homeless Secondary Homelessness (people in SAAP) count reducing the figure from 19 849 to 17 331 (ABS Discussion Paper, p.36).

New trends in persons accommodated in SAAP based on ABS review.

- In 2001, the ABS review estimates that 13 420 people were staying in SAAP accommodation on Census night.
- In 2006 the ABS review estimates that this number had increased to 17331. This represents an increase of 29.1% between 2001 and 2006.
- If we analyse the SAAP data for the period 2001/02 to 2006/07, we can see that the number of clients supported increased for 93,000 to 118,800 during that period, an increase of 27.7%. This broadly accords with the increase in persons staying in SAAP on Census night between 2001 and 2006.

Friends and Relatives

The ABS review has drastically reduced the number of people counted as experiencing secondary homelessness (staying with friends and relatives) on Census night.

The review has removed 27 277 people from the friends and relatives count reducing homelessness in this category by more than 58%. The new figure was arrived at by the ABS after statisticians cross-tabulated several other sources of data drawn from the Census form (ABS Discussion Paper, p.4).

The ABS pays specific attention to the phenomenon of grey nomads over the course of the discussion paper. The ABS claims that Chamberlain and Mackenzie have assumed that all people reporting no usual address and enumerated in private dwellings are homeless and being accommodated temporarily by friends or relatives.
The ABS has concluded that of the 32,519 people enumerated in the Census in ‘visitors without a usual address’ (i.e. No tenancy or owner-occupier status to the property), 13,033 people were in visitor-only households (that is, no occupants had tenancy rights or were owner-occupiers of the residence as their primary dwelling). (ABS Discussion Paper, p.40.)

Of the 13,033 people:

- The ABS excluded 2,469 people who were re-classified as grey nomads.
- They were excluded because all members of the ‘household’ were aged 55 and over and because they were located in collection districts that were ‘holiday destinations’, particularly in Northern Australia.
- The ABS concluded that this group who were included in the Counting the Homeless data, had increased from 1,669 in 2001 to 2,469 in 2006 but that this was not realistic because economic and social conditions improved between 2001 and 2006. This is highly contentious as the ABS appears to assume that the benefits of economic growth are shared equally.
- The ABS believes that this group will continue to grow as more and more ‘baby boomers’ retire and seek to become mobile (ABS Discussion Paper, pp.40-41).

The ABS determined that:

- A further 3,472 people should be removed from the homelessness count because they were staying in rented cabins, caravans and houseboats and were not with friends or relatives.
- The ABS has assumed that these people were travelling on holiday.

The ABS has further excluded:

- 2,351 people who were in properties that they either owned outright or reported having a mortgage. The ABS has assumed that these people were staying in holiday homes or a second home on Census night (ABS Discussion Paper, p.41).

The ABS removed a further group of:

- 2,960 people in visitor only households other than caravans, cabins and houseboats that they indicated they were renting on Census night. The ABS believes this group should be excluded because they are likely to be renting holiday homes.

Overall, the ABS has excluded 11,252 people in visitor only households from the homelessness count. This leaves 1,781 people for which the ABS could not identify a unifying theme for exclusion from the homelessness count.

The ABS does not believe that all of these people are homeless but has left them in the reviewed homelessness count nonetheless.

New Migrants
The ABS excluded 1309 more people from the friends and relatives count on the basis that they were new migrants who had been in Australia for not more than 7 months. “It is assumed that they had not yet had the time to decide upon the purchase or rent of a particular dwelling and report correctly in the Census as not having a usual address at which they had spent or expected to spend 6 months or more in the Census year (ABS review, p.41).

**Note: If they have not yet had the time to purchase and/or rent a property, by definition does this not make them homeless?**

**People returning from overseas**

- The ABS has determined that 837 people who returned from overseas in the 12 months prior to the Census should also be excluded. It notes that 64% are aged 20-39 and 120 were earning more than $70 000 per year (ABS Discussion Paper, p.42).

- The removal of this group requires further explanation by the ABS.

**Totality of Exclusions**

- Overall the ABS has excluded 12,940 adults from the friends and relatives count for the reasons outlined above. Homelessness Australia is not convinced that these exclusions are appropriate. This is a significant number of people and the new assumptions require more explanation from the ABS. (ABS Discussion Paper, p.42)

**Young People**

The *Counting the Homeless* methodology initially classifies 6378 young people aged 12-18 as experiencing homelessness on Census night. Adjustments are then made by Chamberlain and Mackenzie to account for what they and many people within the youth sector believe is a significant under count of youth homelessness that can be attributed to the way in which the Census is conducted and the hidden nature of youth homelessness.

