

International students face severe housing stress in Australia

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A recent academic survey has revealed that “hot-bedding”—the practice of tenants sharing a bed in shifts to reduce rental costs—is becoming more common in Australia.

Immigrants and international students are the most likely to live in accommodation where multiple people share one bedroom or even one bed, due to unaffordable rents and the worsening cost of living. This often leads to a level of overcrowding that damages the physical and mental health of the students forced into these conditions.

The survey was published last November by Dr. Zahra Nasreen, a researcher at the University of Sydney and Macquarie University, and included responses from 103 students. All the students surveyed shared their bedroom with strangers to ease rent costs.

The majority of respondents were international students with lower income. Of this sample, 17 percent shared their bedroom with three or more other people, while 18 percent reported that the living room in their accommodation was partitioned into one or more “bedrooms.” The most extreme case was a Nepalese international student who had been one of 20 people living in a single two-bedroom apartment.

According to the survey, 46 percent of respondents were renting without a written lease, and 37 percent were paying rent in cash, a situation which would leave no record of their tenancy, giving them no legal options to counteract attempts by landlords to violate stated agreements, such as refusing to return deposits.

Dr. Nasreen explained that these students understand their weak position in the rental market. They “lowered their housing expectations and settled for shared room situations that might not meet their everyday basic needs and can lead to health and safety risks,” she wrote.

Several surveyed students gave interviews that painted a vivid picture of the degrading conditions they face. Some reported not being allowed to cook, in order to prevent false fire-alarm penalties for the landlord or “head-tenant,” or being barred from using the heaters or air conditioners, for the landlord to save money on utility bills. One described the rules enforced in their accommodation, a two-bedroom apartment used by seven people: “[Y]ou’re not allowed to use the living room, you’re not allowed to talk loudly or laugh, even between phone calls or with the flatmates...”

Tenants in these overcrowded conditions, the survey continued, reported sleepless nights, filth and social friction between themselves and fellow roommates, all strangers with their own schedules and needs. This increased the likelihood of physical disease and mental illness, negatively impacting the students’ employment and education.

Measures including hot-bedding, skipping meals and tolerating abusive landlords are all desperate responses to an increasingly unaffordable rental market.

In Sydney, the weekly rent of a one-bedroom apartment can range from \$300 to \$700, as of September 2024. The cost of living has increased staggeringly in the last five years: the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows the Consumer Price Index (CPI), a measure of household expenses, rose by 2.8 percent from September 2023 to September 2024, and has risen consistently since mid-2020, with a peak annual increase of around 7 percent in 2022.

However, these CPI increases and the official inflation rate are an under-representation of the actual increases in costs of daily utilities, food items and rent.

The Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, since taking office in 2022, has backed multiple increases in mortgage interest rates, translating

to higher rent prices for tenants. This is just one element of an historic assault on the social conditions of the working class and youth by Labor, including education and health, the steepest cuts since the 1930s.

Successive Australian federal governments, led by both Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition, have enacted pro-business policies that are accelerating the cost-of-living crisis. They have slashed social services as well as funding for universities, leaving universities to shift their financial losses onto international students and charge them exorbitant fees.

It was the Labor Party government in the 1980s, under Prime Minister Bob Hawke, that began the abolition of free higher education, beginning with fees for international students in 1989, as well as a broad pro-corporate assault on the social conditions of the working class.

Rental prices increased sharply across Australia between 2023 and 2024, including by 12 percent in Victoria and even 30 percent in parts of Brisbane. Over the last five years, rents have risen by over 50 percent, while wages are stagnant and declining in real terms.

An earlier survey, conducted in 2019 by researchers from the University of Technology Sydney, investigated housing stress among international students. It found that 3 percent of survey participants practiced hot-bedding. Extrapolated to the entire international student population in Australia, this amounts to over 20,000 students hot-bedding at that time. About a quarter of respondents lived in houses with at least two people per bedroom.

As the study stated, “hot-bedding is indicative of extreme financial stress.” About 22 percent of respondents deprived themselves of food and utilities to pay rent, while 57 percent had a total income of under \$500 per week.

International students were among the most vulnerable layers affected by lockdowns during the initial outbreak of COVID-19. From the 2019 survey participants, 852 answered a follow-up survey in mid-2020. Of those who were employed, 61 percent lost their jobs. The proportion of those who skipped meals to afford rent ballooned from 22 to 33 percent. International students were also ineligible for any financial assistance from the government, leaving them to face this social crisis alone.

Five years since the 2019 survey, the financial stress

that underlies the resort to hot-bedding has significantly worsened. International students, who pay exorbitant fees and cannot access state financial aid, are viewed as cash-cows by the entire Australian political establishment and the universities, which are run as highly profitable businesses.

The Labor government is attacking public education and housing because it is a party of Australian capitalism, intimately connected to big business and property developers and advancing their profit interests.

This has also been demonstrated in Labor’s drive to demolish public housing. The Victorian state Labor government is setting out to demolish 44 public housing towers across Melbourne, displacing up to 10,000 residents, and replacing them largely with private apartments. This is being done on the totally false pretext that the towers are unfit for habitation and there is no cost-effective way to refurbish them.

Whatever fraudulent claims Labor has made to be alleviating the housing crisis for ordinary people, their actions have been aimed at extracting more wealth from the population for the benefit of the ultra-wealthy, and expanding military spending as the Australian ruling elite prepares for a US-led conflict against China in the Indo-Pacific.

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