



research bulletin



Riverland Rough Sleeper Count November 2009

Introduction

The Riverland area¹ encompasses 5 major centres:

- Waikerie
- Barmera
- Berri
- Renmark, and
- Loxton.

According to *Counting the Homeless 2006: South Australia*², there were 434 people who were homeless in the Riverland on census night in 2006. The rate of homelessness in the region was reported to be 108 per 10,000, compared with 68 per 10,000 for regional and remote South Australia. Twenty-four per cent, or 103 of the homeless people in the Riverland, were in improvised dwellings, tents, or sleeping rough. This data suggests the Riverland has one of the highest incidence of homelessness outside the metropolitan area in South Australia. Consequently, a decision was made by the Homelessness Inter-Ministerial Committee (HIMC) to conduct a Count of 'rough sleepers' in the Riverland area, to:

- monitor current levels of homelessness; and
- provide more information about the circumstances and profiles of the primary homeless population.

In South Australia, 'Rough Sleeper Counts' have been conducted in the Inner City of Adelaide since June 2007 and have proved a useful tool in monitoring the number of rough sleepers in the area.

The Riverland Rough Sleeper Count was conducted on the 8th and 9th of November 2009. The Count was a partnership between the Department for Families and Communities (DFC), the Social Inclusion Unit (Department of Premier and Cabinet) and local agencies and services including:

For more information:

Department for Families and
Communities
Business Affairs
Research Unit

research@dfc.sa.gov.au

ph: 08 8413 8176

www.dfc.sa.gov.au/research/

¹ A map of the Riverland is attached as Appendix A.

² Chamberlain, C & Mackenzie, D (2009) *Counting the Homeless 2006: South Australia*. Cat.no. HOU 206. Canberra: AIHW.

- DFC (Housing SA)
- SA Police
- the Department for Environment and Heritage (Park Rangers)
- Community Health (SA Health)
- Life Without Barriers
- Aboriginal Sobriety Group
- Anglican Community Care
- Mission Australia, and
- The Salvation Army.

Methodology

During the initial phase of planning for the Riverland Count, a focus group was held with key local partners to develop the data collection methodology, discuss homelessness in the region and identify the likely locations where people 'sleeping rough' would be found.

Local partners reported that the majority of people 'sleeping rough' would be found along the banks of the River Murray. Key locations were identified on a large scale map of the area. It was also noted that, unlike the Inner City Count, meal and day centres (where people congregate and can be easily accessed) were not a feature of the local response to homelessness. Thus, scans of identified areas were necessary in order to locate people sleeping rough. Local support agencies also agreed to administer questionnaire surveys for people attending their services on that day. These agencies were:

- Housing SA, Berri
- Anglican Community Care
- Mission Australia
- Riverland Community Services: Salvation Army

Local partners also identified a Sunday afternoon 'soup run', organised by a local church group, as another useful way of contacting people who may be homeless. Considering the logistics of the Count (including the need to use local services and the geographic distance to be covered), a decision was made to run the Count over two days, commencing with the soup run at 4.00 pm on Sunday (8th November) and continuing through Monday (9th November) from 7:30 am to 2 pm.

A questionnaire was developed to reflect local requirements. This questionnaire was focused on the people in primary homelessness, including those sleeping outside,

living in improvised dwellings (including caravans in very poor conditions), in tents or cars (the survey questionnaire is attached as Appendix B).

A few days before the actual Count, officers from DFC attended the Riverland, providing comprehensive training to those who would be involved and confirming the final logistical arrangements. This included confirming the final draft of a schedule allocating 'Count Teams' to specific sites throughout the region and ensuring vehicles would be available to transport collectors between across the area.

During the Count itself, local service providers and volunteers assigned to Count Teams took the lead in identifying and engaging with respondents, while DFC staff played a more supportive but less obvious role. The teams went to the designated areas along the river, taking with them bottled water (because of the hot conditions). Sandwiches were also offered to some respondents.

Collectors located people by physically walking through likely sites and the areas where homeless people were known to stay, including along the river and in townships. This was a very thorough process and, though a small number of people may have been hidden and not located by the collectors, it is unlikely that this would have been more than a very few.

