



**Australian Government**

**Australian Institute of  
Health and Welfare**

*Authoritative information and statistics  
to promote better health and wellbeing*

# **People turned away from government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation**

**2010–11**

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare  
Canberra

Cat. no. HOU 260

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ISBN 978-1-74249-248-3

### **Suggested citation**

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011. People turned away from government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation 2010–11. Cat. no. HOU 260. Canberra: AIHW.

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Published by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

**Please note that there is the potential for minor revisions of data in this report.  
Please check the online version at <[www.aihw.gov.au](http://www.aihw.gov.au)> for any amendments.**

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# Acknowledgments

This report draws together a large amount of statistical material and could not have been produced without the efforts and cooperation of service providers and clients, who provided service and client information, and state and territory funding departments, which provided administrative data.

# Summary

This report presents data on the people turned away from government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation in 2010–11, and is the final report using data sourced from the SAAP NDC.

Specialist homelessness agencies in Australia accommodate a large number of people every day. However, they cannot always meet accommodation requests. When a valid request for accommodation cannot be met, the requestor is referred to as having been ‘turned away’. The data collected in 2010–11 indicate that government-funded specialist homelessness agencies are operating to capacity and are unable to completely meet the demand for accommodation. Some groups, such as families, experience more difficulty than others in obtaining accommodation.

On an average day, 59% of all people who made a new request for immediate accommodation were turned away. New requests, however, comprise only 4% of the total demand for accommodation. When new requests plus all people currently in accommodation are considered, 2% of all people who sought immediate accommodation were newly accommodated and 2% were turned away.

The overall level of turn-away was consistent with that reported in recent years.

There are several caveats surrounding the data presented in this report (see Box 1.2). These are related to policy and service delivery arrangements; agency coverage; the period surveyed; and the exclusion of data from Victoria.



# 1 Introduction

This national report presents data on the people turned away from government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation in 2010–11. It is accompanied by an appendix containing statistical tables and further information on the data (AIHW 2011a).

The data for this report was collected in the SAAP National Data Collection (SAAP NDC) (see AIHW 2011a:Appendix 2 for details). This is the final report that will be produced using data from this collection. A new collection, the Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) collection, replaced the SAAP NDC on 1 July 2011. The SHS collection is intended to better reflect the changed arrangements under the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA) and the national partnership agreements.

## **Box 1.1: The government response to homelessness**

The government response to homelessness has been shaped by the Homelessness White Paper – *The road home: a national approach to reducing homelessness* (Australian Government 2008). The response is administered under the NAHA and the national partnership agreements. These agreements cover people who are homeless and those who are at risk of homelessness, with a focus on the reduction and prevention of homelessness.

### **National Affordable Housing Agreement**

The NAHA is designed to provide a framework for all levels of governments to work together to reduce homelessness and improve housing affordability. The objective of the NAHA is to ensure that all Australians have access to affordable, safe and sustainable housing that contributes to social and economic participation. Funding for the NAHA commenced on 1 January 2009.

### **National partnership agreements**

The NAHA is supported by the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH), which outlines the roles and responsibilities of the Australian Government and the state and territory governments specifically in relation to reducing homelessness. It contributes to the NAHA outcome that ‘people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness achieve sustainable housing and social inclusion’. The NPAH was signed in December 2008 and funding commenced 1 July 2009.

The NPAH is complemented by other partnership agreements, designed to respond to a range of housing needs including homelessness. These include the National Partnership Agreement on Social Housing and the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing.

### **Box 1.2: Interpreting data in this report**

#### **Government-funded specialist homelessness services are only part of the picture**

Currently there is no accurate measure of the proportion of people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness who make contact with a specialist homelessness agency. While the SAAP NDC provides reliable estimates of those using homelessness services, it should not be interpreted as representing the entire population of those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

The SAAP NDC is designed to capture the government response to homelessness and therefore service providers who do not receive government funding are excluded. Further, the collection is focused on services provided by 'specialist homelessness agencies' – those that specifically target and provide services to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness – and more general service providers are not included.

#### **The model of service delivery and client target groups vary by jurisdiction**

The approaches to delivering homelessness services vary between jurisdictions. In particular, accommodation-related data in Victoria has not been recorded in the SAAP NDC in a way that is consistent with other states and territories (see AIHW 2011b:Box 1.1). For this reason, Victorian data has been excluded from the analysis in this report.

The states and territories also have a different mix of client focus ('primary target group') for service delivery. For example, Western Australia has a high proportion of agencies primarily focused on delivering services to women escaping domestic violence.

#### **Policy and service delivery arrangements have changed over recent years**

There have been changes in arrangements for determining homelessness policy and service delivery in recent years (see AIHW 2011b:Box 1.1). Data collection has continued under the new arrangements but will have been affected.

#### **Changes to homelessness data collection**

On 1 July 2011, the SHS collection replaced the SAAP NDC. The SHS pre-implementation requirements may have impacted the ability of some agencies to fully participate in data collection in the final stages of the SAAP NDC (see AIHW 2011a:Table A2). Changes in participation particularly affect the smaller jurisdictions where a small variation in numbers can have a large effect.

