ACT shelter

POLICY BRIEFING · NOVEMBER 2026

Rental stress among Commonwealth Rent Assistance recipients in the ACT

Canberra is often ranked Australia's most affordable capital for renters, based on median rents and average incomes. But averages mask a very different reality for people on low incomes: the ACT has had the highest proportion of Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) recipients in rental stress of any state or territory every year since 2013.

51.5%
of ACT CRA recipients are in rental stress, compared with 44.4% nationally

1 in 7
ACT CRA recipients spend more than 70% of their income on rent

14 of 14
years the ACT has had the highest rate of any jurisdiction (2013–2026)

Key messages

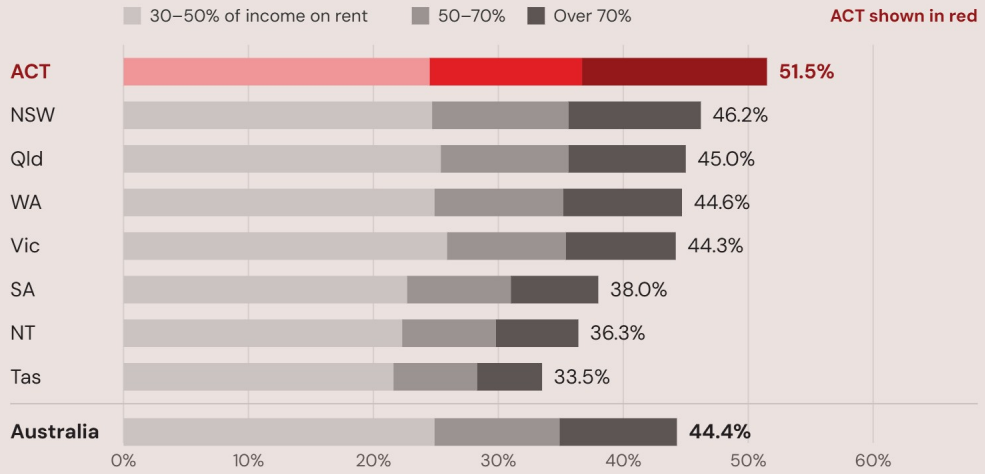
- **More than half are in rental stress.** 51.5% of ACT CRA recipients pay over 30% of their income on rent, even after assistance (national: 44.4%).
- **Stress is more severe.** More than one in four (27.1%) spend over half their income on rent, and almost one in seven (14.8%) spend over 70% (national: 19.4% and 9.4%).
- **CRA does less here than anywhere else.** It cuts the share in stress by 25.8 points, compared with 31.0 nationally. A flat national payment does not reflect ACT rents.
- **There is no improvement.** Stress has held at 50–52% since 2022, above the pre-pandemic 48.3%. The gap with the national rate has narrowed only because other jurisdictions have got worse.
- **Young people are hit hardest.** Almost three in four recipients aged 20–24 are in stress. Older ACT renters also fare worse than anywhere else, with the highest rates for every age group over 65.
- **Headline affordability rankings tell only part of the story.** They tend to compare median rents with average incomes, which masks the rental stress experienced by people on low and fixed incomes.

Figures are Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) data for June 2026. Rental stress means paying more than 30% of income on rent after CRA. See "Understanding the data" on page 5.

The ACT has the highest and most severe rental stress

More than half of ACT recipients pay over 30% of their income on rent after assistance, and the ACT has the largest shares paying over 50% and over 70%. The darker segments show people left paying more than half their income on rent even after receiving CRA.

CRA recipients in rental stress after assistance, by share of income spent on rent, June 2026



Source: AIHW, Commonwealth Rent Assistance in Australia: quarterly data, Supplementary table CRA.3.

CRA provides the least relief in the ACT

Without CRA, ACT recipients would be in rental stress at about the same rate as those in NSW. CRA closes less of the gap in the ACT than in any other jurisdiction, because a flat national payment does not reflect higher ACT rents.

Jurisdiction	In stress without CRA	In stress with CRA	Reduction due to CRA (points)
ACT	77.3%	51.5%	**25.8**
NSW	77.3%	46.2%	31.1
Qld	74.6%	45.0%	29.6
WA	74.7%	44.6%	30.0
Vic	74.6%	44.3%	30.4
SA	72.9%	38.0%	34.9
NT	72.0%	36.3%	35.7
Tas	73.1%	33.5%	39.5
Australia	75.3%	44.4%	**31.0**

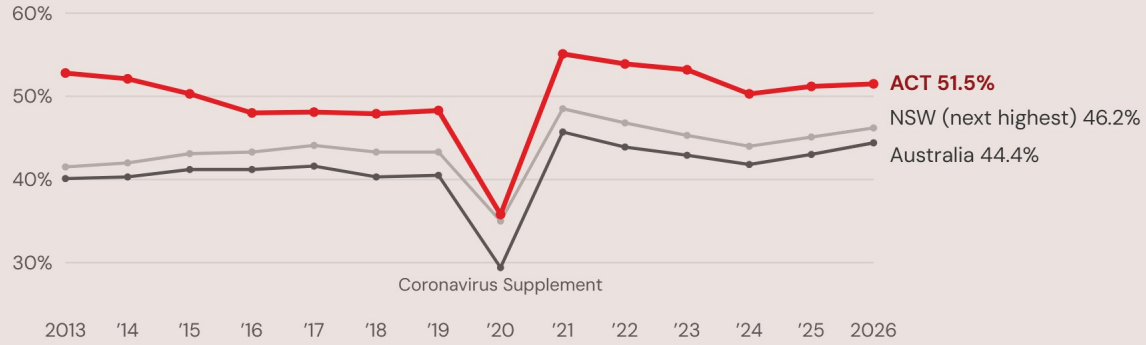
Source: AIHW, Commonwealth Rent Assistance in Australia: quarterly data, Supplementary table CRA.2 (June 2026).

Trend over time

Rental stress among ACT CRA recipients has remained stubbornly high, at around 50–52% since 2022. At 51.5% in June 2026, it remains above the pre-pandemic rate of 48.3% in 2019.

Although the gap between the ACT and national rates has narrowed since 2013, this is not because the ACT has become more affordable. Rather, rental stress has increased across other jurisdictions, bringing their rates closer to the already high ACT level.

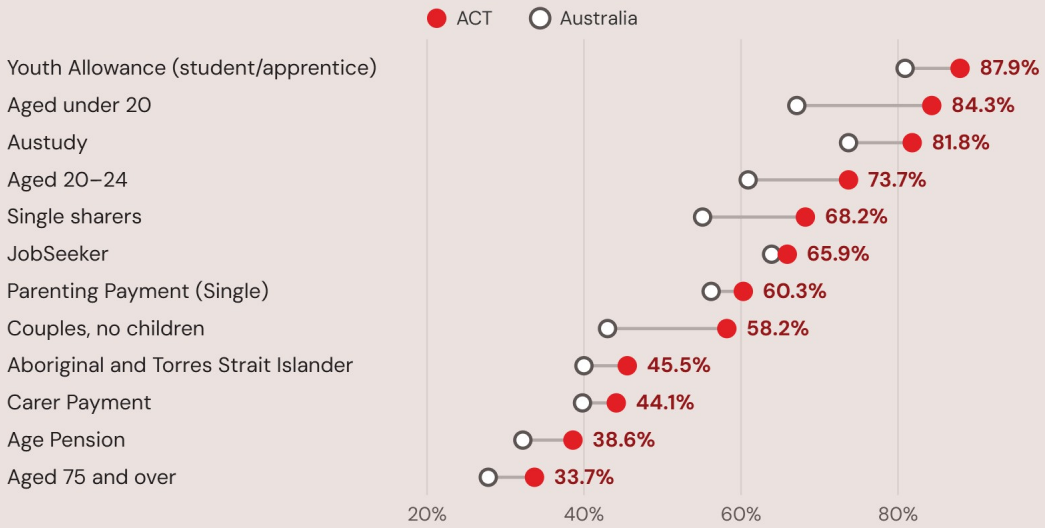
CRA recipients in rental stress after assistance, June each year



Source: AIHW, CRA quarterly data, Supplementary table CRA.2. NSW is the next-highest jurisdiction in 2026. The 2020 dip reflects the temporary Coronavirus Supplement.

