

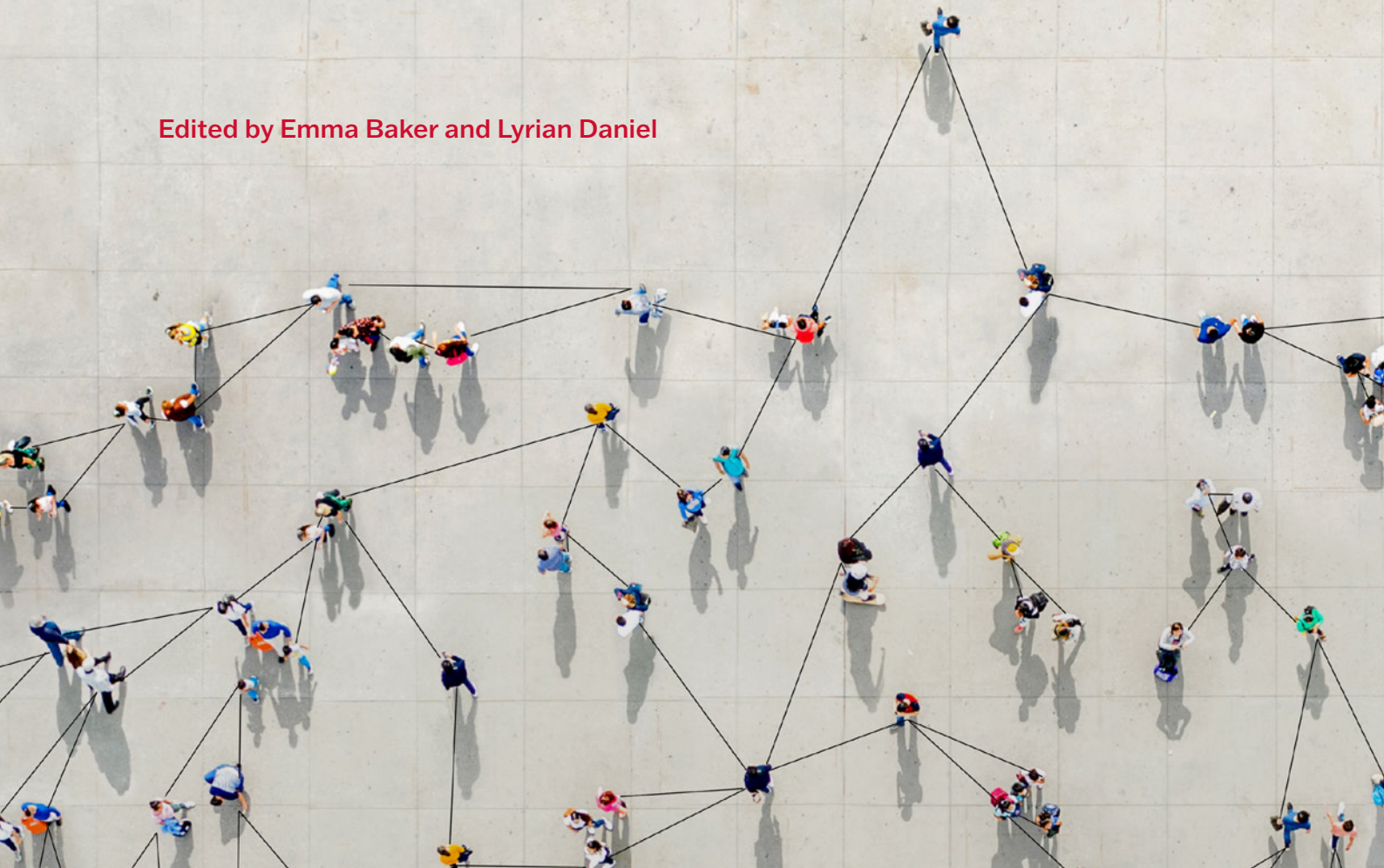
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RENTAL INSIGHTS

A COVID-19 COLLECTION

Edited by Emma Baker and Lyrian Daniel



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Foreword



Michael Fotheringham
AHURI

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a stark reminder of how we are housed – where we are located, the quality, security and amenity of our housing – impacts on our health, wellbeing and economic productivity.

Governments across Australia (and indeed globally) responded rapidly to the pandemic, with a high level of coordination, to address the health and economic crises. The speed and success of Australia's policy responses to COVID-19 has rested heavily on investments into evidence building – for vaccines, but also for monitoring effects, and developing successful interventions.

The dataset upon which this collection is based emerges from a sustained, multilateral commitment to invest in research and research infrastructure from the Australian Government and state and territory governments. This funding to the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, as well as the Australian Research Council, and the Linkage Infrastructure, Equipment and Facilities scheme (LIEF) has enabled the development of the foundational dataset.

When the pandemic emerged, and the economic lockdown hit, this existing research and infrastructure was able to be leveraged through AHURI's special COVID-19 Funding Round, which was implemented to inform rapid policy development and support national recovery. The Funding Round was just part of AHURI's strategy in responding to the pandemic, which also included:

- leading and facilitating national and international policy exchanges to share new knowledge on emerging research findings and policy innovations
- establishing a COVID-19 Research Hub as an online resource with the latest research, policy analysis and news on housing, homelessness and urban responses to COVID-19
- disseminating evidence and policy implications through an ongoing series of free webinars that showcase new research and consider its policy application.

The Australian Rental Housing Conditions Dataset (ARHCD) had been funded through the ARC LIEF scheme, and had already undergone ethical clearance. The research team were able to pivot and introduce a COVID-19 specific module to supplement the ARHCD. This dataset provides a new and rich understanding of the housing conditions in Australia's private rental markets, and will establish a much-needed baseline to monitor the rental housing conditions.

The private rental sector has grown by 36 per cent over the last ten years—twice the rate of household growth. More than a quarter of all Australian households—some 2.1 million households—are private renters. This growth is set to continue as home ownership declines, particularly amongst younger and middle-aged Australians faced with rising house prices and a shrinking social housing sector.

Understanding the housing conditions of this growing segment of the population is valuable for policy makers interested in Australia's wellbeing and productivity. It is also an issue of keen research interest. This collection demonstrates the value of a robust and representative dataset addressing an area of important policy concern. The insights generated by a wide range of contributors canvasses a number of key themes, each of which are worthy of further, more in-depth analysis as subsequent waves of the dataset are lodged. Some of these themes include

- Lack of available and affordable private rental housing
- The financial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated shut-downs
- Relationships between renters and landlords
- Impacts of unsuitable housing on the health of individuals and families
- Social isolation, and mental health impacts of COVID-19 restrictions
- The aspirations of renters to enter home ownership.

This collection offers insights into the ways Australians have responded in a pandemic. The ways in which we recover as a nation, any the renovations we make to our housing systems, will be important in shaping the housing experiences we share over the coming years.

Understanding the housing conditions of this growing segment of the population is valuable for policy makers interested in Australia's wellbeing and productivity. It is also an issue of keen research interest.

Towards a national discussion on housing

**Emma Baker
and Lyrian Daniel**
(Editors)

COVID-19—a dual health and economic crisis—has almost certainly changed the way we think about our housing, what we want from it, how we use it, and what our housing aspirations will be in the future. This Collection reflects on a timely new evidence base describing the Australian rental sector in the emerging COVID-19 era. Our aim in producing the Collection is that it should be a starting point of an important national discussion about the housing, and housing system, we need.

Rental is Australia's fastest growing tenure. Roughly one in three Australians are renters, and one in five are landlords. The housing stock within the sector is diverse, though there is increasing evidence of fairly widespread problems, such as poor dwelling conditions (e.g. across maintenance, and basic health and safety requirements), tenure insecurity, limited tenant rights, and unaffordability.

We have not yet seen the full health or economic effects of COVID-19 but, for many reasons, the rental sector will almost certainly be where many of Australia's big challenges sit.

In the early stages of Australia's COVID-19 pandemic, renters were especially vulnerable to economic effects—due to, for example, disproportionate employment in the sectors hardest hit by the economic shutdown, as well as lower average wealth, and slightly weaker attachment to the labour market. Economic effects quickly translated, for many renters, into tenure insecurity, with eviction risk so widespread that eviction moratoriums were one of the first responses legislated by the states. With the progression of the pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns, many existing inequalities within the rental sector, as well as in comparison to people who own their home, have been amplified. Importantly though, until now, we have not had a robust, nation-wide dataset on rental conditions, so our ability to formulate evidence-based responses has been restricted.

In mid-2020, Australia's largest dataset of tenant households and their living conditions was collected. The Australian Rental Housing Conditions Dataset (ARHCD)¹ was designed to meet the needs of the research and policy community for robust, nation-wide data on housing conditions and tenant characteristics. This dataset provides the most current comprehensive data collection of the Australian rental sector and has a dedicated COVID-19 module² that enables important insights into the experiences and effects of the pandemic across the renter population.

In advance of the public release of this dataset, we invited leading thinkers from housing, economics, policy, urban planning, and epidemiology to explore the data, and tell the pressing stories arising from it. Interestingly, while each of the 20 contributions to this Collection differ, a series of 'echoes' exist between the stories, which should almost certainly demand our attention.

- Children, especially those living with a sole parent, are a group of particular concern. Households with children are, for example more likely to live in poorer quality housing (such as damp, plumbing and wiring problems). Sole parent households containing children, are also the most likely household type to report that their homes were inadequate for work or study. Children are also at high risk of living in households where the family had difficulty keeping warm in winter.
- The mental health effects of lockdown appear to be substantial and widespread, with almost half of all renters reporting a decline in their mental health during COVID-19. Some groups within the population, for example people with unaffordable housing or those living in poor condition dwellings, had a marked decrease in their mental health during the pandemic. Loneliness and isolation were key concerns, especially for older renters.
- There is a clear indication that the economic effects on households are yet to be fully realised, because they are currently hidden by temporary solutions, such as savings and superannuation, or interventions like JobKeeper, rent deferral, and eviction moratoriums.

There are many more stories to be told, and the challenge posed to every reader of this Collection is to ask questions, tell more stories, and start thinking about the housing we want and need for a post-pandemic world.

Roughly one in three Australians are renters, and one in five are landlords.

¹ Baker, E., Beer, A., Baddeley, M., London, K., Bentley, R., Stone, W., Rowley, S., Daniel, L., Nygaard, C., Hulse, K., Lockwood, T. (2020) *The Australian Rental Housing Conditions Dataset*, doi:10.26193/IBL7PZ, ADA Dataverse, V1.

² Baker, E., Bentley, R., Beer, A. and Daniel, L. (2020) *Renting in the time of COVID-19: understanding the impacts*, AHURI Final Report No. 340, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/340>, doi:10.18408/ahuri3125401.

About the Australian Rental Housing Conditions Dataset

In mid-2020, the largest systematic collection of data on living in the Australian rental sector—the Australian Rental Housing Conditions Dataset (ARHCD)—was conducted. Gathering information from 15,000 (public and private) renting households across all Australian states and territories, funded by the Australian Research Council in partnership with six Australian universities. An additional AHURI-funded COVID-19 module was included in the survey to leverage the timing and scale of this major Australian data collection.

The ARHCD questionnaire, [developed by the research team³](#), focussed on housing experiences, characteristics and quality, health, and household demographic characteristics. A commercial survey provider was contracted to undertake data collection. The full data collection commenced in July 2020, using a combination of computer-aided-telephone-interview (CATI) and online panel methods. Data was gathered from a representative proportion of renters in all Australian states and territories.

The contributions in this Collection are based on the preliminary version of the dataset provided to researchers in late August. The dataset contains information from 14,486 households renting their housing in Australia. The majority of responding households (13,289) were surveyed via the online platform, which included the COVID-19 module. All survey respondents resided in rented accommodation, either in the private rental sector or in public and community housing, at the time that they participated in the survey.

The ARHCD, including the COVID-19 module, achieved a balanced sample across age, gender, location and landlord type. Quotas were used to achieve representativeness by state/territory and landlord type. Respondents living in social housing (public and community sectors) were purposely over-sampled to allow for adequate sample sizes when stratified in future analysis.

Following embargo, the ARHCD will be accessible via the Australian Data Archive.

<https://dataverse.ada.edu.au/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.26193/IBL7PZ&version=1.0>

Data citation:

Baker, Emma; Beer, Andrew ; Baddeley, Michelle ; London, Kerry; Bentley, Rebecca; Stone, Wendy; Rowley, Steven; Daniel, Lyrian; Nygaard, Andi; Hulse, Kath ; Lockwood, Tony , 2020, "The Australian Rental Housing Conditions Dataset", doi:10.26193/IBL7PZ, ADA Dataverse, V1

³ Emma Baker, The University of Adelaide; Andrew Beer, The University of South Australia; Rebecca Bentley, The University of Melbourne; Steven Rowley, Curtin University; Michelle Baddeley, (formerly) The University of South Australia; Kerry London, (formerly) University of Western Sydney; Wendy Stone, Swinburne University; Lyrian Daniel, The University of Adelaide; Andi Nygaard, Swinburne University; Kath Hulse, Swinburne University; Tony Lockwood, The University of South Australia.



Emma Baker
The University of Adelaide



DETERIORATING RENTAL AFFORDABILITY

**Many renters have
struggled to make ends
meet during COVID-19**

Key findings

Renters reported a series of negative effects on their living circumstances due to COVID-19 and the related lockdown measures. Many skipped meals, had difficulty paying their rent or other bills, or had to find other more affordable accommodation. Almost a third of renting households, for example, had difficulty paying bills and rent, or went without meals during the COVID-19 pandemic.

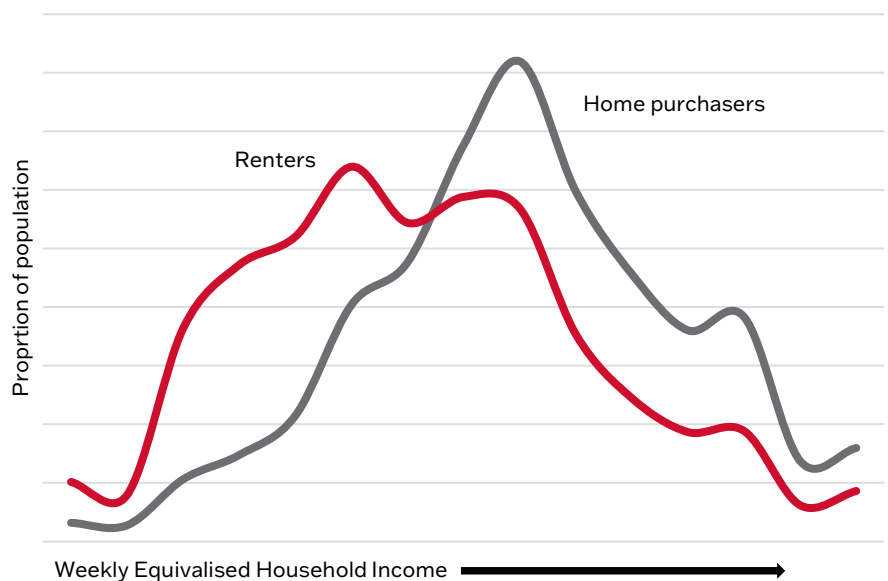
Why is it important?

Just under 1/3 of Australians rent, and in the last Census, more people rented than owned their own homes outright.⁴ Even though we have not been able to measure it until now, researchers in the field have predicted that renters would be especially vulnerable to the effects of the economic shutdown. This is because, even before the pandemic hit, there was concern about rental affordability—renters were over represented in the industries most affected by economic shutdown measures, and many rental contracts left people vulnerable to eviction if they fell behind in their rental payments.

Who is most affected?

