

Renter Researchers: SA snapshot

Better Renting, July 2023

In June 2023 Better Renting began working with a group of 11 renters in South Australia to document their experiences of winter. Each renter began tracking the real-time temperatures in their home, as well as providing qualitative information on their experiences. This is an interim update highlighting themes identified so far and reporting on quantitative data from the first few weeks of June.

The key findings to date are:

- Renters describe homes that cannot be kept at a healthy temperature and where whole sections of the home are unuseable,
- This contributes to high energy costs and a fear of energy debt, &
- A cold home also increases social isolation by reducing motivation and discouraging people from having guests over.

Quantitative results for SA

From our eleven researchers in South Australia, over a period from 1 June until around 24 June:

- Minimum temperature recorded: 8.5°C
- Average minimum temperature: 12.9°C
- Median temperature across all participants: 15.8°C. Participants are below this temperature 50% of the time.
- Roughly 90% of participants have a median temperature below 18°C.

Interim qualitative findings

Homes are painfully cold

Renters in SA describe homes that offer no protection from winter cold. This is often due to the thermal quality of the home itself. People describe dwellings that have no insulation, so heat rapidly escapes through the ceilings. Another common issue was cracks and gaps around windows and doors. This causes draughts, which allows the outdoor cold to easily penetrate a home. The experience of moving air indoors also reduces the felt temperature and contributes to psychological discomfort.

"My home is very cold during the winter, the indoor temperature is barely any warmer than outside. It's really difficult to warm up the living space."

Jasmine, Unley

"My bed and my kids beds have flannelette sheets and 2 high warmth winter weight quilts on each bed and it's still freezing. I washed my daughter's school jumper and hung it inside, 3 days later it's still wet."

Emily, Mount Barker

Some people attempt to compensate through heating. But a healthy home remains unattainable. Commonly people can gain a few degrees of warmth while they are heating, but the home does not function to retain heat and so becomes cold again as soon as the heater goes off. This contributes to a sense of helplessness and futility. Even with heating, people are still in cold temperatures for much of the time.

"The house does not have any thermal retention, so it does not keep in whatever heat we might import in and tends to let all the cold in."

Ben, Mount Barker

"It doesn't feel like the house has much insulation, as it gets cold quickly and heat from any sort of heater isn't retained well. As soon as the heater is turned off, it gets cold again."

Ali, Mitcham

"Very poor insulation, gaps around doors, single glazing, freezing floor. It just lets the outside temperature in and doesn't hold in any of the heat we put into it!"

Pam, Adelaide

People respond to this by using less of their homes. If only one room has a heater, people will spend most of their time at home in that room, often zoning off other parts of the house in a Quixotic attempt to make at least one room liveable. In effect, substandard housing means that renters are denied access to the full house they are paying to rent.

"I can't do anything except huddle under the blankets. It takes over my life."

Edwina, Coromandel Valley

A cold home causes social isolation

A cold home has a direct negative impact on the mental health of occupants: it's not nice living in a cold home. But there is also the indirect negative impact of a home that is too cold to invite friends. This leads to social isolation and the mental health harms of missing out on interpersonal connection. A recurring theme for South Australian participants was how their cold home reduced socialising or sapped them of the motivation needed to instigate social experiences.

"Generally, we don't choose to host social events in our home during winter. It's too cold and too difficult to heat to invite people over for dinner or games etc, like we would at other times of the year."

Ali, Mitcham

"We don't really enjoy having people over in winter because our house is so inhospitable in terms of temperatures."

Ben, Mount Barker

"I have no social life. I go nowhere and do nothing."

Emily, Mount Barker

The social harms of cold homes were exacerbated by the increasing cost of living. Some people wouldn't have people over because of how much it would cost to heat the home to a socially-acceptable temperature. But at the same time, high housing and energy costs reduce the disposable income that people have available for social outings outside of the home. The combination of cold homes and high costs leaves people with nowhere to turn, unable to have people over or to go out.

Cost concerns

The rising cost of living came up a great deal in responses. The most obvious relationship is that people cut back on heating in order to reduce their energy costs. The direct consequence of this is a colder home, with the downstream negative impacts on health and wellbeing. With rent increases also at record highs, housing costs made it harder to afford energy, and left people with less money to cover other essential expenses.

“I certainly worry about our energy bills, particularly with the increases in price over the coming months. Every time we turn a heater on, I worry about having to pay for it.”
Ali, Mitcham

“Even baking for school lunchboxes has reduced because I never have the ingredients anymore. My winter electricity bill is huge. I am way behind in my gas bill and am getting close to a disconnection notice.”

Emily, Mount Barker

Opportunities

Better energy performance for substandard rental homes achieves many benefits. Basic features like ceiling insulation and efficient appliances can help people to heat their homes at a lower cost: a recent report from Renew estimates annual savings of over \$1000.¹ Making it easier for people to keep a warmer home also has health benefits, for both physical and mental health. In fact, interventions aimed at warmth and energy efficiency have shown some of the clearest positive impacts on health.²

Victoria and the ACT have led on seizing these opportunities. Since March 2023, Victoria has required that rental homes have an energy-efficient heater in the main living area. Since April, the ACT has required a minimum standard of ceiling insulation in rentals. The first of these requirements makes it cheaper and easier for renters to add sufficient heat to their homes; the second makes it easier to raise indoor temperatures and retain heat. The two measures would work most effectively in tandem.

There are promising indications that South Australia may yet catch up in this area. A recent SA Green Paper on energy transition notes the challenges facing renters and refers to the progressing of “minimum energy efficiency standards rental standards”.³ A spokesperson for CBS SA recently confirmed that they are “considering the issue of energy efficiency standards”.⁴ It remains to be seen how many more winters will pass before people renting in SA can be comfortable in a healthy home.

¹ Rob McLeod and Sam Cope, ‘Efficient Heating and Cooling in Adelaide Homes’ (North Melbourne, 2023).

² Marcia Gibson et al., ‘Housing and Health Inequalities: A Synthesis of Systematic Reviews of Interventions Aimed at Different Pathways Linking Housing and Health’, *Health and Place* 17, no. 1 (2011): 175–84, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2010.09.011>.

³ Department for Energy and Mining, ‘South Australia’s Green Paper on the Energy Transition’, June 2023, https://www.energymining.sa.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/922043/South-Australias-Green-Paper-on-the-energy-transition.pdf.

⁴ Swain, ‘This Could Be Australia’s Coldest Home’, 4 July 2023, <https://www.9news.com.au/national/australias-coldest-homes-found-life-study-calls-new-rules/0c92da76-2f24-4432-bc42-231d0e274625>.