Who is most affected

Rental stress is particularly acute for young people and students. Older renters are also experiencing disproportionately high levels of rental stress in the ACT compared with their counterparts nationally.



Source: AIHW, CRA quarterly data, Supplementary table CRA.2 (June 2026). Share of each group of recipients in rental stress after assistance.

The findings in focus

87.9%
Youth Allowance recipients
Almost nine in ten are in rental stress

84.3%
Renters under 20
More than four in five are in rental stress

68.2%
Single people sharing
More than two in three are in rental stress

38.6%
Age Pension recipients
Almost two in five, the highest rate of any jurisdiction

The ACT is not the worst jurisdiction for every group. For people aged 35–64, Disability Support Pension recipients and single parents with one or two children, ACT rates are at or below the national rate.

Policy implications

These findings raise serious questions about whether a nationally uniform Commonwealth Rent Assistance payment is keeping pace with rents in higher-cost markets such as the ACT. CRA provides essential support, but it still leaves more than half of ACT recipients in rental stress.

The findings also show why rental affordability must be assessed through a range of measures. Median rents and average incomes can mask the experiences of people on low and fixed incomes. A fuller picture looks at what different groups of renters can afford, how much of their income goes on rent, and how far government assistance reduces that burden.

It should also consider how rents are distributed within a location. A median rent says nothing about how many homes are available at rents that people on low incomes can afford. Measures such as lower-quartile rents, or the share of rentals affordable to someone on income support, show whether the cheaper end of the market is actually within reach.

What needs to happen

- The Australian Government should review the adequacy of CRA, including whether payment rates should better reflect differences in local rental markets.
- This must be accompanied by broader action to improve housing affordability, including sustained investment in social and affordable housing.

Rental assistance should provide meaningful relief from housing costs, not leave people struggling to pay the rent despite receiving support.

Understanding the data

The figures in this briefing show how much rent CRA recipients pay relative to their income, after CRA has been taken into account. They therefore show how much financial pressure remains even after government rental assistance.

What is Commonwealth Rent Assistance?

Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) is an Australian Government payment that helps people on low incomes with the cost of renting privately. It is paid to eligible people receiving certain Centrelink payments or Family Tax Benefit, including Age Pensioners, people on JobSeeker and Youth Allowance, and single parents.

The amount depends on how much rent people pay, their circumstances and the applicable payment limits.

How rental stress is measured

The AIHW defines rental stress as spending more than 30% of gross income on rent. For CRA recipients, this is calculated **after deducting the Rent Assistance payment from the rent**. CRA is not counted as income:

$$\frac{\text{Weekly rent - weekly CRA}}{\text{Weekly gross income (excluding CRA)}}$$

Who is counted

The AIHW reports these figures by income unit: an individual or a group of related people (such as a couple or family) whose income is treated as shared. Unrelated people sharing a home are counted separately. This briefing calls income units receiving CRA "CRA recipients".

Coverage

Housing ACT tenants are not eligible for CRA because their rents are already subsidised, so they are not included. Community housing tenants may be eligible for CRA and can be included.

Age mix

ACT recipients are younger than recipients nationally (18% are under 25, against 7%). If the ACT had the national age mix, its rate would be about 46.6%, still equal highest with NSW. The ACT's younger population does not explain away the result.

Where the data come from

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Commonwealth Rent Assistance in Australia: quarterly data* (cat. no. HOU 341), Supplementary tables CRA.2 and CRA.3, June 2026 data, published [date]. The AIHW updates these tables every quarter using Department of Social Services administrative data.

Comparisons over time

Trends use June figures for each year from 2013 to 2026, because December quarters dip every year. The 2020 fall reflects the temporary Coronavirus Supplement.

Rounding and small groups

The AIHW rounds counts to the nearest 5. Some ACT groups are small, such as the 445 recipients aged under 20, so their rates should be read with care.