The Australian Rental Housing Conditions Survey shows a diversity of experience among renters during COVID-19. The quotations cited on page 6 show some of the common issues that people highlighted. Many struggled to get by, finding it difficult to pay for basic necessities like electricity, some drew on their savings and superannuation, and some called on their families for financial assistance. Notably, some people found that, with the additional support of JobKeeper and JobSeeker, they had more money to spend each week.

Income by tenure, Home purchasers and Renters



⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2017) 2016 Census of Population and Housing, <https://www.abs.gov.au/census>.



Looking deeper at the data, these effects were experienced unevenly across the population. People with disabilities and long-term illnesses were especially vulnerable. Across both mental and physical health measures, renters with the poorest health were more than twice as likely as people with excellent health to have struggled to make ends meet. For example, 39 per cent of people with poor mental health had difficulty paying bills and rent, compared to 14 per cent of people with excellent mental health. Households with children were slightly more likely to have struggled overall.

There was also a strong age gradient in the data, with younger people experiencing more challenges to their living situation than older people. Renters at all income levels experienced negative effects on their living situations, but people with low (and even moderate <\$90,000) incomes appear to have been disproportionately affected.

If the pandemic and its economic impacts continue, many renters are likely to require increased and more diverse forms of assistance.

What is the relevance to Australian policy?

This insight into experiences of renters is, importantly, a snapshot—taken during July and August 2020. The data shows that in the first months of the pandemic's economic effects, many renters were already struggling. Some had dipped into savings and made temporary adjustments to their living situations, and many were quite rapidly thrust into living situations where they were unable to pay for basic utilities or were reliant on charity. Many of the adjustments documented in the data will be almost certainly unsustainable in the longer term, and this presents a challenge to policy makers.

If the pandemic and its economic impacts continue, many renters are likely to require increased and more diverse forms of assistance. Measures might focus on extending existing eviction protections, providing new assistance pathways into homeownership, or ensuring basic utilities. In a likely tight economic climate, the unevenness of the negative effects of COVID-19 across different groups in the Australian renting population suggests that any future policy responses should be quite carefully targeted—to those struggling most, to low-income households, families with children, or to people most at risk of poor health.

As a result of COVID-19 has your living situation been affected?

- 'Had to use savings for rent until I found more work'**
- 'Have sold most of my personal belongings to put food on the table for my family'**
- 'Moved back home to my Mum's'**
- 'Having to ask the parents for help with money'**
- 'Skipped meals to make sure children were fed'**
- 'Canceled gym membership and private health insurance'**
- 'No longer saving for a deposit as all money going to pay for life'**
- 'Dipped into house deposit'**
- 'General struggle'**
- 'Have to pay double rent to cover for vacant room and inability to find a subtenant'**
- 'Charities for food hampers, and vouchers so I could afford bills'**
- 'Fear of being homeless if JobKeeper ends while under lockdown'**
- 'JobSeeker increased, but when this ends may have to find cheaper accommodation'**
- 'I've been selling some of my things on eBay/Facebook to recoup some money and cover our bills'**
- 'Living in darkness and cold because electricity is too much'**
- 'Deliberately missed essential medical care and medications'**
- 'Struggling to pay utilities and buy food'**



Hal Pawson
UNSW Sydney



DETERIORATING RENTAL AFFORDABILITY

**Low-income renters
pushed further into
rental stress**

Key findings

Only a little over half of low-income tenants (59%) consider their rent ‘affordable’—56 per cent of private tenants and 71 per cent of social renters.

Even in social housing, one in six (16%) report that household income absorbed by rent normally leaves them with insufficient funds for food, clothing or other basic essentials.

Income losses during the pandemic pushed up the incidence of such ‘post-rent deprivation’ to 22 per cent of all low-income tenants.

Why is it important?

The significant incidence of rental stress among tenants in public and community housing (even in ‘normal times’) conflicts with the expectation that rents (generally) pegged at 25 per cent of household income provide a guarantee of affordability for social renters.

However, it confirms earlier research findings⁵ that a significant proportion of tenants in public and community housing are subject to (income-geared) rents that are too high or incomes that are too low to leave sufficient funds for basic essentials.

Who is most affected?

Post-rent deprivation in social housing

Families with children—both single parent and two-parent families—were most likely to be affected by post-rent deprivation in social housing. This was true for more than a fifth of these groups (21%), as compared with only 13 per cent of single people living alone.

At the same time, because of their greater overall representation in the sector, childless households accounted for most of the social renters subject to rental stress as defined in this way.

Pushed into rental stress by the pandemic

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in pushing tenants into rental stress is highly related to age. Among low-income renters, this scenario had affected 11 per cent of tenants aged 18–29, but only 1 per cent of those aged over 50.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in pushing tenants into rental stress is highly related to age.

As indicated in the word cloud, many of those involved had simply lost employment, faced reductions in casual work hours or overtime, or lost wages when compelled to take leave. Others had seen their small business collapse or had to cease earning to cover childcare when schools were closed.

5 Burke, T., Stone, M. and Ralston, L. (2011) *The residual income method: a new lens on housing affordability and market behaviour*, Final Report No. 176, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/176>, doi: 10.18408/ahuri3125401.

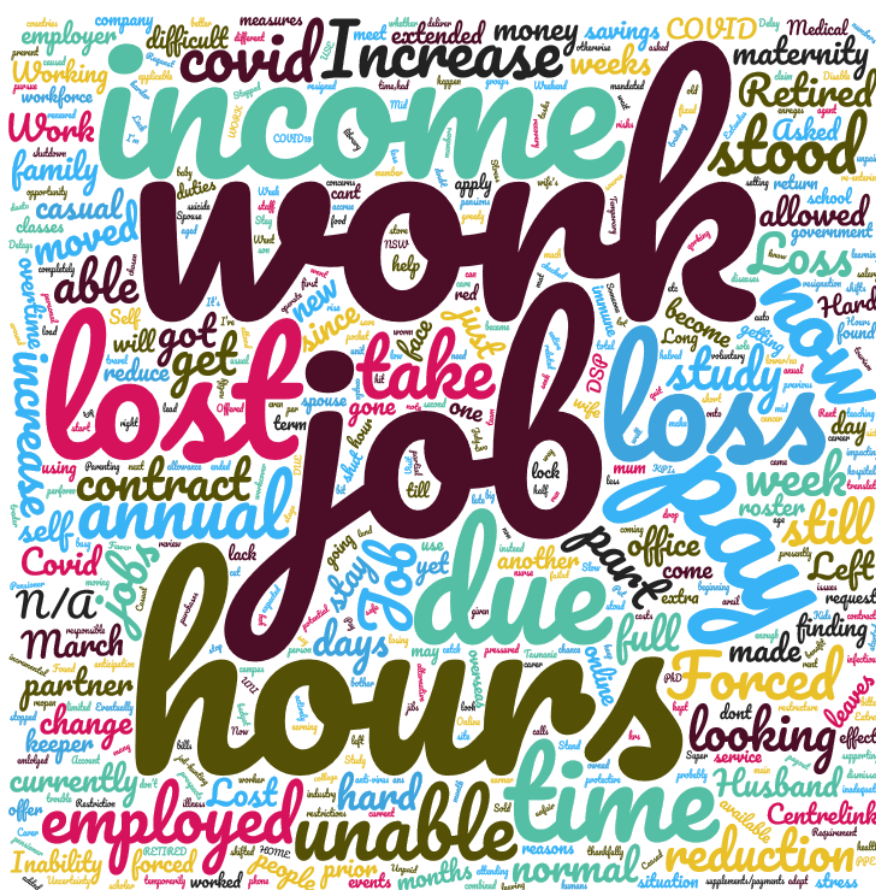


What is the relevance to Australian policy?

The findings on social housing suggest that to ensure affordability in the sector, the standard formula sets rents too high. At the same time, other research demonstrates that, even at this level, rental revenue collectable by public housing authorities is insufficient to fund essential management, maintenance and tenant support —let alone new housing provision⁶.

This points to the need for enhanced social security benefit rates and/or additional public subsidy for the provision of social housing.

When it comes to low-income tenants being pushed into rental stress by the pandemic, part of the answer lies in the fact that such a large proportion are—in normal times—perched only marginally above this threshold. It also reflects that, for all their benefits, even at their initial high rates, government income protection measures failed to protect all these vulnerable tenants.



... even at their initial high rates, government income protection measures failed to protect all these vulnerable tenants.

⁶ Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal New South Wales 2017, Review of rent models for social and affordable housing. Final Report, Special Reviews. Sydney, New South Wales. [https://www.ipart.nsw.gov.au/files/sharedassets/website/shared-files/pricing-reviews-section-9-publications-review-of-social-and-affordable-housing-rent-models/final-report-review-of-rent-models-for-social-and-affordable-housing-july-2017-\[w172737\].pdf](https://www.ipart.nsw.gov.au/files/sharedassets/website/shared-files/pricing-reviews-section-9-publications-review-of-social-and-affordable-housing-rent-models/final-report-review-of-rent-models-for-social-and-affordable-housing-july-2017-[w172737].pdf)



Michelle Baddeley
University of Technology
Sydney



DETERIORATING RENTAL AFFORDABILITY

**Retrenched renters
vulnerable to long-term
inequality**

Key findings

Retrenched renters are struggling with immediate pressures on household finances, and are more likely than not- retrenched renters to be struggling with bills and accumulating increasing debt.

Over the long term, retrenched renters will be significantly more vulnerable to rising inequality because of their relatively high rates of superannuation withdrawal and dis-saving.

Why is it important?

While current economic policy focuses on managing the short-term impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, the long-term economic and financial fallout is likely to be large and especially overwhelming for vulnerable groups, including renters.

Data from the Australian Rental Housing Conditions Dataset (ARHCD) shows that retrenched renters are significantly more vulnerable than not-retrenched renters to the economic and financial hurdles associated with the COVID-19 crisis. Specifically, the ARHCD captures evidence that retrenched renters are facing significant economic challenges over the long term as well as the short term because, not only are they struggling to pay their bills today, they are also vulnerable to rising inequality over their lifetimes. Relative to not-retrenched renters, they have high rates of superannuation withdrawal and are more likely to have spent-down their savings.

They are also vulnerable in terms of their physical and mental health—serious problems in themselves, and exacerbated because poor mental and physical health will erode future employment chances.

Who is most affected?

From a sub-sample of n=11,062 renters from the ARHCD survey, 538 (4.9%) had experienced retrenchment; 10,524 had not. Comparing the background and experiences of the two groups—the retrenched versus not-retrenched renters were similar in terms of age (modal age for both groups was 30–49 years old), household income (modal income range \$9,001–\$90,000), and the condition of their rental properties (modal property condition ranking of 'good' for both groups). Wellbeing was also similar across the two groups (modal rating of 'no change' from COVID-19 for both groups).

However, there was one critical difference in terms of the impacts of current housing circumstances on renters' finances over the past 12 months (i.e. including many months of pre-COVID-19 conditions). Pre-COVID-19, retrenched renters were already struggling more than the not-retrenched renters—with an average response that their housing circumstances had negatively impacted on their finances over the past year, relative to an average response of 'no impact' for the not-retrenched renters. So retrenched renters were already financially vulnerable even before the COVID-19 crisis hit.

... the long-term economic and financial
fallout is likely to be large ...



There were also small gender differences, with women represented less strongly in the retrenched group (52% identified as female, in comparison with 59% in the not-retrenched group).

The figure on the right depicts these patterns: relative to not-retrenched renters, retrenched renters were more likely to be struggling with bills (45% versus 22% for not-retrenched renters); and accumulating debt (33% versus 14%). Their physical and mental health was also more vulnerable with the retrenched renters more likely to be skipping meals (35% versus 14%) and experiencing increased anxiety levels (56% versus 49%). The figure also captures worrying long-term trends in rising wealth inequality for retrenched renters—46 per cent had withdrawn superannuation funds (relative to 17% for not-retrenched renters) and 69 per cent had spent their savings (relative to 38% for not-retrenched renters).

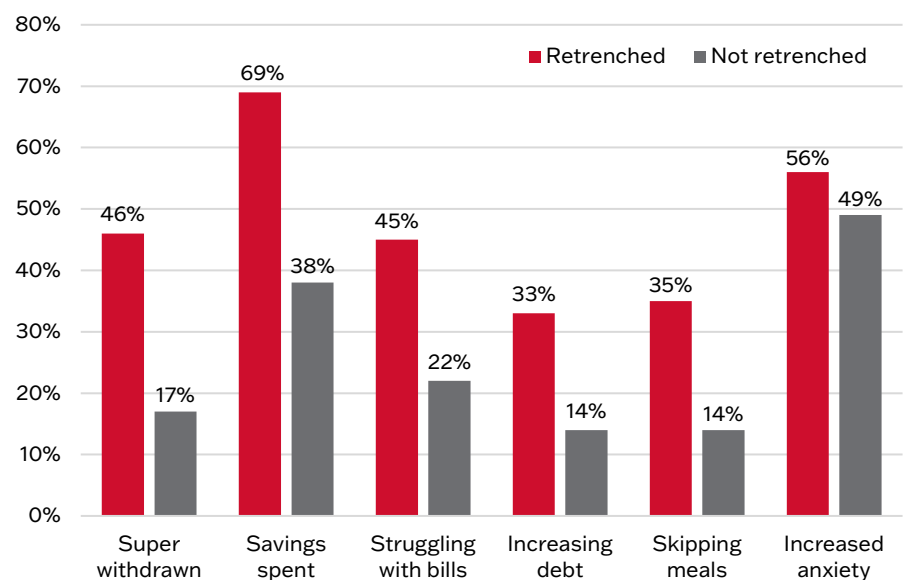
What is the relevance to Australian policy?

The socio-economic ramifications from the COVID-19 crisis will endure for many years to come. Understandably, the current economic policy focus is on protecting against COVID-19's short-term impacts—including via fiscal stimuli to boost output and employment in 2020.

Short-term policies will not, however, ameliorate COVID-19's impacts in increasing income and wealth inequality over the long term. Extensions to job protection policies, including JobKeeper and JobSeeker, also need to be carefully considered, alongside government and regulatory support for renters facing rent rises, eviction and/or poor housing conditions. Increased public investment in good quality social housing will also help to reduce impacts for vulnerable groups. Overall, having a diverse set of economic policies will help to maintain living standards, livelihoods, health and wellbeing—policy goals that should be regarded as essential to ensuring that the long-term impacts from the COVID-19 crisis are not unendurable for vulnerable groups.

Overall, having a diverse set of economic policies will help to maintain living standards, livelihoods, health and wellbeing ...

Retrenched versus non-retrenched renters





Akshay Vij
University of South Australia



COPING WITH LOW INCOME

The imbalance of power between tenants and landlords

Key findings

The Australian Rental Housing Conditions Survey found that 17.5 per cent of participants had asked their landlord or agent for a rent reduction due to the COVID-19 pandemic, of which 10.3 per cent received a rent reduction or deferment and 5.2 per cent were refused. Roughly one-in-three requests for rent reduction were declined by landlords and agents.

An additional 5.9 per cent of the sample reported not asking due to contractual reasons; 7.6 per cent reported not asking due to it being too hard to request a rent reduction; and 8.7 per cent reported other reasons for not asking that most often included fear of negative repercussions, such as eviction, or impact on future rentals. The following qualitative responses illustrate some of these experiences:

'Would love to, but unsure what the reaction will be, and we would like to extend our lease for a few more months'

'I don't want that on my rental history in case I need it for mortgage/rental reference'

'I don't want to get a bad rep with the estate agent'

Why is it important?

The share of the Australian population that rents their home has increased steadily since the 1980s. As per the 2016 Census, 27 per cent of Australians were renting their home.

