

Homelessness NSW.ACT

A red graphic element consisting of a thick, curved line that starts from the left, dips down, and then curves sharply upwards to the right, resembling a stylized checkmark or a swoosh.

The best with what we've got: Building a profile of NSW SAAP family agencies

Kristie Brown
HomelessnessNSW.ACT

Research Assistance by Taryn Champion
HomelessnessNSW.ACT

This project was funded by the Coordination and Development Committee of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program through the Service and Regional Research Program (SARRP) administered by the Australian Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

© Commonwealth Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed to the production of this report. Firstly, thank-you to the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs for funding provided for this report under the SAAP Service and Regional Research Project, particular thanks to Luyen Nguyen for his assistance.

Thanks also to the staff of the AIHW SAAP National Data Collection Agency for their assistance in obtaining quantitative data used throughout the report, in particular Qasim Shah and Andrew Powierski.

Thanks go to Sue Cripps, Homelessness NSW.ACT, and Catherine Robinson, University of Technology Sydney, for the continued support and feedback on the project and report. Also, thanks to Gudrun Reid and Jane Eivers for their participation on the project Steering Committee.

To Taryn Champion, research assistant for the project, thank you for the fantastic job you have done assisting in every aspect of the production of this report.

And finally, a big thank-you to all the participants and agencies involved in the focus groups. Your time, energy and knowledge are greatly appreciated.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Living in the shadows	6
The story so far: the context of family homelessness	8
Building a picture of family agencies with SAAP data	16
NSW family agency numbers, funding and support periods	17
Demographic factors of clients accessing family agencies in NSW	18
Client circumstances and reasons for seeking support	21
Support provided to clients	22
Lessons from quantitative data	26
You try to do the best you can with what you've got: building a picture of family agencies through qualitative data	27
"Whatever needs to be done": strengths in working with families	28
Needing "the whole works": agency and client related barriers	31
"The barriers for these people are insurmountable": dealing with human service agencies and the private rental market	34
Lessons from qualitative data	38
Where to now? What this profile means for family agencies	39
Bibliography	41
Appendix A: Focus Group Questions	44

Executive Summary

Over the last 10 years references have been made to the rate of growth of homeless families, with Mission Australia stating “families with children are the fastest growing group among Australia’s homeless” (2000, p.1). This increase in homeless families has to some extent been accompanied by an increase in literature and research. However, there is a notable gap in this research in relation to the operation of Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) family agencies in NSW.

In order to build a profile of these NSW family agencies this report utilises quantitative data obtained by special request from the SAAP National Data Collection Agency (NDCA) and qualitative data collected from focus groups with 6 NSW SAAP agencies that work with families.

In the first part of this report, the quantitative data is used to build a general profile of the function of NSW SAAP family agencies and the families that they support (all data is applicable to the period 2003-04). In the second section this general profile is supplemented by the qualitative data to explore in more depth the perception SAAP workers have of the strengths of their agency in responding to homeless families and the sorts of barriers and problems they face.

There are 24 SAAP family agencies in NSW. These agencies receive a mean funding per agency of \$212,500. This is \$55,800 less than the state mean of \$268,300 per agency (AIHW 2005b, p.4). NSW family agencies provided 1,400 support periods in 2003-04 (AIHW 2005b, p.20).

From the AIHW data it is possible to draw together a demographic profile of the clients accessing NSW SAAP family agencies. Particular aspects to note are that almost half of the support periods provided by NSW family agencies were for a ‘person with child(ren)’ (49.3%), or single parent families (AIHW, 2005b, p.20). In addition to this almost two-thirds of support periods provided in NSW were for females (75.3%), and the largest age bracket of clients at the start of a support period was between the ages of 20-24 years (20.2%). This indicates that a number of support periods are provided to female headed single-parent families, many of which appear to be young (20-24). Although largely Anglo Australian, one in five support periods is provided to a client identifying as Indigenous, and just under one in five were not born in Australia (data obtained by special request to the AIHW, 2005).

It is evident from SAAP data that poverty and domestic violence are major contributing factors to family homelessness. Domestic violence was the most frequently cited ‘main’ reason for seeking assistance from a family agency (20.8%) whilst ‘financial difficulty’ was cited the most when families cited multiple reasons for seeking support (39%) (data obtained by special request to the AIHW, 2005).

Overall it appears that SAAP family agencies are providing support and accommodation to families relatively successfully. Timeframes for support and accommodation are generally consistent with the SAAP crisis and medium term expectations, with the most common length of time supported accommodation was provided being 4-13 weeks (25.9%) followed by 13-26 weeks (14.7%) (data obtained by special request to the AIHW, 2005).

The most common services provided in support periods in family agencies were SAAP/CAP accommodation (79.9%) and basic support services such as emotional support and other

counselling (62.5%), advice/information (61%), and laundry/shower facilities (55.3%) (data obtained by special request to the AIHW, 2005).

However, there were nineteen different types of requests that were neither provided nor referred at the completion of support periods that registered above 2%. The largest of these were domestic violence counselling and support (3.3%), family planning support (3.3%), physical disability services (3.2%), intellectual disability services (3.1%), and incest/sexual assault counselling (3.1%) (data obtained by special request to the AIHW, 2005). The breadth and serious nature of these unmet needs in NSW family agencies is concerning and requires further investigation.

Whilst allowing for a good overview of family agencies, this quantitative data is limited in illustrating the more complex or experiential elements of the way that family agencies operate. For this reason, qualitative information was sought from NSW agencies that work with families. This data allows for a more pointed understanding of the strengths agencies perceive they have in working with children as well as some of the barriers and problems they face.

The key strengths identified by services throughout the interviews were their flexibility and the linkages and relationships that they had developed with other service providers and agencies. The workers felt that these characteristics enabled them to do “whatever needs to be done” with a client group that generally needed “the whole works”.

A broad range of difficulties and barriers were articulated by participants. Some of these barriers were related to the service model of agencies, including: limited timeframes, particularly in crisis accommodation agencies, limitations due to the physical layout of agencies (for instance insecure premises restricting the capacity of the agency to take women and children escaping domestic violence) and the general resource limitations of the agency.

Participants also articulated a number of limitations and barriers in working with NSW Government agencies. In summary, participants perceived that there were problems:

- Accessing area health services, particularly in terms of counselling
- Accessing mental health, as well as inadequate intervention and support.
- Inadequate response from the NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS) in relation to child protection notifications; and
- The processes and policies of the NSW Department of Housing

Finally, on a more systematic level, agencies also cited a general lack of exit options for families as a major barrier. In the perception of participants this was a result of a broad array of factors, including a lack of affordable housing, NSW Government public housing policy and the exclusion of many families from private rental through the operation of Residential Tenancy Databases (RTDs).

This report provides an introductory profile of NSW SAAP family agencies, outlining a range of quantitative and qualitative features. As an initial overview, this report should not be viewed as a final or complete account of these agencies. Rather, it is a starting point from which further in-depth and focused research and analysis can be undertaken, and supported for homeless families through SAAP strengthened.

Living in the shadows

The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) is a significant part of Commonwealth and State Government responses to homelessness. Through SAAP, community agencies and some local governments are funded to provide accommodation and support services for homeless people and those at risk of homelessness (see www.facs.gov.au for more information). This includes agencies that provide support and accommodation to homeless families.

Over the last 10 years references have been made to the rate of growth of homeless families, with Mission Australia stating “families with children are the fastest growing group among Australia’s homeless” (2000, p.1). This increase in homeless families has to some extent been accompanied by an increase in literature and research. However, there is a notable gap in this research in relation to the operation of SAAP family agencies in NSW, the topic of this report.

Through the SAAP program there are two types of agencies with a ‘primary target group’ specific to families, one of which is family agencies, the other is agencies for women and children escaping domestic violence¹. As the name would suggest agencies for women and children escaping domestic violence are targeted specifically at this group, whereas family agencies are held to be more ‘generalist’ in nature, not restricted to a particular family type or circumstance. In NSW there are currently 24 family agencies compared to 92 agencies for women and children escaping domestic violence (AIHW 2005b, p.4). This difference can be partly explained by the fact that domestic violence is the most commonly cited ‘main reason’ for seeking assistance from a SAAP service (cited in 17.1% of support periods in NSW for 2003-04 (AIHW 2005b, p.21). However, there is also a notable difference in the funding levels of these agencies. In NSW agencies for women escaping domestic violence receive mean funding of \$319,100 per agency, \$106,600 more than family agencies in NSW, which have a mean funding per agency of \$212,500 (AIHW 2005b, p. :4). The apparent differences between these two agency types, both in terms of agency numbers and funding levels, outlines the importance of analysis based on agency type. The small number and lower funding levels received by family agencies make these agencies a potentially overlooked group.

The lack of information available on NSW family agencies may be the result of a combination of factors. For one, much of the research available on family homelessness is undertaken in Victoria, which can often limit the pertinence of results to NSW agencies (see Bartholomew 1999, Kolar 2004). Secondly, within this research there is a strong focus on ‘tracking’ the experiences of families or exploring their pathways into and out of homelessness. Whilst this focus is important in bringing the voices of homeless families to the foreground, it generally lacks an analysis of agencies that support families. Thirdly, where information does focus on SAAP agencies (such as the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare SAAP National Data Collection Reports used above) it is mostly not disaggregated by target group or type of agency, therefore allowing only an overall picture of SAAP agencies and clients. All of these factors mean that there is a need to develop information specific to the operation of NSW family agencies.

¹ The SAAP National Data Collection, for instance, uses these categories for data analysis. See <http://www.aihw.gov.au/housing/sacs/saap/index.cfm>

In order to build a profile of these agencies a broad range of data and information has been used throughout the report. The next chapter provides a brief discussion of literature on family homelessness, outlining some of the major debates and information available in Australian literature to contextualise the report. The next chapter provides a broad overview of family agencies in NSW based on data obtained by special request to the SAAP National Data Collection Agency (NDCA). The final chapter supplements this broad, quantitative overview by outlining the results of qualitative focus groups with six agencies that work with families in NSW.

Whilst limited individually, in combination the data and research provides an initial synthesis of information that allows for a general profile of NSW family agencies to be built. As an initial overview, this report should not be viewed as a final or complete account of these agencies. Rather, it is a starting point from which further in-depth and focused research and analysis can be undertaken.

The story so far: the context of family homelessness

This chapter provides an overview of some of the major themes and debates present in literature and research on family homelessness. Although limited in focus on NSW family agencies, which has already been discussed above, this information is important in providing an illustration of the context and broader environment in which family agencies function. Where possible, particular attention has been paid to information related to the operation of NSW family agencies.

Perhaps the most striking feature of literature on family homelessness is the ongoing contestation surrounding the definition of homelessness. This definitional debate is a crucial one. The definition of homelessness used in literature and research influences our understanding of family homelessness on both a qualitative and a quantitative level, and this in turn affects policy and responses to family homelessness. Chamberlain (1999) outlines the importance of definitional clarity, arguing that:

There can be no meaningful public debate about the best policy responses to assist homeless people, unless there is reliable information on the number of homeless people in the community. This requires an operational definition of homelessness which can be easily measured, and credible data on the population identified by the definition. (p.1)

Within literature there are various approaches to defining homelessness. One of the ways that definitions have been understood is by separating them into 'statutory definitions' and those with a 'qualitative or subjective focus'. Bartholomew (1999) explains that the difference between these approaches is significant:

...numerous authors rely on statutory definitions as a basis for their research; some focus only on that small percentage of the homeless who are literally living on the streets, while others include those in shelters, emergency accommodation, refuges and transitional housing arrangements. Another subsection of researchers extend the definition towards a qualitative or subjective focus, and include those who have marginal housing, are doubling up, or simply *feel* homeless – regardless of the physical features or 'shelter component' of their living arrangements. (p.7)

On one level this conceptual blurriness is easily resolved for SAAP services. The definitional framework for the SAAP program is enshrined in the Supported Accommodation Assistance Act (1994) which clearly states:

For the purposes of this Act, a person is homeless if, and only if, he or she has inadequate access to safe and secure housing.

