

Specialist Homelessness Services Collection, 2020–21; Quality Statement

Identifying and definitional attributes

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Relational attributes

Data sources linked to this Quality statement: [Specialist Homelessness Services Collection Longitudinal Data Set](#)

Data quality

Quality statement summary:

Description

The Specialist Homelessness Services Collection (SHSC) collects information on people seeking services from agencies that receive funding under the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA).

Summary

- Data are collected monthly from agencies participating in the collection. All agencies that receive funding under the NHHA to provide specialist homelessness services are in scope for the SHSC, although some agencies are exempt from supplying data.
- For the 2020–21 reporting period, 100% of Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) agencies provided data for each month they were expected to participate in the collection.
- Matching of data from individual clients who presented at different agencies and/or at different times requires a valid statistical linkage key (SLK). In 2020–21, 99% of support periods had a valid SLK.

Institutional environment: The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) is an independent corporate Commonwealth entity under the [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Act 1987](#) (AIHW Act), governed by a [management board](#) and accountable to the Australian Parliament through the Health portfolio.

The AIHW is a nationally recognised information management agency. Its purpose is to create authoritative and accessible information and statistics that inform decisions and improve the health and welfare of all Australians.

Compliance with the confidentiality requirements in the AIHW Act, the Privacy Principles in the [Privacy Act 1988](#) (Cth), and AIHW's data governance arrangements ensures that the AIHW is well positioned to release information for public benefit while protecting the identity of individuals and organisations.

For further information, see the AIHW website <https://www.aihw.gov.au/about-us>, which includes details about the AIHW's governance (<https://www.aihw.gov.au/about-us/our-governance>) and vision and strategic goals (<https://www.aihw.gov.au/about-us/our-vision-and-strategic-goals>).

The SHSC was developed by the AIHW in conjunction with the states and territories and is administered by the AIHW. SHSC system operations are funded by states and territories. For 2020–21 data holdings, all agencies that receive funding under the NHHA to provide specialist homelessness services are in scope for the SHSC, although some agencies are exempt from supplying data. Data are collected monthly from agencies participating in the collection.

Timeliness: The SHSC contains data from 1 July 2011 and data are published annually in a range of formats.

SHS agencies submit data monthly to the AIHW. Data for 2020–21 use data from July 2020 to June 2021 that were submitted and validated as at 12 August 2021. These data are first published in a dashboard report released quarterly on the AIHW website, and then in a more comprehensive annual SHS report with accompanying data products in December 2021.

Accessibility: Data are reported in the AIHW's annual [Specialist homelessness services](#) reports and the Productivity Commission's annual [Report on government services](#).

Users can request additional disaggregations of data which are not available online or in reports (subject to the AIHW's confidentiality policy and state and territory approval) via the AIHW's online customised data request system at <https://www.aihw.gov.au/our-services/data-on-request>. Depending on the nature of the request, requests for access to unpublished data may also incur costs or require approval from the AIHW Ethics Committee.

General enquiries about AIHW publications can be directed to info@aihw.gov.au.

Interpretability: Information on the development of the SHSC, definitions and concepts, and collection materials and processes can be found on [Specialist Homelessness Services Collection \(SHSC\) information site](#) on the AIHW website. Information on definitions, concepts and classifications can also be found in the [Specialist homelessness services collection manual](#).

Relevance:**Scope and coverage**

The SHSC contains information about people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and seek assistance from specialist homelessness services agencies. All specialist homelessness services agencies that receive funding under the NHHA (previously the NAHA or NPAH) to provide specialist homelessness services are in scope for the SHSC.

For the 2020–21 reporting period, 100% of SHS agencies provided data for each month they were expected to participate in the collection. On average, 3.2% of agencies were in-scope for the collection but were exempt from providing data each month. The main reasons for agencies being exempt are:

- does not see clients directly but supports other agencies
- level of SHS funding makes it impractical to participate
- support high number of clients with minimal direct support or do not assess client needs.

