

# Housing First in Hamilton: Who Were First Housed?

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## Introduction

The People's Project (TPP) in Hamilton (NZ) is a collaborative effort between 13 local organisations which takes a Housing First approach to homelessness.<sup>1</sup> A Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment-funded collaboration between the Universities of Waikato and Otago and TPP<sup>2,3</sup> has allowed the gathering of evidence regarding the Housing First approach to homelessness in Hamilton, the people served, and their engagement in services in the years leading up to registering for support. A better understanding of the sociodemographic characteristics, as well as the specific needs and experiences of this cohort, helps to consider how to most appropriately implement the principles of Housing First to meet the requirements of the local population and context.

For this analysis, TPP provided collated information from its case management system (Recordbase) where responses were provided to a basic questionnaire administered by TPP staff. The dataset contained 49 variables collected during the registration process of 695 individual clients actively engaged in TPP (and not exited from the programme) from July 2015 to March 2017. Informed consent was obtained from each individual for the analysis of their data for research purposes. Questions asked at registration included those within the broad areas of: demographic information; housing situation and preferred housing arrangement; and broader wellbeing indicators. Details in this dataset, particularly in the early years of TPP development, were not always complete or consistently collected. This in part reflects the chaotic nature of people's lives, the learning journey of TPP, and the disinclination of people to share detailed, personal

information during registration to the service. Recognising these challenges, we were nevertheless able to undertake analysis of key components and consider the characteristics and context of this homeless population — including potential triggers that preceded the need for Housing First support.

We present this information here, and discuss implications from our findings with regards to who is facing homelessness and how we can better meet their needs.

## Who is homeless in Hamilton? Demographics and Family Context

Between July 2015 and March 2017, more than half (54.4 per cent) of the 695 TPP Housing First client population were aged between 25 and 44 years at the time of registration with the service, and one-fifth (19.8 per cent) were under 25 years of age. In comparison, 28.1 per cent of the estimated Hamilton resident population (2016) were aged 25 to 44 years and 38.9 per cent aged 24 years or younger.<sup>4</sup> Just over half (55.7 per cent) of those registered with TPP were female, with a greater proportion of those aged 25 to 44 years or under 25 years identifying as female, while a greater proportion of those aged 45 to 65 years registered at TPP were male (Figure 1).

A single ethnic group was recorded for 647 clients, with the majority (73.7 per cent) identifying as Māori (compared to 22 per cent of the Hamilton City population in the Census, where multiple ethnic identities for each person are collected if relevant). The remaining clients identified as NZ European (20.4 per cent), Pacific (3.1 per cent), and other ethnic groups (2.8 per cent).

The ethnicity for 48 people registered with TPP was not recorded.

Data was collected from TPP clients regarding the number of children each person had, and the ages of their children. Both of these data fields were complete for 597 clients, with 28.3 per cent having no children aged under 18 years (described as 'dependent children' for the purposes of this summary), and 56.6 per cent having one to three dependent children. There were approximately 1,039 dependent children among the registered client group. In addition, 32 clients were pregnant at the time of registering with TPP. Each parent was also asked 'Where do your children live?' For the 428 clients with children, over half (55.4 per cent) of the children were living only with the TPP client at the time of registration (and were also therefore homeless). A further 26.9 per cent of parents responded that their children lived with a family member. The remaining children were reported as living with a combination of their parent and other family members. A small proportion (approximately 5 per cent) of dependent children were described as living in foster care.

## Housing Situation Prior to Seeking Housing First Support

Among the 639 TPP clients who described where they slept the most prior to registration, 18.5 per cent reported 'couch surfing' as their most common housing situation, 15.6 per cent said they mostly slept 'on the streets' and 15.5 per cent reported living with family. Motels/hotels were the next most common sleeping location, followed by private rental accommodation. Combinations of these sleeping locations (with night shelters, boarding houses, backpackers, emergency accommodation and Housing NZ properties) were also mentioned.

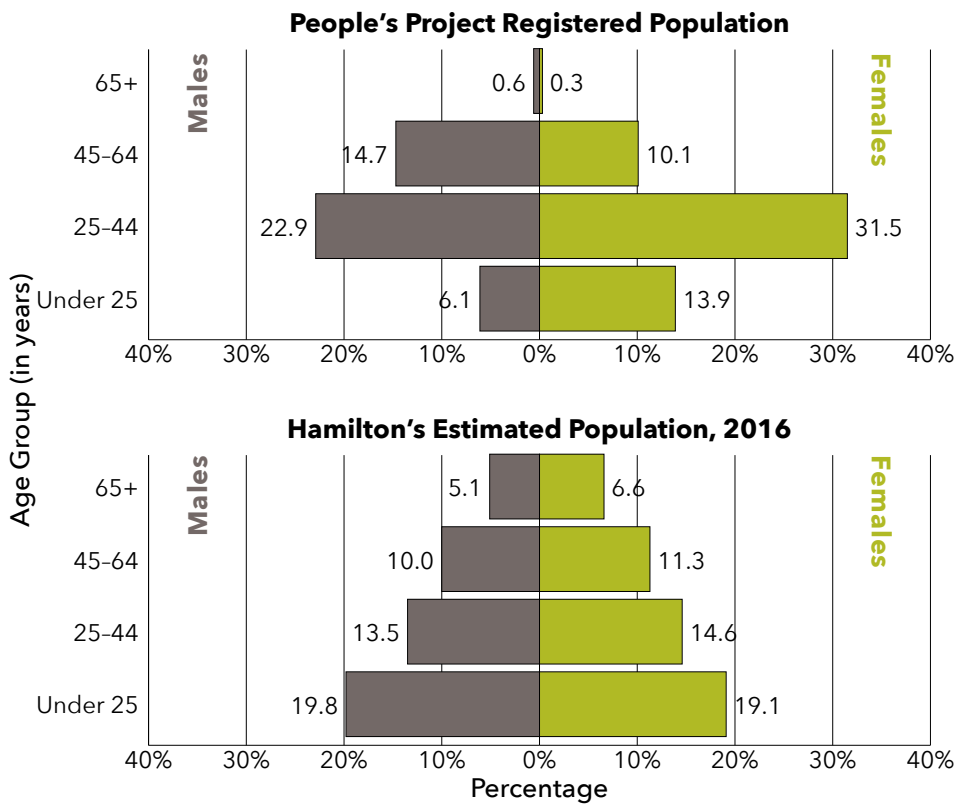


Figure 1. The age-sex profile of the people registered with the People's Project Hamilton compared to that of the estimated population of Hamilton City in 2016.

For the 198 TPP clients (39.8 per cent) who described a prior experience of homelessness at registration, they were then asked 'when and what happened to cause you to become homeless'? Those that answered this question provided a free text response. These responses most frequently described a homelessness trigger associated with a family relationship breakdown (such as domestic violence), followed by a health issue (physical and mental health or addiction), or a tenancy issue (such as the cost of rent).

### Additional Contextual Issues for Homelessness in Hamilton

Of the 695 TPP clients registered between July 2015 and March 2017, 76.5 per cent described being enrolled with a General Practitioner, and 476 were described as cigarette smokers. Approximately half of the clients who indicated drug use were interested in getting support to reduce or stop their drug use, including meeting with Community Drug and Alcohol Services (CADS). CADS and other mental health services, church and Salvation Army, and budgeting services were among the wide range of existing support services described by TPP clients.

With respect to support from budgeting services, one of the common issues described was debt. The question 'do you have any debts?' was answered by 501 TPP clients. Of these, 75.6 per cent described being in financial debt. These clients were also asked how much debt they were in, and the types of debt they had. The amount of debt was estimated by 49.6 per cent of those who stated they were in debt. For these, an average of \$10,000 was owed (median \$4,690; range \$60,000 to \$100,000). The total monetary amount owed by those who described their debt situation in this detail was \$1,912,725. Where information was provided about the types of debt held, the frequency of debt types mentioned (in decreasing order) were to: utilities companies; fines; debt being followed up by BayCorp debt collection agency; Work and Income New Zealand; bank loan/credit card; mobile/home shopping trucks; car finance; rental/landlords; and student loans.

### Conclusions and Implications for Housing First Provision in Hamilton

This analysis of the early TPP database and its 695 clients found that in Hamilton, Māori, those aged 25 to 44 years, and those with children were commonly requesting

the support of Housing First. This population has clearly experienced a complex picture of housing arrangements prior to registering for a Housing First response, including, but by no means exclusively, street living. This picture of homelessness, determined from this unique database, differs somewhat from the most commonly depicted image of the homeless person being an older 'vagrant' man on the streets. In addition, the evidence of younger families experiencing homelessness, and issues of relationship and financial strains as important antecedents to homelessness are often hidden crises of critical importance for breaking intergenerational inequities and supporting future generations.

Enrolment in primary care provision was commonly reported, however requirements for the receipt of certain types of government benefit may mean that this enrolment fulfils more of an administrative





function than a health function. Indeed, a wide range of health and wellbeing needs were described. Few TPP clients described existing support arrangements within the governmental social sector, and debt to government agencies (such as Work and Income New Zealand) was common.

Both individual factors (such as substance dependencies, family breakdown) and structural factors (lack of suitable and accessible housing, deinstitutionalisation, poverty, service and systems failure) are expressed by this Housing First population in Hamilton as important issues to be addressed, and these are described also in the homelessness and Housing First literature.<sup>5,6,7,8</sup> The ability of TPP staff to develop meaningful relationships with each client, and to support their access first to housing and then to suitable assistance is therefore critical.

The success of the Housing First approach for this population is demonstrated by achieving permanent housing for 422 of these 695 by the end of September 2017.

As a result of this research collaboration, TPP has further developed its registration data collection process and is able to provide an ongoing, robust analysis of the reality of homelessness for TPP clients. Additional research continues looking more specifically into the causes of homelessness for this cohort and interactions with government agencies in the years leading to TPP registration, in addition to qualitative research on those who have been successfully housed by TPP.

#### Endnotes

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