

A national profile of services provided under the  
Australian Government funded  
Bringing Them Home and Link Up counsellor program  
for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people



# Service Activity Reporting Bringing Them Home and Link Up Counsellors

2007–08



**Australian Government**  

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**Department of Health and Ageing**

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*Services Reporting Section*

*Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (OATSIH)*

*December 2009*

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In December 1997, the Australian Government responded to the *National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (conducted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission) with a range of initiatives to address the recommendations of the national inquiry, including the establishment of the Bringing Them Home (BTH) and Link Up counsellor program. The BTH and Link Up counsellor program funds services to employ counsellors to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples separated from their families as a result of past governments' forced removal policies and practices.

This report includes the following key findings from the 2007–08 data collection on BTH and Link Up counsellors:

- In 2007–08, there were 76 services with BTH and Link Up funded counsellor positions. All 76 services returned questionnaires and were used in the analysis.
- At 30 June 2008, 112 BTH and Link Up counsellors were employed by the 76 respondent services.
- The majority of BTH and Link Up counsellors were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (73%). Females represented 65% of all counsellors.
- At 30 June 2008, 62 services (82%) employed at least one BTH and Link Up counsellor, but the remaining 14 services (18%) had no counsellors employed.
- In 2007–08, 79% of BTH and Link Up counsellors reported having academic qualifications. Forty-four per cent of counsellors held degrees in fields such as psychology, social work or mental health.
- In 2007–08, BTH and Link Up counsellors saw approximately 9,190 clients. Approximately 14% of clients were First generation clients, and 29% were Second generation clients.
- In 2007–08, BTH and Link Up counsellors reported approximately 38,700 client contacts. The majority of client contacts were with Indigenous women (56%).
- The most common types of support available to BTH and Link Up counsellors during 2007–08 were peer support and debriefing (both provided by 81% of services).

## 1.1 Background

In December 1997, the Federal Government responded to the *National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (conducted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission) with a range of initiatives to address the recommendations of the national inquiry. The initiatives included providing support for a national network of family link-up services; employing counsellors to help heal the grief, loss and trauma experienced by forcibly removed children, their families, descendants and communities; and support for extending networks of regional centres for social and emotional wellbeing to provide professional support and assistance to counsellors.

### 1.1.1 Role of Social and Emotional Wellbeing Regional Centres

In 2007–08, the Australian Government funded 12 Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) Regional Centres nationally.

Regional centres provide training and support for Aboriginal mental health workers and specialist social and emotional wellbeing counsellors, including BTH and Link Up counsellors and caseworkers.

The main purposes of regional centres are to:

- provide support to the Social and Emotional Wellbeing workforce
- provide training to the Social and Emotional Wellbeing workforce
- support regional level needs assessment and planning and
- build linkages between service providers in the region to enhance service delivery.

Each regional centre has developed its own model of working within these broad guidelines.

An independent review conducted by Urbis Keys Young (UKY) during 2006–07 found that SEWB Regional Centres were not performing all of their functions equally well and that reform of this program was recommended. Reform to the program will be in effect from the start of the 2009 financial year.

### 1.1.2 Role of Link Up services

The Australian Government currently supports 11 Link Up sites across the country, funded through 10 Indigenous community organisations.

Link Up services provide support, guidance and assistance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people forcibly separated from their families and communities as a result of past governments' laws, policies and practices, to trace and reunite with their families, including:

- searching for and locating relevant records and files relating to the clients or their families
- obtaining information on behalf of clients

- providing general emotional support and guidance
- referring clients to professional counsellors, if needed, and
- managing reunions (including the pre-reunion, reunion and post-reunion phases) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have been successful in tracing and locating living relatives from whom they were separated.

### **1.1.3 BTH Counsellors**

BTH counsellors provide a support service for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have been affected, either directly or indirectly, by the removal and separation of children from their families, and those going through the reunion process.

The funding provided by OATSIH for BTH counsellor positions is intended to cover BTH counsellors' salaries and on-costs, administrative support, professional development and training, professional supervision, and mentoring from a qualified health professional.

## **1.2 Purpose of this report**

This report contains a summary of key findings from the questionnaire for BTH and Link Up counsellors 2007–08, collected from 1 July 2007 to 30 June 2008.

This report contains data on topics such as gender, Indigenous status and qualifications of BTH and Link Up counsellors, the number of clients, client contacts and the activities, achievements and constraints of individual BTH and Link Up counsellor programs.

The information gathered in the questionnaire will provide the services and the Australian Government with information to:

- identify the BTH and Link Up counsellor workforce nationally
- identify the key issues affecting BTH and Link Up services
- understand and enhance training and support arrangements for BTH and Link Up counsellors
- contribute to reporting to the federal parliament regarding BTH and Link Up funding and
- undertake more informed SEWB, BTH and Link Up policy development, SEWB Regional Centre program development and advocacy for further resources.

This report, and previous BTH Key Results reports, are available on the OATSIH website:

<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/health-oatsih-bth-key>

Copies of previous BTH questionnaires are also available on the OATSIH website:

<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/health-oatsih-bth-quest>

### 1.3 Caveats for this report

The BTH and Link Up questionnaire collects data on a broad set of indicators on the BTH and Link Up program and does not aim to provide a comprehensive set of statistics on the activities of the services or their needs. Therefore, the following caveat for this report applies:

- Clients and client contacts and the proportion of time that BTH and Link Up counsellors spent on activities are often estimates, and while these figures are thought to be reasonable, there has been no audit to check their accuracy.

The following should also be noted in relation to this report:

- Report figures refer to data from a number of services. The number of services from which data are included is identified as: “n=*number of relevant services*.” For example, “n=76” means that data from all 76 services are included. Services can be excluded from particular analyses for various reasons, such as the unavailability of certain data.

