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Client Circumstances Before and After SAAP Assistance: An Analysis of the National Data Collection, 2002—03

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Introduction

If a program is to be successful for clients, it is important to be able to assess the outcomes before and after having been in the program. In order to draw some conclusions about the success of SAAP the following article attempts to summarise briefly the changes in circumstances experienced by SAAP clients when compared with their pre-SAAP circumstances.

The article uses the benchmarks employed by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) SAAP National Data Collection (NDC) to make the comparisons, namely source of income, employment status, accommodation type and living situation. The data provided suggest that most clients benefit from SAAP assistance and the following analysis provides brief explanation of the trends.

An explanation of the data used

The data provided by the NDC which compares clients before and after SAAP is divided into two cohorts. Firstly, the circumstances of all clients whose support periods have ended are compared. Second, only those clients (whose support periods have ended) who stated that they required particular types of assistance (for example, in obtaining independent accommodation) are compared (AIHW 2003, p. 86).

It is important to add that the number of clients who requested specific services is small compared with the overall SAAP population (ranging from approximately 7% to 35% of the total cohort). However, examining both sets of data together allows a comparison of the changes in circumstances between (1) those who asked for particular types of assistance and (2) those who did not. The results reveal that the before and after comparison is more favourable when the requests were specifically made.

The data used in the following are based on the circumstances at the end of a ‘closed support period’. A closed support period is defined by the AIHW as a support period which concludes within the year surveyed (the 12 months to June 30; AIHW 2003, p. xiv).

Source of Income

As indicated in Table 1 below, clients who requested assistance obtaining and maintaining a pension or benefit generally experienced an improvement in their income after exiting from SAAP. Significantly, there was a rise in the numbers in receipt of a government pension or benefit (73.2% up to 85.6%) and a corresponding decrease in the numbers with no income at all (16.2% down to 5.9%). There was only a slight decline in the percentage with no income but awaiting the payment of a pension/benefit.

In comparison, the following points regarding clients overall are notable.

- The proportion of clients with either no income or in receipt of a government payment was approximately equal among both cohorts (6.6% for all vs 5.9% and 86.2% for all vs 85.6% respectively).
- Clients overall experienced more modest improvements in their income source (with the exception of ‘no income, awaiting pension/benefit’).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of income</th>
<th>Before</th>
<th>After</th>
<th>Before</th>
<th>After</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No income</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No income, awaiting pension/benefit</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government pension/benefit</td>
<td>73.2</td>
<td>85.6</td>
<td>83.8</td>
<td>86.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Employment Status

Table 2 highlights the positive effects of SAAP assistance among clients who requested assistance with employment and training. Although the most common employment status among such clients before and after SAAP was ‘unemployed (looking for work)’, there was a decline in the number of clients constituting this category (50% to 42.7%). Similarly there was:

- a decline in the second most frequent employment status (‘not in labour force’; 41.4% to 38%);
- a significant rise of those in full-time employment (1.4% to 5.7%); and
- a rise in the percentage of clients in part-time or casual employment (7.3% to 13.5%).

However, the proportion of clients in employment is still low compared with the general (non-SAAP) population, and as employment and income are closely linked to obtaining appropriate, affordable and sustainable accommodation, the figures provide some insight into the barriers experienced by SAAP clients.

When the above data are compared with all SAAP clients, the following are noteworthy.

- A much lower percentage of clients were in either full-time (3.6%) or part-time/casual employment (7.2%) post-SAAP.
- A smaller proportion were unemployed (looking for work; 30.6%) which would include those in receipt of unemployment payments.
- A higher percentage of clients were not in the labour force at all (58.7% vs 38%).
- Clients overall did not experience a significant change in their employment status especially when compared with the more favourable outcomes experienced by clients who needed assistance with employment issues.

Living Situation

Table 3 illustrates the living situations of all clients before and after SAAP assistance. The most common living situation before SAAP was with ‘spouse/partner with/without children’ which accounted for almost a quarter (23%) of clients. This was followed by clients living alone (20%) and those staying with relatives/friends in the short-term (17.4%). In contrast, the clients after SAAP were most likely to be living alone (22.6%), alone with their children (18.7%) or with their spouse/partner with or without children (15.6%).

The significant decline in the proportion living with a spouse/partner with/without children after SAAP (from 23% before to 15.6% after) and the corresponding rise in those living alone with their children (10.9% up to 18.7%) probably reflects the large number of women and children who come to SAAP escaping domestic violence (29,200 clients nationally or 22.1% of the SAAP population; AIHW 2003, pp. 23–24, 26–27). Such data suggests that, in many cases, these clients are able, via SAAP, to move away from abusive situations into more suitable accommodation.