The Counting the Homeless methodology also uses non-Census data sources including SAAP Data and data obtained from the National Census of High School Students (NCHSS) to arrive at the figure of 21,940 people (ABS Discussion Paper, p.42).

Before dealing with the new assumptions made by the ABS to account for what is a drastic and significant reduction in the youth figure Homelessness Australia did want to draw the sector’s attention to a definitional issue. The ABS paper refers to young people consistently as ‘runaways’ in its descriptions.

As a peak body, Homelessness Australia rejects this reference entirely. It is outdated and does not accurately reflect the complex nature of youth homelessness. Homelessness Australia will raise this definitional issue with the ABS during the consultation process.
The Review

- The ABS Paper states that there were 39,966 people aged 12-18 who were visiting private dwellings. The ABS paper states that this is the pool from which Chamberlain and Mackenzie source the 15,562 young people not immediately enumerated in the Census data.
- The review notes the difficulty that exists in trying to differentiate between young people who were ‘sleeping over’ at friends or relatives places with the permission of their parents and those unable to return home who are couch surfing.
- The ABS states that after applying its own corrections to some of the Counting the Homeless methodology, the gap between the Census based count and the Chamberlain and Mackenzie figure rises to approximately 16,500 young people.
- The ABS has assigned young people enumerated in the Census as staying in other households to five categories (see table 1.2 below) (ABS, p.43).

Table 1.2: Visiting youth with a reported usual address (aged 12-18)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visiting Circumstance</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A  Visitor Only Households</td>
<td>6200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B  Travelling with one or both parents or other young people</td>
<td>8600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C  Youth accompanied by children aged &lt;12</td>
<td>2100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D  Lone youth visiting a lone person household</td>
<td>3100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E  Other</td>
<td>20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total visiting youth</strong></td>
<td><strong>40,000</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a) Visiting youth in visitor only households

The ABS does not believe that these young people should be classified as “running away” but it does not go into great detail to explain why they should be excluded from the homelessness count other than that they were spending time away from home either in the company of one or both parents or with other young people. The ABS does concede that some of this group ‘could be homeless’ but they are ‘few if any’ in number.

According to the ABS, of the 6200 in visitor only households:
- 2400 were travelling with both ‘parents’;
- 1700 were travelling with at least one ‘parent’;
- 500 were travelling with other youth (ABS Discussion Paper, p.43).

b) Visiting youth travelling with ‘parents’ or other youth
The ABS has identified 8600 visiting young people in households where “usual residents’ were also present, who it claims were travelling with either parents or other young people, of whom:

- 1600 were travelling with both ‘parents’
- 2500 were travelling with their ‘father’; and
- 3500 were travelling with other youth and visiting either a family or lone person households.

The ABS claims that a majority of young people across all of these groups were enumerated in holiday/tourist destinations. This is used as the basis for their exclusion from the count as they are visiting dwellings in ‘desirable destinations’.

The ABS has concluded that few if any of this group of young people are homeless. The ABS claims:

“...their characteristics do not accord with assumptions made for this group in Counting the Homeless...” (ABS Discussion Paper, p.44)

c) Visiting youth accompanied by children under 12 years

The ABS has also isolated a group of 2100 young people aged between 12 and 18 who were not accompanied by parents but were in the company of young children.

Of these, they have determined that:

“...200 are old enough and the children, young enough, for there to be a potential parent/child relationship between them...” (ABS Discussion Paper, p.44)

They then conclude however, that “such a circumstance does not accord with the assumptions made in Counting the Homeless for this group.

The remaining 1900 are assumed by the ABS to be “travelling with their younger siblings”. The ABS again concludes that while:

“...it is possible that some of the youth and accompanying children in this group are homeless... This is highly unlikely...” (ABS Discussion Paper, p.44)

Homelessness Australia is not convinced that the ABS assumption here is satisfactory. We believe it warrants further exploration and explanation.

d) Lone youth visiting a lone person household

The ABS determined that there were 3100 young people aged 12-18 visiting “lone person households”. Approximately 50% of this group were visiting people aged 36-55 years. The ABS assumes that:
“...it is highly likely that the 2300 youth in these circumstances were visiting a parent or grandparent...” (ABS Discussion Paper, p.44)

The ABS again concludes that:

“...while it is possible that some of the youth in this group are homeless... It is highly unlikely...” (ABS Discussion Paper, p.45)

Homelessness Australia is again not convinced that the ABS has explained the grounds for excluding this group in sufficient detail. We are also concerned that 2300 does not equate to 50% of the 3100 people assigned to this statistical category. Indeed it is closer to 65%.

e) Visiting youth in other circumstances

The final statistical category of young people devised by the ABS following its review of the Counting the Homeless methodology is “visiting youth in other circumstances”, to which the ABS has assigned a pool of some 20,000 young people aged 12-18 years. Of these 20,000 young people:

