# Understanding the characteristics of those at risk of homelessness

## Problem

**What is the policy problem?**

Homelessness is a complex problem that affects thousands of Australian families and can extend across several generations. It is a challenge for governments to address due to the large number of factors that contribute to the risk of homelessness for vulnerable people. Understanding the characteristics and life pathways of those at risk is essential to providing effective government services. These services can then help vulnerable people to maintain secure housing arrangements and the financial independence needed to support their families into the future.

**What are the data challenges?**

There is very limited data on the living arrangements of people receiving income support (including whether they are at risk of homelessness) with most data based on surveys that have a limited sample size.

## Action

**What have we done so far?**

Six Australian Government agencies have come together, creating the feasibility project, the Multi-Agency Data Integration Project (MADIP). This project has securely linked existing Medicare, government payments, personal income tax, and 2011 Census data.

The agencies include the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Australian Taxation Office, the Department of Education and Training, the Department of Health, the Department of Human Services, and the Department of Social Services.

Analysts from these agencies have explored and analysed the de-identified microdata. The analysis has revealed that household size and labour force participation are key variables that affect the risk of homelessness. These findings show how linked data is useful to provide evidence for complex policy/social issues.

The privacy and confidentiality of personal information is maintained through strong legislative protections as well as best practice data management. The linked data can only be accessed via secure systems and access is restricted to approved users for approved purposes. The MADIP complies with the Privacy Act 1988 and with the legislative responsibilities of each partner agency.

## Outcome

**What has the project let us do?**

The project found clear differences between the characteristics of people at risk of homelessness and those not at risk. For example, working-age members of vulnerable households were less likely to be in employment than those from non-vulnerable households.

The linked data provided robust evidence for policy analysts to determine and investigate the characteristics of small, hard-to-reach groups of vulnerable Australians, while ensuring the privacy and confidentiality of their personal information.

**How will we build on this?**

The project is in an evaluation phase. This project has demonstrated the potential value of linking existing public data. Streamlining data sharing and access arrangements can enable greater efficiencies, and inform decision making within government and the community.

Future partner collaboration could build on the usefulness of linked existing data for policy analysis, research, and statistical purposes.
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Households at risk of or experiencing homelessness

4 person households

Working aged adults:
34% employed
34% receiving a government payment

7 person households

Working aged adults:
28% employed
39% receiving a government payment

Source: MADIP, 2011

- In households at risk of homelessness, people were much more likely to receive social security payments. This pattern remained consistent across smaller and larger households.
- People in smaller at-risk households, with 3 to 5 members, were more likely to be employed and not receiving social security payments compared with individuals who lived in larger at-risk households with 6 or more members.
- In at-risk 4-person households, people were equally likely to be employed and to be receiving social security payments.

These findings demonstrate how the better use of existing public data can inform our understanding of the characteristics and outcomes of groups/those who are at risk of homelessness to target policies and services to help reduce homelessness in Australia.