For the purposes of this Act, a person is taken to have inadequate access to safe and secure housing if the only housing to which the person has access:

- damages, or is likely to damage, the person's health; or
- threatens the person's safety; or
- marginalises the person through failing to provide access to:
- adequate personal amenities; or
- the economic and social supports that a home normally affords; or
- places the person in circumstances which threaten or adversely affect the adequacy, safety, security and affordability of that housing.

However, the contentiousness of the concept makes accepting this legislative definition as a resolution simplistic. The definition provided in the SAAP Act is what Bartholomew terms a “statutory definition” (1999, p.7) and what Chamberlain (1999) similarly considers a “service delivery definition”; that is it reflects what SAAP must be able to do in “practical service delivery terms” (p.2). As such this definition is subject to the limitations and criticism of such definitions. Bartholomew makes the criticism that the SAAP definition can only be understood through invoking a normalising concept of what is it to have safe, secure and adequate housing. He argues that such a definition “Impl[ies] an accepted standard...The inherent assumption of such omission is that the concepts are universally understood.” (p.9).

Another definition often cited is provided by the Council to Homeless Persons Victoria. This definition broadens the concept of ‘homeless’ to incorporate an experiential element of social isolation or exclusion associated with homelessness.

A homeless person is without a conventional home and lacks most of the economic and social supports that a home normally affords. She/he is often cut off from the support of relatives and friends, she/he has few independent resources and often has no immediate means and in some cases little prospect of self support. She/he is in danger of falling below the poverty line, at least from time to time. (cited in Bartholomew, 1999, p.8)

Chamberlain (1999) argues that this is an “advocacy definition” which is intended to “draw the community’s attention to the plight of homeless people” (p.12). He makes the criticism that the failure of this definition relates to its incongruity with policy, arguing that “From a policy point of view it is unwise to use an individual’s subjective assessment of their situation as ‘the criterion’ by which to establish whether or not they are homeless.” (p.12)

In response to the limitations of these definitions, Chamberlain and McKenzie offer a frequently cited ‘three-tier’ definition of homelessness in response:

Primary homelessness: people without conventional accommodation – living on the streets, in deserted buildings, in cars, under bridges, in improvised dwellings etc.
Secondary homelessness: people moving between various forms of temporary shelter, including friends, relatives, emergency accommodation and boarding houses.
Tertiary homelessness: people living in single rooms in private boarding houses on a long-term basis – without their own bathroom, kitchen or security of tenure.
(Chamberlain & Johnson 2000, p.8)

Whilst these definitional debates commonly feature in writing on homelessness, there is no notable analysis of how each of these definitions affects understanding of the extent and nature of *family* homelessness particularly. This may be because it is assumed that these definitions simply take on additional people and then become functional definitions of family homelessness. If so, the accuracy of such an assumption in providing an accurate mechanism for understanding and responding to family homelessness requires substantiation.

For the purpose of this report a definition of family homelessness has not been imposed, as the quantitative and qualitative data used has been attached to predetermined definitions, the quantitative data through the SAAP AIHW definition, and workers definitions generally held to be the definition of the agency they work for. As such, analysis contained in this report is subject to the limitations of the definitions utilised in these data sources (this is discussed further where data is used).

Despite the complexity of defining family homelessness, and perhaps despite this, over the last 10 years it has been widely argued that homeless families are the fastest growing group of the homeless (McChesney 1990; Bartholomew 1999; Mission Australia 2000). Given the lack of a coherent and accepted definition of what a homeless family is, it is difficult to substantiate or expand on this. Some authors argue that partly due to a lack of conceptual clarity, homeless families are overlooked as the 'hidden homeless' (Bahro 1996, Walsh 2003). Stephensen (2001) makes this point, arguing that:

The past decade has seen a focus on women escaping domestic violence and on youth homelessness in both the media and general community, and a subsequent government response to these issues. However, it is argued that less attention has been paid to the significant housing problems experienced by low income families, with homelessness being the most dramatic demonstration of this trend. (p.4)

This division of women escaping domestic violence from low income families works to some extent on a service delivery level, (the distinction between family agencies and agencies for women escaping domestic violence has been set out above) however at a human level the division is not as neat. Authors cite various 'risk factors' that may contribute to a family becoming homeless, and it is generally held that homelessness results from a complex interplay between these factors. Factors frequently cited as contributors to homelessness amongst families include: poverty, a lack of affordable housing, domestic and family violence, substance misuse, mental health disorders and unemployment. The role and effect that each of these factors plays in relation to family homelessness is again widely debated.

McChesney (1990), for instance, makes a distinction between 'individual' and 'structural' factors, and argues that "Families are homeless for structural rather than individual reasons." (p.191) McChesney argues that there is a direct and inextricable link between the amount of affordable housing and the level of family homelessness. She explains:

At the aggregate level, the cause of family homelessness is clear: when the number of poor households exceeds the number of low-income housing units, a shortage of low-income housing exists. When that happens, households do two things. Those that can do so pay for their housing. Those that cannot pay more double up with family or friends. The remainder, who cannot do either, become homeless. (p195)

Despite not writing in an Australian context, McChesney's critique of service system responses to family homelessness provides some salient points. She argues that an approach which treats the individual deficits as the cause of family homelessness will not rectify the structural problems that cause family homelessness, notably a lack of appropriate housing options. Therefore these responses will be ineffective at curbing homelessness amongst families. Within the context of the SAAP program this criticism is particularly relevant, as the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program Act (1994) makes clear that the "overall aim of SAAP is to provide transitional supported accommodation and related support services, in order to help people who are homeless to achieve the maximum possible degree of self-reliance and independence" (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994).

In his research involving homeless families and service workers in Victoria, Bartholomew (1999) also found poverty to be a recurrent factor in family homelessness. However Bartholomew's analysis is broader than McChesney's, citing unemployment as another important structural factor associated with poverty and family homelessness. He argues that:

Until recently, one could be poor and still maintain reasonably secure shelter. No longer is this the case. Likewise, in previous decades, employment was a reasonable guarantee against homelessness. This also is no longer true. (p.35)

Bartholomew found that “the commonly-held view that homeless families represent dysfunctional entities, or are made up of people who have personal shortcomings that cause their housing crisis, was decreasingly valid.” (p.109)

Another prominent research project to examine family homelessness was the Hanover Family Longitudinal Outcomes Study (HFLOS). The project tracked families that had accessed homeless services over a two-year period. In the final report Kolar (2004) notes that in the first-wave of interviews over fifty per cent of participants cited ‘financial difficulties’ as the impetus of their housing crisis. However the research also found that as housing was stabilised other concerns became a priority for the families. These concerns included both structural and ‘individual’ factors, including relationship/family difficulties, physical/emotional abuse, health problems and unemployment.

The variety of issues affecting homeless families identified through the HFLOS study is similar to those identified by McCaughey (1992). In a comprehensive analysis McCaughey identified several factors associated with family homelessness, including: unhappy families of origin, poor performance at school, unemployment and poverty, unstable relationships, poor health, involvement in crime, lack of family support, lack of stable, affordable housing and frequent moving.

Rather than being either ‘structural’ or ‘individual’ characteristics associated with family homelessness, McCaughey’s work as well as that of the HFLOS identifies that there are a complex combination of structural and individual characteristics that can influence homelessness amongst families, something that has also recently been noted by the Commonwealth Government’s Family Homelessness Prevention Pilot (FHPP). The interim report (RPR Consulting 2003) outlined that:

FHPP services have found that families assisted have multiple and complex issues, including: A high incidence of family violence and conflict...high levels of financial need...Significant levels of previous homelessness and instability in housing...A lack of social support networks. (p.6)

Whilst the effect of ‘individual’ characteristics on family homelessness is contested, an assessment of demographic characteristics and their relationship with family homelessness is common. For instance, literature outlines a strong link between family homelessness and domestic violence. The recent interim evaluation of the FHPP pointed out that “the increasing family homelessness rate also reflects the incidence of family violence, with many women and children becoming homeless as a result of escaping domestic violence.” (RPR Consulting 2003, p.8). The link between domestic violence and women’s homelessness is unequivocal. The AIHW estimates that 33% clients accessing the SAAP program nationally in 2003-04 were women escaping domestic violence (AIHW, 2005a). The relationship between domestic violence and homelessness has been examined through *Partnerships Against Domestic Violence* (PADV), and particularly the report *Home safe home: the link between domestic and family violence and women’s homelessness* (2002). More broadly, the link between women and children escaping domestic violence illustrates a gendered element to family homelessness.

Beyond domestic violence, Devine, Wright and Rubin (1998) outline a gendered analysis of family homelessness, arguing that poverty itself is gendered.

...the poverty rate among female-headed households (regardless of race) is about five or six times the rate among intact husband-wife households. Women heading their own families confront a sharply elevated risk of being in poverty and, therefore, an equally elevated risk anything that is associated with being in poverty, and that definitely includes being homeless. Most homeless families turn out to be husbandless women with children for the very simple reason that most poor families are also husbandless women with children. (p. 96)

The disproportionate effect of homelessness on certain demographic groups is also evident in the case of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Indigenous people are severely overrepresented in SAAP services, constituting 16.5% of SAAP clients nationally in 2003-04, yet accounting for 2% of the Australian population aged over 10 (AIHW 2005a, p.26). There are a range of publications relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Homelessness, including a major report commissioned by the Commonwealth Government *Homelessness in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community and its possible implications for the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program* (Keys Young 1998). The report identified five types of homelessness experienced by Indigenous communities: spiritual, overcrowding, relocation and transient homelessness, escaping an unsafe or unstable home, and lack of access to any stable shelter. In relation to families, the report emphasised that compared to non-Indigenous communities, within Indigenous communities homelessness was “a broader issue” (p.iv). However, the report did not investigate Indigenous family homelessness in any particular depth, impeding an analysis of how the experience of family homelessness may or may not be different for Indigenous families.

Despite a lack of particular attention to Indigenous family homelessness in this report, there is some evidence that Indigenous families face particular problems in relation to homelessness. For instance, Walsh (2003) in a report based on interviews with families that had been or were homeless in QLD, found that “Indigenous families faced some special issues including overcrowding, often linked to the importance of extended family networks, extreme discrimination and issues arising from violence in remote communities.” (Walsh 2003). The issue of Indigenous families and violence has also been outlined by the AIHW (2005e) in a report *Female SAAP clients and Children escaping Domestic and Family Violence 2003-04*. The report found that in 2003-04, 24% (almost a quarter) of this group were Indigenous Australians. This indicates that where Indigenous people are overrepresented in SAAP in general, women and children escaping domestic violence are particularly overrepresented.

Another vulnerable group discussed in literature on homeless families is children. Children in family or domestic violence agencies are understood as ‘accompanying children’ in SAAP discourse (as opposed to children who present ‘unaccompanied’ for assistance, mainly at youth services (see Champion 2005). Reports that investigate the effect of homelessness on children concur that the ramifications can be significant. Bahro (cited in Walsh 2003) argues that:

Homelessness is one of the most damaging destructions to family life. The very basis for bringing up children, namely safety and stability of living conditions, has vanished, leaving the parents with a shifting ground for all attempts at “successful” parenting...The parent will feel...unable to attend to the child’s perceived and real needs. Preoccupation with essential living conditions robs the parent of the energy that is needed for maintaining a positive and meaningful relationship with the child (p226)

The Social Policy Research Centre has recently completed a report *Children in the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program* (Norris, Thompson, Eardley, Hoffmann, 2005). The report provides a comprehensive literature and some data analysis on children (accompanied and unaccompanied) in SAAP services. The report found that “substantial numbers of children present to SAAP, but the program was not designed with the needs of children in mind and until recently there was little information available on the characteristics of children” (p. xi). The report argued that:

Overall there was found to be an increasing awareness within SAAP of the needs of children, but some concern about whether that awareness could be translated into improving services in the light of decreasing resources. The particular service needs of homeless children and young people recommended in various earlier studies include: childcare, specialist workers, domestic violence counselling and protection from abuse, education, health care, toys and pets. Good practices identified include the development of child-centred approaches that involve better integration of child support services into the mainstream of SAAP services. However, it is difficult to assess from the literature how far these recommendations have already been implemented. (p.xii)

There is also some specific analysis of the needs of children in some of the research that has been undertaken on family homelessness. For instance, as the Hanover Family Longitudinal Outcomes Study found that the impact of homelessness on children was broad and considerable. A period of homelessness for a child is likely to have considerable impact on their health and personal development; they are more likely to have behavioural problems and disturbances and attend multiple schools, which will have a considerable impact on their education. They also have a higher occurrence of asthma, ear infections, skin problems, and development delays (Horn 1996). Similarly, Walsh (2003), in their Queensland study of homeless families, found that:

“The impacts of homelessness for children are quite dramatic, particularly in terms of behavioural problems, health problems and adverse educational outcomes. Reducing the residential instability for children in homeless families is critical to avoid interruptions with schooling and the associated adverse impacts on children’s health and development.” (p.10)

All of these demographic factors and debates regarding the causes and contributors of family homelessness are inextricable from critique of models of services delivery to homeless families, and the function of SAAP agencies particularly.

