Welcome to our May edition for 2019. The year is well underway and full of significant changes on the horizon, the perfect time to take stock of initiatives and innovative research that might pave the way as we move forward. Read on to learn more.

**Housing stress**

Increased numbers of Australians are experiencing high levels of [housing stress](#), as low to middle income earners are struggling in [housing they cannot afford](#). Housing stress describes the situation when households are forced to spend a disproportional amount of their income on housing, and thereby limit spending on essential items and services such as food, health and education.

Rising housing stress is intrinsically linked to the deterioration of housing affordability over the past two decades, with research from [Compass Housing Services](#) analysing the gap between the incomes of private renters and the incomes needed to afford average rents. The report argues that the private rental market has become unaffordable not just for low-income earners, but for median income earners too, creating an [extreme demand for affordable housing options](#). [Home ownership](#) rates across the nation have declined while prices have increased, pushing more people into unaffordable rental situations and [increasing the risk of homelessness](#).

Focusing on Western Australia, a new report by the Bankwest-Curtin Economics Centre (BCEC), [Getting our house in order? BCEC Housing Affordability Report 2019](#), provides a remarkable level of insight into housing affordability in Western Australia with the circumstances of 3,600 Western Australians surveyed by BCEC. Key findings linked to housing stress include: [single parents](#) experience the highest level of housing stress, with 6 in 10 facing housing cost burdens in excess of 30% of their income, and 1 in 10 committing more than half; regional affordability has improved, with the proportion of households spending more than 30% of their income falling from 44% to 34%; and, a 3% increase in mortgage interest rates would have a major impact on 51% of WA households.

Action on housing stress and affordability serves to resolve other related issues, including the [significant impact](#) on the health and wellbeing of individuals and families who experience housing stress, with [women and the elderly representing the fastest growing cohort experiencing housing stress](#). The national [trend of housing stress](#) is prompting [public demands](#) to develop [strategic solutions](#).
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to be one of the most vulnerable groups in Australia, despite some improvements. General and long-term health conditions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are below that of non-indigenous people, with a higher prevalence of issues such as kidney disease which affects one in fifty Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 2 years and over. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who live in remote or very remote communities, which comprise 18.4% of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, access to and use of health services is significantly poorer than for people living in metropolitan areas.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with end stage kidney disease (ESKD), this lack of access to health services often leads to permanent relocation to urban areas, where there is a lack of affordable, accessible and culturally safe housing and accommodation; as discussed in a recent issues brief by the Deeble Institute. The brief, which considers the existing support mechanisms for ESKD patients, argues the patient population is at high risk of housing insecurity and homelessness, and discusses the need for the development of a comprehensive policy response, including: improving patient involvement in their care; adopting a collaborative approach and governance structure to provide a model of coordinated healthcare and housing support; and, introducing a new care package scheme to provide targeted support for the complex care needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander renal patients. Agencies, such as the Aboriginal Hostels Limited, play a role in providing short-term accommodation and have indicated they are considering improved levels of amenity to better accommodate for long-term needs.

Economy and Employment

The state of the economy has long dominated political and public discourse, however climate change is steadily becoming a central issue for debate with new research exploring the link between climate change and the economy. A report by the Climate Council argues that there are few forces affecting the Australian economy that can match the scale, persistence and systemic risk associated with climate change. Climate change is also expected to have knock-on effects on interest rates, as understanding climate change and its ramifications has become an essential part of developing economic models and frameworks that inform monetary policy decision-making. The Monash Sustainable Development Institute declares that the Australia has been slow to grasp this new financial agenda and recognise the broader economic risks of climate change, and action is needed to mitigate this risk.
Housing and Homelessness

Older Women’s Risk of Homelessness

Homelessness in Australia has increased, with older women now representing the fastest growing cohort experiencing homelessness in the country, increasing by 31% since 2011. The results from the 2016 Census indicated that nationally, an estimated 6,866 older women were homeless, with a further 5,820 older women living in marginal housing, placing them at a high risk of homelessness. The Australian Human Rights Commission argues that the full extent of older women’s homelessness is ‘hidden’, as homeless older women typically manage their homelessness by staying with friends or in overly crowded dwellings. Understanding the causes of older women’s homelessness is fraught with complexity, driven by connecting factors including sustained economic disadvantage, housing stress and instability, family and domestic violence and poor physical and mental health. With a significant lack of homelessness services targeting older women, Homelessness Australia and the Mercy Foundation argue that addressing the issue requires action, by increasing to the supply of affordable housing and more sufficient income supports for older Australians.

