

COTA

*for older Australians
New South Wales*



Engagement
Report
2025

**Weathering the Storm:
Older Adults and
Climate Change in NSW**

COTA NSW acknowledges the following people for their thoughtful input, expertise and support throughout the development of this report:

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COTA NSW is funded by the NSW Government under the NSW Seniors Strategy.

Acknowledgment of Country

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land throughout New South Wales and Australia. We pay our respects to their Elders, past, present and future. We recognise the deep connection that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have to this land, and the vital role that Elders play as custodians of culture, knowledge, and tradition. Their wisdom and guidance are invaluable to their communities and to all Australians. We honour their contributions and the enduring legacy they provide for future generations. As we work together towards a more inclusive society, we commit to learning from and respecting the rich cultural heritage of our First Nations people, by acknowledging the importance of their voices in shaping our shared future.

About COTA NSW

Council on the Ageing (COTA) NSW is the leading not-for-profit organisation representing the rights and interests of people over 50 in NSW. We're an independent, consumer-based, non-government organisation. We are determined to ensure that older people's contributions to society are valued and that they have access to the opportunities other members of the community take for granted. We work with politicians, policymakers, service providers, and the media to ensure that older people's views are heard and acted on.

CEOs Foreword

Climate change is no longer a future threat, it is a lived reality. For older adults across New South Wales, extreme weather events such as heatwaves, floods, bushfires, and storms are no longer rare disruptions; they are becoming regular and severe challenges that reshape everyday life. These events are not only testing the resilience of our infrastructure, they are testing our systems of care, our emergency planning, and ultimately, our social contract with those most at risk.

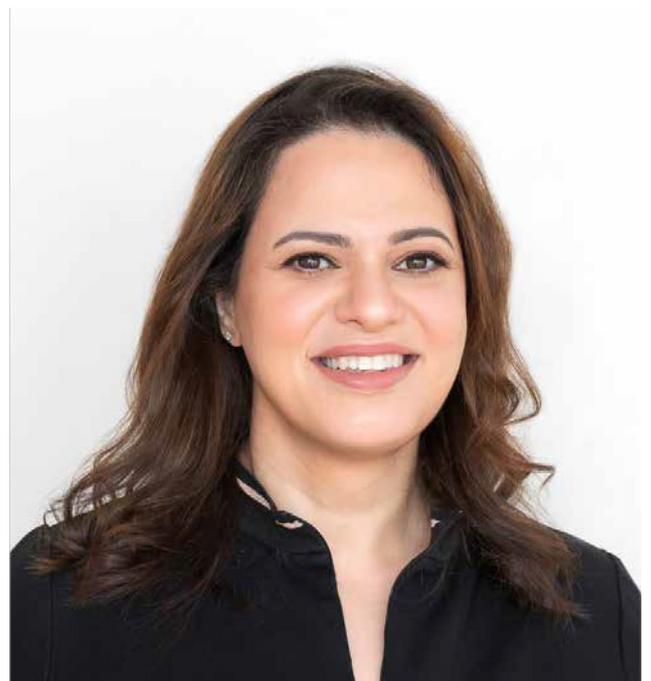
For older people, the impacts are deeply personal. We heard from individuals who cannot afford to cool their homes, who avoid medical appointments during extreme heat, and who feel increasingly cut off from their communities. For some, it is the fear of being stranded without transport. For others, it is the invisible weight of climate anxiety, disrupted sleep, strained mental health, and a growing sense of isolation.

This report presents the voices and experiences of older people themselves. It captures their stories with clarity and urgency, revealing how the rising frequency and intensity of extreme weather is affecting their lives, and where our systems and responses are falling short. It also offers something we need more than ever: hope. The people we spoke to are not passive victims, they are adapting, supporting one another, and calling for change.

We know what needs to be done. Older people are telling us: improve housing so it is safe and cool, expand energy concessions, make transport accessible, ensure clear and inclusive communication, and provide mental health support where and when it is needed. Most importantly, include older people in the planning and policies that shape their futures.

These are not just policy asks, they are essential measures for equity and justice. Older people have contributed to our communities throughout their lives. They deserve to age in safety and dignity, with access to the resources and support that enable them to thrive. A climate-resilient future must be one that recognises and values the needs, rights, and voices of older Australians.

The need for government leadership and coordinated, cross-sector action has never been more urgent. Our responses must be inclusive, localised, and grounded in lived experience. COTA NSW calls on all levels of government to ensure that older people are not left behind as the climate crisis intensifies.



Gohar Yazdabadi

Chief Executive Officer

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a 2025 survey of 964 older adults across NSW, supported by five in-depth focus groups. It explores how climate change and extreme weather events are affecting people aged 50 and over, with a focus on daily routines, health, housing, mobility, and social connection.



The main findings from the surveys and focus group include:

- Heatwaves were the most frequently reported event, with 55% of respondents saying they affected their health or wellbeing.
- 63% of respondents reported difficulty keeping their homes cool during heatwaves.
- 1 out of 2 respondents avoided using heating or cooling appliances due to high energy costs.
- Nearly half of respondents said heatwaves stopped them from doing basic daily tasks such as cooking or shopping. 6
- 20% avoided or were unable to attend healthcare appointments during extreme heat.
- Older people were often unable to leave their homes due to transport issues, illness, or pets.
- Focus group participants described heat and climate anxiety as deeply affecting their sleep, mental health, and ability to connect with others.



Key recommendations from this survey:

- Provide financial assistance and practical support to adapt homes for extreme weather such as insulation, shading, and cooling upgrades - and expand concessions and emergency utility relief to ensure older people can safely use cooling appliances during heatwaves.
- Fund accessible community and public transport options so older adults can reach cool, safe locations during extreme weather, and ensure emergency information is clear, timely, and accessible through digital and non-digital channels, with practical guidance tailored to older people.
- Invest in local mental health services and community-based peer support to help older adults cope with the emotional impacts of extreme weather and strengthen local networks of care.
- Create meaningful opportunities for older adults to share their lived experience, insights, and resourcefulness, and ensure they are actively involved in the design of climate policies and emergency responses.
- Encourage shopping centres and similar facilities to develop and implement protocols that welcome older people during heatwaves and extreme weather. This includes clear signage, accessible seating, hydration points, and staff awareness to ensure these spaces function as safe, inclusive havens.
- Encourage clubs, RSLs, and other community venues to consider how they can dedicate their spaces to support older people during extreme weather. This includes ensuring those spaces are physically accessible, comfortable, and age-friendly, and promoting them as safe places to escape the heat when needed.

The full findings offer a snapshot of resilience and vulnerability as well as a roadmap for ensuring older adults can continue to live safely and with dignity as our climate changes.

Introduction

Purpose of the report

This report explores how climate change and extreme weather events affect older adults across New South Wales. Through survey data and focus group interviews, we examine the lived experiences of older people during heatwaves, floods, and other climate-related disruptions. Our aim is to centre the voices of older adults in the climate conversation and provide evidence-based recommendations for building more inclusive, equitable, and resilient communities.

Why climate change and ageing matters

Australia, like many countries, is experiencing two powerful demographic shifts: an ageing population and a rapidly changing climate. While both pose significant challenges, it is at their intersection that vulnerability becomes most acute. Older adults are disproportionately affected by climate change due to age-related physical, cognitive, and social factors that limit their ability to prepare for, respond to, and recover from extreme weather events.

A recent systematic review of global health data found that older people are at significantly higher risk of morbidity and mortality due to climate change (Figueiredo et al., 2024). Health conditions linked to extreme temperatures, air pollution, and natural disasters include cardiovascular, respiratory, renal, and mental health disorders, along with physical injuries such as falls and fractures (Figueiredo et al., 2024). For example, heat-related mortality among people aged 65+ has increased by over 50% in recent decades (Figueiredo et al., 2024). Temperature variability, droughts, and wildfires also contribute to increased hospitalisations and deaths, particularly in individuals with underlying health conditions or limited mobility.

Climate resilience as a social justice issue

The impacts of climate change are not evenly distributed. Socioeconomic status, housing quality, digital access, and community infrastructure all shape how individuals experience and respond to environmental hazards. Building climate resilience among older people is therefore not only a public health priority, it is a matter of justice. Strategies to support this must extend beyond emergency response and include investment in housing, local infrastructure, transport, social connection, and communication systems tailored to the needs of an ageing population.



Methods

This research project involved a mixed-methods approach comprising a statewide survey and a series of focus groups, conducted during March and April 2025 across New South Wales.

The survey targeted adults aged 50 and over and was self-administered using SurveyMonkey. Recruitment began with a callout to COTA NSW's e-newsletter subscribers and membership base. To ensure broad representation, the survey was also promoted through the NSW Seniors Card e-newsletter, shared by community organisations, and distributed via local council websites across metropolitan, regional, and rural areas of the state.

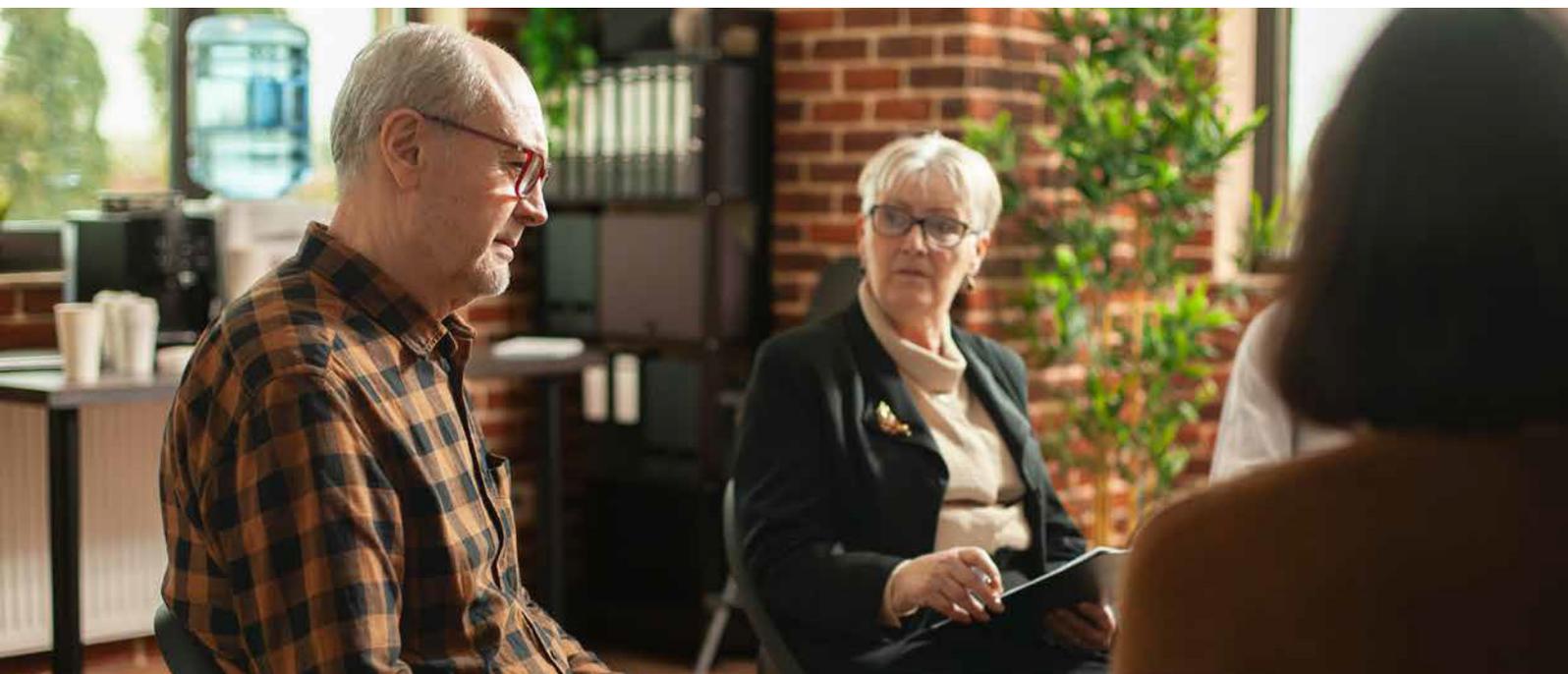
In addition to the survey, five focus groups were held to gather in-depth qualitative insights. Sessions were conducted both in-person and online, with locations including Sydney CBD, Parramatta, Ballina and a retirement village on the Northern Beaches. Each group consisted of 6 to 8 participants, enabling meaningful discussion while allowing all voices to be heard.

COTA survey sample characteristics

A total of 964 older adults from across New South Wales completed the survey, with responses evenly split between metropolitan (58%) and regional or rural areas (42%). Most participants were aged between 65 and 75, and two-thirds were women. The majority lived in their own home, either with or without a mortgage, while smaller numbers lived in private rentals, retirement villages, or social housing. Over half lived with a partner, and around one in three lived alone. Key income sources included superannuation (42%), government pensions or allowances (25%), and wages or salary (10%). Full demographic details can be found in the appendix.

Focus group details

To complement the survey findings, COTA NSW conducted five focus groups with older adults across a mix of urban and regional locations. Six people participated in a session in Ballina on the Northern Rivers, seven attended a group in Parramatta, and eight took part in a focus group held in Sydney's CBD. Another eight residents joined a focus group in Northern Sydney. Finally, an online focus group was held with six people from across regional NSW.



Experiences of extreme weather events



55% of respondents experienced a **heatwave** with effects on their health and wellbeing



33% of respondents experienced a **bushfire** with effects on their health and wellbeing



24% of respondents experienced a **severe storm or cyclone** with effects on their health and wellbeing



19% of respondents experienced a **drought** with effects on their health and wellbeing



13% of respondents experienced a **flood** with effects on their health and wellbeing

Heatwaves emerged as the most commonly experienced and impactful event, with 55% of respondents reporting minor to large effects on their health or wellbeing. Only 9% indicated they had not experienced a heatwave, underscoring its widespread prevalence and disruptive nature.



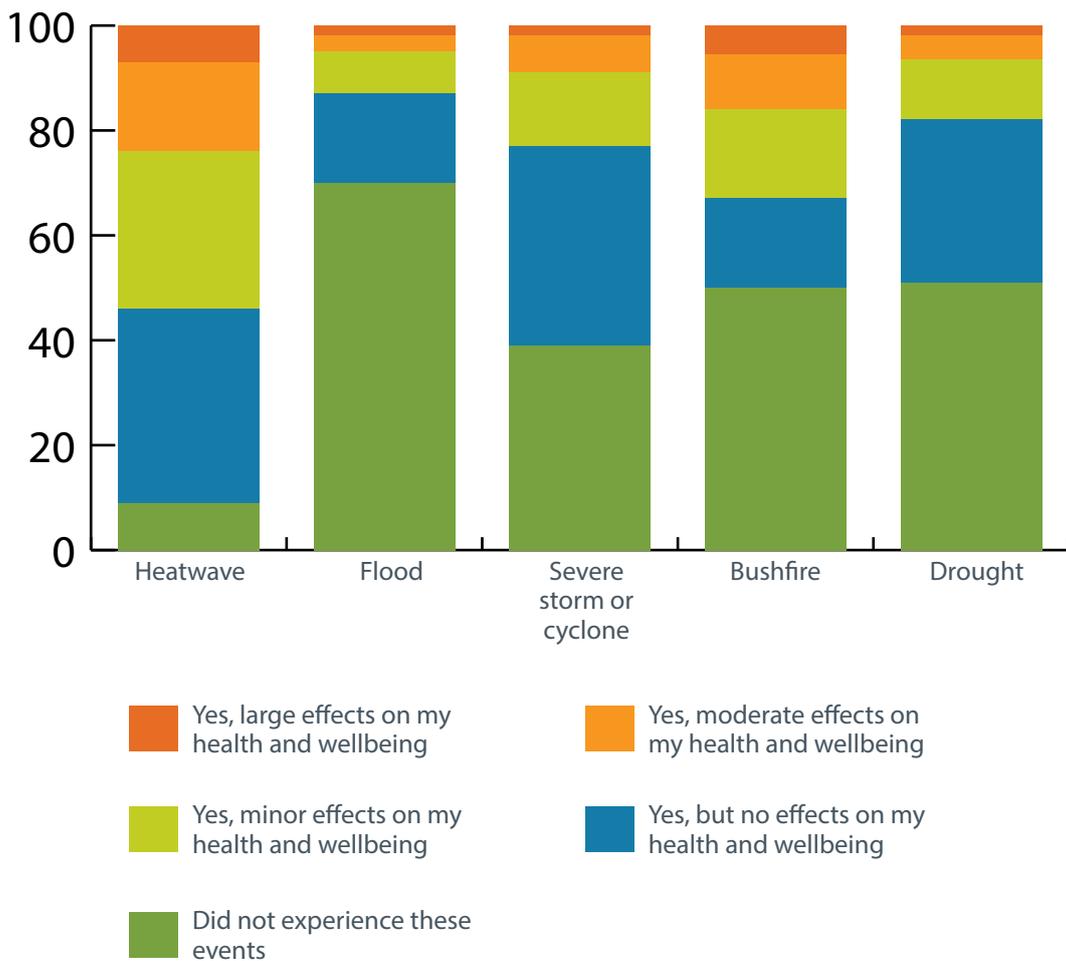
While heatwaves were the most experienced extreme weather event among older adults, they were not the only ones that caused significant distress. Respondents were asked whether they had experienced various types of extreme weather in the last 20 years, and whether these events had impacted their health or wellbeing.

The events included:

- Heatwaves (i.e. maximum temperatures in the high 30s or above for at least 3–4 days) 10
- Floods (i.e. overflow of water beyond the normal limits of rivers and drains, partially submerging properties)
- Severe storms or cyclones (with very strong winds or heavy, prolonged rainfall)
- Bushfires (that threatened homes and/or caused smoke hazards)
- Droughts (i.e. no or almost no rainfall for three months or more)

More than half of older adults reported being affected by heatwaves. Floods, bushfires, and severe storms also had significant impacts, with a smaller proportion affected by drought. When asked which single event had the most impact, respondents most frequently identified heatwaves, followed by bushfires and floods.

These events did not occur in isolation. Many older people experienced more than one over time, often compounding the emotional, financial, and logistical toll.



The focus groups revealed powerful, at times harrowing stories from older adults who had lived through fires, floods, and storms. Their reflections show how sudden these events can be and how enduring their effects.

Fires

One in three older adults (33%) reported that bushfires had affected their health and wellbeing.

I heard this thing that sounded like 1000 motor bikes... this huge [fire] as high as the top of the gum trees... it was just coming down like a wall.

People were running out of medicines. Churches from Sydney were sending down clothes and water, but there was no one to unload the trucks.

For a long time I had panic attacks every time I heard there was a fire anywhere nearby. It was so visual at the time and so impactful.

You looked out the window every day in panic. The fire would move, and you'd have no way of knowing where or when.

Floods

13% respondents reported experiencing health and wellbeing impacts as a result of flooding

We were told to be prepared with an evacuation route, but no one ever told us where we were supposed to go. Do we go to the beach? The hills? We never knew.

It was like a war movie really... no one could get out, there were kids, dogs, people crying — the whole highway was blocked. We had no food, no power, and no information.

It was the most frightening experience I've ever had... all I could think was, did I read the fine print in the insurance papers, and what's happening with my children, it was Christmas Eve.

These personal stories underscore the need for coordinated, localised emergency planning and support, and not just during a disaster, but in the long aftermath of trauma and recovery.

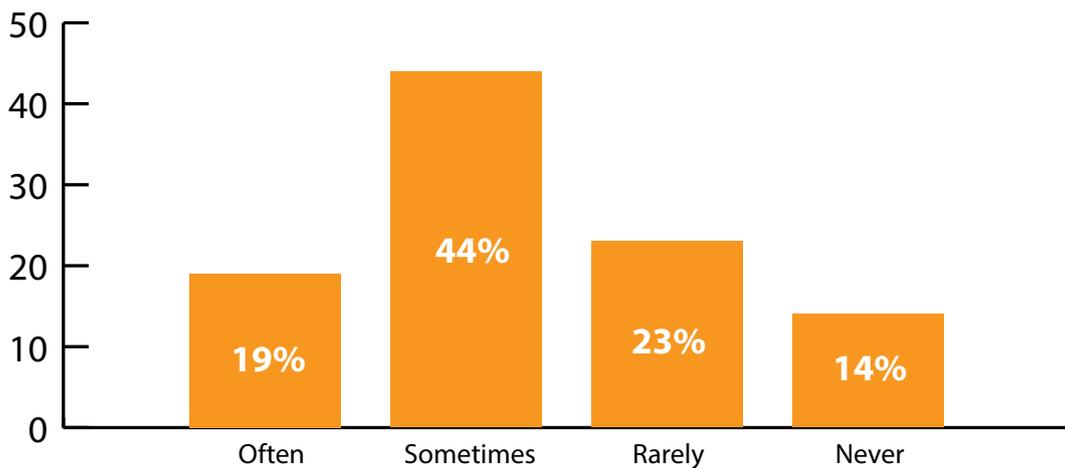
Heatwaves and their impacts on older adults

More than half of respondents (55%) were impacted by heatwaves, reporting effects on their health and wellbeing.

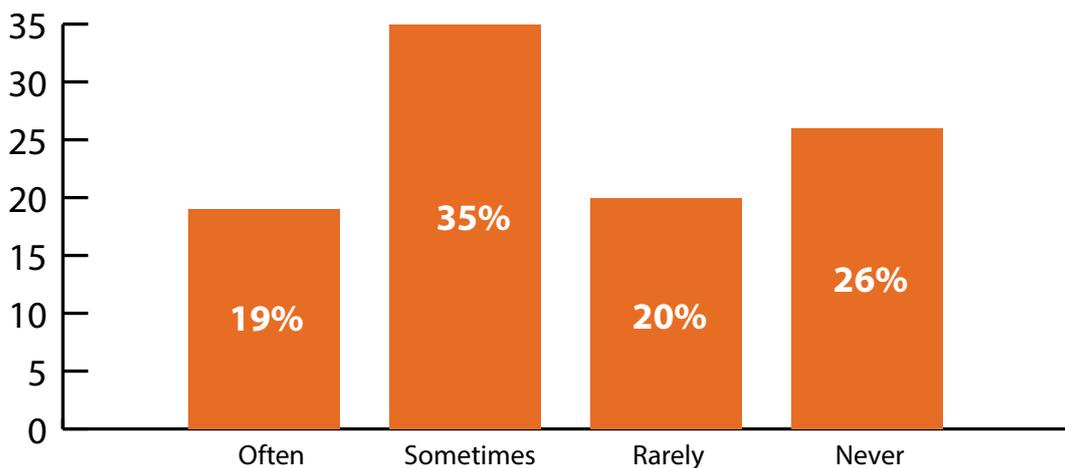
Staying cool at home

For many older adults, maintaining a safe and comfortable indoor temperature during a heatwave is a real challenge. Nearly two-thirds, 63%, of respondents have trouble keeping their residence cool or at a comfortable temperature. Cost is a major barrier. More than half of respondents (54%) stated that the costs of energy (e.g. electricity, gas) have stopped them from using fans, air conditioning, or heating to cool or heat their home.

During heat waves do you have trouble keeping your place of residence cool/at a comfortable temperature?



Have the costs of energy (e.g., electricity, gas) ever stopped you from using fans, air conditioning, or heating to cool or heat your home?



For many older adults, the cost of cooling is not just a financial inconvenience, it's a major barrier to comfort, safety, and wellbeing during extreme heat. One person shared, *"If I could afford it, I would install air conditioning especially as I cannot sleep at night."* Others reported avoiding use altogether, even when temperatures became unbearable: *"Can't afford the energy bills so stay in a hot house. Sometimes the thermometer inside read 30 degrees C."* The rising cost of electricity was a recurring theme, with people noting that they *"limit usage of air conditioning or use of fan"* or *"just stay home or sit in the shopping centre if my energy bill is climbing."* Some said plainly, *"Can't use air conditioner due to high cost of energy"* or *"Air conditioning units are too expensive to operate."* Even outside the home, affordability was a barrier: *"Aircon in car is broken, can't afford to fix it so suffer greatly when driving on hot days."* The effects of extreme heat extended beyond the physical. Respondents frequently linked poor sleep, mental fatigue, and emotional distress to high indoor temperatures: *"When the temperature starts to climb, I start to lose concentration... I get irritable,"* *"On hot nights with high humidity, I don't have a restful sleep... I wake up regularly, and that impacts my ability to concentrate and my energy the next day"* and *"We had several nights where it never cooled down. I was alone and couldn't sleep...once you can't sleep, you can't function."*

These accounts paint a clear picture; energy affordability is directly impacting the health, safety and resilience of older people during heatwaves.

"We used to be able to afford basic energy use but now people can't run a fan without thinking about the bill."

Focus group participant



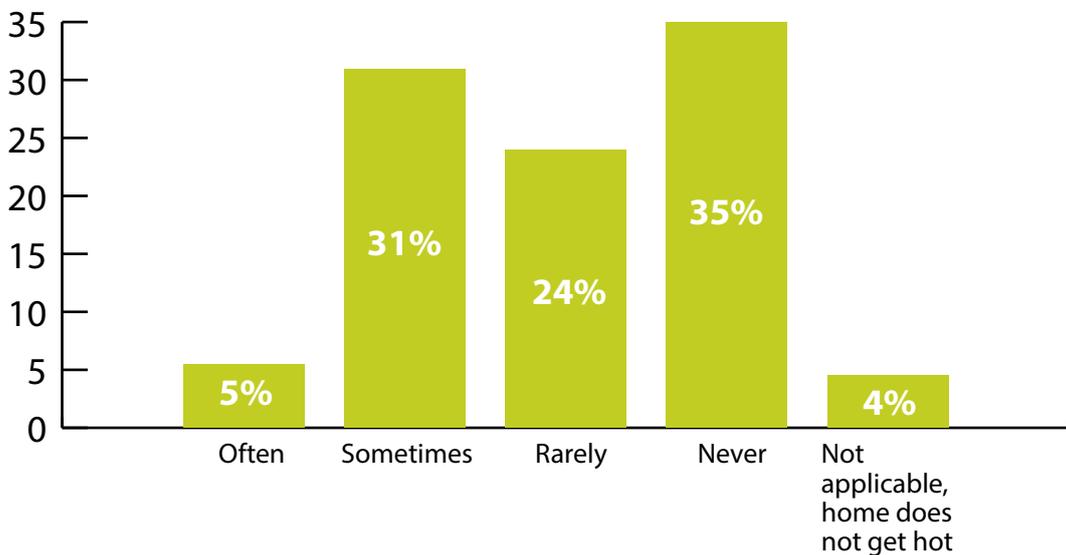
Leaving the home to stay cool

When asked whether they left their home during heatwaves, 36% of respondents said they went somewhere else to be cooler. Strikingly, only 4% said this question was not applicable to them as their home does not get hot, meaning the overwhelming majority experience at least some level of heat in their homes.

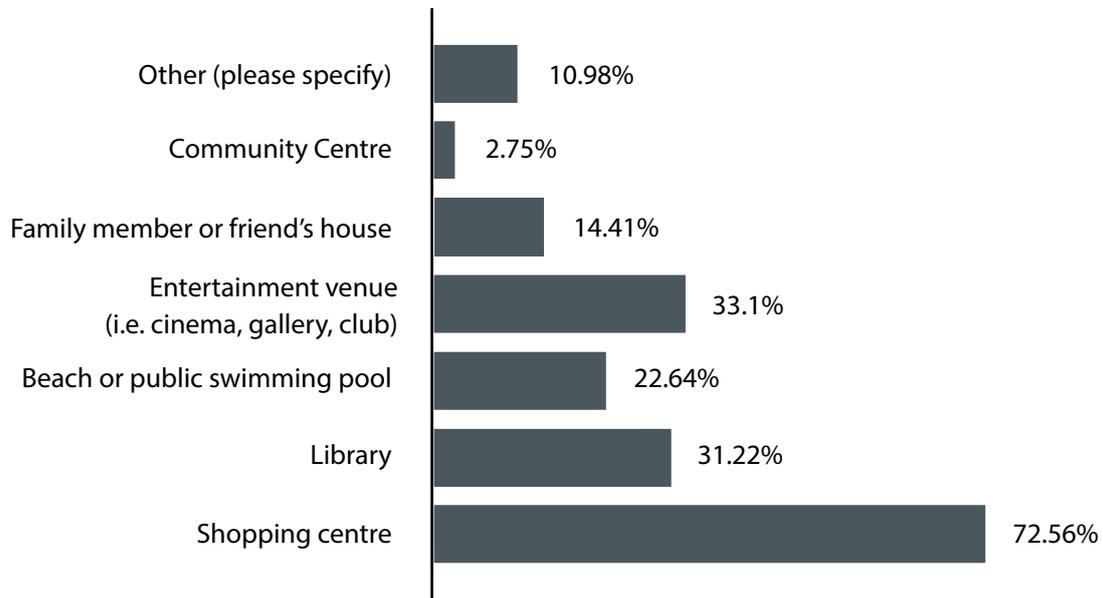
Among those who did leave their homes, shopping centres were by far the most common destination, cited by 73% of those who left. This was echoed by qualitative comments indicating that shopping centres are viewed as safe, familiar, and reliably air-conditioned public spaces. One participant noted *“I use the shopping centre for my exercising. I walk several times up and down the length of the mall on hot days.”* Other popular destinations included Entertainment venues (33%) such as cinemas or galleries, and Libraries (31%) with one participant recounting *“I go to the movies in the afternoon just for the air con.”*

While this shows a degree of resourcefulness and adaptability, the data also points to a reliance on commercial or public spaces that may not be easily accessible to all, particularly those living with mobility issues or far from town centres. One focus group participant said *“I would like to go somewhere cool however the public transport around here is almost non-existent and finding a taxi that can accommodate a wheelchair is an absolute nightmare.”* Other insights from the focus groups revealed some older adults *“don’t feel comfortable occupying public spaces for long periods”*, highlighting a potential role for more formalised “cool spaces” in communities. Areas that would function as designated, welcoming environments for people to shelter safely during heat events.

During heatwaves, how often have you left your home and gone somewhere else to be cooler?



If you went somewhere else to be cooler, where did you go?



The cost of comfort

An older woman lives alone in a small brick unit in western Sydney. She's fiercely independent and proud of managing on a modest pension. She's fiercely independent and proud of managing on a modest pension. But during a recent heatwave, the indoor temperature soared past 30 degrees. *"I just sat in front of the fan, counting the hours until sunset,"* she said. *"I'd love to turn on the air conditioner, but I'm terrified of the electricity bill."* Even everyday tasks like making tea or hanging washing outside feel overwhelming. *"You don't realise how much the heat takes from you. Your energy, your routine, your peace of mind."*

To keep active and escape the heat, Diane heads to her local shopping centre to walk laps in the air conditioning. *"I try to get my steps in. Up and down the mall a few times is better than nothing,"* she said. But it's not easy. *"I use the TripView app to time the bus down to the minute so I'm not stuck waiting in the sun at the stop. There's no shade, so I can't afford to miss it."*

Diane's story reflects the daily trade-offs many older adults face as they juggle health, mobility, and safety while navigating rising costs and a changing climate. *"You do what you can,"* she says. *"But it's exhausting."*

Barriers to leaving home

While many older adults sought refuge in cooler public spaces during heatwaves, a significant number were unable or unwilling to leave their homes, often due to reasons rooted in health, safety, or personal circumstance. In our survey, 13% of respondents said they did not leave because they were not feeling well enough, suggesting that the very people who may be most vulnerable to extreme heat are often the least able to escape it. Others cited practical and emotional barriers: 15% said they stayed home because they did not want to leave a pet or animal, a reminder of how deeply people’s wellbeing is tied to their responsibilities and connections. Meanwhile, 4% didn’t know where to go and 2% did not feel safe leaving.

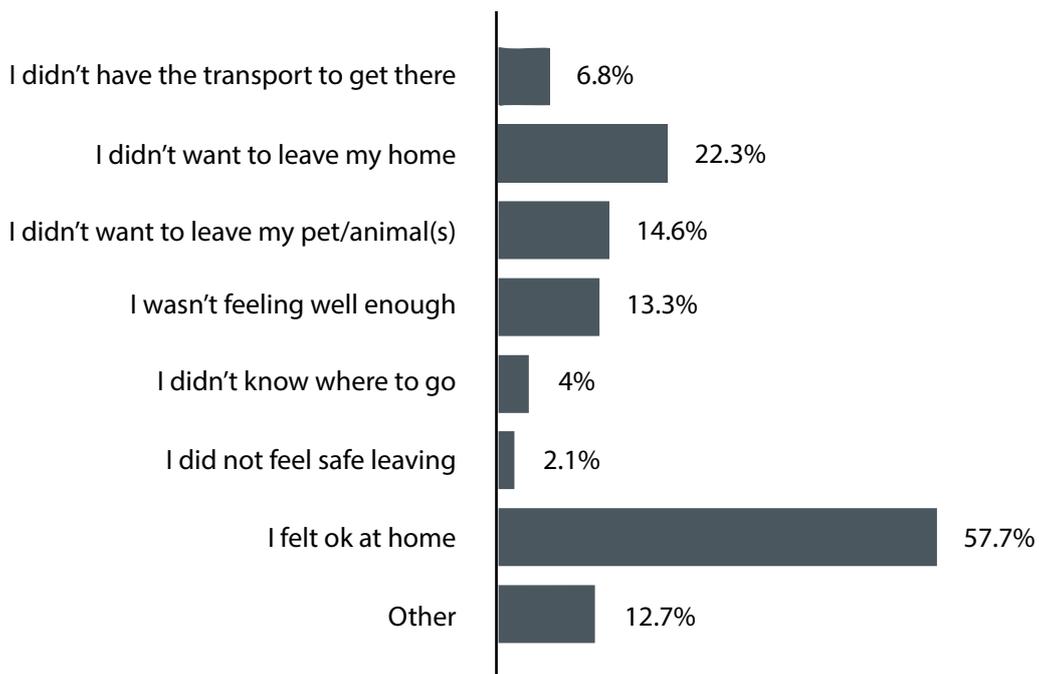
These findings point to the need for more accessible community supports and better communication during heat events. Ensuring that people know where they can go, feel safe getting there, and have plans in place for pets and dependents could significantly improve outcomes for those who currently feel trapped during periods of extreme heat. It also raises broader questions about how we design heatwave responses that centre the lived realities of older adults, particularly those who are isolated, unwell, or caring for others.

“We can’t just tell people to ‘go somewhere cool’ if they have no way to get there.”

Focus group participant



If there were times you would have liked to go somewhere cooler but didn’t, what stopped you?



Transport during heatwaves

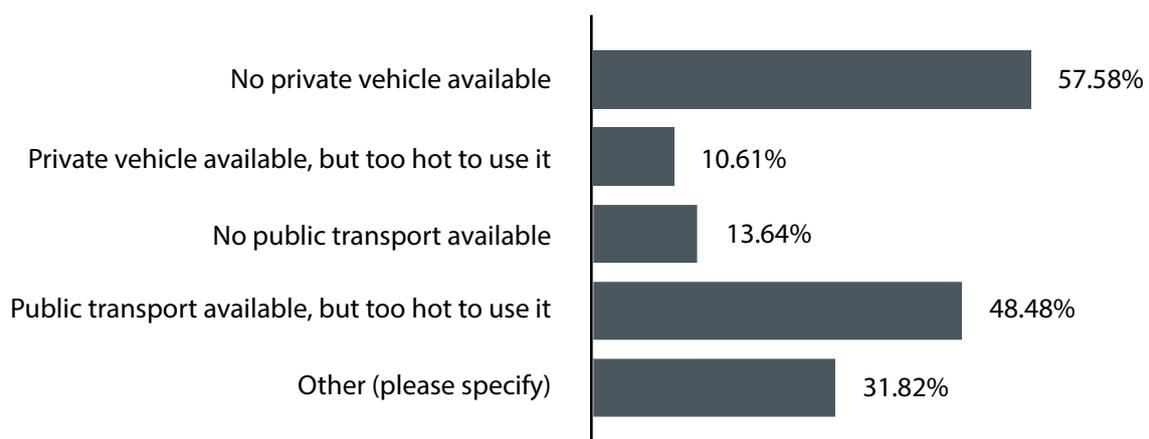
Interestingly 7% of respondents did not leave their home because they did not have the transport to get there. When examining this further, a large majority (58%) of respondents said this was because they didn't have a private vehicle available, whilst a large proportion (49%) said they had public transport available, but it was too hot to use it. A similar theme appeared with 11% saying their private vehicle was too hot to use. Whilst 13% said they did not have public transport available altogether.



These issues were echoed throughout the focus groups, where participants described how inaccessible or impractical transport options limited their ability to leave the house during extreme heat. One participant explained, *"The clubs could be great places to cool down, but we can't get to them. No taxis, barely an Uber — and certainly not affordable for most."* Others pointed to inadequate infrastructure at bus stops, saying, *"There's no shelter at many bus stops — you're stuck standing under the sun or in the rain,"* and *"There's no shade at the bus stop. The seat's in full sun unless you hit it at the exact right hour."* To manage these limitations, some had developed their own strategies: *"I drive to a different bus stop with a shelter. There's one closer, just two houses away, but it has no cover and I can't stand in the sun waiting for the bus."*

These reflections show how even small design features can have a significant impact on older people's ability to stay safe during extreme weather events.

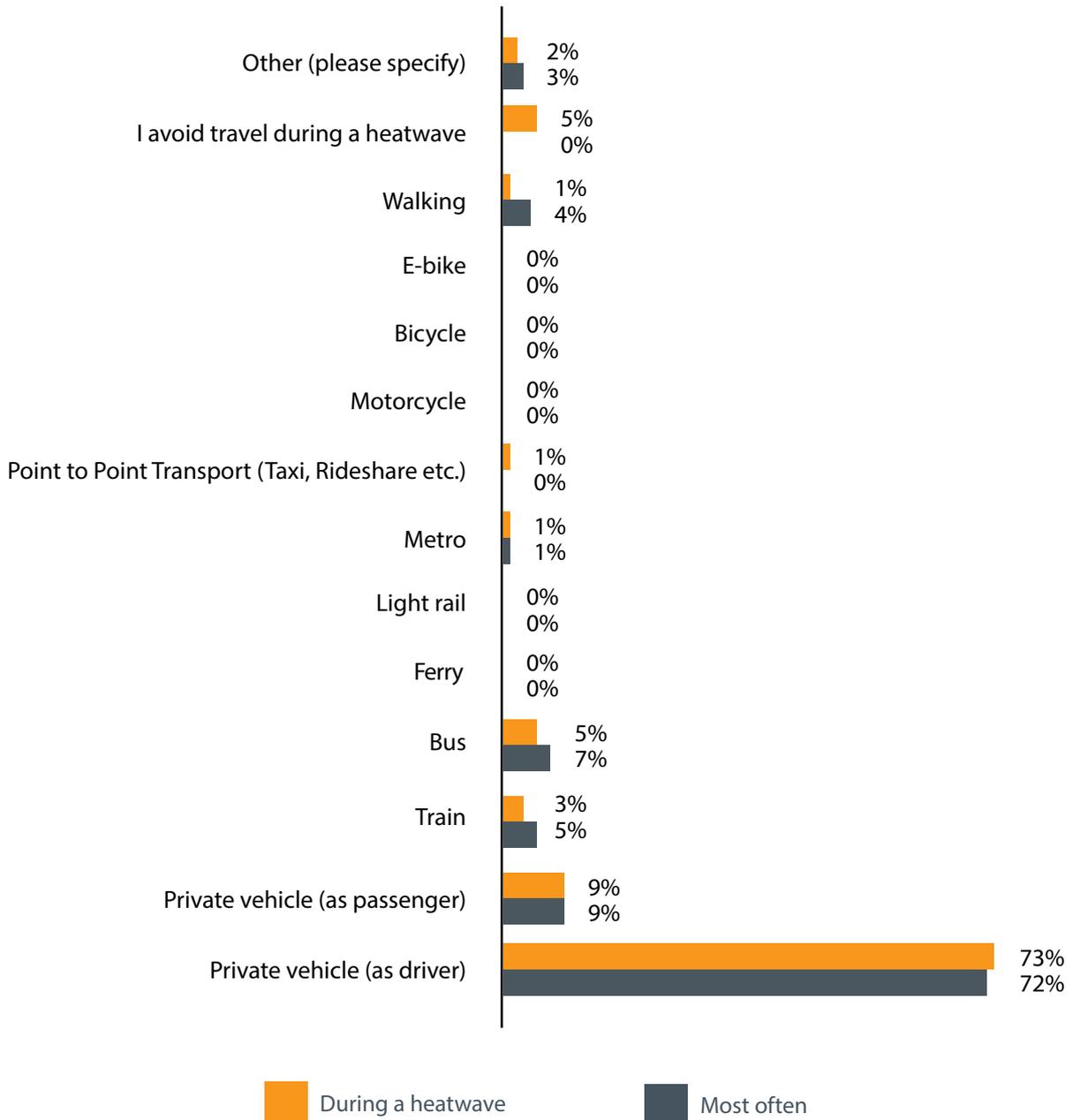
Could you please explain why you didn't have access to transport (tick all that apply)?



Private vehicles were by far the most commonly used form of transport, with nearly 75% of older adults saying they use their own car regularly, a pattern that held steady even during heatwaves. But this reliance is not guaranteed to last. As one participant noted: *"I can drive now, but all my routes are hilly. When I can't drive, I won't be able to get to a cool place."*

While driving remained consistent, the use of more exposed or physically demanding modes of transport, such as walking, bus, or train, dropped sharply during periods of extreme heat. This suggests that high temperatures are a barrier to using more exposed or less climate-controlled modes of transport limiting the options of mobility for older adults. A small but important 5% of respondents reported avoiding travel altogether during heatwaves, reflecting concerns around fatigue, dizziness, or other health risks.

What type of transport do you use?



Focus group participants also offered thoughtful suggestions:

“ Public transport vehicles should have proper tinting or automatic shading like on aircraft, because you can’t move away from the sun on a full train. ”

“ The only transport that works well around here is the school transport... they’ll pick up my daughter from our front door. Why can’t that be used for older people during extreme weather? ”

“ Clubs already run buses for patrons who’ve had too much to drink. Why not use them during heatwaves to pick up older adults without cars? ”

These ideas point to a broader opportunity; re-imagining transport systems as a form of climate resilience infrastructure, not just for movement, but for safety, health, and inclusion.



Changes to daily routine and mobility

Heatwaves have a clear and wide-reaching impact on the lives of older people in NSW. The data shows that many are prevented from engaging in day-to-day life, with disruptions to routine, relationships, care responsibilities, and access to health services.

“No energy to walk to public transport, no energy to cook decent meals, no stamina for activities that give satisfaction.”

Focus group participant

Key statistic

During a heatwave:

45% of older adults are prevented from engaging with friends or loved ones during a heatwave

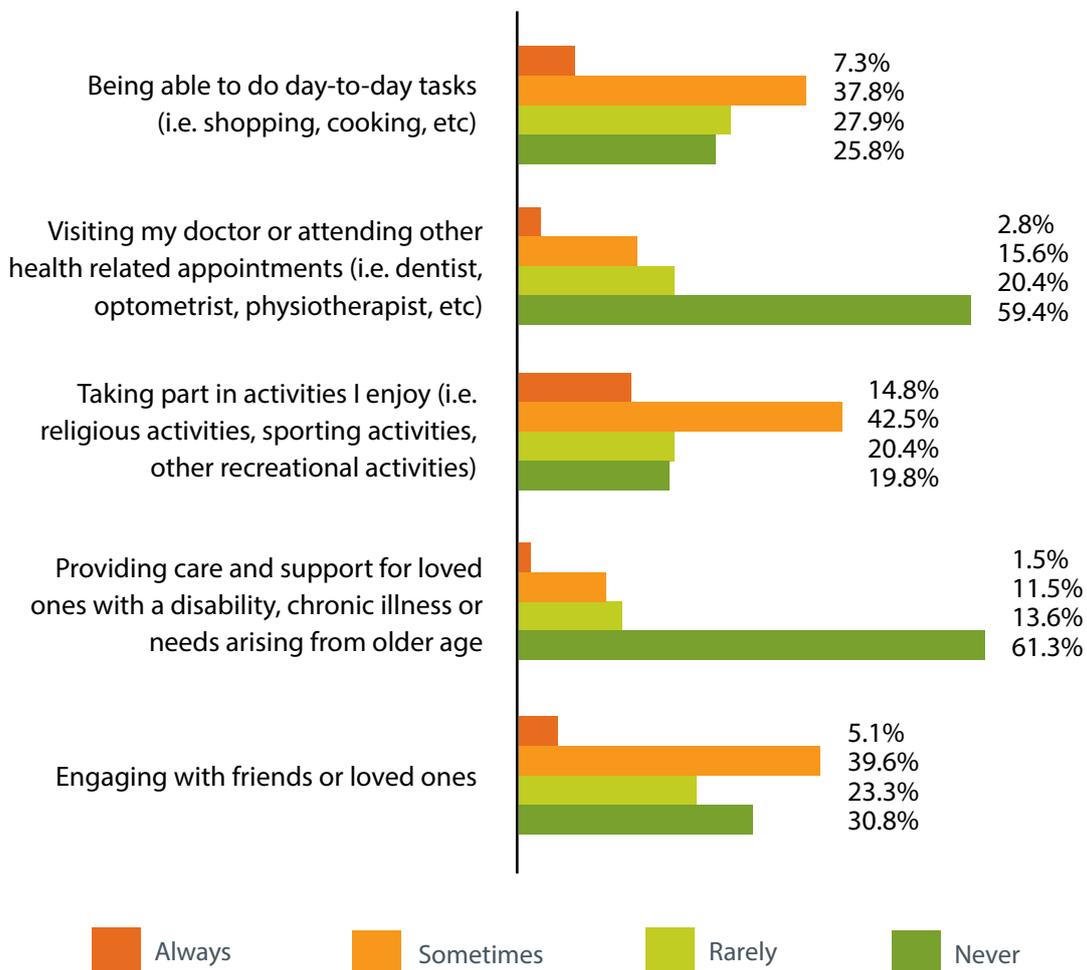
57% are prevented from taking part in activities they enjoy

Almost half (**45%**) of older adults are prevented from doing basic day-to-day tasks

1 in 5 older adults are prevented from visiting their doctor or attending health related appointments

Survey findings reveal that heatwaves disrupt a wide range of daily activities for older adults, with nearly half reporting they are unable to complete basic tasks such as shopping, cooking, or managing household chores. This disruption goes beyond temporary discomfort, as it represents a serious threat to independence and wellbeing. When daily routines are broken, older people may skip meals, delay essential errands like picking up medication or groceries, and lose the sense of stability that's vital for mental and physical health. For those living alone or without support, this can lead to feelings of helplessness and a diminished sense of autonomy. Social connection is also deeply affected: 45% of respondents said they were unable to engage with friends or loved ones during heatwaves, and 57% missed out on activities they enjoy. This is particularly concerning given the existing risks of loneliness and social isolation in later life and reflects how extreme weather can deepen disconnection. One in five older people said they were unable to attend health-related appointments, raising concerns about delayed care and worsened health conditions. Additionally, 13% were unable to provide care or support to others, highlighting the ripple effects of extreme heat on families and communities. When daily routines break down, skipped meals, missed medications, and social withdrawal can compound quickly, undermining both mental and physical health.

Generally, during a heatwave, I am prevented from:



More detailed insights from open-ended survey responses and focus group discussions paint a deeper picture of the daily challenges experienced by older people during extreme heat.

Lack of energy

One of the most common themes in participants' responses was the sheer exhaustion experienced during heatwaves. Many older adults described feeling physically drained, lethargic, or unable to function. As one respondent put it, *"The heat leaves me with no energy, can't do anything."* Others echoed this, saying they were *"too tired to do anything"* or that *"heatwaves sap your energy and make it hard to perform everyday activities like cleaning or exercise."* For some, this exhaustion led to complete inactivity, with one person stating, *"Wipes out your strength to do anything around the house."*

Impacts on cooking

Basic tasks like cooking and eating well were frequently disrupted. Several respondents noted they were unable to prepare meals during extreme heat, often skipping cooking altogether. One person explained, *"No energy to cook decent meals,"* while another simply said, *"Less likely to cook."* This kind of disruption to routine can have cumulative health impacts, especially for those already managing chronic health conditions or with limited support networks.

Chronic health conditions

Older adults living with health conditions were particularly vulnerable during heatwaves. Many reported flare-ups of asthma, migraines, swelling, pain, and autoimmune symptoms. One respondent shared, *"In the heat my ankle swells up badly, making mobility difficult. Heat can also make my asthma worse."* Others echoed similar concerns, describing *"breathing difficulties, migraines,"* and *"exacerbation of autoimmune symptoms."* Another person explained, *"Heat directly affects my disability... it makes my neurological symptoms worse."* These physical impacts often led to reduced activity or total withdrawal from daily life. As one person said, *"Extreme heat gives me migraines so I would not go out at all,"* while another reflected, *"Heatwaves increase my pain levels, which means I can't do any day-to-day activities — like maintaining my home."*

For some, heat also created new challenges in managing medication. One respondent expressed concern about power outages: *"I have insulin that needs to be kept in the fridge. The uncertainty of continuous electricity supply or threat of blackouts is stressful, which in turn negatively impacts my glucose levels."*

Social isolation

Heatwaves don't just disrupt routines, they can also deepen feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Many older adults described cancelling plans or withdrawing from usual activities when the temperature soars. *"I have cancelled going out when I know it's going to be hot,"* one person said. Another noted, *"A sense of isolation as some activities need to be cancelled."* This disruption often extends to walks, hobbies, or casual social interactions. As one participant put it, *"I don't get to go for walks or see people as often due to the heat."* For some, the emotional toll is more acute: *"I don't see my neighbours as frequently as I want,"* said one respondent, while another stated simply, *"Feelings of isolation and helplessness."* These reflections reveal how extreme weather can quietly erode connection, compounding the risks for those already vulnerable to loneliness.

As one person summarised *"We're seeing that one issue is causing a whole series of knock-on events that affect older adults... where there is already lower connectivity, it just gets completely hampered when it's too hot or too cold."*

Changes to routine

To cope with the challenges of extreme heat, many older adults described adjusting their daily routines, often in quiet but significant ways. This included shifting housework, errands, and outdoor activity to the cooler parts of the day. *"I get up at 5am when it is not hot to do things,"* one person shared, while another echoed, *"I wake up at five and get the oven on early, if it's a hot day, I'm not cooking later."* Others reported adapting outdoor tasks: *"I try to schedule outdoor jobs like watering the garden for early morning or late evening and definitely would not attempt to do any gardening jobs on those days."* Exercise routines were also commonly impacted. *"I limit my activity outside which means I am unable to go on daily walks for exercise,"* said one respondent. Others modified their routines to maintain some movement while avoiding heat exposure: *"I've had to avoid the sun... so I changed the hours I exercise. I find the coolest spot and do my sitting-down exercises."* As another explained, *"I don't go walking when it's hot and humid — I should be doing walks, but I just can't do it because I'm struggling to breathe."*



Preparedness and response

Despite increasing exposure to climate-related risks, many older adults do not feel adequately prepared for extreme weather events. In our survey, 44% of respondents reported not having a plan in place for how they would respond to such events. This lack of preparedness was echoed in the focus groups. As one participant reflected: *“We were under-prepared — no battery radio, flat torch batteries, lost all the food in the fridge.”*

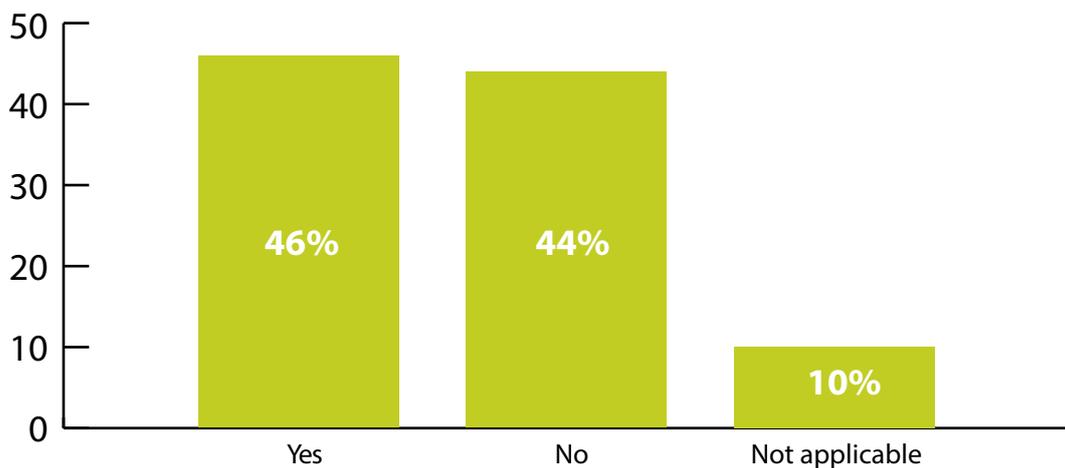
For some, it was only after a direct and frightening experience that steps were taken. One person recalled how their response to a bushfire prompted practical change:

“I told my kids, anything marked in yellow is what you grab if we need to leave — the rest doesn’t matter.”

Focus group participant

These reflections suggest that lived experience often becomes the catalyst for future preparedness — but relying on disaster to trigger planning is neither safe nor equitable. There is a clear need for more proactive support to help older adults prepare before emergencies unfold.

Do you have any plans in place for how you will respond to heatwaves, bushfires, floods, or extreme weather events?



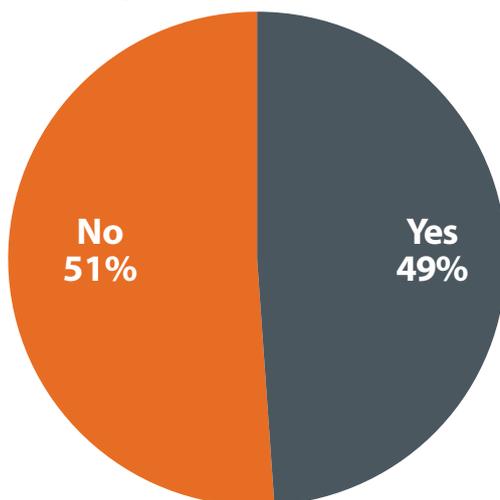
Changes to residence

Housing plays a crucial role in shaping climate resilience. In our survey, 49% of older adults said they had made changes to their home to reduce the impacts of extreme weather, but 51% had not. Among those who hadn't made any changes, a large portion identified significant barriers. 21% said they could not afford to make the changes they wanted, while 14% were unsure what changes they should make. Only half of respondents felt their home didn't need any modification — meaning the other half did, but were unable or uncertain how to proceed. Renters faced particular challenges, with 10% citing tenancy restrictions as the reason they hadn't modified their living environment. As one participant explained:

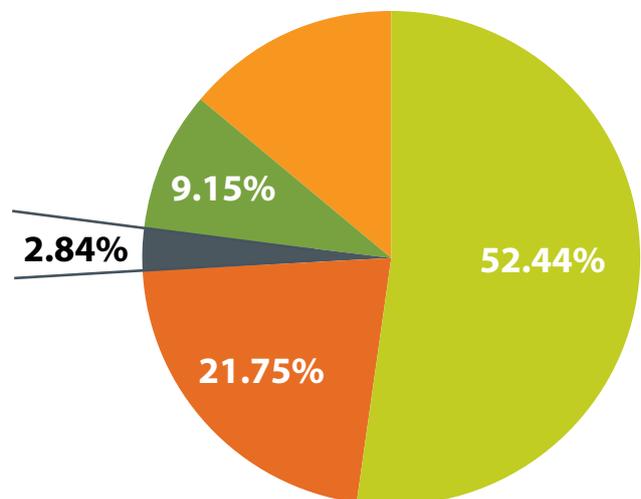
“Retrofitting’s expensive. If you rent or live in a unit, there’s often no permission to make changes.”

Focus group participant

In the last few years, have you made any changes to your place of residence to reduce the impacts of extreme weather events like heatwaves, floods, severe storms or cyclones, bushfires and/or bushfire smoke, or drought?



What was the main reason for not making changes to your place of residence?



My home didn't need any changes

I couldn't afford to make changes

I live in a shared residence (like an aged care facility), so others handle changes I

am a renter and don't want to/can't make changes

I'm not sure what changes I should make

Everyday adaptations

Beyond structural changes, many older adults are finding creative, low-cost ways to adapt their living environments to the changing climate. In our survey, 38% of respondents said they had taken other actions (now or in the past) to reduce the impact of extreme weather events.

Focus group discussions highlighted a range of practical, DIY solutions:

My neighbour uses frozen bottles in front of a fan. That's the 'poor man's air con'.

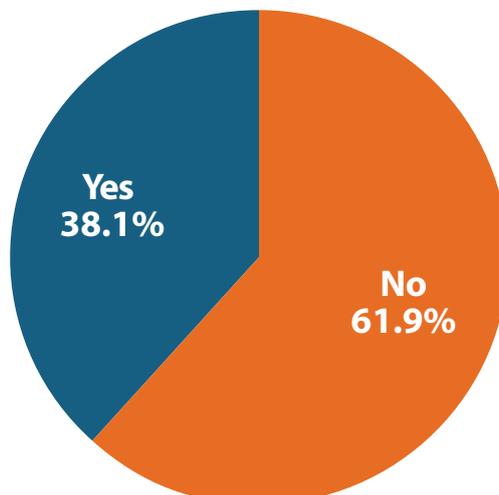
I used a rose bush to shield my lounge room window — it turned hot light into dappled light, and now the room is livable.

I do my best with good blinds to keep out the heat and sun. And I always open up the house at night to get a cross breeze. Heatwaves are draining.

I created dense planting on my balcony — it's like a mini forest. It cools everything and I don't feel trapped.

These examples show how older adults are not passive in the face of climate change — they are inventive, resilient, and often find ways to adapt with limited resources. Supporting and amplifying these grassroots strategies could significantly strengthen community resilience.

Have you undertaken any other actions to reduce the impacts of extreme weather events on you or on your family now or into the future?

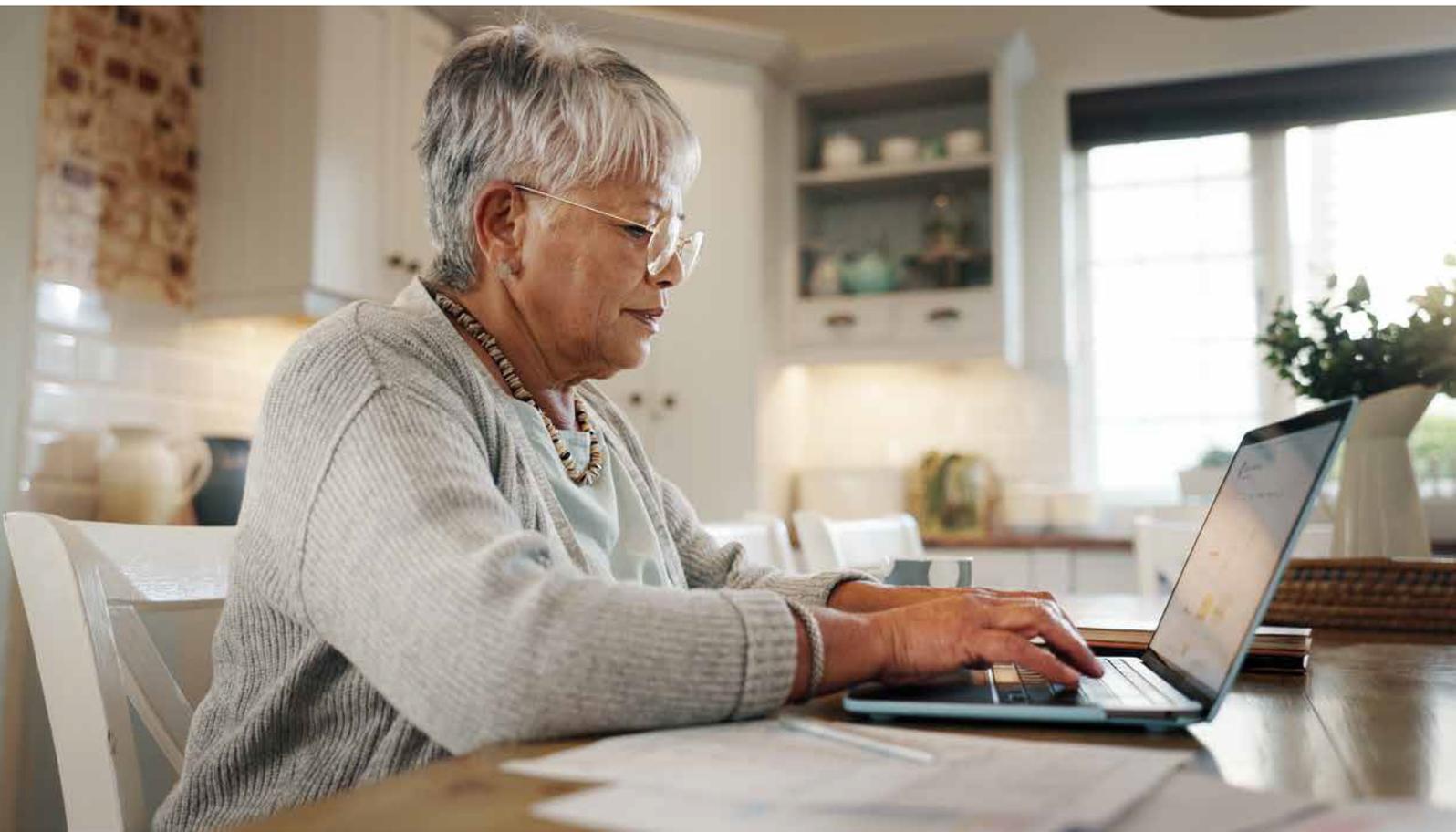


Access to information and emergency communication

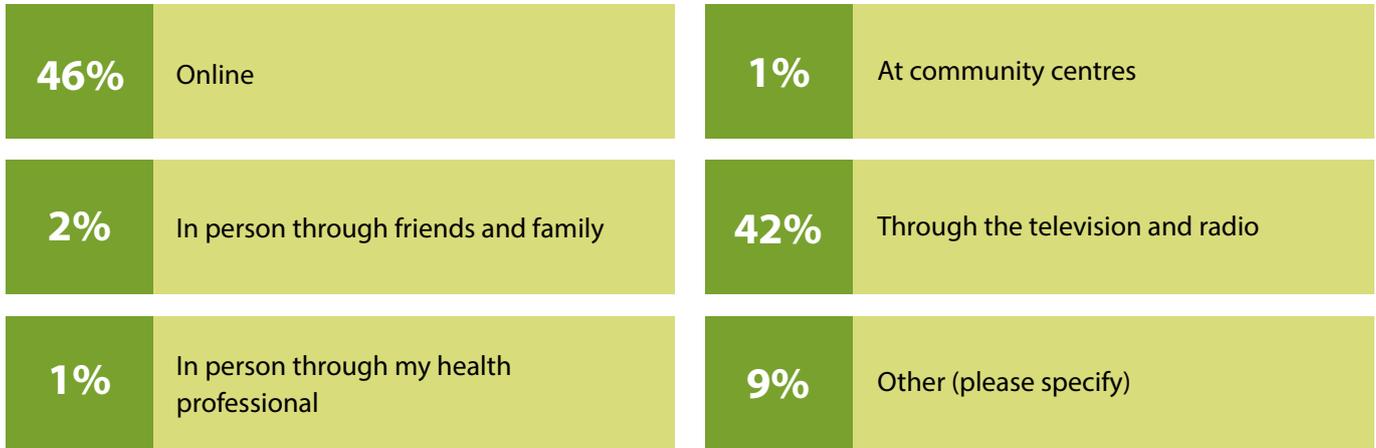
Older adults rely on a range of sources for information about how to prepare for and respond to extreme weather. In our survey, 46% said they get this information online, followed by 42% via television or radio. A small number received updates through family or friends (2%), health professionals, or community centres (1%).

However, our focus groups revealed that the format, accessibility, and clarity of emergency information can significantly affect its usefulness. One participant noted, *“Not everyone uses email. Councils should put alerts on posters in shopping centres and libraries where older people go.”* Another emphasised the need for variety and clarity: *“We need multiple channels, radio, TV, SMS. And make sure the messages are actually clear.”* Others called for better engagement from trusted services, saying, *“Healthcare providers need to be better prepared. Older people don’t always know what services are available.”* While many embraced digital tools to stay informed, such as *“Apps like AnyTrip help me avoid waiting at a hot bus stop. I time it to the minute,”* and *“I have the Hazards app, which I find very useful,”* others found that technology introduced new anxieties. *“Apps help us stay alert, but also make us more anxious. You’re constantly watching weather radars and bushfire maps.”* Concerns about design and accessibility were common: *“Some apps just aren’t designed for seniors. The fonts are tiny, and the layout is confusing,”* and *“I help older friends navigate the tech. Not everyone has someone who can do that.”*

Several participants missed important updates altogether due to poor app functionality: *“My council sends alerts, but they go to spam. I missed important updates because I didn’t check,”* and *“I was getting fire alerts for the wrong location and didn’t know how to fix it. In a panic, you can’t navigate apps. You’re just running around your house thinking you need to evacuate.”* Participants also stressed the importance of analog options during power outages: *“Most cars don’t even have AM radios anymore. People don’t know that sitting in the car might be their only option to get information,”* and *“We need to be told: when the power’s out, your car radio might be the only lifeline.”* These reflections make it clear that emergency communication strategies must be inclusive, multi-channel, and designed with older adults in mind, especially those who are digitally excluded or navigating crises under stress.

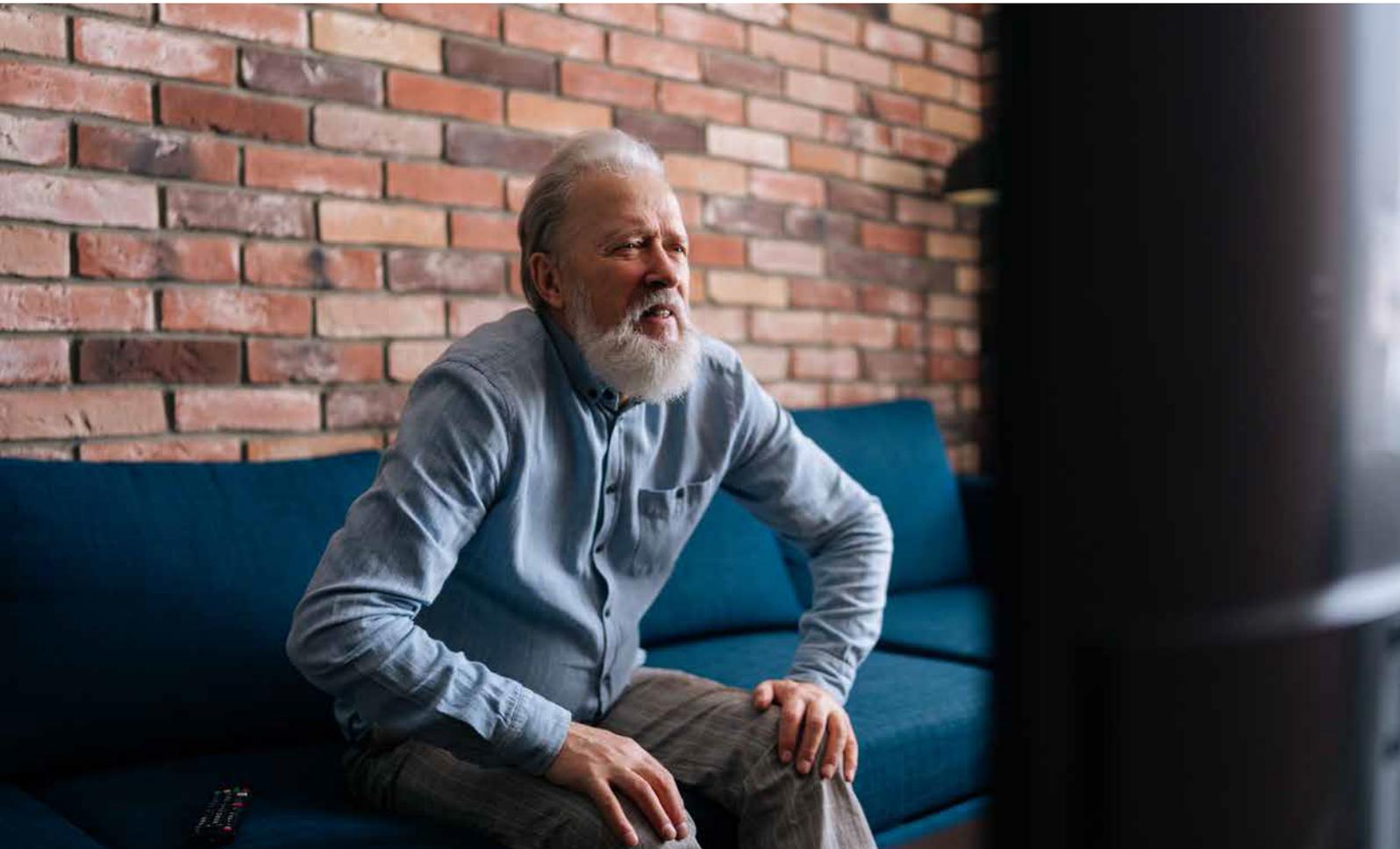


How do you like to receive information on preparing for and responding to extreme weather events?



When asked how satisfied they were with the information available on how to reduce the impacts of extreme weather on their health and wellbeing, 60% of respondents said they were satisfied, while only 9.8% reported being dissatisfied.

This suggests that while there is a reasonably high level of satisfaction overall, there are still critical gaps in delivery, accessibility, and format — particularly for older adults who are not digitally connected or who need information in simple, consistent formats across multiple channels.



When the water rose

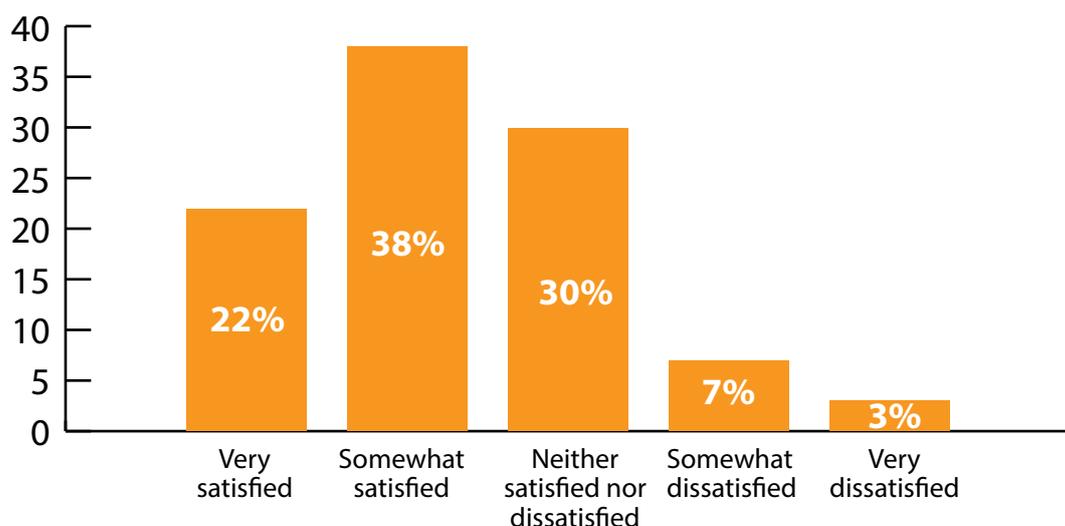
In a small northern NSW town, an older man sat alone in his home as floodwaters began to rise. The warnings had come, but without a car or internet, and with mobile coverage lost, he had no way of knowing how serious it was or what he was meant to do. Power had gone out early, and with it, all lines of communication. *“No phone. No radio. No internet. It was like the world had gone quiet.”*

Mobility issues made leaving the house impossible, even if there had been somewhere to go. Just as anxiety began to build, there was a knock at the door. A neighbour had come to check on him, knowing he lived alone and might need help. *“That meant the world. Just knowing someone knew I was here.”*

Over the coming days, the community came together. People shared food, passed on updates, and used cars to charge phones. More than anything, it was the conversations that made the difference. *“We sat outside and talked about what we’d all been through. Everyone had their own story, and somehow it helped just to listen.”*

This experience is a powerful reminder that in times of crisis, it is often the people closest to us who provide the greatest support. For older adults, community is not just a source of practical help. It is a lifeline.

How satisfied are you with the information available on how to reduce the impacts of extreme weather events on your health and wellbeing?



Climate change concerns

Key statistic



71%

of respondents are worried about climate change

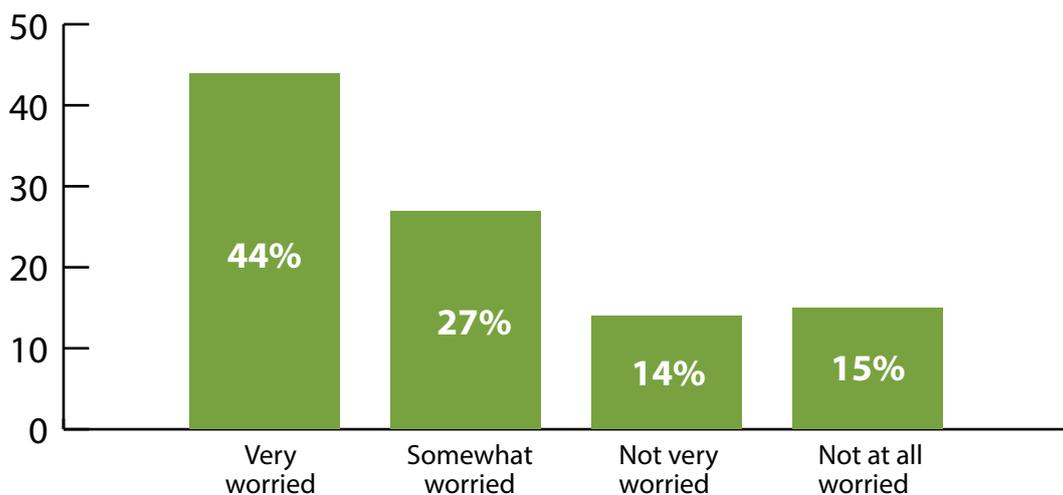
VS



15%

of respondents are not worried at all about climate change

Are you worried about climate change?

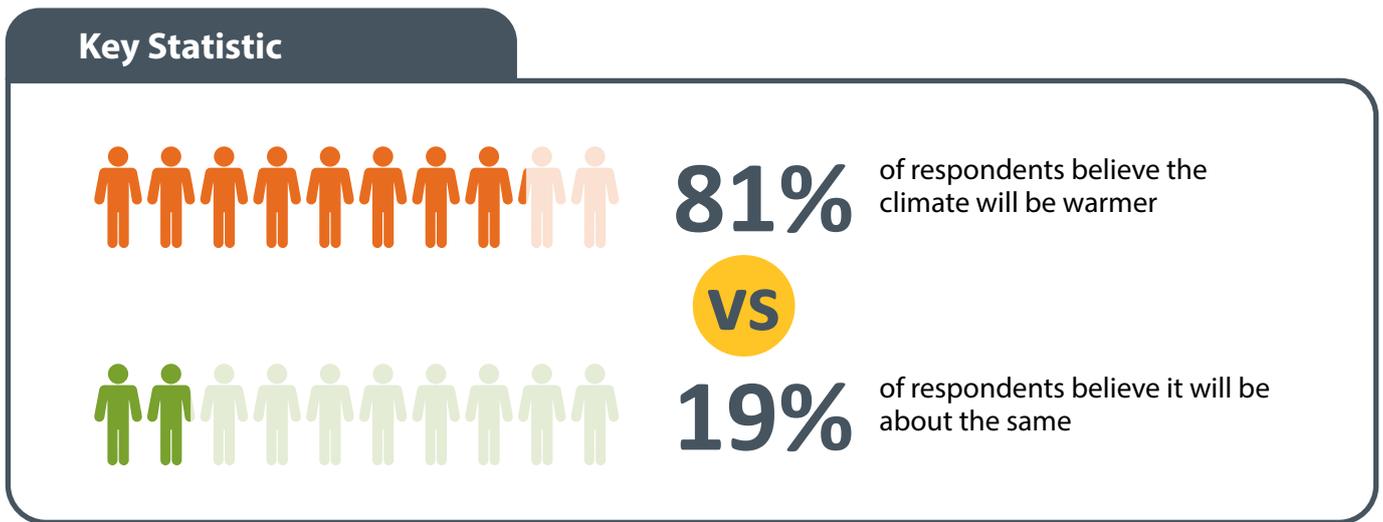


Our research reveals that climate change is not only altering the physical environment for older adults, but also affecting their sense of stability and emotional wellbeing. More than 7 in 10 respondents (71%) said they are worried about climate change, with a notable portion describing feelings of ongoing concern, anxiety, and helplessness.

This emotional impact was echoed throughout the focus groups. One participant reflected, *“I didn’t think climate change would affect me in my lifetime. But now I know it will — and I worry constantly.”* Others spoke about the distress of trying to ignore what feels inescapable: *“I try not to think about it because it causes anxiety. But I do think about it. I can’t help it.”* Another added, *“I’m deeply worried about the future. It’s not just the heat or fires, but coastal erosion, new types of storms. We’re not prepared.”*

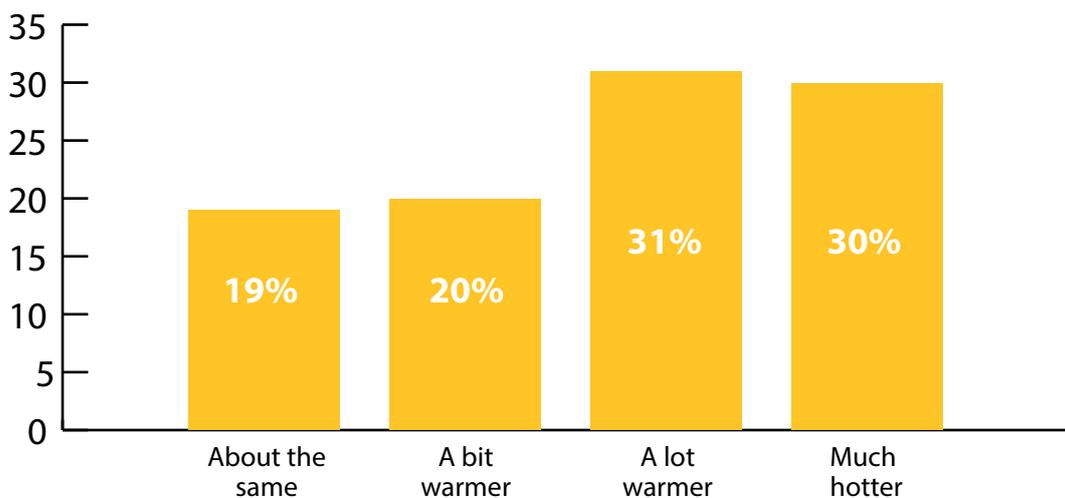
Many described how climate-related events and warnings have shifted their day-to-day behaviour. *“We’re more hyper alert now, constantly checking weather, news, radars. It takes a toll.”* Others connected their emotional wellbeing to their physical health and family responsibilities: *“Heat affects us mentally... it causes us to think about our kids and grandkids... it affects us physically, which is then affecting my mental being.”*

At the same time, a smaller proportion of respondents expressed little concern. Fifteen percent said they are not worried at all, and some felt that the climate has always been variable. As one person shared, *“I grew up in the 50s in the west of Sydney, and the heatwaves that I recall as a child were plus 100 degrees for five and six days at a time. I don’t see any more extreme weather now that compares with the 50s.”* Another participant reflected a more stoic view: *“It is going to be a challenging time for the next generation, but it always has been. I’m one of those ‘whatever will be, will be’ type of people. I’m not unduly concerned.”* These views suggest a spectrum of beliefs and coping strategies, shaped by personal history, worldview, and generational experience.



Still, the overwhelming majority of participants believe the climate is changing. Eighty-one percent of respondents expect the climate to be warmer in the future, and 61% expect it to be “a lot warmer.” Only one in five thought the climate would stay about the same. These expectations are driving a sense of urgency for some and disengagement for others, but few are untouched.

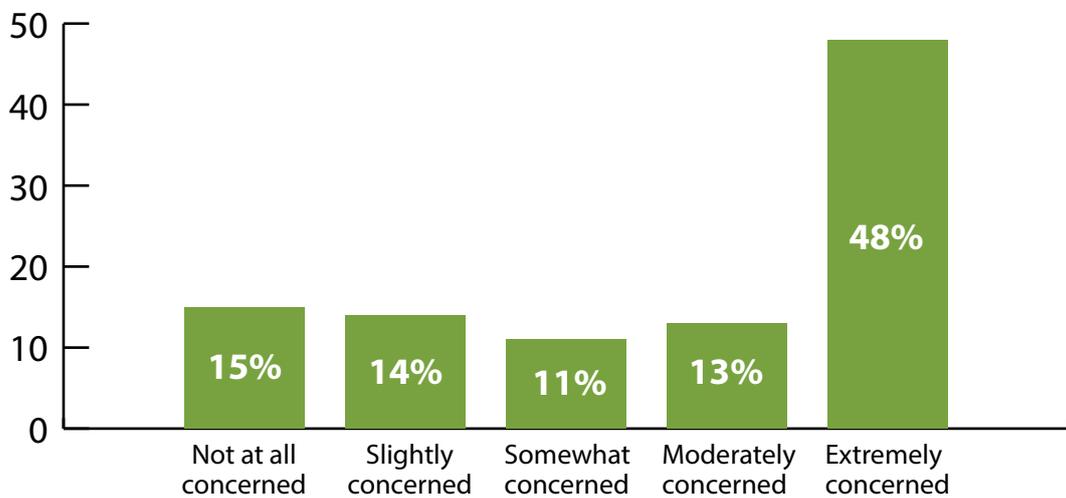
Do you believe that by 2050 the climate in Australia will be:



Concern for younger generations was another powerful theme. Sixty-one percent of respondents said they were worried about the effects of climate change on future generations, and nearly half of those were “*extremely concerned.*” Focus group participants described how this concern shapes how they interact with and support their families. “*I raise my granddaughter to think about climate... she’s already saving for an electric car and learning to garden.*” Another added, “*I worry about younger people. Some of them wonder whether or not to have children.*”

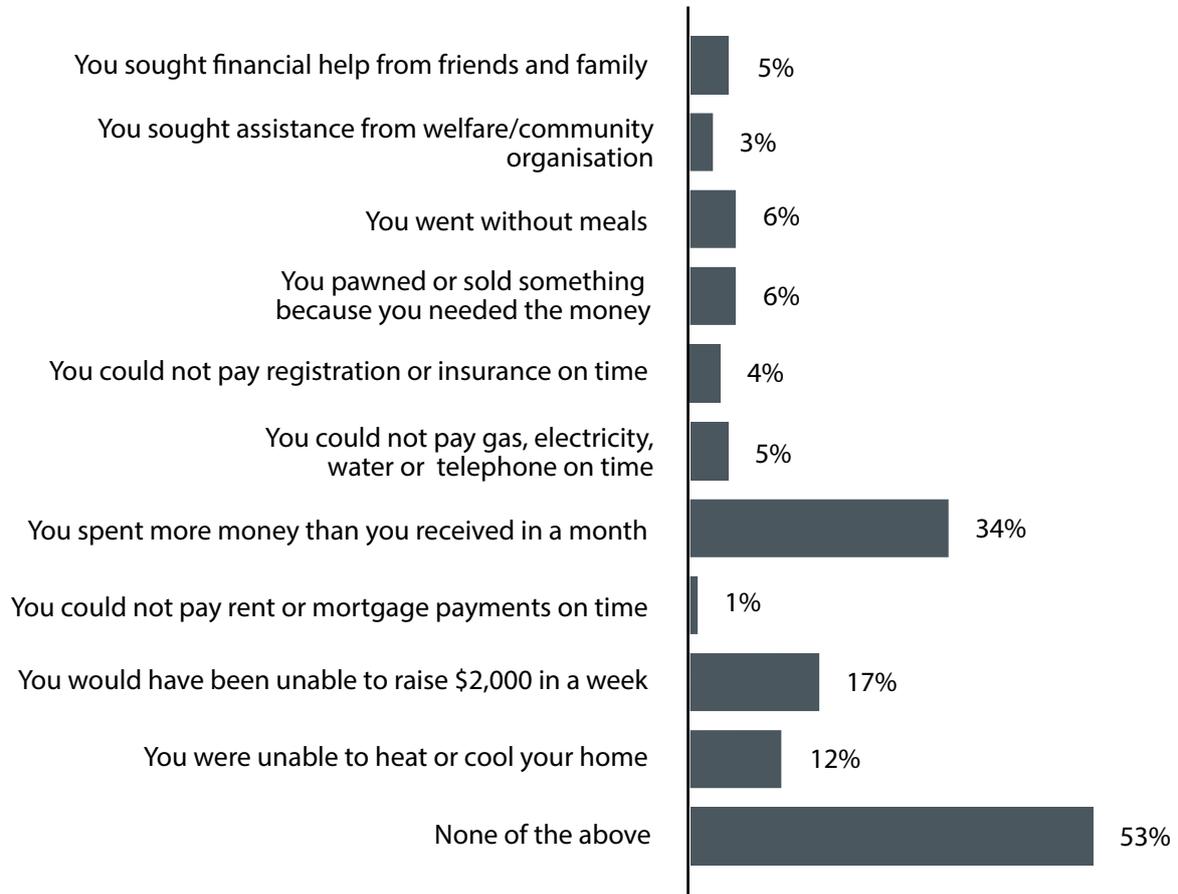
These reflections make clear that for many older adults, climate change is not only a physical or policy issue. It is deeply personal, emotional, and intergenerational. The psychological toll of anticipating an uncertain future underscores the need for more inclusive public discourse, stronger mental health supports, and climate communication that empowers rather than overwhelms.

Thinking 20-30 years into the future, are you concerned about the effects of a changing climate on future generations?



General concerns

In the last 12 months, did any of the following apply to you?



Stories of resilience and struggle

Case study 1: No power, no plan, no way out

A participant in one of our online focus groups, lives in a small regional town in NSW. Her experience during the Black Summer bushfires was harrowing and all too familiar to many older adults in remote or poorly serviced areas.

"It was like a war movie really... no one could get out. There were kids, dogs, people crying, the whole highway was blocked. We had no food, no power, and no information."

In the days that followed, she was left without access to power, medication, or timely emergency updates. She described a complete communication breakdown:

"Everything runs on tech, when the power's out, you have nothing. No phone, no radio, no alerts. We were told to have an evacuation plan, but no one ever told us where to go."

She reflected on how the lack of clear public messaging and support left her community vulnerable both during and after the fires.

"We had no public support for mental health. People lost their homes, some knew people who died, but there was nowhere to talk about it. People are still carrying that trauma."

She now advocates for stronger, community-led disaster preparedness measures such as local drop-in hubs for recovery, accessible public transport to cooling or evacuation centres, and more inclusive communication strategies. Experiencing it all firsthand she noted *"not everyone has an app. We need messages that reach people where they are and we need someone to listen when it's over."*

Case study 2: The water just kept rising

One Ballina resident shared a vivid account of being caught in the devastating Northern Rivers floods. Despite multiple warnings, she did not expect the water to reach her home, but within hours, the floodwaters had inundated the area.

“It was the middle of the night, and I woke up to the sound of rushing water. It was already in the house. I didn’t have time to grab much.... just the dog and my medication.”

Her street was cut off, and there was no way to drive out. With power already down, communication was impossible.

“We lost power early on, so I couldn’t charge my phone or contact anyone. I had no idea what was going on. You’re just waiting, watching the water rise.”

She also noted, *“I experienced a great deal of helplessness in not being able to get out and contact people.”*

She described the isolation and fear that came with not knowing what help, if any, was on its way. *“There were people worse off than me, but it’s the not knowing ...not knowing when someone’s coming, or if they know you’re there. That’s what stays with you.”*

Like many in the region, she believes localised planning and support networks could make all the difference in future events. *“You can’t just rely on texts and apps. We need local centres, people who know who’s where, who can check in when it happens again.”*

Reflecting on her experience, she suggested a powerful idea: *“We need disaster drop-in groups — a place to talk, share stories, feel closer to our community. It helps build resilience.”*

Recommendations

1. Help older adults stay safe at home

Provide financial assistance and practical support to adapt homes for extreme weather - such as insulation, shading, and cooling upgrades - and expand concessions and emergency utility relief to ensure older people can safely use cooling appliances during heatwaves.

2. Improve access to safe, cool places

Fund accessible community and public transport options so older adults can reach cool, safe locations during extreme weather, and ensure emergency information is clear, timely, and accessible through digital and non-digital channels, with practical guidance tailored to older people.

3. Support mental health and community resilience

Invest in local mental health services and community-based peer support to help older adults cope with the emotional impacts of extreme weather and strengthen local networks of care.

4. Include older people in climate planning

Create meaningful opportunities for older adults to share their lived experience, insights, and resourcefulness, and ensure they are actively involved in the design of climate policies and emergency responses.

5. Make shopping centres part of the safety net

Encourage shopping centres and similar facilities to develop and implement protocols that welcome older people during heatwaves and extreme weather. This includes clear signage, accessible seating, hydration points, and staff awareness to ensure these spaces function as safe, inclusive havens.

6. Mobilise clubs and community venues as age-friendly refuges

Encourage clubs, RSLs, and other community venues to consider how they can dedicate their spaces to support older people during extreme weather. This includes ensuring those spaces are physically accessible, comfortable, and age-friendly, and promoting them as safe places to escape the heat when needed.



References

Figueiredo, T., Midão, L., Rocha, P., Cruz, S., Lameira, G., Conceição, P., ... & Costa, E. (2024). The interplay between climate change and ageing: a systematic review of health indicators. *PLoS one*, 19(4), e0297116.

Appendix

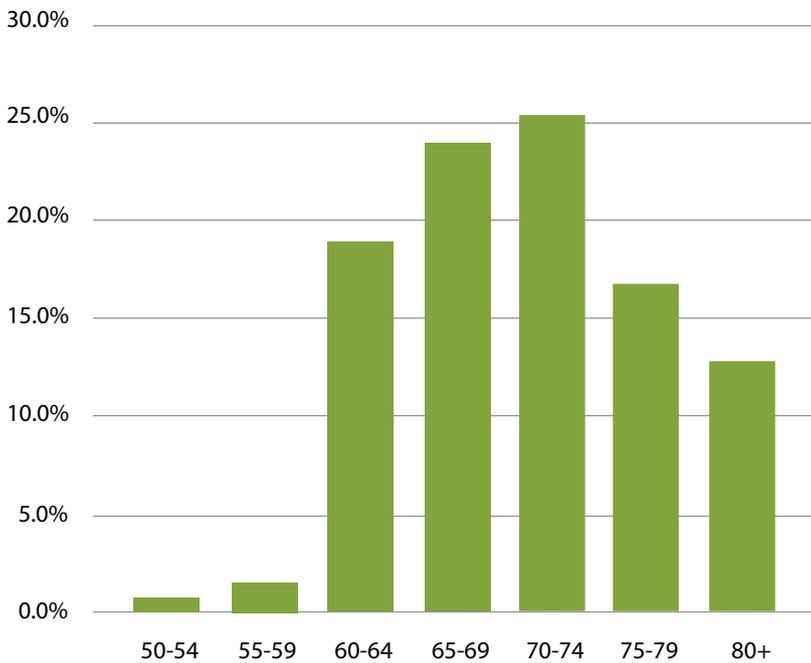
COTA survey sample characteristics

A total of 964 older adults in NSW completed the survey.

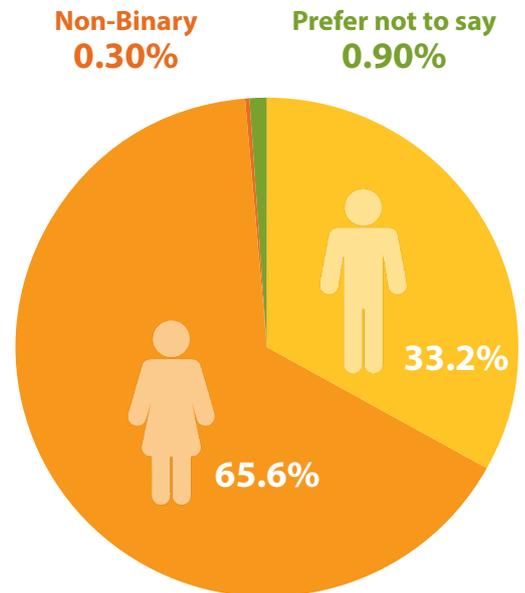
Women made up the majority of respondents at 66%, followed by men at 33%, with a small proportion identifying as non-binary (0.3%).

Most respondents fell within the 65-75 age range, with 24% aged 65-69 and 25.3% aged 70-74. A smaller portion were aged 60-64 (19%) and 75-79 (16.7%), while those aged 80+ make up 12.8%. The younger groups, aged 50-54 and 55-59, accounted for 0.7% and 1.6% of the respondents, respectively.

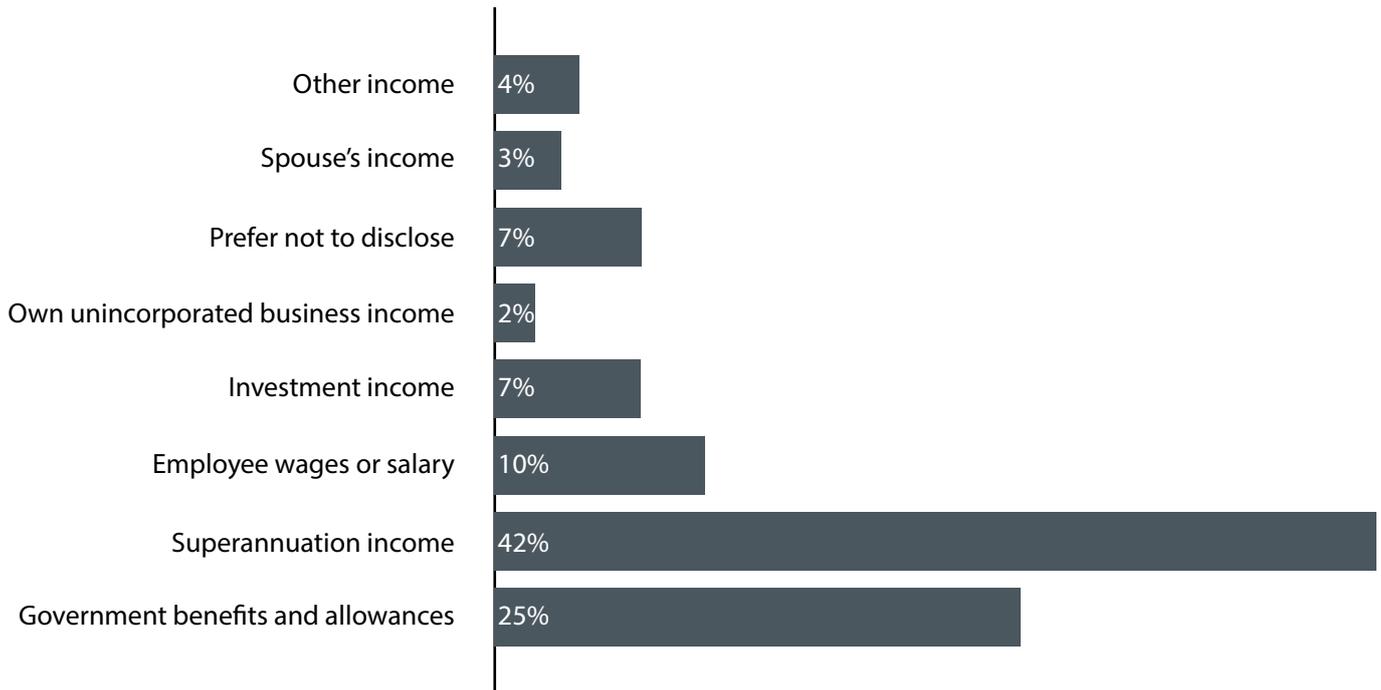
What is your age?



What is your gender?



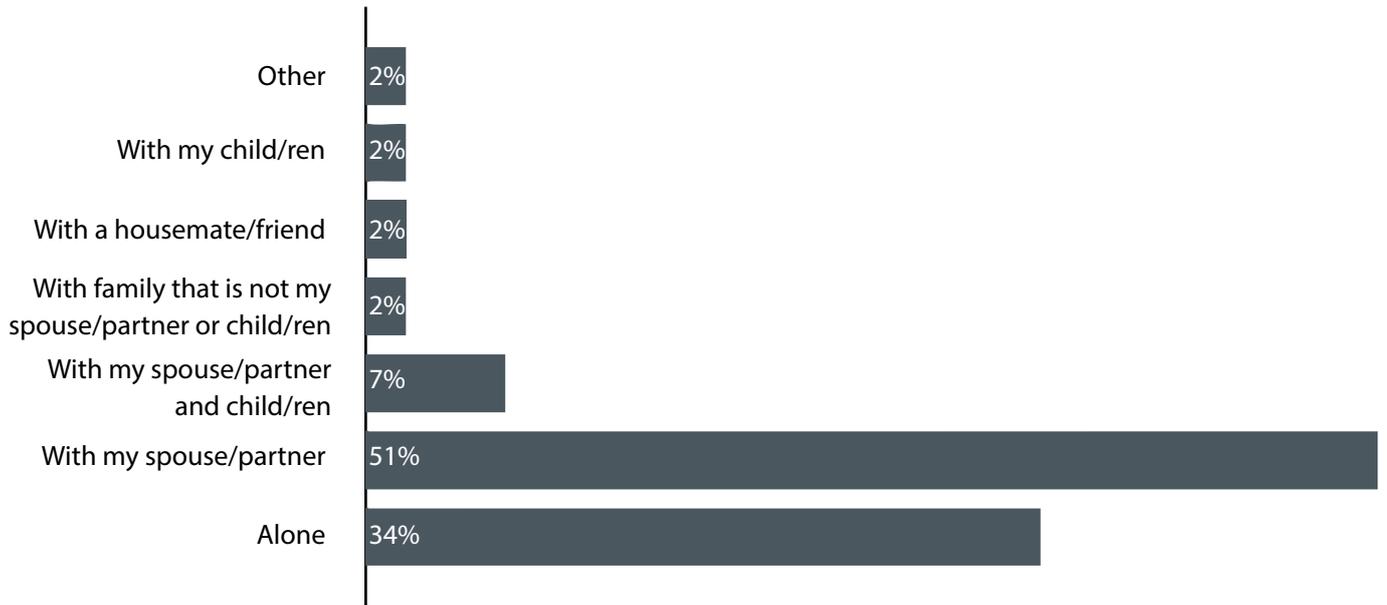
What is your main source of income?



The primary sources of income for respondents were superannuation (42%) and government pensions or allowances (25%), followed by employee wages or salary (10%), investment income (7%), other sources (4%), spouse's income (3%) and own unincorporated business income (2%).



Living Arrangements

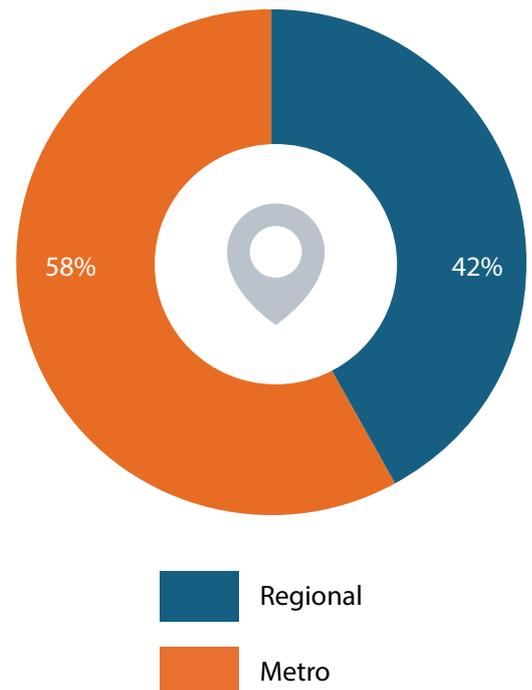


In terms of living arrangements, 51% lived with a partner, while 34% of respondents lived alone. A smaller portion lived with a partner and children (7%), family that is not my spouse/partner or child (2%), or other arrangements such as housemates or friends (2%) or with just their children (2%).

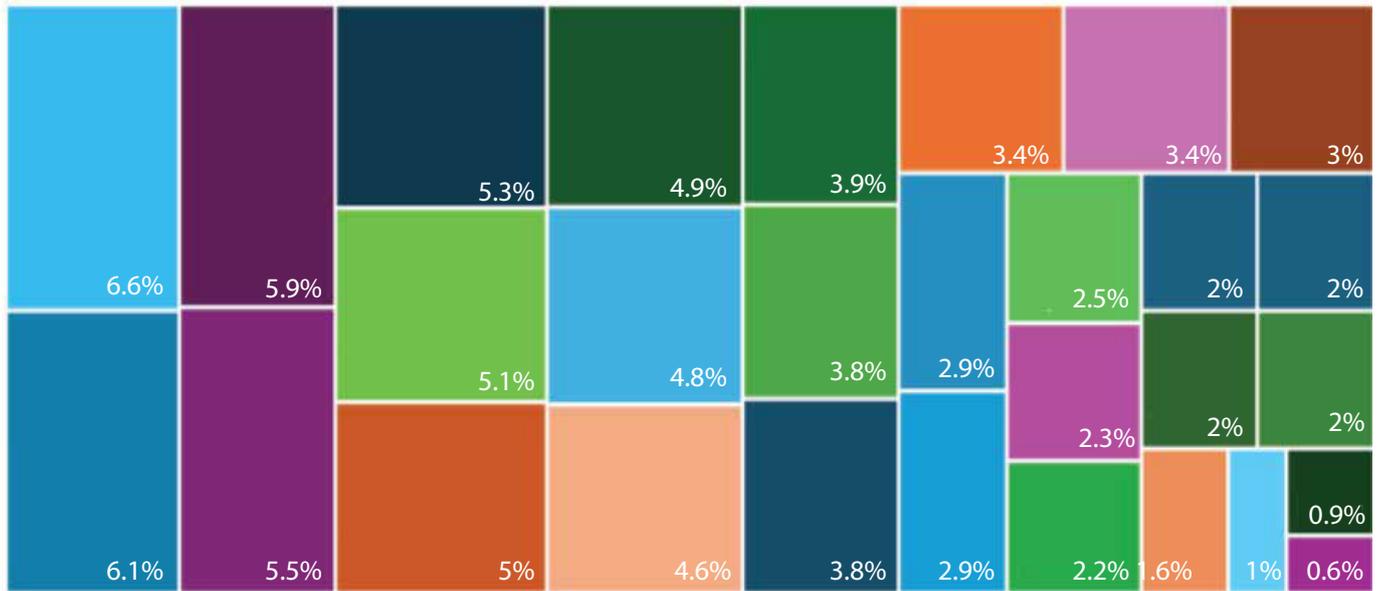
Housing Type

The largest portion of respondents live in their own home. Followed by 7% who live in a private rental. Smaller proportions are represented by those in retirement villages (5%), social housing (1.5%), aged care (0.2%) and temporary accommodation (0.1%).

6.8%	Live in a private rental
1.5%	Live in social housing
10.7%	Live in their own home without a mortgage
73%	Live in their own home with a mortgage
5.2%	Live in a retirement village
0.2%	Live in aged care accommodation
0.1%	Live in temporary accommodation
2.5%	Other (please specify)



Where you live



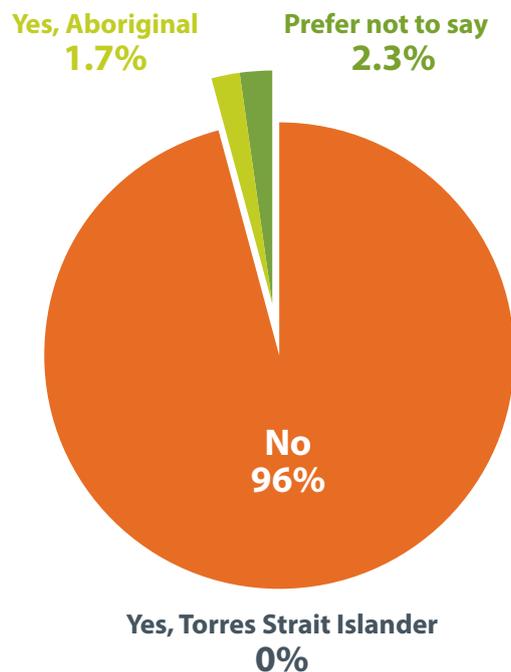
- Sydney - Baulkham Hills and Hawkesbury
- Sydney - North Sydney and Hornsby
- Newcastle and Lake Macquarie
- Sydney - Northern Beaches
- Illawarra
- Sydney - City and Inner South
- Sydney - Inner South West
- Sydney - Inner West
- Sydney - Other West and Blue Mountains
- Sydney - Parramatta
- Central West
- Hunter Valley excl Newcastle
- Sydney - Eastern Suburbs
- Central Coast
- Sydney - Sutherland
- Mid North Coast
- Richmond - Tweed
- Coffs Harbour - Grafton
- Sydney - Ryde
- Sydney - Blacktown
- Sydney - Southern Highlands and Shoalhaven
- Capital Region
- Other Territories
- New England and North West
- Sydney - Outer South West
- Riverina
- Sydney - South West
- Murray
- Far West and Orana

Language/s spoken at home

The majority of respondents spoke English at home for those that didn't the languages spoken other than English included :

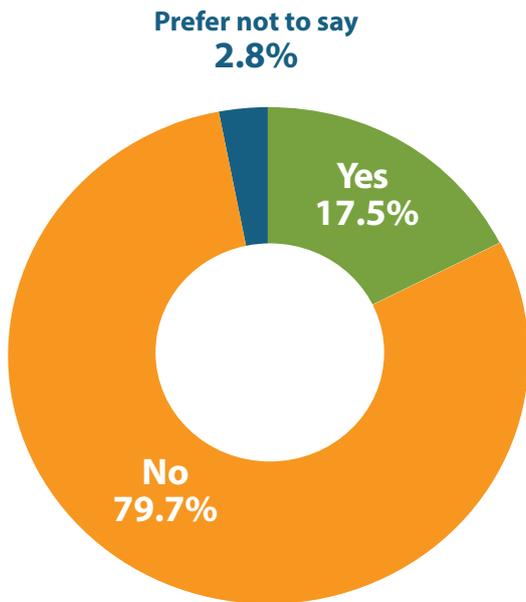


Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?

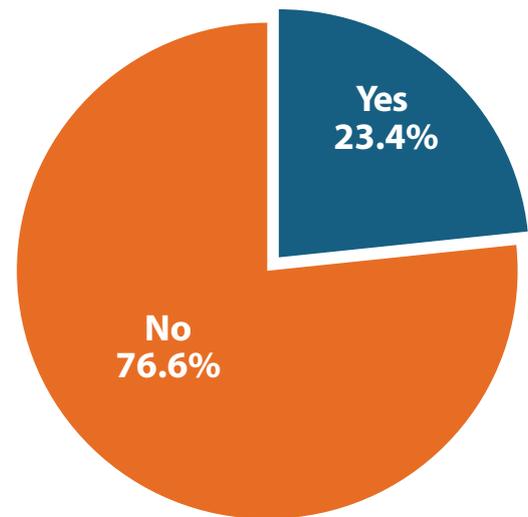


23% of respondents identified as a carer and 18% having a disability. Of those that had a disability the 110 respondents reported having a physical disability, followed by hearing (33 respondents) and neurological (27 respondents). Additionally, 1.7% identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Finally, 77% of respondents had children whilst 61% had grandchildren.

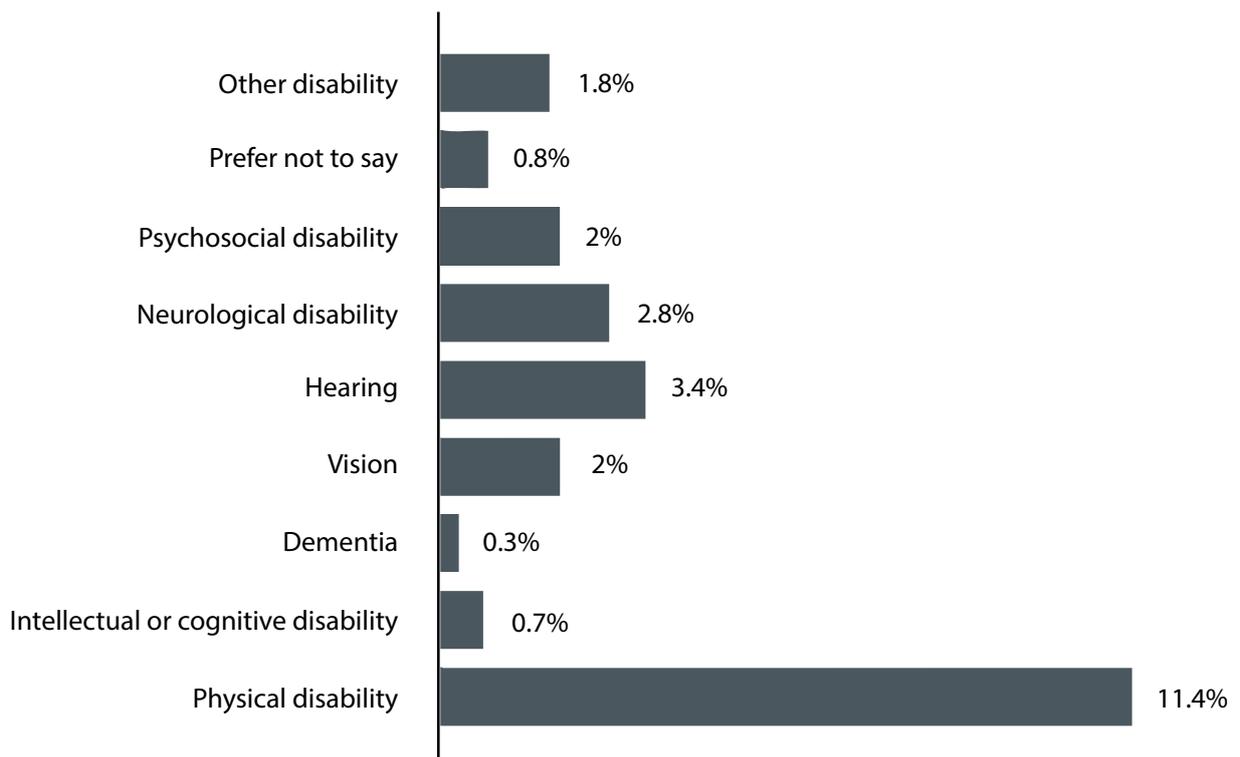
Do you have a disability?



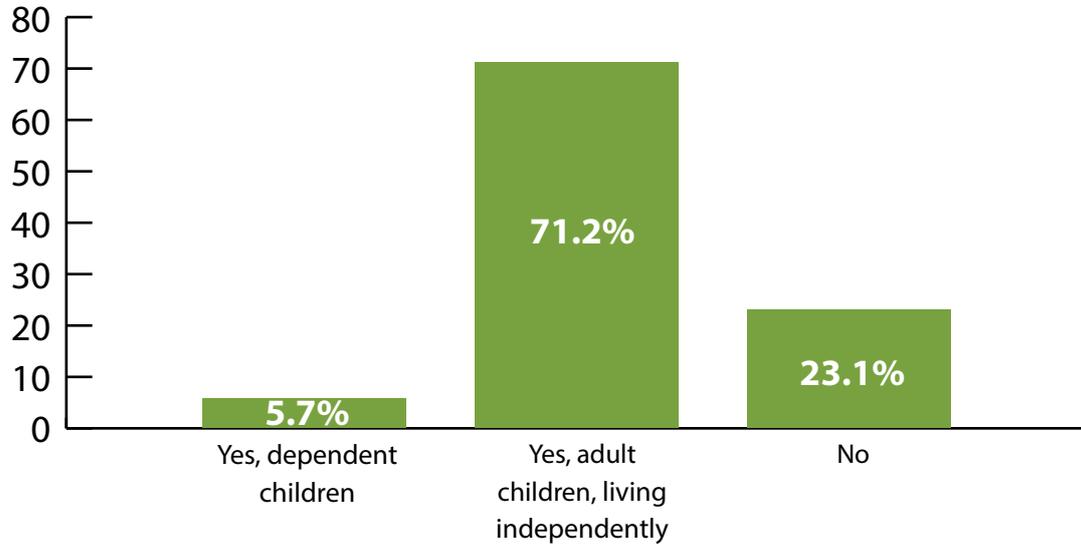
Do you provide ongoing unpaid care for a family member, friend, or neighbour who has a disability, chronic illness, mental illness, or who has needs arising from older age?



How would you describe your disability?



Do you have children (including step-children)?



Do you have grandchildren?