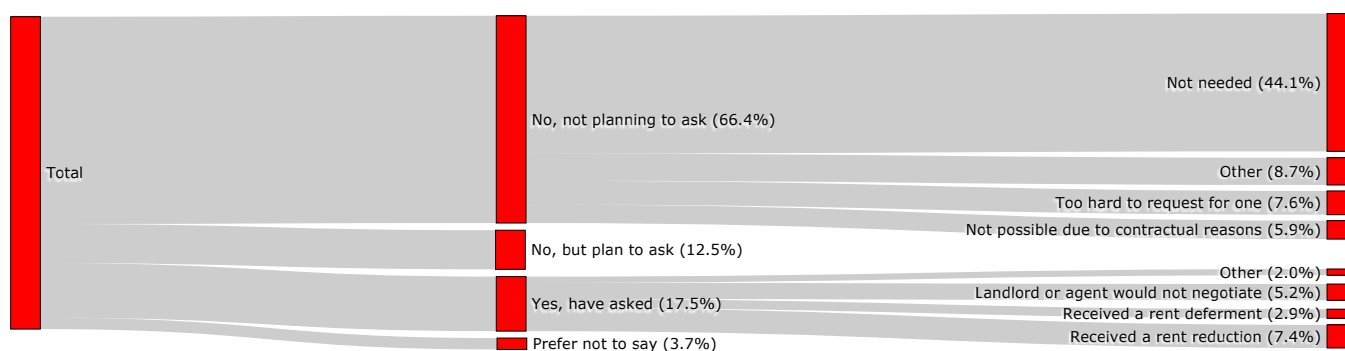
Rental stress is measured by the proportion of households in the bottom 40 per cent in terms of income that are paying more than 30 per cent of their income in rent. Rental stress is a major source of concern for many low-income Australian households. A 2020 report from the Productivity Commission found that 41 per cent of low-income individuals receiving Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) were already in rental stress.

The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to increase both the number of low-income households across the general population, and the proportion of incomes that these households spend towards rent, further exacerbating the issue of rental stress for these vulnerable populations.

Rental stress is measured by the proportion of households in the bottom 40 per cent in terms of income that are paying more than 30 per cent of their income in rent.



Did you ask your landlord or agent for a rent reduction due to COVID-19?



Who is most affected?

On average, those who indicated some need for rental payment assistance were more likely to be young (31.4% of these individuals are 18–29 years old, compared to 24.7% of those who did not feel the need to ask for a rent reduction), low-income (36.3% have annual household incomes less than \$59,000, compared to 31.8% for the reference group) and have children (41.0% belong to a household with children, compared to 35.2% for the reference group).

What is the relevance to Australian policy?

Multiple jurisdictions across Australia have initiated rent relief grants and other tenancy protection measures to assist residential tenants who are facing financial hardship due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, not all tenants who need of assistance qualify for rent relief. Consequently, they need to negotiate directly with their landlords and agents for rent reductions and/or deferments. As our analysis points out, many tenants do not feel that they can ask for rent reductions out of fear of negative consequences, most frequently eviction. This suggests that current tenancy protection measures could potentially be strengthened to safeguard the interests of existing tenants, and to redress the imbalance of power between tenants and landlords in the country.

... many tenants do not feel that they can ask for rent reductions out of fear of negative consequences ...



Mark Stephens
University of Glasgow



COPING WITH LOW INCOME

Loss of rental affordability linked to raids on super

Key findings

Deteriorating rental affordability is the factor most strongly associated with private renters deciding to make use of the COVID-19 Superannuation Early Release Scheme. Some 40 per cent of respondents whose rent became unaffordable as a result of COVID-19 applied for early release, compared to 15 per cent whose rent had remained affordable.

Why is it important?

Since the 1990s Australia has developed a compulsory superannuation scheme operated by approved funds which provides a bedrock of financial security in retirement.

The Australian Government introduced the Superannuation Early Release Scheme (SERS) in response to financial hardship caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This allows people to withdraw up to \$20,000 over two years.

The Australian Prudential Regulation Authority reported that, by late August, 3.1 million members had made an application under SERS and a further 1.2 million repeat applications had been made.

The use of SERS as a relief fund is a fundamental departure from the purpose of superannuation.

Who is most affected?

The survey found that 16.9 per cent of private tenants had applied to the SERS. A further 3.3 per cent indicated that they 'preferred not to say'.

Tenants were asked whether they had applied to the scheme to cover housing or other costs. They were more likely to have done so if they experienced problems with housing affordability. More than one-quarter (26.3%) of tenants who reported their housing to be 'very unaffordable' and 22.1 per cent who found it 'unaffordable' had applied to the scheme. In contrast, around 15 per cent of those who did not experience problems with affordability had applied.

A more striking relationship is found with tenants whose rent had become unaffordable as a result of COVID-19. Some 40 per cent of tenants whose rent had become unaffordable due to COVID-19 had applied to SERS to cover housing or other costs. This compares with 14.8 per cent who had done so even though their rent had not become unaffordable.

The survey also shows a strong overlap between those tenants who had applied to SERS and those who had drawn on their savings to cover housing or other costs.

Almost three-quarters (74%) of those who had applied to SERS had also drawn on their savings.

Some 40 per cent of tenants whose rent had become unaffordable due to COVID-19 had applied to SERS to cover housing or other costs.



Tenants aged under 50 were more likely to have made use of SERS than older people. Around one-fifth (19%) of both 18–29 and 30–49 age groups had made an application, whereas 12.1 per cent of 50–64- year-olds and just 4 per cent of over 65s had done so.

People with children were also more likely to have made an application. Around one- fifth of couples with children (21.2%) and lone parents (20.0%) had applied compared to 15 per cent of childless couples and 14 per cent of singles.

There is also a distinct pattern of applications relating to tenants’ incomes. Around one-fifth of those with pre-tax household incomes of \$31–59,000 and \$59– 90,000 had made an application with declining proportions doing so as income rises (up to the highest income band where there is a slight uptick).

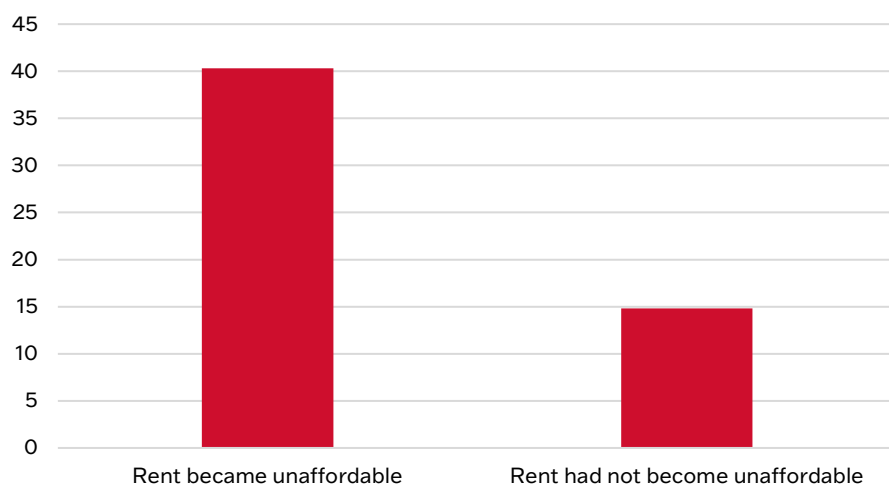
What is the relevance to Australian policy?

Whatever relief SERS provides as an immediate response to COVID-19 related hardship, it risks undermining the long-term financial security of the individuals involved. It may further undermine the integrity of the scheme if governments see it as an alternative to working age social security in the future.

The survey has shown an overlap between use of SERS and loss of housing affordability arising from COVID-19. This is strongly suggestive of income loss, and the key question for Australian policy makers is why policies actually designed to help people in such circumstances, notably Commonwealth Rent Assistance, appear to be inadequate.

Tenants aged under 50 were more likely to have made use of SERS than older people.

Renters who accessed COVID-19 Superannuation Early Release Scheme by rental affordability





Peter Phibbs
The University of Sydney



COPING WITH LOW INCOME

The private rental market—a COVID-19 inequality accelerator

Key findings

The private rental market acted to increase the disadvantage of low-income households during COVID-19. The ability to negotiate rent reductions and the adequacy of living environments provide two key examples of inequality acceleration.

Households on the lowest incomes had the most trouble negotiating a rent reduction with their landlord/real estate agent.

Households on the lowest incomes were much more likely to report that their housing was not adequate at all for working or learning from home.

Why is it important?

The housing market will act to deepen disadvantage for Australian households unless it is explicitly considered in all policy frameworks.

Households on the lowest incomes are the most at risk in a recession and are likely to need the most consideration in negotiating a rent reduction but appear to be receiving the least assistance. This is in stark contrast to assistance for home purchasers who were able to arrange mortgage repayment deferrals from their banks without negotiation

While the freeze on evictions was a good initiative, the arrangements for negotiating a rent reduction were not clear to all key stakeholders. For some tenants, the stress of negotiating rent reductions added to the other financial stresses that the pandemic generated. Asking someone to enter into negotiations, often with a real estate agent whose income was tied to rent revenue, generates considerable stresses for all parties.

In relation to learning and working from home, these policies need to explicitly consider the housing situation of all households. Children in households with lower incomes are already at a learning disadvantage. If these children are unable to effectively learn in their home environment, their disadvantage is compounded.

Who is most affected?

Households with the lowest incomes struggled the most to be able to seek rent relief and to use their homes as a workplace or learning centre.

One-parent families were the most common household type to report that their home was not adequate for work or study. There was also a strong income gradient in the data, with lower income households much more likely than higher income households to report their homes as inadequate for work or study.

... the stress of negotiating rent reductions just added to the other financial stresses ...

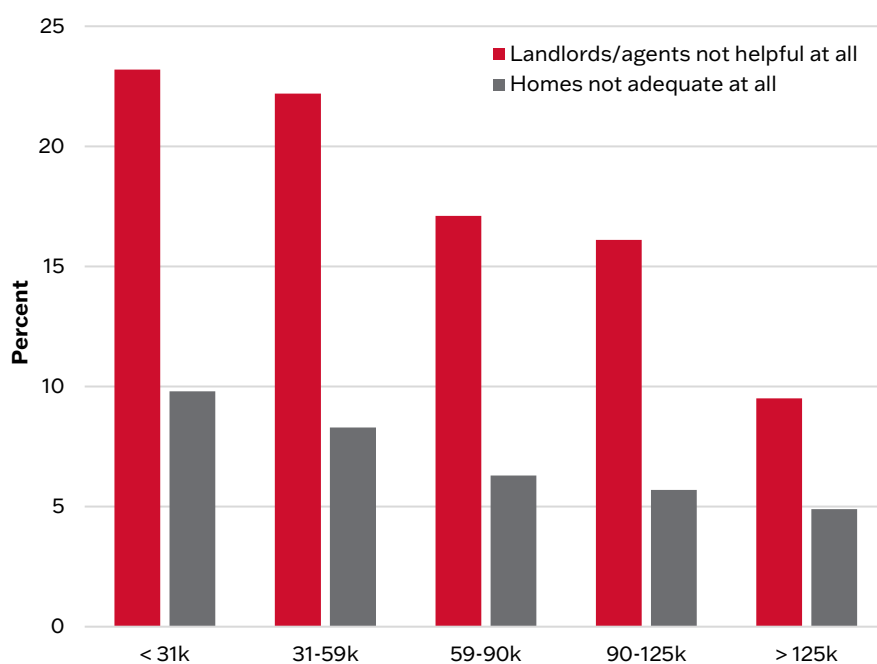


What is the relevance to Australian policy?

Better policy frameworks for negotiating rent reductions in future pandemics, recessions and other emergencies need to be provided. A clear set of rules, relief funds for landlords as well as tenants, and discounts on government charges such as land tax where a landlord discounts rents should be provided. A system whereby, if certain conditions were met (e.g. the tenant had lost a full time job) a set reduction in rent occurred automatically, would be more equitable. Then negotiation between the tenant and landlord would only be needed if a tenant was seeking a deeper discount. While negotiating on a case-by-case basis would seem appropriate in commercial leases, using the same approach for the private rental market is less appropriate.

Learning-from-home strategies need to consider the housing circumstances of all households and develop policies that consider the needs of children living in the private rental market in houses that are not suitable for learning from home.

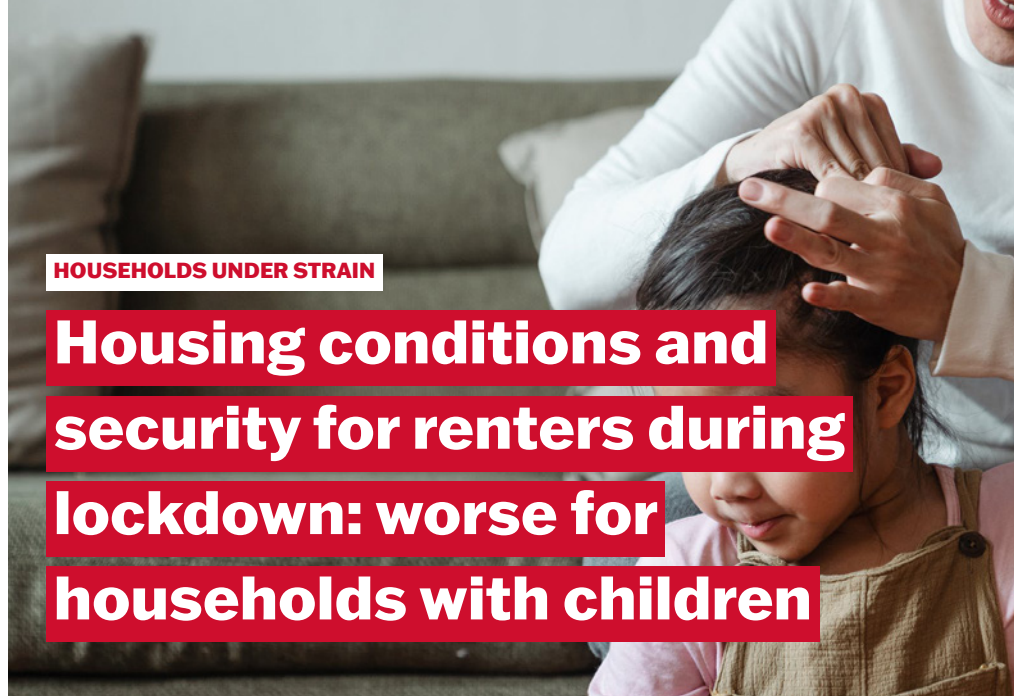
COVID-19 ISSUES AND HOUSEHOLD INCOME: Helpfulness of landlords/agents negotiating rent reductions and adequacy of homes for working/learning from home



One-parent families were the most common household type to report that their home was not adequate for work or study.



Amy Clair
University of Essex



HOUSEHOLDS UNDER STRAIN

Housing conditions and security for renters during lockdown: worse for households with children

Key findings

Only 34 per cent of renters reported living in a home with no housing quality issues, down to 29 per cent among households containing dependent children. Households with children were also more likely to report multiple housing problems.

Similarly, nearly 8 per cent of households with children were served an eviction notice following the outbreak of the pandemic in Australia, twice the number of households without children. Poor quality and insecure housing is detrimental to health at all times, but this impact is likely to have been greater during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the increased importance of, and amount of time spent in, the home during lockdown.

Why is it important?

The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns have highlighted the importance of housing to health, emphasising the home as a safe space. However, the extent to which this is true depends on the quality and security of the home. Poor quality housing has been linked to numerous physical and mental health conditions. While insecure housing has been shown to affect parenting behaviours, as well as physical and mental health. Given the importance of housing conditions and security in more ordinary times, understanding their impact during the pandemic and lockdown is vitally important.

Who is most affected?

The most common housing problems reported in the Australian Rental Housing Conditions Survey are cracks in the walls and floors, plumbing issues, and mould.

All these issues were more common among households with children, and most (53%) households with dependent children reported multiple housing problems. As well as reporting a greater number of issues, households with children are also more likely to report more significant problems. Thirty-five per cent of households with children had at least one issue requiring urgent repair, compared to 25 per cent of other households.

