

# Cruel Summers

Renters' diverse experiences of  
Summer 23-24



**We respectfully acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of the country on which we live and work. We pay our respects to elders past and present. It is a privilege to be able to learn from the example of the world's oldest ongoing civilisation.**

# better renting

Better Renting "Cruel Summers" Canberra: Better Renting, March 2024

This report is available online at: [www.betterrenting.org.au/renter\\_researcher\\_summer\\_24](http://www.betterrenting.org.au/renter_researcher_summer_24)

Better Renting is a community of renters working together for stable, affordable, and healthy homes. Find out more about Better Renting at [www.betterrenting.org.au](http://www.betterrenting.org.au)

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## Executive summary

From December 2023 to February 2024 Better Renting worked with over 100 renters as part of a citizen-science project to track temperature and humidity in Australian rental homes. Through the same period we asked these ‘Renter Researchers’ about their experiences: what do these temperatures mean for you? What effect does it have? How do you cope?

The summer in question was particularly challenging for renters. Many renters were struggling with the cost of living, following record increases in rents and the costs of other basic essentials. A low vacancy rate meant that renters who had moved were more likely to accept substandard accommodation; incumbent renters were less able to advocate for their rights or seek better options. And then it turned out to be [the third hottest summer on record](#): a predictable consequence of global warming, with concerning implications for future summers, which are likely to be even hotter.

These adverse conditions — a hotter climate, higher cost of living, worse housing — are reflected in the temperature data we recorded in each jurisdiction:

- **New South Wales** renters had median indoor temperatures of 25.2°C, meaning that temperatures were above this level 50% of the time. NSW also had the worst humidity, with renters spending half their time above 65% humidity, and the highest maximum humidity — 95% — recorded in this state. Homes were above 25°C over 12 hours a day on average, with almost 1 hour a day above 30°C. Indoor temperatures exceeded outdoor temperatures over 40% of the time: when this happened, indoor temperatures averaged 28°C.
- **Victoria** experienced a summer that was warmer than long-term averages, but cooler than other recent summers. Our data reflects this, showing conditions that — while still a problem — are better than those recorded elsewhere. The average median temperature was 23°C, with rental homes surpassing 25°C almost 5 hours a day.
- **Western Australia** faced what is predicted to be its hottest summer on record: it was the second-hottest state in our dataset. Rental homes averaged 16 hours a day above 25°C, with an average median temperature of 26.3°C. Almost 3 hours a day rental homes were above 30°C indoors. Unlike other areas, WA was *hotter* overnight, with a median temperature of 26.8°C from 10pm to 6am. When it was hotter in than out, WA rental homes performed worst, being on average 4°C hotter inside than out.

- In **South Australia**, renters spent around 6 hours a day with indoor temperatures above 25°C, including overnight, where median temperatures were hotter than during the day. The single highest maximum temperature, 45.3°C, was also recorded in SA. This is during a summer that was relatively cool compared to recent and anticipated future summers.
- **Queensland** was the hottest state in our analysis. Rental homes averaged 50% of the time above 28.2°C, also experiencing high average humidity (64.4%). Daily, about 6 hours were above 30°C, and night-time temperatures exceeded 25°C for 86% of the time. Indoor temperatures exceeded outdoor temperatures over 60% of the time, during these times it was 3.9°C hotter indoors.
- The wet season in the **Northern Territory** brought indoor conditions that were virtually unbearable. Only 2 hours a day on average were less than 25°C, with over 8 hours a day cracking 30°C indoors. This is also true for overnight conditions, where median temperatures were 29.3°C from 10pm to 6am.
- Conditions in the **ACT** and **Tasmania** were milder. ACT had median temperatures averaging 23.3°C, and rental homes cracked 25°C for about 4 hours a day. Tasmania was below 25°C for 94% of the time, with a benign median temperature of 21.7°C.

Our qualitative research found that the experience of such temperature conditions was mediated by the quality of rental housing and how much financial pressure renters were under. Better housing meant that a home would warm up less, and renters had access to cooling appliances. A stronger financial position could mean being able to run AC or escape the heat by going out. Conversely, renters in worse housing would experience greater temperature variability and have fewer options to address the heat. Greater cost-of-living pressure would also mean a reluctance to use energy for mechanical cooling, and greater likelihood of being stuck at home in potentially dangerous conditions.

Our research indicates that renters are suffering through summer in rented homes that aren't fit for purpose. To address this and help prevent increased suffering and mortality from future heat, we have two key recommendations. Firstly, to introduce minimum energy performance standards for rental homes, making it mandatory for such properties to have features that make it practical and affordable to keep a home at a healthy and comfortable temperature. Secondly, to improve renters' power in the market both to obtain a decent rental and to exercise their rights once established.

This summer has been one of the hottest summers of the last 100 years . But, with a warming climate, it's also likely to be one of the *coolest* summers we'll see in the next 100 years. For now, this is mostly a matter of renters' health and wellbeing. Increasingly, it will be a matter of life and death.



## Introduction

Australian homes have poor energy performance in general. As a mild-climate country, we put less effort into ensuring that our homes perform well in extremes of heat and cold. Ironically, the consequence of this is indoor conditions that are often worse than those found in countries that have more extreme climates.