#### **Agency coverage and period surveyed**

While the measures of turn-away and other Demand for Accommodation data included in this report provide an indication of the overall experience of people seeking specialist homelessness accommodation, such measures:

- include only data from agencies that responded to both the Client Collection and the Demand for Accommodation Collection. These agencies represented 60% (553) of all participating agencies (929) (AIHW 2011a:Table A1; excludes Victorian data). It is not known to what extent the activities of any non-responding agencies differ from those that did respond, however, many of the non-responding agencies were those that provided support services only, rather than accommodation
- relate to 2 weeks in the year. It is not known to what extent seasonal and other factors may result in different rates being experienced at other times of the year.



## 2 What was the level of turn-away?

### **Box 2.1: Measuring turn-away**

This chapter uses data from the SAAP NDC Demand for Accommodation Collection and the SAAP NDC Client Collection. See the appendix to this report for more information (AIHW 2011a).

Data are reported in terms of individual people. People covered in this chapter:

- made a valid unmet request for immediate accommodation at a government-funded specialist homelessness agency
- did not receive accommodation later that same day.

Two measures of turn-away are presented. The first measure is the turn-away for people requiring new and immediate accommodation. It is calculated as the daily average percentage of people who were turned away relative to all people who required new and immediate accommodation. This provides an indication of a person's likelihood of obtaining government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation.

However, government-funded specialist homelessness agencies accommodate large numbers of people on any given day, including people who are continuing their accommodation from a previous day. For this reason, simply examining the daily request turn-away without acknowledging the number of people already in accommodation may provide an incomplete picture. It is therefore important to consider those turned away in relation to the total expressed demand for accommodation. This second measure is calculated as the daily average percentage of people who were turned away relative to all people who required new and immediate accommodation plus those who were continuing their accommodation from the previous day. It provides an indication of the overall ability of government-funded specialist homelessness agencies to meet the demand for their accommodation.

It is important to note that neither of these measures provide an indication of the additional capacity required to meet the expressed demand for accommodation, only a measure of the undersupply of accommodation (in terms of people) on an average day during the Demand for Accommodation Collection period.

Data reported in this chapter exclude Victorian data. See Box 1.2 for more detail.

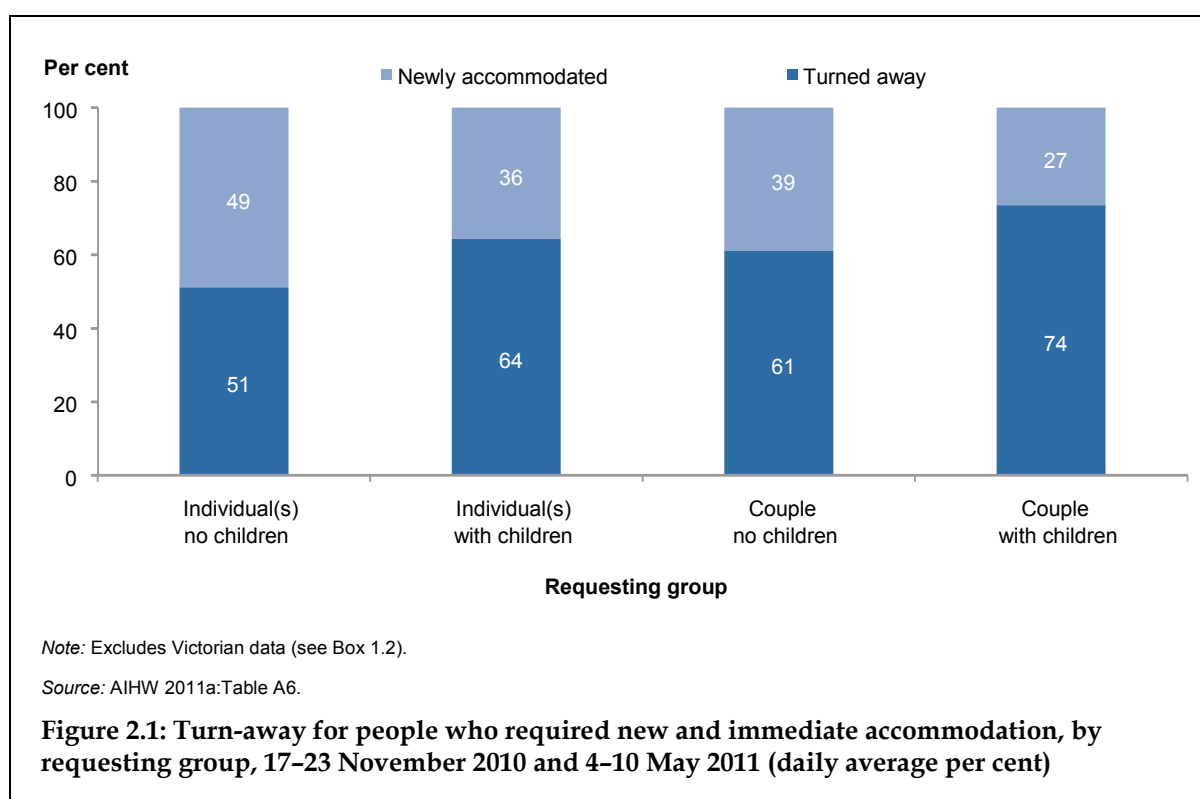
## Turn-away as a percentage of people requiring new and immediate accommodation

This measure provides an indication of a person's likelihood of obtaining government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation on a given day. It excludes people already in accommodation.