### 1.4 Further information

If additional information on BTH or Link Up counsellors is required, please contact the Services Reporting Section of OATSIH:

BTH Contact Officer  
Services Reporting Section (MDP 17)  
Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health  
Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing  
GPO Box 9848  
CANBERRA, ACT 2601

or

e-mail: [oatsih.enquiries@health.gov.au](mailto:oatsih.enquiries@health.gov.au)

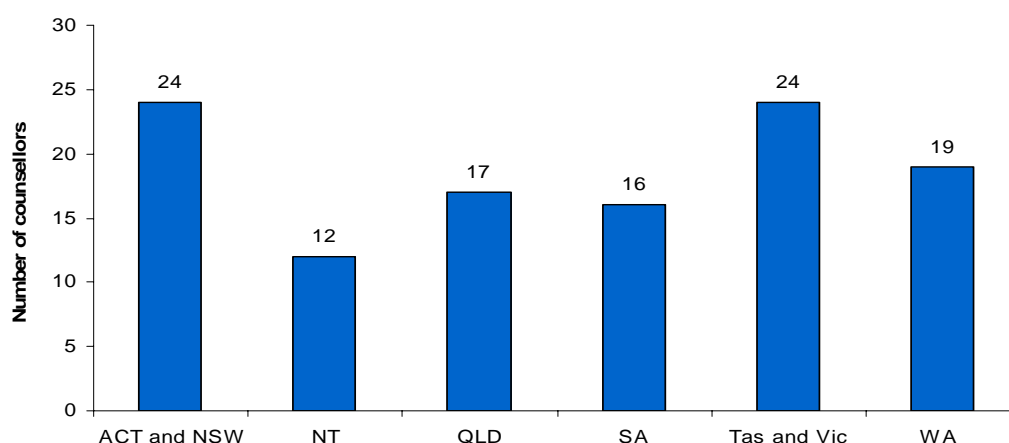
This section provides information on the BTH and Link Up counsellors employed during 2007–08. Counsellor vacancies for the survey period are also provided, along with information on counsellors' gender, qualifications, training, time budget and activities.

### 2.1 Number, distribution and workload

At 30 June 2008, 112 BTH and Link Up counsellors were employed by the 76 respondent services. Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory had the fewest counsellors during 2007–08, while New South Wales and Victoria employed the most counsellors.

**Figure 1** shows the number and national distribution of BTH and Link Up counsellors at 30 June 2008.

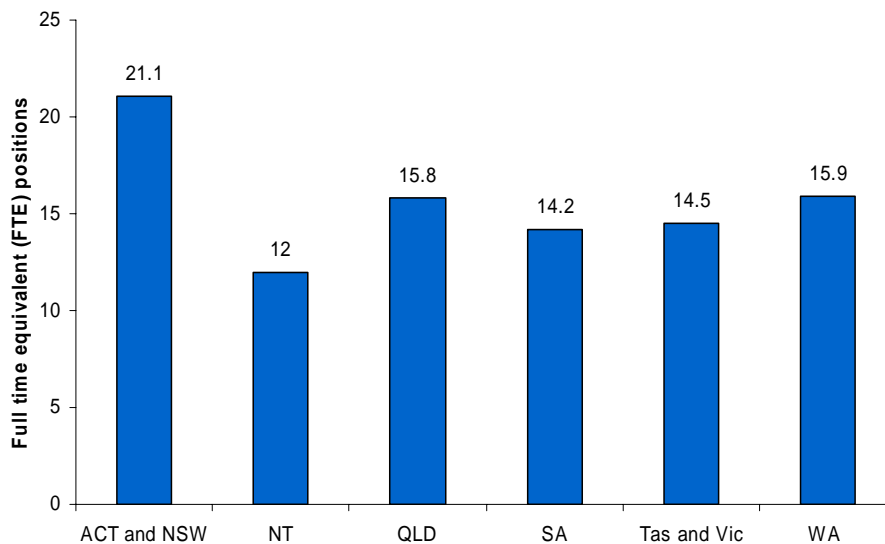
**Figure 1** Number of BTH and Link Up counsellors by state or territory at 30 June 2008 (n=76)<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> To maintain confidentiality, numbers for the Australian Capital Territory and Tasmania have been combined with New South Wales and Victoria, respectively.

During 2007–08, there were 93.5 full time equivalent (FTE) BTH and Link Up counsellor positions. According to **Figure 2**, in 2007–08, New South Wales had the highest number of FTE positions.

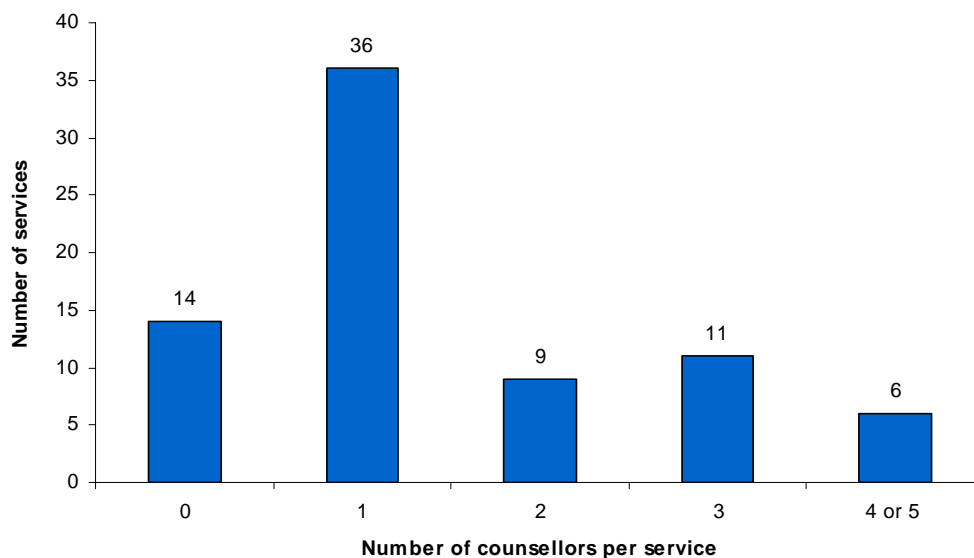
**Figure 2 Full time equivalent (FTE) BTH and Link Up counsellor positions by state or territory, 2007–08 (n=76)<sup>2</sup>**



At 30 June 2008, 62 services (82%) employed at least one BTH and Link Up counsellor. Thirty-six services (47%) employed only one counsellor, 12% of services employed two counsellors and 23% of services employed three or more counsellors. Fourteen services (18%) had no counsellors employed.

The distribution of BTH and Link Up counsellors per service is shown in **Figure 3**.

**Figure 3 Number of BTH and Link Up counsellors per service at 30 June 2008 (n=76)**



<sup>2</sup> To maintain confidentiality, numbers for the Australian Capital Territory and Tasmania have been combined with New South Wales and Victoria, respectively.

## 2.2 Vacancies

Some services reported experiencing problems in recruiting BTH and Link Up counsellors in 2007–08. Across Australia, 28 services (37%) had at least one vacant BTH and Link Up position. At 30 June 2008, positions were vacant for a median of 16 weeks and ranged in length from a minimum of 1 week to a maximum of 52 weeks.

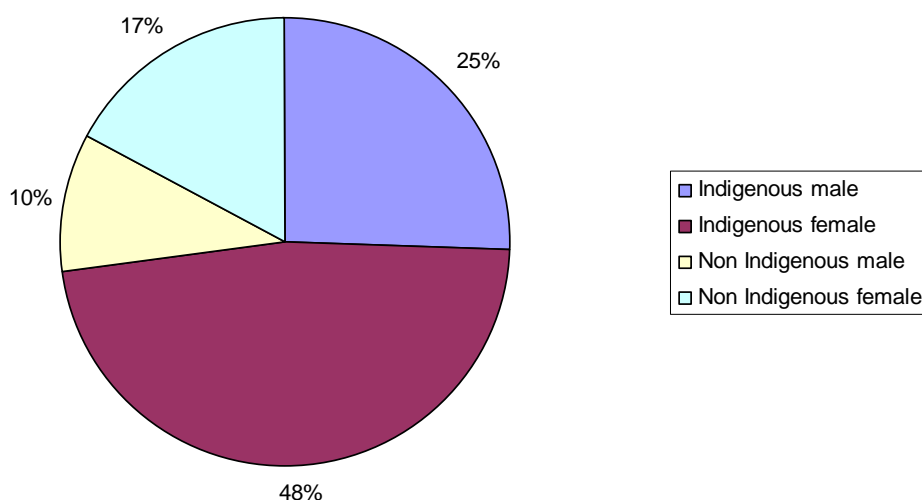
Services reported that recruiting qualified staff, particularly staff with relevant qualifications, was difficult.

## 2.3 Gender and Indigenous status of BTH and Link Up counsellors

Most of the BTH or Link Up counsellors were female (65%) and 35% were male. Of those services that provided information on the Indigenous status of their counsellors, 82 counsellors (73%) identified themselves as Indigenous Australians. Of those services with BTH or Link Up counsellors, 9 services (15%) employed no Indigenous counsellors.

**Figure 4** shows the gender and Indigenous status of BTH and Link Up counsellors.

**Figure 4 Gender and Indigenous status of BTH and Link Up counsellors, 2007–08 (n=76)**



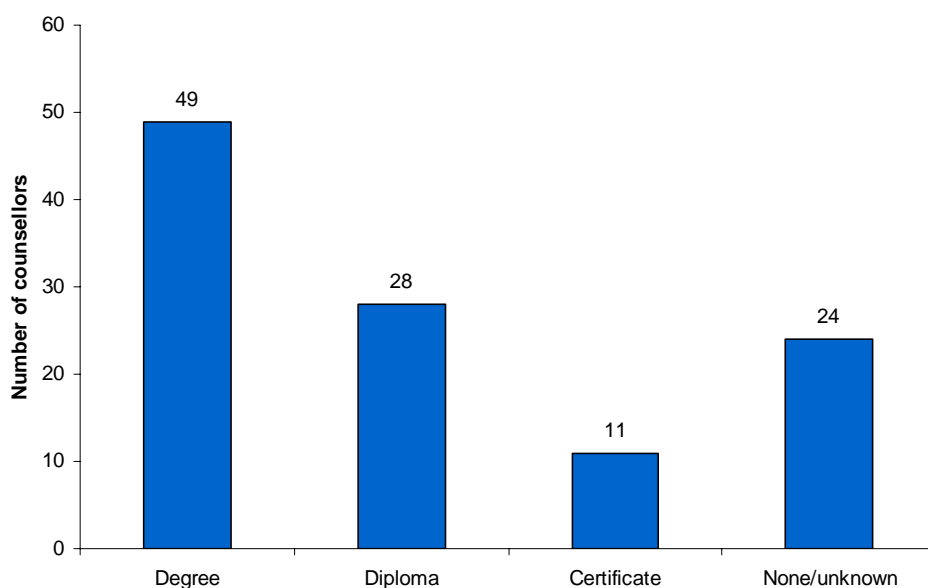
## 2.4 Qualifications and experience

The education level of BTH and Link Up counsellors remained high in 2007–08 with 88 counsellors (79%) holding academic qualifications.

In 2007–08, the most commonly held qualification was a degree in fields such as psychology, social work, mental health and social science. The types of diplomas that counsellors held included community services, counselling, primary health care and narrative therapy. Other qualifications included certificate courses in Aboriginal community health, mental health, counselling and youth work.

**Figure 5** shows the academic qualifications held by BTH and Link Up counsellors during 2007–08.

**Figure 5** Type of academic qualifications held by BTH and Link Up counsellors, 2007–08 (n=76)



## 2.5 Staff training

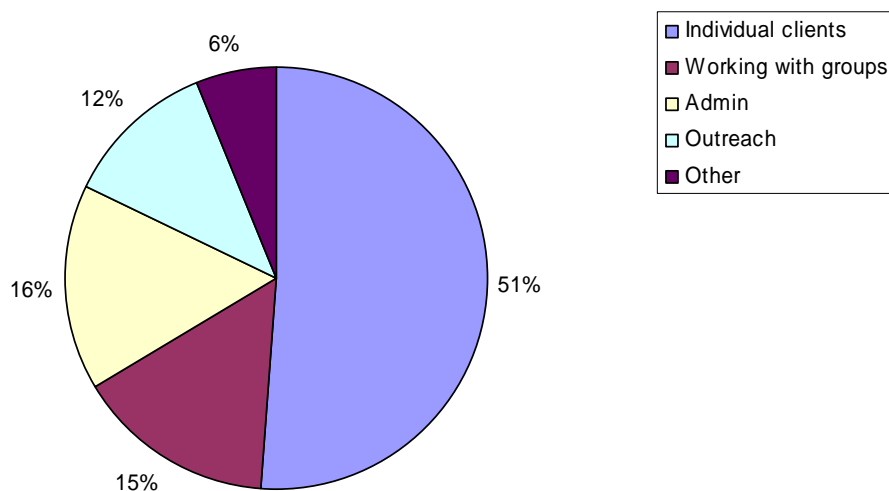
During 2007–08, BTH and Link Up counsellors from 33 services (43%) attended formal training. The range of courses, conferences and workshops attended included narrative therapy, drug and alcohol training programs, counselling, first aid, mental health first aid, community and development services, youth and social work training.

## 2.6 Time budget

BTH and Link Up counsellors spent their time on a range of activities. Services reported that during 2007–08 approximately half of BTH and Link Up counsellors' time was spent with individual clients (51%). Counsellors spent approximately 15% of their time working with groups, 16% was spent on administrative tasks and 12% was spent on outreach activities.

**Figure 6** shows the average proportion of time BTH and Link Up counsellors spent working with clients, administration and other activities during 2007–08.

**Figure 6 Time spent on activities, 2007–08 (n=75)**



Activities in the 'other' category included:

- training, professional development and studying
- attending events (e.g. reunions, community events and liaison work)
- meetings, workshops and conferences
- program coordination, policy development, promotion and implementation
- networking with other services and providing assistance to other services (e.g. Indigenous centres and government agencies)
- staff supervision, mentoring and advocacy and
- travel and transporting clients.

This section provides information on clients including the number, generation, Indigenous status and gender of clients seen during 2007–08. The 2007–08 reporting period is the first year that BTH and Link Up services provided information on client numbers.

### 3.1 Definition of generations

- First generation clients are those that were moved from their families and communities
- Second generation clients are parent(s) of first generation members
- Third generation clients are grandparent(s) of first generation members and
- Fourth and subsequent generation clients are directly descended from people who were moved from their families and communities but not in the second or third generations.

### 3.2 Number of clients

In 2007–08, BTH and Link Up counsellors saw approximately 9,190 clients<sup>3</sup>. Of these, approximately 8% were referred by a Link Up service or were Link Up clients.

As client numbers were collected for the first time in 2007–08, not all services were able to provide data on their clients, including generations, gender or Indigenous status. For those services that were able to provide this information, BTH and Link Up counsellors provided services to approximately:

- 1,065 First generation clients (14%)
- 2,225 Second generation clients (29%)
- 1,340 Third generation clients (17%)
- 1,280 Fourth and subsequent generation clients (16%)
- 1,615 other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients (21%) and
- 260 non-Indigenous clients (3%)

The majority of clients in 2007–08 were female (59%) and 41% were male.

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<sup>3</sup> Client numbers are rounded to the nearest 5 throughout this section.

## 4 CLIENT CONTACTS

This section provides information on client contacts, including the number, gender and Indigenous status of client contacts during 2007–08. Methods for collecting the data, and the factors affecting the number of clients seen, are also examined.

### 4.1 Definition of a client contact

An individual client contact is where a client has contact with a BTH or Link Up counsellor to receive care or information. This includes:

- a separate contact for each time the client has contact with the counsellor and
- phone contacts if they involve provision of care.

For family or relationship counselling, separate client contacts are only counted for people who have their own file or record.

### 4.2 Number of client contacts

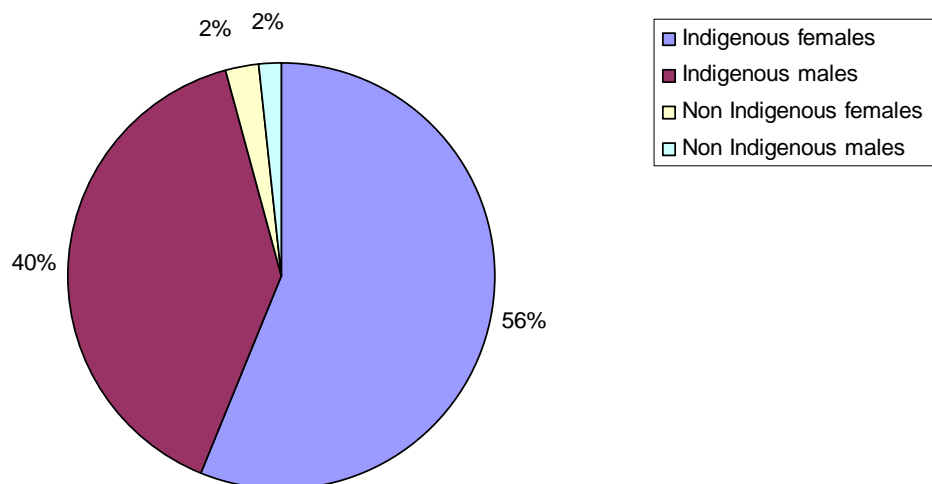
In 2007–08, BTH and Link Up counsellors reported approximately 38,700 client contacts.

Similar to client numbers, accurate data on client contacts is difficult to collect, and it is possible that these figures are an underestimation of the total number of client contacts. As group work is excluded from the numbers of individual client contacts, it does not reflect the total amount of contact that counsellors may have with clients.

### 4.3 Gender and Indigenous status of client contacts

Most services were able to provide a breakdown of client contacts by gender and Indigenous status. In 2007–08, the majority of contacts were with Indigenous clients (96%). Most contacts were with female clients (59%). The gender and Indigenous status of BTH and Link Up client contacts for 2007–08 are illustrated in **Figure 7**.

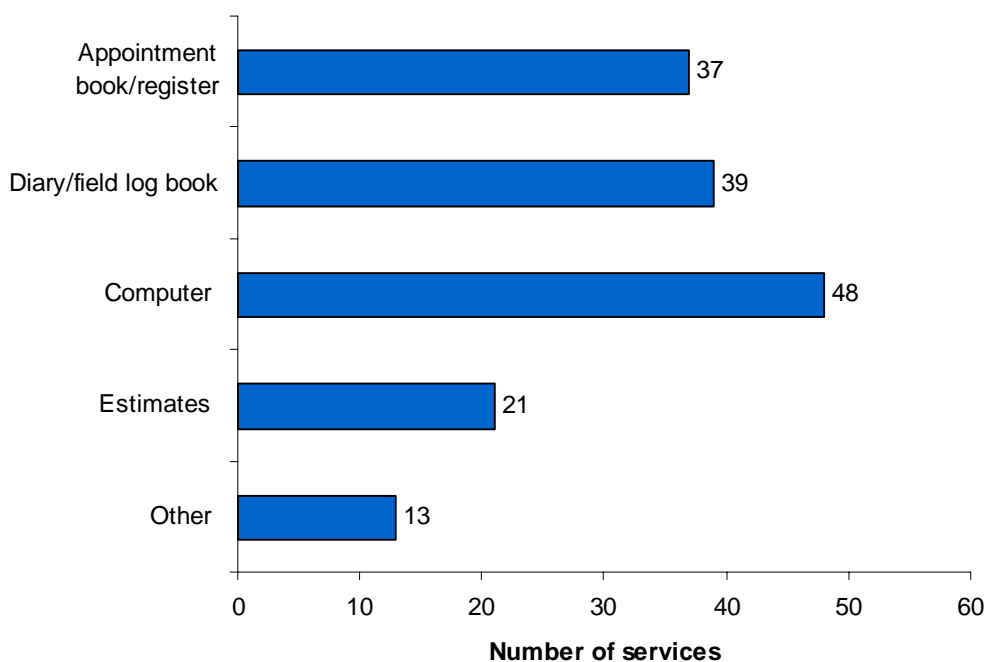
**Figure 7 Client contacts classified by gender and Indigenous status, 2007–08 (n=67)**



#### 4.4 Data collection of client statistics

Services collected information on the number of BTH and Link Up clients and client contacts in a number of ways (**Figure 8**). The three most common methods for collecting data in 2007–08 were computer records (64%), diaries or field log books (52%) and appointment books or registers (49%). Some services could only estimate their client numbers and client contacts information (28%). Other methods of collecting the data included monthly reports and client files.

**Figure 8 Data collection of client numbers and client contacts, 2007–08 (n=75)**

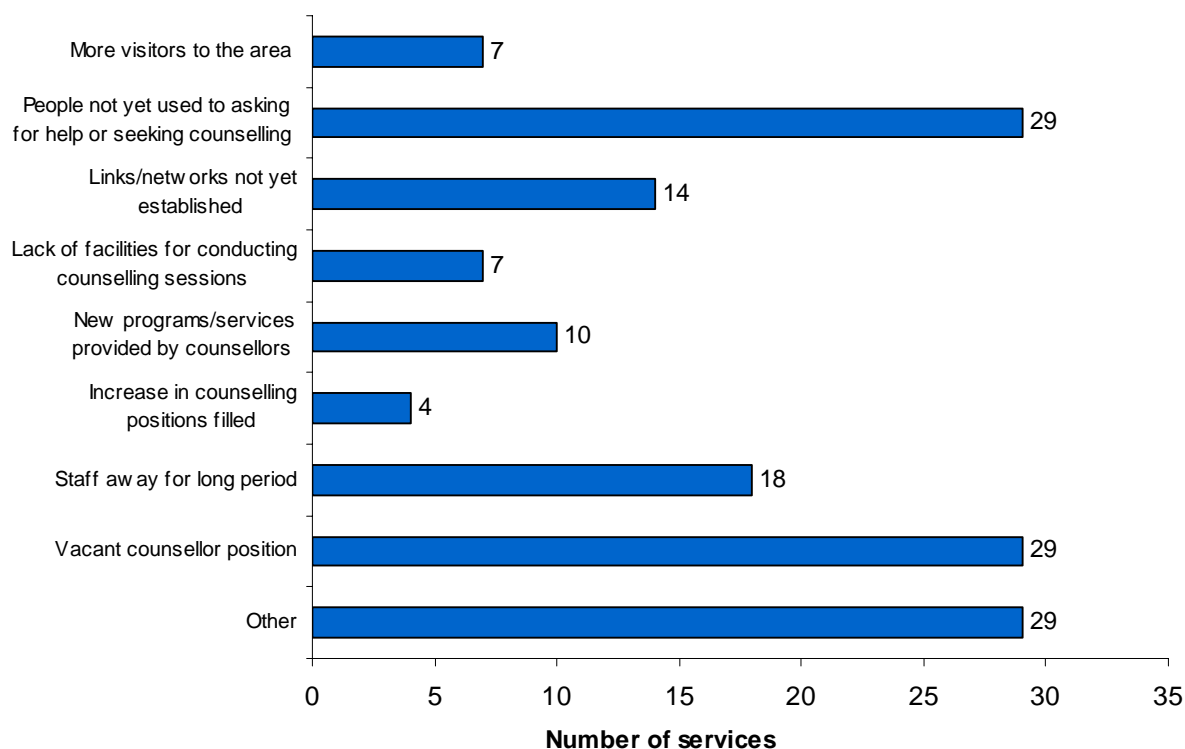


#### 4.5 Factors affecting the number of clients and client contacts

Services reported a variety of factors that affected client numbers and client contacts during the survey period. In 2007–08, 38% of services cited ‘people not yet used to asking for help or seeking counselling’ and ‘vacant counsellor position’ as having a significant effect on client numbers and client contacts. ‘Staff away for long periods’ (24%) also affected the number of clients and client contacts.

The factors affecting the number of BTH and Link Up clients seen during 2007–08 are shown in **Figure 9**.

**Figure 9 Factors affecting counselling clients, 2007–08 (n=76)**



The 'other' factors that affected the number of clients and client contacts seen during 2007–08 included:

- staff constraints:
  - lack of BTH and Link Up counsellors
  - high staff turnover affecting rapport between clients and counsellors and the time needed to build trust and relationships
  - training/development and administration or management tasks
  - high counsellor work loads (e.g. increasing number of clients combined with expanding role of counsellors)
- administration and management constraints:
  - inadequate staff housing
  - relocation of service
  - development and maintenance of database

## 5 SUPPORT AVAILABLE TO COUNSELLORS

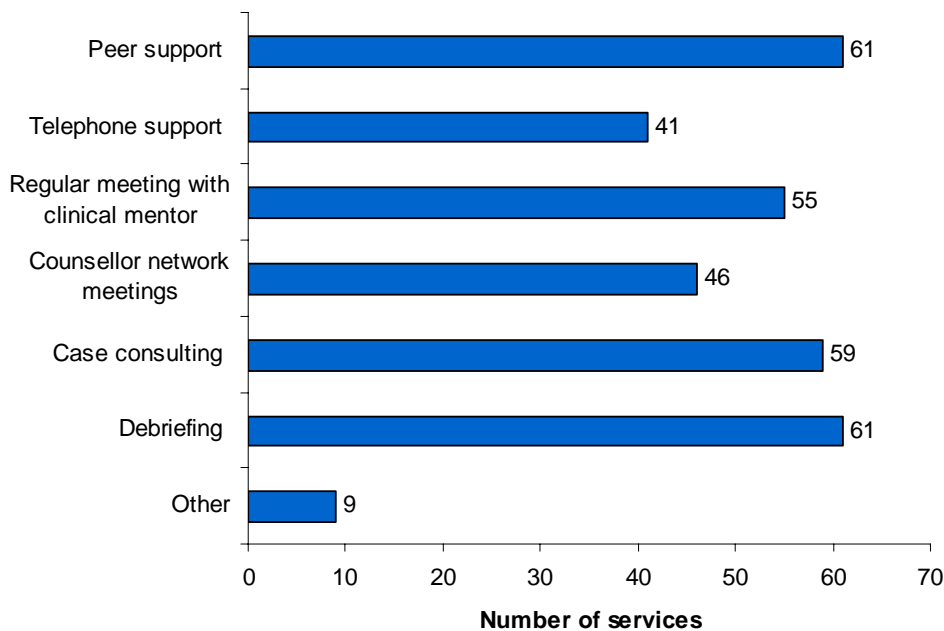
This section provides information on support available to counsellors in 2007–08 including supervision, mentoring and compensation for after-hours work.

### 5.1 Support for BTH and Link Up counsellors

Fifty services (66%) reported that their counsellors received internal or external supervision from a qualified mental health professional during 2007–08.

The most common types of support available to counsellors in 2007–08 were peer support and debriefing (both provided by 81% of services), case consulting (79%), and regular meetings with a clinical mentor (77%). Other types of support included other BTH and Link Up counsellors, Aboriginal health workers, nurses, CEOs and Elders within the community (**Figure 10**).

**Figure 10** Types of support available to BTH and Link Up counsellors, 2007–08 (n=75)



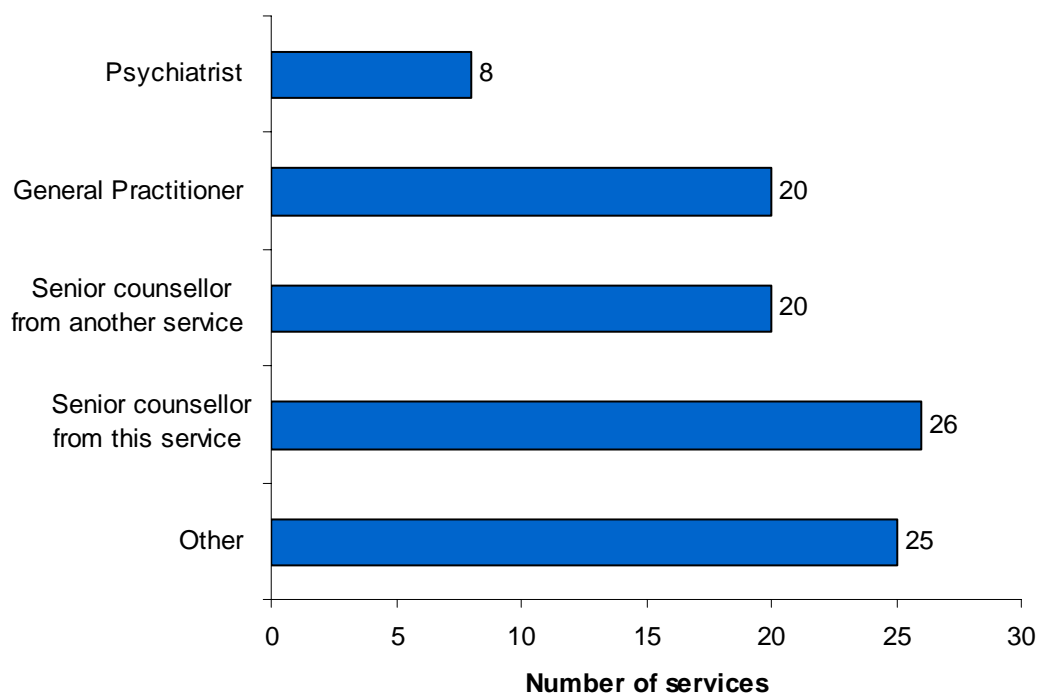
### 5.2 Provision of mentoring

Mentoring was reported as being provided to BTH and Link Up counsellors at 55 services (73%).

Of the 55 services that provided mentoring, 26 services (47%) reported that counsellors were mentored by a senior counsellor from the service. Counsellors at 20 services (36%) were mentored by a general practitioner or a senior counsellor from another service. Counsellors from eight services (15%) were mentored by a psychiatrist (**Figure 11**).

Mentors listed in the 'other' category included psychologists, mental health counsellors, external BTH counsellors, social workers, nurses and CEOs.

**Figure 11 Provision of mentoring, 2007–08 (n=55)**



### **5.3 Compensation for after-hours counselling work**

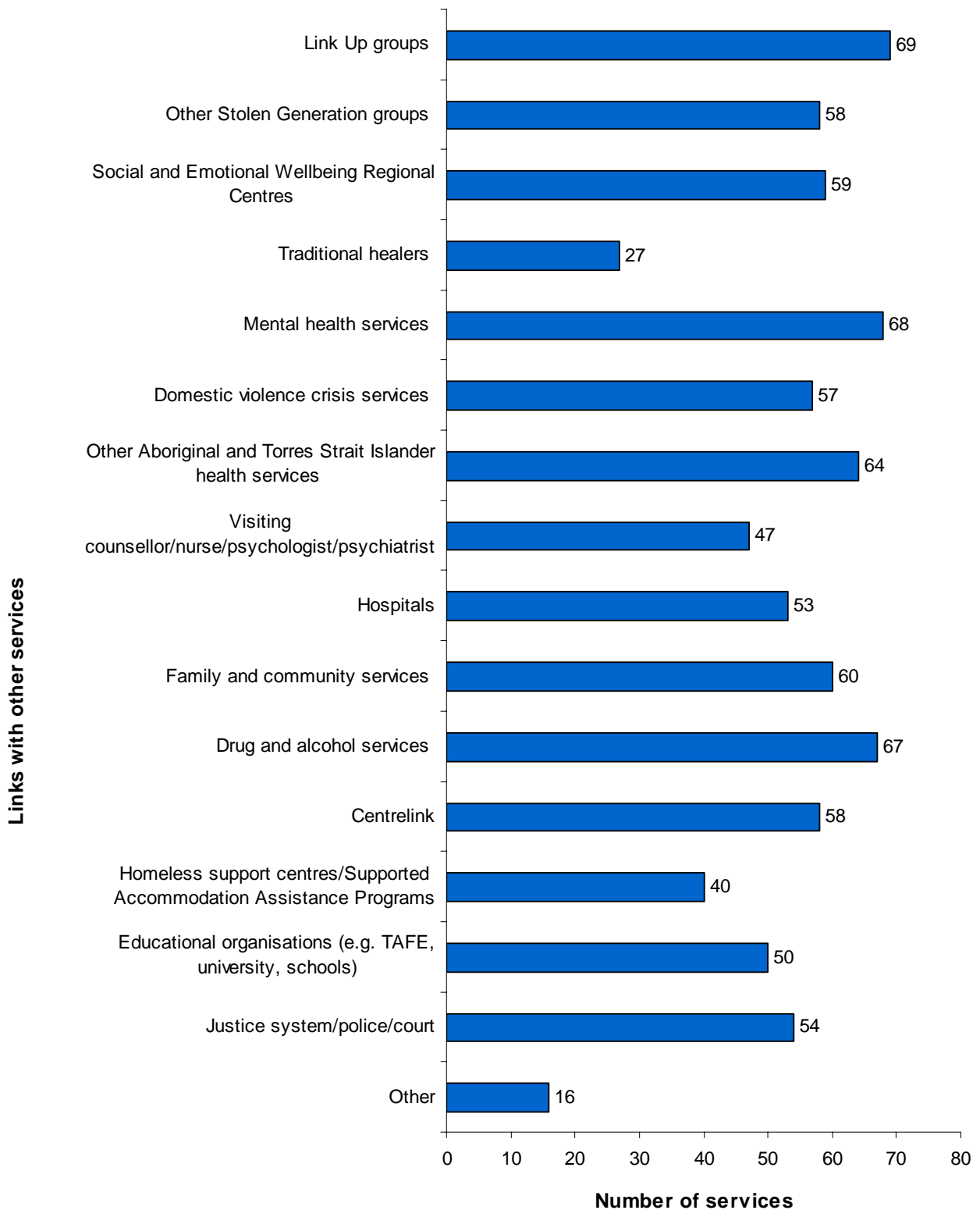
In 2007–08, 43 services (57%) reported that counsellors provided care to clients after hours. Services used a variety of methods to compensate BTH and Link Up counsellors working after hours. For those services providing care after hours, the most common type of compensation was time off in lieu (93%). Some services were unable to compensate BTH and Link Up counsellors for after-hours work.

### **5.4 Working relationships**

Services with BTH and Link Up counsellors maintained numerous links with other agencies. During 2007–08, BTH and Link Up counsellors had working relationships with a range of services, such as other Link Up agencies, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health services, drug and alcohol services and mental health services.

The types of services that counsellors had links with are shown in **Figure 12**.

**Figure 12 Working relationships with other services, 2007–08 (n=76)**

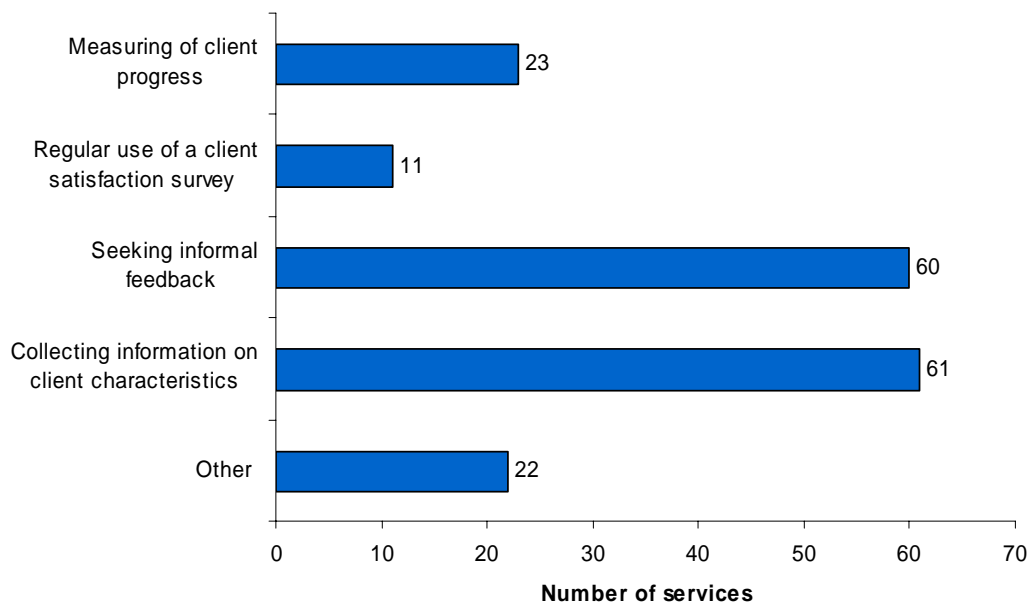


## 6 MONITORING AND EVALUATION

This section provides information on the strategies used by services to monitor and evaluate the performance of BTH and Link Up counsellor programs.

The two most commonly used were collecting information on client characteristics (81%) and seeking informal client feedback (80%). Twenty-three services (31%) indicated that measuring of client progress (e.g. using rating scales) was used to monitor and evaluate the performance of BTH and Link Up counsellor programs (**Figure 13**).

**Figure 13 Monitoring and evaluation strategies, 2007–08 (n=75)**



Some of the 'other' monitoring and evaluation strategies used by services included:

- formal feedback (e.g. client feedback forms, formal evaluation tools or reviews)
- meetings, networking and debriefing (e.g. regular meetings with staff and supervisors and networking with other services and agencies) and
- reporting and reviewing data (e.g. performance benchmarks, client statistics, case notes and peer review).

## 7 ACHIEVEMENTS AND DIFFICULTIES

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Services commented on the achievements of their BTH and Link Up counsellors program and the difficulties they faced during the survey period.

During 2007–08, some of the program achievements included the following:

- BTH and Link Up counsellor program outcomes
  - positive outcomes for clients (e.g. reunions)
  - variety of services offered
  - events organised and attended (e.g. community events, forums)
- positive feedback from clients and the community
- training and support internally and externally
- improved linkages, partnerships and relationships within the community and other services/agencies and
- improved awareness of programs within the community.

Difficulties encountered by BTH and Link Up counsellors included the following:

- staff recruitment, supervision, support and high staff turnover
- poor working conditions
- lack of resources (e.g. vehicles and suitable IT systems)
- increased demand for services with inadequate funding
- service location (e.g. remoteness/isolation) and
- lack of promotion of programs and the time taken to develop new ones.

Issues such as staff recruitment, particularly vacancies, were the most frequently mentioned in this section. Services also reported difficulty in finding appropriate replacements in a short amount of time.