This is particularly a problem for people who rent. The rental housing stock, on average, has even worse energy performance than the owner-occupier stock. Surveys show that energy performance features such as ceiling insulation, reverse-cycle air conditioners, and solar panels, are all less common in rental homes. Unlike owner-occupiers, renters lack autonomy to make structural changes to their homes.

Better Renting has examined the implications of this over the past two summers through our 'Renter Researchers' project, producing our reports [Hot Homes](#) and [Sweaty and Stressed](#). We found a consistent pattern of renters experiencing indoor temperature and humidity outside of healthy ranges, with consequential adverse impacts on physical and mental health.

However, these past two summers were in some sense atypical, in that they were closer to a 20th-century summer, and not representative of the sort of summer that is going to become more common through the 21st century. With the summer of 23-24 predicted to be one of the hottest to date, we were particularly interested to track the conditions and see how they compared: rental homes are already struggling with summer heat, how can we expect them to fare as summer conditions worsen?

In addition to shifts in climate, other factors are making it harder for renters to maintain healthy homes through summer. Increases to the cost of living, particularly energy costs, mean that people are less able and willing to use cooling appliances such as air conditioners. It can also mean that some adaptive behaviours, such as leaving the home to visit an air-conditioned space, are less accessible. We would expect energy poverty to result in higher indoor temperatures; shifts in adaptive behaviours wouldn't affect temperatures but would change renters' experiences of heat.

Then, of course, we have changes in the rental market itself. Through 2023 we saw a record crunch in the rental market, with low vacancy rates producing a rapid increase in advertised rents, [as well as large rent increases for established tenancies](#). The consequences of this are broader than just how much money a rental household has left at the end of the pay cycle. A tighter rental market also pushes renters into more marginal

accommodation: someone may be able to avoid rent increases, but only by moving into lower-quality accommodation. Even for renters who don't move, a tighter rental market and the risk of rent increases makes renters reluctant to ask anything of their landlord. Even asking for basic repairs is avoided, and asking for improvements is out of the question.

Evidence suggests that such trends are making life increasingly difficult and unhealthy for people who rent. Extreme heat events are, of course, deadly, with heat-related mortality [predicted to double](#) if climate changes continue and household energy performance remains the same. Morbidity impacts of heat cover cardiovascular health, renal health, and mental health impacts, particularly anxiety and depression. [Rent increases and housing stress have also been linked to worse cardiovascular health.](#)

Renters today sit at the intersection of multiple trends. Renting is becoming more common, including a growing number of older people and young children in rental homes — two cohorts particularly vulnerable to heat. Rent increases are at record highs. And summer temperatures continue to increase. This year's iteration of Summer Renter Researchers — our final cycle, and our largest yet — examines what these trends mean for renters in substandard housing.



*A photo from a Renter Researcher showing their ceiling at over 46°C.*

## Method

In October 2023 we began recruiting ‘Renter Researchers’ to participate over summer, receiving over 240 applications from renters across Australia. From this pool, we selected a cohort of 123 participants, aiming to represent a broad range of renters both in terms of geography and experiences of renting. We used mixed-methods of quantitative data through indoor temperature tracking and qualitative data through surveys and interviews. 14 participants withdrew during the study period, leaving 109 total.

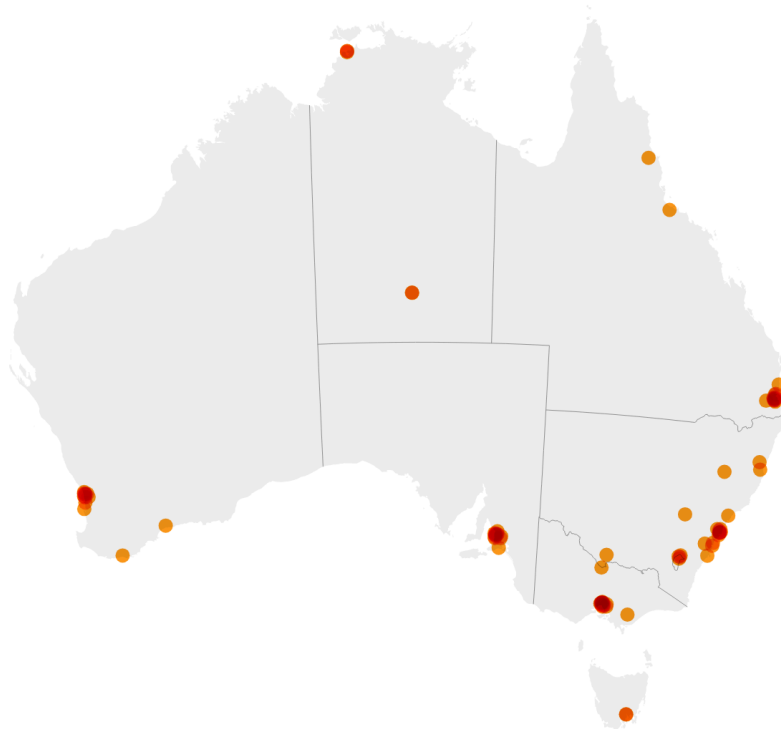


Figure 1: The distribution of Researchers across Australia.

## Quantitative Methods

We sent each participant a Govee H507 smart thermo-hygrometer to record temperature and humidity at 1m intervals in their home. In addition, we sourced data on outdoor temperatures using a network of outdoor weather stations, WunderMap, asking participants to nominate the station closest to their home. Participants would sync tracker data every two weeks with a central server, from which we obtained raw data. Raw data was processed by a custom database to generate a summary for each participant as well as a data showing the temperature and humidity for each participant at 15-minute intervals for the study period of 1 December to 7 February 2024. We then used custom R scripts to obtain summary data. These scripts are available through our [GitHub](#).

