



Hands Across Canberra



MEDIA RELEASE

NEW REPORT SHOWS INEQUALITY IN ACT LIVING STANDARDS

Almost half of all children living in Canberra's single parent families are in poverty (44%).

That's according to the latest *Vital Signs 2021* snapshot of the Canberra community, created by Hands Across Canberra and the Snow Foundation, which has also found that despite The ACT having the highest average weekly earnings in Australia, two out of five Canberrans living in poverty are in wage earning households, and that one in three Canberra adults are vulnerable to financial shocks.

"We have a reputation of being one of the most liveable cities in the country, and there is a strong sense of belonging. Yet we are also one of the most expensive and there is a 38,000 (or 9% of our population) living in poverty, and this is something we need to work on," Hands Across Canberra CEO Peter Gordon said.

However, the report wasn't all doom and gloom, with many strengths to celebrate amongst the challenges.

"The large majority of ACT residence find this area, and the broader Canberra region to be highly liveable, and the majority of those from non-English Speaking backgrounds say this place is very welcoming," Mr Gordon said.

"We have low unemployment, a high level of education and a strong sense of belonging across our community."

"However, there is much we need to do to ensure that those who experience economic and social disadvantage are not left behind, especially as we begin our recovery from COVID-19, so all can participate in what our community has to offer."

The report is a follow up from the first *Vital Signs 2018*, and looks at key indicators across four themes, Health, Education and Employment, Housing and Belonging. These themes were chosen by the Canberra community during the development of the first *Vital Signs 2018* report and will be maintained for future reports. *Vital Signs 2021* uses a global research methodology, drawing from a range of source data, including the census.

Dr Emma Campbell, CEO of the ACT Council of Social Service, said the findings regarding the high cost of living were not a surprise.

"The report provides evidence of increasing numbers of working poor in the ACT. In the past, ACTCOSS's work has focused on people on income support and other types of disadvantages, as a result of discrimination or barriers to accessing services," Dr Campbell said.

"We now frequently find ourselves including many full-time workers in the cohort of people we represent. The dramatic increases in cost of living means that many people in full-time work find themselves in rental stress and unable to cover the basics such as utilities, food, healthcare, education and transport."



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The report found Canberra to be one of the most expensive cities in Australia to rent. It found high rates of rental stress for low-income earners, with limited rental vacancies, despite an increase in people renting from 30% to 34%. Home ownership was also down, from 30 % to 25 % with the median house price reaching \$1m.

Also of concern in the report is the growing level of outreach to domestic violence, sexual assault and other crisis support services, particularly during the pandemic, as well as increased poor mental health outcomes and high rates of self-harm, especially amongst young Canberrans.

Dr Justin Baker, CEO of the Youth Coalition of the ACT said the experience of multiple COVID lockdowns have been especially hard on young people in Canberra.

“COVID has robbed our young people of the activities that bring them joy and connection. Education, socialising, job prospects, their very ability to get out and about and be with each other has been impacted. Due to this and more, we are seeing increased use of crisis services,” Dr Baker said.

“So it’s no surprise they are experiencing high levels of mental distress, due to these social determinants. I know it’s particularly difficult for our young LGBTIQ community in the ACT.”

Ms Georgina Byron, from the Snow Foundation, said the report was an important snapshot into the lives of people in Canberra, uncovering truths that can often be hidden behind closed doors.

“This is a very important report for our local region. It provides researchers, policy makers, and service providers, with guidance on what we should be focussed on, to make this city and region a place for everyone. It helps us recognise the areas we should be proud of, while also highlighting those we must work on,” CEO of the Snow Foundation, Ms Byron said.

“It’s also important to note that this report was developed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to this, much of the source data will have been impacted, and as such, some of our findings could be also have been impacted.

“We do know that COVID has been a factor in increased calls to crisis support lines, however, this doesn’t change the underlining problem of domestic violence, sexual assault, self-harm. We hope this report catalyses on the vital conversations we need to have that will help make this city an even better place to live.”

The *Vital Signs 2021* report is available for download [HERE](#).

Media contact: Chris Wagner 0434 078 939

(SEE THE FOLLOWING PAGE FOR A SUMMARY OF THE KEY FINDINGS ACROSS THE KEY THEMES)



KEY FINDINGS

Our Canberra

- The ACT has the lowest proportion of people indicating that Government Support has been their main source of income in the last two years compared to the Australian figure
- However, 38,300 are living in poverty of whom 8,000 are children
- A third of ACT adults reported a financial position which indicates they have relatively high vulnerability to financial shocks, with limited ability to cope with events such as loss of income or sudden large expenses
- Looking into the future, the proportion of the ACT population aged 65 years+ will almost double in the next 40 years

Health

- The ACT has the highest life expectancy in Australia despite the majority of adults being overweight or obese
- Low activity levels in children are reflected in their obesity rate which is above the national level
- Most Canberrans drink alcohol, but not at risky levels
- Most older persons in the ACT live at home and report their health to be good, very good or excellent
- Mental health declined, especially from 2019 to 2020
- The suicide rate for males is 3 times higher than for females while ambulance attendance rates for females involving a suicide attempt are the highest in the country
- Mental Health – 7% to 17% (increase in adults reporting high rates of distress (2020 – Unemployed 88% and Renters 68%
- The ACT continues to have the lowest bulk-billing rate in Australia

Education and Employment

- A significantly higher proportion of 3-year old's are enrolled in preschool than the Australian average
- Unlike other states and territories, around one in three Canberra workers are employed in one industry - Public Administration and Safety, and mostly work in public service roles for either the federal or territory government
- The ACT has the highest average weekly earnings in Australia, a highly educated workforce and low unemployment
- We have high rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids attending a preschool program and completing Year 12
- Our gender pay gap was significantly narrower than the national figure
- We had the largest percentage growth in new businesses of any state/ territory despite confidence in business conditions falling in 2020

Housing

- Over the last five years, the overall CPI has risen at a higher rate in Canberra than nationally
- Lack of affordable housing remains the biggest challenge confronting people on low incomes in the Canberra community with a rapidly increasing number of older women at risk of or homeless



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- Housing is the most significant expense for low-income households in the ACT
- There is a shortfall in social housing of 3,100 houses
- Canberrans are less likely to access Specialist Homelessness Services
- Canberra is currently the most expensive capital city in which to rent
- We have the highest rate of rental stress among lower income private rental households

Belonging

- The large majority of ACT residents find their local area and the ACT region as a whole, highly liveable
- Most ACT residents, including those from non-English speaking backgrounds, feel Canberra is a welcoming city
- On the positive side, adults living in the ACT have higher levels of personal wellbeing, better financial positions and better access to transport than the Australian average, but are challenged by higher cost of living and somewhat lower levels of social connection
- Notably, young people were less likely to feel a strong sense of belonging, and more likely to have poorer mental health, to feel lonely and lack some social connection, and to be underemployed
- Significantly, the ACT Government has become the first jurisdiction to commit to legislative reform to raise the age of criminal responsibility
- Most ACT residents feel Canberra is a welcoming city
- ACT adults are confident that human rights are protected in the ACT
- Canberra has the highest proportion of people who feel they can trust most people
- The ACT has the lowest adult Imprisonment rate in Australia
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander imprisonment rates for adults and children are disproportionately high
- Nearly a third of all children in out of home care are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
- Significantly more students reported strong school identification in 2020
- A significant number of LGBTQA+ youth reported feeling unsafe or uncomfortable at secondary school due to their sexuality or gender identity
- Canberrans demonstrate strong commitment to donating and to volunteering

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