



Who receives priority housing and how long do they stay?

Summary

Public rental housing and state owned and managed Indigenous housing (SOMIH) are among the social housing programs that provide affordable accommodation to eligible households. This bulletin looks at:

- the characteristics of households that were allocated public rental housing or SOMIH
- the characteristics of households with urgent needs that were given priority (out-of-turn) access to public rental housing or SOMIH
- the reasons these households were given priority access
- the tenancy duration of priority households compared with those not assessed as urgent.

The major findings of this bulletin are:

- Priority allocations comprised 42% (12,000) of all allocations of public rental housing and SOMIH during 2006–07.
- About 16% (4,600) of all allocations were priority allocations due to homelessness.
- New households accessing public rental housing and SOMIH were predominantly single people and single parent families.
- New households in public rental housing and SOMIH generally had younger tenants than households in the Australian population as a whole.
- The median income of new households in public rental housing and SOMIH was about one-third of the national median household income.

(highlights continued overleaf)

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- ♦ Indigenous households were over-represented among new public rental housing households.
- ♦ Younger households, group and mixed households, and single parent families were more likely than other household types to have been given priority allocation due to homelessness.
- ♦ Households given priority allocation due to homelessness were equally as likely as non-priority households to still be housed in the same dwelling after 2 years.
- ♦ The proportion of households given priority access to public rental housing and SOMIH and the reasons for priority allocation differed substantially across states and territories. This reflected the differences in allocation policies and criteria across jurisdictions.

Introduction

Public rental housing and SOMIH programs provide affordable accommodation to households whose needs cannot be met by the private rental market. These and other social housing programs are funded by the Australian Government and the states and territories under the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement (CSHA), and are delivered by the state and territory housing authorities.

The 2003 CSHA has been extended to 31 December 2008, and encompasses 11 guiding principles designed to ensure that funds are used effectively (FaCS 2003). Of these, guiding principles 2 and 5 seek to ensure that priority access to social housing is given to clients with complex needs, and that the needs of those clients are met once they are housed. Guiding principle 5 also specifies that housing assistance should have a role in preventing homelessness.

The Australian Government has identified homelessness, domestic violence, mental illness and other complex needs as issues of national importance (Rudd 2008). About 100,000 people were identified as being homeless in the 2001 Census (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 2003). While the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) forms the government's primary response to homelessness, governments, researchers and non-government organisations regard social housing as a very important longer-term solution.

Demographics of households entering public rental housing and SOMIH

The types of households that entered public rental housing and SOMIH during 2005–06 were substantially different from the types of households in the general Australian population represented in the 2006 Census (ABS 2006). This is largely due to housing policies that target vulnerable or at-risk groups in the population.

- ♦ In general, households newly accessing public rental housing and SOMIH were younger and had lower incomes than households in the general Australian population (Table 1).
- ♦ Households allocated public rental housing were smaller than average households, and were more likely to be single persons or sole parent families.
- ♦ Households accessing SOMIH were larger and much more likely to be sole parent families than households accessing public rental housing or Australian households generally.
- ♦ There were higher proportions of households with one or more Indigenous persons among new allocations of both public rental housing and SOMIH than in the total Australian population.

Table 1: Characteristics of newly allocated households in public rental housing and SOMIH, 2005–06, and all Australian households, 2006

	Newly allocated households			All Australian households
	Public housing	SOMIH	Public housing and SOMIH	
Average number of persons per household	2.1	3.2	2.2	2.6
Median age of main tenant ^(a)	39	33	39	48
Median weekly household income	\$322	\$425	\$332	\$1,027
Proportion of households that were: (per cent)				
Single persons	46	18	45	24
Sole parent families	30	46	31	11
Couples	5	3	5	26
Couples with children	8	14	8	33
Group or mixed composition	9	15	9	5
Other	3	4	3	0
<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>
Households with Indigenous person(s) (per cent)	13	100	17	2.3

(a) Main tenant includes 'Husband or wife in registered marriage', 'Lone parent', 'Group household member', and 'Lone person'.

Source: ABS 2006; AIHW National Housing Assistance Data Repository.