On an average day, 59% of all people who sought immediate accommodation were turned away (AIHW 2011a:Table A5).

### Requesting group

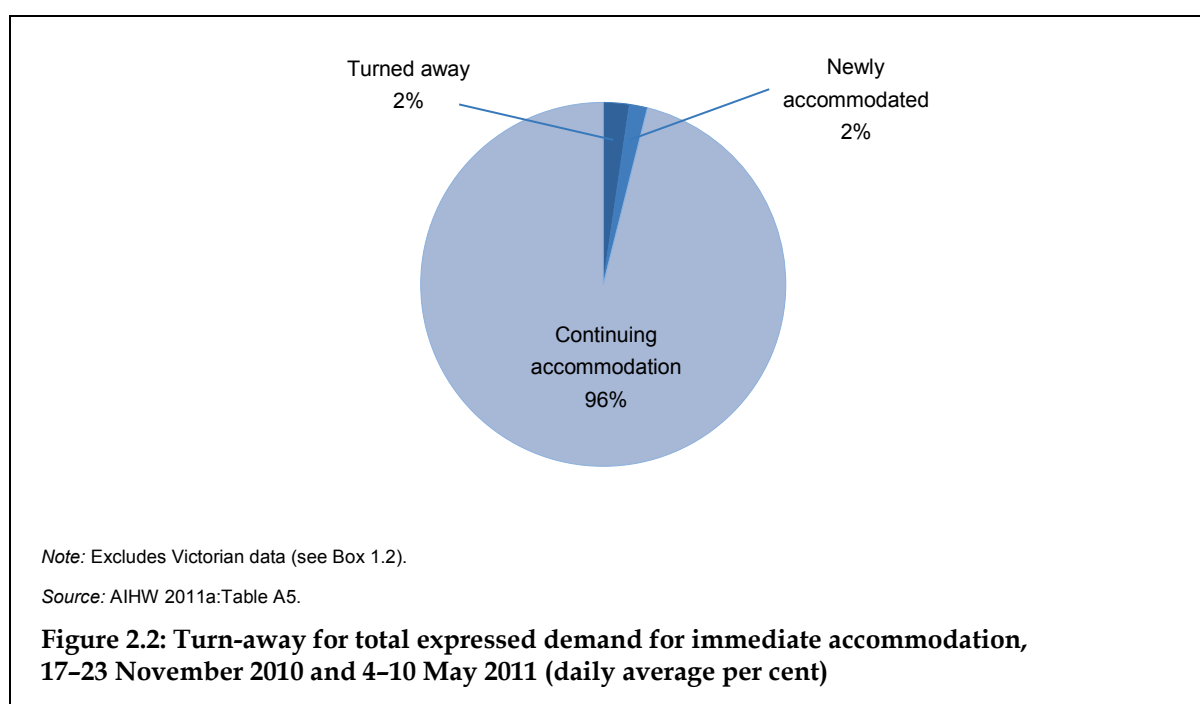
For people who required new and immediate accommodation, the requesting groups most likely to be turned away were family groups—74% of couples with children, 64% of individuals with children and 61% of couples without children were turned away, compared with 51% of individuals without children (Figure 2.1). This indicates that individuals who present without children are more likely to obtain accommodation than those who present in family groups.



## Turn-away as a percentage of the total expressed demand for immediate accommodation

This measure provides an indication of the ability of agencies to meet the total expressed demand for government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation. It includes people already accommodated by these agencies.

People needing new and immediate accommodation account for a relatively small proportion of the total demand for accommodation on an average day (4%) (Figure 2.2). When considered in this light, 2% of all people who had a demand for government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation were newly accommodated and 2% were turned away.



### Requesting group

Agencies were slightly less able to meet the demand for accommodation from people without children than for people with children (AIHW 2011a:Table A6). There was only a small variation between requesting groups – ranging from 3% of couples and individuals without children to 2% of couples and individuals with children.

### Changes over time

The overall level of turn-away in 2010–11 was consistent with that reported in recent years (AIHW 2011a:tables A8 and A9).

Caution should be exercised when analysing changes in turn-away over time, because of changes in the participation of agencies between years and small population sizes (see Box 1.2 and AIHW 2011a:Table A1). Particularly in the smaller jurisdictions, a small change in numbers can have a large effect.

### 3 Who was turned away?

#### Box 3.1: Who is included in this chapter?

This chapter uses data from the SAAP NDC Demand for Accommodation Collection. See the appendix to this report for more information (AIHW 2011a).

