

Quality of life in high-density apartments varies—here are 6 ways to improve it

May 28 2020, by Hazel Easthope, Laura Crommelin, Laurence Troy and Megan Nethercote



Credit: Gethin Davison, Author provided

We're building a lot of apartments in Australia. High-density precincts are being developed across our major cities. But these buildings and neighbourhoods are often not designed and managed in ways that meet the needs of lower-income residents.

Our [research](#) released today identifies five key problem areas. We also

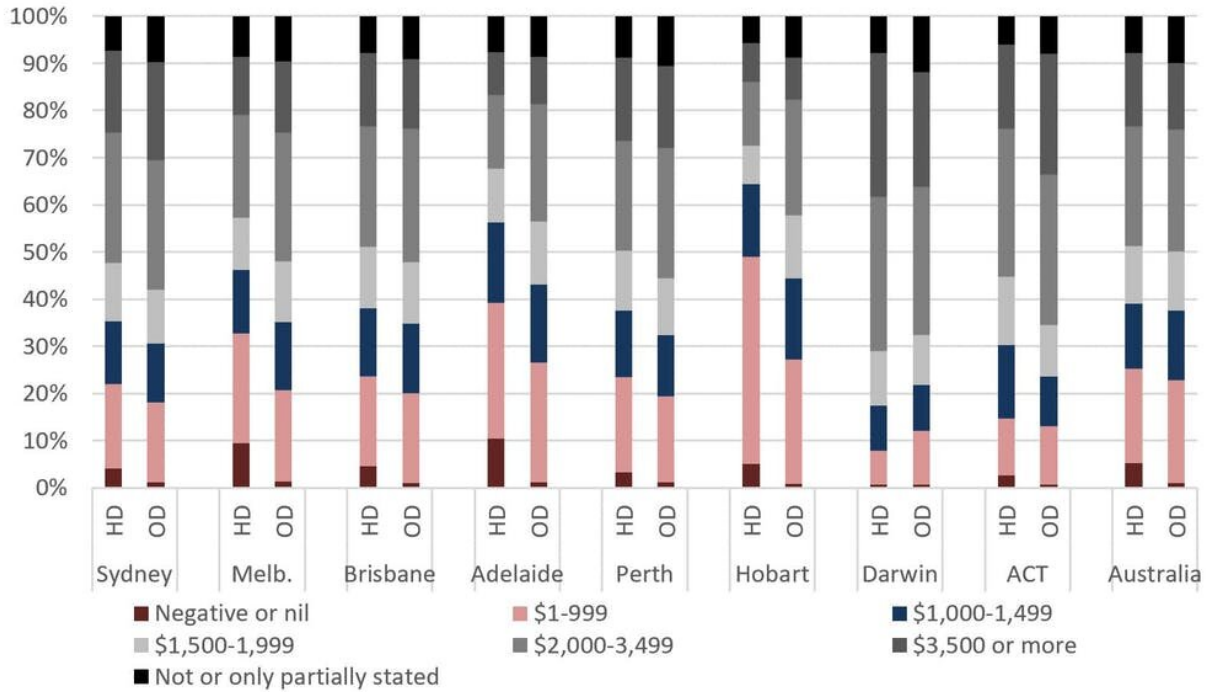
propose a broad range of solutions, including six outlined in this article. Some are easy to apply and others will require more effort and funding.

Business as usual, however, will result in increasing social and economic costs. This is because the proportion of Australians living in apartments, [now one in ten](#), continues to increase. In recent years, we've been [building bigger apartment complexes](#) and creating more high-density precincts (buildings of four storeys or more).

Apartments house a broad cross-section of the population. However, they are more likely than other dwelling types to house people on [lower incomes](#), especially in Sydney and Melbourne. Over 70% of Australia's high-density dwellings are in these two cities.

Lower-income households have less choice about their living situation. This means they're particularly affected if their building or [neighbourhood](#) is poorly designed or managed. It's especially important, then, for our planning and development processes to consider their needs.

So how can we make sure the apartments and neighbourhoods we're building meet the needs of lower-income households (the bottom 40% of incomes)?



Income distribution of households in high-density (HD) dwellings (4+ storeys) and in all other dwelling types (OD). Credit: Data from ABS Census 2016

What are the problem areas?

Our research investigates this issue. It included [case studies](#) across four high-density neighbourhoods in Sydney and Melbourne.

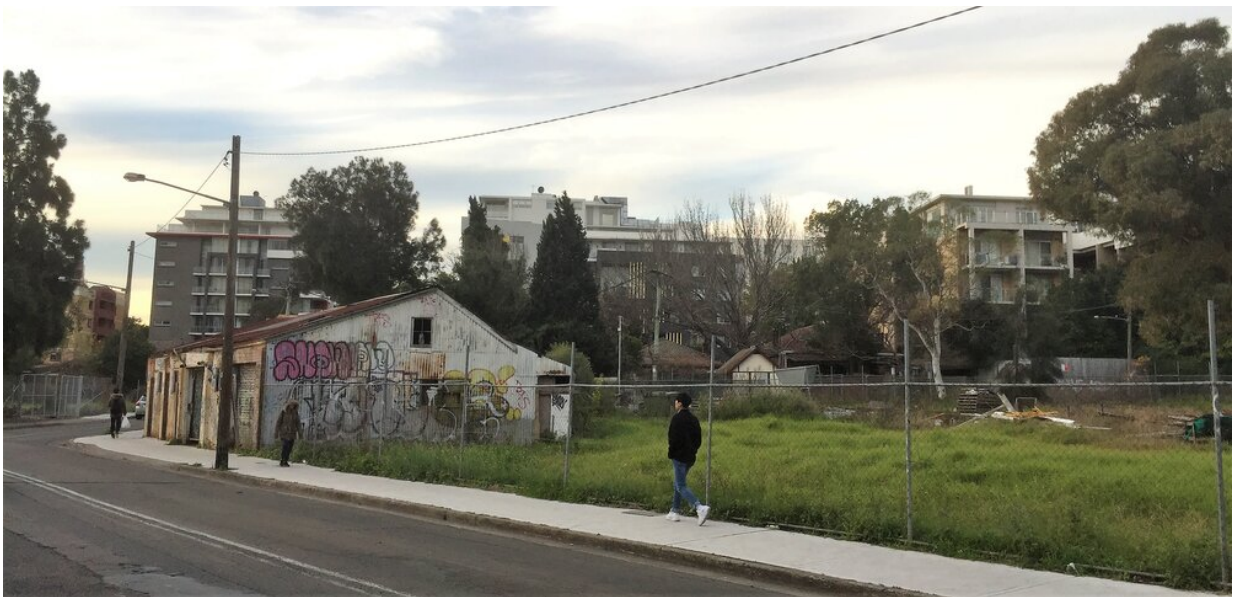
These four neighbourhoods house lower-income residents with varying degrees of success. We found notable differences between the outcomes of urban redevelopment that was co-ordinated and redevelopment that was ad hoc.

Residents of Upper Strathfield in Sydney were living next to an empty development site, without the street upgrades or park they'd been told

was coming. The development had been delayed, which also delayed the contributions needed to provide this infrastructure. One grandmother we spoke with walks past the site with her grandchildren to catch a train to go to a park in another suburb.

In the same local government area, Rhodes West has fantastic local parks and a multipurpose community centre. It was designed with community input and funded through negotiated developer contributions.

These neighbourhoods provide a notably different quality of life, even though lower-income residents live in both precincts and both are in the same local government area. This highlights why improved policy responses, applied consistently across cities, are needed.



Still waiting for the promised park: the vacant lot in Upper Strathfield. Credit: Gethin Davison, Author provided

We identified five main points of tension in delivering high-density buildings and precincts that meet the needs of lower-income residents. These were:

- competing incentives between the development and operational phases of a new development, including poor development decisions affecting building operations (such as unnecessarily inflating maintenance costs)
- concerns over the boundaries between private buildings and the [public domain](#), including unclear divisions of responsibilities for maintenance between private and public entities, [challenges associated with privately owned public spaces](#), and a lack of street life when street-level shops remain empty
- challenges in aligning infrastructure needs and delivery, such as ensuring developer contributions are used effectively to fund the local infrastructure that is actually needed
- tensions between the roles of local and state government
- difficulties meeting the needs of both current and future residents. In our Melbourne case studies in North and South Carlton, for example, gentrification created new challenges, such as some residents having to travel outside the area to get affordable groceries.

What are the solutions?

Our [AHURI](#) report, [Improving Outcomes for Apartment Residents and Neighbourhoods](#), proposes priorities for policy and practice to help resolve these tensions and guide future high-density development.

Implementing these recommendations will require strong co-ordination by government agencies in partnership with private developers. Ensuring developments are both publicly beneficial and privately profitable is challenging for planning authorities.

More funding for public infrastructure is essential. Lower-income residents rely greatly on services and facilities like community centres, libraries and parks.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Relying on development contributions to provide these facilities can be risky. In some case studies we found developer contributions did fund parks and community centres. In others, stalled developments left residents with poor local services.

Some of our proposals are relatively easy to apply. Examples include:

- giving residents clear and detailed information about their rights and responsibilities

- focusing more on the needs of families and children in the design process
- better co-ordinating neighbourhood services.

Others proposals will require significant effort and funding by both government and industry. Examples include:

- [building](#) more affordable and social housing
- hiring dedicated place managers to oversee neighbourhood redevelopments
- redesigning how local infrastructure is funded.

We need to prioritise these changes to ensure our high-density neighbourhoods meet the needs of all residents, not just the wealthy. If we don't, there will be social and economic costs.

Apartment living is growing fast, meaning more people will experience the pros and cons of high-density living in coming years. Failure to cater for this shift, and to reduce the inequities lower-income residents face, risks undermining the prosperity and social cohesion of our cities.

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