- 3600 were travelling with their mother. The ABS concedes that it is possible that some of this group may be homeless (i.e. staying with a mother escaping violence) but have nonetheless concluded that the vast majority are not homeless. They have therefore decided to exclude them from their revised estimate.
- For the remaining 16,000 young people in this category, the ABS concludes that:

  “…it is possible that the scenario depicted in Counting the Homeless may play out...” (ABS Discussion Paper, p.45)

- This group were visiting households “by themselves” but the ABS believes that approximately half of the young people in this group should be excluded because they were visiting “holiday destinations”.
- According to the review, “there is no evidence to suggest that a significant proportion of this group are likely to be homeless... indeed the great majority of youth in this circumstance will be having a sleepover or similar visit”.
- The ABS has conservatively concluded that only around 2000 of this group are likely to be “hidden homeless”. (ABS Discussion Paper, p.45)

Homelessness Australia does not agree with the new assumptions made by the ABS for this group. The ABS has not provided sufficient justification for the exclusion of so many young people from the homelessness count. The ABS has simply provided vaguely documented assertions as to why they believe 14,000 young people should be excluded from the count. Homelessness Australia will urgently seek further evidence from the ABS to justify the blanket exclusion of such a significant pool of young people from the homelessness count.

The ABS claims to have confidence in its revised estimate of secondary homelessness within a margin of +/- 10%. At this stage, neither Homelessness Australia nor practitioners within the homelessness sector share this confidence. We need more information and more evidence to be provided by the ABS to justify what essentially appear to be new
assumptions arrived at by simply cross-tabulating Census datasets. We do not believe this is sufficient to arrive at an accurate figure for a population with the characteristics of people experiencing homelessness.

- The ABS has revised the secondary homelessness (staying with friends and relatives) count downwards from 46,856 people to between 17,500 people and 21,500 people with a median estimate of 19,579 (ABS Discussion Paper p.73).

Homelessness Australia is not convinced that the ABS have made the case for the removal of 27,277 people from the homelessness count in this category.

We are particularly concerned about the removal of more than 16,000 young people from the homelessness count. We do not believe that the exclusion of 75% of young people from the homelessness count is justifiable.

**The National Census of High School Students**

The ABS notes that the starting point for the estimate of youth homelessness arrived at in the *Counting the Homeless* report is the National Census of High School Students (NCHSS).

The ABS has expressed the view that they are not in favour of using this data to influence a Census night count of homelessness amongst young people who are aged 12-18 because it collects data over a period of more than one night and because they have concerns about aspects of the methodology and the quality of the data.

In their view:

“...the NCHSS may over count the number of homeless youth in public and Catholic secondary school systems, largely due to:
- Some ambiguity in the questions asked of schools;
- The nature of reporting, for such a mobile population, being unlikely to approximate a Census night measure; and
- The methodology to upwardly adjust by 20.5% may not be well founded.”

*However, the estimates for homeless youth outside these settings may overstate the count even more*. (ABS Discussion Paper, p.47)

It is clear that the ABS do not believe that the youth homelessness problem is as significant as either practitioners or other researchers in the field of homelessness.

Whereas the Burdekin Report *Our Homeless Children*, the National Youth Commission Report, *Australia’s Homeless Youth* and Chamberlain and Mackenzie believe that one third of homeless young people remaining enrolled in schools is a reliable estimate, the ABS disagrees believing the figure is closer to 50-60%. They offer little in the way of supporting evidence to justify this new assumption which automatically reduces the youth homelessness (12-18 year olds) estimate by one third.
They refer to SAAP data which shows that of the young people who present to homelessness services in this age group as accompanying children, 59% are still enrolled in school. Conversely, it could be argued that young people who are experiencing homelessness in family units that have managed to stay together are significantly more likely to remain enrolled in education than young people who have left or have been forced out of the family unit.

The table on page 73 of the ABS Discussion Paper provides a breakdown of homelessness by age and new estimates of the number of people from each age group who the ABS believe were found to be in different sectors of homelessness on Census night.

When we look closely at where the ABS claims that people aged 12-18 years were accommodated it appears that the new data does not tally with what the sector understands about youth homelessness (see table 1.3 below)

Table 1.3: Young people aged 12-18-Homeless Operational Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operational Group</th>
<th>Total (n)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary Homelessness</td>
<td>631</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAAP</td>
<td>2731</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends and Relatives</td>
<td>1055</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boarding Houses</td>
<td>902</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Temp Lodging</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>5424</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As table 1.3 shows, the ABS has concluded that approximately half of all young people aged 12-18 who were experiencing homelessness on Census night in 2006 were accommodated by SAAP services. While this age group are heavy users of SAAP services this does seem proportionally very high.