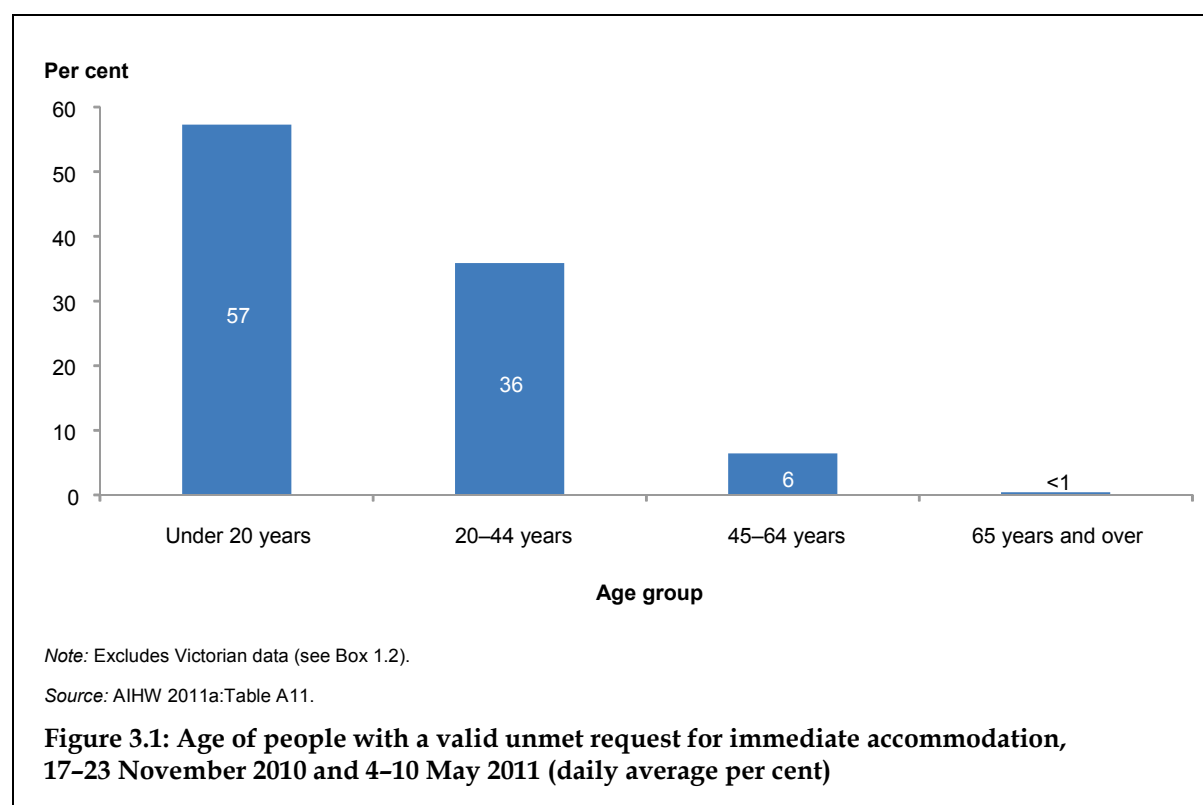
Data are reported in terms of individual people. People covered in this chapter:

- made a valid unmet request for immediate accommodation at a government-funded specialist homelessness agency
- may have received accommodation later that same day.

The SAAP NDC does not allow the measures of turn-away presented in Chapter 2 to be broken down by sex, age, country of birth or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status (see Chapter 2:Box 2.1; and AIHW 2011a:Appendix 2). The people analysed in this chapter include the small number of people who subsequently received accommodation later that same day (see AIHW 2011a:Figure A3.1).

Data reported in this chapter exclude Victorian data. See Box 1.2 for more detail.

## Age and sex



Over half of the people with a valid unmet request for immediate accommodation were aged under 20 (57%) (Figure 3.1). This age group includes children accompanying a parent or guardian. If accompanying children are excluded from this calculation: 26% of people with a valid unmet request for immediate accommodation were aged under 20; 63% were aged

20–44; 11% were aged 45–64; and just under 1% were aged 65 and over (AIHW 2011a:Table A11).

Over half (60%) of all people with a valid unmet request for immediate accommodation were female, 40% were male (AIHW 2011a:Table A10).