Reasons for priority allocation

The CSHA reporting framework incorporates performance indicators on 'priority access to those in greatest need' (AIHW 2008a, 2008b). Greatest need households are low-income households that, at the time of allocation, were subject to one or more of the following circumstances (AIHW 2006):

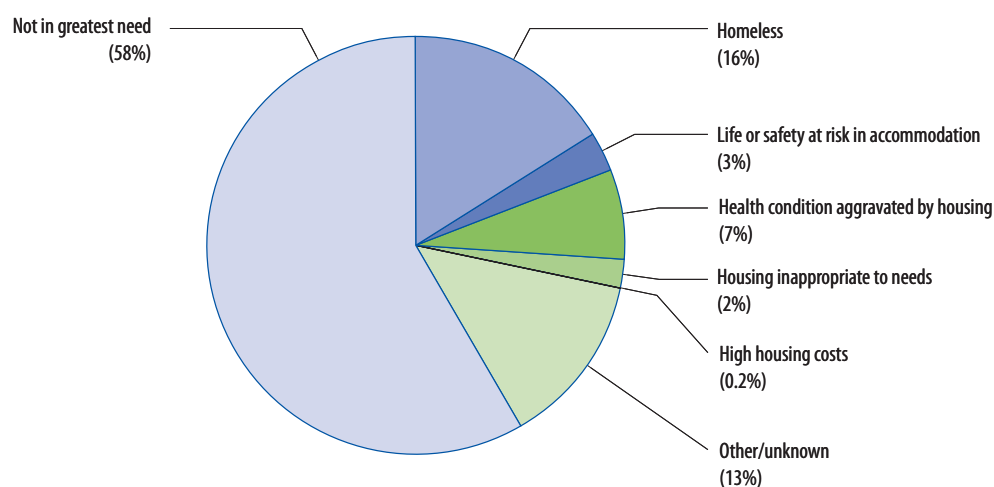
- ♦ They were homeless.
- ♦ Their life or safety was at risk in their accommodation.
- ♦ They had a health condition that was aggravated by their housing.

- Their housing was inappropriate to their needs.
- They had very high housing costs.

Households given priority allocation to public rental housing or SOMIH for reasons other than those above were also considered to have been in greatest need for the purposes of reporting, but were not further classified into the five greatest need categories (these are labelled 'other' in this publication).

Priority allocation at the national level

During 2006–07, 28,300 households were allocated public rental housing and SOMIH. Almost half (42%) of new allocations were made to households classified as being in greatest need; that is, 16% were homeless, 3% had their life or safety at risk in their accommodation, 7% had a health condition that was aggravated by their housing, 2% had housing that was inappropriate to their needs, and less than 1% had very high rental housing costs (Figure 1). The remaining 13% had a priority code that did not map to any of the standard greatest need reasons.



Source: AIHW National Housing Assistance Data Repository.

Figure 1: Greatest need status and reason, tenancies allocated public rental housing and SOMIH during 2006–07

There were notable differences in the proportion of priority allocations between public rental housing and SOMIH. While 43% of public rental housing was allocated to households in greatest need, only 26% of SOMIH was allocated to these households.

The total number of all new allocations to public rental housing and SOMIH fell between 2004–05 and 2006–07 from 29,300 down to 28,300. Over that time, however, the number of allocations made to households in greatest need rose from 10,900 (37% of allocations) to 11,900 (42%). There was little variation over time in the proportions of tenancy allocations made to households in each of the greatest need categories.

Priority allocation at state and territory level

Jurisdictions varied in the detail they were able to provide to AIHW on the reasons for priority allocation. Furthermore, due to differences in state and territory priority allocation policies, the mappings of priority codes to reasons for greatest need were different for each state or territory, and occasionally changed from year to year within jurisdictions. For these reasons, care should be taken in making direct comparisons between states/territories or between different years for the same state/territory (see AIHW 2004 for further discussion).

The number of households assisted and the reasons for priority allocation of public rental housing or SOMIH during 2006–07 are shown in Table 2. Tasmania (91%), the Australian Capital Territory (87%) and Victoria (67%) had a higher proportion of priority allocations than the other states/territories. They also had higher numbers of priority allocations for homelessness, with Victoria being responsible for over half of all priority allocations for homelessness nationally.

The reasons for the state differences in priority allocation categories and in priority allocations overall are complex and generally beyond the scope of this report. For example, Queensland gave priority allocation of public rental housing or SOMIH to only a small number of households that were homeless because the Queensland Government does not consider these types of housing to be the most viable option for the homeless and instead prefers to house them in community housing.

