

# **Journeys Home: A Longitudinal Study of Factors Affecting Housing Stability**

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## *Acknowledgements*

This paper describes, and presents data collected from, the Journeys Home project, a longitudinal survey based study managed by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research on behalf of the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). The findings and views reported in this paper, however, are those of the authors and should not be attributed to either FaHCSIA or the Melbourne Institute.

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## **Abstract**

As part of the Australian government's commitment to halving the rate of homelessness by 2020, a research agenda was developed to expand the evidence base for understanding homelessness. A major component of this agenda was the commissioning of a new longitudinal study intended to track the experiences of a sample of persons currently facing housing difficulties, including persons with a recent history of homelessness, into the future (albeit, only over a relatively short period – two years). Work on the design of that study, now known as *Journeys Home*, commenced in late 2010, with the first wave of fieldwork conducted over the period, September to November 2011. This paper summarises the design of the study and reports on fieldwork outcomes from the first wave of data collection. It describes: the target population and approach to sampling from that population; survey content; and fieldwork parameters (e.g., survey mode, frequency, contact protocols, use of incentives). It also presents information on wave 1 response, including the characteristics of respondents and how they differ from non-respondents.

**Keywords:** Homelessness; Housing instability; Longitudinal survey research

## Introduction

In December 2008, the Australian Government released a White Paper on homelessness, *The Road Home*. A feature of *The Road Home* was an explicit commitment to the development of a long-term research agenda, leading to the release, in November 2009, of the Government's *National Homeless Research Agenda 2009-2013*. The stated aim of this agenda is '[t]o improve the evidence base for preventing and responding to homelessness' (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs [FaHCSIA] 2009, p. 4). A key theme running through both documents is that policy development and service delivery in the area of homelessness are impeded by the absence of high quality, reliable data. Furthermore, FaHCSIA (2009) point specifically to the absence of a large-scale longitudinal study.

Counts of the homeless, such as have been constructed from Census data, can be helpful in providing a guide to the extent of homelessness<sup>1</sup>, but do not provide rich information on the circumstances of the homeless and tell us nothing about the different pathways that people take into and out of homelessness. The latter, of course, is a weakness inherent in all cross-sectional data sources. If we are interested in better understanding both the causal relationships between homelessness and other outcomes, and why it is that some people experience housing difficulties while others with similar characteristics do not, then we need data collected at different points in time from the same individuals (or families). In recognition of this, Australian researchers have been increasingly moving towards implementing their own longitudinal research designs.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, most research studies to date have employed samples that are either very small or restricted to specific sub-groups, and in many cases both (e.g., Thomson Goodall Associates 2001; Baldry et al. 2003; RPR Consulting 2003; Kolar 2004; Cashmore & Paxman 2007; Flatau et al. 2008; Johnson, Gronda & Coutts 2008; Mallett et al. 2010). Further, in many cases the samples are recruited from users (or recent users) of some type of support service, typically using what might be described as 'convenience sampling'. Much larger samples are sometimes employed when using administrative data obtained from service providers (e.g., Parkinson 2003; Kelly 2006; AIHW 2007; Johnson & Chamberlain 2011), but by definition these too are restricted to tracking the experiences of persons who access support services. Further, in these cases the data available to researchers was collected as a by-product of service provision and not the result of a deliberate research strategy. In short, while research on the homeless population in Australia has made significant strides over the last decade or so, it is still difficult to know the

extent to which findings from individual studies can be generalised to the broader populations of both the homeless and those at high risk of experiencing homelessness in the future.

In response to this data deficiency, FaHCSIA (in late 2010) commissioned the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research (at the University of Melbourne) to design and implement a new longitudinal survey tracking (albeit only over a relatively short time frame – two years) a national sample of individuals exposed to high levels of housing insecurity employing much more rigorous sampling methods than ever previously used. This paper summarises the design of that study, now known as Journeys Home, and reports on fieldwork outcomes from the first wave of data collection. It describes: the purposes of the study and breadth of the survey content; the target population and the approach taken to sampling from that population; and fieldwork parameters (e.g., survey mode, frequency, contact protocols, use of incentives). It also provides information on: wave 1 response, including the characteristics of respondents and how they differ from non-respondents; the scope for linking survey responses to administrative data collected via Centrelink; and interviewer observations about the interview experience.

