

PRICED OUT, RUN DOWN

Older Australians in unaffordable and poor-condition housing

Commissioned by Housing for the Aged Action Group, new research from Swinburne University of Technology shows that mid-life and older Australians are increasingly facing multiple and overlapping forms of housing precarity, with private renters most affected.

Older renters face the greatest risks including unaffordable homes, poor conditions and ongoing housing insecurity, with women disproportionately affected. Those living in housing that is both unaffordable and in poor condition report the most serious impacts on their health and wellbeing.

Drawing on the newly released Australian Housing Conditions Dataset (AHCD 2024) (Baker et al., 2024), the research offers a new lens on multidimensional precarity for ageing Australians.

The full report is available online at: oldertenants.org.au

RENTING VS. OWNING: A RETIREMENT DIVIDE

The retirement system assumes home ownership, but more older adults are retiring with mortgages or as private renters. This creates a stark housing and financial security gap. For renting in retirement to offer security similar to ownership, proper regulation and legislative reform are essential. Additionally, support is needed for the growing number of older people, especially women, struggling to maintain home ownership due to large mortgages. Key groups most affected are:

Private renter households, especially those in unaffordable and poor-condition homes, who report:

- **Greater financial hardship**, with over one-third unable to afford essentials (such as food, bills, and transport), and around three-quarters unable to afford non-essentials (such as leisure activities, social outings, and non-essential food).
- **Negative impacts on wellbeing**, particularly on physical and mental health, financial circumstances, and social life.
- **Higher residential mobility**, shorter lease agreements (typically 6–12 months), and limited control over housing decisions.

Mortgaged households in unaffordable poor-condition homes experience housing precarity. These households report financial hardship and compromised wellbeing outcomes, though they tend to move less frequently and live in larger dwellings.

Women, in both mortgaged and privately rented homes, are overrepresented in unaffordable and poor-condition housing.

Single-person households, particularly in private rental housing, are disproportionately represented in unaffordable poor-condition homes.

People living in dwellings built before 1990, who are more likely to experience poor housing conditions and related problems.

Housing affordability and condition profiles of people aged 50 years and older by tenure

Mortgage



Private rental



■ Affordable - good condition ■ Affordable - poor condition ■ Unaffordable - good condition ■ Unaffordable - poor condition

“My home is difficult to maintain, however due to my low income I cannot refinance to improve or sell and move”

Mary (name has been changed), 62, lives with her partner in a property they own with a mortgage. When interviewed she relied entirely on the Disability Support Pension for income. She is concerned about the ongoing maintenance costs of her housing and feels she has no options other than to stay where she is. —HAAG case study

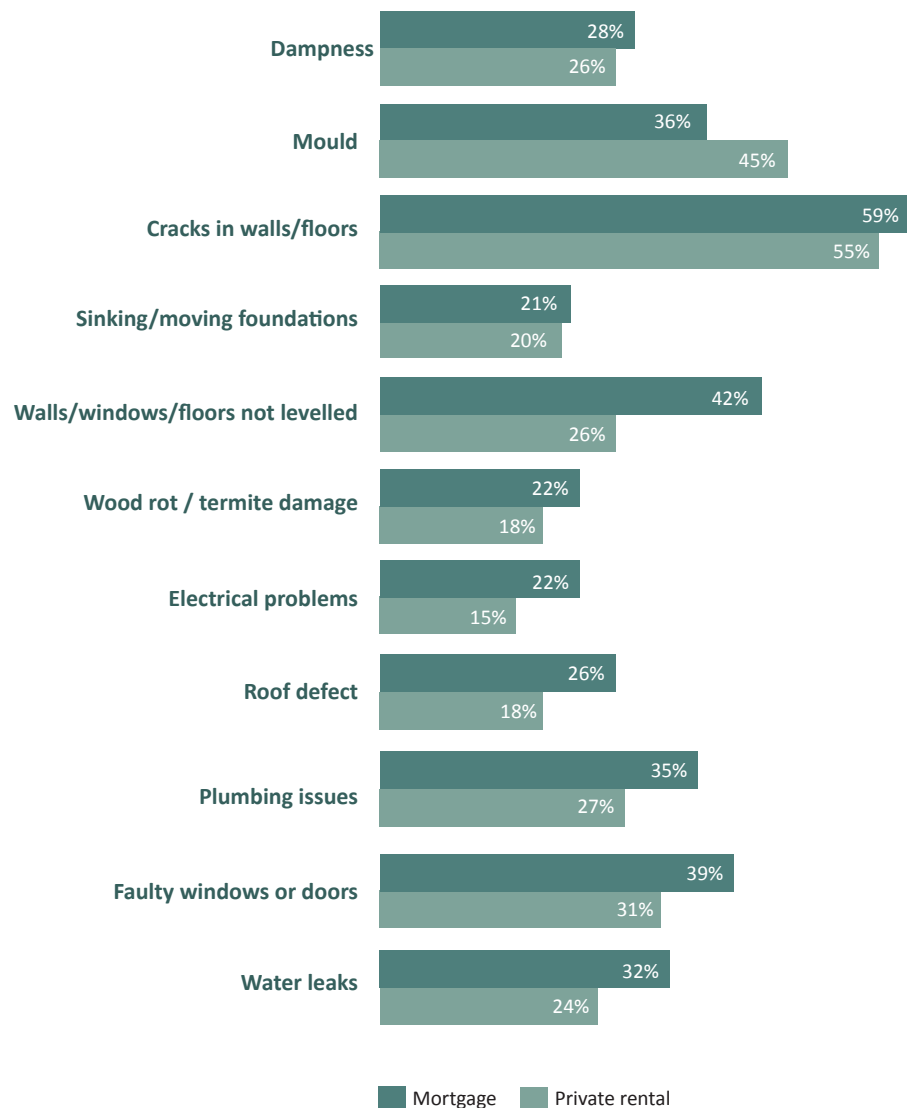
Heyab (name has been changed) is an older woman relying on JobSeeker payment who lives in a one-bedroom private rental property in Victoria. She has been living there for several years and although the property is small and she is paying well over 65% of her income on rent, there are no other affordable housing options available to her in the private rental market. She relies on her son to buy her weekly groceries and other necessities.

She does not have access to reliable hot water and she uses a bucket of hot water to shower. She uses a portable gas cooktop as her stovetop is not working.

She finds that she is paying more money for basic necessities to compensate for the unrepaired issues around the home. When she raised these issues with the landlord, she was told she can leave if she does not like the property. She is reluctant to raise issues due to fear of a rent increase or being evicted.

—HAAG case study

Self-reported housing problems in unaffordable poor-condition households, by tenure



OLDER WOMEN FACE A HOUSING CRISIS

Single older women are one of the most marginalised groups in the fight for safe, affordable, and suitable housing. This disparity stems from lifelong disadvantages—the gender pay gap, time taken off for caring, and lower-paid work—which culminate in severe housing insecurity later in life.

This research shows older women, especially private renters, are disproportionately stuck in housing that is both unaffordable and poor quality. The result? They struggle more to cover basic expenses and report poorer health outcomes than men. Housing policy must urgently address these systemic challenges.

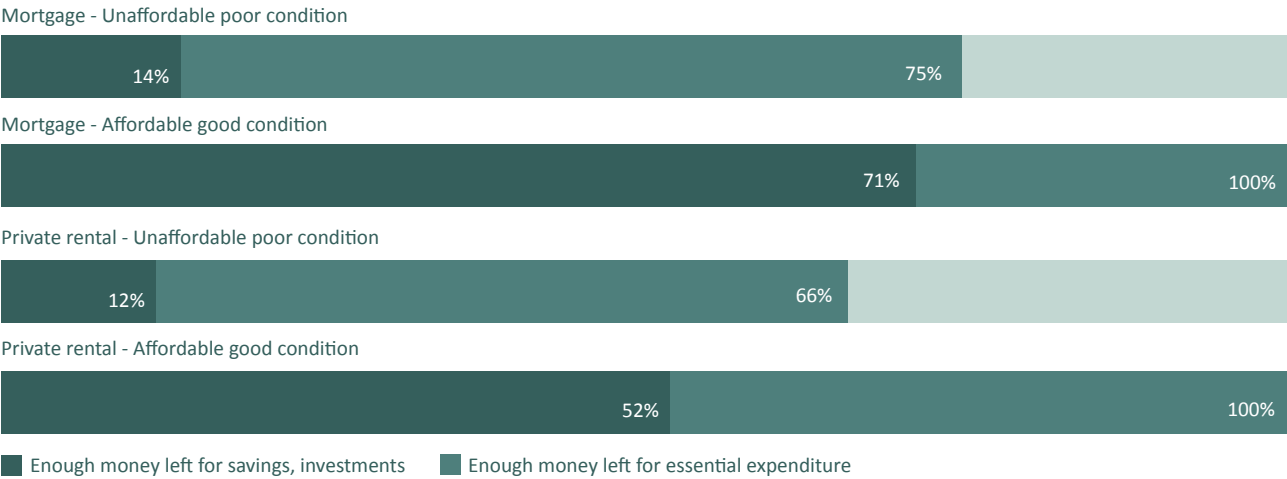
Housing affordability and condition profiles of people aged 50 years and older by tenure and sex



Kim (name has been changed) is in her late 50s and has been privately renting a small unit for almost four years, over 60% of her sole Disability Support Pension. She has taken good care of the property and the garden area over the years. She always paid rent on time, even where it meant being unable to afford regular meals or to heat the home in winter.

She reported multiple unresolved maintenance issues at the rental property, including mould. She reports that the landlord has given her a ‘hard time’ over the 4 years and refused to address the maintenance issues. Kim was admitted to hospital twice in past 12 months, due to a lung infection and influenza with a drawn-out recovery period. She believes that these could be caused or exacerbated as a result of mould in the rental property that she is unable to resolve by cleaning. —HAAG case study

Financial hardship after housing costs by affordability and condition profiles and tenure





FOR OLDER ADULTS, THE COST OF HOUSING IS A DIRECT THREAT TO INDEPENDENCE

Housing costs are squeezing older people, threatening their independence and wellbeing. The problem is harshest for private renters: 31% report living in unaffordable, poor-quality housing (compared to 16% of homeowners). High housing costs leave little for essentials like food, medicine, and travel, and unfavourable rental laws, combined with short-term leases, make crucial home modifications nearly impossible. Competing for private rentals in this housing market is harder for older people and many live in untenable housing due to fear of evictions.

After paying for housing, around one third of people in private renter households living in unaffordable, poor condition homes could not afford to pay for essential items such as bills, food, clothing and transport. Among those in affordable housing, regardless of condition and tenure, no respondents reported difficulty affording essential items.

Rates of those unable to pay for non-essential items were much higher than for essential items: 74% of private renters in unaffordable, poor condition homes could not pay for things like leisure activities and social outings after paying for housing.

Anne, (name has been changed), is an 88 year old single woman living alone in a private rental property on the Aged Pension, paying more than 80% of her income on rent, with little to no money to pay for food, utilities and cover her medical expenses. She receives Meals on Wheels three days a week, which cost her \$12 a meal, so she stretches them over 7 days.

She doesn't use heating or cooling, and she can't access emergency relief because she can't afford to travel. Mary has been housebound for months as she has been unable to go down the stairs. Her roof leaks when it rains and she's afraid to complain about it to the landlord. She wants to stay in the area to be near family.

—HAAG case study

UNAFFORDABLE AND POOR QUALITY HOUSING IS NEGATIVELY AFFECTING OLDER PEOPLE'S HEALTH AND WELLBEING

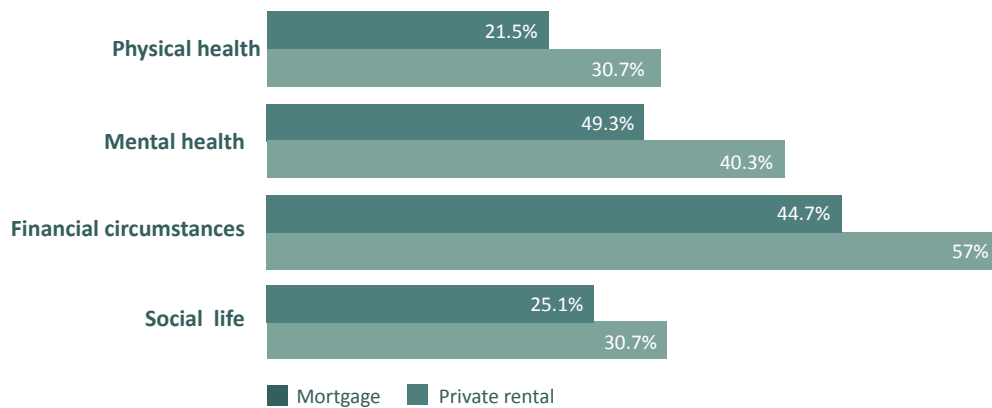
Participants in unaffordable, poor condition homes reported that their housing negatively affected their wellbeing, with impacts more severe in private rental households than compared to mortgaged households. These included negative effects on financial circumstances (79% in private rental homes vs 74% in mortgaged homes), mental health (63% vs 54%), physical health (46% vs 44%), and social life (52% vs 47%).

Participants in poor condition dwellings, across both mortgaged and private rental households, commonly reported difficulty keeping homes warm or cool (40-51%), along with issues such as leaks, flooding or plumbing problems (42-53%) and pest infestations (39-49%).

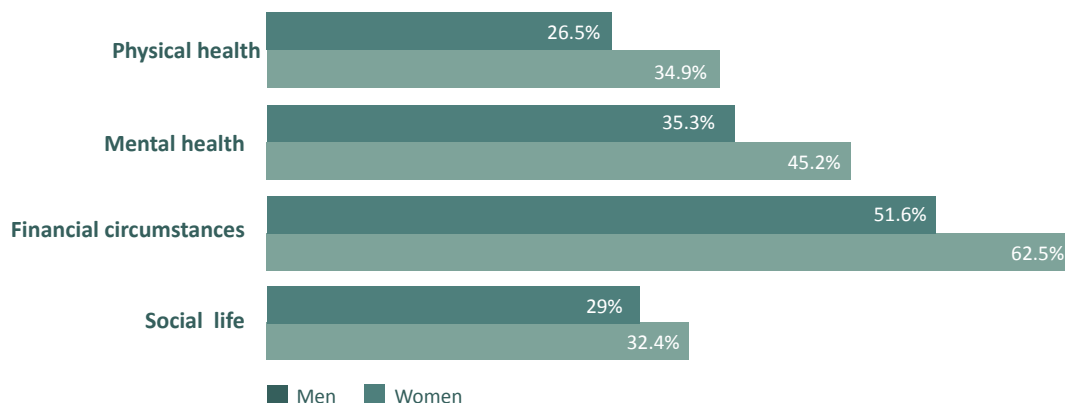
People living in unaffordable, poor condition dwellings reported 'fair or poor' general and mental health in both private rental and mortgaged homes: around 50% of private renters in this profile reported these outcomes, and about 40% of those living in mortgaged homes.

Sam (name has been changed), a 50 year old woman was living in an apartment when it had a burst pipe and a water leak that flooded the floor. Mould developed and she subsequently developed intense skin irritations and respiratory problems, which impacted her sleep and well-being. The health issues arising from the mould exacerbated her existing back injury, which meant that she was unable to find work. She first alerted the property manager in 2022 and it took three years for the landlord to fix it. —HAAG case study

NEGATIVE WELLBEING IMPACTS



GENDERED WELLBEING IMPACTS AMONG PRIVATE RENTERS





RECOMMENDATIONS

1. PRICED OUT: ADDRESSING HOUSING AFFORDABILITY

- **Fund Dedicated Older Persons' Social Housing:** Ringfence a minimum 20% to 30% of all Big Housing Build and future social housing stock for people over 55, including two-bedroom dwellings to support carers. Ensure no loss of existing older persons housing stock.
- **Address Asset Limits:** Substantially increase the asset limit for priority access to the Victorian Housing Register (VHR) to acknowledge the severe housing stress faced by older people with modest savings or assets who are still unable to secure housing in the private rental market.
- **Guarantee on stable rent that is genuinely affordable in perpetuity:** Legislate tenancy law for all State-supported Affordable Housing programs (e.g., Homes Victoria) to mandate that rents are capped at a maximum of 30% of the tenant's actual gross income (not the area median) and available to people on the lowest incomes, and enforce a covenant in perpetuity to ensure the dwelling remains affordable regardless of ownership changes or program expiration.
- **Innovative Housing Investment:** Invest seed funding and guarantee land/planning approvals for innovative, community-led housing models for older people (e.g., co-housing, community land trusts) that promote social connection and security.
- **Implement a Rent Cap Linked to Inflation:** Legislate a cap on the amount of rent increases for existing private tenancies, limiting them to a specified index like the Consumer Price Index (CPI) or a percentage point above, to prevent unreasonable and sudden increases that push older people into financial distress.
- **Mandate the Offer of Multi-Year Leases:** Require rental providers (landlords) to offer tenants the option of a multi-year lease at the start of a tenancy or renewal, allowing older renters to choose long-term stability and security.

Note: Under this model, the tenant should still retain the flexibility to break the lease under hardship provisions, and the rent cap would apply annually within the multi-year term.

2. RUN DOWN: ADDRESSING THE HEALTH AND SAFETY RISK OF SUBSTANDARD HOMES

- **Enforce rules to make more homes energy efficient:** Expedite the introduction and rigorous enforcement of the newly legislated minimum energy efficiency standards (insulation, draught-proofing, heating, cooling, etc.) to address the health and safety risks in existing properties, with clear compliance targets for older housing stock.
- **Mandate Accessibility in Existing Rentals:** Amend the Residential Tenancies Act 1997 to mandate minimum accessibility standards (e.g., grab rails, accessible paths) when existing private rental properties undergo significant renovations, or as a condition of State grants, to reduce the financial and social barrier to ageing in place.
- **Establish a Dedicated Retrofit Grant Program:** Launch a substantial State-wide grant and loan program specifically designed to subsidise the full cost of high-impact energy efficiency upgrades (insulation, draught-proofing, efficient heating/cooling) for vulnerable households, with priority to older low-income groups who can't afford the upfront costs of mandatory upgrades and maintenance.