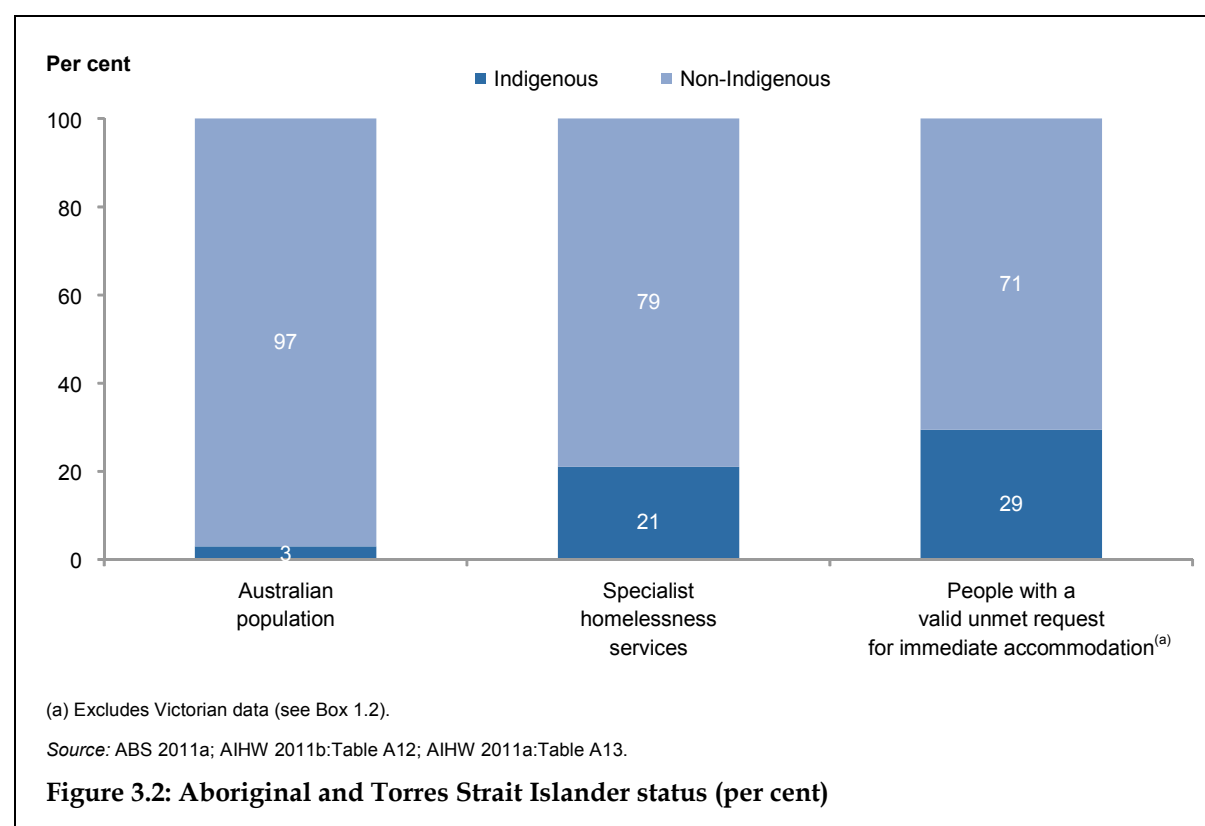
## Country of birth

The majority of people with a valid unmet request for immediate accommodation were born in Australia (88%) (AIHW 2011a:Table A12). This was higher than in the general Australian population, of which around 73% were Australian-born (ABS 2011b:9).

Seven per cent of people with a valid unmet request for immediate accommodation were born overseas in countries in which English is not the main language and 5% were born overseas in predominantly English-speaking countries.

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Most people with a valid unmet request for immediate accommodation were non-Indigenous (71%) (Figure 3.2). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were, however, highly over-represented relative to their population size – 29% of people with a valid unmet request for immediate accommodation identified as Indigenous compared with around 3% of the general Australian population and around 21% of people using specialist homelessness services (ABS 2011a; AIHW 2011b).



## 4 Why were people turned away?

### Box 4.1: Who is included in this chapter?

This chapter uses data from the SAAP NDC Demand for Accommodation Collection. See the appendix to this report for more information (AIHW 2011a).

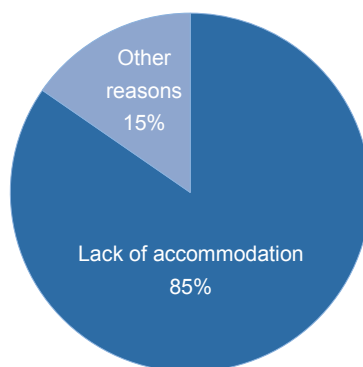
Data are reported in terms of valid unmet requests. A valid unmet request for accommodation occurs when a person approaches a government-funded specialist homelessness agency for accommodation but is turned away. A request may include more than one person and a person may make more than one request in a day.

Data are reported in terms of requests, rather than people, because the reason a person is turned away may vary with each request.

Data reported in this chapter exclude Victorian data. See Box 1.2 for more detail.

The majority of valid unmet requests for immediate accommodation occurred because there was a lack of accommodation (85%) – either because insufficient accommodation was available at the agency itself or because a referral agency was unable to refer the group on because they had no vacancies on their books (Figure 4.1).

The remainder of valid unmet requests for immediate accommodation were for other reasons (15%), including where the agency could not offer the type of accommodation the person was seeking (6%). For example, a person may be seeking longer term or independent accommodation but the agency might only be able to provide refuge or dormitory-style crisis accommodation.



*Note:* Excludes Victorian data (see Box 1.2).

