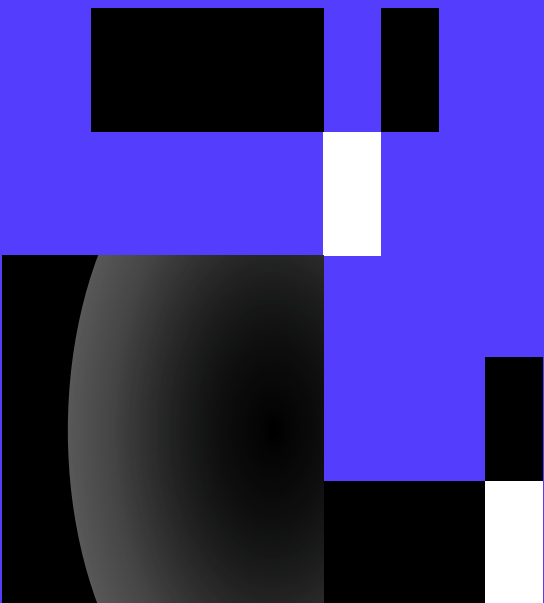
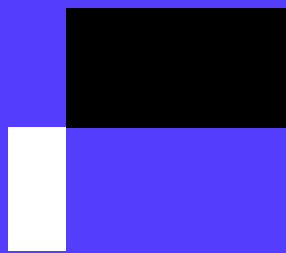


MAPPING SOCIAL COHESION 2023

by Dr James
O'Donnell



FOREWORD

When we think of social cohesion, we often envisage individuals and families optimistic about their future, feeling comfortable in their neighbourhoods, trusting of others, of their institutions and of the Federal Government.

As ideal as that may be, we also know that the world is not static; it is constantly changing and creating challenges to our sense of belonging, worth, acceptance or justice.

The Scanlon Foundation commenced the Mapping Social Cohesion survey and report in 2007. It is the only comprehensive survey of the Australian population focusing on social cohesion with a particular focus on the transition of migrants. Consequently, the survey asks multiple questions about immigration, trust in others and in the government, multiculturalism and perceptions of financial security and happiness.

We are very pleased to bring the 2023 Mapping Social Cohesion Report to you and I want to extend my thanks to the author, Dr James O'Donnell and his colleagues at the Australian National University. We are also grateful for the invaluable support of the Social Research Centre and Ms Trish Prentice of the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute.

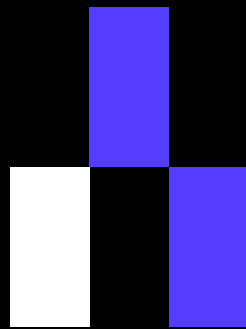
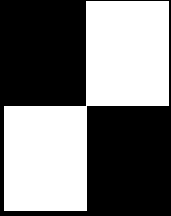
This year the report contains the results of the survey, the analysis of over 50 qualitative interviews and the addition of survey boosts into three cultural communities. These additional survey boosts have provided us with more reliability in our understanding of the views of respondents from different cultural backgrounds.

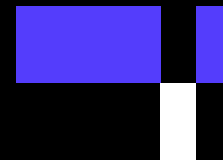
Our social cohesion is ongoing and whatever the data indicates this year, it simply provides us with the components we need to work on. We all have a responsibility to build trust, encourage a sense of belonging and a community of welcome and optimism.



Anthea Hancock

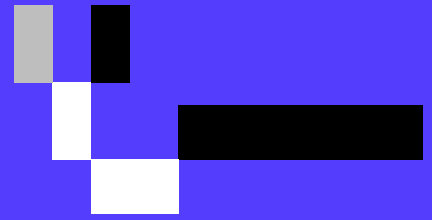
CEO, Scanlon Foundation Research Institute





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social cohesion in Australia has been remarkably resilient through the challenges of recent years. However, we continue to face difficult national and global circumstances, global conflict, economic pressures and uncertainty and division over issues such as the Voice referendum.

As a result – and while we remain connected – our social cohesion is under pressure and declining on some fronts. Our sense of national pride and belonging has been declining for some years, discrimination and prejudice remain stubbornly common, while in more recent years, we are reporting greater financial stress, increased concern for economic inequality and growing pessimism for the future. However, in the strong connections we have in our neighbourhoods and communities and the way we increasingly embrace our differences and diversity, there is reason for optimism that we can respond collectively to the challenges we face and restore and strengthen our social cohesion.

Mapping Social Cohesion 2023

The Mapping Social Cohesion 2023 report comes at a crucial time – a time to take stock and consider the challenges ahead. In 2023, almost 7,500 people participated in the Mapping Social Cohesion survey, making it the largest survey in the series. As has been the case since 2018, the 2023 survey was administered to the Social Research Centre's Life in Australia™ panel.

In preparing this year's Mapping Social Cohesion report, we have taken extra steps to ensure we are reflecting the views of all Australians, particularly in view of our vast ethnic and cultural diversity. To do this, 251 targeted surveys were conducted with people from Indian, Middle Eastern and African backgrounds in four different languages (including English). We also conducted 55 in-depth qualitative interviews with people who have

migrated to Australia over the years. This adds to the growing body of information on the attitudes and experiences of migrant Australians collected through the main Life in Australia™ survey, providing a greater, more in-depth and nuanced understanding than ever before. More information on the surveys and interviews are provided in the Appendix of this report.

Social cohesion in Australia is under pressure and declining

In our 2022 report, we remarked that social cohesion appeared to be at an important juncture. Our indicators suggested that cohesion had been declining after a COVID-related spike in 2020. While there were some signs to suggest that cohesion was returning to a pre-pandemic normal, declines in our sense of national pride and belonging, increasing financial strain and a weakening sense of social inclusion and justice were warning signs of further weakening in our social fabric.

The results of Mapping Social Cohesion 2023 reinforce these concerns and underline the precarious and uncertain social environment of Australia in 2023. In the last 12 months, the Scanlon-Monash Index of social cohesion declined by four points to 79, the lowest score on record. Since a peak in social cohesion during the COVID-19 pandemic in November 2020, social cohesion has declined by 13 points.

The economy is the number one concern for many people but climate change and global conflict still weigh heavily on the minds of Australians

In 2023, almost half of us (48 per cent) think that economic issues are the most important set of problems in Australia today, by far the most commonly cited set of problems. The next most commonly cited problem was housing affordability and shortages, cited by 14 per cent of people. Combined, more than three-in-five people (62 per cent) think that economic and housing affordability issues are the most important problem in Australia. This is comfortably the largest share of the population citing these problems since the question was first asked in 2011.

The preoccupation with economic issues coincides with fears for the global economy. Almost nine-in-ten (87 per cent) people are very or quite concerned about the prospect of a severe downturn in the global economy.

People remain concerned about climate change and the environment. One-in-ten (11 per cent) people cited an issue related to the environment, climate change and water as the most important problem facing Australia, down from what we recorded in 2022 (17 per cent), but in line with its average since 2018. More tellingly, two-in-five (39 per cent) people are very concerned about climate change, a similar proportion to last year. Approximately two-thirds of people are at least quite concerned about climate change.

Financial pressures are weighing heavily on social cohesion

The cost of living has been an important daily issue for many Australians this year. Between 2020 and 2023, the proportion of people who are satisfied or very satisfied with their finances declined from 73 per cent in July 2020 to 61 per cent in 2023.

Financial pressures are leading to a range of personal and family hardships, with 12 per cent of people in 2023 saying they often or sometimes went without meals in the last 12 months because there was not enough money for food, 12 per cent saying they often or sometimes could not pay their rent or mortgage payments and 22 per cent saying they often or sometimes could not pay for medicines or health care.

Australians continue to report a high degree of happiness despite cost-of-living pressures. Overall, 79 per cent of people said they were happy or very happy in 2023, similar to levels over the last five years. Happiness and financial wellbeing are strongly related though. In 2023, 60 per cent of people who said they were poor or struggling to pay bills also described themselves as unhappy or very unhappy, compared with 11 per cent of those who described themselves as financially reasonably comfortable. Social isolation is also a concern with 48 per cent of people feeling isolated from others often or some of the time, including 76 per cent of people who are struggling financially.

Single parent families, members of group households and those who live alone are the most likely to report feeling financially stressed, unhappy and isolated from others. Two-thirds (66 per cent) of single parents are at best 'just getting along', 40 per cent have went without medicines or health care often or sometimes in the last 12 months and one-in-five have gone without meals and/or could not pay their rent or mortgage. This coincides with a high level of social isolation, with 63 per cent of single parents reporting that they feel isolated from others sometimes or often.

Young adults are also more likely to report personal and financial stress. Almost half (47 per cent) of 18-44 year olds are at best 'just getting along' financially, two-thirds of 18-24 year olds (66 per cent) report feeling isolated from others sometimes or often, almost half (47 per cent) say the things they do in life are worthwhile only a little or some of the time and 30 per cent say they are unhappy.

The 'fair go' under threat?

The rising cost of living has also drawn our attention to economic inequalities and opportunities in Australia. As a result, our sense of social inclusion and justice has declined substantially and is the most significant factor dragging down our overall social cohesion.

The Scanlon-Monash Index of social inclusion and justice is lower now than it has ever been since 2007. Scores on this domain declined by 9 points in the last year, 34 points since July 2020 and by an estimated 13 points from its average over the 2010s.

The decline is being driven by growing concern for economic inequality and fairness. Traditionally, Australians have felt a strong sense of national pride and belief in the degree of fairness, opportunity and the 'fair go' on offer. Between 2007 and 2013, more than 80 per cent of people on the Mapping Social Cohesion survey agreed that 'Australia is a land of economic opportunity where in the long run, hard work brings a better life'. Relatively small differences were recorded during this time between younger and older Australians, conservative and progressive voters, Australian and overseas-born people and those from higher and lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Belief in the fair go, however, appears to be declining. We estimate that overall agreement that Australia is a land of economic opportunity has declined by 16 percentage points since 2013. In 2023, 63 per cent of agreed that Australia is a land of economic opportunity, still a majority of people, but a substantial decline from recent years.

Trust in government and the political system has eroded since COVID-19

After increasing during the pandemic, trust in government and the political system has returned to pre-pandemic levels. Belief that 'the government in Canberra can be trusted to do the right thing for the Australian people' all or most of the time declined from a peak of 56 per cent of people in November 2020 to 36 per cent in 2023, while the proportion who believe the system of government in Australia works fine as it is (as opposed to needing minor or major changes) declined from 21 per cent to 12 per cent. In 2023, 30 per cent of people believe that government leaders abuse their power most or all of the time, while 83 per cent believe powers are abused at least some of the time.

Distrust in government reflects financial pressures and generational and socioeconomic divides. In 2023, just 18 per cent of people who are struggling to pay their bills or describe themselves as 'poor' trust the Federal Government to do the right thing all or most of the time. Trust in government is also lower among young adults and those with lower levels of education.

People who distrust government report lower levels of social cohesion in several other areas. People who trust the Federal Government only some of the time or never are significantly and substantially less likely to believe that people generally can be trusted, less likely to take great pride in the Australian way of life and culture, less likely to have a great sense of belonging in Australia and less likely to believe migrant diversity makes Australia stronger. Trust in government therefore is at the heart of our social cohesion, intersecting with multiple aspects of Australian society and culture.

Trust in government and concern for inequality are contributing to a declining sense of national pride and belonging

Our sense of belonging in Australia continues its downward trend of the last decade or more. In 2022, the sense of belonging was at its lowest recorded level since 2007. In 2023, belonging is lower still, reflecting a continued decline in our sense of national pride and belonging. The proportion of people who have a great sense of belonging in Australia declined from 63 per cent in 2020 to 48 per cent in 2023. While this is specific to the national level, we also find small but significant declines since 2021 in the degree to which we feel a sense of belonging in our neighbourhoods.

Declines in national pride and belonging in recent years are related to declining trust in government and increasing concern for inequality. Declining trust in the Federal Government is estimated to have contributed to 17 per cent of the overall decline in the sense of national pride and belonging, while declining belief that hard work brings a better life contributes a further 27 per cent to the decline. This result supports the notion that trust in government and perceptions of economic fairness help to shape our sense of national pride and belonging.



Australians have an overwhelmingly positive view of multiculturalism and the contribution of immigrants to Australian society, culture and the economy

As reported last year, high and growing support for multiculturalism and diversity is a great asset to Australia and our sense of harmony and cohesion. In 2023, these sentiments remain very strong, even through the social and economic challenges we have faced over the last year. In 2023, 78 per cent agree that ‘accepting immigrants from many different countries makes Australia stronger’, 89 per cent agree that ‘multiculturalism has been good for Australia’, and 86 per cent agree that ‘immigrants are generally good for Australia’s economy’. These proportions are all similar to where they were last year and reinforce the impressive upward trajectory we have been recording since 2018.

Prejudice and discrimination, however, remain as problems. More than 90 per cent of Australians have very or somewhat positive feelings towards immigrants from Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom. But this proportion drops to 70 per cent for immigrants from India, and to little more than 60 per cent or below for immigrants from Ethiopia, Lebanon, China, Iraq, and Sudan. In terms of attitudes towards religious groups, 27 per cent of people expressed a negative attitude towards Muslims and 16 per cent towards Christians in 2023. Encouragingly, the proportion of people with a positive attitude to people born in China increased from 52 per cent in 2020 to 61 per cent in 2023, while the proportion with a negative attitude towards Muslims declined from 41 per cent in 2019 to 27 per cent in 2023.

The experience of discrimination, however, remains stubbornly common. In 2023, one-in-six (18 per cent) people said they experienced discrimination in the last 12 months because of their skin colour, ethnic origin or religion. This includes more than one-in-three (36 per cent) from non-English speaking backgrounds, 41 per cent of migrants from a Chinese background, 50 per cent of Indian Australian migrants, 45 per cent of African and Middle Eastern Australians and 39 per cent of people who have migrated to Australia in the last 10 years. Within these groups, those who experience discrimination report a significantly weaker sense of belonging and personal wellbeing. Although difficult to precisely measure, this suggests that discrimination contributes to weaker social cohesion and wellbeing, particularly among our newest Australians.

Neighbourhood and community belonging and connections remain strong

Neighbourhood belonging and cohesion generally increased during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 and remain high in 2023. Substantial majorities of people agree or strongly agree that they belong in their neighbourhood (80 per cent in 2023) and that their neighbourhood has a strong sense of community (64 per cent in 2023). Similar sentiments were reported across our wide set of indicators related to neighbourhood belonging and cohesion. We suspect that our shared experience of and collective response to the pandemic had a galvanising effect, helping to bring us together during difficult times, to get to know each other better and to rely on each other for mutual support. These collective experiences means those bonds are not easily broken and can be a lasting positive legacy of the pandemic.

The Voice referendum has been a difficult debate but should not be allowed to interrupt reconciliation

When we ran the Mapping Social Cohesion in July 2023 (three months before the Referendum), support for the Voice was highly polarised. The proportion of Liberal/National voters who thought we should establish the Voice declined from 40 per cent in 2022 to just 21 per cent in 2023, while support among Labor voters decreased more modestly from 70 per cent to 63 per cent.

The hardening of positions in the debate and the growing division is also highlighted by the doubling in the proportion of people who strongly disagreed with the Voice (from 10 per cent in 2022 to 20 per cent in 2023).

Despite division over the Voice referendum, we can take some comfort from the still strongly positive sentiment expressed towards First Nations Australians and their position in wider society. In 2023, 86 per cent of people agreed that the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and the wider Australian community is very important for the nation, similar to where it was in 2022 (89 per cent). A similar proportion (85 per cent) think Indigenous histories and cultures should be included in the school curriculum.

Financial pressures and difficult debates are weighing heavily on social cohesion in Australia but there are reasons for optimism

We are reporting higher levels of financial stress at least since 2020, less trust in government, a weaker sense of national pride and belonging, growing doubts about our future and growing concern for economic inequalities and fairness. In spite of these challenges, we continue to recognise, support and celebrate our ethnic and cultural diversity and the positive impact it has had on Australian society, culture and the economy. We also remain strongly connected and engaged in our neighbourhoods and local communities. And while the challenges we face are substantial and varied, we can see in the incredible richness of the Mapping Social Cohesion study where our efforts to strengthen social cohesion are best focused. In sum, community and government efforts to strengthen our personal, social and material wellbeing and our connections with each other can go a long way to correctly managing our current challenges and ensuring a cohesive, resilient and vibrant society in the years to come.



AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY IN 2023

Australia has been faced with a challenging set of circumstances in recent years. Since the end of 2019, we have experienced severe bushfires, COVID-19, severe floods and a cost-of-living crisis to name but a few, with no respite between events and in the midst of a world struggling with geopolitical tensions and conflict.

Even now at the end of 2023, we are only just emerging from a difficult and challenging debate over the Voice referendum and renewed conflict in the Middle East. And that is just the last few years. In truth, current events add to longer running domestic and international issues including a divisive and tumultuous political environment, difficult debates over issues of climate change and social change, stagnating material standards of living and growing concern for social and economic inequality.

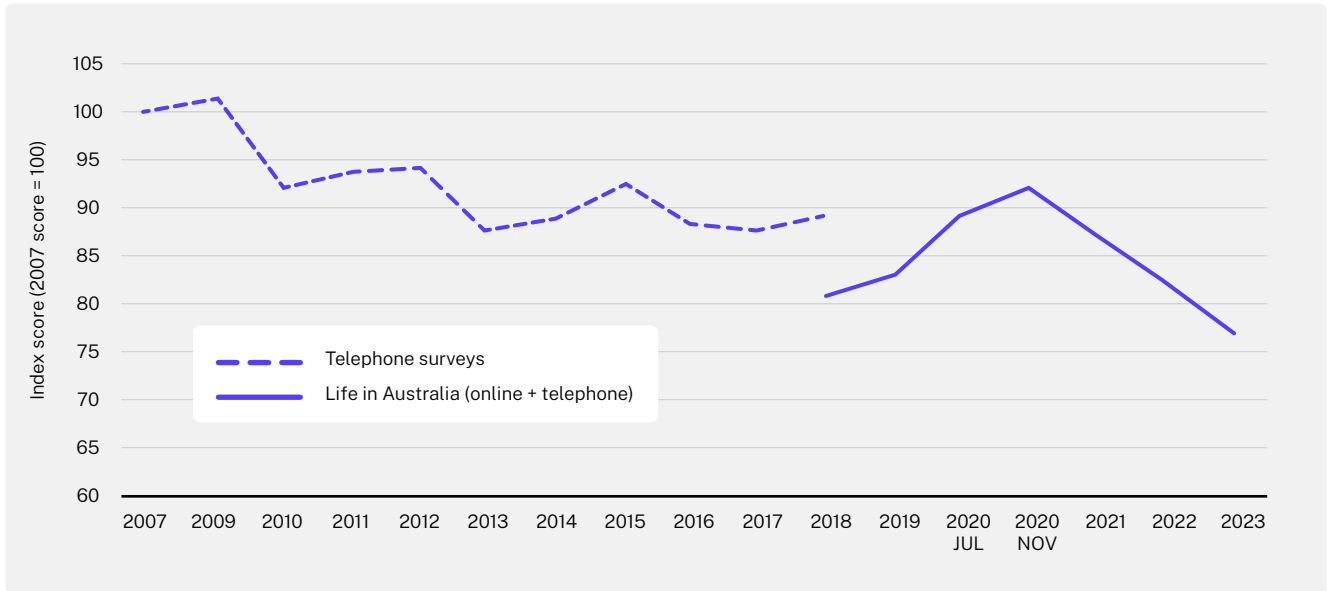
Recent and long running events and trends place pressure on Australian society and our social cohesion. Social and political polarisation and declining national pride and belonging have been trends noted in both Australia and around the world (Haerper et al., 2022; UN, 2023). This is not to say we are not connected as a society. Indeed, we have been remarkably resilient, most notably through the COVID-19 pandemic, and remarkably connected, including through this year's football World Cup. Our social cohesion is fragile though and, as we reported last year, at a crucial juncture. In this chapter, we outline the key trends in social cohesion in 2023, the major issues we face and how they are impacting Australian society.

Social cohesion in Australia is under pressure and declining

In our 2022 report, we remarked that social cohesion appeared to be at an important juncture. Our indicators suggested that cohesion had been declining after a COVID-related spike in 2020. While there were some signs to suggest that cohesion was returning to a pre-pandemic normal, continued declines in our sense of national pride and belonging, increasing financial strains and a weakening sense of social inclusion and justice were warning signs of further weakening in our social fabric.

The results of Mapping Social Cohesion 2023 reinforce these concerns. In the last 12 months, the Scanlon-Monash Index of social cohesion declined by four points to 79, the lowest score on record. Since a peak in social cohesion during the COVID-19 pandemic in November 2020, social cohesion has declined by 13 points. The overall trajectory of the Scanlon-Monash Index of Social Cohesion since 2007 is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 The Scanlon-Monash Index of Social Cohesion, 2007 to 2018 (telephone surveys) and 2018 to 2023 (online and telephone)



As we have explained in previous reports (see also the Appendix in this report), the time series was interrupted in 2018 by the transition from a telephone survey to a largely online survey through the Social Research Centre’s Life in Australia™ panel. We estimate this transition reduced overall social cohesion scores by 7 points as people were more likely to admit feeling financially dissatisfied, unhappy and less connected to others in society when they could complete the survey online rather than having to speak to a person over the telephone.

Taking this transition into account, we estimate that social cohesion in 2023 is 14 points lower than it was in 2007 and 4 points lower than its average across the 2013–2019 period.

Social cohesion has declined in almost all domains over the last year

The degree of political participation has been reasonably stable in recent years, with scores hovering within a narrow range between 93 and 97 since 2018. However, scores on each of the other domains of the Scanlon-Monash Index of social cohesion have been declining. Scores are shown in Table 1 for the period 2007-2018 (when the survey was run as a telephone survey) and in Table 2 for the period 2018-2023 (when the survey was run as a mostly online survey with the Life in Australia™ panel).

The sense of social inclusion and justice in Australia has declined substantially and is the most significant factor dragging down our overall social cohesion. The Scanlon-Monash Index of social inclusion and justice is lower now than it has ever been since 2007. Scores on this domain declined by 9 points in the last year, 34 points since July 2020 and by an estimated 13 points from its average over the 2010s. We explain more about how and why this has happened later in the report (see the chapter ‘Economic inequality, social inclusion & justice’). It is clear though that the decline is being driven by growing concern for economic inequality and doubts about the degree of fairness in Australia, with most people believing the gap in incomes between rich and poor is too large and declining shares believing that hard work will always help people get ahead and that low-income earners receive enough government support.

At personal and household levels, financial and cost-of-living pressures are weighing heavily on our sense of worth. The Scanlon-Monash Index of worth declined by 3 points in the last year. Scores on the worth domain were reasonably stable across the 2010s and indeed increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. The sense of worth though has declined by 9 points since 2020 and is now an estimated 3 points lower than its average across the 2010s. We describe these trends in the chapter ‘The economy, cost of living and the sense of worth’, pointing in particular to the increase in financial dissatisfaction in recent years and the current experience of financial hardship.

Australians are increasingly pessimistic about the future and the experience of discrimination has become more common. Both of these have contributed to a decline in the acceptance domain of social cohesion. The Scanlon-Monash Index of acceptance and rejection declined by a substantial 8 points between 2022 and 2023, reversing the gains achieved between November 2020 and July 2022. Scores are now back to where they were in the period from 2016 to 2020. We explain these trends in the chapter ‘Multiculturalism, diversity and acceptance’. Generally, it appears that we continue to recognise the value of our diversity and multiculturalism to a great extent. However, a higher proportion of us report experiencing discrimination in the last 12 months, while we are more likely to believe our lives will be worse in three or four years.

The sense of national pride and belonging in Australia continues its downward trend. The Scanlon-Monash Index of belonging declined by 3 points in the last year, adding to the longer term downward trend. In 2022, the sense of belonging was at its lowest recorded level since 2007. In 2023, belonging is lower still, reflecting a continued decline in our sense of national pride and belonging. While this is specific to the national level, we also find small but significant declines since 2021 in the degree to which we feel a sense of belonging in our neighbourhoods. See the chapter ‘Belonging and engagement in Australia and our communities’ for more information on these trends.

Table 1 The Scanlon-Monash 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
Overall social cohesion	100	101	93	94	94	89	90	93	89	89	90

Table 2 The Scanlon-Monash Index of Social Cohesion, 2018 to 2023 (Life in Australia™ – online and telephone)

MEASURE	2018	2019	JUL 2020	NOV 2020	2021	2022	2023	CHANGE 2022-2023	CHANGE 2020-2023
1. Sense of belonging	85	86	88	88	84	81	78	-3	-10
2. Sense of worth	77	80	84	83	82	78	75	-3	-8
3. Social inclusion and justice	88	93	112	111	97	86	77	-9	-34
4. Political participation	95	93	95	94	95	97	96	-1	+1
5. Acceptance and rejection	63	67	67	87	81	74	65	-9	-2
Overall social cohesion	82	84	89	92	88	83	78	-5	-10

Australians have become a little less trusting of other people and more pessimistic about the future

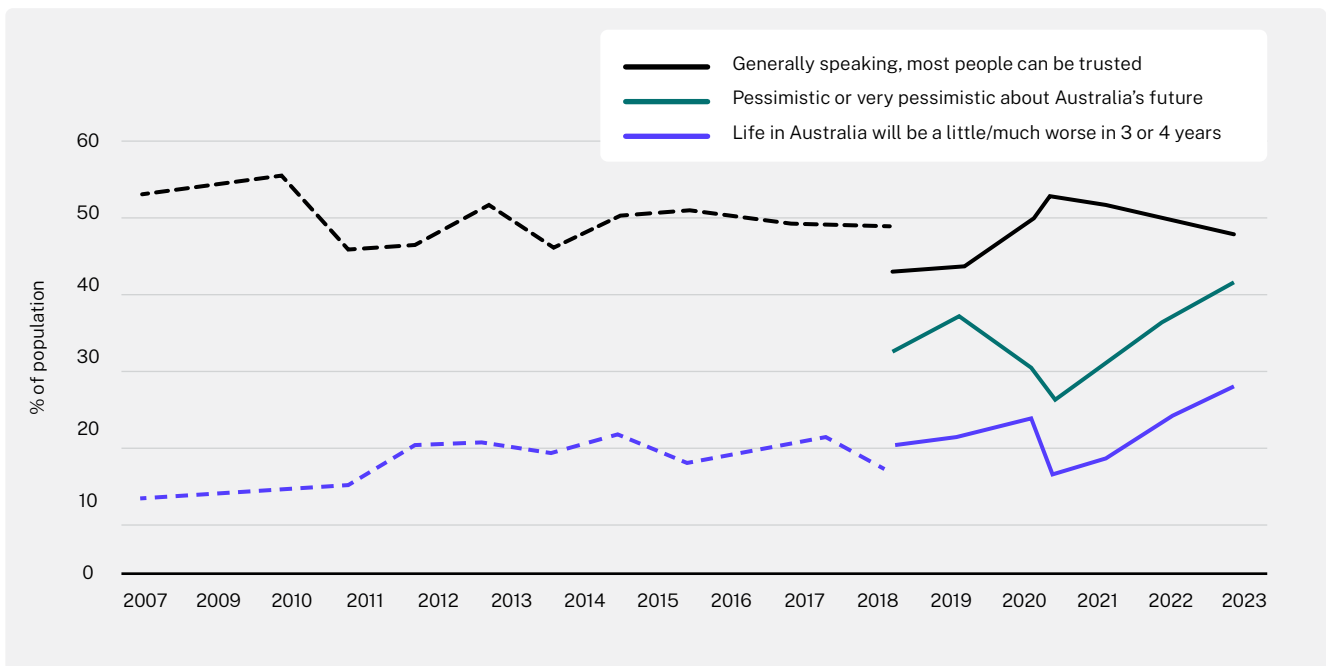
In 2023, 47 per cent of people believed that generally speaking, most people can be trusted, down from 52 per cent in November 2020. Over the same period, the proportion of people who are pessimistic about Australia’s future has increased from 24 per cent to 41 per cent, while the proportion who believe their life in Australia will be worse over the next three or four years has increased from 14 per cent to 26 per cent. While the level of trust is similar to where it has been over the last 16 years, pessimism towards the future is more common now than ever before reported on the Mapping Social Cohesion survey (see Figure 2).

Young adults and those experiencing financial disadvantage are the least trusting and the most pessimistic. In 2023, just 37 per cent of 18-24 year olds believed that most people can be trusted, compared with 52 per cent of people aged 65 years and over. Almost half (47 per cent) of 25-34 year olds and 42 per cent of 18-24 year olds are pessimistic about Australia’s future, compared with 35 per cent of people 65 and over. Similarly, just 31 per cent of people who describe themselves as struggling to pay bills or poor

and 37 per cent of those who have only up to a Year 11 education believe most people can be trusted, compared with 65 per cent of those who describe themselves as living prosperously or very comfortably and 60 per cent of those with a postgraduate degree. Almost two-in-three (63 per cent) people who are poor or struggling to pay bills are pessimistic about Australia’s future, while almost half (47 per cent) think their own lives will be worse in three or four years.

The decline in trust and increasing pessimism have been largest among lower socioeconomic groups and divided according to political preferences. Since its peak in November 2020, declines in trust have been greatest among Greens voters (17 percentage points), 45-54 year olds (10 percentage points) and people who live in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods (10 percentage points). The increase in pessimism has been strongest among conservative voters and people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The proportion of Liberal/National voters who believe their life will be worse in three or four years increased by 19 percentage points between November 2020 and 2023, while the proportion increased by 15 points for people living in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Figure 2 Trust in other people and pessimism towards Australia’s future and our own lives, 2007 to 2018 (telephone surveys) and 2018 to 2023 (online & telephone)



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™. Pessimism about Australia’s future was first asked in the 2018 survey.

The economy is still the number one concern for many people but climate change, geopolitical tensions and the threat of war still weigh heavily on the minds of Australians

In 2023, almost half of us (48 per cent) think that economic issues are the most important set of problems in Australia today, by far the most commonly cited set of problems. The next most commonly cited problem was housing affordability and shortages, cited by 14 per cent of people. Combined, more than three-in-five people (62 per cent) think that economic and housing affordability issues are the most important problem in Australia. As shown in Figure 3, this is comfortably the largest share of the population citing these problems since the question was first asked in 2011.

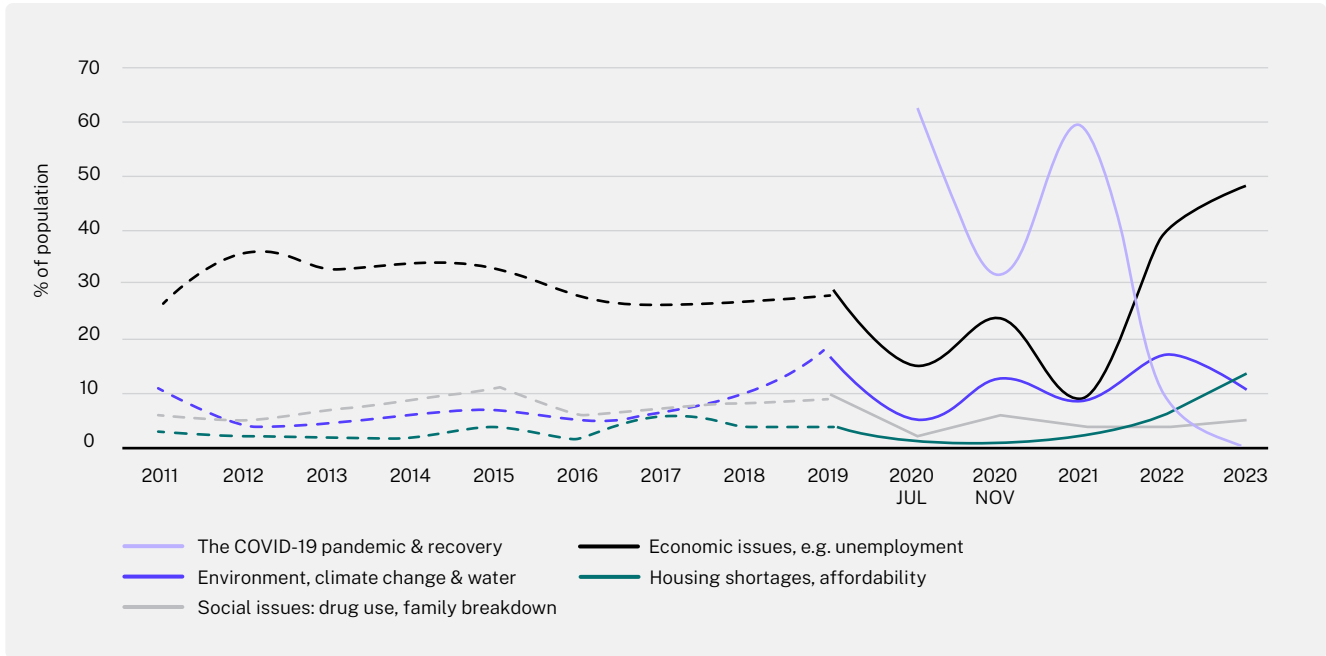
The preoccupation with economic issues coincides with fears for the global economy. Almost nine-in-ten (87 per cent) people are very or quite concerned about the prospect of a severe downturn in the global economy. As shown in Figure 4, we recorded a similar proportion in 2022 when we first included questions in the survey measuring levels of concern for selected major issues. Of the five major issues we asked about (listed in Figure 4), people were most likely to be at least quite concerned about the threat of a global downturn.

People remain concerned about climate change and the environment despite it taking somewhat of a backseat to economic issues. One-in-ten (11 per cent) people cited an issue related to the environment, climate change and water as the most important problem facing Australia (Figure 3), down from what we recorded in 2022 (17 per cent), but in line with its average since 2018. More tellingly, two-in-five (39 per cent) people are very concerned about climate change, a similar proportion to last year. Of the five issues we ask about (listed in Figure 4), climate change is the issue that people are most likely to be very concerned about. In total, approximately two-thirds of people are at least quite concerned about climate change. This suggests that while cost-of-living issues are top-of-mind at the moment, the level of concern about climate change persists.

Concern over geopolitical issues has eased over the last year. The proportion of people who are somewhat or very concerned about Australia-China relations declined from 76 per cent in 2022 to 57 per cent in 2023. The proportion at least somewhat concerned about a military conflict declined from 54 per cent to 49 per cent. The proportion who are very or quite concerned about COVID-19 and other potential pandemics declined from 62 per cent to 36 per cent.