## Qualitative Methods

We obtained a large amount of qualitative data through two major surveys, one-on-one phone interviews, and a Codesign Workshop to test our key themes for the report. We also established a community chat through Discord, where participants could connect with one another, share their rental experiences, and have community discussions. We analysed these discussions to complement our findings from surveys, focus testing, and interviews. By using mixed methods for our qualitative data, we gained new and unique insights from individual renters and from community insights in group discussions. This gave us a rich understanding of the challenges faced by renters in substandard housing.

We analysed our qualitative data using thematic coding with Userbit, a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software. We used multiple stages of coding, starting with 'open coding' the responses from participants' applications and their first survey responses. From these responses we tried, with mixed success, to develop six key themes. We were able to identify two core themes that were consistent across most participant responses: cost of living pressures and poor quality of housing.

We found that the remaining core themes were interdependent with one another, and could not reasonably be separated into distinct and separate categories. In response to this, we developed four 'renter archetypes' which could represent the complex experiences of renters without diminishing or over-simplifying their stories. Based on the strong 'cost of living' and 'poor quality housing' discussion that was near-unanimous among participants, we used these as the metrics for developing our renter types.

We obtained participant feedback on these archetypes through a Codesign Workshop and a second survey. Participants were asked to choose which archetype they identified with and select corresponding traits. We also asked for feedback on the accuracy of these categories, and we modified the renter types based on this feedback. We explore these renter types in more detail later in this report, under "[Qualitative findings](#)".

## Quantitative findings

Our quantitative results draw upon over 650,000 recordings from 109 Renter Researchers, from the period 1 December 2023 to 7 February 2024.

The results are captured below in a number of tables with some brief discussion. Top-line figures are as follows:

- **Individual maximum indoor temperature anywhere:** 45.3°C in South Australia at 7:30pm, 4 January 2024
- **Area with the highest median temperature:** Northern Territory. 50% of the time, temperatures were above 28.9°C
- **State with the highest median temperature:** Queensland, 28.2°C
- **Area with the highest median humidity:** NSW. 50% of the time, humidity was above 64.6 %.
- **Area with most time 25-30°C:** Queensland, with temperatures between 25 and 30°C 63% of the time, or over 15 hours a day.
- **Area with most time above 30°C:** Northern Territory, 35.7% of the time, or over 8 hours a day.
- **Worst state to be indoors?** Queensland, where it was hotter inside than out almost two thirds of the time. During these periods it would average 27°C outdoors, and 31°C indoors.

## Overview

The below table gives an overview of the summary data from each state/territory.

- Max T. is the maximum recorded by any Researcher in that area.
- Max RH is the highest relative humidity recorded by any Researcher.
- Avg median T. indicates the temperature that Researchers were above (or below) for roughly 50% of the time. It is the arithmetic mean of the median for each individual Researcher.
- Avg median RH is the same calculation, applied to humidity.

Area	Max T. (°C)	Max RH (%)	Avg median T. (°C)	Avg median RH (%)
ACT	34.2	91.4	23.3	60.2
NSW	40.5	94.6	25.2	64.6
NT	36.5	90.3	28.9	59.4
QLD	41.4	91.8	28.2	64.4



Area	Max T. (°C)	Max RH (%)	Avg median T. (°C)	Avg median RH (%)
SA	45.3	89.7	23.2	55.9
TAS	34.2	75.6	21.7	53.1
VIC	37.3	92.2	23	60.1
WA	37.1	82.8	26.3	48.9
National	45.3	94.6	24.9	59.5

Table 1: A summary of temperature and humidity data from each jurisdiction.

From the above table we can see that Renter Researchers were routinely in uncomfortable and sometimes unliveable temperatures, with four jurisdictions having average median temperatures above 25°C. High indoor humidity worsens the experience of heat as it reduces evaporative cooling, so renters in jurisdictions that were both hot and humid, like Queensland or the NSW, would experience a felt temperature several degrees higher than what was recorded by the tracker.

## Time spent in different temperature ranges

The below chart summarises how much time Researchers in different areas spent in different temperature ranges. We have chosen these thresholds to capture inflection points at which the impact of heat becomes particularly acute, and even dangerous.

Area	Below 25°C (%)	Above 25°C (%)	Above 30°C (%)
ACT	82	18	0.2
NSW	48	52	4.1
NT	9	91	35.7
QLD	13	87	24.2
SA	74	26	0.9
TAS	92	8	0.3
VIC	80	20	1.1
WA	33	67	11.7
National	52	47.9	8.4

Table 2: Time spent in different temperature ranges.

It's striking how unusual it is for these rental homes to be achieving healthy, comfortable temperatures below 25°C: across Australia, we're talking about only half the time.

Amongst the states, Queensland is particularly striking as an area where about 6 hours a day exceed 30°C indoors.

## Overnight temperature analysis

One thing we heard from renters was the challenging experience of night-time heat in particular. To examine this, we calculated similar temperature data as above, but only for the time window of 10pm-6am.