Close to twice as many households with children received eviction notices compared to households without children. Of those who received an eviction notice, over 60 per cent of households with children present were evicted, compared to 52 per cent of other households. There is an overlap between housing problems and the likelihood of receiving an eviction notice—just 2.5 per cent of households reporting no housing problems had received an eviction notice compared to over 9 per cent of households with 3 or more problems, rising to nearly 12 per cent for households with children where the property has 3 or more problems.

Further evidence of the importance of housing to the impact of the pandemic is found by exploring reported changes. Asked if they had experienced higher levels of anxiety or worry as a result of the pandemic, under 37 per cent of people in homes with no problems responded 'yes', compared to over 60 per cent of people in homes with 7 or more problems. Similarly, under 14 per cent of people in homes with no issues reported difficulties in their personal relationships compared to nearly half of those in homes with 9 problems. These relationships are linear, with more housing problems leading to a higher likelihood of reporting personal issues.



What is the relevance to Australian policy?

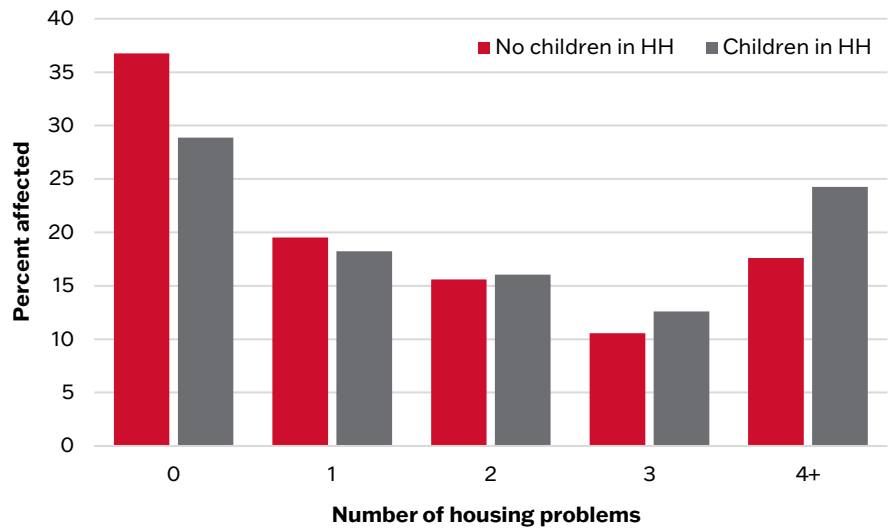
The high level of housing problems in rented homes is a significant concern, particularly in the context of COVID-19. Poorer housing conditions have amplified the impact of the pandemic on people's mental health and personal relationships.

Households with children are more likely to live in rented homes with multiple housing problems, meaning that for children having to study from home, this may have serious implications for educational, as well as health, inequalities. This is important beyond the pandemic, particularly for older children who have homework.

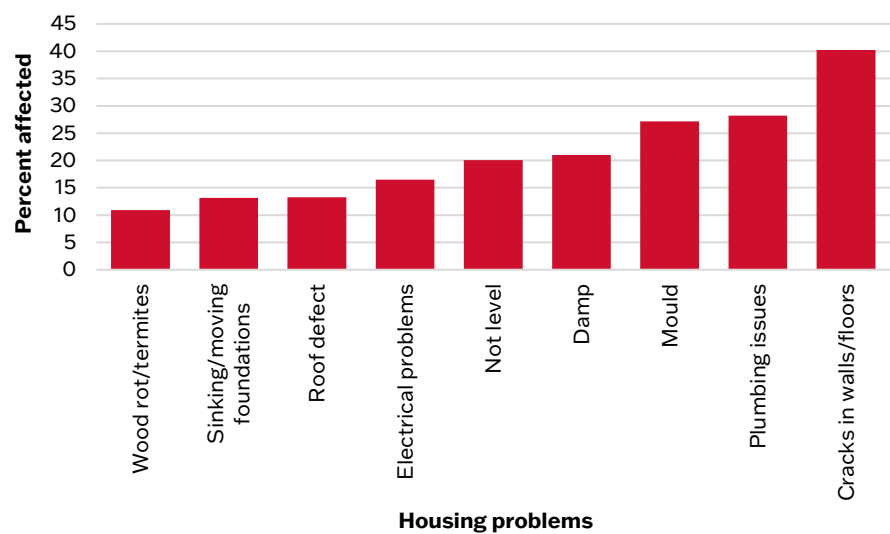
Housing problems predate the COVID-19 pandemic, but the pandemic has exacerbated their effects. These findings support calls to improve housing conditions through minimum standards, as well as to protect renters from instability. The benefits of such changes will extend beyond housing into health, education, and other areas of people's lives.

Close to twice as many households with children received eviction notices compared to households without children.

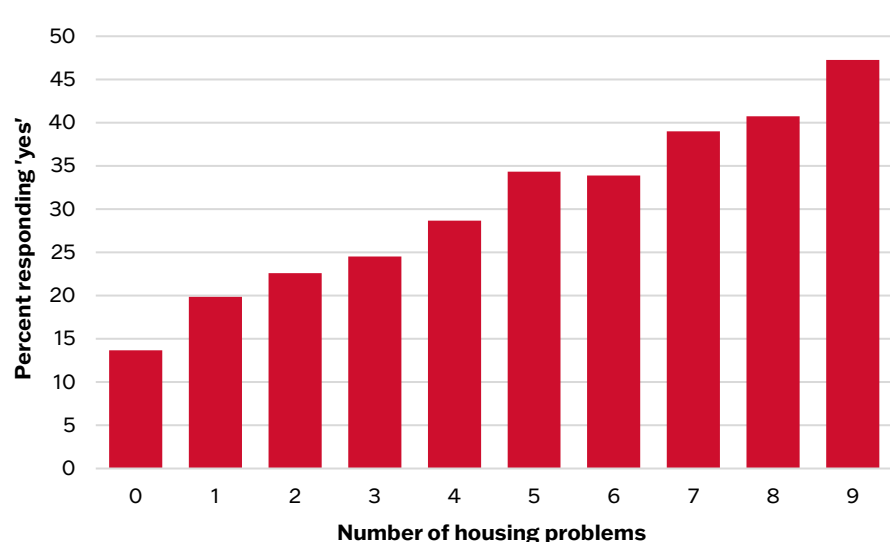
Number of housing problems by household type



Type of housing problems reported by all households



Number of housing problems for all households





Andrew Beer
University of South Australia



HOUSEHOLDS UNDER STRAIN

Tenants with a disability at risk during COVID-19

Key findings

COVID-19 and the associated lockdown of parts of the economy has generated a cascade of troubles for Australians with a disability in the private rental market.

In 2020, 18.8 per cent of renters with a disability reported that their mental health had decreased significantly as a result of COVID-19, almost twice the rate for tenants without a disability (10.3%). More tenants with a disability were forced to ask for a rent reduction (18.8%) and reported being fully retrenched (6.7%) at double the rate of tenants without a disability (3.9%). Tenants with a disability were much more likely to withdraw monies from their superannuation (23.4%) compared with other tenants (14.9%).

Worryingly, they were also much more likely to have received an eviction notice (12.3%), and of those so warned, two-thirds (65%) were forced to move. Tenants with a disability were more likely to report that their rent had become unaffordable (10.4%) relative to those without a disability (7.7%). There was also a small—but significant—minority forced to move out of their home (5.5% compared with 3.1%), skip meals to save money (20.4% versus 12.5%), and reporting that they were struggling to make ends meet (28.7% relative to 20.5%).

Overall, private tenants affected by a disability are in a bad set of circumstances that has become worse through 2020.

Why is it important?

We already know that Australians with a disability are among the most disadvantaged within the Australian housing market, especially those relying on the private rental market. Their disadvantage is, in part, an outcome of the precarious employment of many of them.

The introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) since 2012 has significantly improved the provision of services to individuals with an impairment. However, previous research has shown⁷ that the Specialist Disability Accommodation Program (SDA) within the NDIS has not yet delivered a significant volume of accommodation for people with a disability who need housing.

Many people with a disability remain in pre-NDIS supported accommodation or pay a significant percentage of their income in rent to private landlords.

Tenants with a disability were much more likely to withdraw monies from their superannuation ...

⁷ Beer, A., Hemphill, L., Flanagan, K., Verdouw, J. Lowies, B. and Zappia, G. (2018) *Understanding specialist disability accommodation (SDA) funding*, Final Report No. 310, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne.



Who is most affected?

People with a range of impairments—sensory impediments, intellectual or developmental disability, mobility limitations—are all at risk in the private rental market, and the data show that those in the workforce are in an especially precarious position.

SDA housing is targeted to approximately 6 per cent of NDIS recipients—essentially those whose needs could not conceivably be met within the market. The remaining 94 per cent, however, remain dependent upon market-based housing, exposing them to the consequences of a COVID-19 affected rental sector.

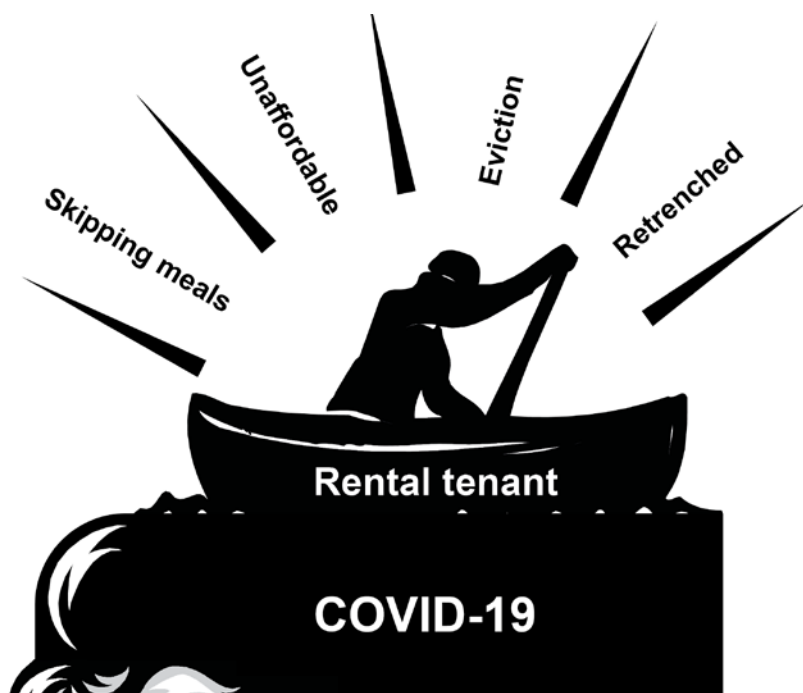
What is the relevance to Australian policy?

These findings underscore, once again, the compound and complex disadvantage experienced by people with a disability in Australia's housing market.

Critically, there is no single risk factor making the housing of this group so challenging. Rather, disadvantage stems from a combination of factors—labour market disadvantage, low incomes, high housing costs and insecure tenure—coming together to entrench marginality.

It is clear from the data that people with a disability have less resilience in responding to shocks in the housing and labour markets when compared with the population as a whole.

There is a clear need to provide targeted accommodation that allows people with a disability to build their lives away from the shadow of eviction, escalating housing costs, and insecure household circumstances.



Many people with a disability remain in pre-NDIS supported accommodation or pay a significant percentage of their income in rent to private landlords.



Emma Power
Western Sydney University



Key findings

Older, very-low income renters⁸ are struggling financially.

More than 1 in 5 find it difficult to meet their essential costs after rent is paid, including food, bills and clothing.

Nearly 2 in 3 are struggling to pay for non-essential costs like social activities, and over three-quarters do not have enough money to save or invest.

Most (85%) have a government pension or allowance as their main income.

Of these renters, 2 in 5 reported escalating loneliness as a result of COVID-19.

Why is it important?

People unable to afford basic essential expenses like food are likely to experience health and wellbeing costs and be more dependent on charities like local foodbanks to make ends meet.⁹ During COVID-19 these services have faced disruption, closing for periods, and placing vulnerable households at high risk.

Non-essential costs like social activities may not be necessary for survival, but they are the key to wellbeing. Inability to afford social activities can lead to a loss of social connections and negatively impact wellbeing.¹⁰ COVID-19 exacerbates this risk, particularly during periods of lock-down, driving elevated levels of loneliness.

Being unable to save or invest puts households at high risk of financial and housing crisis if they have a sudden cost, including a notice to vacate, health crisis or an unexpected bill,¹¹ as highlighted in the qualitative responses:

'Using credit card for food and medications'

'Missed doctor's appointments and not going shopping to save on fuel'

'I am usually left with no money at all after bills and shopping. So I am broke for 12 days in a fortnight'

Who is most affected?

Older very-low income renters are facing everyday financial struggles more frequently than other renters.

- 23 per cent report typically not having enough money left after rent to meet essential expenditures like bills, clothing, essential transport, food and drink. They are 2.7 times more likely than all other renters to report this economic crisis and 1.3 times more likely than other low-income renters.
- 65 per cent report typically having insufficient funds after rent to meet non-essential expenditure, including social activities, holidays, TV, non-essential food and drink, and alcohol. They are 4.4 times more likely to experience this than all other renters, and 1.6 times more likely than other very low-income renters.
- 76 per cent typically do not have enough money after paying rent to save or invest. They are 4.4 times more likely to report this than all other renters, and 1.8 times more likely than other very low-income renters.

⁸ Aged 50 and over and with an annual household income less than \$31,000.

⁹ Power, E. R. (2020) Older women in the private rental sector: unaffordable, substandard and insecure housing, Western Sydney University, <https://doi.org/10.26183/5edf0f0d75cf8>.

¹⁰ Morris, A. (2016) *The Australian Dream: Housing Experiences of Older Australians*, CSIRO Publishing, Clayton South.

¹¹ Productivity Commission (2019) *Vulnerable Private Renters: Evidence and Options*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.



Of this group, 40 per cent reported feeling higher levels of loneliness as a result of COVID-19. Single, older very-low income renters reported even higher rates of loneliness in this period (46%). They are 1.5 times more likely than all other renters to report this.

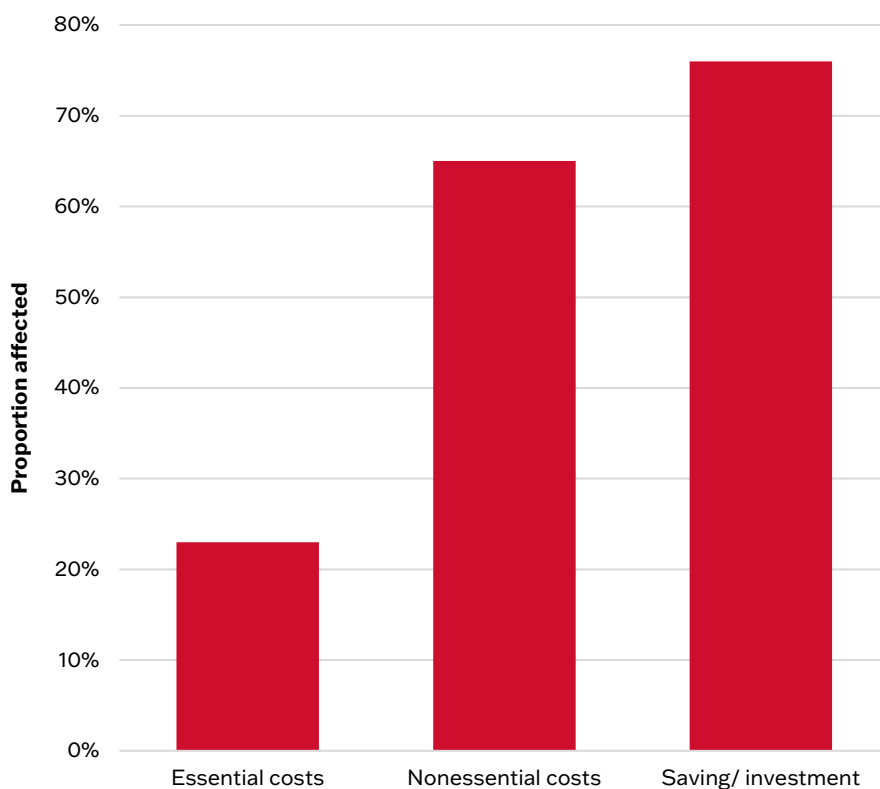
What is the relevance to Australian policy?