The ABS has also determined that only 19% of the people experiencing homelessness in this age group were staying temporarily with friends and relatives on Census night. This would seem based on the advice we receive from our members in the youth sector as well as what the literature tells us to be a very small percentage and an underrepresentation. It is widely known and accepted that a high proportion of young people experience homelessness in the form of ‘couch surfing’, that is staying temporarily with friends or relatives or even associates because they are unable to return to their family home. The ABS has attempted to explain the exclusion of 16 000 young people by claiming that most of them are ‘sleeping over’ with permission from their parent(s) or guardian(s). They have not provided sufficient justification in the paper to account for this assumption and given that the Census is conducted on a Tuesday night (a school night), it is not reasonable to assume that the vast majority are ‘sleeping over’ with permission. This argument may be more persuasive if the Census was conducted on a Friday or Saturday night.

The third assumption that does not accord with our understanding of youth homelessness is the tertiary homelessness (people staying in boarding houses) figure.
We know that service providers are extremely reluctant to put people aged under 25 in boarding houses let alone those aged 12-18. We also know that young people generally don’t stay in boarding houses in great numbers or return to them after an initial stay due to the nature of the client group who use the boarding house sector and the fact that many boarding houses are sites of theft, standover tactics, violence and intimidation. While it is possible that some of those aged 12-18 are staying in boarding houses with parent(s) or guardian(s) as a family unit on Census night, Homelessness Australia does not believe that this proportion would roughly equate to that of the ‘couch surfers’ It simply does not accord with practice experience.

Homelessness Australia is not convinced that 75% reduction in the number of young people aged 12-18 that the ABS has determined were experiencing homelessness on Census night has been adequately justified in the ABS Discussion paper. The final conclusion for young people reached by the ABS in its review is extremely concerning:

“...The conclusion reached in this review is that the methods used by Chamberlain and Mackenzie appear to create a very large youth homeless population on Census night that cannot be reasonably related to Census data...” (ABS Discussion Paper, p.48)

Homelessness Australia does not believe that all young people who are experiencing homelessness can be captured using Census data alone. We recommend that FaHCSIA provide funding for researchers to conduct a national census of high school students or an equivalent survey with similar coverage that captures secondary school students who are experiencing homelessness and is measurable on a point in time basis.

**Improvised Homes, Tents and Sleepers Out: Primary Homelessness**

Consistent with the rest of the new assumptions made by the ABS in the Discussion Paper, the ABS believes that the figure of 16,375 for people experiencing primary homelessness on Census night overestimates the number of people sleeping rough or in improvised dwellings.

Unlike many of the other assumptions in the paper, Homelessness Australia believes that some of the exclusions from the category of primary homelessness flagged in the ABS paper are appropriate.

There are examples of people living in dwellings that would appear to be improvised to Census collectors that are in fact functioning as housing that does not meet the definition that the ABS believes is appropriate for primary homelessness. The ABS cites a number of examples including:

- Construction workers who are employed in the development and construction of new suburbs and are living in on-site sheds but who may own a home or be renting a property elsewhere.
- “Hobby farmers” and other owner-builders living in sheds that the ABS describes as “part of the property’s ongoing infrastructure” and “quite habitable” albeit by people “not living in a standard suburban way” (ABS, p.51) but which the ABS determines that Census collectors would incorrectly identify as ‘improvised
dwellings’, thus including occupants in the primary homelessness count. The ABS states that “particular examples were reviewed in the context of a wide range of reported Census variables to establish the nature of these “hobby farmers”/owner-builders and general rules were applied to the entire group of people enumerated in improvised dwellings to establish likely homelessness” (ABS Discussion Paper, p.51).

While Homelessness Australia believes it is appropriate to review this category and to exclude some people from the primary homelessness count due to home ownership status we are concerned that the ABS has excluded a very large number of people from this category of homelessness.

Given that “offering supported accommodation to all rough sleepers who seek it by 2020” is one of the two headline goals articulated in the White Paper it is imperative that the primary homelessness count derived from the Census is as accurate as possible. Below is a summary of the people the ABS has determined should be excluded from the count and their stated reasons for doing so:

- 5052 persons who reported a tenure type ‘owned outright’, ‘owned with a mortgage’, ‘being purchased in a rent-buy scheme’ ‘being rented’, ‘being occupied under a life-tenure scheme’, and with at least one person in the dwelling reporting being ‘employed-full time’.
- 2356 persons with a tenure type ‘owned outright’ and no-one in the dwelling reporting being ‘employed-full time’.
- 382 persons who reported a tenure type ‘owned with a mortgage’, no-one in the dwelling reported being “employed-full time” and the monthly mortgage repayments were $1050 or more per month.
- 57 persons reported a tenure type “being rented”, no-one in the dwelling reported being ‘employed-full time’ and rent repayments were $300 or more per week; and
- 109 persons reported a tenure type of ‘being occupied rent free’, ‘other tenure type’ or ‘not stated’, at least one person in the dwelling reported being ‘employed-full time’ and the household income was $2000 per week or more. (ABS, p.51).

