



Hot Summer Nights

Notes on Queensland's Renter Researchers
February 2024

better
renting

Introduction

From December 2023 Better Renting has been working with 19 renters in Queensland to track the temperature and humidity in their rental homes, as part of our Summer Renter Researchers 2024 project. Each participant used a temperature tracker to track the minute-by-minute conditions in their homes. This data is complemented by qualitative analysis drawing upon surveys of these participants. The majority of renter researchers were based in and around Brisbane, with some individual participants based near Cairns and Townsville.

This paper gives a snapshot of data obtained from 1 December 2023 to 22 January 2024. While the tracker data helps to quantify the conditions facing renters, the personal testimony is essential to understand the human impacts of this. The highest temperature we tracked was 41.4°C, on 22 January at 4:15pm. This renter, who has three children, tells us: *"We have not been able to stay in our house...none of my household has been coping."* Another renter, trapped at home with a severe spinal injury, has had indoor temperatures above 28°C for over 12 hours a day. They say: *"The heat would absolutely consume me, I would feel anxious, irritable, angry, restless and quite helpless."* This renter's home has a broken AC, which the landlord hasn't fixed. While the quantitative data help to document the extent of the problems renters face, it is these human stories that remind us why it's so important to do something about this.



Quantitative findings

Drawing on over 84,000 individual recordings from 19 researchers over 47 days, we find that:

- All rental homes in the sample were above 25°C degrees for 86% of the time, or over 20 hours a day.
- Renters' homes were above 30°C degrees over 5 hours a day.
- The average indoor temperature was 27.6°C
- The average maximum temperature was 36.2°C. The overall maximum was 41.4°C.
- Overnight conditions (10pm - 6am) were approximately the same, with average temperatures of 27.2°C and temperatures above 25°C for 84% of the night.
- Indoor temperatures were 2.3°C higher on average than outdoor temperatures.
- Queensland was hotter than any other state.

These findings are captured in the table below:

	Qld	Qld (10pm-6am)
Above 30°C	22%	12%
Above 25°C	86%	84%
Below 25°C	14%	16%
Min T (°C)	22.3	22.4
Median T (°C)	27.6	27.2
Max T (°C)	36.2	33.8
Median T out (°C)	25.2	22.9
Median relative humidity	65.4%	66.6%
Max relative humidity	91.7%	89.3%

Table 1: Table of quantitative data of all individual Researchers

The interim results from this summer are generally hotter than the Queensland data we recorded during Summer Renter Researchers 2023, available in our report [Sweaty and Stressed](#). The median temperature is higher: 27.6°C compared with 27. And renters are spending more time above 25°C: 86% of the time, compared with 81% of the time. Although an apparently small difference, this is equivalent to about 70 minutes per day, or about 56 hours over 6 weeks. The biggest difference is the proportion of time being spent above 30°C, which has increased from 13% to 22% – or about two extra hours per day.