Table 2: Allocations of public rental housing and SOMIH, by greatest need reason, by state, 2006–07

	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA ^(a)	Tas ^(b)	ACT ^(c)	NT ^{(a)(c)}	Total
Homelessness	631	2,687	244	241	..	287	548	..	4,638
Life or safety at risk in accommodation	181	137	145	506	..	12	9	..	990
Health condition aggravated by housing	1,182	367	416	..	..	36	..	..	2,001
Housing inappropriate to needs	36	355	48	..	..	n.p.	24	..	463
Very high housing costs	..	..	..	..	..	56	..	..	56
Other ^(d)	616	..	385	333	1,516	694	26	161	3,731
<i>Total in greatest need</i>	<i>2,646</i>	<i>3,546</i>	<i>1,238</i>	<i>1,080</i>	<i>1,516</i>	<i>1,085</i>	<i>607</i>	<i>161</i>	<i>11,879</i>
<i>Total not in greatest need</i>	<i>6,418</i>	<i>1,762</i>	<i>3,559</i>	<i>2,370</i>	<i>1,627</i>	<i>106</i>	<i>88</i>	<i>483</i>	<i>16,413</i>
Total	9,064	5,308	4,797	3,450	3,143	1,191	695	644	28,292

.. Not applicable.

n.p. Not provided.

(a) South Australia and the Northern Territory were unable to provide a breakdown of greatest need.

(b) Greatest need reasons for Tasmania are for public rental housing allocations only. Greatest need is assessed but not currently recorded for SOMIH allocations.

(c) The Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory do not have a separate SOMIH program.

(d) Includes not stated, inadequately described and not provided. All allocations in Tasmania against 'other' were made to households with two or more CSHA greatest need factors.

Note: Care should be taken in making comparisons between states as the mappings of priority code to greatest need reasons vary. Most states lacked priority codes for some of the greatest need reasons (shown as not applicable).

Source: AIHW National Housing Assistance Data Repository.

Factors contributing to need for priority allocation

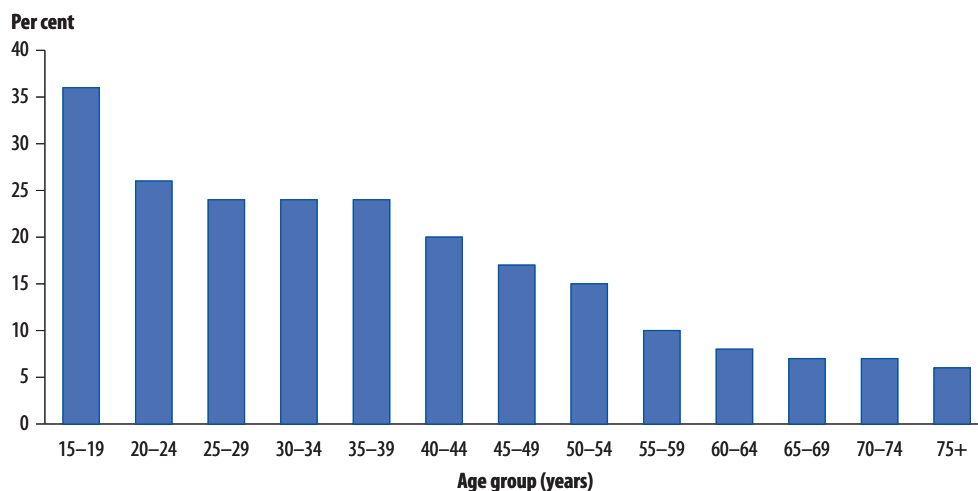
The analysis of factors contributing to the need for priority allocation is based on 2006–07 data from New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory.¹

Homelessness

In the six jurisdictions included in this analysis, 19% of households allocated public rental housing or SOMIH were homeless. The likelihood of having been homeless before allocation decreased with age (Figure 2). For new allocations during 2006–07:

- ♦ 36% of new allocations whose main tenant was aged between 15 and 19 years were homeless before being allocated
- ♦ 20% of new allocations whose main tenant was aged between 20 and 64 years were homeless. This ranged from 26% of those aged 20–24 years declining to 8% for those aged 60–64 years
- ♦ In contrast, 7% of new allocations whose main tenant was aged 65 years and over were homeless.

These findings echo those reported elsewhere: the 2005–06 SAAP annual report and the ABS publication *Counting the homeless 2001* showed that younger people were disproportionally represented among SAAP clients and the homeless population (AIHW 2007a; Chamberlain & MacKenzie 2003).



Note: South Australia and Northern Territory data are excluded, as these jurisdictions were unable to provide a breakdown of greatest need reasons.

Source: AIHW National Housing Assistance Data Repository.