For instance, flowing from the ‘individual’ or ‘structural’ debate, Fopp criticises the ‘primary-target group’ structure of SAAP, arguing that arranging service provision in accordance with particular characteristics (e.g. youth services, services for women escaping domestic violence) sets these characteristics as (individual) deficiencies that have contributed to a homeless state, thus masking the ‘macro’ (structural) causes. These characteristics then “become social problems which are caused by individuals and remedied as a cost to the state” (Fopp cited in Bartholomew, 1999, p.12).

Criticism has also been made of the ‘transitional’ basis of SAAP, which again is inextricable from the individual/systemic debate. McChesney (1990) summarises this position, explaining that a focus on ‘transitioning’ people back to “the maximum possible degree of self-reliance and independence” (SAAP Act 1994) “is implicitly based on the assumption that participants are

homeless because of 'defects' in their personal characteristics or behaviours that can be 'fixed' by program participation." (p198)

On a more specific level some authors have critiqued particular models of service delivery within SAAP as inappropriate for families. Bartholomew (1990), for instance, is particularly critical of a 'brokerage' approach to families, whereby they are placed in hotels. He found that:

...hotels bring with them specific health, familial, economic and social problems that other forms of emergency accommodation may not. These developments carry the potential to further hinder the family's bid to end their housing crisis, and also to place family members at imminent risk. (p.39)

Criticism has also been made of the 'post-crisis' orientation of the SAAP system, whereby accommodation and support is often provided once a family has become homeless (Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, 2005, p.4). There are, however, some service and program exceptions to this, such as the Commonwealth Government's Household Organisation Management Expenses (HOME) Advice Program (formerly known as the Family Homelessness Prevention Pilot (FHPP)). This program functions to "increase individual families capacity to prevent homelessness" by linking 'at risk' families with Centrelink and community agencies to assist the families to stabilise their housing, financial situation and other matters (RPR Consulting 2003, p.10). However, this program is itself limited, operating in one location in each State and Territory only.

Interestingly the FHPP evaluation noted a difficulty raised frequently by SAAP services: a "lack of other services and opportunities available to address families' needs." They noted this was particularly the case in relation to financial and other counselling services, lack of affordable childcare and housing options and a lack of employment opportunities (RPR Consulting 2003, p.30), largely 'structural' issues. This illustrates another 'vulnerability' in the operation of SAAP. The provision of appropriate support to clients is often reliant on other human service agencies and systems, which at times is not cohesive with the operation of SAAP agencies (this is discussed further in the qualitative data chapter).

A further limitation of the FHPP is that as a prevention-centred project, that is a project almost the opposite of the 'post-crisis' SAAP, those who are "living in a situation defined as primary or secondary homelessness cannot be considered to be assisted" and are therefore ineligible to participate (RPR Consulting 2003, p.28). This raises a concern that a focus on early-intervention not occur at the expense of those families that do not receive or are not successful with early intervention models.

In highlighting these various shortcomings, the point is often made that to effectively meet the needs of homeless families and combat family homelessness a combination of service models and responses is required. Summarising this, Kolar (2004) argues that the HFLOS results show:

One size does not fit all. It is imperative that support services encompass crisis response, prevention and early intervention models. There is a need for the Supported Accommodation Assistance Scheme (SAAP) to become more sophisticated at matching assessment of needs to resources. The circumstances of families with multiple and complex needs illustrate the necessity for a holistic and integrated response... (p5)

Literature on family homelessness is similarly critical of some aspects of broader policy and the effect that this has on homeless families. Horn (1996) argued that economic factors influenced

levels of homelessness, citing the example that 'reforms' of the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement were linked to the subsequent decline in provision of public housing. He argued that this in turn forced families to seek accommodation from the private housing market, which "in its current form is unable to meet the needs for low-cost, secure housing." (p.8). Similarly at a macro level, Horn argues that:

...both at State and Commonwealth levels, cuts across all areas of welfare and family support provision, with increasing reliance on 'user pays' principles, is resulting in families having to make impossible decisions about what they spend their meagre income on. Increasing numbers of families will become more vulnerable to housing crisis as they will have to spend more on health, medication, education and transport to survive. Alternatively they will compromise on one or more of these areas in order to maintain their housing. (p.10)

Within literature there are many such criticisms of broader housing policy and how it impacts on family homelessness. Walsh is similarly critical of policies that implicitly or explicitly force families into the private rental market from SAAP services, arguing that their research shows that for many of these families private rental is not an option, as they are excluded because of a number of factors such as being 'blacklisted' on tenancy databases, discrimination from agents and bad debts. Due to circumstances such as this Bartholomew (1999) highlights that this lack of housing exit options lead to families spending longer periods of time in SAAP services, which in turn has flow on effects for other families seeking assistance from the service. This sense of the impact that broader policy has on SAAP agencies is an important element within literature, although it is one that needs to be examined further in regards to family homelessness particularly.

Throughout this chapter the literary themes discussed have provided a context for understanding the environment in which NSW family agencies operate. What is evident throughout this chapter is the interconnection between 'macro' discussions and debates and the 'micro' manifestation of service delivery to homeless families. This can be seen particularly in the links between debates regarding the causes and contributors of homelessness and the subsequent criticism made of service models and the SAAP system. There is, however, a need for a more targeted analysis of how many of these themes relate to family homelessness in general and the delivery of services through family agencies in particular. This is necessary in order to ensure that responses to family homelessness, including the operation of family agencies, are relevant and meaningful.

Building a picture of family agencies with SAAP data

The previous chapters have highlighted the gap in information available on family agencies in NSW, and the importance of developing this knowledge in order to ensure meaningful and appropriate responses to family homelessness. In answer to this, this chapter provides an overview of NSW family agencies based on SAAP NDCA data. This overview is broad, outlining basic information about family agencies, such as the number of agencies and the funding they receive. An outline of the clients accessing family agencies is also given, including demographic factors, the reasons cited by families for seeking support, and the broader circumstances of clients before support. Finally, information on the type of support provided by the agencies is presented.

The data discussed in this chapter has been collected from SAAP agencies in NSW through the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) National Data Collection Agency (NDCA). Most of the data discussed in this chapter was obtained from the SAAP NDCA via a special request. A special request was necessary as SAAP NDCA annual reports provide little information based on the primary service type of agencies, that is, information specifically on family agencies. All of the data refers to the period of 2003-04, for the purposes of consistency and relevance, as at the time of writing this was the most recent data available.

As the data was obtained from the SAAP NDCA it is subject to any limitations affecting that data. There are a number of factors that should be noted in relation to these limitations. Firstly, this data does not represent all homeless families in NSW. As was discussed above, the definition of a 'homeless family' is a contested one, which impacts on understandings of who and how many families are homeless. The definition used for this data defaults to the definition contained in the SAAP Act (1994), as this is the definition used by SAAP agencies and the NDCA. This data therefore reflects those homeless families that accessed SAAP family agencies in NSW, where client information was provided and/or recorded on client forms. It does not represent all homeless families in NSW. As such, this section, in line with the report in general, does not provide an overview of homeless families in NSW, but rather the operation of SAAP family agencies in NSW and the support periods that they provide to homeless families. Secondly, the data only includes information from SAAP services that complete and submit client forms, for NSW family agencies this amounted to 95.8% in 2003-04 (AIHW 2005b, p. 51). Thirdly, of those agencies that complete and return forms, valid consent from the client must be obtained in order for the information to be included in the AIHW data set. For NSW family agencies valid consent was obtained for 78.9% of cases for families (AIHW 2005b, p.51) in this period. Lastly, care should be taken in interpreting SAAP statistics, as data can be presented in relation to the number of support periods or the number of clients. As a client can potentially have a number of support periods the two are not interchangeable. All possible care has been taken in this respect when presenting data in this chapter.

In addition to these general points, there is an ambiguity in relation to the special request data. The data is limited to those services classified as 'family agencies' in NSW, but it is unclear how these agencies are designated. Information on the target group of agencies is provided by States to the AIHW, and the process for this allocation, whilst presumably related to funding criteria, is not open to scrutiny. Therefore any inaccuracy in the classification of agencies by the States to the AIHW is reflected in this data.

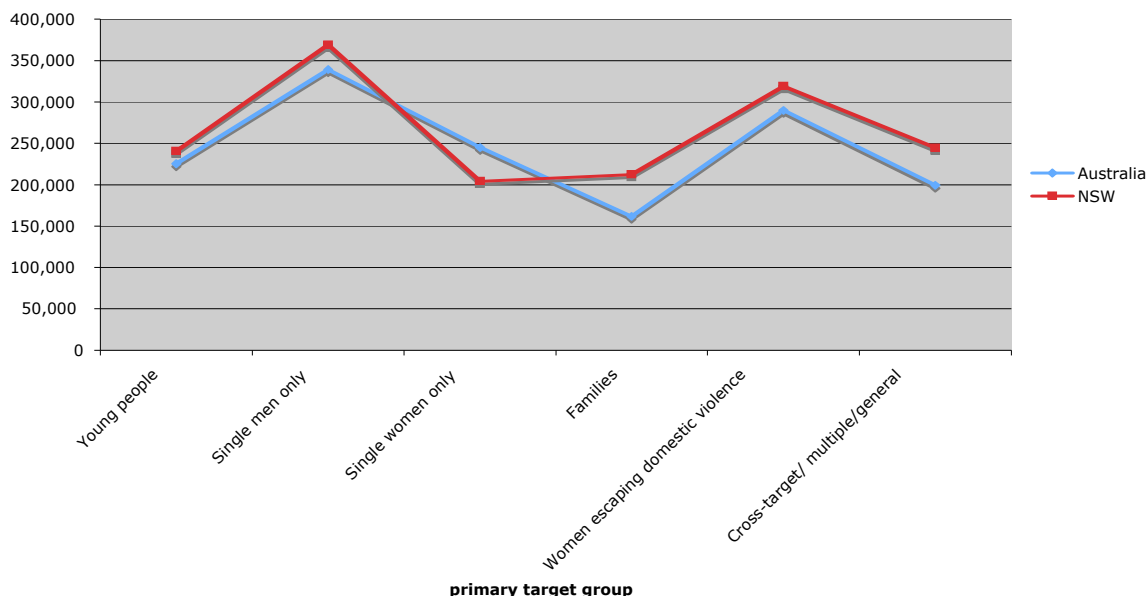
Whilst it is important to be aware of these limitations, they do not invalidate the data. The AIHW is an excellent resource when looking at SAAP agencies. For the purpose of this chapter it allows for a profile to be developed of family agencies which are otherwise absent from literature.

NSW family agency numbers, funding and support periods

In the 2003-04 period there were 24 family agencies in NSW, the third largest number of any state behind Victoria (39) and Queensland (27) (AIHW 2005b, p.4; AIHW 2005c, p.4; AIHW 2005d, p.4). Overall it appears that Family agencies are a relatively minor part of SAAP, representing 9.5% of agencies across Australia and 6.1% of agencies in NSW (the second lowest group of agencies, behind single women’s services at 5.1%)(AIHW 2005a, p.7; AIHW 2005b, p.4).

