

# A Place to Call Home

A pilot survey of people seeking asylum  
in Greater Sydney

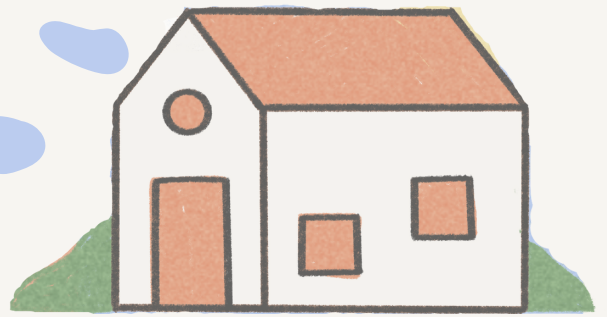
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# Acknowledgements



This research was a collaborative effort and thanks go to:

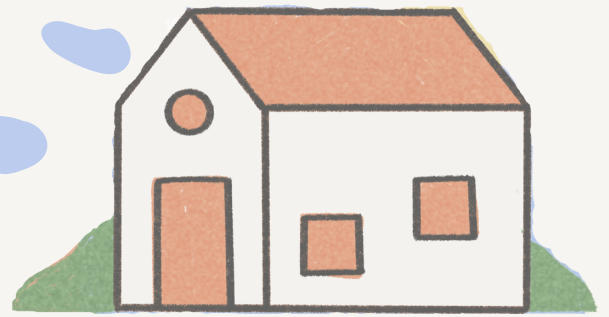
- Interpreters from TIS National who helped with verbal translation of the survey for respondents requiring language assistance.
- A Place to Call Home Advisory Group for their feedback on the survey design and assistance with recruitment of survey respondents
- Mercy Foundation and Life Without Barriers for their financial support of this pilot project.

Gratitude is also extended to the many respondents who willingly gave their time to participate in the survey and share their experiences of finding a place to live in Australia.

## Advisory Group

Australian Red Cross  
House of Welcome, St. Francis Social Services  
Life Without Barriers  
National Refugee-led Advisory and Advocacy Group (NRAAG)  
NSW Department of Communities and Justice  
St Vincent De Paul Society NSW  
Tenant's Union of NSW

# Summary of Findings



## Background

This survey asked people seeking asylum about their housing and homelessness experiences since arriving in Australia and also about their income, employment, and the impact of COVID-19 restrictions of March 2020. The survey was conducted in March 2021, and findings reflect experiences at that time and in the preceding 12 months.

Although the sample size is small (101 respondents), this is one of the few surveys of people seeking asylum that also includes experiences during the pandemic.

The majority of respondents are recipients of JRS Australia's food bank service, and residents across West and South West Sydney in Cumberland, Parramatta, Blacktown and Canterbury-Bankstown local government areas.

## Demographic profile

- Respondents were predominantly aged between 25-44 years, and the majority were women (56%).
- Just over half the respondents (55%) were living with their partner, and about a third (35%) were living with no partner (single).
- 62% of respondents were living with at least one, and most often two dependent children.
- 29% of respondents were at the primary stage of the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) process and 24% of respondents were at the post-review stage.
- Only 68% of respondents had the right to work.

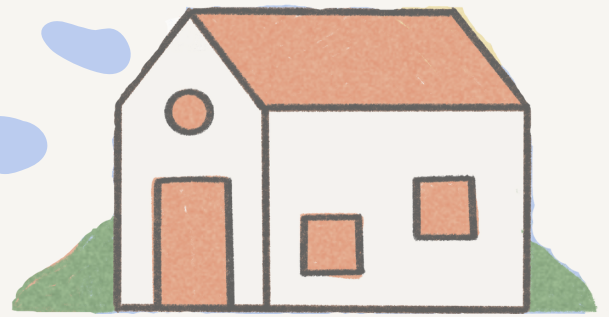
## Homelessness in Australia

- Since arriving in Australia, 55% of respondents had experienced some form of homelessness, as defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) for statistical purposes. [1]
- 9% of respondents had slept rough, in a car or other improvised dwelling and 14% had stayed in emergency accommodation.
- Experiences of homelessness occurred most in 2019 (23%), followed by 2020 (21%).
- 15% of respondents experienced homelessness for 7-12 months, and 19% for 1-3 months.

[1] When a person does not have suitable accommodation alternatives they are considered homeless if their current living arrangement:

- is in a dwelling that is inadequate;
- has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable; or
- does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations

# Summary of Findings



- 17% of respondents experienced homelessness over multiple years, and 39% only in one year.
- Despite the State Government's moratorium on evictions in 2020, 29% of respondents were either evicted or moved from their accommodation because they were unable to pay rent.

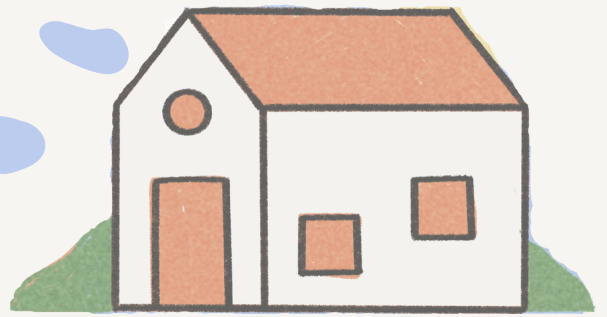
## Housing conditions, wellbeing, and safety

- 55% of respondents needed at least one more bedroom to feel safe and comfortable.
- 25% of respondents reported the conditions of their housing made them feel miserable, anxious or depressed.
- 20% stayed in their room longer than they wanted to feel safe or comfortable.
- 19% of respondents reported feeling anxiety or fear about their own or their family's safety within their house, including 14% of women respondents in the sample.
- 14% of respondents spent as much time as possible away from the house.
- Most (55%) respondents chose their current accommodation because it was affordable, or because there was no other choice.
- Many respondents (58%) cited high cost as the challenge of finding suitable housing, followed by a lack of rental history (33%) in Australia.

## Unemployment and financial hardship

- 68% of respondents had work rights, however only 16% were employed.
- Among the small group of respondents that were employed pre-March 2020, at least half lost their jobs or had hours reduced because of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and their impacts on the economy.
- Approximately one quarter of respondents (23%) reported no income at the time of survey.
- Approximately a third of respondents reported they had difficulty paying rent (36%) and electricity/gas bills (34%) in the last 12 months.
- 45% of respondents ran out of food in the previous 3 months and could not afford to buy more.
- 55% borrowed money from friends and family, and only 9% of respondents said they had not borrowed money at all.

# Methodology



A Place to Call Home – Housing Survey was conducted over three weeks in March 2021 using the online survey platform Qualtrics. The survey was designed to be self-completed and was presented in English and Farsi languages. Only the English language findings are presented here.

The survey asked about experiences in finding and keeping a home since arriving in Australia as well as questions about employment, income, financial hardship, physical and mental health, social connections, personal safety, and neighbourhood.

The survey also focused on the impact of COVID-19 in two ways. First, many of the questions asked about respondents' experiences in the preceding twelve months. This period coincided with the period in which Australian Federal and State Governments first introduced pandemic-related restrictions. Second, the survey also asked respondents about the direct impacts of COVID-19 on their circumstances.

Most participants completed the survey on their own; a small number of participants requested assistance and completed the survey with an interpreter over the phone. The survey was designed to take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete and all participants were offered the opportunity to enter a draw for one of three \$30 gift vouchers which were drawn each week during data collection.

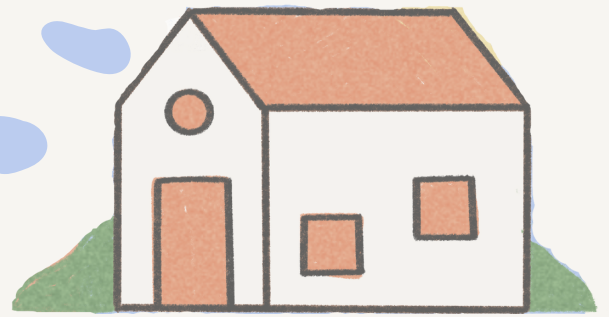
An invitation to complete the survey was sent to all food bank clients of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Australia. The online link was also shared with a range of community partners including members of the Advisory Group.