Figure 2: Proportion of households that were homeless before allocation of public rental housing or SOMIH, by age of main tenant, tenancies allocated during 2006–07

1 South Australia and Northern Territory data were excluded, as they did not provide a breakdown of greatest need reasons.

There was also some variation in priority allocation for homelessness in relation to household composition, with group and mixed composition households, and families with children being most at risk. Of new allocations:

- 29% of group and mixed composition households were homeless before allocation
- 23% of single parent families were homeless
- 20% of couples with children were homeless
- 15% of singles were homeless
- 9% of couples were homeless.

Households with 7 or more occupants were more likely to receive priority allocation for homelessness (29% compared with 21–23% of households with 2–6 occupants). However, these larger households comprised only 1% of new allocations for 2006–07. The findings relating to group, mixed composition and large households may be explained by a number of reasons, including the allocation of single people who were homeless to a group or supported household.

In the six jurisdictions, 20% of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous households in public rental housing were given priority allocation because of homelessness. However, only 7% of all priority allocations of SOMIH (where all households are Indigenous) were because of homelessness. This reflects the differences observed in the proportion of overall priority allocations between the two programs.

Life or safety at risk in accommodation

Women, especially those who were single parents, were more likely than men to have been given priority allocation because their life or safety was at risk in their previous accommodation.

- Six per cent of newly allocated single parent families were given priority allocation because their life or safety was at risk in their previous accommodation, compared with 5% of mixed composition households and 2–4% of households in the other major household composition categories.
- While 85% of all newly allocated single parents were women, almost all (94%) single parents given priority allocation because their life or safety was at risk were women.
- Six per cent of women had their life or safety at risk in their previous accommodation, compared with 2% of men.

The high risk to women with and without children is also highlighted in the 2005–06 SAAP report, where domestic or family violence was the main reason for seeking SAAP assistance for over half of women with children and up to 37% of single women (AIHW 2007a).

Health condition aggravated by housing

Households with one or more persons with disability (17%) were more likely than other households (4%) to have received priority allocation because of a health condition that was aggravated by their previous housing.

The proportion of households with a member whose health condition was aggravated by their previous housing also increased with the age of the main tenant. Such households made up:

- ♦ 3% of households whose main tenant was aged 15–24 years
- ♦ 9% of households whose main tenant was aged 25–64 years
- ♦ 11% of households whose main tenant was aged 65 years and over.

Newly allocated Indigenous households were less likely to have had a health condition aggravated by housing (3%) than non-Indigenous households (9%).

Length of tenancy for public rental housing and SOMIH households

Australia's welfare 2007 highlights the importance of stable and sustainable tenancies for households with complex needs and their role in enhancing the non-housing outcomes of those households (AIHW 2007b). Prior research has shown some of the benefits of stable tenure to include better health outcomes, reduced juvenile participation in crime, and better education outcomes (Howden-Chapman & Wilson 2000; Phibbs & Young 2005; Weatherburn & Lind 1997).

Tenancy duration can reflect the stability of tenure, and thus provides an indication of housing outcomes for those in need. With data on the reasons for greatest need having been collected for 2004–05, 2005–06 and 2006–07, it is possible to determine the length of tenancy up to 2 years for households helped during 2004–05 in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory, by combining the data sets across years.²

For the households that were newly allocated public rental housing or SOMIH during 2004–05³:

- ♦ 5% of tenancies ended after 3 months
- ♦ 5% continued for 3 to 6 months
- ♦ 10% continued for 6 months to 1 year
- ♦ 14% continued for 1 to 2 years
- ♦ 66% of households were still living in the same dwelling after 2 years.

2 South Australia and Northern Territory data were excluded, as these jurisdictions were unable to provide a breakdown of greatest need reasons.