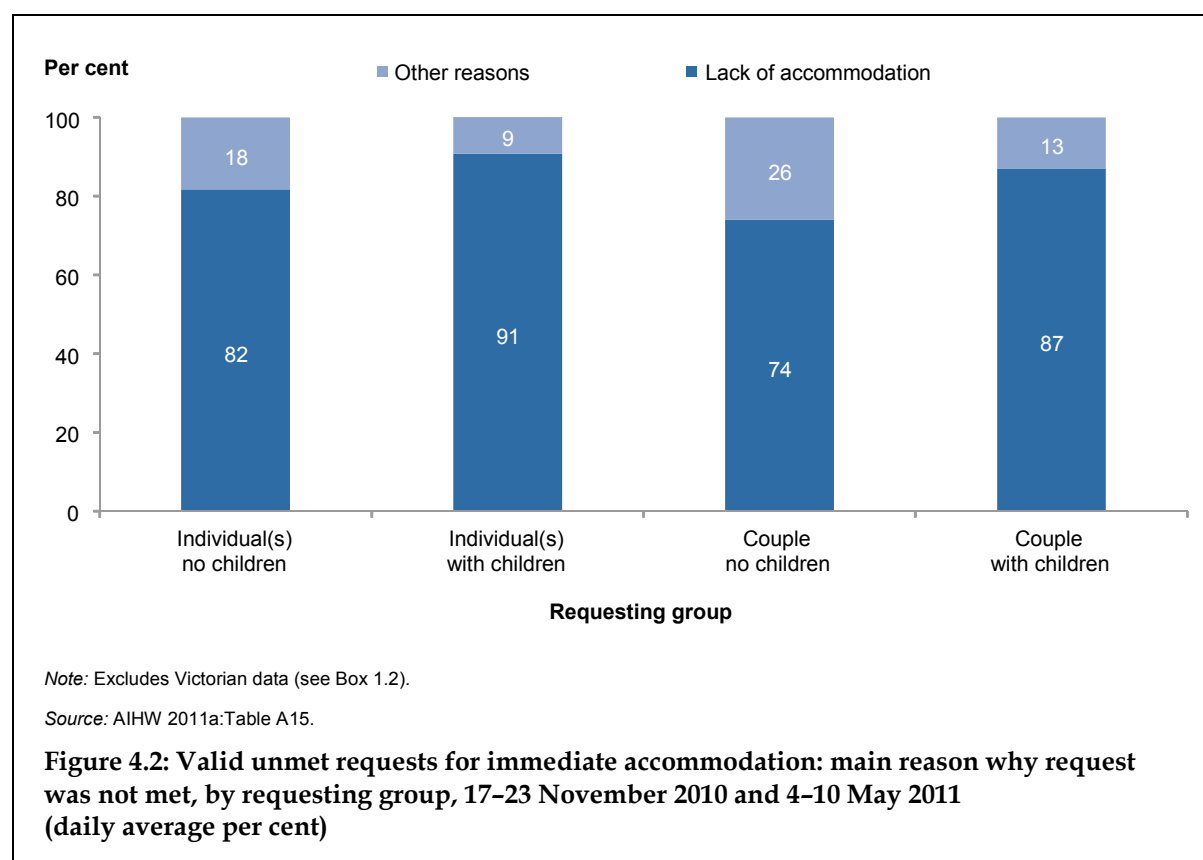
*Source:* AIHW 2011a: Table A14.

**Figure 4.1: Valid unmet requests for immediate accommodation: main reason why request was not met, 17–23 November 2010 and 4–10 May 2011 (daily average per cent)**

## Requesting group

Across all requesting groups, the predominant reason why valid requests for immediate accommodation could not be met was because of a lack of accommodation (Figure 4.2). This was highest for family groups with children – in 91% of cases for individuals with children and 87% of cases for couples with children compared with 82% for individuals without children and 74% for couples without children.

Couples without children had a relatively high proportion of valid requests for immediate accommodation not met because the agency could not offer the particular type of accommodation sought – 10% compared with between 3% and 7% for the other requesting groups (Table A15).



## 5 Were people referred on to other accommodation when turned away?

### Box 5.1: Who is included in this chapter?

This chapter uses data from the SAAP NDC Demand for Accommodation Collection. See the appendix to this report for more information (AIHW 2011a).

Data are reported in terms of valid unmet requests (see Box 4.1). Data are reported in terms of requests, rather than people, because whether a person was able to be referred on to other accommodation may vary with each request.

In the context of the Demand for Accommodation Collection, a referral is a formal referral. That is, contact was made with another organisation who then accepted the person for an appointment or interview. Outcomes from referrals are not recorded so it is not known how many of the people who were referred on for accommodation actually secured that accommodation or whether the quality of the referred accommodation was comparable to that offered by specialist homelessness agencies.

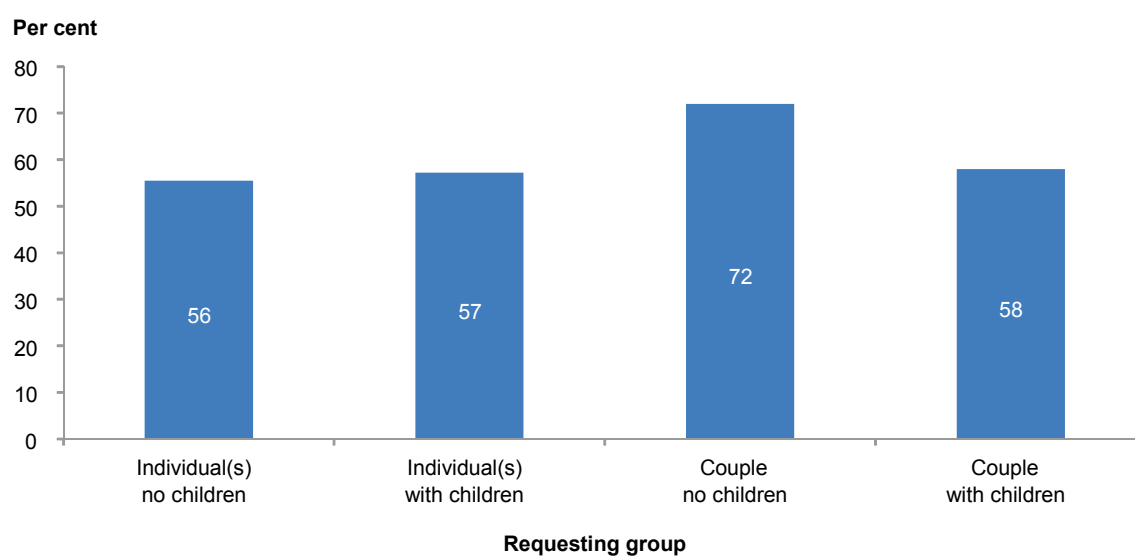
Data reported in this chapter exclude Victorian data. See Box 1.2 for more detail.