Very low-income older renters report these as 'typical' risks. They are not particular to COVID-19. This shows a failure of the private market to meet the needs of vulnerable households, particularly those with government pensions or allowances as their main source of income.

There is an urgent need to address rental affordability among very low-income renters, and particularly older renters who are struggling more. Public support for secure social and affordable housing is essential as the private market is not addressing the needs of this group.

Growing social isolation through COVID-19 also needs to be addressed.

Proportion of older very-low income renters who report typically not having money left after rent to afford costs



Non-essential costs like social activities may not be necessary for survival, but they are the key to wellbeing.



Rebecca Bentley
The University of Melbourne



ISOLATION AND MENTAL HEALTH

Lockdown and mental health: who has been most affected?

Key findings

More than half of respondents (52%) report that their mental health has decreased during COVID-19 lockdown and more than 10 per cent report that this impact has been of a significant nature. Importantly, this has not been the same for all renters.

The lockdown has most acutely affected the mental health of women and younger people, people working from home, people indicating they will require financial assistance in the next year, people who live in poor conditions, insecure or unaffordable dwellings, and Victorians (where there has been the longest period of lockdown).

Why is it important?

Renters are especially vulnerable to the effects of the economic shutdown in response to COVID-19 for several reasons. First, many renters are in group houses reducing their control over social isolation and making them vulnerable to the financial consequences of changing household composition as job losses and underemployment cause upheaval in many people's lives. Second, even before the pandemic hit, there was concern for the affordability, security and the poor condition of many rental dwellings.

Finally, renters (on average) are more likely to be precariously employed and therefore more exposed to the economic shocks that have resulted from government responses to COVID-19.

Who is most affected?

The Australian Rental Housing Conditions Survey reveals a pattern of impact on mental health based on socio-demographic characteristics, employment characteristics, housing characteristics and where people live.

Women reported the greatest negative mental health effects since March 2020 as a result of COVID-19 lockdowns.

People who indicated they were likely to require financial assistance in the next 12 months, that their housing costs were unaffordable or that they had moved frequently in the past five years reported the greatest negative impact of COVID-19 on their mental health. Notably, people requesting financial assistance had five times the odds of reporting their mental health to have been significantly diminished.

Housing conditions also had an important association with mental health. People who reported that their housing was in poor condition or cold were more likely to report a significant decrease in their mental health resulting from COVID-19 lockdowns.

Finally, and perhaps expectedly, renters residing in Victoria reported the greatest mental health affects compared with residents of other states and territories. This is unsurprising given the prolonged period of lockdown and difficult economic conditions that have ensued. Added to this, Victorians have done the most home schooling and remote working.

Women reported the greatest negative mental health effects since March 2020 as a result of COVID-19 lockdowns.

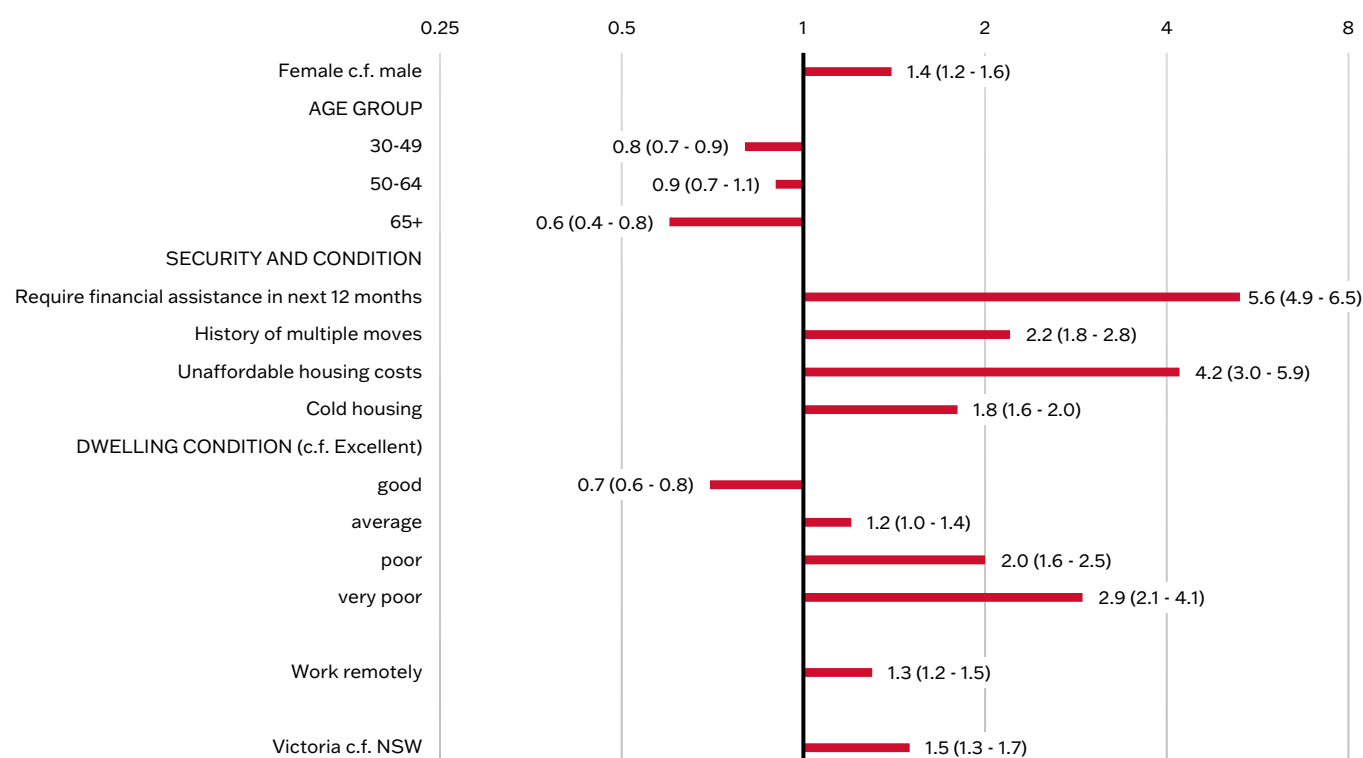
What is the relevance to Australian policy?

The negative mental health impact of COVID-19 on women compared to men is of significant policy importance. There are likely multiple reasons for this gender-based differential related to the increased caring responsibilities borne by women, financial stress experienced by single-parent households and the impact of working from home. In addition, and likely related, there has been a six-fold increase in calls to services providing support for women who experience domestic violence.

Financial strain and affordability and security concerns for people in the rental housing market have the strongest association with people's odds of reporting worse mental health. JobSeeker, JobKeeper and rental assistance will provide some relief to tenants, however, longer term solutions are required. Similarly, the halt on evictions is currently protecting many from homelessness but placing tenants in a stressful situation nonetheless.

The condition of some rental dwellings (as rated by tenants) and the extent to which people have been able to keep them warm over winter is also of policy significance. This is likely to be related to financial constraints as well and the structural properties of dwellings requiring multiple types of interventions.

Odds of reporting significantly decreased mental health as a result of COVID-19





Carol T. Kulik
University of South Australia

Ruchi Sinha
University of South Australia



ISOLATION AND MENTAL HEALTH

**Renters experienced
loneliness working from
home during the pandemic**

Key findings

The COVID-19 pandemic forced 46 per cent of renters to work or study remotely from their homes. Across all living arrangements, renters in remote work/study were vulnerable to loneliness and isolation as a result of COVID-19: 42 per cent of renters in remote work/study reported heightened levels of loneliness, compared with 33 per cent of renters not engaged in remote work or study.

Why is it important?

Loneliness is a painful and pernicious emotion, and a large body of research links loneliness to mental and physical health. Loneliness's association with mortality and disease puts it in the same risk factor category as smoking, obesity and alcoholism.

The findings from this survey highlight the value of social connections at work and in school. Small spontaneous conversations with co-workers and fellow students have positive effects on people's wellbeing. For example, employees who participate in office chit-chat experience more positive emotions, go out of their way to help co-workers, and end the workday in a better frame of mind.

Without access to these social connections, people experience loneliness—putting their mental and physical health at risk.

'The lack of social contact was challenging at times'

'Been much more isolated than usual...'

The findings from this survey highlight the value of social connections at work and in school.

Who is most affected?

Higher levels of loneliness were reported by renters in single-person or shared-living arrangements than by renters living with family. Single people are not necessarily less socially connected than partnered people or parents, but remote work/study had a greater impact on single people's access to their social network. Renters who lived with their partners or children were better positioned to compensate for the loss of work/school connections by strengthening domestic relationships (for example, using the flexibility of remote work/study as an opportunity to share family meals or spontaneously play with children).

Women in single-person living arrangements were especially susceptible to increased loneliness when they worked/studied remotely. Women usually report higher levels of loneliness than men, and the findings from this survey suggest one explanation: Women may be more dependent than men on the relationships they develop at the workplace and at school. Remote work/study generates more task-focused interactions than social ones, making it difficult to maintain friendships with work and school colleagues.

'Loss of social contact with friends and family.'

'I moved back to my parents' place temporarily just for company and comfort.'



What is the relevance to Australian policy?

In response to the financial pressures of COVID-19, employers and universities are launching cost-saving initiatives and downsizing their physical facilities. People can expect to spend more time working/studying at home after the pandemic is over.

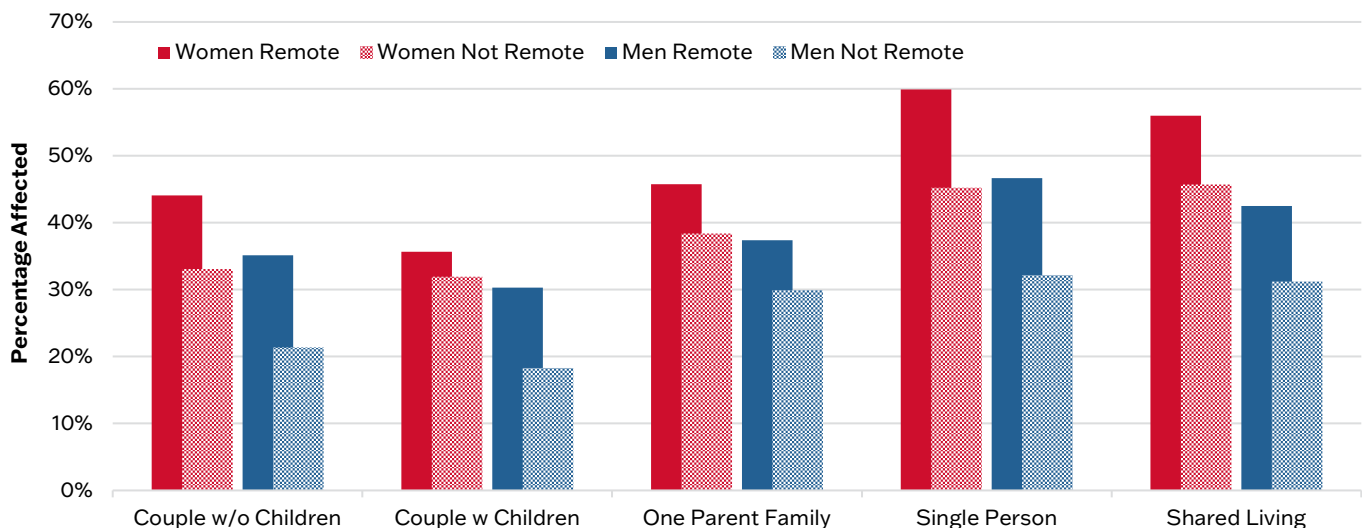
Organisations, therefore, need to give careful consideration to how they manage remote work and study. For example, employers should avoid mandating remote work and develop flexible policies, so that employees can choose work locations that best maintain—and expand—their social connections.

In addition, organisations should make a deliberate effort to enable social connections among remote workers and students. Connections might be supported through hybrid work/study models that combine virtual activity with face-to-face contact; and managers and instructors can schedule time for casual conversations alongside task-focused interactions.

In the short term, loneliness can motivate people to seek out relationships. But when loneliness is experienced on a long-term basis, it has the opposite effect: lonely people withdraw and stop building relationships. If the loneliness risks of remote work/study are not addressed quickly, loneliness is likely to accelerate and have a society-level impact on the physical and psychological wellbeing of a large group of people.

Higher levels of loneliness were reported by renters in single-person or shared-living arrangements than by renters living with family.

As a result of COVID-19, have you felt higher levels of loneliness or isolation?





Lyrian Daniel
The University of Adelaide



UNHEALTHY HOUSING

1/4 Australian renters live in housing that makes them sick

Key findings

In 2020, 23 per cent of renters were unable to keep warm in their home during cold weather, 27 per cent reported problems with mould, and 21 per cent reported problems of dampness.

Younger households (18–49 years old) were disproportionately exposed to cold, mouldy and damp housing compared to respondents aged over 50 years old.

Why is it important?

Some of Australia's top disease burdens are caused or exacerbated by exposure to cold, mouldy and damp housing. For example, approximately 2.7 million Australians had asthma in 2017–18, and it is the leading burden of disease for children aged between 5 and 14 years old.¹²

Shockingly, the prevalence of cold, mould and damp was much higher among people with the worst health (Figure 1). Among the respondents who had asthma, the rates of cold (27%), mould (35%) and damp (28%) were even higher than among the broader sample.

'My boy got ill because of the allergies that came from mould from carpet'

'[I have] continuous bronchitis and breathing difficulties from living in damp, wet, cold and mouldy housing'

During a time when many of us are spending significant amounts of our days at home, whether due to formal COVID-19 restrictions or changes in work and study arrangements, the health and safety of our home environments has never been more important.

Who is most affected?

Many of those reporting cold, mouldy and damp housing were among the people that we may expect to have poor housing conditions—public and community housing tenants, single and couple-parent households, people living in share houses, and those on lower incomes—though there were some surprises. Younger households (18–49 years old) were disproportionately exposed to cold, mouldy and damp housing compared to respondents aged over 50 years old. While cold housing was graded by household income, we see high rates from the very lowest income households (29%) to even the very highest income households (15%).

The experience of cold, mouldy and damp housing was also reflected in respondents' assessment of the overall quality of their home; prevalence ranging from 8–11 per cent in 'Excellent' quality houses to 69–78 per cent in 'Very Poor' quality houses.

'Due to the bad insulation it is incredibly cold in winter'

'The floorboards are coming apart, the dust and cold air come straight in'



What is the relevance to Australian policy?

Overall, these findings suggest widespread problems of cold, mould and damp that have, historically, been under-acknowledged in the Australian context.

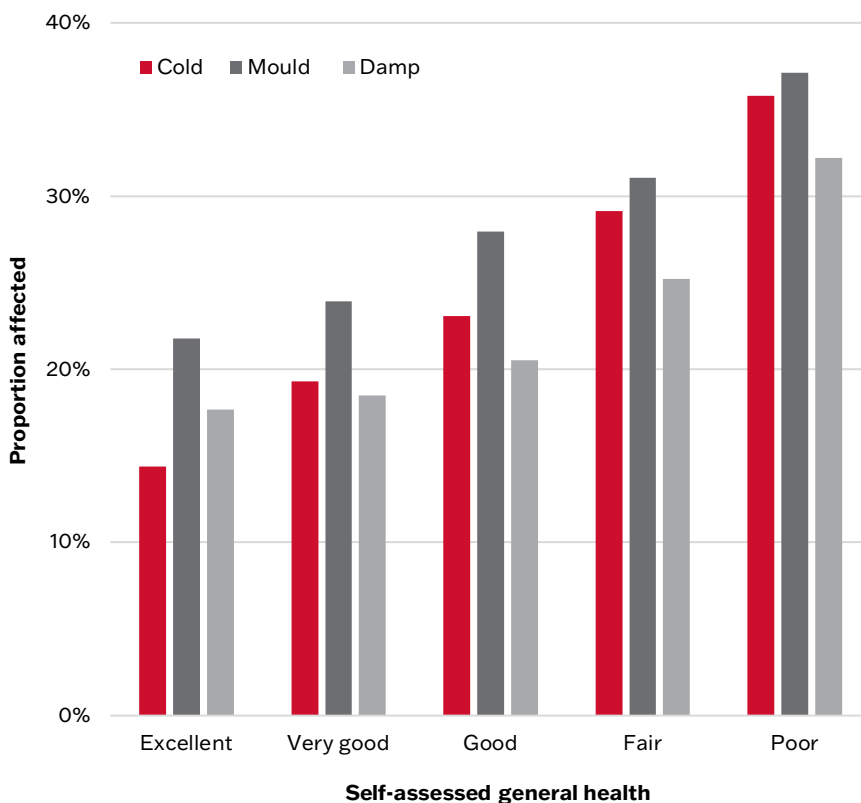
These early findings from the 2020 Australia Housing Survey add to the mounting body of evidence demonstrating that the poorest housing conditions occur in the public and private rental sectors.

Importantly, individuals and households who rent often face overlapping social and economic disadvantage, which means that interventions must be carefully designed and targeted to overcome these multiple barriers.

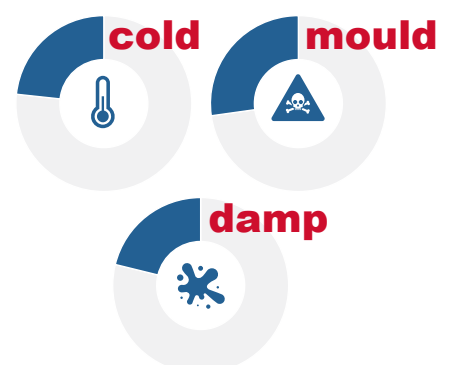
The current move of some states towards mandating minimum housing standards within the private market represents promising early steps, however it is likely that a suite of targeted policy intervention measures will be needed to assist those who are most vulnerable.

Remediation of cold, mouldy and damp housing presents significant opportunity to improve population health and wellbeing, which may also realise savings across other health and welfare services. As we emerge from pandemic-related economic and social shutdowns, investment in improving material conditions across the whole of our housing stock presents an opportunity to stimulate the construction sector while also providing population-wide benefits.

Housing problems by self-assessed general health



Remediation of cold, mouldy and damp housing presents significant opportunity to improve population health and wellbeing.





Wendy Stone
Swinburne University
of Technology



Key findings

Existing research has focused on the impacts of some aspects of the living conditions of Australia’s children.

This small but important Australian evidence- base shows that housing in which children grow up affects their education, development, health—and overall life chances. Children living in households with low income are particularly vulnerable to negative impacts of housing- related affordability stress, crowding and heightened/ forced residential mobility. International evidence also suggests that the quality of housing that children live in also matters.

Until now, the data available to consider the impact of housing conditions of children’s home environment on their wellbeing, development, education, health and long-term outcomes has been limited. Using the ARHCD we can begin to ask important policy questions, such as: ‘What proportion of children in Australia are growing up in poor quality housing conditions?’, ‘How does the burden of exposure to poor quality conditions differ for children living in couple-headed families compared with that for children living in single-parent families, with typically lower relative incomes?’ and ‘Are children living in very low-income families better off in social or private rental, from a housing quality perspective?’.

Results are stark for children and families living in rental housing in Australia.

Families with children are significantly more likely to live with three or more forms of housing condition problems than households without children. Among couple-headed families, new data shows that 27 per cent live with no problems, 17 per cent live with one problem, another 17 per cent live with two and that 39 per cent live with three or more problem conditions. Rates are higher for single parent-headed families, with 26 per cent living with no housing quality problems, 17 per cent reporting living with one problem, 14 per cent with two, and 44 per cent living with three or more condition problems in their rental homes.

Who is most affected?

Figure 1 shows that for all families with dependent children living in private (let from a real estate agent or person outside the dwelling) or social housing (renting from a state/territory housing authority or community housing provider), rates of reporting living with three or more building condition problems are high. In privately rented dwellings 39 per cent of couple-headed families with children and 42 per cent of single parent-headed families report this scale of building problem.

For families with children in social housing, results are worse—close to half of couple and single parent headed families report multiple building problems. In all rental types, the most commonly reported problems include: damp, mould, electrical/wiring problems and plumbing.





What is the relevance to Australian policy?

One under-explored consequence of the increasing lock-out of younger generations from home ownership, is that many young families are tenants. Put another way, growing numbers of Australian children are spending all or large parts of their formative years living in rental housing.

This includes children living in moderate income families as well as those living with low-waged families. It also includes children living in very low-income families in privately rented or social housing.

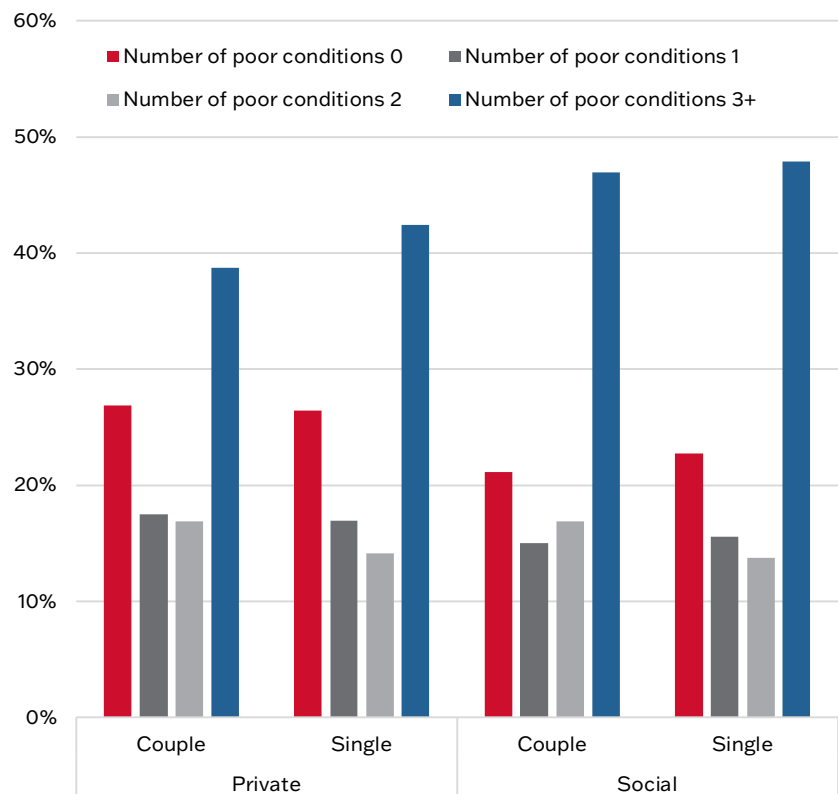
Housing quality is important in all tenure forms, for residents of all generations.

Relatively light touch regulations about the quality of private rental housing in most states and territories is inadequate for protecting children and teens from the negative impacts of poor building quality.

A focus on social housing as essential quality infrastructure accompanied with renewed investment is needed.

The multiple housing condition problems that families with children live with across all rented housing indicates the need for an Australian focus on the rights of children to live in adequate quality dwellings, and a policy roadmap to achieve this.

Number of housing quality conditions reported by families living with children, in private and social rented housing



Families with children are significantly more likely to live with three or more forms of housing condition problems than households without children.



Joel Dignam
Better Renting



UNHEALTHY HOUSING

Children's health threatened by cold rental homes

Key findings

In 2020, one in four renters with children had difficulty staying warm in their rental property in winter, with the rate rising to over one in three for households on the lowest incomes. This suggests that there are a large number of children whose health may suffer from growing up in cold rental homes.

Why is it important?

A growing number of Australians rent their homes, and this includes a growing number of families with dependent children. Around two in five rental households in this survey were either a 'couple with children' or a 'one-parent family'. In 1981, this figure was closer to 30 per cent.¹³

Rental properties are generally less energy-efficient, and this means that the people in these properties are more likely to experience indoor cold. For renting households that identified either as a one-parent family with children or a couple with children, 24 per cent reported difficulty with staying comfortably warm in winter.

Prolonged exposure to indoor cold is bad for your health. Housing that is too cold in winter contributes to cardiovascular and respiratory disease. In Australia, 6.5 per cent of all deaths are attributable to cold, compared to just 0.45 per cent attributable to heat.¹⁴

Who is most affected?

Young children are particularly vulnerable to the health impacts of cold housing. While many rental households face cold temperatures, the households that contain children face additional health risks.

Such health impacts are typically on the respiratory system. Previous research has found, for example, that children living in cold, damp and mouldy homes are more likely to develop symptoms of asthma, suffer from chest and breathing problems, and experience increased sickness and absenteeism that affects educational outcomes.

The survey results indicate that as household income increases, renters with children are less likely to be uncomfortably cold in winter. However, even on higher incomes, almost one in five houses still experience excessive cold.

Rental properties are generally less energy-efficient, and this means that the people in these properties are more likely to experience indoor cold.

¹³ Stone, Wendy, Burke, Terry, Hulse, Kath and Ralston, Liss. (2013) 'Long-term private rental in a changing Australian private rental sector, AHURI, Melbourne.

¹⁴ Gasparrini, Antonio, Guo, Yuming et al. (2015) 'Mortality risk attributable to high and low ambient temperature: a multicountry observational study', *The Lancet*, vol. 386, no. 9991: 369–75.



What is the relevance to Australian policy?

This survey adds to a growing body of evidence that Australia's homes have comparatively poor energy performance. Rental homes typically perform even worse. This has negative impacts on the health of occupants, including children, and puts household budgets under greater strain. This is particularly salient in recent years, given striking increases in utility costs.

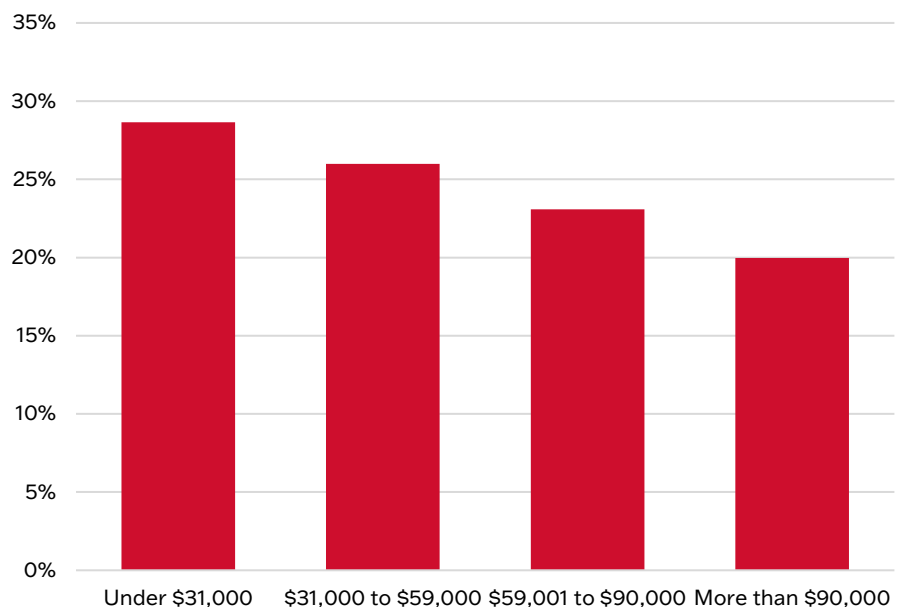
Different governments have attempted to address this through incentivising landlords to improve household energy efficiency. In general, however, these have been largely ineffective. For example, a 2009 subsidy scheme for household insulation began with a separate component especially for property investors, but was later scrapped due to low demand. Landlords made up a disproportionately low proportion of participants in the scheme.

While many rental households face cold temperatures, the households that contain children face additional health risks

In the face of this, more governments are considering regulating minimum standards to address the unhealthy conditions facing people who rent. The ACT Government has committed to implementing minimum performance standards for rental properties, and the Queensland Government has also proposed minimum measures. Victoria has published draft regulations, including a requirement for energy-efficient heaters, and in late 2019, Australia's energy ministers committed to developing a 'national framework for minimum energy efficiency requirements for rental properties'.

This issue has a significant health dimension. However, another relevant context is climate change. State governments have committed to net-zero carbon emissions by 2050; they are also cognisant of the need for adaptation. Improving the energy efficiency of rental properties—typically, through regulated minimum standards—would reduce carbon pollution from fuel consumption, and also assist with climate adaptation.

Cannot keep comfortably warm in your house during winter vs. household annual income before tax





Kerry London
Torrens University Australia



UNHEALTHY HOUSING

Renovating substandard rental housing

Key findings

High rates of cold, mould and damp in rented properties point to failures in Australia's standards for construction and regulation of the rental sector.

Why is it important?

The pandemic is also highlighting how critical the design and construction of our homes has become for our physical and mental health. There is legislation that governs minimum standards for rental properties in each state. Are minimum standards acceptable though? Who assesses and who governs minimum standards? Clearly the system is not working. The survey also indicated the relationship between quality of living environment and mental health.

A vast number of rental properties are in dire need of renovations to make them safe, dry, habitable, warm and healthy. As we go forward, we also need to rethink our approach to the renovation of rental homes. Landlords of substandard rental properties rarely care whether the design of homes are the havens that people need. The home has become a work environment, a place for leisure and home-schooling. We eat, sleep, work and play all within very small inflexible spaces. In the future we should be concerned about designing for flexibility and different activities taking place in the same space either simultaneously or at different times. Never has the attention to how we design these important spaces been more critical to our health and wellbeing. It is not just about the minimum anymore; it is about maximising what we have.

Who is most affected?

The most obvious answer to this is those Australians who live in substandard rental housing. However, if we reframe the problem to look at the entire sector then there are numerous people affected. The supply of rental housing and the renovation of rental homes has multiple actors who would need to be mobilised to address this problem.

Reframing the problem will involve occupants, architects, certifiers, housing contractors and subcontractors, rental boards, landlords, Councils, lending institutions and funding agencies.

A vast number of rental properties are in dire need of renovations to make them safe, dry, habitable, warm and healthy.



Involving architects who are specialists in functional home design is key to creating quality living areas for the future. Everyone in Australia not only deserves a home to live in but deserves light, air, warmth and aspect. It is about reframing the problem of the systems that creates, monitors, and provides for quality housing for all. Those renovations could be categorised in three ways. First, minor repairs and maintenance which typically is painting, fixing steps, plastering cracking from movement, etc. Second, major construction projects that would require repairing damage to the structure or major items such as roofing or cladding, and third, redesign to improve the quality of thermal performance, light penetration, as well as potentially including skylights, additions of windows/glazed doors, external sunscreens/pergolas or internal reconfiguration of rooms/walls, etc.

What is the relevance to Australian policy?

It is not enough to simply identify the extent of the problem through research, we also need to think through policy implications. Australia has always viewed the housing sector as key to economic growth and stability. In response to the pandemic and the ensuing recession, we yet again look to the housing sector to help us out. The national Homebuilder Stimulus Package scheme for housing new build and renovations was put forward as a stimulus to house building and construction.

