



9 Data environment

Community services and housing assistance information relates to a broad array of services, provided to a widely ranging group of clients and delivered by a complex system of government and non-government organisations. As a consequence, the development of high-quality data which is consistently defined and collected across both programs and jurisdictions is a challenging and multi-faceted task.

Community services are provided to individuals and families of widely differing ages and in widely differing social and economic circumstances. They protect and support vulnerable individuals and families at key stages of their lives. Community services also contribute to the development of community infrastructure and networks that in turn promote the social, emotional, physical, psychological and economic well-being of individuals and families.

This chapter describes the national infrastructure supporting the development of nationally consistent community services and housing assistance data and highlights recent changes and developments in national information on welfare services and assistance.

9.1 The national information infrastructure

Information agreements provide the structure and processes needed to support the national statistical effort in both welfare and health statistical work. These agreements are signed by the relevant government departments in all jurisdictions, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and the AIHW. Three such agreements are currently in operation in the welfare sector:

- the National Community Services Information Agreement (NCSIA; AIHW 2005a), renewed for a further 5 years in 2004;
- the National Housing Data Agreement (NHDA; AIHW 2000a), renewed for a further 5 years in 2003; and
- the Agreement on National Indigenous Housing Information (ANIHI; AIHW 2000b), renewed in 2003.

A similar agreement in the health sector was renewed in 2004 (AIHW 2005b).

Under each of these agreements, information management groups, data committees and working groups are established to promote the development, collection and use of nationally consistent statistics. In addition, within program areas, groups of administrators support the development of nationally consistent data collections across jurisdictional boundaries. Such groups include the National Disability Administrators, Home and Community Care Officials, the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program Coordination and Development Committee and the Australasian Juvenile Justice Administrators. Under the new NCSIA – negotiated in 2004 – each of these groups

has become a signatory to a Schedule to the Agreement as indication of their commitment both to the principles of the NCSIA and to participating in achieving its objectives.

The goal pursued within the context of these national arrangements (for more quality and consistency in national statistics) is supported by a national metadata infrastructure for the development, processing, management and dissemination of data standards. This infrastructure has been developed and maintained by the AIHW since 1997. It has comprised the National Data Dictionaries and the Knowledgebase which has now been redeveloped and is replaced by *METeOR*, the Institute's new metadata online registry which is available at <www.meteor.gov.au>.

METeOR was launched in mid-2005 as Australia's repository for national data standards for the health, community services and housing assistance sectors. It will facilitate the work of the national community services and housing information management committees in promoting greater consistency and comparability across community services and housing assistance data. It also fulfills the same role for health data and contributes to greater consistency of data across the health, housing and community services sectors. Activities to date have involved the re-engineering of existing national standards from the original metadata registry (the Knowledgebase) into a format consistent with recent international standards for metadata registries.

National community services information management

The development and management of the NCSIA and related structures and processes is the responsibility of the National Community Services Information Management Group (NCSIMG) which is a subcommittee of the Community Services Ministers' Advisory Council. Membership of the Management Group comprises representatives of signatories to the NCSIA and the groups of administrators who signed Schedules to the Agreement. The Advisory Council appoints one of its members as Chair of NCSIMG.

NCSIMG has established the National Community Services Data Committee (NCSDC), sector-specific working groups and ad hoc project groups to assist in its work. The NCSDC and ad hoc project groups undertake NCSIMG projects that cut across community services sub-sectors. The NCSDC also has oversight of the National Community Services Data Dictionary.

The NCSIMG and its working groups are responsible for an extensive work program of data development across the community services sector. The NCSDC Communication Strategy, which aims to promote the benefits of nationally consistent data standards within the sector, was endorsed. Specific plans have been developed in consultation with several jurisdictions and non-government organisations to implement the strategy. NCSIMG, principally through the activities of the Data Committee, has also been actively involved in the development of *METeOR*.

Since 1999, national community service information development has been guided by the priorities set down in the National Community Services Information Development Plan (AIHW 1999). This first Plan was developed by NCSIMG and approved by CSMAC. The program of work priorities identified in the initial plan has been completed. During 2005 the NCSIMG developed a draft National Community Services Information Strategic Plan to guide its work program over the next 5 years.

The draft plan was the subject of extensive consultation with both government and non-government sectors. The final version is scheduled for release in December 2005 (AIHW forthcoming). The strategic plan outlines key priorities under the following three domains:

- maintaining and strengthening national data standards infrastructure to support information activities across the community services sector;
- improving the scope and quality of sector-specific data and information for reporting and monitoring within program areas; and
- developing cross-sectoral data that crosses program boundaries, and recognises the growing need for person-centred rather than program-centred information.