## **Survey Purpose and Content**

### *Aims*

The Journeys Home survey was originally conceived as a tool for enabling research that would improve understanding of both the pathways into and out of homelessness in Australia and the consequences of homelessness for long-term outcomes. More specifically, FaHCSIA, in its Statement of Requirement that accompanied the original Request for Quotation to design and implement what was then known as the Longitudinal Study of Australian Vulnerable to Homelessness, set out a series of research questions that it hoped the data collected in this study would help address. These were as follows:

- What characteristics are associated with people identified as homeless?
- What is the length of time that people in the sample experience homelessness, including multiple episodes of homelessness?
- What factors are associated with instability/stability in housing tenancy or occupancy, including over time?
- What are the characteristics that distinguish at-risk families who become homeless from those who do not?

- What are the protective factors, including familial and psychosocial, for staying out of homelessness?
- What role do geographical factors have on pathways into and out of homelessness?
- What are the key intervention points to prevent homelessness and chronic homelessness?
- What are the triggers for any changes from being at-risk of homelessness to becoming homeless, including movement between levels of homelessness?
- What are the factors that are important in the road out of homelessness?
- What are the personal factors, family characteristics and other situational factors that impact on longitudinal outcomes for those in the welfare support system who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness and those who do not become homeless?
- What are the risk factors for persistent homelessness?

Critical for the design of the study was the explicit recognition that, in understanding pathways in and out of homelessness, we must be able to identify a sample that includes not just persons currently experiencing homelessness, but also housed persons living in circumstances that suggest they might be vulnerable to experiencing homelessness in the future.

#### *Questionnaire Content*

The wave 1 survey instrument was designed primarily with a view to: identifying the housing circumstances of sample members; measuring other outcomes associated with housing difficulties; and capturing information about factors that influence transitions between different housing situations.

The instrument comprised 11 main sections, ten of which are administered to the respondent by an interviewer and one which is completed by the interviewer. These covered the following broad topic areas:

- Personal details: such as age, gender, Indigenous status, marital status, children, education, and geographic mobility.
- Employment and voluntary work: including work history, current employment status and working arrangements, job search behaviour, and use of employment services.

- Housing and living arrangements: including current housing and living standard situation, housing tenure and costs, accommodation standards, search for alternative accommodation, and housing history.
- Support services and networks: including information about family, friends, acquaintances, and the welfare services that respondents use, and the level of support respondents receive from these different sources.
- Health and well-being: including physical and mental health, usage of health services, substance use, life satisfaction, and expectations for the future.
- Family history while growing up: including questions on who sample members lived with and who cared for them during adolescence, the home environment, and experiences with institutional care.
- Contact with the justice system: in regards to juvenile or youth detention, adult prison, or remand as an adult.
- Exposure to violence: including physical violence, sexual violence and threats of violence while growing up, since turning 18, and in the last six months.
- Financial situation: including income sources and levels, partner's income (where relevant), debts, other indicators of financial stress, and gambling behaviours.
- Tracking information: which seeks contact information from the respondent for the purpose of tracking them in the future.
- Respondent and interview information: which is completed by the interviewer in a separate location after each interview, and which records information about the respondent and the interview situation that may have influenced their answers or ability to answer, and makes recommendations about the way the respondent should be approached at the next wave.

In designing the instrument, and especially the section on housing and living arrangements, primacy was given to the objective of collecting data that would not constrain researchers to using any one specific definition of homelessness. Thus data were collected on the type of accommodation and place in which people lived, the stability of those arrangements, the security of tenure, and the quality of accommodation.

An important feature of the design was the inclusion, in the income section, of a question seeking the consent of respondents to link their survey responses to their Centrelink records. Obtaining consent both obviates the need to have to ask any questions of respondents about their Centrelink payments and provides highly accurate information about respondents' benefits history (back to July 2002).

As was made clear to all sample members, both in the pre-survey notification material and by interviewers in the introduction prior to the interview commencing, participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Sample members could thus elect not to be interviewed or could choose not to answer all questions posed. Additionally, the potentially sensitive nature of the questions on violence required the voluntary nature of participation be reinforced. Specific questions were, therefore, inserted at the commencement of the section on violence that invited respondents to skip these sequences if they felt uncomfortable.

The instrument being used in waves 2, 3 and 4 differs from the wave 1 instrument in its focus on changes in respondents' circumstances since the previous interview, which is expected to cover, on average, a 6-month period, and in the removal of all questions about the respondents' histories prior to the survey commencing. Especially critical was the inclusion of questions designed to measure key details of respondents' housing moves since they were last interviewed. This information will allow us to build a detailed picture of respondents' pathways into and out of homelessness throughout the survey period.