Interestingly, family agencies in NSW receive 4.8% of NSW recurrent allocation, disproportionately less than their number (6.1%) (AIHW 2005b, p.4). Further to this, they appear to be financially disadvantaged compared to other SAAP agencies in NSW, with mean funding per family agency amounting to \$212,500, compared to a state average of \$268,300 (AIHW 2005b, p.4). In comparative terms this is the second lowest mean funding of all agency types in NSW, Single Women’s services being the lowest, with family agencies receiving \$106 600 less than agencies for women escaping domestic violence on a mean funding per agency basis. However, family agencies in NSW follow a general trend evident in NSW agencies in receiving more mean funding per agency than the national mean for the same agency type, which is \$161,900 nationally for family agencies (nationally this is the lowest mean funding level of any agency type.) (AIHW 2005a, p.7).

Mean funding per agency by primary target group, Australia and NSW, 2003-04



Source: AIHW, 2005a, p.7; AIHW 2005b, p.4

NSW family agencies provided 1,400 support periods in 2003-04, amounting to 15.05% of the 9,300 support periods provided nationally (AIHW, 2005b, p.20; AIHW, 2005a, p.33).

Overall this indicates that compared to other agencies in NSW family agencies account for lower funding level, both in terms of mean funding per agency and the share of recurrent funding received compared to the proportion of the sector they constitute. However, compared to national averages for family agencies NSW agencies appear to be in a better financial position, receiving 25.4% of funding allocated to family agencies, yet constituting 19% of the agencies that receive this funding and providing 14.7% of the support periods given by these agencies .

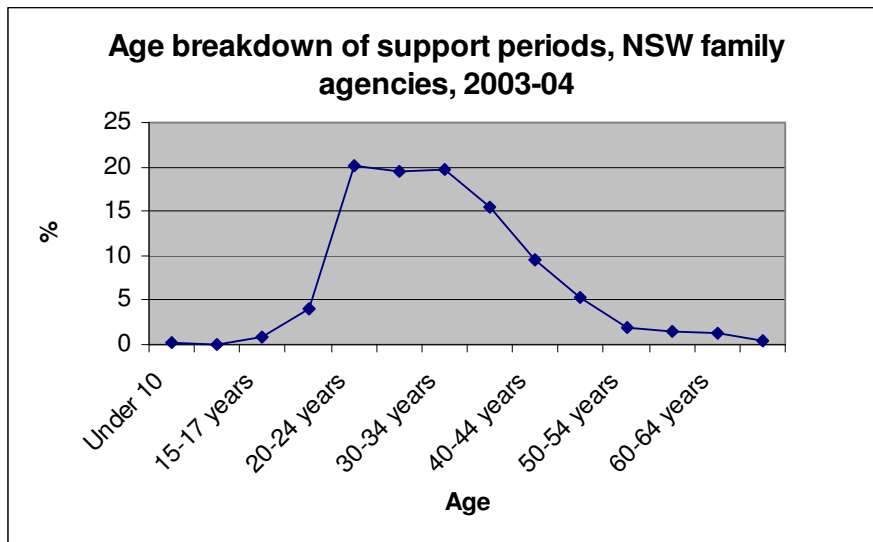
Demographic factors of clients accessing family agencies in NSW

In examining family agencies in NSW it's important to be aware of the characteristics of families using the agencies. This is a central element in ensuring that service provision is tailored to the needs of clients accessing the agency, as well as being an important tool in identifying any groups *not* accessing the agency.

Almost half of the support periods provided by NSW family agencies were for a 'person with child(ren)' (49.3%) (AIHW, 2005b, p.20). 'Couples with children' constituted 15% of support periods in NSW (lower than the 24.1% nationally), followed by a relatively small number of 'couples without children' at 3.5% (AIHW, 2005b, p.20; AIHW, 2005a, p.33). Interestingly the second largest number of support periods provided by family agencies in NSW was for 'persons alone or with unrelated persons' (30.2%) (AIHW, 2005b, p.20). It is unclear why family agencies are providing such a large percentage of support periods to people presenting alone and this requires further investigation.

Almost two-thirds of support periods provided in NSW were for females (75.3%), which combined with the large number of single parent families requesting assistance indicates that female-headed single parent families are a frequent demographic group to seek assistance from family agencies (data obtained by special request to the AIHW, 2005). This potentially supports the argument set out in literature about domestic violence and single-parent related poverty being significant causes of family homelessness. Men accounted for the remaining 24.7% of clients.

The largest age bracket of clients at the start of a support period was between the ages of 20-24 years (20.2%), with client ages concentrated between 20 to 34 years (59.3%). This indicates that clients accessing family agencies are relatively young, which combined with the large number of female-headed, single parent families is of particular concern (data obtained by special request to the AIHW, 2005).



Source: Data provided from the AIHW through a special request

Consistent with the SAAP program generally, a large number of support periods that were provided by NSW family agencies were for clients that identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders. In NSW this amounted to 20.2% of support periods (markedly higher than the 16.5% for family agencies nationally). This is a large over-representation when compared to a general NSW Indigenous population level of 1.7% (although as has been cited the number of support periods does not necessarily equate to client numbers) (AIHW, 2005, p.15). Although the over-representation of Indigenous people in the SAAP system is widely documented through AIHW data, it is particularly concerning that in the case of family agencies this amounted to one in five support periods. This is particularly distressing given that there is a general lack of literature that examines Indigenous family homelessness.

Further looking at cultural diversity, in NSW 65.3% of clients identified as Anglo Australians, which was 5.6% less than family agencies nationally (70.9%), indicating a higher provision of support periods to non-Anglo cultural groups in NSW than nationally. Other than Anglo-Australian and Indigenous Australian, the major cultural groups receiving support periods in NSW were African (2.6%), Maori (1.3%) and New Zealander (0.9%) (data obtained by special request to the AIHW, 2005).

The country of birth of clients by the provision of support periods is, somewhat contrastingly, a much more diverse group. Whilst the majority of clients accessing family SAAP services were born in Australia (81.2% in NSW), just under one in five people accessing SAAP family services were not. Whilst individually the percentage of support periods provided to each of these groups is quite small, cumulatively they are a larger and quite diverse group:

Country of Birth of client	Support period provided (%)
New Zealand	2.3%
Sudan	2.5%
England	1.3%
Philippines	0.9%
Samoa, Western	0.7%
Italy	0.6%
Russian Federation	0.6%
Egypt	0.6%
China (excluding Taiwan)	0.6%
Chile	0.6%
Scotland	0.5%
Fiji	0.5%
Malaysia	0.5%
Iran	0.5%

In particular, there were a large amount of support periods provided to clients born in Sudan and the Philippines. This is not something that has emerged in literature on family homelessness, and is an issue that deserves further, specific exploration.

Perhaps somewhat reflecting this cultural diversity, in NSW the proportion of support periods provided to clients that spoke English 'very well' was a relatively low 34.1%. This is, however, difficult to assess, as there were large number of 'no answers' recorded for this question (n=849 in NSW) (data obtained by special request to the AIHW, 2005). However, this issue is worth further investigation, as affordable and appropriate access to interpreters and other service delivery measures are a priority for agencies with large number of clients that have limited English language skills.

Drawing this demographic profile together, the AIHW data is able to give a good overall demographic picture of the clients accessing NSW SAAP family agencies. In particular it appears that a large number of support periods are provided to female headed single-parent families, many of which appear to be young (20-24). Although largely Anglo Australian, one in five support periods is provided to a client identifying as Indigenous, and a wide range of other cultural groups also receive support.

Client circumstances and reasons for seeking support

Building on these client demographic trends, this section examines information collected from clients in relation to their circumstances before support and their reasons for seeking assistance.

When asked their 'main' reason for seeking support from a family agency, the largest reason provided by clients accessing NSW family agencies was domestic violence (20.8%). Given that there are 92 services specifically for women escaping domestic violence in NSW it is somewhat surprising that the more 'generalist' family agencies have such a large number of support periods where this is the main reason for seeking support. The literary focus on domestic violence as a main cause of homelessness is certainly supported by this data. Following domestic violence, the other 'main' reasons cited were eviction/previous accommodation ended/asked to leave (12.9%), relationship/family breakdown (11.4%), recent arrival/no means of support (9.1%) and usual accommodation unavailable (8.1%) (data obtained by special request to the AIHW, 2005).

Given that it could be assumed that a number of factors may contribute to a family seeking support from a SAAP family agency it is not necessarily constructive to highlight only the *main* reason. When citing all reasons for seeking assistance a complex array of factors including financial difficulty, accommodation ending, and relationship breakdown and/or including domestic violence emerge. Whilst domestic violence was cited as the largest 'main' reason, the most cited factor overall in family agencies in NSW was financial difficulty (39%). Again this provides support to arguments in literature that link poverty to homelessness. Other reasons frequently cited were relationship or family breakdown (35.1%), domestic violence (29.1%) and interpersonal conflicts (21.9%) (data obtained by special request to the AIHW, 2005).

Given the frequency with which financial difficulty is cited as a reason for seeking assistance from a family agency it is useful to examine the income of families before support. The most common primary income type before SAAP support is Parenting Payment (single) (40.8%), which is to some extent unsurprising given the large number of single parent families seeking support. Other common income types were Newstart Allowance (6.9%) and Disability Support Pension (12.1%) (data obtained by special request to the AIHW, 2005). Given the apparent link between financial difficulty and income support payments it is interesting to consider this issue further. The Hanover Family Longitudinal Outcomes Study (HFLOS) found similar links between homeless families and income support, and Kolar (2004) consequently argued that there was a substantial connection between poverty and reliance on family payments particularly:

For families who participated in the HFLOS, the main source of income was Family Assistance Payments. The median weekly income for families was around \$50.00 below the Henderson Poverty Line. The implications of this meant that families struggled financially to cover the cost of basic items such as food. In the early part of the study, for example, 29 per cent of families had accessed support services specifically for food assistance; when the study ended it was 63 per cent. While families generally had their housing needs met, parents still struggled financially. (Kolar 2004:96)

Whilst it is difficult to make the same conclusion from this data, it appears that the link between financial difficulty and income support is an issue that warrants further attention in the future. The number of families on Parenting Payment (single), as well as the arguments of authors such as Devine, Wright and Rubin (1998) discussed earlier suggest that particular attention

should be paid to the situation of single parent families, particularly female-headed single parent families, in such an analysis.

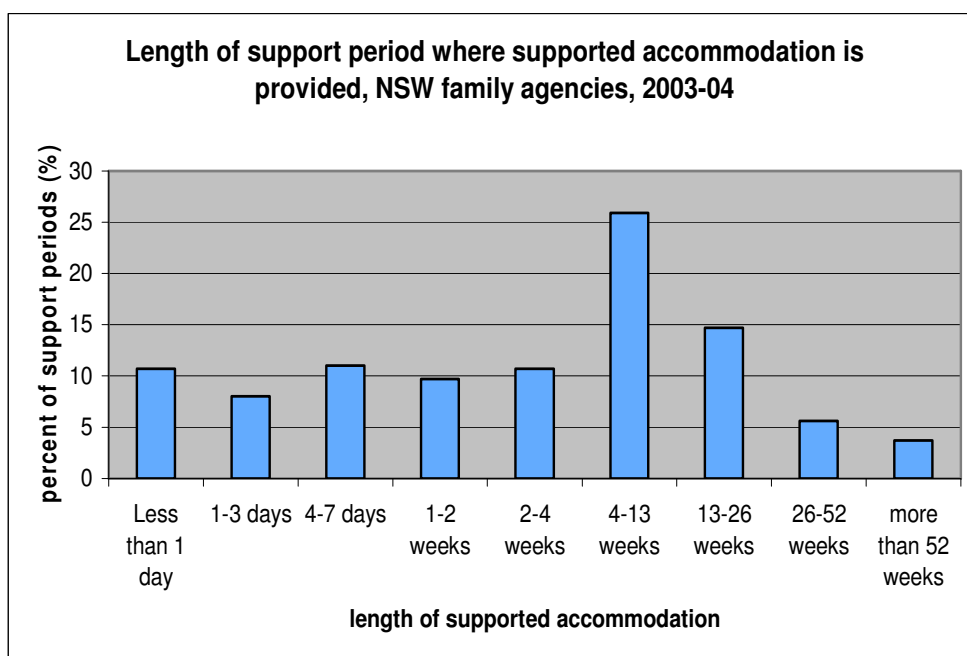
In continuing to build a picture of families before the sought support it is also interesting to examine their accommodation type before support. The most common accommodation type before support was private rental (22.1%), followed by boarding in a private home (18.3%). Public housing and community housing were not particularly common (8.7% and 3.2% respectively). There are a number of families that appear to move to a SAAP family agency from a crisis SAAP services (7.9%), however this could indicate a move from a crisis service into a medium or longer-term service. It is also interesting to note the number of families living in what could be considered precarious accommodation before support, such as 'rent free in a house or flat' (9.2%), rooming house/hostel/hotel (5.2%), renting a caravan (4%), living in a car/part/tent/street or squat (3.9%) and prison/youth training centre (4.4%) (data obtained by special request to the AIHW, 2005).