Given the focus on people 'sleeping rough', collectors did not approach obvious holiday makers. They generally reported that they had no difficulty in discriminating between holiday makers and rough sleepers, making this judgement on the basis of visual cues such as standard of accommodation, dress, and behaviour. Thus, an older couple relaxing outside of a well appointed caravan over a glass of wine, although showing an interest in proceedings, were clearly not the focus of this exercise; however, some 'backpackers' and individuals in cars were not so easily categorised.

The collectors approached people whom they thought could be in the target group, explained to them what they were doing, and invited their participation in completing the short survey questionnaire. For those who declined to participate or were assessed to be incapable of providing informed consent and completing the survey (eg due to inebriation), questionnaires were completed (as much as possible) according to the collector's observation and/or knowledge. In all, only one person declined to participate and two others were observed to be incapacitated (from alcohol) and unable to participate. The presence of any children accompanying adults was recorded on the survey relating to the adult participants.

Survey questionnaires were also placed at key 'shop front' agencies, including Housing SA and other services in Berri and Waikerie, to be used if homeless people presented at these agencies on the Monday of the Count.

Collectors completed surveys for 25 adults and two accompanying children. One of these respondents was in stable housing, and was therefore excluded from the total. All but two of the respondents were found along the river or in the vicinity of Lake Bonney at Barmera. No surveys were completed at local offices, when the extreme temperatures on that day meant few people were in town or attending services.

The 24 adults and two children identified as sleeping rough or in improvised dwellings were significantly less than the 103 recorded in the Census in 2006. It is noted again that the November Count was very thorough and could not have missed more than a very few.

Findings

Twenty-four adults and two children 'sleeping rough' were located in the Count. Most commonly, people were staying in tents (33.3%) and old caravans³ (29.2%) (Table 1). Most respondents were in the Plush's Bend area (Table 2 and Appendix A). The most common reason given for being there was "nowhere else to stay" (Table 3).

Fourteen or 58.3% of the respondents reported having been in their current location for less than six months, with only three (12.5%) being there for more than two years (Table 4). Half (12) of the respondents reported they had been without stable and permanent housing for more than one year, with nine individuals (37.5%) homeless for more than two years (Table 5). The majority of respondents had spent most of their time in the last 12 months in the Riverland (Table 6).

Males outnumbered females in the Count, (19 to 5 Table 7). Whilst most respondents were aged between 35 and 64 years, one was younger than 25 years and another over 65 years. The majority (62.5%) were born in Australia and 5 people (20.8%) identified as Indigenous. Most people were single adults. Two children, aged 15 and 8 respectively, were located: they were staying with two Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults (extended family members), in a shed.

Domestic violence and mental health issues were (informally) reported by three individuals. One woman was sleeping in a tent, having recently left home to escape domestic violence. Another woman reported domestic violence from her partner who suffered from serious mental illness. Collectors also noted one man with clear mental health issues living in a house boat. The house boat was described by the collector as being in a very poor condition, with a leak in the pontoon and without kitchen or bathroom facilities⁴.

³ Caravans are not included as improvised dwellings in the category of 'primary homelessness' for the ABS Census. However, a decision was made to include the caravans reported here because of the condition of the vans (described by collectors as 'appalling' and 'unroadworthy', including without access to fresh water, toilet or bathroom facilities, power connections, and generator). None of these caravans were in caravan parks.

⁴ And thus was also included as an 'improvised dwelling'.

Only three respondents reported that they had or would use another local service on the day, or the day following the Count, namely, Centrelink and Life Without Barriers.⁵

Summary

The Riverland Rough Sleeper Count identified 26 people (including 2 children) who were currently experiencing primary homelessness. This is considerably less than the 103 people reported in *Counting the Homeless 2006: South Australia* (with figures derived from the Census 2006 data).

Possible explanations for the differences in this count and *Counting the Homeless 2006: South Australia* include:

- The different time of the year in which the counts were conducted (August compared to November)
- The specific targeting of people in rough sleeping homeless circumstances in this count may have been more successful in excluding backpackers, seasonal workers (with homes elsewhere) and people in 'improvised dwellings' in the Census (such as shacks and sheds along the river bank - for example, people living in a shed whilst building their own home). This issue has been nationally recognised as requiring further investigation by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)
- There is also anecdotal evidence that the SAPOL drug squad had recently visited the region, which may have been a factor in people moving away from the Riverland during this period.