## **Sample Design**

### *Target Population*

As noted earlier, previous Australian studies of homelessness pathways have typically drawn their samples from small sub-groups of the homeless populations (e.g., users of a specific type of support service), often living within a relatively small geographic area. The approach taken for Journeys Home, however, is quite different. Instead, the sample was drawn from the Research Evaluation Database (RED) developed by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), which in turn contains records for all Centrelink income support customers since 1<sup>st</sup> July 2002.<sup>3</sup> This has the distinct advantage that it provides much wider coverage of the homeless population within Australia given the strong likelihood that the large majority of homeless persons will be in receipt of a Centrelink income support payment.<sup>4</sup>

The main problem with this approach is that a very large number of Australians are in receipt of Centrelink payments at any point in time (4.75 million as at 27 May 2011), most of whom are not currently homeless nor are at any great risk of experiencing homelessness in the near future. Since 1<sup>st</sup> January 2010, however, local Centrelink office staff have been required to flag in their database those customers they determine to be either 'homeless' or 'at risk of homelessness', as defined by their Homelessness Indicator service delivery tool. This enables a sample of Centrelink customers to be drawn that we expect will consist of people who have had recent experiences of homelessness. It also provides the opportunity to draw a sub-sample, using statistical techniques, of persons that have not been flagged as homeless but nevertheless have characteristics similar to those that have been. These persons might be thought of as a group of people who are, at least in a statistical sense, vulnerable to homelessness. It also will likely include some homeless persons who have not yet been flagged as such by Centrelink staff.

Critical are the definitions of homelessness used by Centrelink. These are set out in Centrelink's *Homelessness Awareness Training Manual* and read as follows:

A person who is 'homeless' is one that:

- is without conventional accommodation (e.g., sleeping rough, squatting, or living in a car); or
- lives in, or moves frequently between, temporary accommodation arrangements (e.g., with friends or extended family, emergency accommodation, or youth refuges).

A person who is 'at risk' of homelessness is one that:

- lives medium to long term in a boarding house, caravan park or hotel, where accommodation is not covered by a lease;
- lives in accommodation which falls below the general community standards which surround health and wellbeing, such as access to personal amenities, security against threat, privacy and autonomy;
- is facing eviction;
- lives in accommodation not of an appropriate standard which may be detrimental to their physical and mental well-being, or where they have no sense of belonging or connection (e.g., Indigenous Australians living in crowded conditions or disconnected from their land, family / kin, spiritual and cultural beliefs and practices).

Taken at face value, the combination of these two definitions give a population of 'homeless people' that roughly accords with the cultural definition of homelessness put forward by



Chamberlain and Mackenzie (1992) and used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics to enumerate the homeless population in the 1996, 2001 and 2006 Censuses.

In summary, we opted for a sample design involving three sub-samples:

1. people flagged by Centrelink as homeless;
2. people flagged by Centrelink as at risk of homelessness; and
3. people identified by the research team as vulnerable to homelessness.

The population scope was initially established as all Centrelink customers aged 15 years or older in receipt of any income support payments at any time during the 28-day period prior to 27 May 2011. The 28-day window permits people who have recently moved off income support, be it permanently or temporarily (e.g., due to payment suspensions), to be included in the population.

This definition gives a total of 27,017 persons flagged as homeless and 15,319 persons flagged as at risk of homelessness.

Identification of the vulnerable population is based on the probability of an individual being homeless or at risk of being homeless, and involved the estimation of a logistic regression equation predicting the probability of being flagged as homeless or at risk of homelessness. The choice of predictor variables for inclusion in the logistic regression model was largely driven by what was made available within the administrative data (i.e., the RED). The list is extensive, but included controls for: key demographic characteristics (such as gender, age, whether an Indigenous Australian, country of birth, marital status, number of children and age of youngest child); the presence of medical conditions by type (with psychological and psychiatric problems specifically identified); housing tenure type (i.e., whether a home owner, renter or living rent free, and among renters whether renting from private or public landlords); residential mobility (as represented by the number of moves in the past year); labour and business earnings; income support arrangements and history (including current benefit type, the proportion of time on income support, both since age 16 and in the past year, number of suspensions by Centrelink in the past year, whether ever been subject to an income management plan, whether ever been in receipt of the homeless rate of Youth Allowance, ABSTUDY or Disability Support Pension); the 'regional' homeless rate (based on Census data); whether an ex-offender or not; and a range of other indicators used by Centrelink to identify 'vulnerability' (such as drug or alcohol dependence, lack of literacy and language

skills, serving an 8 week non-payment period in the past year, and experiencing a recent traumatic relationship breakdown).<sup>5</sup>

We then defined the ‘vulnerable to homelessness’ population to be Centrelink customers who had a predicted probability in the top 2% of all income support population who were not already flagged by Centrelink. This resulted in a group numbering 95,755 persons. Choice of a 2% cut-off point was largely arbitrary and reflected value judgements about what the size of this population should be.

