

# NCOSS Issues Paper: Insights on Priorities



April 2019

# NCOSS Issues Paper

## Insights on priorities

In February 2019, NCOSS sought the views of 544 NSW residents on their perceptions of inequality. This Issues Paper compares the findings of this exercise with other research and commentary on similar issues. It identifies evidence related to trends in community views and where the sample of 544 residents think more action needs to be taken.

Overall, it is clear that people feel inequality is growing and that more action is required from the NSW Government on a range of essential services. In a prosperous state like NSW, it is hard to believe that poverty and inequality are still major concerns. However, the views of respondents can be validated by research. Wealth inequality is growing throughout Australia.<sup>1</sup> In NSW, the rate of poverty is still 13.3%.<sup>2</sup> That is more than one million people.

Many are being [left behind](#) in NSW and this isn't good enough. NCOSS will continue to work toward reform that will drive down poverty, inequality and disadvantage.

### Summary of findings

- The clearest priority for action for respondents is building more hospitals and health facilities. This is the case across age groups, income brackets, genders and locations.
- Respondents feel that inequality has grown, and men have felt that increase at a greater rate than women.
- Women more than men are of the view that housing is a top issue for the NSW Government.
- The priorities of young people are housing and mental health, and these priorities need to hold sway as a new generation of voters emerges.
- People in regional NSW have felt the growth of inequality acutely and want more supports and services for health and mental health.
- The NSW environment is a key concern linked with issues that have garnered public attention over the months preceding the data collection.

# Insights on priorities



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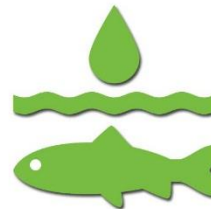
A quarter of NSW voters are now aged 18-35. Their priorities are housing and mental health.



Access to affordable and secure housing is a top issue for women more than men.



Respondents feel like economic inequality has grown, and men have felt that increase at a greater rate than women.



Over a third of respondents prioritise managing water and the environment.

## A common theme: build more hospitals and health facilities

All respondents, across age group, income bracket, location and gender, agreed that action should most urgently be taken on building more hospitals and health facilities. This priority reflects current circumstances. Australians are living longer than ever before. In 2018, 50 per cent of Australians were living with chronic health conditions.<sup>3</sup> In NSW over 2016 and 2017, 36 out of every 100 residents was hospitalised at some point, and the rate of hospitalisation was higher in regional areas.<sup>4</sup>

The rate of hospitalisation does not greatly vary between socioeconomic status;<sup>5</sup> it is a universal need. It is known though, that people from lower socioeconomic groups are at greater risk of poor health, have higher rates of illness, disability and death, and live shorter lives than those from higher socioeconomic groups.<sup>6</sup> This fact is reflected in the data collected for NCOSS, which shows a smaller percentage of high income respondents placing health services as their first priority, although it is a clear preference for action across all groups.

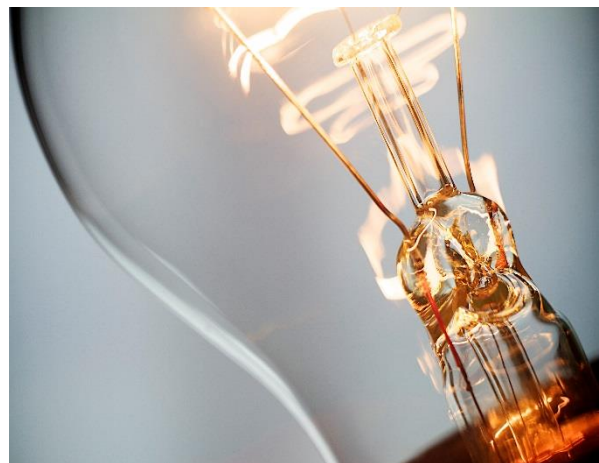
## Inequality is compounded by cost of living pressures

Most respondents believe that there has been an increase in inequality since the NSW election in 2015. In fact, wealth inequality in Australia did increase over the twelve years to 2016, and income inequality is starker in regional NSW than in Australian cities.<sup>7</sup> The average wealth of the highest 20% rose by 53% from 2003 to 2016, while that of the lowest 20% declined by 9%; the gap between the rich and poor has grown.

These respondents are also likely feeling an increase to their cost of living.

People on lower incomes are more likely to be renters.<sup>8</sup> In Sydney and NSW more broadly, renting has been consistently unaffordable over the last four years. This has been found through quantitative research and [reported in the media](#). In 2018, the Anglicare Rental Affordability Snapshot found that only 6 per cent of Australian rental properties were affordable to people on government income support payments, and 28 per cent were affordable to households on the minimum wage.<sup>9</sup>

Add to this that more people are renting, renting for longer, and are living in properties that are much less energy efficient than newer, owner-occupied homes.<sup>10</sup> Renters are four times more likely to live in a home without insulation, and they are less likely to have window treatments, such as curtains<sup>11</sup>. Excess heat, cold and dampness from inefficient homes can generate and aggravate a range of illnesses and allergies and have a significant impact on personal and public health spend.<sup>12</sup> Yet, people facing cost of living pressures are tending to under-use their energy to save money because the cost has grown over the last five years.<sup>13</sup> The cost of electricity increased by 20% in 2017 alone.<sup>14</sup>



Putting all of this together, people on low incomes are more likely to be renters, to live in homes that are not energy efficient, to spend a higher proportion of their income on rent and utility costs, plus have higher costs associated with their health.<sup>15&16</sup> In other words, it is very expensive to be poor.

The respondents feel this inequity in cost of living pressures; the majority of respondents are of the view that the Government is not doing enough about alleviating homelessness, making renting more affordable and supporting families who are struggling.

## Views about inequality are gendered, and not without consequence

Views on social inequality were different between men and women. 22 per cent of men compared with 17 per cent of women felt that social inequality had increased a lot. That men are feeling an increase in inequality, particularly in regional areas, has been the subject of much [commentary](#) of late. Journalists and others have reported that regional men are working harder but feeling less able to provide for their family, leading to dissatisfaction and anger. Such social and economic climates have been linked to wider cultural and political trends of regress and backlash against current shifts in attitudes and gender roles.<sup>17</sup>

There is cause to consider the potential consequences. Research that assesses the role of traditional beliefs about gender norms finds that conforming to ideals of traditional masculinity has a real cost, both for young men themselves and for the women and men around them. 35 per cent of men in Australia believe that they should be the ones to support their family financially. This and other beliefs associated with dominant ideals of masculinity have been found to negatively impact men's physical and mental health, and feature as a risk factor for domestic violence.<sup>18</sup>

## Housing is a priority issue for more women



Following access to health, women felt that housing was the most important issue. This is reflected in recent Australian Bureau of Statistics data showing that more women than men are living in housing stress. The Everybody's Home campaign and the Equality Rights Alliance put this disparity down to a combination of economic disadvantage including lower female incomes, caring responsibilities, the effects of fleeing family violence and single mothers paying higher rents to accommodate their children.<sup>19</sup>

The confluence of economic inequality and unaffordable housing is seen in the high rates of housing stress among single mothers and the rising ranks of single, older women experiencing homelessness.<sup>20</sup>

## The priorities of young people matter

33 per cent of the younger cohort in this data collection were 18 – 34 year olds, and of the view that social inequality has increased.

Like women, young people want affordable housing to be a top priority of the NSW Government. 51 per cent of 18 – 34 year olds identified housing as a top 3 concern. Other research reiterates this finding, and finds that even children and young people under 18 are very concerned with housing.<sup>21</sup> Young people are disproportionately affected by homelessness, and are not concerned with home ownership, but simply with finding and securing adequate and safe accommodation.<sup>22</sup>

Young people also view investment in mental health services as a top priority for the NSW Government. 39 per cent of 18 to 34 year old respondents hold a view that is consistent with young people responding to recent surveys. The Mission Youth Survey found that for young people aged 15 – 19, mental health is the number one concern. The rate of young people identifying mental health as a key national issue in this survey has doubled since 2016.<sup>23</sup> The NSW Advocate for Children and Young People undertook a survey of 4000 youth and found mental health care and support was a top priority for 17 per cent and in the top 5 issues that the NSW Government should focus on.<sup>24</sup>



It is important that Governments pay heed to the concerns of young people in NSW. There are 1.34 million voters aged 18-35, 25 per cent of all electors across the state. There are now 140,000 more 18-24-year-old voters than 1.5 years ago.<sup>25</sup> These are [record highs](#) following a 2017 surge in national enrolment when 65,000 new young voters registered for the same-sex marriage poll.

### **The regional-metro divide in views reflects the realities of regional living, and people are demanding better supports and services**

The NCOSS data collection divided metropolitan Sydney into eastern and western suburbs based on federal electorates. Those outside metropolitan Sydney, 34 per cent of respondents, were deemed regional.

This data collection, along with commentary leading up to the NSW election, has identified considerable frustration in regional NSW about a range of key social issues. These issues are consistently more pressing for respondents in regional areas than in Sydney.

First, respondents living outside metropolitan Sydney were more likely to say inequality has increased or stagnated compared to their city counterparts. This is consistent with research findings that have for many decades identified inequalities between ‘the city and the bush’.<sup>26</sup> Poverty is higher at 13.8 per cent among people living outside capital cities.<sup>27</sup> By contrast, the richest Australians live in Sydney’s northern and eastern suburbs, where there is a gap of more than \$200 000 in average income from those in the poorest postcodes.<sup>28</sup> Between 2012 and 2016, median household income increased faster in Sydney; by 3.8 per cent compared with only 2.8 per cent in non-urban areas.<sup>29</sup>

Growth in inequality is linked with changes in the way people think and feel about social relations and the treatment of groups such as immigrants and other minorities.<sup>30</sup> A Government that seeks to reduce inequality and make space for diversity in our communities by providing truly universal services also reduces risks associated with discrimination and divisiveness.<sup>31</sup>

Second, alongside the evident income inequality in regional areas, people living in regional and remote NSW experience higher levels of illness compared to people living in metropolitan areas.<sup>32</sup> This data shows that regional NSW is crying out for a greater focus on regional health care investment from the NSW Government. The poll reveals 76 per cent of regional NSW residents believe building more hospitals and health facilities should be a top priority.

Last, while rates of reported mental illness sit at about 20 per cent of the population throughout NSW, rates of self-harm and suicide increase with remoteness.<sup>33</sup> There are very significant mental health issues to be addressed in rural and remote areas that are reflected in this data. 57 per cent of residents outside metropolitan Sydney said the NSW Government is not doing enough to provide mental health services. 52 per cent of residents outside metropolitan Sydney said the NSW Government is not doing enough to support suicide prevention programs.



## Environment is increasingly part of the conversation

34 per cent of respondents prioritised managing the environment and water.

Our river systems were of particular concern to regional respondents (47 per cent) and people aged over 55 (44 per cent).

The [supply of water](#) to regional and remote towns, [fish kills](#) in the Menindee Lakes early in 2019 and ongoing attention on the management of the [Murray Darling Basin](#) were found by recent research to have become key concerns throughout NSW.

Changes to the natural environment can compound issues for families experiencing cost-of-living pressures, and when large geographic areas are impacted, entire communities can experience sudden vulnerability.

## Methodology and sample

Essential Research collected data for NCOSS in February 2019 via an online omnibus. There were 544 respondents. 37 per cent of respondents were located in East Sydney, 29 per cent from Western Sydney and 34 per cent from the rest of NSW. 49 per cent were men, 51 per cent women and participants ranged in age, household type, income and educational attainment.

The data does not represent a statistically significant sample of NSW. There are limitations to the randomisation of the sample and sources of error including response mistakes and weighting. Having compared the NCOSS findings to robust research and media commentary, we hope to reflect a more reliable picture of the basic trends in views of residents in NSW than the results alone.

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- NB: Most international poverty research defines poverty as 50% of median household disposable income. After taking account of housing costs, more than one in eight people (13.2%) live below the poverty line in Australia. Disturbingly, the poverty rate among children is much higher, at more than one in six (17.3%). There are 3.05 million people in poverty in Australia, including 739,000 children.
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- <sup>20</sup> National Foundation for Australian Women, *Housing Fact Sheet*, Canberra, 2019. Available [here](#).
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- <sup>26</sup> Public Health Information Development Unit, Torrens University Australia, *Regional health: trends in inequalities in health and wellbeing by remoteness, for New South Wales*, Australia, 2017, p. 1
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NB this number uses the 50 per cent of median income after housing measure.

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