Local informants (including service providers) indicated that the 2009 figure (of 26 people) was more consistent with their local knowledge of homelessness in the region. This suggests that the *Counting the Homeless* figure may not be an accurate count of rough sleeping in the region.

The Riverland Rough Sleeper Count (November 2009) is the first regional rough sleeper count of this type nationally. Testing the validity of the results from this count can only be confirmed by future counts. South Australia are now in a better position to provide advice to the Commonwealth and the Australian Bureau of Statistics during their planning and implementation of regional rough sleeper counts as part of the 2011 Census. The Department for Families and Communities and the Social Inclusion Unit (DPC) will be discussing future rough sleeper counts in the Riverland region.

⁵ The data of service utilisation should be interpreted with caution. On the Monday of November 2009, due to the hot weather, some centre-based agencies in Riverland, including Housing SA, Salvation Army, Mission Australia, and Anglican Community Care, reported no homeless people using their services.

Table 1: Type of shelter stayed in on the night of 8 November 2009

Type of shelter	n	%
Caravan	7	29.2
Car	2	8.3
Tent	8	33.3
Squat	1	4.2
Swag	1	4.2
Riverbank	2	8.3
Shed	2	8.3
Other(house boat)	1	4.2
Total	24	100.0

Table 2: Location of shelter used on the night of 8 November 2009

Location of shelter	n	%
Plush's Bend	9	37.5
Martins Bend	4	16.7
Rodeo grounds	1	4.2
Gurra Creek	1	4.2
Lake Bonney	2	8.3
Berri Township area	2	8.3
Other	3	12.5
Maize Island	1	4.2
Ricciuto Rd., Waikerie	2	8.3
Unknown	2	8.3
Total	24	100.0

Table 3: Main reason for staying in current shelter

Main reason	n	%
Looking for work	3	12.5
Working in the area	1	4.2
Living here permanently	5	20.8
Nowhere else to stay	10	41.7
Other	2	8.3
Unknown	3	12.5
Total	24	100.0

Table 4: Length of time at shelter used on the night of 8 November 2009

Length of time at shelter	n	%
Less than or equal one week	3	12.5
2 to 4 weeks	5	20.8
5 to 11 weeks	1	4.2
3 to 6 months	5	20.8
7 to 12 months	3	12.5
1 to 2 years	0	0
More than 2 years	3	12.5
Unknown	4	16.7
Total	24	100.0

Table 5: Length of time since last stable housing

Length of time	n	%
Less than or equal one week	1	4.2
2 to 4 weeks	1	4.2
5 to 11 weeks	0	0
3 to 6 months	3	12.5
7 to 12 months	2	8.3
1 to 2 years	3	12.5
More than 2 years	9	37.5
Unknown	5	20.8
Total	24	100.0

Table 6: Location of accommodation spent most time at in past twelve months

Location	n	%
Riverland	16	66.7
Adelaide metro	0	0
Other country South Australia	1	4.2
Interstate	2	8.3
New South Wales	1	4.2
Northern Territory	1	4.2
Unknown	5	20.8
Total	24	100.0

Table 7: Demographic information

	n	%
Age groups		
Under 18	0	0
18 to 24	1	4.2
25 to 34	3	12.5
35 to 44	6	25.0
45 to 54	5	20.8
55 to 64	5	20.8
65 to 74	1	4.2
75 and over	0	0
Not stated	3	12.5
Gender		
Male	19	79.2
Female	5	20.8
Country of birth		
Australia	15	62.5
Other	9	37.5
Cultural background		
Aboriginal	3	12.5
Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander	2	8.3
Non-indigenous	14	58.3
Not stated	5	20.8
Living arrangement		
Single person	17	70.8
Single person and with children	0	0
Couple and no children	3	12.5
Adults and with children	2	8.3
Staying with friends, relatives or an unrelated group	2	8.3
Total	24	100.0

