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According to the best estimates at the time, almost 105,000 Australians were homeless on census night in August 2006. This promoted then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to make the ambitious commitment to accommodate all people sleeping rough and halving the number of homeless in Australia by 2020.

The Government committed significant resources for specialist homeless services and new affordable housing initiatives, particularly through economic stimulus and various multi-governmental...
agreements under the new federal financial relations regime.

But how successful have Australian governments been in reducing homelessness?

At this stage, we don’t know. Part of the reason is the difficulty in estimating the number of people who are homeless. But hopefully the Australian Bureau of Statistics’ (ABS) revised definition of homelessness will give us a clearer understanding of the crisis in Australia.

**The existing definition**

Since 2001, the “cultural definition” of homelessness, developed by Melbourne academics Chris Chamberlain and David MacKenzie, has been used to describe the nature and extent of homelessness in Australia. This definition defines homelessness as not having access to:

> “the minimum accommodation that people have the right to expect in order to live according to the conventions of contemporary life”.

Chamberlain and Mackenzie describe the accepted minimum Australian community standard as “a small rented flat”, with the minimum required amenities, such as a bedroom, living room, bathroom and kitchen.

This “cultural definition” of homelessness led to the identification of three categories within the homeless population:

a) **primary homelessness** – people without conventional accommodation living on the streets, in deserted buildings, railway carriages, under bridges and in parks (“rough sleepers”);

b) **secondary homelessness** – people moving between various forms of temporary shelter including friends’ homes, emergency accommodation, refuges and hostels; and

c) **tertiary homelessness** – people living permanently in single rooms private boarding houses without their own bathroom or kitchen and without security of tenure. They are homeless because their accommodation does not satisfy the requisite conditions of the minimum community standard.

The ABS endorsed this “cultural” definition of homelessness, but in 2009 advised that it was reviewing Chamberlain and MacKenzie’s seminal work to provide its own official methodology.

**A new definition**

The ABS released a discussion paper reviewing the methodology of Counting the Homeless in March 2011. It didn’t change the definition but it challenged some of the assumptions that informed the definition. The discussion paper was criticised for lacking consultation with experts and failing to have an on-the-ground understanding of homelessness.
Commendably, the ABS then took the opportunity to engage more fully with experts in homelessness policy and service delivery. As a result of this work, the ABS released a report earlier this month that includes a new definition of homelessness:

When a person does not have suitable accommodation alternatives they are considered homeless if their current living arrangement:

- is in a dwelling that is inadequate; or
- has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable; or
- does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations.

Unlike the cultural definition, which judges the adequacy of housing against an amorphous “standard”, this new definition is informed by the notion of “home” and the elements that are consistently identified with home.

The definition is intended to operationalize the collection of official estimates of homelessness through the Census. While an admirable goal, this presents several practical difficulties.

The definition includes elements of “habitability” or “adequacy”, which aren’t measured by Census data. And the definition fails to address any specific cultural definition issues relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ understandings of home or homelessness, which the ABS have committed to addressing.

Interestingly, the Commonwealth is now contemplating a new statutory definition of homelessness. The Commonwealth’s definition has been criticised for introducing an element of choice into peoples’ experience of homelessness, risking the perpetuation of the common myth that people choose to be homeless.

It is unfortunate that there will be multiple definitions rather than a commonly accepted and understood definition, but the loose consensus on the ABS’s work may lead to an agreed definition and understanding of homelessness.

Recounting the homeless

A week after releasing the new definition, the ABS recast the estimate of people who were counted as homeless through the Census process in 2001 and 2006. As a result, the number of homeless Australians counted changed from about 100,000 to over 95,000 in 2001 and 105,000 to almost 90,000 in 2006.

There are also changes in demographic groups: the estimate of people experiencing homelessness in the Northern Territory has almost tripled; overcrowding is recognised as a new form of homelessness; and the number of young people (aged 12-18) has halved. The measurement of young homeless
people is particularly problematic (acknowledged by the ABS) and may be the clearest example of the shortcomings of using census data to measure homelessness.

While the use of Census data is problematic, this data shows a minor decrease in the number of people experiencing homelessness from 2001 to 2006, and the ABS will release its estimation of homelessness from the 2011 census later this year, which will hopefully show a further decrease.

Despite the revised figures, as Council to Homeless Persons CEO Jenny Smith points out, there is still a huge and growing demand for homelessness services, with thousands of people becoming homeless on any given night and limited resources in the sector to deal with this pressure.

The ABS’s commendable work in measuring homelessness will enable the government to report against its commitment to halve homelessness by 2020. While the census isn’t the only tool, it is part of a body of work that will contribute to a better understanding of homelessness, and how it can be ended.