One hundred and sixty-two people attempted the survey however a large number did not complete the survey in full, suggesting there may have been issues with English language ability or the length of the survey. Any surveys that were less than 35% complete (i.e. minimally completed the housing questions) were excluded from analysis.

This resulted in a sample size of 101 however there remains substantial missing data for questions later in the survey (up to 40% of respondents had missing data for later sections). This proportion is listed as 'unknown' in the tables. The total sample size of n=101 is used throughout unless otherwise specified.

Finally, this is a preliminary presentation of the survey findings. The data is being further analysed by gender and by stage in the RSD process and will be presented at a later date.

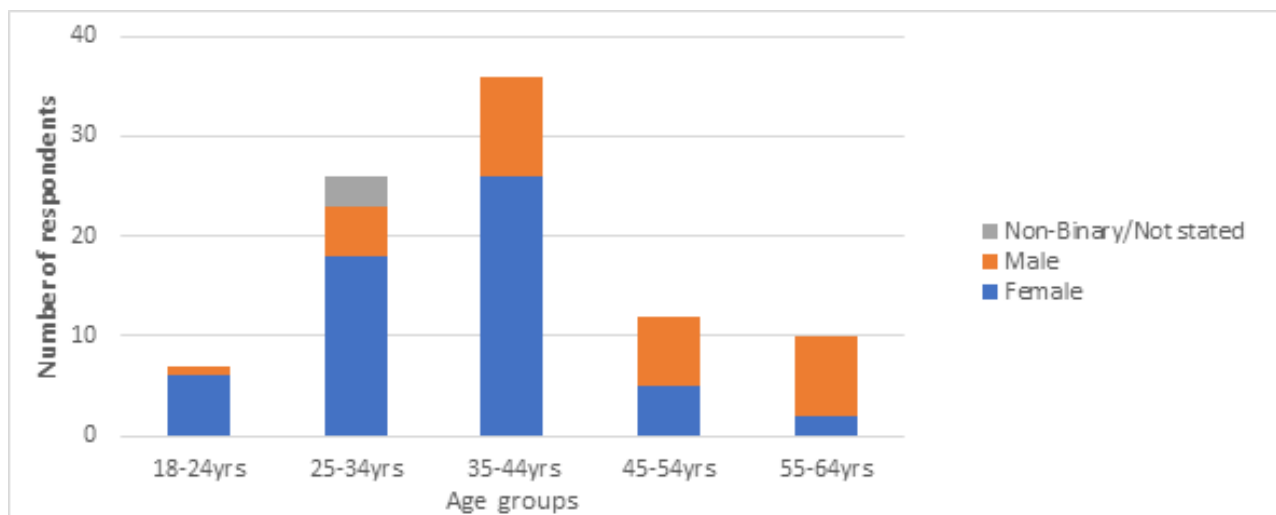
# Findings



## Profile of people who completed the survey

Survey respondents were aged 39 years on average (SD=10.5; range 20-63) and were predominantly aged 25-44yrs (*Figure 1*). There were more females than males that completed the survey (56% vs 31%, respectively) and only a few who identified as non-binary (3%) or did not respond (10%). The mean age of female respondents was 36 years (SD=8.7; range 20-62), significantly younger than the mean age of male respondents (45 years; SD=11.5; range 24-63) ( $t=3.603$ ,  $p=.001$ , CI 3.77-13.28).

*Figure 1: Age group distribution of male and female survey respondents (n=101)*

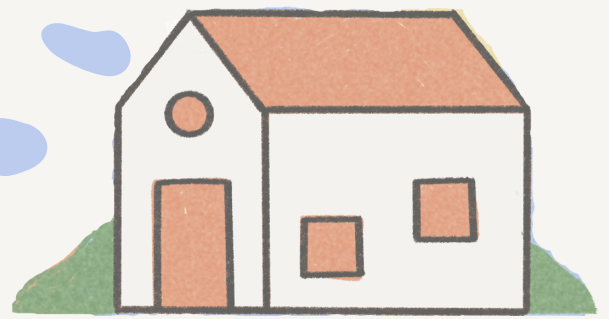


## Refugee Status Determination process

The Refugee Status Determination process in Australia comprises several stages and can be a protracted and lengthy process. In the Housing Survey, most respondents were at the primary application stage or the post-review stage. Several respondents had no active process or were unsure of the stage of their application for protection (*Table 1*).

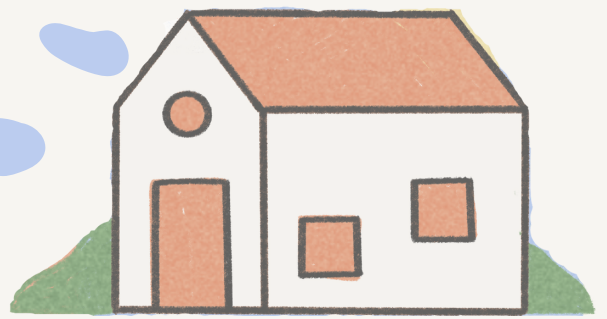
Most respondents arrived in Australia by plane and after July 2013. Generally, respondents had not spent any time in immigration detention facilities. Those respondents that had spent time in an immigration detention facility typically spent less than one year in detention.

Almost all respondents were on some type of bridging visa. Three respondents had no visa and one respondent had a final departure bridging visa. Most respondents had work rights (68%) but several had no work rights including 12% of respondents that had never had work rights.



*Table 1: Characteristics of the RSD process among respondents (n=101)*

Indicator	Total
Year of arrival	
- Before 13 Aug 2012	3 (3.0%)
- 13 Aug 2012 – 18 Jul 2013	21 (20.8%)
- After 19 Jul 2013	64 (63.4%)
- Unknown	13 (12.9%)
Mode of arrival	
- Boat	29 (28.7%)
- Plane	58 (57.4%)
- Prefer not to say	2 (2.0%)
- Unknown	12 (11.9%)
Time spent in Immigration detention	
- None	60 (59.4%)
- Less than 1 year	19 (18.8%)
- 1 year or longer	10 (9.9%)
- Unknown	12 (11.9%)
RSD stage	
- Initial application	29 (28.7%)
- Review	13 (12.9%)
- Post-review	24 (23.8%)
- No active process	7 (6.9%)
- Unsure	16 (15.8%)
- Unknown	12 (11.9%)
Type of visa held	
- Bridging Visa A	46 (45.5%)
- Bridging Visa B	1 (1.0%)
- Bridging Visa C	4 (4.0%)
- Bridging Visa E	28 (27.7%)
- Final Departure Bridging Visa E	1 (1.0%)
- No visa	3 (3.0%)
- Other	7 (6.9%)
- Unknown	11 (10.9%)
Work rights	
- Current work rights	69 (68.3%)
- Previous work rights	8 (7.9%)
- Never	12 (11.9%)
- Unknown	12 (11.9%)



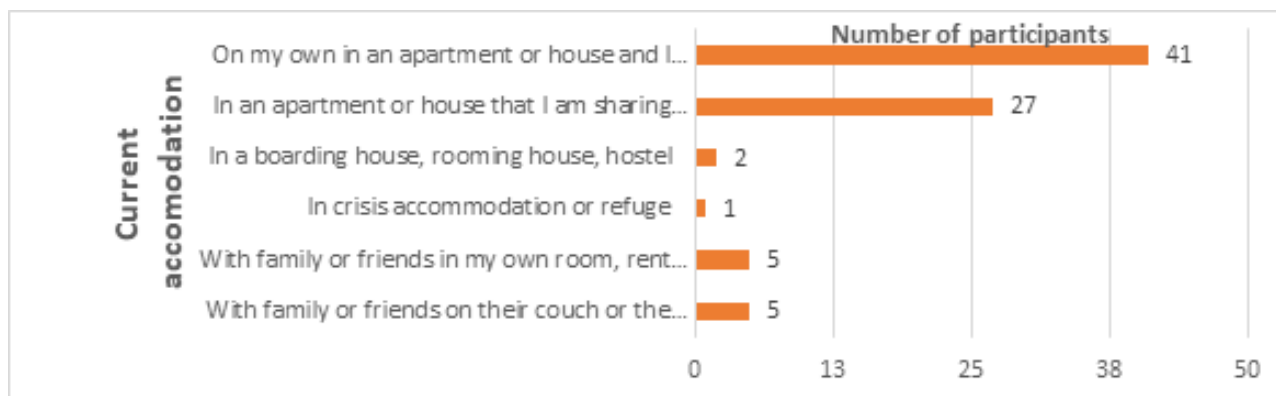
## Current housing circumstances

At the time of the survey, most respondents were staying in a place where they were paying rent, either on their own (41%) or in a share house arrangement (27%).