The SHSC contains information about people who receive assistance, as well as information about people who seek assistance but do not receive any assistance at that time. People of all ages, including children, are included in the collection and are counted as clients. People who are homeless who do not seek assistance from an SHS agency are not in scope.

Agencies submit data on the periods of support provided to clients, and support periods for individual clients are joined using a statistical linkage key (SLK). Information from all support periods is included in analyses about clients. In 2020–21, 98.6% of support periods had a valid SLK. For records relating to people who were unassisted, 52% had a valid SLK.

Accuracy:**Data validation**

Data are validated at two stages: at the point of entry into the client management systems that agencies use to record their data, and upon submission to the AIHW.

Non-response bias

Minimal non-response bias is anticipated as agency response rate is 100% and the SLK validity rate is very high and exemption rates are very low.

Imputation

Prior to 2017–18, data were imputed to account for agency non-response and invalid SLKs. Imputation is no longer required for the SHSC due to the high rates of agency response and SLK validity.

Incomplete responses and missing information

In many support periods, valid responses were not recorded for all questions—invalid responses are recorded, 'don't know' can be selected, or no response is recorded. Support periods with invalid/'don't know'/missing responses were retained in the collection and no attempt is made to deduce or impute the true value of invalid/'don't know'/ missing responses at the unit level. Where data relate to the total client population, the total includes clients with missing information. This information is attributed in proportion with those clients for whom information is available.

Geographical information

Information about the geographical location of both agencies and clients is available in the SHSC. Client location information is mapped (using reported state/territory, locality and/or postcode information) to Statistical Area 2 (SA2) mainly using standard correspondences published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). For 2020–21, the majority of support periods (86%) were able to be mapped using a combination of all 3 location variables. Agency location information is mapped (using reported state/territory, locality and/or postcode information) to remoteness area using standard correspondences published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). For 2020–21, the majority of agencies (93%) were able to be mapped using a combination of all 3 location variables.

Information about the geographical location of clients for 2011–12 to 2013–14 is not published due to concerns about data quality. Caution should be used when comparing geographical information about agencies with geographical information about clients as the location where a client lives may be different to the location of the agency where they present for support, especially for clients who live in remote areas of Australia.

People who did not receive assistance

Due to concerns about the reliability of information collected about people who seek assistance from SHS agencies but do not receive any assistance at that time, only limited data on these instances are reported.

ADF indicator

The ADF indicator was introduced into the SHSC in July 2017. Data on clients aged 18 and older who identify as current or former members of the Australian Defence Force are available in the annual SHSC products from 2017–18 onwards. Variability in the implementation of this item means that coverage is incomplete for 2017–18 and caution should be taken when comparing this first year of data with subsequent years.

NDIS indicator

On 1 July 2019, a National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) indicator was included for new support periods to gain an understanding of the number of clients who were receiving an agreed NDIS package of support at the time of presentation to an SHS agency.

This indicator has not been well reported, with high proportions of ‘don’t knows’ for some states/territories. Therefore, caution should be used when comparing data across states and territories.

Main language spoken at home and proficiency in spoken English

On 1 July 2019, a question was added for new support periods to record the client’s main language spoken at home. A follow up question was also added for those who did not speak English as a main language at home. This second question collects information on how proficient the client feels they are at speaking English.

Although in 2020–21 the main language spoken at home question was answered for the majority of clients, the question regarding English proficiency has been less well reported, with high proportions of ‘don’t knows’ for the majority of jurisdictions. Therefore, caution should be taken when using this data for 2020–21.

The addition of ‘Other’ to the Sex item

An ‘Other’ category was added to the sex item in both the Client and Unassisted persons components of the SHSC for episodes starting from 1 July 2019. This change has meant that there has been a break in time series for some clients as their SLK has changed to reflect their change in recorded sex. In 2020–21, just under 0.5% of clients identified as Sex = Other.