Formal referrals on to other accommodation were not always obtained when a person was turned away. On an average day, agencies were able to formally refer those turned away on to other accommodation in 56% of valid unmet requests for immediate accommodation (AIHW 2011a:Table A16). This means around half of the people who were turned away from specialist homelessness accommodation were directed to another source of potentially available accommodation (for example, to another agency, a hostel, a motel, or a caravan park).

### Requesting group

Family groups generally had a higher level of referral than individuals who presented without children (Figure 5.1).





*Note:* Excludes Victorian data (see Box 1.2).

*Source:* AIHW 2011a:Table A17.

**Figure 5.1: Valid unmet requests for immediate accommodation: referrals on to other accommodation, by requesting group, 17–23 November 2010 and 4–10 May 2011 (daily average per cent)**

## 6 Factors affecting turn-away

The data presented in this report suggest that specialist homelessness agencies are operating to capacity and are unable to meet all the requests for accommodation they receive. In particular, the high turn-away of people who required new and immediate accommodation, the low daily turnover of people already in accommodation, and the modest referral rate when accommodation cannot be provided suggest that obtaining specialist homelessness accommodation can be difficult, particularly for families (Figure 6.2; AIHW 2011a:tables A5, A7 and A16).

However, the small number of people not accommodated relative to the total demand for accommodation suggests that even a relatively small increase in the number of places available on an average day could have a major impact on the level of unmet demand (AIHW 2011a:Table A5). This does not take account of how long people stay once they get accommodation, of their barriers to exiting to other accommodation, or of the unknown number of people who need accommodation but do not approach agencies.

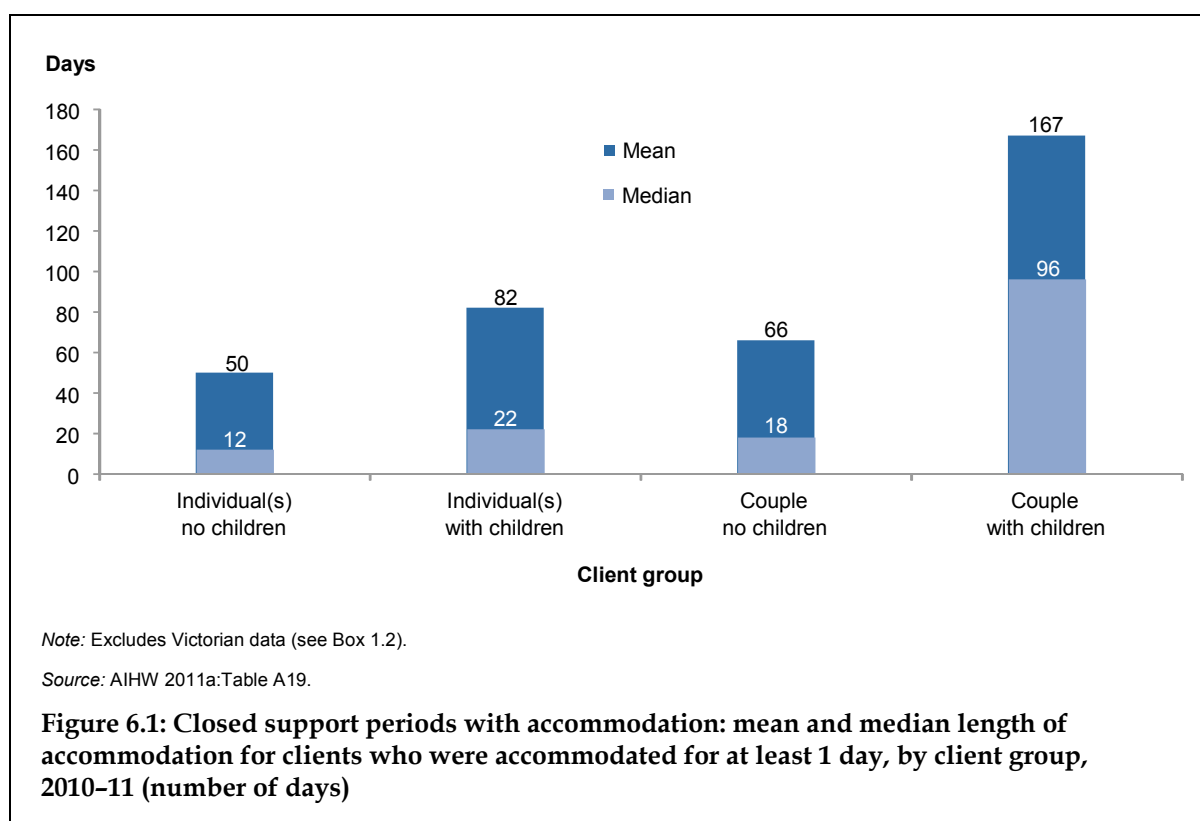
### Undersupply of specialist homelessness accommodation

In the majority of valid unmet requests for immediate accommodation people, and particularly family groups with children, were turned away because of an undersupply of accommodation (AIHW 2011a:Table A15).