Comparing inside and outside temperatures averaged to a single day

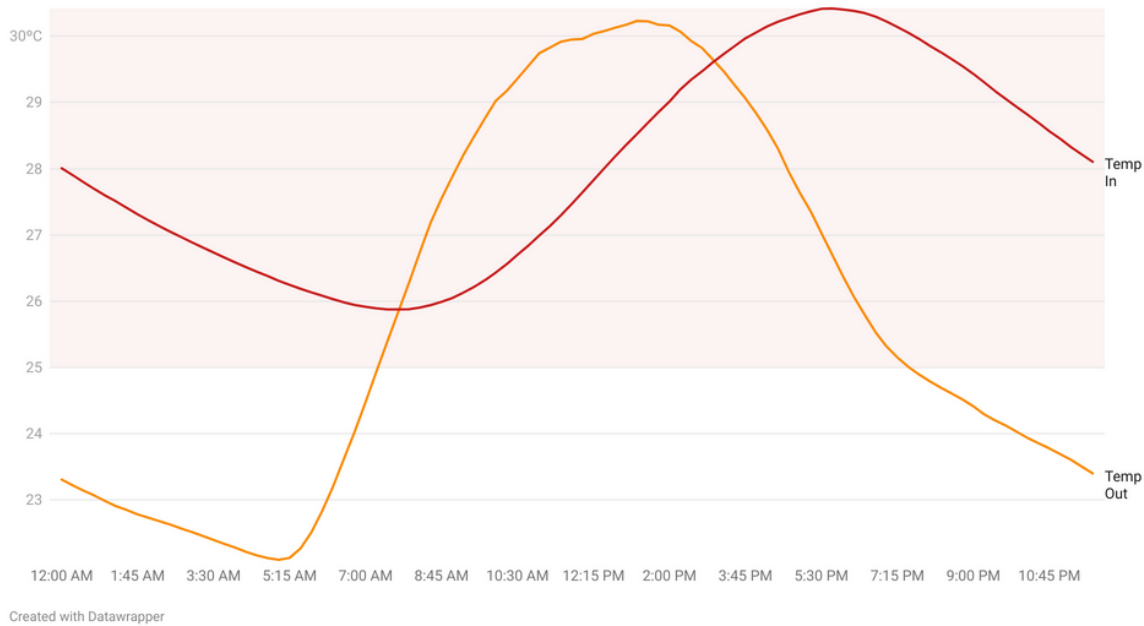


Figure 1: Average indoor temperature and outdoor temperature by time of day

The above figure shows all temperature data averaged by time of day. In effect, each reading indicates the average temperature, across all renter researchers and all days, for that time of day.

What is readily apparent is that indoor temperatures exceed outdoor temperatures for the greater part of the day. From 7:45am until about 3:00pm, there is a narrow window when the indoor environment is cooler. But then almost 17 hours follow – during the time when people are most likely to be at home – when it is hotter inside than out.

It's also noteworthy that – regardless of the outdoor temperature – the indoor temperature is virtually always too high. The coolest indoor temperature occurs at 7:45am: this is just under 26°C, which is still too hot to feel comfortable in a home, especially with elevated humidity.

This sort of visualisation shrinks a range of experiences that are different on different days and for different people. It's a one-dimensional sketch of a multi-dimensional reality. In the next section of this paper we turn to a qualitative discussion of renters' experiences, as captured in survey responses, helping to capture more of the dimensions of what it is like living through these conditions.

Qualitative findings

From December to January, Queensland renters experienced higher average temperatures and more time overall in high temperatures, compared to renters elsewhere in Australia, other than the NT. The qualitative survey data obtained from our researchers helps to understand the causes and consequences of these conditions.

The reason these renters are experiencing extreme indoor heat is because of inadequate housing. Although Queensland has a hot climate, it is not inevitable that homes should be unlivable indoors. It is possible, and normal in many areas, to have homes that remain comfortable indoors, despite changing outdoor conditions.

"We live in a Queenslander with no insulation - the walls are just one plank of wood thick (about 1.5 inches). The fans push around the air but the windows are too low for the heat to escape. We have one air conditioner in one bedroom but it does not work - it can't even cool the one bedroom well enough."

Where housing does not offer protection from outdoor conditions, it points to housing that doesn't fulfil its purpose, and a policy context that allows this to continue. 84% of researchers described issues with the quality of their housing, including poor insulation, a lack of ventilation, and an absence of shade.

"Our landlord doesn't want to do anything that is above the bare minimum required by law."

"We can't be in the house on really hot days. I have to take my 4 children out in the car to be able to keep them cool because no amount of freestanding fans keeps the house cool enough for them"

Living in constant heat takes a toll on physical and mental health, and quality of life more broadly. This is true for those with chronic health conditions, as well as those without, who nonetheless suffer when they are denied access to healthy and comfortable indoor conditions.

The central vector here is sleep quality. To achieve decent sleep, the body temperature must drop. This is difficult or even impossible to achieve in a too-hot bedroom: the UK's Chartered Institution of Building Services Engineers recommends that bedroom temperatures should not exceed 26°C, unless fans are available, to allow a decent quality of sleep. However, renter researchers exceeded this threshold overnight (10pm to 6am) for 69.7% of the time, or over five and a half hours each night.

This was not an occasional issue present only during heatwaves: it was a recurring problem for the vast majority of participants, with 16 of 19 participants spending at least 6 hours a night at above 25°C.

“At night we all struggle with sleep deprivation due to the heat. The thought of another summer in this house causes conflict, my children are desperate to move but there's no where to go.”

“Our house gets so hot that it becomes impossible to sleep, work or even think clearly.”

Missing out on sleep like this worsens physical health, while the exhaustion and malaise undermine mental health. 74% of survey respondents described health impacts from heat. Many Researchers described impacts on mood, wellbeing, and executive functioning, related both to the heat itself and to its deleterious effects on sleep quality.

“The relentless heat and its impact on me also results in depression, boredom and grief as I am unable to do the things I want to do and ultimately lose the desire/ability to do anything that might bring pleasure.”

“I'm not as productive as I could be which has a negative impact on my mental health.”

“...I've been almost completely incapacitated by the recent heat.... I don't have the energy to tend to basic self-care (like showers) and it's incredibly overwhelming. Things are difficult for me at the best of times but the heat really adds to my difficulties.”



On top of the mental health toll of sleeplessness is the anxieties of having to exist in Queensland's rental system. High rents and high living costs add to the stresses facing renters, as well as a sense of resignation to a system that gives renters little agency or control. Unlike various other jurisdictions, Queensland allows no-grounds terminations at the end of a fixed-term, and the real estate industry has been cut-throat at using this to [keep tenancies insecure](#) and [raise rents at every opportunity](#). Renters feel trapped: struggling to eke out a decent existence in their current rental, yet afraid to agitate for change, and unable to conceive of finding something better elsewhere.

“I am so scared. Of not knowing if / how much my rent will go up, if I'm going to pass each rental inspection, knowing that I can't afford to move if my lease doesn't get renewed, despite being a model tenant. Never feeling completely comfortable or safe in 'my' space.”

“...we don't want to make any fuss because of fear of not having our lease renewed at the end of the tenancy.”

"I am so scared. Of not knowing if / how much my rent will go up, if I'm going to pass each rental inspection, knowing that I can't afford to move if my lease doesn't get renewed, despite being a model tenant. Never feeling completely comfortable or safe in 'my' space."

"I don't feel stable in this rental as we have been advised the rent will raise significantly at the next lease renewal and I was forced to leave my last two rentals due to sale of the property and rising rents...."

Overall, the design of Queensland's housing and rental system forces many renters to put up with low-quality rental housing that undermines their physical and mental health in summer. The risks of facing an unlimited rent increase or receiving a termination notice mean that renters are in a poor position to advocate for change themselves, while low vacancy rates and the broader lack of affordable options leaves people with little option but to put up and shut up. There are no regulated minimum standards for energy performance, allowing landlords to rent out properties lacking basic features such as ceiling insulation. Such properties, we have found, are virtually uninhabitable during summer.



Conclusion

The trends for renters in Queensland are not encouraging. This summer, we see renters enduring hotter temperatures, and more time in unhealthy temperature ranges. This is likely an arbiter of things to come, as summers become hotter and heatwaves become more intense and frequent.

Alongside action to address climate change, a source of hope could be action to improve renting or housing conditions. At the very least, this means introducing minimum energy performance standards for rental homes, requiring basic features such as ceiling insulation and fans that can make it easier and cheaper to attain healthy temperatures inside a home. Sadly, the Queensland government has thus far turned down opportunities to act on this front.

With more people renting and summer conditions predicted to worsen, if renters are to have healthy homes, it is essential to combine action on the quality of housing itself with action on tenancy laws. This is the best way to ensure that renters can have a secure and decent home – an essential foundation for establishing and maintaining a decent life.

Who made this report?

better renting

Better Renting is a community of renters working together for stable, affordable, and healthy homes.

Your housing has a big effect on your health. But with more Australians locked out of home-ownership, more of us are renting for longer and raising children in unhealthy homes. This is a big problem: a home that is too cold, for example, can contribute to asthma or stroke. People renting on a low-income, or with a health condition, are especially vulnerable. Even if a house is too expensive to buy, you still need a home that keeps you healthy.

As a non-partisan community organisation, we use three complementary approaches to achieve our mission:

- Campaigning for rental laws that provide healthy homes
- Growing communities of renters who are empowered to defend and extend their rights
- Changing the narrative, so that our culture values and promotes renting.

This report is available online:

https://www.betterrenting.org.au/hot_summer_nights