The Sex = Other option may have also been applied by some agencies to young children where their sex was not obvious or for those who did not want to state their sex. Due to this, as well as the confidentiality concerns that accompany small numbers of clients, those clients identifying as Sex = Other have been included in the ‘Female’ category when reporting the data for 2020–21.

Coherence:

Changes in reported data

The SHSC contains data extracted from agency databases. These data change regularly as new periods of support are added and as existing records are updated. As a result, SHSC data can change over time, and the numbers reported by the AIHW for a particular year may be updated in subsequent data releases.

Changes over time

Changes in SHSC data over time may be influenced by changes in underlying state and territory policies, programs or systems. These changes might affect the service

delivery area, the characteristics of priority clients, or how services work together to respond to client needs. Some of these changes will result in coherence problems and may lead to breaks in time series.

Geographical classifications changes over time

Some geographical classifications change over time. For client geography, changes are generally applied to all years of data in published reports and data products so trend analysis is comparable. This also means that numbers reported by the AIHW for a particular year, using a particular geographical classification, may be updated in subsequent releases. For 2020–21, no changes were made to geographical classifications.

Breaks in time series

Clients subject to care and protection orders: Improvements made in 2015–16 to the method used to identify clients subject to care and protection orders mean that data from 2011–12 to 2014–15 are not comparable with data from 2015–16 onwards.

Source of income—DVA pension or payment: In 2017–18, the response options for source of income were updated and the three response options relating to payments or pensions from the Department of Veterans' Affairs (disability pension—DVA, service pension—DVA and war widow(ers) pension—DVA) were replaced with the single response option 'DVA pension or payment'. As the single 'DVA pension or payment' option can include more payment types than the three options previously available, data on the 3 DVA pension or payments from 2011–12 to 2016–17 are not comparable with data on the 'DVA pension or payment' from 2017–18 onwards.

Source of income—several payments: On 20 March 2020, Newstart allowance, Sickness allowance, Bereavement allowance, Wife pension and Widow B pension were ceased and replaced with Jobseeker or Age pension depending on circumstances. For the purpose of SHS collection, Jobseeker payment has been recorded as Newstart allowance. Due to changes to these payments, there has been a break in time series for several SHS income categories including Newstart allowance, Age pension, Sickness allowance and Other government pensions and allowances (not elsewhere classified).

Data-specific issues that require caution when making comparisons

Disability: Data for clients with disability who require assistance may not be comparable across age groups due to differences in the interpretation of the disability questions; this issue relates mainly to young children.

Presenting unit type: Data for presenting unit type may not be comparable across age groups due to differences in interpretation of presenting units and how they are recorded. This issue mainly concerns young children and presenting unit type 'lone person'.

Housing crisis, financial difficulties and housing affordability: Improvements made during 2014–15 resulted in changes to the way agencies were required to report 'main reason' and 'reasons for seeking assistance'. In addition, wording providing a specific example of housing crisis was removed from the section relating to reason for seeking assistance. Caution should be used when making comparisons over time as the reporting of these items may be inconsistent between agencies. These changes in agency reporting were evident in the data from all states and territories.

Children presenting alone: South Australia has a comparatively high number of children reported as presenting alone. This may be due to differences in how presenting units are recorded in South Australia's client management system. Caution should be used when comparing data for children presenting alone in South Australia with other states and territories.

Case management: Some aspects of case management are recorded differently in South Australia's client management system. Caution should be used when comparing data on case management for South Australia with other states and territories.

Unmet need: South Australia's recorded level of unmet need (i.e. service not provided or referred) for services other than accommodation are likely understated due to a different data collection method. Caution should be used when comparing unmet need data for South Australia with other states and territories.

Services and Assistance—Assertive outreach: In 2017–18, there was a clarification made to the response option used to record clients who needed, or were provided, or referred assertive outreach services. The option was changed to specify that this service was directly targeted at rough sleepers. Due to this change, caution should be taken when comparing the number of clients receiving assertive outreach services before and after 2017–18.

COVID-19: From 26 March 2020, SHS agency workers were instructed to add 'COVID-19' in the free text section of the 'Other reason for seeking assistance' item if the client and/or the agency were affected directly or indirectly by the crisis. This change has been implemented differently across jurisdictions and therefore caution should be taken if making any comparisons between jurisdictions.

Improvements to data items

Mandatory data items: Changes made in 2014–15 resulted in a substantial improvement in data quality for mandatory data items and in particular resulted in a decline in the number of non-response or missing values for these data items. Care should be used when comparing results from 2011–12 to 2013–14 with results from 2014–15 onwards.

Housing situation: Following improvement in the derivation for housing situation used in the SHSC in 2016–17, clients with a tenure status of 'life tenure scheme' are now counted under the housing situation category 'private or other housing (renter, rent-free or owner)' if their dwelling status was 'housing/townhouse/flat'. This change has very little impact on housing situation percentages and hence does not constitute a break in time-series.

Age: In 2017–18, age and age-related variables were derived using a more robust calculation method. Caution should be used when comparing results in publications from December 2018 onwards (that include 2017–18 data) with publications released prior to December 2018.

Family and domestic violence:

In July 2019, the following changes were made to improve the collection of information regarding family and domestic violence (FDV) in the SHSC:

- The inclusion of an 'FDV agency' option in the 'Formal sources of referral' item to capture clients referred from non-SHS funded FDV services.
- A change to the 'Services and assistance' received item to separately identify clients who received services for 'FDV victims' and/or services for 'FDV perpetrators'.
- The inclusion of an FDV services category to the 'Type of service requested' in the unassisted persons component of the SHSC.

The victim and perpetrator services can be combined to reflect the general FDV services item used prior to 1 July 2019.

The split between victim and perpetrator services has not been widely reported in 2020–21. This is due to the change being implemented differently between agencies causing data quality issues, as well as the small numbers of perpetrator services provided causing confidentiality issues.

Imputation and weighting

Prior to 2017–18, data were imputed to account for agency non-response and invalid SLKs. Due to improvements in agency response and SLK validity rates, data for 2017–18 onwards were not weighted. As the aim of the imputation strategy was to account for low rates of agency response and SLK validity in previous years, unweighted data for 2017–18 onwards are directly comparable with weighted data for 2011–12 to 2016–17. The removal of weighting does not constitute a break in time series.

The annual SHS report and accompanying products use financial year data, and for

2011–12 to 2016–17 these data are weighted. However, other AIHW publications that analyse the pathways of individual clients over time, including publications using SHS longitudinal data, or data linked with data from other collections, do not use weighted data.

Comparisons between years of counts of clients and support periods should use weighted data for 2011–12 to 2016–17 and unweighted data from 2017–18 onwards. These counts can be obtained from the annual report and accompanying data products.

Differences between the SHSC and the SAAP NDC

On 1 July 2011, the SHSC replaced the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) National Data Collection (NDC), which began in 1996. The SHSC differs from the SAAP NDC in many respects. The major definitional differences between SAAP and SHSC relate to the capture of information about children and support. In the SAAP NDC, children who accompanied a parent or guardian were counted as accompanying children (with only limited information collected); in the SHSC, children are included as clients (in their own right) if they directly receive assistance. In SAAP, support was generally considered to entail 1 hour or more of a worker's time; in the SHSC no time-related condition exists.

Homelessness and service provision

There is no single definition of homelessness. The SHSC considers that a person is homeless if they are living in non-conventional accommodation (such as living on the street), or short-term or emergency accommodation (such as living temporarily with friends or relatives). Other data collections describing the nature and scale of homelessness, such as the Census, use alternative definitions. Counts of homelessness in the SHSC are only for those people who access services.

COVID-19

States and territories introduced funding and policy initiatives to support people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019–20 and 2020–21. There are differences across state and territories in the timing and types of initiatives implemented. These initiatives were implemented within or outside the scope of the SHSC, both of which could impact on specialist homelessness service use. Caution should be used when comparing service use across states and territories during the pandemic period.