Area	Below 25°C (%)	Above 25°C (%)	Above 30°C (%)	Median T (°C)
ACT	82	18	0	23.3
NSW	48	52	2	25.1
NT	11	89	36	29.3
QLD	14	86	15	27.6
SA	73	27	1	23.6
TAS	94	6	0	22
VIC	82	18	1	22.9
WA	26	74	14	26.8
National	52	48.3	6.5	24.9

Table 3: A summary of overnight temperature data from 10pm to 6am.

Although external temperatures are typically cooler overnight, internal temperatures are almost the same, and in some cases are hotter. This suggests that rental homes have a thermal lag relative to the outdoor environment: they are typically at their hottest several hours after outdoor temperatures peak, with this heat lasting until the early hours of the morning. This daily heat maximum coincides with the window of time during which renters are at home in the evening, trying to complete basic functions such as cooking, cleaning, and sleeping.

## Temperature through the day

Another way of trying to grasp the internal temperature conditions facing renters is to observe how the temperature changes through the day. The below chart shows the average temperature at each time of day for each jurisdiction, across all participating Researchers.

### Temperature by Time of Day, each State/Territory

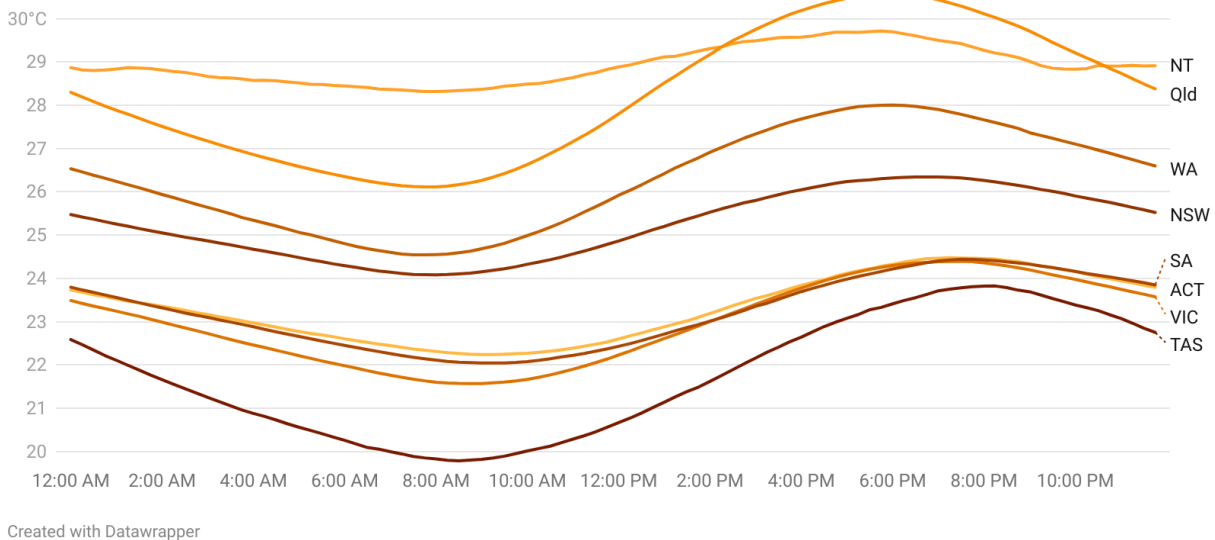


Figure 2: Average temperature through the day, by state and territory. Available online at: <https://tinyurl.com/4nn8a627>

In all areas, temperatures are at a nadir around 7-8am. They tend to peak around 6-8pm — the key period when people are likely to be home and trying to go about their daily domestic life. Temperatures remain high as people approach typical bedtimes, interfering with sleep.

## Inside versus outside temperatures

This was the first summer that we were able to track outdoor temperatures in addition to indoor temperatures. This allows us to analyse indoor temperatures compared to outdoor temperatures. Renters frequently described that their home would feel hotter inside than outside. We wanted to know: is this really true?

The table below helps us to understand this. The first column shows the proportion of time that the outside temperature was greater than 21°C. As expected, this is higher in hotter areas. The second column shows the proportion of time that the outside

temperature exceeded 21°C *and* the indoor temperature exceeded the outdoor temperature. The third column shows the mean outside temperature when it was above 21°C. Generally, this is related to the proportion of time, but we can note that ACT has a surprisingly high figure: it's hot less often, but when it is hot, it is quite hot. Queensland, in contrast, is hot outside very often (per the first column), but on average the hot outdoor temperature is not much hotter than ACT, WA, or SA. The final column tells us how much hotter the indoors was when it was hotter than the outdoors and the outdoors was above 21°C.

Area	Outside T > 21? (%)	Hotter in than out? (%)	Mean outside T. when T>21 (°C)	Temp difference when hotter indoors
ACT	42%	11.1%	26.4	2.1
NSW	69%	42.5%	25.4	3.0
NT	96%	35.8%	30.8	2.7
Qld	93%	63.6%	26.7	3.9
SA	44%	16.2%	26.2	2.4
Tas	18%	6.9%	23.6	2.2
Vic	37%	13.5%	25.9	2.5
WA	67%	37.4%	26.6	4.0
Aus.	60%	32.5%	26.4	3.3

*Table 4: How indoor temperatures compare with outdoor temperatures.*

Part of the intended function of housing is to standardise the thermal experience. If a home is well-designed and built, the indoor temperature will remain within a relatively narrow range, regardless of the outdoor temperature. We can see that the rental housing in our analysis is not meeting this bar and is often even counterproductive, apparently leaving renters worse off than they would be outdoors. In Queensland, renters are hotter indoors a majority of the time, and in such conditions it is typically almost four degrees hotter indoors. NSW, NT, and WA also perform poorly here. NSW has the second-worst amount of time (42.5%) of homes being hotter outside than in, with an average difference of 3 °C in such times. This would mean homes sitting at about 28.4°C.