Whilst this data doesn't allow for a deep analysis of the circumstances of families before they seek support, it does substantiate literature on family homelessness that suggests poverty and/or domestic violence are major contributing factors to family homelessness. This would indicate that it's important for family agencies in NSW to be appropriately trained in responding to situations of domestic violence, even though they are not specialist services, and to be able to provide financial advice and advocacy. The data also shows that most families receive parenting payment (single) before support as their primary income (40.8%), which warrants further investigation. In terms of accommodation, the largest accommodation type for families before support was private rental (22.1%), however there were a number of families that appeared to come to SAAP from inappropriate or precarious accommodation (data obtained by special request to the AIHW, 2005).

Support provided to clients

In continuing to build the profile of NSW SAAP family agencies and the families that access them, the AIHW data collects information on the length of client support periods, the support provided and not provided or referred for families in these agencies. This information is particularly useful in understanding the type of work that NSW family agencies do. It is also interesting to examine the accommodation of families *after* support in order to gain an idea of the type of accommodation they exit to as one measure of the success of the agency in stabilising the housing situation of families.

The length of time supported accommodation was provided by family agencies in NSW generally reflects timeframes associated with crisis and medium term services, with 25.9% of support periods lasting 4-13 weeks and 14.7% lasting 13-26 weeks. Outside of these timeframes the third largest support period was 4-7 days (11%), which may be related to the large number of clients citing domestic violence as their main reason for seeking assistance, as AIHW data indicates that support periods for these clients can be quite short, the most common being one day or less (30%), followed by 2 to 7 days (21%) (AIHW, 2005e, p.6). Similarly this may explain why 10.7% of accommodated support periods lasted less than one day. A moderate number of accommodated support periods lasted above 26 weeks (9.3%). However when the length of support periods not linked to accommodation is considered there are higher proportions of support periods lasting 26-52 weeks (9.4%) and more than 52 weeks (6.3%). This may indicate that some families are receiving support from agencies well beyond the length of their accommodation.



Source: Data provided from the AIHW through a special request

Case management or support plans were a regular feature of support provided to families by agencies, with 72% of support periods provided involving a support plan. However there was no support plan in just under one in five support periods (18%). In comparison only 10% of support periods didn't involve a support plan nationally, which may indicate particular difficulties in developing or gaining the agreement of families to develop support plans in NSW family agencies. Nonetheless where support plans were in place they were generally successful, with 26.8% of support periods in NSW achieving all goals in the support plan. 34.8% of support periods involved 'some' goals being met and 8.9% reporting support plan goals had 'not at all' been achieved (data obtained by special request to the AIHW, 2005). There are a number of variables involved in the achievement of support goals (complexity of goals, responsiveness of other service systems, dedication of client and staff) and it is not possible to examine this in any more specific detail.

A better understanding of the support needs of clients and the operation of family agencies can be gained from analysing more specifically the support provided to clients. The most common services provided in support periods in family agencies were SAAP/CAP accommodation (79.9%) and basic support services such as emotional support and other counselling (62.5%), advice/information (61%), and laundry/shower facilities (55.3%). There was a general trend of services providing these basic services, but there were higher referral rates for some supports requested, including assistance to obtain/maintain independent housing (15.5%) and health and medical services (15.1%) (data obtained by special request to the AIHW, 2005).

The situation for services requested by clients that were neither provided nor referred by the agency was markedly different in NSW than at a national level. National figures indicate that for Australian family agencies there were only two types of supports that registered an unmet request percentage of greater than 2%: SAAP/CAP accommodation, (5.4%) and assistance to maintain/obtain independent housing (2.6%). In comparison in NSW there were nineteen different types of unmet requests that registered above 2%. The largest of these were domestic violence counselling and support (3.3%), family planning support (3.3%), physical disability

services (3.2%), intellectual disability services (3.1%), and incest/sexual assault counselling (3.1%) (data obtained by special request to the AIHW, 2005). The breadth and serious nature of unmet needs in NSW family agencies is concerning, and requires further investigation in order to understand how and why this is occurring. However it should also be noted that in most areas unmet needs are lower for NSW family agencies than national averages across the sector.

Support periods, support to the client, NSW Family Agencies 2003-04

	Needed %	Provided %	Referred %	Not provided or referred %
SAAP/CAP accommodation (including THM's and other SAAP managed properties)	81	79.9	2.2	0.5
Assistance to obtain/maintain short-term accommodation	13.8	12.9	5.3	2.2
Assistance to obtain/maintain independent housing	41.7	34	15.5	2.9
Assistance to obtain/maintain benefit/pension/other govt allowance	18	17.2	4.4	1.3
Employment/training assistance	10.3	5.9	5.6	2.4
Financial/material aid	46.1	43	11.7	1.2
Financial counselling and support	18.3	15.8	4.2	1.9
Incest/sexual assault counselling and support	3.6	2.6	1.4	3.1
Domestic violence counselling and support	19.8	17.3	4.8	3.3
Family/relationship counselling and support	26.9	23.9	7.3	2.6
Emotional support/other counselling	63.4	62.5	5.6	0.5
Psychological services	5.3	2.5	3.2	2.9
Psychiatric services	5.3	3.6	3.2	2.7
Living skills/personal development	18.4	18.5	1.1	1.5
Pregnancy support	5.3	4	2.1	2.6
Family planning support	2.4	1.5	0.6	3.3
Drug/alcohol support or intervention	13.1	10.5	5.9	2.2
Physical disability services	1.3	1.1	0.5	3.2
Intellectual disability services	1.5	0.6	0.2	3.1
Culturally appropriate support	7.8	6.8	2.5	2.7
Interpreter services	2.4	2.2	0.9	2.9
Meals	46.6	48.1	1.8	0.2
Laundry/shower facilities	53.1	55.3	0.1	0.2
Recreation	25.6	26.6	0	0.2
Transport	46.1	46.7	0.8	0.5
Assistance with legal issues/court support	18.6	15.8	6.4	1.7
Health/medical services	27.1	18	15.1	1.2
Advice/information	60	61	4.7	0.4
Brokerage services	9.3	9	1.5	2.9
Retrieval/storage/removal of personal belongings	16.4	16	2.1	2.5
Advocacy/liaison on behalf of client	48.3	48.4	5.4	0.6
Assistance with problem gambling	1.5	1.1	0.8	2.9
Assistance with immigration issues	2.2	1.9	0.9	2.9
Other	17.3	17.2	1.4	0
Total	--	--	--	--

Note: More than one type of support service may have been appropriate so percentages do not total to 100 and numbers may not add to the total number of support periods.

Source: Data provided from the AIHW through a special request

Following support periods the most common accommodation for families was the private rental market (25%). Interestingly the number of families exiting to the private rental market in NSW was lower than at a national level (32.3%). Although it is difficult to deduce anything substantive from this it may be consistent with the opinion of some authors that there are barriers for some families in obtaining or maintaining a tenancy on the private rental market in NSW. Following private rental, other common accommodation types after support in NSW were public housing (19.8%), and boarding in a private home (13.9%). A small percentage of families were exiting from a family SAAP agency back into another crisis/short term SAAP service (4.7%). There were also a small number of families exiting to 'Living in a car/tent/park/street or squat' (1%), which, although a low number, is concerning. Overall, however, it appears that accommodation after support is potentially less precarious and inappropriate than the accommodation families were in before support.

Support periods, type of housing/accommodation before and after support

	Before Support		After Support	
	N	%	N	%
SAAP crisis/short term accommodation	80	7.9	32	4.7
SAAP medium/long term accommodation	7	0.7	15	2.2
SAAP funded/arranged hostel	5	0.5	1	0.1
SAAP funded/arranged motel/hotel	8	0.8	5	0.7
SAAP funded/arranged community placement	0	0	0	0
Other SAAP funded/arranged accommodation	10	1	22	3.2
Non-SAAP emergency accommodation	20	2	6	0.9
Living rent free in house or flat	93	9.2	38	5.6
Private rental market	223	22.1	169	25
Public housing	88	8.7	134	19.8
Community housing	32	3.2	59	8.7
Renting a caravan	40	4	10	1.5
Rooming house/hostel/hotel	52	5.2	24	3.5
Boarding in a private home	184	18.3	94	13.9
Purchasing or living in own home	26	2.6	11	1.6
Living in a car/tent/park/street/squat	39	3.9	7	1
Other non-SAAP accommodation	13	1.3	14	2.1
Hospital/psychiatric institution	22	2.2	9	1.3
Prison/youth training centre	44	4.4	6	0.9
Other government residential arrangement	5	0.5	3	0.4
Detoxification unit/rehabilitation centre	13	1.3	9	1.3
Other institutional setting	3	0.3	9	1.3
NA/No consent	187	.	187	.
Not answered	98	.	245	.
Error	3	.	1	.
Support period ongoing/incomplete	0	.	185	.
Total	1,295	100	1,295	100

Source: Data provided from the AIHW through a special request

Overall it appears that SAAP family agencies are providing support and accommodation to families relatively successfully. Timeframes for support and accommodation are generally consistent with the SAAP crisis and medium term expectations, support plans are a common, there are relatively low rates on unmet needs although there are a wide variety of them and the accommodation of families after support from appearance is more stable than before families received support.

Lessons from quantitative data

Throughout this chapter quantitative data has been useful to build a basic profile of NSW family agencies. Whilst only providing a broad overview, the data suggests some interesting trends.

In particular family agencies appear to have lower funding levels compared to other types of agencies in NSW. This may indicate that the equitability of funding across agencies in the NSW SAAP system requires further investigation. Demographically it is also concerning that many of the support periods provided by family agencies are for female headed, young, single-parent families. One in five of these support periods is for an Indigenous client, and just under one in five support periods is for a client not born in Australia. The latter findings are particularly concerning given the significant lack of attention paid to these groups in literature on family homelessness.

The data supports information available in literature that suggests poverty and domestic violence are major factors in family homelessness. The large number of families on parenting payments before support periods combined with 'financial difficulty' being cited as the most frequent reason for seeking support (39%) appear to support Kolar's (1994) suggestion that a review of the adequacy of income support payments be undertaken.

There is also some positive information available in the data. Family agencies in NSW appear to be functioning well, with accommodation and support periods generally falling within the expected crisis and medium term time-frames, a relatively low number of unmet needs and clients generally exiting to (what appears to be) appropriate accommodation.

Whilst it is useful to gain a general overview of family agencies, this quantitative data allows for a limited understanding of the function of family agencies and may not capture some of the complex or experiential elements of the way that family agencies operate. In particular it only allows for a superficial, deductive analysis of the strengths that agencies have as well as any difficulties or barriers that they face. For this reason qualitative information has been sought to supplement this data. This data is discussed in the next chapter.

You try to do the best you can with what you've got: building a picture of family agencies through qualitative data

This section outlines the results of six focus groups held with staff of NSW SAAP agencies that work with families. This qualitative information was sought in order to combine with the quantitative data discussed in the previous chapter to provide a more sophisticated overview of how NSW SAAP agencies that work with families operate.

The agencies that participated in the qualitative element of this project were a diverse group, covering a range of factors including: crisis, medium term and brokerage agencies; metro, regional and rural locations; family agencies as well as multiple/cross-target agencies that work with families. However, there were staff from only six agencies involved in the focus groups, and as this is a small number it is important to note that these results do not provide a representative sample of SAAP agencies that work with families. However, the general consistency in issues raised throughout the focus groups outlined in this section may mean that these issues are more broadly indicative of agencies that work with families, and warrant further investigation. Focus group participants generally included the service manager and other support workers. The focus groups were held at the agencies and followed a standard set of questions (See Appendix A).