National housing information management

The 2003 Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement (CSHA) continued the arrangement established in 1999 to include a subsidiary NHDA. The agreement is managed by the National Housing Data Agreement Management Group which includes representatives of all jurisdictions, the AIHW and the ABS. The 2003 CSHA also strengthened existing arrangements to resource national data development work in Indigenous housing assistance, continuing the ANIHI. The ANIHI is managed by the National Indigenous Housing Information Implementation Committee. This approach provides a commitment to the development and provision of nationally consistent data and continues, for the duration of the current CSHA, the partnership between the Housing Ministers' Advisory Council and the AIHW to resource national data development work.

As part of the agreements around the 2003 CSHA, a joint review was undertaken of both the NHDA and the ANIHI. The extensive review process reported back to the Advisory Council in August 2004; the recommendation was that both agreements be retained for the duration of the 2003 CSHA. Some modifications were, however, introduced.

Whereas formerly the National Housing Data Development Committee was a subcommittee of the Management Group, from August 2004 the committee was tasked with supporting the work of both the Management Group and Implementation Committee. This joint approach ensures shared expertise across the full range of data development and reporting. The development of common approaches across the CSHA and related programs to defining and measuring need, alignment of national reporting requirements and the use of common standards should be further supported under this arrangement. This new working relationship also recognises that housing assistance to Indigenous Australians is a key component of the 2003 CSHA.

Also as a result of the review, the Management Group now reports to the Advisory Council through the Advisory Council's Policy and Research Working Group, whereas under the 1999 CSHA it had reported directly to the Advisory Council. This change brings a greater interaction between the data and the policy and research agendas of housing ministers. The Implementation Committee reports to the Advisory Council through the Standing Committee on Indigenous Housing.

The NHDA identifies three major work areas comprising development of national minimum data sets, national performance indicators and national data definitions and standards. The work program also meets the national CSHA performance reporting requirements for the Council of Australian Governments' Review of Government Services. The work program for Indigenous housing data development work supports the Standing Committee's national reporting framework. The major component of the work program for Indigenous housing data development is improving the data for the National Reporting Framework for Indigenous Housing. The framework is a set of 37 performance indicators used to monitor changes in housing conditions for Indigenous Australians. The focus of data development work will be on improving the quality of data reported for the Indigenous community housing sector and on developing new measures of dwelling condition.

National Indigenous information development

Improving the quality and quantity of information available on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within community services and housing assistance data collections continues to be an area where national statistical agencies, particularly the ABS and the Institute, take an active role across all their collections. Efforts to improve Indigenous statistics in the community services and housing areas are driven by the information governance bodies and articulated through the national information plans and agreements described above.

A number of national statistical surveys and reports describing the information available on Indigenous Australians in the community services and housing assistance areas are conducted or produced regularly. Most recently these include: the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (ABS 2004); the biennial report *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples* (ABS & AIHW 2005); the reports on *Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage: key indicators 2005* (SCRGSP 2005), *Indigenous housing indicators 2003–04* (AIHW 2005c) and *State Owned and Managed Indigenous Housing for 2003–04* (AIHW 2005d).

In addition, an assessment of the quality of Indigenous identification in a number of national community services data collections—covering disability services, child protection, aged care and homelessness collections—has been undertaken (AIHW 2004a). The results will assist in furthering the quality of Indigenous identification for those specific national collections.

In the area of juvenile justice, where a new NMDS has been implemented, the ABS standard question on Indigenous status is one of the items collected. The recently agreed Children's Services National Minimum Data Set also includes data items on the Indigenous status of both children and workers which matches the standard question recommended by the ABS.

In mainstream housing data collections, a number of jurisdictions have introduced processes to improve the quality of their Indigenous identification and the number of new households in public housing with 'unknown' Indigenous status is much lower than for all households.

National data dictionaries

National Community Services Data Dictionary

The National Community Services Data Dictionary is the reference on agreed data definitions and information standards of relevance to the community services sector. In essence, the aim is to provide a 'common language' for the various agencies and governments involved in community services.

Version 3 of the dictionary (NCSDC 2004) contains the first set of data definitions common to both this dictionary and the National Health Data Dictionary (AIHW 2004b). It also includes refinement of existing items, in particular for consistency with the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (WHO 2001) and to take account of a review by the ABS on conformity with ABS standards used for population and household surveys. Subsequent versions of the dictionary will be produced electronically using *METeOR*.