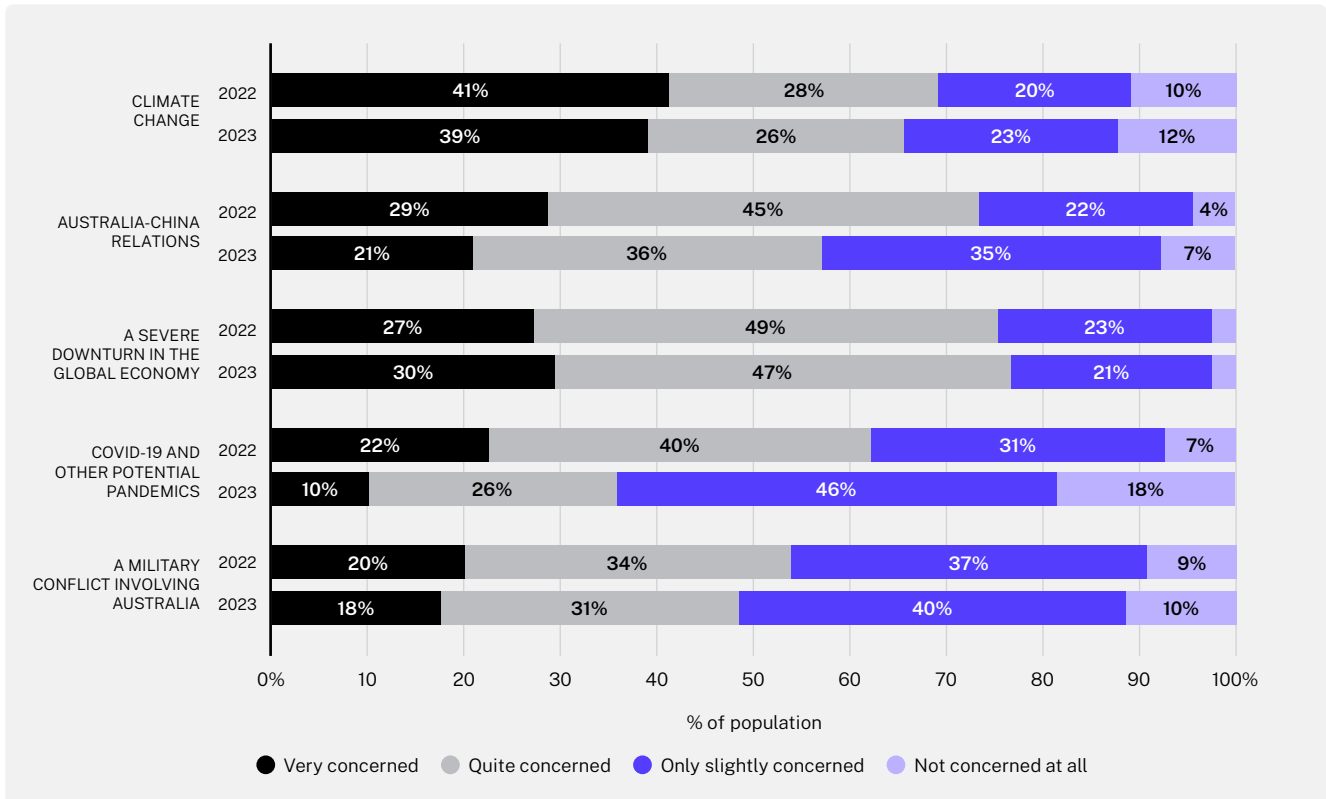


Figure 3 'What do you think is the most important problem facing Australia today?' proportion of population, 2007 to 2018 (telephone surveys) and 2018 to 2023 (online and telephone)



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™

Figure 4 Concern for major issues facing Australia, 2022 and 2023



The Voice referendum has been a difficult debate but should not be allowed to interrupt reconciliation

When we ran the Mapping Social Cohesion survey in July 2023 – three months before the Referendum – 49 per cent of people agreed (21 per cent) or strongly agreed (28 per cent) that we should amend the Constitution to establish the Voice, 30 per cent disagreed (10 per cent) or strongly disagreed (20 per cent) and 20 per cent were unsure. Support for the Voice declined by 10 percentage points between 2022 and 2023 while opposition increased by 11 points.

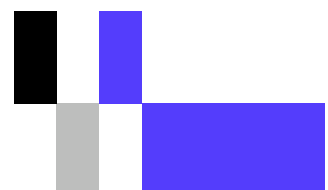
Support for the Voice has been highly polarised on political and demographic lines and this polarisation expanded substantially between 2022 and 2023. The proportion of Liberal/National voters who thought we should establish the Voice declined from 40 per cent in 2022 to just 21 per cent in 2023, while support among Labor voters decreased more modestly from 70 per cent to 63 per cent. A similar trend was found across age groups with larger declines among older people than younger people over the last year. The hardening of positions in the debate and the growing division is also highlighted by the doubling in the proportion of people who strongly disagreed with the Voice (from 10 per cent in July 2022 to 20 per cent in July 2023).

Divisions over the Voice may also be affecting Australia’s social cohesion. Supporters of the Voice report a weaker sense of belonging, worth and social justice than people who oppose the Voice. Much of this appears to be explained by demographic characteristics including the younger age profile of Voice supporters and their concern for issues of cost of living, economic inequality and trust in government. Nevertheless, in mirroring differences and inequalities in social cohesion, division over the Voice potentially adds to social divides and polarisation.

Despite division over the Voice referendum, we can take some comfort from the still strongly positive sentiment expressed towards First Nations Australians and their position in wider society. In 2023, 86 per cent of people agreed that the relationship between Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islanders and the wider Australian community is very important for the nation, similar to where it was in 2022 (89 per cent). This sentiment was near universally shared among people who agreed (96 per cent) and strongly agreed (98 per cent) that the Voice should be established. Importantly, the large majority of people who opposed the Voice nevertheless agree that the relationship is very important: 79 per cent in the case of people who disagreed with the Voice and 62 per cent who strongly disagreed. Similarly, 85 per cent of people agree that it is important that Indigenous histories and cultures are taught in the school curriculum, including 77 per cent of people who disagreed with the Voice and 55 per cent who strongly disagreed.

Strikingly, support for the Voice was consistently high for overseas-born Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds (57 per cent in 2022 and 58 per cent in 2023). All of the decline in support for the Voice between July 2022 and 2023 was recorded among Australian-born people (a decline of 11 points) and overseas-born people from English speaking backgrounds (a decline of 10 points). Overseas-born Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds are also very likely to agree that the relationship between First Nations and the wider Australian community is important (87 per cent) and that Indigenous histories and cultures should be included in the school curriculum (89 per cent).



Social cohesion in Australia has been declining, straining under the weight of global economic pressures, geopolitical conflict and a polarising debate over the Voice referendum

When the Mapping Social Cohesion survey was conducted in July 2023, the economy was the most important issue for by far the largest number of Australians. At the time, Australians expressed deep concern for the state of the national and global economy, were themselves faced with increasing financial pressures and were increasingly concerned for economic inequality and the economic opportunities available to all Australians.

As we will explain in later chapters, growing economic concerns are also coinciding with a declining sense of belonging, weaker trust in government and growing pessimism for the future. Social and political divisions and global conflict add to and potentially amplify the pressures and strain on our social cohesion. Australians remain connected and engaged particularly in their local communities though and this can be an important resource in managing the challenges ahead.





BELONGING & ENGAGEMENT IN AUSTRALIA & OUR COMMUNITIES

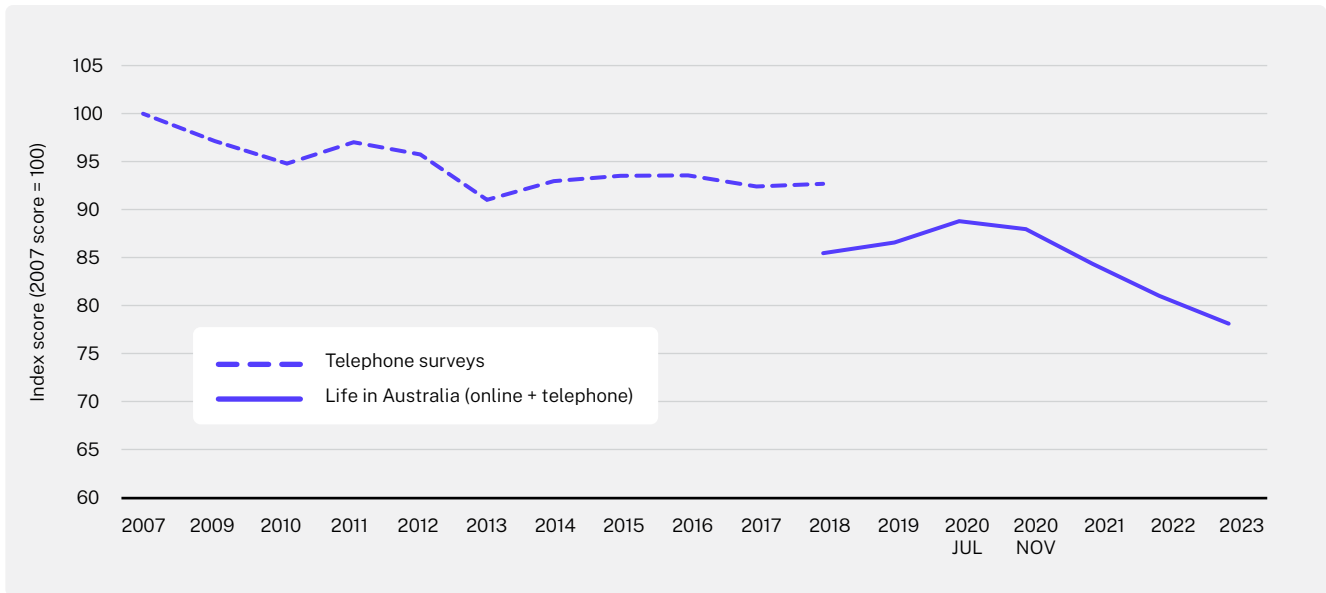
Our sense of belonging in Australia and our communities is a core component of our personal wellbeing and collective social cohesion. Belonging is a foundation of our identities and active involvement in society, providing the emotional ties and practical actions that maintain our social fabric and keep our communities connected (O'Donnell et al., 2023).

While Australians have traditionally reported a strong sense of pride and belonging in Australia, the Mapping Social Cohesion study has also been recording steady declines over the last decade or more. To the extent these declines result from normal shifts in social and cultural attitudes and tastes, this may not be a problem. However, as we explain in this chapter, the relationship between national pride and belonging and personal wellbeing, financial hardship, distrust in government and social and economic inequalities is a cause of concern. As we touch on in this chapter though, the strong connections we have in our neighbourhoods and local communities are a valuable resource in efforts to strengthen social bonds and connections more widely.

Australians' sense of national belonging and pride is declining

The Scanlon-Monash Index of belonging declined by three points between 2022 and 2023. As shown in Figure 5, this continues a long-term downward decline in belonging. Belonging scores declined from the benchmark score of 100 in 2007 to 91 in 2013 before stabilising until at least 2018. After we switched the survey from telephone polling to the primarily online Life in Australia™ panel in 2018, scores increased modestly, from 85 in 2018 to 88 in July 2020, but in 2022 they fell below their pre-pandemic level to 81, and then to a new low of 78 in 2023.

Figure 5 The Scanlon-Monash Index of belonging, 2007 to 2018 (telephone surveys) and 2018 to 2023 (online and telephone)



The decline in belonging has been driven by three key components:

- > The proportion of people who feel a great ‘sense of belonging in Australia’ declined from 77 per cent in 2007 to 64 per cent in 2018, in our telephone surveys. When the survey transitioned to the Life in Australia™ panel, the proportion increased from 57 per cent in 2018 to 63 per cent in July 2020 but fell to 52 per cent in 2022 and 48 per cent in 2023 (see Figure 6). This proportion has declined by an average of 1.4 percentage points every year between 2007 and 2023, or a total of 22 percentage points over the 16 years, after removing the effect of the transition from telephone to internet surveys.
- > The proportion of people who take great ‘pride in the Australian way of life and culture’ was reasonably stable between 2007 and 2018, moving from 58 per cent to 55 per cent in our telephone surveys. On the Life in Australia™ panel, the proportion increased from 43 per cent in 2018 to 48 per cent in 2020 but fell to 37 per cent in 2022 and 33 per cent in 2023 (see Table 3). Overall, pride in the Australian way of life and culture has declined by 13 percentage points since 2007.

- > The proportion of people who strongly agree that ‘in the modern world, maintaining the Australian way of life and culture is important’ declined from 65 per cent in 2007 to 58 per cent in 2018 in our telephone surveys. On Life in Australia™, the proportion increased slightly from 46 per cent in 2018 to 48 per cent in 2020 but fell to 42 per cent in 2022 and 40 per cent in 2023. Overall, belief in the importance of the Australian way of life and culture declined by 13 percentage points between 2007 and 2023.

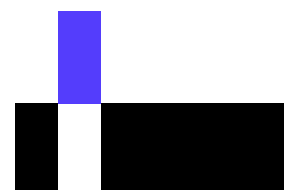


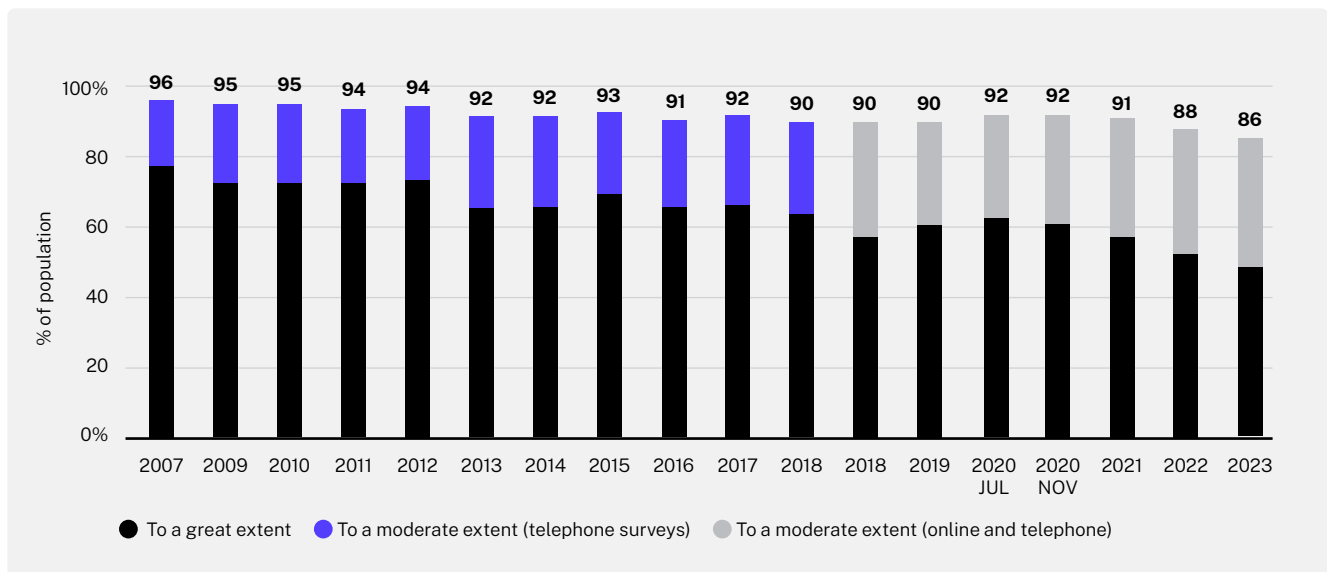
Table 3 Responses to questions on the sense of belonging measure, 2018 to 2023

		2018	2019	JUL 2020	NOV 2020	2021	2022	2023
		% OF RESPONDENTS						
SENSE OF BELONGING IN AUSTRALIA	Great extent	57	61	63	61	58	52	48
	Moderate extent	33	29	29	31	34	35	38
	Total great/moderate	90	90	92	92	91	88	86
PRIDE IN THE AUSTRALIAN WAY OF LIFE AND CULTURE	Great extent	43	45	48	46	42	37	33
	Moderate extent	44	41	41	42	45	46	48
	Total agree	87	85	89	88	86	83	82
IMPORTANT TO MAINTAIN WAY OF LIFE AND CULTURE	Strongly agree	46	49	48	47	44	42	40
	Agree	42	37	41	43	43	44	46
	Total agree	88	87	89	90	87	87	87

The majority of people continue to have at least a moderate sense of pride and belonging in Australia, despite declines in the very strongest levels. So, for example, while the proportion who have a great sense of belonging in Australia has declined substantially, the very large majority of people (86 per cent) have at least a moderate sense of belonging in 2023. Likewise, 87 per cent of people at least agree (if not strongly agree)

that maintaining the Australian way of life and culture is important, while 82 per cent have at least moderate pride in the Australian way of life and culture. These numbers are somewhat lower than where they have been over the last 16 years, indicating that while national pride and belonging have been declining, they are coming off a very high base.

Figure 6 'To what extent do you have a sense of belonging in Australia?' 2007 to 2023



The belonging and connections we have in our neighbourhoods and local communities remain strong

As we reported in our Mapping Social Cohesion 2022 report, neighbourhood belonging and cohesion generally increased during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 and remained high in 2022. The information we collected through the survey and the qualitative interviews we conducted led us to suspect that our collective response to the pandemic had a galvanising effect, helping to bring us together during difficult times, to get to know each other better and to rely on each other for mutual support. These collective experiences means those bonds are not easily broken and can be a lasting positive legacy of the pandemic.

In 2023, indicators of neighbourhood belonging and cohesion have declined somewhat but remain at very high levels. Substantial majorities of people agree or strongly agree that they belong in their neighbourhood (80 per cent in 2023) and that their neighbourhood has a strong sense of community (64 per cent in 2023). Similar sentiments were reported across our wide set of indicators related to neighbourhood belonging and cohesion. Table 4 gives a summary of responses to questions of neighbourhood belonging and cohesion since 2018. In summary:

- The proportion of people who agree or strongly agree with the statement ‘People in your local area are willing to help their neighbours’ increased from 81 per cent in 2019 to a high of 87 per cent in November 2020. Since then, the proportion has declined to 85 per cent in 2022 and 83 per cent in 2023. As shown in Figure 7, this 2023 level is broadly in line with its long-term average.
- The proportion of people who agree or strongly agree that their local area ‘is a place where people from different national or ethnic backgrounds get on well together’ increased significantly from 78 per cent in 2019 to 84 per cent in 2020 and 2021. This figure has remained at a high level since and above its long-term average, sitting at 83 per cent in 2022 and 82 per cent in 2023. As Figure 8 shows, this proportion has been high since at least 2010 but has been at an even higher plateau since 2020.
- Approximately two-in-three people (64 per cent) feel fairly or very safe walking alone at night in their local area in 2023. This proportion has fluctuated in recent years but is similar to its average level since 2018. Almost all people (97 per cent) feel at least fairly safe at home during the day.
- Approximately one-in-six people (18 per cent) in 2023 believe their local area is getting better while 62 per cent believe their area is unchanged. Approximately, one-in-five people (19 per cent) believe the area is getting worse, a proportion that has increased since 2020 (16 per cent) but is similar to where it was in 2019 (20 per cent).
- The proportion of people who agree or strongly agree that they are ‘able to have a real say on issues that are important’ has declined somewhat to 57 per cent in 2023. This proportion had reached a high of 65 per cent in 2020.
- Four-in-five people (80 per cent) agree or strongly agree with the statement ‘I feel I belong in my neighbourhood. This proportion has declined modestly from 83 per cent in 2021 and 82 per cent in 2022, driven by a three point decline in the proportion who strongly agree with this statement.
- Almost two-in-three people (64 per cent) agree or strongly agree that their ‘neighbourhood has a strong sense of community’ in 2023. This proportion has declined slightly from 67 per cent in 2021 and 66 per cent in 2022.
- Almost all people (97 per cent) feel very or fairly safe at home by themselves during the day in 2023. The proportion who feel very safe though has declined modestly from 74 per cent in 2021 and 2022 to 70 per cent in 2023.

Table 4 Responses to questions on neighbourhood belonging and cohesion, 2018 to 2023

		2018	2019	JUL 2020	NOV 2020	2021	2022	2023
		% OF RESPONDENTS						
NEIGHBOURS WILLING TO HELP	Strongly agree	18	18	20	18	18	18	15
	Agree	63	62	66	69	69	68	69
	Total agree	81	81	86	87	86	85	83
NEIGHBOURS GET ON WELL	Strongly agree	11	13	14	14	11	12	10
	Agree	65	66	70	70	73	71	72
	Total agree	76	78	84	84	84	83	82
FEEL SAFE AT NIGHT	Very safe	20	21	19	19	22	26	23
	Fairly safe	40	43	40	46	41	40	41
	Total fairly/very safe	60	63	59	66	63	66	64
LOCAL AREA GETTING BETTER	Much better	2	2	1	1	2	2	2
	Better	17	18	13	14	23	19	16
	Unchanged	58	60	70	72	57	62	62
	Total	78	80	84	88	82	83	80
HAVE A SAY IN LOCAL AREA	Strongly agree	7	9	7		6	6	5
	Agree	51	52	58		56	56	52
	Total agree	58	61	65		62	62	57
NEIGHBOURHOOD BELONGING	Strongly agree					15	15	12
	Agree					68	67	68
	Total agree					83	82	80
SENSE OF COMMUNITY	Strongly agree					15	12	11
	Agree					52	54	53
	Total agree					67	66	64
FEEL SAFE AT HOME DURING THE DAY	Very safe					74	74	70
	Fairly safe					24	24	27
	Total very/fairly safe					98	98	97

Figure 7 'People in your local area are willing to help their neighbours', 2009 to 2018 (telephone surveys) and 2018 to 2023 (online and telephone)

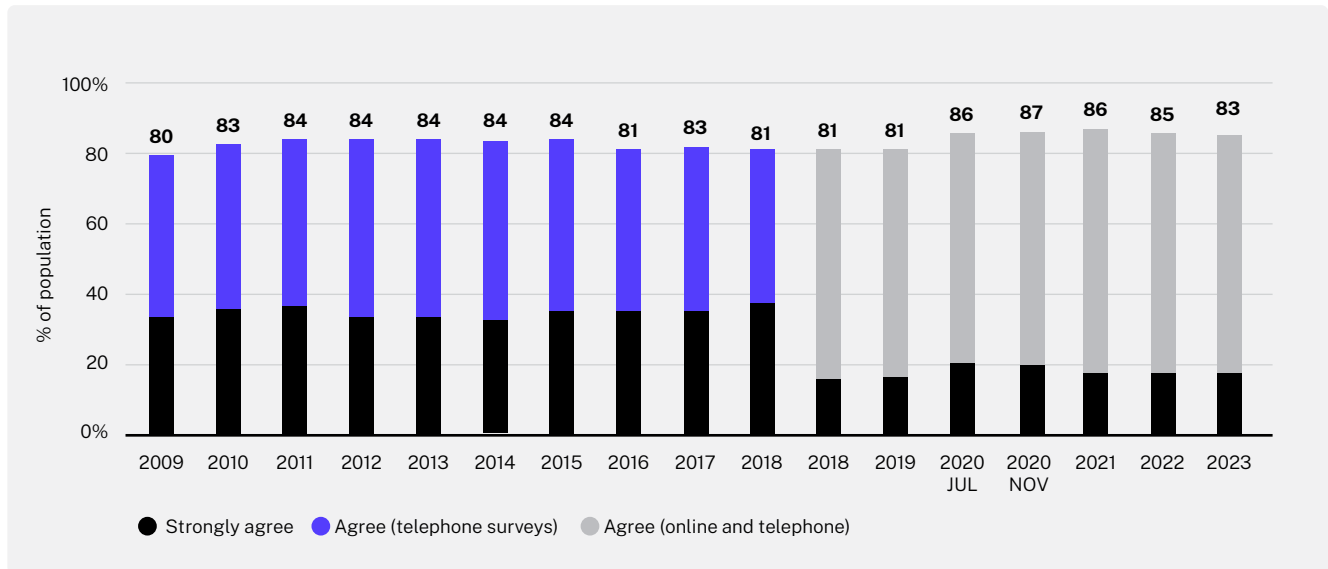
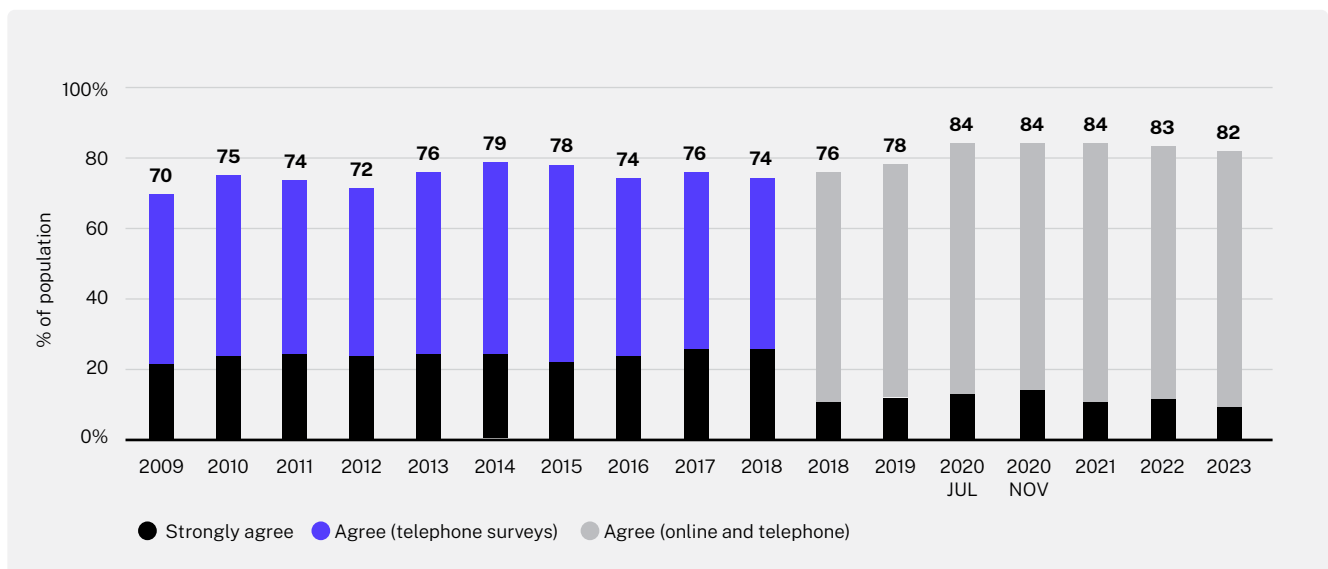


Figure 8 'My local area is a place where people from different national or ethnic backgrounds get on well together', 2009 to 2018 (telephone surveys) and 2018 to 2023 (online and telephone)



Engagement in social, community and civic groups has been stable over the last two years

To track the extent to which Australians are engaged and participating in their communities, the Mapping Social Cohesion survey asks people whether they have been actively involved in three different types of groups in the last 12 months and whether they have provided any unpaid help to anyone outside the household in the last four weeks. The three types of groups are:

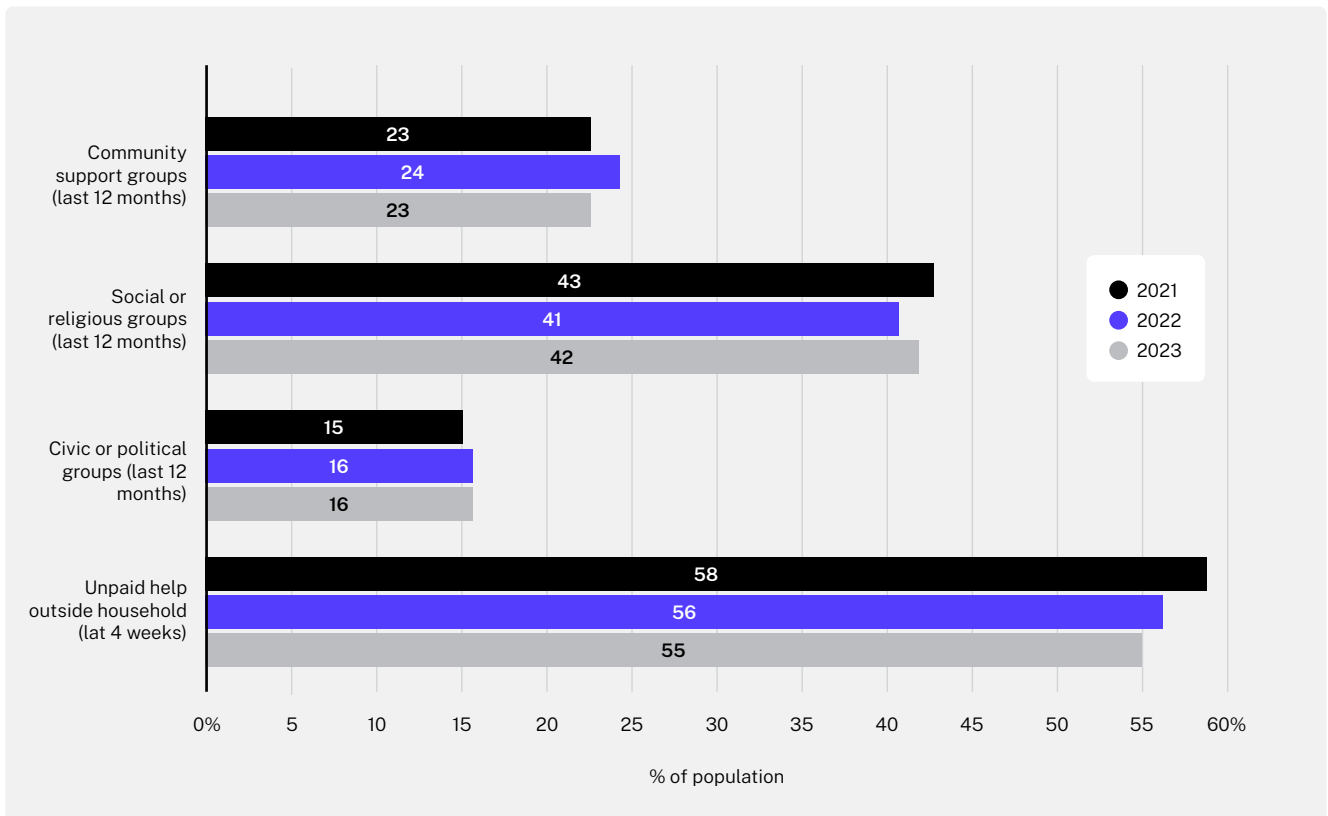
- > **Community support groups** which includes groups like Rotary, Lions, the RSL, St Vincent de Paul, Save the Children, the Australian Red Cross and State Emergency Services;
- > **Social and religious groups** which includes sports clubs, churches, mosques and temples, ethnic clubs and art, craft and hobby groups; and

- > **Civic and political groups** which includes trade unions, professional associations, political parties, environment and civil rights groups, bodies corporate and consumer associations.

In 2023, 23 per cent had been involved in a community support group in the previous 12 months, 42 per cent in a social or religious group, and 16 per cent in a civic or political group. As shown in Figure 9, these proportions have remained reasonably unchanged since 2021. Overall, 55 per cent of people had been actively involved with either a social, community support or civic/political group in 2023, nearly identical to the proportions recorded in 2022 (54 per cent) and 2021 (54 per cent).

While these measures reflect the degree of participation in formal organisations, informal unpaid help is at least as common. In 2023, 55 per cent of people had provided unpaid help to someone outside their household in just the four weeks before our survey. This represents a significant though slight decline from 58 per cent in 2021.

Figure 9 Involvement in community, social, religious, civic, and political groups and unpaid help, Life in Australia™, 2021, 2022 and 2023



Belonging and engagement vary across age

As shown in Table 5, just 26 per cent of 18-24 year olds and 31 per cent of 25-34 year olds have a great sense of belonging in Australia in 2023, compared with 72 per cent of people aged 65 years and over. Declines in the sense of national belonging though have been recorded across all age groups in just the last two years and indeed across all the demographic and socioeconomic groups shown in Table 5.

Older and retired Australians are the most likely to be involved in social, community and civic groups. More than two-in-three (68 per cent) people aged 75 years and over – 95 per cent of whom are retired – and 61 per cent of all retired people have been actively involved in social, religious, community, civic and/or political groups in the last 12 months. People aged 25-34 years are somewhat less likely to be involved in these groups (47 per cent), though still remain connected to their communities.

As we will explore later in this report, the sense of national belonging and participation is also somewhat weaker for migrant Australians (see the chapter ‘Becoming Australian’), while declining belonging has been particularly common among Liberal/National voters (see the chapter ‘Confidence in government and the strength of democracy’). The large decline in belonging amongst ‘other’ voters between 2021 and 2022 (see Table 5) is likely explained in part by the rise of the ‘Teal’ independents at the 2022 election, so it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions about changes in belonging among minor party and independent voters.

Belonging and engagement are weaker among disadvantaged groups

As shown in Table 5, just 36 per cent of those who said they were struggling financially or poor have a great sense of belonging in Australia in 2023. Although this proportion has declined by a substantial 10 percentage points since 2021, the decline has been larger among people who describe themselves as prosperous or very comfortable (a decline of 13 percentage points to 55 per cent in 2023).

People who are struggling financially are also less likely than those who regard themselves as well off to be involved in social, community and civic groups. In 2023, 50 per cent of people who were struggling and 51 per cent of those who were ‘just getting along’ were actively involved in a social or religious group, community support group and/or a civic/political group, compared with 62 per cent of those living prosperously or very comfortably and 57 per cent of those living reasonably comfortably.

On the other hand, people who are struggling financially – women specifically – are significantly more likely to provide unpaid help to people outside the household. In 2023, two-in-three women (68 per cent) who said they were struggling financially were providing unpaid help, compared with 58 per cent of women and 53 per cent of all people who said they were at least reasonably comfortable financially. After accounting for demographic characteristics and a range of socioeconomic circumstances, we estimate that for a woman working a part-time job and renting, providing unpaid help is associated with a 53 per cent higher risk of financial struggles (10 per cent higher risk for men). This suggests that unpaid care is a particular burden on women who are struggling and potentially contributes to increased financial difficulties.

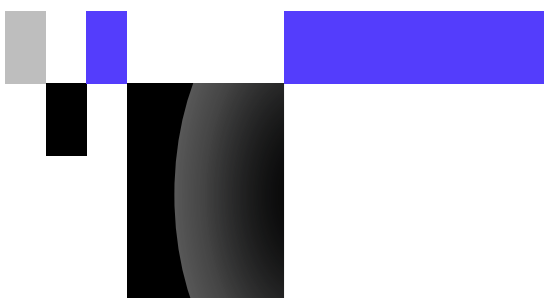


Table 5 'To what extent do you have a sense of belonging in Australia?' Proportion of people who say 'to a great extent', Life in Australia™, 2021, 2022, 2023

GENDER	Female	Male	Persons			
	58, 54, 51	57, 51, 47	58, 52, 48			
AGE	65+	55-64	45-54	35-44	25-34	18-24
	78, 75, 72	73, 67, 62	66, 57, 52	47, 41, 36	42, 31, 31	29, 34, 26
STATE	NSW	Victoria	Queensland	South Australia	Western Australia	
	58, 53, 48	53, 49, 45	57, 55, 53	65, 51, 48	60, 55, 49	
CAPITAL CITY/ REST OF STATE	Capital city	Rest of state				
	54, 49, 46	65, 59, 54				
HIGHEST EDUCATION	Postgraduate degree	Bachelor degree	Certificate/ diploma	Year 12	Up to Year 11	
	48, 46, 43	54, 46, 43	62, 55, 52	47, 44, 44	70, 66, 57	
FINANCIAL SITUATION	Prosperous/ very comfortable	Reasonably comfortable	Just getting along	Struggling to pay bills/ poor		
	68, 63, 55	60, 56, 54	48, 43, 42	46, 40, 36		
VOTE	Labor	Liberal/ National	Greens	Other		
	56, 55, 52	71, 69, 61	39, 37, 34	68, 48, 44		
WHERE BORN & FIRST LANGUAGE	Australian-born	Foreign-born/ English	Foreign-born/ non-English			
	65, 58, 53	48, 46, 44	37, 35, 31			
HOUSEHOLD TYPE	Couple no children	Couple parent	Single parent	Group household	Live alone	
	NA, 61, 58	NA, 51, 45	NA, 47, 39	NA, 33, 36	NA, 54, 55	
HOUSING TENURE	Own outright	Mortgage	Rent			
	NA, 73, 65	NA, 54, 46	NA, 39, 34			
NEIGHBOURHOOD DISADVANTAGE	Quintile 1 (Low disadvantage)	Quintile 2	Quintile 3	Quintile 4	Quintile 5 (High disadvantage)	
	57, 52, 51	61, 53, 48	56, 51, 46	58, 54, 51	56, 52, 45	

Notes: Neighbourhood disadvantage is measured with the ABS (2018) Socio-economic Indexes For Areas (SEIFA) Index of Relative Socio-economic disadvantage. Index scores are based on respondents' postcode and grouped into five equally sized quintiles.

Trust in government and concern for inequality are contributing to declining national pride and belonging

People who trust the Federal Government are much more likely to have a great sense of belonging in Australia. Approximately 60 per cent of people who trust the government all or most of the time have a great sense of belonging in Australia, compared with 42 per cent of people who trust the government only some of the time or never.

While it is difficult to establish whether a lack of trust in government causes a weaker sense of belonging, we can say that the relationship between government trust and belonging cannot be explained by other characteristics of people that we can measure, including their age, education, financial situation, migrant status and housing and household situations.

It is a similar story with respect to economic inequality. Just 36 per cent of people who disagree that 'Australia is a land of economic opportunity where in the long run, hard work brings a better life' have a great sense of belonging in Australia, compared with 56 per cent of people who agree with the statement. As with trust in government, this difference cannot be explained by demographic and socioeconomic characteristics.

Our evidence suggests that declining national pride and the sense of belonging in recent years is related to declining trust in government and increasing concern for inequality. To examine this, we create a new score for our survey respondents combining their sense of belonging in Australia, their pride in the Australian way of life and culture and the extent to which they feel that it is important to maintain the Australian way of life and culture. We then look to measure how much these scores have changed between 2020 and 2023 and how much of this change can be explained by the characteristics and attitudes of our survey respondents. We do this through what is called a decomposition analysis.

We find that that the sense of national pride and belonging has declined by approximately 5 per cent since 2020. Declining trust in the Federal Government is associated with a 17 per cent of this decline while declining belief that hard work brings a better life is associated with a further 27 per cent to the decline. Combined, 44 per cent of the decline in national pride and belonging since 2020 is related to declining trust in the Government and increased concern for economic equity. This result supports the notion that trust in government and perceptions of economic fairness help to shape our sense of national pride and belonging.



Belonging and engagement are important for our happiness and wellbeing

People who have a sense of belonging in their neighbourhood are significantly less likely to feel isolated from others often or some of the time, more likely to be happy and more likely to trust other people. After taking into account differences in demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, we estimate that a sense of neighbourhood belonging is associated with a 24 percentage point reduction in the probability of feeling isolated often or some of the time, a 21 point increase in the probability of feeling happy and a 15 point increase in the probability of believing that people generally can be trusted (see Table 6).

As shown in Table 6, similar differences are found between people who have a great sense of belonging in Australia and those who have only a slight or no sense of belonging. For example, 65 per cent of people who have only a slight or no sense of belonging in Australia feel isolated sometimes or often, compared with 40 per cent of people with a great sense of belonging (a 24 percentage point difference). Differences in feelings of isolation, happiness and trust are also significant though much smaller in size between people who have and have not been involved in social, community and/or civic groups in the last 12 months.

Table 6 Predicted isolation, happiness and trust by the sense of national and neighbourhood belonging and participation, controlling for demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, Life in Australia™, 2023

	ISOLATED ¹	HAPPY ²	TRUST OTHERS ³	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
PREDICTED % OF POPULATION				#
I FEEL LIKE I BELONG IN MY NEIGHBOURHOOD				
Agree/strongly agree	44	83	50	6,162
Disagree/strongly disagree	67	62	35	1,223
Difference	-24	21	15	
ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN SOCIAL, COMMUNITY, CIVIC GROUPS				
Yes	46	80	52	4,445
No	50	77	42	3,009
Difference	-4	2	9	
SENSE OF BELONGING IN AUSTRALIA				
To a great extent	40	84	53	4,027
Only slightly / not at all	65	59	36	859
Difference	-24	25	17	

¹ The proportion of people who 'feel isolated from others' often or some of the time.

² The proportion of people who 'taking all things into consideration' have been happy or very happy over the last year.

³ The proportion of people who believe that 'generally speaking' most people can be trusted.

Australians remain connected and engaged with their neighbourhoods and communities – however generational, political and economic divides put pressures on our connections to Australia

The sense of national pride and belonging in Australia continue to decline and are now at their lowest levels since the start of the Mapping Social Cohesion survey. This need not necessarily be an urgent concern particularly since we remain engaged and feel a strong

sense of belonging in our neighbourhoods and local communities. A relative lack of national belonging though is strongly related to a weaker sense of personal wellbeing (including unhappiness, financial stress and social isolation) and concern for major national issues (including economic inequality and the performance of governments). In this way, the sense of belonging intersects with aspects of life in Australia at multiple levels of society and so is a crucial barometer of social cohesion.





THE ECONOMY, COST OF LIVING AND THE SENSE OF WORTH

The economy is the most important issue facing the largest proportion of Australians today. As explained in the chapter 'Australian society in 2023', almost one-half (48 per cent) of people believe economic issues are the most important problem facing Australia today.

A further 14 per cent cite issues of housing affordability and shortage. As was shown in Figure 3, these proportions have been growing substantially since 2021 and are now higher than have ever been since they were first asked in the Mapping Social Cohesion survey in 2011. These concerns also coincide with fears for the global economy, with 30 per cent of people very concerned about the prospect of a global economic downturn and 77 per cent at least quite concerned (see Figure 4).

Economic and financial concerns are also felt close to home. Financial and cost-of-living pressures have been affecting an increasing number of Australians over the last two years. As we explain in this chapter, financial pressures result in various hardships and sacrifice. This impacts on our overall social cohesion, both directly through the pressure placed on our sense of material worth, and indirectly through the strong association between financial stress and our sense of belonging, social inclusion and justice, and acceptance of differences and diversity.



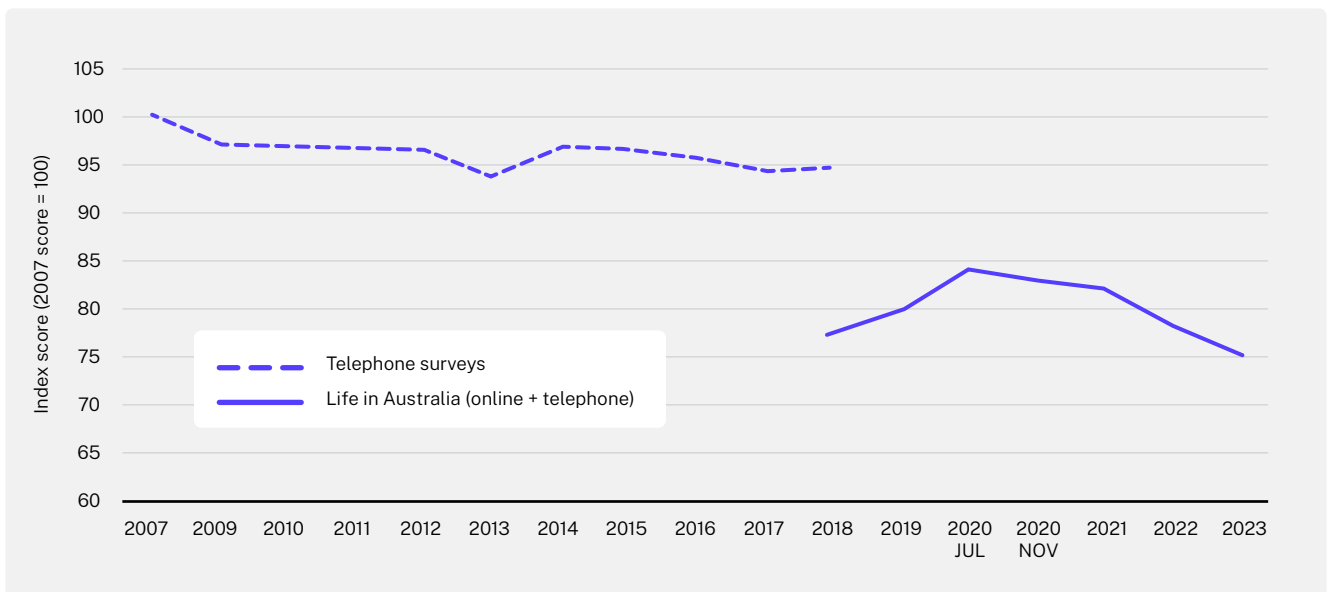
Our sense of worth is straining under the weight of cost-of-living pressures

The Scanlon-Monash Index of worth declined by 3 points over the last 12 months and by 9 points since its peak in July 2020. The sense of worth is a key measure of social cohesion and a core domain of the Scanlon-Monash index of social cohesion. The sense of worth reflects the extent to which the harmony and connectedness of society provides for the social, psychological and material well-being of individual members. Since 2007, the sense of worth has been measured through two items on the Mapping Social Cohesion survey: financial satisfaction and happiness. In recent years, we have added a wider set of items relating to the personal and material wellbeing of Australians.

The trajectory of the sense of worth is shown in Figure 10. The Index of worth was very strongly affected by the transition from the telephone survey to the largely online Life in Australia™ survey in 2018 – as people were more likely to report feeling unhappy and financially dissatisfied in an online survey than when they had to speak to a person over the telephone.

- > Adjusting for the transition to the online survey, we estimate that the sense of worth is approximately 4 points below its average throughout the 2010s.

Figure 10 The Scanlon-Monash Index of worth, 2007 to 2018 (telephone surveys) and 2018 to 2023 (online and telephone)



The decline in the Index of worth is entirely the result of declining financial satisfaction. Between 2020 and 2023, the proportion of people who are satisfied or very satisfied with their finances declined from 73 per cent in July 2020 to 61 per cent in 2023. Meanwhile the

proportion who say they are happy or very happy has been remarkably consistent, ranging between 78 and 80 per cent between 2018 and 2023 (see Table 7 and the section in this chapter ‘Australians are resilient – though personal and mental wellbeing is a major concern’).

Table 7 Indicators of the sense of worth, 2018 to 2023

		2018	2019	JUL 2020	NOV 2020	2021	2022	2023
		% OF RESPONDENTS						
FINANCIAL SATISFACTION	Very satisfied	10	11	11	11	9	9	7
	Satisfied	51	53	63	61	61	55	54
	Total satisfied	61	64	73	72	71	64	61
HAPPINESS OVER THE LAST YEAR	Very happy	14	13	11	10	12	13	13
	Happy	63	67	68	69	67	66	66
	Total happy	78	80	80	79	79	78	79

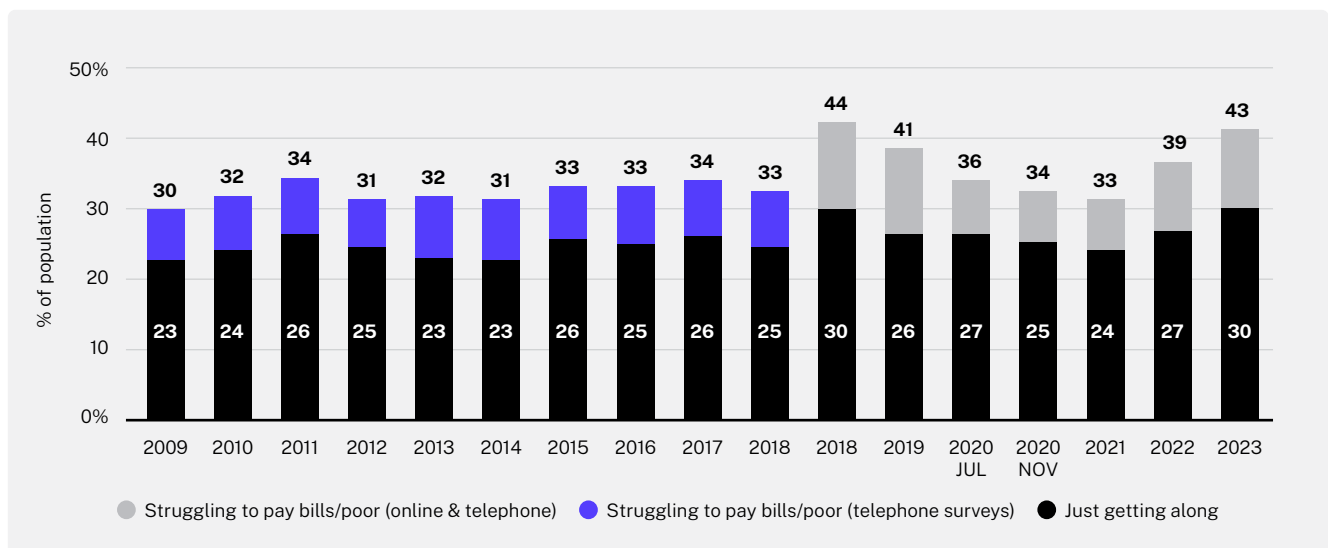
Australians face growing financial pressures and hardships

Financial pressures and the rising cost of living has seen an increase in financial stress. In addition to the decline in financial satisfaction reported above, the proportion of people who describe themselves as poor or struggling to pay their bills increased from 7 per cent in 2021 to 11 per cent in 2023, and the proportion who describe themselves as ‘just getting along’ increased from 24 per cent to 30 per cent.

The combined proportion who say they are poor, struggling to pay their bills, or just getting along increased significantly from 31 per cent to 41 per cent.

Financial stress and financial satisfaction are at similar levels as they were before COVID-19. Figure 11 shows that the proportion of people who describe themselves as poor, struggling to pay their bills, or just getting along was 42 per cent in 2018 and 39 per cent in 2019. The proportion appears to have steadily declined during the pandemic, falling to 31 per cent in 2021 before rising again to 41 per cent in 2023.

Figure 11 Financial circumstances, proportion ‘just getting along’, ‘struggling to pay bills’ and ‘poor’, 2007 to 2018 (telephone surveys) and 2018 to 2023 (online & telephone)



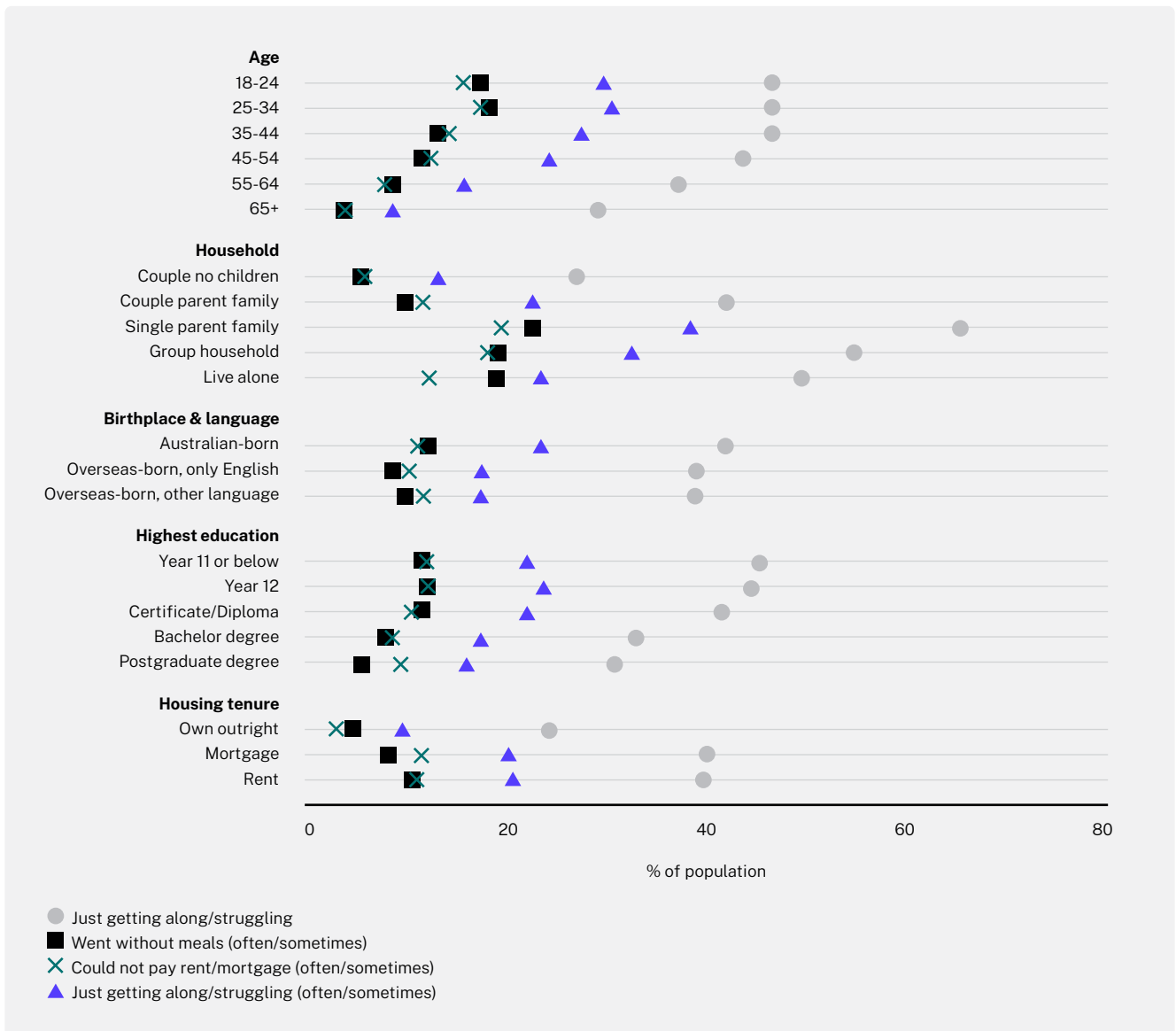
Financial pressures are leading to a range of personal and family hardships

- > One-in-ten people (12 per cent) in 2023 said that it was often or sometimes true that they went without meals in the last 12 months because there was not enough money for food. This has increased from 9 per cent in 2021 and 11 per cent in 2022.
- > One-in-ten people (12 per cent) in 2023 said that it was often or sometimes true that they could not pay their rent or mortgage payments in the last 12 months.

- > One-in-five people (22 per cent) in 2023 said that it was often or sometimes true that they could not pay for medicines or health care they need in the last 12 months.

Single parent families, members of group households and those who live alone are the most likely to report financial stress. As shown in Figure 12, two-thirds (66 per cent) of single parents are at best ‘just getting along’, 40 per cent went without medicines or health care often or sometimes in the last 12 months and one-in-five have gone without meals (20 per cent) and/or could not pay their rent or mortgage (20 per cent).

Figure 12 Indicators of financial stress for select demographic and socioeconomic groups, 2023, Life in Australia™



Renters and mortgage holders are equally likely to be experiencing financial pressures with two-in-five reporting that they are ‘just getting along’ at best, one-in-five went without medicines and health care and one-in-ten missed rent/mortgage payments and/or meals often or sometimes.

Almost 50 per cent of young and middle aged adults (18-44 years) say they are only just getting along, while 30 per cent have gone without medicines or health care. Older adults are substantially less likely to report financial difficulties.

Financial pressures are also significantly more common among people without a university degree. Approximately 44 per cent of people with up to a Year 12 education say they are just getting along at best, compared with 33 per cent of people with a Bachelor degree.

Australians are resilient – though personal and mental wellbeing is a major concern

Australians continue to report a high degree of happiness despite cost-of-living pressures. As we have previously reported, happiness and financial wellbeing are strongly related on the Mapping Social Cohesion survey. In 2023, 60 per cent of people who said they were poor or struggling to pay bills also described themselves as unhappy or very unhappy, compared with 11 per cent of those who described themselves as financially reasonably comfortable. As financial and cost-of-living pressures increase, therefore, we might expect to see a decline in happiness.

Overall though, 79 per cent of people said they were happy or very happy in 2023, similar to levels over the last five years (see Figure 13). Indeed, the resilience of our happiness has been remarkable given the challenges of recent years. This resilience is also evident on World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al., 2023) where Australia was consistently ranked between tenth and twelfth in the world between 2017 and 2022 on life satisfaction.

On a broader range of indicators, there are some concerns related to our personal wellbeing. These are shown in Table 8. In 2023, 1-in-4 people think their life in Australia will be a little or much worse in three or four years from now, significantly above levels during COVID-19, as well as levels recorded in 2018 and 2019. Almost half (48 per cent) of people feel isolated from others often or some of the time, a figure that has been stable since 2021. Most people feel they are treated with respect to at least a moderate extent (88 per cent) and that the things they do in life are worthwhile at least most of the time (61 per cent). Notably though, a sizable share of the population (39 per cent) believe the things they do are worthwhile only some or a little of the time.



Figure 13 ‘Taking all things into consideration, would you say that over the last year, you have been...?’ Life in Australia™, 2018 to 2023

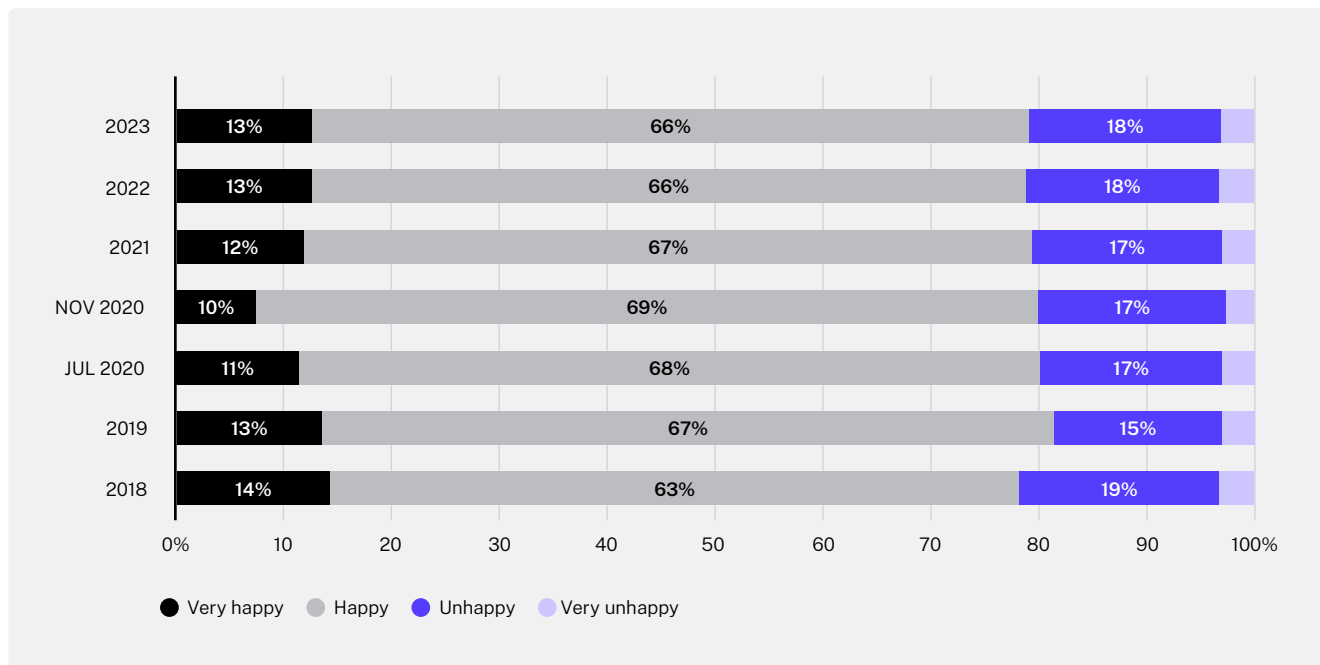


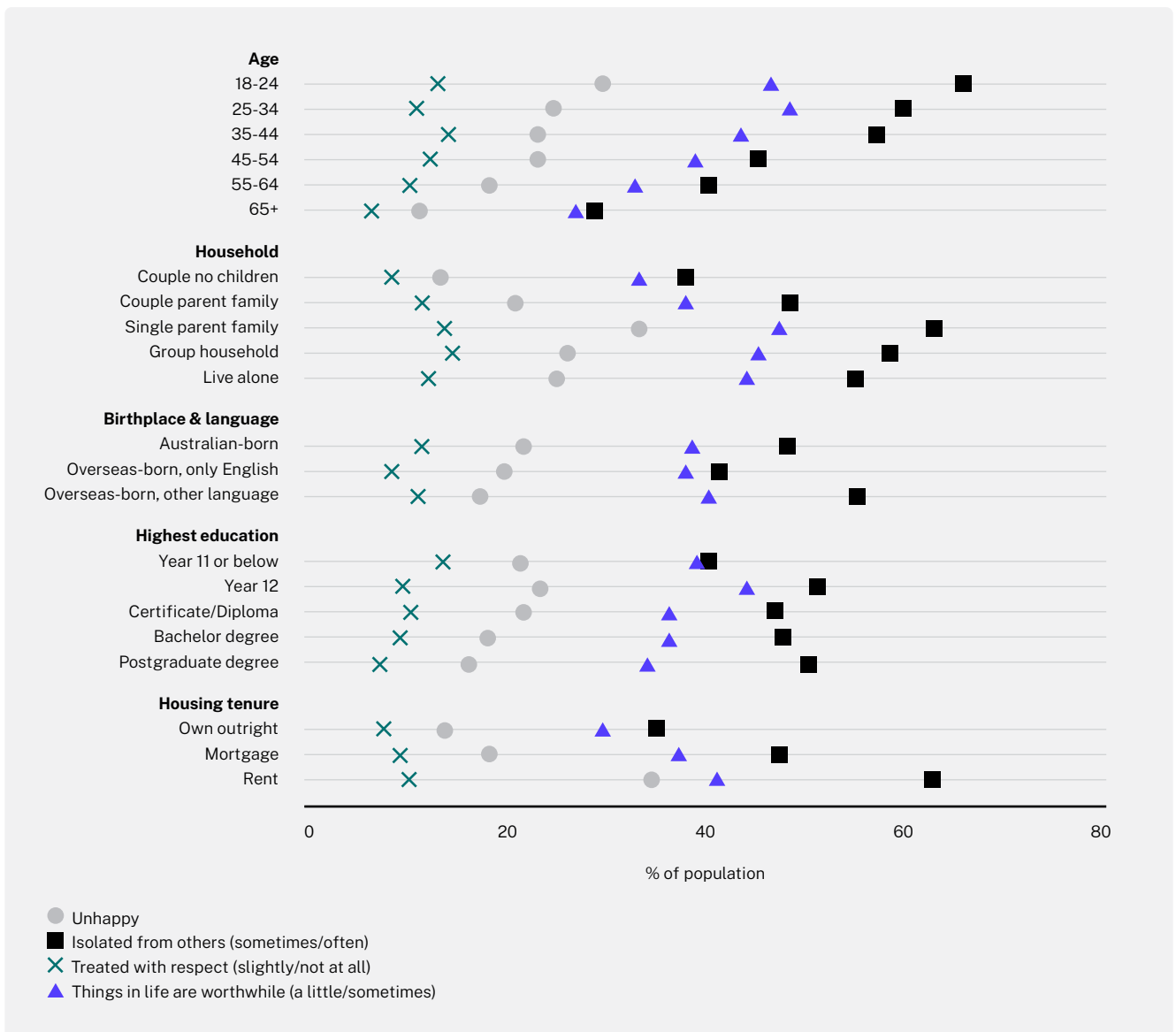
Table 8 Indicators of personal and mental wellbeing, 2018 to 2023 surveys

		2018	2019	JUL 2020	NOV 2020	2021	2022	2023
		% OF RESPONDENTS						
HAPPINESS OVER THE LAST YEAR	Very happy	14	13	11	10	12	13	13
	Happy	63	67	68	69	67	66	66
	Total happy	78	80	80	79	79	78	79
LIFE IN 3 OR 4 YEARS	Much worse	4	4	4	3	4	5	6
	A little worse	14	15	18	11	12	17	20
	The same as now	37	35	30	33	33	33	31
	Total	55	54	52	47	49	55	57
FEEL ISOLATED FROM OTHERS	Often					12	9	10
	Some of the time					37	40	38
	Total often/some					48	49	48
PEOPLE TREAT YOU WITH RESPECT	To a great extent					27	26	25
	To a moderate extent					64	63	64
	Total great/moderate					90	89	88
THINGS IN LIFE ARE WORTHWHILE	All of the time					13	12	12
	Most of the time					47	45	48
	Total all/most					60	58	61

Young adults are much more likely to report feeling unhappy and isolated from others. Figure 14 shows the proportion of people in selected demographic and socioeconomic groups responding to four key indicators of personal wellbeing. Two-thirds of 18-24 year olds (66 per cent) report feeling isolated from others sometimes or often, almost half (47 per cent) say the things they do

in life are worthwhile only a little or some of the time and 30 per cent say they are unhappy. This compares with 29 per cent of people aged 65 years and over who feel isolated sometimes or often, 27 per cent who feel things are worthwhile a little of some of the time and 11 per cent who are unhappy.

Figure 14 Indicators of personal stress for select demographic and socioeconomic groups, Life in Australia™, 2023



Strongly related to this generational divide, renters and people living in group households are also more likely to report personal stress on these indicators along with single parents (see Figure 14). In 2023, 63 per cent of single parents, 59 per cent of those living in group households and 62 per cent of renters felt isolated from others sometimes or often. This compares with 38 per cent of couples with no children and 35 per cent of people who own their home outright.

Financial stress is the most important factor dragging down social cohesion

Financial satisfaction directly impacts social cohesion under the Scanlon-Monash Index of social cohesion as an important variable in the worth domain. As discussed earlier in this chapter, declining financial satisfaction has driven a 9 point decline on the Scanlon Monash Index of worth since July 2020. Financial stress is also likely having a large indirect impact on social cohesion. Financial stress is the single most important factor associated with an individual’s sense of belonging and social justice, while also related to their social, community and civic participation and acceptance of differences and diversity.

To demonstrate this, we tally a number of indicators of financial hardship reported by individuals. Financial hardships are counted across five indicators. If a person reports that they ‘sometimes’ went without meals, could not pay their rent or mortgage or could not pay for medicines or health in the last 12 months, this counts as one hardship each. If a person says this is ‘often’ the case, this counts as two hardships. If they say they are ‘dissatisfied’ with their finances or that they are ‘just getting along’ financially, this counts as one hardship each. If they say they are ‘very dissatisfied’ with their finances or describe themselves as poor or ‘struggling to pay bills’, this counts as two hardships. The number of hardships that a person can report on the survey range between zero and ten.

Almost half (46 per cent) of people report at least one hardship in 2023, 19 per cent report three or more hardships and 5 per cent report six or more hardships.

We use a regression model to predict how an increase in the number of financial hardships impacts a person’s sense of social cohesion. We use this model to control for their personal characteristics such as their age, gender, location, education, migrant status and concern for national and global issues such as climate change and Australia-China relations. This allows us to say that the relationship we find between financial hardship and social cohesion cannot be explained by these other factors.

We find that compared with a person experiencing no financial stress, the sense of belonging is 5 per cent lower on average among people experiencing one hardship, 12 per cent lower among people experiencing three hardships and 19 per cent lower among people experiencing six hardships. These differences are very large. By comparison, people who have migrated to Australia in the last 10 years have a predicted sense of belonging that is 5 per cent lower on average than people born in Australia – similar to the predicted effect of having just one financial hardship.

The results across all domains of social cohesion are shown in Table 9. In addition to the sense of belonging, financial hardship is also strongly related to the worth and social inclusion and justice domains of social cohesion. Compared with a person with no financial hardships, the sense of social inclusion and justice in Australia is 26 per cent lower on average among people who experience six hardships. Although not as large in size, the proportion of people who participate in social, community support or civic/political groups is 10 per cent lower on average (see the chapter ‘Belonging and engagement in Australia and our communities’ for information on this form of participation). The very strong relationship between financial hardships and worth is to be expected, as the sense of worth is measured by financial satisfaction among other indicators.

Table 9 Predicted effect of financial hardships on social cohesion by domain, controlling for demographic characteristics and social attitudes, Life in Australia™, 2023

SOCIAL COHESION DOMAIN	NUMBER OF FINANCIAL HARDSHIPS					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
PREDICTED % CHANGE IN SOCIAL COHESION SCORES (COMPARED WITH 0 FINANCIAL HARDSHIPS)						
Belonging	-5	-9	-12	-15	-18	-19
Worth	-10	-19	-26	-33	-38	-41
Social inclusion and justice	-5	-10	-14	-18	-22	-26
Participation	-2	-4	-6	-7	-9	-10
Acceptance	-2	-3	-4	-5	-5	-6
Overall social cohesion	-3	-5	-8	-10	-12	-13

Financial and cost-of-living pressures are impacting our material wellbeing and contribute to hardship and weaker social cohesion

Financial stress and hardship have a direct impact on social cohesion by diminishing our sense of worth, while also being strongly associated with all other aspects of cohesion, including the sense of belonging, trust, participation, social inclusion and justice and acceptance of diversity. Australians are resilient though particularly in terms of personal and social wellbeing and we may expect the sense of worth and overall social cohesion to rebound if cost-of-living pressures ease in coming months. Nevertheless, the growing concern for economic inequality discussed in the next chapter points to widespread support for community and policy efforts to protect our standards of living and enable our full social, economic and civic engagement in society.





ECONOMIC INEQUALITY, SOCIAL INCLUSION & JUSTICE

In the midst of cost-of-living pressures and concerns for the national and global economy, Australians are concerned not just about their own household budgets but also about the extent of economic fairness, justice and the ‘fair go’. Indeed, economic inequality is a widely perceived and growing issue in Australia today.

This is reflected in the very large declines on the Scanlon-Monash Index of social inclusion and justice that we reported on in the chapter, ‘Australian society in 2023’.

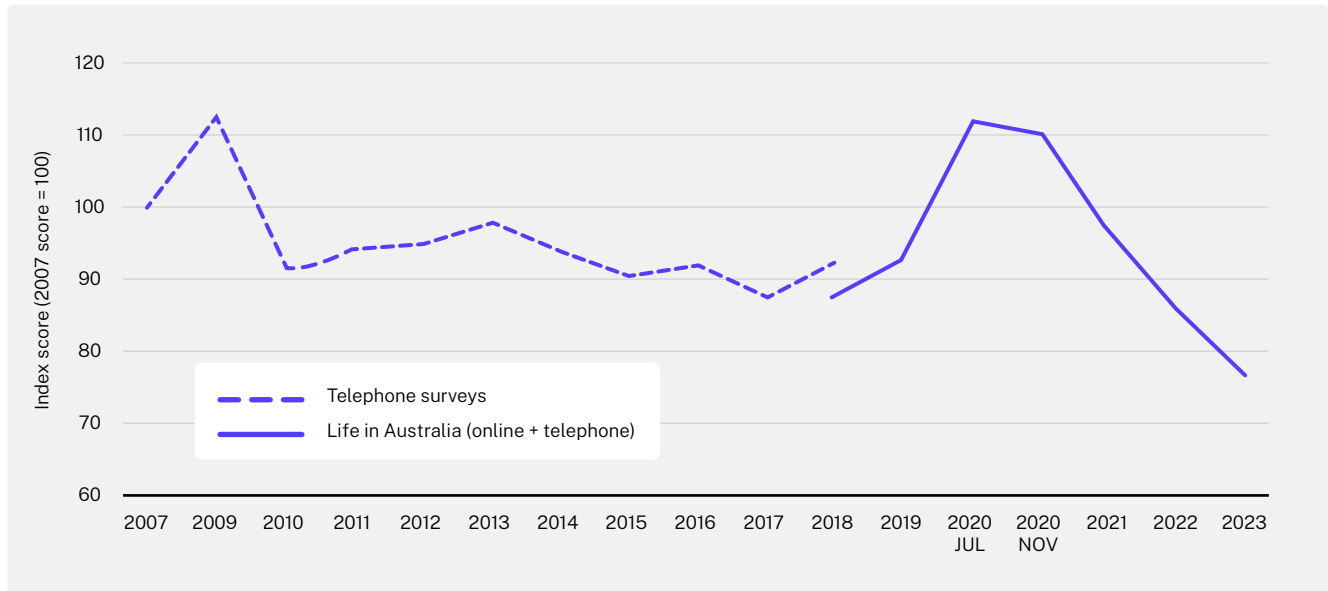
In this chapter, we explore and explain the recent trends in our sense of social inclusion and justice. We note that although Australia starts from a strong base, perceptions of social justice have been declining, while concern for economic inequality and fairness is increasing. This increasing concern has a direct and large negative effect on our measure of social cohesion through the social inclusion and justice domain. We also find evidence to suggest that increasing concern for economic inequality is strongly associated with other aspects of our social cohesion, including our trust in others and in government, our sense of belonging and our degree of pessimism for the future.

Australians have a declining sense of social inclusion and economic justice

The Scanlon-Monash Index of social inclusion and justice has declined substantially since its peak in 2020, falling 35 points from 112 in July 2020 to 77 in 2023. As shown in Figure 15, this is partly related to a spike in social inclusion and justice during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the score in 2023 is also substantially below where it was across the 2010s, prior to the pandemic.

We estimate that the Index of social inclusion and justice is 13 points lower than its average across the 2010s, 20 points lower than in the first survey in 2007 and 33 points below its peak in 2009 after adjusting for the transition to a mostly online survey in 2018.

Figure 15 The Scanlon-Monash Index of social inclusion and justice, 2007 to 2018 (telephone surveys) and 2018 to 2023 (online and telephone)



The decline in social inclusion and justice is driven by four components (see also Table 10):

- Just 12 per cent of people strongly agree that ‘Australia is a land of economic opportunity where in the long run, hard work brings a better life’. This proportion has declined by 9 percentage points since 2018. While the majority of people still agree with this statement (63 per cent), this proportion has declined by a similar amount since 2018 when it was 71 per cent.
- The proportion of people who agree or strongly that ‘in Australia today, the gap between those with high incomes and those with low incomes is too large’ has increased to 84 per cent in 2023, the highest level on record. The proportion of people who strongly agree with this statement increased from 27 per cent in July 2020 to 40 per cent in 2023.
- The proportion of people who believe the ‘government in Canberra can be trusted to do the right thing by the Australian people’ all or most of the time has declined from a peak of 56 per cent in November 2020 to 36 per cent in 2023. These trends are described in more detail in the chapter ‘Confidence in government and the strength of democracy’.
- The proportion of people who agree or strongly agree that ‘people living on low incomes in Australia receive enough financial support’ declined from a peak of 55 per cent in July 2020 to 38 per cent in 2023. But for a spike during COVID-19 (perhaps reflecting the income support measures provided during the pandemic), this appears to be part of a longer term downward trend. Between 2007 and 2018 this proportion declined 8 percentage points when the survey was run as a telephone survey. In 2023, the proportion is now a further 6 percentage points below what it was in 2018 during the time the survey has been run on the mostly online Life in Australia™ panel. We estimate therefore that the proportion of people who believe that low income earners receive enough financial support has declined by approximately 14 percentage points since 2007.

Table 10 Indicators of social inclusion and justice, 2018 to 2023

		2018	2019	JUL 2020	NOV 2020	2021	2022	2023
		% OF RESPONDENTS						
AUSTRALIA IS A LAND OF ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY	Strongly agree	21	19	19	19	15	14	12
	Agree	50	51	55	53	58	54	51
	Total agree	71	71	74	72	74	69	63
THE GAPS IN INCOMES IS TOO LARGE	Strongly agree	36	31	27	35	31	36	40
	Agree	44	46	49	43	46	46	44
	Total agree	80	78	76	78	77	81	84
TRUST FEDERAL GOVERNMENT	Almost always	2	3	5	6	4	2	2
	Most of the time	26	33	49	49	40	39	34
	Total most/always	28	36	54	56	44	41	36
LOW INCOME EARNERS RECEIVE SUPPORT	Strongly agree	8	8	9	10	6	5	5
	Agree	36	32	45	38	42	35	33
	Total agree	44	40	55	49	47	40	38
EVERYONE HAS FAIR CHANCE OF GETTING JOBS	Strongly agree					5	7	6
	Agree					46	48	45
	Total agree					51	55	51

A new question asked on the Mapping Social Cohesion survey since 2021 suggests Australians are evenly split on whether ‘everyone in Australia has a fair chance of getting the jobs they seek’ (see Table 10). In 2023, 51 per cent of people agreed with this statement, with 49 per cent disagreeing. The proportion agreeing is a little down from where it was in 2022 (55 per cent) but similar to where it was in 2021.

The ‘fair go’ under threat?

Agreement that ‘Australia is a land of economic opportunity where in the long run, hard work brings a better life’ is an important indicator of social justice. In reflecting the degree of fairness, opportunity and the ‘fair go’, the indicator taps into a narrative enmeshed in Australian values, identity and culture and cuts across political and ideological lines.

Traditionally, this sentiment is strong and widely held. Between 2007 and 2013, more than 80 per cent of people on the Mapping Social Cohesion survey agreed that Australia was a place where hard work was

rewarded, with relatively small differences recorded between younger and older Australians, conservative and progressive voters, Australian and overseas-born people and those from higher and lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Belief in the fair go, however, appears to be declining. We estimate that overall agreement that Australia is a land of economic opportunity has declined by 16 percentage points since 2013 after adjusting for the effects of the transition to the mostly online Life in Australia™ panel. The long-term trajectory of responses to this question is shown in Figure 16. In addition to a modest decline after 2013, much of the decline has occurred in just the last 2-3 years.

Table 11 shows the variation in agreement that hard work brings a better life in Australia across demographic and socioeconomic groups in 2013, 2018 and 2023. The 2013 results derive from when the Mapping Social Cohesion survey was run as a telephone survey and so care needs to be taken in interpreting results over the time. Nevertheless, the results are illustrative of the changes in attitudes across Australian society.

In 2013, more than 80 per cent of people in all age groups except 45-54 years agreed with the statement, along with more than 80 per cent of people in the five mainland states (these are the states we have a large enough number of respondents to report results for) and more than 80 per cent among people with higher and lower levels of education, those who live in capital and non-capital city areas and those who were born in Australia or overseas. At least three-in-four (76 per cent) Greens voters agreed with the statement along with 81 per cent of Labor and Liberal/National votes in 2013.

Agreement that Australia is a land of opportunity declined substantially across most groups in the years to 2023, with disparities appearing across society. In 2023, just 41 per cent of Greens voters, 51 per cent of 25-34 year olds and 57 per cent of males agreed with the statement. The gap between Liberal/National and Greens voters increased from 5 percentage points in 2013 to 37 points in 2023, while the gap between 25-34 year olds and those aged 65 years and over increased from 1 to 24 points. While the gap in agreement has long been reasonably substantial between those who are living very comfortably financially and those who are struggling to pay their bills, the gap has widened from 24 percentage points in 2013 to 38 points in 2023.

Figure 16 'Australia is a land of economic opportunity where in the long run, hard work brings a better life', proportion who agree or strongly agree, 2007 to 2018 (telephone surveys) and 2018 to 2023 (online and telephone)

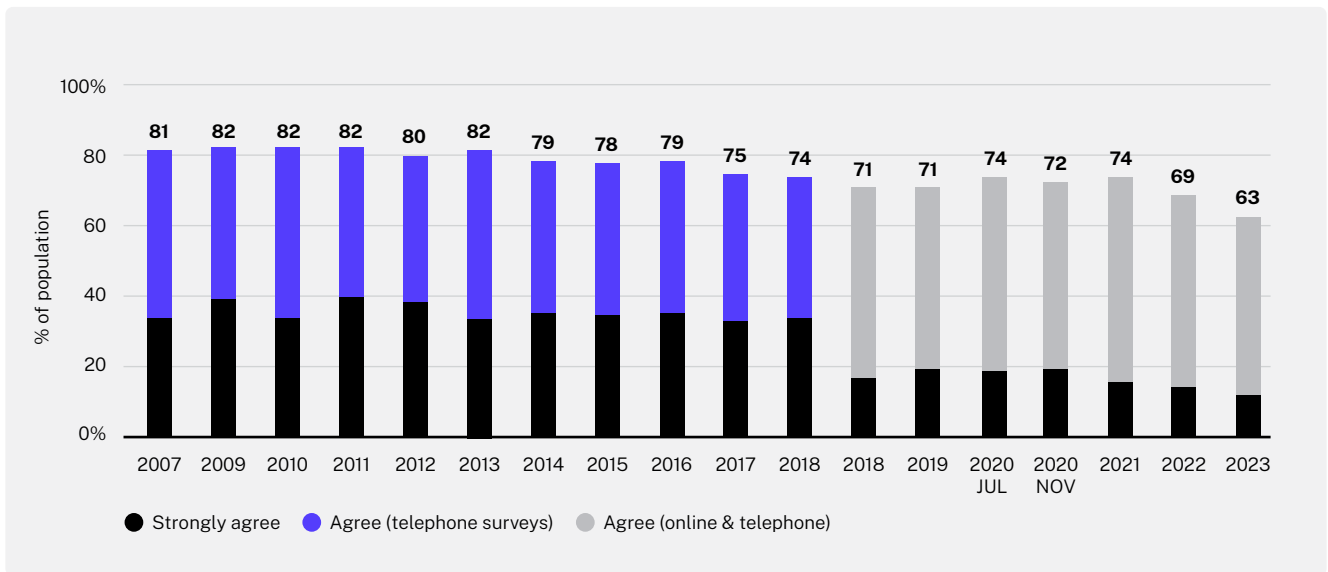


Table 11 'Australia is a land of economic opportunity where in the long run, hard work brings a better life', proportion of people who agree, 2013 (telephone survey), 2018 and 2023 (online & telephone survey)

GENDER	Female	Male	Persons			
	83, 76, 70	80, 67, 57	82, 71, 63			
AGE	65+	55-64	45-54	35-44	25-34	18-24
	81, 83, 75	84, 67, 66	77, 72, 61	86, 68, 60	80, 68, 51	83, 66, 59
STATE	NSW	Victoria	Queensland	South Australia	Western Australia	
	81, 71, 62	82, 71, 64	81, 68, 60	84, 71, 65	87, 79, 66	
CAPITAL CITY/ REST OF STATE	Capital city	Rest of state				
	82, 72, 62	82, 71, 63				
HIGHEST EDUCATION	Postgraduate degree	Bachelor degree	Certificate/ diploma	Year 12	Up to Year 11	
	78, 74, 64	82, 74, 65	80, 72, 61	86, 63, 61	82, 75, 65	
FINANCIAL SITUATION	Prosperous/ very comfortable	Reasonably comfortable	Just getting along	Struggling to pay bills/ poor		
	87, 82, 75	85, 74, 71	78, 69, 53	63, 56, 37		
VOTE AT 2022 ELECTION	Labor	Liberal/ National	Greens	Other		
	81, 65, 61	81, 83, 78	76, 58, 41	74, 72, 67		
WHERE BORN & FIRST LANGUAGE	Australian-born	Foreign born/ English	Foreign born/ non-English			
	80, 70, 59	84, 72, 68	85, 77, 74			
HOUSEHOLD TYPE	Couple no children	Couple parent	Single parent	Group household	Live alone	
	NA, NA, 68	NA, NA, 64	NA, NA, 50	NA, NA, 58	NA, NA, 59	
HOUSING TENURE	Own outright	Mortgage	Rent			
	NA, NA, 73	NA, NA, 64	NA, NA, 53			
NEIGHBOURHOOD DISADVANTAGE	Quintile 1 (Low disadvantage)	Quintile 2	Quintile 3	Quintile 4	Quintile 5 (High disadvantage)	
	84, 72, 65	82, 76, 65	81, 70, 61	78, 70, 61	81, 68, 60	

Notes: Neighbourhood disadvantage is measured with the ABS (2018) Socio-economic Indexes For Areas (SEIFA) Index of Relative Socio-economic disadvantage. Index scores are based on respondents' postcode and grouped into five equally sized quintiles.

Economic inequality is likely detrimental to our social cohesion

People who think that economic inequality is a problem in Australia report substantially weaker trust in government and the political system, a weaker sense of national pride and belonging and are more likely to be pessimistic about Australia’s future. To demonstrate this, we use a regression model to predict an individual’s attitudes and perceptions in these areas based on their perceptions of economic inequality and controlling for a wide range of their demographic (including their age, gender, location and family structure) and socioeconomic characteristics (including their educational qualifications and employment status), as well as their attitudes and concerns related to issues including climate change and the Voice referendum. We calculate people’s attitudes to inequality by combining responses to three of the questions listed in Table 10 – whether they think Australia is a land of economic opportunity, whether they think the gap in incomes is too large and whether they think low earners receive enough financial assistance.

In the results below, people who are most concerned about economic inequality are the 20 per cent of survey respondents with the highest scores on this combined measure, while the least concerned are the 20 per cent with the lowest scores.

We predict that among those who are most concerned about inequality, 55 per cent are pessimistic about Australia’s future, compared with 23 per cent of people who are least concerned about inequality. This means that people who are concerned about inequality are 2.3 times more likely to be pessimistic after controlling for all the characteristics and attitudes of people described above.

Similarly, people who are concerned about inequality are predicted to be 61 per cent less likely to trust the Federal Government to do the right thing by the Australian people all or most of the time, 2.3 times more likely to believe their own life in Australia will be worse in three or four years, 43 per cent less likely to have a great sense of belonging in Australia and 13 per cent less likely to believe that people generally can be trusted. Indeed, and as we explained in the chapter ‘Belonging and engagement in Australia and our communities’, increasing concern for economic inequality helps to explain a substantial share of the decline in national pride and belonging since 2020.

Concern for economic inequality is not particularly related to attitudes to migrant diversity and multiculturalism. However, although the perception of inequality is not related to attitudes towards migrant diversity, the experience of financial disadvantage is strongly negatively associated with attitudes to diversity. People who say they are struggling to pay the bills or ‘poor’ are 13 per cent less likely to believe that ‘accepting migrants from many different countries has made Australia stronger’. As we will explain in the chapter ‘Multiculturalism, diversity and acceptance’, socioeconomic disadvantage is strongly negatively related to attitudes to multiculturalism in Australian generally.

Concern for social inclusion, justice and economic inequality is the single largest factor impacting Australia’s social cohesion in 2023

Since a peak in 2020, the Scanlon-Monash Index of social inclusion and justice has declined by a remarkable 34 points. This, is no small way, reflects the widespread support for government measures to protect our health and financial wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. As these measures were withdrawn, it is not surprising that the degree of trust in government and the sense of social and economic justice would also decline. What is of concern, though, is the sense of social inclusion and justice, which seems to have now returned to its longer term downward trend of the last 10 years, and in 2023, is lower than it has ever been in the Mapping Social Cohesion series. In a time of cost-of-living pressures, increasing concern for social justice and economic inequality across all demographic and socioeconomic groups paradoxically underlines the fact that Australians are connected to each other and concerned for the wellbeing of others across society. Indeed, Australia’s cohesiveness and connectedness demand action to ensure Australia remains a land of economic opportunity for all.

CONFIDENCE IN GOVERNMENT AND THE STRENGTH OF DEMOCRACY

Trust in government and the political system is an important component of social cohesion. This component stems in turn from the importance of government leadership in maintaining our social connections and social fabric, ensuring opportunities for community, economic and democratic participation across society and addressing disadvantage and discrimination.

Trust is a critical resource for governments, a key factor enabling them to pursue their policy agendas and reforms (O'Donnell et al., 2023). The heightened sense of trust Australians expressed towards governments during COVID-19, for instance, was likely instrumental in ensuring compliance with public health directives and protecting lives.

Outside of the pandemic however, Australians have usually been reasonably distrustful of governments. That distrust is also coupled with a certain cynicism towards politics and the political system. As we will discuss in this chapter, distrust and cynicism are returning to pre-pandemic levels in 2023, with fewer people believing that the Federal Government can be trusted all or most of the time and an increasingly common view that leaders abuse their powers and that major changes to our political system are required. We are also detecting increased polarisation in some areas, marked by a hardening of attitudes to major issues, like the Voice, according to political and ideological preferences. We remain engaged in and committed to democracy though, suggesting that reforms to deepen and strengthen our democracy may provide a path to instilling greater confidence in government and our political system.

Trust in government and the political system has declined since COVID-19

Trust in the Federal Government and the system of government in Australia increased sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although levels have since declined, trust in government remains at or above pre-pandemic levels.

Table 12 gives a summary of people's responses to our survey questions related to trust in government and the political system. It shows:

- > Belief that 'the government in Canberra can be trusted to do the right thing for the Australian people' all or most of the time declined from a peak of 56 per cent in November 2020 to 44 per cent in 2021, 41 per cent in 2022 and 36 per cent in 2023. However, it remains significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels. As shown in Figure 17, trust in government is substantially and significantly higher in 2023 than it was over the period 2010 to 2018, when a consistent average of 29 per cent was recorded.
- > Similar levels of trust are expressed in state governments. In 2023, 37 per cent of people believed that their state or territory government could be trusted all or most of the time. This level of trust in state governments is similar in NSW (36 per cent) and Victoria (38 per cent), significantly lower in Queensland (31 per cent) and higher in South Australia (41 per cent), Western Australia (50 per cent) and the ACT.

> The proportion of people who believe ‘the system of government we have in Australia works fine as is’ or needs only minor change declined from a peak of 71 per cent in November 2020 to 60 per cent in 2021, 63 per cent in 2022 and 59 per cent in 2023. In 2023, 41 per cent of people believe the system of government needs major change or needs to be replaced, similar to where it was in 2018-19 and since 2021 (see Figure 18).

There are widely held doubts about the integrity of politicians and the electoral system

> The proportion of people who believe that government leaders abuse their power none or only a little of the time declined from 23 per cent in 2021 to 21 per cent in 2022 and 16 per cent in 2023. The very large majority of people in 2023 believe leaders abuse their powers at least some of the time, with 53 per

cent of people saying it is some of the time and 30 per cent saying it is most or all of the time. This latter proportion increased from 24 per cent in 2022.

- > 70 per cent of people agree or strongly agree that ‘politicians don’t care about the problems of the average person’.
- > Nine-in-ten (89 per cent) people agree or strongly agree that ‘some laws are not fair’.
- > Fewer than one-in-six people (16 per cent) in 2023 believe that elections in Australia are fair all the time. Almost half (47 per cent) believe elections are fair most of the time, while more than one-in-three (36 per cent) believe elections are fair some of the time at most. These proportions are similar to where they have been since 2021.

Table 12 Attitudes to government and the political system, 2018 to 2023

		2018	2019	JUL 2020	NOV 2020	2021	2022	2023
		% OF RESPONDENTS						
TRUST FEDERAL GOVERNMENT	Almost always	2	3	5	6	4	2	2
	Most of the time	26	33	49	49	40	39	34
	Total always/most	28	36	54	56	44	41	36
TRUST STATE GOVERNMENT	Almost always							2
	Most of the time							35
	Total always/most							37
SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT	Works fine as it is	12	16	17	21	13	14	12
	Needs minor change	44	46	52	51	47	48	47
	Total minor/no change	57	62	69	71	60	63	59
STRONG LEADER & NO ELECTIONS/ PARLIAMENT	Very bad	43	43	47	49	48	51	53
	Fairly bad	30	33	30	28	30	29	27
	Total very/fairly bad	73	76	78	78	78	80	80
LEADERS ABUSE POWER	None of the time					2	2	1
	A little of the time					21	19	15
	Total little/none					23	21	16
ELECTIONS ARE FAIR	All of the time					15	18	16
	Most of the time					49	47	47
	Total all/most					63	65	63

Trust in government is divided along political, demographic and socioeconomic lines

Only one-in-six (18 per cent) people who are struggling to pay bills or describe themselves as poor and just over one-in-four (28 per cent) who are ‘just getting along’ think the Federal Government can be trusted at least most of the time. As shown in Table 13, these proportions have declined substantially since 2021 – by 14 points in the case of people who describe themselves as

struggling to pay bills or poor – over the same time that the proportion of people who describe themselves as just getting along, struggling or poor has increased from 31 per cent to 41 per cent.

Trust in government is also low among young and middle-aged adults. In 2023, fewer than one-in-three people aged 18-44 believe the Federal Government can be trusted all or most of the time, compared with 43 per cent of people aged 65 years and over.

Figure 19 ‘How often do you think the government in Canberra can be trusted to do the right thing for the Australian people?’ 2007 to 2018 (telephone surveys) and 2018 to 2023 (online & telephone)

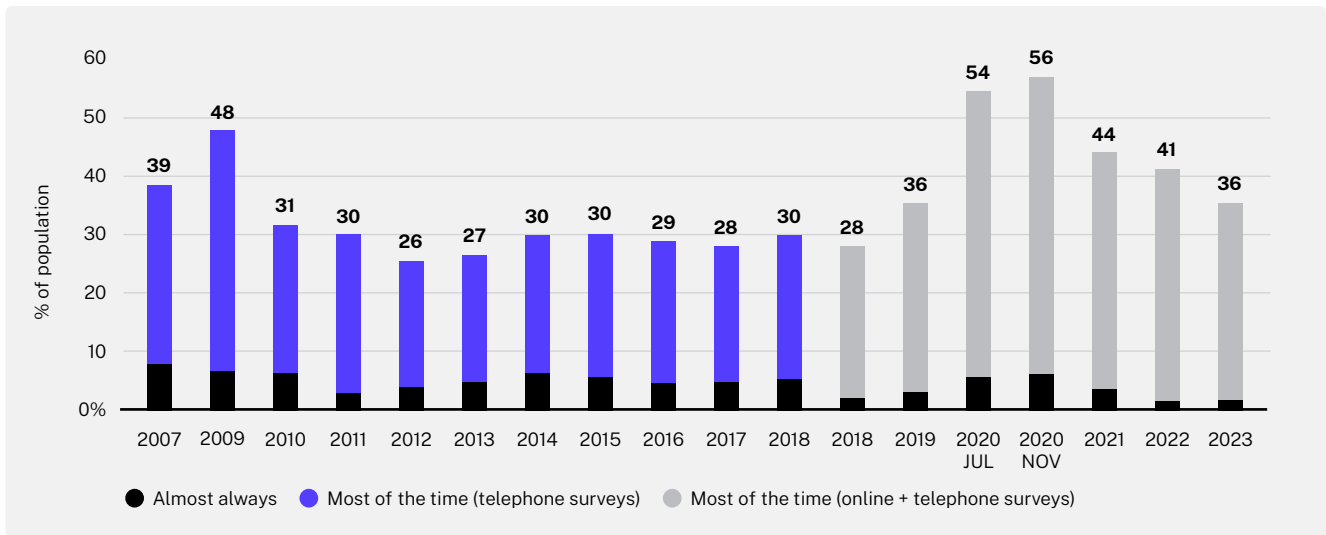


Figure 20 ‘Would you say the system of government we have in Australia works fine as is?’ 2007 to 2018 (telephone surveys) and 2018 to 2023 (online and telephone)

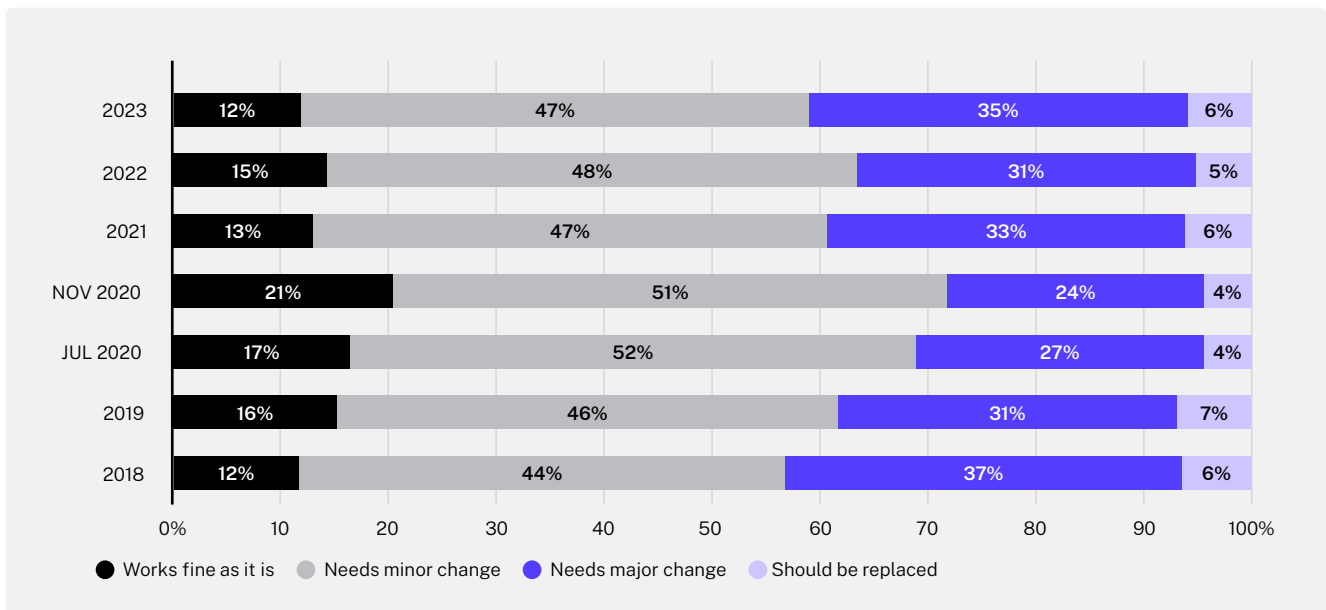


Table 13 'How often do you think the government in Canberra can be trusted to do the right thing by the Australian people?' Proportion of people who say 'almost always' or 'most of the time', Life in Australia™, 2021, 2022, 2023

GENDER	Female	Male	Persons			
	46, 44, 38	43, 40, 34	44, 41, 36			
AGE	65+	55-64	45-54	35-44	25-34	18-24
	55, 48, 43	49, 45, 38	46, 43, 38	43, 41, 34	33, 32, 29	38, 36, 32
STATE	NSW	Victoria	Queensland	South Australia	Western Australia	
	47, 40, 37	38, 42, 36	42, 39, 33	49, 43, 37	51, 47, 37	
CAPITAL CITY/ REST OF STATE	Capital city	Rest of state				
	43, 43, 37	46, 39, 34				
HIGHEST EDUCATION	Postgraduate degree	Bachelor degree	Certificate/ diploma	Year 12	Up to Year 11	
	43, 49, 45	46, 45, 40	42, 42, 33	43, 39, 37	49, 35, 29	
FINANCIAL SITUATION	Prosperous/ very comfortable	Reasonably comfortable	Just getting along	Struggling to pay bills/ poor		
	49, 57, 50	48, 46, 42	37, 31, 28	32, 20, 18		
VOTE AT 2022 ELECTION	Labor	Liberal/ National	Greens	Other		
	31, 48, 46	72, 51, 34	22, 32, 26	44, 31, 33		
WHERE BORN & FIRST LANGUAGE	Australian-born	Foreign born/ English	Foreign born/ non-English			
	44, 41, 35	42, 42, 36	49, 42, 43			
HOUSEHOLD TYPE	Couple no children	Couple parent	Single parent	Group household	Live alone	
	NA, 46, 40	NA, 43, 35	NA, 28, 26	NA, 34, 42	NA, 41, 36	
HOUSING TENURE	Own outright	Mortgage	Rent			
	NA, 47, 42	NA, 44, 36	NA, 36, 44			
NEIGHBOURHOOD DISADVANTAGE	Quintile 1 (Low disadvantage)	Quintile 2	Quintile 3	Quintile 4	Quintile 5 (High disadvantage)	
	43, 46, 43	43, 42, 36	42, 40, 33	46, 40, 35	48, 37, 32	

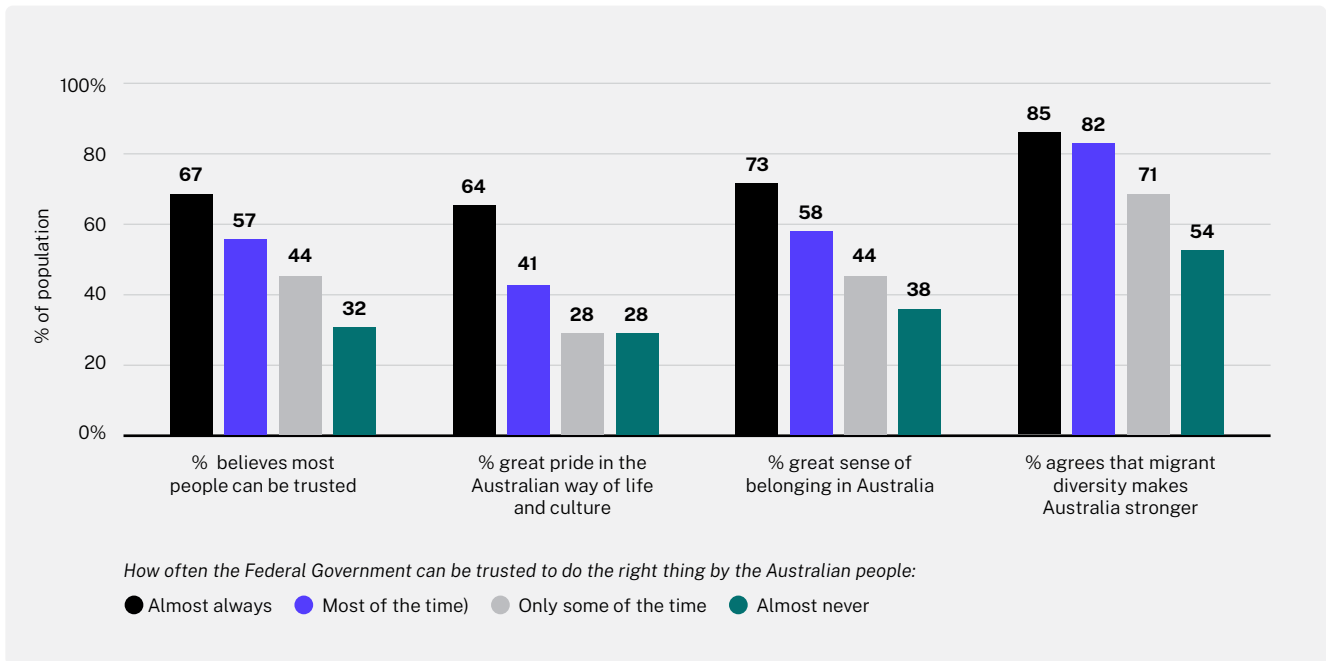
Notes: Neighbourhood disadvantage is measured with the ABS (2018) Socio-economic Indexes For Areas (SEIFA) Index of Relative Socio-economic disadvantage. Index scores are based on respondents' postcode and grouped into five equally sized quintiles.

People who distrust government feel less cohesion in Australia

Trust in government is strongly related to how people experience and perceive social cohesion in other areas. As shown in Figure 21, approximately two-in-three people who believe the Federal Government can be trusted all or most of the time also think that people generally can be trusted (67 per cent) and take great pride in the Australian way of life and culture (64 per cent). This compares with fewer than one-in-three people who think the Government can be trusted ‘almost never’. Similarly, almost three-quarters of people (73 per cent)

who trust the Government almost always have a great sense of belonging in Australia and 85 per cent agree that accepting migrants from many different countries makes Australia stronger. These proportions are more than 30 percentage points higher than the proportions for people who almost never trust the Government. These differences are significant and substantial after controlling for the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of people, indicating a close association between trust in government and these other indicators of social cohesion.

Figure 21 Trust, belonging and acceptance by levels of trust in the Federal Government, Life in Australia™, 2023



Our trust in the government of the day likely shapes our wider perceptions of politics and the political system

We expect trust in government will ebb and flow depending on people’s political preferences and the political party in power at the time. Such fluctuations in trust are not necessarily a concern where people retain confidence and trust in the broader political system and the system of government.

The results of the Mapping Social Cohesion survey suggest that while a distinction is made, people’s confidence in politics and Australia’s democracy and system of government is related to their trust in the government of the day. This is illustrated by changes in perceptions and attitudes among voters before and after the Federal election in May 2022 – an election that brought the current Labor Government to power after the Liberal/National coalition had been in power since 2013. The results are shown in Figure 22.

- > The proportion of Liberal/National voters who trust the Federal Government to do the right thing all or most of the time fell by 40 percentage points between July 2021 and July 2023, from 73 per cent to 33 per cent, while the equivalent proportion for Labor voters increased 15 percentage points, from 31 per cent to 46 per cent.

- > The proportion of Liberal/National voters who believe the system of government in Australia needs major changes or needs to be replaced also increased substantially over the 2021-2023 period from 20 per cent to 36 per cent (16 percentage points). The same proportion for Labor voters declined by 8 percentage points, from 43 per cent to 35 per cent.
- > The proportion of Liberal/National voters who believe government leaders abuse their power all or most of the time increased by 19 percentage points from 10 per cent in 2021 to 30 per cent in 2023. The same proportion declined by 8 points for Labor voters, from 31 per cent to 23 per cent.
- > The proportion of Liberal/National voters who believe elections are fair all or most of the time declined by 13 percentage points from 77 per cent in 2021 to 64 per cent in 2023. The same proportion increased by 8 points for Labor voters, from 63 per cent to 71 per cent.

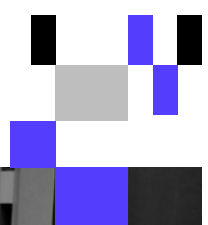
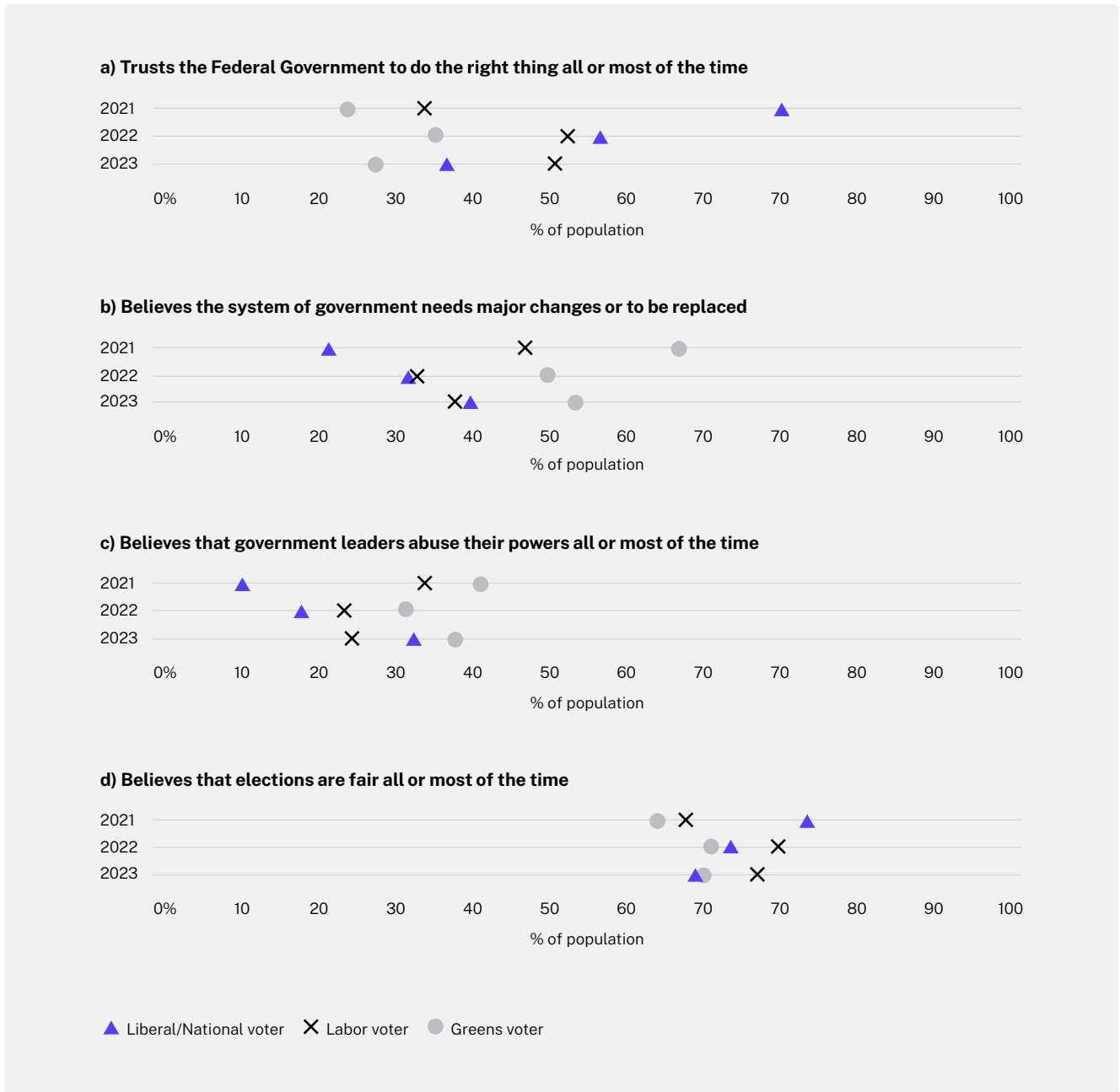


Figure 22 Indicators of trust in government and the political system by political party preference, Life in Australia™, 2021–2023



The results suggest that attitudes to government and Australia's democracy are politically charged and polarised. This may not yet be a cause for alarm, particularly as the gap between conservative and progressive voters on these indicators has substantially narrowed since 2021. The difference between the shares of Liberal/National and Greens voters that trust the Federal Government to do the right thing all or most of time, for example, has declined from 50 percentage points in 2021 to 8 percentage points in 2023. Nevertheless, the sharply lower trust in government and the political system among Liberal/National voters since the election of the current Labor Government warrants continued monitoring.

Attitudes to and perceptions of major issues and social cohesion in Australia are also polarised along political lines

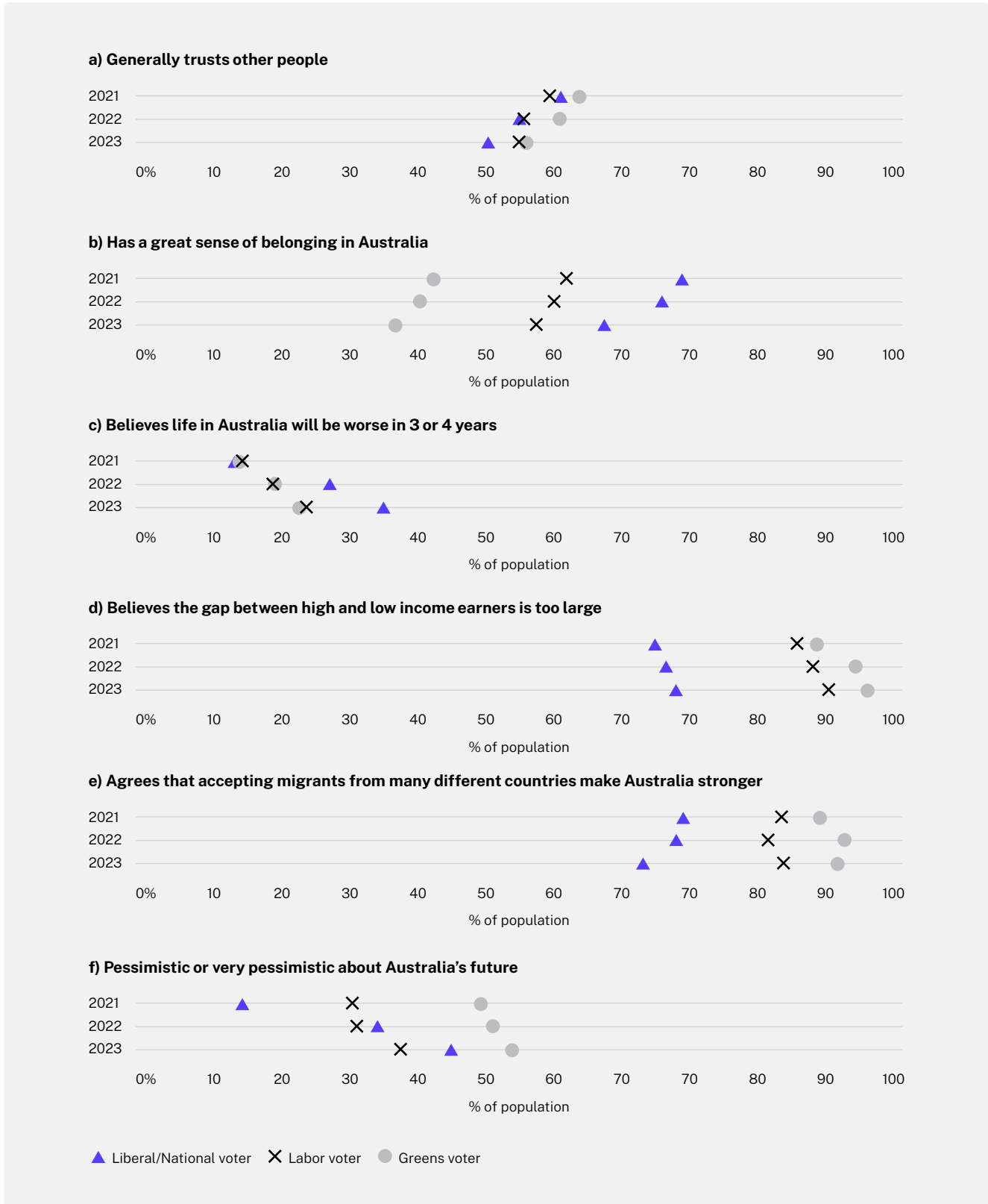
Political polarisation is noted as a major challenge in the world today (UN, 2023). Marked by a hardening of attitudes to a range of social, cultural, economic and political issues, the rise of political parties previously on the fringes and the decline of mainstream parties, substantial political polarisation around the world has largely passed Australia by to this point.

However, in addition to a growing degree of polarisation on the indicators of political trust shown in Figure 20, attitudes to major issues have also become increasingly politically aligned. Agreement that Australia should amend the Constitution to establish an Indigenous Voice halved from 40 per cent in July 2022 to 21 per cent in July 2023 (three months before the Referendum) while agreement among Labor voters declined 7 percentage points from 70 per cent to 63 per cent. On climate change, the proportion of Liberal/National voters who were somewhat or very concerned declined by 8 percentage points from 49 per cent in 2022 to 41 per cent in 2023, compared with a 5 point decline among Labor voters (from 83 per cent in 2022 to 78 per cent in 2023).

The Mapping Social Cohesion survey has also recorded changes in attitudes to and perceptions of social cohesion that vary according to political preferences. As shown in Figure 23, between 2021 and 2023, the proportion of Liberal/National voters who:

- > believe that people generally can be trusted declined by 9 percentage points (compared with a 4 point decline for Labor voters);
- > have a great sense of belonging in Australia declined by 10 percentage points (a decline of 4 points for Labor voters);
- > believe their life will be worse in three or four years increased by 19 points (an increase of 8 points for Labor voters);
- > agree that accepting migrants from many different countries has made Australia stronger declined by 5 points (no change for Labor voters); and
- > are pessimistic or very pessimistic about Australia's future increased by 27 points (6 point increase for Labor voters), from 14 per cent in 2021 to 41 per cent in 2023.

Figure 23 Indicators of social cohesion by political party preference, Life in Australia™, 2021–2023



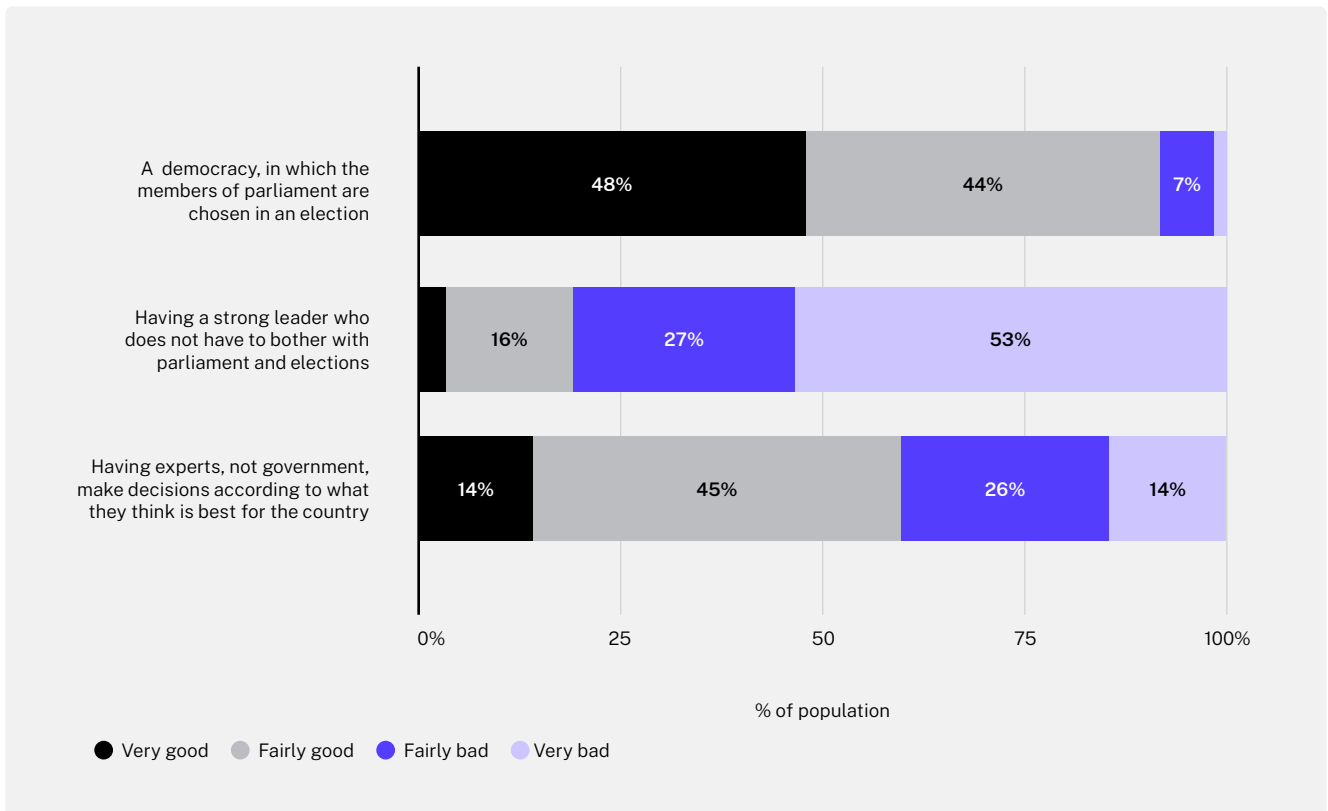
Distrust in the political system does not translate to support for an authoritarian system

In 2023, more than nine-in-ten people (92 per cent) believe that a democracy is a very good or fairly good way to govern Australia, compared with 19 per cent of people who say that a political system with a strong leader and no parliament or elections would be very good or fairly good (see Figure 24). Approximately three-in-five people believe that having experts make decisions would be fairly or very good.

Most people support democracy even among those who say that a strong leader would be very or fairly good. Among these people, 87 per cent also say democracy is a very or fairly good way of governing Australia – indicating that the 19 per cent who believe a strong leader would be good does not translate to a preference for an authoritarian system. Likewise, among people who think that democracy is a fairly or very bad way to govern Australia, only 30 per cent think an authoritarian model would be fairly or very good.

- > In total, only 4 per cent of people gave a better rating to a system with a strong leader than a democracy, 16 per cent gave the same rating to both systems and 80 per cent of people gave a better rating to democracy.

Figure 24 ‘Would the following be a good or bad way to govern Australia?’ Life in Australia™, 2023



Our levels of political engagement have been reasonably consistent

Political engagement is measured with the Scanlon-Monash Index of political participation. Since our first survey in 2007, this index has measured the extent to which individuals have voted, signed a petition, communicated with a Member of Parliament, joined a boycott or attended a protest in the last three years.

Figure 25 shows the index of political participation over time. Scores on the index fluctuated around an average of 100 between 2007 and 2018 when Mapping Social Cohesion was run as a telephone survey. The index has averaged 95 since 2018 when the survey transitioned to online and telephone surveys through Life in Australia™. In 2023, it sits at 96.

Figure 26 shows the proportion of Australians engaged in political activities.

- > 80 per cent of people in 2023 said they had voted in an election in the last three years (a period incorporating the 2022 Federal Election). Understandably given the nature of compulsory voting in Australia, this proportion fluctuates with the election cycle, higher after elections and lower at other times. The proportion who say they have

not voted includes those who were required to vote but did not, those who are ineligible to vote or only recently became eligible (including people who have migrated to Australia and those who have recently turned 18) and potentially some who have forgotten they voted.

- > Signing a petition is the second most common political activity after voting. In 2023, 51 per cent of Australians said they had signed a petition in the last three years, similar to 2022 but significantly lower than in either 2020 or 2021.
- > Engagement in political protest has increased from a low point during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, 11 per cent of people said they had attended a protest, march, or demonstration in the last three years, significantly higher than the 8 per cent recorded in November 2020.
- > The proportion of people who communicate with Members of Parliament (20 per cent in 2023), join boycotts (17 per cent in 2023) and get together to resolve local problems (13 per cent in 2023), and post anything about politics online (26 per cent in 2023) has been relatively stable in recent years.

Figure 25 The Scanlon-Monash Index of political participation, 2007 to 2018 (telephone surveys) and 2018 to 2023 (online and telephone surveys)

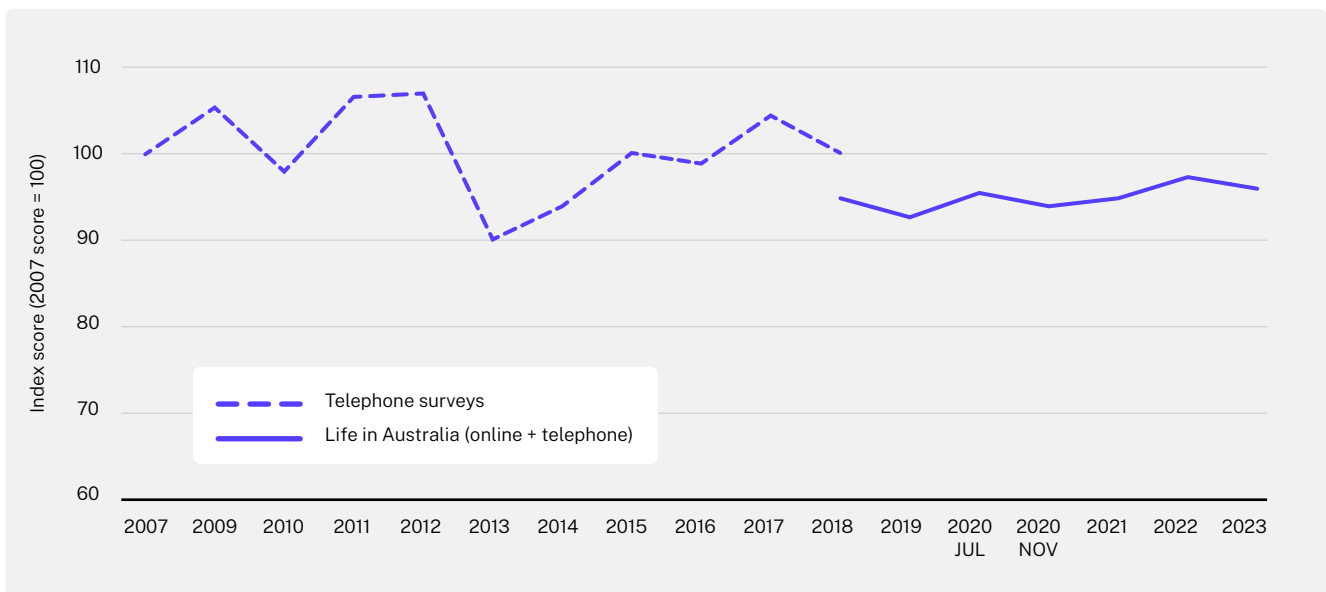
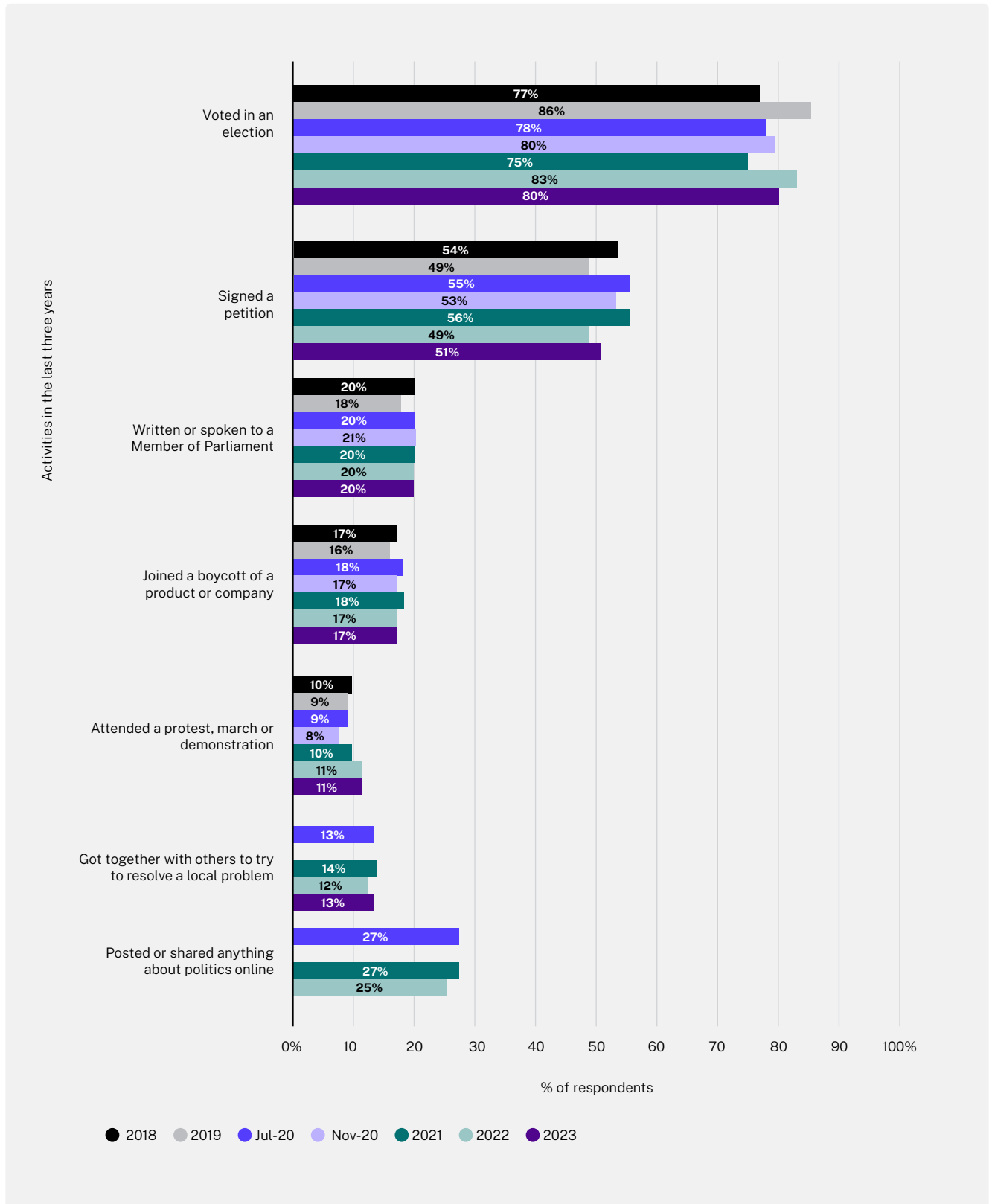


Figure 26 Engagement in political activities, 2018 to 2023 surveys



Political engagement helps to strengthen democracy and the political system

Political engagement and action is foundational to open democracies and a key way in which we can call for change and improvements to our social, economic and political systems. Of course, these calls for change are often politically charged and not all people will agree with them. Even so, political action and protest for any given cause is a crucial indicator of our collective belief that we can achieve change for the better.

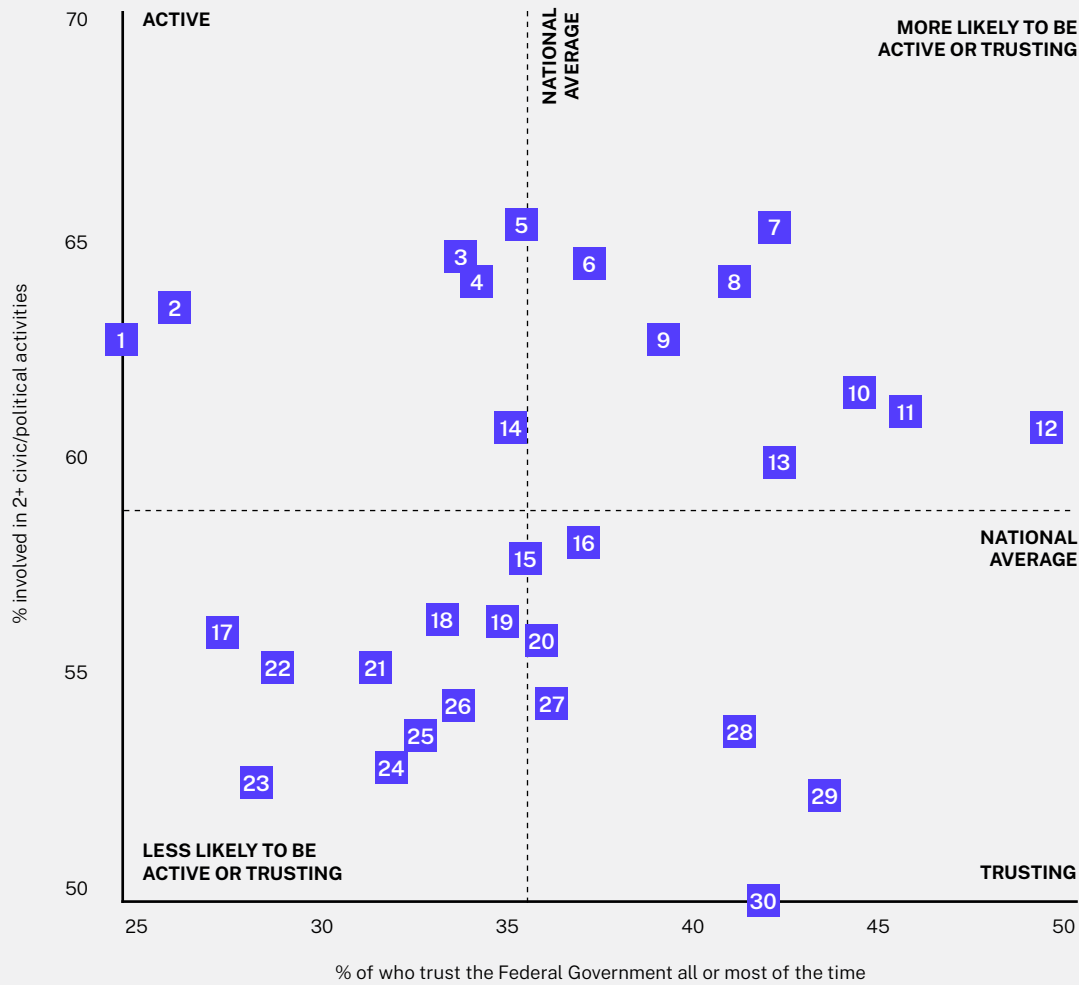
In this way, political action has an important relationship with trust in government. The population who distrust government and are highly politically active is an indicator of the extent to which people are willing and able to seek change. The population who distrust government but are not engaged is an indicator, although not definitive, of a degree of political marginalisation – of people unwilling or unable to effect change.

Variations in the degree of trust in government and political engagement across demographic and socioeconomic groups are shown in Figure 27.

The horizontal axis running from left to right represents the proportion of people who believe the Federal Government can be trusted all or most of the time in 2023. The national average of 36 per cent who trust the Federal Government is shown in the dashed line running from top to bottom. The vertical axis (also running from top to bottom) shows the proportion of people who have been involved in two or more political activities in the last three years. The political activities are those listed in Figure 26. The national average of 59 per cent who have been involved in two or more activities is shown in the dashed line running from left to right.



Figure 27 Levels of trust in the Federal Government and political activism for demographic and socioeconomic groups, Life in Australia™, 2023



1 Struggling to pay bills/poor	9 Couple no children	17 Just getting along financially	25 Minor party voter
2 Single parent family	10 Postgraduate degree	18 Liberal/National voter	26 35-44 years
3 Non-capital city	11 Labour voter	19 Couple parent family	27 Completed Year 12 (no further quals.)
4 Australian-born	12 Financially prosperous/very comfortable	20 Overseas-born, speaks only English	28 Group household
5 Holds a certificate/diploma	13 Affluent neighbourhood	21 Disadvantaged neighbourhood	29 Renting home
6 55-64 years	14 Lives alone	22 25-34 years	30 Overseas-born, speaks other language
7 65+ years	15 Own home with mortgage	23 Did not finish Year 12	
8 Own home outright	16 45-54 years	24 18-24 years	

Young and middle aged adults and people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to both trust in government and be politically active than older and more affluent populations. The Xs inside Figure 27 show the proportion of specific groups that trust government and are politically active. The X for 25-34 year olds, for example, indicates that 29 per cent of 25-34 year olds trust the Government all or most of the time in 2023 and 55 per cent have been involved in two or more political activities in the last three years. Both of these proportions are below the national averages, placing 25-34 year olds in the bottom left hand corner, suggesting that this demographic is relatively less trusting and less active – and potentially more marginalised – than other groups in society. People living in relatively disadvantaged neighbourhoods, those who are ‘just getting along’ financially, those aged 18-44 years and those who did not finish Year 12 are also relatively less trusting and active.

People who describe themselves as ‘poor’ or ‘struggling to pay bills’, single parents and people who live alone are relatively less trusting in government, though surprisingly, are relatively more likely to be politically active. For example, 29 per cent of single parents have posted or shared anything about politics online in the last three years (compared with a national average of 26 per cent), 15 per cent have got together to resolve a local problem (13 per cent national average), 22 per cent have joined a boycott (17 per cent national average), 21 per cent have written or spoken to a member of parliament (20 per cent national average) and 56 per cent have signed a petition (51 per cent national average).

Declining trust in government and Australia’s democracy and growing political polarisation are far from crisis levels though warrant ongoing monitoring and attention

Levels of trust in government have been declining since 2020. They remain somewhat above the low levels of trust we were reporting throughout the 2010s, though the gains that were made during the COVID-19 pandemic have by now disappeared. In the last two years, we see signs of growing polarisation around major issues such as the Voice referendum, climate change and Australia’s political system as well on indicators of social cohesion such as belonging, trust and concern for the future. Australia’s social cohesion and political engagement provide resources to manage these potential challenges, though disparities in political trust and engagement and their relationship to wider social and economic inequalities warrant a focus on how to ensure all Australians have the opportunity to participate in Australia’s democracy.



MULTICULTURALISM, DIVERSITY AND ACCEPTANCE

Social cohesion in Australia today is the product of our unfolding history, both recent and deeper in our past. Modern Australia is highly diverse, home to people who have settled here from all corners of the world. However, the legacy of the often violent colonial history of Australia remains. Together, this diversity and history shape who we are and how we relate to one another.

We have made important progress in creating and maintaining a cohesive society in this uniquely Australian context. As we have previously reported, nearly 90 per cent of us believe that multiculturalism has been good for Australian and that Australia’s relationship to its First Nations peoples is very important to the country. The difficulties and divisions associated with the Voice referendum has perhaps slowed that progress in 2023, while the experiences of discrimination, prejudice and social inequalities act as ongoing handbrakes.

Nevertheless, as we will explain in this chapter, the continued positive sentiment expressed towards multiculturalism, diversity and First Nations Australians are shining lights that remind us of our progress to date and can help to lead us through the challenges of 2023 and to a stronger future. Among a wide set of indicators on the Mapping Social Cohesion survey, these aspects of Australia are captured in the Scanlon-Monash Index of acceptance and rejection. This index tracks the extent to which people are accepting of others and feel accepted themselves. In addition to explaining the trends on this index, this chapter will explore a wide and very rich set of indicators that point to the progress and strength of multicultural Australia.

The Scanlon-Monash index of acceptance and rejection has been declining since 2020

The index of acceptance and rejection shows the extent to which people are accepting of people from different backgrounds and are themselves accepted by wider society. Since the Mapping Social Cohesion survey in 2007, the acceptance and rejection measure has included four items. These are the level of acceptance of immigrants in Australia from diverse backgrounds, support for the provision of government assistance to maintain the customs and traditions of ethnic minorities, experiences of discrimination and perceptions of life in Australia in three or four years’ time.

Figure 28 shows that the scores on the index of acceptance and rejection were on a downward trajectory until 2017. Scores increased before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, they have declined by 21 points since November 2020, to a relatively low point of 65 in 2023.

This decline, however, is not a reflection of our attitudes to multiculturalism in Australia, ethnic and cultural diversity and to migrants themselves. As will be explained in this chapter, our support for each of these remains at very high levels in 2023, coming off very impressive growth since the late 2020s. The decline in acceptance and rejection is, in fact, driven by a growing sense of general life pessimism.

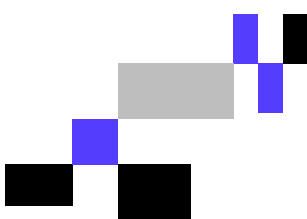
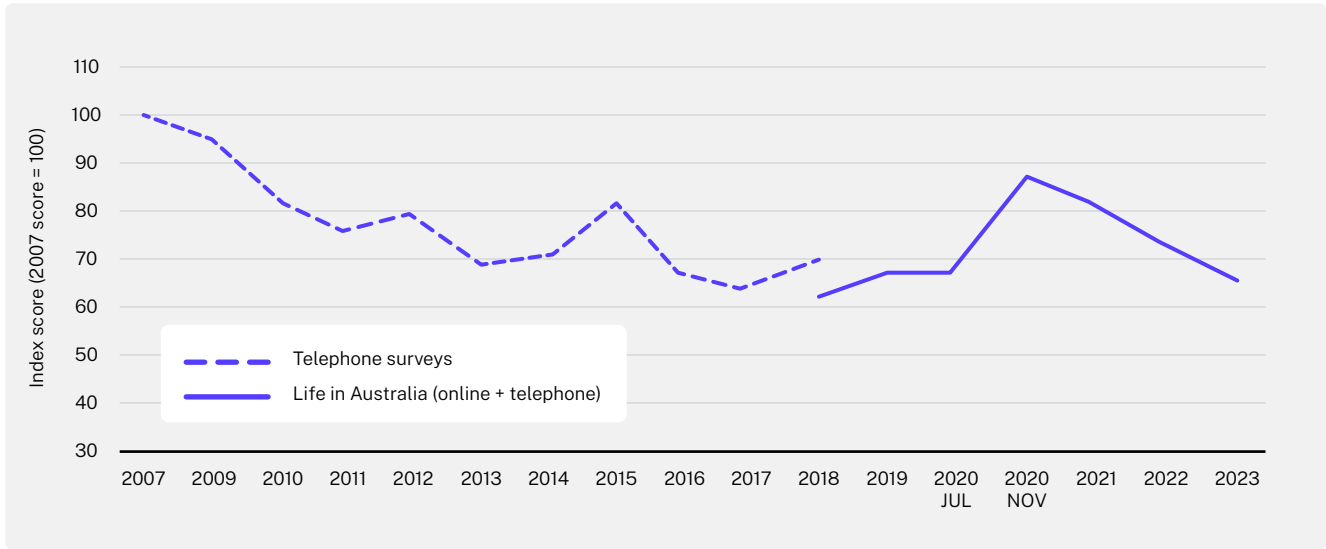


Figure 28 The Scanlon-Monash Index of acceptance and rejection, 2007 to 2018 (telephone surveys) and 2018 to 2023 (online and telephone surveys)



Many Australians are worried about the future

One-in-four (26 per cent) Australians believe their life in Australia will be a little or much worse in the next three or four years, a significant increase over the last year (22 per cent in 2022) and since before the COVID-19 pandemic (18 per cent in 2018 and 19 per cent in 2019).

Optimism for the future increased during COVID-19 and pessimism decreased. As shown in Figure 29, the proportion of people who thought their life would be improved in three or four years peaked at 53 per cent in November 2020, while the proportion who thought life would be worse was 14 per cent. Although an odd finding, it is perhaps not surprising that pessimism has since increased given the context in which the November 2020 survey took place. Melbourne was coming out of a very long lockdown and COVID-19 infections around the country were very low.

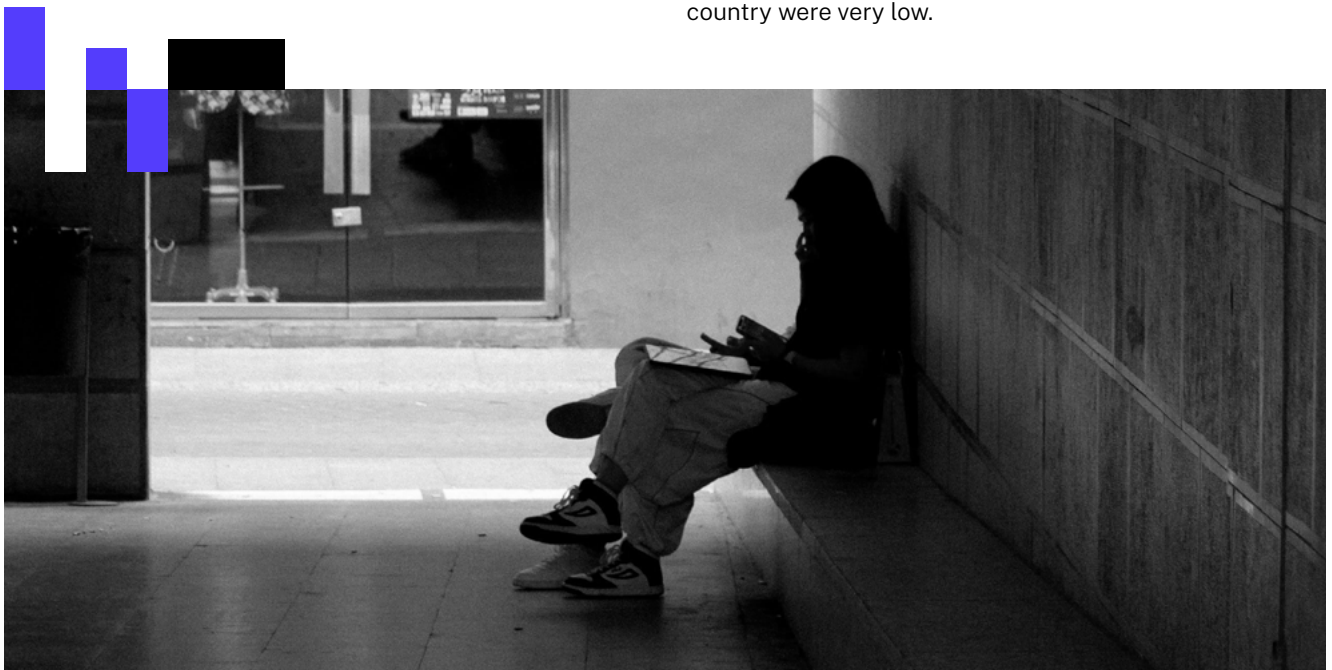
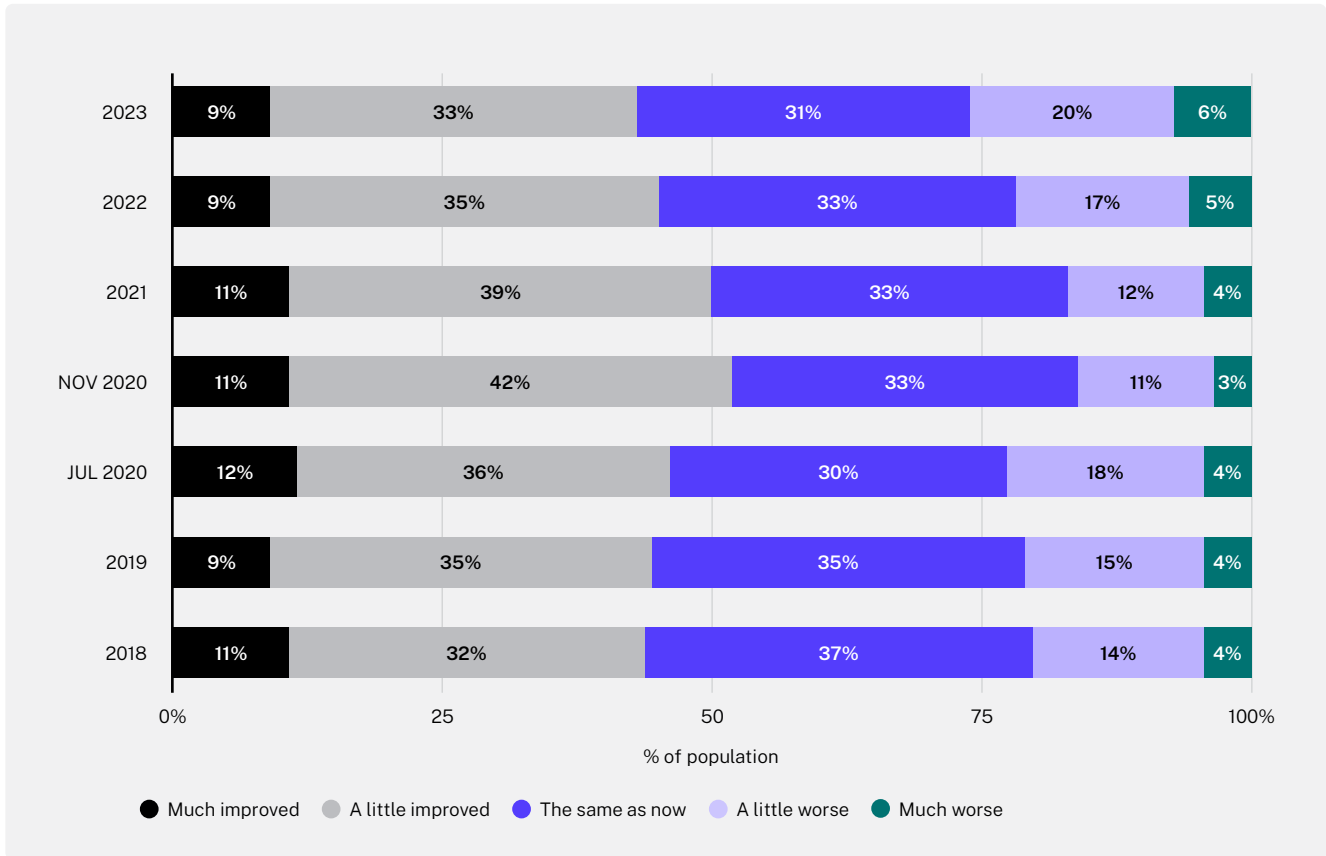


Figure 29 'In three or four years, do you think that your life in Australia will be...'



Nevertheless, the increase in pessimism over and above pre-pandemic levels is a cause for concern. The increase looks very much related to financial and cost-of-living pressures. In 2023, almost half of people (47 per cent) who are struggling to pay their bills or describe themselves as poor and one-third of people (32 per cent) who are 'just getting along' believe their life will be a little or much worse, compared with 20 per cent of people who are 'reasonably comfortable' financially. The 31 per cent increase in the proportion of people 'struggling', 'poor' or 'just getting along' since 2021 has therefore likely contributed to an increase in pessimism.

In saying that, increased pessimism may also be impacted by political preferences. In 2023, one-in-three Liberal/National votes (32 per cent) believed their life would be worse in three or four years (compared with 22 per cent of Labor and Greens voters). This is a significant and very substantial increase from the 13 per cent of Liberal/National voters who were pessimistic for their future in 2021 before the election of the current Labor Government.

Australians have an overwhelmingly positive view of multiculturalism, migrant diversity and the importance of the relationship to its First Nations peoples

As we reported in last year’s report, high and growing support for multiculturalism and the perceived importance of Australia’s relationship with First Nations people is a great asset to Australia and our sense of harmony and cohesion. In 2023, these sentiments remain very strong, even through the social and economic challenges we have faced over the last year – including the difficult debate over the Voice referendum. Key results on these indicators are shown in Table 14.

On two of the questions listed in Table 14, survey respondents were given the explicit option to respond ‘don’t know’ or ‘none of the above’ for the first time in the 2023 survey. This has impacted the time series. To derive results that are consistent over time, respondents who say ‘don’t know’ or ‘none of the above’ are not counted in these proportions in Table 14. The two affected questions are:

- > 72 per cent of people agree that ‘accepting immigrants from many different countries makes Australia stronger’ in 2023. Almost 8 per cent said ‘none of the above / don’t know’. Removing these respondents 78 per cent of people agree with the statement. This is the same proportion as 2022, but has been trending strongly upwards since 2018 (63 per cent).
- > 86 per cent agree that ‘multiculturalism has been good for Australia’. Almost 4 per cent said ‘none of the above / don’t know’. Removing these respondents, 89 per cent of people agree with the statement, similar to the proportion recorded in 2022 (88 per cent) and significantly higher than where it was in 2018 (77 per cent).

The other results in Table 14 show that:

- > 86 per cent do not think people should be rejected from migrating to Australia on the basis of their race or ethnicity, while 83 per cent do not think we should be rejecting on the basis of religion. Combined, 18 per cent of people agree that it should be possible to reject immigrants on the basis of race, ethnicity or religion, a significant decline from the 32 per cent of people recorded in 2018 and 2019.
- > 86 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’. Agreement with this sentiment has declined by 4 percentage points since 2021 though remains very high.
- > 85 per cent of people agree or strongly agree that ‘it is important for Indigenous histories and cultures to be included in the school curriculum’. This proportion has declined by 3 percentage points since 2021 though also remains high.

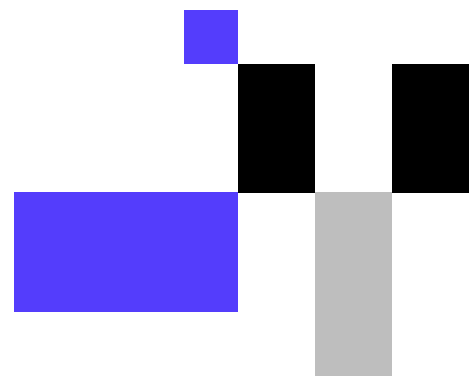


Table 14 Attitudes to migrant diversity and multiculturalism, 2018 to 2023 surveys

		2018	2019	JUL 2020	NOV 2020	2021	2022	2023
		% OF RESPONDENTS						
IMMIGRANT DIVERSITY MAKES AUSTRALIA STRONGER ¹	Strongly agree	17	17	19	21	23	24	26
	Agree	46	50	53	53	53	54	53
	Total agree	63	67	71	74	76	78	78
MULTICULTURALISM GOOD FOR AUSTRALIA ¹	Strongly agree	25	25	26	27	29	30	35
	Agree	51	55	58	57	57	58	54
	Total agree	77	80	84	84	86	88	89
REJECT IMMIGRANTS BY RACE/ETHNICITY	Strongly disagree	35	36	38	41	42	46	50
	Disagree	42	41	43	40	41	40	36
	Total disagree	78	77	82	81	83	86	86
REJECT IMMIGRANTS BY RELIGION	Strongly disagree	32	30	34	37	37	41	44
	Disagree	39	40	43	39	42	41	39
	Total disagree	71	70	76	75	79	82	83
FIRST NATIONS' RELATIONSHIP VERY IMPORTANT	Strongly agree					46	43	41
	Agree					44	46	45
	Total agree					90	89	86
INDIGENOUS HISTORIES & CULTURES IN THE CURRICULUM	Strongly agree					46	45	42
	Agree					42	43	43
	Total agree					88	87	85
EXPERIENCED DISCRIMINATION LAST 12 MONTHS	Yes	19	16	18	13	16	16	18
	Total	19	16	18	13	16	16	18

¹ Excludes respondents who responded 'none of the above / don't know in 2023

Australians value the contribution of immigrants to Australian society, culture and the economy

Generally positive attitudes to multiculturalism and diversity are complemented by very strong recognition of the value of the people themselves who come to Australia. This is reflected in the extent to which immigrants are thought to benefit our society and economy and their perceived standing in the community. Key results on these indicators of attitudes to immigrants are shown in Table 15.

Survey respondents were given the explicit option to respond 'don't know' or 'none of the above' on one of the questions in Table 15 for the first time in the 2023 survey. As above, respondents who say 'don't know' or 'none of the above' are not counted in the proportions in Table 15 to ensure a consistent time series. The affected question is:

- 91 per cent agree that 'someone who was born outside of Australia is just as likely to be a good citizen as someone born in Australia' in 2023. Almost 3 per cent of respondents said 'none of the above / don't know'. Excluding these respondents, 94 per cent of people agreed with this statement in 2023. This proportion has been very high (above 90 per cent) since it was first asked in 2020.

The other results in Table 15 show that:

- > 85 per cent agree that ‘immigrants improve Australian society by bringing new ideas and cultures’ in 2023. This is a similar proportion to 2022 (86 per cent) and is significantly higher than it was in 2018 (76 per cent) and 2019 (78 per cent).
- > 86 per cent agree that ‘immigrants are generally good for Australia’s economy’ in 2023, a similar proportion to what we recorded in 2021 (86 per cent) and 2022 (87 per cent) and significantly higher than 2018 (74 per cent) and 2019 (76 per cent).
- > 75 per cent do not believe that ‘immigrants take jobs away’ in 2023, a fraction lower than it was in 2022 (78 per cent), but in line with 2021 (75 per cent) and significantly higher than was recorded in 2018 (64 per cent) and 2019 (64 per cent).
- > 18 per cent of people in 2023 said they experienced discrimination in the last 12 months because of their ‘skin colour, ethnic origin or religion.’ This proportion is somewhat higher than was recorded in 2021 and 2022 (16 per cent), but is in line with its average since 2016.

Table 15 Attitudes to immigrants, 2018 to 2023 surveys

		2018	2019	JUL 2020	NOV 2020	2021	2022	2023
% OF RESPONDENTS								
IMMIGRANTS IMPROVE AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY	Strongly agree	17	17	22	22	23	23	22
	Agree	59	61	60	61	62	63	63
Total agree		76	78	82	83	84	86	85
IMMIGRANTS MAKE GOOD CITIZENS ¹	Strongly agree			40	43	43	47	51
	Agree			50	49	49	47	44
Total agree				90	91	92	94	94
IMMIGRANTS ARE GOOD FOR THE ECONOMY	Strongly agree	14	17	18	22	22	25	22
	Agree	60	60	63	61	63	62	64
Total agree		74	76	81	83	86	87	86
IMMIGRANTS TAKE JOBS AWAY	Strongly disagree	12	14	15	16	17	20	19
	Disagree	52	51	55	55	58	58	57
Total agree		64	64	70	71	75	78	75

¹Excludes respondents who responded ‘none of the above / don’t know in 2023

Australians have differing views on our mutual responsibilities in strengthening multiculturalism

A growing share of people agree that ‘we should do more to learn about the customs and heritage of different ethnic and cultural groups in the country’. This share has increased from 59 per cent in 2018 to 69 per cent in 2022 and 71 per cent in 2023. Most people, however, do not think ‘ethnic minority groups in Australia should be given Australian Government assistance to maintain their customs and traditions’. In 2023, only one-in-three people (33 per cent) agreed with this statement, 55 per cent disagreed and 11 per cent responded ‘none of the above / don’t know’.

- > Respondents were given the explicit option to respond ‘don’t know’ or ‘none of the above’ for the first time in the 2023 survey. Excluding these respondents (so we can compare the results over time), 37 per cent agree that ethnic minority groups should be given assistance. This proportion increased from 30 per cent in 2018 and 2019 to 38 per cent in 2022.

Australia are split on the question of whether ‘too many immigrants are not adopting Australian values’. The proportion of people who agree with this statement has decreased significantly and substantially, from 67 per cent in 2019 to 53 per cent in 2023. Australians therefore are increasingly likely to believe that immigrants are adopting values, however a large share of people still do not think that is the case (45 per cent disagreed with the statement in 2023). A summary of these indicators is shown in Table 16.

Table 16 Attitudes to immigrant integration, 2018 to 2023 surveys

		2018	2019	JUL 2020	NOV 2020	2021	2022	2023
		% OF RESPONDENTS						
LEARN ABOUT CUSTOMS & HERITAGE OF GROUPS	Strongly agree	14					19	18
	Agree	45					50	53
	Total agree	59					69	71
GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE TO MAINTAIN TRADITIONS ¹	Strongly agree	5	4	6	7	8	8	9
	Agree	25	26	30	28	30	31	28
	Total agree	30	30	36	35	38	38	37
IMMIGRANTS NOT ADOPTING AUSTRALIAN VALUES	Strongly disagree		26	32	32	34	38	38
	Disagree		5	6	7	7	8	7
	Total disagree		31	39	38	41	46	45

¹ Excludes respondents who responded 'none of the above / don't know in 2023

Most Australians have friends from different backgrounds

A powerful indicator of active intercultural relations is the number of friendships people have with people from different backgrounds. In 2023, 81 per cent of people say they have two or more people in their 'close circle of friends' who come from 'national, ethnic, or religious backgrounds' different to their own, while 40 per cent said they have five or more such friends. These proportions are near identical to where they have been since 2021.

Concerns that Australia's migration program is too large are becoming more common since COVID-19 – but remain below pre-COVID levels

In 2023, 33 per cent of people think 'the number of immigrants accepted into Australia at present' is too high, 51 per cent say it is about right and 14 per cent believe it is too low. The 2023 Mapping Social Cohesion survey is the first in the post-COVID era in which there were no international border closures in the prior 12 months. When borders were closed between early 2020 and early 2022, belief that the number of immigrants was too high declined substantially, while belief the number was too low increased (see Figure 30). In 2023 and with a substantial immigrant intake since borders were reopened, these trends have reversed. Nevertheless, half of the population believe the intake is about right, a similar proportion since 2020 and higher than pre-COVID levels.

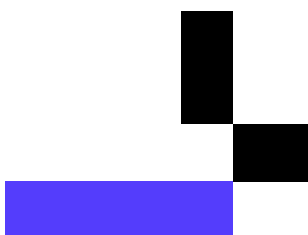
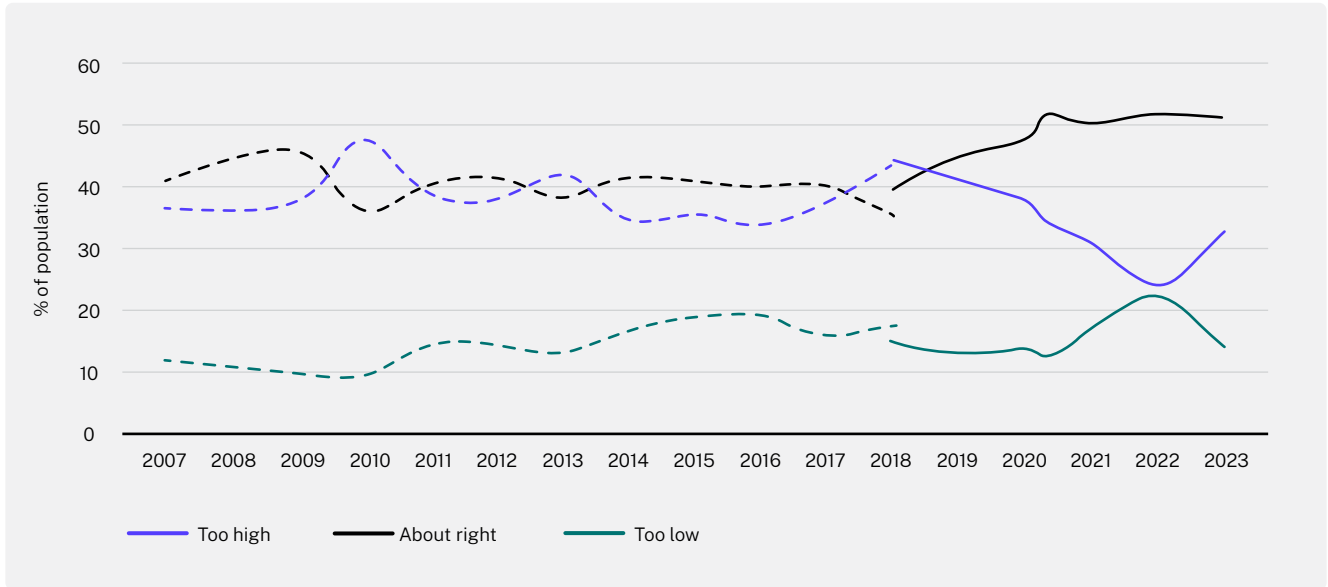


Figure 30 'What do you think of the number of immigrants accepted into Australia at present? Would you say it has been... too high, about right or too low', 2007-2008 (telephone surveys) and 2018-2023 (online and telephone)



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™

Most people are able to distinguish their views on the size of the migrant program from their attitudes to diversity, multiculturalism and the contribution of migrants to Australian society. Among those who believe the migrant intake is too high, 87 per cent agree that people born overseas are just as likely to be good citizens as Australian-born people, 75 per cent agree that multiculturalism has been good for Australia, 69 per cent disagree that it should be possible to reject immigrants based on their religion, race or ethnicity and 66 per cent agree that immigrants improve Australia society by bringing new ideas and cultures.

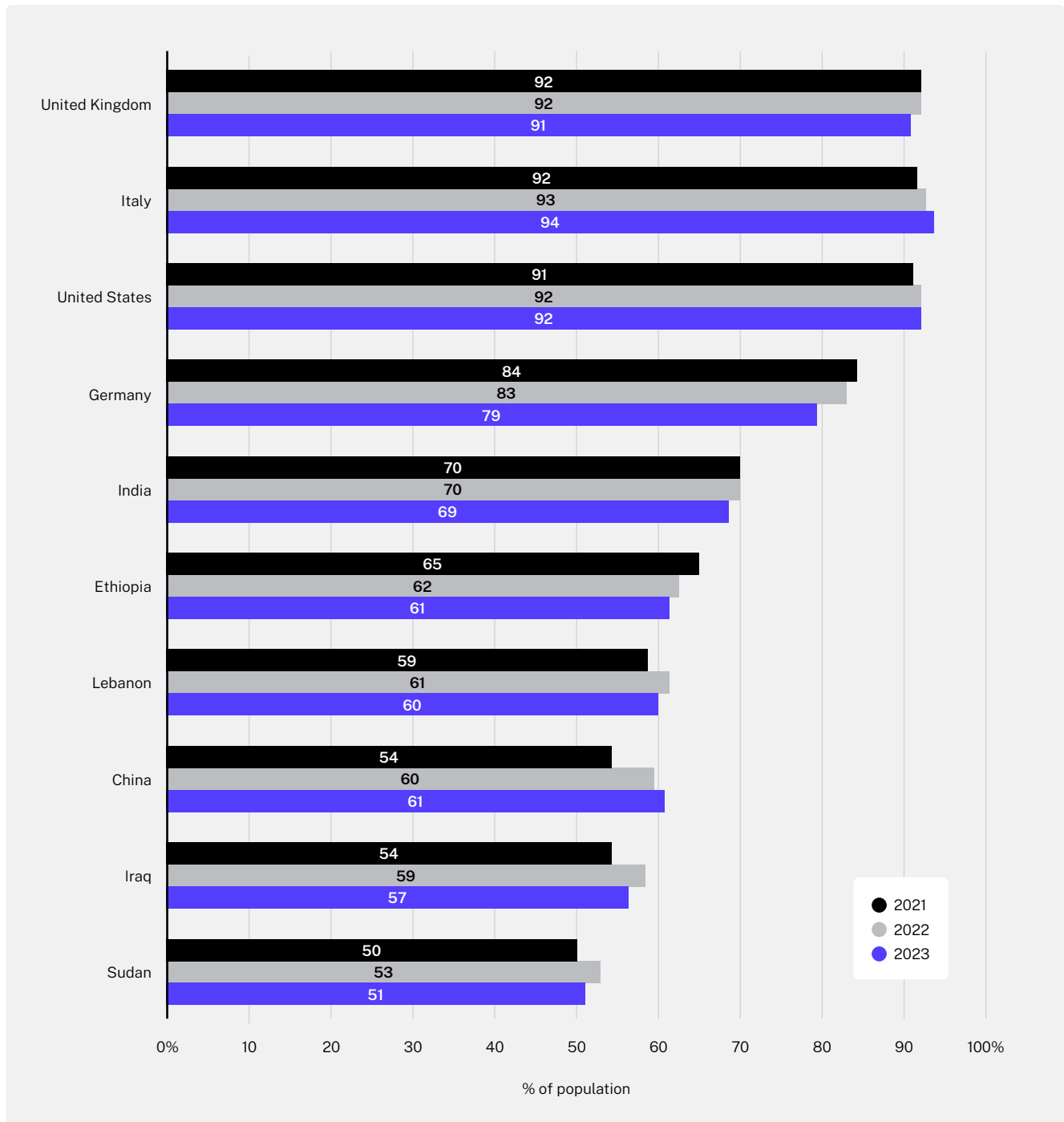
Prejudice remains a problem

Despite very high and growing levels of support for multiculturalism, prejudice remains common in Australia. Figure 31 shows that more than 90 per cent of Australians have very or somewhat positive feelings towards immigrants from Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom. But this proportion drops to 70 per cent for immigrants from India, and to little more than 60 per cent or below for immigrants from Ethiopia, Lebanon, China, Iraq, and Sudan. The proportion of people with a positive attitude to people born in China increased from 52 per cent in 2020, 54 per cent in 2021, 60 per cent in 2022 and 61 per cent in 2023.

We also ask people whether their personal attitudes are positive, negative, or neutral towards people from six religious groups – Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and Jews. Negative attitudes were most commonly directed towards people of Muslim and Christian faiths. Figure 32 shows that 27 per cent of people expressed a negative attitude towards Muslims and 16 per cent towards Christians. A declining share of the population express negative attitudes towards Muslims. As shown in Figure 33, the proportion with a somewhat or very negative attitude declined from 41 per cent in 2019 to 32 per cent in 2021 and 27 per cent in 2023. The share of people with a negative attitude towards Christians, however, has increased, from 12 per cent in 2020 to 16 per cent in 2023.

The decline in negative attitudes towards Muslims has been widespread. Large declines were recorded between 2019 and 2023 among groups that were traditionally more likely to hold negative attitudes, including females (13 percentage point decline), older Australians (12 point decline for those aged 65 years and over), Queenslanders (15 point decline) and people with lower levels of education. The proportion with a negative attitude towards Muslims, for example, declined by 18 percentage points among people who have up to a Year 11 education, from 54 per cent in 2019 to 36 per cent in 2023.

Figure 31 'Would you say your feelings are positive or negative towards immigrants from...?' Proportion who have a somewhat or very positive attitude, 2021–2023 surveys



Overall, more than three-in-five (63 per cent) people have a negative attitude towards one or more of the migrants groups from Asia, the Middle East and Africa (the countries listed in Figure 31) or one of the non-Christian religions. More than one-third (35 per cent) of people expressed a negative attitude towards two or more of the Asian, Middle East and African migrant groups in 2023

but expressed only positive attitudes towards each of the groups from the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy and the United States. This striking discrepancy in the attitudes expressed towards European (and US) and non-European migrants is a worrying indicator of the potential racial prejudice held within Australia.

Figure 32 'Is your personal attitude positive, negative, or neutral towards...?' 2023 survey

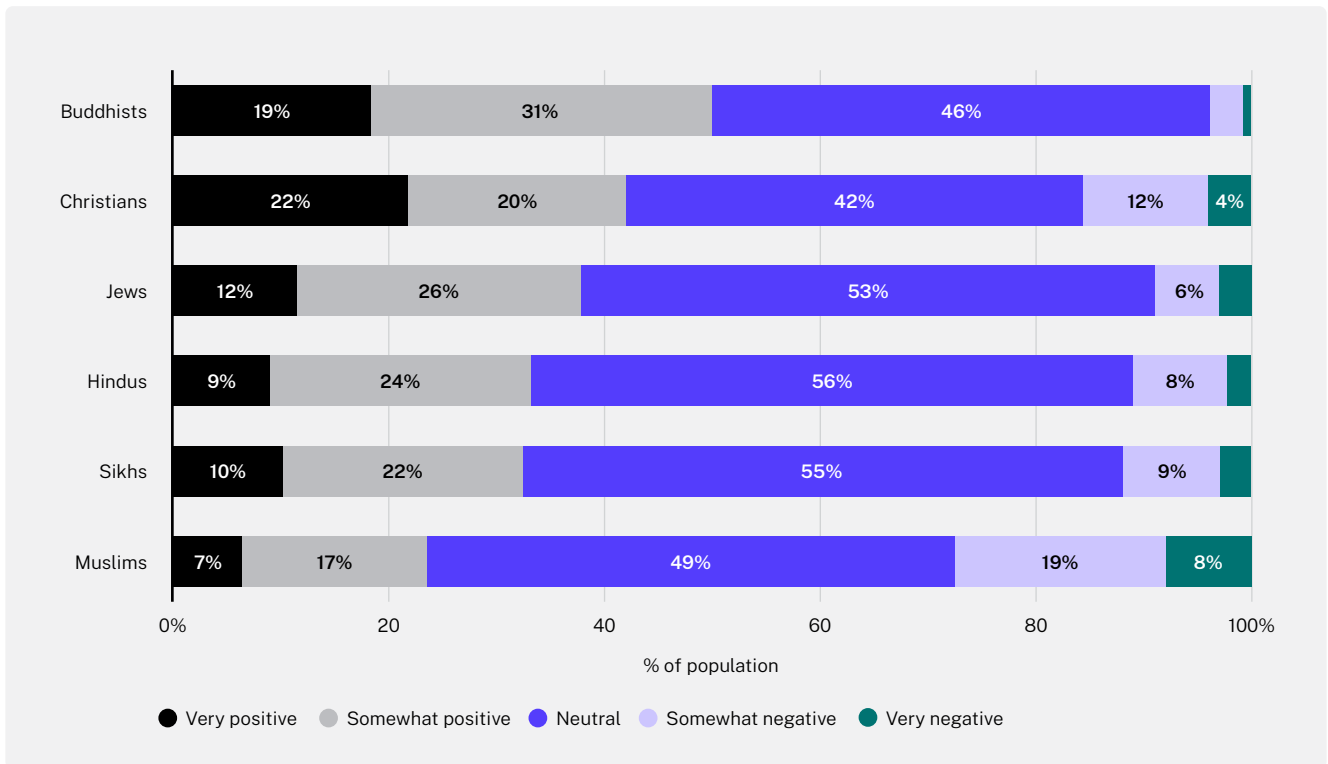
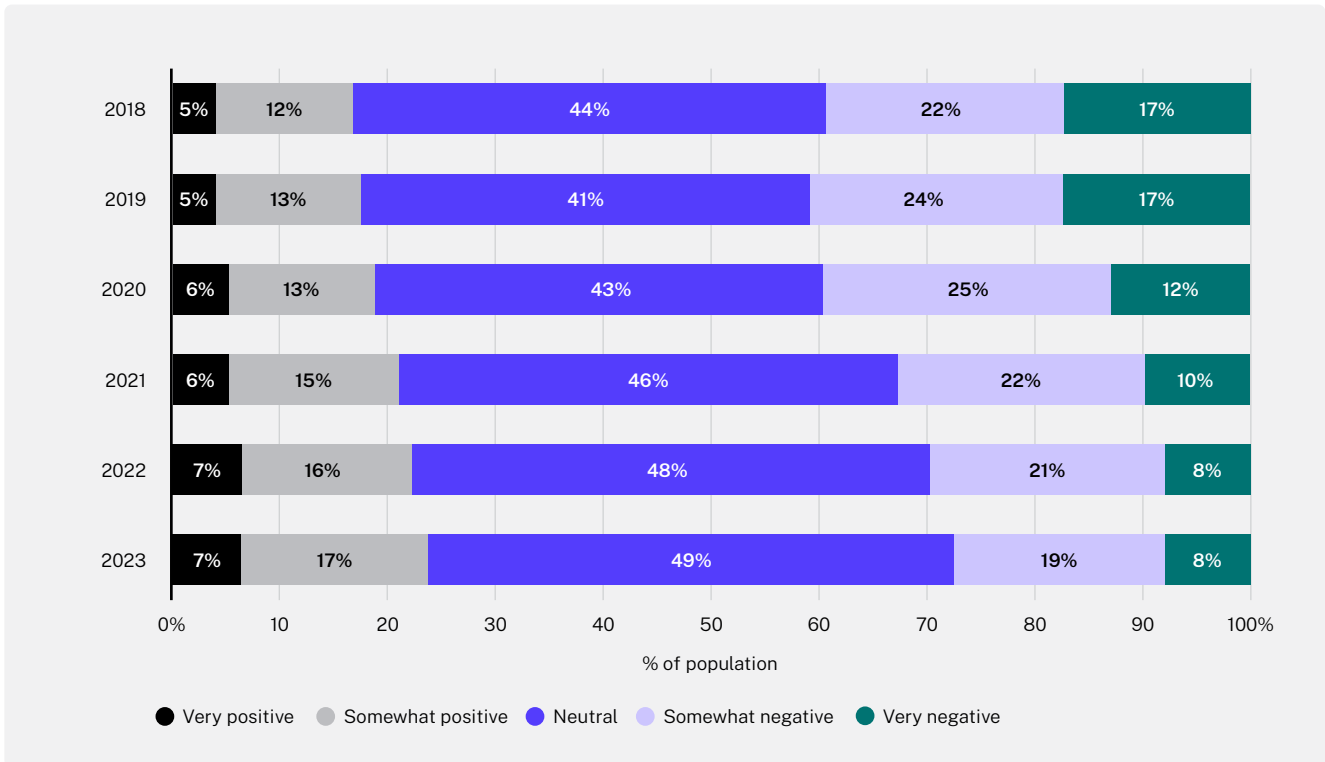


Figure 33 'Is your personal attitude positive, negative, or neutral towards Muslims?' 2018-2023 surveys



What does multiculturalism mean to Australians?

The very strong support for the view that multiculturalism has been good for Australia suggests that multiculturalism is an important symbol and holds great value to people across a broad cross-section of society. However it is also apparent that multiculturalism is defined and understood in multiple ways. For some people, the view that Australia has benefitted from multiculturalism is coupled with views that immigrants are integrating well in Australia, that ethnic groups should receive assistance to maintain traditional customs and hold no negative views of people from different migrant and religious backgrounds. For many others though, generally positive views on multiculturalism are coupled with negative views on one or more of these aspects.

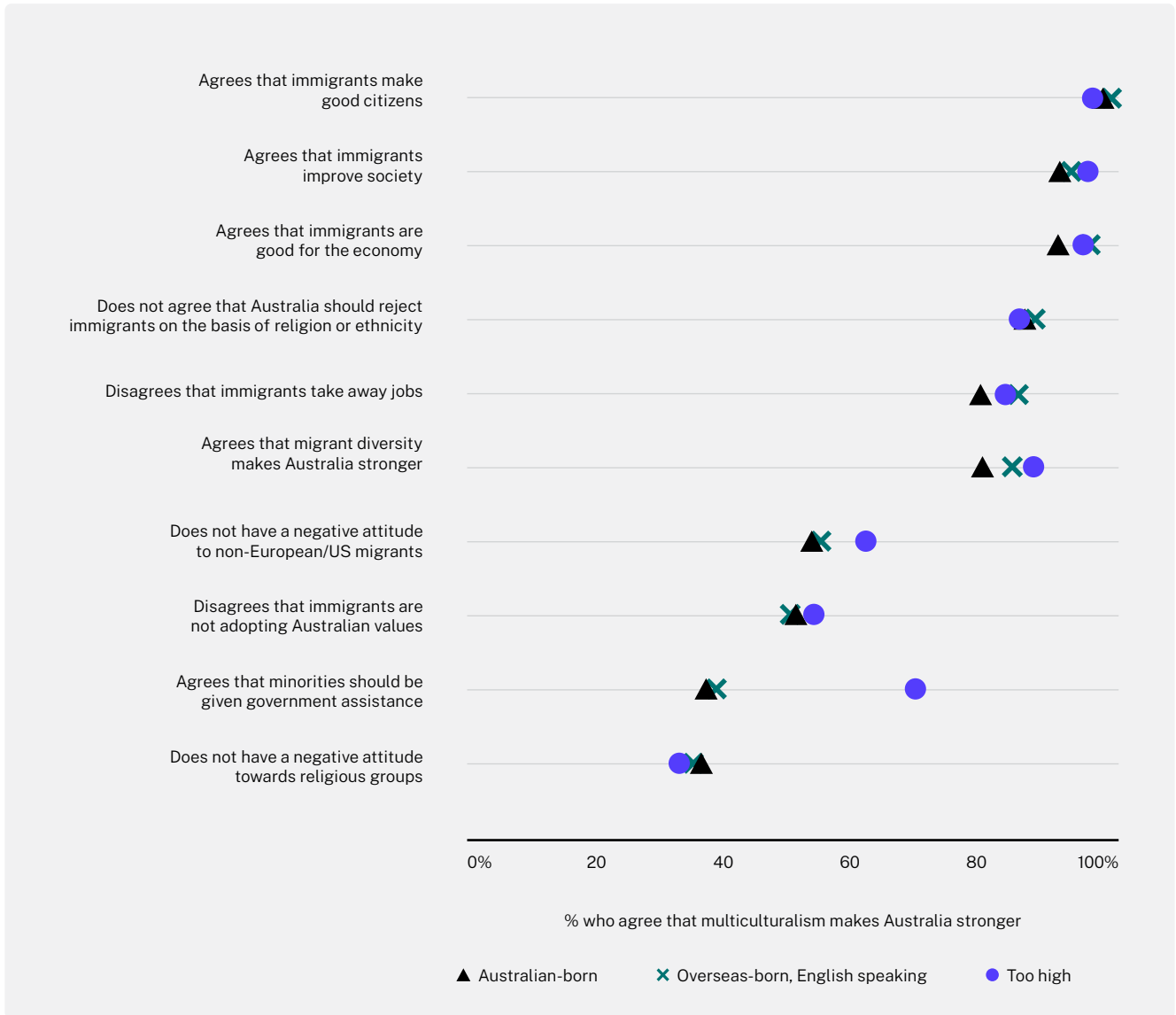
Figure 34 shows how attitudes to immigrants and diversity vary in Australia among people who agree that multiculturalism has been good for Australia. Over 90 per cent of these people – irrespective of whether they are born in Australia or overseas, from English or non-English speaking backgrounds – believe that immigrants make just as good citizens as Australian-born people, improve society by bringing new ideas and cultures and are good

for the economy. Near 80 per cent or more do not think Australia should reject immigrants on the basis of religion or ethnicity, disagree that immigrants take away jobs and agree that migrant diversity makes Australia stronger.

On the other hand, people who support multiculturalism have very mixed views in terms of their attitudes towards migrant integration and specific migrant and religious groups. Around 50 per cent of people born in Australia and who have a positive view of multiculturalism also hold a negative attitude to one or more migrant groups from Asia, Africa or the Middle East and disagree that immigrants are not adopting Australian values. Only a little over one-in-three Australian-born people agree that minorities should be given government assistance to maintain customs and traditions (37 per cent) and do not have a negative towards one or more religious groups (36 per cent). Interestingly, similar views are held among overseas-born Australians. A major difference though is overseas-born Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds are much more likely to believe that minorities should receive government assistance (69 per cent, compared with 37 per cent for Australian-born people).



Figure 34 Attitudes to immigrants and diversity among people who believe multiculturalism has been good for Australia by migrant status and first language, Life in Australia™, 2023



Social and economic inequalities strongly predict attitudes to multiculturalism in Australia

We create a multicultural index to examine the differences in attitudes towards multiculturalism across Australia. The index is created by adding together responses to 12 questions related to immigration and multiculturalism on the Mapping Social Cohesion survey, including those listed in Figure 34. Index scores range from 1 to 100, with scores of 100 representing the highest level of support for multiculturalism where people strongly agree that multiculturalism has been good for

Australia, strongly disagree that immigrants are not adopting Australian values, strongly agree that minorities should receive government assistance to maintain their traditions and customs and do not have negative attitudes towards one or more religious or migrant groups.

We use a structural equation model to help us to identify the characteristics of people that best predict their scores on the multicultural index. We use this type of model to seek to understand what it is about people – in terms of their social, demographic and economic characteristics – that might help to explain their views and attitudes to multiculturalism.



The model recognises that the characteristics of people can have a direct relationship with attitudes to multiculturalism and an indirect relationship through, for example, the relationship that demographic and socioeconomic characteristics may have with a person's sense of personal, social and financial worth.

The results demonstrate that social cohesion is very strongly related to attitudes towards multiculturalism. People who are happier, more financially satisfied, more trusting in political leaders and more involved in community and civic activities report significantly higher scores on the multicultural index. Active involvement in social, community and civic groups is associated with a 4 per cent higher score on the multicultural index, while those with high levels of personal, social and financial worth and confidence in the political system are each predicted to have 15 per cent higher index scores than those with low worth and confidence.

People with higher levels of education have more favourable attitudes towards multiculturalism. Among people born in Australia, having a university degree is associated with 11 per cent higher support for the various aspects of multiculturalism.

Most of this is a direct association between educational attainment and attitudes towards multiculturalism. However, we also find an indirect relationship through the fact that university educated people have a stronger sense of personal, social and financial worth and greater trust in political leadership.

High and growing support for multiculturalism is an important asset for Australian society, but multiculturalism itself is still a work in progress

We continue to recognise the value of multiculturalism and the social, cultural and economic contribution of migrants to Australian society. We also recognise the importance of Australia's relationship to its First Nations peoples. Discrimination and prejudice however, remain as important issues. Negative attitudes towards some migrant and religious groups though have become less common, while the symbolic value placed on multiculturalism and the contribution of migrants are valuable assets for ensuring and enhancing multicultural harmony.

BECOMING AUSTRALIAN

Belonging, integration and social cohesion among our newest Australians

Trish Prentice, Qing Guan, Rouven Link & James O'Donnell

The Mapping Social Cohesion 2023 study contains more information than ever to help us understand the experiences of Australians who have migrated here over the years. The main Mapping Social Cohesion survey administered to the Social Research Centre's Life in Australia™ was completed by almost 7,500 Australians in 2023, including almost 2,200 people who were born overseas. Additional targeted surveys were also used this year to further boost this number, with ultimately 2,430 overseas-born Australians completing a survey in 2023 in one of four different languages (including English). We also conducted 55 in-depth qualitative interviews with migrant Australians. All of this provides extraordinarily rich information on the experiences, attitudes and perceptions of Australians who have arrived from all corners of the world. More information on the surveys and interviews are provided in the Appendix at the end of this report.

In this chapter, we explore the experiences, attitudes and perceptions of migrant Australians, drawing on both the quantitative surveys and the qualitative interviews. The chapter focuses on the sense of belonging and the processes through which migrants come to feel 'Australian' and to feel a sense of home and place here. These processes can be described as a form of social integration, reflecting the social bonds and ties that support the personal wellbeing of migrants and ensure they are able to become engaged and active members of their communities and Australia (Ager & Strang, 2008).

In this chapter, migrant and overseas-born Australians include all survey respondents and interview participants who were born outside Australia. Survey respondents are further identified by the country or region in which they or one or both parents were born. We do not have a large

enough number of respondents to report results for each country or region, but are able to give results for six key groups. These are overseas-born Australians who were born in or have one or more parents born in:

1. Mainland **China**, including a number of respondents who were born in Hong Kong but whose parent(s) were born on the mainland;
2. **India**;
3. The **Middle East**, including North Africa, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran and Syria;
4. Sub-Saharan **Africa**, including South Sudan, Kenya and Nigeria but excluding South Africa;
5. **South East Asia**, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia; and
6. **Eastern Europe**, including Hungary, Poland, Russia, Czechia and south eastern European countries including Greece, Croatia and Serbia.

The number of survey respondents by country or region are shown in Table 17. The median number of years that respondents have lived in Australia for are also shown. Note that the way we classify people by the country or region of their birth or their parents' birth means that a small number of people fall in two or more groups (for example if one parent was born in China and the other parent was born in south east Asia). For this reason, the sum of respondents in each country or region of origin does not add up to the total number of overseas-born respondents.

Table 17 Mapping Social Cohesion 2023 survey respondents, overseas-born Australians by country or region of origin

COUNTRY OR REGION OF ORIGIN	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	MEDIAN LENGTH OF TIME IN AUSTRALIA (YEARS)
China	160	15
India	263	13
Middle East (including North Africa)	182	16
Africa (excluding North Africa and South Africa)	96	17
South East Asia	262	17
Eastern Europe	140	33
Other	1,371	35
Total overseas-born	2,430	23

As explained in the Appendix, the 55 people who participated in an in-depth interview were born all around the world, including 20 from east and south east Asia (including China), 14 from sub-Saharan Africa, 8 from Europe and the Americas, 7 from south Asia (including India) and 6 from the Middle East. Participants had lived in Australia for various lengths of time: 15 participants have immigrated in the last 5 years, 29 in the last 15 years and 25 have lived here for 15 years or longer.

The survey results reported in this chapter are weighted so that the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics (e.g. by age, gender and education) of survey respondents match the characteristics of the total Australian populations. More information on the weights is included in the Appendix.

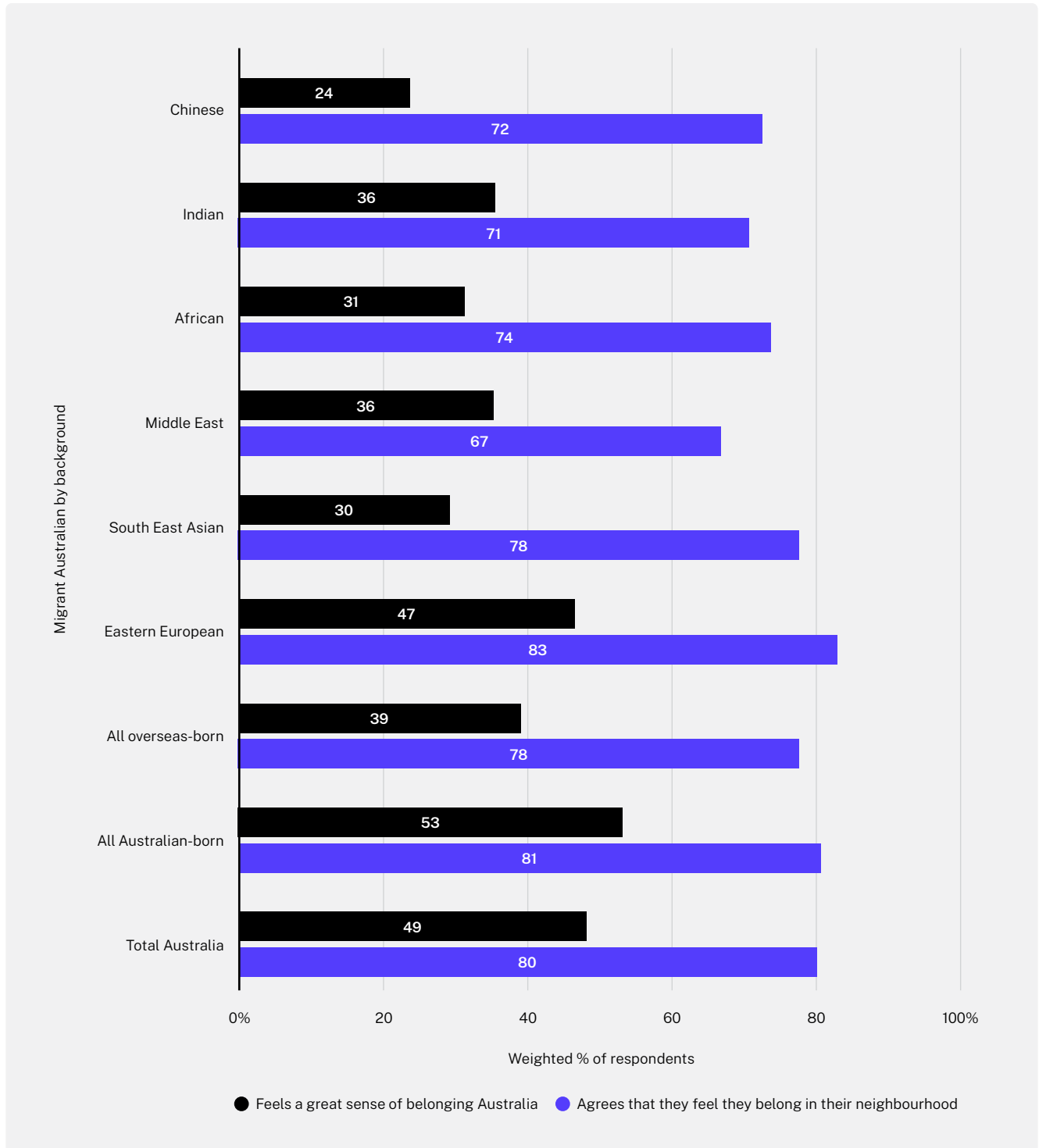
The sense of belonging in Australia grows among migrants over time

Among all overseas-born Australians, 39 per cent feel a sense of belonging in Australia to a great extent, while 81 per cent feel a sense of belonging to at least a moderate extent. Although these proportions are significantly lower than for the Australian-born population (53 per cent have a great sense of belonging and 87 per cent have a moderate or great sense), migrants are generally more likely to have a great sense of belonging if they have lived in Australia for longer. Approximately 23 per cent of people who have migrated to Australia in the last ten years have a great sense of belonging in Australia, compared with 31 per cent of those who have been here 10-19 years, 29 per cent who migrated 20-29 years ago and 58 per cent among people who migrated 30 years ago or more.

Among all migrant Australians, those from non-European backgrounds are significantly less likely to have a sense of belonging in Australia. As shown in Figure 35, the proportion of survey respondents with a great sense of belonging in Australia is lower among migrants from Chinese (24 per cent), south east Asian (30 per cent) and African (31 per cent) backgrounds than among all overseas (39 per cent) and Australian (53 per cent) born people. Much of the differences disappear after controlling for the number of years migrants have lived in Australia, indicating that at least part of the weaker sense of belonging among non-European migrants is due to the fact that they have lived in Australia for a shorter period of time on average.



Figure 35 The sense of national and neighbourhood belonging for overseas-born Australians, by country or region of birth, 2023



There are a number of explanations as to why migrants who have lived in Australia for longer feel a stronger sense of belonging. From the qualitative interviews, it is clear that time is an important factor to grow social connections and networks and emotional ties to Australia.

“I guess that is something that you don’t really expect to happen organically. But when you start to realise that time also plays a factor in it. So it’s going to be close to 20 years. Most of my adult life has been here. Most of the references that I have connected to one way or another are in Australia. So it is kind of the universe telling you formally, you’re one of us now.” (interview 1.03, born in Colombia, lives in Victoria)

“In the first few years after arriving in Australia, I sometimes felt that I did not belong to here [Australia]. Now I have integrated [into the country] and feel like this is my second hometown. When people ask me where I came from, I will answer ‘Australia’.... Living in Australia for over 30 years now, I see Australia as my second hometown and am very proud to see myself as an Australian citizen.” (interview 1.09, born in mainland China, lives in Victoria)

Neighbourhoods and local communities are important to migrant integration and belonging

Migrant Australians, on average, have a strong sense of belonging in their neighbourhoods. Among survey respondents, almost eight-in-ten (78 per cent) overseas-born Australians agree or strongly agree that they feel a sense of belonging in their neighbourhood, little different from the proportion for people born in Australia (80 per cent). Neighbourhood belonging also appears to grow over time, with the proportion of migrants who feel a sense of belonging in their neighbourhood increasing from 69 per cent for those who have lived in Australia for less than 10 years, to 76 per cent for those who have lived here 10-19 years, 78 per cent for those who have lived here 20-29 years and 85 per cent of those who have lived here 30 years or longer. As shown in Figure 35, a high proportion of migrants from south east Asian and eastern European feel a sense of belonging in their neighbourhood, compared with lower proportions among Middle Eastern (67 per cent), Indian (71 per cent) and Chinese (72 per cent) Australians.

Neighbourhood connections and belonging are strongly related to the wider sense of belonging in Australia. Among overseas-born Australians, 44 per cent of those who have a sense of belonging in their neighbourhood also have a great sense of belonging in Australia, compared with 23 per cent of those who do not feel they belong in their neighbourhood. The qualitative interviews indicate that the social interactions people have on a daily basis in their local communities, and the local sense of connection and belonging they develop, are important for their sense of identity and belonging in Australia more generally.

“So I think that connecting with the local community has been one of the most important things that has helped me or helped us to transition in this migration process.” (interview 6.06, born in Honduras, lives in Tasmania)

“I’ve been here like 14 years. So I love my area, really. And I’m familiar with the neighbourhood. I’m familiar with the people around me, and because they are so nice, even if I don’t know them -- like we met in the bus stop, and we start to chat with each other so that they are really very kind. They don’t make me feel I’m strange or a stranger, or I don’t belong to here, and they try really to look after me.” (interview 6.05, born in Iraq, lives in Tasmania)

Several elements increase migrants’ sense of belonging to their local communities. These include getting to know neighbours or at least having friendly interactions, greater familiarity with the location and environment generally, engagement in and support from local community groups and feelings of being respected, welcomed and accepted by the community.

“Most people here are friendly. When I go outside, some of the women smile at me. So it’s very good. It gives me a lot of energy.” (interviewee 6.04, born in Afghanistan, lives in Tasmania)

“Also I feel connection with the mums of the school because we share the same experience. So working and bringing all the kids to do extra activities, we help each other a lot. For example, in our street, I know different mums that can help me with drop off and pick up the kids.” (interview 5.02, born in Italy, lives in Western Australia)

Several interviewees reported that they value the diversity and multiculturalism of their communities.

“I live in a multicultural community, and I feel good living here. Here you can learn about cultures and customs from different countries and ethnic groups. Maybe because this community has large numbers of established and new migrants, here we are able to integrate well and respect each other. There is no racism and discrimination [in my community] and we all feel we belong to the community.” (interview 1.09, born in mainland China, lives in Victoria)

Identity and belonging in Australia for migrants is complex and some migrants feel caught between worlds

Many people retain strong connections to countries of birth, particularly through language, culture and their families and friends.

“I’m certainly Australian, but it’s always been the case that I wasn’t born here and also that neither of my parents were born here. So there is a sense

of this is definitely our home and it’s all of our home. But it’s probably that there are also strong connections still to Sri Lanka and to the UK, particularly because of my mother’s culture. When we moved here, we moved so that she could be close to her quite elderly parents, who had immigrated to Australia from Sri Lanka. So the cultural connection -- the Sri Lankan cultural connection -- is still quite strong. So I say, yes, I definitely am Australian, but I’m definitely a migrant.” (interview 3.05, born in the United Kingdom, lives in Queensland)

For several interview participants, their growing connection and attachment to Australia has come at the expense of their connections to their countries of birth. This is often seen as a natural process, particularly when they have been away from their countries of birth for many years and with each return visit, the country has become less and less familiar to them. Migrant Australians themselves change too, taking on more and more Australian traits and characteristics to the point they are marked out as different by friends, family and strangers in their countries of birth. People are generally philosophical on this transition, but a sense emerges that,



at least for some people, they feel neither fully Australian nor a member of their home countries and their social identities are caught between the two.

“I feel that I don’t belong to Australia, and even not to Italy. That’s the sense, you know, once you have done this big jump, probably you don’t belong to anything.” (interview 5.02, born in Italy, lives in Western Australia)

“I feel a strong sense of connection to Tanzania, but I think that connection is more so to the Tanzania in my memory, not the Tanzania that it is now... it’s so different now. You go there, and sometimes you project what used to be there but what is no longer there. But because it’s home, in a sense, and it still has certain elements which are beyond the physical. Then you still have that sense of attachment to the things that are like beyond the physical itself. Things that are difficult to put into words, language, maybe food, even if it’s not the same place, but it’s the same kind of food, the same flavours, the same smells. Those kinds of things are still there.” (interview 4.02, born in Tanzania, lives in South Australia)

“I still feel connected to Hong Kong, but I also can feel that I’m losing that connection to Hong Kong. I think part of the reason is that I already moved here for few years and Hong Kong has changed a lot during this period. Last year I went back to Hong Kong to visit and I can experience that there’s something different. It’s not the one that I feel very familiar with, but I also feel that I’ve changed as well because to be more like the Australian style, the lifestyle or the way to think.” (interview 5.01, born in Hong Kong, lives in Western Australia)

For some, any potential identity crisis is resolved – or at least managed – by their strong connections to the important things in their lives, including family, friends, work and religion.

“I still struggle with my identity because I feel like people ask me ‘where you’re from?’ – What do I say? New Zealand Bangladesh? Oh, wait! What do they mean? But when I go back [to Bangladesh, people ask me] ‘where are you from?’ I’m like: Australia... So I don’t know, I still haven’t really figured out how to answer that question of my identity, but I feel like Australia is the place where I’ve been here the longest. So I feel sort of connected and I’m invested in.

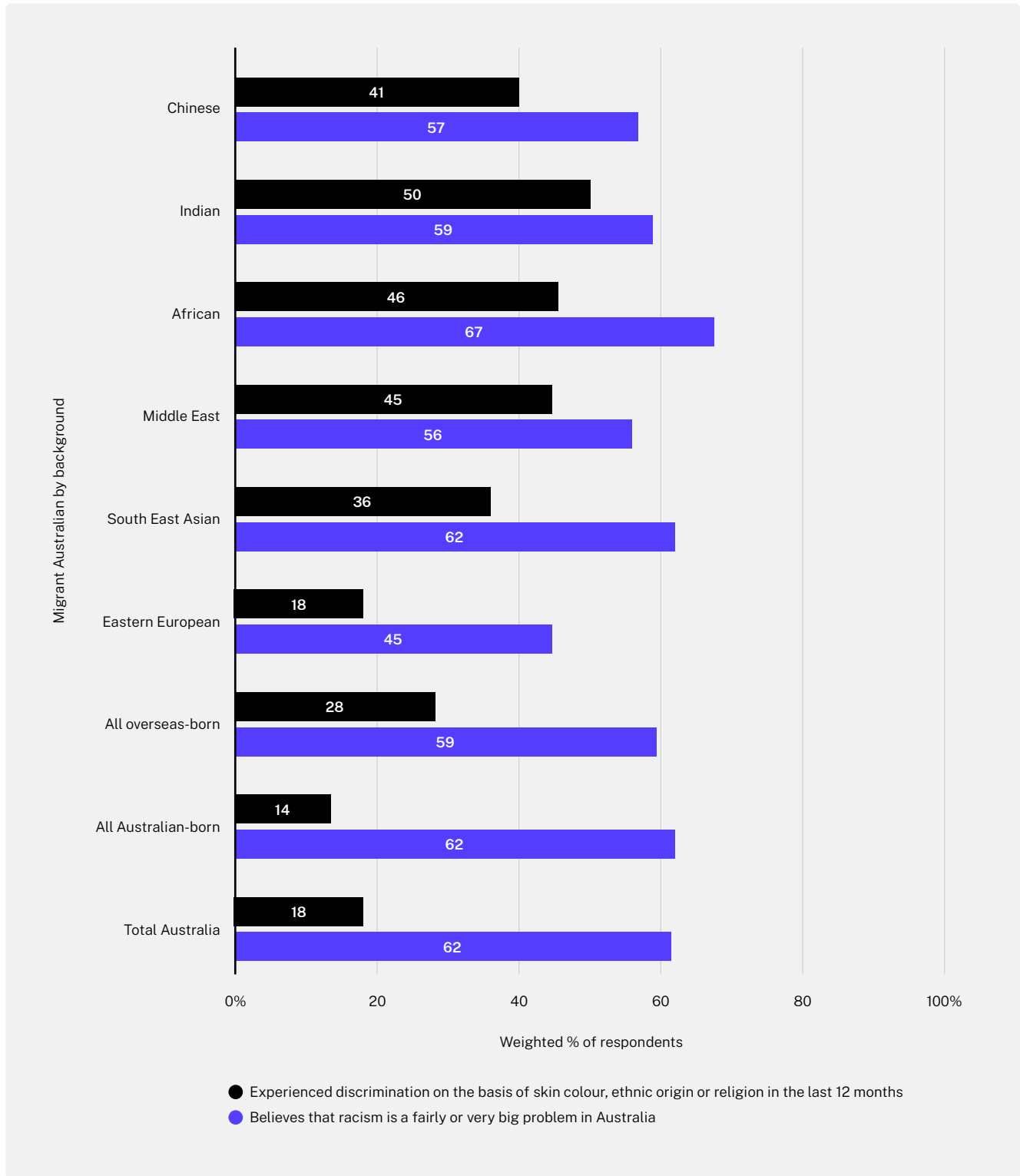
I want this country to be better. So yeah, I guess I can call myself Australian. I’ll always be Muslim, I think. Muslim first and Australian second. Because that’s what’s important to me. And I think people want you to be Australian first. But I’m like, no.” (interview 2.07, born in Bangladesh, lives in New South Wales)

The experience of discrimination and racism negatively impacts the development of Australian identity and belonging

In 2023, 18 per cent of Australians said they had been discriminated against in the last 12 months based on their skin colour, ethnic origin or religion. This rises to 28 per cent for people born overseas and 39 per cent for people from non-English speaking backgrounds. Compared with migrants from European backgrounds, those from Asian, African and south-central American backgrounds were all significantly more likely to experience discrimination in 2022-23. As shown in Figure 36, 41 per cent of Chinese Australian migrants who responded to the survey reported discrimination in the last 12 months, 50 per cent of Indian Australians, 36 per cent of migrants from south east Asian backgrounds, 45 per cent of those from the Middle East and 46 per cent of migrants from African backgrounds.

Survey respondents widely acknowledge that racism remains a problem in Australia today. In 2023, 13 per cent of overseas-born Australians think that racism is a very big problem and 59 per cent believe it is either a very big or fairly big problem. Strikingly, these proportions are equally high among the Australian-born population, with 15 per cent saying it is a very big problem and 62 per cent saying it is at least a fairly big problem. While people who have experienced recent discrimination are significantly more likely to say that racism is at least a fairly big problem (75 per cent of respondents who have experienced recent discrimination think that racism is at least a fairly big problem), respondents from Asian and Middle Eastern backgrounds are, overall, no more or less likely to believe that racism is a problem. As shown in Figure 36, two-thirds (67 per cent) of survey respondents from sub-Saharan African backgrounds (excluding South Africa) believe racism is a fairly or very big problem, a view shared by 45 per cent of respondents from Eastern European backgrounds. Otherwise, around three-in-five or 60 per cent of people in each of the other groups consider racism a very or fairly big problem.

Figure 36 Discrimination and perceived racism among migrant groups in Australia, 2023



Interview participants had mixed views on racism in Australia. Very few people think that Australia is a particularly racist country, though many have experienced discrimination, verbal and sometimes physical racial abuse, racial prejudice and stereotyping and been the butt of racially motivated jokes and ‘humour’. For some, racism and discrimination have been major challenges in their experiences in Australia.

“I would say the number one challenge is to do with racial discrimination from the white folks. That’s the first challenge that we experienced. (interview 3.14, born in Ghana, lives in Queensland)

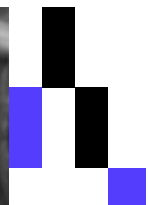
“I don’t really feel like I belong in Australia. Most of the time, I don’t feel welcome.” (interview 4.04, born in mainland China, lives in South Australia)

The experience of racial abuse in public places was a common theme throughout our interviews. Abuse has been a longstanding problem for many, especially for those of Muslim faith. In more recent times, abuse was amplified during COVID-19 for Chinese Australians and indeed anyone of Asian appearance.

“I experience it, a lot... not discrimination... but verbal abuse.” (interview 1.17, born in Ethiopia, lives in Victoria)

“There’s a big anti-migrant group... And we had to pass by there, because the bus stop is not far from there. And people would shout ‘go back to your country. Blah blah blah!’ Inside that hit hard because, we came to Australia because we cannot stay in our country, so we think ‘Oh, this country will be better’. And then we got a choice to come, and we thought people would be welcome, but we find it’s a bit hard.” (interview 1.14, born in Myanmar, lives in Victoria)

“At the beginning of the pandemic, I was yelled at by a drunken Western man at the train station, saying, ‘This is not China, you don’t need to wear a mask.’ He then tried to come to me and remove my mask while mimicking removing a mask. I hurriedly ran away.” (interview 1.13, born in mainland China, lives in Victoria)



“Some of my friends had this experience during COVID. Because [people] don’t know who is Chinese, who is Japanese, who is Korean. So my friends had people throwing stones or something [at them].” (interview 1.06, born in Japan, lives in Victoria)

Even without overt racism, migrants are often made to feel different. Physical appearances, skin colours, accents and religious and cultural signifiers like headscarves mark people as ‘different’ and can cause them to be treated as ‘others’. For migrant Australians, these experiences can be tiresome in their repetitiveness, constantly reminding them that they do not quite fit in and are not ‘one of us’ even if they understand that people are not always intentionally or actively seeking to give this impression. While everyone has their coping strategies, cumulative experiences can be stigmatising and isolating – and impede the processes of integration and belonging in Australia.

“But in [the first suburb where I lived], I was very new to the country. And I felt very much a stranger. And the people, they don’t know why I’m wearing a scarf. Why I’m here. From my skin colour, it’s very obvious I’m not Australian, and I don’t belong here. So they are not comfortable, and they don’t know even if I speak English or not. So they are not comfortable to interact with me.” (interview 6.05, born in Iraq, lives in Tasmania)

“When people ask me where I’m from, because I’ve got an accent, I tell them that I’m from the Czech Republic but I’ve been here living here for a long time. I mean it does get a little bit old. But I guess that’s the curiosity of Australians. And you know, asking where you’re from, it could be taken as a negative thing where you sort of go, ‘well, you obviously ask because I’ve got an accent, and so are you telling me that I don’t belong? Or are you just interested?’ But I take it politely and answer the question and things like that. But you know, particularly early on when I couldn’t communicate as well in English, and could have missed some of the undertones and things like that... ‘was this person actually, you know, like making fun of me? Or are they really just interested, or, you know, is it...?’” (interview 3.04, born in Czechia, lives in Queensland)

Several interview participants noted how Australian humour continues to rely on racial stereotypes that might seem funny and light-hearted to some, but can be offensive and damaging to people on the receiving end.

“It would be the jokes...if you don’t do that right, we’ll put you back on the boat, <laugh>, we’ll send you to the boat.” (interview 2.05, born in Germany, lives in New South Wales)

“People think it is funny to, you know, greet you with the salute, the Nazi salute, and that kind of stuff. And you just go whoa...” (interview 2.05, born in Germany, lives in New South Wales)

“Oh, where are you from? Colombia? Oh, we got the drug dealer here. Blah blah blah!” (interview 1.03, born in Colombia, lives in Victoria)

“I still remember a colleague of mine, she just could not stop picking on how I say W and B and how I pronounce woman. You know, still to this day, I cannot figure out what was wrong with the way I said woman and how to correct it. So even though it was like on the lighter side in the moment, afterwards I would still think about it and not feel really good.” (interview 5.04, born in India, lives in Western Australia)

While white Australians from European backgrounds bear the greatest responsibility for issues of racism and discrimination, issues within and between ethnic and cultural groups also exist. This can be a difficult issue to discuss, particularly where it falsely shifts the blame for racism onto migrant and minority groups and risks stigmatising the whole ethnic or cultural community as racist. Nevertheless, it is apparent that some of the discrimination, prejudice and stereotyping that people experience are coming from people from the same or other ethnic minority groups.

“I’ve been labelled, but not by Australians around me per se, but by South Asians who [have] been around me.” (interview 1.20, born in India, lives in Victoria)

In the face of any form of racism, discrimination, prejudice or stereotyping, people are resilient and find ways to manage their effects internally within themselves and externally.

“I turn it around in the way it was perceived by me. ‘You have an accent’ might not necessarily mean I want to highlight that you are different. It might mean ‘I want to connect with you. Where are you from?’” (interview 4.03, born in Armenia, lives in South Australia)

“I learned a bit how to speak out, even if it was not easy, because when you don’t speak the language at the beginning, it’s hard, you know, to have a say or have thoughts or emotions flowing out and to express [yourself]. It is hard when someone is having fun at you or making jokes about your country. It is really hard to put boundaries in and make a clear comment of like, please respect.” (interview 4.01, born in Colombia, lives in South Australia)

“Sometimes you get sidelined because of the way you look, the way your skin colour is, the way your accent is. But it can only be solved with awareness, and, as I said, empathy and not judgment. I can’t judge you for your name or your pronoun and it cost me absolutely nothing to clarify something that I’m not sure of about yourself.” (interview 1.20, born in India, lives in Victoria)

It is also important to note that not all migrants perceive or experience discrimination in their own lives.

“I’ve heard from other people, but it didn’t happen to me. No. I didn’t have any negative experience that affect me or my mental health or anything. I didn’t feel like it’s a barrier for me to get, you know, a job position or at university.” (interview 6.03, born in Iran, lives in Tasmania)

“Well, I would say, I haven’t experienced any form of racial discrimination, though it’s not something I’ll look after... I’ve not seen anyone who has segregated or stigmatised me because of my colour. No, it’s not something that we experienced in Australia.” (interview 2.03, born in South Africa, New South Wales)

For others, improvements in society are being made, even if progress is uneven, slow and, at times, unjust.

“I’m sure things are changing in a good way. But it will take some time before things come to a stop. People do get racist comments. There’s a lot of internal racism that needs to be addressed, and that kind of gets to your head sometimes. It does get to my head sometimes. People I know and I thought were good friends, they’ve asked me such unwanted questions that it took me a couple of seconds to recover from that. So things are going well. But more needs to be done.” (interview 1.20, born in India, lives in Victoria)

Language and culture

The way of life and culture in Australia is often a great source of attraction for recently arrived migrants. In 2023, 31 per cent of migrant Australians said they take great pride in the Australian way of life and culture, while 81 per cent have at least a moderate sense of pride. An even larger majority (86 per cent) agree that it is important to maintain the Australian way of life and culture.

These proportions are somewhat lower than for the Australian-born population and, as with the Australian-born population, have declined over time. Nevertheless, interview participants tell us they continue to value the freedom, opportunities and lifestyles offered in Australia and the generally friendly and respectful personalities of other Australians.

“Everyone is sort of respected [in Australia], which is not the same in other countries... my faith teaches that there shouldn’t be divisions among people. So I love how Australia has that. I do feel like there’s great things about this country that I do really like that. We try to bond with people, we’re sort of laid back. And then I found I can connect with wider streams of people quite easily as well. So yeah, there’s definitely parts of Australia that I really appreciate.” (interview 2.07, born in Bangladesh, lives in New South Wales)

Australian life and culture, however, can also be strange, confusing, amusing, daunting and, at times, isolating. For people arriving from non-English speaking backgrounds, language barriers are among the first and most immediate challenges to settling into the country.

“When I arrived here, I was able to speak in English, but of course the level is different when you learn a language at school. Even if I started from primary school English, it’s such a big difference to speak with native people... And especially at the beginning, it was very, very hard for me to jump from the school level to the language that is spoken with normal native language people. And, yes, I would say that at the beginning I felt sometimes discriminated against for the language... But on the other sense, if you want to be fully accepted in a culture, the only way is to learn very well the language. Otherwise, it’s always hard because it’s about communication. So if they don’t understand you, you are not into the community. But it’s hard. It’s a big jump from another country and learning another language.” (interview 5.02, born in Italy, lives in Western Australia)

Most people eventually adjust and learn to understand aspects of Australian culture and language. However, it often takes a very concerted effort and a process of discovery and realisation.

“And because Armenia used to be a very conservative country, seeing people semi naked or wearing thongs in winter, I was like, why? I don’t understand why they cannot be like me. But it took me also time to grow up myself to realise that my way is not the right way all the time. People are different and it needs to be respected and acknowledged.” (interview 4.03, born in Armenia, lives in South Australia)

For a small minority though, the differences seem insurmountable.

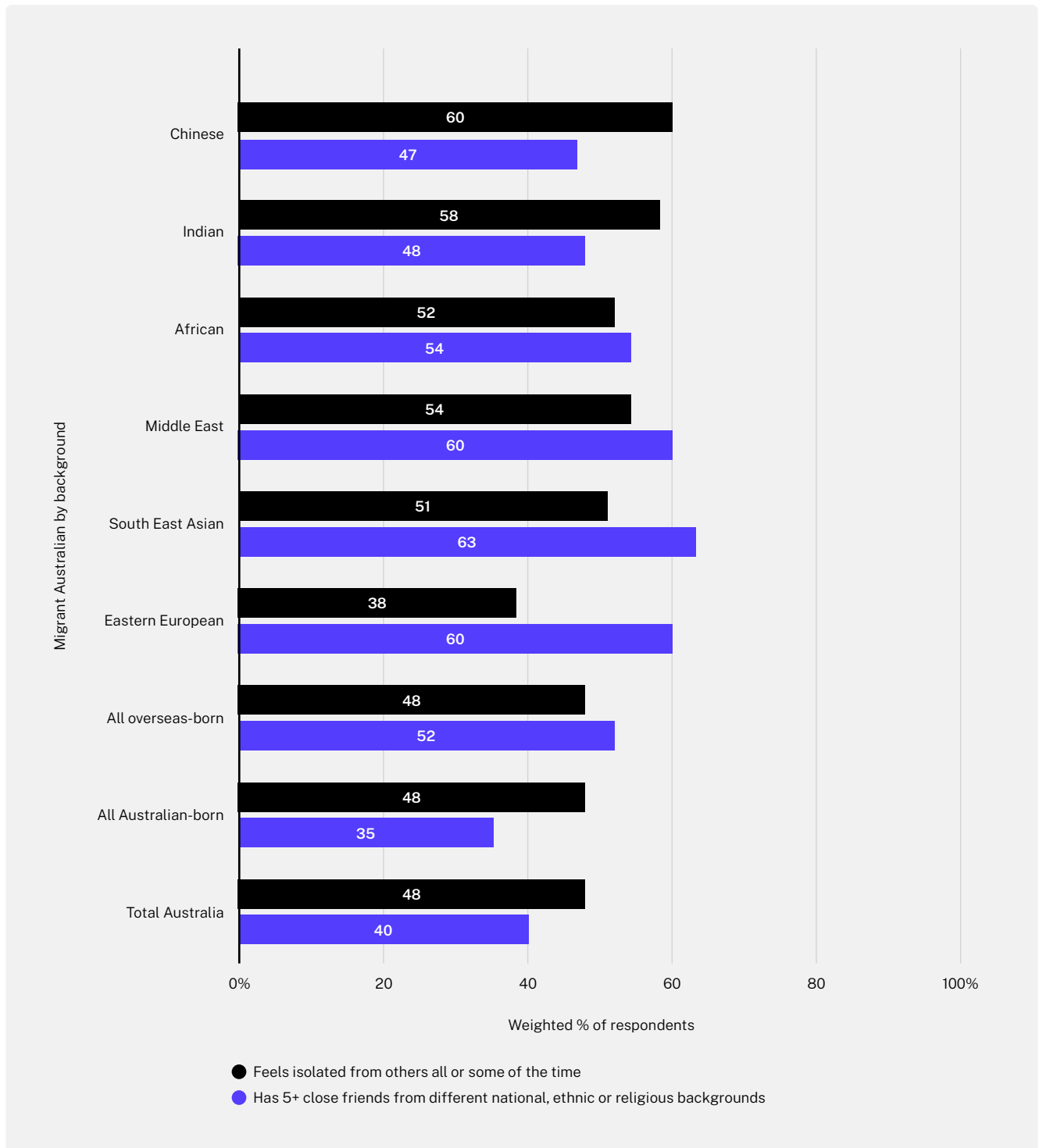
“No, I don’t have a sense of belonging to Australia. [Australia and China are of] different cultural backgrounds and have different value systems.” (interview 1.12, born in mainland China, lives in Victoria)

Friendships and social connections are important for the sense of belonging

Migrating to Australia, especially without family, can be a difficult and isolating experience. In 2023, 58 per cent of people who have migrated to Australia in the last 10 years reported that they feel isolated from others some of the time or often. This is significantly higher than for people who have been here for 30 years or longer (37 per cent) and those born in Australia (49 per cent). As shown in Figure 37, approximately three-in-five (60 per cent) migrants from Indian and Chinese backgrounds feel isolated at least some of the time, along with more than 50 per cent of migrants from African, Middle Eastern and south east Asian backgrounds. Among migrants who feel isolated often or some of the time, only 28 per cent have a great sense of belonging in Australia and 69 per cent feel a sense of belonging in their neighbourhood (compared with 49 per cent and 86 per cent respectively of those who hardly ever or never feel isolated).



Figure 37 Feelings of social isolation and intercultural friendship by country or region of origin, 2023



Not surprisingly then, interview participants strongly affirmed the importance of friendships and social connections to their integration and sense of belonging in Australia.

“But again, the sense of belonging for me is from people. The people that you want to see, the people that you want to connect with.” (interview 4.01, born in Colombia, lives in South Australia)

Friendships with people from their own background have been important in helping many migrants to become established in Australia. Friendships and connections with people from similar backgrounds are considered forms of ‘bonding capital’. These are the resources and support networks from within our own cultural and language groups that we rely on for emotional and practical support on a daily basis. For recently arrived migrants, these friendships and networks help to reduce any sense of isolation of living in Australia, alleviate the stress of constantly having to communicate across cultural and language barriers and can help people become involved in their communities, especially through ethnic clubs and religious groups.

“But it’s easier to connect with someone of my ethnic background. You know we exchange, we speak, the bonding process goes a lot faster... so it becomes a lot easier than when it comes to meeting someone from a different ethnicity. It takes a whole lot of conscious and careful effort to build that relationship.” (interview 2.03, born in South Africa, lives in New South Wales)

Most migrant Australians also have friends from different backgrounds. In our survey results, 52 per cent of overseas-born Australians said they have five or more close friends from different national, ethnic or religious backgrounds to their own, while 88 per cent have at least two friends. Both proportions are significantly higher than for the Australian-born population (35 per cent have five or more and 79 per cent have two or more close friends). Migrants from Asian, Middle Eastern, American (north, south and central) and Europe are significantly more likely to have friends from different backgrounds than the Australian-born population. As shown in Figure 37, between 47 and 54 per cent of overseas-born survey respondents from Chinese, Indian and African backgrounds have five or more close friends from different backgrounds, along with 60 per cent or more of respondents from Middle Eastern, south east Asian and eastern European backgrounds.

Friendships between groups are important forms of ‘bridging capital’. While bonding capital, especially friendships within groups, is important for day-to-day practical and emotional support, friendships and social connections across groups is crucial to the sense in which migrants feel they are fully part of Australian society, while in the aggregate, are also important for intercultural harmony and social cohesion.

Most interview participants value the friendships they have made with people from different backgrounds. Making friends though can be difficult particularly for people who have migrated as adults. Many friendships are made through work, study, their children and the community and religious activities they are involved with.

“I guess, because I’m also very social. I have friends across different groups of people, and I’m not particularly looking for people who are my background to be friends with. I just look for people that I connected with.” (interview 1.04, born in Ghana, lives in Victoria)

“I always believe that if I have left India, I don’t want to be particularly connecting with only Indians. Then what was the point of leaving the country in the first place? So now, I meet with people from different races and backgrounds, I know people who are from Pakistan, and maybe some of them are from the UK. So it’s a mixed bag and I like it that way. So the community is always there. I just had to kind of push myself to bring myself out of the comfort zone and just talk to people. And then I realise, well, people are friendly.” (interview 1.20, born in Indian, lives in Victoria)

“I do not have a lot of friends, but then I still socialise with my work colleagues. That is very easy to do, because you see everybody at work 5 days a week.” (interview 1.15, born in Myanmar, lives in Victoria)

“I’ve made some friends through my children. So my children are in school and you’re hanging out at school and meet people. Quite a few good friends through my children’s school networks.” (interview 2.06, born in the USA, lives in New South Wales)

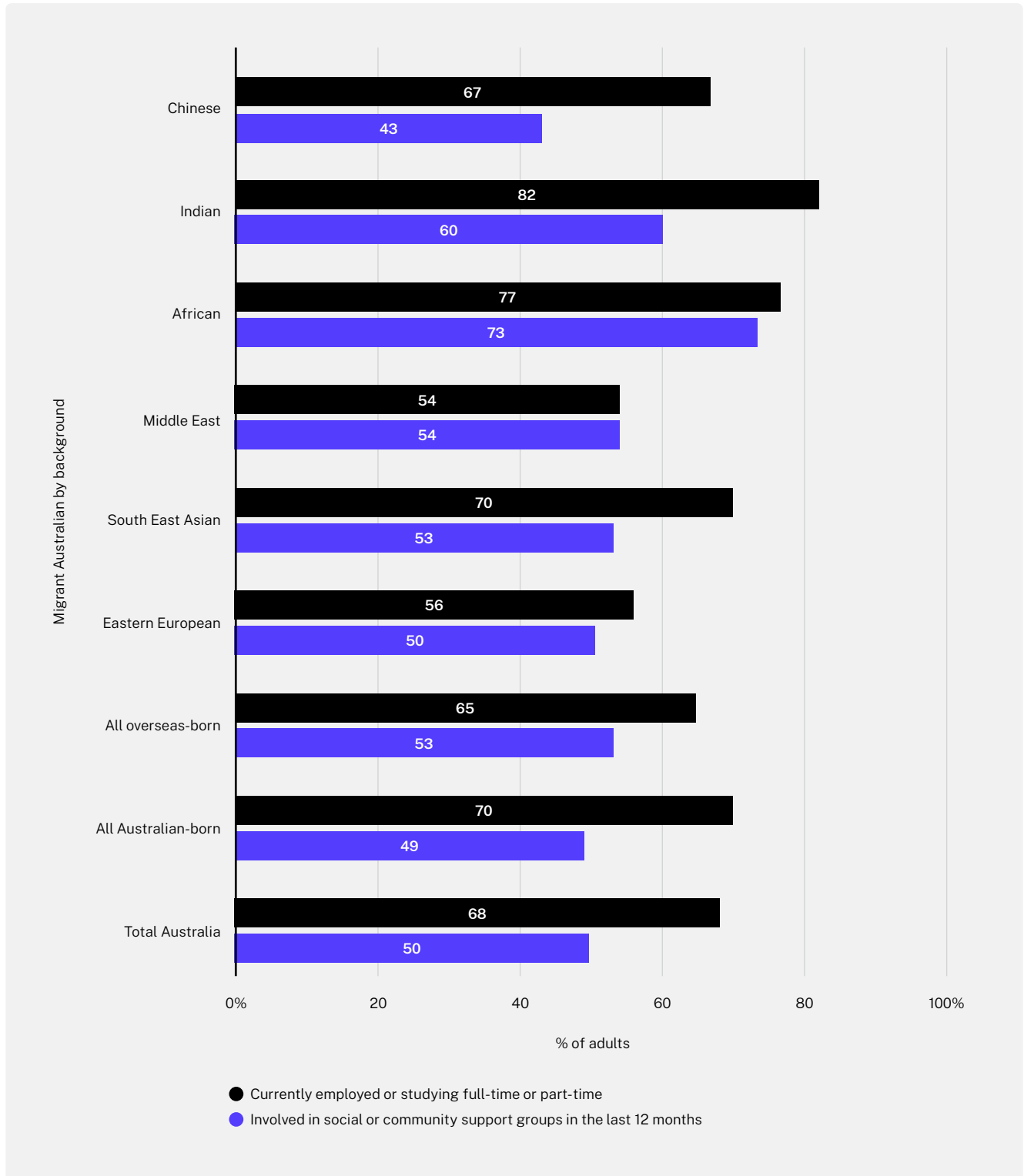
People want to contribute to their communities and this helps to strengthen their sense of belonging

Migrants are actively engaged in their communities and Australian society through their employment, education and involvement in social and community networks and groups. In 2023, more than half (53 per cent) of all overseas-born adults (aged 18 years and over) had been actively involved with a social or community support group, such as sports, religious and ethnic groups, Rotary, Lions or State Emergency Services, in the last 12 months.

This compares with 49 per cent of the Australian-born population. According to the 2021 Census, two-thirds (65 per cent) of all adult overseas-born Australians were employed or studying at the time, compared with 70 per cent of the Australian-born population. As shown in Figure 38, migrants from Indian, African and south east Asian backgrounds are most likely to be working or studying while African and Indian respondents to the Mapping Social Cohesion survey were most likely to be involved in social or community groups.



Figure 38 Employment, study and community participation by country or region of origin, 2023



Note: Data on employment and study are extracted from the 2021 Census (ABS, 2022).

For many interview participants, their work is an important way in which they contribute to Australian society. One participant, a healthcare worker, noted how the importance of their work contributed to their personal wellbeing and sense of belonging.

“Working is important... I’m going to work for 5 days a week because I’m needed, talking to the patients, talking to my colleagues, and that makes you feel more happy. Welcome and needed.” (interview 1.15, born in Malaysia, lives in Victoria)

The general view that work is important for developing a sense of identity and belonging was widely reported.

“When I found a job and I joined a group organisation, I felt more useful, helpful for this society. So, you know, I feel I belong here.” (interview 6.04, born in Afghanistan, lives in Tasmania)

“I’ve heard once from one of my colleagues something very nice about the sense of belonging that changed my point of view because many people think that when the local people accept you in their groups or their community, you will have that sense of belonging to the community. It’s kind of something external. They have to accept you. But once my colleague told me that as long as you contribute to the community, as long as you put some effort to learn the language, to learn the law, to respect the land, the environment, animals and the people, if you help people, so you belong... I’m a useful person, I’m studying, I’m working, I’m paying taxes... I respect people, I respect environments. So I belong here.” (interview 6.02, born in Iran, lives in Tasmania)

Outside of work, interview participants are involved in their communities in a wide range of ways. Many specifically spoke about the ways in which volunteering, being involved in local politics and local organisations, joining professional associations, being community activists and advocates, running podcasts and going to events and socialising generally in the community were important ways in which they contribute to their communities, while strengthening their own social connections and identities.

“There was a time I ran for council... I wasn’t necessarily going to go into council because I knew that I couldn’t win, but surprisingly, I did very well. And the reason I did that was just to put a face of

difference to my community so they understand that Australia, actually, that was my slogan, ‘Australia belongs to all’. And since then, I’ve been invited to be involved in a few things, like to come and speak to people in the community. And so I make myself relevant.” (interview 1.07, born in Nigeria, lives in Victoria)

“It’s only when I started being part of the Armenian community and doing things and seeing how whatever I do actually benefits the community, my community, the South Australian community, that I felt I was part of this fabric. It’s only after five years, but now I feel like I belong here.” (interview 4.3, born in Armenia, lives in South Australia)

Religion is an important way for many migrant Australians to connect with others and become engaged and integral to their communities.

“I always try to stay connected to the community, do something community-minded, because that’s like you know what my faith teaches me. Because I find Islam is a very social religion, everything’s done in groups. So that’s one of the great things that I love about my faith is that you always try to do things together and you get rewarded more when you do things together.” (interview 2.07, born in Bangladesh, lives in New South Wales)

However, some participants noted that it had become increasingly difficult to maintain their connections and involvement both within their own ethnic and religious communities and more broadly. The pressures of work and family, alongside increasing physical distances as people move away, population change and the disconnect created during the COVID-19 pandemic have made it difficult for some to maintain their connections.

“When I arrived here, I was more involved [in the Burmese community]... I wasn’t working on weekends much in those times, and I would go into monasteries and temples... I used to know most of the Burmese there, or most of the Burmese that I see. But then, after about 10 or 15 years, I’m quite busy with my work, my family life. And things like that. So I don’t go into the community as much as I used to go, every now and then, I go in occasionally. I don’t know many faces anymore, because there are a lot of new Burmese migrants, I mean newcomers. But

the community is a lot bigger, a lot bigger, a lot more functions. I'm quite far away. I don't get involved in as much as I used to. I think it's just the time. I cannot give a lot of time in their community. But then I'm always happy to be in the community. Yeah, I still find it quite a happy time with them." (interview 1.15, born in Myanmar, lives in Victoria)

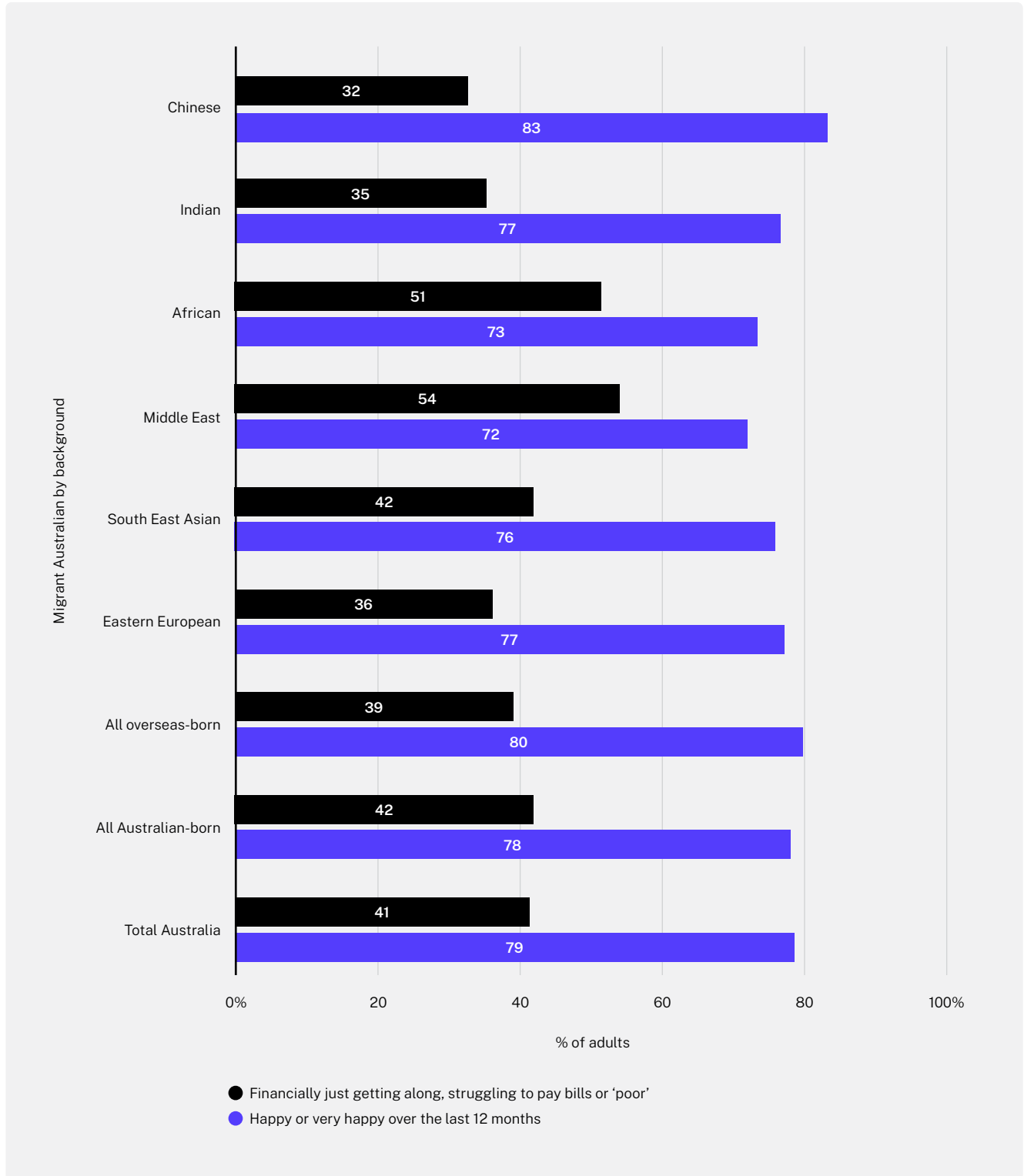
Structural barriers in housing, the jobs market and government services create struggles for some groups

The majority of migrants come to Australia with a wide set of skills and experiences and a desire to contribute to society and the economy. However, these skills and experiences are not always well harnessed and sometimes undervalued. Barriers to employment, housing and access to critical migrant services, for instance, can make it difficult for recent migrants, especially those from lower socioeconomic, non-English speaking and refugee backgrounds, to familiarise themselves with and engage in Australian society.

One of the ways in which the effects of structural barriers can be seen in the Mapping Social Cohesion survey is through the sense of worth and specifically, the experience of personal and financial stress. As shown in Figure 39, overseas-born Australians as a whole report levels of financial stress and happiness that are in line with the Australian-born population. There is though a reasonable amount of variation across groups. Respondents from African and Middle Eastern backgrounds are significantly more likely to report they are financially 'just getting along', 'struggling to pay bills' or 'poor' than migrants from western European backgrounds. They are also somewhat less likely to say they have been happy in the last 12 months.



Figure 39 Financial wellbeing and happiness by country or region of birth, 2023



The barriers faced by migrant Australian were discussed by several interview participants. One participant, a community advocate for the African Australian community, remarked how barriers to employment, housing and access to services are damaging the social and economic integration of members of the South Sudanese community in Australia.

“A lot of the South Sudanese are thinking of going back. So now, does that mean it says that they feel a sense of belonging? No, no. I think a lot of them feel misunderstood and underestimated. There are a lot of families who are even taking their kids back to Africa to go and study because they think the environment here is not good.” (interview 3.10, born in South Sudan, lives in Queensland)

“A lot of our people always feel that you know, they are the target, like when we talk about homelessness, ‘Oh, it’s happening to me, because I’m not Australian... or because I’m African or...’, but no. So this is where we correct them, that no, this is a societal issue. If there are not jobs, this is not just your problem. This is an Australian issue that you are now a big part of.” (interview 3.10, born in South Sudan, lives in Queensland)

The lack of diverse representation in key areas of government, industry and services is seen by some as a source of structural discrimination.

“It’s quite obvious to me that there’s often a real lack of representation in terms of just skin colour, in any kind of marketing, or any kind of representation at all levels of every industry and business and government, and marketing. So whilst I would say, I don’t know that I’ve experienced discrimination, maybe not overtly, but I would say subtly, always.” (interview 3.05, born in the UK, lives in Queensland)

“Very often I can feel it [the discrimination]. It is structural discrimination. You see the police officers, firefighters, and ambulance drivers are almost always white people. It feels like the white people are the ruling class. Chinese people here usually run small businesses or are employees of some companies – of which the management team consists of almost only white people. It is structural discrimination, which cannot be easily solved in the short term.” (interview 1.12, born in mainland China, lives in Victoria)

Discrimination in the jobs market was a particular point of concern for several participants.

“I’ve been looking for a job for 15 years, although I’m an engineer. I did a couple of periods of study in here. I have a certificate III in Social Work and I studied at Uni. I couldn’t even get a job part-time. All of these years. I start working from 2011 as a bilingual culture support worker or interpreter, but very casually depending on the new arrivals.” (interview 6.05, born in Iraq, lives in Tasmania)

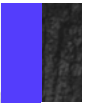
Interview participants also reflected on the positive and negative impacts politicians and the government have on diverse and multicultural communities. Many participants believe that governments in Australia do the right thing by people most of the time, they trust Australian governments and were particularly trusting through COVID-19. Many though have varying levels of cynicism towards government and several believe government can do much more to address racism and strengthen multiculturalism and cohesion.

“I’ve had a variety of experiences with the government in terms of how they handle people from various cultural backgrounds. Australia, on one hand, is renowned for its multiculturalism and has policies in place to support inclusion and diversity. On the other hand, this isn’t always easily translated into how people really conduct their lives. In many facets of life, such as in employment, social interactions, and education, racism, prejudice, and cultural insensitivity still exist.

Although some politicians and public servants truly support the rights and welfare of cultural communities, there have been times where the response to racism and discrimination has been viewed as insufficient. Politicians’ words and deeds may not always line up, according to some, and there may be a lack of awareness of the complex difficulties experienced by immigrants from various backgrounds.” (interview 4.04, born in mainland China, lives in South Australia)

Respect, empathy, opportunity and a welcoming environment go a long way to helping our newest Australians create a new home here and support our multicultural harmony and social cohesion

Australia has a great deal to offer people migrating here – a generally welcoming environment, freedom, a valued lifestyle and the potential to achieve a good standard of living. However, Australian society, culture, the economy and the services systems can be difficult to navigate, while ingrained bias and prejudices are difficult to break. So there is still much work to do strengthen multicultural harmony and cohesion in Australia, but also some very important foundations and progress to build on.



CONCLUSION

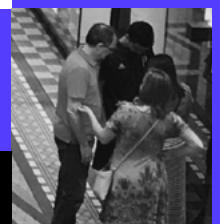
The challenges to Australian society today are many and varied. We have emerged from the Voice referendum somewhat divided and uncertain as to where to next for reconciliation. The political divide over the Voice also appears to reflect and may be helping to amplify polarisation around attitudes to government and society. At a global level, geopolitical conflict and tension is a risk to Australia's harmony, as while we are (usually) geographically distant, we are connected to all sides of current conflicts through our migrant and ancestral diversity, as well as the diversity of our values and ideas. Overriding much of this is concern for household finances and the economy. Rising interest rates and the rising cost of living coincide with increasing financial stress and hardship, widespread worries for the state of the global economy and growing concern for economic fairness and inequality.

The social, economic and political environment places strain on Australia's social cohesion. Financial and cost-of-living pressures directly impact our material sense of worth, while being very strongly related to a weaker sense of national and neighbourhood belonging, less happiness, weaker trust in government and other people, greater pessimism for the future and a weaker sense of social inclusion and justice. Growing doubts about economic fairness in Australia, meanwhile, are strongly associated with a declining sense of national pride and belonging and growing distrust in government and the political system.

The social connections that have built up Australia's social cohesion over years and decades provide important assets to manage current challenges. Our connections and engagement in local communities and support for multiculturalism are particular strengths, reminding us of our social progress so far and provide sources of emotional and practical support in meeting our challenges. These resources though are fragile and require continual nurturing. Our once strong but now strained sense of national pride and belonging and the 'fair go' are testament to this fragility.

Multiculturalism in Australia is an important strength, but also a work in progress. While multiculturalism has important symbolic value, it is also apparent that people understand and interpret its lived reality and its implications for society and policy in various ways. For migrant Australians, the growing respect and appreciation of diversity across society at large aids their growing sense of Australian identity and the degree to which they see Australia as home. Migrants nevertheless continue to experience discrimination, prejudice, stereotyping and racism that hinders these processes, while also facing structural barriers in housing, employment and access to services.

Key priorities emerge from these results for efforts to strengthen social cohesion. Many of the challenges we face are connected by economic pressures and the social relations and respect we have for each other and our differences. Economic wellbeing contributes to our sense of worth, belonging, trust, social justice and acceptance, while our social connections and respect help to maintain and strengthen our multicultural harmony and help us to manage difficult debates and points of difference. Thus, through the very rich set of results emerging from the Mapping Social Cohesion 2023 study, we can see that community and government measures to strengthen economic wellbeing, while supporting and drawing on the strength of our social connections and diversity, can go a long way to ensuring a cohesive, resilient and vibrant society in the years to come.



APPENDIX A

The 2023 Mapping Social Cohesion Study

The Scanlon Foundation's Mapping Social Cohesion series has been the pre-eminent source of information on social cohesion in Australia over the past 16 years. The 2023 study is the 17th in the series, following the benchmark survey in 2007 and annual surveys since 2009 (and two in 2020, after COVID-19 hit). The 2023 study is the largest and most ambitious yet, combining a nationally-representative survey of 7,454 Australians with additional targeted boost surveys of 251 first and second generation Australians and 55 in-depth qualitative interviews with people who have migrated to Australia over the years. The targeted boost surveys and interviews provide more information and insights than ever before on our newest Australians who have migrated here and ensure the Mapping Social Cohesion study is representing the rich diversity 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 2016 and is Australia's first and only national probability-based online panel. In 2022, 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. 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 provides 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 have been 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 2023 Mapping Social Cohesion survey, 98 per cent of responses were provided online and 2 per cent by telephone.

The number of respondents to the main 2023 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 are 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)

GENDER	Female	Male	Persons			
	4,274 (2.0)	3,119 (2.2)	7,454 (1.5)			
AGE	65+	55-64	45-54	35-44	25-34	18-24
	2,335 (2.6)	1,388 (3.1)	1,222 (3.4)	1,206 (3.4)	947 (3.8)	349 (5.8)
STATE	NSW	Victoria	Queensland	South Australia	Western Australia	
	2,315 (2.6)	1,906 (2.9)	1,436 (3.3)	621 (4.8)	709 (4.5)	
CAPITAL CITY/ REST OF STATE	Capital city	Rest of state				
	5,080 (1.8)	2,370 (2.5)				
HIGHEST EDUCATION	Postgraduate degree	Bachelor degree	Certificate/ diploma	Year 12	Up to Year 11	
	2,146 (2.6)	1,873 (2.8)	1,981 (2.5)	626 (4.5)	657 (4.4)	
FINANCIAL SITUATION	Prosperous/ very comfortable	Reasonably comfortable	Just getting along	Struggling to pay bills/ poor		
	1,365 (3.6)	3,386 (2.2)	1,980 (2.8)	692 (4.6)		
VOTE	Labor	Liberal/ National	Greens	Other		
	2,840 (2.4)	1,614 (3.0)	1,101 (3.9)	1,322 (3.4)		
WHERE BORN & FIRST LANGUAGE	Australian-born	Foreign born/ English	Foreign born/ non-English			
	5,197 (1.8)	1,318 (3.5)	851 (4.1)			
HOUSEHOLD TYPE	Couple no children	Couple parent	Single parent	Group household	Live alone	
	2,388 (2.5)	2,302 (2.5)	507 (5.6)	299 (6.8)	1,430 (3.3)	
HOUSING TENURE	Own outright	Mortgage	Rent			
	2,935 (2.4)	2,493 (2.5)	1,600 (3.1)			
NEIGHBOURHOOD DISADVANTAGE	Quintile 1 (Low disadvantage)	Quintile 2	Quintile 3	Quintile 4	Quintile 5 (High disadvantage)	
	2,079 (2.8)	1,584 (3.2)	1,472 (3.2)	1,274 (3.5)	1,030 (3.8)	

Targeted boost surveys

In 2023, targeted boost surveys were conducted to ensure greater representation across specific migrant groups. Respondents were recruited from a non-probability panel run by Multicultural Marketing and Management (MMM). Three migrant groups were targeted: people born in India, north Africa and the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa (excluding South Africa).

The boost survey respondents are added to existing responding members of Life in Australia™ to strengthen our ability to report on the wellbeing and perceived cohesion of specific migrant groups. Survey respondents are identified by a) whether they were born in an overseas country and b) the country or region in which they or one or both parents were born. The total number of respondents who completed a survey are shown in Table A2 for six countries or regions of origin where we have a combined minimum of 96 respondents in 2023. The number of migrant respondents from China (161), south east Asia (262) and eastern Europe (140) are only those that responded to the main survey through Life in Australia™ – there was no boost survey for these groups.

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 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).

Table A2 Number of respondents for selected countries or regions of birth, Life in Australia™ and targeted boost surveys, 2023

COUNTRY/REGION OF BIRTH	LIFE IN AUSTRALIA™	TARGETED BOOST	TOTAL
China	161	0	161
India	167	96	263
Middle East	79	103	182
Sub-Saharan Africa (excl. South Africa)	59	37	96
South East Asia	262	0	262
Eastern Europe	140	0	140

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 2023 Mapping Social Cohesion study included 55 in-depth interviews with people who have migrated to Australia over the years. The interviews provided valuable contextual information on the experiences of overseas-born Australians. Interview participants were recruited through the Scanlon Foundation’s extensive networks, a process led by Trish Prentice from the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, in collaboration with Rouven Link from the Institute and Qing Guan and James O’Donnell from the Australian National University.

The number of interview participants are listed in Table A3 by the region in which participants were born and how long they have lived in Australia. Most interviews were conducted in English, though several were conducted in Mandarin Chinese.

Table A3 Number of interview participants by region of birth and length of time lived in Australia, 2023

PARTICIPANTS	
Region of birth	
East and South East Asia	20
Europe and the Americas	8
Africa	14
South Asia	7
The Middle East	6
Length of time in Australia	
1-4 years	15
5-14 years	14
15-24 years	17
25+ years	8

Ethics approval

The 2023 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 2023/263).

The Scanlon-Monash Index of Social Cohesion

As every year, the 2023 Mapping Social Cohesion report publishes estimates of social cohesion based on the Scanlon-Monash 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 Scanlon-Monash 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-Monash 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 2023 to examine how social cohesion varies across society. In this year’s report, new 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.



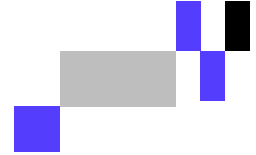
Table A4 Domains and items in the new and historical Indices of Social Cohesion

DOMAIN AND QUESTION	HISTORICAL INDEX	NEW INDEX
Domain 1: Sense of belonging		
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
Domain 2: Sense of worth		
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
Domain 3: Social inclusion and justice		
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
Domain 4: Participation		
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? • Providing transport or running errands • Any teaching, coaching, or practical advice • Providing any emotional support	No	Yes
Domain 5: Acceptance and rejection		
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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