The ABS has also determined that:

“...Emerging affluence, ‘tree change’, ‘sea change’ and ageing population are all likely to see this component of the Counting the Homeless population increase as populations move and adapt to their living environment...”

But that;

“...The characteristics of those over counted are unlikely to match any homeless population... The improvised nature of their dwellings perhaps represents significant lifestyle choices that they can afford, or cost-effective responses to employer-supplied mobile accommodation that suits their working arrangements. It is likely that most but not all of the people so classified as living in ‘improvised dwellings, tent, sleepers out’ who are not sleeping out do not meet a cultural definition of homelessness...” (ABS, p.52).

**ABS Confidence in the revised primary homelessness estimate**
• The ABS has revised the primary homelessness count downwards from 16,375 to 7,764 persons taking into account the exclusions outlined above and the removal of 656 people who were not enumerated in the field but were “system imputed” to be resident in an improvised dwelling. Of these 6000 are rough sleepers and 1764 are residing in improvised dwellings.

This represents a reduction of more than 50% in the primary homelessness count.

The ABS states that:

“...For this review it cannot be certain which of the people enumerated in improvised dwellings are the travelling construction crews and owner builders etc. An estimate of +/- 20% around the total reviewed estimate of primary homelessness may be appropriate i.e. An estimate in the range of 6000-10 000...”

(ABS, Discussion Paper, p.52)

Homeless Indigenous Australians

The ABS acknowledges in the Discussion Paper that Indigenous Australians are undercounted in the Census data and in the Counting the Homeless data for the following reasons:

• Under-enumeration of Indigenous persons in the Census;
• The nature of reporting ‘no usual address’ for Indigenous visitors’ to a dwelling
• The classification of a dwelling structure.

The ABS note that Indigenous Australians have been undercounted in the 2001 and 2006 Censuses by 11.5% in 2006 and 6.1% in 2001 (ABS Discussion Paper, p.53).

Homelessness Australia agrees with the ABS about the likelihood that the figure arrived at in both Counting the Homeless and the ABS review significantly understates the extent of Indigenous homelessness in Australia.

We are particularly concerned about the very low count of Indigenous people experiencing secondary homelessness ‘staying temporarily with friends and relatives’. See table 1.3 below:

Table 1.4: Homelessness amongst Indigenous people

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Homelessness Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary Homelessness</td>
<td>2095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAAP</td>
<td>2692</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends and Relatives</td>
<td>872</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boarding Houses</td>
<td>859</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Temporary Lodging</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6655</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The above figures are interesting when contrasted with the non-Indigenous population. According to the ABS, the proportion of Indigenous people staying with friends and relatives is just 13.1% of the homeless population compared with 34% for the non-Indigenous population.

Given what we know about the cultural obligation to house extended family and people from kinship/skin groups who may have no tenancy or occupancy rights to the property, a figure of just 872 Indigenous people staying with friends and relatives who are otherwise experiencing homelessness across Australia seems completely unrealistic and completely inappropriate for performance indicator construction given what the ABS’ own data tells us about the extent of overcrowding amongst Indigenous households as discussed earlier.

Homelessness Australia is not convinced that the above numbers are an accurate reflection of the totality of Indigenous homelessness. We are particularly concerned about the secondary homelessness (staying temporarily with friends and relatives) count.

### Homelessness by Age

#### Table 1.4: Homelessness by Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group (CTH)</th>
<th>Number Homeless on Census Night</th>
<th>(ABS review)</th>
<th>Change (n)</th>
<th>Change %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-12 years</td>
<td>12 133</td>
<td>7 552</td>
<td>-4 581</td>
<td>-37.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-18 years</td>
<td>21 940</td>
<td>5 423</td>
<td>-16 517</td>
<td>-75.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-24 years</td>
<td>10 504</td>
<td>7 992</td>
<td>-2 512</td>
<td>-23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34 years</td>
<td>15 804</td>
<td>11 893</td>
<td>-3 911</td>
<td>-24.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44 years</td>
<td>13 981</td>
<td>10 600</td>
<td>-3 381</td>
<td>-24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54 years</td>
<td>12 206</td>
<td>8 757</td>
<td>-3 449</td>
<td>-28.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-64 years</td>
<td>10 708</td>
<td>6 332</td>
<td>-4 376</td>
<td>-40.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 or older</td>
<td>7 400</td>
<td>4 920</td>
<td>-2 480</td>
<td>-33.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>104 676</strong></td>
<td><strong>63 469</strong></td>
<td><strong>-41 204</strong></td>
<td><strong>-39.3</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the table above indicates, the ABS Review of the Counting the Homeless methodology has resulted in a dramatic reduction in overall homelessness but particularly a major reduction in youth homelessness and homelessness amongst older Australians.

We remain concerned about the statistically significant nature of the differences between the figures arrived at in the *Counting the Homeless* reports and the figures arrived at by the ABS as a result of their review of the *Counting the Homeless 2006* methodology.

In order to fully understand the totality of the exclusions it would be useful for Homelessness Australia (time permitting) to have access to the Census tables that the ABS have used to re-classify people counted by Chamberlain and Mackenzie as homeless. While the ABS has provide some explanation in the discussion paper for the exclusions they are
significant in number and having access to the Census tables may improve the sector’s understanding of the rationale for the exclusions.

**Comparison between 2001 and 2006 based on ABS Review estimates**

The ABS has also provided a reviewed estimate for the 2001 Census. This comparison data is provided below:

Table 1.5: Change in homeless population between 2001 and 2006 (ABS, pp.4-5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>Change (n)</th>
<th>Change (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boarding houses</td>
<td>23 749</td>
<td>16 828</td>
<td>-6921</td>
<td>-29.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAAP</td>
<td>13 420</td>
<td>17 331</td>
<td>+3911</td>
<td>+29.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends/relatives</td>
<td>17 877</td>
<td>19 579</td>
<td>+1702</td>
<td>+9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary H/less</td>
<td>8 933</td>
<td>7 764</td>
<td>-1169</td>
<td>-13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temp. Lodging</td>
<td>1 395</td>
<td>1 970</td>
<td>+575</td>
<td>+41.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>65 384</strong></td>
<td><strong>63 472</strong></td>
<td><strong>-1 912</strong></td>
<td><strong>-2.9</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the table above indicates, the ABS review estimates that the overall population of Australians who were experiencing homelessness on Census night declined by 2.9% between 2001 and 2006. The ABS attributes this to improvements in economic conditions during that time period.

The statistically significant percentage increase in people accommodated by SAAP on Census night roughly correlates with the increase in the overall number of people supported by SAAP services over the course of the financial year between 2001/02 and 2006/07. The decline in the number of people staying in boarding houses on Census night between 2001 and 2006 is statistically significant and interestingly corresponds exactly to the percentage increase in the number of people the ABS believes were accommodated in SAAP services, though the decrease in the number of people accommodated in boarding houses was significantly greater given that they were found to have accommodated more than 10 000 more people than SAAP services in 2001.

There is a body of evidence that indicates that the boarding house sector has been in decline for over a decade now and it is likely that boarding houses did accommodate fewer people who were experiencing homelessness on Census night 2006 than they would have on Census night in 2001. The size of the decrease estimated by the ABS is statistically very significant however and may warrant further investigation.

Interestingly despite citing improved economic conditions as a reason to explain the slight decrease in overall homelessness between 2001 and 2006, the ABS review has determined that between 2001 and 2006 the proportion of people staying temporarily with friends and relatives on Census night increased by just under 10% between 2001 and 2006. This may warrant further investigation.

The ABS review found that the population of people they believe meet the cultural definition of primary homeless on Census night (of which they estimate more than 80% are
rough sleepers) declined by 13.8% between 2001 and 2006. This is again primarily attributed to improved economic conditions.

The ABS has estimated that their newly devised category of persons ‘in other temporary lodging’ increased by more than 40% between 2001 and 2006. While it represents a small number of people in relation to the overall count, an increase of 40% is very significant and may also warrant further investigation.

Given that the ABS has conducted an extensive review of the methodology and added a new category of ‘temporary lodging’ to the count, it may be prudent to also consider including ‘marginal residents of caravan parks’ in the homelessness count. Homelessness Australia is aware that service providers often use caravan parks to accommodate people experiencing homelessness in regional and rural areas. Outside of our cities they fill the same gap that boarding houses fill and given that they offer diminished security of tenure in comparison to a residential tenancy agreement and that people not staying in cabins also lack access to their own kitchen and bathroom facilities, the standard of accommodation shares many characteristics with that of boarding/rooming houses.

**Future Directions**

The ABS identified four future directions following the review:

1) Repeat the very successful 2006 practice of jurisdictional lists and the ‘green sticker’ approach for supported accommodation arrangements. This generated a count very close to Census week SAAP counts compiled by AIHW, but one which is more complete and does not rely on a usually very slow reporting and compilation process through SAAP agencies to AIHW. For the 2011 Census, the request for lists has also included a request for additional information on tenure arrangements and the facilities available in the accommodation. This aspect of data collection will need to be reviewed as the nature of service provision continues to evolve.

2) Extend the list approach in 1 above to jurisdictional lists of registered boarding houses, and new forms of crisis and transitional housing such as foyer accommodation.

3) Use the expansion in Census funding and effort for the count of the Indigenous population to reduce the initial Census undercount of Indigenous people.

4) Release homelessness related data from the Census coincident with, or as soon as possible after, the standard first and second releases from the 2011 Census i.e. release homeless estimates from the 2011 Census in the second half of 2012 (ABS, p.57)

**Conclusion**

Homelessness Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the methodological review of *Counting the Homeless 2006*. After participating in the ABS workshop in September 2009 and contributing our submission in response to the Issues Paper which flagged the beginning of the review process in October 2009, Homelessness Australia
received no communication from the ABS until we contacted them in February 2011 asking for information about where the bureau was up to with the review process.

This was extremely disappointing for us given the importance of the Census count for our sector and the contribution that the *Counting the Homeless* reports have made to improving our understanding of homelessness, it causes and patterns of change within the homeless population over time.

In our submission in October 2009, we disagreed with the assertion made by the ABS that the *Counting the Homeless* numbers overestimated the overall level of homelessness in Australia and particularly youth homelessness. We consulted broadly with our Councils and members who were able to identify a number of instances for us of people who would meet the cultural definition of homelessness but because of their circumstances on Census night would not be included in the count. These were outlined above.

We agreed with the ABS that a number of the people included in the primary homelessness-improved dwellings count could potentially be excluded from the primary homelessness count on the basis of other factors revealed on the Census form such as living on their own land. We did not agree that income should immediately exclude a person from the homelessness count if their living situation matched that of others in different sectors of the homeless population. In other words, we believe that homelessness should be based on the amenity of the dwelling and the security of tenure that it affords as the cultural definition relates to the standard of accommodation and not other factors.

Having canvassed the Discussion Paper released by the ABS on 31 March, Homelessness Australia has a number of concerns about the findings of the methodological review.

These relate to:

- The significant reduction in the youth homelessness count. Homelessness Australia does not believe the ABS has provided adequate justification for the 75% reduction in the count of people aged 12-18 years.

- The significant reduction in the overall secondary homelessness count. Homelessness Australia is not convinced that the ABS has provided us with sufficient information to adequately explain the exclusion of 27,277 people from the secondary homeless-staying with friends and relatives category.

- Indigenous homelessness, particularly that which is masked by overcrowding. The ABS’ own data on overcrowding amongst Indigenous households suggests that over 102,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in overcrowded households. According to its discussion paper, only 873 of this group were homeless in this circumstance on Census night. That translates to approximately 0.75% of all Indigenous people in overcrowded households. This would not seem to reflect the cultural realities of Indigenous homelessness. The ABS has acknowledged that it generally undercounts Indigenous people in Census data but Homelessness Australia believes a greater commitment should be made to accurately counting people whose homelessness is masked by overcrowding.
• Tertiary homelessness. According to the ABS Discussion Paper, the number of people staying in Boarding Houses declined by 29% between 2001 and 2006. Even accounting for the reported decline in the boarding house sector this reduction is statistically very significant and warrants further investigation.

Homelessness Australia is pleased that we have been invited to participate in a consultation process that may enable representatives from the sector to voice these and other concerns about the significant changes to the methodology flagged in the paper.

While we support the opportunity to review the methodology, we also think it is vital that other researchers with knowledge of the complexities of homelessness and who have been leaders in the field are not completely sidelined by the ABS. They have provided us with very useful qualitative information about the complexities of homelessness in Australia and its particular dimensions across different regions. Their work has and continues to provide the most comprehensive source of information about homelessness in Australia to date. Their work should be acknowledged and respected even if statisticians disagree with the methodology employed.

Homelessness Australia remains extremely concerned that the lasting legacy of this review will be that the Consensus that has existed for many years now between the sector, Government, the ABS, AIHW and researchers may well be shattered if the findings of this review are not properly accounted for. Based on feedback we have received from members, particularly in the state of Victoria there are early signs that this may already be occurring.

Should such a breakdown in consensus occur there could be lasting implications for the ABS, Government and the sector and most importantly, for the tens of thousands of Australians who are currently experiencing homelessness and need accommodation and support.

Australia has enjoyed a remarkable consensus over the past two decades in homelessness. This broad agreement about its prevalence has ensured that collaborative action to address the issue has occurred.

The Homelessness sector was re-energised in 2009 following the release of the White Paper and the partnership between the sector and Government was arguably strengthened as a result of the commitments made in the White Paper that were matched by significant new investment.

At the end of 2009, the ABS released its paper and invited us to provide feedback. At the time we welcomed the opportunity to contribute to the review. After more than 12 months without involvement in the review the sector became increasingly sceptical about the direction that it might be taking.

These concerns appear to have been validated by the findings in the Discussion Paper. There is little evidence in the paper that our concerns have been taken into account. The submissions are referred to in the preface to the Discussion Paper but not in the paper itself. This is a further cause for concern.
Homelessness Australia remains committed to constructively engaging with the ABS in the current consultation process. We sincerely hope that our concerns are taken on board in through this process so that the Consensus we have enjoyed can be maintained.

Appendix 1: Aggregated Survey Data ABS Evidence Based Policy Paper

Table 1- State and Territory Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State/Territory</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Australia</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Australia</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Capital Territory</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 - State and Territory and locality data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Locality</th>
<th>NSW</th>
<th>Vic</th>
<th>QLD</th>
<th>WA</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>Tas</th>
<th>ACT</th>
<th>NT</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inner-city</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 - Client Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Client Group</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women escaping violence</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single adult men</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single adult women</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>55</strong>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Some services provide accommodation and support to more than one client group hence the total is greater than the response count.

Table 4 - Perceptions of Demand Pressures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demand Trend</th>
<th>Service Level</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>51.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the same</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>45</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>45</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

The response rate we received to our survey represents almost 15% of our membership which compares favourably to other surveys we have conducted. Statistically, a response rate of 10% is considered to be representative of a high response rate. It should also be noted that the time taken by members to respond was much more rapid than we would
generally expect when surveying our members about an issue. This suggests that the issue of the review of the methodology used to enumerate homelessness in Australia is an important one for Homelessness Australia’s members and one to which they are able to contribute data based on their practice experience. Obviously given that the data that is derived from the Census night point in time homelessness counts has been used to produce detailed qualitative and quantitative reports on the prevalence and characteristics of homelessness for a range of demographics and at a national, state/territory and regional (census collection district) level this is not surprising. These reports (Counting the Homeless) have provided us with the most comprehensive data about homelessness that we have available. They are important in helping us to understand not just the prevalence of homelessness and variations across jurisdictional boundaries but also its qualitative characteristics and dimensions and trends over time as well as reasons that may help us to understand these trends.

The Survey

Homelessness Australia understands that the survey data does not provide a point in time count of people experiencing homelessness. We were however interested in getting a sense from our members about their perceptions of whether or not demand for their services had increased in recent years and whether or not they believed based on their experience as practitioners, the prevalence of homelessness in their area had increased in recent years.

We also provided members with a list of examples of people who for various reasons may not be identified as experiencing homelessness on Census night even though they would meet the ABS cultural definition of homelessness. These examples were provided by representatives of our Councils during our consultations at the time of the release of the issues paper by the ABS which flagged the commencement of the methodological review of Counting the Homeless 2006 that is the subject of this paper. We wanted to see if these examples held true for our broader membership and we asked members to list other examples. The ABS has concluded that:

“...There is widespread agreement that the numbers reported in Counting the Homeless are indicative rather than being entirely appropriate for performance indicator construction and may well overestimate the count of homeless people in Australia in general and that of homeless youth in particular...” (ABS 2009, p.1)

When Homelessness Australia consulted with our members in late 2009 however we found that our members did not agree with this assertion. Practitioners were able to identify a number of examples of people who may meet the ABS cultural definition of homelessness because of circumstances in which their clients may find themselves on Census night but who would not be readily identified as homeless, thus resulting in an undercount.

We agreed with the ABS about the potential for double counting in some instances and we agreed with the proposition that a number of people who were included in the primary homelessness count because they were staying in sheds and temporary structures on land that they owned or in improvised dwellings while they owned properties elsewhere.
Members indicated to us however that the totality of these exclusions would not outweigh the number of people whose circumstances met the cultural definition of homelessness on Census night but who were for various reasons not counted as homeless.

All of the members that Homelessness Australia surveyed over the course of researching for this paper identified with some or all of the examples of potential undercounting.

This suggests that they remain valid concerns for our members.

End Notes

v ABS, ibid, p.1.


Chamberlain, Chris; Mackenzie, David, ibid, p.31.


Chamberlain Chris; Mackenzie, David *Counting the Homeless 2006- Northern Territory*, et al, pp.28-29.