The total starting population thus numbered 138,091 persons.

### *Survey Population and Sample Clustering*

Cost considerations required further restrictions in the scope of the population. In particular, the high cost of face-to-face interviewing meant that the sample had to be clustered, with only those clusters where homelessness was sufficiently common to ensure a viable interviewing workload retained for selection.

Clusters were formed based on the geo-coded address and postcode information available in the RED. The key requirement was that clusters should not be larger than 10km in radius in the major cities and 20km in regional and rural centres. This resulted in the survey population being divided into 739 clusters. To be eligible for inclusion in the final sample a cluster in a major city had to have at least 45 flagged persons (that is, persons flagged as either homeless or at risk) and a cluster in a regional or rural centre at least 65 flagged persons. Only 200 of the 739 original clusters were thus eligible for inclusion in the final sample, with the eligible population of persons now numbering 110,616 (22,640 persons flagged as homeless, 13136 persons flagged as at risk of homelessness, and 74,840 persons identified as vulnerable to homelessness).

### *Sample Selection*

Given the available budget and expected response rates the number of clusters was set to 36. The sample was further stratified into eight groups: Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth, other major cities, one regional centre in Northern Territory, and all remaining locations. Within each strata, clusters were randomly selected with a probability proportional to their size, where size is measured as the sum of the proportions the cluster contributes to the total of each of the three sub-populations (homeless, at risk, and vulnerable) for that strata.

Individuals were then randomly selected from each of the three sub-groups in each cluster based on the following sampling rate:

$$r_{cg} = \left( \frac{n_c}{N_{cg}} \right) \left( \frac{\frac{N_{cg}}{N_g}}{\frac{N_{c1}}{N_1} + \frac{N_{c2}}{N_2} + \frac{N_{c3}}{N_3}} \right)$$

where  $r_{cg}$  is the sampling rate for group  $g$  (one of the three sub-sample groups: homeless, at risk, or vulnerable) within cluster  $c$ ,  $n_c$  is the number to be selected from the cluster across all three groups,  $N_{cg}$  is the total number of persons in the population in group  $g$  and cluster  $c$ , and  $N_g$  is the total population of group  $g$  summed across all clusters. The number selected in each cluster was based on the desired number of achieved interviews (36 in major metropolitan areas, 41 in Brisbane and 54 in other areas) after allowing for expected: rates of response<sup>6</sup>; number of cases not issued to field (see below); and number of individuals to move outside the interviewer network prior to fieldwork commencing. The target number of interviews in each of the three sub-groups was 500.

As just noted, not all selected cases are issued to field. Specifically, we deemed as out-of-scope any cases in our sample that were subsequently identified (by DEEWR officials using the Centrelink database), as: (i) in prison; (ii) an overseas customer; (iii) requiring an interpreter; (iii) having specifically indicated to Centrelink that they were not willing to participate in research studies; or (iv) having a record marked as ‘sensitive’<sup>7</sup>. This results in about 7% of the original selections being treated as out-of-scope. Further cases were deemed out-of-scope as a result of moving to locations outside of the cluster boundaries prior to fieldwork commencing. Additionally, concerns about the difficulties obtaining parental consent meant that all interviewers were instructed not to attempt interviews with persons under the age of 18 years who were still living with their parents.

### *Following Rules*

In tracking people over time, like most other longitudinal cohort studies (e.g., the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth in the US), we only follow those persons that respond at wave 1. In subsequent waves, the only wave 1 respondents that will be excluded from locating efforts will be those known to have died or who subsequently withdraw their consent to be contacted. The latter, however, are still counted as part of the eligible sample.

## **Survey Administration**

### *Survey Mode*

The principal mode of data collection is face-to-face interviews using a questionnaire delivered by Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) tablet consoles. The time and place of interview is of the sample member's choosing (but subject to concerns about interviewer safety). Telephone is used where that is the sample member's preferred mode or the person has moved to a location outside the reach of the interviewer network. Just 1.6% (n=26) of completed interviews were undertaken by telephone in wave 1. In subsequent waves, however, this proportion can be expected to be much higher given sample member mobility.

### *Fieldwork Period and Frequency*

The fieldwork for wave 1 was conducted over a 12 week-period from 1 September to 23 November 2011. There will be a further three waves conducted approximately six months apart. Wave 2 thus commenced in the first week of March 2012.