The research was designed to comply with the National Health and Medical Research Council's *Human research ethics handbook* (NHMRC 1999). To comply with such standards three key strategies were employed. Firstly, to ensure informed consent for participation in the project, potential participants were contacted regarding participation and sent information relating to the collection and use of material, the amount of time and resources required from the organization and any of their questions and concerns in relation to the project answered. Secondly, participants were asked to sign an agreement for participation that set out the requirements and outcomes of the research and the storage of data etc. Lastly, participants were advised in writing and discussion that they were free to withdraw, without punishment or adverse consequences at any time, and that they could choose not to answer a particular question in the interviews without withdrawing participation altogether.

In outlining the results of these focus groups, this section builds on the previous chapters to add another layer to the profile of family agencies in NSW. The section is structured into two sections aimed at targeting the information missing from the previous chapters: participant's perceptions of the strength of agencies in working with families and the barriers and problems they face in doing this.

“Whatever needs to be done”: strengths in working with families

The key strengths identified by services throughout the interviews were their flexibility, their staff and the linkages and relationships that they had developed with other service providers and agencies. These issues were articulated by workers as integral to their work with homeless families.

Of these strengths, flexibility was the most frequently cited. It was the central feature through which workers felt they were able to best support families and achieve good outcomes. Flexibility as a strength was multifaceted, used to describe the focus and function of the service on both a macro and micro level. On a macro level flexibility was the foundation workers used to describe the client group the agency ‘prioritised’. Of the agencies interviewed many had chosen to focus on and prioritise either women with children (often those escaping domestic violence) *or* men with children and couples with children. These agencies reasoned that this was the result of a response to those in the community with the ‘greatest need’. One agency prioritising men with children explained that:

Respondent: ...our eligibility criteria, in terms of prioritising need, single fathers with kids have first priority, then it’s couples and then women with children.

Interviewer: So what is the thinking behind the priority list in terms of men with children, couples with children?

Respondent: Because it is a matter of need, in that there are no other places for those people to go to...we could fill this place up with women escaping domestic violence situations, but there are other places for those women to go to...

A service that had prioritised women and children escaping domestic violence used similar community-responsiveness justifications for their decision:

DV was always our priority and we thought, well if [the other service in town] can take care of the men they are not left high and dry. We can eliminate some of that difficulty of them being in here and be able to offer a safe service for women.

This apparent ‘specialisation’ of family agencies is somewhat surprising. It is often assumed that the generic title of ‘family agencies’ implies an open client group to all family types. This was not the case with this small group of services, which raises some concern about the accuracy of information available on family agencies in terms of service delivery capacity to different family groups. Put simply, it cannot be assumed that because there are 24 family agencies in NSW these agencies all take men with children or couples with children – the options for this group may be fewer than they appear. The data discussed in the previous chapter has outlined the large number of female-headed single parent families receiving support periods. It has also shown that domestic violence was a major reason cited by families seeking assistance. Rather than being coincidental, this may be because there are family agencies that are focusing on this group of clients as a priority over others. Given that there are a large number of agencies in NSW that are targeted at women and children escaping domestic violence the prioritisation of this group by family agencies could mean that men with children or couples with children are disadvantaged in seeking assistance from SAAP. There is also a question of whether family agencies are able to appropriately and effectively deal with situations in which women and children are escaping domestic violence.

Flexibility to community or client needs was also articulated as a strength at the perhaps less problematic level of program and project development. One agency explained how “the programs change all the time because the programs are designed to meet the needs of the majority of the residents that are here at the time”.

On a more micro level, a flexible approach from staff and management was frequently cited as an effective method of working with families. For example, one service described how they managed to avert a single mother being sent to gaol:

We do things like for instance I went to court with a mum who absolutely was going to go to gaol because she keeps on driving without a license and they are being tough on that at the moment. I talked with her solicitor and he kept saying he ‘can’t do this [keep her out of gaol], this is the fifth time’. I worked on this and in the end he said ‘I’m going to put you on the stand’, and I said ‘fine’. I got up there and I talked with this magistrate. It took three quarters of an hour and in the end he said ...the reason behind this person not going to gaol is because we had set up all sorts of services around the place to help this family...So we kept her out of gaol with that...so I guess the strength is they [the staff] do whatever needs to be done.

Such examples of staff being the strength of the agency through their flexibility were common. When pushed further on what exactly was meant by staff being flexible it was generally held to mean their willingness to do whatever needed to be done to achieve the best outcomes for families. For instance, when asked to give an example of this ‘flexibility’, one service responded:

Well, the majority of people, if their shift finishes and they are in the middle of something, they won’t just pack up and go home. They may put aside their own private arrangement to stay another hour and half or two hours in order to resolve a situation.

Flexibility was a strength that was also mentioned in conjunction with positive relationships and links with other agencies – another key strength. One worker, in describing how the flexible approach of the service was a strength, tied this flexibility in with the holistic response that was provided to the community as a result of the relationships that existed between two main agencies, arguing that “I don’t think we would function well without the [accommodation service] being here, it is actually really important to have both sorts of services available, I think. But flexibility is a huge advantage, yeah.” This also reiterates the discussion in the literature chapter that highlighted the importance of a diversity of service models to respond to family homelessness.

When prompted further on the nature of these relationships and linkages, workers identified their strength as being that they were much more likely to be informal and personality-based than formal agency relationships or protocols:

... the relationships that really work well, work because of people and work because of the personal links we have made. By personal I mean professional, of course, you know. So I would ring, say [Aboriginal Agency], and I have a person there that I speak to, and we have a very good professional relationship...I am not sure a protocol would translate to the next person if she leaves, I don’t know if that would make a difference.

Other aspects cited about these relationships included a focus on developing relationships that facilitate good outcomes for families, “working together to make things work for people”, investing time in maintaining relationships with key agencies and staff. One participant described how this involved daily contact with the department of housing. Another participant explained that:

The other [relationships] that are useful to us, that we have worked really hard to work, are with some of the charities. They are really important for our clients. I mean, I had a relationship with a emergency food provider, normally people were required to fill in a form and bring down all sorts of ID etc. But the protocol was ‘if you ring us - or if this service rings us - and says ‘this person is who it is’ (because quite often these people do not have any ID) ‘we will accept your word for it’. That was so useful!

Interestingly, some of the rural and regional workers were particularly focused on the importance of relationships and flexibility as strengths of the agencies in working with families. One worker explained that:

But also the other strength, I am not sure I can say! That we are a long way from Sydney, and we have a lot of autonomy. We can do what we need to do. We work very holistically...We are able to be very flexible, we do not do anything outside our brief, I mean we see our CPO every six months you know. That is what I was saying, I am not sure I should be saying all of this! But in a way that is a real strength, a real benefit because we know these families in this area and we can do whatever it is that it takes, you know. They [DoCS and others] don’t know we are here. I have to say we don’t do anything we shouldn’t do.

The small sample of agencies used in this research means this is a difficult issue to substantiate or elaborate on. But anecdotally it may suggest that services in rural/regional areas are more ‘linked’ in with each other and the community, perhaps from necessity, given the limited number of options agencies and clients can have to work with.

The strengths of agencies in working with homeless families articulated by participants outline a number of important points that contribute an extra layer of understanding to the profile of family agencies being created. In particular, the key elements in working with families involve flexibility and strong relationships and links with other agencies. From the quantitative chapter it is evident that agencies provide a range of different supports to families and those families generally appear to have good accommodation outcomes and low levels of unmet needs when they exit agencies. Through this qualitative information we begin to understand the way in which these agencies work to achieve this.

As this picture continues to be built, hopefully through further research and analysis, the ways in which family agencies can be supported and their work with families strengthened will hopefully become clearer. From this data it can be deduced that it’s important that family agencies are given general flexibility (by boards, funding bodies, the community etc.) in the way that they function and work with families. Similarly, workers and agencies should be supported to develop interpersonal and professional connections with other relevant agencies.

Needing “the whole works”: agency and client related barriers

In contrast to the small group of strengths articulated by participants, there were a broad range of problems and barriers cited by participants in working with homeless families. These problems and barriers generally fell into two categories: those that related to the agency itself, such as the operation of the agency and its client group, and those that related to external agencies, such as government departments and the private rental market. Participants often framed barriers to their work as the result of a cumulative number of problems, rather than as finite occurrences. However, for the purpose of examining these barriers and problems, they have been compartmentalised in this analysis.

It should also be noted again that despite the consistency in the response of workers across different agencies, the small number of agencies and workers that participated in the focus group mean that the problems and barriers outlined here should not be considered as representative of all family agencies in NSW, but should be looked at as an indication of what sorts of problems these agencies can face in working with homeless families. This provides an important platform for developing an understanding of how family agencies operate, and as a topic should be given particular attention in any future work undertaken that aims to better assist these agencies to support homeless families.

A difficulty cited repeatedly by workers was the complexity of the issues and needs that families that accessed the agency had. When asked about what some of the needs of clients were when they accessed the agency, one worker described how homeless families often needed “the whole works”

“There’s a lot of clients that come in here that are homeless that need the whole works. They are just so mixed up...they need a whole big network of help”

In looking at some of the causes and contributors to homelessness in literature in an earlier chapter, it was evident that a distinction is often made between the ‘structural’ and ‘individual’ contributors to homelessness (Bartholomew 1999; Chamberlain 1999). Workers were less inclined to separate factors in this way and more inclined to articulate the combined effect that both structural and individual factors had on families, generally on a case-by-case basis. This created a more complex and service-oriented approach than is often presented through literature. As perceived by participants, common factors that contributed to family homelessness included ‘individual characteristics’, such as mental health problems, drug and alcohol misuse, gambling and domestic violence. These individual characteristics were viewed in conjunction with ‘structural’ issues to create a complex picture of the needs of families that accessed agencies. In an archetypal example of the views of participants, one worker explained:

The main issues are the structural things that are outside of their control such as domestic violence, um, and the expense of private rental and poverty. We have had a number of very large employers contract their services and become smaller, therefore people have been unemployed, and therefore poverty comes through. Then there are the other things which are, if you like, at least theoretically under people’s control: drug and alcohol abuse, gambling is now becoming a big one. People simply can’t afford to maintain their accommodation...more and more we are now seeing people with mental health issues, because again they are not able to maintain tenancies, especially in the private rental market.

This sort of analysis provided throughout the focus groups is similar to McCaughey's (1992) explanation of 'risk factors' involved in family homelessness, although workers are clearer in expressing the prevalence of 'structural' issues. These views also reinforce some of the quantitative data discussed earlier, particularly the issues of financial difficulty and domestic violence.

Other difficulties cited by workers often related to the operation of their particular agency. However the consistency of the problems that were raised indicates these issues are not individualised, but rather may be structural problems with SAAP agencies that work with families. The most frequent barriers cited with the operation of agencies themselves related to the timeframes workers had to support families, the physical layout of agencies and resource limitations.

Barriers posed by time constraints were a particular hindrance for crisis or short-term agencies (generally understood as up to three months). This was a problem because of the complexity of need of the families and the slow response of external organisations (e.g. waiting lists for counselling or the Department of Housing). One worker explained:

Our housing is all short term...we don't have a lot of time to work with, so we have got to be gentle and kind, but a bit pushy to get some result at the end, you know. If we got a whole bunch of people in and we just locked the whole place up we wouldn't be able to do any intake. So we have got to turn these people out the other end...

Services, particular medium-term agencies, articulated further time-related constraints existed as a result of exiting families from an agency. In order to exit families, workers often had to commit to provide ongoing support, which these agencies were not funded to provide. One worker explained that the consequence of this was:

If we commit to providing someone with ongoing support it becomes a bit of a balancing act...I mean how many people can we keep giving ongoing support to?

The physical space or layout of the services also imposed constraints on agencies, and was often connected with the targeting of particular family groups - the 'specialisation' described earlier. This often meant limitations to how and what sorts of services were provided. For instance, one service that focused on men with children and couples with children indicated that they were not able to take women and children if they were escaping domestic violence due to "the nature of this property" not providing the level of security needed in cases of domestic violence. Similarly, a service that focused on domestic violence outlined that this was a result of having a male client "go ballistic" and end up in another section of the agency where a woman with children escaping domestic violence was staying.

