Developments in Homelessness Estimates to Better Inform Community Sector Policy and Practice: A Case Study from Greater Western Sydney

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The 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census saw several additional features added to homelessness estimates. These additions have allowed for greater insights into homeless populations living within Australian communities.

The first addition was the release of homelessness estimates on a Local Government Area (LGA) level, rather than just the Statistical Areas (SAs)[1] created by the ABS. The release of homelessness estimates on an LGA level has made it easier for findings to be presented, interpreted and used by local homelessness stakeholders. The second addition was that homelessness estimates can now be cross-tabulated with demographic variables (such as age, sex, Indigenous status and country of birth) on a range of geographic levels. This has provided an unprecedented look into the characteristics of the homeless population in a given area, which can then be used to better inform local homelessness policy and service delivery.

WESTIR Limited (Western Sydney Regional Information and Research Service) has recently produced homelessness estimates for at-risk groups in Greater Western Sydney (GWS), one of the fastest growing regions in Australia.[2] These estimates are becoming increasingly important, given the rising homelessness occurring westward of inner Sydney due to drivers such as inner city gentrification, housing unaffordability, and precarious labour market conditions.[3] This article provides a summary of this research,

along with suggestions on how ABS homelessness estimates can be further developed in the future.

Homelessness among at-risk groups — findings from Greater Western Sydney

WESTIR Limited's latest 2016 Census Topic Paper called 'Homelessness among at-risk groups in Greater Western Sydney'[4] provides estimates for the following types of homelessness in the GWS region:

- youth homelessness

- older person's homelessness

- women's homelessness

- Indigenous homelessness

- homelessness among priority groups identified by the New South Wales Government Targeted Earlier Intervention (TEI) Reform

- homelessness among culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) people

- homeless with a disability

- student and worker homelessness.

The paper revealed that approximately 13,958 persons in GWS were homeless on Census night in 2016. This equated to 60.9 homeless persons per 10,000 in the region. Cross-tabulation with key demographic variables showed that males were over-represented in the homeless population in GWS (58.0 per cent), most homeless persons in the region were aged 20 to 24 years old (14.3 per cent), and over two thirds were living in 'severely' crowded dwellings (66.4 per cent). The highest number of homeless persons were concentrated in the south-west of the region, in SAs such as Fairfield (2,002 persons), Auburn (1,727 persons), Merrylands–Guildford (1,520 persons) and Canterbury (1,291 persons).

Estimated homelessness numbers and rates for at-risk groups in GWS in 2016 are outlined in Table 1. The data shows that youth homelessness is an issue for GWS, with young people accounting for over a quarter of the region's homeless population. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community continues to be over-represented in the homeless population, although the prevalence of Indigenous homelessness is still likely to be underestimated. The data also confirms that other at-risk groups, such as older people and women, experience homelessness in the region and rates for these groups

Table 1: Homelessness numbers and rates, selected at-risk groups, GWS, 2016			
At-risk group	*Number of homeless persons*	*% of GWS homeless population*	*Rate per 10,000*
Young people (12 to 24 years old)	3,710	26.6	92.9
Older people (65 years and over)	712	5.1	25.2
Women (15 years and over)	4,477	39.8	48.4
Indigenous	460	3.3	110.0
0-3 year olds (TEI priority group)	819	5.9	62.1
Persons born overseas	8,975	64.3	88.7
Has a disability	794	5.7	61.5
Data source: ABS Census of Population and Housing 2016, Tablebuilder Pro, Counting persons, Estimating Homelessness.			

will likely increase over time if they reflect national trends.[5]

The estimates also strongly show that homelessness is a major issue for overseas born persons in GWS. Almost two thirds of the region's homeless persons were born outside Australia, mostly in South East Asia and the Middle East. Cross-tabulation with demographic variables showed that most overseas born homeless persons in the region had recently arrived in Australia, did not have Australian citizenship, and many had limited or no English proficiency.

The cross-tabulation of homelessness estimates with demographic variables also allowed the educational and employment characteristics of the region's homeless population to be explored. The estimates showed that approximately 7.7 per cent of homeless persons in GWS were attending a university or other tertiary institution in 2016, highlighting the ongoing issue of student homelessness in the region and across Australia.[6] Just under a third of the region's homeless population were employed either full time or part time (31.8 per cent), with those in low wage, manual industries (such as construction, accommodation and food services, and manufacturing) experiencing the highest rates of homelessness.

Conclusion — priorities for future homelessness estimates

The ABS homelessness estimates for at-risk groups are useful for community service providers in the GWS region, particularly in informing their homelessness policy and planning responses. These estimates highlight potential groups within the homeless population that may need targeted support, where they are likely to be located and what type of support they may require. The above findings highlight that mainstream and specialist community service providers in GWS need to be continually aware of the complex cultural, social and economic challenges experienced by the region's homeless population in order to provide the best support possible.

There will always be limitations to homelessness estimates, particularly around certain groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, for whom there is a known likely undercount in the Census.[7] For specific regions such as GWS, homelessness estimates can also be very small and therefore must be treated purely as an estimate. Despite these limitations, the ability to cross-tabulate demographic variables with homelessness estimates is considered a positive step towards better understanding the unique characteristics of homeless populations in local communities over time. There are several areas

the ABS could work on to make homelessness estimates more reliable, including ensuring that their homelessness definition better accounts for the cultural dimensions of homelessness. The release of additional demographic variables could also allow the homelessness experience of other at-risk groups, such as the LGBTQI+ community, to be further explored.

Recent commentary reiterates the importance of homelessness estimates that consider population groups in different regions, rather than assuming that state-wide trends are always applicable to people experiencing homelessness in a particular area.[8] It is hoped that other regions like GWS will prioritise the release of more localised homelessness estimates, in conjunction with the lived experience of at-risk groups, to better understand and address homelessness in their communities.

WESTIR Limited has released two Census 2016 topic papers on homelessness called *Estimating Homelessness in Greater Western Sydney* and *Homelessness among at-risk groups in Greater Western Sydney*. These topic papers can be viewed at *www.westir.org.au*

Endnotes

1. Statistical Areas or SAs are structures that the ABS specifically uses for outputting statistics. The Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) provides a framework for SAs to enable the publication of statistics that are comparable and spatially integrated. The ABS also uses non-ABS structures, such as LGAs, for some data to improve their relevance for certain administrative areas. For more information on SAs, please visit the ABS website.

2. *The Centre for Western Sydney Community Profile – Greater Western Sydney Region*, Western Sydney University, 2019, *www.profile.id.com.au/cws/population*

3. Parkinson S, Batterham D, Reynolds M and Wood G, 2019, *The changing geography of homelessness: a spatial analysis from 2001 to 2016*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne.

4. Lawton A, 2019, *Homelessness among at-risk groups in Greater Western Sydney*, WESTIR Limited, Parramatta.

5. ABS, *2049.0 — Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2016*, 2018, *https://bit.ly/33n2Uok*

6. Koziol M 2018, 'Couchsurfing and living in cars: 11,000 tertiary students are homeless', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 April, *https://bit.ly/2vggpt3*

7. Memmott P and Nash D, 2014, 'Indigenous homelessness' in Chamberlain C, Johnson G and Robinson C (eds), *Homelessness in Australia: an introduction*, New South Publishing, Sydney.

8. Leebeek M, 2019, 'Youth Homelessness Across Queensland: What Does the Data Say?', *Parity*, vol.32, no. 2, pp. 44-46.