

# Hungry or Homeless — Tough Choices in a Cost-of-Living Crisis

*How do low-income families prioritise?*



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# 1. Introduction

There has been a great deal of discussion recently about the cost of living. Rising prices, interest rate rises and a lack of affordability in the private rental market have meant that low-income households are finding it increasingly difficult to survive. To do so, they need to make choices — sometimes very difficult ones — which can create stress and trauma as well as increase the vulnerability of both individuals and families.

For many decades, Anglicare Sydney has delivered a suite of programs designed to support people experiencing financial hardship across Greater Sydney and the Illawarra. These services — called Food and Financial Assistance (FFA) — provide a range of supports for people in need including emergency relief (food and material aid), support with the payment of rental arrears and utility bills, financial counselling, and access to case management, case coordination and advocacy where required.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of people accessing our FFA services and how they deal with the balancing act of making ends meet in what has become a very challenging financial environment. This report will provide the context for the current situation and then, through the findings of 27 face-to-face client interviews conducted in February and March 2023, explore the scope and nature of the choices being made and the sacrifices these choices often entail.

There are two caveats that apply to this study.

Firstly, the focus of this study is on low-income households only, their coping strategies, experiences, and prioritisation of expenditure on items which are essential or non-discretionary, such as food, housing, transport, communication, and electricity.

Secondly, this is a qualitative study. Its purpose is to provide nuance, understanding and insights into people's individual experience. It should not be considered representative of all low-income households in Sydney.

What does emerge in this study are strong themes of balancing critical priorities to make ends meet and of the significant sacrifices that parents are making to protect their children, particularly in relation to food insecurity, housing, being appropriately clothed, being digitally connected, and accessing health supports.

## 2. Study Methodology

### Interviews and Focus Group

Following a review of the literature, the research team designed an interview schedule which was deployed across three Anglicare Sydney community hubs — Liverpool, Mt Druitt and Parramatta.

Interviews were conducted over a 6-week period (February to March 2023) with client recruitment being conducted locally at each site. Potential participants were approached by caseworkers or were recruited through posters displayed on-site. Participants were provided with a gift voucher in appreciation for the time taken to participate. Access to counselling was offered in case the issues under discussion generated any anxiety; however, no interviewees sought counselling.

The 27 interviews were conducted confidentially and written up as anonymised case studies. Emergent thematic analysis was undertaken of the interviews.

A focus group was also conducted with the Anglicare FFA managers to test the findings and provide further context and insights.

### Case Study Participant Profile

Of the 27 people interviewed, 19 were women and 8 were men. The youngest person interviewed was 21 years of age and the oldest was 64 years. Only 3 participants were under the age of 30 and 3 over the age of 60.

In terms of household type, 10 participants were in single parent households, 9 were in lone person households, 3 in couple households with children, and 5 in households living with extended family.

In terms of housing tenure, 14 participants were in private rental, 8 in public housing, 4 were paying off a mortgage and one man was homeless. Two other participants had recently been homeless, with one moving into private rental and the other moving into public housing in the previous month. One of the participants was living with his mother in a purchased dwelling and was contributing to the mortgage repayments.

In terms of income, Jobseeker and the Disability Support Pension was the main source of income for 9 participants respectively. Two participants were reliant on the Single Parenting Payment and Carer's Payment respectively. Four participants were reliant on wages, either their own or their partner's. Six participants were also receiving the family tax benefit.

Most people in the study were not working, often for disability or childcare reasons. One participant was working full-time, but her wage was very low. Two participants were working part-time/casually and were looking for additional work. Two participants were temporarily off work through injury but were expecting to return to work. Two participants were predominantly reliant on their partner's salary with one married to an Uber Eats driver whose income was irregular.

Table 1 provides an overview of participants.



**Table 1: Participant Profile**

	Code	Gender	Age	Tenure	Household Type	Main Source of Income
1	48F	Female	48	Private Rental	Single Parent	Jobseeker
2	45M	Male	45	Mortgage	Living with mother	DSP
3	41F	Female	41	Private rental	Single Parent	Jobseeker/FTB
4	45F	Female	45	Private rental	Single Parent	DSP
5	54M	Male	54	Homeless	Single	No income
6	47F	Female	47	Private Rental	Single Parent	DSP
7	48M	Male	48	Public Housing	Single	Jobseeker
8	64M	Male	64	Mortgage	Single Parent	DSP
9	51F	Female	51	Public Housing	Single	Carers Payment
10	21F	Female	21	Private rental	Couple in Extended Family	Partner's wages
11	24F	Female	24	Private Rental	Single parent	Parenting Payment Single/FTB
12	39F	Female	39	Private rental	Single Parent in Extended Family	Carer's Payment/FTB
13	40F	Female	40	Mortgage	Single Parent	Wages
14	35M	Male	35	Public Housing	Single	Jobseeker
15	25F	Female	25	Private rental	Single Parent	Jobseeker
16	24F2	Female	24	Private rental share house	Single Parent	Parenting Payment Single/FTB
17	50F	Female	50	Private Rental	Single	DSP
18	58F	Female	58	Public Housing	Single	DSP
19	44F	Female	44	Private rental	Couple with Children	DSP
20	31F	Female	31	Private Rental	Couple with Children	Partner's wages/FTB
21	63M	Male	63	Public Housing	Single	Wages
22	47F2	Female	47	Public Housing	Couple with Children	Jobseeker/FTB
23	57F	Female	57	Public Housing	Single	DSP
24	31F2	Female	31	Private Rental	Single Parent	Jobseeker
25	35M2	Male	35	Public Housing	Single	Jobseeker
26	62F	Female	62	Mortgage	Extended Family	DSP
27	53M	Male	53	Private Rental	Extended Family	Jobseeker

### 3. A Cost-Of-Living Crisis

#### How Big is the Problem?

The current cost-of-living crisis needs to be seen in the context of pre-existing financial hardship and poverty in the community.

A recent UNSW Social Policy Research Centre and ACOSS report estimated that, in the period 2019-2020 and prior to the cost-of-living crisis, one in eight Australians (over 3 million) were living below the poverty line, including one in six children (761,000)<sup>1</sup>, a finding supported by a recent UNICEF and ARACY study.<sup>2</sup>

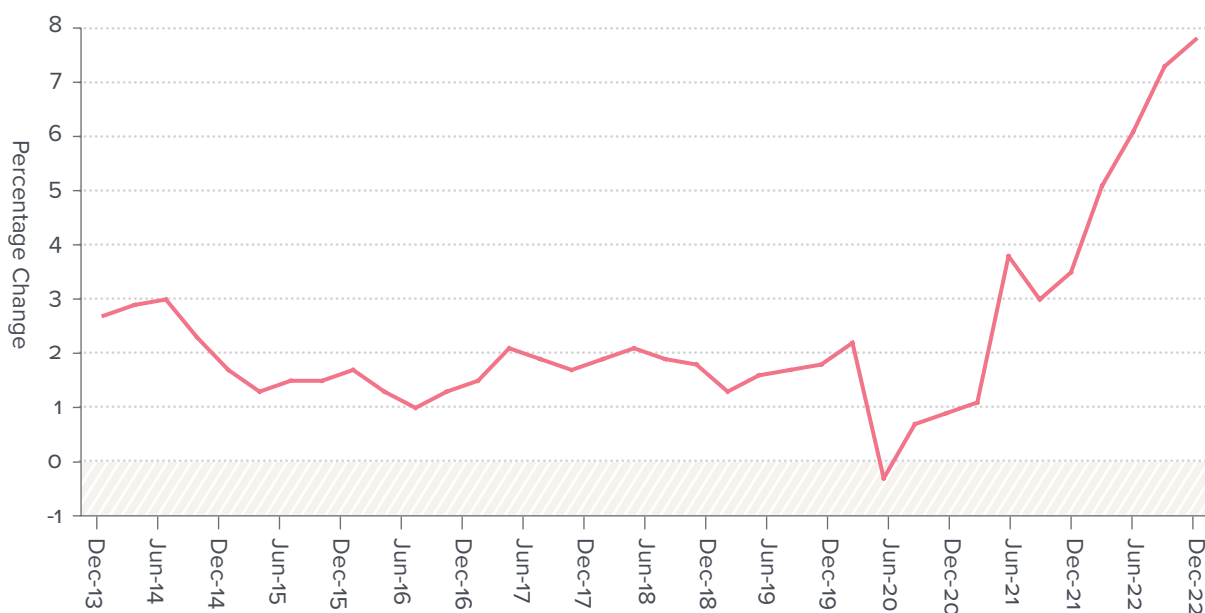
It was estimated by the National Australia Bank that, by the end of 2022, 40% of Australians experienced some form of financial hardship, which is the highest level in the past 3 years. Their survey revealed that one in four people believed they were struggling to make ends meet, and the most common hardship was 'not having enough money for an emergency, followed by not having enough for food and basic necessities and being unable to pay a bill'.<sup>3</sup>

Poverty is also evident in levels of homelessness. Based on the Census, there has been a rise of more than 5% in homelessness between 2016 and 2021, to a total of just over 122,000 people.<sup>4</sup>

#### Key Drivers of Cost-of-Living Increases

Inflationary pressure, as indicated by a steady rise in the Consumer Price Index, is a clear measure of changes in the cost of living. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data indicates the onset, scope and scale of the crisis shown in **Chart 1** below.

**Chart 1: Annual Change in CPI (%)**



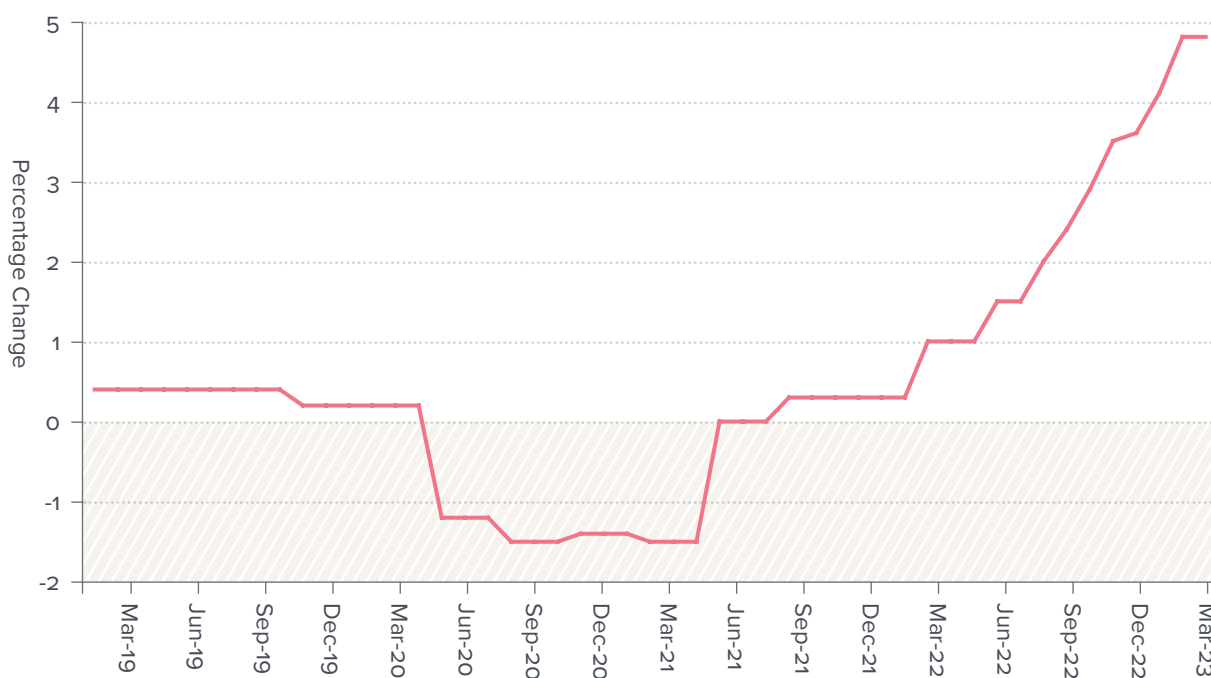
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Consumer Price Index, Australia December Quarter 2022.

Chief components in the cost-of-living rise for the year ended December 2022 were food and non-alcoholic beverages (9.2%), housing (10.7%), fuel (13.2%), electricity (8.6%) and transport (8%).<sup>5</sup> Other components included clothing and footwear (5.3%), financial services (5%), education 4.6% and health (3.8%).<sup>6</sup>

This crisis has been driven by several factors including international supply side shocks as a result of the war in the Ukraine, emergence of the economy from COVID-19 lockdowns in 2021, and a series of natural disasters including extensive flooding in 2022.

However, one of the key drivers in this crisis has been the lack of appropriate and affordable housing particularly in the private rental market. This in turn has resulted from a confluence of factors including escalating rents and a shrinking vacancy rate. Rents grew by 2% in the December 2022 quarter and 'since rents first began to rise in September 2020, rents across Australia have increased by 22.2%.<sup>7</sup> **Chart 2**, based on data from the ABS, dramatically illustrates the rental pressures emerging in the last 12 months.

**Chart 2: Annual Change in Rents (%)**



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Monthly Consumer Price Index Indicator, February 2023



Rising interest rates (325 basis points by February 2023) have not only generated mortgage stress for low-income households but have increased the pressure on the private rental market:

*There is no doubt the cost to service a mortgage compared to rent is keeping people in rental accommodation, adding to the extreme pressure on rental demand at a time when supply levels have not responded.<sup>8</sup>*

***Rising interest rates and rents combined with a falling vacancy rate is causing significant rental stress.***

This pressure is also being generated by other factors such as a downturn in residential construction, increasing population through new migration, and falling household size — all of which have led to falling vacancy rates.<sup>9</sup> CoreLogic reported in April 2023 that vacancy rates nationally were at a near record low of 1.1% for the first quarter of 2023. The total listings for the four weeks prior to April 2 had fallen to 95,000, which was 36.3% below the previous 5-year average.<sup>10</sup>

Housing supply shortage, rising rents and falling vacancy rates are all trends which are likely to continue into the foreseeable future. This has had particularly devastating impacts on low-income renters for whom rent makes up a disproportionate percentage of average weekly income:

*Low-income renters bear the brunt of a tightening rental market. When rents across the market increase, high-income renters can move into cheaper accommodation ... But low-income renters already occupying lower-cost properties have few places to go. There are reports of people moving into informal or marginal rental properties (eg boarding houses, renting individual rooms within a property, hotels, motels, caravan parks) because the formal private rental market has become too expensive ... At the extreme, high rents increase the risk that life shocks lead to homelessness.<sup>11</sup>*

## Unequal Impacts

Most households make some changes to their spending habits during a cost-of-living crisis. Studies of middle-income households, for example, indicate that the cost-of-living crisis has generated lifestyle and spending changes for this cohort. A 2022 NAB study indicated changes in discretionary spending such as a move to cheaper brands and cutting back on food delivery services, entertainment, subscriptions to newspapers and magazines, and gym, club and sport memberships.<sup>12</sup>

The focus of this Anglicare study, however, is low-income households and on expenditure items which are essential or non-discretionary such as food, housing, transport, communication and electricity. It appears that prices for these items are rising more quickly than for non-discretionary items. The ABS recently reported that the annual discretionary inflation for 2022 was 7.1% compared with non-discretionary inflation at 8.4%.<sup>13</sup>

Low-income households spend proportionately more of their income on essentials so that any rise in the prices of these commodities generates a greater impact. A good example of this was provided by the Combined Pensioners and Superannuants Association in its submission to the Cost-of-Living Inquiry where they noted that, on average, 20% of private renters spent more than 30% of their income on rent; however, this figure rose to 58% of low-income households.<sup>14</sup> This unequal impact was further verified in a July 2022 study by UTS and NCOSS which highlighted that, in their survey of households living below the poverty line, 79% were in housing stress.<sup>15</sup> This means that even small changes in rent can have a devastating impact on low-income households.

This has led some providers in the sector to conclude that ‘it is becoming more and more expensive to be poor in Australia’<sup>16</sup> or, as The Salvation Army succinctly phrased it, ‘the cost-of-living crisis is hurting us all, but it is not hurting us equally’.<sup>17</sup> This was a conclusion reached, for different reasons, by the authors of a much earlier study in Tasmania (2011) which they termed ‘the price of poverty’. In that study, the authors highlighted the additional cost in time, money and health which low-income households expend when purchasing basic goods and services.<sup>18</sup>

## Charitable Agencies’ Responses

Such cost-of-living pressures generate greater demand for food and financial support from charities. This is reflected in a 2023 submission by The Salvation Army to the Select Committee on the Cost of Living which estimated that one in three people accessing their emergency relief services nationally were ‘identifying cost of living as the reason they are seeking help’.<sup>19</sup> This increased demand for charitable services is a trend which was clearly observable at the end of 2022. The results from the Australian Community Sector Survey highlight a charitable sector significantly challenged by the demands now being placed upon it where only 3% of providers felt they could always meet demand.<sup>20</sup> One of the key issues was the rising cost-of living:

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***‘The cost-of-living crisis is hurting us all, but it is not hurting us equally’.***  
**– The Salvation Army**

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***Charities are responding to the need but finding it increasingly difficult.***





*Respondents consistently identified cost-of-living pressures as the main challenge faced by people using community services throughout the year. A total of 63% of survey participants identified this challenge overall... It was also the most reported challenge in each state and territory. In each service type, it was identified in the top two identified challenges affecting service users and communities.<sup>21</sup>*

These developments were further compounded by rising levels of domestic violence and increased complexity of issues for people presenting to emergency relief centres. This in turn generated longer waiting lists, increased turn away rates and, in some cases, closure of waiting lists.<sup>22</sup> A broader Anglicare Australia survey of its members providing emergency relief in late 2022 indicated increasing demand from between 10% to 50% over the year.<sup>23</sup>

The longer-term nature of this increasing demand means that relief is no longer ‘emergency’ or ‘one off’ but a response to increasingly pervasive, intractable and chronic food insecurity, requiring a diversification of food distribution beyond the ‘traditional charity network’.<sup>24</sup>

A recent ACOSS report (April 2023) highlights the ‘exhaustion’ being faced by the workforce in the sector as it battles to meet increasing demand:

*To survive over the past ten years, the community sector has exhausted almost every efficiency, innovation, and alternative it can muster to make the most of limited funding; funding which has often lost its real value over*

*the life of successive contracts with government. Everyone, including senior leaders and frontline staff, works longer and harder. Four years of rolling disasters has only exacerbated these trends.<sup>25</sup>*

Current funding levels generally fail to meet the full cost of service delivery or wages costs especially when there is no inbuilt indexation or where indexation does not cover real costs in many of the government contracts.

Anglicare Sydney services too have been stretched. In 2022, a total of 34,590 people in Greater Sydney and the Illawarra sought emergency relief assistance.

Staff in the Anglicare focus group for this current study observed the following, on-the-ground trends:

- Emergence of a new group of people accessing support: employed but struggling with mortgages.
- Evidence of increased referrals coming in from other agencies that are clearly over extended and could not meet demand.
- Loss of the COVID-19 support funding now having a significant impact, causing programs to begin rationing supports to the most needy and most complex client situations.
- Rental arrears emerging as one of the bigger issues facing people presenting for assistance but, with funding tight, the level of support being offered is constrained and staff are endeavouring to be more creative with limited resources, such as referring people out for case work but still providing food hampers.
- An increasing need to close waiting lists, particularly in Western and South-western Sydney.
- In the Illawarra, fresh food from OzHarvest is delivered on a Monday and is now fully expended on the same day. This is a relatively new and concerning development.
- Some staff have also noticed more people unable to work because of the impact of long COVID and, therefore, an increasing need for material aid support.

While providers are struggling to meet demand a critical question becomes: what are the impacts on low-income households and how do they manage in this increasingly challenging environment?

## 4. How Do People Manage?

Recent studies have confirmed that people on low incomes are experiencing severe negative impacts as a result of this cost-of-living crisis. ACOSS surveyed 449 people living on government benefits between July and August 2022. Their study revealed high levels of rental stress for people in the private rental market, concerning levels of food insecurity, and changed patterns of behaviour in relation to medication management, electricity usage and transport. A follow-up study in February 2023 of 365 people accessing benefits indicated that, in the 6-month period between the surveys, the situation had worsened, especially in terms of increased suicide ideation, failing health and poor housing.<sup>26</sup>

***People are trying to manage by rationing and prioritising.***

The evidence is clear that essential commodities have become increasingly more expensive since the end of the COVID-19 lockdowns. For low-income households these commodities make up the greatest proportion of their budget and, for many, this generates a budgetary balancing act between shelter, food and other basic necessities. Previous studies have identified that, for low-income households, the most critical items of essential expenditure are food, housing, utilities, communication, transport, children and health.<sup>27</sup>

These are among the key themes identified in this current study and described more fully below. Participants in the current study were also asked at the beginning of the interview when they first noticed cost-of-living increases. For the majority, it was within the last two years post the COVID-19 pandemic. For some participants, the cost of living became an issue because of a life event, such as losing work, a relationship breakdown, or a member of the household moving out.

### 4.1 Food Management

*Food security* is generally defined as ‘whether an individual can access food in the quantity and quality they need to live an active and healthy life’.<sup>28</sup> Food insecurity, on the other hand, exists ‘whenever the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or the ability to acquire acceptable food in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain’.<sup>29</sup>

Foodbank estimated that in 2022 about 3.3 million households struggled to meet their food needs. Over 2 million households (21%) experienced severe food insecurity which meant ‘they ran out of food because of financial limitations and at worst went entire days without eating’.<sup>30</sup> They consider this trend is likely to continue given the rising cost of food, energy and housing.

Food insecurity operates on a continuum from mild to moderate, to severe. A number of participants in this study exhibited signs of severe food insecurity where one or more members of the household routinely altered their eating patterns, reduced food intake with some in the household going hungry, reduced the size and frequency of meals, had foregone meals to protect children, had foregone other items such as medication, changed the pattern of eating to include less fruit and vegetables and more processed carbohydrate based food, and routinely accessed emergency food relief such as food hampers.<sup>31</sup>



In other research, food was considered only second to housing costs in terms of the most significant household expenses.<sup>32</sup> However, while food is an essential and large item of expenditure in low-income household budgets, it can become almost discretionary, depending on the levels of financial hardship being experienced.

*Prioritising* and *rationing* were key themes in food strategies used by participants in the current study. Some participants commented that they had to cut back on food to ensure they could pay rent and/or other bills which were seen as having greater priority. All interviewees commented that food had become more expensive which in turn generated the need to make changes in their food choices and eating patterns.

The interviews revealed that, for people on low-incomes, strategies for addressing the rising cost of living have included changing how they do their shopping, changing the composition of their diet, cutting back or going without meals, protecting children, and an increasing reliance on charities and family networks to be able to survive.

### The Shopping Experience

Participants provided some interesting insights into how they had changed or modified their shopping habits because of the increasing pressure on incomes. Some no longer bought in bulk because they could not afford it (40F). Not being able to buy in bulk meant that, over the long run, participants were paying more per unit for products with longer shelf lives.

*There are some amazing butchers and they do bulk meats, but you need to have the initial outlay for that. You pay more for a large sum on the spot. What we do is we live hand to mouth... We aren't able to scrounge away enough money to go to the butchers and say, "here's \$300, I want all the meat that's going to cover 2 months' worth of meals". When you are spending \$250 a week on food you can't save any money to buy in bulk. You can't save money to pay money to save money (39F).*

There was a theme in the interviews around diversifying food shopping by using multiple outlets such as Woolworths, Coles and Aldi to determine the best prices (24F). Several interviewees commented that they were also accessing Asian food outlets as the groceries were cheaper there (21F) (40F).

*The meat and veg I get from the local Chinese grocer. They are amazing ... Even my dog bones, I will get a 2kg bag for \$2 and the meat is a lot cheaper than the grocery stores, even on special (40F).*

There was also increased vigilance on watching prices, often using company websites to check out weekly or daily specials (4 participants). This meant a certain agility was required in moving away from foods where prices had increased and substituting with those commodities where prices had fallen or stayed the same; eg, buying broccoli one week when it is cheaper and foregoing it the next week if the price has risen.

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**Key strategies included changing shopping habits and composition of diet, cutting back or going without meals, foregoing food to protect children and relying more on charities.**

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**People use social media, websites, researching specials and changing the time of day they shop**

Several participants commented that local Facebook and social media were helpful in highlighting specials, cheaper items, hampers and free food (45F) (48M). Being informed before going shopping was helpful and some people pre-planned their shopping, always keeping a listening ear within their own networks.

*I'm always looking for what's on special, always looking for specials. Mum does that too... she looks online at Coles and Woolworths...She knows what days last week's specials finish and everything (45M).*

*I have joined certain Facebook groups where they might put a post up and share cheaper deals... I have learnt to outsource a little bit more, like find out what foodbanks are on this week, where the op-shops are... This comes through Facebook and friends mainly, like word of mouth (48F).*

For some people, cost pressures also changed the time of day they went shopping — often in the late afternoon or early evening, Coles after 7pm was mentioned, when food was put on special (45F) (25F) (47F). Another strategy was buying food close to the use-by-date which usually meant these items were discounted.

*I have noticed that Sunday they have a lot of specials on at Woolies and Coles and sometimes Mondays as well (25F).*

*I realised that Coles at night, after 7 o'clock, they have lots of stuff on special and then I have to go ALDI 'cause the bread and milk are cheaper there. Then I have to look on my app to see what's on at Woolworths... As I said, it just never ends, I feel like I'm in a war; like I have to go there and get things before someone else gets them... it's just too much stress. (47F).*

For several participants shopping was a stressful experience. One young mother (31F) commented that, as she was walking down the food aisles, she was calculating in her head the totals to make sure she would have sufficient funds when she got to the cash point. Another interviewee (50F) also commented on the need to calculate total costs while shopping:

*The cost of food in ALDI is so expensive now. I've noticed things have gone up by \$2 or \$1.50. I'm so conscious, I know what my bills are. I calculate it before I go. I know when stuff has gone up. I calculate my costs as I walk around the store, so I know. I could usually get everything for \$50 now it's gone up to \$65 and I have to start putting things back (50F).*

Transport to the shops sometimes created issues. Since many were only going to the shops on a needs basis and buying small amounts of groceries because of limited income, this meant more frequent shopping trips. In the Anglicare staff focus group, mention was made of a client in the Southern Highlands who had not had a working fridge for 6 months and used an Esky, which meant that she had to shop almost daily.

## Changing Diets

Food insecurity literature highlights the need for people to shift their diet away from meat, fresh fruit and vegetables to cheaper, more carbohydrate laden options. A 2011 Tasmanian study used the term ‘rationing’ to describe the process by which people buy less meat, fresh fruit and vegetables to make the budget go further.<sup>33</sup> Participants in the current study also used this strategy, such as buying cheaper cuts of meat, sausages and mince and sometimes foregoing meat altogether. There was evidence of people using more processed and tinned foods such as spaghetti and tinned soup with an increasing reliance on bread, rice, pasta and noodles as filling options (8 participants). One young mum (24F) commented that the supply of fruit for her children was now largely restricted to apples. Another woman (51F) commented that her increasing reliance on bread as a main staple had led to weight issues:

*I’ve been eating a lot of bread which has meant I’ve put on a lot of weight and my clothes don’t fit anymore (51F).*

One man (64M) commented on his increasing reliance on Weet Bix and baked beans and the difficulty this posed because his daughter, who has an eating disorder, hated that type of food. A single mother spoke of macaroni and cheese and cheese toasties as a family staple (24F). Other examples included:

*Fresh produce and meat have been sacrificed. They have been replaced with whatever is in the cupboard, whatever we’ve got until there’s nothing left. We use a lot of rice and pasta because they go further. We buy tinned tuna and stuff like that because I can turn the tinned tuna into other things that go further (44F).*

*The grocery list has to be reduced all the time and gets to the point where it’s just noodles and toast or mince and spaghetti for 3 nights (47F2).*

A few people noted an increasing use of frozen vegetables (31F) and one older man (63M) had begun relying on frozen meals as his main dietary source. A homeless man (54M) prioritised bread and butter as his main staple food, although he noted that even bread had become more expensive.

Beyond food there were also concerns about the cost of other household staples. Some found it difficult to do a ‘proper’ shop, including not just food but other items:

*I need deodorant but can’t afford it (50F).*

*I have to buy shampoo, toothpaste, toilet paper, cleaning products and then if you need new utensils for the kitchen, sheets for the bed, all of that. It’s really hard, it’s impossible (58F).*

The need to access personal hygiene items was also highlighted in the Anglicare focus group — when these items were included in hampers there was a surge in demand for such hampers.

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**People were switching to cheaper, more filling, carbohydrate laden foods and less meat, fruit and vegetables.**

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**Cost of living pressures make it more difficult to buy toiletries, shampoos and household cleaning products.**

**People are running out of food before the next pay cycle, leading to rationing.**

### Going Without

In the more advanced stages of food insecurity, people cut their meal portions or skip meals altogether; there is evidence that this is happening across the study cohort. Some participants experienced periods where they had run out of food, buying at the beginning of the pay cycle but then not having sufficient to last the week or fortnight (45M). One single mother (31F) indicated that she had only \$5 left and still two days to go before her next income payment. Another single mother commented that she had to wait to get paid before she could do the food shopping (24F); this was the case for others in the cohort (5 participants).

*Once pay day comes everything is gone by Monday or Tuesday. From there I just live off whatever is in the cupboard. Will sometimes just go without much food in the off weeks (57F).*

In view of the risk of running out of food, participants sought to ration food over the pay cycle (47F). One single, older woman (57F) found herself just going without meals all together in the off-pay week. Another young single mum (31F) referred to her 'little week' where she only had around \$80 left after rent and a 'big week' where she had around \$200 to buy food and pay bills. She then only shopped on her 'big week'. One man (35M2) relied on family and friends whenever he ran out of food before his next pay. Running out of money before the next pay was a recurring theme for many interviewees:

*I often wait to get paid before I can do food shopping (24F).*

Others spoke about cutting down their meal sizes (31F) and/or skipping meals altogether (5 participants):

*I have been skipping meals 2-3 times a week which has been happening more in the past 2-3 months... I've cut down a lot on meal sizes and basically live on noodles a lot (57F).*

*I have skipped meals many times because I don't feel hungry anymore, just couldn't be bothered. It's easier to drink a glass of milk than to eat (62F).*

One woman generally had one meal a day — often a late lunch and two cups of coffee as her staple diet (51F). One older participant (58F) said she had to ration her meals to two a day and had been doing so for 2 years. She reasoned that by cutting out the 3rd meal in the day she can then afford car insurance. Another older woman on disability support (62F) said she relied heavily on milk and sandwiches to stave off hunger pangs. Along the same lines, other participants reported:

*I don't eat lunch or breakfast (39F).*

*I don't eat half the time anyway, and it's purely so there is enough there for other meals (44F).*

## Protecting Children

In the most advanced stage of food insecurity, dependent children end up going without meals or going hungry. However, before this stage is reached, the adults in the family will usually go without to ensure their children still have access to meals. This protective mechanism, cited in a number of studies, was also evident in the current study:

*My husband and I skip meals. We always make sure that there's food for the kids, for their lunches and dinners but sometimes my husband and I won't eat during the day until dinner time when we all sit down together. We have been cutting down on meal sizes, trying to figure out how to stretch the ingredients further (31F).*

*I skip meals but the children don't. I make sure that the children always have meals on the table (47F).*

Some parents believed that their children had not been too adversely impacted because they go without themselves rather than letting their children go hungry (48F) (47F). One young single mother (24F) commented that she ensures her children get three meals a day and snacks as needed. To achieve this, she restricts herself to two meals a day; however, her family still need to have spaghetti on toast quite often and need to supplement where they can with food hampers.

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**Parents go without to ensure children have food on the table.**

Parents skipping meals was seen by participants as a way of protecting their children from the worst impacts of the rising cost of living (40F). However, some commented that there have been times when the children go hungry, leading to parents being frustrated and upset because they can't give their children the food they need.

Some parents commented that having to cut back on food creates tension within the family:

*In a way grocery prices have been impacting my children. I have had to be very careful with what I'm buying and the prices. My girls are starting to learn so much about the prices of things now. There are certain things I will only buy on special, but we are also going without those ice-cream luxuries and stuff like that... and they let me know (40F).*

*I have noticed impacts on the children. They are always saying to me "mum there's no food, there's no food" and I'm like "there's food". They get upset with me. They should understand but they don't. There's not much I can do about it (41F).*

One young mother whose daughter had dietary issues still bought fresh vegetables, but they were reserved just for her daughter alone (25F). Even if most children were not missing out on food they appeared to be missing out on having a variety of food. Several women (44F) (31F2) said their children were asking for various foods which they could not provide, and the children were having some difficulty understanding why:

*It's really heart breaking when your daughter or your son say 'can we please have this' and you're like 'well I don't have the money there so no we can't'... They will sometimes ask can we have takeaway or can we have a specific meal and I'm like 'well I don't have the ingredients for it so no we can't'... The kids can't have the fruit and vegetables that they want all the time (44F).*

Going without was not solely about protecting children but could include other members of the household. One young mother (39F) who lived in a multi-generational household went without meals to ensure her mother and grandmother had sufficient food.

### Outsourcing Food Provision

Some participants commented on the need to supplement the household food supply by accessing free meals at local charities and obtaining food hampers and food vouchers.

***For some, there is an increasing reliance on food hampers and vouchers provided by charities.***

There was a mixed reaction among interviewees about accessing this kind of support. Some only considered it when they 'hit rock bottom' (45M), while others were grateful for being able to put food on the table but resented the need to accept charity (64M). One participant commented that she had never accessed food relief because she found it so difficult to go and stand in line for food (47F). Another relied on family networks instead; on a 'bad week' she would take the children to her sisters for a family meal (44F).

However, others who sourced such food relief were positive about the experience. One interviewee commented that she takes the family out once a week for a free dinner at a local community hall. Several people indicated an increasing reliance on free food hampers (31F) (31F2) (53M):

*We have come last week and received food help from Anglicare. We got food help previously from another place but most of the food was expired so we couldn't eat it (21F).*

*I go to a food hamper place at a church, I pay \$3 and I get a big box of veggies and fruit, so I am okay, I'm so grateful, it's beautiful. I go there every week, so I always get fruit or veg no matter what (31F2).*

One single mum (24F) goes to a community pantry at least once a week to supplement food for her children. She had never been to a community pantry before the cost-of-living crisis began to bite, and the journey means a costly 20-minute drive from home. She has also been supplementing the family food with food vouchers and hampers from several local charities including Anglicare:

*I have been given food vouchers from Hills Community Aid, Mission Australia and a food hamper from Anglicare. Food vouchers happen every 6 months. Anglicare offer the food hamper anytime I need it (24F).*

An older man (63M) commented that he had been accessing Anglicare's food relief every week for the last 6 weeks and a younger man on Jobseeker (35M) was also getting support every week. One participant's experience (54M) revealed the importance of being aware of charities' opening hours and operational patterns. In his case, he was aware that Parramatta Mission opened twice a week and gave





out free fruit and vegetables, but that visitors had to be on site, on time, to be able to access the food.

Staff in the Anglicare focus group noted that some people from certain cultural backgrounds were seeking support to provide food for visitors, to avoid being shamed or becoming socially isolated due to an inability to provide hospitality.

One young mother (39F) had begun growing fruit and vegetables in her backyard to reduce stress on the food budget. She saw this as supplementing their food not replacing the need to buy food:

*We started a backyard, hobby farm thing, in a small urban backyard. We've got zucchinis, 5 tomato plants, strawberries, capsicums... Starting a vegetable garden is not as easy as you think because once again you have to outlay the initial expenses. Anglicare helped with that because they were able to get us some Bunnings vouchers... We bought some potting mixes and stuff and found a few old garden beds on the side of the road for council collection...even if you plant a vegetable garden, to be able to get enough of it you would have to turn your entire backyard into a mini farm to feed your family (39F).*

### **Special Dietary Requirements**

Food insecurity for people with special dietary requirements is especially problematic because sourcing such food is often difficult and more expensive. In this study, those participants with specific dietary requirements appeared to be struggling. One participant spoke of her lactose and dairy intolerance and other issues; because the required food items are often more expensive, she also needed to reduce her food intake (45F). One father noted that his daughter had an eating disorder (64M) and it was important to have food on the table; however, increasingly the fridge was empty.

One young mother had a daughter who was highly allergic to eggs and so was trying to manage this issue on a very tight budget:

*Things that are like lactose free, dairy free, things that have nothing in them, cost so much more, anything organic, fruit, vegetables, have all gone up. So, you can either afford to eat well or you can't (25F).*

One single woman's digestive system was highly compromised by food allergies and intolerances, particularly to yeast, lactose and sugar (58F). Tinned processed foods generated a violent allergic reaction, which severely restricted what food she could buy on a very limited budget. It also meant that food hampers from charities were of little assistance because these didn't contain the foods she generally could eat. In her case, food vouchers were a better option. Comments received from participants about the impacts and limitations of special dietary requirements included:

*I can't have tinned foods, processed foods, dairy, it makes me violently ill... That's what the doctor diagnosed me as having, allergies and a yeast disease, I can't have any anything with yeast in it and processed sugars. So, what I normally buy is my tofu, that's gone up, my almond milk, that has gone up from 4.50 to \$6 and I have to have about 3 of them a week (58F).*

*Anglicare are good because they offer you hampers but in the hamper is 90% things that our family don't eat, and my husband is coeliac as well (44F).*

*I also need to buy organic foods because of my condition, I can't eat lactose meals... It's impacting my health because I can't afford lactose free foods at times (45F).*

## FOOD MANAGEMENT — KEY FINDINGS

Participants adopted any of a number of strategies to manage food insecurity in the context of the rising cost of living:

- Shopping at a variety of outlets to optimise bargains.
- Vigilance in watching prices by using social media and researching supermarket websites.
- Changed diets by shifting to cheaper processed foods high in carbohydrates and away from more expensive meat, fresh fruit and vegetables.
- Cutting back on the size of meals, variety of food and number of meals, sometimes only eating one meal per day.
- Adults cutting back their own portions or skipping meals to ensure that children did not go hungry.
- Increased reliance on emergency relief services, Foodbank, food vouchers and food hampers to supplement the household diet.

For people with special dietary requirements, managing food on a low income is especially challenging.



## 4.2 Housing

### Rental Affordability

Rental affordability is a major issue in Australia. People on low incomes are particularly vulnerable as rent in the private rental market can take up a significant proportion of disposable income. A recent ACOSS study of 365 people receiving income support payments found that 93% were in housing stress (ie spending more than 30% of their income on rent).<sup>34</sup>

Escalating rents and falling vacancy rates have meant that renting privately has become increasingly unaffordable. In data released by Anglicare Sydney through the 2023 Rental Affordability Snapshot, the number of rental listings available in Greater Sydney and the Illawarra on the Snapshot weekend in March had more than halved from 24,978 in 2021 to just 11,395 in 2023. There were just 46 affordable and appropriate rental properties available to people on income support payments, a fall from 1.3% in 2022 to just 0.4% in 2023 of listed rental properties.<sup>35</sup>

In the current study, those in public housing by and large had fewer problems, noting that rents had not increased much at all over the past 12 months (4 participants). Nor did they report having the constant threat of rental hikes or potential evictions. One participant (35M2) had recently moved from a boarding house where he was paying \$200 per week for a room into public housing where his rent is just \$83 per week, until he can find work.

### Rising Mortgage Repayments

What is evident from the interviews in the current study is that both private renters and those paying mortgages are finding rent and repayments very difficult. While finding affordable rentals is notoriously challenging for people on low incomes, it was not surprising that the people in the study paying mortgages were also seeking charitable support. A March 2023 survey by Finder calculated that, as a result of the 10 RBA cash rate rises since 2020, 'a typical Australian mortgage holder's repayments on a \$600,000 loan [had increased] by \$12,061 per year'.<sup>36</sup> In NSW, this added roughly \$1,200 to monthly repayments.

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***Rent is the greatest priority to ensure people do not become homeless.***

One participant who was paying off a mortgage commented that repayments now consumed 95% of her weekly budget (40F) and another said it accounted for 40% (62F). One DSP recipient (64M) indicated that his mortgage had climbed by over \$120 per fortnight and this rise, coupled with land rates, had caused him to sell some of his possessions to make ends meet.

### Prioritising Housing Costs

Continual rent rises were placing great pressure on study participants. One participant (48F) said that her rent had risen twice in the past 2 years by \$25 per week. A single mother (41F) indicated that, after rent and car payments, she was left with \$30 per week to pay all her other bills including food. She has received support from Anglicare for the payment of rental arrears but was prioritising rent over everything else because she didn't want her children to be homeless again. This was a theme expressed by others: shelter being the most important priority particularly if there were children in the household.

*I try to allocate my money to make sure that I pay the rent because I would rather have a house to live in [even if it means] having no food. There are food hampers and stuff available but to get another house that is a lot harder (31F2).*

Such priorities do not seem to have changed over the course of time. The prioritising of housing costs was a key finding of a 2011 study which the authors termed ‘budget ordering’:

*Commonly, participants prioritise housing costs in their budgets, after which they pay for electricity. In many instances telephones and debt repayments are given the next priority. Food is significantly marginalised in household budgets — purchased with the money left over after these significant deductions have been made.<sup>37</sup>*

In our current study, one mother (47F) had around \$10-\$15 in hand for the family until the next income payment had arrived. Her concerns were heightened in the interview because she had a specialist appointment coming up and knew that, if she paid it, she would not be able to pay the rent that month. She was concerned about possible eviction and then acquiring a poor rental record. Inevitably, it is doubtful that she would have turned up for the specialist appointment, given the competing priorities. The focus on paying rent and/or mortgage and foregoing food was shared by others (31F) (62F) since being hungry was more bearable than being homeless.

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***Going hungry is better than being homeless.***

For one single mum escaping domestic violence, rent consumed 50% of her income — and this was despite her accessing some subsidies (25F). In her case, the property manager was understanding if she was late in making a rental payment or only paying for a week at a time instead of per fortnight. While the manager was understanding, the owner of the property was not. He was now threatening to evict her and her children, and she was facing being homeless in the near future. The rent was \$750 per week to which her mother made a small contribution, but she was not really earning enough to be able to maintain the rent. If she got some casual work then she had a net income of around \$400 per fortnight after rent; otherwise, she needed to rely on Centrelink payments, leaving her only \$100 per fortnight.

One interviewee (21F) had married last year and had a young baby, and her husband was an Uber Eats driver — but his income was irregular and insufficient to cover the rent. Demand for food delivery services has been declining, leading to a decrease in their income. Her father paid half their rent each fortnight to ensure that they did not end up homeless:

*We only just moved in 2 months, but the rent is an expensive bill... My dad is always there so sometimes we borrow money from him to pay half the rent (21F).*

Another single mum commented that her rent had gone up by \$60 per week which was considerable given her income. Another young family (31F) were paying \$650 per week which was taking up 50% of the current household income. Rent rises were common; one participant (47F) noted that her rent had risen from



\$300 to \$550 per week and, while she was currently on the NSW Housing list, she was having trouble managing her household budget. Another participant (63M) was struggling to pay rent even within the public housing context and was very concerned that he would end up homeless. He had previously lived in a car and was concerned that he would end up living on the streets.

Staff in the Anglicare focus group also observed that some clients are able to pay the first week of rent in a fortnight but are unable to meet the second week's payment. Once people fall behind with rent, they then end up with a poor rental history which further impedes them finding cheaper alternative housing. Furthermore, once Anglicare becomes involved in supporting people with rental arrears, future landlords become concerned about the client's capacity to pay on an ongoing basis — further inhibiting successful application for rental properties.

### **Appropriateness of Rental Properties**

Participants in the current study referred to maintenance issues with their rental property and the lack of action on the part of the agent or landlord. One participant (48F) said that she had not had a working oven for 12 months and that a blocked toilet had taken over a week to be repaired.

Some participants commented on the inadequate size of their accommodation due to small rooms or an insufficient number of bedrooms for their family.

Other studies have highlighted that tenants fear asking landlords to address such issues in case they are then viewed as difficult tenants, or the repairs then generated a rent rise.<sup>38</sup> There was also evidence of this occurring in the current study.

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***People put up with poor quality housing because they fear being evicted or having their rents increased.***

One participant (44F) has been faced with a lack of storage at her tenancy and has been unable to unpack half of her storage boxes. Paint is peeling off the ceiling, and there is mould around the windows which hasn't been removed. There are safety issues with the back deck, broken light fittings in the laundry and a back door that is not useable because of water damage. The bathtub had previously been replaced because of black mould but the mould is re-emerging. She did not know how to access the Tenancy Tribunal or to make her issues known, and she felt she might be penalised if she did raise concerns. Her view expressed in the interview was that she and her children didn't have any real choice and just needed to put up with conditions as they existed:

*I spoke to the Tenancy Tribunal advocacy people and they just don't have the man-power to help... I don't know how to write the proposal. I know what is wrong with the house. I know what we have done to try and fix things, but how do I write it. If I was to write it the way I want to write it, I would sound not very nice... I just want somewhere safe to live with my kids (44F).*

One mother (39F) living with four generations of her family was renting a house which had been flooded twice. This amplified existing problems of mould and cracked ceilings and they ended up paying for some of the repairs themselves by accessing some grants and using Bunnings vouchers. The landlord intended to knock the house down and rebuild so he did not see the need to do any repairs.

### Changing Rentals

Moving house under such circumstances is sometimes not the answer. In a 2022 study, the Tenants' Union of NSW estimated that rental households face immediate core costs of \$2,520 with each move, but the total average cost is possibly closer to \$4,075, which escalates if the moves take place in regional settings.<sup>39</sup> Regular moves into new properties are costly, can generate ongoing feelings of insecurity and uncertainty, can be physically challenging for older people, leads to the shedding of significant personal items, and results in a breaking of ties with established community and support networks.<sup>40</sup>

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***Moving house to find cheaper rent may be costly and difficult.***

Several participants in this study considered moving from their current rental property, but the costs involved in relocation were considered too high or alternative properties difficult to obtain (6 participants). One single mother (41F) who had previously experienced homelessness outlined how she had emailed 70 agents to try to get a private rental — and finally succeeded — but it was a daunting task to consider doing it again.

*I would like to move to somewhere cheaper, but I don't think that's even possible because of the cost of actually moving and finding somewhere cheaper. It's gonna cost money to move to find somewhere cheaper, so it's kind of not do-able (48F).*

*With the rental crisis at the moment, I am going to stay put. I've seen what they put up for rent, and the dumps that they are; I will not move, I am quite content where I am (31F2).*

One participant (47F) felt she was worse off after her move. She decided to move after her rent had risen from \$500 to \$550 per week. She moved to a smaller

apartment with her four children, paying rent of \$470 per week; however, this soon increased to \$490 per week. Now she is unsure when the next increase will occur or by how much. To make matters worse, she has found that the small apartment is not suitable for her large family.

Another participant (25F) felt she should move to the outer west which would be more affordable, but this effectively meant she would be leaving all her current support networks.

One single mum (24F2) was desperate to move from an unsuitable share house arrangement:

*At the moment I live with my 2 children and 2 housemates but me and my children are trying to move to get away from my housemates... Looking for other properties has been a nightmare, there is basically nothing around in my price range and then what is around is in terrible areas... I've been to about 20 property inspections and a lot of them there's either the place has been trashed completely by previous tenants and the owners don't want to fix the damages or it's in terrible areas and then, what is a decent area, there is like 30+ people looking at it, so it's a nightmare to try and fight with everybody (24F2).*

## HOUSING — KEY FINDINGS

- The continued escalation of rents combined with a falling vacancy rate is a significant challenge for private renters.
- In some cases, rent is absorbing more than 50% of household income, which leaves little discretionary income to pay other essential bills such as food and energy.
- Commonly, people prioritise their housing costs above other items of expenditure since, for many, the alternative would be eviction and possibly homelessness. This often means going hungry in order to pay the rent.
- Interest rate rises are also creating significant budgetary challenges for those with a mortgage.
- People are putting up with inappropriate or poorly maintained housing, to avoid being viewed by the landlord as a troublemaker or having maintenance costs passed onto them in higher rents.
- Changing rental properties can be an expensive and difficult option especially in a tight rental market.`





### 4.3 Energy Costs

A study carried out in 2011 by Anglicare Tasmania found that:

*'...of all the components in a household budget, expenditure on electricity is one that is least sensitive to change. This means that the percentage of income spent on energy is higher in low-income households and, as a consequence, any significant increase in electricity prices will be regressive in its impact and a relatively severe burden for all low-income households'.<sup>41</sup>*

Difficulties in paying energy costs or *energy stress* is most common among low-income households who are privately renting according to research conducted by the Brotherhood of St Laurence. Energy stress generally includes energy expenditure greater than 6% of disposable income coupled with an inability to pay bills on time or an inability to heat the home.<sup>42</sup>

Generally, people in the current study who resided in public housing appeared to have acquired little or no energy debt, could pay their bills on time, had not been disconnected and generally did not need to ration energy use. However, the story was very different for people in the private rental market.

Three main themes emerged in the interviews: issues with being able to pay bills, strategies used to moderate energy usage and the need to access external supports.

## Paying Energy Bills

Most interviewees, except those in public housing, indicated they had trouble paying energy bills and/or were in arrears (10 participants). Some were or had been at risk of disconnection (5 participants).

In some cases, the bills received seemed inexplicably high and did not appear to reflect the energy usage of the household. Examples include:

- A single mother (47F) who lived in a small unit had bills of over \$1,000 and could not work out why, and another participant (53M) received a \$3,000 electricity bill which he couldn't understand and was trying to work out how to pay it off.
- A single mother was billed \$1,700 and went to the Ombudsman. The issue was resolved when it was discovered the bill was based on average usage in her area and not her meter reading (39F).
- An older woman (58F) who lived on her own in a small unit was receiving quarterly bills of \$700-\$800. Since she cooked rarely, had short showers, and did not use a microwave, her bill should have been much lower. The issue is currently with the Ombudsman but inaccuracies in bills can cause significant anxiety and stress.
- Another female participant (62F) received an energy bill for \$1,000 after the energy company back dated her bill when they did a meter reading. The family then had to go without food in order to address the bill ('living on sandwiches for a couple of weeks') and then sought assistance from Anglicare.

Various strategies were used by participants to be able to meet energy bills. One single mother had cut back on buying clothes for her two young daughters in order to save for the energy bill (45F). A single father requested a reduction in school fees to make ends meet (64M), and a single mother delayed paying her phone bill (24F).

Some cut back on food in order to be able to pay energy bills and then used food vouchers and food hampers as interim measures to tide them over until the next energy bill was due (48F) (21F):

*I've been using less electricity, cutting back on heating... To pay for electricity we've been sacrificing food... I tend to go elsewhere. If I have to pay some money (for electricity), I will source food elsewhere like foodbanks and things like that (48F).*

*The winter bill was \$1027... it killed me until I finished it. Of course, for me to pay it, I have to cut on things like maybe not do shopping that week so I can pay \$100 because I keep getting disconnection notices... It went for so long and, by the time I finished that, I have another \$570 coming. It never ends (47F).*

## Reducing Energy Usage

Energy saving strategies deployed by participants included cutting back on showers and use of hot water (47F), cooking less, avoiding watching television and listening to music (40F), not leaving appliances on at the power point, not



using the clothes dryer but leaving washing on the line (24F), restricting the use of television and devices by the family (44F), and using fans instead of air conditioners (47F). Some participants had solar panels at their rental properties, but poor maintenance meant these didn't always work (24F2) (47F).

Winter was generally seen to be more tolerable in terms of moderating electricity usage since people could rug up (6 participants), but very hot weather was seen as more problematic:

*We just kind of rugged up. Winter is a bit easier 'cause you can put blankets on and wear layers. It's easier to keep warm. In summer, it's harder to try and stay cool so you don't have a choice to use the air con some days (24F2).*

Others found it difficult to reduce energy usage due to health issues or the needs of other members of the household. For instance:

*I have a really old dog... she's blind and deaf... she can't handle the heat, so my electricity bill will be large because I've had to put on the air con. Not only that, I'm going through menopause and I'm getting extreme hot flushes which is very hard to cope because it's a very overwhelming sensation... The place gets really hot in the summer... it's like an oven. I need to cool the place down (50F).*

### External Supports

EAPA vouchers, provided by the NSW Government to support low-income families with their energy bills, were regularly used by most interviewees who were renting privately and were mentioned as making a significant difference (13 participants):

*EAPA vouchers have been a wonderful help... We've had the letters for disconnection but then EAPA vouchers have come in and helped with that (44F).*



Several people commented that they had worked closely with the energy provider and developed a fortnightly plan to pay off bills (8 participants). In the process, some had received information on how to make savings by being more careful in the use of their electricity (eg changing settings on washing machines, switching off lights when not in use, using air conditioning for heating rather than small high usage heaters).

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***EAPA vouchers and energy payment plans made a difference.***

*I do have to say that the electricity company are quite good, they seem to be reasonably understanding and always try and work within what you can do... We have received disconnection notices, some of it is my fault when we have needed to put a pay arrangement in place and I haven't called them and arranged it... This was able to be sorted out (31F).*

For some, however, the energy debt continued, despite adhering to an energy plan (47F).

#### **ENERGY COSTS — KEY FINDINGS**

- With the exception of those in public housing almost all participants were having difficulties paying their energy bills — some were in arrears and others were at risk of disconnection.
- Participants employed a range of energy saving strategies including being aware of their energy usage and implementing ways to reduce it.
- External support in the form of EAPA vouchers and payment plans has made a significant difference for many.

## 4.4 Health Services

The foundations of Australia's Medicare system are principles of simple, fair and affordable health care. However, out of pocket costs have become increasingly problematic, particularly for those from low socio-economic backgrounds.<sup>43</sup> A 2023 ACOSS study found that 68% of a sample of social benefit recipients were having trouble accessing medication or medical care due to the cost of living.<sup>44</sup> Participants in the current study were making significant and potentially dangerous sacrifices in medical care in order to meet other expenses in the household budget or because they could not afford upfront costs.

### Medical Specialists

Almost every participant who spoke about experiences with specialists considered them to be 'unaffordable'. Amongst non-hospital services, specialist appointments

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**People are sacrificing specialist health care because the costs are too high and there is very little bulk billing.**

account for the largest share of out-of-pocket expenses paid by Australians (34%).<sup>45</sup> In 2021-22 an estimated 684,000 Australians delayed or did not see a specialist at least in part due to cost.<sup>46</sup>

For participants in the current study, specialist appointments were often sacrificed or delayed despite significant health issues and, in some cases, amidst significant physical pain. For those few who could afford the upfront costs of specialist appointments this was only because their specialist bills were covered (either through bulk-billing, concession cards or workplace cover).

*I have noticed the specialists are so expensive. I am meant to be getting to see a specialist; \$420, there is no way that I can just pull that out of somewhere. I've literally just been suffering because I can't afford it (41F).*

*I've got skin cancer at the moment, and I used to go to a specialist skin doctor... I cancelled that because he wants \$100 upfront and I said "sorry I won't be turning to you no more because I can't afford it" (64M).*

For those who attended specialist appointments this may have been funded by putting off other bills such as rent or power, cutting back on already minimal food budgets, selling items, borrowing money or simply waiting until there was enough money in the budget.

*This is the honest truth, I've been skipping the specialist for a year now and I'm now at the point that the doctor said I have to see the specialist, but I have to shop around for specialists ... It looks like it doesn't matter where you go it's, \$340, \$350, \$360. I have no choice, so I have to not pay the rent for that week to see the specialist (47F).*

*My husband had to see a specialist a little while ago, that was \$200, we had no choice, we had to pay it... and he's supposed to go back to get his results next Monday, which will cost \$150. We may just have to cancel that appointment and do it in a month's time. If it's a bad week we have to cancel the appointments. I have no choice; I can't afford it otherwise (44F).*



For others, specialist appointments had to be postponed but remained a concern:

*There was a specialist that I was referred to that I didn't go to because of the cost. A specialist I probably should've seen but I cancelled it because it was something like \$255 for the visit... It's essential and I should look at it in the future (63M).*

One participant (25F) spoke about how the cost of a specialist was not communicated to her until after the appointment, at which point her account was then cleaned out paying the bill, leaving her to rely on her mother for groceries that week.

For four participants, they had only been able to access expensive specialist appointments through the generosity of specialists who offered to bulk-bill or reduce their rates knowing that their clients couldn't afford the appointments.

*I see a psychiatrist too for anxiety and even he bulk bills me. He doesn't normally bulk bill, he says don't worry about it. I'm lucky there. Some people are understanding (45M).*

### Medical Care for Children

Five parents also noted the difficulties in providing medical care for their children. One participant (39F), whose daughter has an eating disorder, has had to make significant sacrifices to pay for her daughter's therapy, as the NDIS could not fund her therapy. Although the best levels of care would involve fortnightly sessions, she can only afford occasional sessions:

*I am paying \$200 each session to get the help she needs... I can't afford \$200 a week so it's only when I can afford it (39F).*

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***Parents would go without food or even skip paying rent to ensure children's medical care needs are covered.***



As with other budgetary areas, those participants with children were often making significant personal sacrifices to ensure that their children would have the best possible medical care within the budget. For example, one participant (41F) goes without food or skips paying the rent in order to pay for her daughter's mental health appointments because the waiting list for public assistance is too long.

### **Going Without Medication**

Almost half the participants spoke about having difficulty affording medication or having to juggle the costs of medication with other expenses. This was either because the cost of non-prescription medications had risen noticeably or because they required a large amount of subsidised medications that had become a cost burden due to rising costs in other areas of the household budget.

For some participants, this meant sacrificing medication to the detriment of their own health:

*I've only just gone back on my medication after 2 weeks because I had no money for my script. So, I was an actual mental case a few days ago (41F).*

One participant, a single parent on disability support (64M), was struggling with a kidney condition and needed to take medication to avoid dialysis. However, even after cutting back significantly on other costs such as electricity, petrol and groceries, as well as selling belongings, he was still needing to sacrifice medication:

*I cut back sometimes on my medication, I try and miss out a couple and I can't really do that because that's what keeps me going. Lately, this has been happening a bit more but again I'm not allowed to miss any of mine but what can you do.*



Even basic, over-the-counter medications and medical items have become almost unaffordable for some participants. One participant (54M), for example, who was experiencing homeless, was having to juggle the costs of food, having sufficient credit on his phone and opal card, and the cost of basic medications.

*Medicine is expensive as well. Panadol is \$8. Even Vicks VapoRub has gone up to \$6. It is absurd (54M).*

For the remainder of participants, the cost of medication was of little concern because they did not have significant health costs or because medication was covered under the PBS.

### HEALTH SERVICES — KEY FINDINGS

- Almost all participants considered specialist appointments to be unaffordable, often going without specialist care despite significant health concerns or making sacrifices in order to afford them.
- Parents with children with health problems made significant personal sacrifices to ensure that their children had as much medical care as possible.
- Almost half of the participants had difficulty affording medication or had to juggle medication costs against other areas of the budget.

## 4.5 Wellbeing and Lifestyle

### Mental Wellbeing

Globally, it has been well established that depression, anxiety and suicide are negatively related to income. A range of possible mechanisms for this relationship have been explored in the literature; key factors include the stress that comes from economic instability and income volatility, childhood development factors, poorer physical health, greater exposure to trauma and crime, and the impacts of lower social status and feelings of shame.<sup>47</sup>

Cost-of-living concerns have been related to increasing distress for many Australians. Suicide Prevention Australia's Monthly Community Tracker found that, in February 2023, 74% of surveyed Australians (over 18 years of age) had experienced elevated distress, which was primarily driven by cost-of-living concerns and personal debt, followed by social isolation and loneliness.<sup>48</sup> In addition, a 2023 study of Australians receiving income support payments and those most vulnerable to economic instability, found that the rising cost of living had affected the mental health of 52% of study participants 'a great deal'.<sup>49</sup>

In the current study, all except one participant spoke about significant increases in stress, anxiety and/or depression in relation to the cost of living. Several participants also spoke about having histories of severe mental illness such as PTSD, anxiety and depression which were being compounded by cost-of-living concerns:

*I've got depression and anxiety problems because I always try and laugh behind all my problems. I've been stressed for my daughter and for what's going on now, what's gonna happen tomorrow? I don't know, I just try and get through the day (64M).*

**Almost all participants spoke of anxiety, stress and depression because of cost of living pressures.**

It was clear for interview participants, who were already amongst those most vulnerable to mental illness due to their socio-economic status, that the constant stress of juggling bills, not knowing how they were going to pay for food, keeping a roof over their heads, providing for others in the family and/or feelings of loss over the life that they used to have were all combining to have a significant effect on mental wellbeing. Many participants were living day-to-day with one participant describing life as 'survival'.

*I don't know where the money is going to come from next, so it's been very stressful living day to day (53M).*

In addition, some participants spoke about low self-esteem and helplessness over the current situation. One participant (51F), who has been unable to work due to an injury, has had to make significant sacrifices to pay bills and groceries, including stopping all selfcare; this has taken a toll on her self-esteem:

*Self-care is really important and at the moment I'm dragging myself on the ground. I know I look terrible. I had to fight myself today to try and find something decent to wear so I didn't look like I just got out of bed (51F).*

Recent research has also highlighted how Australians are losing sleep over the cost-of-living crisis, with only 1 in 10 Australians in ResMed's latest global sleep survey feeling rested after sleep. One in three blamed financial concerns for



declining quality of sleep. Cyclically, poor sleep is also related to increased risk of depression, anxiety<sup>50</sup> and other factors that affect mental health such as chronic illnesses and poorer cognitive functioning.<sup>51</sup>

Participants in the current study noted physical flow-on effects from the mental toll of cost-of-living pressures, including persistent exhaustion, poor sleep and increasing bouts of sickness:

*It hits me hard. Physically I'm out of shape, I'm tired, sleeping all the time which might be part of the stress and anxiety. I sleep a lot you know because when I'm sleeping, I'm not worrying and then when I'm awake I hate being awake and I want to be asleep (45M).*

*I am literally making myself sick with migraines from the stress... and definitely anxiety just feeling sick. This has been worse in the past 2 months (40F).*

### Wellbeing and Food Insecurity

There are well established links between food insecurity, which was heavily present amongst interview participants, and aspects of both physical and mental wellbeing. Food insecure households are more vulnerable to chronic health conditions like diabetes, heart disease, obesity, hypertension, arthritis and back problems through poorer diets and inadequate nutrition.<sup>52</sup> In addition, food insecurity is related to a significantly higher risk of anxiety and depression<sup>53</sup> as well as poorer cognitive functioning.<sup>54</sup>

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***Food insecurity impacts both physical and mental health.***

Several participants had already noticed declines in their physical health and functioning because of skipping meals, cutting down on meal sizes or being forced to purchase less nutritious food:

*Genuinely being malnourished physically... I've had really low iron over the past couple of years which I've had to go and get proper infusions for (25F).*

*I'm not as healthy as I should be because I don't have access to the foods that we used to be able to afford and my daughter and her eating has affected it (39F).*

### Social Isolation

Social isolation, defined as a quantitative and/or qualitative lack of contact with social connections,<sup>55</sup> has been tied to a range of harmful outcomes such as mental illness and distress, suicide, dementia, premature death, poor health behaviours, physical inactivity, poor sleep and biological effects such as high blood pressure. Australian data shows that social isolation disproportionately affects people in lower income households as well as single parents and single adults.<sup>56</sup>

However, irrespective of household status, most interviewees described situations where they could not go out and found themselves 'at home all the time' only making necessary trips. This included sacrificing social outings, family trips, and eating out. At the centre of this problem was the cost of going out, particularly petrol costs, rather than the lack of desire to do so. One participant (40F) was unable to see her family because of petrol costs:



*Family that I don't really see were going to see my grandfather up the Central Coast and I couldn't afford to go because of the petrol... I also can't go and see my parents up the coast as well because I'm too strapped (40F).*

Several participants described how they had not been able to see friends for long periods and others felt that they had lost social networks and were becoming increasingly isolated.

Participants with children either described situations where the children were home all the time as well, or where the children's activities had become the same as the parents, restricting outings as much as possible. One participant (44F), who lives with her husband and 2 children, described how the family could not afford to go out anymore, but that they had become creative with trips:

*The only time we have gone out without having the funds to do it was for a birthday party up the coast... for somebody who wasn't going to be able to have another birthday ever. We made sure we went to that and afterwards we went to the beach... That's the extent of our outings at the moment. If we have to go somewhere for something we will go and then go to the beach or a park before we come back home (44F).*



## Self-care and Leisure Activities

As expected, most participants had eliminated all discretionary, self-care spending. The most common sacrifices were beauty-related activities such as haircuts and hair colouring, lashes and nails, as well as new clothing. One participant who lived alone (35M2) had been using the same clothes and shoes for several years:

*New shoes are lower down on the list. I just make do, no brand-new clothes... everything is like 2 or 3 years old... I don't mind it but it's something I can't do anyway.*

***Most participants had eliminated discretionary spending such as going out, hairdressers and new clothes.***

An additional range of leisure activities that were important to participants had been dropped such as gym memberships, driving for pleasure, eating out, drinking alcohol and fishing. Several participants who were living alone described how things like streaming services, entertainment and paying internet bills were essential because they had become the alternative to going out.

## WELLBEING AND LIFESTYLE — KEY FINDINGS

- Almost all participants were experiencing significant mental health effects from the rising cost of living. Some of these participants already had long histories of mental illness.
- Participants were also experiencing physical health effects from having to forego health promoting activities, food insecurity and the flow-on effects of poor mental wellbeing.
- Most participants described being socially isolated due to the cost of going out and cutting back on social activities. This was also being experienced by their children.
- For most participants, most self-care activities had been abandoned due to cost.

## 4.6 Transport

### The Cost of Petrol

The cost of petrol was seen by several participants in the current study as one of their primary budgetary concerns. From the December quarter 2021 to the December quarter 2022, the cost of unleaded petrol in Australia rose an average of 19c per litre, a 13.2% increase, while the average cost of motor vehicles also increased by 5% over the same period.<sup>57</sup>

The cost of petrol competes with other important priorities in the household budget (58F) (51F) (24F). Around 60% of study participants, almost all of those who owned a car, stated that they were consistently filling up half or quarter tanks of petrol only, juggling the cost of petrol against other areas of the household budget and trying to stretch their supply of petrol by going out as little as possible. Some participants found that they couldn't make long-distance trips or even shorter trips because they had little or no fuel and couldn't afford to buy petrol that week.

In these situations, participants would either go without essential goods, seek alternative transport where possible or borrow money from their support networks to meet transport costs:

*I avoid Woolworths like the plague and that's my closest shop and I won't go there 'cause it's so expensive... I have to drive to the ALDI... Sometimes I can't afford to go because of petrol and, in that situation, I will just go without (50F).*

*My son paid for home delivery 6 months in advance. Without it I wouldn't be able to transport everything on the bus and would have to get an Uber to get home from shops (47F2).*

Many of the interviewees were in *transport poverty*. Transport poverty occurs when disproportionate amounts of a household budget are being spent on transport, in order to access essential services, travel to work and engage in social activities.<sup>58</sup> Few studies have estimated the prevalence of transport poverty

in Australia, however, one study using longitudinal data from the Household, Income & Labour Dynamics in Australia survey (HILDA), estimated that an average of 8% of households were in transport poverty in Australia between 2007 and 2016.<sup>59</sup> A small number of Australian studies have found that transport poverty is related to poorer subjective wellbeing, social isolation and decreased access to essential services.<sup>60</sup>

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**People only quarter or half filled their car's petrol tank and went out less often.**

As already discussed, participants were sacrificing social activities and outings, in large part, due to petrol costs. In addition, for several participants, transport poverty was so severe that they were having to go without essentials such as groceries to ensure that they had enough petrol to make important trips or access basic services:

*If there's no fuel in the car my husband can't get to work, so we constantly have to have fuel in the car, so that if he gets called for work he can go, but then you can't put food on the table or pay the bills (44F).*



*Lack of petrol has affected my mental health. It's stressful. I say to myself if I have an appointment with a doctor, I've gotta eat less that week and make sure I have petrol (58F).*

### Car Maintenance

Several participants emphasised that their car was their lifeline, and that relying on public transport was not enough in their situation. This could have been for a range of reasons such as needing the car for work, dropping off kids at school or activities, being unable to walk to essential services due to distance, having to walk with young children, not having good access to public transport, or wanting to remain independent. One interviewee (21F) described how her husband needed the car for work as an Uber driver but that they often couldn't afford to pay for fuel because his work was sporadic and diminishing.

The upfront costs of maintaining cars were problematic for participants. Around half of the participants who owned cars described needing to put off car maintenance, ranging from basic services to long-term issues. By putting off regular vehicle maintenance, owners run the risk of doing more significant damage to their vehicles in the future.<sup>61</sup> Unfortunately, people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are also more likely to purchase and run vehicles that require more maintenance but are less likely to have the resources required to keep up with the maintenance.<sup>62</sup>

Several participants spoke about running older cars; some wanted to sell their car because of age or fuel inefficiency but recognised that they would be unlikely

to succeed. Even if they did so, it was also unlikely that they would be able to purchase a more reliable or fuel efficient, replacement vehicle.

All car-owning participants expressed concern about their car breaking down with some concerned about losing the car altogether:

*I had a flat tire for 3 months now and kept pumping it up every 2nd day. I just managed to get it done yesterday. It was only \$40 but I could get away with it for a while because I couldn't afford it and just pump it up every 2 days, but it was driving me mad...Because of the \$40 bill there is no food and no milk at the moment (51F).*

*I haven't done a service on it, so we are very overdue a service on it. We are just kind of hoping it won't break down... I don't have the money... it's going to be about \$500. I don't have a spare \$500 sitting there, I don't even have a spare \$100 sitting there (24F).*

Two participants emphasised the importance of paying for car insurance or roadside assistance because of the fear of having an accident or breakdown, resulting in their being without a car (31F, 58F).

### Public Transport

It was evident that most participants were reliant on their cars, however, for the small number of participants who also relied on public transport, most had trouble paying public transport costs. Three participants described situations where they needed to ride without paying because there was no money left in the budget (45M, 63M, 62F).

## TRANSPORT — KEY FINDINGS

- Almost all participants were living in transport poverty.
- Almost all car owners had to stretch their fuel or only fill up with small amounts of petrol.
- Some participants were unable to access essential services due to petrol costs.
- Owning a car was essential to the needs of many participants.
- The upfront costs of car maintenance were unaffordable for nearly all car owners meaning that car maintenance was regularly postponed.

## 4.7 Children

Currently in Australia, 1 in 6 children, or approximately 761,000 children, live in poverty. The poverty line is based on half the median household income of the total population, meaning that, for example, 2 children in a family of 4 that live on less than \$1027 per week would be in poverty.<sup>63</sup>

The costs of raising children can be high. In 2023, NSW parents with primary school children in government schools will, on average, pay \$164 in school fees, \$288 on uniforms, \$137 on textbooks and \$110 on school shoes.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, additional costs for extra-curricular activities, technology, sport, and other expenses will cost parents significant amounts of money every year.

In 2018, the Australian Institute of Family Studies estimated that, for a partnered family where the main income earner was unemployed, a healthy household budget for a 6-year-old girl and a 10 year old boy would ideally be \$560 per fortnight, which was well above the living standard provided by the Newstart payment (now JobSeeker).<sup>65</sup> However, between 2016 and 2021, the average cost of raising a child increased by 10%, driven predominantly by increases in food and technology followed by education, extracurricular activities and transport costs. Most categories increased by at least 50% over that time with the average costs in some categories doubling over that time.<sup>66</sup>

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**Parents were changing shops, cutting back on food and bills, using Buy Now, Pay Later schemes and requesting family and friends to give clothes as gifts.**

Participants in the current study have already discussed struggles in providing food for children, having to cut back on treats and outings, and providing medical care. Participants were also asked about other kinds of costs for children.

### Children's Clothing

The most noticeable additional concern raised by participants was the cost of children's clothing. Parents were concerned over increases in the cost of clothes combined with children frequently growing out of their clothes and shoes. A 2021 report by Suncorp Bank found that the average cost of clothing per month per child increased from \$85 in 2016 to \$140 in 2021, a 65% increase.<sup>67</sup> In 2023, children's clothing was rated as the top unexpected cost for parents in Australia due to children outgrowing clothes more often than expected.<sup>68</sup>

A range of strategies were being used by interview participants to accommodate these cost increases. Participants mentioned switching to Kmart or op-shops for clothes shopping. Two participants mentioned that they had instructed all relatives to only give clothes to their kids for birthday and holiday presents. Others were cutting back on food and other expenses, or using Buy now, pay later (BNPL) schemes to meet the upfront costs for clothes.

One participant (47F2), who had a child in high school, mentioned how she had made additional sacrifices to prevent her son from being bullied at school about his clothes:

*I can't afford the branded stuff but sometimes I don't have a choice. My son has been picked on at school, so I try to make sure that he isn't wearing clothes that make him look homeless. Sacrifices are made to food and we would get mince that week.*





### School Related Costs

Several parents described how the cost of sending their children to school would have been a major concern if not for the NSW Back-to-School vouchers which had covered most of these costs. The vouchers, which are set to expire on June 30, are provided by the NSW Government and include 3x\$50 vouchers for each child, to use on the cost of school uniforms, shoes, bags, textbooks, etc.<sup>69</sup>

*My kids are growing out of their clothes, out of their shoes. I was very thankful for those Back-to-School vouchers. That was a lifesaver (40F).*

By contrast, one parent — who had been recently homeless and had expired identification which meant that she couldn't qualify for the NSW Back-to-School vouchers — was very concerned about how she would meet the costs of schooling without the vouchers.

In addition, three parents rated school items as the lowest concern in their budget because of their relationship with their children's respective schools and being able to negotiate the timing of payments:

*Because I'm in good with the school, that's one good thing. I know the principal, and all of that and he sometimes waives a lot of things for me. That's why I stand by the school because they are pretty good to me (64M).*



## Keeping Children Connected

It was common for parents to say that paying internet bills was essential for the children because of school needs or entertainment. However, participants were generally less concerned about internet and phone bills than other areas of the budget because these had not been rising significantly and, in some cases, had reduced as participants changed internet and phone plans.

According to the ABS, the CPI for communication has had the smallest annual increase of the major budget categories, rising only 1.3% between December 2021 and 2022 quarters.<sup>70</sup> However, parents still described struggling with these bills and used BNPL schemes or delayed payment of the bills:

*The internet, the kids, the homework, I've got a kid in year 10 and 9 and even the boys in year 5 need the internet for school. I have to pay it, \$20, \$50, I have to pay it... A few times the internet has been disconnected... so I have to go on Zip Pay which carries, every time I use it, \$7 interest on top... I do rely on that (47F).*

*I need to have internet and entertainment for the kids so that bill is being paid no matter what. Sometimes I will have to lower my food shop (in order to pay entertainment bills) depending on how much I need to spend, or I will let other things go into debit rather than paying (24F).*

Only one parent discussed the possibility of foregoing the internet despite his daughter requiring it for school, because of how desperate the situation had become:

*Internet is mandatory because of the school. At the moment, I'm tossing up what do I do; should I try and keep it going or cut it off. That'll be one of the things that goes first, she'll (his daughter) just have to go next door (64M).*

## CHILDREN — KEY FINDINGS

- Among study participants, clothing was the most concerning additional cost related to children. To meet the costs of children's clothing, parents were having to change shops, go without foods or other essentials, use BNPL providers or request relatives to gift clothes.
- The NSW State Government's Back-to-School vouchers meant that most of the parents with school-aged children were better able to manage school related costs.
- Paying for the internet was considered essential by many participants for their children's schooling and entertainment.
- Though communication was often the least concerning of the main budgetary areas, some parents were still making sacrifices, using BNPL schemes or going into arrears in order to pay phone or internet bills.

## 4.8 Financial Stress

Financial stress can be defined as difficulty meeting basic financial commitments due to a shortage of money. Financial stress increases the risk of homelessness and can negatively impact an individual's health and psychological well-being.<sup>71</sup> Financial stress is generally highest for those on JobSeeker payments but is also evident for other income support recipients.<sup>72</sup>

A 2022 UTS and NCOSS study of low-income households highlighted the strategies people who are financially stressed undertake to be able to survive. These strategies include seeking assistance from family and friends, use of Buy Now Pay Later (BNPL) schemes to pay for essential items, pawning goods, and seeking support from charitable agencies. All these strategies were mentioned by participants in the current study.<sup>73</sup>

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***Income is so low it is almost impossible to save.***

### Little or No Savings

While it is true that the household savings ratio has fallen to its lowest point since 2017,<sup>74</sup> it is also generally true that low-income households have minimal savings. In fact, a key indicator of financial hardship is the lack of access to savings or financial resources. The UTS and NCOSS study, for example, indicated that more than half the people in their study had no money set aside for emergencies.<sup>75</sup>

Inability to save because income was so low, was a recurring theme in the current study. While one participant did have some savings, this was dwindling rapidly (40F). Generally, any money coming into the household was spent on essentials such as rent, food and electricity. There was little or nothing left for any discretionary spending.

### Accumulation of Credit Debt

It was noticeable from the interviews that some of those in public housing were not accruing financial debt (4 participants). At least another three participants considered that accessing financial credit services was very problematic because they were concerned they would get into debt which they couldn't repay.

However, for the vast majority of participants in the study, accessing credit was the main way of managing bills, paying rent and keeping food on the table. The lack of savings meant that most participants were living precariously from week to week.

Debt was a result of credit cards and BNPL schemes including Afterpay and Zip Pay (13 participants). Some participants felt BNPL was the most effective way to pay everyday expenses (47F) (31F), such as internet bills, petrol, school photos, additional food etc, and others used it to tide them over between Centrelink payments (39F). One woman (50F) said she used Zip Pay to buy Christmas presents since it seemed to be the only way she could so. Another young mother used Afterpay for nappies and baby wipes (24F) but was trying to ensure that she did not have to repay more than \$400 per fortnight. Once the debt got to reasonable levels, she would then buy clothes for the children. A number of participants had maxed out their credit limits.

Many others restricted themselves to just repaying the minimum owed which meant they could not address the accumulating debt (39F). A number also

mentioned rental and utility arrears and one participant had an \$11,000 tax bill outstanding (51F).

Very few mentioned pay day lenders (45M). One older man (63M) noted that he was managing to pay back his pay day loans with a plan and regular repayments. He finally felt as if he was making some headway in repaying the debt but, given his current income and the cost of living, this was only just manageable.

Debt could be incurred in other ways. One participant had a car accident and wasn't insured so he was paying this debt back gradually to the insurance company (45M). At the same time, he had an Optus debt which he was repaying in order to keep access to his phone. One single parent (41F) had acquired a BNPL debt when she was homeless and had still not repaid that debt.

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***Buy now, pay later was relied upon heavily by some to manage everyday bills.***

### **Support from Family and Friends**

When faced with financial stress, some participants indicated that they had received in-kind and financial support from community members, family or friends. One single mother (41F), moved into a home after being homeless but had no furniture, bedding or blankets. However, through a local community Facebook page, she was helped to furnish her entire house with second-hand goods including a refrigerator.

Others indicated that family members were assisting them — either through contributing to rent, or directly lending cash when it was needed (6 participants). One woman (44F) indicated that her mother and sister often helped with school items such as school shoes and toiletries when she could not afford them. Another older man (63M) had sought loans from three different family members but was very uncomfortable asking for such support.

Some indicated that they or family members had been accessing their superannuation (45M) (44F), when allowed to do so during the COVID-19 pandemic. Another woman had started selling household items to pay bills (44F).

### **FINANCIAL STRESS — KEY FINDINGS**

- Participants did not have access to savings or emergency funds but were paying bills on a week-by-week basis. Any sudden unexpected bill or event would adversely impact a precariously balanced household budget.
- Limited funds meant many had to access Buy now, pay later services to meet one-off bills or assist with day-to-day living expenses.
- Family and charitable agency support was a critical element in being able to manage on restricted household budgets.

## 5. Key Findings

When people do not have enough income to cover the basic essentials of life, then they need to make hard choices about which has the highest priority. This varies from individuals to households but the narrative from the interviews clearly indicates that people are considering such choices on a daily or weekly basis. Some key themes have emerged from this study which are outlined below.

### **Housing costs have the greatest priority.**

Shelter — keeping a roof over one's head — appears to have been the greatest priority for all households. The alternative for many would be eviction and homelessness. In a tight and expensive private rental market this is particularly true and, given that rent is the largest item generally in the family budget, any increase of even \$10-\$20 per week can adversely impact the finely balanced budgets of most participants in this study. There was evidence that people were stressed and anxious about their housing situation and putting up with maintenance issues and poor living conditions rather than raise these with the landlord, for fear of being evicted.

### **There is evidence of severe food insecurity.**

In the current study, people are cutting down on the number and size of meals, switching to cheaper, carbohydrate-based foods, cutting back on fresh fruit and vegetables, and changing how they shop for food. In households where children are present, adults are cutting back on meals to protect their children, but there is evidence that children are receiving smaller portions and less variety in their daily food intake. In the worst cases, people are going hungry especially in the week before their next income support payment, often rationing food to make it last.

### **Parents are making sacrifices for their children.**

Parents appear to be making significant personal sacrifices to ensure their children are not food insecure, are appropriately clothed and housed, can access health services and remain digitally connected. At times, this means adults skipping meals, going hungry, cutting back or not taking medications, and not keeping specialist and medical appointments.

### **The private rental market is very challenging.**

People who are privately renting while living on income support payments or very low incomes are in a precarious position due to rising rents and falling vacancy rates combined with insufficient rental protection. The current rate of affordable rental properties for people on government benefits in Greater Sydney is just 0.4% of available properties<sup>76</sup> and, with rent taking up a greater proportion of fixed income, there is little left for other non-discretionary items such as food and electricity.

### **Managing a tight household budget requires agility, research and planning.**

This was evident from the interviews where people spoke of using social media, planning food purchases in advance, organising shopping trips to take advantage of specials, and weighing up the priority of bills on a weekly basis while trying to



ensure the most effective outcomes on very limited funds. In terms of managing energy costs, a broad range of cost saving strategies was evident with people being very conscious of their power usage. For most, this was a finely tuned balancing act often in partnership with energy providers through the development of payment plans. This resilience in the face of hardship has been well recognised by others. In an April 2023 ACOSS report it was noted that,

*People on the lowest incomes are some of our country's most resilient and resourceful people, squeezing every cent in their bank accounts in ways most people would not imagine.<sup>77</sup>*

#### **Financial stress is common among study participants.**

For most of the participants in this study there was very little accumulated savings and no reserves upon which they could call in an emergency. This made budgeting precarious and a week-by-week process. A sudden unexpected bill or event led many to access BNPL schemes. Others used this as a credit line in order to deal with day-to-day expenditure. However, it has led to a cycle of credit debt which impacts current budgets and future capacity to manage in a low-income environment.

#### **Public Housing tenants generally fare better.**

There is evidence that the eight public housing tenants in the study did not have as many critical issues with food, rent and energy bills when compared with private renters or those with mortgages. Generally — even though they too were on low incomes — they appeared to be faring better. This could be a reflection of the fact that their rent was not an impossible burden on their household budget.

**The cost of transport isolates people from essential services and social connections.**

For those with cars the cost of petrol and insurance was challenging. Many spoke about not going out because it was too expensive to run the car, only partially filling their petrol tanks and making sure they only travelled short distances. For some, this occasionally prevented them from accessing essentials such as groceries and, for others, this isolated them from going out with friends.

**The cost-of-living crisis is generating and entrenching mental health issues.**

Almost all participants spoke about having anxiety and stress. The struggle to manage bills, balance budgets, maintain both shelter and food on the table, keep the lights on and ensure children were protected was creating ongoing uncertainty and stress.

**Some medical care is unaffordable despite the need.**

Out-of-pocket costs for medical care are greatly affecting low-income Australians. For study participants, medical specialists have become unaffordable with appointments being skipped or significant sacrifices being made to meet health costs. In addition, almost half the participants had trouble affording medication and were juggling these costs with other budget areas or skipping medication altogether.

**External networks and supports are critical.**

Being able to access charitable agencies, such as Anglicare and food pantries, getting advice, support, referrals and assistance with bills and payment plans, food vouchers and hampers, can act as a buffer against eviction, disconnection and homelessness. Such support was greatly valued by many participants. Critical support was also provided by family and friends.

**Charitable agencies are struggling to meet demand.**

A number of submissions from the sector to the Senate Select Committee on the Cost-of-Living, as well as recent ACOSS reports, have highlighted the increasing demands being made on charitable agencies, the increasing levels of cross referrals and the rationing of supports in order to make existing funding go further. This was also reflected in the Anglicare staff focus group where concerns were raised as to how Anglicare's Food & Financial Assistance service could continue to meet accelerating demand now that COVID-19 funds are no longer available.



## 6. What Can Be Done?

It is a matter of grave concern that participants in this study did not have the capacity to pay for essential goods and services and were forced to prioritise and make hard choices to survive. Although it is hoped that the current cost-of-living crisis will be mitigated by fiscal and monetary policy over time, Anglicare is concerned that millions of households will remain entrenched in poverty into the future since many of the systemic issues remain.

There are some broad policies at both a Federal and State level that would make a difference.

### **Raise the level of JobSeeker.**

Current estimates indicate that more than 3 million people are living in poverty. At the time of writing this report, the current level of JobSeeker for singles was less than \$50 a day and is barely more than half of the Henderson Poverty Line.<sup>78</sup> On average, 95% of people accessing Anglicare Sydney's emergency relief services are on government benefits, an indication that the current safety net is not working. The inadequacy of both JobSeeker and Youth Allowance was highlighted in the most recent report (April 2023) to the Federal Government by its own advisory committee:

*All indicators available to the Committee show current rates of these payments are seriously inadequate, whether measured relative to the National Minimum Wage, in comparison with pensions, or against a range of income poverty measures. People on these payments face the highest levels of financial stress in Australia. Committee members heard from people who live on income support having to choose between paying for their medicine or electricity bills.*<sup>79</sup>

Anglicare Sydney supports the call being made by the sector for a more substantial safety net ensuring JobSeeker payments rise in line with the Age pension, that this payment be regularly indexed to wages as well as price increases, and the level of the payment be regularly reviewed by an independent tribunal.

### **Build more social housing.**

Under the Australia Future Fund, the Federal Government is aiming to deliver 30,000 social and affordable housing properties through the provision of \$10 billion. This would have an impact on the current lack of affordable housing and affordability issues in the private rental market. A lack of social and affordable housing and the ending of the National Rental Affordability Scheme have combined to generate a housing crisis. More social housing needs to be built at the rate of 25,000 dwellings per year, there needs to be increased protections for those in the private rental market and the rate of the Commonwealth Rental Assistance needs to be increased by 50% in order to ensure it reflects real housing costs.



**Ensure charitable agencies can respond to the increasing demand in the sector.**

The 2022 Australian Community Sector Survey highlighted both the increasing demands being placed on the sector and the resilient and adaptive capacity of the sector to rise to the challenge. But without ongoing and adequate funding, fewer and fewer agencies will be able to meet increasing community needs. Government needs to ensure equitable indexation of all grants and contracts, long-term guaranteed funding stability, an increase in funding for emergency relief services for the financial year 2023/24, and ensuring that the full cost of service delivery is fully funded. This will take pressure off these people in financial crisis as well as the emergency relief providers themselves.<sup>80</sup>

**Address high levels of food insecurity.**

Foodbank and other agencies have argued comprehensively for a long-term, whole of government strategy to address the levels of food insecurity in Australia. This could be achieved through the development of a National Food Security Strategy but would require bi-partisan support to be implemented.

## 7. Conclusion

This study has gathered personal insights from 27 members of the community who were willing to give up their time to speak to the research team about their personal experiences of living through a tough cost-of-living crisis.

Any qualitative study, while not universally representative, does provide a unique perspective on the human experience. In this case, it illuminates the difficult, conflicting choices being faced by many as they endeavour to balance competing priorities. While battling a lack of resources and opportunities, many showed they were creative, agile and careful in their day-to-day management of their budgets. They were planning ahead and were often proactive.

However, what is also clear is that sacrifices are having to be made on a daily basis in relation to such core essentials as food, housing, health, electricity and transport.

When children were involved, it seemed that no sacrifice was too much to ensure children were protected from the worst experiences of living in financial hardship even to the point of hunger and poor health. However, it is also evident that some children, despite their parents' best efforts, were still feeling the brunt of the current crisis. While perhaps not going hungry their diets had changed, they had less access to fresh fruit and vegetables, their clothing was often second hand and family excursions were becoming less and less frequent.

This current cost-of-living crisis has thus further exposed people on income support payments and low incomes to significant personal and family hardship. The prioritising of shelter over everything else has been raised in other studies and confirmed in this research. For most people, homelessness is a spectre to be avoided at all costs. This may mean rationing food, going hungry, sacrificing medications and access to health professionals, rugging up in winter rather than using heating, using cars and public transport as little as possible, and accessing charitable support in order to make ends meet.

One of the critical factors in this cycle of poverty and disadvantage is the cost of housing, particularly in the private rental market. Soaring rents and falling vacancy rates have jointly made the private rental market increasingly unaffordable. Many people are now precariously placed in the housing market, willing to put up with substandard properties and becoming increasingly housing insecure. As rent eats up more and more of the household budget, less and less is available for other essentials. The stress and anxiety this is creating in some households, combined with the presence of food insecurity, has the potential to fracture families and generate relationship breakdown, increase the incidence of domestic violence, and increase the prevalence of mental health issues.

A coordinated, multifaceted approach by all levels of government is required which targets the low level of JobSeeker and rapidly expands the supply of social and affordable housing. The levels of hardship being experienced by so many in our community, many of whom are children, need to be addressed if we are to ensure that people are not going hungry, can pay their bills and are not at risk of homelessness.

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