### *Pilot Testing*

The survey instruments and fieldwork procedures were pilot tested and amended prior to the main survey commencing. Fieldwork for the pilot test took place over a 5-week period in May 2011 and involved a sample drawn from six cluster areas: two in metropolitan Victoria, two in regional Victoria, and two in metropolitan New South Wales.

### *Pre-field Approach*

Approximately two weeks prior to the beginning of fieldwork all selected sample members were sent, via mail, a letter (the Primary Approach Letter, or PAL) informing them of their selection into the study and encouraging them to participate. It also provided them with details of who to contact should they either have any other questions or wished to provide more up to date information about their own contact details. Accompanying the PAL was a brochure that provided more information about the study, including how sample members came to be selected, the voluntary nature of participation, and details on confidentiality.

### *Interviewers and Interviewer Support*

All interviews are conducted by professional interviewers employed by Roy Morgan Research, the organisation that was sub-contracted to undertake the fieldwork. A total of 37 interviewers were employed on wave 1. All interviewers are required to attend a two-day

project specific training session prior to each survey wave. In addition, wave 1 interviewers working in areas with a high proportion of Indigenous sample participated in a half-day Indigenous training workshop led by an Indigenous consultant.

Interviewers and sample members are supported by a telephone support group (Team 1800), who staff project-specific free-call 1800 telephone numbers. During fieldwork these numbers were staffed 14 hours a day (8 am to 10 pm), seven days a week. The role of Team 1800 includes: handling respondent calls and emails; assisting interviews by, for example, advising of changes in respondent details, providing technical CAPI support, advising on field protocols, advising on duty of care issues, and providing emotional support; and tracking respondents pre-field and when cases are returned to the office during fieldwork. A total of 15 Team 1800 staff members were trained on the Journeys Home project.

### *Making Contact*

The initial set of contact details for all sample members in wave 1 came from the information contained on the Centrelink customer database. This typically includes a home address (available for 89% of selected sample members), a postal address (94%), and a mobile number (80%). It may also include a home (landline) phone number (just 12%) and a telephone number for an alternative contact (10%). The original sample file was provided by DEEWR to Roy Morgan Research on 29 July 2011, with a further sample update provided just prior to fieldwork commencing and two more during fieldwork.

A major problem confronting the study was that the contact information provided for a substantial proportion of the sample was either inaccurate, out of date or missing. As a result, only 55% of the sample was found to be living at the addresses originally provided.

In making initial contact with sample members, interviewers were expected to follow a set of protocols. These were:

- Make at least three face-to-face attempts for respondents with known addresses, with each attempt made at different times of the day and week.
- If the sample member does not appear to be 'home' at the time of approach, leave a calling card with interviewer details in a place they were likely to find it. Including a brochure and/or PAL in a Journeys Home envelope addressed to the person was also recommended.

- When arriving at a residence and it is found that the target respondent no longer lives there, make enquiries with current residents and neighbours about the sample members whereabouts.
- Either after three face-to-face attempts, or earlier if it becomes apparent that the respondent will not be found at the address provided, use other available contact details provided for the respondent. This may include a telephone or SMS to the target respondent or approaching an alternative contact (either provided within the respondent information or obtained during fieldwork). Up to at least six telephone attempts must be made for each number.
- Collect current contact information from people who are most likely to know where the target respondent has moved to if they change address.
- If the target respondent can still not be found after face-to-face, telephone or SMS attempts, approach service providers (e.g., the Salvation Army) in the local area to see if they can assist. All interviewers were provided with list of service providers in their interviewing areas, each of which had previously been sent a letter prior to fieldwork commencing informing them about the survey and mentioning that their assistance may be sought. Interviewers were also encouraged to approach additional providers in the area, and were provided with generic provider letters and brochures to assist in securing their assistance.

Interviewers were also encouraged to use their own initiative in trying to locate sample members. This would include, for example, making further call attempts with disconnected mobile numbers (given numbers are often disconnected temporarily), and pursuing searches using the internet or White Pages telephone directory.

If the sample member still could not be contacted, the case was then returned to office for Team 1800 where they would initiate further attempts at tracking.

In subsequent waves the sample is restricted only to persons responding in wave 1. As a result, the updated contact information provided at regular intervals by DEEWR will be supplemented by additional contact information (or ‘anchor points’) collected during the preceding wave interview.

### *Incentives*

All sample members are offered a \$40 incentive each time they agree to be interviewed. In the case of face-to-face interviews, the incentive is provided as cash and paid immediately

after the sample member agreed to participation. In the case of telephone interviews, the incentive is sent by mail, in cheque form, to the respondent after completion of the interview. All respondents are given the option to decline payment, though only three respondents in wave 1 elected to do so (all of whom were interviewed by telephone).

### *Interview Length*

The intent was that the average interview would take 50 minutes in wave 1 and 40 minutes in subsequent waves. The actual average interview length in wave 1 was almost one hour (59.7 minutes), and ranged from a low of 24.6 minutes to a high of 166.8 minutes.

### *Ethics Approval*

All survey protocols, instruments and materials were approved by the University of Melbourne Behavioural and Social Sciences Human Ethics Sub-Committee. The approval process was a two-step process with separate approval being obtained for the piloting stage and the main survey stage (which was conditional on reporting on the pilot test outcomes).

## **Response and Sample Characteristics**

### *Response Rates*

A summary of the response outcomes from the wave 1 fieldwork is provided in Table 1. As reported there, a total of 2992 cases were issued to field. Of these, 273 were subsequently determined to be out-of-scope, mainly because the sample members were known to have moved out of the designated survey interview area (i.e., cluster) prior to fieldwork commencing (n=180), but also because the sample member was away for the entire survey period, was in prison or in another institution on more than a short-term basis, was a young person still at home with their parents, or had died. This gives a total in-scope sample of 2719 persons.<sup>8</sup>

Interviews were successfully obtained from 1676 members of this in-scope group. There were also a small number of persons (n=14) that terminated interview prior to completion. As noted previously, the intent was that the sample of persons followed in waves 2 to 4 would be restricted to those persons interviewed at wave, raising the question of what to with respondents that terminated their interview and which were unable to be completed at an alternative time. We subsequently decided to include six of the 14 terminations in the responding sample. These were all cases where the termination of interview did not result in the sample member requesting not to be reapproached in the future and where the interview

was not the result of English language problems. Further, in five of these six cases a substantial amount of data was collected prior to the termination. The usable sample thus numbers 1682 cases, giving a response rate of 61.9%.

By almost any yardstick, this is a very good outcome. Other Australian studies that sample from disadvantaged populations typically report obtaining noticeably lower initial response rates. Examples include the Residents Outcomes Study, which reported successfully recruiting 53.5% of its target sample (Thomson Goodall Associates 2001), the Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients, which reported a 45.5% response rate at wave 1 (RPR Consulting 2003), and the On the Outside project, with a 46% response rate (Johnson, Gronda & Coutts 2008).

Of the non-respondents, about 35% refused to participate and a further 13% were still non-responsive at the end of the fieldwork period despite contact having been made (that is, no clear refusal had been given but neither had an appointment for interview been arranged). Together, these two groups (n=507) can be thought of as representing those persons that were reluctant or unwilling to participate. The remainder were mostly persons with whom no contact had been made.

#### *Sample Characteristics and Response Bias*

While the response rate is reasonably high, it is still a long way from 100%, thus raising the possibility that non-respondents are systematically different from respondents. In Table 2, therefore, we report figures on the distribution of the responding sample by selected known sample member characteristics (as recorded in the RED) and how they compare with equivalent distributions for both the attempted in-scope sample and the total sample initially selected (many of which were not actually used).

On most characteristics there are few sizeable differences between the attempted in-scope sample and the original sample selected, suggesting that for the most part sample exclusions did not markedly affect the composition of the sample. There are, however, three exceptions. First, Indigenous persons were more likely to be excluded from the attempted sample than non-Indigenous persons. This might reflect greater mobility on the part of Indigenous persons. However, it also reflects our differential sampling method which began with the assumption that areas with high concentrations of Indigenous persons would have lower rates of response. This proved not to be true, and as a result relatively more cases in these areas did not need to be issued to field. Second, ex-offenders were relatively more likely to be omitted



or excluded, reflecting both a higher rate of mobility and a relatively greater likelihood of indicating a preference not to be involved in research. Third, and entirely as expected given our restriction on interviewing persons who move away from the selected clusters, persons who have a recent history of frequently changing address are more likely to have been excluded. Statistically significant differences were also found with respect to gender, country of birth, benefit type and time on income support, but in all of these instances we would argue that the size of the difference is too small to suggest it will make any practical difference to any analysis of the data.