A small proportion of respondents were staying with family or friends rent-free, either in a spare room (5%) or else on the couch or floor (5%). Only one person was staying in crisis accommodation and two people were living in a boarding/rooming house (Figure 2).

Approximately one-third (34%) of respondents were either very or fairly satisfied with their current accommodation, 20% were indifferent, and 26% were dissatisfied. The living arrangements of 20% of participants were unknown.

Figure 2: Current living arrangements of survey respondents (n=101)



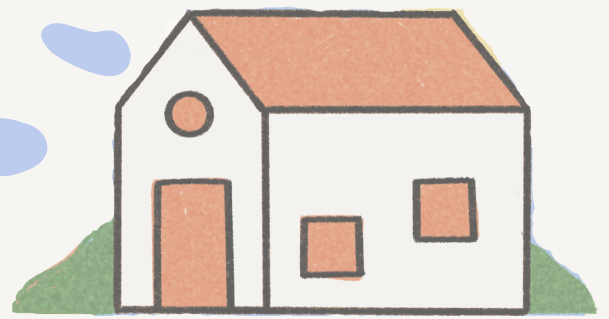
## Household composition and experiences of overcrowding

More than three in five of the respondents had a spouse or partner and just over half (55%) lived with their partners in Australia. Only a small proportion of respondents with partners were not living with them, including those whose partners resided overseas (6%) and those with partners living elsewhere in Australia (4%).

Three-quarters (n=76) of respondents had children. Among this group, 82% (n=62 of 76) had dependent children residing with them in Australia, including children under five years (n=32 of 76).

Overall, 35% of respondents were single and 25% did not have any children.



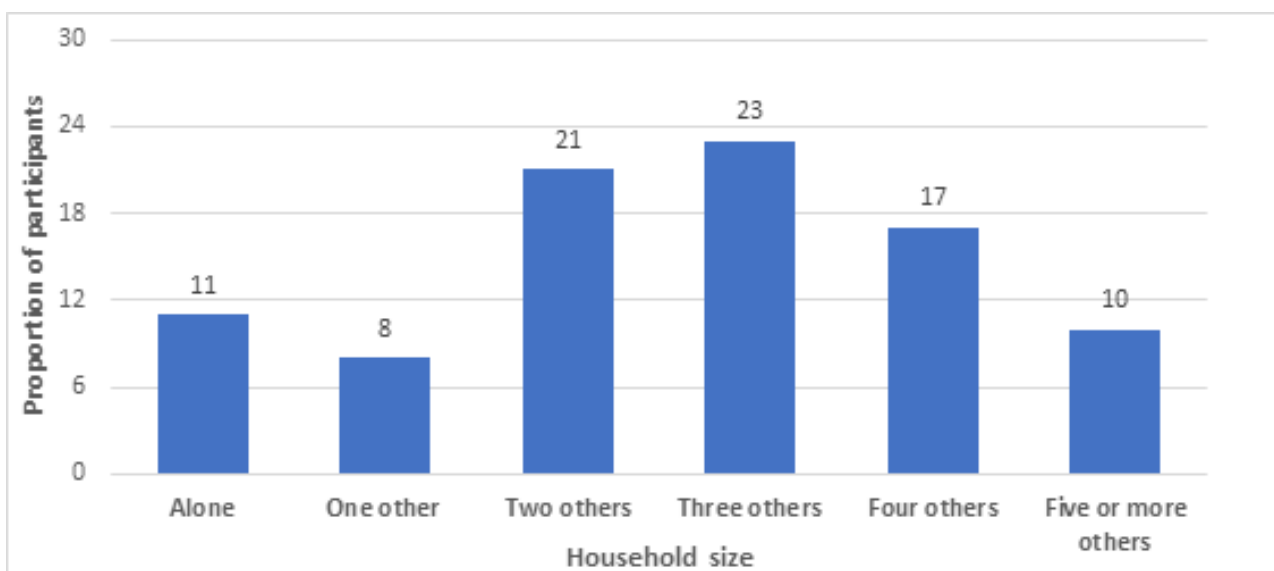


**Table 2: Family and household characteristics of survey respondents**

Family characteristic	n (%)
Proportion with a spouse/partner (n=101)	
- Lives with partner	56 (55.4%)
- Partner resides elsewhere in Australia	4 (4.0%)
- Partner is overseas	6(5.9%)
- Unknown	35(34.9%)
Proportion with children (n=101)	76 (75.2%)
- Children aged <5yrs living in Australia (n=76)	32(42.1%)
- Children aged 5-17yrs living in Australia (n=76)	44(57.9%)
- Unknown	11(10.9%)

Households generally comprised at least 3 or more people (*Figure 3*). Most respondents lived with at least two other people in their home with some having as many as five or more other people in their home. A little over half of survey respondents lived with a partner (55%), 61% lived with at least one child while a small proportion (5-10%) lived with siblings, other relative, friends or unrelated adult/children.

**Figure 3: Size of households among survey respondents (n=101)**



Considering the generally large household sizes, the majority of respondents indicated they required more bedrooms to feel comfortable (*Figure 4*). More than half (n=55) of the respondents needed at least one more bedroom to feel comfortable, including 27 (27%) and 17 (17%) who needed two or three or more bedrooms, respectively. Only 16% (n=16) of all respondents were happy with the number of bedrooms they had.

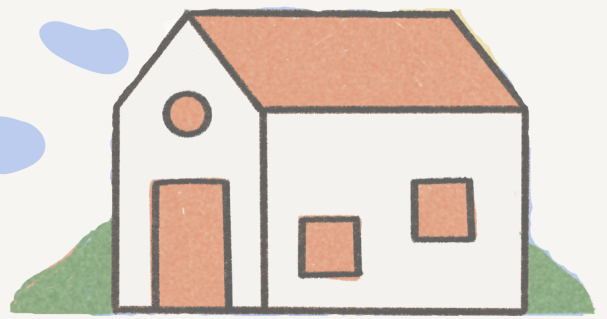
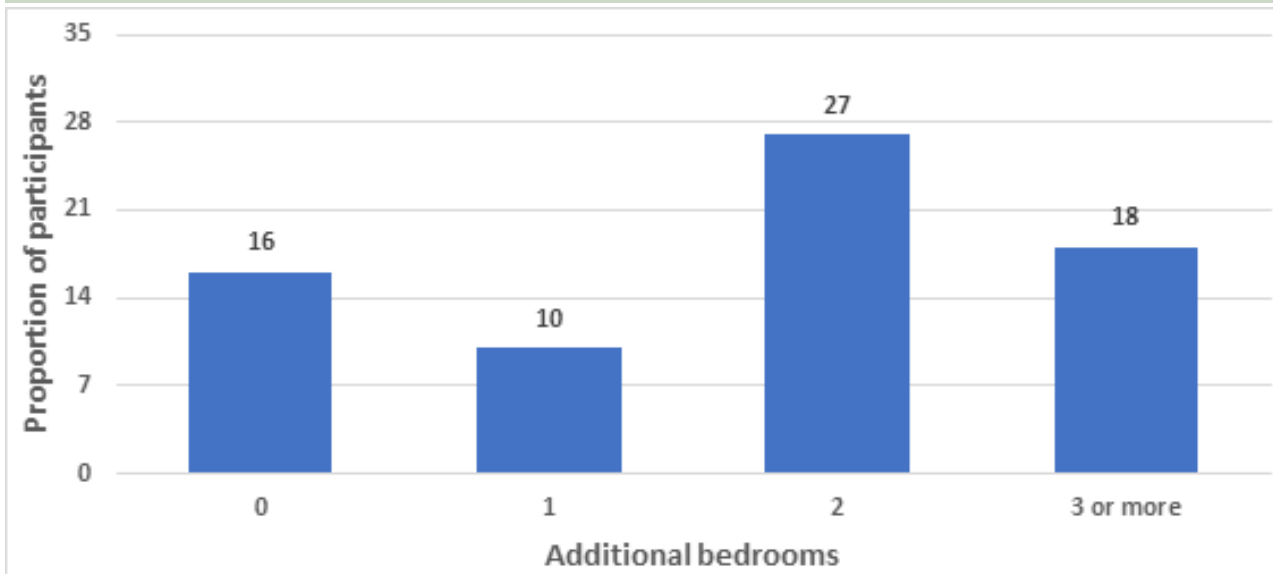


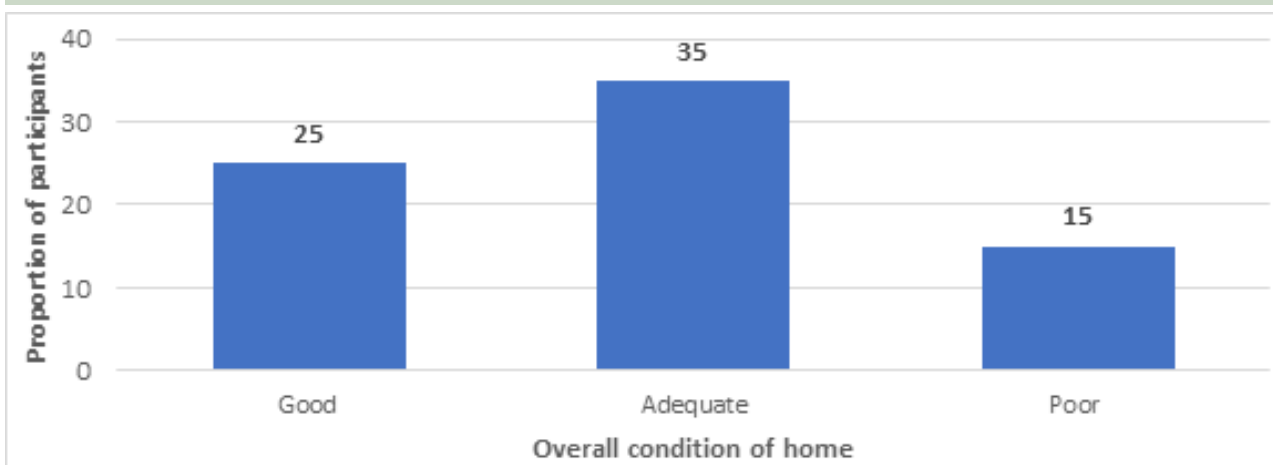
Figure 4: Number of bedrooms needed in a household for survey respondents to be comfortable (n=101)



## Quality of Housing

In terms of the overall state of repair of their current accommodation, many respondents provided positive feedback (Figure 5). Several respondents, however, described the overall state of their accommodation as poor. About one-quarter (26%) of respondents had missing data for this question.

Figure 5: State of repair of housing resided in by survey respondents (n=101)



Additionally, some respondents reported poor housing conditions that negatively impacted their health and wellbeing (Figure 6). Most commonly, respondents reported the poor condition of their housing made them feel miserable, anxious or depressed, or else they stayed in their room longer than they wanted to feel safe or comfortable.

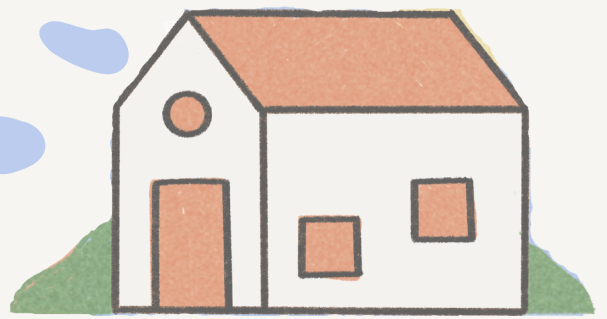
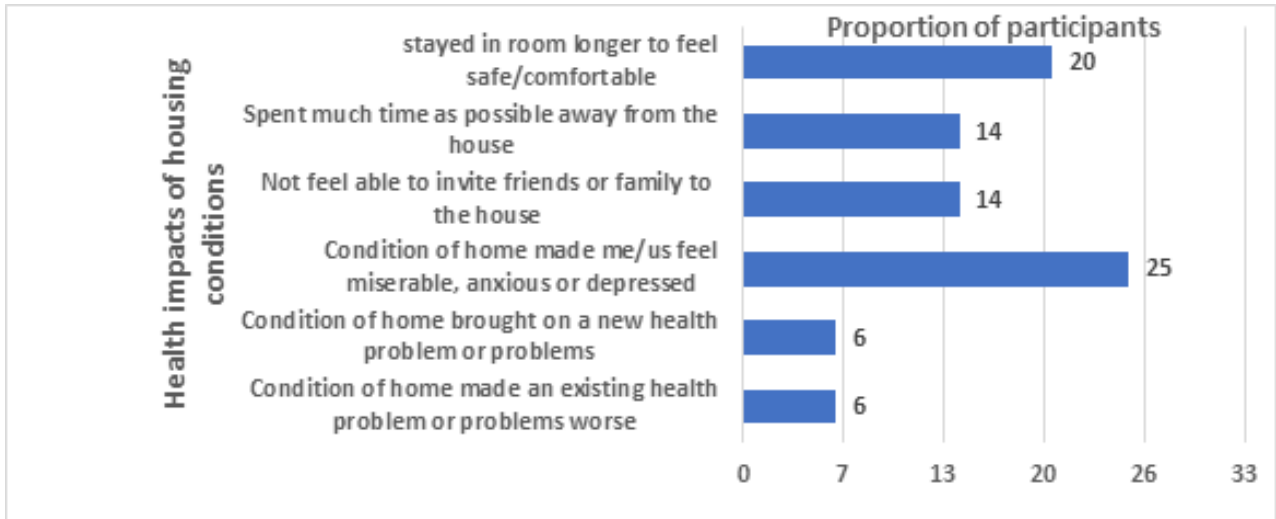


Figure 6: Impact of housing quality on respondents' wellbeing (n=101)



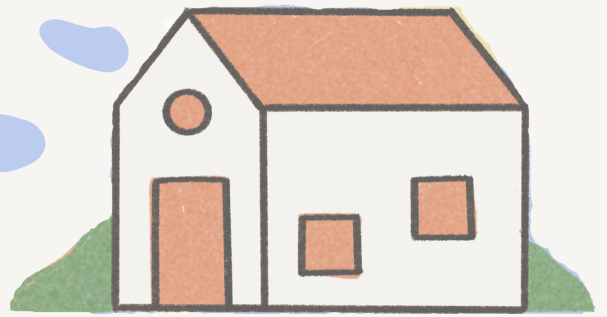
## Experiences of finding a place to live

Many respondents chose their current accommodation because it was cheap or there was no other alternative but also because of family or work reasons, connections to religious or ethnic communities, and for reasons of neighbourhood safety (Figure 7). Most respondents relied on themselves or family and friends to find housing (Figure 8). Smaller numbers of respondents received help from a settlement caseworker or other support service, community groups, and real estate agents.

Some of the challenges that respondents encountered in finding accommodation are shown in Figure 9. The high cost of housing and lack of rental history in Australia were the main impediments to finding accommodation. Barriers associated with English language proficiency were also identified as were a range of 'other' challenges, including a lack of income.

For example, one participant described in comments:

“ I have never applied alone before; no work and small children makes it difficult to get a rental property due to concerns about being able to pay ”



This intersected with concerns about maintaining the privacy and safety of family members. Another participant wrote in comments:

**“I got no choice. After my wife and son arrived here, I had to find my own house to rent for my privacy and safety for my wife and son. Unfortunately, after a year I couldn’t afford the rent because of my bad situation of my financial issues.”**

Figure 7: Reason for choosing current accommodation (n=101)

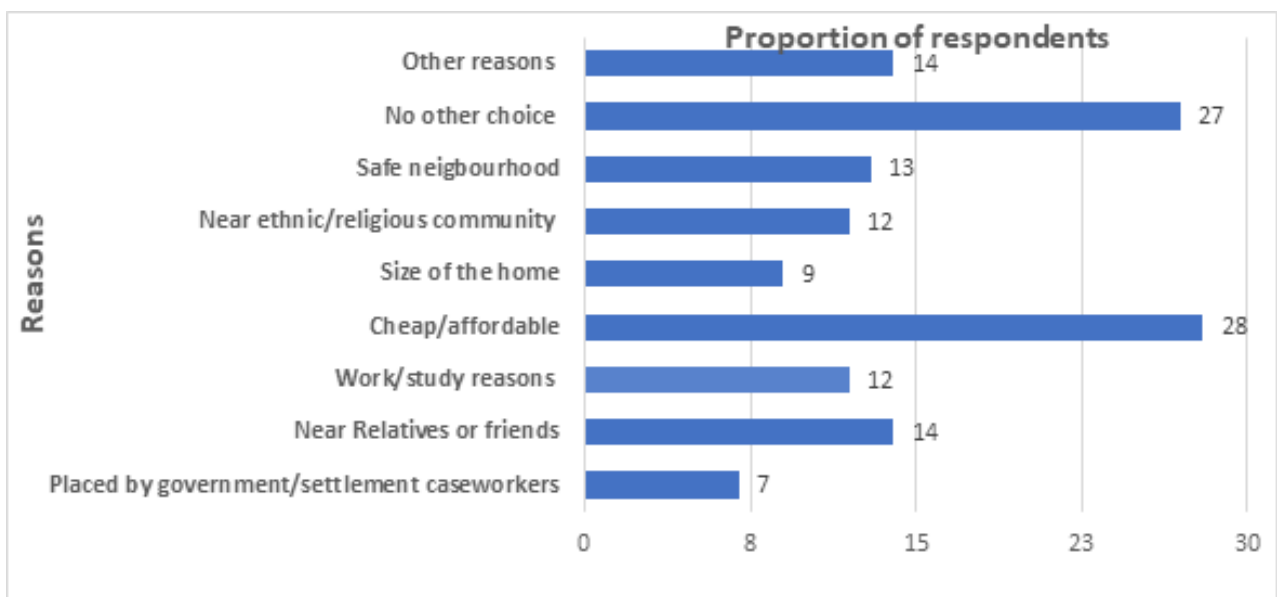
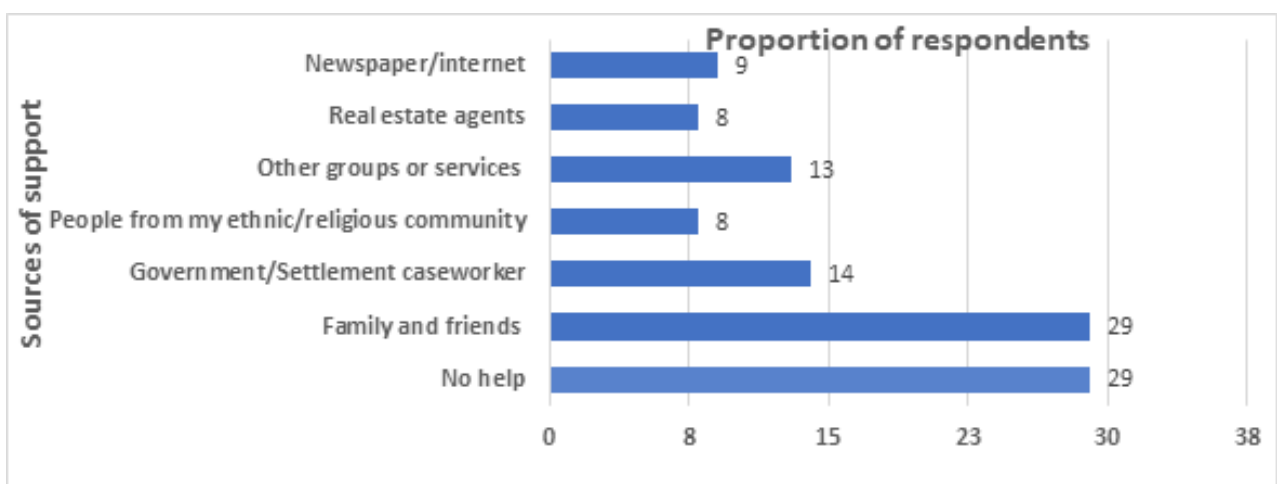


Figure 8: Type of support accessed to find housing (n=101)



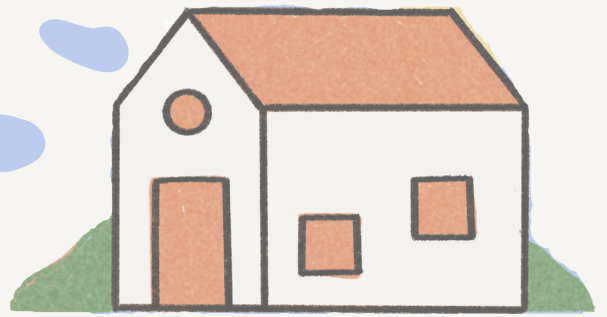
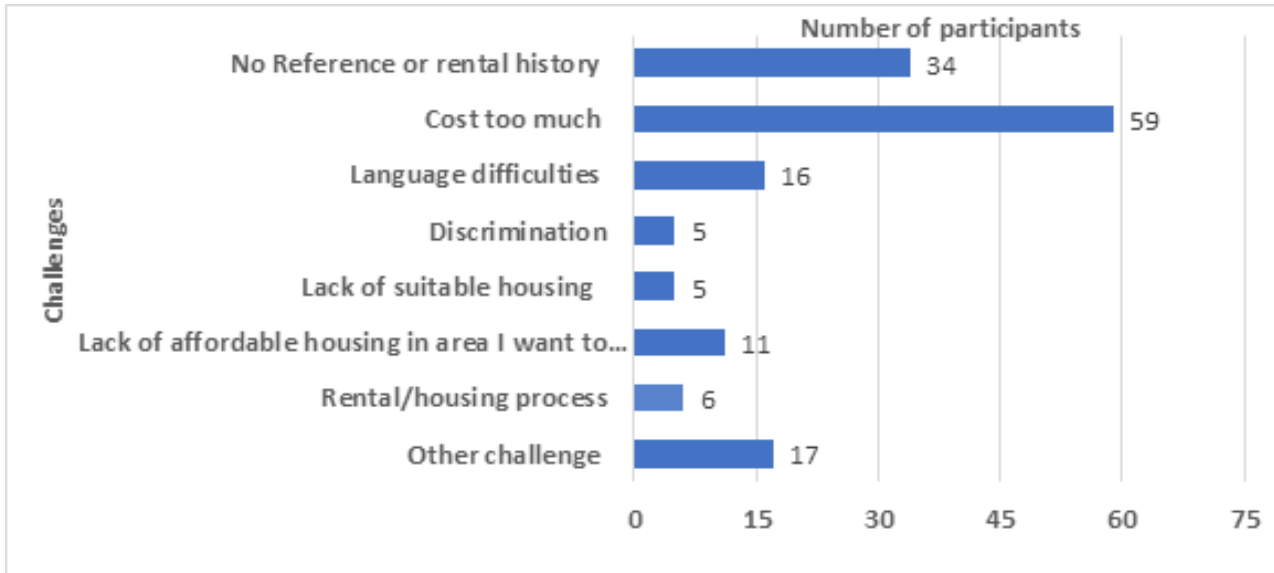


Figure 9: Challenges experienced in finding suitable housing (n=101)



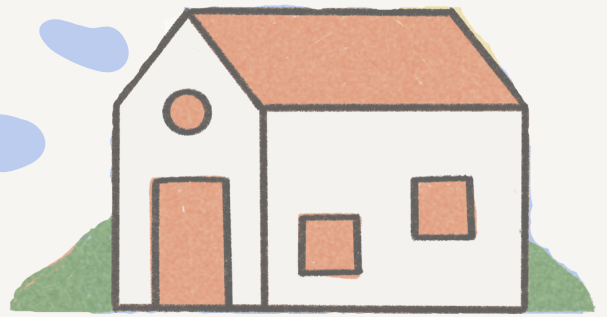
Participants were asked about suburbs in which they live, and commonly indicated Auburn, Liverpool, Pendle Hill, and Toongabbie. Weekly rent paid by respondents ranged from \$90 to \$500, with a median of \$280.

## Experiences of homelessness

Questions about homelessness referred to staying with family or friends, on the street or in a car, on a train or other improvised dwelling, or in emergency or temporary accommodation because of the lack of any other options. Insecure accommodation was defined as being under the threat of eviction, squatting or not having a legal right to stay in the accommodation. Together these constitute a broad definition of homelessness. This is an appropriate benchmark because in Australia we expect that all people have a safe and secure place to live, with access to a private bathroom and kitchen, and adequate space and privacy to undertake activities as a single person, couple or family.

Since arriving in Australia, a little over one-quarter of respondents had lost their home with no alternative accommodation to go to. A small proportion of respondents had experienced rough sleeping or stayed in improvised dwellings such as a car or tent (9%) – this is what we refer to as a narrow definition of homelessness, sometimes referred to as rooflessness.

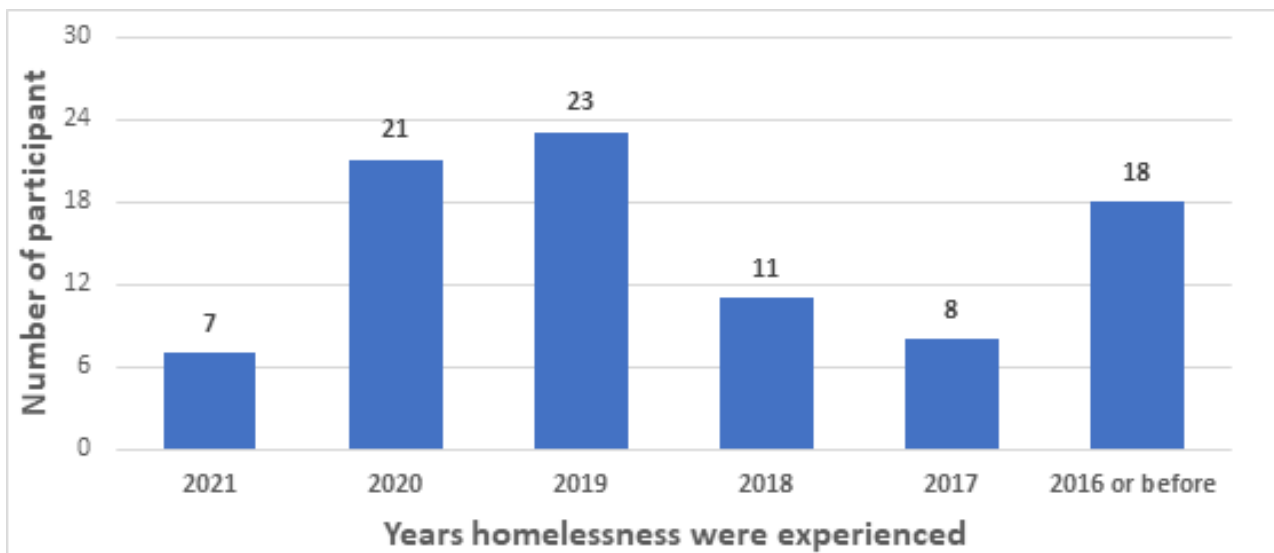
More commonly, respondents stayed with family or friends (38%) or in emergency accommodation (14%). A few respondents had stayed in insecure forms of accommodation (5%).

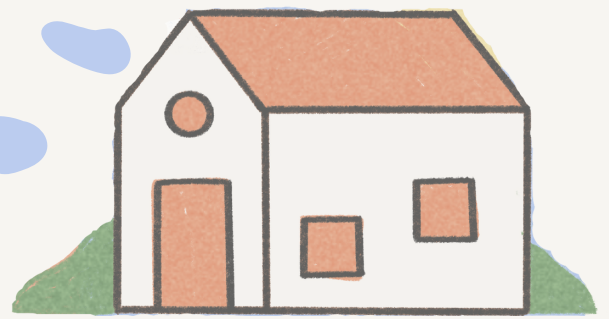


Altogether, 55% of respondents had experienced some form of homelessness since arriving in Australia, in line with the broad definition above. Fourteen percent of respondents had experienced two or more different forms of homelessness (including insecure accommodation).

While most respondents experienced homelessness within a single year, a small number of respondents reported homelessness over multiple years. The highest prevalence of homelessness among respondents was reported for 2019, followed by 2020 (Figure 10). Among those that had experienced homelessness in the past year, the duration of homelessness experienced was typically less than 3 months.

*Figure 10: Number of participants that experienced homelessness during the past 5 years (n=101)*





*Table 3: Experiences of homelessness among survey respondents (n=101)*

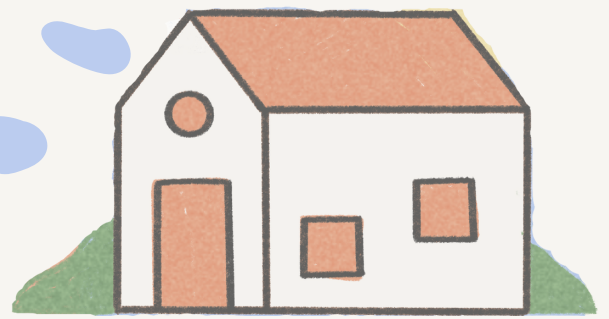
Indicator	Total sample N (%)
Stayed in insecure accommodation	5 (5.0)
Stayed with family/friends	38 (37.6)
Stayed in emergency accommodation	14(13.9)
Slept in a car	3(3.0)
Stayed on the street or in a park, tent, train	6(5.9)
Lost home with nowhere else to go	14 (13.9)
Homelessness types experienced	
• None	28 (27.7)
• Single type	40 (40.6)
• Two or more types	14 (13.9)
Chronicity of homelessness experienced	
• In a single year	39 (38.6)
• Over multiple years	17 (16.8)
Duration of homelessness past 12 months	
• 1-3 months	19 (18.8)
• 4-6 months	10 (9.9)
• 7-12 months	15(14.9)

## Housing stability

Housing stability was defined in terms of security of tenure and housing moves. The number of housing moves is not always emblematic of housing insecurity.

For example, people may relocate for a better job or to be closer to support networks when they start a family. In combination with measures of employment and income, however, these indicators provide a picture of the (in)stability of someone's housing circumstances. The greater the precariousness or instability of housing, the greater the risk of someone becoming homeless.

As can be seen in *Table 4*, most respondents were residing in accommodation with some type of tenancy agreement. Still, there were several respondents living without security of tenure.



One-fifth of respondents indicated they were likely to move out of their current accommodation in the next three months and a further 30% were unsure whether they would be moving in the next three months.

Several reasons accounted for the respondents' likelihood of moving from their current accommodation. The most common reason related to the unaffordability of their current accommodation, followed by family reasons, and the desire to move to a different or better area.

Respondents also cited employment and the need for different sized accommodation as reasons for moving. Only four respondents cited eviction/repossession/end of tenancy as the main reason for moving.

*Table 4: Indicators of Housing Stability (n=101)*

Indicator	Total sample N (%)
<b>Accommodation tenure</b>	
• Short-term contract	27 (26.7%)
• Long-term contract	31 (30.7%)
• No contract	15 (14.9%)
• Other	4 (4.0%)
• Unknown	24 (23.8%)
<b>Likelihood of Moving</b>	
• Very likely	13 (12.9)
• Quite likely	7 (6.9)
• Neither likely nor unlikely	11 (10.9)
• Very unlikely	16 (15.8)
• Don't know	30 (29.7)
• Unknown	24 (23.8%)
<b>Main Reason for moving</b>	
• Wanting a larger/smaller/different accommodation	6 (5.9%)
• Wanting to move to a different/better area	11 (10.9%)
• Problems with the neighbourhood or with neighbours	2 (2.0%)
• Employment reasons	6 (5.9%)
• Family reasons	12 (11.9%)
• Cannot afford present accommodation	12 (11.9%)
• Eviction/repossession/end of tenancy	4 (4.0%)
• Health, disability or mobility problems	1 (1.0%)
• Other	11 (10.9%)
• Unknown	26 (25.7%)



## Employment and income

As can be seen in *Table 5*, only 16% of respondents were in some form of paid work at the time of completing the survey and few were working more than 25 hours per week.

Approximately one-third of respondents were unemployed and looking for work with the remaining participants not working (possibly because of stigma in finding work due to visa status or English language ability) or looking for work, perhaps because they were primary caregivers, were without work rights, or unable to work due to illness.

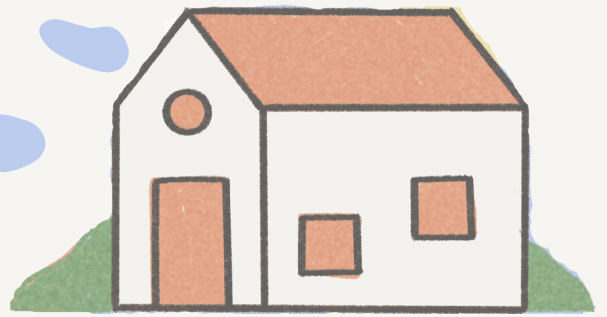
When asked about their preferred number of work hours:

- 25% would like to work more hours than they currently do.
- 18% would like to work fewer hours than they currently do.
- 8% did not want to work more than they currently do.

*Table 5: Employment circumstances of survey respondents (n=101)*

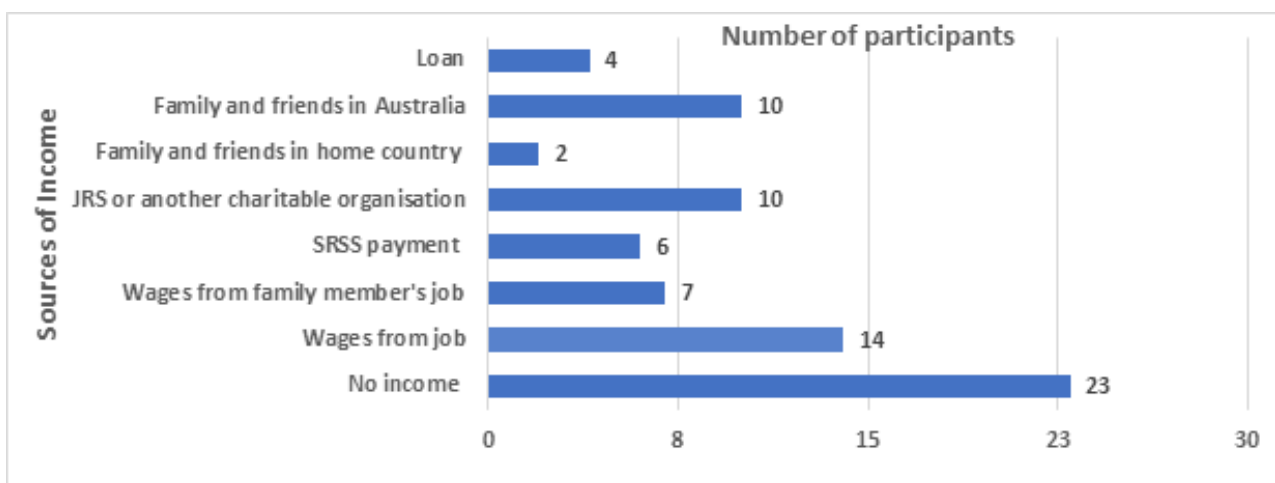
Indicator	Total n=101
<b>Work status in the past month</b>	
• In paid work (full or part-time)	16 (15.8%)
• Unemployed and looking for work	36 (35.6%)
• Other (neither working nor looking for work)	18 (17.8%)
• Unknown	31 (30.7%)
<b>Number of working hours per week</b>	
• No hours	34 (33.7%)
• Up to 25 hours	14 (13.8%)
• More than 25 hours	3 (3.0%)
• Unknown	50 (49.5%)
<b>Preferred number of working hours</b>	
• Fewer hours than you do now	8 (7.9%)
• About the same hours as you do now	18 (17.8%)
• More hours than you do now	25 (24.8%)
• Unknown	50 (49.5%)

*Figure 11* shows the different sources of income for the remaining respondents. Consistent with the employment figures above, a small number of respondents received wages from their own job or a family member's job.



Some respondents received financial support from family and friends (both here in Australia as well as their home country). Several participants also received income through financial payments, including from charitable support services (such as JRS Australia) and Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) payments (provided by the Australian government). Almost one-quarter of respondents reported they had no income.

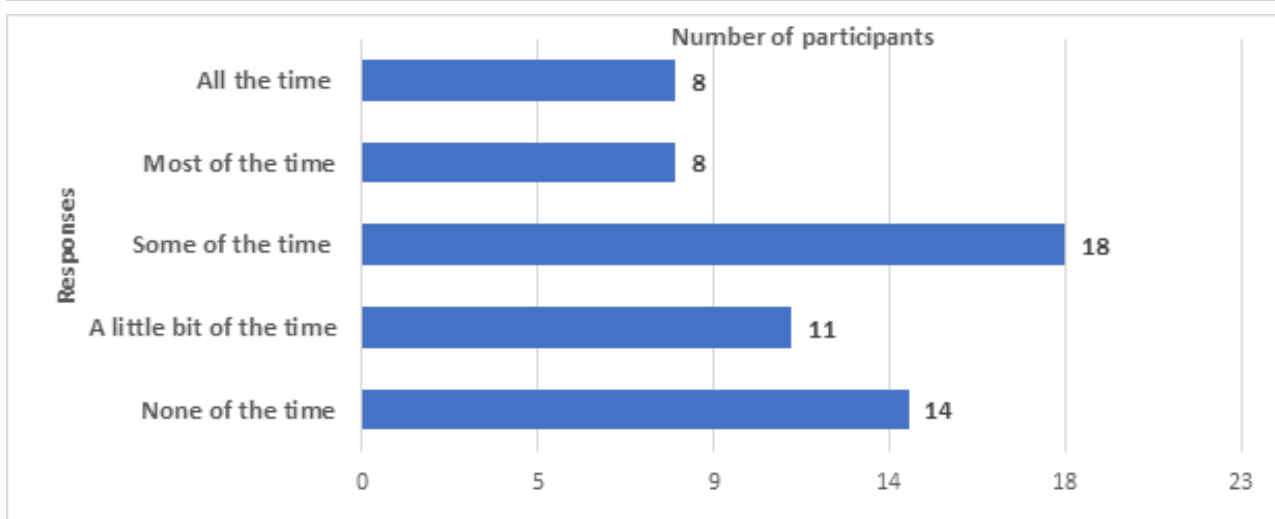
Figure 11: Sources of Income (n=101)

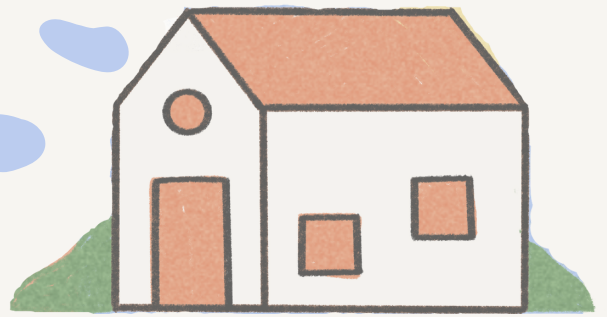


## Financial hardship

Given the precarious employment and income circumstances of survey respondents, many reported experiences of financial hardship. For instance, almost half of the respondents (45%) had run out of food at some point in the last three months and could not afford to buy more (Figure 12).

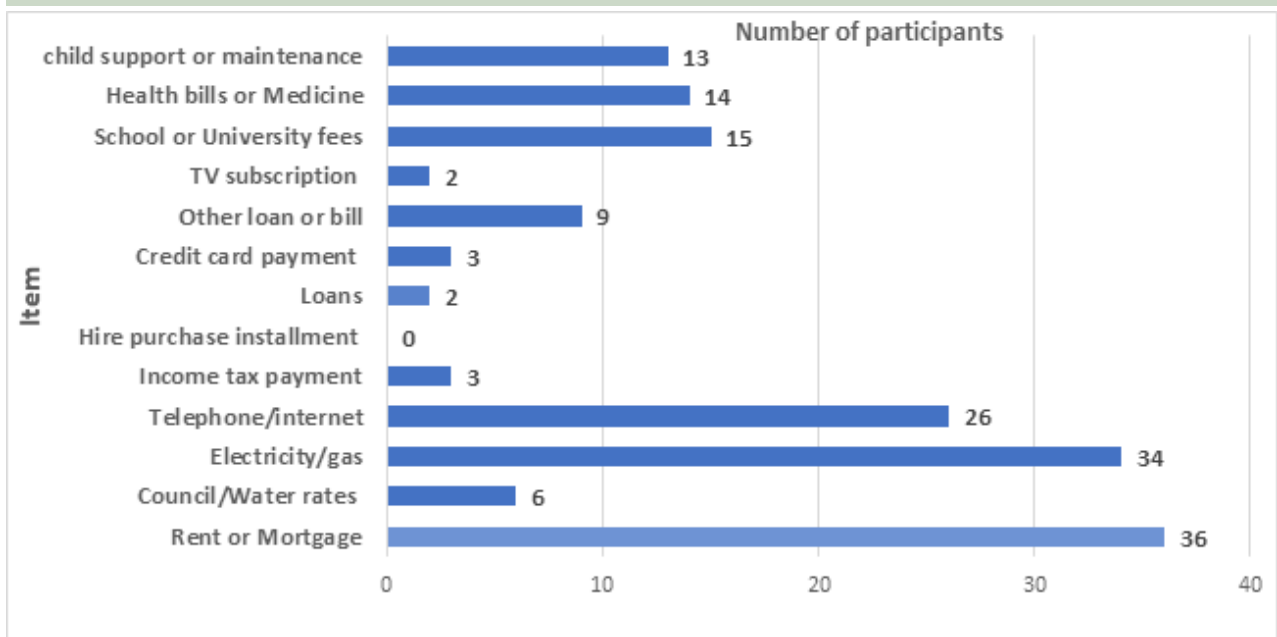
Figure 12: Number of respondents unable to buy enough food in the past 3 months (n=101)





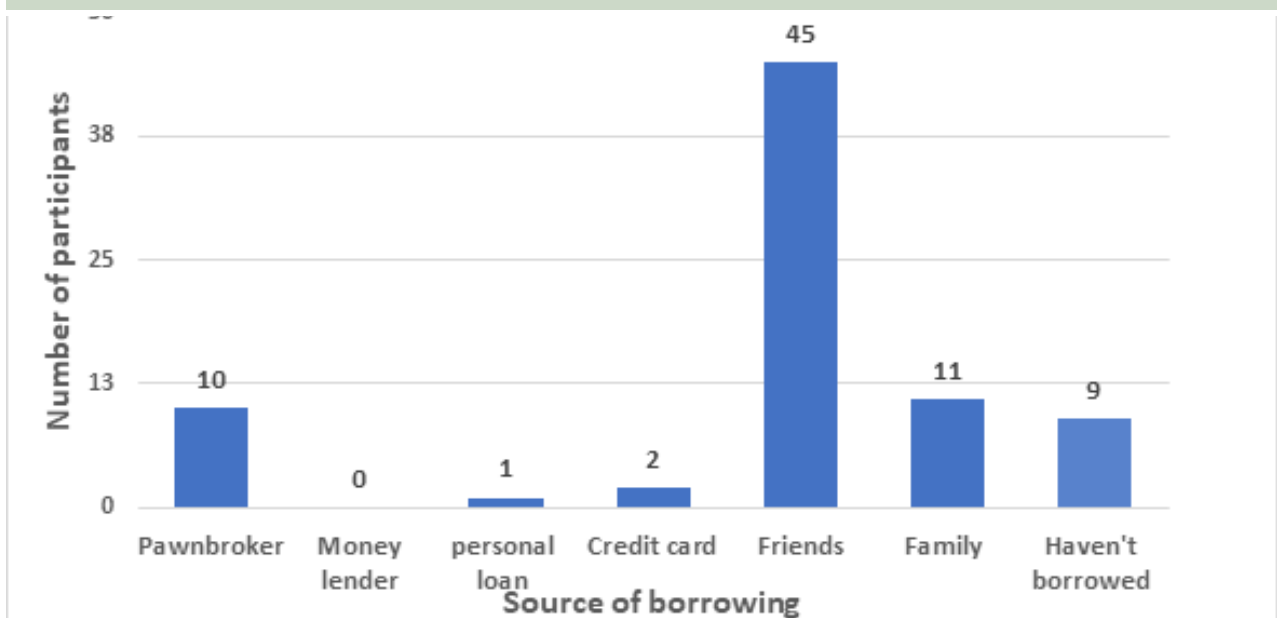
Similarly, many participants had difficulty paying their bills in the past 12 months due to a lack of money (Figure 13). Of serious concern was the number of participants who were unable to pay their rent or mortgage (35.6%), as well as utility bills such as electricity or gas (33.7%), and telephone or internet (n=25.7%).

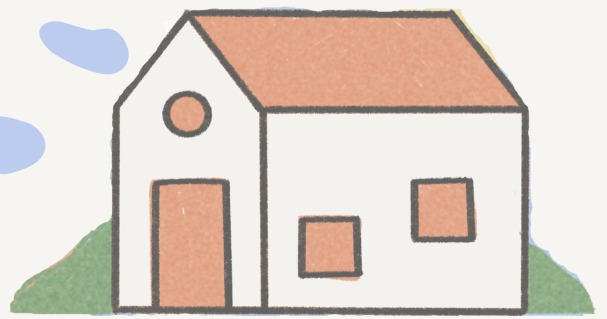
**Figure 13: Number of respondents that had difficulty paying bills in the past 12 months (n=101)**



Many respondents borrowed money to pay for day-to-day needs (Figure 14). Respondents mostly borrowed from friends, but a small proportion also borrowed from other family members and pawnbrokers. Only nine participants indicated they had not borrowed money from any source in the past 12 months.

**Figure 14: Number of participants that borrowed money in the past 12 months (n=101)**





Nearly half (n=50) of the respondents had received help from charity and community organisations in the last 12 months, although only a few received such help frequently. Importantly, respondents mostly indicated that such help from community and charitable organisations had some impact on their well-being (Table 7).

*Table 7: Help from charity and community organisations*

Indicators	Total n=101
<b>Frequency of receiving help from charitable or community organisations</b>	
- None of the time	9 (8.9)
- A little of the time	20 (19.8)
- Some of the time	21 (20.8)
- Most of the time	8 (7.9)
- All of the time	1 (1.0)
- Unknown	42 (42.8)
<b>Impact of help from charitable or community organisations</b>	
- A very big impact	14 (13.9)
- Big impact	15 (14.9)
- Some impact	11 (10.9)
- Small impact	12 (11.9)
- No impact at all	7 (6.9)
- Unknown	42 (42.8)

## COVID-19 impacts

A substantial proportion of respondents were impacted by the introduction of the Australian government restrictions to counter the transmission of the COVID-19 virus. Despite the NSW government's moratorium on rental evictions, 29% of respondents were either evicted or moved from their accommodation because they were unable to pay the rent.

Among the 17 respondents with a job at the time the governments' restrictions came into place:

- 5 respondents lost their jobs entirely.
- 4 continued working but with reduced hours.
- The circumstances of 8 respondents were unknown.