

Life at home during COVID-19: vulnerabilities and resilience



Based on AHURI Final Report No. 345: The lived experience of COVID-19: housing and household resilience

What this research is about

This research investigated housing outcomes during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic and evaluated the complex interrelated impacts on Australian households with a range of vulnerabilities. The researcher analysed 40 interviews with participants drawn from across Melbourne and regional Victoria. The participants had been interviewed prior to COVID-19 (2017-19) and were interviewed again during COVID-19 (in June–July 2020).

The context of this research

Housing is a primary site of everyday life, which has taken on increasing significance with the COVID-19 pandemic. The project aim was to evaluate complex interrelated impacts of COVID-19 and associated government measures on households with a range of vulnerabilities.

Pre-existing vulnerabilities such as poor housing quality and location; housing affordability; energy poverty and a range of social, mental and physical health conditions have been exacerbated during the pandemic. Restrictions on movement, social distancing, and cleaning and sanitising requirements all affected vulnerable households disproportionately. Set against this, a range of policy interventions, ranging from financial payments and guidelines around housing costs relief were designed to ease the impacts. Nevertheless, this research reveals, significant challenges and responses inside homes, including knock-on effects upon relationships and mental and physical health.

The key findings

Housing provides a key hub for control measures instituted to control the COVID-19 pandemic. However, housing is not currently organised in a way that provides for universal sanctity, security, health and liveability. Instead, already existing inequalities, together with sensitivities, make for unequal vulnerability.

People living in lower-density, detached housing with income security, online social networks and use of a car were at some advantage overall. Hobbies such as gardening took off. On the other hand, for those in poorer quality, poorly situated lower density dwellings with few local services, the lived experience of low-rise was more about spending additional time in cold, uninsulated or poorly heated homes, or needing to use public transport to access essential work—alongside well-founded anxieties about contamination. For some of those in high rise apartments, services they depended on were closed temporarily or inaccessible, imposing confinement in small spaces with ill-equipped kitchens.

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Coping with employment and income loss

Those participants in paid work prior to the pandemic, and who were eligible to access JobKeeper payments due to loss of work were in a situation of reduced income but seeking to maintain their pre-COVID-19 finances, including rent or mortgage and other commitments. On the other hand, those who were on JobSeeker payments prior to COVID-19 were already accustomed to living on very low incomes, and their incomes rose following the introduction of COVID-19 support payments.

Seeking mortgage or rent relief and other housing finance strategies revealed complexities around pre-COVID-19 power relations between landlords and tenants; and trust relations between banks and mortgagees.

For private renters, seeking rent relief involved navigating existing relations with landlords and agents. For social housing tenants, the financial pressure was significantly reduced, as were anxieties around landlord power and motives. Instead, participants' concern was about balancing a sense of gratitude at having secure housing against a lack of control or agency over the property itself and its location.

Working from home

For people working and learning from home, making material changes to their homes formed an essential part of making it 'work'. The burden of labour at home fell disproportionately on some householders, yet many showed resilience by using the opportunity to learn and teach new skills.

In shared apartments and houses, working from home led to changes in material and social arrangements. These changes aimed to minimise disturbance and to preserve the sanctity of communal spaces. While temporary changes to the apartment made working from home easier, characteristics of the apartment itself—such as a good orientation and pleasant views—were also seen as supporting a 'work from home lifestyle'. These views formed an important part of how people coped with isolation and mental health challenges.

Food provisioning and consumption

Many aspects of housing are important in the context of food security. Access to affordable and healthy food is connected to housing security and affordability; the availability and appropriateness of space and facilities inside the dwelling; and access to quality and affordable food markets and supermarkets.

The impact of restrictions and not being able to go out to eat also translated into doing more cooking at home, and thus increased reliance on grocery shopping. Some participants regretted the lack of space in apartments and the kitchen or access to better appliances, as it prevented them from participating in quarantine practices such as 'baking bread or stocking up'.

Our research suggested that when there was a bit of extra income due to the COVID-19 income-support measures, participants sought to improve the quality of food they had been eating pre-COVID-19. By contrast, for other participants, the loss of income or COVID-19-related price changes led to deprivation and new (or continued) austerity measures, which led to negotiations about nutrition and freshness of ingredients in their diets.

Energy practices: managing comfort and energy bills

Many participants, aware of the growing energy and comfort challenges of being forced to spend more time in poorly designed homes, coped using learned practices. However, their efforts were constrained by the ability to make material changes or to afford energy bills.

Participants relayed the impact of staying at home on energy use in two main ways:

- experiences of thermal (dis)comfort
- changes in energy bills.

Most participants put the onus (and stress) on themselves as individuals to keep warm or cold and many resorted to self-deprivation to keep the bills down.

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Social ties, housing and COVID-19

Housing ties and relationships are being deeply altered by the increased amount of time spent at home under COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, combined with the downturn of social relationships ordinarily performed outside the home. Housing and home are invested with relationships that lie at the centre of people's lives.

An effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on social relationships has been the accelerated transition towards digital modes of communication and exchange, hastening some households in using apps and technology—but excluding others. Digital media and devices are playing an unprecedented role in the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the limited preparation time has created uneven access and exposed unequal capabilities.

With the physical distancing restrictions limiting social interactions to intimate partners and people living close by, COVID-19 placed strong-tie relationships disproportionately at the centre of participants' socialisation and everyday life. Resilience to the lack of contact with close relatives was shown by many participants, who made major readjustments to accommodate the restrictions. Reducing their social circles also had effects on participants' routines, increasing pre-existing stressors or creating new constraints—which revealed varying capabilities and levels of interdependence to partners, friends and family members.

Maintaining privacy, achieving intimacy

Pre-existing housing stress combined with COVID-19-related stress affected how much privacy people had to work, study, relax or create intimate moments for themselves. Space within and between homes also created a major role in accentuating or mediating the impacts of COVID-19.

COVID-19 exacerbated both visual and acoustic issues—especially in apartment buildings. Recent research on apartment living in Australia has shown that apartment buildings are prone to create visual and bad acoustic insulation within their homes or between apartments in multi-unit buildings. Nine participants explained that their new sensitivities to noise were because of their longer stays at home.

Increased time spent at home during lockdown restrictions created pressure to provide privacy and intimacy in the dwelling space. Overall, physical and spatial separation inside the household was essential for participants to create moments of privacy.

In apartments, having an additional room allowed for multi-functionality with positive benefits, such as easier tidying; and for households with small children or teenagers, it gave the 'opportunity to close one door and just have another space'.

Micro-spaces such as balconies were used to perform self-realisation: one participant used her balcony as a refuge to escape the tension emerging from her husband's work life and dodge conflictual interactions.

A connection to the outside world was helped by having a view, even if amenities were minimal. The view was also seen as supplementing human connection by offering a metaphysical experience of the world and a mental breakout.

Social integration

The study found evidence that COVID-19 may have contributed to better social integration in some ways. For example, there were cases of children, young adults and partners starting to help more around the house. However, interactions between neighbours was mixed, even where there was shared spaces for entry and exit. Many apartment dwellers reported that they had no (or only incidental) interactions with their neighbours in person or in the shared spaces.

"The study found evidence that COVID-19 may have contributed to better social integration at the scale of the household, larger family and neighbourhood."

Infection control and hygiene

Amongst the study participants, physical distancing was possible in the neighbourhood and home, and all participants had access to hot water. No participants were in shared or marginal housing. Nonetheless, the study revealed impacts on practices of infection control and hygiene at the three scales of the (1) neighbourhood, (2) the building and (3) within the home. The responses included a combination of reducing outings into the community; avoiding touch points; and introducing physical barriers.

At the intersection of the community and the home, infection control was influenced by the actions of the apartment building managements. Social housing providers tried to reinforce public health messages through pamphlets and signs in lifts and in front of them.

Participants in privately managed buildings had mixed views of infection control within their buildings. It seemed that posters were placed in lifts and hand sanitisers were provided in some apartment blocks but, as in the social housing apartments, the messages were not always received.

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What this research means for policy makers

Policy development options arising from this research relate to mechanisms to build resilience by addressing sensitivities, exposures and capabilities as they relate to housing at the nexus of employment, health and society.

Financial support: The successful JobKeeper, JobSeeker and the coronavirus supplements should be maintained for affected households to recover and re-enter their paid work. The rent and mortgage support measures have been less successful and should be reviewed in light of householders' reluctance and lack of trust to engage with landlords and banks in what they view as uneven power relations.

Cleanliness: Other short-term policy options relate to the cleanliness and policing of COVID-19 distancing requirements on public transport and in common areas around multi-unit dwellings.

Urban design: Inequalities in the distribution and quality of urban services such as parks and open space, local shops and other facilities are exacerbated under COVID-19 restrictions upon movement. This points to a need to redouble policy directions to address such inequalities by (re)building accessible 20-minute neighbourhoods with high-quality local urban space, services and employment opportunities.

Building design: This study points to policy development opportunities in building design and retrofit. This is a matter for building design codes and policy settings to ensure basic standards of energy efficiency and comfort to protect against ill-health and energy poverty.

Community cohesion: Social and community services, ranging from caregiving to libraries, provide essential sources of connection. Recognising these as essential services is important in ensuring a base resilience and maintaining provision of these services in the face of future disasters.

Social housing: A significant expansion of social housing stock would facilitate more choice, and also access to secure housing options for a much larger number of households.

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