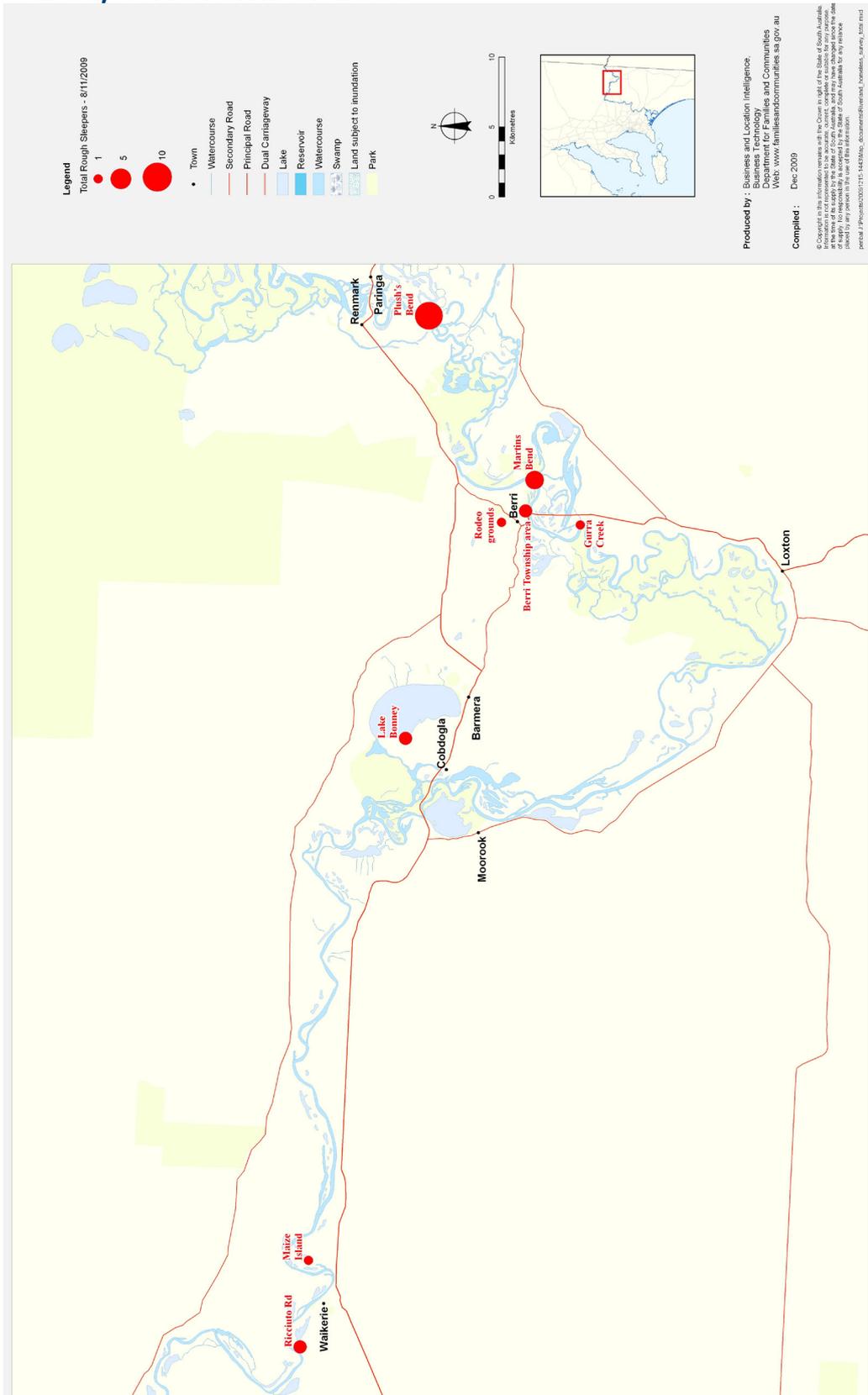
For more information about the *Inner City Rough Sleeper Street Count*, including information about previous Counts, please visit the Department for Families and Communities Research Unit webpage at www.dfc.sa.gov.au/research/