More pervasive and marked differences occur when comparing the responding sample with the in-scope sample, suggestive of response bias. This can be seen most obviously by looking at the differences across groups in the response rate, reported in the final column of Table 2. Thus, and slightly unexpected, response rates were lowest among the “vulnerable” group (57%), even though they are expected to be the least disadvantaged, and highest among persons flagged as being at risk of homelessness (67%). Far less surprising, men, while still representing the largest fraction of the responding sample, were less likely to respond than women (57% vs 68%). This is a result common to many surveys. Other significant differences in response were uncovered with respect to: age (both the very young – under 21 – and older persons – 45 to 64 – were most likely to respond; the presence of dependent children (persons with children had much higher response rates than those without); the proportion of time spent on income support (with response rates mostly rising with time on income support); and whether an ex-offender (with ex-offenders being less likely to respond). Differences with respect to Indigenous status, country of birth, marital status (but then very few members of the sample were partnered), whether a respondent had a recorded history of psychological problems, and recent residential mobility were all statistically insignificant.

Overall, and despite the presence of a number of statistically significant differences, the characteristics of the responding sample mostly do not seem to be so different from the initial selected sample to suggest response bias is a major problem that is either non-ignorable or cannot be dealt with by data users.

## **Other Survey Outcomes**

### *Data Linkage*

As previously mentioned, a key feature of the design of the study is the ability to link survey respondent data to their Centrelink administrative data records, which provides accurate

information about respondents' income support history. Linking the survey data to these records, however, requires gaining the informed consent of respondents. A consent question was thus included in the wave 1 survey instrument, with 93.5% of respondents agreeing to their Centrelink information being used for research purposes by research staff within both the Melbourne Institute and FaHCSIA (and subject to the assurance that no identifying information from the survey would ever be passed on to Centrelink).

#### *Item Non-response*

Survey non-response can also take the form of survey respondents choosing not to, or being unable to, answer specific questions. In most interviewer-administered surveys this is usually not a large problem and Journeys Home is no exception, with item non-response averaging less than 1%. That said, item non-response is an issue in those sub-sections of the instrument where respondents are prompted to consider opting out. As noted earlier, these occur at the start of the section on exposure to violence, and then again within this section prior to the sequence on sexual violence commencing. Almost 7% of respondents indicated that their preference was to skip the exposure to violence sequence, while a further 5% indicated that they did not wish to answer the sexual violence questions.

#### *Interviewer Observations*

Interviewers were asked to indicate whether respondents appeared to have 'problems' that may have affected the interview. A relatively large proportion of respondents (18%) were identified as being affected by at least one problem. Such problems included English language difficulties, mental illness, being under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or just general confusion on the part of the respondent.

Interviewers also rated respondents according to their understanding of the questions, their level of cooperation, and their degree of suspicion about the study. Despite the high prevalence of potential problems, ratings of understanding were mostly very positive (63% = excellent; 30% = good). Less than 1% were assessed as having a poor (or very poor) understanding. Assessments of cooperation were even more favourable (75% = excellent; 22% = good). Further, just over 94% of respondents were recorded as not being suspicious at all about the study, while only a handful of cases (n=8) were very suspicious.

Finally, the interview situation was not always one which the interviewer could control, with 19% involving the presence of another adult. In most of these cases it was the interviewer's

opinion that the presence of another did not influence any answers. Nevertheless, in just over one-quarter of these cases the presence of another was reported as having “a little” influence.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Mounting a large-scale longitudinal survey of a population dominated by homeless people and others facing insecure housing situations or having recent experience of housing difficulties is no small challenge. It should thus be unsurprising that no previous study of this scope, size or methodological rigour has previously been conducted in Australia.

Nevertheless, the experience of Journeys Home suggests that well designed and resourced surveys can succeed in reaching these populations. Indeed, the experience of Journeys Home suggests that most sample members are highly receptive to participation in research studies. This is most obviously reflected in relatively high rates of unit response, extremely low rates of item non-response, high consent rates with respect to data linkage requests, and mostly favourable interviewer assessments about the level of respondent cooperation and suspicion.

The main challenge is simply finding sample members, which, in turn, is a function of the level of resources available for fieldwork. However, given both that relationships have now been established with the participants and the overall positive reaction to the study we are cautiously confident that attrition rates can be kept low.

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**Table 1: Wave 1 call outcomes**

<b>Sample outcome</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
Total sample issued	2992	
Less out-of-scope	273	
Total in-scope sample	2719	100.0
Completed interviews	1676	61.6
Terminations	14	0.5
Incapable	22	0.8
Refusal	369	13.7
Other non-response		
Contact made	138	5.1
Non-contact and all calls made	316	11.6
Moved to unknown address	184	6.8

