

Australian report documents cold conditions for renters

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A recent report entitled “Cold and Costly” has underscored the difficult and dangerous conditions confronting many people who rent properties in Australia.

The report, by the Better Renting organisation, cited a 2015 *Lancet* study which found that more people die from exposure to the cold in Australian homes than in colder countries like Sweden and Canada.

The study said that approximately 6.5 percent of all mortalities (or about one in fifteen) between 1988 to 2009 were attributable to winter cold exposure in Australia. That compared with 3.69 percent in Canada and 4.46 percent in Sweden. Cold weather claims more lives than hot weather, with the study reporting that heat contributed to only 0.5 percent of overall mortality in Australia over the same period.

This is extraordinary considering the climatic differences between the countries. Australia’s winters tend to be relatively mild, with daily mean temperatures in capital cities Sydney and Melbourne generally between 11.0 and 13.4 degrees Celsius in July, (52 to 56 degrees Fahrenheit) the coldest month of the year, according to the Bureau of Meteorology.

By contrast, Sweden’s capital Stockholm experiences mean January winter temperatures of -1.0°C, and Canada’s capital Ottawa 10.2°C (30°F and 14°F respectively).

The Better Renting report highlighted some of the factors responsible for Australia’s surprising level of cold-related mortality.

The report entailed a study of 70 renters from across Australia. Participants were given smart thermometers which monitored the temperature and humidity in their homes at one-minute intervals.

The report cited the World Health Organization (WHO), which recommends that 18°C (64.4° F) is the

minimum healthy indoor temperature. Over the recording period from June 13 to July 31, the study’s participants reported indoor temperatures dropping below 18°C on average 75 percent of the time, that is approximately 18 hours per day.

For some households, there were days where the indoor temperatures did not rise above the 18°C temperature threshold. For those so affected, the incidence was around 39 percent of the time. In the state of Tasmania, one person reported temperatures of 0.2°C on July 21.

In Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), the average temperatures recorded were 13.9°C and 14.2°C respectively and in both Victoria and New South Wales (NSW) the average temperature was 15.4°C.

The report cited a study from March this year which found that eliminating cold in Australian homes, through adding insulation and proper heat containment measures, could lower rates of heart and cardiovascular disease, and increase life expectancy by an estimated 1.6 years per 1000 people.

The report found that those who reside in poorly built homes were consistently colder by about 4°C and saw temperatures decrease faster overnight and increase slower during the day compared to those who lived in well insulated homes.

The report presents the difference as simply being between rental and owned homes, but this obscures the extent of the crisis. A November 2021 report from PowerHousing Australia estimated that approximately 8 million (out of a national housing stock of 10.6 million) existing homes have “energy inefficient” designs, meaning they “are cold in winter, hot in summer, and prohibitively expensive to cool and heat.”

Participants in the Better Renting study reported that

many were hesitant to turn on their heating because of energy costs. The privatization of the power industry has resulted in a crisis where millions of households pay more for energy costs.

The federal Labor government in July authorised payments of an estimated \$1.5 billion to electricity generators to avoid blackouts caused by companies' refusal to supply power because of high coal and gas prices. These payments are being imposed on regular people via increased energy bills.

The Australian Energy Market Operator (AEMO) revealed that wholesale costs of electricity in the National Electricity Market (NEM) averaged \$264 per megawatt-hour between March and June, a 203 percent increase on the first three months of the year. This was double the previous high of \$130 in the first quarter of 2019, and three times higher than the average price in the June quarter of 2021, which was \$85.

Gas prices averaged \$28.40 per gigajoule in NSW, Queensland and Victoria, up 246 percent on 12 months, and almost triple the previous record of \$10.74/GJ set in the September quarter last year.

Numbers of participants described the experience in their homes as “Dickensian.” One person said: “We burn tissues, pages of old books, shoe boxes for kindling. We eat two meals a day... I have to reduce groceries to pay the electricity and gas bill. We share 1 chicken breast between 3 people (9, 11, adult) and my kids are really thin.”

Prolonged exposure to the cold can have long-term health consequences and has been found to increase the likelihood of maladies such as high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease. Another participant reported that “every tiny headcold... I've caught has evolved into full-on bronchitis thanks to the lack of heating in this room... I've had to go to a doctor and get a stronger inhaler just to get through everyday coughs and cold.”

The report cited a Scotland study which found “that the risk of high blood pressure was two times higher below 18°C, and four times higher below 16°C.”

Many working-class families are forced to reside in poorly built homes. A December 2020 report from the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) which sampled 14,486 households across Australia, said: “Over 23 percent of renters reported that they were unable to keep warm in their home during cold weather,” and “27 percent reported

problems with mold, and 21 percent reported problems of dampness.” Households reported “cracks in the walls/floors were even more common (52%)” and other “common issues included plumbing problems (42%) and electrical faults (27%).”

The AHURI report added that “in privately rented dwellings 39 percent of couple-headed families with children and 42 percent of single parent-headed families” reported “living in homes with three or more building condition problems.”

Despite these problems, families often pay exorbitant rents. The *Guardian* reported in July that rental costs had increased by 9.1 percent in cities and 10.8 percent in regional areas over the previous 12 months, spurred on by skyrocketing inflation and the decreasing availability of rentals.

Domain reported that the national vacancy rate for rental properties in August was at a record low of 0.9 percent, down from 1.7 percent last August. The proportion of vacant rentals in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane had halved over the previous year.

For homeowners, mortgage repayments continue to climb as a result of the series of interest rate hikes imposed by the Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) with the complete support of the Albanese Labor government.

These rapid rate increases are deepening a crisis confronting homeowners. Some homeowners have already seen their monthly repayments increase by \$1,000 or more since the hikes began in May this year.



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