As a catalyst to the Australian economy and a solution to adequately housing people in disadvantaged situations, we also need to redesign and reconstruct existing rental housing to improve the quality of life.

The quality of the existing housing stock would dramatically improve. For too long we have focused on new building; it is time to reset the housing policy agenda to address poor quality existing housing stock.

This requires a complete review of the systems that would fund, assess, evaluate, monitor, regulate and audit. There would need to be independent assessments of building and design quality and then degrees of legal requirements to ensure that landlords authentically accessed funds. The design, building and certification community would need to be mobilised and incentivised.



Everyone in Australia not only deserves a home to live in but deserves light, air, warmth and aspect.



Steven Rowley
Curtin University



TENANT SATISFACTION

Poor quality, unaffordable housing: a dangerous trap

Key findings

Poor quality housing is often viewed as more affordable, but the Australian Rental Housing Conditions Dataset shows that almost a quarter of households living in what they regard as poor quality housing also rate their housing as unaffordable. Such households are the most dissatisfied with their housing outcomes.

While 70 per cent of good quality housing was considered affordable by survey respondents, almost a quarter living in poor quality housing rated it unaffordable. Many households struggle to afford even the lowest quality dwellings with little chance to escape to better quality accommodation.

Why is it important?

Households struggling with housing costs are often forced to move into low quality dwellings that can have an impact on both their mental and physical wellbeing.

Households in unaffordable housing reported suffering from dampness (32%) and mould (39%) while cracks in the walls/floors were even more common (52%). Other common issues included plumbing problems (42%) and electrical faults (27%). All these issues affect the quality of life and are potentially dangerous.

Unaffordable housing does not necessarily equate to housing dissatisfaction, but when combined with low quality the outcome is clear. Of those in unaffordable housing, 85 per cent were satisfied with their housing when its quality was considered good or better while 81 per cent were dissatisfied when the quality was rated as poor. Hence, households can live with unaffordability, but they struggle when it is combined with poor quality.

Who is most affected?

While just 7 per cent of survey respondents living in good quality housing believed their housing to be unaffordable, this figure rose to 13 per cent of those living in average quality housing, and 24 per cent for those in poor quality housing. Only 56 per cent of households in poor quality, unaffordable housing reported being able to meet essential expenditure (compared to 90% of all renters) while just 15 per cent could meet non-essential expenditure (compared to 67% of all renters). Ten per cent of those in unaffordable, poor quality housing were renting from a state or territory housing association. Forty-two per cent of all households living in poor quality and unaffordable housing contained children, with 17 per cent of the total being one-parent families with children.

... households can live with unaffordability, but they struggle when it is combined with poor quality.



What is the relevance to Australian policy?

While housing policy debate often concentrates on the impact of housing affordability on households, it is important to note that some households take on high housing costs by choice to access perhaps a particular dwelling type in a particular neighbourhood. Dwelling quality is one housing factor that households demand and the data from this survey shows that households can be happy in unaffordable housing provided it is of good quality.

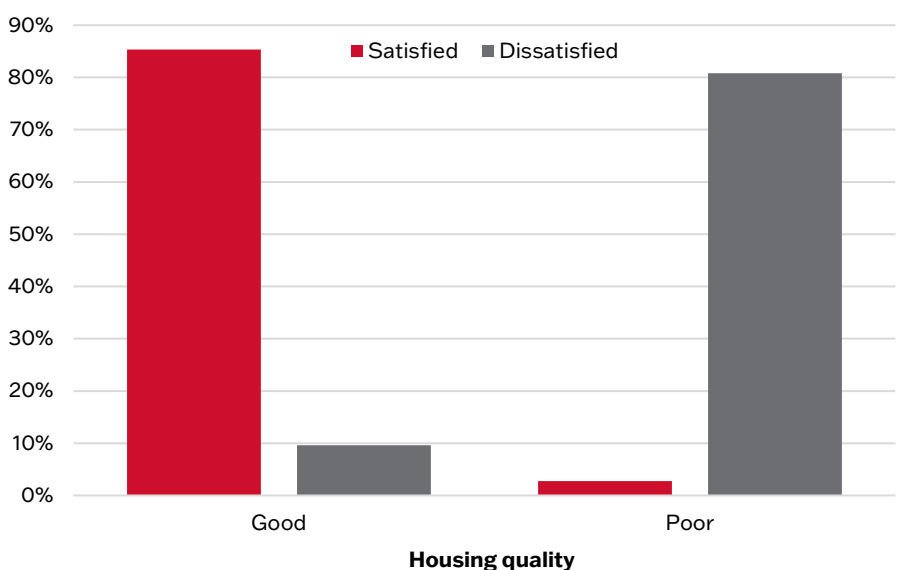
Once housing quality is poor, households are far more likely to be unsatisfied with their dwelling with the quality aspects affecting household wellbeing. Hence, while it is extremely important to ensure an adequate supply of affordable housing, it is also very important to ensure dwellings are of good quality as it appears to be just as important in household perceptions of housing satisfaction.

It is not just the private rental sector where affordability and quality issues collide; state governments need to ensure the quality of their dwellings. Overall, a supply of good quality, affordable housing is essential to lift those households trapped in poor quality, unaffordable housing out of the poverty cycle.

Affordability and quality



Unaffordable and unsatisfied: housing quality matters





Kath Hulse
Swinburne University
of Technology

Christian A. Nygaard
Swinburne University
of Technology



Key findings

Eighty per cent (80%) of lower-income households experience rental stress in the private rented sectors (PRS) of Melbourne and Sydney (paying more than 30% of their income on rents, unadjusted for any Rent Assistance).¹⁵

The incidence of rental stress for low-income households is even within 50km of Melbourne and Sydney CBDs.

Even though rents are typically lower in outer parts of Melbourne and Sydney, the perception of unaffordability for very low-income households rises with distance to the CBD. For higher-income groups, perceptions of unaffordability are either flat or declining with distance to the CBD.

Why is it important?

'The affordability focus is in central locations. However, for very low-income households the perception of unaffordability is greater in outer parts of Melbourne and Sydney'

Who is most affected?

Since the early 2000s, the private rental sector (PRS) has grown rapidly in Australia. In 2016, some 20 per cent of very low-income Melbourne and Sydney households lived in the PRS, 30 per cent of low-income households. The incidence of disadvantage in Australia is linked to the geography of PRS.

Growth in the PRS has coincided with a structural shift away from rental properties for low-income households, to mid- and higher-income households. In Melbourne and Sydney, there is a growing shortage of affordable and available private rental options.¹⁶

As a result, low-income households may be displaced to more peripheral parts of capital cities¹⁷ where some rental options may be more affordable; or trade-off rental affordability for more central access to labour markets and urban amenities¹⁸.

Even though rents are typically lower in outer parts of Melbourne and Sydney, the perception of unaffordability for very low-income households rises with distance to the CBD.

¹⁵ PRS is here defined as renting from 'real estate agent' or 'person not in the household'. Affordability/rental stress is here measured based on household rent payment divided over gross household incomes category (\$31,000 and \$45,000, respectively). No separate adjustment made for Rent Assistance. Lower-income is here defined as Q1 and Q2 households.

¹⁶ Hulse, K, Reynolds, M, Nygaard, C, Parkinson, S and Yates, J (2019) *The supply of affordable private rental housing in Australian cities: short-term and longer term changes*, AHURI Final Report No. 323, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne.

¹⁷ Randolph, B and Tice, A (2014) 'Suburbanising disadvantage in Australian cities: socio-spatial change in an era of neo-liberalism', *Journal of Urban Affairs*, vol. 36, no. S1: 1-16.

¹⁸ Hulse, K, Reynolds, M, op. cit.



What is the relevance to Australian policy?

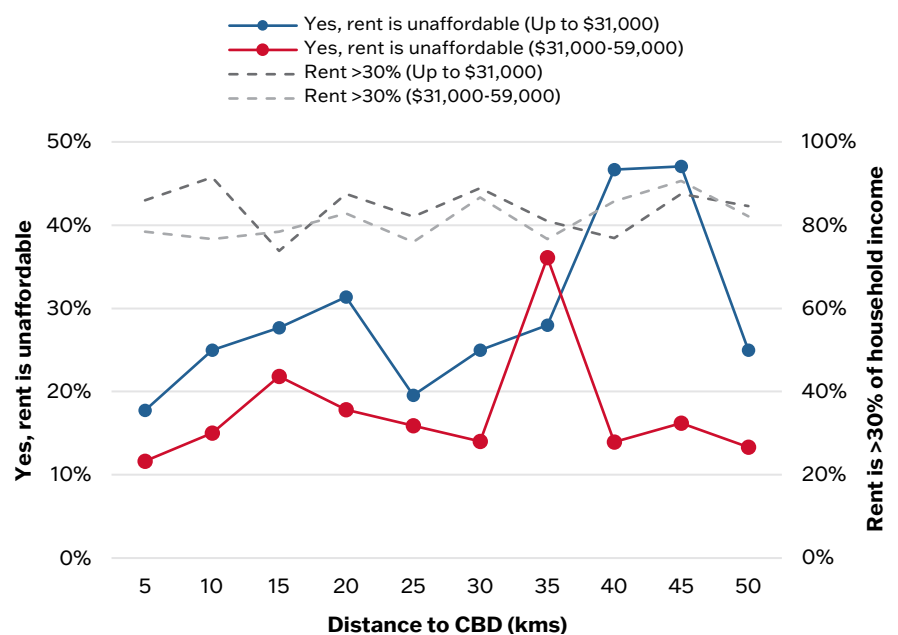
Several Australian and state government policies aim to increase the supply of dwellings in central locations and/or reduce the impact of affordability stress.

1. Without targeted supply and access to new (central) dwellings, these are not available to lower-income households. The policy focus on affordability in outer parts of Melbourne and Sydney is considerably less. While rents are cheaper in outer areas, perceptions of unaffordability are greater.
2. While most of the lower-income households are paying a large proportion of their income on rent, many of these do not perceive their rent as unaffordable (some due to Rent Assistance).

Reasons for this outcome are complex, but for some lower-income households paying more than 30 per cent of income on rent is not necessarily detrimental to their wellbeing.

While rents are cheaper in outer areas, perceptions of unaffordability are greater.

As a result of COVID-19, have you felt higher levels of loneliness or isolation?



Note 1: Estimated incidence of rental stress broadly in line with previous research (Hulse, Reynolds et al. 2019).

Note 2: The ABS divide household income into 5 quintiles (Q). Based on the inflation adjusted 2017/2018 Australian household income distribution, 'lower income' described here approximates Q1 ('very low-income') and Q2 ('low-income').



Heather Holst
Commissioner for
Residential Tenancies
(Victoria)



ASPIRING HOME OWNERS

**Most renters would prefer
to own their own home**

Key findings

The two most commonly reported reasons for renting given by tenant households are that they cannot afford to buy their own home or that they do not have enough saved for a deposit or down-payment.

Why is it important?

Living in rental housing, despite a desire for home ownership, is a persistent issue in the Australian housing system over the years and has many consequences for the people involved. In particular, it means that a growing number of Australian households are living without the security, privacy and standard of housing that they need to feel at home.

The answers people gave when asked about why they rent are striking for the high number who responded that they would rather not rent. In the main, it is because they could not afford to buy a home. There were a smaller number of respondents who value the better location and quality that they could afford by renting or who simply prefer to rent, and so the picture is not all negative, but the common story is about settling for the lesser option.

... it means that a growing number of Australian households are living without the security, privacy and standard of housing that they need to feel at home.

Who is most affected?

The huge upheaval caused by COVID-19 is still playing out and extra temporary protections have been introduced seeking to secure tenancies during this period. Hundreds of Victorian tenants have written to me, as Commissioner for Residential Tenancies, about the rental experiences that they want improved and many have emphasised that they don't like the sense of living in a place from which they can readily and unpredictably be evicted for a range of reasons. Such concerns are also readily observed in the 2020 Australian Rental Housing Conditions Survey dataset when respondents were asked about their intentions to move in the future:

'Baby on the way. Would like a newer/safer/warmer home that is closer to a main town'

'... Many properties on our street have now become Airbnb properties. It also means it's harder to find somewhere new to rent as there's less out there and lots of competition from fellow long-term renters. We have to leave here in a month as this very property is being renovated so it can be turned into an Airbnb'

'First child about to start school next year. Want a stable home for school'



‘[The] house is too small. Neighbours are very loud. Feels like a hotel room not a home’

‘I never want to move, but when owners sell, or want to renovate, or move in themselves, I don’t have a choice. Happens all the time’

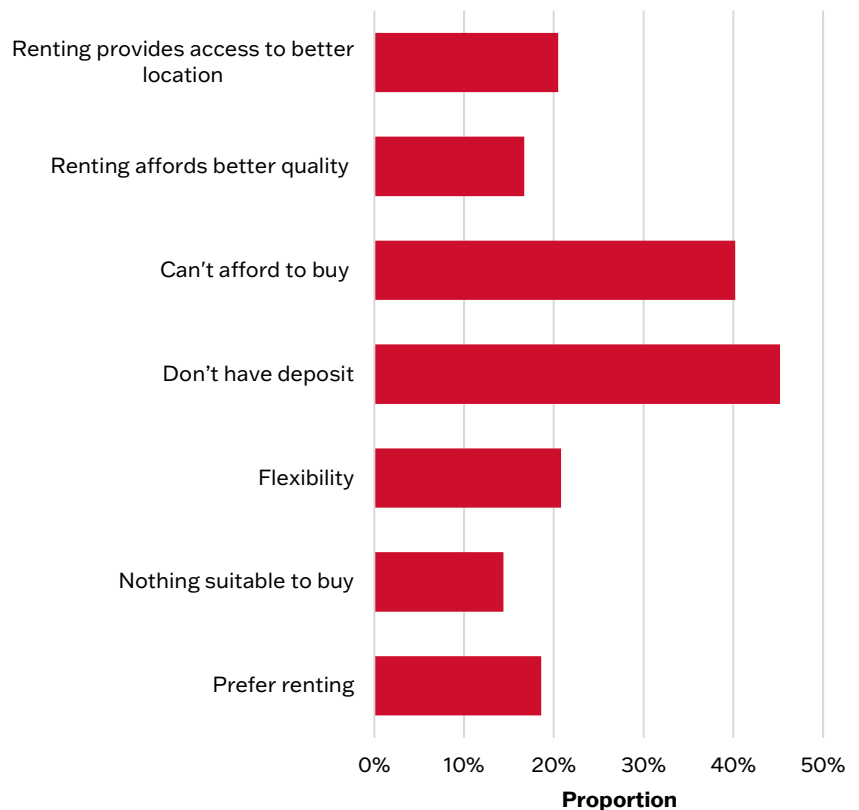
What is the relevance to Australian policy?

The challenge is to build the qualities that people appreciate about home ownership into rental housing, especially into the privately-owned part of the sector that provides most of this housing. This research gives us some excellent pointers to what qualities should be prioritised.

The reforms to the Victorian Residential Tenancies Act are intended to make rental housing more like a home. The reforms will remove no reason evictions (except at the end of the first lease), encourage longer leases, allow renters to keep pets, introduce minimum standards for the safety and amenity of properties, enable the quick return of bonds, reduce the frequency of rent increases, allow the tenant to make minor modifications to the property (such as hanging pictures) and a range of other measures.

Other jurisdictions are making similar reforms, although Victoria’s have so far gone the furthest in improving rights for renters.

Why do people rent?



The reforms to the Victorian Residential Tenancies Act are intended to make rental housing more like a home.



Chris Leishman
The University of Adelaide



ASPIRING HOME OWNERS

Are aspiring home owners in a pandemic being realistic?