## Qualitative findings

Renter Researchers with similar indoor temperatures often had vastly different experiences of heat. This depended largely on their cost of living pressures and the quality of their housing. Some Renter Researchers recorded very high temperatures in their homes and endured significant cost of living pressures. Other Renter Researchers recorded mild temperatures but still reported significant cost of living pressures from maintaining a comfortable home.

To capture these diverse experiences we have developed four renter archetypes. These archetypes highlight the differences and similarities between renters in different sets of circumstances. While the nuances and intricacies of individual renter experiences are not completely captured by these categories, renter archetypes can still help us to understand how two renters in the same climate can have different experiences of summer depending on their housing quality and cost of living pressures.

### Renter Archetypes

We developed the renter types with relatively simple variables: cost of living and quality of housing. Each of these renter archetypes aims to explore how renters in different circumstances dealt with similar issues based on the resources available to them. Renters who had access to more resources — better housing, more disposable income, greater social support — had much better heat resilience than those without. Renters who lacked these resources experienced cascading negative effects to their health, wellbeing and security.

We asked Renter Researchers to select themselves into one of the four categories, 'Alex', 'Blair', 'Charlie' or 'Danny'. These categories are distinguished in relation to two variables, cost of living and quality of housing. See 'Figure 2' for a visual representation of these categories and the proportion of renters self-identifying into each one, before we discuss each archetype in turn.



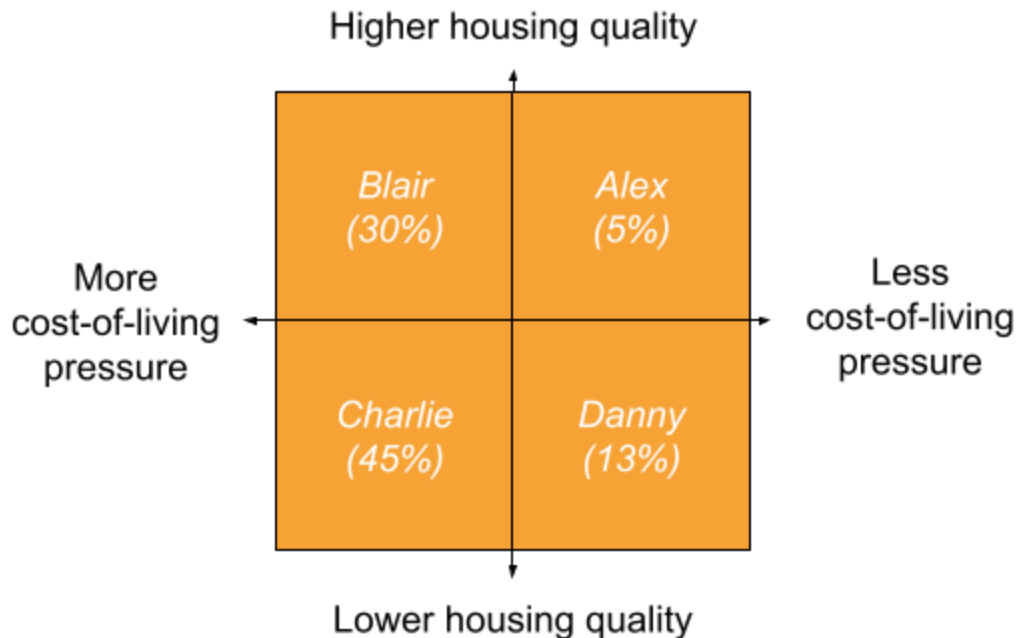


Figure 3: A breakdown of the renter archetype categories. 7% of respondents identified with multiple or no types.

## Alex

Renters in the 'Alex' category are in the fortunate position of having low cost of living pressure and high quality of housing. Only 5% of our participants identified as being in this category. The fact that so few renters identified themselves with this category is a striking indicator of the significant cost of living and housing struggles that renters are dealing with this summer.

An interesting factor to note is that participants in this category often referred to previous homes as being significantly worse than their current housing. This allowed renters to compare their experiences and to measure the various improvements made to their quality of life from living in a comfortable home.

*"I have moved houses. Last summer's house was absolutely horrendous & had a significant impact on my health, symptoms, mental wellbeing & finances. My current home is insulated, is well sealed & has window tinting & I live in a more moderate climate."*

— Sahra

Despite enjoying relatively good quality housing and low cost of living stress, these participants still worried about their position in the rental system. The fact that renters

with good housing and better financial security still feel vulnerable is a strong indication of the precarity that many renters face in the current system, regardless of the other advantages they may enjoy.

*“Making trouble with the property manager is the last thing we want to do. There is a significant power imbalance in renting where tenants bear the costs of poor conditions but have no way to exit easily. You cannot simply move house every six months to make landlords compete and improve conditions. It is a fantasy.”*

— Jacob

Renters in the ‘Alex’ category felt anxious about the rental system, but they had better resources to deal with the heat than renters in other categories. Their homes were better insulated and had good cooling features. These renters could afford to use cooling devices when they needed to, and they didn’t stress about utility costs.

## Blair

Renters in the ‘Blair’ category have medium to high quality housing and high cost of living pressure. Around a third (30%) of our renters put themselves in the ‘Blair’ category. Interestingly, many renters in this category reported significant thermal discomfort, but still rated the quality of their housing as high. A significant portion of these renters described having access to air conditioning but using it sparingly because of the exorbitant cost and environmental concerns.

*“We find it difficult to be at home without being fatigued, or having to run the aircon knowing that we’re increasing our power bill, when we’re already struggling with the rising cost of living. It’s also depressing being reminded of rising globally rising temperatures in our own home.”*

— Matt

The most common issue that came up for renters in this category was the issue of poor-quality sleep. Bedrooms were frequently described as being some of the hottest rooms in their home. Hot homes led to poor quality sleep, poorer performance at work, and higher cost of living pressures associated with cooling their homes.

*“Poor sleep due to high temperatures definitely worsens my anxiety. Heat-induced fatigue also makes it more difficult to handle work and social commitments, which impacts my mental health.”*

— Cameron

Many renters in the 'Blair' category, while struggling with financial resources and lack of sleep, used their social resources and stayed with family during persistently hot weather. This could be a good alternative to using their expensive air conditioning too excessively.

Despite the various issues still faced by renters in the 'Jordan' category, there was an overwhelming consensus that renters in this category wanted to stay in their current rental and were very stressed about the possibility of having to move. Their current standard of housing seemed to be the best they could afford in the current housing market.

## Charlie

Renters in the 'Charlie' category are distinguished by having high cost of living pressure and low quality housing. Almost half (45%) of our participants placed themselves in this category. Renters in the 'Charlie' category were distinguished by intersecting, compounding struggles with health, financial pressures, and significant housing issues. One renter was living in such a hot home that, in the past, they've had to sleep in a tent in their own yard as a preferable alternative to the heat in their home:

*"At night there is no relief from the heat as the design of my house means the wind is blocked from reaching the windows... making it absolutely stifling, and impossible to sleep. I literally have to go live somewhere else during the bad heatwaves, but that isn't always an option."*

— Edwina

Renters in the 'Charlie' category are distinguished by their inability to reduce their cost of living stress or improve the quality of their housing. They experience the worst effects of both struggles and are left without any reasonable options to improve their circumstances.

As one renter in this category puts it:

*"Chronic adversity in current times makes for an extremely bleak experience. There's no option to improve circumstances beyond our control, there are no bootstraps to pull ourselves up by, there's no budgeting your way out of poverty, there's no cure for my disabilities."*

— Claire

Adding to the bleakness of this situation, numerous renters in the 'Charlie' category described experiencing homelessness or evictions in the past. These scarring experiences left renters terrified to get their landlord offside in case they were made homeless again.

Unable to improve their situation by leaving, or even advocating for themselves, renters in the 'Charlie' category feel trapped in poor quality housing. These renters had nowhere further to fall except into homelessness. They were already at the 'bottom' standard of housing, with little prospect of moving anywhere better.

## Danny

Renters in the 'Danny' category are distinguished as having medium to poor quality housing with low cost of living pressures. About 13% of our participants self-identified as being in this category. They described living in hot homes that they put up with because the rent was cheap. Renters in this category also described injustice in the rental system that prevented them from living in better homes.

*"It gets really, really hot... The house faces west as well so in the afternoon the sun blares through the windows...[I] do all I can within my limits to battle the heat in my house, and of course it isn't enough... None of it cools the house down enough because of the terrible design of the house."*

— Daniel

While some renters described saving money due to paying cheaper rent, other renters described the precarity of their affordable rental and their struggle to find another home:

*"I want to move out to a better house but everywhere I can find is just way too expensive. My current room is about \$817/month (\$189/week) including power, water and wifi and it seems to be the cheapest room available in town...everywhere is way more expensive so it seems I am stuck living in the hot swamp for now!"*

— Eilis

Renters in the 'Danny' category could save some money from cheaper rent, but not enough to afford a better quality rental. These renters had some flexibility in their budget, which they could occasionally use for cooling strategies, like purchasing a portable air conditioner. In some cases, these renters could afford to run a car, which they could use to go somewhere cool. Renters in the 'Danny' category had some resources available to get cool, which gave them more heat resilience than renters in the 'Charlie' category.

## Imagining different heatwave experiences

Some of the distinguishing features of the renter archetypes may seem minor. However, if we were to imagine a renter from each category in the same type of scenario, like a heatwave, we can quickly see the domino effect of these variables on other aspects of a renters' life. The details of the below stories are based on the real experiences of renters in these categories under comparable conditions.

### **Alex (better housing, lower cost-of-living pressures)**

During a heatwave, while Alex's home gets hot, it has features that reduce heat gain and make it easier to cool it down. The property is well-insulated and has ceiling fans and a reverse-cycle air conditioner. Some of the west-facing windows have external blinds.

Alex is able to stay home, using the home as shelter from the heat. They close blinds during the day and use their air conditioning as needed. If the heatwave is very hot, or lasts a long time, they have the option to venture out to a cool place like a cinema, shopping centre, or public pool. Although their home can be uncomfortable at times, they can manage their discomfort. They don't feel stressed about the financial cost of using the air conditioner and can also reduce their costs by using cheaper devices like ceiling fans.

### **Blair (better housing, higher cost-of-living pressures)**

Blair has an air conditioner, but avoids using it because of financial and environmental concerns. In anticipation of the heatwave, they close off the hottest rooms and avoid those parts of the house. Unfortunately, this means their upstairs bedroom is out of action: Blair moves their mattress downstairs to the lounge room, the one room they plan to keep cool through the heatwave. During the day Blair uses the AC, set to 27 degrees celsius, but they turn it off at night, regardless of the heat.

Although Blair can ride out this heatwave, they worry about the future, as rising rents and energy costs are making it harder for them to keep it together. Next time they may end up leaving their home and staying elsewhere.

### **Danny (worse housing, lower cost-of-living pressures)**

Danny feels trapped during heatwaves. Their home gets very hot and they don't have good options to cool down. They use second-hand pedestal fans to try to get cool, which provides some relief, but not a lot. Their sleep is particularly bad when the nights are hot; their bedroom faces a busy road and the window has no flyscreen. Danny has to contend with pests and traffic noise when the window is open, and deals with a hotter bedroom when the window is closed. During the hottest day, Danny drives to the cinema to escape



their hot home. They buy some ice-packs and ice cream to help provide relief for when they are home. They can't afford to move to a better house, but they can afford these small comforts when they need them.

### **Charlie (worse housing, higher cost-of-living pressures)**

During an extreme heat event, Charlie has basically no options. Their home is virtually unlivable and they don't have the resources to go anywhere else. Charlie is also reluctant to have people over to their hot home, so they get socially isolated. Their health conditions flare up from the heat, which can add to the discomfort and danger of their home.

Poorly-insulated and without air conditioning, Charlie's home heats up quickly and can't be cooled down.

As the heatwave drags on, Charlie's health continues to deteriorate, and they begin to experience headaches, vomiting, and dizziness. Hesitantly, Charlie decides to call an ambulance. Paramedics provide hydration through electrolytes and organise outpatient home visits for Charlie in future. Thankfully, that night there is a cool change. Charlie is safe for now, but knows that their hot home will continually make them sick and put them in danger. Still, Charlie is reluctant to ask their landlord for changes to the home as they are worried by past experiences of rent increases or eviction. They dread the next heatwave.



*A photo of a temperature tracker showing the current reading of 32.6°C.*

## Discussion

The biggest point of difference between renters in different categories was their access to resources. When renters had access to cooling devices and the financial resources to afford using them they were in a good position to weather summer temperatures. When a renter had at least some resources to deal with the heat, like good social networks, and a car, they were able to drive themselves to stay with family and friends during heat waves. When a renter had no financial resources, cooling devices, social capital or adequate transport, they were essentially trapped in their hot home with no way to cool down or get help.

In practice, these differences manifested the most clearly in relation to participants with health and sleep issues. Renters in the 'Alex' category lived in cooler homes and could afford to run cooling devices to help them sleep comfortably. Renters in 'Blair' or 'Danny' categories (with either higher cost-of-living pressure, or lower housing quality, but not both) would both end up with negative impacts on their sleep: 'Danny', from the poor quality of their housing, and 'Blair' from the inability to afford the cost of cooling appliances. Both types would find themselves leaving their home to be able to sleep in a cooler space.

For renters in hot homes without this social capital to stay somewhere cool and without the discretionary spending for cooling devices, their heat-related health issues could quickly become an emergency. One renter in the 'Charlie' category was forced to call an ambulance after their symptoms escalated and they were completely unable to cool down to safe levels. Going beyond mere discomfort, rising temperatures and deteriorating rental homes will increasingly constitute emergencies for renters stuck in hot homes with no means of escape.

Despite their differences, renters across all categories were also unified by a shared belief that the rental system was structurally unjust and that whatever housing security they did have could not be taken for granted or be expected to last. Renters in the 'Blair' category may be only a rent increase or eviction notice away from being thrown into the 'Charlie' category, with even more vulnerability than before.

## We can and must ensure healthy homes for all

Everybody needs a healthy home. The good news is that this is an achievable goal. Outdoor temperatures will be higher in future summers, but well-built, climate-resilient homes can maintain indoor temperatures that are healthy and comfortable, at a low cost. We must not resign ourselves to homes that rapidly heat up every day, where millions of people in Australia spend sweaty sleepless nights worrying about their health, the safety of their children, and their upcoming electricity bill. Instead we should be motivated by the imperative and the very real possibility of raising the standard of our housing to improve heatwave resilience, reduce power bills, and sustain health.

**Our first recommendation to achieve this is minimum energy performance standards for rental homes.** This could look like requiring specific features that either make it cheaper and easier to cool a home, or help prevent heat gain in the first place. The ACT, for example, has a requirement for ceiling insulation in rental homes, and Victoria is looking to expand their existing standards to include cooling. Other simple features like ceiling fans, fly screens on windows and doors, and external shading, can make a dramatic difference in helping people to manage heat. These will be increasingly essential to reduce mortality risk during heatwaves. Over time, such a ‘features-based’ approach should evolve into an approach based on ‘modelled performance’: using a rating tool such as the Residential Efficiency Scorecard and requiring each rental property to meet a specified minimum standard.

However, this alone will be insufficient. From three summers of doing this work, a recurring theme is that renters struggle to enforce their existing rights. In a tight rental market, where renters are under the threat of retaliatory eviction, renters struggle to achieve basic repairs, and would struggle to self-advocate in relation to energy performance standards.

It is thus essential to **improve the power of renters to exercise their rights.** This means making it impossible for landlords to use the termination of a tenancy to retaliate against renters: primarily, by ending no grounds terminations. The ACT and South Australia have both moved in this direction, and [National Cabinet committed to do so in August 2023](#). Renters should also be protected against retaliatory rent increases through regulations that limit rent increases. At a broader level, the relative power of renters can be improved by increasing the supply of rental housing. When the vacancy rate is higher, renters have more alternatives, and lessors have to try harder to retain tenants.

**Third-party enforcement is also important.** Yes, it can help to give renters more power to self-advocate. But there should also be other channels for renters to report issues to a third-party, such as an ombudsman, that has enforcement authority. Governments should play a greater role in monitoring compliance with rental laws, being both proactive and reactive in investigating landlord conduct and rental property standards.

What won't work is a reliance on financial incentives in isolation. Financial support can *accompany* a mandate, such as in the ACT, where landlords can access zero-interest finance to install ceiling insulation. However, years of past experience demonstrate that incentives alone will be insufficient to drive action. Landlords have a strong status quo bias; addressing substandard rental homes at scale will require a stronger prompt than a weak financial nudge.

Of course, too-hot housing is also a challenge for owner-occupiers. Although rental property tends to be worse, it's not the only place where these challenges exist. However, there are challenges that are unique to rental homes, and this sector of the built environment will require a targeted policy response.

## Conclusion

Through last summer we tracked conditions for 109 renters in their homes, recording quantitative data on temperature and humidity, alongside qualitative data on renters' experiences inside their homes.

Our quantitative data show a set of rental homes that are spending a large proportion of the summer in unhealthy and even dangerous temperature ranges. Across Australia, rental homes spent about 50% of the time above 25°C. The NT, Queensland, and WA, were particularly hot. Night-time offered little relief, with overnight temperature roughly as hot: slightly fewer hours above 30°C, but still conditions that made sleep very difficult. Strikingly, homes were frequently hotter than the outdoor environment. NSW, the NT, Queensland and WA showed rental homes being hotter inside than out over one third of the time, with indoor temperatures typically surpassing outdoor temperatures by over 3°C in these situations. This is rental housing failing to perform one of its most basic functions: providing shelter from the elements.

A renters' experience of these temperatures would vary depending on their circumstances. As such, renters experienced not just one homogenous summer, but multiple 'Cruel Summers', depending on their means. Renters' ability to cope with the heat varied greatly depending on their access to resources, in particular, their quality of housing and whether or not they faced high cost of living pressures. We identified four distinct categories of renters separated by their access to these two resources:

1. 'Alex' (better housing, lower cost-of-living pressures);
2. 'Blair' (better housing, higher cost-of-living pressures);
3. 'Danny' (worse housing, lower cost-of-living pressures) and;
4. 'Charlie' (worse housing, higher cost-of-living pressures).

Renters experienced massive flow-on effects on other areas of their life based on these relatively simple variables. Renters living in good quality housing had better capacity to deal with the heat. Good insulation and housing standards helped to prevent their homes from heating up too much in the first place. Access to cooling devices was extremely useful, but only to renters who could afford the utility costs of using them.

Renters with lower cost of living pressures tended to have additional resources to deal with the heat, such as cooling devices, social capital (help from friends and family), and some discretionary spending to spend on other cooling strategies. Being able to go somewhere cool could also help renters with better sleep and health outcomes. Conversely, renters with high cost of living pressures tended to have lower access to these



types of resources. They were much more likely to be trapped in hot homes without means to cool down or escape. In at least one instance, these factors combined to create a medical emergency.

Despite their differences, Renter Researchers shared a sense of powerlessness in the rental market. Renters expressed fear at losing their current standard of living with possible rent increases and evictions. Relatively few participants expected their rental situation to improve, and many more expected their situation to deteriorate over time. This left a sense of insecurity, even for renters living in relatively good quality homes with less cost of living pressures.

This insecurity also made renters feel unsteady in advocating for their rights or making complaints to their landlords. Even when renters knew their legal rights had been breached, they often lacked the necessary resources and security to escalate the issue further. Far from being paranoid, renters could draw on previous experiences of injustice, where past landlords had evicted them or raised their rent, seemingly as punishment for ‘rocking the boat’ and making too many maintenance requests.

The experiences of our Renter Researchers highlight a gap between the ‘technical rights’ that renters are legally entitled to and the ‘practical rights’ that renters can actually enjoy. This gap is just one illustration of the numerous inherent flaws in the current rental system. To address this, we recommend establishing minimum energy performance standards for rental homes. To make these standards effective in practice, and make it viable for renters to exercise their technical rights, governments at all levels should pursue a higher vacancy rate to improve the relative power of renters. Ending no grounds terminations — which put renters in constant fear of retaliation — and expanding third-party enforcement would also contribute to making rental laws more effective in practice.

What renters experience in their homes is an outcome of government decisions — or indecisions. Far from being an immutable outcome of natural, impersonal forces, whether renters have decent homes and can afford to keep them at a healthy and comfortable temperature is determined by government decisions. The current situation is a result of the policy settings that past governments have instituted and present governments have maintained. With different priorities and different decisions, present and future governments could ensure that all renters have healthy homes.



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