Underlying many of these problems was a limitation posed by the resources available within agencies. In particular workers noted that what services they were able to provide were outstripped by demand. One service commented that this problem was extensive:

Currently we turn away four out of every five people that knock on our door. If every agency is doing the same, which I believe they are, we need a lot more welfare agencies out there with a lot more resources.

This need for “a lot more resources” was cited by many agencies. One worker described how a cumulative lack of resources within the agency and community resulted in particular problems in the case of suicide.

I think that suicide would be the one that really rattles us. How often we get threats of suicide. And because we are not a 24 hour service but staff are on call they know they can ring us. We've got to try and do suicide prevention on the phone while shopping for groceries in Woollies. It's not good, but we are the only ones that they can contact.

Beyond these relatively consistent issues of limitations imposed by time-frames, physical features and a lack of resources, one agency raised a problem based on their particular service model as a brokerage service:

When it comes to families it's tricky. It is tricky for a number of reasons. [Worker] was just been talking about, we very rarely place families in pubs, we have to place them in caravan parks or motels.

Interviewer: and how do the families go in that sort of accommodation?

Bloody awful it is very, very ordinary and it is quite stressful.

Although based on one agency, the consistency of this situation with the results of Bartholomew's (1999) research outlined earlier indicate particular problems with brokerage models aimed at families. It is difficult, however, to investigate these issues much further than this in this report, but this is an issue that warrants further investigation.

A striking element of the focus groups was the variation in responses to children that agencies had. Some agencies seemed to rely on the ‘trickle down’ effect, believing that by stabilising the parents needs the children's needs were met, while others worked directly with children to identify and respond to their individual needs. One worker described how she often felt that children in SAAP agencies were treated as “accompanying baggage”.

Only one of the agencies involved had specified workers for children. In what appeared to be a better response to children from family agencies, a worker in this service described the sorts of things that the agency did specifically for children.

...so we have got play group up there when we have sufficient school age people. We have kids club every afternoon, family movie nights, drop in for the parents, if we are running groups, like money management or whatever...in conjunction with that [the children's worker] does a needs assessment of the children in conjunction with the families case manager. That is usually done in the first week of them being here. Say for instance children need to be referred to a paediatrician, she will make sure those things are happening. With older children if they have got recreational needs and we are unable to meet them on site we try. We also try to do something about accessing the resources within the community, like take them to a youth club or something like that. In terms of their educational needs, liaising with the local schools, organising assessments in the schools, one of the [workers] provides tutoring for the children, that sort of thing. That is basically what her role is. Attending to needs of the children.

In contrast to this, an agency that didn't have a children's worker described how their response to children was to 'link them in':

A good response is seeing kids stay with their families or getting kids back to their families if they are not with them and you get them in to secure accommodation in a healthy and loving environment I suppose. Basically they are all the same.

Clearly within this small group there is a range in the responses that agencies have to children. From these examples it appears that resource levels play a big role in this, however it is difficult to substantiate or explore this further. Responses to children are, however, a feature of the function of family agencies that require particular attention.

The agency-related barriers discussed by workers provide an initial insight into the sorts of restraints and problems agencies can face in working with families, in particular barriers related to service-models. It appears from this small group of agencies that some investigation and analysis is needed in regards to the suitability of a range of service models to working with homeless families, and children in particular. An analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of accommodation versus non-accommodation based agencies, the timeframes of agencies (crisis/medium term etc.) and the conduciveness of the physical makeup of agencies to their model of operation also require further consideration. The intention of such an analysis would be to allow agencies and the SAAP program to better support families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and to support the effective functioning of the SAAP program in relation to homeless families.

“The barriers for these people are insurmountable”: dealing with human service agencies and the private rental market

In conjunction with 'internal' agency difficulties, workers consistently cited significant problems and barriers in working with 'external' human services and private agencies. Problems with external agencies and organisations were the most common and frequent topic discussed across the focus groups. The main types of problems that occurred were related to the inadequate or incompatible function of family agencies with NSW government agencies and broader structural problems such as a lack of exit points. In summary, participants articulated their perceptions regarding the inaccessibility of area health services, accessibility problems with mental health as well as inadequate intervention and support, non-responsiveness from the NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS) in relation to child protection notifications, the processes and policies of the NSW Department of Housing and, more broadly, a lack of accessible and affordable housing exit-options for families supported by these agencies.

Across the focus groups workers frequently cited difficulties in accessing community health resources, in particular counselling services. More specifically workers felt impeded by a lack of timely response in seeking appointments and the length of waiting lists. One participant explained that this was often due to the limited time that families were with the agency:

...a service we do have trouble with is area health, referring clients to area health in regards to counselling. Our clients aren't with us long enough to go and do counselling, because we are now looking at 6 to 8 week waits.

It appears that demand is also outstripping the response available from community health counselling services, which is consequently affecting the ability of SAAP agencies to work with homeless families. One worker explains that:

You need it now. That is a huge challenge. I sometimes have women suddenly disclose horrendous abuse in their past, and even what is happening now. There is a sexual assault service, for instance, but unless the assault is happening now there is again a long waiting list...That is the biggest frustration. We need to be able to access professional services of high quality to assist these people to deal with all this stuff that gets in the way.

Interestingly, access to emotional support and other counselling was the second highest support provided to clients in NSW by SAAP family services (62.5%), and the data did not indicate any significant problem in relation to unmet demand for this type of service. This illustrates the importance of gathering qualitative data in order to highlight any issues that may not be captured through quantitative measurement.

Beyond counselling services, access to mental health services was a common problem cited by workers. The most common problem cited in relation to mental health was again related to a lack of resources, which appeared to be a particular problem for rural and regional agencies. One rural worker explained that:

For mental health services there is always a lack. The nearest psychiatrists are in [another town], we have a [doctor that] comes up once a month. He is there for a day, sees everyone on the production line and sets off. He is good, but it is not enough. They can't keep staff there for very long. We are usually running on about a third of the team, remembering that they also service another two towns. A lot of their service provision can be chewed up just in travel time, so it really does deplete resources.

Gaining a meaningful intervention from mental health services when a client did access the service was also cited frequently as a problem. One worker described the difficulties they had with a particular client who eventually agreed to be taken to a mental health service but was returned to the agency the same day. When the agency followed this up they were informed that she had a mental disorder, rather than a mental illness, and the mental health service was therefore not the appropriate place for her. Cases such as this highlight the difficulties that family agencies can face in accessing appropriate support for clients, which ultimately impedes their capacity to work towards good outcomes with these families.

The apex of workers perceptions of such gaps or inadequacies in service provision was the NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS). One service explained that:

...I mean that is illustrated with the difficult relationship I think everybody has with DOCS, because they are very much bound by their processes. And they change staff so often at the moment I don't have any key personnel, again I had up until a few months ago people again as with all the other services that I could ring and just and talk to about stuff, I have to establish those links again because those people have moved on.

In juxtaposition to the strength workers felt they had in their relationships and links with other agencies, in the view of participants agencies such as DoCS can impede this practice through lacking a 'personal' aspect to relationships with agencies. Agencies perceive that as a result of this lack "the links don't work".

Another common problem cited with DoCS was a strong perception of the inadequacy of the response given to child protection notifications. During an interview one worker described a current incident in which she was dissatisfied with the DoCS response:

There is a family where I really would love DoCS to come and take those children, because I am terrified. But, you know, I made this very urgent report three days ago. I now have a call from DoCS - "can we have a case conference next Tuesday". I hope the children live until next Tuesday.

This dismay was very common and there was a large amount of cynicism in respect to DoCS child protection role. One worker summarized the position expressed by most of those interviewed, stating that:

...We put in DoCS notification, after notification, after notification and they are not getting – there is too many that have slipped through the net, way too many.

These frustrations highlight the extent to which family agencies are 'linked' with NSW Government agencies in supporting homeless families. It appears from the perspective of these workers that aspects of these relationships are dysfunctional. It appears from this data that a qualitative assessment of the accessibility and responsiveness of NSW human services agencies to homeless families is warranted as a supplement to the quantitative data available through the AIHW.

Beyond these problems with NSW Government human service agencies, another 'external' barrier commonly cited by workers was a lack of exit options for families leaving accommodation services. One worker explained that "what is bad is when they are actually ready to fly, if you like, and there is nowhere for them to go." This lack of exit options was tied to a number of factors by workers, one of which is related to a lack of affordable housing, an issue also at the core of McChesney's (1990) work, previously discussed. In one focus group the workers described how the community was becoming more affluent and as a result rental prices were increasing:

The price of housing is a barrier. That is out of control...

Around here a lot of the old places have been knocked over and redeveloped so that the cheaper houses are going and they're building new units. They are all plush inside – the rent goes up.

Plus there is a high demand

It is a diminishing market, the affordable housing

A lack of affordable housing is a big concern for these agencies as the quantitative data discussed above shows that private rental is the most common type of housing for families exiting these agencies (25%). What the focus groups also illustrated is that there is a particularly complicating factor in the accessibility of the private rental market to many of the families in these agencies: Residential Tenancy Databases (RTDs), such as TICA. RTDs are tenant databases that "provide agents with personal information about the previous tenancies of prospective tenants where there may have been problems. This information helps agents to assess if an applicant is likely to be a "financial risk" and as a result "many landlords are not willing to rent a residential property to anyone who is listed on a tenant database" (Office of Fair

Trading 2004). In a report on the effect of RTDs and their relationships with homelessness, Mission Australia (2004) found that “Residential Tenancy Databases have a large impact on people’s ability to find housing in the private rental market. There is also an impact on services, which have to deal with an increased demand on their resources due to people not being able to find housing.”

Problems posed by RTDs on the exit options of families from these agencies were raised in every focus group. One worker pointed out that this was a huge problem for the families they saw, “probably 99 percent”. He explained:

I think it would be safe to say that nobody comes here without bad debts, because if they had good credit ratings they would be able to rent a house, simple as that.

From the point of view of these workers, the lack of transparency, and to some extent fairness, in the operation of blacklists such as TICA had huge ramifications on homeless families.

You try and negotiate your way through that. It is just difficult. A lot of agents will just take the view that if anyone’s ever been on it or if there is any smell of TICA at all, even if they have paid it off, they just don’t want the hassle. They don’t want to take the risk.

Another service described how these issues in particular affected women escaping domestic violence. One service described a problem found with one single mum and her kids who was on TICA:

She had escaped a domestic violence situation, the rent was behind but it was paid back. But they chose to rent to the husband, so they still had him on the books. They had made a judgement that it was her fault, not his. In my view they were being judgemental. They were happy to blame her so they would not give her a go, and we couldn’t get her a start anywhere else. Every time they would ring back to that particular agent, they would give a bad report, so others wouldn’t give her a go.

Although some work has been done on the relationship between homelessness and RTD (Mission Australia 2004), as is the case with much literature there is no comprehensive analysis on families particularly. This is something that, in the opinion of workers, needs to be undertaken as a matter of urgency, particularly if the private rental market is going to be pointed to as the major housing option for these families.

Difficulties in obtaining housing for families were not, however, restricted to the private rental market. Many workers stated that it was currently almost impossible to obtain priority housing (through the NSW Department of Housing) for homeless families, with one worker stating “Priority housing is a joke”. Instead, SAAP agencies and homeless families seem to be frequently told that they can afford to rent privately. This was seen as a disgraceful example of ‘passing the buck’ by many of the workers interviewed. One worker was completely exasperated by the policies of the Department of Housing (DoH), arguing that:

If the department of housing send people away with a handful of computer printouts of ‘these are properties that are available in the price range that we have assessed you as being able to afford to pay’. If that is their strategy for dealing with people’s homelessness, what are we supposed to do? What are we supposed to do?

This was seen as a particularly problematic element of DoH responses to homeless families given the difficulties that many of these families face with RTDs in accessing private rental. Some workers felt that changes to NSW public housing announced in 2005 would exacerbate family homelessness (see http://www.housing.nsw.gov.au/news_publications/ReshapingPublicHousing/). One worker argued:

We can work with the level [of public housing] that we have got now, but I am a little bit worried, in fact I am a lot worried, about what is going to happen when the new DoH rules kick in. Then we will probably have more people coming from DoH [public housing] but also we will have more people that can't get into the DoH [public housing].

Under the *Reshaping Public Housing* changes, rather than being allocated public housing for an indefinite period, people assessed as eligible for public housing will be offered a tenured lease for between 2 and 10 years. The leases will be reviewed, although there is currently a lack of clarity around this process (particularly in relation to what support will be provided to assist people to access alternative affordable housing if leases are not extended.) This is the basis of this workers concern that more families will be accessing the agency from public housing when their lease ends. Another important change is that there will be specific eligibility criterion for public housing, adding a 'need' element to the current 'low income' criteria. Importantly, homelessness is included as new criteria of 'need'. Despite this some workers are pessimistic that these changes will actually improve the accessibility of public housing for their clients. One worker felt that "the number of homeless families is going to increase and that is going to be an outcome of the way the department of housing has been restructured in terms of their time frame leases."

Participant's perceptions that a lack of exit options for families is related to a lack of affordable housing, NSW Government public housing policy and the operation of RTD again illustrated the way that 'macro' level issues such as a lack of affordable housing can affect the function of family agencies at a 'micro' level.

Lessons from qualitative data

The information collected through these focus groups has allowed for further development of the profile of NSW family agencies being created in this report. In particular, information on the strengths and barriers and problems faced by agencies in working with families has complemented the basic profile developed using quantitative data. What is clear from this qualitative data is that the key strengths the participants felt their agencies had in working with homeless families was flexibility and strong relationships and links with other agencies and organisations. This allowed them to do "whatever needs to be done" with a client group that generally needed "the whole works".

The focus groups also allow for a more extensive exploration of the sorts of difficulties and barriers that workers felt they faced in working with homeless families. These ranged from difficulties arising from the service model and operation of the agency itself to problems with the response and accessibility of NSW Government human service agencies. A lack of exit options from the agency for families was one general problem articulated by workers. What these barriers highlight is the breadth of factors that influence the operation of family agencies, ranging from access to counselling at the area health service to the availability of affordable housing.

Where to now? What this profile means for family agencies

This report has built a profile of family agencies in NSW using a range of data sources and literature, something that was missing from information available on family homelessness. In building this profile a number of factors have emerged that require further exploration. Investigating these issues will build on the knowledge contained in this report, and in the long run may improve the way that homeless families are supported through SAAP. Rather than reflect on the profile that has been built throughout this report, this section has a 'where to from here' approach, drawing together some of the particular issues highlighted throughout the report as warranting further analysis and exploration.

From the profile created using quantitative data it appears that NSW family agencies are doing a good job in supporting homeless families. However, despite the existence of research which reports on the experiences of homeless families, there is little information from families that outlines what they want or need from family agencies. This is a key element in evaluating how services are delivered and the effectiveness of these agencies and should be undertaken in order to investigate and tailor the operation of family agencies.

Throughout the qualitative and quantitative data questions were raised concerning the adequacy of funding levels for NSW family agencies. However, the broad nature of the quantitative data and the size limitations of the qualitative data mean that an in-depth analysis or exploration of this situation is difficult. However, the data provided is enough to suggest that the funding situation of these agencies warrants further attention.

There also appears to be a lack of clarity about what a family agency is. Rather than having relatively open accessibility criteria, the qualitative data indicates that family agencies may be targeting or prioritising particular family groups over others. The lack of clarity around who the clients of family agencies are becomes even more confused by quantitative data, which indicates that 30.2% of support periods provided by NSW agencies were for persons alone (AIHW 2005b, p.20). This warrants an investigation of what the accommodation options are for different family client groups in *real* terms.

It is concerning that there is a lack of information available on many of the groups that stand out in a demographic analysis of the clients of family agencies. In particular further investigation of the apparent large numbers of female headed, young, single-parent families is warranted, given that they appear to account for a significant number of the support periods provided by family agencies. Similarly, the number of support periods provided to Indigenous clients and other culturally and linguistically diverse groups should be investigated. It is both surprising and odd to note that there was no notable discussion of these characteristics or groups by agency workers throughout the focus groups.

Throughout the document the links between poverty and domestic violence as causes of homelessness were constantly reinforced. Given that the links between these issues are well developed, work could be undertaken to detail and develop methods of early-intervention to prevent families becoming homeless, consistent with the principles that the FHPP and the HOME advice program are modelled on. In particular the literature and data discussed indicate that an analysis of the connection between levels of income support and family homelessness is warranted.

What was clear from both the literature and qualitative information collected from agencies was the extent to which broad 'macro' issues affect the operation of agencies and our understanding of family homelessness and the operation of family agencies at a 'micro' level. For instance, debates about the causes and contributors of family homelessness are inextricable from analysis of particular service models for working with families. Similarly, the policies of the NSW Department of Housing are perceived by agencies as inextricable from the lack of exit options families leaving. This suggests that Family agencies do not operate in isolation, and therefore in order to understand and analyse the function of these agencies a broad analysis of the factors that influence these agencies is necessary. The qualitative section of this report has highlighted some barriers as articulated by the workers. However this should be investigated more fully in a broader policy context, and be balanced by any factors that *strengthen* the operation of family agencies.

Related to this macro-micro connection, the quantitative data outlines the importance of relationships with other organisations for family agencies. Given this, it is concerning that so many of the barriers cited by workers related to dysfunctional relationships or responses from NSW Government agencies. The number of NSW Government agencies cited in relation to barriers and problems justifies a specific examination of the holistic response of the NSW Government to homeless families and family agencies.

Another element requiring further exploration is the relationship between Residential Tenancy Databases (RTDs) and family homelessness. From the qualitative data it appears that the role of RTDs in contributing to family homelessness and as an inhibitor on exiting family agencies should be reviewed.

Throughout the qualitative interview many of the barriers cited appeared to relate to restrictions imposed by the model of service delivery the agency used. It is not possible to assess models based on such a small sample. A comprehensive analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of different service models in working with families needs to be undertaken in order to allow for more informed analysis and discussion of the best service models for homeless families. In doing this it should be remembered that both literature and workers support the view that a range of service models is needed to respond to family homelessness. From the qualitative data it is apparent that particular attention should be paid to service models that meet children's needs and the resources required for this.

In building an initial profile of NSW family agencies, this report has also provided the foundation for further investigation into these agencies and the families that they support, and with it the potential to enhance the capacity of SAAP to respond to homeless families.

Bibliography

Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, 2005, 'Responding to Homelessness', *AHURI Research and Policy Bulletin*, Issue 66, October 2005, <http://www.housinginstitute.org/news/AHURI.pdf>

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2005a, Homeless People in SAAP: SAAP National Data Collection annual report 2003-04 Australia. AIHW cat.no. HOU126., AIHW, Canberra (SAAP NDCA Report Series 9).

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2005b, Homeless People in SAAP: SAAP National Data Collection annual report 2003-04: New South Wales supplementary tables. AIHW cat.no. HOU120., AIHW, Canberra (SAAP NDCA Report Series 9).

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2005c, Homeless People in SAAP: SAAP National Data Collection annual report 2003-04: Victoria supplementary tables. AIHW cat.no. HOU115., AIHW, Canberra (SAAP NDCA Report Series 9).

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2005d, Homeless People in SAAP: SAAP National Data Collection annual report 2003-04: Queensland supplementary tables. AIHW cat.no. HOU116., AIHW, Canberra (SAAP NDCA Report Series 9).

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2005e, *Bulletin*, 'Female SAAP clients and children escaping domestic and family violence 2003-04', Issue 30., September 2005, <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publications/aus/bulletin30/bulletin30.pdf> (last accessed 16 December 2005).

Bahro, T, 'Children in Homeless Families: Breaking the Cycle', Conference Proceedings on the 1st National Conference on Homelessness, Melbourne, 1996

Bartholomew, T, 1998, 'Family poverty, family homelessness, and the systems abuse cycle', *Changing families, challenging futures: 6th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference*, Melbourne. 25-27 November.

Bartholomew, T, 1999, *A long way from home: family homelessness in the current welfare context*, The Salvation Army, St Kilda.

Chamberlain, C, Johnson, G, 2000, *The Debate about Definition: A Research Paper Prepared for the Victorian Homelessness Strategy Department of Human Services*, <http://www.ashs.org.au/Indep/2.pdf>

Chamberlain, C. 1999, *Counting the Homeless: Implications for policy development*, Catalogue No. 2041.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.

Champion, T, 2005, *States of Neglect: An analysis of child protection legislation and the link with child and youth homelessness*, National Youth Coalition for Housing

Chung, D., Kennedy, R., O'Brien, B., Wendt, S., 2000, *Home Safe Home: The link between domestic and family violence and women's homelessness*, Commonwealth of Australia.

Commonwealth of Australia, 1994, *Supported Accommodation Assistance Act 1994*, Act No. 162 of 1994, Canberra.

Horn, M, 1996, 'Families and Homelessness - Prospects and policies for the 21st century', *Family Research: pathways to policy: Fifth Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference*, Brisbane, 27-29 November 1996

Keys Young, 1998, *Homelessness in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Context and its possible implications for the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP)* [Final Report], Department of Family and Community Services, Sydney, NSW.
http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/aboutfacs/programs/house-newsaap_keys.htm

Kolar, V, 2004, *Home First: A longitudinal study of outcomes for families who have experienced homelessness*, Hanover Welfare Services, South Melbourne.

McCaughey, J (1992), *Where now? Homeless families in the 1990s*, Policy background paper No. 8, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

McChesney, K.Y, 1990, 'Family Homelessness: A Systemic Problem', *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol.46, No.6, pp.191-205.

Mission Australia Research and Social Policy Unit, 2000, *Family Homelessness in Australia*, Leech, M (ed),

Mission Australia, 2004, *Residential Tenancy Database Study*, Department of Family and Community Services.

National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), 1999, *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans*, Commonwealth of Australia,

Norris, K., Thompson, D., Eardley, T., Hoffmann, S., 2005, (Social Policy Research Centre), *Children in the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP)*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

Oberin, J, 2002, 'The gendered face of "family homelessness": Women, Children and Domestic and Family Violence', *Parity*, Vol. 15, No. 2, p.20-21.

Office of Fair Trading, 2004, *Tenant databases: Information for renters*, FT269, Accessed from www.fairtrading.nsw.gov.au.

Roberts, C, 2004, *National Family Homelessness Project: A Longitudinal Research Project on Aboriginal Homelessness in Perth Western Australia*, Centrecare.

RPR Consulting, 2003, *Family Homelessness Prevention Pilot: Interim Evaluation Report*, Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra.
[http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/vIA/nhs/\\$file/fhpp_interim.pdf](http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/vIA/nhs/$file/fhpp_interim.pdf)

Ryan, P. Merlo, R, (RPR Consulting), 2005, *Family Homelessness Prevention Pilot: Final Evaluation Report*, Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra.

Stephensen, T, Hume, A, 2001, *Family Homelessness Discussion Paper*, South Australia Department of Human Services.

Walsh, P, 2003, *More than just a roof: a study of family homelessness in Queensland*, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane.

Wright, J., Rubin, B., Devine, J, 1998, *Beside the Golden Door*, Aldine De Gruyter, New York

Appendix A: Focus Group Questions

1. Tell me about your service, what sorts of services do you offer?
2. Tell me about the families that access the service, what are some of the (main) issues and needs that they can have?
3. What would you identify as key strengths of your service?
4. What are some of the challenges you have faced in providing services to homeless families? Are there any services your clients need that you are unable to provide or access?
5. What would you consider as a good outcome for a family that accessed your service?
 - How often would you say this happened?
 - What would you consider a 'standard' (or common) outcome?
 - What's a worst case scenario for your service?
6. In your experience, what are some of the needs of accompanying children?
 - What do you consider would be a 'good' response to these needs?
 - What do you think is needed in order to do this?
 - What sort of challenges can the service face in dealing with both adults and children?
7. In 10 years time what sort of responses/programs etc would you like to see established to deal with families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness?