

2026

SUMMER SURVEY

SWELTERING CITIES 

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Content Warning

This report discusses statistics and stories that may be distressing including physical and mental health related issues. People who have experienced the themes discussed may find this distressing and those who have not been exposed to this content before may find this confronting.



| ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF COUNTRY

Sweltering Cities acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and live. Sovereignty was never ceded and this land always was and always will be Aboriginal land. We acknowledge colonisation as the start of environmental destruction and unsustainable development and look towards First Nations leadership, science and knowledge.

In this report we have used colonial place names for states, territories and cities, and have also used Indigenous names where possible. These are the names of the cities across the country where we have been actively working on promoting the survey and the majority of respondents live:

Naarm (Melbourne)

Meanjin/Magandjin (Brisbane)

Warrang (Sydney)

Ngunnawal and Ngambri (Canberra)

Tarndanya/Tarntanya (Adelaide)

Boorloo (Perth)

Mparntwe (Alice Springs)

Nipaluna (Hobart)

Garramilla (Darwin)

Gimuy (Cairns)

| EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the fourth of the Sweltering Cities Summer Survey and the largest to date, with more than 2,600 respondents across 766 unique postcodes. The findings show that heat is a serious health issue and that the cost of living crisis is pushing more people into danger. Some people – including people with disabilities, renters, and people who can't afford to keep cool – are already feeling severe heat impacts. As climate change drives hotter temperatures, more and more people will be facing dangerous heat.

The majority of respondents are experiencing physical and mental health impacts due to heat, but some groups are much more likely to be impacted.

- 68% of all respondents said that they feel unwell on hot days or during heatwaves.
- 81% of renters and 87% of people with disabilities said that they feel unwell on hot days.

Cost of living pressures are making it harder for the majority of people to stay safe during heatwaves.

- 61% of people said that cost of living pressures impacted how they would manage in a heatwave.
- There was a significant gap between age groups with younger people more likely to say they felt cost of living pressures related to heatwaves (77% of respondents aged 18 - 34 compared with 55% of respondents over 50).

Energy bills and the cost of keeping cool continue to be a significant concern for the majority of people. As in the 2022 and 2024 survey editions, over 60% of people say that concerns about cost stop them turning on air conditioning.

- In the 2026 Survey, 61% of people said that concerns about cost stop them turning on air conditioning.
- 24% of people said that they were concerned about energy costs on a daily basis, which is a significant mental burden on households and individuals.

People with disabilities are acutely impacted by extreme heat, with significantly higher rates of both health impacts and cost of living stress.

- 82% of people with disabilities said that cost of living stress was impacting how they managed heatwaves.
- 73% of people with disabilities said that concerns about cost stop them turning on air conditioning and 39% said that they worry about the cost of energy on a daily basis.
- The heat resilience solutions that people with disabilities identified include additional support, safe housing, and accessible infrastructure.

Workplaces and schools are two common places where people are exposed to dangerous extreme heat, but many report that their school or employer is not doing enough to keep them safe.

- 43% of people said that heat affects them at work or school (eg. too hot for certain activities, difficult to get to work).
- Of those people, 6% said their employer or school does nothing to keep them safe and 37% of people said that they 'could do more'.

Extreme heat dramatically changes the way many people choose and prepare food, with potential health consequences.

- Two thirds (67%) of people said that on hot days they change how they access, buy, prepare or store food.
- A significant number of people shared with us that they change when and how they shop during summer, will avoid using stoves and ovens, and are more likely to eat pre-prepared or cold food.

This survey demonstrates (yet again) that extreme heat is a universal threat, impacting the majority of Australians through their health, their finances, or the safety of their community. These results prove that the most effective and popular solutions are those that address the systemic drivers of risk: climate change, housing insecurity, and inequality.

Action must be taken at every level of government to protect people at risk from predictable harm, including:

- Enforce heat-safe housing standards by updating the National Construction Code, delivering energy efficiency retrofits for all social housing, and introducing rental minimum standards.
- Invest in access to renewables and affordable energy for renters, low-income households, and those in chronic energy stress.
- Climate-proof our suburbs through heat-aware urban planning and shaded, accessible public transport networks.
- Establish clear Federal and State regulations to protect all workers from extreme heat as a fundamental OHS requirement.
- Mainstream heat safety across every level of government so that preventing heat-related harm is a shared, non-negotiable priority.
- Transition the National Adaptation Plan from a strategic document into a fully funded, operational roadmap for immediate action.

A failure to act on this evidence is no longer a policy oversight – it is a failure to care.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2021, the Sweltering Cities Summer Survey has acted as a thermal map of Australian life. It tells the story of how heat intersects with and compounds the crises of our time. In past editions, we tracked the impacts of the pandemic and housing affordability; this year, the story is one of a dangerous 'cost-of-cooling' crisis.

2026 began with record-breaking heat across South Australia and Victoria. It was a summer defined by environmental whiplash — the rapid, compounding shocks of fires, storms and floods. But long after the headlines fade, the stress and costs felt by our communities go on. For many, that stress is found in the difficult, daily calculations: *Which bill do I pay? Can I afford these groceries if I turn on the air conditioning? Will I come home safe from work or will I lose a day's pay?*

In this fourth edition, we have leaned into these hard truths and private struggles. We have focused specifically on the intersection of heat with cost-of-living pressures, energy stress, and the acute risks faced by people with disabilities and chronic illnesses.

Our findings show that for many Australians, extreme heat is not a matter of comfort, it's about danger at home, at work, and in our suburbs and towns. The results of this survey add to a mountain of evidence (including the National Climate Risk Assessment) demanding action to make our homes safer, our suburbs cooler, and our support systems stronger.

Sweltering Cities is the national community voice for heat safety. We stand with people in hot homes, suburbs, workplaces and schools. Our work is to ensure that as the heat rises, the voices of those most impacted rise even faster.

This report is a testament to the power of community data. To the 2,600 of you who shared your stories, to the donors who funded this research, and to the advocates who analysed the results: thank you. You have turned individual struggle into a collective mandate for change.

We have the evidence. Now, we need real action.

Emma Bacon
Executive Director, Sweltering Cities

Go to www.SwelteringCities.org for more information about our work.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the 2026 Summer Survey demand a coordinated, multi-sector response. We recommend the following actions to mitigate the immediate risks of extreme heat and build long-term climate resilience.

Housing & Energy Justice

- Implement mandatory cooling and energy efficiency standards for all rental properties across every state and territory. Access to a thermally safe home must be recognized as a fundamental right.
- Provide immediate funding for solar installations, energy efficiency retrofits, and high-efficiency air conditioning for all social housing tenants.
- Update the National Construction Code (NCC) and Nationwide House Energy Rating Scheme (NatHERS) standards in line with the 2025 National Adaptation Plan. All new builds and infrastructure must be climate-proofed for projected 2050 temperatures.
- Ensure cheap, clean energy is accessible to everyone prioritising renters, low-income households, and those currently in energy stress.

Workplace, Education, and Economic Safety

- Establish binding Federal and State regulations for heat safety in all industries to protect workers from heat-related illness and death.
- Ensure people on income support are not penalised for missing 'mutual obligations' and compulsory activities requirements during heatwaves.

Community Resilience & Infrastructure

- Fund community-facing and community-led organisations to increase community heat resilience and expand outreach to at-risk groups.
- Consult with people with disabilities and fund the supports that they identify.
- Rapidly increase green cover and tree canopies across the country to reduce the Urban Heat Island (UHI) effect in our streets and suburbs.

Systemic Reform & Communications

- To address the root cause of extreme heat, the Australian Government must commit to a moratorium on all new fossil fuel projects. We cannot adapt our way out of a crisis we continue to fuel.
- Media outlets must treat heat as a public health emergency. Coverage should avoid pictures of the beach or people playing in the water and instead focus on practical safety advice and the serious risks of heat stress.
- Embed heat safety across all levels of government and agencies so that prevention becomes a cross-sector responsibility.
- Transition the National Adaptation Plan from a strategic framework into a fully funded program of action.

METHODOLOGY

The Summer Survey aims to gather the lived experiences of extreme heat on individuals and communities across the country, while identifying community-led solutions to build a heat safe Australia. The 2026 Summer Survey is the fourth edition of the survey. This survey was created in consultation with civil society partners and community members to gather evidence of relevant societal pressures.

The survey collected select demographic information to better understand how heat impacts vary across different communities and postcodes. Questions focused primarily on health impacts and the management of extreme heat. Stakeholders from a range of sectors, including health, academia, unions, social services, and local government were consulted to ensure the survey's results could inform their work to reduce heat health impacts.

The survey was open from 27 November 2025 to 27 February 2026 and was hosted via Typeform, a survey tool only available online. The survey was distributed through email and social media by Sweltering Cities (on Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn and TikTok), with distribution supported by partner organisations, community networks, media coverage, online advertising, physical flyers at events and local council newsletters.

Two questions that we have repeated in each edition of the survey for the purpose of comparison are:

- Do you feel unwell during heatwaves or on hot days?
- Do you have air conditioning? If so, do concerns about cost stop you turning it on?

In this iteration we have also repeated the following questions from the 2024 survey:

- Do you think that cost of living pressures (the price of food, energy, housing and other things) will make it harder for you or your family during a heatwave this summer?
- What do you do to keep cool during a heatwave or hot days? [edited here for brevity]
- What type of support would you like to receive during a heatwave?
- Is there anything else you would like us to know?/Is there anything else you would like to add that hasn't been covered?

BACKGROUND

Heatwaves are the deadliest environmental disaster, killing more people than floods, fires and storms combined and leading to more hospitalisations (AIHW).

Exposure to high temperatures can “increase mortality and morbidity, as well as increase adverse pregnancy outcomes and negatively affect mental health” ([The Lancet, 2021](#)).

The National Climate Risk Assessment published in 2025 stated that heatwaves are a significant risk to health, economy, and ecosystems now, and that the impact is projected to increase. Under a +3° scenario for global warming heat-related mortality is projected to increase by: “444% in Sydney, 259% in Melbourne, 335% in Townsville, 312% in Perth, 146% in Launceston and 423% in Darwin” ([NCRA, 2025](#)).

Housing can keep people safe from extreme heat. However, many people in Australia live in homes that do not provide adequate thermal protection, specifically access to air conditioning, insulation, and ventilation. The [WHO Housing and Health Guidelines \(2024\)](#) note that health risks increase significantly when indoor temperatures exceed 24°C for vulnerable groups, and 30°C for the general population.

An Urban Heat Island (UHI) is a region that is hotter than surrounding or rural areas due to human development and activity. UHIs have few trees, lots of concrete, impervious surfaces, and dark materials that absorb heat. The main contributing factor to UHIs is the physical environment; however, heat may also be produced by energy generation, air conditioners and vehicles.

Renters can have a higher risk of heat exposure at home and physical and mental health impacts due to a lack of control over housing conditions. A report by Better Renting, [Cruel Summers: Renters’ diverse experiences of Summer 23- 24](#), found that monitored homes were above 25°C for 87% of the time in Queensland and 67% of the time in WA.

Australia continues to grapple with a cost-of-living crisis, placing great strain on groups that are already most at-risk in the heat. Energy debt and hardship continued to rise through 2024 to 2025, with 3.1% of residential customers in energy debt by June 2025 (Australian Energy Regulator: Annual Markets Report, issued 1 Dec 2025). Housing prices continue to rise nationwide, especially in major cities. In the 2024 Summer Survey Report, the median house price in Sydney was reported to have risen from \$615,000 to \$1.2 million and has jumped again to \$1.65 million at the end of 2025 (ABS 2025).

Multicultural communities and households from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds face unique challenges presented by the soaring cost of living and housing expenses, and challenges to accessing health information in different languages. Individuals with disability, mental health conditions and chronic illnesses are disproportionately impacted by compounded stresses.

A person is shown in profile, facing right, holding a white tissue to their nose. The image is heavily overlaid with a red and orange color gradient, creating a dramatic, high-contrast effect. The person's hair is short and light-colored, and they are wearing a light-colored shirt. The background is a warm, yellowish-orange hue.

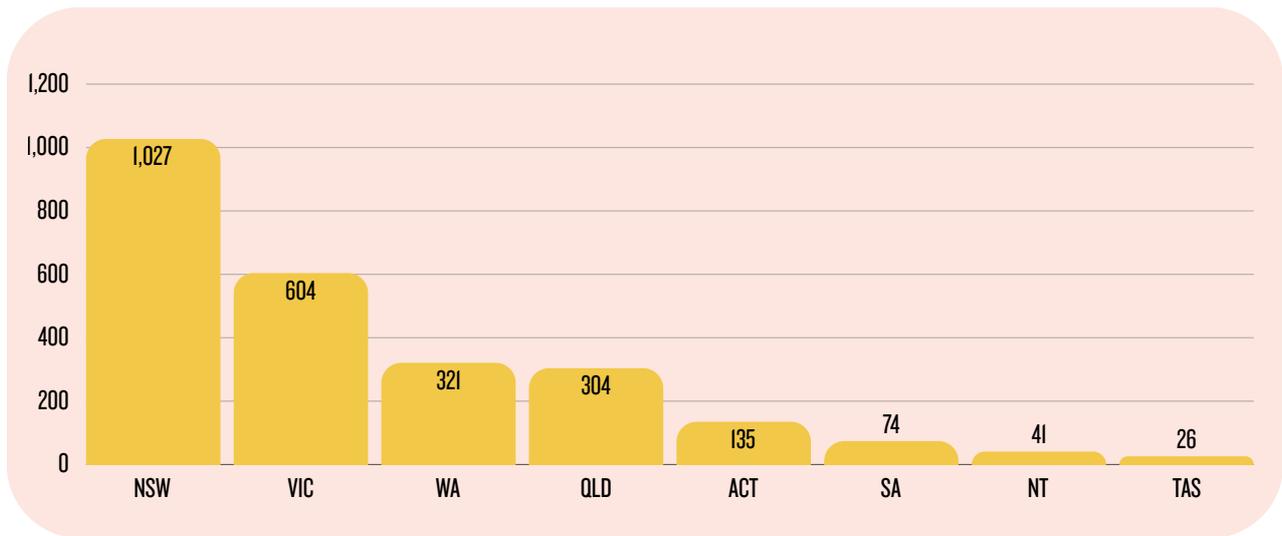
SUMMER SURVEY

RESULTS

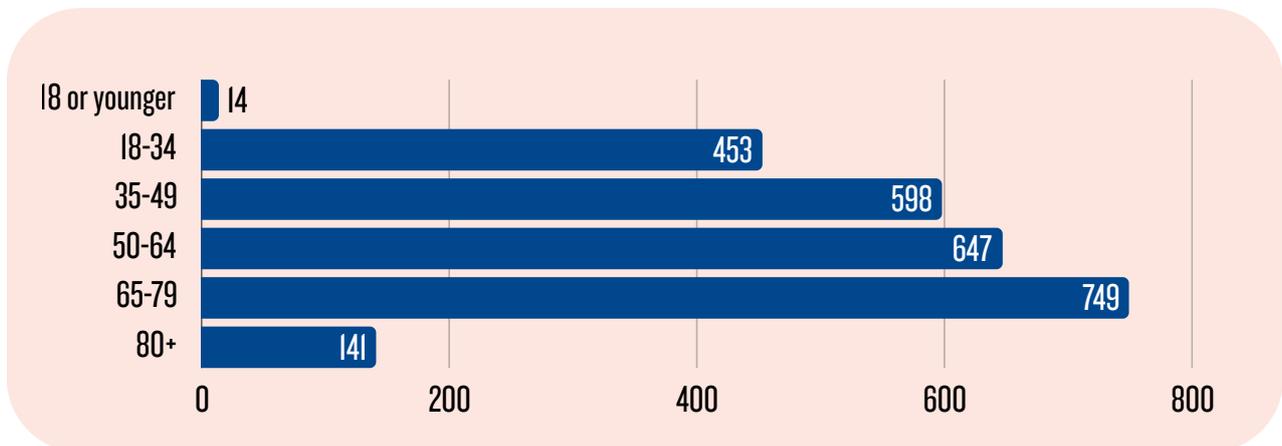
2633 TOTAL RESPONSES

766 UNIQUE POSTCODES

Responses by state/territory



Age demographics



Respondents were also asked to indicate whether they identified as part of specific categories or groups known to be at higher risk from extreme heat.

- 358** People with disability
- 868** People with chronic illness
- 687** People living in rental homes
- 320** People from multicultural backgrounds
- 825** People living in low energy efficiency homes
- 267** People who work outside
- 243** People who are carers
- 35** People who identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- 16** People experiencing homelessness

68% OF RESPONDENTS REPORTED FEELING UNWELL IN THE HEAT.

Some groups are more likely to report feeling unwell in the heat:

87%
people with
disability

85%
people with
chronic illness

81%
renters

77%
people with
multicultural
backgrounds

75%
people who
work outside

74%
people living in
low energy
efficiency homes

Respondents identified a range of heat-related issues, including mental health strain, increased anxiety, and physical symptoms like profuse sweating or chronic condition flare-ups. These challenges often led to exhaustion and sleep deprivation, which significantly reduced their ability to function daily.

I feel unbearably hot, I sweat profusely, I feel nauseated, I get headaches, I feel my physical pain more. I'm less likely to go out, less likely to engage socially. That severely impacts my mental health - depression and anxiety in particular. I can't sleep, I have terrible night sweats that soak through pyjamas and bedding and ruin them (which is an expense I can't afford). I get irrationally angry and irritable when I'm too hot and can't get comfortable. Another really big thing is the impact of not being believed when I say that I find the heat intolerable. It's isolating/alienating.

I have asthma, and with the high humidity lately it's been hard to breathe. I need a new puffer, but it's too hot to go out and get one, so I'm just taking extra puffs from my preventer when it's at it's worst.

61% OF RESPONDENTS REPORTED THAT COST OF LIVING PRESSURES (LIKE THE PRICE OF FOOD, ENERGY AND HOUSING) WILL MAKE IT HARDER FOR THEM OR THEIR FAMILY DURING A HEATWAVE THIS SUMMER.

The impact of cost of living pressures was more pronounced amongst some groups who reported higher levels of concern:

70% of people who live in low energy efficiency homes

83% of renters

88% of renters living with chronic illness or disability

82% OF RESPONDENTS HAVE AC AT HOME

61% AVOID TURNING IT ON DUE TO CONCERNS ABOUT COST

In the 2022, 2024 and 2026 editions of the Summer Survey, over 60% of respondents have consistently told us that concerns about cost stop them turning on air conditioning. This demonstrates why the presence of air conditioning isn't an effective cooling solution for many people, especially since the avoidance of air conditioning due to cost was higher amongst people with disabilities (73%) and chronic illness (68%), who are more likely to experience health impacts of heat.

“

My REA and landlords couldn't fix my AC for 2 months, I ended up having heat strokes, and bellyaches and was feeling unwell the whole day, also the smoke from the bushfire came and we had to have the windows open because we had no AC.

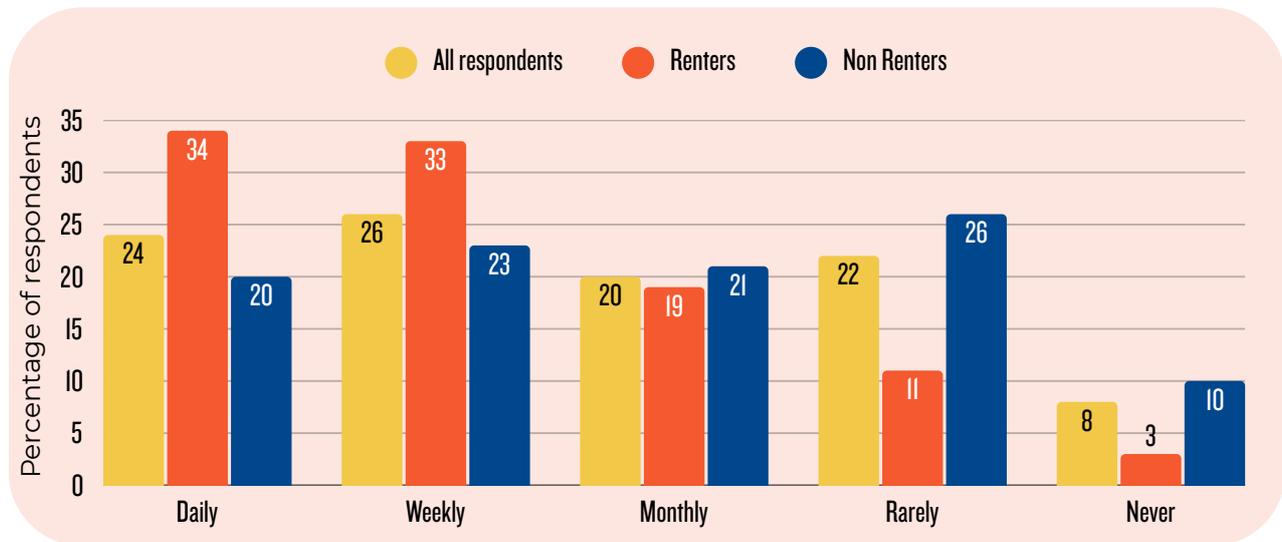
“

I already cannot afford the \$850 to have the air conditioning in my car repaired. That means more time at home. Can't afford to access cooler social spaces like cinema, gallery, museum, shopping centre - so will be staying home feeling isolated. Can't afford beach parking. Can't afford public pools. Won't be able to afford to use the air-conditioner as much as I'd like.

24% OF RESPONDENTS SAID THAT DURING SUMMER THEY WORRY ABOUT THE COST OF ENERGY DAILY.

People who identified themselves as renters were much more likely than non-renters to be concerned about the cost of energy daily or weekly.

During summer, how often do you worry about the cost of energy?



"I'm currently a renter and my house has central air conditioning that doesn't work. I'm not on the lease and my housemates are hesitant to contact the landlord to get anything fixed. We have a portable air conditioner, but it covers a very small area of the house. We're usually okay if there's one hot day, but when it gets to multiple days it gets dangerous.

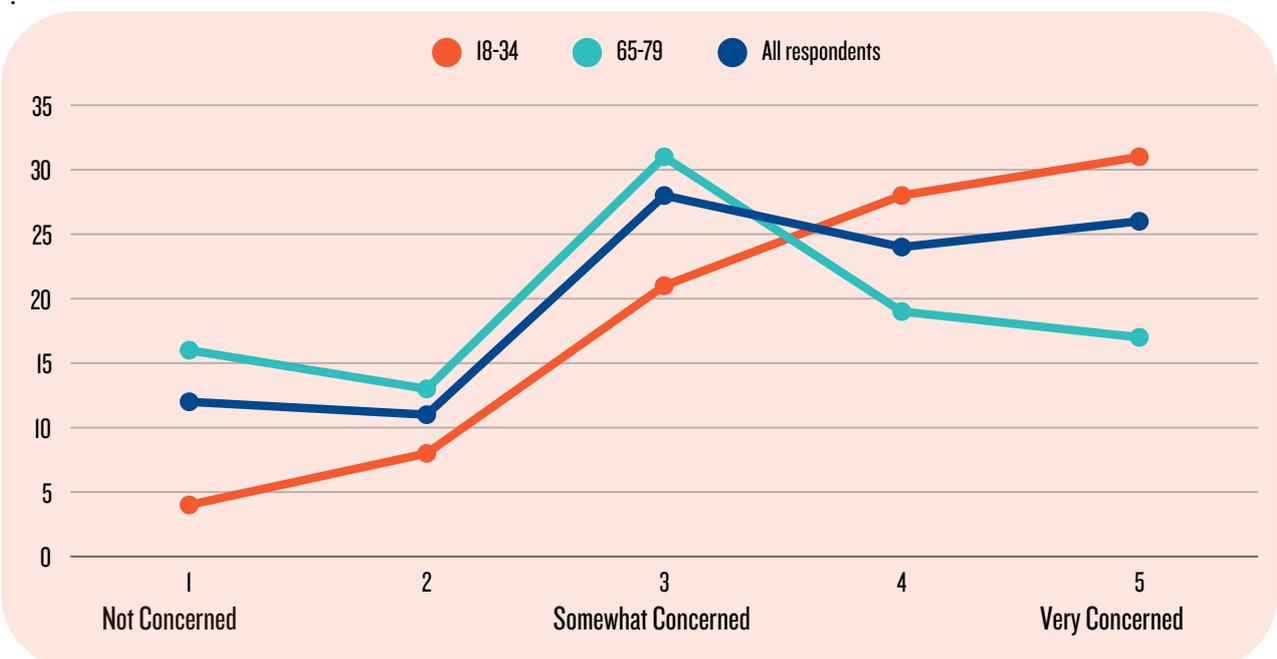
"I gave up this week and have bought an AC for my office - but if it makes the electricity bill go up too much, I won't be able to use it except on the worst days.

YOUNGER RESPONDENTS WERE MORE LIKELY TO BE CONCERNED ABOUT ENERGY BILLS THIS SUMMER AND IN FUTURE SUMMERS.

For the first time, we asked about respondents concern for current and future energy bills. We found a significant gap between age groups, with people in the 18-34 age group telling us that they were 'very concerned' about current and future summer energy bills at almost double the rate of people in the 65-79 age group (17% compared to 31%).

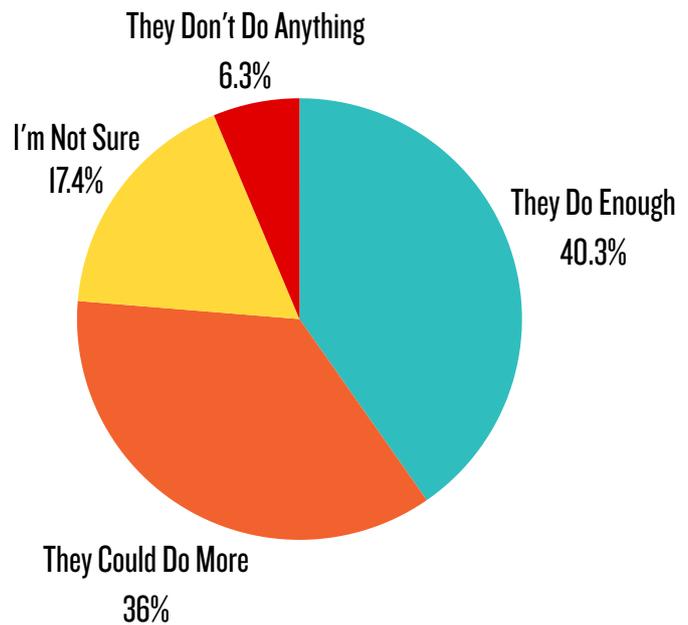
The 18-34 age group were also more likely to be renters compared to people in the 65-79 age group (63% compared to 11%), and more likely to say that concerns about cost stop them turning on air conditioning (77% compared to 48%).

These findings are of note because while older people are more likely to be at risk in the heat for physiological reasons, what the data in the survey shows is that younger people are more likely to be impacted by housing and cost of living stress and are less likely to be able to afford to keep cool.



43% OF RESPONDENTS SAY HEAT AFFECTS THEM AT WORK OR SCHOOL.

When asked if they think their workplace or school could do more to keep people safe when it's very hot, they said:



Results should raise alarms about productivity and economic impacts. If the government or businesses fail to prepare for increasing heat danger at work, more and more of us will pay the price with our health and incomes.



Aircon in my Western Sydney school classrooms are old and the rooms get baking hot with 30 students and me the teacher. It's awful and the young people are suffering, definitely finding it too difficult to focus on high impact learning in such conditions.



Mental health and nervous system issues go up, leading to serious despair and total unproductivity. Outdoor work for media gathering is always affected, and can lead to my camera gear malfunctioning or draining battery too fast.



I want shade over parking lots. While I'm at work, my car is roasting, and all the tarmac around my workplace makes the air hotter.

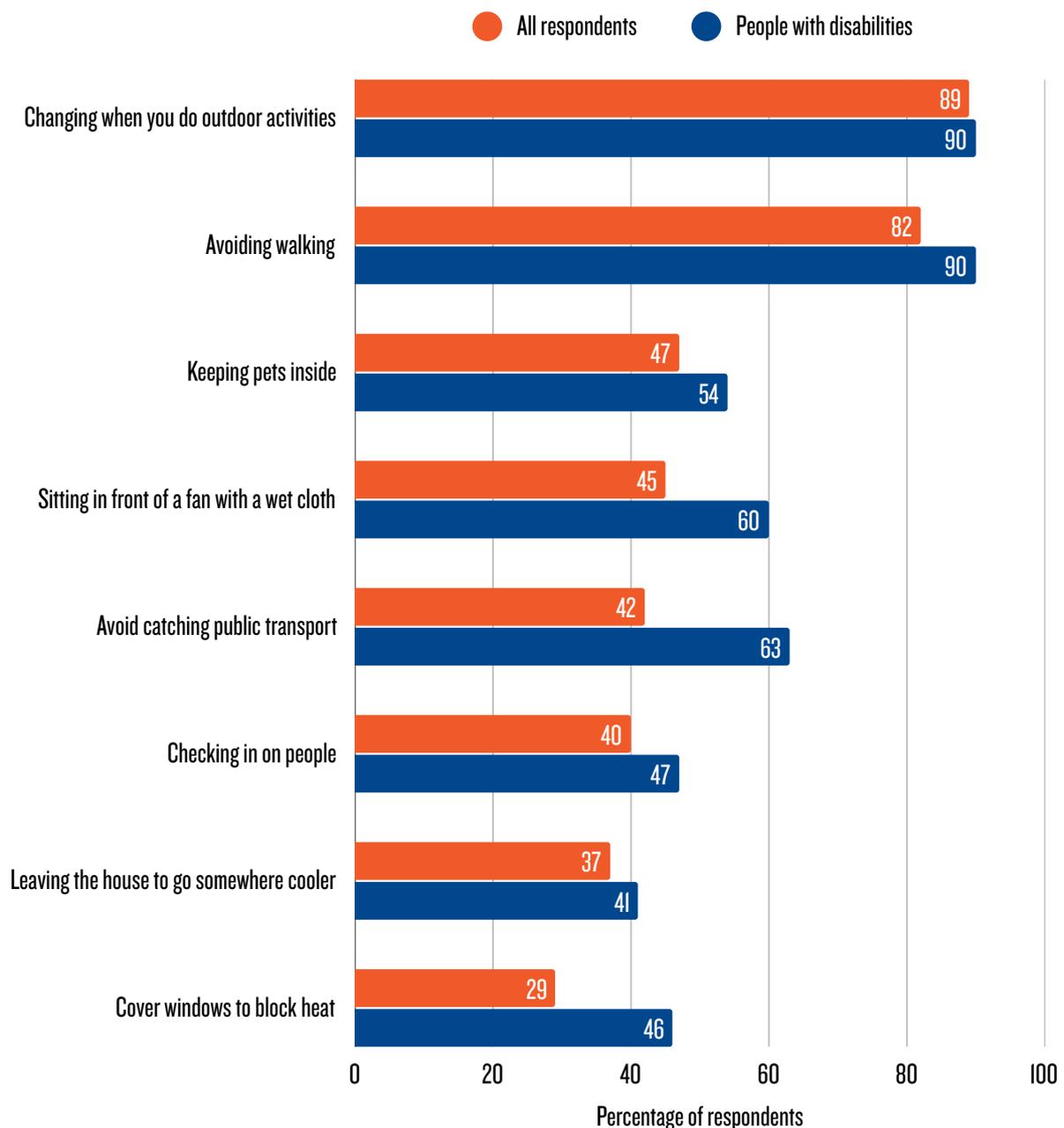


I will work from the office instead of from home on work from home days if it's very hot, and I avoid field work on hot days as much as possible.

We asked respondents what they do on hot days or during heatwaves: **4 in 5 said that they avoid walking in the heat.**

Respondents who told us that they have a disability were significantly more likely to change their behaviours on hot days across all categories, especially whether they would avoid catching public transport. This demonstrates the importance of heat safe transport infrastructure to ensure that transport systems remain accessible to people who are most at risk in the heat.

Do you do any of these things during a heatwave or on hot days?



We asked respondents what type of support they would like to receive during a heatwave.

When asked what support would most effectively help them manage a heatwave, respondents prioritised practical, preventative measures that address both immediate danger and long-term risk, including:

- Lower energy prices and ensuring that cost is never a barrier to staying safe.
- Community education and proactive check-ins for neighbours at higher risk.
- Higher housing standards, large-scale thermal retrofits for existing homes, and increased green cover to cool entire neighborhoods.



More information should be available regarding the physical dangers of health stress and what to do about it. There really is nowhere much to go in my community for people wanting relief from heat. Libraries have restrictions and shopping centres have a pathetic minimum of seating. You can't sit in cafes for long lengths of time. More shade, more trees and gardens are required.



I think people associate heat emergencies with a lack of resilience and don't realise the stress it can place on your health, this can be catastrophic if you're already vulnerable or unable to find refuge. I would like to see emergency management agencies coordinate their relief activities better and more consistently through local government.



Provide more education on the effects of heatwaves on the human body and the limits we can take regarding not only temperature but also humidity. Outdoor workers shifts should be changed to occur in cooler parts of the day.



Improved infrastructure - air con. Better insulation. Obviously - governments see this as being way too expensive to implement. We're disposable.



An indication that governments are doing something about minimising their contributions to the problem. Beyond that more locally, there should be protections such as covered walkways so people can at least get to the places they need to go. Water on demand is a growing trend, good to see, but needs to be more widespread. Sun hats need to be promoted as a personal protection option.



*Designating cooling centers or heat shelters strategically (should be highly accessible, close to public transport, easy access to amenities but *not* in shopping centres) for people who have had to go outside during extreme heat to have somewhere cool to stop and rest.*

We asked what kind of policy interventions people wanted to see from government. **These policies are a clear roadmap for heat resilient communities and a safer Australia:**

- 86%** supported heat safety standards for rentals
- 85%** supported making our transport system safer in the heat
- 73%** supported not cutting off income support payments or enforcing compulsory activities in the heat
- 91%** supported building homes that are safe for future heat
- 81%** supported not approving coal and gas mines
- 80%** supported funding retrofitting to upgrade existing homes
- 96%** supported changing how we plan our cities for cooler suburbs with more trees

Hundreds of people shared specific ideas for heat safety policies and local solutions, including:

- **Outdoor workers' shifts should be changed to occur in cooler parts of the day.**
- **Provide more education** on the effects of heatwaves on the human body and the limits we can take regarding not only temperature but also humidity.
- **Support food security for all** by ensuring access to garden space for all homes and investing in food forests and community gardens at local council level.
- **Listen to Indigenous communities** and how they've been managing the heat here for centuries and implement their ideas.
- **Assurance that I could come to my office at work to use the cool spaces without having to work.** Being able to take my dog to an airconditioned space.
- **24/7 open government community centre with appropriate cooling open to all during heatwaves.** Nationalised electricity service. Additional concession for heat intolerant disabilities.
- **Renting laws that require cooling devices** in both lounge and main bedroom, especially for disabled renters.
- **Children should not be forced or encouraged to take part in sporting activities during high temperatures.** An easy fix would be to make all Phys-Ed classes in the first period for term 4 and term 1.

| SPOTLIGHT ON REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

Over 412 respondents from this year's Summer Survey were from regional postcodes, determined by the Australian Reinsurance Pool Corporation (ARPC). Many respondents came from areas that are at high bushfire risk, and reflected that heatwaves during the bushfire season came with an extra mental load when preparing for increased smoke risks, evacuation plans, and emergency batteries to keep the house cool when the grid fails.

Responses from individuals in regional areas make it clear that solutions cannot be one size fits all across Australia.

Respondents living regionally stressed that:

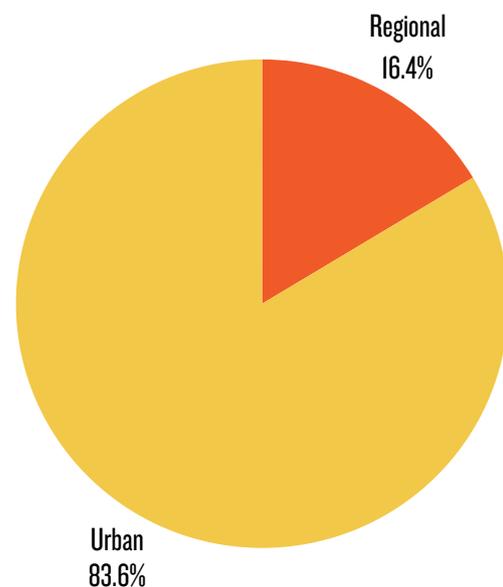
- More public cool spaces were needed in their communities, with some regional towns not even having access to a public library
- The effects of heatwaves are felt at the peak of bushfire season, with many households shouldering the mental burden of both natural disasters
- Access to information is key during natural disasters, but many respondents report not having consistent access to reception or radio frequencies even during bushfire season.



I live off-grid so I'm in charge of my own cooling needs. The only issue for me is poor reception which can impact my ability to keep up with weather changes and emergency warnings. I'm not sure how the ABC switch from AM to FM will impact communication." (Mt Barker in WA)



Tourists use a lot of water generally, because when they are holidays they are not paying for it. Our rivers are very low and we're told to save water. In the event of a fire our hydrants are likely to have insufficient pressure if there are loads of extra people around. (Hotham Heights, VIC)



Proportion of respondents from regional areas compared to Urban (mix of suburban and metro).

NEW SOUTH WALES

1024
responses

The responses were spread across the state, with the most responses coming from the following suburbs: Blacktown, Mt Druitt, Parramatta, Penrith, Wollongong, Baulkham Hills, Newtown, Lane Cove, Marrickville

267
postcodes

This summer in NSW was marked by intense heatwaves, elevated bushfire risk, and high humidity, with both daytime and nighttime temperatures well above average. In January 2026, several Sydney suburbs recorded multiple days exceeding 42°C.

Western Sydney, a rapidly-growing region that is home to 2.8 million people, often experiences temperatures up to 10°C higher than coastal suburbs or surrounding rural areas. This is due to its natural geography and the Urban Heat Island (UHI) effect driven by densely packed developments with heat-absorbing dark surfaces, limited green spaces, and low tree canopy.

70%

of respondents across NSW reported feeling unwell during heatwaves.

89%

of respondents with a disability in NSW reported feeling unwell during heatwaves.

“
Having lived in Western Sydney for 24 years the **heat is getting unbearable**. I take SSRIs for my mental health which can impact heat regulation, so I get heat stressed and dizzy a lot faster than normal. I also live in a unit with no aircon and no solar/battery, so **I have to be smart and conservative about when and how I cool my home**. Every time a heatwave happens I get stressed and upset about climate change and about how others may be impacted by the heat too.
(Wentworthville)



| NEW SOUTH WALES COST OF LIVING

Across NSW, the cost of living was a major concern. Respondents across Sydney's most socioeconomically disadvantaged postcodes, which are also some of Sydney's hottest suburbs, expressed a greater level of difficulty in navigating heat waves during the summer due to cost of living pressures.

Respondents who say cost of living pressures will make heatwaves harder to manage:

Across New South Wales

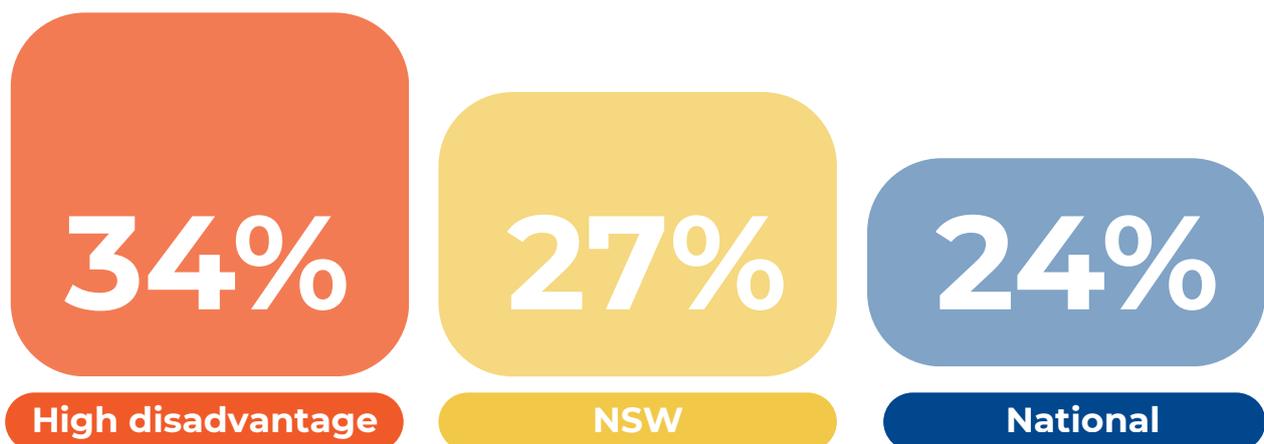


In suburbs with higher socioeconomic disadvantage



1 in 3 respondents in disadvantaged postcodes worry about energy bills every day:

One in three respondents in disadvantaged postcodes worry about energy bills every day, higher than the NSW average (27%) and the national average (24%).



“Despite annual \$200 electricity bonus, it doesn't go far enough to enable air conditioner to be on whenever it is essential. Extreme heat occurs every day in western Sydney. It starts in early spring. In excess of 25 degrees really impacts me physically & emotionally. (Penrith)”

| NEW SOUTH WALES

MULTICULTURAL COMMUNITIES

NSW is one of Australia's most culturally diverse states. In some suburbs in Western Sydney, a majority of residents will speak a language other than English at home. Multicultural communities may face heightened challenges when navigating heatwaves.

In NSW, 80% of respondents who identified themselves as being multicultural reported feeling unwell on hot days.

74% of multicultural respondents said that cost of living pressures would make it harder for them or their family to navigate a heatwave.



I've lived in Western Sydney all my life, being born here as a first generation child to South-East Asian immigrant parents ... they have continually worked hard across the 20+ years they've been in this country and are alarmed at the rising cost of living, especially since my siblings also have disabilities and are majorly impacted by extreme heat on a daily basis. Our energy bills have definitely risen up and so everyone has had to work harder and for longer hours just to make up for it. It's become a matter of: do we want to end up in hospital and suffer or suffer paying a large bill which goes to say sacrifice is interwoven through both of those choices, which is never easy. (Plumpton)



"I'm the only Westie in my team ... I don't feel like there is true empathy for how intense Western Sydney is in a heatwave." (Campbelltown)

Across NSW, 41% of respondents reported that heat affected them at work or school, for example by making it too hot to do certain activities, or difficult to commute to work.. This jumped to 59% for respondents who identified as being multicultural.

The NSW snapshot of the 2026 Summer Survey reveals growing concern about energy affordability and the economic, health, and mental toll of rising costs associated with keeping cool and safe during heat waves. Responses from NSW about the solutions needed to keep communities safe in rising temperatures emphasised practical solutions, including:

- implementing rental standards for cooling and energy efficiency,
- more shade across our suburbs and at bus stops, and
- making cheap, clean energy more accessible for all.

VICTORIA

604
responses

197
postcodes

Victorians experienced record-breaking heat this summer, with multiple days exceeding temperatures above 45° C across the state and the hottest temperature ever recorded in Victoria of 48.9°C in North-west regional towns Walpeup and Hopetoun on January 27, 2026. Prolonged heatwaves placed significant pressure on households, workplaces and essential services, particularly in regional communities impacted by severe bushfires.

Renters in Victoria

Renters are among the most affected by extreme heat in Victoria. Many renters in Victoria are living in apartments with poor insulation, inadequate ventilation, and little or no cooling options at all.

“

“On hot days over 40 degrees, there is not much you can do. You can't move around too much, or you will overheat. Our rental property has no air conditioning. All we can do is lie down and sleep. This is not good for mental health.”

“

“I have a thermoregulatory disorder so heat impacts on every aspect of my quality of life. Housing is THE most important determinant of my physical and mental health, and unfortunately as a renter most housing is poorly designed, built, and maintained that adds to the impact of extreme heat due to climate change. I am housebound due to the heat and am increasingly concerned and anxious with increasing rents and few appropriate housing options.”

4 IN 5 VICTORIAN RENTERS SURVEYED REPORTED FEELING UNWELL ON HOT DAYS.

69% OF VICTORIAN RENTERS SURVEYED REPORTED THAT CONCERNS ABOUT COST STOP THEM TURNING ON AIR CONDITIONING.

In 2025 Victoria legislated to add cooling and insulation to the rental minimum standards. New standards will give renters in Victoria the right to cooler, safer homes during increasingly hot summers. Sweltering Cities will continue to advocate for common sense and affordable energy efficiency measures for renters including better blinds, fans and screen doors.

| VICTORIA

WORKING IN THE HEAT

46% of Victorian respondents said heat affected their ability to work or study, with impacts particularly significant for outdoor workers, care and health workers, and people in insecure or casual employment. Respondents described reduced hours and lost income, as well as inadequate workplace protections during peak heat days.

31% of Victorian respondents who said that they were impacted by heat at work said that their workplaces or schools could do more to keep people safe, including flexible arrangements and clear heat policies.



"Like everyone, heatwaves lower my ability to function both physically & mentally. It is exhausting, unpleasant, frustrating. Causes lapses in concentration. Making me reluctant to leave the house. Which is isolating. Preventing me from being able to work. It is saddening to know people are suffering if they don't have access to heat relief. I'm unable to do ordinary tasks in that heat."

Overall, the Victorian results show that extreme heat is not experienced equally. Renters, workers, and those facing financial pressure are most impacted by rising temperatures. These findings demonstrate that there is a need for safer homes, affordable energy, and workplace heat safeguards to keep all Victorians safe.



WESTERN AUSTRALIA

321
responses

Survey responses came from people living across Western Australia, from Margaret River in the southwest to Kununurra in the far north. Respondents lived predominantly in Perth and surrounding suburbs, while 13% of responses were from those living in regional and rural areas.

96
postcodes

Western Australia is known for its long, dry summers and intense heat. While this summer was not the most extreme compared to recent years, in a climate like Western Australia's even "average" summer conditions can place serious strain on people's health, homes and finances. **64% of Western Australians reported feeling unwell** on hot days, and **58% said cost of living pressures will make it harder** for them and their families during heatwaves.

While 92% of West Australians reported having air conditioning, 62% of those said that concerns about costs stop them from turning it on.

This represents an increase from 56% in our 2024 Summer Survey. The rise in people limiting their cooling use is likely linked to growing cost-of-living pressures, amplified by changes to government energy bill relief including the removal of the \$400 household electricity credit in the state's 2025-26 budget.

4 in 5 WA Renters reported feeling unwell in the heat

Renters in Western Australia are bearing a disproportionate burden of heat stress and energy insecurity. Compared to responses from both homeowners and renters nationally, WA renters report significantly higher levels of financial stress linked to cooling their homes, particularly those living in low energy efficiency housing.

When asked how often they worry about the cost of energy during summer, the proportion who answered "daily" was:

24%

Responses
nationally

34%

Renters
nationally

44%

WA
Renters

50%

WA Renters
in low energy efficiency
housing

| WESTERN AUSTRALIA

SOCIAL ISOLATION

Beyond the physical and financial impacts, many respondents described a quieter, less visible impact: feeling isolated, dismissed, and unsupported in the heat. People shared that heat is treated as “normal” in WA, despite the significant disruption it causes to their daily lives. When heat is normalised and framed as something to simply endure, people can feel alone in their struggle – particularly if they are unable to leave their homes or access cooler public spaces. This social isolation can “compound health risks and increase vulnerability during heatwaves.

Staying inside the majority of the summer leads to me feeling isolated and alone and depressed.

Lots of people love the heat – the hotter the better – and don't feel any concern for people who are distressed by heat. It's just business as usual.

I'll stay at home and don't socialise as it gets down to just surviving.

We need more awareness and actual acknowledgement of the effects.

My life becomes smaller as I try to stay out of the heat in the cool. So I see few friends or family, I get less exercise and I don't feel so well.

I suffer in silence and am invisible – my health and wellbeing doesn't matter, but that's ok because I am now used to it.

| SPOTLIGHT ON PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

946 respondents identified as living with a chronic illness and/or disability. 358 identified as having a disability and 868 identified as having a chronic illness.

People living with disability or chronic illness are at increased risk of heat-related illness and complications during hot weather and heatwaves. Heat can intensify existing health conditions and symptoms, disrupt medication, increase fatigue, pain, sensory stress, reduce mobility and capacity to function. For many, this means that activities that are usually manageable become exhausting or unsafe. As temperatures rise and symptoms worsen, daily routines, independence and support needs can be impacted.

While high temperatures themselves pose risks, these impacts are often compounded by dangerously hot housing, the high cost of cooling, and public spaces and transport systems that are not designed to be accessible or heat-safe, particularly for those with disabilities. A 2022 study of heatwave fatalities in Australia from 2001 to 2018 found that 89 percent of fatalities had a disability or multiple disabilities ([read more here](#)).

84% of respondents with a disability or chronic illness reported feeling unwell on hot days.

3 in 4 reported concerns about cost-of-living pressures.

The intersection of disability and renting presents some of the most severe heat-related impacts identified in this survey. Due to compounding systemic inequalities, people living with disability or chronic illness are more likely to be renters – **36% of respondents with disability or chronic illness reported that they were renters, compared to 26% for all respondents.** This places this group at the sharpest edge of heat inequality: higher health vulnerability combined with insecure and energy-inefficient housing.

89% of renters living with disability or chronic illness reported concerns about cost of living pressures and 90% reported feeling unwell on hot days.

I feel like I can't function. Stuck in the house with portable air conditioner costing more than I can afford.

SPOTLIGHT ON | PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Responses from neurodivergent respondents stood out for the unique ways in which heat affects sensory processing, self-regulation and functioning. Heat policy must recognise cognitive and sensory impacts alongside physical health risks, to ensure neurodivergent people are not left out of adaptation and emergency planning.



I have ADHD. Extreme heat worsens my executive function, attention, focus and motivation. When my symptoms are worse it makes everyday tasks more difficult. This includes things like cooking breakfast, doing chores, managing my time or planning out my day. This can snowball quite quickly into depressive episodes, especially when I'm not sleeping or eating properly.



Being Autistic, I have difficulty with interoceptive awareness, so I find it harder to recognise when I'm thirsty or overheating. Executive dysfunction can make getting a drink seem like an almost insurmountable task at times. Heatstroke catches up to me very suddenly and seemingly without warning as a result and I struggle to prepare ahead of time.



Difficulty sleeping during hot and humid weather can aggravate my bipolar disorder.



I work outside in the western suburbs, have Autism with sensory issues, and have recently been diagnosed with hyperthyroidism which causes heat sensitivity. I have often had to leave work early or call in sick because I don't think I can handle the heat, having had meltdowns and gotten heatstroke. I feel dizzy and headachy. I need to be in bed in the dark.



I have Autism and endometriosis. The hot weather makes me sticky and can sometimes cause me to become extremely overwhelmed and overstimulated. When I am on my period and suffer from endometriosis the pain becomes more excruciating as I am uncomfortable from the heat.

SPOTLIGHT ON | PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

This summer we asked respondents with disability or chronic illness to complete two optional additional questions, aiming to provide a deeper insight into how heat impacts daily life, health, and independence, and what can be done to better support people with disability during extreme heat.

How does extreme heat impact you living with disability or chronic illness?

“ It reduces my already limited energy for the day.

“ Extreme heat exacerbates my symptoms and limits my abilities. Tasks that are normally manageable become exhausting, my pain or fatigue increases, and I often need more support to stay safe and maintain daily routines.

“ My depression is worse. I feel sluggish, incapable of doing anything, I can't go outside. I feel deep shame about spending the whole day on the couch or bed covered in sweat and not being able to do anything.

What do you think would better support people with disabilities during periods of extreme heat?

“ Better support could include accessible cooling spaces, reliable home cooling assistance, clear heat-health guidance, and policies that ensure extra care or check-ins for people with disabilities during extreme heat events.

“ Flexible NDIS funding would be a good start, providing reviews for NDIS during different seasons as so many people's support needs change.

“ Better provision of transport to enable people to access services in the heat.

“ Supports that are broader to include people with disabilities that aren't on DSP, such as NDIS.

These responses point to clear actionable policy change and investments, including improving access to cooling, increasing accessible transport, and funding support systems that are both flexible and extend beyond narrow eligibility criteria. Without deliberate recognition and inclusion, extreme heat will continue to widen existing inequalities.

| SPOTLIGHT ON RENTERS

Renters are at higher risk in extreme heat because of their limited autonomy to control their living conditions, compared to homeowners. Across the country, renters are feeling the health impacts of living in homes without adequate insulation, without affordable cooling, and second guessing whether they can have common sense solutions like better blinds, screen doors or fans.

The 2026 Summer Survey found that renters face higher cost-of-living pressures and greater health impacts during extreme heat.

While 61% of respondents nationally said cost-of-living pressures would make it harder to navigate heatwaves, this rose to 83% among renters.

81% of renters reported feeling unwell on hot days or during heatwaves, compared to 68% of all respondents.



I'm dreading my electricity bill and I'm scared that if I ask the landlord about air conditioning that they'll put my rent up and I still will be hot but potentially homeless.

Renters across the country stressed the importance of minimum energy efficiency standards, many called for more support for landlords to install and update airconditioning, as well as government support for rising electricity costs and access to solar panels and other sources of renewable energy.

Support for heat safety standards for rental homes amongst respondents was 86% nationally, 85% in NSW and 91% each in Victoria and the ACT.

In 2025, Victoria passed legislation to add cooling and insulation to the Rental Minimum Standards, joining the ACT which also has insulation standards for rentals. This progress shows that policies for heat safe rentals are achievable and necessary. It's time for all jurisdictions across Australia to take steps to protect renters from dangerous extreme heat.



My REA and landlords couldn't fix my AC for 2 months, I ended up having heat strokes, and bellyaches and was feeling unwell the whole day, also the smoke from the bushfire came and we had to have the windows open because we had no AC.

| SPOTLIGHT ON FOOD

67% of total respondents change the way they access, buy prepare or store food in high temperatures.



The results also varied across the country.



WA	64%
NT	65%
SA	77%
QLD	60%
NSW	65%
ACT	62%
VIC	75%
TAS	67%

Extreme heat has a multitude of effects on our entire food system. The National Climate Risk Assessment (2025) highlights how climate impacts crops, fisheries and livestock, while Farmers for Climate (2025) finds these pressures can drive up prices for staples like wheat, meat and dairy. Higher prices of food have become another aspect of the financial and physical pressures that extreme heat places on all Australians.

I try to do as little cooking as possible. That means an increase in food costs as buying ready made options is more expensive.

It is clear that extreme heat is fundamentally changing Australians' diets and relationship with food. Behavioural changes, such as limiting the use of stoves and ovens on hot days, were commonly reported in the Summer Survey – concerningly, many respondents reported not eating at all.

Many believed that their diets dropped in quality or diversity on hot days, with respondents resorting to takeaway over cooking. **Pre-prepared rotisserie chicken was mentioned 18 times in the Summer Survey as a staple food item during extreme heat.**

We are more careful about not leaving food out; what I take for lunches is more carefully chosen ... We have significant dietary restrictions as a family, and it seems harder in hot weather to find food solutions when out of the house that aren't going to go revolting. This was also an issue when attempting to find lunch options for school age kids. (South Perth, WA)

CAMPAIGNS

All Sweltering Cities campaigns are rooted in the experiences and ideas shared by people living in hot homes and suburbs. Community stories empower our campaigns.

BUSTED BUS STOPS

For over 5 years, Sweltering Cities has been campaigning to fix Sydney's Busted Bus Stops. Waiting at a bus stop on a hot day should not be a health risk. This summer, our volunteers came together to send over 50 hand-written Christmas Cards to MPs in Western Sydney, picturing a hot bus stop in Plumpton. You can read more about this action you can read in this [Sydney Morning Herald article](#) and [this editorial](#).