The current level of unmet demand would not be resolved by providing the same number of places as the number of people turned away. The length of accommodation of existing clients suggests that many people who are turned away are likely to require accommodation for more than one night, with an average (mean) stay of 61 days (AIHW 2011a:Table A18; Griffin 2008). On this basis, if all people turned away on an average day were provided with accommodation, these beds would be unavailable for other people who require accommodation for however long those people stay.

### Patterns of accommodation use

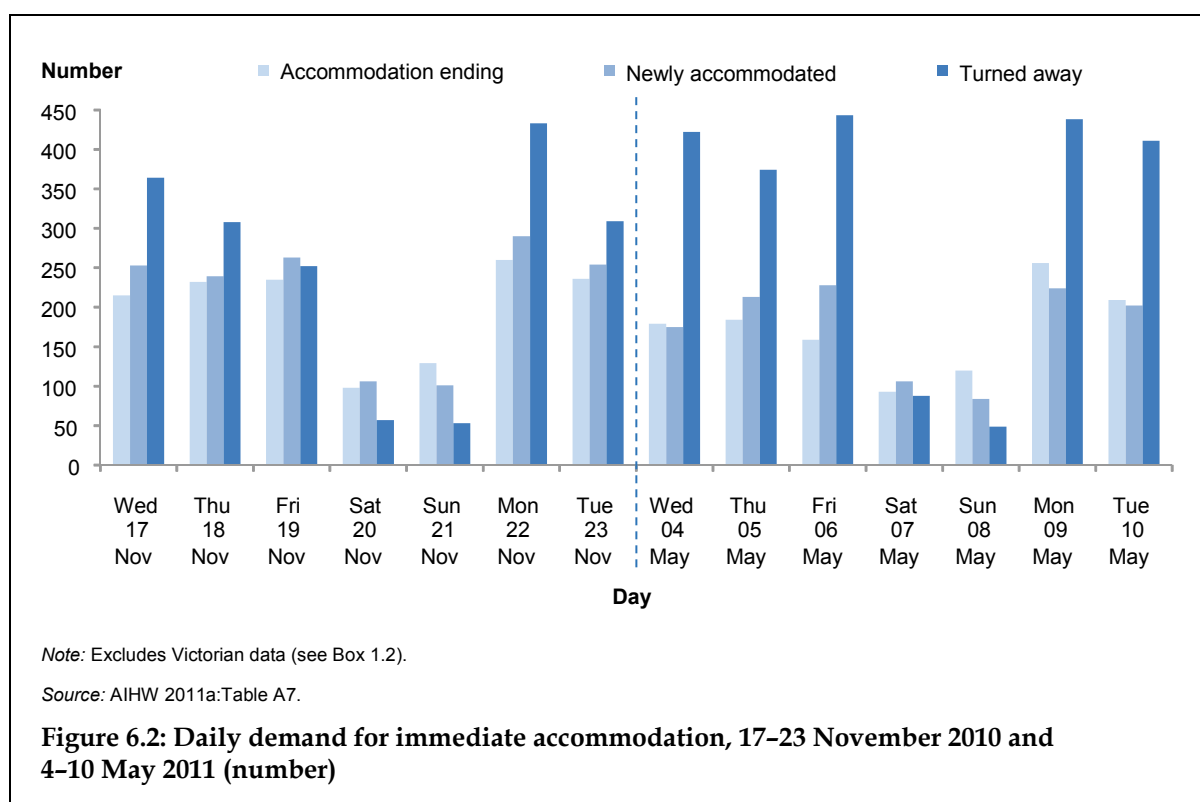
One reason why it may be more difficult for family groups to secure accommodation from government-funded specialist homelessness agencies is that these groups tend to stay longer once they are accommodated (Figure 6.1). The turnover of beds, therefore, is less for family groups than for other clients. This, combined with the higher turn-away and the higher proportion where lack of accommodation was the main reason they were not offered accommodation, suggests that much of the accommodation that is available for family groups is already occupied each day (AIHW 2011a:tables A6 and A15).



## Rate of turnover

Figure 6.2 presents the daily expressed demand for immediate accommodation. It shows that, on any given day, there was generally not a lot of variation between the number of people entering accommodation and those exiting. This suggests that agencies are operating to capacity.

It is also interesting to note that weekends – when some agencies are closed or have reduced staffing and hence there are fewer opportunities available to obtain accommodation – are generally the only days on which the number of people turned away is less than the number entering or leaving accommodation.



## Lack of exit points

External barriers to obtaining accommodation in both the social and private housing sectors – such as the length of social housing waiting lists, the availability of affordable housing, and the need to provide additional support to help people maintain their tenancies – should be considered in order to understand the demand for specialist homelessness accommodation. These factors affect the ability of people to leave specialist homelessness accommodation and move into other housing options (AIHW 2009, 2011c).

## Hidden need for accommodation

There may be a ‘hidden need’ for accommodation when people who need accommodation do not request it. The data presented in this report relate to people who were actively seeking accommodation from government-funded specialist homelessness agencies. There is, however, evidence to suggest that not everyone who requires such accommodation is seeking it. For example, the larger number of homeless people enumerated in the 2006 Census of Population and Housing homeless enumeration strategy, suggests there may be a significant level of hidden need for government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation.

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