Further work will continue to align data definitions between the community services, health and housing sectors where possible and desirable, and to improve access to national data standards for use in national data collections and national minimum data sets.

The dictionary is an initiative under the NCSIA, and all signatories to the agreement have agreed to use the dictionary as the authoritative source of information about endorsed metadata for use in data collections in the community services field. The data standards outlined in the dictionary are compiled by the NCSDC under the auspices of the NCSIMG.

National Housing Assistance Data Dictionary

The National Housing Assistance Data Dictionary is part of the national data infrastructure for housing assistance information development. It provides the basis for consistent national data and is designed to make data collection activities more efficient by providing standards for core data items, and more effective by ensuring that information to be collected is appropriate for its purpose. The dictionary is also designed to be compatible with national data dictionaries in other relevant sectors.

Version 3 of the dictionary (AIHW forthcoming) is scheduled for release in late 2005. It will incorporate new data items related to Indigenous housing and community housing and the specification of performance indicators under the 2003 CSHA National Performance Indicator Framework. In addition, it will contain updated data standards and data items from the previous two versions, which includes the alignment of a number of data definitions with the health and community services sectors.

The dictionary is compiled under the direction of the National Housing Data Development Committee, operating under the auspices of both the Management Group and Implementation Committee. The dictionary forms the basis for six national collections relating to the CSHA, and is used to guide other related collections and initiatives such as the National Social Housing Surveys conducted at the direction of the National Housing Advisory Council and managed by the AIHW.

9.2 Sector-specific and cross-cutting data development activities

Child, youth and family services

Since 2003, significant data development work has been undertaken in the area of child, youth and family services, contributing substantially to national welfare information infrastructure. These activities relate to child protection, children's services and juvenile justice.

The AIHW, working in conjunction with the National Child Protection and Support Services subcommittee of NCSIMG has developed and agreed a draft national minimum data set for the National Child Protection Data Collection. This developmental work shifts the collection to a unit record base, and will be pilot tested early in 2006. The subsequent collection, scheduled for implementation from 1 July 2006, will provide a much richer data source with substantially improved analytic potential, enabling improved national reporting on what is happening to children in the child protection system.

The development phase (including extensive consultations and pilot testing) of the Children's Services National Minimum Data Set (CS NMDS) for child care and preschool services is now complete (AIHW 2004c). This project was undertaken by the AIHW at the request of NCSIMG, under the direction of the Children's Services Data Working Group (a subcommittee of NCSIMG). Full pilot testing of all data items was completed in September 2004, and the final report on the development of the CS NMDS and the data dictionary are scheduled for release in late 2005. NCSIMG has approved the CS NMDS and commenced discussions about implementation processes and associated funding requirements.

At the request of the Australasian Juvenile Justice Administrators, the AIHW has developed, tested and implemented a Juvenile Justice National Minimum Data Set. This work was undertaken under the auspices of these administrators, and with advice and direction from the Juvenile Justice Data Working Group (a subcommittee of the Administrators). The Juvenile Justice NMDS was developed in accordance with the principles set down under the NCSIA, and reviewed and approved by the NCSDC and the NCSIMG (AIHW 2004d). The new collection was successfully implemented by jurisdictions in 2004-05, and a national database established at the AIHW covering 4 years of data, from 2000-01 to 2003-04. The first report is scheduled for release in late 2005 (AIHW forthcoming). This database provides, for the first time, statistical information on all young people under juvenile justice supervision, including not only those on detention but also those under community-based supervision.

Services for people experiencing homelessness

The Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP) national data collection was redeveloped, along with the appropriate software updates, and the new 'core data set' implemented on time from 1 July 2005.

Major changes to the data collection that provides an evidence base for SAAP, the major program that supports homeless people, were introduced from 1 July 2005. A review of

the SAAP national data collection (Gleeson & Wilkins 2000) produced a SAAP Information Management Plan (Gleeson et al 2000) which recommended a paradigm shift from data collection to management of information for SAAP service providers. A key characteristic of the plan was to develop a 'core data set' for SAAP.

After extensive consultation with all data collection stakeholders and pilot testing of paper and electronic data collection instruments, a new pared down data set was signed off by the SAAP Coordination and Development Committee. It constitutes a net reduction of six questions (from 29 to 23 items). The questions align more closely with standard data elements collected in other community services data collections and, significantly, the SAAP statistical linkage key will be changed to agree with the linkage key used in other community services data collections such as those relating to HACC and the Commonwealth/State/Territory Disability Agreement. The latter change will provide the potential, once acceptable linkage protocols are developed, to analyse use by homeless clients of other community services over time.