Sweltering Cities also met with NSW Transport Minister John Graham to share community stories highlighting the urgent need for safe, shaded bus stops. We were encouraged to hear that the Minister is willing to take responsibility for installing more shelters in Western Sydney. We will continue advocating on this issue until funding is delivered. **[You can sign our petition here.](#)**

Shading for bus shelters in Penrith, it breaks my heart daily seeing elderly people and people with disabilities having to stand in the boiling hot sun" (Penrith, NSW)

HEATWAVE SAFE HOMES

Renters across the country are baking in dangerously hot homes every summer. Year on year, rents are skyrocketing on homes that are poorly built and energy inefficient, making the cost of living crisis acute for renters. 95% of renters in this year's survey are calling on mandatory cooling and insulation reforms to ensure that renters are not left behind in a climate that is getting hotter every summer. We know that these changes will save lives, and reduce heat related illnesses and deaths in our communities.

Informed by the 2024 Summer Survey, our Heatwave Safe Homes campaign won insulation and cooling standards in Victoria in 2025. With consultations on rental standards opening in NSW, we will use this year's survey results to advocate for minimum cooling and insulation for renters in the state. Let's make sure that renters are not left behind. **[Will you join our campaign for Heatwave Safe Homes in NSW? Sign our petition here.](#)**

PAYMENTS NOT PENALTIES

There are thousands of people on Jobseeker payments who put their safety second in extreme heat as they need to go to appointments, comply with their Employment Services Provider, or meet the other requirements for their payments. When people on Jobseeker payments don't meet every requirement from Services Australia, they receive penalties and might have their payments cut off.

Nobody should be forced to choose between financial security and following the health advice during a heatwave. 73% of respondents believe that the government should not cut off government income support or enforce compulsory activities for people on income support.

You can get involved by signing this petition to stop penalising people for staying safe during a heatwave.

STOP THE BILL SHOCK

Whilst the cost of producing energy is on the decline, Australians are not seeing these savings in their energy bills. In fact, 331 750 households are in energy debt while Australia's two largest energy companies pocketed \$2 billion in profit combined.

Our survey revealed that 83% of respondents worried about the cost of energy daily, and that 91% of respondents think that cost of living pressures will make this summer even harder. While big energy company profits skyrocket, our energy bills just go up. This must change.

Go to <https://www.stopthebillshock.org/> to find out more.



| CONCLUSION

Over the recent summer, millions of Australians experienced severe heatwaves, with many facing record-breaking, dangerous heat. While this report proves that extreme heat now impacts the physical and mental health of the vast majority of our population, it also reveals that heat risk in Australia is not distributed by chance; it settles precisely where poor housing quality, financial pressure, and health vulnerabilities intersect.

Renters, those in energy-inefficient homes, and people living with chronic illness or disability consistently report the highest rates of heat-related illness. For these communities, energy affordability has become a key driver of danger. When the cost of electricity forces the rationing of cooling, staying safe ceases to be an accessible right and becomes a high-stakes financial decision.

Beyond the home, extreme heat is reshaping our economy and daily lives from the disruption of food security and shifting shopping habits to workplaces and classrooms that are fundamentally unprepared for rising temperatures. Whether through lost income, illness, or the inability to attend school, the cost of inaction is being paid by individuals.

As extreme heat becomes more frequent and intense, it is clear that incremental shifts are no longer enough. The evidence provided by the 2026 Summer Survey is a call for a transformation of our cities, our housing, and our energy systems. Our solutions must finally match the scale, the speed, and the urgency of the challenge.

| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to say thank you to the local councils, universities, unions, community groups, health organisations and environmental groups who partnered with Sweltering Cities to develop and distribute the 2026 Summer Survey.

Thank you to our supporters and respondents who agreed to be followed up - the conversations we had together over the summer allowed us to have the biggest Summer Survey yet, reaching over 2600 people nationwide.

Thank you to our volunteers who got the Summer Survey out into the community, and had hundreds of community conversations about heat this summer.

Thank you to everyone who filled out this year's Summer Survey. Thousands of people have generously shared their stories about extreme heat, and these stories will ground our future campaigns for a fairer Australia.

This report was written by Emma Bacon, Farah Chaar, Sanaa Shah, Ethan Lyons, Nat Edwards, Nelly McNiell, Kim Vernon, and Taylor Tran.

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| SURVEY QUESTIONS DETAIL

These were the questions we asked as part of the 2026 Summer Survey. Only the name and email field were mandatory to ensure that we could make sure that only one response per person was tracked.

Demographics:

- How old are you?
 - *Options:* Under 18, 18 - 34, 35 - 49, 50 - 64, 65 - 79, 80 +
- How would you describe your gender?
 - *Options:* Man, Woman, Non-binary, I use a different term, Prefer not to answer
- What is your postcode? (open field)
- What is your occupation? (open field)
- Hot weather can affect people differently depending on their personal circumstances. By letting us know which of these apply to you, we can get a better picture of how different people are impacted.
 - *Options:* Live in a low energy efficiency home, Come from a multicultural background, work outside, renting, Have a chronic illness (including diabetes, mental health conditions, asthma and other diseases), A carer

Health:

- Do you ever feel unwell on hot days or during heat waves? (YES / NO)
 - *this is a repeated question from 2022, and 2024*
- Please tell us how the heat has affected your physical or mental health (open field)
- People with disabilities and chronic illnesses are more likely to be impacted by high temperatures. We have some specific questions to help us understand those impacts. If you're a person with a disability or chronic illness, can you help us by answering two extra questions? If this doesn't apply to you, just click no or next.
 - *If yes, these two additional questioned were asked:*
 - How does extreme heat impact you living with disability or chronic illness? (e.g. symptoms, abilities, support needs changing as the temperature rises) (open field)
 - What do you think would better support people with disabilities during periods of extreme heat? (e.g. improved infrastructure, services, planning or policies) (open field)

Cost of Living:

- Do you think that cost of living pressures (the price of food, energy, housing and other things) will make it harder for you or your family during a heatwave this summer? (YES / NO)
 - How? (open field)
 - *This is a repeated question from 2024*
- Do you have an air conditioner at home? (YES / NO)
 - *this is a repeated question from 2022, and 2024*
- Do concerns about cost stop you turning it on? (TRUE / FALSE)
- Are you concerned about your energy bills this summer or in future summers? (Scale of 1 - 5)
- During summer, how often do you worry about the cost of energy?
 - *Options:* Never, Rarely, Monthly, Weekly, Daily

| RESULTS DETAIL

Food:

- On hot days do you or your household change how you access, buy, prepare or store food? (YES / NO)
 - IF YES: In what ways? (open field)

Behaviour:

- Do you do any of these things during a heatwave or on hot days?
 - *Options:*
 - leaving the house to go somewhere cooler like a library or shopping centre,
 - sitting in front of a fan and wetting your skin with cloths or a spray bottle,
 - cover windows with blankets, bubble wrap, aluminium foil or other materials to block heat
 - checking in on other people like family, parents, friends or neighbours
 - keeping pets inside or not walking them in the middle of the day,
 - changing when you do outdoor activities
 - avoiding walking
 - Avoid catching public transport
 - *This is a repeated question from 2024*
 - respondents could choose as many options as they wanted.
- Please tell us about what else you plan to do if there is an extreme heatwave (open field)
- Does heat affect you at work or school (eg. too hot for certain activities, difficult to get to work)?
 - *Options:* This does not apply to me, Yes, No
 - If yes, in what ways? (open field)

Solutions and Change:

- Do you think your workplace or school could do more to keep people safe when it's very hot?
 - *Options:* they do enough, there could be more, they don't provide any, I'm not sure
- What type of support would you like to receive during a very bad heatwave? (open field)
This is a repeated question from 2024
- Which of these things do you think the government should do to keep people be safer in the heat?
 - *Options:*
 - Change how we plan our cities for cooler suburbs with more trees
 - Make sure our transport system is safe in the heat (eg. more bus shelters)
 - Don't cut off government income support or enforce compulsory activities for people on income support during heatwaves
 - Build homes to be safe in future heat
 - Stop approving new coal and gas mines
 - Fund retrofitting to upgrade existing homes
 - Heat safety standards for rentals (eg. draftproofing, insulation, cooling, better blinds)
 - *respondents could choose as many options as they wanted.*
- Is there anything else you would like to add that hasn't been covered? (open field)

2026

SUMMER SURVEY

SWELTERING
CITIES 