Linking Mental Health and Housing

A safe, secure and stable home is recognised as a foundation for developing and maintaining good mental health. However, for a growing number of individuals with mental illness, achieving and maintaining a stable housing situation is becoming increasingly challenging. The complex relationship between mental illness, housing instability and homelessness is becoming better understood, although understanding how these issues can be addressed simultaneously in both policy and practice remains underdeveloped. AHURI argues that a lack of integration between the mental health, housing and homelessness systems is resulting in an oversupply of services that don’t meet the needs of individuals experiencing mental illness, housing instability or homelessness. The need and demand for services is growing – with 1 in 4 individuals accessing housing and homelessness support report experiencing mental health issues. Addressing the interrelationship between these issues requires a better synergy of the housing, homelessness and mental health systems, and a focus on bridging the gaps and limitations.

Understanding Changing Housing Aspirations

The ‘Australian Dream’, home ownership, has seen a significant change from 35 years ago, with declining rates of home ownership across all income brackets. Addressing the declining rates of ownership and affordability issues has traditionally focused on tenure, couched in terms of expectations, choices, preferences and needs. However, there is a growing body of literature which suggests we should be considering the relationship between subjective
preferences and the material contexts that form an individual’s housing aspirations. Though in its infancy, this approach shifts away from tenure and choice frameworks, and considers the dimensions which define a persons’ aspirations, such as: the political-economic dimensions including class-based inequalities; societal dimensions, the ‘Australian Dream’ as a social and cultural norm; and individual dimensions, such as reducing cognitive dissonance when faced with unachievable aspirations by adjusting preferences in advance.

Society and Community
This issue of inequality has become an increasingly complex and controversial topic, and one that is firmly in the minds of the Australian and international communities from both social and economic perspectives. ACOSS argues that the income gap in Australia is unacceptably large, as incomes are highly concentrated with the top 20% collectively receiving 40% of all household income, more than the lowest 60% combined. While the overall level of income inequality has remained steady, wealth inequality has grown, leading to deepening social division. The Community Council for Australia argues that current debates about inequality in Australia are fixated on economic performance, rather than driving flourishing communities.

Women’s Interests
With the Federal government’s announcement to invest $328 million of the federal budget to address family and domestic violence in Australian communities, the momentum for research continues to grow. This national allocation includes $68.3 million for preventative strategies, $78.4 million towards safe places for people impacted by violence, and $35 million towards prevention strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The prevalence and impacts of family and domestic violence remain significant, particularly for women, as statistics show that women are nearly three time more likely to experience partner violence than men, and eight times more likely than men to experience sexual violence by a partner. Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety have released a timely report revealing the attitudes of young Australians to violence against women and gender equality, together with a report which focuses on the attitudes towards women in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The reports illustrate a strong level of community knowledge about violence against women, but shows that despite significant government investments, there remains a significant gap in knowledge relating to the gendered nature and partner violence, a lack of programs to address male behaviour and initiatives to challenge negative attitudes towards women. The reports establish a need to target services and investments towards initiatives that inform respectful relationships and breakdown negative attitudes towards women.
Hot off the Press

- Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) – The Business Case for Social Housing as Infrastructure
- Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) – The Changing Geography of Homelessness: A Spatial Analysis from 2001 to 2016
- Australian Institute of Criminology – Parental Offending and Children’s Conduct Problem
- Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety (ANROWS) – Building Safe Communities for Women and Their Children: A Compendium of Stories from the Field
- Centre for Social Impact – Financial Security and the Influence of Economic Resources
- Centre for Social Impact – Money Stories: Financial Resilience Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians
- Commissioner for Children and Young People – Improving the Odds for WA’s Vulnerable Children and Young People
- Mission Australia – Lifting the Weight. Understanding Young People’s Mental health and Service Needs in Regional and Remote Australia
- Queensland University of Technology – Disadvantage and Disability: Experiences of People from Refugee Backgrounds with Disability Living in Australia
- The Lowitja Institute – Health Benefits of Going On-Country
- The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation – Promoting Gender Equality Through the Arts and Creative Industries: A Review of Case Studies and Evidence
- University of Melbourne – Disability and Social Inclusion ‘Down Under’: A Systematic Literature Review

For more communities related resources, visit our Research and Reports page.