Disability and disability services

A disability question for the 2006 Census has been developed by the ABS in consultation with relevant organisations including the AIHW. The collection of basic disability data in the Census will improve data pertaining to relatively small geographic areas, and will support service planning. Disability in relatively small population subgroups will be more accurately described. Information on the experience of people with disability in key areas such as housing and employment will be more comparable with that of the overall population.

With the aim of improving the quality and consistency of national disability data, the AIHW (as the Australian Collaborating Centre for the WHO Family of International Classifications) is continuing to work on the implementation of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health. National metadata standards are included in *METeOR*. A related data capture tool to assist users to apply the classification has been developed – a Functioning and Related Health Outcomes Module – that:

- can be used to describe health status, outcomes of health interventions, and the need for assistance in areas of human functioning; and
- enable the efficient and effective storage and transmission of data on human functioning in a wide range of human service systems.

The National Minimum Data Set for services funded and provided under the Commonwealth State/Territory Disability Agreement, redeveloped by National Disability Administrators in collaboration with the AIHW, produced the first full year of data for 2003–04. Data from the collection, including new information on informal carers, are included in this report.

Ageing and aged care

Several information-related developments have occurred in the ageing and aged care sector. The inclusion of the disability question in the Census (described above) will be a substantial contribution to the quality of information on disability among older people in Australia, particularly as it pertains to geographical areas.

The Community Care Review (DoHA 2004) highlighted the need for increased comparability and consistency across community care data collections maintained by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. This department is considering ways in which this agenda might be taken forward. As a preliminary step, it has asked the AIHW to undertake a review of its community care data collections, with a focus on areas of consistency and inconsistency in existing collections. This work is scheduled for completion in 2006.

Meanwhile, redevelopment of the HACC NMDS has been undertaken under the auspices of the HACC Data Reform Working Group, which consists of the Australian Government, states and territories, service providers and the AIHW. Version 2 has been finalised, and implementation is scheduled from January 2006. One of the key developments has been the inclusion of measures of dependency for the first time, based on the HACC Screening Tool. Version 1 of the HACC NMDS will continue to be supported for a further period as a transitional arrangement.

Finally, in response to the Review of Pricing Arrangements in Residential Aged Care (Hogan 2004), the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing has commissioned the development of a new instrument—the Aged Care Funding Instrument—that will serve as a replacement for the Resident Classification Scale. The new instrument is intended to simplify reporting and funding arrangements, and is currently in a testing phase.

Housing assistance

Since 2003, the implementation of the new CSHA has identified areas requiring significant data development work. Unlike previous agreements, the CSHA introduced in July 2003 has an emphasis on Indigenous housing assistance, including access to mainstream housing and affordable housing provision through private and social ventures including community housing.

The specific inclusion of Indigenous housing in general terms rather than just specific to the CSHA Aboriginal Rental Housing Program has led to more cross-cutting data development work. This has led to major data development work on Indigenous housing assistance and mainstream housing assistance requiring housing assistance data to be supplemented with data from community services areas such as Centrelink income support and SAAP homeless data. Significant data development work is being undertaken to: align measures of mainstream and Indigenous housing assistance need; align national mainstream and Indigenous housing assistance reporting; and build mainstream and Indigenous community housing data capabilities.

Improving national data on community housing assistance for both Indigenous and mainstream areas is recognised as a major challenge. To address these data issues, a strategy for improving the quality and coverage of community housing data for the 2003 CSHA was developed and endorsed by the National Housing Data Agreement Management Group in 2004. The guiding principles for this data development work cover:

- recognition of the fundamental differences between the public and community housing sectors;
- engaging the sector;

- consultation with stakeholders;
- ensuring data are appropriate to the purpose;
- minimising collection burden;
- use of data standards; and
- alignment of data development work with other housing, health and community services areas to ensure comparability and reduce duplication.

Related to this has been the development and conduct in 2005 of three National Social Housing Surveys covering public rental housing, mainstream community housing, and state owned and managed Indigenous housing.

Data linkage

In 2004–05 the AIHW established a new unit responsible for driving the integration and linkage of data in the community services sector. The unit was created to facilitate the development of person-centred rather than program-centred data, in order to support whole-of-government approaches to policy in the community services arena. Linked data sets have long been recognised as essential to understanding the interrelationships between services and client pathways (NCSIMG 2004).