State and territory-specific issues:

New South Wales

- New South Wales homelessness services underwent a period of major transition in 2014–15 that affected continuity of reporting for some service providers. These issues did not affect New South Wales data for 2015–16. The increase in client numbers in New South Wales is largely a result of the consolidation of new post-reform service models. Caution should be used when making comparisons of 2014–15 data with other years' figures for New South Wales and with data for other states and territories.
- New South Wales began implementing the Domestic Violence Response enhancement in late 2015–16. This service change may be responsible for the increase in the number of SHS clients reporting domestic and family violence.

Victoria

- Victorian client numbers are relatively high and appropriate caution should be applied when making comparisons with other states and territories. The main reason for the high client count is that the Victorian system is very demand-driven, with the vast majority of presenting individuals provided initial assessment and planning at homelessness entry point (or central intake) services. In addition, there is a high number of women and children who are referred by police to homelessness-funded family violence services.
- From 2017–18 to 2020–21, there was a 10% decrease in both the total number of Victorian homelessness clients and family violence clients following years of steady increases in these numbers. The decrease was initially due to a practice correction in how some family violence agencies

were recording clients. In addition, during 2018–19, a phased process to shift family violence intake to non-SHS services (The Orange Door) began, which is decreasing the overall number of SHS family violence clients. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 caused a further drop in clients due to the months of ‘stay home’ orders in Victoria, rental eviction moratorium and availability of income through JobKeeper/JobSeeker. Caution should be used when comparing Victorian client numbers over recent years.

Queensland

- In 2014–15, Queensland introduced the government-funded Queensland Homelessness Information Platform (QHIP), comprising the Common Homelessness Assessment and Referral Tool (CHART) and the Vacancy Capacity Management System (VCMS). Funded specialist homelessness services are required to use QHIP to assist with the demand for homelessness services. This practice approach may be responsible for the decline in the reported number of individuals leaving a service ‘unassisted’ through the provision of a connected service system, service coordination and subsequent referral to support clients with other service needs.

Tasmania

- In 2014–15, Housing Tasmania began the implementation of the Housing Connect model in order to improve access to housing and homelessness support services within Tasmania. The introduction of the Housing Connect model resulted in the creation of a number of new agencies in Tasmania. The aim of the model is to unite multiple housing and support organisations and provide a ‘no wrong door’ solution for Tasmanians that require assistance. This new central intake system had a minor flow on effect on a number of data items; therefore, comparisons over time should be made with caution.

Australian Capital Territory

- The Australian Capital Territory closed a large agency due to a change in contract to supply these services at the end of June 2016. As a result, all existing clients of this agency had their support periods closed prior to becoming clients under the new management. This resulted in a rise in the number of closed support periods in the Australian Capital Territory between 2014–15 and 2015–16, even though the numbers of total support periods and clients declined slightly for this same period. This may affect analyses involving closed support periods for 2015–16 for the Australian Capital Territory. Accordingly, these data should be used with caution when making comparisons with past years’ figures for the Australian Capital Territory or with data for other states and territories.
- In 2016–17, the Australian Capital Territory introduced a new central intake service delivery model. In practice, this system requires agency workers to provide assistance of some kind to all presenting individuals. Therefore, caution should be used when comparing data over time and with data for other states and territories, particularly data relating to unassisted requests.

Northern Territory

- A new Northern Territory agency began reporting to the collection in January 2019. The high volume of clients and the nature of the services provided by the agency have impacted results across the data collection, with the full impact being evident in the 2019–20 data. Caution should be used when making comparisons between data before and after 2018–19.

Source and reference attributes

Submitting organisation: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

Steward: [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#)

Relational attributes

Related metadata references:

Supersedes [Specialist Homelessness Services Collection, 2019–20: Quality Statement](#)

- [AIHW Data Quality Statements](#), Superseded 23/11/2021