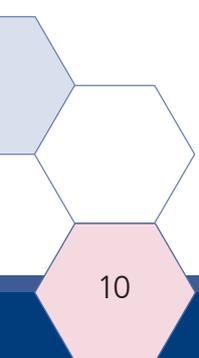
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Appendix A - Distribution of rough sleepers in Riverland area, 8 November 2009





Appendix B - Survey Questionnaire

Introduction

The survey must be explained to the person, who must then give their consent to participate. For example:

Have you heard about the count which is happening today of people in the Riverland? The aim is to find out more about people who are sleeping outside or in cars or tents. This includes where people are staying, and a little bit about them and their housing circumstances. This information will help both the government and Riverland services in their planning for better housing and other services. It is very important that there is accurate information about how many people in Riverland have housing problems or are homeless.

Would you mind if I asked you a few questions as part of this count? It will only take a couple of minutes, and is anonymous and confidential. Is that okay?

The Research Unit in the Department for Families and Communities is going to put together and look after all the data collected today. Data collected will ONLY be used by the Research Unit to produce a report on today's count. No one else in the Department for Families and Communities or other Government agencies will get hold of your data. The report on today's count will just show total numbers of people, and there is no chance that you will be identified in any way. You'll be able to get a copy of the report if you want to.

1. Have you already completed a survey today? (If Yes, **do not** ask any further questions or complete form)

Declined to participate in the survey
No more Questions (By observation - fill out all possible questions please)

Incapacitated to participate in the survey
No more Questions (By observation - fill out all possible questions please)

2. Which of the following best describes where you slept last night?

House or unit
 Caravan
 Hotel or Backpackers
If these, thank you and no further questions

Car
 Tent
 Park
 Squat
 Riverbank
 Swag
 Outside
 Shed
 Other - please specify: _____

3. Where was this located?

Plushes Bend
 Martins Bend
 Rodeo grounds
 Lock 5
 Pike River
 Gurra Creek
 Thiel's Sand Bar
 Lake Bonney
 Berri Township area
 Other - please specify: _____

4. Which one option best describes your main reason for staying here?

- Holiday
- Looking for work
- Working in the area
- Cultural or family gathering
- Living here permanently
- Nowhere else to stay (have no other house or shelter to stay in)
- Other - please specify: _____

5. Do you have a stable and permanent home somewhere else?

- Yes
- No

6. How long have you been staying in the area where you slept last night?

- 1 week or less
- 2 to 4 weeks
- 5 to 11 weeks
- 3 to 6 months
- 7 to 12 months
- 1 to 2 years
- More than 2 years

7. How long has it been since you last had stable and permanent housing?

- 1 week or less
- 2 to 4 weeks
- 5 to 11 weeks
- 3 to 6 months
- 7 to 12 months
- 1 to 2 years
- More than 2 years

8. What area did you spend most of your time in the last 12 months? (Please tick one box only)

- | | | |
|--|---|------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Adelaide metro | <input type="checkbox"/> Interstate (please indicate which state) | <input type="checkbox"/> Vic |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Adelaide metro | | <input type="checkbox"/> WA |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other country South Australia | | <input type="checkbox"/> Qld |
| | | <input type="checkbox"/> NSW |
| | | <input type="checkbox"/> Tas |
| | | <input type="checkbox"/> NT |
| | | <input type="checkbox"/> ACT |

9. Which one option best describes your living arrangement where you slept last night?
- Single person
 - Single person and child/ren **living** with you - Age of these children _____
 - Couple and no children
 - Couple and child/ren **living** with you - Age of these children _____
 - Staying with friends, relatives or an unrelated group
 - Other - please specify: _____
10. What is your age?
- Under 18
 - 18 to 24
 - 25 to 34
 - 35 to 44
 - 45 to 54
 - 55 to 64
 - 65 to 74
 - 75 and over
11. What is your country of birth?
- Australia
 - Other - please specify: _____
12. Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?
- No
 - Yes, Aboriginal
 - Yes, Torres Strait Islander
13. Have you or will you use a local service today? (eg, Centrelink, Salvation Army, etc)
- No
 - Yes - please specify: _____
14. Gender?
- Male
 - Female

SURVEY COMPLETED. THANK THE PARTICIPANT FOR THEIR TIME.

Any observations or comments?

Surveyor ID: