

National Affordable Housing Agreement: 3:Proportion of Australians who are homeless, 2010 QS

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Identifying and definitional attributes

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Data quality

Data quality statement summary:

By their nature homeless people are difficult to count. Traditional Census and survey methods are generally not suitable for locating and identifying homeless people. The ABS has developed special enumeration strategies for finding homeless people in the Census. However, despite these efforts it is likely that a proportion of the homeless population will remain uncounted. Similarly, homeless people are not well captured in administrative records. The SAAP collection provides a count of those people that are provided with specialist homeless services. However, there are currently no adequate counts of homeless people accessing mainstream services.

For these reasons, Chamberlain and MacKenzie have been contracted by FaHCSIA and the states and territories to produce the best possible estimate of the homeless population. The research project "Counting the Homeless" has been undertaken following the release of data from the last three Censuses. This project recognises the difficulties in counting homeless people and the complexity of situations that constitute the state of homelessness. The Counting the Homeless project seeks the best way to pull together the Census data, SAAP data and data from the National Census of Homeless School Students to provide overall counts and distributions of homeless people across the categories of the cultural definition of homelessness i.e. primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness. To achieve this, the methodology involves a number of adjustments to the counts from these collections, which are now subject to review.

The review of the Counting the Homeless methodology is currently underway. This review aims to determine whether improvements can be made to the way homeless people are counted. The review will consider issues of under and over-counting, definitions, application of definitions, assumptions, and preferred methods for future counts. It will also provide insights to the quality of the Counting the Homeless estimates. Once this review is complete, recommendations on improvements in methodology will be made to Housing Ministers in the first half of 2010. The jurisdictions and the sector have sought that the review provides transparency on any impacts on the baseline measure that result from the review.

Institutional environment: The Counting the Homeless project is undertaken by researchers Chris Chamberlain of the Institute for Social Research at Swinburne University of Technology and David MacKenzie of the Centre for Applied Social Research at the School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning, RMIT University, in collaboration with the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

ABS Census - For information on the institutional environment of the ABS, including the legislative obligations of the ABS, financing and governance arrangements, and mechanisms for scrutiny of ABS operations, please see [ABS Institutional Environment](#).

SAAP Collection – For information on the institutional environment of the AIHW including the legislative obligations of the AIHW and its governance arrangements, please see <http://www.aihw.gov.au/aboutus/index.cfm>

National Census of Homeless School Students – This census is undertaken by the authors of the research report, Counting the Homeless with results published by FaHCSIA in the report Youth Homelessness in Australia 2006. Please see http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/housing/pubs/homelessyouth/youth_homelessness/Pages/default.aspx.

Timeliness: The Counting the Homeless report which provides the numerator for this performance indicator was released on the ABS website on 4 September 2008. State and territory Counting the Homeless publications were released on the AIHW website on 9 July 2009. First Release 2006 Census variables which provide the denominator were available on 27 June 2007; Second release variables were available on 25 October 2007.

Accessibility: Census data are available every five years. The most recent available data are for 2006. Annual SAAP data are available. The most recent available data for this measure are for 2006-07. The National Census of Homeless School Students is conducted on an ad hoc basis and the most recent available data are for 2006.

Interpretability: The national Counting the Homeless report is available on the ABS website at [2050.0 - Australian Census Analytic Program: Counting the Homeless, 2006](#). The state and territory Counting the Homeless reports are available on the AIHW website at [Counting the homeless 2006 complete set](#).

Relevance: The research on which this measure is based was specifically commissioned for the purpose of counting the homeless. The use of the 'cultural definition' of homeless and associated concepts underpinning the Counting the Homeless research project are directly relevant to the numerator in this performance indicator. As noted above, the methodology is subject to review.

Accuracy: There are a range of issues in the Counting the Homeless methodology relating to accuracy, coherence and interpretability. There is potential under and overcounting of homeless people in the data sources used by Chamberlain and MacKenzie and their methodology attempts to address these issues in bringing the data sources together to produce the best possible overall counts. However, these methods are not perfect and may result in some double counting and other inconsistencies when the data sources are brought together. The broad methodology of the research has been published but there is little published documentation around the quality of the estimates as they relate to these dimensions or for the purposes of reporting data for this PI.

The Counting the Homeless review steering committee has produced an issues paper that has sought comments from stakeholders on issues in the methodology. This paper is available on the Homelessness Clearing House hosted by FaHCSIA. See [Have Your Say - Issues Paper from ABS on Counting the Homeless](#).

ABS has published a quality statement on the dwelling structure variable collected in the Census which is relevant to the primary homeless count. See [Dwelling Structure](#). Some of the issues identified to date are reported below by the ABS. However, there is some contention about the extent of the issues raised – as noted in the AIHW comments that follow. ABS assessment of the accuracy and coherence of the numerator for PI: Primary homeless – Data reported for this PI equates this homeless category with the cross-classification of the Census dwelling structure 'Improvised home, tent, sleepers out' with either usual residence at that structure or no usual residence. It is ABS's view that many of the Census counts (up to half) observed in this cross-classification, are unlikely to represent people that

meet the cultural definition of primary homeless. The Census is also likely to have missed some people that should have been both enumerated in this category and who would likely represent people that meet the cultural definition of primary homeless. The scale of undercount in this category is not known, but it is implausible that the homeownership, income, occupation and geographic location characteristics of those people overcounted in this PI will be similar to potential undercounts.

Secondary homeless – It is highly likely that the use of multiple sources in compiling the data for this PI results in some double counting of people. For example, it appears that the SAAP 'support period' count was used to compile this PI, which counts people receiving support in a period that spans Census night but not necessarily being accommodated on Census night. This may overcount this population by between 40 per cent and 60 per cent in the PI, because those people overcounted in the SAAP count may be either no longer homeless on Census night, or counted in one of the other homelessness components of this PI sourced from the Census.

Tertiary homeless – Data reported for this PI has been compiled using Census data to identify dwellings that may house homeless people in single rooms without their own bathroom or security of tenure. It is the ABS view that it is not clear whether the appropriate dwellings are identified, and no account is taken in the compiling the PI of the personal characteristics of people enumerated in these dwellings in the Census in estimating this component of homelessness. Many of the Census counts observed in this research classification are unlikely to represent people that meet the cultural definition of tertiary homeless.

Overall, it is the ABS view that the youth homeless component of this PI is much higher than can be reconcilable with Census information about this population.

AIHW Comment on ABS Views

The ABS view on primary homelessness is based on an assumption about which people should or should not be included in the cultural definition of primary homelessness. The additional information included in the Census data quality statement on dwelling structure (linked above) has shed light on the characteristics of people in living in improvised dwellings, showing among other things that some of these people have jobs, reasonable incomes and mortgages. This raises issues about the state of disadvantage of some in this group. However, it cannot be assumed that all of these people do not meet the cultural definition of homelessness. These people meet the definition of living in substandard accommodation which forms the basis of the primary homeless definition. While there will be situations where people are living in improvised dwellings while in the process of building their home, there will be other circumstances where people are in these dwellings due to problems of mental health, substance abuse, family violence and lack of affordable housing. All of these are of direct policy interest in the reform initiatives on homelessness. Unfortunately, there is no information that differentiates those with personal and housing problems from those that do not have such problems but choose to live in improvised dwellings. Discussions about the definition of cultural homelessness and its application will form an important part of the review. There will be a number of stakeholders (government agencies, NGOs, sector peak bodies and the authors of the report) that will dispute the assessments made by ABS on the primary count and the youth count, either due to definitional issues or the contention that the Census is not adequate in identifying these people effectively. The review will allow for objective discussions around these issues, which will enable views to be provided and assessed. It is particularly important that Chamberlain and MacKenzie have a chance to put their views.

The ABS views are selective and all relate to possible over-counts with the possible interpretation that the overall numbers that have been published overstate the problem. The review will provide a better assessment of the overall picture by considering both under and overcounting, an improved understanding of definitions and how they should be applied, and how best to measure these with hard data and where adjustments may need to be made to gain a better understanding of the dimensions of homelessness.

Source and reference attributes

Submitting organisation: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

Steward: [Housing and Homelessness Information Management Group](#)

Relational attributes

**Indicators linked to this
Data Quality statement:**

[National Affordability Housing Agreement: 3: Proportion of Australians who are homeless, 2010](#)

[Homelessness](#), Standard 16/02/2011