**Table 2: Population and sample member characteristics (%)**

<b>Characteristic<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Selected sample<sup>b</sup> (n=4913)</b>	<b>Attempted in-scope sample (n=2719)</b>	<b>Respondents (n=1682)</b>	<b>Response rate<sup>c</sup></b>
<b>Homelessness indicator</b>				
Homeless	35.0	34.9	34.5	61.1
At risk	33.3	34.5	37.3	66.9
Vulnerable	31.7	30.6	28.2	57.1
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	60.2	58.8	54.6	57.4
Female	39.8	41.2	45.4	68.2
<b>Age group</b>				
15-17	10.8	11.4	12.6	68.4
18-20	14.1	14.3	14.9	64.4
21-24	12.6	12.8	12.1	58.2
25-34	23.6	23.0	21.6	58.1
35-44	21.0	20.7	19.7	59.1
45-54	13.0	12.8	14.0	67.3
55-64	4.0	4.1	4.5	67.6
65+	1.0	0.9	0.7	48.0
<b>Indigenous status</b>				
Non-Indigenous	77.8	82.3	82.8	62.2
Indigenous	22.3	17.7	17.2	60.1
<b>Country of birth</b>				
Australia	86.2	87.1	87.3	62.0
English speaking country	5.4	5.8	6.1	65.6
Non-English speaking country	8.4	7.2	6.6	56.9
<b>Marital status</b>				
Single	93.0	93.6	93.0	61.5
Married	1.0	0.7	0.7	60.0
De facto	5.4	5.1	5.7	69.6
Unknown	0.6	0.6	0.5	56.3
<b>Has dependent children</b>				
No	86.7	86.2	83.6	60.0
Yes	13.3	13.8	16.4	73.4
<b>Benefit type</b>				
Not on income support	3.3	2.7	2.6	58.1
Students	5.4	5.8	6.2	66.2
Youth Allowance (other)	16.3	16.8	18.0	65.9
New Start Allowance	43.0	42.4	38.7	56.5
Disability support Pension	21.8	21.6	22.1	63.5
Parenting payment	7.4	8.2	10.0	75.7
Other	2.7	2.6	2.5	60.0

<b>Characteristic<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Selected sample<sup>b</sup> (n=4913)</b>	<b>Attempted in-scope sample (n=2719)</b>	<b>Respondents (n=1682)</b>	<b>Response rate<sup>c</sup></b>
Proportion of time on income support (since age 16)				
Under age 16	0.6	0.5	0.5	61.5
Less than 0.1	4.4	4.0	2.6	39.4
0.10 to 0.24	7.3	7.7	7.8	63.0
0.25 to 0.49	16.2	16.6	14.9	55.8
0.5 to 0.74	22.6	21.0	19.9	58.4
0.75 to 0.89	18.8	18.8	19.7	64.8
0.9 to 0.99	26.4	27.7	30.5	68.2
1.0	3.9	3.8	4.2	68.3
Ex-offender				
No	77.8	80.6	82.5	63.3
Yes	22.2	19.4	17.5	56.0
Ever recorded psychological / psychiatric problem				
No	61.4	60.5	60.1	61.4
Yes	38.7	39.5	40.0	62.5
Numbers of recorded changes in home address in past year				
0	17.7	18.8	18.2	59.9
1	27.4	28.0	28.2	62.4
2	23.8	24.4	24.5	62.2
3+	31.2	28.9	29.1	62.3

a All characteristics are as recorded in the RED on the 27<sup>th</sup> May 2011.

b Excludes any persons known to have died prior to 27 May.

c Calculated as the number of respondents divided by the number of in-scope sample members.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Though even here estimates can vary widely because of differences in the way the definition of homelessness is applied (ABS 2011). In large part, this reflects the fact that the Census was never designed to measure homelessness.

<sup>2</sup> For a review of Australian research on homelessness pathways, see Pinkney and Ewing (2006, Appendix B).

<sup>3</sup> While the RED includes information on all Centrelink customers, it does not include all of the details that are available within the Centrelink customer database.

<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately there are no available data indicating how close to complete the coverage is. We do know, however, that among users of government-funded specialist homelessness services (who represent 27% of the homeless population in the revised ABS homeless count [ABS 2011]) somewhere between 83 and 85 per cent relied on government payment as their *main* source of income in 2009/10 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Detailed results of this estimation are not reported here but are available, on request, from the authors.

<sup>6</sup> The assumed response rate was 52% in all clusters, except for the six with the highest concentrations of indigenous people, where it was 45%. The sample was issued to field in randomly allocated batches in each cluster to limit deviations from the desired number of achieved interviews if the actual response rates were higher or lower than expected.

<sup>7</sup> These are mostly cases where Centrelink staff have identified individuals as either having a predisposition towards violence or are in domestic situations where they are frequently exposed to violence.

<sup>8</sup> This will be an upper bound estimate given that no contact was made with a sizeable number of sample members, some of whom can also be expected to have moved out of scope.