With this new unit, the AIHW has expedited the linkage work already emerging in the ageing and aged care area, and allowed the development of technical and methodological skills relating to data linkage in community services and related areas. An important output from this work is a recommended linkage protocol which ensures—when linking aged care data sets—consistency in linkage procedures over time and across data sets while protecting the privacy of individuals. The work has also generated an aged care data set that made possible the examination of the extent and nature of movements between services, allowing an analytic focus on the flow of clients through the aged care sector rather than simply measures relating to a specific program at a point in time.

Data linkage in community services has progressed in the last couple of years via the use of statistical linkage keys. Different data collections retained different statistical linkage keys, but in the last year or so there has been a shift to promoting the use of a common linkage key (that is, the HACC-type statistical linkage key) across a number of community services data collections, including HACC, disability services, SAAP, child protection and juvenile justice data collections. SAAP has recently piloted and implemented use of the HACC-type statistical linkage key. The adoption of a common statistical linkage key, including clearance by appropriate ethics bodies, would increase the ease of linking community services data sets. In addition to cross-program data linking currently being undertaken in the area of aged care (for example, HACC, Community Aged Care Packages and Residential Aged Care services data linkage; Residential Aged Care services and hospital admissions data linkage), some new possibilities are already being identified; for example, linking child protection data with SAAP data to analyse the extent to which children in out-of-home or institutional care move on to be supported by the SAAP program.

9.3 Conclusion

Throughout Australia there is currently substantial data development activity being undertaken in the community services and housing assistance sectors. This represents a considerable investment of time and resources by governments and the many agencies involved. The complexity of the welfare sector is reflected in the range of committees and working groups which have some influence on the development of community services and housing assistance information.

There are potential benefits, including cost savings, to all agencies, providers and clients from an approach that minimises duplication in data development, collection and reporting activities. A major objective of the NCSIA, NHDA and ANIHI is the development of nationally consistent data. There have been significant achievements towards that end in recent times.

References

- ABS 2004. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social survey, 2002. ABS cat. no. 4714.0. ABS: Canberra.
- ABS & AIHW 2005. The health and welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. ABS cat. no. 4704.0. AIHW cat. no. IHW 14. Canberra: ABS.
- AIHW (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare) 1999. National community services information development plan. Cat. no. AUS 14. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW 2000a. National Housing Data Agreement: a subsidiary agreement to the 1999–2003 Commonwealth–State Housing Agreement. Cat. no. HOU 48. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW 2000b. Agreement on National Indigenous Housing Information. Cat. no. HOU 49. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW 2004a. Data quality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identification. Cat. no. HWI 79. Canberra: AIHW (Internet only.)
- AIHW 2004b. National health data dictionary. Version 12. Cat. no. HWI 75. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW 2004c. Counting kids: developing a new national collection for child care and preschool services. Bulletin no. 22. Cat. no. AUS 55. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW 2004d. Juvenile justice: a new national collection. Bulletin no. 19. Cat. no. AUS 52. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW 2005a. National Community Services Information Agreement. Viewed 12 September 2005, <<http://www.aihw.gov.au/committees/ncsimg/ABSOLUTE%20FINAL.doc>>.
- AIHW 2005b. National Health Information Agreement. Viewed 11 August 2005, <http://www.aihw.gov.au/committees/simc/final_nhia_signed.doc>.
- AIHW 2005c. Indigenous housing indicators 2003–04. Cat. no. HOU 127. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW 2005d. Commonwealth–State Housing Agreement national data reports 2003–04: state owned and managed Indigenous housing Cat. no. HOU 112. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW forthcoming. National community services information—A strategic plan 2005–2009. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW forthcoming. National housing assistance data dictionary. Version 3. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW forthcoming. Juvenile justice in Australia 2000–01 to 2003–04. Cat. no. 65. Canberra: AIHW.
- DoHA (Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing) 2004. A new strategy for community care—the way forward. Canberra: DoHA. Viewed 6 April 2005, <<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/wcms/Publishing.nsf/Content/ageing-research-commcare.htm>>.

- Gleeson T & Wilkins B 2000. SAAP IV information review – interim report. Canberra: Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS).
- Gleeson T, James D & Wilkins B 2000. SAAP IV information review – information management plan. Canberra: FaCS.
- Hogan W 2004. Review of pricing arrangements in residential aged care. Canberra: DoHA.
- NCSDC (National Community Services Data Committee) 2004. National community services data dictionary. Version 3. Canberra: AIHW.
- NCSIMG (National Community Services Information Management Group) 2004. Statistical data linkage in community services data collection. Canberra: AIHW.
- SCRGSP (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision) 2005. Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage: key indicators 2005. Productivity Commission: Canberra.
- WHO (World Health Organization) 2001. International classification of functioning, disability and health. Geneva: WHO.