

2024

# Mapping Social Cohesion

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with Trish Prentice



# Foreword

The Scanlon Foundation Research Institute is pleased to bring you the 2024 Mapping Social Cohesion Report.

In it, Dr James O'Donnell, Qing Guan and Trish Prentice have brought together a profile of the state of social cohesion in Australia, drawing on findings from what is now the eighteenth survey in a series that began back in 2007.

With this year's survey conducted in July 2024, this report enables us to reflect on what has been a year of national and global challenges. Importantly, the report highlights how Australia's social cohesion has remained steady, with the connections and belonging that exist at the local and neighbourhood level being one of this country's greatest strengths.

As you read, you will see that cost of living pressures continue to impact many in our society, and these pressures have a negative impact on trust in government and institutions, one's sense of worth and belonging, and our preparedness to participate in society.

The Scanlon Foundation has created and supported the Research Institute to ensure that Australia has an independent, non-partisan, comprehensive understanding of social cohesion. This research is essential for focusing our attention on the areas where we need to add resources, and areas where we

need to maximise our strengths to spread initiatives and strategies that maintain and build our diverse, cohesive society.

There is much to uncover in the 2024 report, and I would encourage you to read it all, dip in and out, keep it as a reference for your work, and share it with others. As the only survey of its kind in the world, covering more aspects of social cohesion than any other and conducted annually with an ever-growing number of participants, it makes an exceptional contribution to Australia's knowledge of itself.



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# Contents

Executive summary	6
Social cohesion in 2024	12
A challenging national & global environment	22
Migration, multiculturalism & diversity	30
Attitudes, experiences & relations in multicultural Australia	42
Australia's social fabric	54
The cost-of-living, the economy & housing	62
Trust & engagement in Australia's democracy	70
Personal wellbeing & safety	80
Social cohesion in a polarised world	88
Conclusion	98
Appendix A The 2024 Mapping Social Cohesion Study	100
References	108
Acknowledgements	111

# Executive summary

The peace, harmony and cohesion of societies continues to be one of the most important global social challenges of our time. The violent wars and conflicts we have witnessed around the world in recent months and years, the sharply divided debates, election outcomes and protest movements, misinformation, distrust, financial hardship and threats to social and physical wellbeing have diverse and usually complex origins and solutions. What they all have in common is the pressures they signal on global social harmony and cohesion from division, hardship and inequality, of the risk of a fracturing of the global social fabric and the weakening of our common bonds and common humanity.

In a world struggling with conflict and division, social cohesion in Australia is under pressure but has been resilient. Violence in the Middle East has sparked protests at home and strained interfaith relations (Chamas & Ford, 2023). Meanwhile, deeply divided debates over immigration across Europe and North America (The Economist, 2024) have been kept at bay in Australia to an important extent, though we face greater division over the size of Australia's migration program (Al Jazeera, 2024). Home-grown pressures over the last 12-18 months are also evident from the difficult debate over the First Nations Voice Referendum in 2023 (Whiteman, 2023), violent attacks in Sydney (AAP, 2024) and violence against women across the country (ABC, 2024). Perhaps above all in the view of most Australians, economic and cost of living pressures continue to strain household finances and weigh on personal and social wellbeing, trust and acceptance of others, and the sense of fairness and the 'fair go'.

Australia's social cohesion, perhaps now more than ever, is a crucial resource in managing current

challenges. The continued strength of connection and engagement within local communities; the breadth of support for multiculturalism and the contributions migrants have made to Australian society, culture, and the economy; and the foundational importance of First Nations peoples to society, all underpin Australia's social fabric through difficult times. The challenge of renewing Australian multiculturalism and addressing social inequalities are key to maintaining that strength.

## Mapping Social Cohesion 2024

It is in this context that the 2024 Mapping Social Cohesion study takes place. As in every year since 2009 (and following the first in 2007), a nationally representative survey was conducted in July-August to gauge Australians' attitudes, perceptions and behaviours across 100 indicators of social cohesion, immigration, multiculturalism, wellbeing and other topical issues. In 2024, more than 8,000 people completed a survey, while 45 people took part in an in-depth interview, making it the largest study in the history of the Mapping Social Cohesion series.

Most people completed the survey as members of the Social Research Centre's Life in Australia™. Life in Australia™ is a panel of more than 10,000 Australians who have been randomly selected and invited to join as panel members. Almost 7,900 members completed an online survey, while 87 completed the survey by telephone. To ensure the Mapping Social Cohesion study is representative of all Australians, an additional 229 surveys were conducted with people from Indian, Middle Eastern and African backgrounds in one of four different languages (including English). The in-depth interviews were conducted with a cross-

section of Australians to seek their views on how national and global divisions impact life and social cohesion in Australia.

### **Overall social cohesion has been stable over the last 12 months, but is below its long term average**

The Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion was stable between 2023 and 2024, recording a score of 78 in both years. In the context of the national and global challenges of the last 12 months, this stability reflects the resilience of Australian society and the bonds that connect people. Australians' sense of national pride and belonging and personal happiness and wellbeing have been steady over the last year, while participation in the political process and in the social and civic life of communities has been at least as strong as in previous years.

In several areas though, social cohesion remains below past levels while new pressures have emerged. Australians' sense of belonging and social justice are significantly below their long-term averages, while economic and cost of living pressures contribute to stubbornly high financial dissatisfaction and stress. Acceptance of Australia's diversity and multicultural harmony is also strained by the experience of discrimination and mistreatment. Alongside widely reported increases in Islamophobia and anti-Semitism (Dumas, 2024; SBS, 2024), one-in-three (35 per cent) overseas-born Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds in the Mapping Social Cohesion survey report experiencing discrimination on the basis of skin colour, ethnic origin or religion in the past 12 months. In sum, while the Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion has been steady over the last 12 months, it is approximately

six points lower than its average of the 2010s and at its equal lowest level since the first Mapping Social Cohesion survey in 2007.

### **In a divided world, attitudes to migration and multiculturalism remain largely positive but have declined from peaks in recent years**

Attitudes to migrants and migration have been highly divisive across Europe and North America in recent years, evidenced by protests (and counter-protests), riots, polarised political platforms and election outcomes. Harmony across nationalities, cultures and religions is further strained by conflict and tensions, particularly the violent conflict in the Middle East. Such global events infiltrate Australian society and politics through traditional and social media, and through Australia's diversity and our ancestral, cultural and ideological connections to all sides of current debates and conflicts.

Australians however continue to broadly value multiculturalism and the contribution of migrants and migrant diversity to Australian society, culture and the economy. In 2024, 71 per cent of people agree that accepting immigrants from many different countries makes Australia stronger, while more than four-in-five agree that multiculturalism has been good for Australia (85 per cent), that immigrants are generally good for Australia's economy (82 per cent) and that immigrants improve Australian society by bringing new ideas and cultures (82 per cent). Similar proportions say they have two or more close friends from different national, ethnic or religious backgrounds (79 per cent) and like meeting and getting to know people from different ethnic and cultural groups (86 per cent).

Support for multiculturalism has declined though over the last two years. The proportions who agree that multiculturalism has been good for Australia, that immigrants are generally good for the economy, that immigrants from many different countries makes Australia stronger and that immigrants improve Australian society have declined by 2 to 7 percentage points since 2022.

The fact that declines in positive attitudes are coming off such a high base and remain at high levels suggests that support for migration and multiculturalism continues to be a strength and asset to Australia in warding off deeper social and ideological divisions. Nevertheless, the challenges of the past year provide a call to renew and re-invest in Australian multiculturalism to ensure it remains an asset (Dellal et al., 2024).

### **People are more divided on the number of immigrants coming to Australia but strongly support non-discriminatory migration policy including for people arriving from conflict zones**

In 2024, 49 per cent of people say that the number of immigrants to Australia is too high, significantly higher than the 33 per cent recorded in 2023 and 41 per cent in 2019 prior to COVID-19 era border closures. This means Australians are now evenly split between those who think immigration is too high and those who think immigration is about right or too low. While the proportion who say immigration is too high is substantially higher than in previous years, it is perhaps not surprising or out of step with political leadership given that both the Federal Government and the Opposition are pursuing or proposing policies to reduce the immigration intake – actions that may help to lead public opinion on these issues.

Concern about the size of the migration program does not translate to widespread support for a discriminatory migration program. More than four-in-five (83 per cent) people do not agree that Australia should reject migrants on the basis of their ethnicity or race while a similar proportion (79 per cent) disagree that Australia should reject on the basis of religion. Of particular note given current conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere, three-quarters (73 per cent) of people do not think Australia should reject immigrants because they are coming from areas experiencing conflict. Meanwhile, two-in-three people (65 per cent) disagree that it should be possible to reject individuals and families from migrating to Australia on the basis of their health or a disability.

### **Growing belief that immigration is too high is most strongly related to economic and housing issues, rather than attitudes to diversity, multiculturalism and migrants**

Most people who think immigration is too high also value the benefits of multiculturalism and the contribution of migrants to Australian society, culture and the economy. Of people who think immigration is too high, 75 per cent agree that multiculturalism has been good for Australia, 69 per cent agree that immigrants are generally good for Australia's economy and 68 per cent agree that immigrants improve Australian society by bringing new ideas and cultures.

The importance of current economic challenges in shaping attitudes to immigration is clear from the problems that people see and experience. Almost two-in-three (64 per cent) adults who said that immigration is too high cited economic issues or housing shortages and affordability as the most important problem facing Australia, while only 7 per cent cited immigration. More than two-in-five (43 per cent) adults who believe immigration is too high described their financial circumstances as poor, struggling to pay bills or just getting along. Of those who think immigration is too high and are just getting along at best, 88 per cent believe that migrants are taking away jobs or raising housing prices, even though 73 per cent believe multiculturalism has been good for Australia and 60 per cent believe that immigrants are generally good for Australia's economy.

### **The conflict in the Middle East and other events coincide with greater pressure on interfaith relations**

In July 2024, one-in-three (34 per cent) adults say they have a somewhat or very negative attitude towards Muslims. This figure increased from 27 per cent in July 2023, before the current conflict in the Middle East. While a substantial share of people, and a significant increase since the current crisis started, progress in recent years means the current proportion with a negative attitude towards Muslims is still below levels recorded in July 2018 (39 per cent), 2019 (40 per cent) and 2020 (37 per cent). Negative attitudes towards Jewish people have also become more common, though from a lower base, increasing from 9 per cent in 2023 to 13 per cent in 2024. The proportion of adults who have a positive attitudes towards Muslim and Jewish people (as opposed to a negative or neutral view) declined by 7-8 percentage points each between 2023 and 2024.

In truth though, attitudes towards all major faiths are less positive and more negative in 2024. The proportion with a positive attitude towards Christians





decreased from 42 per cent in 2023 to 37 per cent in 2024, with negative attitudes increasing from 16 per cent to 19 per cent. The proportion with a positive attitude towards Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs declined by 6-8 percentage points each, while the proportion with a negative attitude to people of any of the major faiths other than their own increased from 38 per cent to 48 per cent. So, while attitudes to Australia's Muslim and Jewish communities is a particular area of concern, relations towards and across all faiths appear to be under pressure.

### **Cost of living pressures continue to impact financial, personal and social wellbeing**

With a pause in interest rate rises and slowing inflation in 2024, it may have been hoped that financial stress would ease in the last year. However, with the cost of living still high and real incomes shrinking, the experience of financial stress

has been stubbornly common. In 2024, 41 per cent of adults say they are at best 'just getting along' financially, 11 per cent describe themselves as 'poor' or struggling to pay bills and 28 per cent say they often or sometimes could not pay for meals, medicine or healthcare in the last 12 months, or could not pay their rent or mortgage on time. These levels of financial hardship are similar to the levels recorded in 2023, while the proportion of those who are 'just getting along' at best has increased by 11 percentage points since 2021 (from 31 per cent).

Financial pressures continue to be a strong drag on social cohesion. People experiencing financial hardships are much less likely to trust in government, institutions and other people in society, feel a substantially weaker sense of national pride and belonging, a greater sense of social isolation and are more likely to have negative views on migrants and multiculturalism. People who are struggling or poor are 10 per cent less likely to agree that



multiculturalism has been good for Australia than people who are living reasonably comfortably, 20 per cent more likely to believe migrants take jobs away or raise house prices, and 20 per cent more likely to have a negative attitude to people of different religious faiths than their own.

### **Australians have a high degree of trust in community and public services and weaker trust in government and media**

Trust in government and other institutions is an important foundation for democracy and the smooth and cohesive functioning of society. Trust in government and institutions ought to be critical and conditional in holding leaders accountable. Nevertheless, mutual trust between people and institutions such as government, the courts, public services, businesses and the media, supports the free flow of information and the efficient and effective delivery and take-up of important services.

Australians generally value services but are less trusting of government and media. According to the 2024 Mapping Social Cohesion survey, more than 70 per cent of adults trust the police, the health system and community organisations all or most of the time,

while between 40 and 50 per cent of people trust businesses, their local council and trade unions. Only one-in-three people trust their state government, the Federal Government or religious organisations at least most of the time, while one-in-four trust traditional media companies and fewer than one-in-ten trust social media companies. Just over one-half (54 per cent) of adults believe the courts make fair, impartial decisions all or most of the time, while more than one-third (38 per cent) of people do not believe that elections are fair at least most of the time.

Trust in government and the political system continue to decline since the COVID-19 pandemic. The proportion of adults who think the Federal Government can be trusted to do the right thing by the Australian people all or most of the time has declined from 44 per cent in 2021 to 33 per cent in 2024, while the proportion who think the system of government in Australia needs to undergo major changes or be replaced increased from 39 per cent to 45 per cent. Dissatisfaction is strongly related to economic and financial pressures, with those who are renting, struggling financially and/or living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods being the least trusting in government and the most likely to believe major change is needed.

## **While important to democracy and social cohesion, political activism and protest highlight – and likely exaggerate – divisions and divides in Australia**

In 2024, more than one-half (53 per cent) of people said they had signed a petition in the last three years or so, 20 per cent had written or spoken to a Member of Parliament, 20 per cent had joined a boycott of a product or company, 11 per cent had attended a protest, march or demonstration and 26 per cent had posted or shared anything about politics online. While most of these proportions are similar to previous years, involvement in boycotts and petitions are more common in 2024.

Political activity reflects an engaged citizenry, people prepared to fight for what they believe in, to enact and realise change. In this way, political engagement contributes positively to social cohesion. Clearly though, political activism in recent years has also been a symptom of divisions and dissatisfaction in society, including with respect to violence in the Middle East and violence against women in Australian communities.

According to the 2024 Mapping Social Cohesion survey, involvement in protests, boycotts and online activity is most common among young adults and those who identify as left wing. Left wing activists in these areas are significantly less likely to have a great sense of belonging in Australia than other left wing people, while right wing activists are less likely to agree that migrant diversity makes Australia stronger and more likely to have a negative attitude towards Muslims. Regardless of political orientation, those involved in protests, boycotts and online activity are much less likely to trust in government than non-activists. In this way, highly visible protests, boycotts and other political activities seen online and through the media amplify apparent divisions, making Australians seem more divided and dissatisfied than they are.

## **Australians remain connected and engaged within their communities, though they are feeling somewhat less safe**

The connectedness and cohesion of neighbourhoods and local communities has been a great source of strength in Australia, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2024, 82 per cent of adults agreed that people in their local area are willing to help their neighbours while 81 per cent agreed that their local area is a place where people from different national or ethnic backgrounds get on well together. These proportions have declined modestly since 2021 though still remain in line with or above their averages of the last 15 years.

Likewise, Australians remain actively engaged in the social and civic life of their communities. More than one-half (56 per cent) of Australians were involved in a social, community, religious, civic or political group in the last 12 months, including State Emergency Services, sport clubs, charities and religious groups – a figure that is at least as high as it has been in recent years (54-55 per cent in 2021, 2022 and 2023).

In the context of heightened concern around violence, and particularly violence against women, Australians are feeling somewhat less safe. The proportion of women who feel at least fairly safe walking alone at night in their local area declined from 54 per cent in 2022 to 46 per cent in 2024 (from 79 to 74 per cent for men), while the share who are fairly or very worried about becoming a victim of crime increased from 28 per cent to 36 per cent (from 21 to 26 per cent for men). Men and women who feel most unsafe are much less likely to trust other people, feel a weaker sense of belonging in Australia and in their neighbourhoods, are more likely to feel socially isolated and more likely to have negative attitudes to religious faiths other than their own – indicating that concern for safety is closely related to social cohesion.

## **National and global challenges put pressure on social cohesion, but also demonstrate its importance in supporting personal and social wellbeing and connections when it is most needed**

The current national and global environment appears to be taking a toll on Australia. Amidst cost of living pressures, conflict and violence at home and abroad, and deep global divisions over issues such as immigration, Australians are more divided on the size of Australia's immigration program now than they were in 2023, feel less safe in their communities, feel more negatively and less positively towards people of different faiths and multiculturalism generally, are just as likely to be experiencing financial hardship and are feeling more pessimistic about the future. At the same time, Australians are still connected and active in their communities and still value Australia's multicultural diversity. These are important strengths in Australia's social fabric that are positively associated with individual and collective wellbeing. They also highlight that social cohesion is and can continue to be an important resource in weathering challenges now and into the future.

# Social cohesion in 2024



As every year, the Mapping Social Cohesion study measures and tracks Australia's social cohesion. This measurement and tracking is multidimensional and multifaceted, combining survey and interview data from across the last 17 years and resulting in this annual report. The Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion is one important component, combining people's responses to multiple survey questions into single measures of social cohesion and each of its five domains, allowing us to monitor social cohesion over time at a high level.

12

The Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion has been renamed this year from the Scanlon-Monash Index of Social Cohesion. The index was first created in a collaboration between the Scanlon Foundation and Monash University, under the leadership of Professor Andrew Markus. Despite the name change, the Index is the same and so owes its foundation and legacy to the work of Monash University and particularly Professor Markus. The change of name is a simplification, though we continue to recognise and celebrate their contribution – including the ongoing advice and expertise of Professor Markus.

Since 2021, the Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion has been comprised of two sets of six indexes. The first set of six indexes (one index for each domain and an overall social cohesion index) is based on a common set of questions that have been asked in every survey since 2007, and so allows us to track social cohesion over time. Index scores are 'indexed' to 2007, meaning that scores are calculated relative to scores recorded in the first 'baseline' survey conducted in 2007. An index score of 78, for example, indicates a score that is 78 per cent of its value in 2007 – or 22 percentage points lower.

The second set of indexes are based on a larger set of questions, some of which were first asked in 2021. So while we cannot use this newer set of indexes to measure social cohesion over the entire 2007-2024 period, they do provide rich and powerful information on how, why and to what extent perceptions, attitudes and experiences of social cohesion vary across society. More information on how the indexes are constructed is provided in Appendix A.

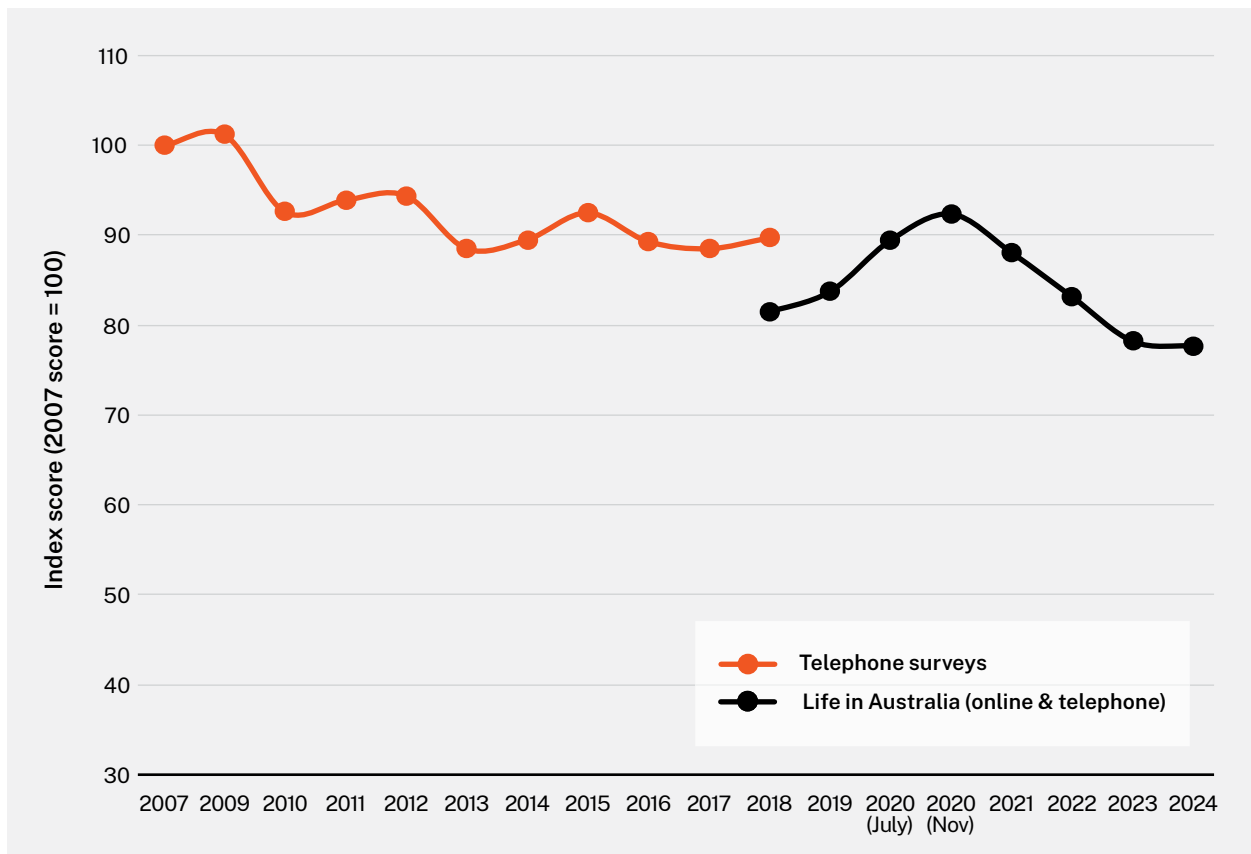
Summarising all of a society’s cohesion in a single set of numbers is powerful at a high level and a useful tool – or set of tools – helping to identify the key trends and emerging issues. However, the Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion on its own only scratches the surface of what it means to live in a cohesive society, with all of its complexity and variability. So, in addition to providing the high level Index

scores, we explain in this chapter (and the rest of the report), the key indicators, drivers, changes and differences across society that underpin a broad, holistic and multidimensional understanding of social cohesion in Australia today.

**Overall social cohesion has been stable over the last 12 months, but is below its long term average**

The Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion was stable between 2023 and 2024, recording a score of 78 in both years (see Figure 1). This is substantially below levels recorded during the COVID-19 pandemic (see the previous Mapping Social Cohesion reports since 2020) and somewhat below average levels recorded during the 2010s.

**Figure 1** The Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion, 2007 to 2018 (telephone surveys) and 2018 to 2024 (online and telephone)



The overall Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion and most of the domains were affected by the transition of the Mapping Social Cohesion survey to the Social Research Centre's Life in Australia™ panel in 2018. Prior to 2018, the survey was delivered as a telephone survey, by randomly calling landline and mobile phone numbers. With the transition to Life in Australia™, the survey became a mostly online survey (1-3 per cent of surveys continue to be conducted by telephone to remove digital access barriers).

When respondents completed surveys online and without having to speak to a real person over the phone, they were more likely to say they had been unhappy in the last year and less likely to say that have a strong sense of belonging in Australia, that they are satisfied with their finances and that they support Australia's migrant diversity.

Although it is more challenging to track social cohesion before and after the transition to Life in Australia™, we can measure and adjust for this mode effect – the change caused by the different way the survey was delivered – by calculating the difference between survey responses and scores when the survey was run in parallel as both a telephone survey and an online survey in 2018 and 2019. We estimate that this difference, the mode effect, reduced overall social cohesion by seven points.

After adjusting for the transition to Life in Australia™ and removing the mode effect, we estimate that overall social cohesion is 15 points lower than in 2007 and six points lower than its average across the 2010s. So while it is positive that social cohesion has been steady through the challenges of the last 12 months, it remains at its lowest levels since the start of the Mapping Social Cohesion study in 2007.

**All domains of social cohesion – except political participation – have recorded modest declines over the last year**

Scores on the Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion are shown in Table 1 for between 2007 and 2018 when the survey was run as a telephone survey and in Table 2 for between 2018 and 2024 when the survey has been run as a largely online survey to Life in Australia™. The sense of belonging, the sense of worth, the social inclusion and justice and acceptance and rejection domains recorded small declines of between one and three points over the last 12 months, while political participation increased by four points.

These changes and their underlying components are explored in the following sections.



**Table 1** The Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion, 2007 to 2018 (telephone surveys)

Measure	2007	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
1. Sense of belonging	100	97	95	97	95	91	93	93	94	92	92
2. Sense of worth	100	97	97	97	97	94	97	97	96	95	94
3. Social inclusion and justice	100	112	92	94	95	98	94	91	92	88	92
4. Political participation	100	105	98	106	107	91	94	100	99	104	101
5. Acceptance and rejection	100	94	82	75	79	69	71	82	67	64	69
<b>Overall social cohesion</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>90</b>

**Table 2** The Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion, July 2018 to 2024 (Life in Australia™)

Measure	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Change 2023-2024	Change 2018-2024
1. Sense of belonging	85	86	88	84	81	78	77	-1	-8
2. Sense of worth	77	80	84	82	78	75	74	-1	-3
3. Social inclusion and justice	88	93	112	97	86	77	74	-3	-14
4. Political participation	95	93	95	95	97	96	100	+4	+5
5. Acceptance and rejection	63	67	67	81	74	65	63	-2	0
<b>Overall social cohesion</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>-4</b>

Note: Two surveys were conducted in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, one in July and one in November. To save space, only the July 2020 results are shown (the usual month in which surveys are conducted).

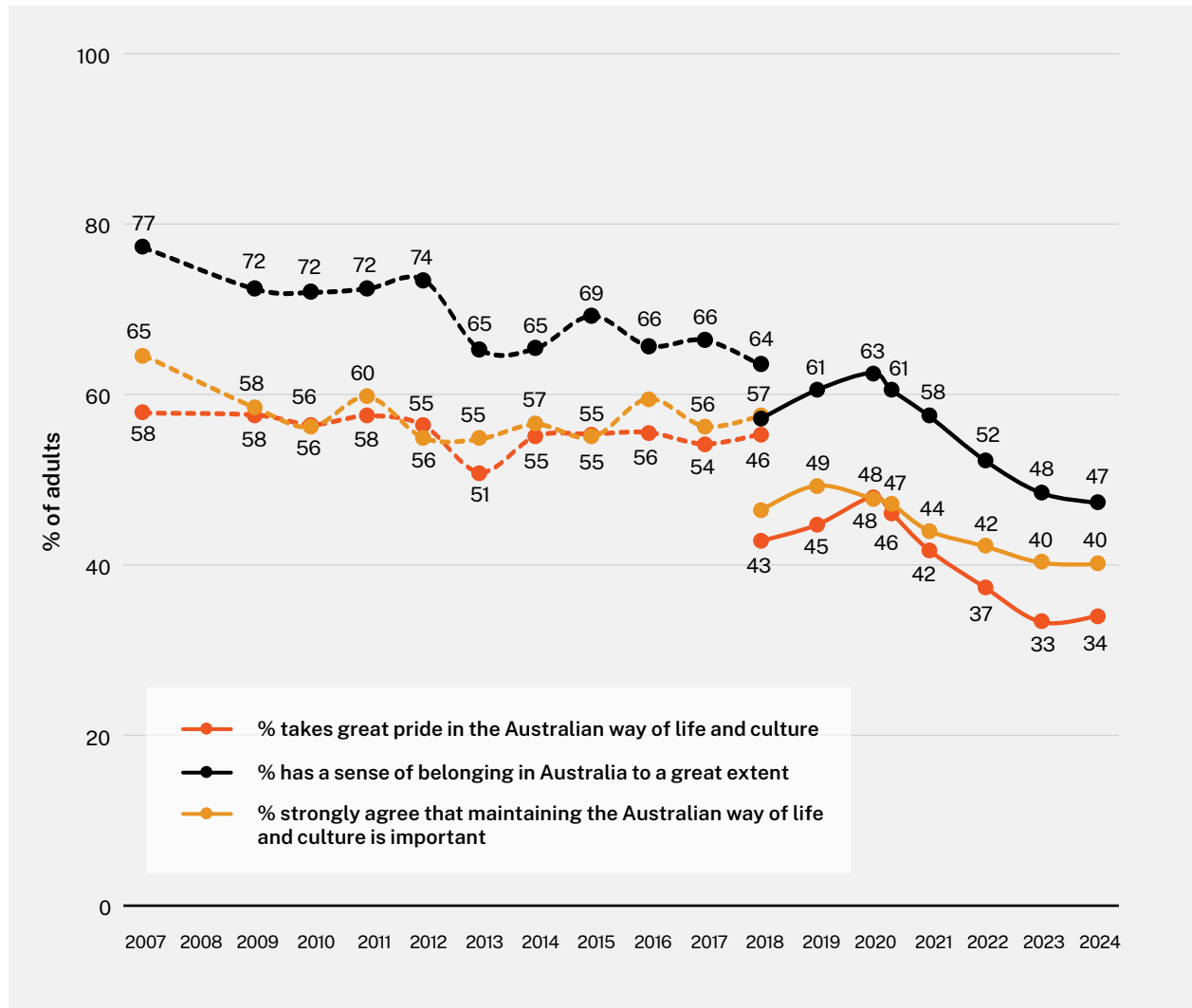
### The sense of belonging has been steady over the last 12 months after several years of decline

The score on the sense of belonging domain was 77 in 2024, one point lower than the 2023 score. Over the longer term, the sense of belonging declined eight points when the Mapping Social Cohesion survey was run as a telephone survey between 2007 and 2018 and by a further eight points between 2018 and 2024 on Life in Australia™.

The sense of belonging domain is based on survey questions that ask about the sense of pride and belonging that people have in Australia. On each of these questions, people are reporting similar results to last year and less pride and belonging than in past years (see Figure 2).

- One-in-three (34 per cent) adults say they ‘take pride in the Australian way of life and culture’ to a great extent in 2024, 47 per cent say to a moderate extent and 19 per cent say only slightly or not at all.
- A little less than half of the population (47 per cent) say they ‘have a sense of belonging in Australia’ to a great extent in 2024, 38 per cent say to a moderate extent and 14 per cent say only slightly or not at all.
- In 2024, 86 per cent of people agree (46 per cent) or strongly agree (40 per cent) that ‘in the modern world, maintaining the Australian way of life and culture is important’, while 11 per cent disagree and 2 per cent strongly disagree.

**Figure 2** Trends in national pride and belonging, 2007 to 2018 (telephone surveys) and 2018 to 2024 (Life in Australia™)



Note: dashed lines represent when the Mapping Social Cohesion survey was run as a telephone survey (2007–2018), before the transition to the largely online Life in Australia™. Two surveys were conducted in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, one in July and one in November.

While these proportions are very similar to 2023, the extent of national pride and belonging has declined significantly over time, both since peaks recorded during the COVID-19 pandemic and since the 2010s. The proportion of people who take great pride in the Australian way of life and culture has declined 14 percentage points since July 2020 and by an estimated 12 percentage points from the average recorded throughout the 2010s (after adjusting for the transition to Life in Australia™); while the proportion who have a great sense of belonging in Australia has declined 16 percentage points since July 2020 and the 2010s. These downward trends are shown in Figure 2.

**The sense of worth has also been steady over the last two years though continues to be pressured by financial and cost of living challenges**

The score on the sense of worth domain was 74 in 2024, one point lower than the 2023 score. The sense of worth domain is based on survey questions about people’s happiness and financial wellbeing. Levels of happiness have been reasonably consistent in recent years, though are somewhat lower than they were ten years ago.



- Almost four-in-five (78 per cent) Australian adults say that ‘taking all things into consideration’ they have been happy (66 per cent) or very happy (12 per cent) over the last year, while one-in-five (21 per cent) say they have been unhappy (18 per cent) or very unhappy (3 per cent).
- We estimate that the proportion of people who are happy or very happy has declined by five percentage points since the average of the 2010-2015 period and after adjusting for the transition to Life in Australia™ survey.

Financial satisfaction has declined since 2020, coinciding with the end of support measures during the COVID-19 pandemic and the emergence of cost of living pressures. Despite slowing inflation and a pause in interest rate rises, financial dissatisfaction and stress remain at similar levels as 2023 and above the longer term average.

- Three-in-five (59 per cent) adults are satisfied (53 per cent) or very satisfied (7 very satisfied) with their financial situation in 2024, while 40 per cent are dissatisfied (31 per cent) or very dissatisfied (9 per cent).
- The proportion who are financially satisfied has declined by 14 percentage points since July 2020 and by an estimated average of five points since the 2010s.

Happiness and personal wellbeing are explored further in the chapter ‘Personal wellbeing & safety’ while financial wellbeing is analysed in ‘The cost of living, the economy & housing’.

### **Declining social inclusion and justice reflects long-term declines in people’s sense of economic fairness in Australia**

The social inclusion and justice domain is based on questions concerning the degree of social and economic fairness and justice in Australia. Index scores spiked in 2009 at the time of the Federal Government’s response to the Global Financial Crisis and again in 2020 at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic when expanded income support measures were in place. Outside of those times, social inclusion and justice has generally declined. In 2024 social inclusion and justice scores are 38 points below

where they were in July 2020 and approximately 16 points below their average across the 2010s.

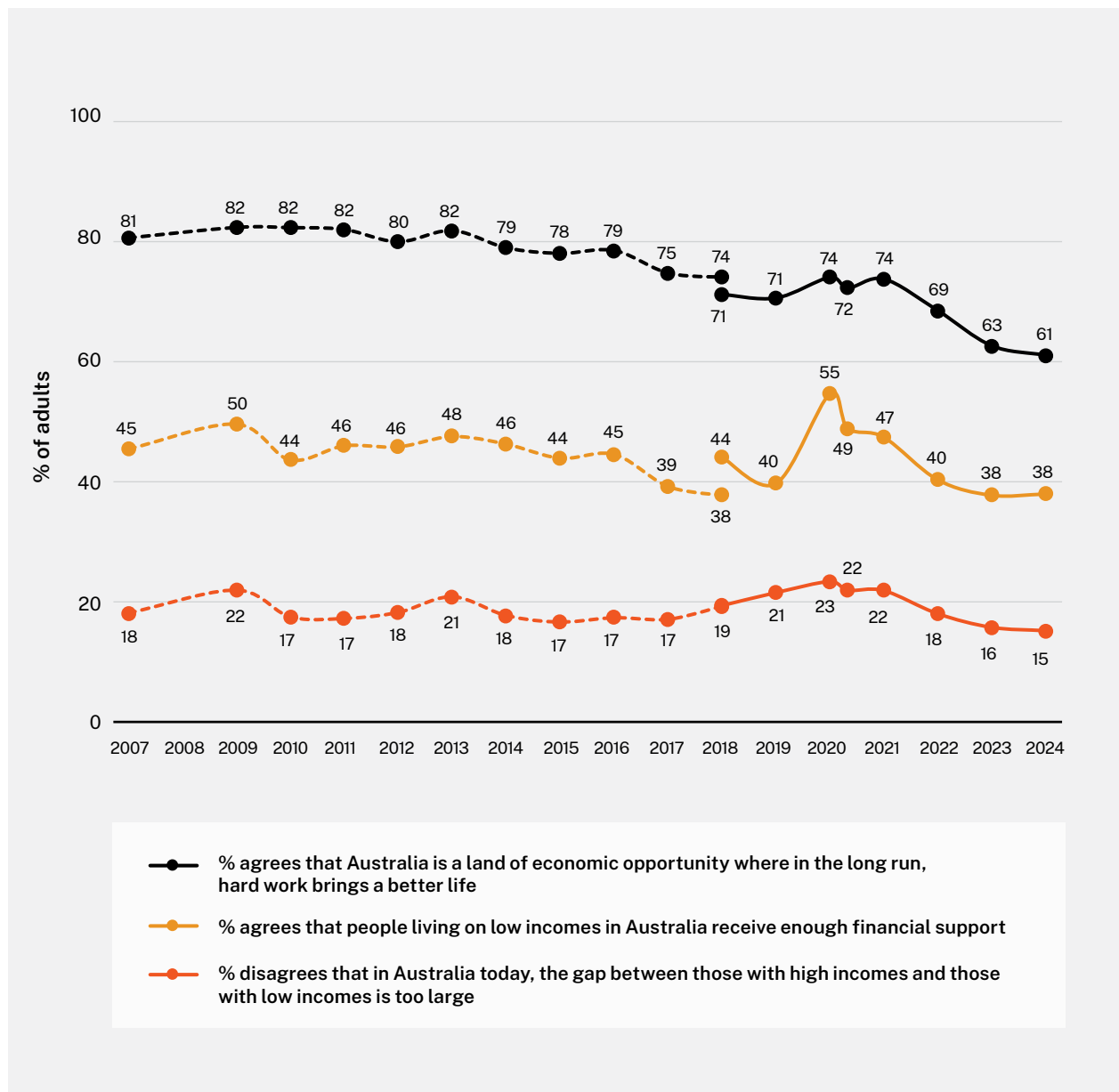
- Most people – although a declining share – believe ‘Australia is a land of economic opportunity where in the long run, hard work brings a better life’, with 61 per cent of people agreeing (50 per cent) or strongly agreeing (11 per cent) with this statement and 39 per cent disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. The level of agreement with this statement has declined by 13 percentage points from 74 per cent in July 2020 and by an estimated 18 percentage points since 2010-2013.
- More than eight-in-ten (84 per cent) people believe that ‘in Australia today, the gap between those with high incomes and those with low incomes is too large’ with 44 per cent of people agreeing with this statement, 41 per cent strongly agreeing and 15 per cent disagreeing. This has always been a common view among survey respondents, with an average of just 18 per cent of adults disagreeing that the gap is too large across the 2010s. Nevertheless, the proportion in 2024 who disagree is the lowest it has been since the first Mapping Social Cohesion survey in 2007.
- Most people (61 per cent) do not think that ‘people living on low incomes in Australia receive enough financial support’ with 44 per cent disagreeing with this statement and 17 per cent strongly disagreeing. Two-in-five (38 per cent) people agree or strongly agree with the statement. Belief that low income earners receive enough support has declined over the last ten years.

The long-term trends across responses to the above three questions are shown in Figure 3.

The social inclusion and justice domain also includes a question on trust in government. Australians’ attitudes to government are explored in the chapter ‘Trust & engagement in Australia’s democracy’.

- In 2024, one-in-three (33 per cent) people ‘think the government in Canberra can be trusted to do the right thing for the Australian people’ at least most of the time, while 51 per cent of people think it is ‘only some of the time’ and 15 per cent think it is ‘almost never’.

**Figure 3** Indicators of social inclusion and justice, 2007-2018 (telephone surveys) & 2018-2024 (Life in Australia™ online & telephone surveys)



Note: dashed lines represent when the Mapping Social Cohesion survey was run as a telephone survey (2007–2018), before the transition to the largely online Life in Australia™. Two surveys were conducted in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, one in July and one in November.

**Against a backdrop of national and international protest and activism, political participation has been steady – if not increased**

The political participation domain increased by four points between 2023 and 2024, reaching a score of 100. Over the longer term, scores in this domain have fluctuated with no clear upward or downward trend. Scores in 2024, though, are higher than they ever have been since 2018 on the Life in Australia™ panel.

Political participation is measured from a set of political activities that respondents say they have been involved with in the last three years. In the last three years,

- 82 per cent of adults voted in an election. This proportion is reasonably in line with its average since 2018 (80 per cent).
- 53 per cent of adults signed a petition (average of 52 per cent since 2018).

- 20 per cent wrote or spoke to a Member of Parliament (average of 20 per cent since 2018).
- 20 per cent joined a boycott of a product or company (average of 18 per cent since 2018).
- 11 per cent joined a protest, march or demonstration (average of 10 per cent since 2018)

In recent years, the Mapping Social Cohesion survey has measured other types of civic and political activity. More information on trends in political activity is provided in the chapter ‘Trust and engagement in Australia’s democracy’.

- 13 per cent got together with others to try to resolve a local problem in the last three years (average of 13 per cent since 2020).
- 26 per cent posted or shared anything about politics online in the last three years (average of 26 per cent since 2020).
- 17 per cent have been involved in a civic or political group in the last 12 months, in line with 2022 and 2023 (16 per cent).

### Acceptance has declined somewhat

The acceptance and rejection domain recorded a score of 63 in 2024, two points lower than scores in 2023, 18 points lower than a peak recorded during COVID-19 in 2021 and in line with pre-pandemic scores in 2018. Over the longer term, the acceptance and rejection domain declined by 31 points between 2007 and 2018.

The substantial decline in the acceptance and rejection domain between 2007 and 2018 was primarily due to an increase in the proportion of people experiencing discrimination. Since 2018, discrimination has been persistently common.

- One-in-six (17 per cent) Australian adults say they ‘experienced discrimination because of their skin colour, ethnic origin or religion over the past 12 months, including one-in-three (34 per cent) overseas-born Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds.
- The overall proportion experiencing discrimination in 2024 is very similar to average levels recorded since 2018 on Life in Australia™ (17 per cent) and between 2013 and 2018 on the telephone survey (18 per cent). However, between 2007 and 2013, the proportion of people experiencing discrimination increased from 9 per cent to 19 per cent.

Attitudes to immigrant diversity and multiculturalism has had a strongly positive influence on the acceptance and rejection domain in recent years. While these attitudes remain positive, declines have contributed to the decline in acceptance and rejection over the last year.

- Seven-in-ten (71 per cent) people agree (52 per cent) or strongly agree (19 per cent) that ‘accepting immigrants from many different countries makes Australia stronger’, while 28 per cent disagree or strongly disagree. The proportion who agree, in total, has declined significantly from 78 per cent in 2022 and 2023, but is in line with the proportion recorded in 2021, and is an estimated seven percentage points higher than the average recorded across the 2010s (after adjusting for the transition to Life in Australia™).
- Just over one-in-three (35 per cent) people agree or strongly agree that ‘ethnic minorities in Australia should be given Australian government assistance to maintain their customs and traditions’, while 63 per cent disagree or strongly disagree. The proportion who agree has declined somewhat since 2022 (38 per cent), but is significantly higher than levels recorded in 2018 (30 per cent) and 2019 (30 per cent), and an estimated seven percentage points higher than the average of the 2010s.

Recent declines in acceptance and rejection have been driven by the worries that people have for their futures. Two-in-five (40 per cent) people believe their life in Australia will be much (7 per cent) or a little (33 per cent) improved in the next three or four years, 33 per cent believe it will be the same as now and 27 per cent believe it will be a little (21 per cent) or much (6 per cent) worse.

The proportion who believe their life will be worse in the next three or four years is significantly higher than levels recorded during the COVID-19 pandemic in November 2020 (14 per cent) and July 2021 (16 per cent). Increased pessimism relative to pandemic-era levels is not necessarily a cause for concern, given the difficult circumstances in 2020 and 2021 and the hope that their life would improve as the pandemic came to an end. However, after adjusting for the effect of the transition to Life in Australia™, pessimism is 8 percentage points higher than prior to the pandemic in 2019 and six points higher than the average of the 2010s.

New survey questions since 2021 recognise the importance of Australia’s relationship to its First Nations peoples. Despite the division and debate over the Indigenous Voice Referendum, Australians have

strong symbolic support for the role of First Nations Australians in society and the importance of their histories and cultures.

- In 2024, 85 per cent of people agree or strongly agree that ‘the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and the wider Australian community is very important for Australia as a nation’, while 83 per cent agree or strongly agree that ‘it is important for Indigenous histories and cultures to be included in the school curriculum’.
- While still very high, agreement with these statements have both declined by five percentage points since 2021.

**Younger adults are generally more accepting of differences and diversity, though face disadvantage on each of the other domains, especially in the sense of belonging**

As shown in Figure 4a, scores in the sense of belonging domain for 18-24 year olds and 25-34 year olds are 50 points and 45 points below the national average respectively, while for 75 year olds, average belonging scores are 70 points above the national average.

- Social cohesion scores in Figure 4 are standardised so they can be compared across groups and domains. Scores are standardised by calculating them as z scores. z scores have an average of 0 and a standard deviation of 1 (which we set equal to 100 points in Figure 4). Standard deviations are indicators of how much scores differ between people. Under particular conditions, four standard deviations (or 400 points in Figure 4) will cover approximately 95 per cent of scores, meaning that the difference between scores of minus 200 points to plus 200 points in Figure 4 is the same as going from the lowest scores to the highest.

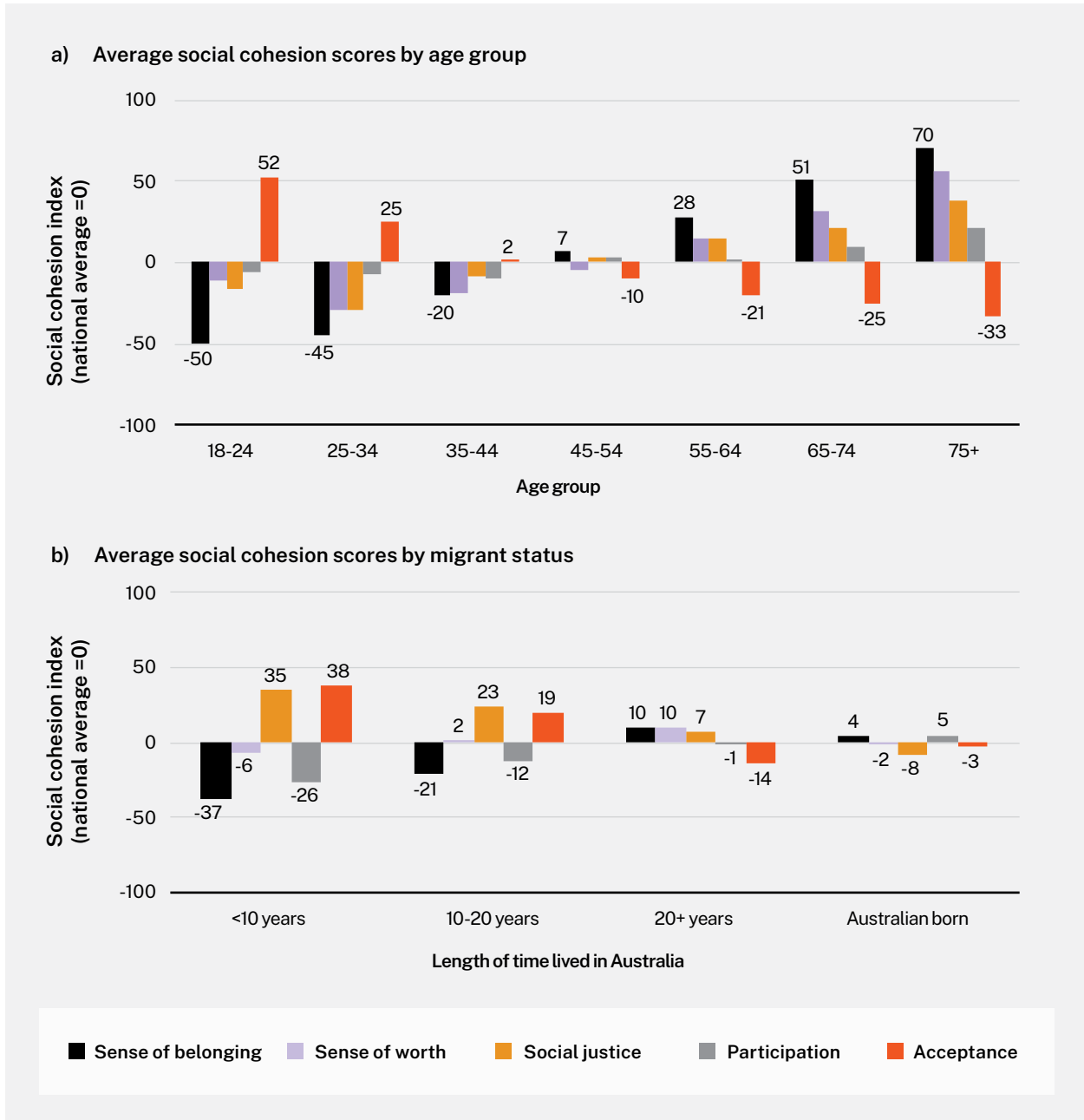
While part of the differences in belonging across age groups may be due to changing social norms and personal preferences, they also reflect levels of social isolation experienced by young people.

In 2024,

- 27 per cent of 18-24 year olds and 30 per cent of 25-34 year olds feel a sense of belonging in Australia to a great extent, compared with 78 per cent of people aged 75 years and over.
- 73 per cent of 18-24 year olds and 74 per cent of 25-34 year olds agree they feel a sense of belonging in their neighbourhoods, compared with 92 per cent of people aged 75 years and over.
- 62 per cent of 18-24 year olds and 64 per cent of 25-34 year olds said they felt isolated from others some of the time or often in the last 12 months, compared with 25 per cent of people aged 75 years and over.
- Loneliness scores are 91 per cent higher for 18-24 year olds and 81 per cent higher for 25-34 year olds than they are for people aged 75 years and over. Loneliness and belonging are closely related, with people experiencing the greatest degree of loneliness also reporting a much weaker sense of belonging. See the chapter ‘Personal wellbeing & safety’ for more information.

In a world in which migration is a highly divisive political issue, it is noteworthy that social cohesion in Australia does not vary a great deal between migrant and Australian born populations – particularly when taking length of time in Australia into account. As shown in Figure 4b, recently arrived migrants have a somewhat weaker average sense of belonging and lower participation than the Australian born population, but a higher sense of social justice and greater acceptance of differences and diversity. Relative to migrants who have lived in Australia for less than 10 years, those who have lived here for 10-20 years or 20 years or longer have a significantly higher sense of belonging and participation. While Figure 4b does not track individuals over time – rather it compares social cohesion scores between different groups of people that have lived in Australia over varying lengths of time – it does suggest belonging and participation grow over time as migrants build their social networks and connections within their communities.

**Figure 4** Inequalities in social cohesion across age, financial circumstances and migrant status, Life in Australia™, 2024



**The recent stability of the Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion speaks to the resilience of Australian society – though beneath the headline numbers, challenges are clear and present**

The stability of the Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion between 2023 and 2024 is a combination of steady but historically low levels of national belonging and financial satisfaction, resilient happiness and participation, rising pessimism, declining trust in government, continued declines in the sense of

economic fairness, persistent discrimination and a tapering off in the historically high levels of support for Australia’s multicultural diversity. In summary, there are several pressure points on Australia’s social cohesion, as well as strengths including resilient connections within and across communities. As we will explain in subsequent chapters, these strengths potentially protect Australian society from deeper division and prevent steeper declines in social cohesion.

# A challenging national & global environment



Conflict and division around the world place social cohesion as a major global issue. Though the causes are varied and often complex, violent conflicts in the Middle East, Ukraine and other regions, political upheaval in many corners of the world and divisive debates and election outcomes, including over immigration in Europe and North America, reflect a world struggling with conflict generally and harmony across cultural and ideological divides in particular.

22

Australian society has been resilient so far in avoiding deep divisions, though the international environment is nevertheless an important context for understanding social cohesion in Australia, not least for the way in which global issues influence national politics.

Global issues also add to domestic issues and challenges. Since 2023, the Voice Referendum and Australia's relationship with its First Nations people, violence against women, economic and cost of living pressures, housing affordability, protests over the conflict in Gaza and the Middle East and the size and composition of Australia's migration program

have been among the most prominent issues facing Australia. While it is difficult to determine their individual effects on social cohesion, domestic and international issues can impact people's social wellbeing and connections across society and thereby shape changes in social cohesion.

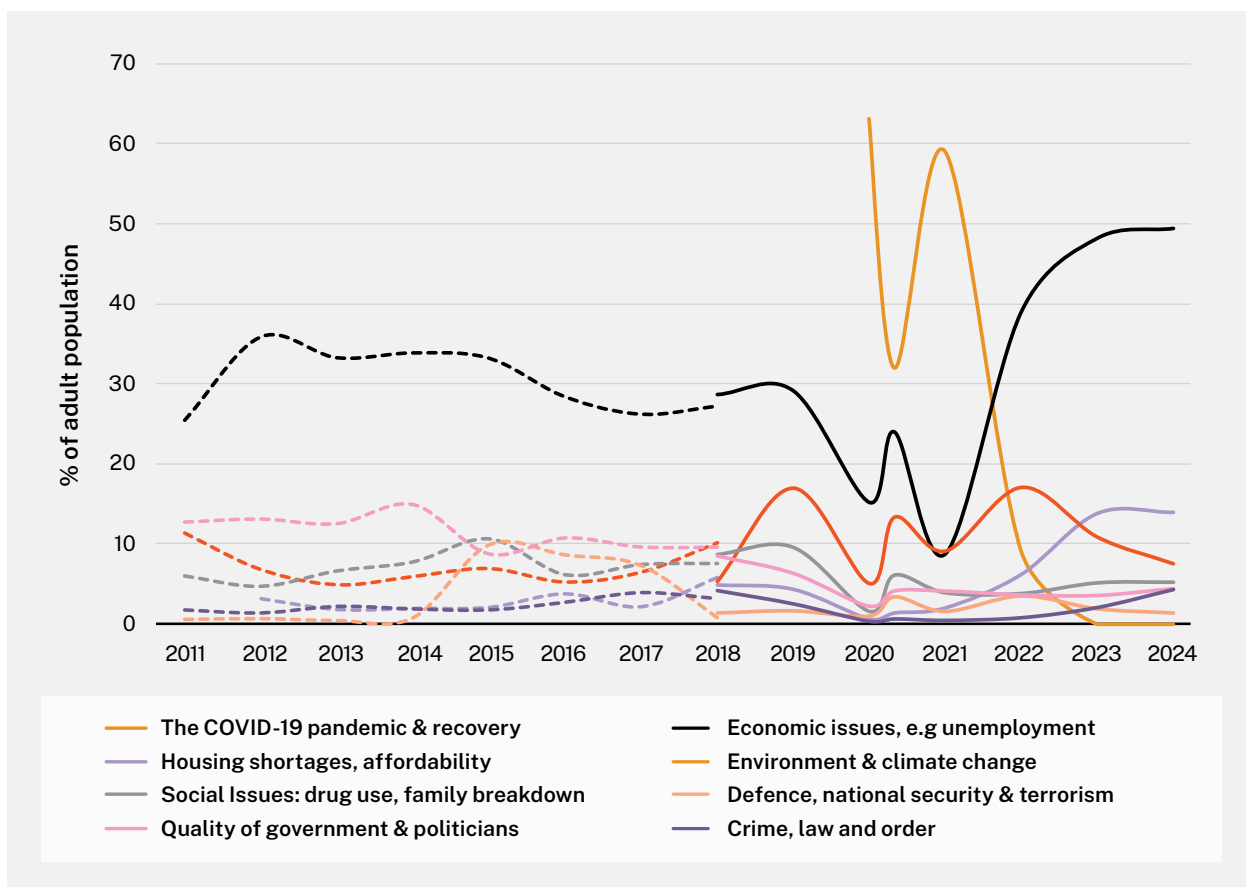
One of the important ways in which national and international issues may strain social cohesion is by adding to polarised or divided attitudes and debates on major issues. Attitudes to major issues like immigration, climate change, the integrity of the political system and the conflict in the Middle East differ by individual political beliefs and orientations

and particularly by whether people describe themselves as left wing and politically progressive or right wing and politically conservative. The media, and particularly social media, can arguably deepen and entrench these differences by, for example, acting as an 'echo chamber' in which people are only seeing and reading news and ideas that conform to their pre-existing beliefs. Whether these polarised ideas and sources of information influence people's views and connections to others is an important question for understanding social cohesion today.

**Most people think that the economy and housing affordability are the most important problems facing Australia today**

The first question on the Mapping Social Cohesion survey since 2011 has asked respondents to name the most important problem facing Australia today. The proportions of people citing the most commonly reported problems are shown in Figure 5. Although very few people cite COVID-19 as the most important problem in 2024, we show responses related to the pandemic and recovery in Figure 5, as it was such a dominant issue in 2020 and 2021 that it dramatically affected the proportion of people citing other issues.

**Figure 5** 'What do you think is the most important problem facing Australia today?' proportion of adults, 2007 to 2018 (telephone surveys) and 2018 to 2024 (Life in Australia™ online & telephone surveys)



Note: dashed lines represent when the Mapping Social Cohesion survey was run as a telephone survey (2007–2018), before the transition to the largely online Life in Australia™. Two surveys were conducted in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, one in July and one in November.

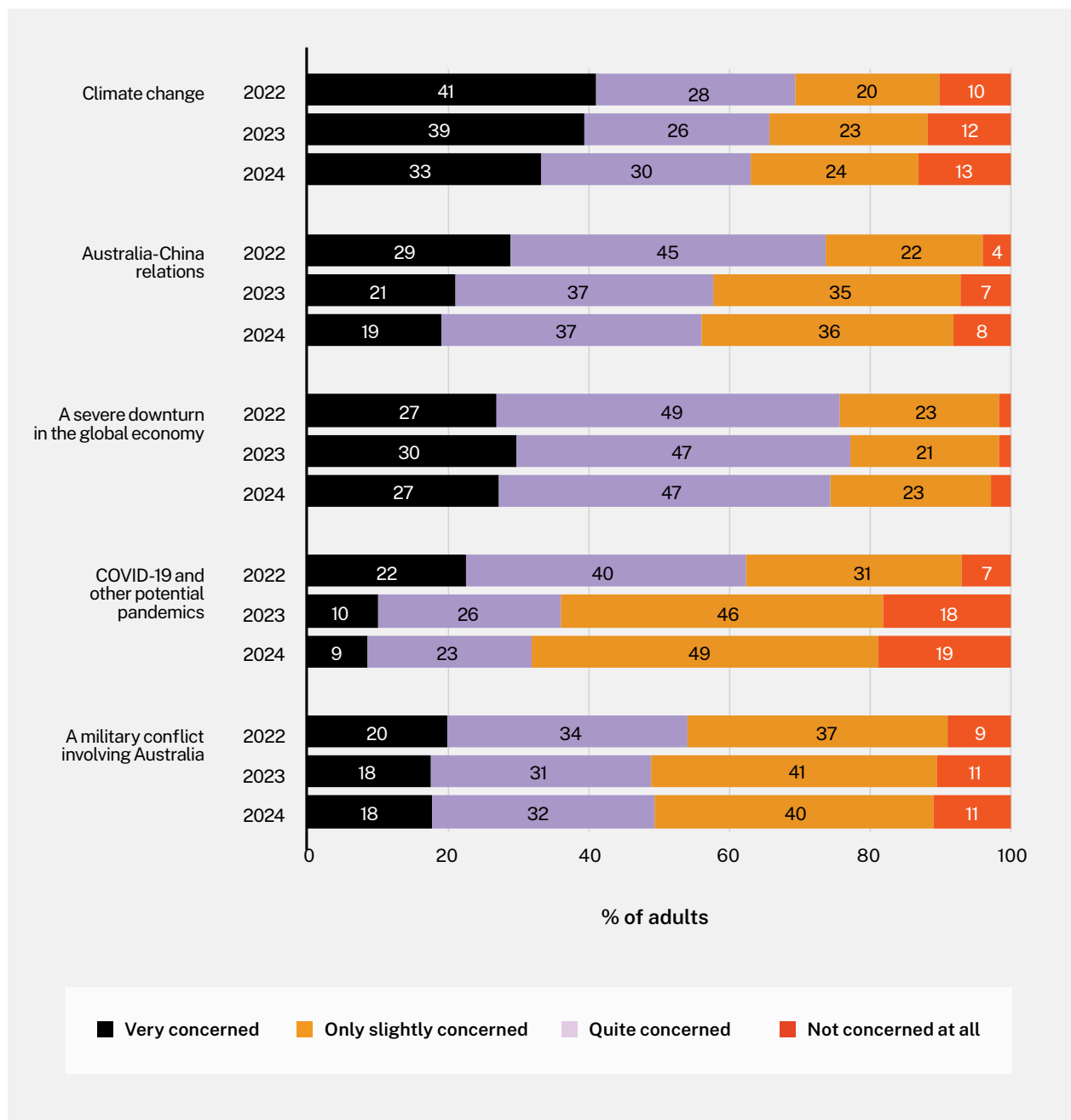
In 2024, one-half (49 per cent) of people cited the economy and economic issues as the most important problem facing Australia today. A further 14 per cent of people cited housing shortages and affordability. Together, almost two-in-three (63 per cent) think economic and housing issues are the most important problems facing Australia.

The proportions of people citing either economic or housing issues are similar to where they were in 2023 and otherwise higher than they have ever been. Outside of 2020 and 2021 (when most people

cited the COVID-19 pandemic as the most important problem), no issue has been as commonly cited as the economy in 2023 and 2024.

The prominence of economic issues also translates to worry about the state of the global economy. Three-in-four (77 per cent) people are very or quite concerned about a severe downturn in the global economy (Figure 6) and one-in-six (18 per cent) cite the global economy as the most important problem facing the world (Figure 7).

**Figure 6** Concern for major issues facing Australia, Life in Australia™, 2022 to 2024





**People have mixed views on the most important problem facing the world, though conflict, war and national security stand out**

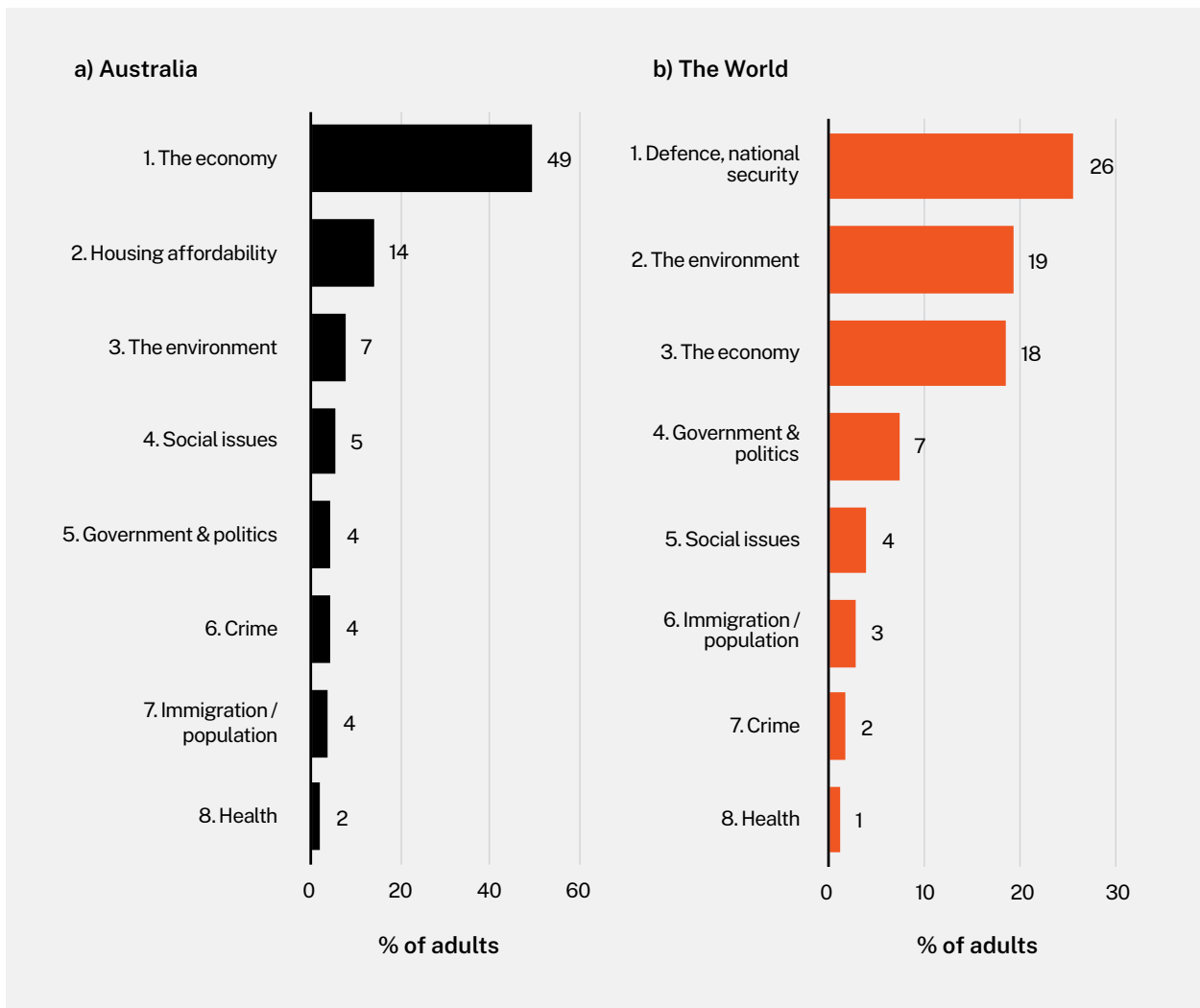
In 2024, the Mapping Social Cohesion survey also asked what respondents think is the most important problem facing the world. In responses to this question, no single issue dominates as much as the economy does in asking about the biggest problem facing Australia (see Figure 5). Global concerns are more evenly spread across issues related to defence and national security, the environment and climate change, the economy and social and political issues.

In Figure 7, we compare the eight most cited problems facing Australia (Figure 7a) and the world

today (Figure 7b). So while the economy dominates as the most commonly cited problem facing Australia, the most commonly cited issue facing the world is more evenly spread, particularly across defence and national security (26 per cent), the environment (19 per cent) and the economy (18 per cent).

In a troubled world, peace, violence and security nevertheless stand out as important issues. One-in-four (26 per cent) adults cited issues related to defence, national security and world peace as the most important problem in the world today. As shown in Figure 6, one-half (50 per cent) of adults are very or quite concerned about a military conflict involving Australia.

**Figure 7** The most important problem facing Australia and the world today, most commonly cited, Life in Australia™, 2024





### Many people are concerned about climate change and the environment though it continues to be a polarising issue

Issues related to the environment and climate change were cited by one-in-five (19 per cent) people as the most important problem facing the world today and by 7 per cent of people as the most important problem facing Australia (Figure 7). This makes the environment and climate change the biggest problem facing the world for the second largest share of the population and the third most commonly cited problem facing Australia. Whether or not people consider climate change and the environment as the number one problem, most people are concerned about climate change. One-in-three (33 per cent) people are very concerned about climate change, while 30 per cent are quite concerned (Figure 6).

Indicating that climate change is a polarising issue for at least a section of the population, just over one-in-ten (13 per cent) people are not concerned at all about the issue. People are particularly divided by their political orientation, with people who describe themselves as left wing or progressive much more

likely to be concerned about climate change than right wing or conservative people. Almost three-in-five (56 per cent) people on the political left said they were very concerned about climate change, compared with 15 per cent of people on the political right. Almost one-in-three (30 per cent) on the right, meanwhile, were not concerned at all about climate change compared with 3 per cent of those on the left.

- Information on political orientation was collected by asking members of Life in Australia™ to give themselves a score from 0 to 10, based on how left wing or right wing they consider themselves to be in terms of their political views. People who scored 0, 1, 2, 3 or 4 were grouped together and labelled 'left wing', people who scored 5 were labelled 'centre' and people scoring themselves as a 6, 7, 8, 9 or 10 were labelled as 'right wing'.

Among many other issues, social media and especially social media echo chambers have the potential to deepen polarised attitudes to climate change. Our results, though, suggest that social media users as a whole are not noticeably more divided on climate change after taking political orientation into account.

Among left wing people, 87 per cent of daily social media users are quite or very concerned about climate change, somewhat higher than the proportion (81 per cent) among left wing people who use social media once every few weeks or less frequently. Among right wing people, 39 per cent of daily social media users and 38 per cent of irregular users are at least quite concerned about climate change, a difference that is not statistically significant (i.e. the difference could be due to random chance).

- Social media use is measured from how regularly Life in Australia™ members say they view posts, images and videos or post their own comments or images on social media. Daily users are classified as those who view or post at least once a day. These are compared to irregular users who are defined as those who view or post at most once every few weeks.

### **Global anti-migrant sentiment is not having a strong impact in Australia, though attitudes to migration are polarised**

As we explain in subsequent chapters, attitudes to multiculturalism and diversity have become somewhat less positive over the last year. Nevertheless, positive attitudes remain at high levels and Australia has not experienced the same divisiveness over immigration that has played out across Europe and North America through protests, counter-protests, online misinformation and the politicisation of immigration in political platforms, movements and election outcomes. On the Mapping Social Cohesion survey, just 3 per cent of Australian adults think that too much immigration and immigration generally is the biggest problem facing the world in 2024, while 4 per cent think it is the biggest problem facing Australia.

Australia, though, is not immune to global discontent and division, particularly over immigration and the conflict in the Middle East. Negative attitudes towards Muslims are held by a substantial share of the population and became significantly more common since before the conflict in 2023 and July 2024. Negative attitudes towards Jewish people have also become more common though from a lower starting point. More information is provided in the chapter on 'Attitudes, experiences and relations in multicultural Australia'.

Attitudes to migration and diversity are divided across the political spectrum, perhaps reflecting global polarisation on these issues. As shown in Figure 8, almost one-in-three (30 per cent) adults who describe themselves as left wing believe that immigration to Australia is too high, compared with 52 per cent in the political centre and 72 per cent of people on the right, while just 12 per cent of left wingers disagree that accepting migrants from many different countries makes Australia stronger compared with 32 per cent of centrists and 45 per cent of right wingers.

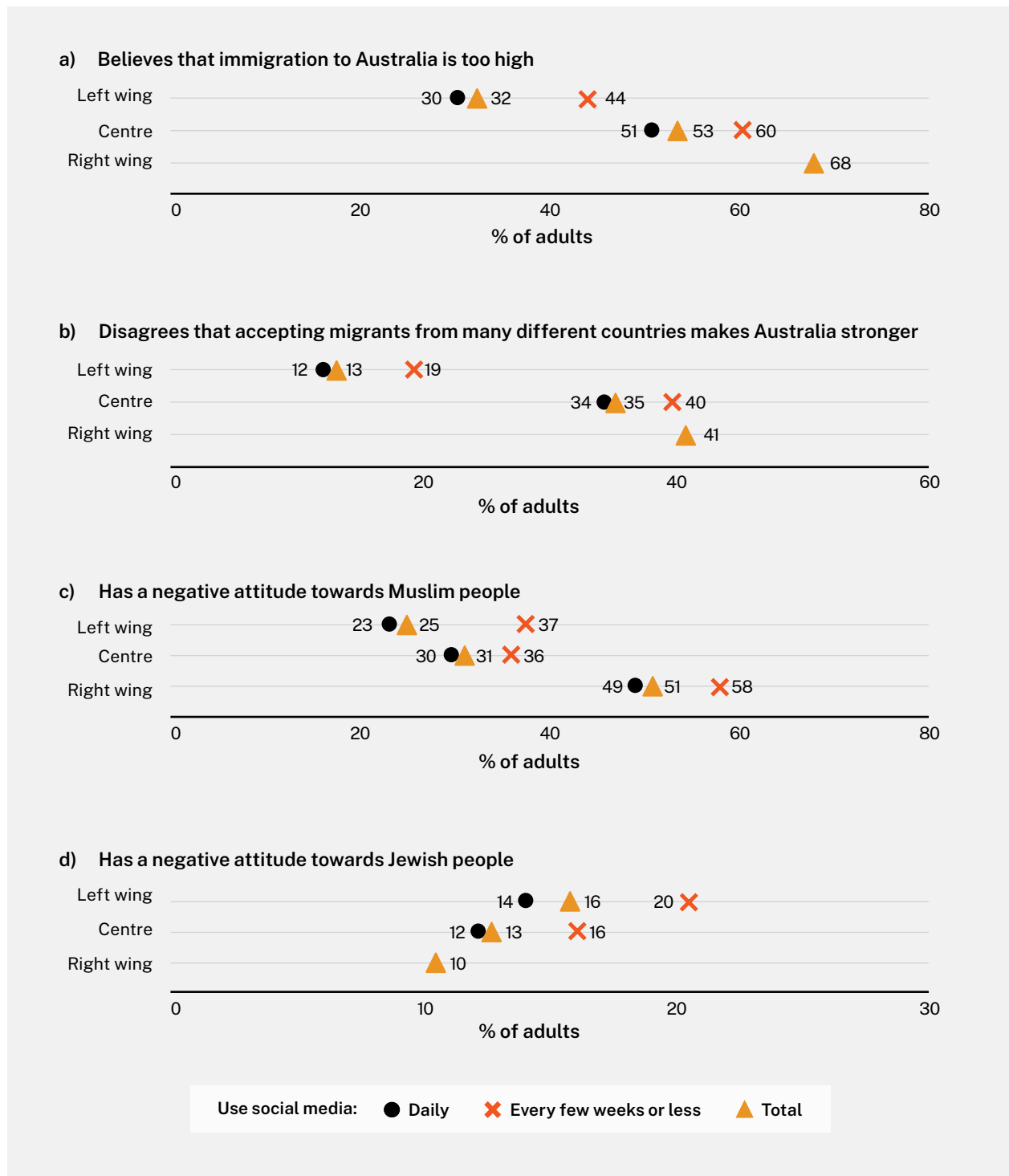
In the context of the conflict in the Middle East, negative attitudes to Muslim and Jewish people are also polarised. When the Mapping Social Cohesion survey was conducted in July 2024, approximately one-half (54 per cent) of right wing people said they have a somewhat or very negative attitude to Muslims, significantly higher than the proportion for those in the political centre (32 per cent) and on the left wing (24 per cent). Among left wing people, 16 per cent said they have a negative attitude towards Jewish people in 2024, somewhat higher than the proportions for those in the centre (12 per cent) and right wing (11 per cent).

### **Social media may amplify divisions over immigration, though is not clearly contributing to deeper polarisation**

Regular social media use is, in fact, associated with more positive attitudes to immigration. Left wing daily social media users are significantly less likely to believe that immigration is too high compared with left wingers who use social media every few weeks or less and at least as unlikely to disagree that migrant diversity makes Australia stronger. There are no significant differences on these items between regular and irregular social media users on the right wing.

- As shown in Figure 8, 30 per cent of left wing daily social media users believe that immigration to Australia is too high, significantly lower than the 44 per cent of left wing people who use social media every few weeks or less.

**Figure 8** Attitudes to migration and select religious groups by political orientation and social media use, Life in Australia™, 2024



Note: results by political orientation and social media use are only shown where differences between daily social media users and less frequent users are significantly different, i.e. that differences are likely not due to random chance. Results for people who use social media weekly are not shown but are included in the totals.



Regular social media users are no more likely, if not significantly less likely, to have a negative attitude towards Muslim and Jewish people, irrespective of political orientation. Left wing people and those in the centre are significantly less likely to have a negative attitude towards Muslim or Jewish people if they use social media on a daily basis, while on the right wing, daily social media users are significantly less likely to have a negative attitude towards Muslims.

A large share of the differences in attitudes to migration and religious group between regular and irregular social media users are due to age and other factors. The finding that left wing daily social media users are less likely than irregular left wing users to believe that immigration is too high is largely explained by age and the fact older people are more likely to see immigration as too high compared with younger adults and less likely to be regular social media users.

Left wing daily social media users, however, are significantly less likely to have a negative attitude towards Jewish or Muslim people than irregular left wing users even after accounting for age and a range of other characteristics including gender, family composition, education, housing tenure, migrant background, religion, disability and neighbourhood socioeconomic disadvantage.

This does not mean that social media is responsible for less prejudice and more positive interfaith

attitudes in society. It is possible and even likely that other characteristics of social media users help to explain their more positive attitudes to immigrants and less negative views of different faith groups. Other characteristics of social media users might include their personality traits and the fact that many use social media to connect with family and friends around the world and so, perhaps, will have a more international and global political and social outlook. Regardless, the results suggest that most Australians are not unduly influenced by inflammatory information and misinformation on social media.

### **Global divisions and conflicts add to local and national issues to create a challenging environment for social cohesion in Australia**

The economy, conflict, security and the environment are among the most pressing national and global concerns weighing on the minds of Australians. Feeding into these concerns are the conflicts and divisions we are witnessing around the world, as well as difficult national debates and social and economic pressures. It is in this important context that social cohesion has been steady over the last year, albeit at relatively low levels historically since 2007. This speaks to both the resilience of social cohesion in Australia, as well as the short and long run pressures on cohesion and multicultural harmony.

# Migration, multiculturalism & diversity



30

Immigration is a major issue and source of division in the world today, particularly across Europe and North America. Populist political movements and parties have risen and re-emerged to prominence across Europe in recent years on varied platforms though united in their opposition to immigration, including Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany, Rassemblement National in France and Fratelli d'Italia in Italy.

In the United States, border walls and deportations have been a major feature of political debate in the lead-up to the Presidential election in November 2024. Counter movements protesting anti-migrant platforms have also arisen (DW, 2024), leaving immigration as a highly divisive issue, particularly along ideological, generational and socioeconomic lines (Dražanová et al., 2024).

Australia has so far avoided this level of discontent and division over immigration. As previous Mapping Social Cohesion reports have shown, Australians continue to value and support multiculturalism and the contribution of immigrants to Australian society. If anything, this support has become more prevalent in recent years. This is particularly noteworthy given Australia is a traditionally high immigration country

and an increasingly diverse and multicultural one (Dellal et al., 2024). Today, 31 per cent of Australians were born overseas (ABS, 2024a), one of the highest proportions in the world and comfortably higher than the United States (15 per cent) and any European country with a population of more than 1 million people (UN, 2020).

Immigration is nevertheless of renewed political and social importance in 2024. After international borders re-opened following the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of immigrants arriving in Australia and the level of net migration (immigrant arrivals minus emigrant departures) spiked (ABS 2024b), provoking renewed concerns over the level of immigration. Both the Federal Government and the Opposition responded by proposing and enacting policies to reduce immigration, including in the Government's case, by capping the number of international students coming to Australia. This bipartisan position on immigration likely reflects and helps to lead public opinion, raising important questions as to how Australians view these issues and how they might influence attitudes to migrants and multiculturalism.

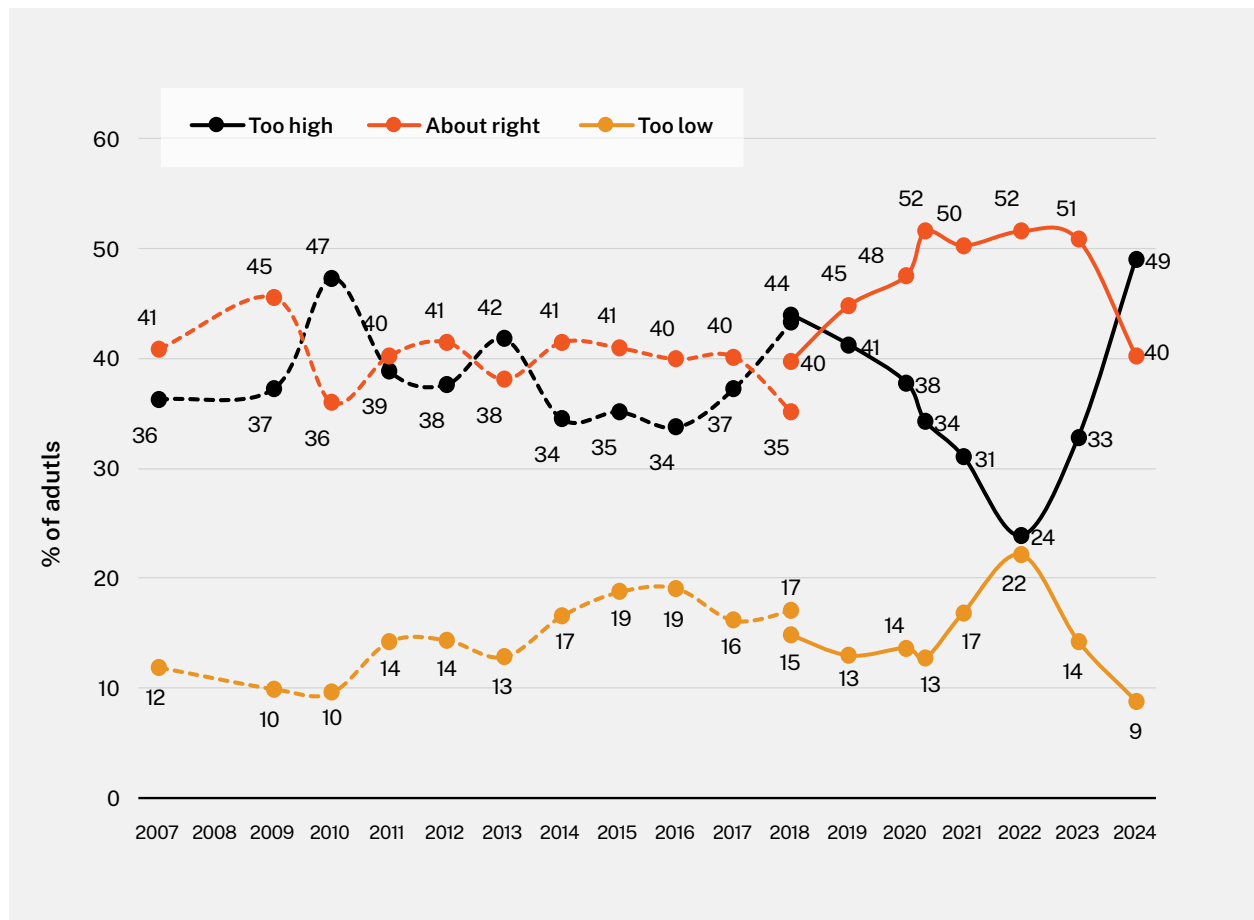
### **Amidst heightened political and public debate, an increasing share of Australians believe immigration to Australia is too high**

In 2024, 49 per cent of people think 'the number of immigrants accepted into Australia at present' is too high, 40 per cent say it is about right and 9 per cent think it is too low (Figure 9).

Attitudes towards the number of immigrants arriving in Australia have shifted substantially during and since the COVID-19 pandemic. With international borders closed during 2020 and 2021, the proportion of adults who believed immigration was too high dropped from 41 per cent in 2019, reaching a low of 24 per cent in 2022, while belief that immigration was too low increased from 13 per cent to 22 per cent.

After the re-opening of international borders and the return of international arrivals, the proportion who believed immigration was too high increased to 33 per cent in 2023. Since 2023, and with the number of immigrants – including international students – increasing and the bipartisan policy shift towards reducing international migration, the share of people who think immigration is too high has increased to 49 per cent in 2024.

**Figure 9** 'What do you think of the number of immigrants accepted into Australia at present? Would you say it has been... too high, about right or too low', 2007-2018 (telephone surveys) and 2018-2024 (online and telephone)



Note: dashed lines represent when the Mapping Social Cohesion survey was run as a telephone survey (2007–2019), before the transition to the largely online Life in Australia™. Two surveys were conducted in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, one in July and one in November.

**Concern about the number of immigrants is related to actual shifts in immigration and the economy – and may not indicate an increase in anti-migrant sentiment**

32

The increasingly common view that immigration is too high reflects actual shifts in the level of immigration as well as economic and financial pressures. As shown in Figure 10, the dip during COVID-19 in the proportion who believe immigration is too high and the subsequent increase followed a similar dip and increase in the actual level of immigration. According to official data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2024b), an average of 493,000 people immigrated to Australia per year in the ten years leading up to June 2020. This equates to 21 immigrants per year for every 1,000 Australians. Under COVID-era border restrictions, immigration dropped to 146,000 people or 6 immigrants per 1,000

people in 2020-21. As international borders were re-opened, immigration increased to 427,700 (17 per 1,000 people) in 2021-22 and then a historic high of 737,200 (28 per 1,000 people) in 2022-23.

At the same time, the economy has slowed and average material living standards have deteriorated. As shown in Figure 10, the increasing share of people who believe immigration is too high since 2022 has also coincided with declining rates of economic growth per person. According to ABS (2024c) data, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per person – one of the most important measures of material living standards – recovered after the initial shock of the pandemic and the nation-wide lockdown at the end of the 2019-20 financial year, but has fallen since. In the year to June 2024, GDP per person declined by 1.5 per cent. The unemployment rate remains below its longer term average but also increased from 3.5 to



4.2 per cent between July 2022 and July 2024 (ABS 2024d).

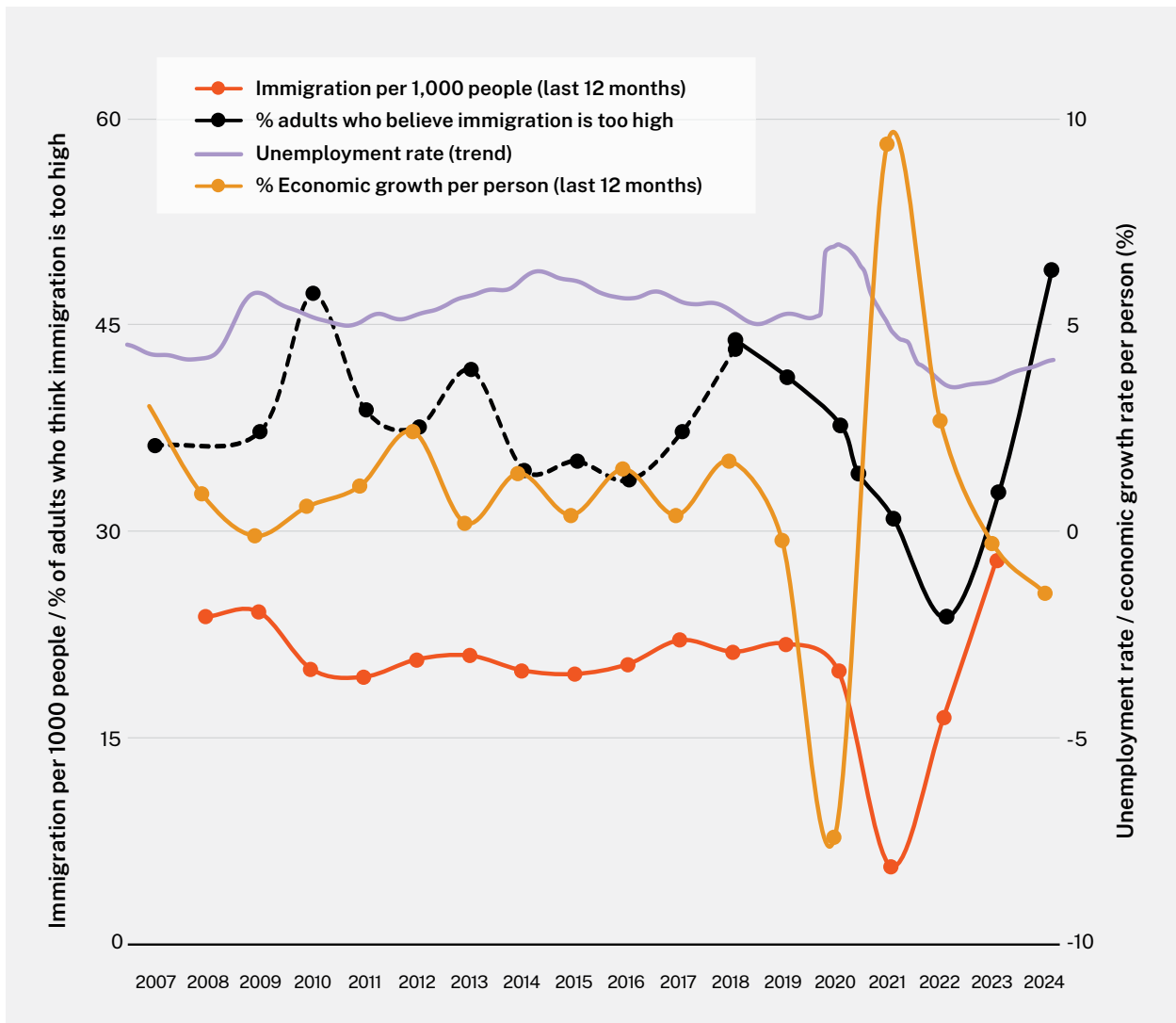
The influence of economic issues on attitudes to immigration is also evident from their prominence in the Mapping Social Cohesion survey. Of people who think immigration is too high in 2024,

- 77 per cent are very or somewhat concerned by the prospect of a severe downturn in the global economy, compared with 71 per cent who think the level of immigration is about right and 74 per cent who think immigration is too low.
- 48 per cent cited economic issues as the most important problem facing Australia and a further

15 per cent cited issues of housing shortages and affordability, while 7 per cent cited immigration. Of people who believe immigration is too high, the combined 64 per cent who cited economic and housing issues as the most important problem facing Australia was similar to the proportion (63 per cent) among people who think immigration is about right or too low.

- 43 per cent describe their own financial circumstances as 'poor', 'struggling to pay bills' or 'just getting along', compared with 38 per cent of those who think immigration levels are about right and 46 per cent who believe they are too low.

**Figure 10** The share of adults who think the number of immigrants accepted into Australia is too high, immigrant arrivals, unemployment and economic growth rates, 2007-2024



Source: ABS 2024b, 2024c and 2024d and Mapping Social Cohesion 2024.

Growing belief that too many immigrants are coming to Australia is related to immediate concerns with housing affordability and jobs, and not the longer-run social and economic contribution of immigration. Of those who think immigration is too high, 78 per cent agree or strongly agree that ‘immigrants increase house prices’ and 52 per cent agree that ‘immigrants take jobs away’, compared with 37 per cent and 11 per cent respectively of those who think immigration is about right or too low. However, 69 per cent of those who think immigration is too high nevertheless agree that ‘immigrants are generally good for Australia’s economy’, 50 per cent agree that ‘accepting immigrants from many different countries makes Australia stronger’ and 75 per cent agree that ‘multiculturalism has been good for Australia’. This is true for those who are financially well off and those who are struggling.

- Of those who think immigration is too high and are ‘poor’, ‘struggling to pay bills’ or ‘just getting along’, 88 per cent believe that migrants are taking away jobs or raising housing prices, even though 73 per cent believe multiculturalism has been good for Australia and 60 per cent believe that immigrants are generally good for Australia’s economy.

In qualitative interviews for this year’s Mapping Social Cohesion study (see the chapter ‘Social cohesion in a polarised world’ for more information), opposition to current immigration levels was also based on issues related to housing, employment, healthcare and other economic issues.

*“People here are on the streets. We can’t find a place to live. And we are bringing the migrants or refugees from everywhere and giving them accommodation that we should have.”*

(FEMALE, 65+ YEARS, QLD)

*“There’s a lot of different ethnicities and different cultures contributing to our national growth and GDP. But I would say as to whether or not if we need to increase or decrease immigration, I would say we need to decrease immigration just because there is still a lot of unemployment and so those unemployed people are competing with immigrants for job positions. And so that sort of just lowers the quality of life for the average Australian.”*

(MALE, 18-24 YEARS, NSW)

Increasing belief that immigration is too high is shared across society. As shown in Table 3, older, more conservative and less educated groups are most likely to believe that immigration is too high, though increasing shares have been recorded since 2022 across all demographic and socioeconomic groups.

- As shown in Table 3, 62 per cent of people aged 65 years and over believe immigration is too high in 2024, compared with 28 per cent in 2022 and 58 per cent in 2019. Younger adults are significantly less likely to believe immigration is too high, though the proportions of 18-24 year olds and 25-34 year olds holding this view also more than doubled between 2022 and 2024, increasing from 16 to 35 per cent and from 15 to 33 per cent respectively.
- Likewise, the proportion of Liberal/National coalition voters who believe immigration is too high more than doubled from 29 per cent in 2022 to 65 per cent in 2024, while the share of Greens voters tripled, from 9 per cent to 29 per cent.
- The proportion of overseas-born Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds who believe immigration is too high increased from 16 per cent to 39 per cent between 2022 and 2024, compared with an increase from 26 per cent to 51 per cent for the Australian born population.
- More than one-half of adults who say they are struggling to pay bills or poor (55 per cent) think immigration is too high, compared with 48 per cent of people who say they are living prosperously or very comfortably. This gap, though, has become smaller since 2019 as more prosperous and financially comfortable people have increasingly come to believe that immigration is too high (see Table 3).

**Table 3** Proportion of adults who think the number of immigrants accepted into Australia at present is too high, Life in Australia™, 2019, 2022, 2024

Gender	Female	Male	Persons			
		42, 23, 44	40, 24, 55	42, 24, 50		
Age	65+	55-64	45-54	35-44	25-34	18-24
		58, 28, 62	47, 31, 57	51, 31, 54	37, 21, 47	25, 16, 35
State	NSW	Victoria	Queensland	South Australia	Western Australia	
		46, 24, 50	41, 24, 48	37, 26, 53	37, 26, 47	41, 19, 45
Capital City/ Rest of state	Capital city	Rest of state				
		39, 22, 46	46, 27, 54			
Highest Education	Postgraduate degree	Bachelor degree	Certificate/ diploma	Year 12	Up to Year 11	
		24, 16, 38	28, 13, 39	39, 28, 53	35, 20, 48	71, 35, 68
Financial situation	Prosperous/ very comfortable	Reasonably comfortable	Just getting along	Struggling to pay bills/poor		
		31, 16, 48	42, 21, 47	42, 28, 50	46, 36, 55	
Vote	Labor	Liberal/ National	Greens	Other		
		33, 21, 45	54, 29, 65	14, 9, 29	61, 31, 55	
Where born & first language	Australian born	Foreign born/ English	Foreign born/ non-English			
		45, 26, 51	35, 21, 49	31, 16, 39		
Family household	Couple no children	Couple parent	Single parent	Other family	Non-family	
		NA, 23, 53	NA, 24, 49	NA, 29, 53	NA, 21, 45	NA, 23, 44
Housing tenure	Own outright	Mortgage	Rent			
		NA, 28, 58	NA, 23, 45	NA, 23, 45		
Neighbourhood disadvantage	Quintile 1 (Low disadvantage)	Quintile 2	Quintile 3	Quintile 4	Quintile 5 (High disadvantage)	
		34, 19, 43	40, 21, 50	37, 25, 51	47, 27, 48	51, 29, 54

### Concern about the size of the migration program does not translate to support for a discriminatory program

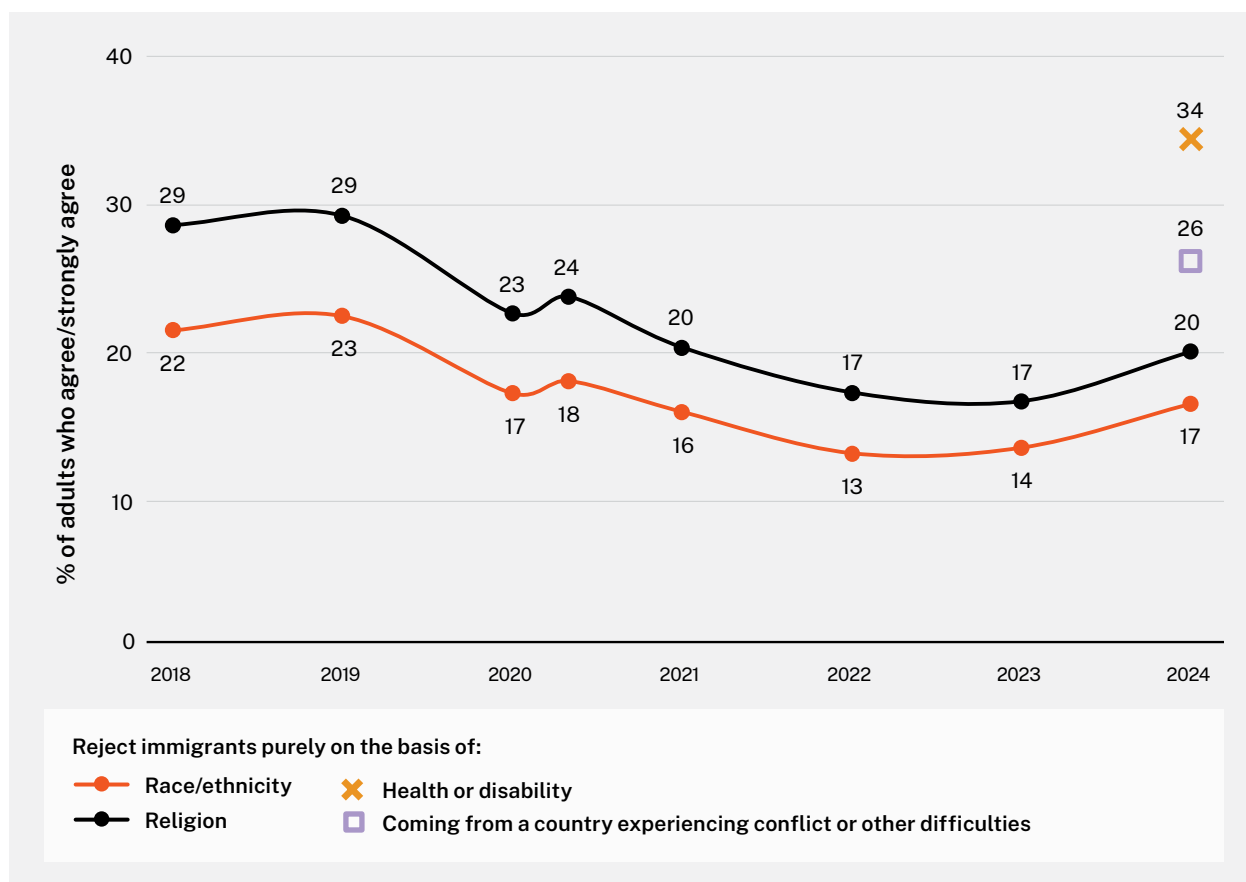
Most adults do not think Australia should reject immigrants on the basis of their race, ethnicity, health or the conflicts experienced in their home countries, irrespective of their attitudes towards the number of people immigrating to Australia. In 2024,

- 17 per cent of adults agree or strongly agree that ‘when a family or individual applies to migrate to Australia, it should be possible for them to be rejected purely on the basis of their ethnicity’, while 83 per cent disagree or strongly disagree. Of those who think immigration is too high, 76 per cent disagree or strongly disagree with this statement.
- 20 per cent agree or strongly agree that it should be possible to reject immigrants purely based on their religion, while 79 per cent disagree or strongly disagree including 71 per cent of those who think immigration is too high.

- Combined, one-in-four (23 per cent) Australian adults agree that families and individuals should be able to be stopped from migrating to Australia purely on the basis of their race, ethnicity or religion, a proportion that has increased from 2023 (18 per cent), but remains lower than pre-pandemic levels.
- 34 per cent of adults agree it should be possible to reject immigrants on the basis of their health or whether they have a disability, while 65 per cent disagree.
- 26 per cent agree that it should be possible to reject immigrants who are coming from a country experiencing conflict or other difficulties, while 73 per cent disagree.

As shown in Figure 11, the proportions of people who think Australia should reject immigrants based on race, ethnicity or religion declined between 2020 and 2023. So while the proportions increased between 2022 and 2024, they are in line with where they were in 2020 and 2021 and significantly below levels recorded in 2018 and 2019.

**Figure 11** Share of adults who strongly agree or agree ‘that when a family or individual applies to migrate to Australia, it should be possible for them to be rejected purely on the basis of...’, 2007-2018 (telephone surveys) and 2018-2024 (online and telephone)



Note: Two surveys were conducted in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, one in July and one in November.

## Most people continue to value the contribution of immigrants to Australia

The majority of the population agree that immigrants are good for the economy, bring new ideas and cultures to Australia and fill important job vacancies instead of taking jobs away (Table 4). The strength of positive attitudes towards immigrants has declined in the last two years but is still higher than pre-pandemic levels. In 2024,

- 82 per cent of adults agree or strongly agree that ‘immigrants are generally good for the economy’, a five point decline since 2022 but still six points higher than in 2019.

- 82 per cent agree or strongly agree that ‘immigrants improve Australian society by bringing new ideas and cultures’, a four point decline since 2022 but still four points higher than in 2019.
- 92 per cent agree or strongly agree that ‘someone who was born outside of Australia is just as likely to be a good citizen as someone born in Australia’, similar to its average since 2020.
- 72 per cent agree or strongly agree that ‘immigrants fill important job vacancies’ (a new question in 2024).

**Table 4** Attitudes to immigrants, Life in Australia™, July 2018 to 2024

		2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
		% of respondents						
Immigrants good for economy	Strongly agree	14	17	18	22	25	22	19
	Agree	60	60	63	63	62	64	63
	<b>Total agree</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>82</b>
Immigrants improve society	Strongly agree	17	17	22	23	23	22	18
	Agree	59	61	60	62	63	63	64
	<b>Total agree</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>82</b>
Immigrants take jobs away	Strongly agree	8	11	5	4	3	4	5
	Agree	25	24	24	20	17	20	23
	<b>Total agree</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>28</b>
Immigrants not adopting values	Strongly agree		32	26	21	18	19	22
	Agree		35	34	36	34	34	36
	<b>Total agree</b>		<b>67</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>59</b>
Immigrants make good citizens	Strongly agree			40	43	47	50	45
	Agree			50	49	47	44	47
	<b>Total agree</b>			<b>90</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>92</b>
Immigrants fill job vacancies	Strongly agree							13
	Agree							60
	<b>Total agree</b>							<b>72</b>
Immigrants raise house prices	Strongly agree							20
	Agree							38
	<b>Total agree</b>							<b>57</b>

Note: Two surveys were conducted in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, one in July and one in November. To save space, only the July 2020 results are shown (the usual month in which surveys are conducted).

Negative attitudes towards immigrants are also more common than they were in 2022 though still less common than prior to the pandemic. In 2024,

- 59 per cent agree or strongly agree that ‘too many immigrants are not adopting Australian values’, higher than in 2022, similar to 2020 and lower than 2019.
- 57 per cent agree or strongly agree that ‘immigrants increase house prices’ (a new question in 2024).
- 28 per cent agree or strongly agree that ‘immigrants take jobs away’, a seven point increase since 2022 but still seven points lower than in 2019.

In the qualitative interviews, people also reflected on the positive and negative sides of immigration:

*“From an economic perspective, increased immigration and especially students will really see the sort of an expansion in our education system and our economy because they’ll be more skilled, our workforce can be more capable, and then we’ll have more people working in Australia. But obviously there’s a lot of attitudes towards potentially immigrants increasing, pushing up prices and contributing towards inflation.”*

(MALE, 18-24 YEARS, NSW)

*“That whole rhetoric about stealing our jobs and all that kind of stuff, it’s just absolute nonsense. If I was to say that it’s less, it would be because the economy can’t handle it or whatever. If it’s more, I fully recognise that the economy might need more people to come in to continue to build the economy.”*

(MALE, 25-34 YEARS, VIC)

### **Support for multiculturalism remains high – though attitudes are mixed as to what multiculturalism means in practice**

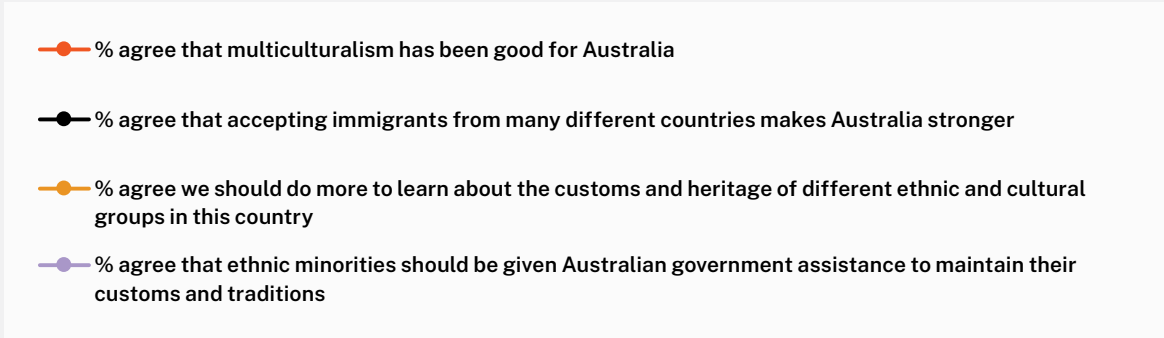
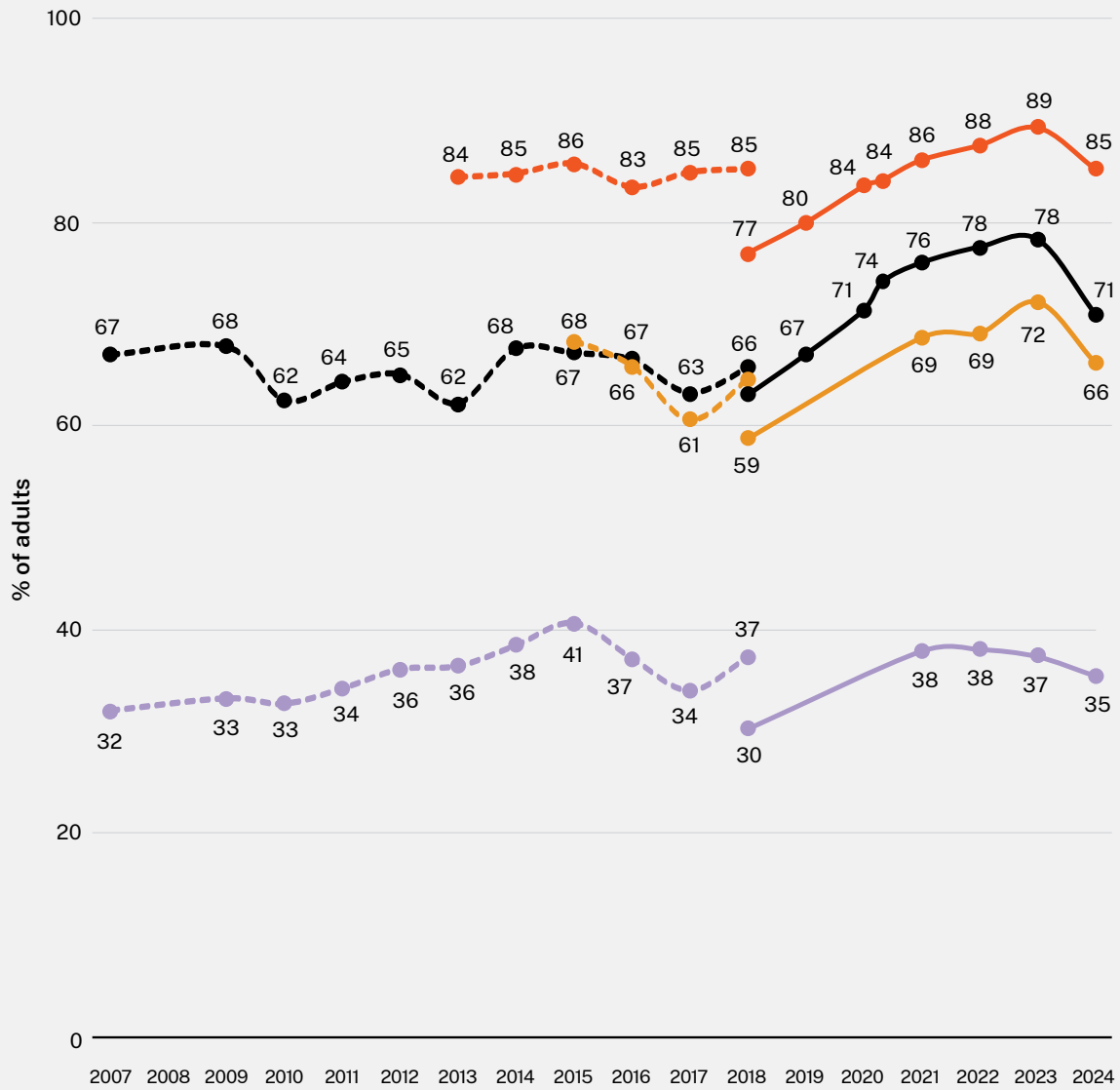
In 2024, 85 per cent of adults agree that ‘multiculturalism has been good for Australia’ and 71 per cent say that ‘accepting immigrants from many different countries makes Australia stronger’. The level of support for multiculturalism has dropped marginally from 2023 levels but is still higher than pre-pandemic levels.

- This symbolic support for multiculturalism is widely held across society. Among people who believe the level of immigration to Australia is too high at present, three-in-four (75 per cent) agree that multiculturalism has been good for Australia and 50 per cent believe that accepting immigrants from many different countries makes Australia stronger.

High levels of support for multiculturalism and diversity do not necessarily translate to support for practical action. While two-in-three (66 per cent) Australian adults agree ‘we should do more to learn about the customs and heritage of different ethnic and cultural groups in this country’, only one-in-three (35 per cent) agree that the Australian government should assist and support ethnic minorities groups to maintain their customs and traditions. Trends in these questions are shown in Figure 12.



Figure 12 Attitudes to multiculturalism and diversity, Life in Australia™, 2018 to 2024



Note: dashed lines represent when the Mapping Social Cohesion survey was run as a telephone survey (2007–2019), before the transition to the largely online Life in Australia™. Two surveys were conducted in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, one in July and one in November.

The changes and differences in symbolic and practical support for multiculturalism was also expressed in the qualitative interviews. While some embrace the idea of multiculturalism, they may still hold a view that there can be 'too much' multiculturalism or that immigrants are not integrating into Australia. This view is challenged, though, by the experiences and attitudes of migrant and Australian-born people alike.

*"I used to love the idea of living in a multicultural society. I thought it was really, really great because there are so many societies. Again, I don't know, it's just my impression, I don't have the real facts or data, but my impression and what you hear from everybody else is the question 'have we overdone it'? And like I said before, so many groups are not wanting to assimilate or integrate into Australia, to change their culture."*

(FEMALE, 55-64 YEARS, VIC)

*"Multiculturalism is good. I mean, we eat the food from India, China, from everywhere, and it is good. You celebrate different celebrations. Yes, but it's again, it needs to be just enough. Not too much."*

(FEMALE, 65+ YEARS, QLD)

*"Yes, multiculturalism is good for Australia. It looks into other people's perspectives and lives. It's like the idea you put yourself in other people's shoes. That's more for personality and development within your character."*

(MALE, 18-24 YEARS, NSW)

*"The country itself is very multicultural, but if it became more so like that and students went to schools where it was so diverse, then I think everyone would be better off. The students and the people would become easier to work with more people from different countries and cultures, more open, more willing to accept them and greater creativity and ideas. I just don't see any negatives [of multiculturalism] really."*

(MALE, 18-24 YEARS, NSW)

## **Australian customs, tradition and language are considered more important to Australian identity than birthplace and religion**

A set of new questions were introduced this year to understand what Australians think is important to be truly Australian. These questions mirror work done by the Pew Research Center in the United States of America early in 2024 (Huang et al., 2024) where they compared 23 countries, including Australia, according to the extent to which people in each country believe that a) being able to speak the country's most common language, b) sharing the country's customs and traditions, c) having been born in the country and d) being a member of the country's predominant religion is important to be truly a member of that country.

The Pew results found that among the countries surveyed, Australians were among the least likely to see the most prominent religion (in Australia's case, Christianity) and being born in the country as important to Australian nationality. While Australians were more likely to view English language and Australian customs and traditions as important, Australia had the second weakest overall strictness (behind Sweden) around how national identity is defined. In other words, a large share of Australians see Australian nationality as inclusive and embracing of people from different backgrounds and faiths.

In the Mapping Social Cohesion survey, we find that perceived inclusiveness of Australian identity is widely held. Overall, more than eight-in-ten adults consider it important for Australians to speak English (87 per cent) and to share Australian customs and traditions (86 per cent). One-in-five adults (21 per cent) consider it important for Australians to be Christian, while one-in-three (32 per cent) consider it important to be born in Australia.

As shown in Table 5, views on Australian identity are similar across Australian and overseas-born populations. People born in Australia are significantly more likely to see being born in Australia as important compared with overseas-born Australians coming from English and non-English speaking backgrounds, though almost two-in-three (64 per cent) still do not see it as important. One-in-five adults see being Christian as important, regardless of their migrant background (21 per cent of all adults). Being able to speak English and sharing customs and traditions is very widely held to be important, with for example, 91 per cent of migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds believing that speaking English is important and 85 per cent believing it is important to share Australian customs and traditions.



**Table 5** 'How important do you think each of the following is for being truly Australian?' by migrant background and first language, Life in Australia™, 2024

	Very important	Somewhat important	Not important	Not important at all
% of adults				
<b>To have been born in Australia</b>				
Australian born	11	25	36	27
Overseas born, English first language	4	17	40	38
Overseas born, non-English	5	19	37	38
<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>To be able to speak English</b>				
Australian born	49	36	10	5
Overseas born, English first language	56	33	7	3
Overseas born, non-English	56	36	6	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>To be a Christian</b>				
Australian born	5	15	25	54
Overseas born, English first language	8	15	29	48
Overseas born, non-English	9	12	29	49
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>To share Australian customs and traditions</b>				
Australian born	44	42	11	4
Overseas born, English first language	42	47	9	2
Overseas born, non-English	36	49	10	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>4</b>

**Overall, the survey results suggest Australians can have a mature and respectful debate over the size of the migration program while continuing to nurture and strengthen multicultural diversity, harmony and prosperity**

Amidst global division around migration, tough economic conditions and bipartisan policies and proposals to reduce immigration from current levels, Australians continue to value and support multiculturalism, diversity and the contribution of immigrants to society. While debate and division over the size of the number of immigrants to Australia has increased, most people are able to distinguish their views on 'how many' immigrants come to

Australia from their generally inclusive and non-discriminatory views on who gets to come here and what it means to be Australian. Attitudes to migrants and multiculturalism have, though, become somewhat less positive over the last 1-2 years where some of the gains made during COVID-19 have been lost. As we will discuss in the next chapter, these trends coincide with pressures on intercultural and interfaith relations. Given the difficult global social and economic environment, this is perhaps not surprising, though still warrant renewed public and community attention as to what the future of Australian multiculturalism looks like.

# Attitudes, experiences & relations in multicultural Australia



42

The prominence of immigration, the rise in anti-migrant sentiment around the world and the deeply divided response to the conflict in the Middle East creates a challenging environment for intercultural and interfaith relations in Australia today. This year has been particularly challenging for many in Australia's Jewish and Muslim communities as well as those from Palestinian, Lebanese, other Arabic and Iranian backgrounds.

The conflict in the Middle East has sparked protest and division in Australia which, while mostly peaceful has also led to instances of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism and difficult experiences for the people and communities involved (Dumas, 2024; SBS, 2024).

As the Federal Government regularly points out (Hyland, 2024), interfaith and intercultural tensions place pressure on Australia's social cohesion. Debate and protest are normal and healthy aspects

of a vibrant democracy. Hatred, marginalisation and stigmatisation of individuals and groups, on the other hand, are detrimental to the social bonds, trust and connections that form the foundation of social cohesion.

Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia are not specifically measured in the Mapping Social Cohesion survey, nor is the survey able to provide information on the difficult experiences faced specifically by Jewish,

Muslim and other communities. For several years though, the Mapping Social Cohesion survey has asked respondents whether they have positive, negative or neutral attitudes towards people of different faiths, including Muslim and Jewish people. The survey has also asked people whether they have experienced discrimination in the last 12 months based on their skin colour, ethnic origin or religion since the first survey in 2007.

The survey results can provide clues as to whether the events and challenges of the last year have impacted the general national mood and general interfaith attitudes. It is important to emphasise though that there is no perfect relationship between our measures of discrimination, interfaith attitudes and the experiences of communities most impacted by current conflicts. We do not, for example, have a large enough number of survey respondents from Jewish, Muslim and other affected communities to give reliable estimates of their experience of discrimination. Our measures, nevertheless, give an important sense of how recent events impact on Australia as a whole, Australian social cohesion and intercultural harmony.

**The conflict in the Middle East may be contributing towards more negative attitudes towards people of the Muslim and Jewish faiths – though interfaith attitudes generally are also strained**

Negative attitudes towards people of the Muslim and Jewish faiths became significantly more common between July 2023 before the current conflict began and July 2024 when this year's Mapping Social Cohesion survey took place.

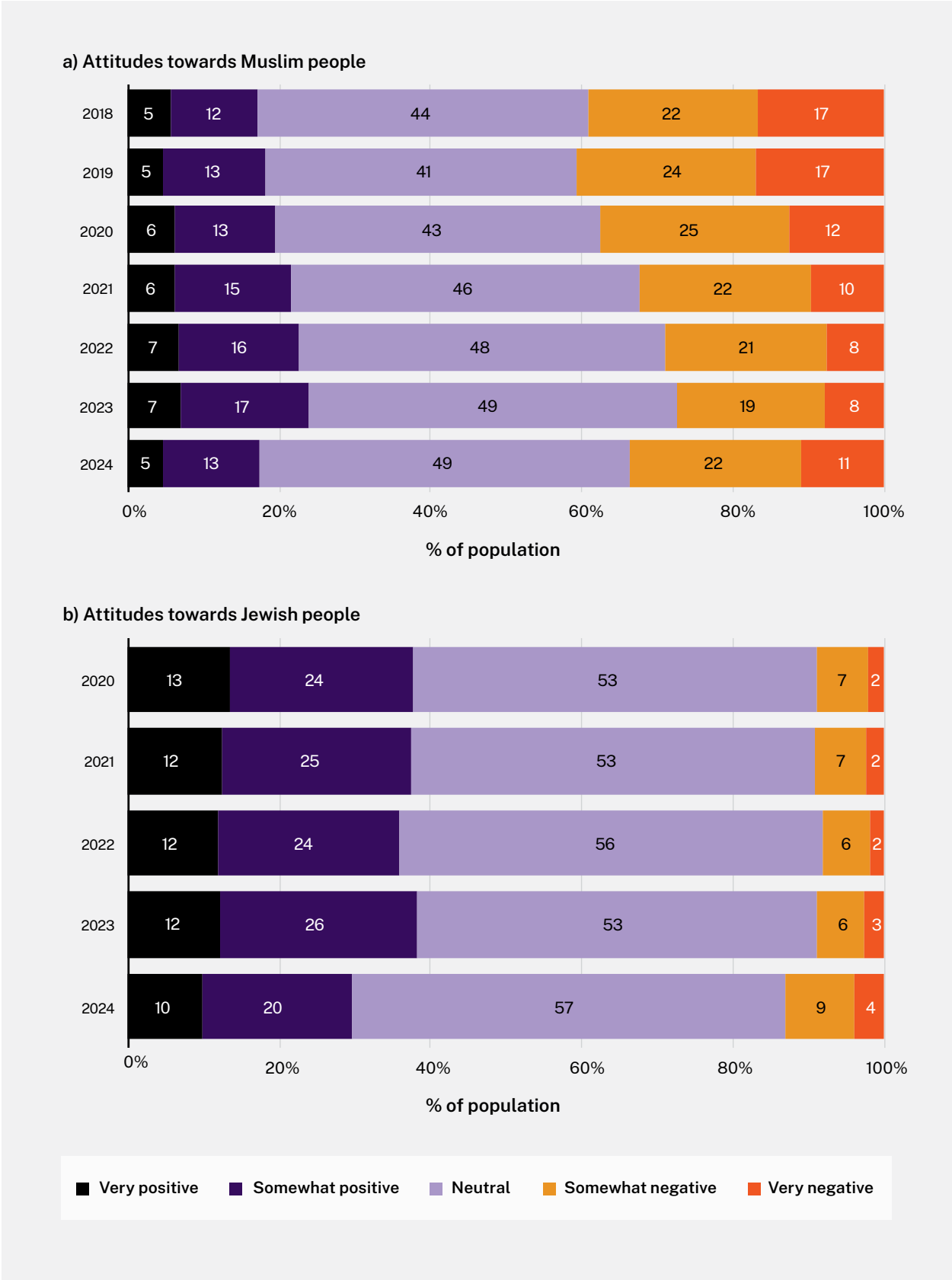
- 34 per cent of adults said they have a somewhat or very negative attitude towards Muslims in July 2024, a seven percentage point increase since before the conflict in July 2023 (27 per cent).
- 13 per cent said they have a negative attitude towards Jewish people in July 2024, a four percentage point increase since July 2023 (9 per cent).

The rise in negative attitudes corresponds with a decline in the share of people with positive attitudes towards Muslim and Jewish people.

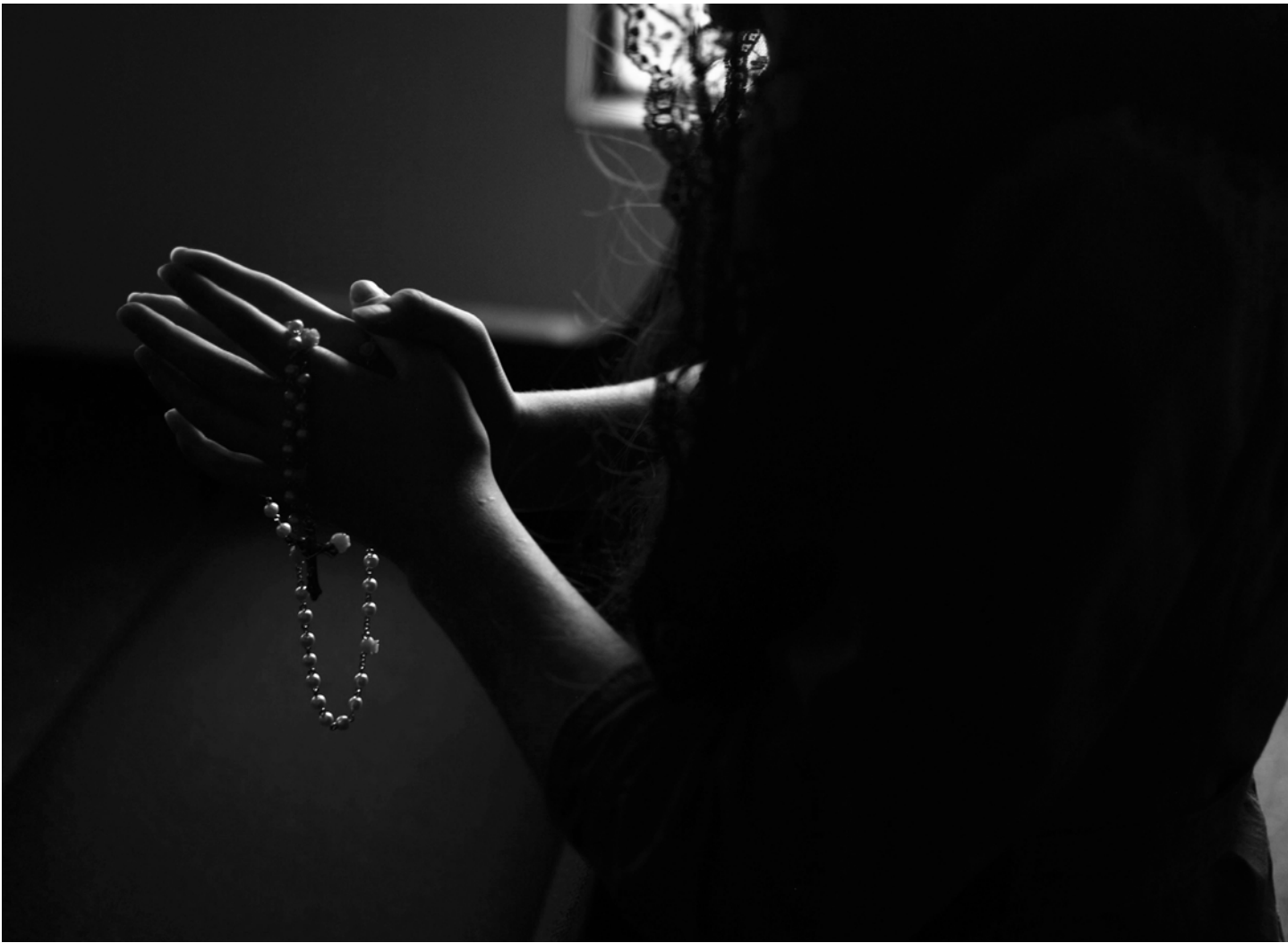
- 49 per cent of adults have a neutral attitude towards Muslim people in 2024 (49 per cent in 2023) and 17 per cent have a positive attitude (23 per cent in 2023).
- 57 per cent of adults have a neutral attitude towards Jewish people in 2024 (53 per cent in 2023) and 29 per cent have a positive attitude (37 per cent in 2023).

As shown in Figure 13, the increase in negative attitudes towards Muslim people in 2024 reverses some of the progress of recent years. Between 2019 and 2023, the proportion of adults with a somewhat or very negative attitude towards Muslims declined from 41 per cent to 27 per cent. The increase to 34 per cent in 2024 is significant and represents a substantial number of Australians. It nevertheless remains in line with the proportion recorded in 2021 and lower than the levels recorded between 2018 and 2020.

**Figure 13** 'Is your personal attitude positive, negative or neutral towards...', share of adults who have positive and negative attitudes towards Muslim and Jewish people, Life in Australia™, 2018-2024



Note: dashed lines represent when the Mapping Social Cohesion survey was run as a telephone survey (2007–2019), before the transition to the largely online Life in Australia™. Two surveys were conducted in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, one in July and one in November.

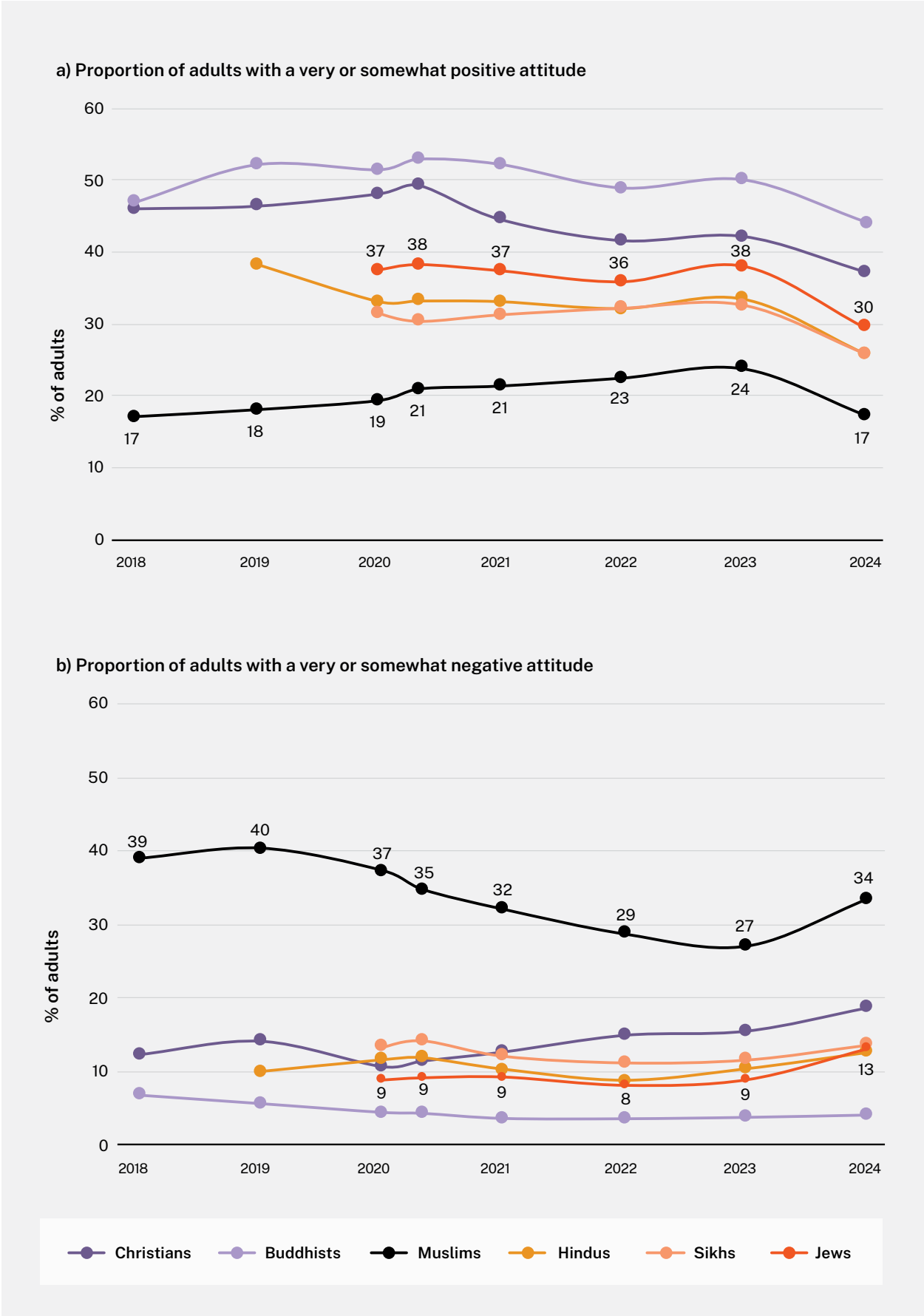


Attitudes to Muslim and Jewish people are likely to partly reflect politically polarised views on the current conflict in the Middle East. As we reported in the chapter ‘A challenging national and global environment’, people who describe their political orientation as right wing are twice as likely to have a negative attitude towards Muslims as left wing people (51 per cent versus 25 per cent). Left wing people are more likely to have a negative attitude towards Muslim people than Jewish people, though are more likely than right wing people to have a negative attitude towards Jewish people (16 per cent versus 10 per cent).

As shown in Figure 14a, the decline in the shares of adults with positive attitudes towards Muslim and Jewish people between 2023 and 2024 was matched by declines for the other major faiths. This did not necessarily translate to an increase in negative attitudes, as people were typically more likely to have a neutral attitude towards people of different faiths.

- The proportion of adults with positive attitudes towards Christians, Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists declined by 5, 8, 7 and 6 percentage points respectively between 2023 and 2024.
- The proportion of adults with a negative attitude towards Christians increased significantly from 16 per cent to 19 per cent between 2023 and 2024, and has generally been on an upward trend in recent years.
- The proportion of adults with negative attitudes towards Hindus and Sikhs increased by two percentage points each between July 2023 and 2024, while the proportion with a negative attitude towards Buddhists was stable.
- The proportion of adults with a negative attitude towards Jewish people is coming off a reasonably low base, and in 2024, is in line with the share of people with a negative attitude towards Hindus and Sikhs, while greater proportions have a negative attitude towards Muslims and Christians.

**Figure 14** 'Is your personal attitude positive, negative or neutral towards...', share of adults who have positive and negative attitudes towards religious groups, Life in Australia™, 2018-2024

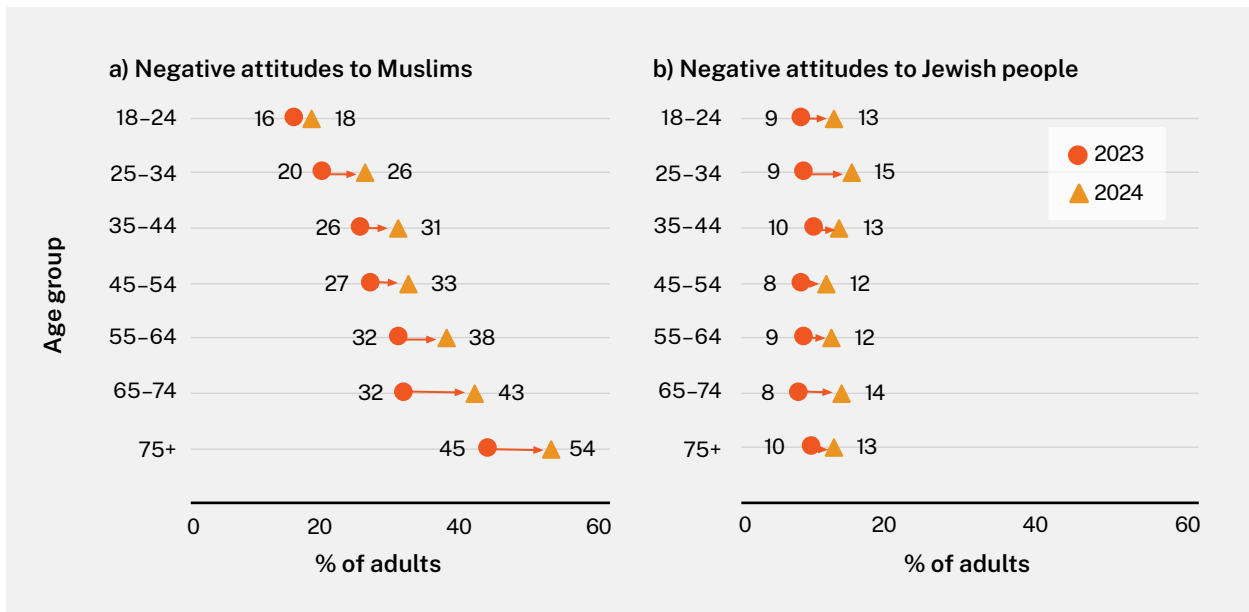


### Shifting attitudes to people of different faiths in part reflect age and ideological differences

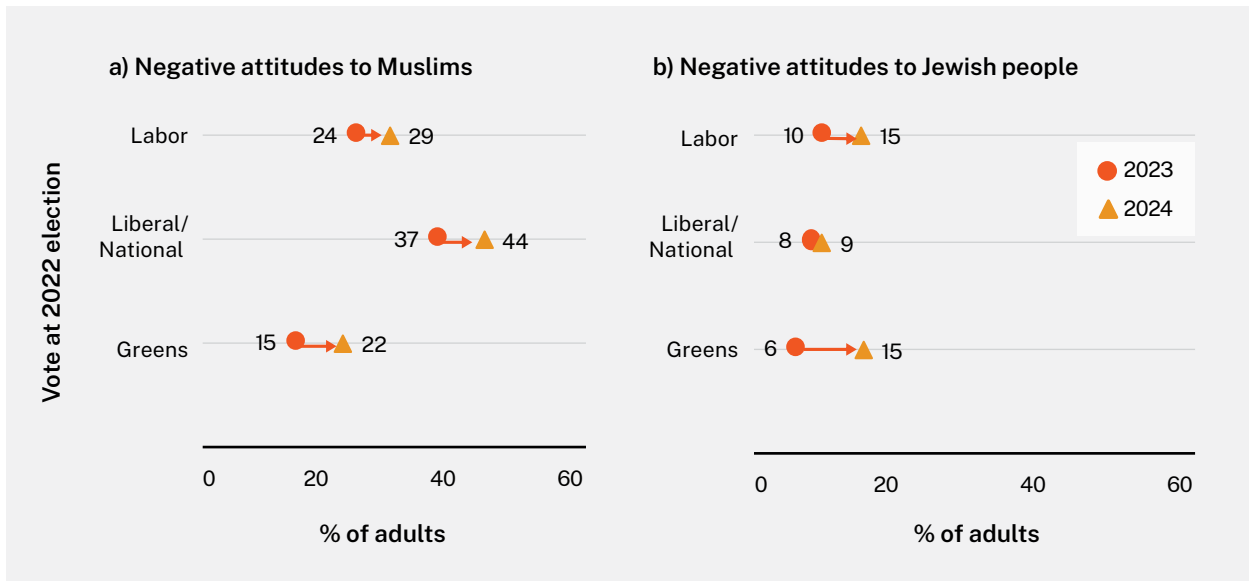
Given the polarised debates and protests over the conflict in the Middle East, we might expect to see sharp differences in attitudes to Muslim and Jewish people based on age and political orientation. The proportions of people with negative attitudes in 2023 and 2024 are shown in Figures 15 and 16 by age groups and who people voted for at the 2022 Federal Election respectively.

Negative attitudes are generally more common among older Australians and increasingly so since the start of the conflict. Between 2023 and 2024, the proportion of 65-74 years olds with a negative attitude towards Muslims increased from 32 per cent to 43 per cent, while the proportion for those 75 years and over increased from 45 to 54 per cent. There is no similar age pattern in negative attitudes towards Jewish people (Figure 15b). Rather, the increase in negative attitudes between 2023 and 2024 was mostly among more left wing and progressive Labor and Greens voters (Figure 16b).

**Figure 15** Negative attitudes to Muslim and Jewish people by age group, Life in Australia™, 2023 and 2024



**Figure 16** Negative attitudes to Muslim and Jewish people by vote at 2022 Federal election, Life in Australia™, 2023 and 2024



## Discrimination and difficult experiences are common among overseas-born Australians

The extent to which negative attitudes lead to discrimination, abuse and mistreatment is a crucial question for social cohesion and the wellbeing of affected groups. Media reports and data have exposed the difficult experiences of people and communities in the last year, particularly in the face of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism (Dumas, 2023, 2024; SBS, 2024; Chamas & Ford, 2023).

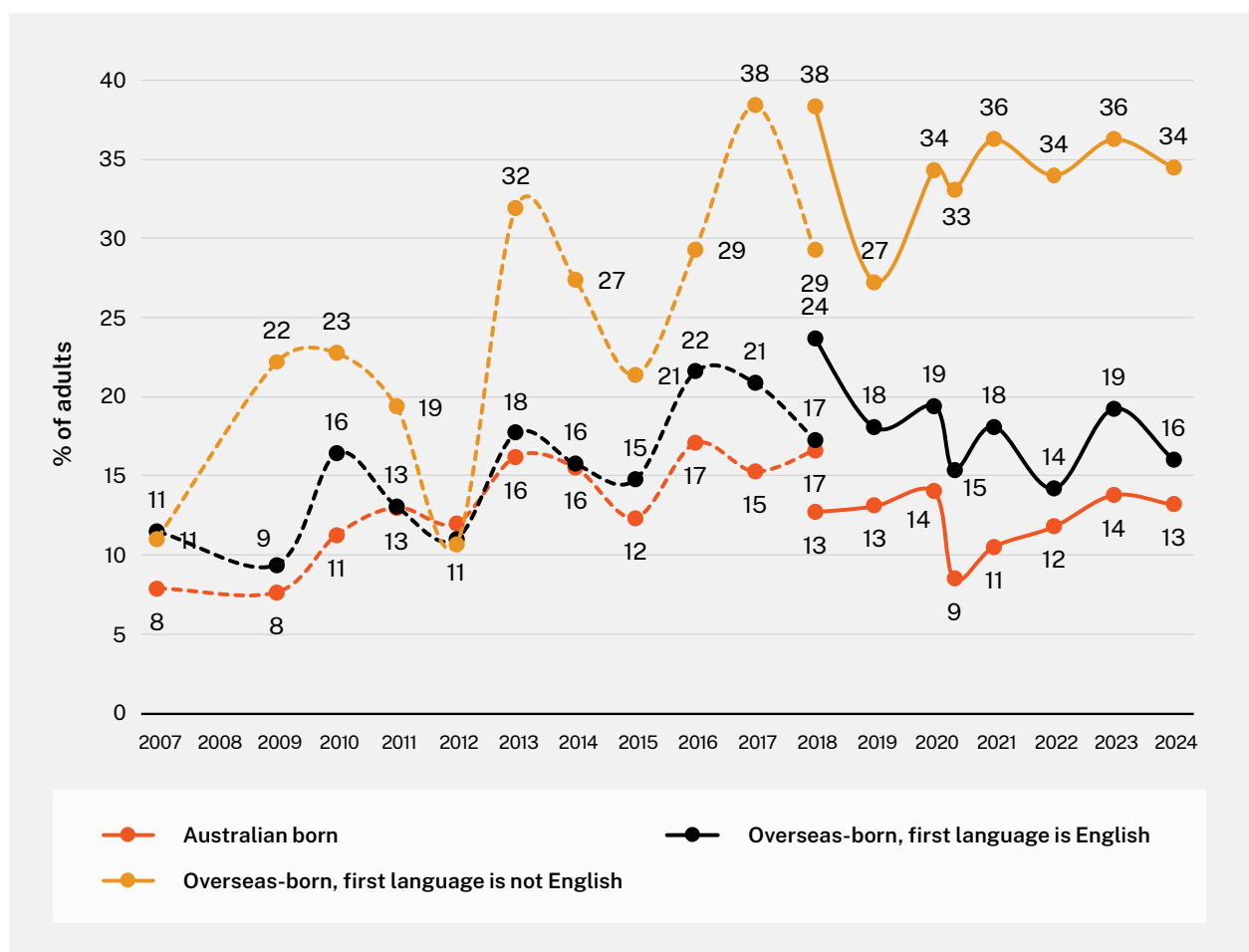
As explained at the start of this chapter, the Mapping Social Cohesion survey is not able to speak specifically to the experience of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism (in part due to the small number of Muslim and Jewish respondents). However, estimates of discrimination and mistreatment in the wider population can be combined with media reports and

data on incidents of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism (e.g. SBS, 2024) to help us understand the impacts of current challenges on social cohesion.

Overall, 17 per cent of Australians say they have experienced discrimination because of their skin colour, ethnic origin or religion in the 12 months prior to the July 2024 survey. This is similar to the level in 2023 (18 per cent) and its average since 2016.

The experience of discrimination is considerably more common among people who have migrated to Australia. One-in-three (34 per cent) overseas-born Australians whose first language is not English report experiencing discrimination in the last 12 months (Figure 17). The 2024 level is similar to levels since 2018. The percentage is 13 per cent for Australian-born adults, a level that is also in line with its recent average (Figure 17).

**Figure 17** 'Have you experienced discrimination because of your skin colour, ethnic origin or religion over the last 12 months?' By migrant and language background, 2007-2018 (telephone surveys) and 2018-2024 (online and telephone)



Note: dashed lines represent when the Mapping Social Cohesion survey was run as a telephone survey (2007-2019), before the transition to the largely online Life in Australia™



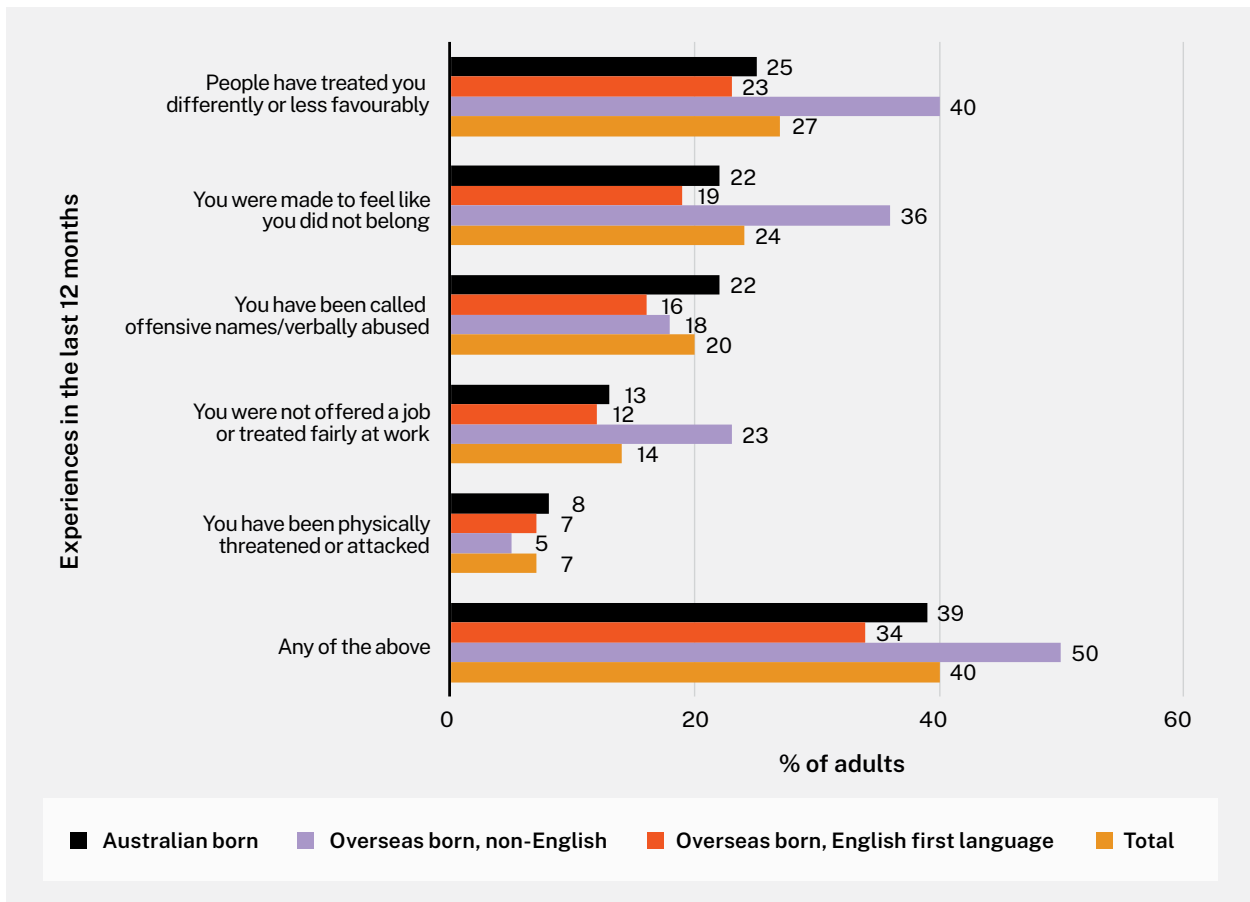
In addition to discrimination, respondents to the 2024 Mapping Social Cohesion survey were asked whether they experienced different forms of mistreatment in the last 12 months regardless of the reason. As shown in Figure 18, mistreatment is commonly experienced across society. People from non-English speaking backgrounds, though, are particularly likely to experience mistreatment at work, and treatment that makes them feel different and as if they do not belong. According to the results,

- 27 per cent of adults have been treated differently or less favourably by other people in the last 12 months, an experience that was significantly more common among overseas-born Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds (40 per cent).
- 24 per cent say they were made to feel like they did not belong, including 36 per cent of overseas-born Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds.
- 20 per cent have been called offensive names or been verbally abused, an experience that was equally likely between people from English and non-English speaking backgrounds.

- 14 per cent were not offered a job or were treated fairly at work, including 23 per cent of overseas-born Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds.
- 7 per cent said they were physically threatened or attacked, an experience that was not more commonly reported by overseas-born Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds (5 per cent).

Much of the mistreatment experienced is likely related to cultural and religious differences. Of those who experienced mistreatment in the last 12 months, 68 per cent said that treatment had come from people who are of a different cultural or religious background to their own, while 49 per cent said that it had come from people of the same background. Among overseas born Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds, 93 per cent said that mistreatment came from people of a different background and 18 per cent said that it came from people of the same background.

**Figure 18** ‘Please indicate if you have personally experienced the following in the last 12 months in Australia’ Life in Australia™, 2024



### **Australians from Asian and African backgrounds are most likely to experience discrimination and mistreatment**

People born in China, India, South-East Asia, Asia generally and Sub-Saharan Africa were significantly and substantially more likely to report experiencing discrimination in the last 12 months based on their ethnic origin, skin colour or religion than those born in Australia – after accounting for factors such as age, gender, family, education and when people arrived in Australia.

- We estimate, for example, that approximately 45 per cent of people born in India, 43 per cent of people born in Sub-Saharan Africa (excluding South Africa), 39 per cent of people born in mainland China and 35 per cent of people born in South-East Asia experienced discrimination in the 12 months prior to the 2024 survey.
- People born in China, India, South-East Asia and Africa were also significantly more likely to say they had been treated differently or less favourably in the last 12 months, made to feel like they did not belong and not offered a job or treated unfairly at work.
- While we are not able to calculate reliable estimates for people of Muslim and Jewish faiths and those most affected by the current conflict in the Middle East, we estimate that approximately one-in-three survey respondents who were

born in the Middle East reported experiencing discrimination in the last 12 months, one-in-three had been treated differently or less favourably, one-in-five had been called offensive names or verbally abused and one-in-seven had been physically threatened or attacked.

### **Most people see racism as a problem in Australia**

In response to the question ‘in your opinion, how big of a problem is racism in Australia’, more than three-in-five (63 per cent) adults said that racism is a very big or a fairly big problem in Australia in 2024. As shown in Table 6, this is a similar proportion to those recorded in 2021, 2022 and 2023.

The extent to which people perceive racism as a problem, on the one hand, likely reflects actual experiences of racism in Australia. On the other hand, it also reflects a widespread awareness that racism exists, arguably an important requirement for addressing the issue and strengthening intercultural relations across Australia. Reflecting widespread awareness of racism, 65 per cent of people born in Australia and 64 per cent of those whose parents were both born in Australia see racism as a ‘very big’ or ‘fairly big’ problem in Australia – at least as high as overseas-born Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds (59 per cent).



**Table 6** 'In your opinion, how big of a problem is racism in Australia?' By migrant status and first language, Life in Australia™, 2021–2024

	A very big problem	A fairly big problem	Not a very big problem	Not a problem at all
% of adults				
<b>2021</b>				
Australian born	14	43	38	4
Overseas born, English first language	17	45	36	2
Overseas born, non-English	16	51	30	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2022</b>				
Australian born	14	48	36	2
Overseas born, English first language	14	44	39	2
Overseas born, non-English	14	45	37	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2023</b>				
Australian born	15	47	34	3
Overseas born, English first language	12	49	35	2
Overseas born, non-English	13	47	36	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2024</b>				
Australian born	15	50	32	3
Overseas born, English first language	12	49	36	3
Overseas born, non-English	15	43	37	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>3</b>

Note: Totals may not add to 100 due to rounding and because respondents who refused to answer or answered don't know to this question are not shown but are included in the totals.

### Despite some challenges, Australians remain engaged in multicultural communities

Almost nine-in-ten (86 per cent) adults say they like meeting and getting to know people from ethnic and cultural groups other than their own. As shown in Table 7, this proportion is particularly high among overseas-born Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds (91 per cent), though also comprises the large majority (85 per cent) of Australian-born adults.

Interest and enjoyment in meeting people from different backgrounds does not always translate to contact and friendships. Nevertheless, contact is common for most people. As shown in Table 7, 59 per cent of adults agree that they often spend time with people from ethnic and cultural groups other than their own. This proportion is higher among overseas-born Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds (65 per cent), though is still the case for more than one-half of Australian-born adults (55 per cent).

**Table 7** Indicators of intercultural relations by migrant status and first language, Life in Australia™, 2024

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
% of adults				
<i>'I like meeting and getting to know people from ethnic and cultural groups other than my own'</i>				
Australian born	18	67	13	2
Overseas born, English first language	19	67	13	1
Overseas born, non-English	25	66	8	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>'I often spend time with people from ethnic or cultural groups other than my own'</i>				
Australian born	9	46	39	5
Overseas born, English first language	11	47	37	3
Overseas born, non-English	15	60	24	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>4</b>

*Note: Totals may not add to 100 due to rounding and because respondents who refused to answer or answered don't know to this question are not shown but are included in the totals.*

Most Australians, likewise, have close friends from different national, ethnic or religious backgrounds. As shown in Table 8, four-in-five (79 per cent) adults say they have two or more friends in their close circle who are from national, ethnic or religious backgrounds different from their own and 35 per cent have five or more friends. For overseas-born Australians whose first language is not English, 89 per cent have two or more friends from different backgrounds and one-half (49 per cent) have at least five friends.

As shown in Table 8, the number of friends from different backgrounds appears to be lower in 2024 than in previous years. In 2024 for example, 34 per cent reported five or more friends, compared with 40-41 per cent in 2021, 2022 and 2023. While it is possible that people have lost friends generally and those from different backgrounds specifically over the last year, the decline may also reflect other factors such as people's symbolic support for migration and diversity. People's support may influence who they consider to be their close friends and how diverse they consider their friendship groups.

Declines in the proportion of adults with five or more friends from different backgrounds were common across demographic and socioeconomic groups between 2023 and 2024, but particularly for people aged 45-54 (45 to 37 per cent), 55-64 (43 to 35 per cent) and 65 years and over (39 to 31 per cent), people who describe their financial situation as prosperous or very comfortable (39 to 30 per cent) and Liberal/National voters (42 to 32 per cent). The declines are also strongly associated with declining support for migrants and multiculturalism, suggesting that if people are less likely to see the benefits of the latter, they are also less likely to report having friends from different backgrounds.

**Table 8** 'With regard to your close circle of friends, how many are from national, ethnic or religious backgrounds different from yours?' By migrant status and first language, Life in Australia™, 2021–2024

	Number of friends			
	0 to 1	2 to 4	5 to 9	9 or more
% of adults				
<b>2021</b>				
Australian born	22	42	20	16
Overseas born, English first language	13	36	27	24
Overseas born, non-English	13	32	28	28
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>2022</b>				
Australian born	22	42	20	15
Overseas born, English first language	13	39	23	24
Overseas born, non-English	9	37	27	26
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>2023</b>				
Australian born	21	43	21	14
Overseas born, English first language	12	37	26	24
Overseas born, non-English	10	35	26	28
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>2024</b>				
Australian born	24	46	19	11
Overseas born, English first language	17	42	22	18
Overseas born, non-English	11	40	25	24
<b>Total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>14</b>

*Note: Totals may not add to 100 due to rounding and because respondents who refused to answer or answered don't know to this question are not shown but are included in the totals.*

**The conflicts and division of the last year strain intercultural and interfaith relations – though social bonds, friendships and goodwill make those relations difficult to break**

The significant increases in negative attitudes towards Muslim and Jewish people and the significant decreases in positive attitudes are perhaps the clearest indicators in the Mapping Social Cohesion survey of the impact of the conflict in the Middle East on Australia. While these indicators fall short of providing a full picture of the personal and community impacts, they point to shifts in national sentiments that potentially contribute to

difficult experiences for Australia’s Muslim and Jewish communities. As we explained in this chapter, attitudes towards other faiths have also become less positive while discrimination and perceived racism remain common, pointing to a wider challenge to Australia’s intercultural and social harmony. While current events even seem to impact how diverse we think our friendship networks are, Australians nevertheless continue to engage positively across cultural divides, including through friendships. These experiences and goodwill are valuable for managing current challenges and can be an important component of Australia’s multicultural future.

# Australia's social fabric



The importance and value of social cohesion comes to the forefront during times of difficulty and crisis. Indeed, the true test of social cohesion lies not in how connected we are during the good times, but how connected individuals, communities and societies are during the tough times, through the challenges that strain and threaten bonds and connections with others.

54

As previous Mapping Social Cohesion reports have shown, social cohesion in Australia increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. The increase reflected a galvanising response to the crisis, a positive response to government and community efforts to protect our health and wellbeing and was made possible through the ability of communities and Australian society to draw on levels of social cohesion that had accumulated in prior years. The willingness of Australians to follow public health orders, comply with lockdown restrictions and get vaccinated in such large numbers (and without the need for widespread vaccine mandates), for instance, reflected a degree of trust in societal institutions and a desire to protect the health and wellbeing of each other.

In the challenging and tumultuous times since, social cohesion in Australia has been declining but remains

an important resource. Since 2021, the Mapping Social Cohesion study has been tracking a decline in the sense of national belonging, declining trust in government, a decline in the sense of financial wellbeing and a weaker sense of social justice. The sense of belonging and social justice are now at their lowest levels since the start of the Mapping Social Cohesion study in 2007.

Looking behind the topline numbers though, people remain connected. Australians are connected and engaged in their neighbourhoods and local communities and continue to support and value Australia's relationship to its First Nations peoples and its migrant and multicultural diversity. These reflect strengths in Australia's social fabric, the interwoven bonds and connections between people that hold society together. Internal and external

pressures, including financial stress, conflict, violence and divisive debate, may strain social cohesion and drag down several indicators of social wellbeing. However, their impact can be effectively cushioned by the strength of the social fabric, the social support it provides along with the sense people have of managing together.

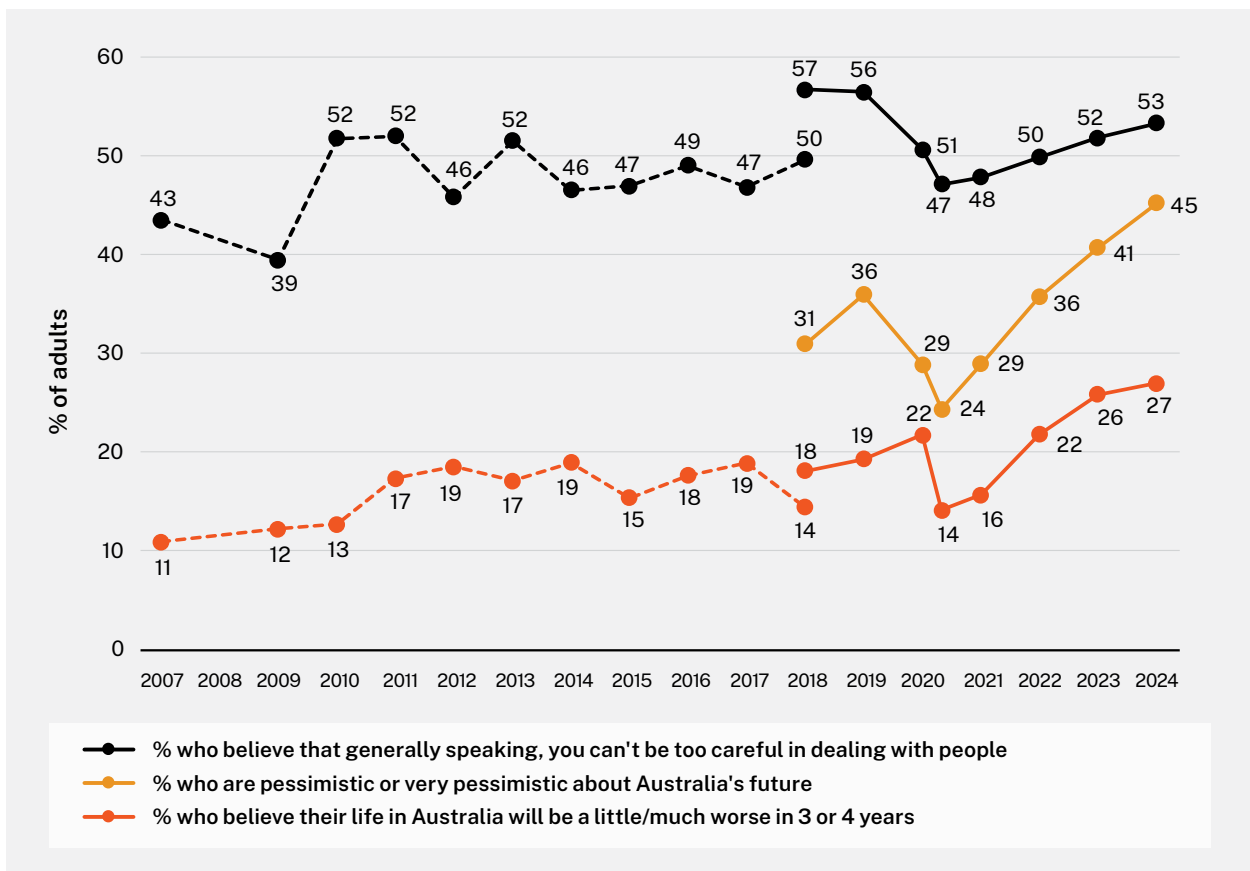
### Australians are less trusting and more pessimistic in 2024

The trust that people have in each other is one of the foundations of social cohesion. Social trust is built from the interactions and experiences people have, the trustiness of our personalities and the

perceptions of others we acquire through media, government, social networks and other information sources. Trust, in turn, provides capacity and confidence to engage in communities and society to the fullest, to rely on others and to draw on their help when it is needed.

Australians are fairly evenly divided on whether other people can be trusted. In 2024, 46 per cent of people say that generally speaking, most people can be trusted. This proportion is in line with its long-term average since 2007, but is significantly below the 52 per cent of people who believed most people can be trusted in 2021. Conversely, 53 per cent say that you cannot be too careful in dealing with people, up from 48 per cent in 2021 (see Figure 19).

**Figure 19** Trust in other people and pessimism towards Australia's future and our own future, 2007 to 2018 (telephone surveys) and 2018 to 2024 (online & telephone)



Note: the dashed lines indicate when the survey was run as a telephone survey.

Australians are also more pessimistic about the future. In 2024, 45 per cent of people are pessimistic or very pessimistic about Australia's future, up from 29 per cent in 2021, while 27 per cent of people believe their life in Australia will be a little or much worse in three or four years, up from 16 per cent in 2021 and approximately six percentage points higher than its average between 2011 and 2019 (after adjusting for the transition to Life in Australia™).

The increase in pessimism since 2021 is most strongly associated with the declining sense of social inclusion and justice in Australia, somewhat weaker neighbourhood cohesion, weaker trust in government and increased financial stress. In other words, people with a low sense of social inclusion and justice, a weaker perception of cohesion in their neighbourhoods, who distrust government and/or are experiencing financial stress are more pessimistic about their own life in Australia and Australia's future – and as these perceptions and experiences have become more common since 2021, pessimism has also grown.

➤ We analyse the factors associated with the increase in pessimism through a decomposition model (Jann, 2008). This model attempts to quantify how much of the increase in pessimism between 2021 and 2024 is associated with changes in the proportion of people in different groups and how much is related to changing pessimism within those groups. For example, the model estimates how much of the increase in pessimism is due to a growing group of people who have a low sense of social inclusion and justice and how much is due to increasing pessimism among people with a high and a low sense of justice. The model accounts for a range of factors including age, gender, education, migrant background, neighbourhood disadvantage, perceived safety, voting preference, social isolation and happiness.

➤ The sense of social inclusion and justice is measured with the Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion (see chapter 'Social Cohesion in 2024' and Appendix A) and captures the degree to which people believe that Australia is a land of economic opportunity, that low income earners receive enough support and that jobs markets, elections and courts are fair.

### Neighbourhood social connections and bonds increased during the COVID-19 pandemic but have now returned to pre-pandemic levels

Some of the strongest and most important social bonds are those felt within neighbourhoods and local communities. In 2024, four-in-five adults agree or strongly agree that 'people in your local area are willing to help their neighbours' (82 per cent) and that 'my local area is a place where people from different national or ethnic backgrounds get on well together' (81 per cent). These proportions have declined by 3-4 percentage points since 2020 and 2021, but remain at or above their levels recorded in 2018 and 2019.

As shown in Table 9, a similar pattern can be seen for other neighbourhood indicators:

- 18 per cent of adults say that living in their local area is becoming much better or better, 61 per cent say it is unchanged and 20 per cent say it is becoming worse. These proportions are similar to where they were in 2018, 2019 and 2023, while the proportion who believe their local area is getting better is seven percentage points lower than its recorded high point in July 2021.
- 55 per cent agree or strongly agree that 'I am able to have a real say on issues that are important to me in my local area'. This proportion is significantly below levels recorded between 2019 and 2022.
- 81 per cent agree or strongly agree that 'I feel like I belong in my neighbourhood', similar to its average since the question was first asked in 2021.
- 62 per cent agree or strongly agree that 'my neighbourhood has a strong sense of community'. This proportion has declined from 67 per cent when the question was first asked in 2021.



**Table 9** Indicators of neighbourhood social cohesion, Life in Australia™, July 2018 to 2024

		2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
		% of respondents						
Neighbours willing to help	Strongly agree	18	18	20	18	18	15	14
	Agree	63	62	66	69	68	69	68
	<b>Total agree</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>82</b>
Neighbours get on well	Strongly agree	11	13	14	11	12	10	9
	Agree	65	66	70	73	71	72	72
	<b>Total agree</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>81</b>
Local area getting better	Much better	2	2	1	2	2	2	1
	Better	17	18	13	23	19	16	17
	Unchanged	58	60	70	57	62	62	61
	<b>Total agree</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>79</b>
Have a say in local area	Strongly agree	7	9	7	6	6	5	4
	Agree	51	52	58	56	56	52	51
	<b>Total agree</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>55</b>
Neighbourhood belonging	Strongly agree				15	15	12	11
	Agree				68	67	68	70
	<b>Total agree</b>				<b>83</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>81</b>
Sense of community	Strongly agree				15	12	11	10
	Agree				52	54	53	53
	<b>Total agree</b>				<b>67</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>62</b>

Note: Totals may not add up exactly due to rounding. Two surveys were conducted in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, one in July and one in November. To save space, only the July 2020 results are shown (the usual month in which surveys are conducted).

### Younger and disadvantaged Australians have the least favourable perception of Australia's social fabric

Overall perceptions of Australia's social fabric were measured in this year's survey through the concept of anomie. Anomie is an old and much debated concept related to social cohesion – though in the opposite direction – referring to a breakdown in social norms or the unwritten rules that guide how people live and interact with one another (Bjarnason 2009). Teymoori et al. (2017) measure anomie as a) the breakdown of a society's social fabric, reflected in a lack of trust between people and an erosion of moral standards, and b) the breakdown of leadership, reflected in a lack of trust in the legitimacy and effectiveness of political and community leadership. The opposite of

a breakdown in society's social fabric, in other words, its strength and resilience, is a useful complement to how we measure social cohesion in the Mapping Social Cohesion study.

In the 2024 Mapping Social Cohesion Survey, we measure Australia's social fabric from four items suggested by Teymoori et al. (2017).

- Two-in-three (65 per cent) adults agree (56 per cent) or strongly agree (9 per cent) that 'people do not know who they can trust and rely on'.
- Almost one-half (47 per cent) of adults agree (40 per cent) or strongly agree (7 per cent) that 'everyone thinks of themselves and do not help others in need'.

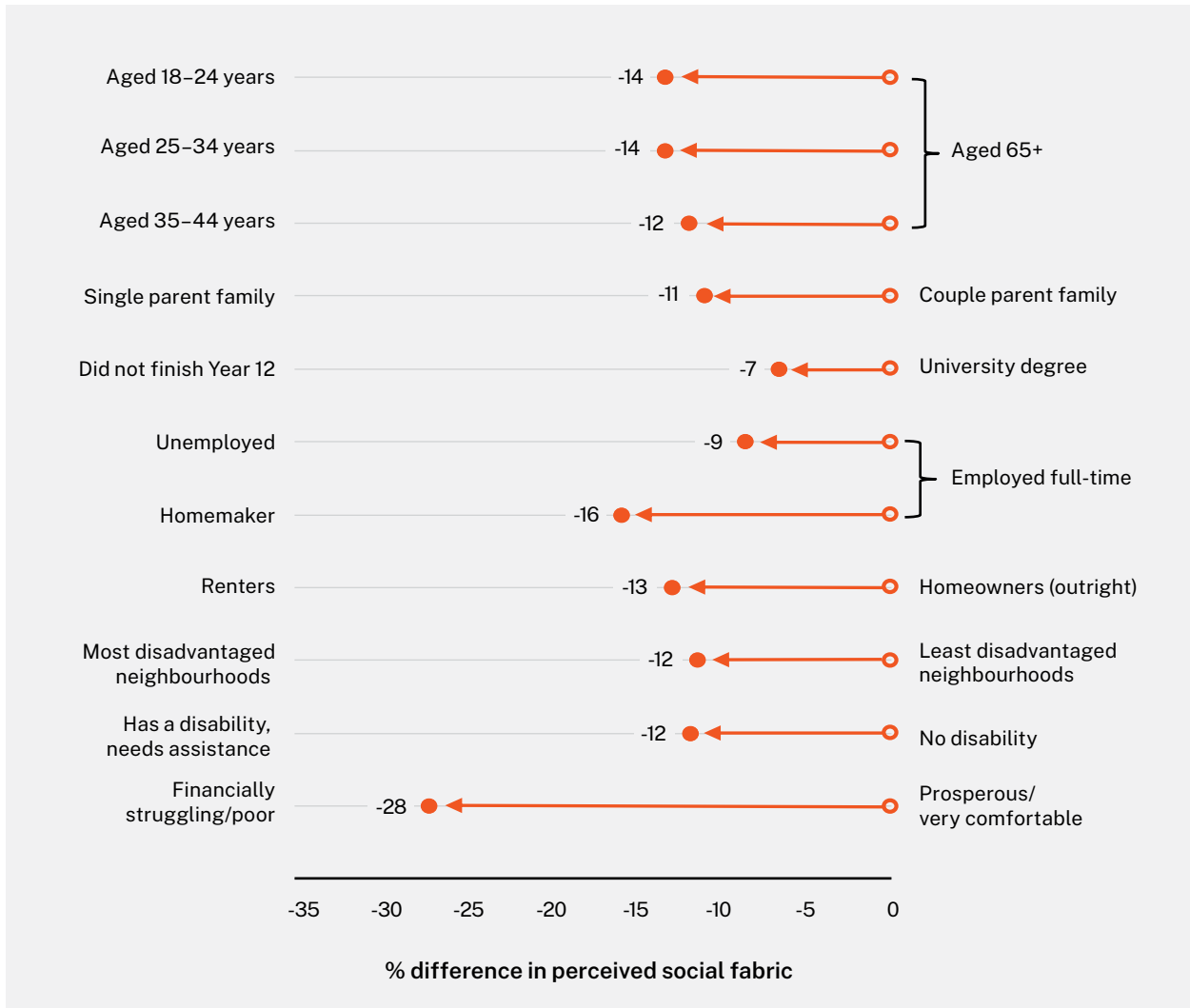
- More than two-in-five (44 per cent) adults agree (38 per cent) or strongly agree (7 per cent) that 'people think there are no clear moral standards to follow'.
- More than one-half (54 per cent) of adults agree (47 per cent) or strongly agree (7 per cent) that 'most people think that if something works, it doesn't really matter if it's right or wrong'.

Perceived social fabric varies across society. Responses to the questions above were added to give an overall measure of perceived social fabric. Higher scores indicate lower anomie and a higher perception of Australia's social fabric. The scores allow us to measure differences in how Australia's social fabric is perceived across groups in society. Figure 20 illustrates the groups where differences in perceived social fabric are the largest and most significant. The results indicate that perceived social fabric scores are:

- 28 per cent lower among people who describe themselves as poor or struggling to pay bills, relative to those who are financially prosperous or living very comfortably
- 16 per cent lower among people who work in the home as homemakers and 9 per cent lower among unemployed people relative to people who are employed full-time
- 14 per cent lower among 18-24 and 25-34 year olds relative to people aged 65 years and over and 12 per cent lower among 35-44 year olds
- 13 per cent lower among renters relative to those who own their home outright
- 12 per cent lower among people living in the most socioeconomically disadvantaged 20 per cent of neighbourhoods relative to those in the least disadvantaged neighbourhoods
- 12 per cent lower among those with a disability relative to people with no disability.



**Figure 20** Significant differences between groups in their perceived social fabric, average percentage difference in scores, Life in Australia™, 2024



**Australia’s social fabric is strongly associated with personal and social wellbeing**

People with a weaker sense of Australia’s social fabric are more likely to feel socially isolated, less likely to feel a sense of belonging in Australia and less likely to say they have been happy over the last 12 months.

- To demonstrate this, we run a series of regression models where we look to predict several indicators of personal and social wellbeing at different levels of perceived anomie. The regression models control for a range of characteristics, including age, sex, family composition, housing tenure, migrant status, education, neighbourhood socioeconomic status, disability, religion, political orientation and financial stress. While we cannot determine from

these results whether Australia’s social fabric directly affects wellbeing, the results tell us that the associations between individuals’ perceptions of the social fabric and their wellbeing are independent of, and cannot be explained by, these other factors.

Relative to people with the highest social fabric scores (highest 10 per cent), people with the weakest sense of social fabric (in the lowest 10 per cent of scores) are:

- 48 per cent more likely to feel isolated from others often or some of the time
- 24 per cent less likely to say they were happy or very happy over the last 12 months
- 38 per cent less likely to have a great sense of belonging in Australia.



### Australians remain engaged in the social and civic life of communities

Trust, optimism and perceptions of the social fabric are important markers of how people feel about the social connections and relationships around them. Active participation is an important way in which these feelings translate into actions and lived behaviours that create, maintain and strengthen societal bonds. Volunteering through charities and other organisations, helping run sports clubs, community and religious groups, providing unpaid assistance to people in the community and being an active member of political parties, trade unions and civic and professionals associations are important ways in which people connect with others and make positive contributions to their communities, and so benefit the wellbeing and connections of others.

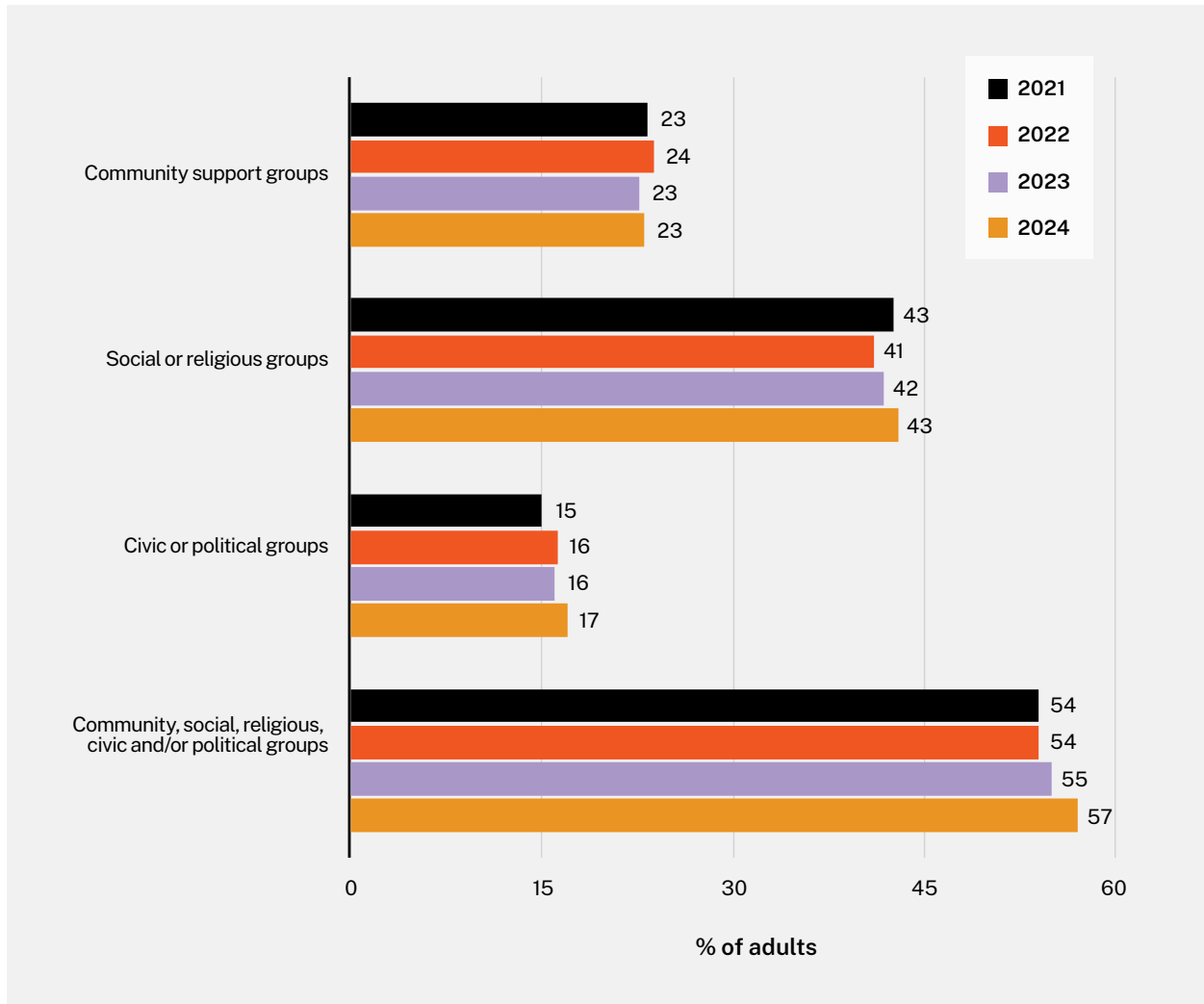
According to the results of the Mapping Social Cohesion 2024 survey, participation in social, community and civic activities has been steady over the last 12 months (see Figure 21).

- Almost one-quarter (23 per cent) of adults were involved in a community support group in the last 12 months, such as St Vincent de Paul, Rotary, the RSL, Scouts and the Australian Red Cross.

This proportion has been nearly identical in every survey since the question was first asked in 2021.

- Just over two-in-five (43 per cent) adults were involved in a social or religious group in 2024, including sports, arts, craft, ethnic and multicultural clubs and groups, also similar to levels recorded since 2021.
- One-in-six (17 per cent) adults were involved in a civic or political group such as a trade union, political party, environmental and civil rights groups, consumer organisations and tenants' associations, largely the same share since 2022.
- Almost three-in-five (57 per cent) adults were involved with a community, social, religious, civic or political group in the last 12 months, similar to, if not a little higher than, levels in 2023 (55 per cent), 2022 (54 per cent) and 2021 (54 per cent).
- More than one-half (55 per cent) of adults provided unpaid help to anyone not living with them in just the last four weeks, similar to the proportions recorded in 2023 (55 per cent), 2022 (56 per cent) and 2021 (58 per cent).

**Figure 21** Involvement in community, social, religious, civic and political groups in the last 12 months, Life in Australia™, 2021 to 2024



**Inequalities and current events strain Australia’s social fabric – though connections and engagement remain resilient and continue to support personal wellbeing**

In 2024, Australians are more likely to be pessimistic about their own future and Australia’s future, are somewhat less trusting of others and less connected within their neighbourhoods. Connections and cohesion within neighbourhoods, though, remain

at a high level, and along with the continued active engagement and participation people have within their communities, represent important strengths in Australia’s social fabric. How people perceive Australia’s social fabric, however, varies widely, likely reflecting social, economic and generational inequalities that may in turn impact our personal and social wellbeing and future social cohesion.

# The cost of living, the economy & housing



Amidst a wide set of national and international challenges, the economy still stands out as the dominant issue for most people. As reported in previous chapters, one-half of Australian adults cite the economy as the most important problem facing the country, while a further 15 per cent cite housing shortages and affordability. Since 2023, the share of people citing these issues has been at their highest levels since the question was first asked on the Mapping Social Cohesion survey in 2011.

62

The prominence of economic issues reflects a continuation of cost-of-living pressures and a deteriorating national economy. Since emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, inflation has driven the cost-of-living higher across the economy (ABS, 2024e). Rising interest rates to combat and prevent further inflation has increased mortgage and rent costs and squeezed household budgets tighter. While it may have been expected that slowing growth in inflation and interest rate rises in 2024 would bring financial relief, these changes have been accompanied by a slowing economy and declining real incomes and

living standards throughout the year (ABS, 2024c). As a result, the experience of financial stress, hardship and deprivation has remained stubbornly common.

Economic challenges create social inequalities that drag down Australia's social cohesion. As the history of the Mapping Social Cohesion study demonstrates, financial wellbeing is one of the factors most strongly associated with the sense of belonging people have in Australia and within their neighbourhoods, their social connections, happiness and sense of social justice in society, their trust in

people and government and their acceptance of social, cultural and religious differences in society.

Social cohesion however is more than just a reflection of the state of the economy. In providing emotional and practical support, friendships and social connections, social cohesion can potentially help to lessen the burden of financial hardship on personal wellbeing and happiness. Social cohesion does not displace the need for economic opportunity

and wellbeing, but can help to protect us through challenging economic times.

### Financial difficulties have been widespread again in 2024

On all of our indicators, financial difficulties are at least as common in 2024 as they were in 2023 and above their longer-term averages. These indicators are shown in Table 10.

**Table 10** Indicators of financial stress, Life in Australia™, July 2018–2024

		2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
		% of respondents						
Satisfaction with finances	Very dissatisfied	9	10	5	6	7	9	9
	Dissatisfied	29	26	22	23	28	30	31
	<b>Total dissatisfied</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>40</b>
Financial position	Poor/struggling to pay	12	12	8	7	10	11	11
	Just getting along	30	26	27	24	27	30	30
	<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>41</b>
Went without meals	Often				1	2	3	3
	Sometimes				8	9	9	10
	<b>Total</b>				<b>9</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>
Could not pay rent/mortgage	Often						2	2
	Sometimes						10	11
	<b>Total</b>						<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>
Went without healthcare	Often						5	5
	Sometimes						17	18
	<b>Total</b>						<b>22</b>	<b>23</b>
Worried about losing job	Very worried	6	7	7	5	3	5	5
	Worried	8	9	10	8	8	8	9
	<b>Total worried</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>14</b>

Note: Totals may not add up exactly due to rounding. Two surveys were conducted in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, one in July and one in November. To save space, only the July 2020 results are shown (the usual month in which surveys are conducted).

- 40 per cent of adults are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their finances in 2024. This proportion is similar to 2023, but significantly higher than any year (aside from 2018) since the question was first asked in 2007 (after accounting for the transition from the telephone to the Life in Australia™ survey).
- 41 per cent of adults say they are ‘poor’, ‘struggling to pay bills’ or ‘just getting along’ financially in 2024 (as opposed to living reasonably or very comfortably or prosperously). This proportion is also similar to 2023 and higher than any year since 2019.
- 13 per cent of adults in 2024 said they often or sometimes went without meals in the last 12 months due to a lack of money. This proportion is significantly higher than it was in 2021 (9 per cent) and 2022 (11 per cent) and similar to 2023 (12 per cent).
- 13 per cent of adults in 2024 said they often or sometimes could not pay their rent or mortgage in the last 12 months due to a lack of money and 23 per cent said they went without healthcare or medicines, similar to the proportions recorded in 2023 (12 per cent and 22 per cent respectively).
- Overall, 28 per cent of adults said they often or sometimes went without meals, could not pay their rent or mortgage or went without healthcare or medicines in the last 12 months due to a lack of money (27 per cent in 2023).
- 14 per cent of employed adults said they are worried or very worried about losing their job in the next 12 months, significantly higher than in 2022 but in line with its average since 2017.
- 26 per cent of renters said they often or sometimes went without meals in the last 12 months due to a lack of money, significantly higher than in 2022 (21 per cent) and 2023 (23 per cent). The proportion of mortgagees who went without meals increased from 8 per cent in 2022 and 2023 to 10 per cent in 2024.
- 23 per cent of renters and 13 per cent of mortgagees often or sometimes could not pay their rent or mortgage in the last 12 months due to a lack of money (20 per cent of renters and 12 per cent of mortgagees in 2023).
- 41 per cent of renters and 21 per cent of mortgagees have gone without medicines or healthcare in the last 12 months due to a lack of money (38 per cent of renters and 20 per cent of mortgagees in 2023).
- Overall, 48 per cent of renters and 26 per cent of mortgagees often or sometimes went without meals, could not pay their rent or mortgage or went without healthcare or medicines in the last 12 months due to a lack of money (46 per cent of renters and 26 per cent of mortgagees in 2023).

Housing costs appear to be driving financial stress. Compared with people who own their home outright, renters are 2.8 times more likely and mortgagees 72 per cent more likely to have often or sometimes gone without meals, missed rent or mortgage payments or gone without healthcare or medicines in the last 12 months due to a lack of money after accounting for a range of demographic and socioeconomic factors, including employment status and neighbourhood disadvantage. So while we do not have data on actual rent and mortgage payments, this suggests that housing costs, as opposed to (and perhaps in addition to) labour market and general economic conditions, are associated with financial stress.

### Financial stress is common among renters

With rising housing costs, renters are bearing a large burden of current cost of living challenges. Most renters (61 per cent) say they are ‘just getting along’ at best, with 22 per cent saying they are poor or struggling to pay the bills. The proportion of renters who are poor or struggling to pay the bills increased significantly from 18 per cent in 2022 and is at least as high as it was in 2023 (20 per cent).

The proportion of mortgagees who are poor or struggling to pay the bills has also increased significantly from 6 per cent in 2022 to 10 per cent in 2023 and 2024.

Our other indicators suggest that many renters, and to a lesser extent mortgagees, are experiencing financial stress.

In Table 11, we show how financial circumstances vary across other groups.

- For example, the proportion of single parents who describe their financial circumstances as ‘just getting along’, ‘struggling to pay bills’ or ‘poor’ was 59 per cent in 2022, 66 per cent in 2023 and 55 per cent in 2024 (a statistically significant decline). The proportion of 25-34 year olds who describe themselves as ‘just getting along’ at best increased significantly from 40 per cent in 2022 to 50 per cent in 2024.



**Table 11** Proportion of adults who describe their financial situation as 'just getting along', 'struggling to pay bills' or 'poor', Life in Australia™, 2022, 2023, 2024

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Persons</b>			
	40, 44, 45	33, 38, 37	37, 41, 41			
<b>Age</b>	<b>65+</b>	<b>55-64</b>	<b>45-54</b>	<b>35-44</b>	<b>25-34</b>	<b>18-24</b>
	27, 29, 29	35, 38, 35	40, 44, 44	42, 47, 49	40, 47, 50	39, 47, 43
<b>State</b>	<b>NSW</b>	<b>Victoria</b>	<b>Queensland</b>	<b>South Australia</b>	<b>Western Australia</b>	
	37, 40, 40	36, 41, 43	38, 44, 44	39, 45, 44	34, 41, 38	
<b>Capital City/ Rest of state</b>	<b>Capital city</b>	<b>Rest of state</b>				
	36, 41, 41	38, 41, 43				
<b>Highest Education</b>	<b>Postgraduate degree</b>	<b>Bachelor degree</b>	<b>Certificate/ diploma</b>	<b>Year 12</b>	<b>Up to Year 11</b>	
	24, 31, 30	26, 33, 33	40, 46, 47	39, 44, 42	45, 46, 49	
<b>Vote</b>	<b>Labor</b>	<b>Liberal/ National</b>	<b>Greens</b>	<b>Other</b>		
	39, 41, 41	28, 34, 33	40, 44, 46	39, 42, 43		
<b>Where born &amp; first language</b>	<b>Australian born</b>	<b>Foreign born/ English</b>	<b>Foreign born/ non-English</b>			
	36, 42, 42	35, 39, 37	40, 39, 44			
<b>Family household</b>	<b>Couple no children</b>	<b>Couple parent</b>	<b>Single parent</b>	<b>Other family</b>	<b>Non-family</b>	
	26, 27, 30	34, 42, 42	59, 66, 55	47, 47, 49	45, 52, 50	
<b>Housing tenure</b>	<b>Own outright</b>	<b>Mortgage</b>	<b>Rent</b>			
	22, 24, 23	32, 40, 40	54, 60, 61			
<b>Neighbourhood disadvantage</b>	<b>Quintile 1 (Low disadvantage)</b>	<b>Quintile 2</b>	<b>Quintile 3</b>	<b>Quintile 4</b>	<b>Quintile 5 (High disadvantage)</b>	
	26, 32, 34	35, 39, 38	38, 44, 42	41, 45, 43	47, 49, 53	

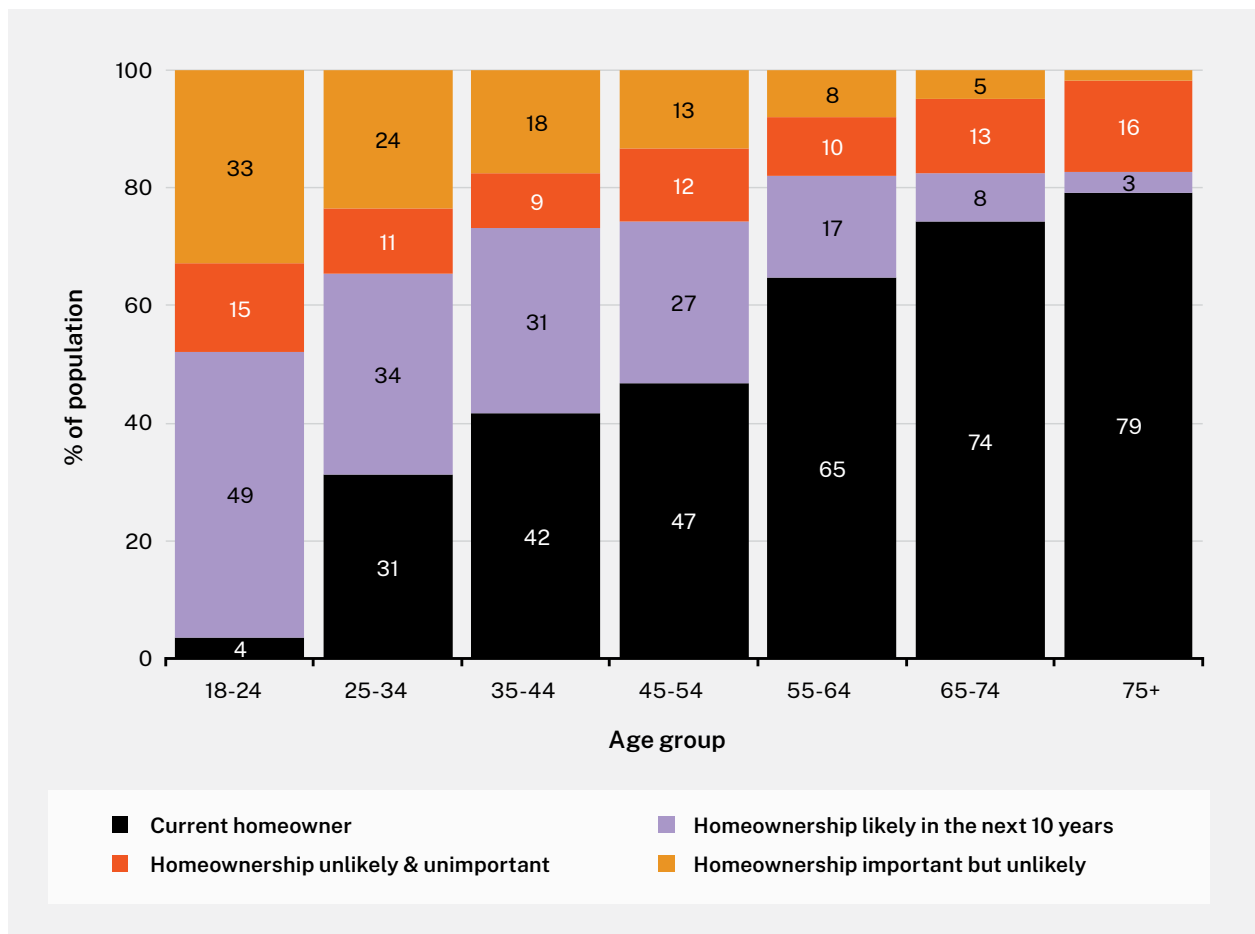
### Young people and those experiencing financial stress are less likely to see themselves breaking into the housing market

Most people who do not currently own their own home see home ownership as important. Of those who do not own their home (either outright or with a mortgage),

- 46 per cent say it is 'very important' to them to buy a place of their own over the next 10 years, while three-quarters (73 per cent) said it was at least 'fairly important' and 26 per cent said it was 'not all that important' or 'not important at all'.
- 48 per cent said it was very or fairly likely that they would be able to buy a place of their own in the next 10 years, while 51 per cent said it was not very likely or not at all likely.
- 29 per cent said that home ownership in the next 10 years is at least fairly important to them but not very likely or not at all likely. Of all adults, including home owners, 15 per cent believe ownership is important but not likely.

Young adults and those who are struggling financially are the most likely to see homeownership as important but unlikely in the next 10 years. As shown in Figure 22, 33 per cent of 18-24 year olds, 24 per cent of 25-34 year olds and 18 per cent of 35-44 years olds (including those who currently own their home) see ownership as important but unlikely. Almost two-in-five (38 per cent) people who are struggling to pay bills or poor and 24 per cent of those who are just getting along believe home ownership is important but unlikely. Conversely, three-quarters (74 per cent) of people who say ownership is important but unlikely are 'just getting along' at best and 59 per cent have often or sometimes gone without meals, missed a rent payment and/or gone without healthcare or medicines in the last 12 months due to a lack of money.

**Figure 22** Homeownership status, aspirations and expectations in the next 10 years by age group, Life in Australia™, 2024





**People facing financial stress and with lower housing expectations are less trusting, have a weaker sense of belonging in Australia and are less likely to be happy – though neighbourhood cohesion may have a protective effect**

Financial wellbeing is strongly related to trust, belonging and happiness. As shown in Figure 23, 65 per cent of those who are financially prosperous or very comfortable believe that generally speaking most people can be trusted, compared with 27 per cent of people who are struggling to pay their bills or poor and 33 per cent of those who believe home ownership in the next 10 years is important to them but unlikely. The differences are also substantial for belonging and happiness – for example, 92 per cent of those who are financially prosperous/very comfortable say they have been happy in the last 12 months, compared with 40 per cent of those who are struggling to pay bills poor (Figure 23c).

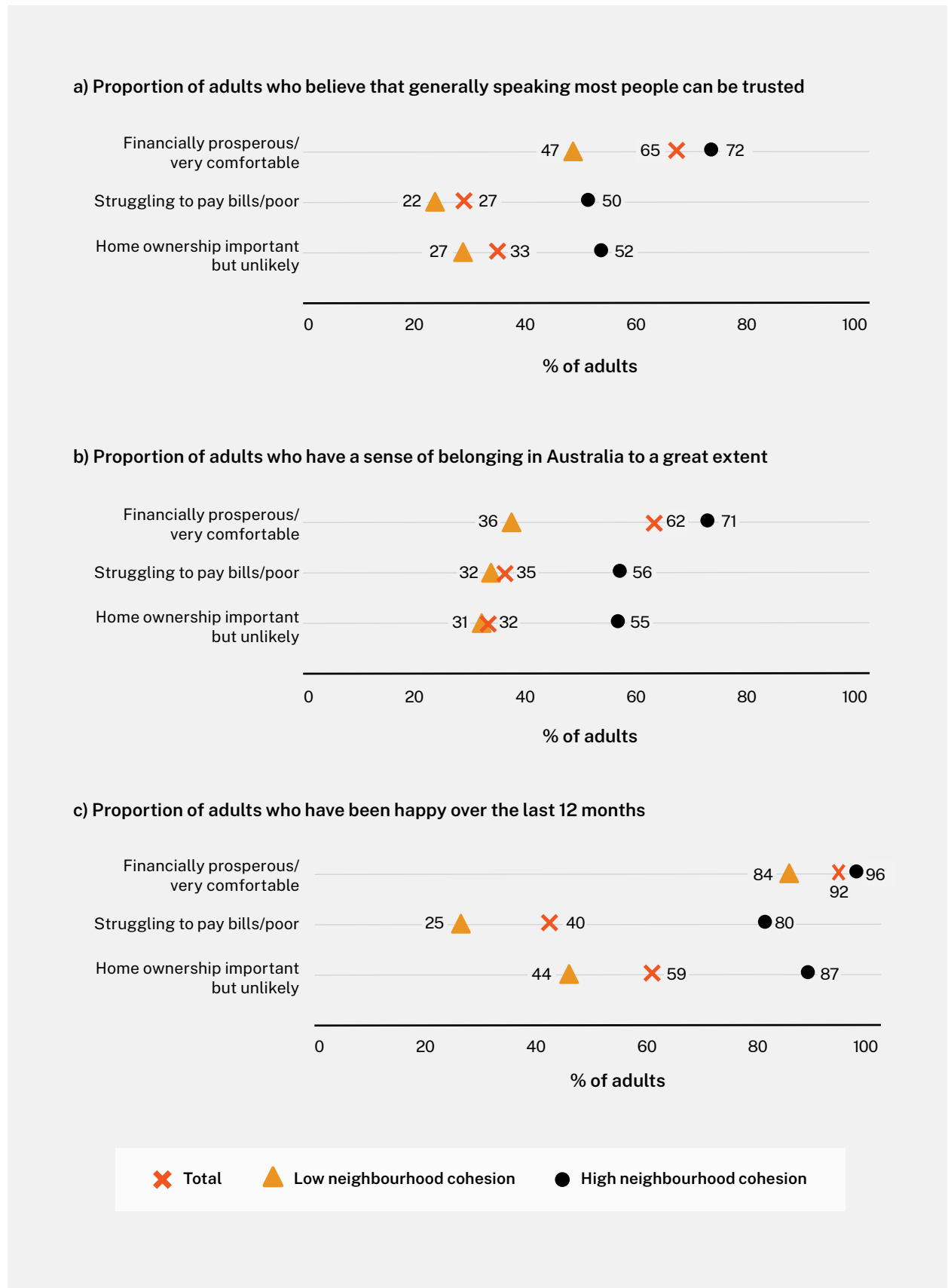
Trust, belonging and happiness though are substantially stronger among financially stressed people if they have a positive perception of their neighbourhood cohesion.

- ▶ We use logistic regression models to analyse associations between financial stress, housing aspirations, personal wellbeing and

neighbourhood social cohesion. With these models, we try to predict the probability of a person trusting others, feeling a sense of belonging in Australia and being happy where they are a) financially prosperous or very comfortable, b) struggling to pay bills or poor and c) unlikely to buy a house in the next 10 years despite seeing it as important, and whether they live in a neighbourhood with a) low or b) high cohesion. We run these models accounting for age, gender, marital status, city of residence, whether the person has a disability and their religion. While we cannot say that neighbourhood cohesion definitely protects people's personal and social wellbeing in the face of financial hardship, we can say the results are not due to these other factors.

- ▶ Neighbourhood cohesion is measured by adding responses to seven questions, including whether respondents agree or disagree that their neighbours are willing to help one another, get on well together and have a strong sense of community. Neighbourhoods with high cohesion are those where scores are in the highest 10 per cent of all scores while low cohesion neighbourhoods are those with scores in the lowest 10 per cent.

**Figure 23** Predicted trust, belonging and happiness by neighbourhood cohesion, financial hardship and housing aspirations, Life in Australia™, 2024



Note: Results for low and high neighbourhood cohesion are predictions based on regression models that control for age, gender, marital status, city of residence, whether the person has a disability and their religion.

Among people who are struggling financially, 50 per cent of those living in high cohesion neighbourhoods believe most people can be trusted (Figure 23a) after accounting for other factors, 56 per cent have a great sense of belonging in Australia (Figure 23b) and 80 per cent have been happy in the last 12 months (Figure 23c), 1.7 to 3.2 times larger than the predicted proportions among people living in low cohesion neighbourhoods. Trust, belonging and happiness are also significantly more common among people who believe home ownership is important but unlikely in the next 10 years if they are living in a high (versus low) cohesion neighbourhood (1.8 to 2.0 times more likely).

- We cannot say from these results that neighbourhood cohesion definitely protects people's personal and social wellbeing in the face of financial hardship, as there are other factors including personality traits that could explain these relationships. We can say, though, that people who feel they are struggling financially are much more likely to trust people, to feel a sense of belonging in Australia and to report feeling happy when they also believe that their neighbourhoods are cohesive places.

### **As the economy struggles, financial stress continues to impact personal and social wellbeing**

As we have explained in previous Mapping Social Cohesion reports, financial stress is strongly associated with indicators of social cohesion, related to people's sense of belonging and happiness, their trust in people and government, their perceptions of fairness in society and their acceptance of differences and diversity. In this way, economic disadvantage is related to a range of social disadvantages that undermine overall social cohesion. Despite slowing inflation, financial stress is at least as common in 2024 as it was in 2023, with renters and young adults particularly impacted in terms of their financial circumstances, their personal and social wellbeing and their future housing aspirations. While social cohesion itself is likely impacted by financial stress, we also find evidence that cohesion may help to support wellbeing through difficult economic times, underlining the value of social cohesion not only for Australia as a whole, but to each of us as individuals.



# Trust & engagement in Australia's democracy



Trust and engagement in government and other institutions are important foundations for democracy and the smooth and cohesive functioning of society. Trust in government and institutions, as well as the mutual trust between people and institutions, are critical in holding leaders accountable, supporting the free flow of information and ensuring the efficient and effective delivery and take-up of important services.

70

Australians generally have mixed levels of trust in governments and organisations. Over the course of the 2010s, fewer than one-in-three adults on the Mapping Social Cohesion survey believed the Federal Government could be trusted to do the right thing by the Australian people at least most of the time. As we have shown in previous reports, trust in government increased during the COVID-19 pandemic and has remained above the level of the 2010s since. The 2023 OECD Trust Survey found that 46 per cent of Australians had high or moderate trust in the Federal Government, above the average and amongst the highest levels of the 30 countries surveyed (OECD, 2024a). Australia was also substantially above the OECD average in satisfaction with healthcare and education systems, the extent to which people

believe that applications for government benefits are treated fairly and that public sector innovation improves services.

While government and institutional trust reflects people's attitudes and perceptions, civic and political participation is an important behaviour and reflection of how people engage in democracy. Political activity reflects an engaged citizenry, people prepared to fight for what they believe in, to enact and realise change. In this way, political engagement contributes positively to social cohesion. Clearly though, political activism in recent years has also been a symptom of divisions and dissatisfaction in government and society, including with respect to violence in the Middle East and violence against women in Australian communities.

Protests and activism over the conflict in the Middle East in the last year has also been associated with anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, creating difficult experiences for Australia’s Jewish and Muslim communities as well as those generally from Palestinian, Lebanese, other Arabic and Middle Eastern backgrounds. As we explained in the chapter ‘Attitudes, experiences and relations in multicultural Australia’, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia are not specifically measured in the Mapping Social Cohesion survey, though survey results can provide clues as to whether protests have strained intercultural and interfaith relations.

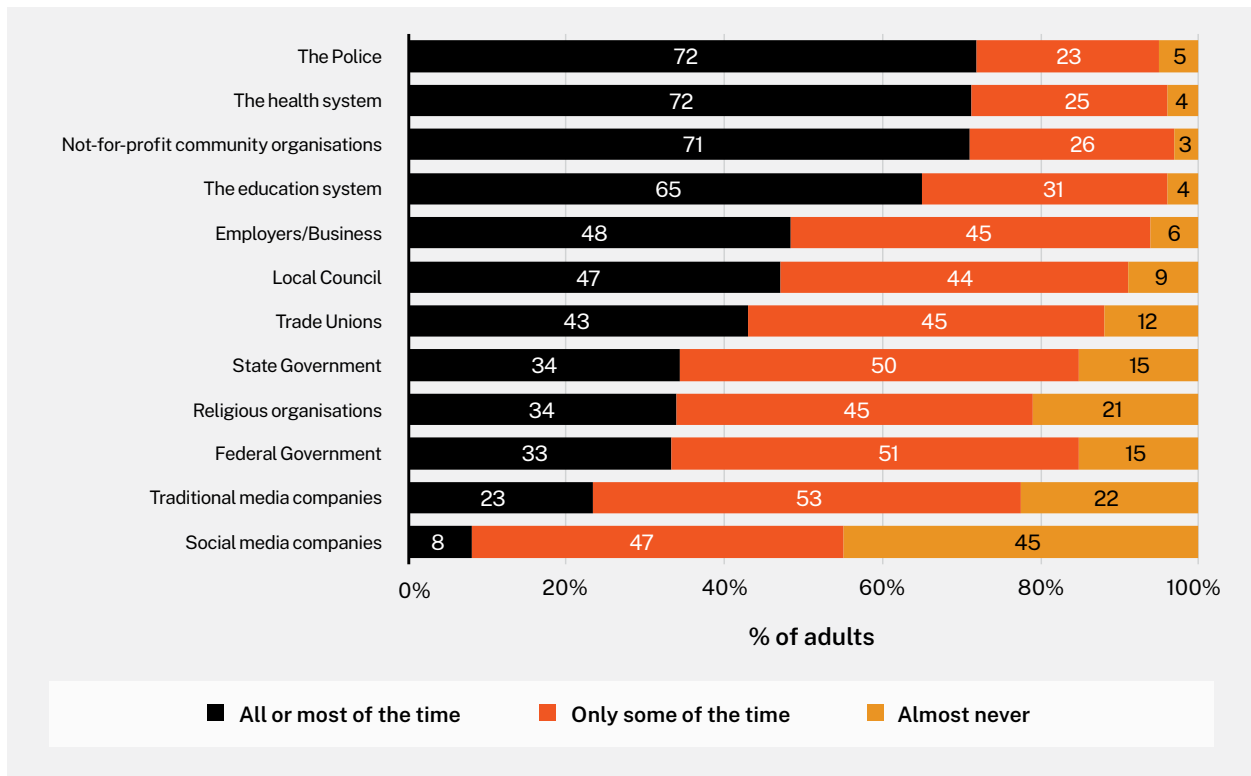
**Australians generally value public and community services but are less trusting of government and media**

In 2024, more than 70 per cent of adults think the police, the health system and not-for-profit

community organisations can be trusted all or most of the time (Figure 24). Two-in-three (65 per cent) trust the education system in Australia, while between 40 and 50 per cent trust employers or businesses, their local council and trade unions all or most of the time. One-in-three adults trust their state government, the Federal Government or religious organisations all or most of the time, while approximately one-half trust government and religious institutions only some of the time.

Media companies attract less trust from the public than other institutions in the survey. One-in-four (24 per cent) Australian adults trust traditional media companies and fewer than one-in-ten (8 per cent) trust social media companies all or most of the time. Almost one-half (45 per cent) of adults almost never trust social media companies, and 22 per cent almost never trust traditional media companies.

**Figure 24** How often people think selected institutions can be trusted, Life in Australia™, 2024



Trust in the Federal Government has declined since the COVID-19 pandemic, though remains marginally higher than levels recorded in the 2010s. An average of 29 per cent of adults believed the Federal Government could be trusted to do the right thing by the Australian people all or most of the time between 2010 and 2018. This proportion increased substantially in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, reaching as high as 56 per cent in November 2020. The proportion has since declined to 33 per cent in 2024.

A certain level of distrust is also evident in the wider government, political and legal systems. Several indicators are shown in Table 12.

- 45 per cent of adults believe ‘the system of government we have in Australia’ needs major changes or should be replaced, an increase from 31 per cent in 2020. The proportion who believe the system works fine or needs minor change was 62 per cent in 2019, 69 per cent in 2020 and 55 per cent in 2024.
- 31 per cent believe that ‘government leaders in Australia abuse their power’ all or most of the time, an increase from 27 per cent in 2021 and 24 per cent in 2022. One-half (50 per cent) of people in 2024 think leaders abuse their power some of the time and 18 per cent think it is a little or none of the time.
- 38 per cent believe that ‘Australian elections are fair’ some of the time (24 per cent) or a little or none of the time (14 per cent). This proportion was 34 per cent in 2022 and 36 per cent in 2023. In 2024, 61 per cent believe that elections are fair all or most of the time (65 per cent in 2022).
- 65 per cent believe their state or territory ‘government can be trusted to do the right thing’ only some of the time (50 per cent) or almost never (15 per cent), an increase from 62 per cent in 2023. The proportion who believe their state/territory government can be trusted all or most of the time was 37 per cent in 2023 and 34 per cent in 2024.
- 45 per cent believe the ‘courts make fair, impartial decisions based on the evidence available to them’ some of the time (30 per cent) or a little/none of the time (14 per cent). This proportion was 42 per cent in every year between 2021 and 2023. In 2024, 54 per cent believe the courts make fair decisions all or most of the time.

General scepticism towards not just a particular area of the government but to the wider multi-tiered system of government was explained in the qualitative interviews.

*“I feel like we have too many levels of government. We have a local government, then we have a state government and the Federal Government. It’s just too many levels and it’s very mismanaged. We don’t have a central agenda. We don’t have the same goals. We pull in multiple directions. We’re not investing our money or we invest in somewhere else which is probably not necessarily urgent or not important enough. So we’re attacking the wrong problems and with very short problems. And just only while you are in office, you don’t really think what’s going to happen in five or ten years time.”*

(MALE, 50-54 YEARS, VIC)

*“Relative to other countries, I would say our government is definitely more trustworthy. I definitely think there is corruption happening on both micro and macro level, but just in ways that we’re not hearing about it. But I would say even though there is corruption and there is sort of things, agendas that they’re pushing, they still are in favour of Australian society’s betterment. They still want to better the quality of life for Australians. So I would say for that reason they are fairly trustworthy.”*

(MALE, 18-24 YEARS, NSW)

*“Their [political leaders] interest is in their own benefits, not the country, not the ones that are really in the leader position. I think there are a lot of younger politicians who probably get into the politics because they want to do good. They’ve got this ideology and they want to change things for the better and so on. But I think the ones that have made it, no, they’ve lost it.”*

(FEMALE, 55-64 YEARS, VIC)



**Table 12** Indicators of trust in government and the political and legal systems, Life in Australia™, July 2018-2024

		2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
		% of respondents						
Trust Federal Government	Some of the time	56	50	40	44	49	51	51
	Almost never	16	13	6	12	9	13	15
	<b>Total</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>66</b>
System of Government	Needs major change	37	31	27	33	31	35	38
	Should be replaced	6	7	4	6	5	6	6
	<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>45</b>
Leaders abuse power	Some of the time				50	54	53	50
	A little/none of the time				23	21	16	18
	<b>Total</b>				<b>73</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>68</b>
Elections are fair	Some of the time				23	20	22	24
	A little/none of the time				13	14	14	14
	<b>Total</b>				<b>36</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>38</b>
Courts make fair decisions	Some of the time				31	30	29	30
	A little/none of the time				11	12	13	14
	<b>Total</b>				<b>42</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>45</b>
Trust State Government	Some of the time						48	50
	A little/none of the time						14	15
	<b>Total</b>						<b>62</b>	<b>65</b>

Dissatisfaction with government does not translate to support for a less democratic system. Indeed, most people still think democracy is a good system of government even if they are dissatisfied with the current system. For example, among those who think the system of government in Australia needs major change or should be replaced, 83 per cent believe that ‘a democracy, in which the members of parliament are chosen in an election’ is a very or fairly good way to govern Australia, compared with 26 per cent of people who believe that ‘having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections’ would be very or fairly good.

- This level of support for a less democratic and more authoritarian system is not insubstantial, though it is important to note that these people do not necessarily prefer a less democratic system over a democratic one. Of all those who think having a strong leader would be a good way to govern Australia, 88 per cent also think that a democracy would be a good system.

### People who are financially struggling have the weakest confidence in political leadership

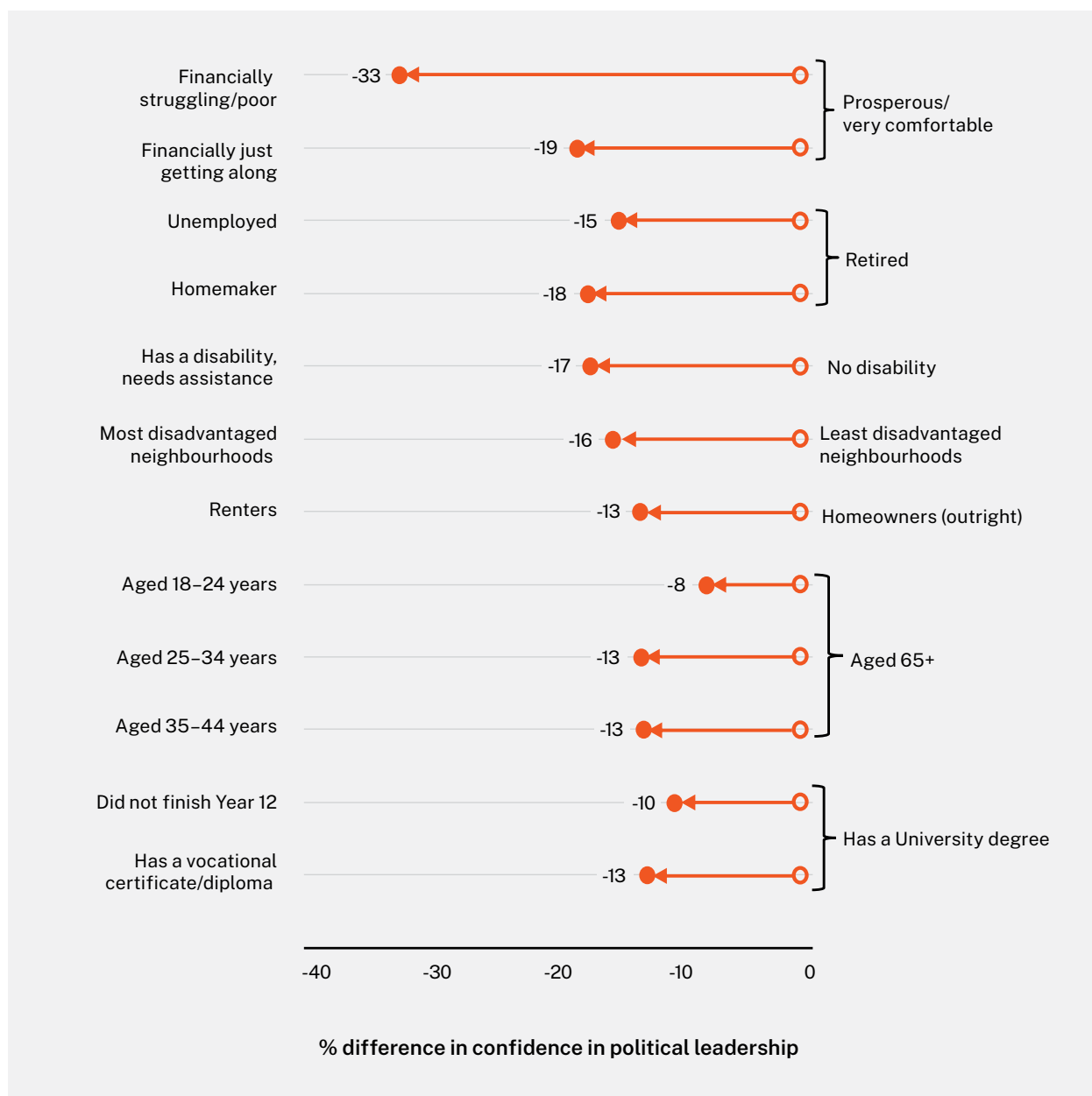
Trust in government and political leadership has also been measured in the Mapping Social Cohesion since 2023 through the concept of anomie. As discussed in the chapter ‘Australia’s social fabric’, anomie refers to a breakdown in social rules and leadership and so is similar to a breakdown of social cohesion. Teymoori et al. (2017) measure anomie across two domains, breakdown in the social fabric and breakdown in political leadership. Breakdown in political leadership is measured in the Mapping Social Cohesion survey through the following items:

- 70 per cent of adults agree (46 per cent) or strongly agree (24 per cent) that ‘politicians don’t care about the problems of the average person’ in 2024, similar to the proportion in 2023.
- 42 per cent disagree (35 per cent) or strongly disagree (7 per cent) that ‘governments use their power legitimately’ (40 per cent in 2023).

- 89 per cent agree (65 per cent) or strongly agree (23 per cent) that ‘some laws are not fair’, the same as 2023 (89 per cent).
- 42 per cent disagree (37 per cent) or strongly disagree (5 per cent) that ‘government laws and policies are effective’, significantly higher than the proportion in 2023 (37 per cent).
- Overall scores in the political leadership domain in 2024 were 2 per cent lower than they were in 2023, indicating somewhat weaker confidence in political leadership in the last year. Overall scores were calculated by adding up respondents’ answers to each of the above four questions.

Figure 25 compares average scores between groups with the largest and most significant differences in their confidence in political leadership. People who describe themselves as poor or struggling to pay their bills have average scores that are 64 points below the national average and 97 points below those who describe their financial circumstances as prosperous or very comfortable. Unemployed people, homemakers, people who have disabilities, renters and young and middle aged adults (25-44 years) also have significantly weaker confidence in political leadership.

**Figure 25** Differences in confidence in political leadership across demographic and socioeconomic groups, Life in Australia™, 2024



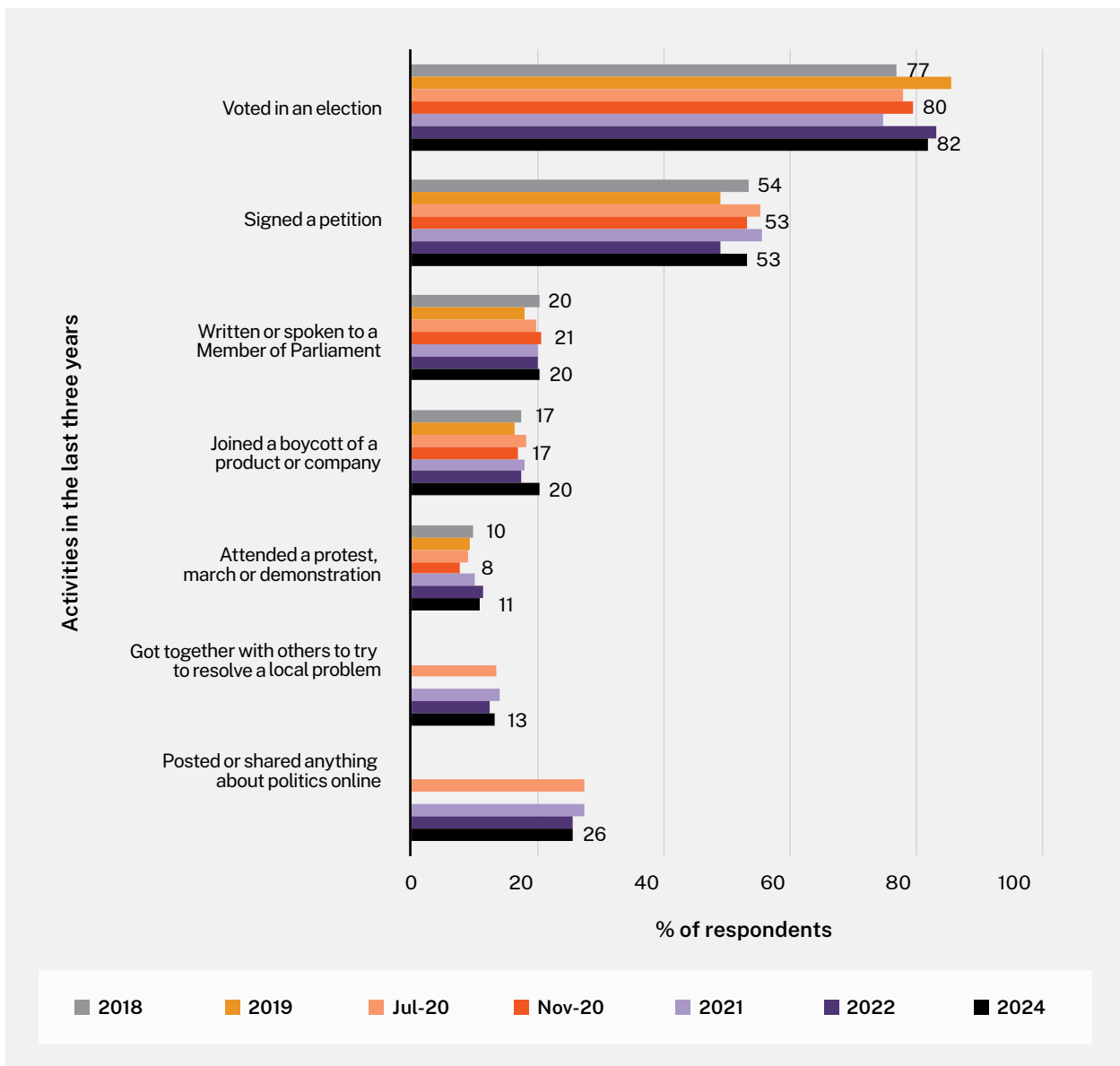
### Engagement in political activities has been at least as common as previous years

As explained at the start of the chapter, trust in government and other institutions is an important indicator of how we feel about and perceive leadership in society. Participation in the political system is an indicator of behaviours and how people actually engage in the civic and political life of communities.

Trust and political participation are not necessarily well aligned. For some people, engagement through protest and activism is an expression of dissatisfaction and a lack of trust, while others engage in the political process because they believe they have a voice and confidence that they can make change for the better.

In 2024, 82 per cent of people said that they had voted in an election in the last three years, 53 per cent had signed a petition, 20 per cent had written or spoken to a Member of Parliament, 20 per cent had joined a boycott of a product or company, 11 per cent had attended a protest, march or demonstration, 13 per cent had got together with others to try to resolve a local problem, and 26 per cent had posted or shared anything about politics online (Figure 26). While most of these proportions are similar to previous years, involvement in boycotts and petitions are slightly more common in 2024.

**Figure 26** Engagement in political activities in the last three years, 2018 to 2024 surveys



Involvement in protests, boycotts and online activity is most common among young adults and those who identify as left wing (Table 13).

Among 18-34 year olds,

- 15 per cent said they attended a protest, march or demonstration in the last three years, compared with 5 to 10 per cent of those aged 35 years old and above.

- 25 per cent joined a boycott of a product or company, compared with 12 to 19 per cent of those aged 35 years old and above.

- 29 per cent of people had posted online about politics, compared to 24 to 25 per cent for those aged 35 years old and above.

**Table 13** Involvement in political activities in the last three years by age group and political orientation, Life in Australia™, 2024

	Age group				Total
	18-34	35-54	55-74	75+	
	% of population				
Attended protest, march, demonstration	15	10	9	5	11
Joined a boycott of a product/company	25	19	18	12	20
Posted online about politics	29	24	24	25	26
<b>Protest, boycott or posted online</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>37</b>
Signed a petition	52	53	56	51	53
Spoke/wrote to an MP	13	19	24	37	20
Got together to resolve a local problem	9	12	16	19	13
<b>Petition, spoke with MP or got together</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>60</b>

	Political orientation			Total
	Left wing	Centre	Right wing	
	% of population			
Attended protest, march, demonstration	24	6	7	11
Joined a boycott of a product/company	36	13	19	20
Posted online about politics	43	17	28	26
<b>Protest, boycott or posted online</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>37</b>
Signed a petition	67	47	56	53
Spoke/wrote to an MP	28	16	23	20
Got together to resolve a local problem	18	11	15	13
<b>Petition, spoke with MP or got together</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>60</b>



Young adults are, by contrast, less likely to speak or write to a Member of Parliament or get together to resolve a local problem compared to other adults.

Left wing people are more active in all dimensions of political activities compared to those who identify themselves as right wing or in the centre (see Table 13).

- 59 per cent of adults who describe their political orientation as left wing have attended a protest, joined a boycott and/or posted online about politics in the last three years, compared with 26 per cent of people in the political centre and 38 per cent of right wing people.
- 72 per cent of left wing people have signed a petition, communicated with a Member of Parliament (MP) and/or got together with others to resolve a local problem, compared with 64 per cent of right wing people and 53 per cent of people in the political centre.

### **Political activism and protest highlight – and likely exaggerate – divisions and divides in Australia**

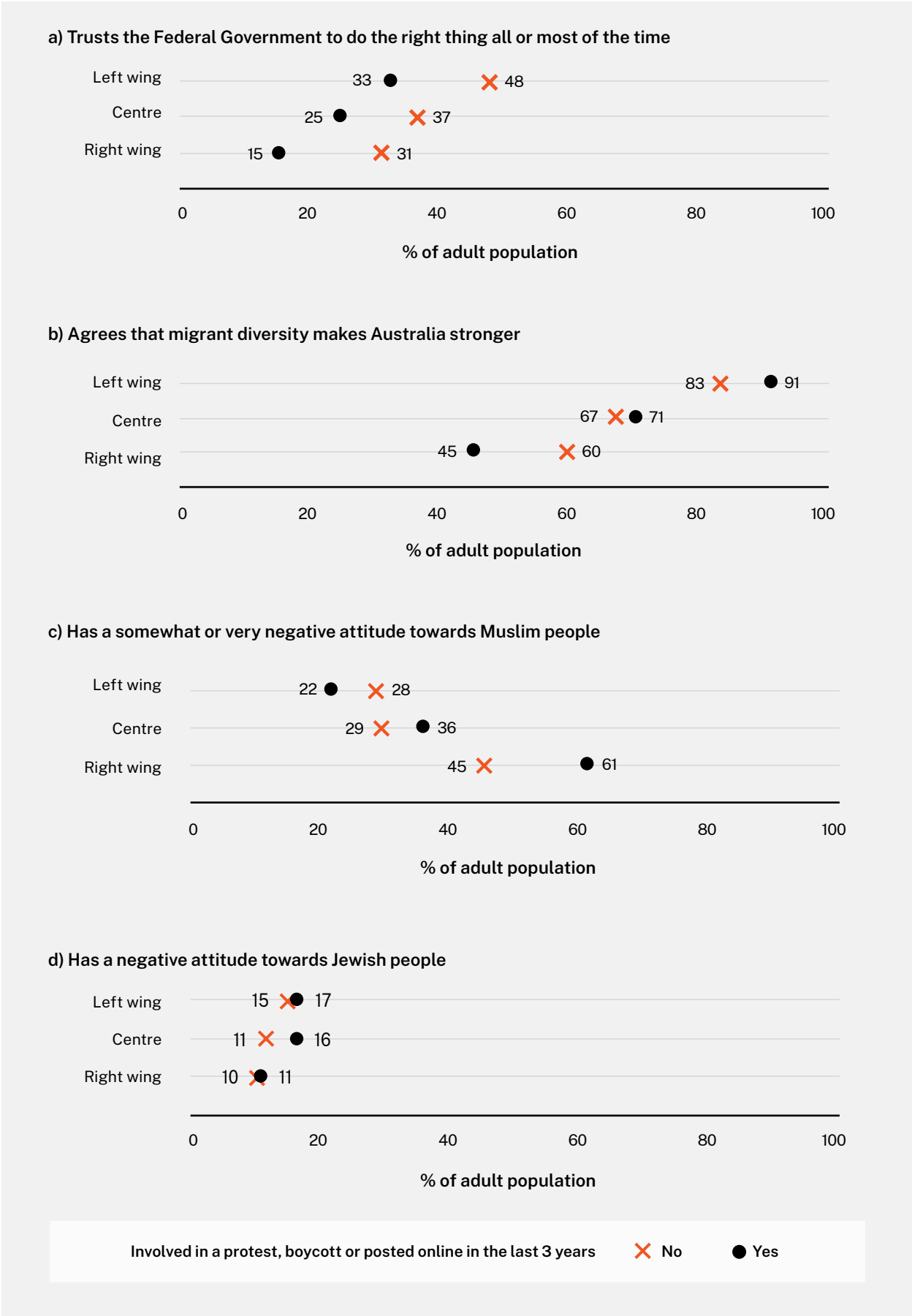
People across the political spectrum are significantly less likely to trust Government if they have been involved in a protest, boycott or posting online in the last three years. As shown in Figure 27a, 33 per cent of left wing people who are politically active in these areas trust Federal Government to do the right thing by the Australian people all or most of the time, compared with 48 per cent of left wing

people who are not politically active. Similarly, on the right wing, activists are one-half as likely to trust the Government as non-activists. These differences are significant and remain substantial after accounting for a range of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, including age, location and education.

While trust is lower among activists across the spectrum, attitudes to migration and diversity are highly polarised. As shown in Figure 27b, 91 per cent of left wing political activists agree that accepting immigrants from many different countries makes Australia stronger, twice as high as the proportion of right wing activists (45 per cent). Similarly, 22 per cent of left wing activists have a negative attitude towards Muslims, one-third the level of right wing activists. These differences across the political spectrum are substantially smaller among non-activists, suggesting that attitudes expressed through protests and online activity are much more polarised than the attitudes of Australians as a whole.

In this way, highly visible protests, boycotts and other political activities seen online and through the media amplify apparent divisions, making Australians seem more divided and dissatisfied than they are. In saying that, a cohesive society is not one – and should not be one – where everyone agrees. Differences in ideas and values are central to democracy. The ability to publicly express, debate, argue and protest in support of these ideas and values is a marker of the robustness of the democratic system and our individual and collective desire to make change for the better.

Figure 27 Indicators of social cohesion by protest action and political orientation, Life in Australia™, 2024



**Political and societal distrust and protest are symptoms of dissatisfaction around the world today, as well as calls to action**

Trust and engagement are important ways in which people connect with and relate to the key institutions of democracy, including government, the media, the courts and the political system. High levels of trust in public and community services and robust political participation support social cohesion by underpinning the functioning of society and the delivery of services while providing impetus and support for social changes to address inequalities and injustices. Trust in institutions, though, is

conditional on mutual trust and their performance in supporting the public good, placing the onus on organisations and institutions including government and the media to strengthen and maintain trust. Political protest and activism, meanwhile, will always by their nature challenge society, bringing to light and emphasising divisions and struggles. With respect, empathy and recognition of common bonds despite our differences, political engagement remains a powerful resource for strengthening society.



# Personal wellbeing & safety



Social cohesion is an important collective good, a feature of the combined wellbeing of communities and society as a whole, reflecting the harmony, goodwill and cooperation of all members. Importantly, a cohesive society is also one that benefits individuals and families, particularly their mental and physical wellbeing.

80

Social cohesion provides resources that help people maintain connections in their communities, that provide friends, acquaintances, friendly neighbours and sources of support during difficult times. In reflecting the trust people have in one another, cohesive communities also provide a sense of safety, allowing people to live in their communities to their fullest and without fear of becoming the victim of violence and crime. A cohesive society is therefore one that supports people to be happy, safe and connected.

Personal wellbeing and safety are prominent issues in Australia today. Safety has been a major domestic issue in the last year, following high profile instances

of family and community violence, particularly against women (ABC, 2024). Loneliness and social isolation have been important issues too, with important research pointing to the problem faced by younger and older adults (Ending Loneliness Together, 2024; Engel & Mihalopoulos, 2024; Marinos, 2024). General wellbeing has also been rising in public and policy prominence, including through the Federal Government's Measuring What Matters framework (The Treasury, 2023). The importance of social cohesion to safety, loneliness and wellbeing has been well-established through many years of research (O'Donnell et al., 2022; Sampson et al., 1997) and is also borne out in the Mapping Social Cohesion survey.



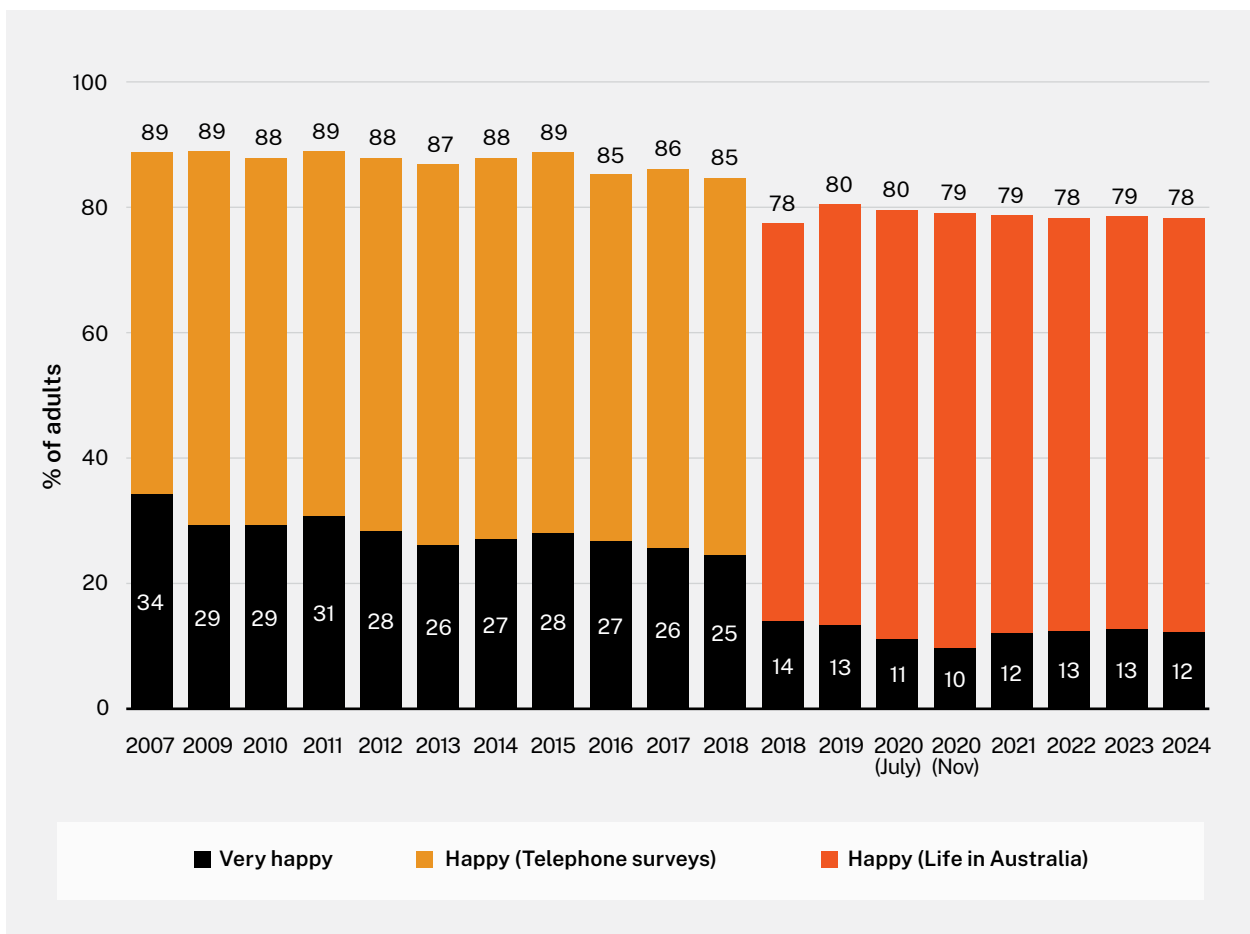
**Most people are happy and satisfied with life – though less so for people facing social and economic disadvantage**

Australians are reasonably happy by international comparison. According to the OECD’s (2024b) Better Life Index, average life satisfaction in Australia is the 13th highest among 41 high income and developed countries, 0.4 points higher than the average. In the World Happiness Report 2024, Australia is ranked 10th highest in the world for average life evaluation (Helliwell et al. 2024).

In the 2024 Mapping Social Cohesion survey, 78 per cent of adults said they have been happy

(66 per cent) or very happy (12 per cent) over the last 12 months, while 21 per cent said that were unhappy or very unhappy. As shown in Figure 28, these proportions have been consistent since 2018. The proportion of adults who say they are very happy was substantially higher when the Mapping Social Cohesion survey was run as a telephone survey and respondents had to report how happy they were to an interviewer. Removing this potential interviewer effect, we estimate that the proportion of adults who are happy or very happy in 2024 is similar to its average since 2016 (79 per cent) and approximately four percentage points below its average between 2009 and 2015.

**Figure 28** ‘Taking all things into consideration, would you say that over the last year you have been...?’ Proportion of adults who say happy or very happy, 2007-2018 (telephone surveys) and 2018–2024 (Life in Australia™ online & telephone)

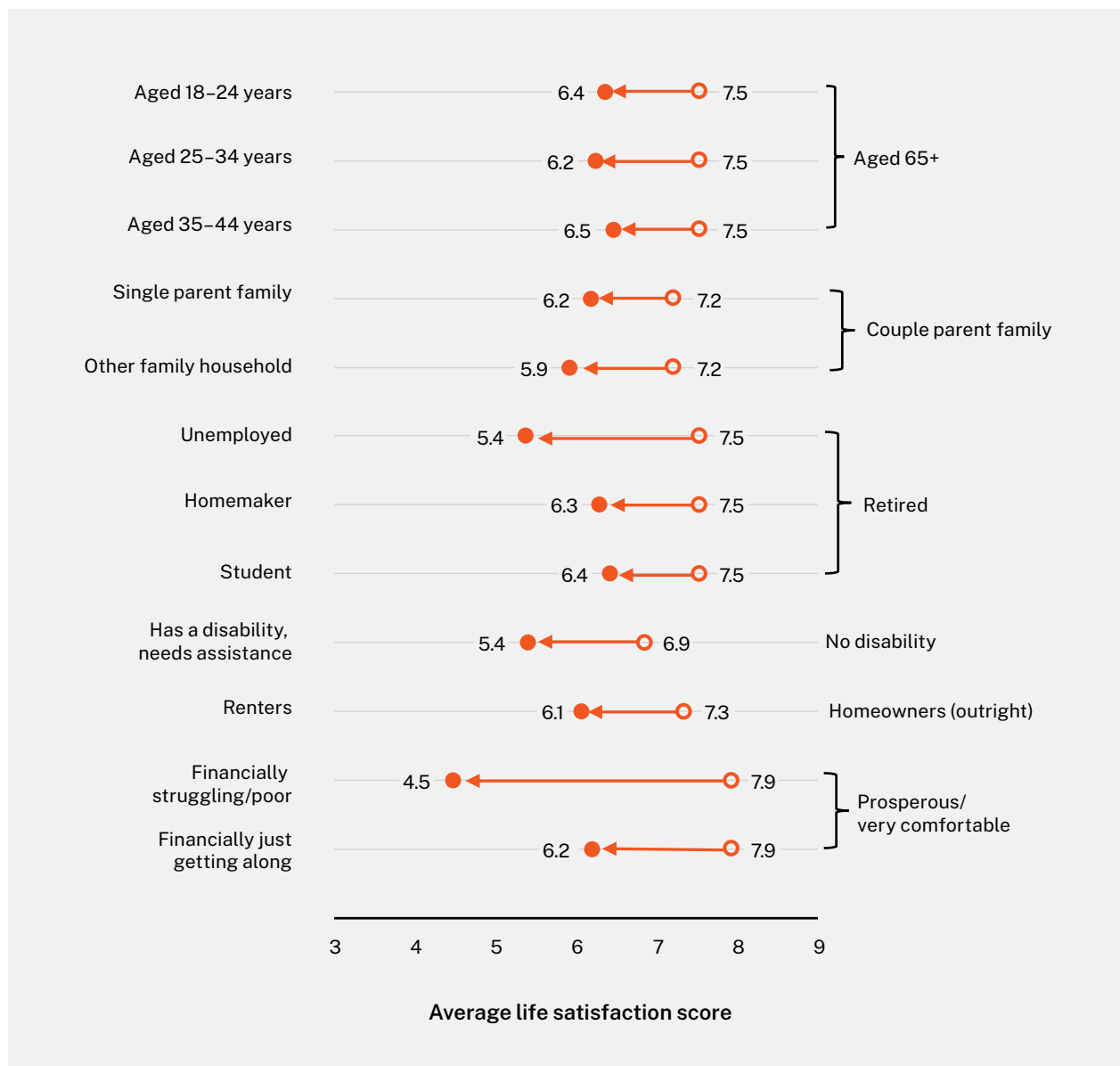


In 2024, survey respondents were also asked to rank their overall life satisfaction on a scale of 0 to 10. The average score respondents gave was 6.8. Two-in-five (39 per cent) people gave a score of 8 or more, while 13 per cent gave a score of less than 5. Half of adults (50 per cent) gave a score of 7 or 8.

Young adults, people with a disability and people who are struggling financially have significantly lower happiness and wellbeing. Only two-in-five (40 per cent) adults who are struggling to pay bills or poor have been happy over the last year compared with 92 per cent of people who are financially prosperous or very comfortable. The average life satisfaction of people who are struggling (4.5) is 3.4 points lower than the average for people who are prosperous/very comfortable.

▶ Figure 29 shows other significant differences in average life satisfaction between groups. For example, the average life satisfaction of unemployed people is 2.1 points lower than for retired people, people living with a disability have scores that are 1.5 points lower than for people without a disability and people aged 25-34 years have scores that are 1.3 points lower than for people aged 65 years and over.

**Figure 29** Significant differences in life satisfaction across society, Life in Australia™, 2024



Financial wellbeing and life satisfaction are subjective measures, based on individuals' self-assessments. This makes it difficult to determine whether financial changes cause changes in life satisfaction or whether they are both due to personality characteristics such as having a generally positive and optimistic (or negative and pessimistic) outlook on life. We can say, though, that life satisfaction is also significantly associated with objective measures of economic status.

- For example, people who live in neighbourhoods of high socioeconomic disadvantage (measured by the ABS (2023) Socioeconomic Indexes for Areas) have significantly lower average life satisfaction than people who live in areas of low disadvantage (6.5 versus 7.0) after accounting for factors such as age, gender, household composition, city of residence and migrant and language background.

### **Most people have regular social interactions though loneliness and social isolation are common**

In this year's survey, we asked people about how regularly they are in contact with family and friends. According to the results, more than half (56 per cent) of adults meet up with family or friends outside the household in person on at least a weekly basis, 70 per cent speak on the phone, 82 per cent write, text or email and 66 per cent communicate by social media. Overall, 92 per cent of people communicate with family and friends on at least a weekly basis by any means. Almost two-in-five (37 per cent) people do not have weekly contact in person and rely on calling and writing, including by email and through social media, to maintain weekly contact.

Phone and online contact is particularly important for middle age and overseas-born Australians. More than two-in-five adults aged 35-44 (44 per cent) and 45-54 (43 per cent) year olds do not have weekly contact in person and rely on calling and writing to family and friends. The same is true of 44 per cent of people who have immigrated to Australia in the last 10 years and 42 per cent of those who immigrated 10 to 20 years ago.

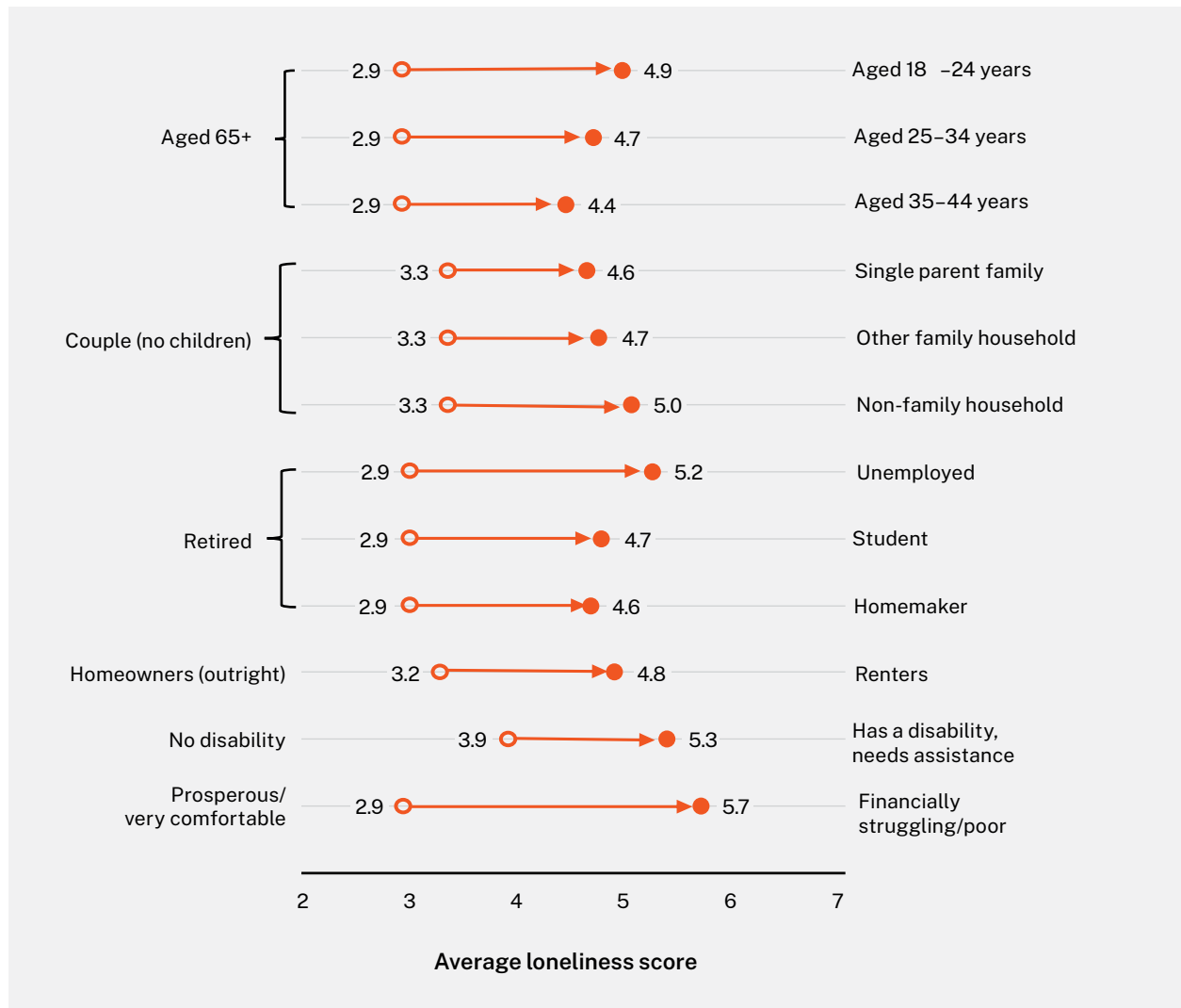
People with regular social contact are – not surprisingly – less likely to report symptoms of loneliness. Loneliness was measured on the 2024 Mapping Social Cohesion survey through the Hughes loneliness scale (Hughes et al., 2004). This scale measures loneliness by combining responses to three questions:

- Half of all adults (49 per cent) say they often (10 per cent) or some of the time (39 per cent) feel isolated from others in 2024, a proportion that has been consistent since 2021. One-third (33 per cent) of people 'hardly ever' feel isolated and 18 per cent never feel isolated. The proportion who never feel isolated has declined significantly from 24 per cent in 2021, though only because of an increase in the proportion who hardly ever feel isolated. The proportion who often or sometimes feel isolated has been very consistent since 2021 (48 per cent in 2021, 49 per cent in 2022, 48 per cent in 2023).
- Two-in-five (42 per cent) adults say they lack companionship often (11 per cent) or some of the time (31 per cent) in 2024.
- A similar proportion (41 per cent) say they often or sometimes feel left out.

Three-quarters (75 per cent) of adults who are not living with a spouse and see family and friends less than once a month in person say they feel isolated from others some of the time or often, twice as high as the proportion (37 per cent) among people who are married or co-habiting and see family and friends outside the house on a daily basis.

Like life satisfaction, loneliness varies across age, family and socioeconomic groups. In Figure 30, we show significant differences in average loneliness scores between groups. Average loneliness scores are 2.8 points higher among people who are financially struggling to pay bills or poor compared with those who are financially prosperous or very comfortable, 2.3 points higher among unemployed people relative to retired people and 2.1 points higher among 18-24 year olds relative to those aged 65 years and over.

**Figure 30** Significant differences in loneliness across society, Life in Australia™, 2024



### Women and men are feeling less safe in their communities in 2024

Australia has made progress in recent decades in reducing many forms of crime and threats to safety (ABS, 2024f). Data on recorded crimes though suggest that progress has slowed or even reversed in several areas, with the number of recorded homicides, instance of sexual violence, break-ins and blackmails increasing in recent years (ABS, 2024f), while cases of violence against women have sparked protests and demonstrations in response (ABC, 2024). The Mapping Social Cohesion survey suggests that these events may be impacting how safe Australians feel in their communities.

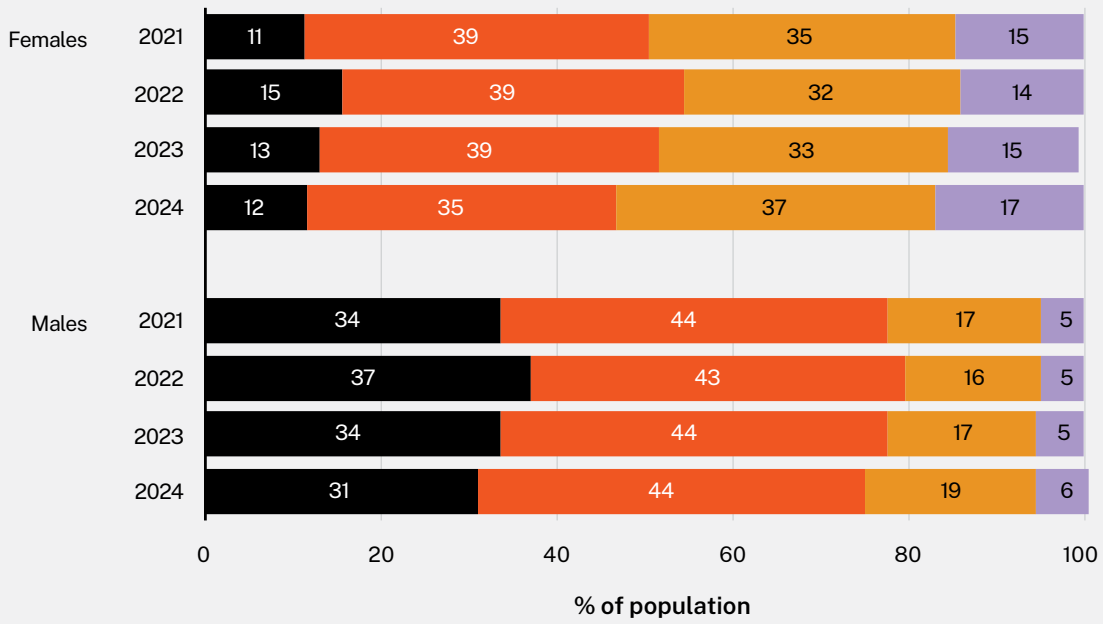
- 53 per cent of females feel very (17 per cent) or a bit (37 per cent) unsafe walking alone at night in their local area (35 per cent feel fairly safe and 12 per cent feel very safe). The proportion of females who feel very or a bit unsafe has increased significantly from 46 per cent in 2022. For males, the proportion feeling at least a bit unsafe

increased from 21 per cent in 2022 to 25 per cent in 2024. See Figure 31a.

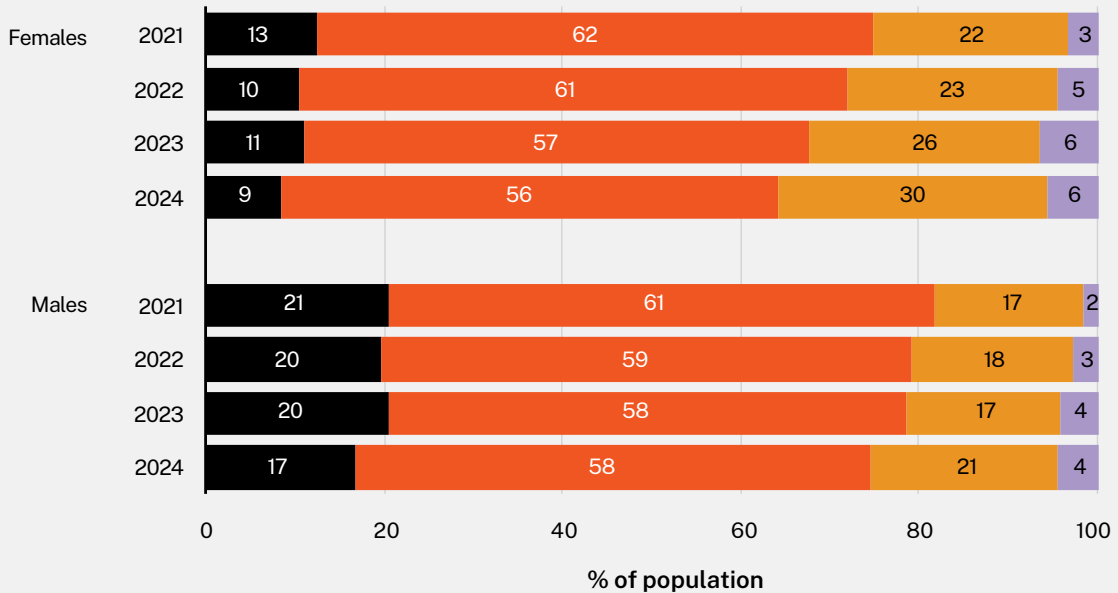
- The proportion of females who feel very or fairly worried about becoming a victim of crime in their area increased from 25 per cent in 2021 to 28 per cent in 2022, 32 per cent in 2023 and 36 per cent in 2024. For males, the proportion who are at least fairly worried increased from 19 per cent in 2021 to 25 per cent in 2024. See Figure 31b.
- 7 per cent of females and 4 per cent of males feel a bit or very unsafe at home by themselves during the day, 35 per cent of females and 30 per cent of males feel fairly safe, while 58 per cent and 66 per cent feel very safe. The proportion who feel a bit or very unsafe increased significantly from 3 per cent of females in 2022 and 2 per cent of males.

**Figure 31** Feelings of safety for men and women, Life in Australia™, 2021 to 2024

**a) How safe do you feel walking alone at night in your local area?**



**b) How worried are you about becoming a victim of crime in your local area?**



## Fears for safety are related to economic inequalities

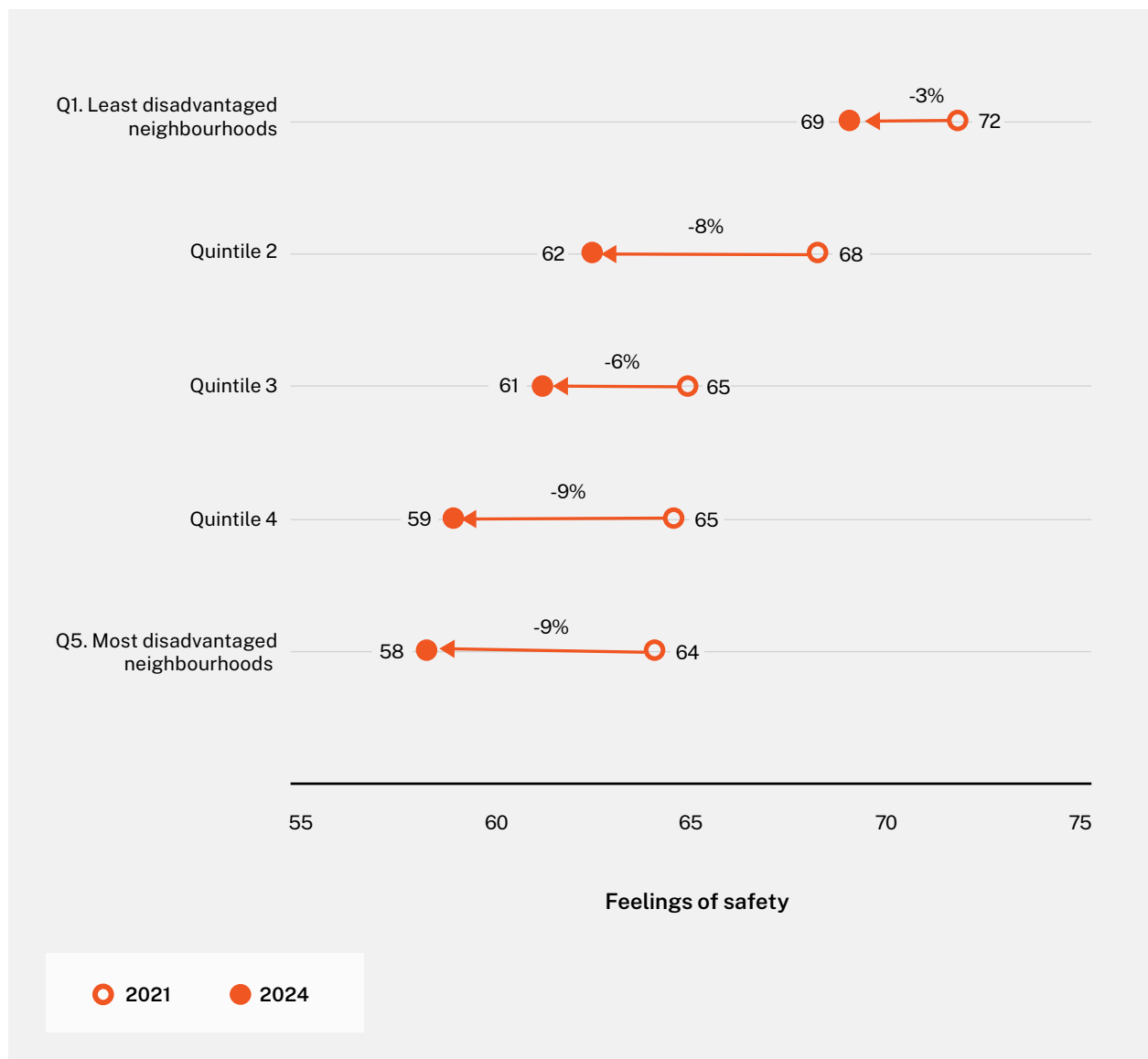
How safe people feel in their communities is associated with neighbourhood socioeconomic disadvantage. People who live in the most disadvantaged 20 per cent of neighbourhoods in 2024 have an overall level of safety that is 16 per cent lower on average than people who live in the least disadvantaged neighbourhoods (16 per cent for females and 14 per cent for males).

Between 2021 and 2024, perceived safety declined across all neighbourhood types, but particularly among more disadvantaged neighbourhoods. As shown in Figure 32, safety declined by 9 per cent in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, compared with 3 per cent in the least disadvantaged

neighbourhoods. This may reflect an important social inequality where people with the least access to community resources and protection feel the most exposed to the risk of violence and crime.

- Overall levels of safety are calculated by adding up the responses to the three questions on safety described above.
- Neighbourhood socioeconomic disadvantage is measured with the ABS (2023) Socioeconomic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) Index of Relative Socioeconomic Disadvantage based on survey respondents' postcode of residence. The index scores and ranks postcodes based on their economic characteristics at the 2021 Census.

**Figure 32** Feelings of safety for women by neighbourhood disadvantage, Life in Australia™, 2021 to 2024



### **A lack of safety is potentially detrimental to social connectedness and wellbeing, multicultural harmony and overall social cohesion**

Men and women who feel most unsafe are much less likely to trust other people, feel a weaker sense of belonging in Australia and in their neighbourhoods, are more likely to feel socially isolated and more likely to have negative attitudes to religious faiths other than their own.

We use a logistic regression model to predict social outcomes for different levels of safety in a way that controls and accounts for a range of personal and community characteristics including age, sex, education levels, family household composition, state, neighbourhood disadvantage, disability, religion and financial wellbeing. While this does not prove that a lack of safety causes weaker social connections, wellbeing and cohesion, the results allow us to say the relationship between safety and these outcomes is independent of and not explained by these other social, demographic and economic characteristics.

Females who are feeling the most unsafe in their communities in 2024 are:

- 59 per cent less likely to believe that ‘generally speaking, most people can be trusted’ compared with females who feel relatively safe;
- 27 per cent less likely to have a great sense of belonging in Australia;
- 22 per cent less likely to agree that they have a sense of belonging in their neighbourhood;
- 50 per cent more likely to feel isolated from others often or some of the time;
- 32 per cent more likely to have a negative attitude towards people of one or more religious faiths other than their own.

Males who are feeling the most unsafe in their communities in 2024 are:

- 66 per cent less likely to believe that ‘generally speaking, most people can be trusted’ compared with males who feel relatively safe;
- 27 per cent less likely to have a great sense of belonging in Australia;

- 24 per cent less likely to agree that they have a sense of belonging in their neighbourhood;
- 43 per cent more likely to feel isolated from others often or some of the time;
- 48 per cent more likely to have a negative attitude towards people of one or more religious faiths other than their own.

Men and women who are feeling the most unsafe are defined as those whose combined safety score (adding up responses to the three safety questions above) is in the lowest 10 per cent of all respondents. People who feel relatively safe are those with safety scores in the highest 10 per cent of respondents.

### **Recent trends and inequalities in personal wellbeing and safety point to strengths and challenges in social cohesion**

Most Australians report a degree of happiness in their lives, and at levels that have been remarkably consistent through the tumult of recent years. Relatedly, most people have regular contact with family and friends whether in person, by phone or online. Nevertheless, feelings of social isolation and loneliness are reasonably common particularly for young adults. Loneliness, like life satisfaction, reflects social and economic inequalities, with people experiencing financial stress and those who have disabilities among those with the highest average levels of loneliness and the lowest life satisfaction. Australians generally and particularly women are also reporting weaker levels of personal safety in their local areas in recent years. The resilience of happiness, the inequalities in wellbeing and social isolation and the decline in perceived safety are important to social cohesion, both for the way in which they point to the strengths and weaknesses in the way social cohesion helps to protect wellbeing and safety and for the way in which wellbeing and safety provide some of the conditions for people to engage and participate in their communities and contribute to Australia’s social cohesion.

# Social cohesion in a polarised world

By Trish Prentice



88

Recently, various commentators have suggested that Australia is either polarised or at least greatly at risk of becoming so (Murphy, 2023; Molloy, 2023). Edelman's (2023) report on trust, for instance, describes Australia as "on a path to polarisation." This trend, it suggests, is being driven by a weakening of Australia's social fabric, the decline in trust of key institutions and a lack of unity and shared purpose (Edelman, 2023).

In discussions on polarisation, America is frequently held up as an example of what other nations fear to become. It is regarded as deeply divided, both along ideological and political lines (Edelman, 2023).

Shared political values between the two major parties have reportedly decreased and there is growing contempt for those who hold opposing

political views or loyalty (Pew Research Centre, 2014). These trends do not just impact political views and voting behaviour. Polarisation appears to be impacting America's social fabric, with deep divisions around community values and avoidance of those who hold different ideological positions (Pew Research Centre, 2014).



For Australia, some concerns about polarisation centre around its potential to erode democratic life. Division and difference are, of course, healthy. A society will not grow and progress if everyone thinks the same. But robust disagreement can solidify into entrenched positions where reaching consensus becomes impossible. If this is coupled with avoidance, animosity or hostility towards ‘the other’ (any individual who holds a contrary position), then society’s very cohesion can break down. Trust of others, a sense of shared values and national unity are important for individuals’ sense of belonging and for participation in social, civic and political spheres. Our ability to come together, to deliberate issues with an openness to other views and to work together towards the common good are all essential elements of a healthy democracy and a functioning, prosperous society. This is why understanding the dynamics of conversations in community and public life has never been more important.

This year’s Mapping Social Cohesion qualitative study focuses on the issue of polarisation. Drawing upon semi-structured interviews, it aims to provide insights into the dynamics of unity and division in Australia, the forces that are bringing people together (or driving them apart) and the extent to which positions are becoming entrenched and ‘othering’ is occurring. These results reflect the views of a sample of diverse individuals from both sides of the political spectrum, both younger and older Australians. Forty-five interviews were conducted in total, 15 of which were conducted with younger Australians aged 18 to 25 years, five with people aged 35-44 years and 25 with slightly ‘older’ Australians aged 50 years and over (see Appendix Table A3 for other sample details).

The results of the qualitative study reported in this chapter add richness and depth to quantitative studies on this topic. In this chapter, the number and proportion of interviewees who respond to questions in various ways are often reported, but for the purpose of providing context to the

statements and conclusions reached. Interviewees are not necessarily ‘representative’ of the Australian population, so it should not be assumed that the proportions are true for Australia as a whole. For example, that 60 per cent of interviewees consider Australia is more divided should not be interpreted as saying that 60 per cent of Australians think that Australia is more divided. Rather than the numbers, the value and contribution of this aspect of the Mapping Social Cohesion study is in the voices provided by the Australians who participated in an interview. Through the quotes and the summaries of their responses, their voices give meaning to the numbers and help us to make sense of and understand polarisation and division in Australia and the ways in which it may impact social cohesion.

#### ***What is polarisation?***

It is only recently that studies on polarisation have gained momentum. Research has particularly focused on the polarisation of opinions and values in the US, although there is emerging literature on divisions in Europe, particularly in the face of increased socioeconomic inequality (Gerlitz et al., 2024). While it has become a ‘buzzword’ of late, working out what polarisation means has been largely left to “intuition” (Lannelli et al., 2021: p245). In fact, there remains “conceptual ambiguity” among researchers about what the term means and how it should be measured (Lannelli et al., 2021). Some scholars refer to polarisation as a context where “opposing and conflicting positions occur” (Lannelli et al., 2021: p245). Others explain it in terms of disagreement to the extent that no cross-cutting interconnections can be found between fragmented groups. Still others refer to “irreconcilable systems of beliefs” or as a form of partisanship, where there is a tendency to dislike those from the other group or even to isolate themselves from them in social environments (Lannelli et al., 2021: p.245; Edelman, 2023; Gerlitz et al., 2024: p.5).

What is key to these definitions is a sense of division on social or political issues (or ideology), with potential flow on effects into the attitudinal, behavioural or social spheres.

### Part 1: Is Australia divided?

In this study individuals were asked whether they thought people in Australia are more divided or more united than they used to be in their beliefs and opinions. Most of the 45 interviewees (n=45) considered Australia to be more divided (60 per cent), while some perceived Australia to be less divided (27 per cent). The remaining interviewees were less categorical, describing the country as neither more united nor divided, or as more united in some senses but not in others. For example, this young Australian described Australia as more divided at one level, because social media makes it easier to express opinions and therefore difference is more visible these days. However, she believed that underlying these differences in opinion was still a strong sense of unity:

*“I think before it was a matter of the herd mentality sort of thing where people would just go with the most common ideology and beliefs and sort of be afraid to express their own [opinion] because they don’t really have an outlet to express themselves. Whereas now everyone’s expressing their own opinions and so we are sort of divided by our beliefs, I think. But then again, I wouldn’t say we’re extremely divided, it’s just more on minor issues. For example, I think whenever some sort of natural disaster happens, that really showcases how we can unite as a society. Everyone comes together. A lot of people pull their money together and donate it to the charities that are supporting natural disasters, a lot of people volunteer to maybe help rebuild homes or provide food, water, shelter, all those sorts of things. So I would say yes, we are more divided, but we’re also united.”*

(FEMALE, 18 YEARS, NSW)

Breaking down the responses into age groups, most of the older interviewees perceived Australia to be divided. They felt that Australia lacked identity as a nation, that there was little bipartisanship among the political parties, that there was clearly division in the public sphere (majority vs minority views), that Australia was experiencing a cultural and generational divide, that national or identity groups were “only fighting for themselves and not for a united Australia” and that population increase and diversity had introduced more opinions and viewpoints, ultimately adding to division.

On the other hand, young people more frequently

described Australia as united. They perceived that there was shared opinion on many major issues, including the need for improvements to the educational system and to address cost of living pressures and housing.

For some interviewees, this consensus was actually a negative development. For example, in the words of one interviewee, “[I think we are] more united, but in a kind of negative aspect, we’re more united in the sense that we all agree that things are falling apart.” (male, 18-24 years, NSW). Others saw it more positively as a reflection of Australia’s progressive values, that there was respect and inclusivity, and that people were coming together around shared concerns.

For those young people who perceived division, several saw it as a natural result of Australia’s multicultural makeup. Diversity necessarily brought with it differences of opinion, which was not detrimental to society. Others said that division had always been there, but people either felt more enabled to voice their beliefs or opinions or were utilising a broader range of platforms to do so.

The diversity of platforms to express views was, in fact, the most frequent theme to emerge from young people’s responses. Many interviewees stated that Australia was not united or divided, but now there were simply more forums to express one’s opinion, particularly via social media platforms. Opinion at this time was just more visible, not characteristically different:

*“Nowadays it’s much more convenient to discuss, to openly discuss your political views just because a simple post on Instagram... if you see a post that someone else made, you can just share it to your own account, or you can comment on a post that everyone can see. And [they can] discuss your opinion as well with you.”*

(MALE, 21 YEARS, NSW)

*“I mean, COVID was obviously a massive one. Housing... The Voice referendum. That was a massive issue. I think definitely we’ve started to talk about it more”*

(FEMALE, 21 YEARS, WA)

This was less a theme among the older interviewees; however, several did acknowledge the impact of having a broader range of platforms to express one’s point of view. This, in the words of one interviewee, makes people “more vocal than they used to be...” (female, 62 years, QLD)

**What are Australians divided on?  
Where is there unity?**

The interviewees described various issues where they perceived opposing and conflicting opinions in Australia. The most frequently mentioned were immigration, the war in Gaza, the Voice to Parliament/Indigenous' rights, climate change and the cost of living. On issues where Australians were united, the cost of living was the most frequently mentioned.

Again, there were differences in the range and frequency of issues mentioned between older and younger Australians. Immigration was the issue where older Australians perceived opposing opinion most frequently, followed by the Voice to Parliament, the cost of living, climate change and the war in Gaza (all equally mentioned), followed by the class/generational divide, the energy crisis/renewables and gender, racism and religion (all equally mentioned). Among young people, immigration, the war in Gaza, taxation and global issues were all the most frequently mentioned issues where they perceived division. The Voice to Parliament, climate change, the cost of living, housing and racism were also mentioned, but less frequently.

Young people believed Australians are most united around the issue of the cost of living, followed by climate change. Other issues where they perceived unity included the need for changes to government spending, privacy concerns (including protection from data breaches), the safety of children/children's rights, the protection of public infrastructure, LGBTQ+ rights, the war in Gaza, Indigenous rights,

freedom of expression and the housing crisis (all equally mentioned).

Older Australians saw unity around Australians' love of sport, the housing crisis and the need for universal health care/Medicare, followed by climate change, the threat of China, the cost of living, the need to maintain social services, the need to control immigration and events that facilitate national pride (like ANZAC day or the Olympics).

Overall, negative sentiment about public debate was stronger among the older interviewees, while younger individuals were more frequently positive and optimistic about its dynamics in Australia.

***Institutions contributing to unity and division***

Teachers were most frequently mentioned as a uniting force in Australian society. This was followed closely by community groups/charities and religious groups. The government was seen as playing a uniting role in bringing together individuals with similar beliefs or political views, but not as a societal unifying force.

The most frequently mentioned institution perceived to be contributing to division in society was the government/political parties. Other divisive institutions mentioned (in decreasing order of frequency) included religious leaders, right wing extremists (or other forms of religious/political extremism), the media, unions, corporations and lobbyists.



## Part 2: The dynamics of public and private debate in Australia

It is important to recognise that difference of opinion does not necessarily equate to polarisation. Conflict is regarded as a necessary feature of democratic societies. It is only when opinion becomes hardened and division between groups becomes so pronounced that consensus cannot be reached that we can start to frame dissent as polarisation.

These dynamics are difficult to measure and quantify, however researchers are attempting to do so. The Edelman Trust Barometer report, for instance, asks respondents to rate their country on the extent they perceive it to be divided. According to this measure, a “less polarised” society is perceived to have “deep divisions,” while a moderately polarised society is perceived to have deep divisions that “might be addressable.” At the other end of the scale, an entrenched society is one where the individual does not believe divisions can be overcome (Edelman, 2023: p.19).

This next section details interviewees’ views about the dynamics of discussion and debate in Australia. Individuals were asked whether they perceived that people are more (or less) willing to engage with those who hold different opinions now, compared to the past; whether they had ever changed their own views on an issue after talking to others, and whether there were any issues they avoided discussing in their own social circles.

### Entrenchment

Many interviewees had observed some form of entrenchment, or hardening of attitudes and opinions, in public debate. Entrenchment was commonly reported by older interviewees (40 per cent), many of whom see a reluctance of people to engage with the ‘other side’ and a lack of openness to other points of view or immovable positions:

*“I think people on either end of the spectrum are probably less willing to really talk about it and then more people are more dogmatic and really just whatever you say probably won’t change anyone’s mind really. [They] really have taken sides...”*

(MALE, 34 YEARS, VIC)

*“I think people are becoming more steadfast in their beliefs, less open-minded, less willing to live and let live, and it doesn’t matter what side of the spectrum you’re on, left [or] right is the same. The people on the extremes of either side have become so dogmatic and blinded and myopic, that’s the word I’m looking for, that they’re not interested in hearing a contending viewpoint. If you’re talking to a lefty who’s like that and you disagree with them, then automatically you’re a Nazi or fascist. But if you’re talking to a righty and you’re like that, then you’re just some stupid, diluted, idealistic, communist, whatever. They’re just very quick to hurl the insults at you rather than listen to what you’re saying.”*

(FEMALE, 49 YEARS, VIC)



*“Debate’s a good thing. I think that’s what we’ve lost because people don’t debate. They don’t listen to the other side and then present their side and there’s no exchange. It’s just, I’m right. I’m right. And there’s no middle ground. There’s no compromise.”*

(FEMALE, 71 YEARS, VIC)

There was also some evidence of the hardening of interviewees’ own positions on social issues. As an illustration, one interviewee stated:

*“So, when I’m staunch on something and I know that truth resonates with me and I just know it’s the truth, no one can change my mind.”*

(FEMALE, 55 YEARS, NSW)

### **Partisan animosity**

Older interviewees also reported observing growing negative sentiment between groups or opposing sides in public debate (36 per cent of older interviewees, compared to 7 per cent in the younger age group). Some interviewees referred to specific groups, including the ‘left’ verses the ‘right,’ opposing political parties or young people vs older people, but others spoke in more general terms about the changed dynamics of public debate:

*“I’ve totally tuned out because it’s no longer about the debate. It’s almost like all these individuals come on and it’s about trying to score points for themselves or for whatever organisational party that they belong to or represent. And it’s more about just upping the ante or being deliberately, I don’t know, antagonising, almost. And it’s become quite aggressive...”*

(FEMALE, 50 YEARS, SA)

*“I do think that there’s an element to society here that’s changed, that there’s a hostile element that wasn’t here before. I don’t think it’s as friendly as it used to be or as laid back. And when I say hostile, I don’t mean standoffish because frankly I found people here standoffish when I first arrived. I’m talking about younger people who are violent and hostile and they’re willing to yell at you now and scream and just be antisocial and nasty and abusive, which I never felt before until the last three years, but that’s mostly in younger people.”*

(FEMALE, 49 YEARS, VIC)

*“I think that we are free ... everyone can say whatever they think. What happens is they will get a big backlash. And I find that there is a lot of groups that are bullies. There are bullies. They’re like bullies and they mainly come from the left.”*

(FEMALE, 49 YEARS, ACT)

In some cases, the interviewees themselves expressed dislike or hostility towards ‘the other’ in their response.

*“This transgender nonsense, anything and everything between male and female... it’s just constantly divide and conquer.”*

(FEMALE, 55 YEARS, NSW)

*“It’s from both sides of politics. You’ve got a lot of the left protesting about social causes that are beneficial to them that don’t benefit the rest of Australia. And you’ve got a lot of people on the right that are just being idiots out and about and throwing salutes and yeah, we don’t need that.”*

(MALE, 52 YEARS, QLD)

### **Cancel culture**

Interviewees from both age groups reported observing or personally experiencing dynamics where having a different point of view had led to being criticised, ostracised or ‘shut down.’ Sometimes this occurred in the public sphere, at other times in individuals’ social circles:

*“I think it’s becoming a bit more judgmental, and I think people are fearing it a little bit more to have a different opinion to what is seen to be acceptable.”*

(FEMALE, 36 YEARS, VIC)

*“People can get cancelled so easily now, but I think no one really speaks up unless they know that their opinion is a common one.”*

(FEMALE, 19 YEARS, QLD)

*“And nowadays things become more personal. If you don’t agree with a person, they might as well cut you off or vice versa. So, you have to be really, really careful what you say to anybody nowadays, even within families, it’s really, really sad.”*

(FEMALE, 64 YEARS, VIC)

### Self-censorship

Issues that the interviewees were reluctant to discuss included, most frequently, gender issues and the war in Gaza. Other issues that were avoided included religion, politics, climate change, sexuality, immigration, COVID and vaccines. Some interviewees spoke of being reluctant, in general, to talk about any issue that could be perceived as sensitive:

*“At the moment you can’t have an opinion about anything. So, unless it’s something that I guess is undeniable [like] hey, we are going out to the supermarket and it’s more expensive than two years ago.... Hey inflation is going up. Hey, what’s happening here? No one offers more opinions beyond that, no...”*

(FEMALE, 49 YEARS, ACT)

*“I tend to not want to talk to people about controversial issues. When my friend was talking about Kamala Harris, I just changed the subject after a bit. I’m just not interested in having a debate...”*

(FEMALE, 46 YEARS, NSW)

### Freedom of expression

Nevertheless, several positive themes also emerged from the interviews. Most interviewees spoke about freedom of expression in Australia and affirmed individuals had the freedom (both expressed in law and in evident in practice) to voice their opinions and contribute to public debate.

*“I don’t think anything’s particularly censored. People speak freely and openly in my opinion, in what I’ve seen and in the circles that I’ve seen and in public what I’ve seen. I don’t feel like anybody is not able to speak freely.”*

(FEMALE 52 YEARS, NSW)

*“I think that in Australia there’s very much so open debate and people are willing to hear each other out and without it escalating or turning into serious conflict and so on. So here I don’t think it’s too bad. I think our freedom of speech and all that stuff is pretty good.”*

(MALE, 18 YEARS, NSW)

### Commitment to public debate

Most interviewees believed that public debate is beneficial to society and plays an important role in information dissemination, value development and intellectual and social progression:

*“I think most of the time it is good. It’s like that theory that if you want progression in a society, you need to have conflict.”*

(MALE, 21 YEARS, NSW)

*“I think it is really good. It’s even necessary for society. I think that’s the way people learn and see each other’s point of views. And without that understanding of the other person’s mindset, you stay really rigid in your own thinking, which is not always good...”*

(FEMALE, 19 YEARS, VIC)

*“I think debate is important for any society, for a family, for parents to sit at the table and talk to their kids about any topic that is relevant to a person’s life. Life and death. Money, no money, whatever it is. I grew up being told there are poor people so you don’t waste food and all that kind of thing. You are taught values that are very important.”*

(FEMALE, 62 YEARS, VIC)

### Openness to change

Several interviewees also cited examples where they themselves had changed their opinion after listening to another’s point of view:

*“Absolutely. In some issues, because although I am far right on some issues with regards to the environment, climate change, etc I changed my positions because I could see that in some aspects they were right...”*

(MALE 54 YEARS, NSW)

*“When I was just talking with my parents, I’m like, oh, why do we have to pay so much taxes, blah, blah, blah. And initially I was always thinking, these taxes are just going to be used ...how can I explain it, it’s going to be used in a corrupt manner by the people who decide where it should be spent. But then my parents, they came up with a lot of statistics, they came up with a lot of anecdotes themselves, and that kind of changed my view on why paying taxes is patriotic and it’s a good thing to do...”*

(MALE, 20 YEARS, WA)

### **Underlying cohesion**

Despite observing division in society, several interviewees spoke of a sense of cohesion that, despite differences, still held Australians together:

*“There seems to be some cohesion that we’re a certain type of person. We have some great things in place that still keep us together. We’re held together.”*

(FEMALE, 59 YEARS, NSW)

*“There is an overall sense of belonging and being a part of community. So a lot of times when I’ve had something to say, and even though I might share a completely different opinion, I’ve always felt heard.”*

(FEMALE, 22 YEARS, SA)

### **Part 3: The role of social media in polarisation**

One explanation commonly put forward for growing societal polarisation is the influence of social media (Beardow, 2021: p.153). The algorithms embedded in these platforms create recommendations that draw individuals towards content that confirms their pre-existing viewpoints, essentially creating “partisan echo-chambers” (Beardow, 2021: p.153).

Most of the individuals interviewed for this study were active on social media to some extent. Some only used it to connect with family members and friends; some passively observed news and information that entered their feeds; while others actively followed news channels, journalists or social commentators.

#### **Echo chambers**

Several interviewees were cognisant of the echo-chamber effect of their social media feeds. They were aware that the content they were viewing was filtered or they had observed the impact of distorted content on others:

*“I thought I was the only one who thought the way I did. And then when I found other people I was amazed. I think maybe through social media, I just found different groups of people who thought like I did, and then I didn’t feel alone anymore.”*

(FEMALE, 55 YEARS, NSW)

*“Her whole world... she’s gone down the rabbit hole. Her algorithms are evil, and that’s all her feed gets now.”*

(FEMALE, 59 YEARS, NSW)

However, other interviewees observed that the echo-chamber effect was not just confined to social media. Several interviewees from across the entire sample (15 per cent, n=45) commented that their social circles also curtailed the breadth of opinions they were exposed to and influenced the way they thought about issues:

*“I’d say people in those groups of by and large we think similarly.”*

(FEMALE, 71 YEARS, VIC)

*“I can talk freely with certain people but that’s the minority. It’s maybe not so much minority for me because I’m picking those people as friends.”*

(FEMALE, 64 YEARS, VIC)

*“All my friends and the people whom I talk to on a regular basis, we all have the same opinions. So, I’m never scared to say anything.”*

(FEMALE, 19 YEARS, VIC)

*“Generally, the people I surround myself are a bit more progressive like myself and diverse, so I feel like I’m sort of around people who agree with me on most things.”*

(FEMALE, 24 YEARS, NSW)



### **Misinformation and public debate**

Many interviewees considered social media to be generally untrustworthy in terms of the accuracy and reliability of information it provided (40 per cent of the older age group, n=25; 27 per cent of the younger, n=15). They described it in terms of being biased, “pushing a narrative” or as having an agenda. Many considered it to be a primary source of misinformation and fake news in Australia (44 per cent of the older age group and a third of the younger interviewees).

However, there were some qualifications to this. Many individuals (particularly in the younger age group, but not exclusively) are accessing content from traditional news agencies via their social media feeds and ascribed this content a higher level of trustworthiness. Some interviewees were engaging in further research or “fact-checking” before giving weight to the information they were consuming. These interviewees did not consider social media platforms to be an entirely negative influence on public debate.

Interviewees in the younger age group also spoke frequently of the benefits of social media, including providing exposure to other viewpoints and the convenience of having readily accessible information.

*“...it does give you more viewpoints, which I think is really important. And more ways to interpret the data. I feel like if we didn’t have social media, we wouldn’t be able to kind of see different ways.”*

(FEMALE, 24 YEARS, VIC)

*“I think most people at the moment would be getting news from social media just because it’s much easier just to open your phone and scroll and intake that information.”*

(MALE, 21 YEARS, NSW)

Other interviewees described it as an important source of information, particularly for rapidly unfolding events like natural disasters.

*“I think social media is very good with the fact that [when] something happens, you will know instantly.”*

(FEMALE, 69 YEARS, VIC)

### **Part 4: Polarisation and social trust**

In the literature, a negative relationship has been found between polarisation and social trust (Lee, 2022). When a society becomes more polarised, individuals are less likely to believe they share similar values, a cornerstone of social trust (Lee, 2022).



Perceptions of partisan divisions make people less trusting, which can impact their willingness to do good deeds, to voluntarily contribute to society or to put their own interests aside for those of “the collective” (Lee, 2022: p.1551). This is one significant way that polarisation can affect social cohesion.

Individuals were asked whether they believed Australians in general can be trusted. Most interviewees affirmed their trust of ordinary people though with some qualifications:

*“Yes, yes. I think humans in general can be trusted a lot more than what we think. Most people, the vast majority are what you would call good people. They would do the right thing.”*

(FEMALE 64 YEARS, VIC)

*“I mean, if I knew them and if I got to know them and then yeah, potentially I, I'd be more trusting. I'd probably be more trusting of just someone that I would meet and get to know than I would a politician or the media.”*

(MALE, 34 YEARS, VIC)

## Part 5: Conclusion

Globally, nations are concerned about polarising public opinion and the impact it is having on their societies. Recent research suggests these dynamics are not just impacting attitudes but permeating social spheres too, creating separation and division between groups.

The participants in this study are broadly of the view that Australia is divided in relation to current political, economic and environmental issues and older Australians, in particular, are feeling that Australia has changed.

Difference of opinion, in and of itself, however, does not necessarily equate to polarisation. Disagreement is important for democratic functioning. Yet some worrying threads emerged from this study. Reports of immovable viewpoints and partisan animosity (and evidence of both among some of the interviewees) suggest some polarisation of public opinion. Reports of individuals being ‘cancelled’ for voicing their opinion or of actively avoiding the discussion of certain social or political issues (self-censoring)

suggest that the environments where people come together to discuss public life are under pressure. Further research will be necessary to gauge the extent of these issues.

At the same time there are some positive signs. Individuals are still committed to public debate and see it as a crucial aspect of societal functioning. There is strong support for freedom of expression (within the bounds of the law) and individuals observed this right functioning in practice. Moreover, many individuals indicate they are capable of changing their opinion and could speak of examples where they had done so in the face of new information. Most individuals also expressed unqualified social trust. These findings suggest we are not at a point where opposing viewpoints have become irreconcilable. There remains a strong foundation of shared values between ordinary Australians.

As we know, social media is changing public debate. Some of its contributions are negative. It is widely believed to be responsible for the dissemination of most of the fake news and misinformation Australians are exposed to. Individuals are aware that its algorithms create echo chambers, preventing them from exposure to other viewpoints (although it is not the only environment to do this). However, young people, particularly, see these platforms more positively, regardless of these caveats. They believe social media broadens their exposure to other opinions and provides a greater range of forums for public discourse. It brings new (and previously marginalised) voices into the public sphere.

Australia is at risk of greater polarisation. Some elements of this are already present and there is a perception that many of the key institutions that play a role in contributing to social and political cohesion are actually facilitating division. Teachers, community groups, charities and religious groups are currently perceived to be making a positive contribution to public discourse, but it is perhaps timely for other institutions to reflect on their contribution. There is scope to actively work towards open and constructive dialogue and against partisan animosity, which only has the potential to place our cohesion under further strain.

# Conclusion



From the cost of living, global conflict and division and threats to personal safety, national and global challenges put pressure on personal and social wellbeing, intercultural harmony and social cohesion. While pressured, part of the value and importance of social cohesion lies in protecting individuals and society, weathering challenges and enabling debate while preventing deep divisions particularly through difficult times.

98

It is noteworthy and a source of strength then that social cohesion in Australia has been stable over the last year. Social, community, civic and political participation have been at least as common as in past years, helping to keep communities and society connected and vibrant, while happiness and belonging have been steady (albeit in the case of belonging after several years of decline).

In the face of current challenges, these trends and the overall stability of the Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion suggest a certain resilience and capacity to collectively manage the current challenges.

Clearly though, many Australians have been impacted by current conflicts and divisions and pressures on social cohesion have emerged.

The difficulties experienced by Australia's Muslim and Jewish communities and others affected by the conflict in the Middle East are mirrored in the Mapping Social Cohesion survey by the significant increase in negative attitudes towards Muslims and Jewish people between July 2023 and July 2024. The increases partly reflect polarised responses to the conflict, with the largest increases in negative attitudes to Muslims recorded among older people and conservative voters, while the increase in negative attitudes to Jewish people were largely among more progressive voters, albeit from a lower base.

While attitudes to Muslim and Jewish people reflect pressures emerging from the current conflict, there are also general pressures on multiculturalism and interfaith relations. Pressures are evident from the decline in positive attitudes to people of other major faiths, increased division over the number of immigrants arriving in Australia and a tapering off in the high regard Australians have for diversity and the contribution of immigrants to society, culture and the economy. Given this has occurred in the midst of ongoing economic and financial pressures and globally strained intercultural relations and attitudes to migration, Australia's relations and attitudes are perhaps best seen as a cause for attention but not alarm. Indeed, the fact that support for multiculturalism and migrant diversity has declined modestly from a high base suggests that the accumulated strength of Australia's intercultural harmony may be helping to prevent deeper divisions.

More broadly, social and economic pressures continue to weigh on social cohesion, though also demonstrate its importance in difficult times. In 2024, Australians are reporting higher levels of pessimism towards their own future and the future of Australia, a weaker sense of economic fairness and belief in the 'fair go', less trust in people and government, somewhat weaker neighbourhood connections, high levels of financial stress, continued weakness in the sense of belonging and greater concerns for personal safety. While social cohesion does not replace the need for measures to address disadvantage and injustice, we show that it can potentially help to manage some of these challenges, for example in protecting happiness in times of financial stress. In addressing the social and economic disadvantages that weigh on social cohesion, strengthening the emotional and practical bonds that connect us and fostering respect and acceptance in debate, differences and disagreement, social cohesion in Australia can continue to support us individually and collectively through hard times and good.

# Appendix A

## The 2024 Mapping Social Cohesion Study

The Scanlon Foundation Research Institute's Mapping Social Cohesion series has been the pre-eminent source of information on social cohesion in Australia for almost two decades. The 2024 study is the 18th in the series, following the benchmark survey in 2007 and annual surveys since 2009 (and two in 2020, after COVID-19 hit). The 2024 study is the largest, combining a nationally-representative survey of 7,965 Australians with additional targeted boost surveys of 229 mostly overseas-born Australians and 45 in-depth qualitative interviews. The targeted boost surveys and interviews provide rich information and insights and ensure the Mapping Social Cohesion study is representing the diversity and complexity of contemporary Australia.

### The Mapping Social Cohesion survey

The main Mapping Social Cohesion survey was administered through the Social Research Centre's Life in Australia™ panel. Life in Australia™ was established in 2017 and is Australia's first and only national probability-based online panel. In 2024, Life in Australia™ had more than 10,000 active members. Panel members are initially recruited via their landline or mobile phone and paid \$20 to join the panel. They are offered a further incentive of \$10 for each questionnaire completed, paid by gift voucher, deposit into a PayPal account, or charitable donation. Members can be asked to complete a survey on a monthly basis with members invited to complete the Mapping Social Cohesion survey once a year in July.

The Mapping Social Cohesion survey was first administered to Life in Australia™ in 2018. Prior to Life in Australia™, the first 10 surveys in the Mapping Social Cohesion series were administered firstly to landline telephone numbers, and then to landline and

mobile numbers, employing Random Digit Dialling (RDD). In 2018 and 2019, the survey was undertaken both via RDD and the Life in Australia™ panel. Since 2020, the survey has been undertaken exclusively on Life in Australia™.

- The parallel administration in 2018 and 2019 of the Mapping Social Cohesion Survey via both Random Digit Dialling (RDD) and the Life in Australia™ panel provided an understanding of the impact of the data collection mode on the results. Generally speaking, Life in Australia™ members report lower levels of social cohesion than were reported through the RDD survey, likely because respondents to the largely online Life in Australia™ survey are more comfortable reporting financial stress and unhappiness than when they had to speak to a person over the telephone.

Unlike most research panels, Life in Australia™ includes people both with and without internet access. Those without internet access and those

who are not comfortable completing surveys over the internet are able to complete surveys by telephone. For the 2024 Mapping Social Cohesion survey, 99 per cent of responses were provided online and one per cent by telephone.

The number of respondents to the main 2024 Mapping Social Cohesion survey are shown in Table A1 for the main demographic and socioeconomic groups used throughout this report. As described below, all respondents are weighted to ensure the total pool of survey respondents is representative of the Australian population. This allows us to infer from the survey results what social cohesion looks like across all of Australia.

Of course, we do not survey all Australians and random errors and variation mean that we cannot be certain that survey results will be true for the whole population. We use statistics to estimate the maximum size of this potential error based on the weights used and the number of respondents in

each group. The estimated error shown in brackets in Table A1 is the 95 per cent margin of error. This tells us the range in which we believe with 95 per cent confidence that the true estimate lies for the whole population.

- For example, if 50 per cent of male respondents to the survey say that people generally can be trusted (after applying weights), the margin of error of 2.2 indicates that we are 95 per cent confident that the proportion of all Australian males who trust others is within 2.2 percentage points of 50 per cent. In other words, we are 95 per cent confident that between 47.8 per cent and 52.2 per cent of all Australian males think that people generally can be trusted.

**Table A1** Number of respondents (and estimated maximum 95% margin of error)

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Persons</b>			
	4,642 (1.8)	3,251 (2.1)	7,965 (1.4)			
<b>Age</b>	<b>65+</b>	<b>55-64</b>	<b>45-54</b>	<b>35-44</b>	<b>25-34</b>	<b>18-24</b>
	2,435 (2.6)	1,461 (3.1)	1,314 (3.3)	1,391 (3.1)	977 (3.7)	382 (5.3)
<b>State</b>	<b>NSW</b>	<b>Victoria</b>	<b>Queensland</b>	<b>South Australia</b>	<b>Western Australia</b>	
	2,444 (2.5)	2,043 (2.8)	1,571 (3.1)	647 (4.8)	772 (4.4)	
<b>Capital City/ Rest of state</b>	<b>Capital city</b>	<b>Rest of state</b>				
	5,360 (1.7)	2,490 (2.5)				
<b>Highest Education</b>	<b>Postgraduate degree</b>	<b>Bachelor degree</b>	<b>Certificate/ diploma</b>	<b>Year 12</b>	<b>Up to Year 11</b>	
	2,294 (2.7)	2,093 (2.9)	2,151 (2.3)	650 (4.3)	634 (4.3)	
<b>Financial situation</b>	<b>Prosperous/ very comfortable</b>	<b>Reasonably comfortable</b>	<b>Just getting along</b>	<b>Struggling to pay bills/ poor</b>		
	1,423 (3.4)	3,639 (2.1)	2,120 (2.6)	768 (4.4)		
<b>Vote</b>	<b>Labor</b>	<b>Liberal/ National</b>	<b>Greens</b>	<b>Other</b>		
	3,015 (2.3)	1,720 (2.9)	1,214 (3.7)	1,417 (3.3)		
<b>Where born &amp; first language</b>	<b>Australian born</b>	<b>Foreign born/ English</b>	<b>Foreign born/ non-English</b>			
	5,633 (1.7)	1,383 (3.4)	934 (3.9)			
<b>Household type</b>	<b>Couple no children</b>	<b>Couple parent</b>	<b>Single parent</b>	<b>Group household</b>	<b>Live alone</b>	
	2,569 (2.4)	1,995 (2.6)	646 (5.0)	420 (5.4)	2,107 (2.9)	
<b>Housing tenure</b>	<b>Own outright</b>	<b>Mortgage</b>	<b>Rent</b>			
	3,030 (2.3)	2,784 (2.3)	1,715 (2.9)			
<b>Neighbourhood disadvantage</b>	<b>Quintile 1 (High disadvantage)</b>	<b>Quintile 2</b>	<b>Quintile 3</b>	<b>Quintile 4</b>	<b>Quintile 5 (Low disadvantage)</b>	
	1,082 (3.7)	1,369 (3.3)	1,614 (3.1)	1,784 (2.9)	2,001 (2.9)	

## Targeted boost surveys

In 2024, targeted boost surveys were conducted to ensure greater representation across specific migrant groups. Respondents were recruited from non-probability panels run by Multicultural Marketing and Management (MMM), i-Link Research, and the Language Other Than English (LOTE) Agency. Three migrant groups were targeted: people from India, the Middle East and North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Respondents to the targeted boost surveys received a shorter version of the Mapping Social Cohesion questionnaire. The shortened version was designed to take approximately 10 minutes on average to complete, roughly half the length of the full questionnaire. The boost surveys were delivered

in one of four different languages, English, Arabic, Punjabi and Swahili. These languages were selected as they were estimated to provide the widest coverage of the Australian population in the three targeted groups (India, the Middle East and North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa) based on data from the 2021 Census on a) the languages that people speak at home and b) their proficiency in English (as reported by the household).

A total of 229 boost surveys were conducted and the results added to the responses of Life in Australia™ members. The boost surveys strengthen our ability to report on the wellbeing and perceived cohesion of specific migrant groups. The total number of respondents who completed a survey in 2024 are shown in Table A2 for three targeted countries or regions of origin, other overseas places and Australia.

Table A1 Number of respondents

Country/region of birth	Life in Australia™	Targeted boost	Total
India	161	91	252
Middle East and North Africa	72	88	160
Sub-Saharan Africa (excl. South Africa)	54	18	72
Other overseas countries/regions	2,041	33	2,074
Australia	5,637	0	5,637

## Weighting of survey results

Survey data are weighted to adjust for the chance of being sampled in the survey and to ensure the demographic and socioeconomic profile of respondents mirrors the Australian population as closely as possible.

This involves assigning each respondent a weight so that the sum of weights across a set of demographic indicators line up with benchmarks set by population and census data created by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The benchmarks included in the weighting solution are: state or territory of residence, whether lives in a capital city or elsewhere in the state, gender, age, highest education (bachelor's degree or below), language spoken at home (English or other), dwelling tenure, and household composition.

## In-depth qualitative interviews

The 2024 Mapping Social Cohesion study included 45 in-depth interviews with people who were born in Australia or have migrated to Australia over the years. Interview participants were recruited through the Farron Research company. The number of interview participants are listed in Table A3 by participants' age, gender, state of residence, and vote in the last federal election. All interviews were conducted in English.

**Table A3** Number of interview participants by age, gender, state of residence, and vote in the last federal election, 2024

Participants	
<b>Age</b>	
18-25	15
35-44	5
45+	25
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	17
Female	27
<b>State of residence</b>	
New South Wales & the Australian Capital Territory	18
Victoria	14
Queensland	6
South Australia & Western Australia	6
<b>Party voted for in the last federal election</b>	
Labor Party	19
Liberal/National Party	10
Greens	7
Other	8



## Ethics approval

The 2024 Mapping Social Cohesion survey (incorporating also the targeted surveys) was approved by the Australian National University Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol number 2022/166).

The in-depth qualitative interviews were also approved by the Australian National University Human Research Ethics Committee under a separate ethics protocol (Protocol number 2024/874).

## The Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion

As every year, the 2024 Mapping Social Cohesion report publishes estimates of social cohesion based on the Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion. Developed by Professor Andrew Markus from Monash University and colleagues, the index has been used to measure social cohesion in Australia since 2007 and is now one of the most important and long-running barometers of Australia's social well-being. The Index was renamed this year from the Scanlon-Monash Index of Social Cohesion. This is a simplification, though we continue to recognise and celebrate the contribution of Monash University and particularly Professor Markus.

The Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion is constructed by aggregating responses to 17 survey questions on the Mapping Social Cohesion survey. Responses are organised into the following five core measures or domains of social cohesion:

- **Belonging:** the sense of pride and belonging people have in Australia and in Australian life and culture.
- **Worth:** the degree of emotional and material well-being across society, as measured through levels of happiness and financial satisfaction.
- **Social inclusion and justice:** perceptions of economic fairness in Australian society and trust in the Federal Government.
- **Participation:** active engagement in political activities and the political process, including through voting, signing a petition, contacting Members of Parliament, and attending protests.
- **Acceptance and rejection:** attitudes to immigrant diversity, support for ethnic minorities, and experience of discrimination.

In 2021, the Social Research Centre was commissioned to re-develop the Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion. The objective was to enhance the robustness and statistical validity of the measurement of social cohesion and provide greater capacity to examine how expressed levels of cohesion vary across individuals and groups in society.

The re-developed index is comprised of an expanded set of 29 questions across the five domains of social cohesion. The new index is based on a rigorous and robust methodology, designed to build on the original index and strengthen our understanding of social cohesion. The particular areas in which the new index expands this understanding are as follows:

- The original index design measured social cohesion in the Belonging domain as the sense of pride and belonging in Australia and Australian life and culture. The new index measures belonging at national and neighbourhood levels, as well as on a personal level through individual social connectedness.
- 'Participation' in the original index design exclusively refers to political participation, or engagement in political activities and the political process. The new index combines engagement in political activities with measures of participation in social, community, religious, civic, and political groups.

The re-developed Index of Social Cohesion provides new power in 2024 to examine how social cohesion varies across society. In this year's report, analyses explore how social cohesion varies across individuals and groups in society, revealing important information on the sources of social inequality and social exclusion in society. However, several questions in the new index were only asked for the first time in 2021. For this reason, the original index design based on the smaller set of 17 questions continues to be used in this report to track social cohesion over time and examine how overall social cohesion in Australia has changed since 2007.

The survey questions used to construct the historical and new indices of social cohesion are listed in Table A4.

**Table A4** Domains and items in the new and historical Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion

Domain and question	Historical index	New index
<b>Domain 1: Sense of belonging</b>		
To what extent do you take pride in the Australian way of life and culture?	Yes	Yes
To what extent do you have a sense of belonging in Australia?	Yes	Yes
Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?		
'In the modern world, maintaining the Australian way of life and culture is important'	Yes	No
'I feel like I belong in my neighbourhood'	No	Yes
'My neighbourhood has a strong sense of community'	No	Yes
How often do you feel isolated from others?	No	Yes
How safe do you feel at home by yourself during the day?	No	Yes
<b>Domain 2: Sense of worth</b>		
How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your present financial situation?	Yes	Yes
To what extent do you feel that people treat you with respect?	No	Yes
Taking all things into consideration, would you say that over the last year you have been very happy, happy, unhappy, or very unhappy?	Yes	Yes
During the past 30 days, about how often did you feel the things you do in your life were worthwhile?	No	Yes
Over the last 12 months, how often is the following statement true...		
'You / your household went without meals because there wasn't enough money for food'	No	Yes
<b>Domain 3: Social inclusion and justice</b>		
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?		
'Australia is a land of economic opportunity where in the long run, hard work brings a better life'	Yes	Yes
'In Australia today, the gap between those with high incomes and those with low incomes is too large'	Yes	No
'People living on low incomes in Australia receive enough financial support from the government'	No	Yes
'Overall, everyone in Australia has a fair chance of getting the jobs they seek'	No	Yes
'Elections are fair'	No	Yes
How often do you think the government in Canberra can be trusted to do the right thing for the Australian people?	Yes	No
How often do you think government leaders in Australia abuse their power?	No	Yes
In your opinion, how often do the courts make fair, impartial decisions based on the evidence made available to them?	No	Yes

Domain and question	Historical index	New index
<b>Domain 4: Participation</b>		
Please indicate which, if any, of the following you have done over the last three years or so?		
1. Voted in an election	Yes	No
2. Signed a petition	Yes	No
3. Written or spoken to a Federal or State Member of Parliament	Yes	Yes
4. Joined a boycott of a product or company	Yes	Yes
5. Attended a protest, march, or demonstration	Yes	No
6. Posted or shared anything about politics online	No	Yes
In the last 12 months, have you been actively involved in any community support groups?	No	Yes
In the last 12 months, have you been actively involved in any social or religious groups?	No	Yes
In the last 12 months, have you been actively involved in any civic or political groups?	No	Yes
In the last 4 weeks, did you help anyone (not living with you) with any of the following activities?	No	Yes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Providing transport or running errands</li> <li>➤ Any teaching, coaching, or practical advice</li> <li>➤ Providing any emotional support</li> </ul>		
<b>Domain 5: Acceptance and rejection</b>		
How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?		
'The relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and the wider Australian community is very important for Australia as a nation'	No	Yes
'It is important for Indigenous histories and cultures to be included in the school curriculum'	No	Yes
'Accepting immigrants from many different countries makes Australia stronger'	Yes	Yes
'Ethnic minorities in Australia should be given Australian government assistance to maintain their customs and traditions'	Yes	Yes
Have you experienced discrimination because of your skin colour, ethnic origin, or religion over the last 12 months?	Yes	No
In three or four years, do you think that your life in Australia will be much improved, a little improved, about the same, a little worse, or much worse?	Yes	No

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