Key findings

Many individuals and their households have experienced changes in living conditions and housing arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic; 18 per cent of individuals who see themselves moving home in the near future are also aspiring to become home owners. However, this rises to 30 per cent for those who have had to work from home during the pandemic and see themselves moving in the next 12 months.

Are people realistic about their prospects of entering home ownership? About 35 per cent of people who think they will move within 1 year believe they will become home owners, but this drops to 28 per cent for people who think they will move within 2 years, and only 11 per cent who think they will move within 5 years. This is also reflected in responses about ability to save or invest after paying current housing costs. Of those who say they can, 26 per cent see themselves becoming home owners. Of those who say they can't, this falls to 15 per cent.

Why is it important?

Two-thirds (66%) of all respondents to this survey thought that they will move home within the next 5 years, and the majority of these thought that their move would occur within 2 years. Around a third of these individuals thought that their current rent is too high and/or that their rent might rise in the future. However, they are also aspirational in the sense that 55 per cent cited wanting a better location as the reason they will move home.

'Many private renters remain highly aspirational and view home ownership as attainable'

Who is most affected?

A surprisingly high proportion of survey respondents report that they are able to save or invest money after they have paid their housing costs (rent). The proportion is almost 60 per cent and is roughly the same for people who think they will move in the near future and those intending to move a bit later (but within 5 years).

More people intend to move to get into a better location rather than because they are dissatisfied with the rent or characteristics of their current home.

But high rents and dwellings that are unsuited to working from home are much more important factors for renters looking to move within the next 12 months.

When we examine respondents who are currently on JobKeeper, JobSeeker or report that they may need further financial assistance in the future, a surprising picture emerges. More than 40 per cent also express the intention to move within 12 months, and about the same within 2 years. When we compare this to the population of all renters, the proportion is 54 per cent (within 1 year) or 64 per cent (within 2 years). Thus, being reliant on income support interventions has only modestly reduced aspirations.



What is the relevance to Australian policy?

Most private renters see themselves moving home in the near future—within 1 or 2 years. Although this undoubtedly reflects the short term and transitory nature of renting privately, it also presents an opportunity for some renters.

A high proportion of renters aspire to be home owners, there is a clear culture of saving money, and aspiring to live in better locations and change tenure. People who worked from home during the pandemic were much more likely to see themselves moving soon, and potentially into home ownership. But are these aspirations realistic, and what are the implications for policy?

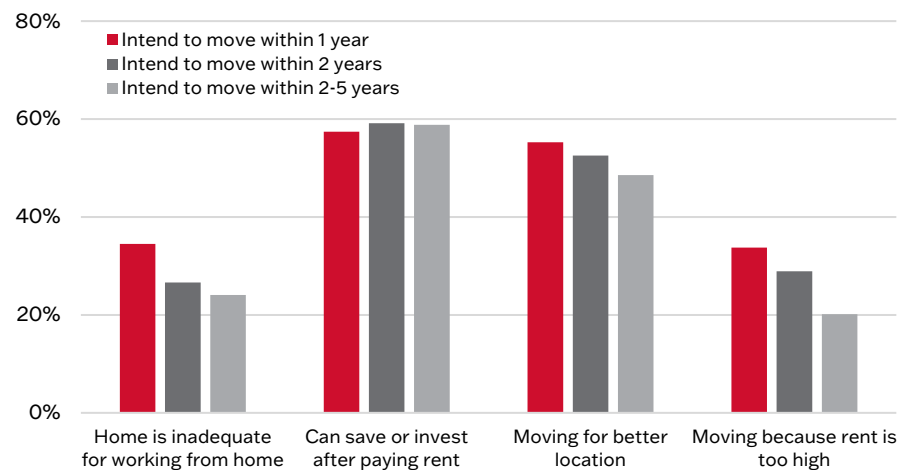
There is some evidence of realism in respondents' answers. For example, the respondent-stated probability of entering home ownership drops away for people who do not think they will move in the next 1-2 years. It was also lower for renters who were unable to save.

However, the idea that 35 per cent of people intending to move within 12 months believe they will become home owners strongly suggests that many are unrealistic. It takes the typical new home owner around 5 years to save the 20 per cent deposit needed to enter home ownership.

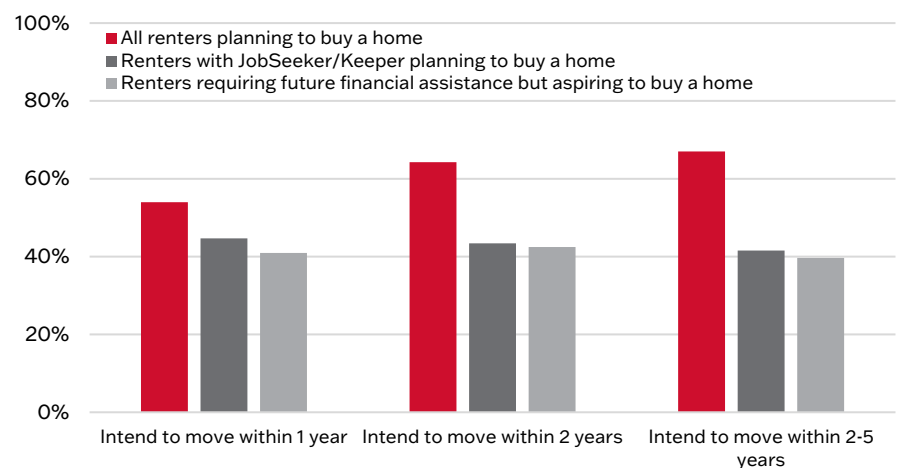
Strong demand for recent products such as the NHFIC's first home loan deposit scheme, Homestart and Keystart Finance loans, and new-build 'rent to buy' options show that the market is wide open for more innovation, and plenty of frustrated demand from private renters aspiring to become home owners.

A high proportion of renters aspire to be home owners ...

Reasons given for intention to move house



Intended timing of house move for renters





Dallas Rogers
The University of Sydney

Keith Jacobs
University of Tasmania



HOUSING POLICY

Doing fast housing policy in a pandemic

Key findings

We outline three key challenges for fast COVID-19 housing policy making.

1: Dealing with the past

The first challenge relates to how we might connect housing research findings in the present COVID-19 moment to the long trajectory of housing research. At what point will we know whether rental conditions during the pandemic represent a significant rupture with the past, or simply a continuation of longstanding housing problems?

2: Data in the present

The second challenge is related to the first; how and in what form should housing scholars provide housing policy (and other) advice from 'inside' a pandemic with an unknown end point? One lesson from the global financial crisis (GFC) is that it was hard to make sense of the GFC from 'inside' the GFC; and it was only later, with some temporal distance and analytical perspective, that the policy lessons became clearer.

3: Policy making for the future

The third challenge relates to slow housing policy making. What are the challenges of doing fast housing research within a context of slow policy making and the longue duree of housing policy change?

There is a need to exercise caution in how these data are interpreted.

Why is it important?

Dealing with the past

It is entirely appropriate that researchers consider the impact of the pandemic and offer some possible implications over the medium to long term. Nonetheless, it is important that those who produce or draw upon contemporary evidence exercise caution when making prediction and policy.

Policy makers, the media and the public more generally are calling for particular types of housing information and data related to COVID-19; statistics about various aspects of the housing system, rapid-fire policy solutions that governments might implement, or surveys of peoples' housing experiences.

Housing academics are not immune to overstating claims about the significance of legislation, or new funding streams, or the long-term impacts of rapid housing change. The only certainty about the future, it seems, is that it is hard to predict. With this in mind, how should we proceed?

... it is important that those who produce or draw upon contemporary evidence exercise caution when making prediction and policy



Who is most affected?

Working from the present

First, housing scholars might critically reflect on the demands of journalists or funding agencies for rapid-fire commentary and/or data on the pandemic and housing, which might be taken as a guide for future housing policy.

Second, they could draw on the fabulously useful sociological writing of Norbert Elias and C. W. Mills who understood very well the problem of what can be termed 'presentism' in social science. They both argued that social science can only really be undertaken in hindsight, when it becomes easier to trace the continuities and discontinuities that link and divide one period from the next. If we take seriously their arguments—and as many have already pointed out—COVID-19 has accentuated many long-standing inequalities that are a feature of the housing system.

Third, then, we also need to continue to pursue a slower and more deliberative housing research and policy response over the long term. The need to collect data on COVID-19 and highlight its immediate effects, needs to be supported by a longer-term research agenda to fully appreciate housing change through, and beyond the pandemic, and what this means for policy making.

What is the relevance to Australian policy?

Doing fast policy making

First, housing policy makers should adopt a COVID-19 response that accounts for longstanding inequities, rather than by drawing a line between the present pandemic and the housing policies that preceded it.

Second, the pandemic should be seen as an opportunity to see the longstanding housing problems in sharper relief and use this insight to reset the power dynamics that have accentuated inequalities in the housing system. At this point, the pandemic might have more to teach us about the past than the future.

Third, it should not be assumed that the underlying systemic features of the housing system have been eclipsed by COVID-19 and are no longer relevant for housing analysis.

It is historical analyses that have shown us that the housing system is key to how inequality operates. While COVID-19 might be seen as a disruption, it is housing researchers' job to also show the continuities; to show the ways in which housing systems remain intact and continue to discriminate against some while generating wealth for others.

When asked about the impact of the French Revolution, the late Chinese premier Zhou Enlai is reputed to have said:
'Too early to say'

(anon. nd.)

New knowledge and a new housing agenda for a ‘new normal’

Andrew Beer and Rebecca Bentley

Across the globe, governments, researchers, and commentators have raced to understand the nature and depth of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy, society, households and individuals. There is a shared, and broadly discussed, awareness of the magnitude of the headline impacts on communities, but what remains unseen are the deep, fine-grained, challenges to health, wellbeing and prosperity that have permeated every nook and crevice of our lives, as well as the way we understand our place in the world. For many experiencing prolonged lockdown, our homes have become our world.

The past six months
have highlighted
how quickly so
much of what we
understand about
the operation of
our economy and our
society can change.

While we know that many COVID-19-wrought changes will be ongoing—nowhere will this be more pronounced than in our housing. COVID-19 does not make people homeless, but the changes it brings are having profound effects—loss of employment, reduced incomes, greater inequality—undermines individuals, their housing security, their expectations around accommodation and their socialisation. This is inextricably linked to our health and wellbeing. It is not surprising, therefore, that our rental stories reveal a sector requiring significant policy attention. Many Australians are faring poorly in this sector during COVID-19; ‘the inequality accelerator’¹⁹. This includes people with disabilities²⁰, older people on low incomes²¹, the recently retrenched²², and people working from home²³. While tenants have options (negotiating with their landlord, withdrawing their super) these actions are not straightforward or risk-free generating anxiety as people look towards the future²⁴. In the bigger picture—reform to the sector in terms of standards and design²⁵ are likely to make tenants feel similarly about their rental property as they would about a home they are purchasing²⁶.

The past six months have highlighted how quickly so much of what we understand about the operation of our economy and our society can change. In a world of near-unlimited personal travel and the movement of goods and services around the globe, seismic change can unfold quickly and with devastating impacts. In Australia we have watched with shock the rapid unveiling of coronavirus outbreaks first in China, then Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom and the US, while simultaneously responding to the rapid growth in cases here in the first half of 2020 and the subsequent resurgence of infections in Victoria from June through to September.

Four clear lessons have emerged over the past 12 months as we consider how Australia—and other nations—have responded to these unexpected environmental shocks:

- The research community needs to act quickly; more quickly than we are used to. Accurate, up-to-date and finely grained data is critically needed to inform decision-making. This urgency challenges the established research cycle of 12-month funding rounds and extensive consultation. The best example of a change in modus operandi has been seen in vaccine development with the fast-tracking of vaccine trials designed to meet the challenges of delivering safe vaccines in timeframes previously thought inconceivable. In a similar way, in the social and health sciences, rapid reviews of evidence and targeted data collection are the ‘new black’ of research.

¹⁹ Phibbs, P., p. 15

²⁰ Beer, A., p.19

²¹ Power, E., p.21

²² Baddeley, M., p.9

²³ Bentley, R., p.23 and Kulik, C. and Sinha, R., p. 25

²⁴ Viji, A., p.11 and Stephens, M., p.13

²⁵ London, K., p.33

²⁶ Holst, H., p.39

- Second, governments need to demonstrate a hitherto unknown agility in responding to adverse events such as COVID-19 or a summer of bushfires. This agility is only possible if the necessary infrastructure—data, equipment, financial and human resourcing—is in place to deliver services and supports where needed. The capacity of governments to respond in a coordinated and effective way in Australia has been tested and sectors with infrastructure and personnel in place have been the most agile responders (e.g. the success of contact tracing in NSW reflecting decades of greater investment in public health infrastructure).
- Third, housing and the sense of being ‘home’ is critical in a time of crisis to our wellbeing and financial security. The truth of this is clearly visible in our rental stories. For some who have remained in work and have the benefit of spacious housing, the pandemic represented a respite from daily commuting, the opportunity to reconnect with family and increased leisure time. For others, the same lockdowns were associated with a sense of social isolation, increased financial stress and potential new frictions within personal relationships.
- Fourth, the ‘Black Summer’ of 2019–20, as well as the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, have forced Australians to rethink their housing and to put aside—temporarily at least—the national obsession with making wealth through the property market. As a nation we have been forced to acknowledge that our housing is a key piece of health infrastructure. Our homes offer us a degree of protection from the ravages of bushfire, the insidious danger of smoke, and the airborne particulates it carries, as well as a safe haven from the unseen threat of viruses.

These insights have been hard-earned and have come at considerable cost for many Australians. The crises that have confronted Australia over the past year have shown up the inadequacies of a system of housing supply woefully unable to replace homes lost in fires, the inability of many suburban and urban homes to provide safe shelter during the COVID-19 crisis, and the on-going crisis of unaffordable housing in Australia’s cities and regions. Why is this the case? Australia does not have a national housing policy and there is little integration of our housing and health policies, unlike New Zealand (Healthy Homes Standards 2019), the United States (Report to Congress and Surgeon General’s Call to Action) and England (Housing and Health Rating System). There are clear positive benefits of doing so. Nations such as New Zealand where a healthy housing agenda has been embraced have better developed systems for monitoring how well the housing stock is performing with respect to providing protection against cold and providing neighbourhoods that support the development of future generations.

As the 21st Century matures into its third decade, all Australians increasingly recognise that we are living in an environment that is marked by greater risks, many of which we have created for ourselves. These risks cannot be removed, but they can be better managed—to reduce their impact on the population as a whole, to provide surety to vulnerable populations, and to help provide a pathway to a more productive and prosperous future—one marked by higher levels of health and wellbeing.

Better management of risks and more effective responses to challenges such as COVID-19 calls for better information systems. We need to find better ways to monitor the housing environment in much the same way we increasingly monitor our physical environment in order to ensure the health of our rivers, the productivity of our farming regions, and the strength of our biodiversity. Increased investment in data collection and real-time surveillance of changing conditions is one of Australia’s needs, but at the same time we need to boost our capacity to analyse data, create policy-relevant knowledge, and equip policy makers with the tools they need to make better decisions.

Both formal media commentators and social media talk about the ‘new normal’ that has arisen, and will emerge more fully, in the wake of COVID-19. Such discussion recognises that this point in time represents a significant disjuncture—akin to the Spanish influenza—in contemporary history. As such, we need to embrace the opportunity to make changes now that produce a better future for all. Now is the time to act, and our first steps must include:

- the development of systems and processes for the on-going monitoring of how Australians are faring in the rental market
- the creation of better methods for the translation of research findings into policy action, and
- new ways of sharing research outcomes with the wider community, including new forms of citizen social science that seeks to both inform and mobilise our fellow Australians.
- the adoption of a healthy housing agenda in Australia so that we are prepared for economic and health shocks into the future.

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