3 Excluding South Australia and the Northern Territory.

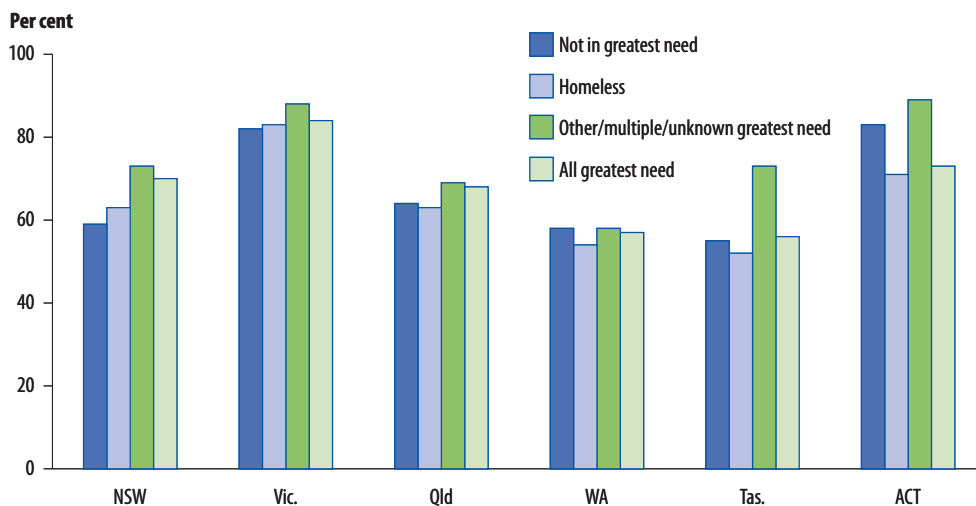
More than three-quarters (79%) of public rental housing or SOMIH households whose tenancies were ongoing at 30 June 2007 had lived in their current dwelling for at least 2 years.

State and territory variations in length of tenancy

States and territories varied in the number of tenancies continuing for the periods detailed above, with Victoria and Australian Capital Territory households allocated during 2004–05 having generally longer tenancies than the national average, and Western Australia and Tasmania households having generally shorter tenancies (Figure 3). The relative length of tenancy for priority and non-priority households also varied across states and territories, with relatively longer tenancies for priority allocations in New South Wales but shorter tenancies among priority allocations in the Australian Capital Territory. It was unclear whether priority households had longer or shorter tenancies over all states.

Previously homeless households living in New South Wales and Victoria tended to have slightly longer tenancies than all non-priority households, whereas those living in Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania had slightly shorter tenancies. Such households living in the Australian Capital Territory had markedly shorter tenancies.

By comparison, households given priority allocation for reasons other than homelessness almost consistently had longer tenancies across the states than non-priority households. This trend was not found in Western Australia; however, this can be explained by the greatest needs classifications used in this state.



Notes

1. South Australia and Northern Territory data are excluded, as these jurisdictions were unable to provide a breakdown of greatest need reasons.
2. Some data from other states were excluded as the data could not be linked across years.

Source: AIHW National Housing Assistance Data Repository.

Figure 3: Proportion of households assisted in 2004-05 that were still housed 2 years after allocation, by greatest need reason, by state

Variations in length of tenancy among priority allocation categories

To establish nationally whether households given priority access to public rental housing and SOMIH had longer or shorter tenancies than non-priority households, it was necessary to remove the influence of individual state allocation policies.⁴ This was done by applying weights to state and territory data.⁵ After weighting, households given priority allocation in 2004–05 generally had somewhat longer tenancies than non-priority households, with 70% of priority households still housed after 2 years compared with 65% of non-priority households.

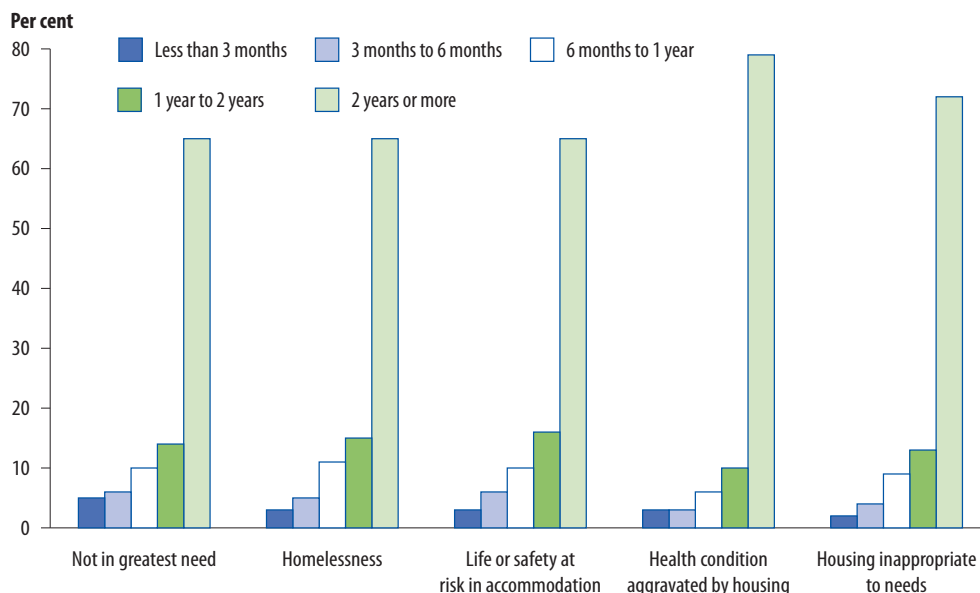
Among the specific priority allocation categories, there was no difference in tenancy length at 2 years between previously homeless households, those whose life or safety was at risk in their previous accommodation, and non-greatest need households, with 65% of households in these groups still living in the same dwelling after 2 years (Figure 4). However, households given priority allocation for other reasons were more likely to still be housed after 2 years, in particular:

- 79% of households with a health condition that was aggravated by their housing
- 72% of households whose accommodation was inappropriate to their needs.

There were some differences in tenancy duration among non-priority households and households given priority allocation for homelessness in the short term, with homeless households more likely than non-priority households to remain housed at 3 months, 6 months, and 1 year after the start of the tenancy (Figure 4).

4 The data used for this report are limited to public rental housing and SOMIH and do not capture households receiving assistance from other programs (see, for example, the Queensland policy for allocating community housing to homeless people noted above). Hence, it is assumed that while the proportion of allocations in each priority category differs between states, this reflects the differences in state allocation policies rather than the number of people in each state who might be considered to be in greatest need if a uniform measure of need were applied nationally. Therefore, the differences in state allocation policies can interact with the differences in length of tenancy to produce misleading results. For example, without correcting for Victoria having the highest number of priority allocations for homelessness and the longest tenancies, it would incorrectly be concluded at a national level that households receiving priority access for homelessness had longer tenancies than non-priority households.

5 Complete data and methods are available from <www.aihw.gov.au/housing/assistance/index.cfm>.



Notes

1. Figure is based on data from New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory, weighted to account for the different proportions of greatest need allocations between states.
2. South Australia and Northern Territory data are excluded, as these jurisdictions were unable to provide a breakdown of greatest need reasons.
3. Some data from other states were excluded as the data could not be linked across years.

Source: AIHW National Housing Assistance Data Repository.

Figure 4: Length of tenancy, by greatest need reason, households assisted during 2004–05

Discussion

A key aim of the CSHA is 'to provide appropriate, affordable and secure housing assistance for those who most need it, for the duration of their need' (FaCS 2003). It is clear from the data on current allocations that public rental housing and SOMIH is not used simply to house those with low incomes, but, in accordance with targeting policies, is increasingly being used to house tenants with complex needs and disadvantaged backgrounds. These include homelessness, domestic violence, the lack of appropriate and affordable housing, and factors such as disability, Indigenous status and being a sole parent on low income. The fact that only single priority codes are recorded nationally (that is, one area of need per household) possibly masks the complexity and interrelatedness of these factors, such as the relationship between homelessness and domestic violence reported in SAAP (AIHW 2007a).

It is likely that the incidence of homelessness and other need factors reported here is understated due to the large number of priority allocations that could not be classified. Improved data collection and reporting would allow trends across time and between jurisdictions to be assessed, and help present a more accurate representation of priority allocations nationally.

Moreover, given the high proportion of people previously experiencing homelessness who enter public rental housing or SOMIH, greater integration between social housing and SAAP and other homelessness programs would be beneficial. In addition, linkage and greater commonality between data collections and improved consistency in data would allow better analysis of multiple program use and support of homeless people. Such improvements in program integration and data linkage would partially satisfy CSHA guiding principle 5 (ensuring that housing assistance links effectively with other programs) and assist with evaluating programs aimed at improved outcomes for the homeless.

In this analysis it was not possible to look at repeat use of public housing and SOMIH by priority households. However, previous studies have indicated that there is a substantial incidence of recurring homelessness among public housing tenants, sometimes termed 'the revolving door of homelessness' (Lake 2003; Gale 2003). The Future of Service Delivery Project in South Australia showed that, of tenants with complex needs who left social housing within 1 year of allocation, almost half returned within 6 months (Gale 2003). Furthermore, the 2006 SAAP National Data Collection annual report showed that, of all SAAP clients with closed support periods, 11% came from public housing and 16% had entered public housing after their support period ended (AIHW 2007a). More detailed analysis of movement between these programs would better assist governments in understanding the relationship between social housing and homelessness.

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