The decline (albeit modest) in clients living with friends or relatives in the short-term (17.4% to 13.7% after) and the corresponding rise in the proportion of clients staying with friends and relatives in the long-term (3.7% to 5.3%) may be considered as a favourable outcome. Put differently, clients resided in this living situation in the long-term after SAAP at almost one and a half (1.4) times the rate as before they received support (amounting to nearly a 50% increase). Many clients, including young people, have a history of moving between short-term, unstable, informal accommodation with friends or family members as circumstances permit (often referred to as ‘couch surfing’). The data here suggests a degree of success in moving away from such less desirable housing towards, for example, renting with friends or residing with relatives on a more long-term, stable basis.
Similarly, fewer clients lived with their parents (10% down to 8% — a 20% decrease) after SAAP than before. As family conflict (along with domestic violence) is a principle reason for presenting at SAAP agencies (AIHW 2003, pp. 22, 26), the movement (although modest) away from living in previous circumstances post-SAAP should be regarded favourably.

**Accommodation**

Table 4 shows the housing outcomes among SAAP clients after a support period, especially for those who needed specific assistance to secure housing. The Table reveals:

- a substantial increase in the proportion accommodated in public or community housing (up to 20.7% from 7.9%);
- a decrease in accommodation in private rental (from 17% to 26%); and
- a decrease in the percentage residing in more unstable forms of housing such as living rent free in a house or flat (from 13.6% to 7.9%) and living "rough" (6.7% to 1.5%).

As living rent-free may also indicate the absence of independent accommodation, it is significant that fewer clients lived in such accommodation subsequent to SAAP. Other notable trends include an unchangeable proportion of clients residing rooming houses, hostels, hotels or caravans (defined as ‘tertiary homelessness’; 8.2% to 8.3%).

Also of note are the 16.1% of clients who requested assistance to access accommodation and the 20.4% of clients generally who were accommodated in SAAP after a support period. This is likely due to clients accessing a different level of supported accommodation (moving from short to longer-term SAAP accommodation) and/or accommodation from a separate agency. However, the circumstances in which clients move onto further accommodated support periods are not clearly discernible from the data. Thus the number of clients requiring further SAAP accommodation may be of concern.

The SAAP population overall did not fare so well. Compared with clients who requested assistance with obtaining/maintaining independent accommodation, SAAP clients generally were:

- less likely to move into more desirable accommodation such as private rental (26% vs 18.8%) or public/community housing (20.7% vs 16.5%);
- more likely to remain in SAAP accommodation (20.4% vs 16.1%);
- twice as likely (3% vs 1.5%) to be living ‘rough’ post-SAAP, (although clients in both cohorts were less likely to be living in such a situation after SAAP than before);
- only slightly more likely to be accommodated in private rental or public/community housing after SAAP than before, in contrast with clients who received assistance with obtaining accommodation.

**Conclusion**

This article has attempted to compare client circumstances before and after SAAP support. Such comparisons are crucial for evaluating the success of the program. The above analysis provides only a snapshot of the experience of people who are homeless in need of other assistance.

The results show that clients who requested the specific types of support identified here experienced more favourable circumstances after SAAP assistance than before in relation to:

- income;
- employment;
- accommodation; and
- living situation.

By contrast, however, the SAAP population overall did not experience as favourable outcomes after exiting SAAP, particularly in their accommodation after support. In fact, when considering the SAAP population overall, many people who leave SAAP are in much the same circumstances as when they entered it. This obviously tempers the more favourable outcomes by those clients who received specific types of support, as does the exclusion from the data of clients from ‘high volume’ agencies. Such clients (constituting 20% of support periods) are more likely to be chronically homeless and experience less favourable outcomes after exiting SAAP (AIHW 2003, p. 80).

Further, policy implications can be drawn from the above analysis including: why are outcomes not more favourable overall? What would need to be done to achieve better exit circumstances for clients? More questions need to be asked of both the data and SAAP itself to establish why, for example, more clients do not move to public housing and why some remain in SAAP. By assessing the extent of positive (and adverse) outcomes for SAAP clients, the above data is able to inform future policy development in terms of client need, service provision and agency funding.

The author would like to thank the two referees and Dr Rodney Fopp who provided valuable feedback now incorporated into this article.