



# Perceptions of poverty in Australia



Brotherhood of St. Laurence  
Working for an Australia free of poverty

**Let's make  
change  
that lasts**

# A message from our Executive Director

Poverty shows up in obvious ways – kids missing out at school, families stuck in poor housing, people putting off going to the doctor. But it also hides in the isolation of those cut off from community life, or in the quiet stress of parents trying to hold it all together. Whether it's seen or unseen, poverty chips away at education, health, housing, connection and stable democracy – and that's a cost Australia can't afford to ignore.

**Perceptions of poverty in Australia** shows Australians are deeply aware of poverty. Many have lived with it or seen it affect people they know. Most believe everyone deserves fair opportunities in housing, health and work – especially during the current cost-of-living crisis.

The research tells us most Australians believe inequality is growing. And they want government and employers to act on poverty. A majority of people living in Australia also see that inequality is damaging our democracy. This is troubling, as diminishing confidence in democratic institutions and the social contract can lead to greater social and political instability.

The introduction of official poverty measures would help address poverty and inequality in Australia. We need both a monetary measure and a multidimensional measure to capture the full picture of disadvantage – in areas such as housing, education, health, employment and social participation. This would show us not only who is struggling, but how. It also helps us know what is working and would provide a way to see and celebrate progress.

A commitment to official dual measures would give us the opportunity to work together – across government, community, academia and lived experience – to design measures that show the reality of hardship in Australia and guide meaningful action.

Take this as your open invitation to join us in addressing poverty and inequality. Let's make this the turning point – when Australia decided not just to talk about poverty, but to measure it – and act on it.



A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Travers McLeod".

**Dr Travers McLeod**  
BSL Executive Director



# About this research

In 2025, the Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) commissioned researchers at 89 Degrees East to conduct original research exploring beliefs, perceptions and experiences of poverty in Australia. 89 Degrees East conducted a survey of 1,629 diverse community members aged 18 years and older.

In January 2026, BSL commissioned Essential Research to undertake additional polling of 1,022 people in Australia on perceptions of poverty and inequality, and their impacts on democracy.

Together, the results show that people in Australia understand the challenges facing those experiencing poverty. While there are differing perspectives on the causes of poverty, there is overwhelming support for proposed policy responses to end poverty, and action by government that will support all people in Australia to live lives they value.

## **A note on methodology and the research sample**

In this report, 'people living in Australia' refers to a representative sample of 2,651 Australians aged 18+ recruited online from a research panel by 89 Degrees East (n=1,629) between 7 and 13 February 2025 and Essential Research (n=1,022) between 23 and 28 January 2026 using hard target quotas (age, gender, location) and rim weighting in line with Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021) and Australian Electoral Commission data.

# Key findings – a snapshot



## Support for reducing poverty

**94%** of people living in Australia thought more should be done to reduce poverty in Australia.\*



## Cost-of-living pressures

Over the prior two years, **76%** of people living in Australia had been impacted by cost-of-living pressures.

**27%** were experiencing persistent stress or anxiety due to financial insecurity and **53%** thought more people in their community were living in poverty these days.

**60%** agreed that efforts to reduce poverty will help ease the pressures of the cost of living for all people living in Australia.\*\*



## Support for cost of living

More than **82%** of people living in Australia believed it is especially important to support people experiencing poverty during a cost-of-living crisis.\*\*



## Support for opportunity and fairness

**70%** of people living in Australia agreed that no matter where people start in life, we all deserve access to safe housing, fair pay and the things we need to live a meaningful life.\*\*



## Experience and exposure to poverty

**38%** of people living in Australia had experienced poverty themselves and/or had seen people they know affected by poverty. **15%** reported living in or having lived in poverty.\*\*



## Awareness of poverty

**61%** of people living in Australia agreed poverty is a major issue affecting many people in the community.\*\*

\* Source: Essential Research, January 2026

\*\* Source: 89 Degrees East, March 2025

## Dimensions of poverty

Survey respondents were asked which scenarios they thought were examples of a person experiencing poverty. Monetary poverty, and how it limits access to basic necessities such as food, was the most commonly recognised dimension of poverty, followed by housing security.



**Monetary: 8 in 10 (79%)** believed a person who regularly does not have enough money to buy food is experiencing poverty.\*\*



**Personal safety: Nearly 5 in 10 (45%)** believed a person who does not feel safe and secure in their day-to-day life is experiencing poverty.\*\*



**Housing: 7 in 10 (70%)** thought someone who does not have a safe and comfortable place to live is experiencing poverty.\*\*



**Employment/educational opportunities: Fewer than 4 in 10 (39%)** saw someone who has difficulty getting a secure job or someone with limited access to education or skills/training opportunities (**35%**) as experiencing poverty.\*\*



**Health: 6 in 10 (59%)** said someone with poor health and limited access to health care is experiencing poverty. **Fewer (42%)** thought someone with mental ill-health with limited access to support is experiencing poverty.\*\*



**Social connection: Fewer than 3 in 10 (27%)** considered a person lacking social connection and community as someone experiencing poverty.\*\*





## Who is the most responsible?

**55%** of people living in Australia thought government is most responsible for reducing poverty.\*

## Priorities for government

When people living in Australia were asked to choose (multiple selection) what action government should prioritise to reduce poverty:

- **80%** thought affordable housing should be prioritised to reduce poverty.
- **61%** thought employment opportunities should be prioritised to reduce poverty.
- **56%** thought financial assistance should be prioritised to reduce poverty.
- **53%** thought education opportunities should be prioritised to reduce poverty.\*



## Inequality in Australia

**75%** of people living in Australia thought Australia is becoming more unequal with a growing wealth gap.\*

**70%** of people living in Australia agree that 'struggling to afford basics doesn't mean someone is lazy, it means our economy isn't working for all Australians'.\*\*

## Impact on democracy

**55%** of people living in Australia thought inequality is affecting our democracy.\*

***It's a sad state of affairs that Australia has this huge problem as we are a wealthy country who could do so much more.***

*- Survey respondent*

# What Australians know

Most people in Australia acknowledge poverty is a major issue that affects many living here.

People surveyed also recognised that living in poverty often means experiencing poor health and having limited access to health or mental health care; a lack of safety and security in daily life; or difficulty finding secure employment.

There was broad recognition that cost-of-living pressures can exacerbate poverty. Eighty-two per cent of people agreed it is especially important to support people living in poverty during a cost-of-living crisis.

***I've had to put my house and car insurance on my credit card, which now has more than \$9,000 debt on it. I'm really just paying the interest. I have been avoiding opening letters about the card because it's too stressful.***

**– Lived experience advocate**

Most people living in Australia recognised the link between limited opportunities and poverty. Two-thirds recognised that the more opportunities people have, the less likely they are to experience poverty.

Seventy per cent agreed or strongly agreed that 'struggling to afford basics doesn't mean someone is lazy, it means our economy isn't working for all Australians'.

***When I do a grocery shop, I put everything that I need into the trolley in the hope that, when I get to the register, I'm able to afford it. I'm wondering if I'm going to be able to afford what's left in it and sometimes experiencing the embarrassment and the shame of having to remove items ... I can no longer afford.***

**– Lived experience advocate**

## What causes poverty?

People living in Australia recognised that poverty is caused by a range of things outside a person's control, such as 'not having a job' (56%) or 'living with chronic illness and/or disability' (53%).

People also recognised systemic or 'top down' factors as driving poverty. Thirty-six per cent blamed 'an unfair system designed to advantage wealthy people' and 27 per cent believed poverty is driven by 'decisions made by large corporations and businesses' or 'discrimination e.g. on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, disability' (26%). Other commonly perceived causes included those that speak to a lack of support and lack of opportunities from government or employers.

Forty-five per cent believed a 'lack of government support for people in need' as well as 'decisions made by governments and politicians' (40%) were contributing to ongoing poverty in Australia.

Fifty-two per cent saw 'low wages and/or lack of secure work' as a major influence, while 41 per cent selected 'lack of education or opportunities to develop skills'.

**Both my sister and I have a genetic chronic illness that very suddenly put each of us in a very challenging financial position. We both live on a Disability Support Pension but I'm able to share my mother's house, so it's easier for me. I do have difficulty covering the cost of medications and medical treatments, so I don't have much room to move financially.**

– Survey respondent

### **Inequality and impact on democracy**

The majority of people living in Australia (55%) believed that the government is responsible for addressing poverty. Only 13 per cent thought that individuals were personally responsible.

Seventy-five per cent of people living in Australia believed that 'the gap between the rich and the poor in Australia is increasing'. The proportion who agreed that this wealth gap was increasing was significantly higher among those 55 and over (83%), and those struggling or in serious financial difficulty (82%).

Overall, 55 per cent of people living in Australia believed that rising inequality is affecting our democracy. The proportion of people who believed inequality in Australia is affecting our democracy increases to 66 per cent among those who believe that wealth disparity is increasing in Australia.

### **Support for effective responses**

Regardless of how people in Australia understand the experience of poverty, or perceive its causes, there is overwhelming support for better responses to lift people out of poverty.

There was very little disagreement on using policy responses to address poverty. Some 74 per cent believed we can find and act on poverty by 'choosing to redesign our policies and systems so that they work for all of us, not just for the wealthy'.

**Addressing poverty is not just about providing financial support; it's also about education, employment and social inclusion to ensure that everyone can participate fully in society.**

– Survey respondent

**There is overwhelming support for better responses to lift people out of poverty.**



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## What the research tells us

***Perceptions of poverty in Australia*** presents a modern-day snapshot of people's understanding and experiences of poverty in Australia.

This research found that the Australian community has a deep understanding of the multiple dimensions of poverty and, importantly, people living in Australia feel concern for people who experience poverty. Most people living in Australia believe inequality is growing and this is having an impact on democracy.

While there are some differences in how people perceive its causes, almost all agreed on better responses to poverty, and wanted to see government and employers do more to prevent, alleviate and stop it.

This research highlights strong support from the Australian community for government to do more to address both monetary and multidimensional poverty, even at a time when many households are experiencing their own cost-of-living crisis.

Australia does not have a standard definition of poverty, nor does it have an official way to measure poverty. The definition and approach can vary across organisations and between government departments. This makes it difficult to fully understand people's experiences of poverty in Australia, and whether poverty is getting better or worse.

The Australian Government should legislate official poverty measures, both monetary and multidimensional, to enable deeper understanding of the reality many people in Australia face and provide a clearer path to addressing poverty.



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# About BSL

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) is a social justice organisation that works to prevent and alleviate poverty across Australia.

To read further stories of people with lived experience of poverty and more from survey respondents from this research go to [www.bsl.org.au/povertyperceptions](http://www.bsl.org.au/povertyperceptions)



The Brotherhood of St. Laurence respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land and waterways on which our organisation operates. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past and present.

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