

# Stuff happens

## Unused things cluttering up our homes

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### Summary

This study is about the extent to which Australian homes are cluttered with things that are rarely or never used. A nationally representative online survey of 1,002 respondents was carried out in December 2007, and was followed up with a series of telephone interviews with people who identified themselves as having problems with clutter.

Our survey findings show that 88 per cent of homes have at least one cluttered room, and the average home has three or more cluttered rooms. The spare room is the most cluttered area in the home, followed by cupboards, the garage and bedrooms. Not surprisingly, people living in detached houses had more clutter than people living in townhouses or apartments, and people with kids in the home tend to have more clutter than those without. Victorian homes are the most cluttered, while New South Wales homes are the least cluttered.

Four in ten Australians say they feel anxious, guilty or depressed about the clutter in their homes. Women are much more concerned about clutter than men: almost half of the women surveyed said they were anxious, depressed or worried about the clutter in their home, while a third said they were embarrassed by it. Indeed, fully 59 per cent of women said there was a room in the house that they don't like visitors to see because of the clutter.

Naturally enough, clutter tends to accumulate over a lifetime, with older people having much more than younger people and people who own their own home having more than mortgagees or renters. However, younger people are more *worried* about their clutter, and more anxious to do something about it. Older people, by contrast, seem to have accepted or resigned themselves to their clutter, despite having more of it.

Our research shows that many people – 84 per cent of survey respondents – are in the strange situation of having bought things in order to deal with the excessive amount of things they have bought. Around a quarter had even bought *vacuum storage bags* –

which suggests that the stored items will not be in use for some time. One in five respondents had *built a shed or garage* to keep or store things, while one in eight had even *moved house* to accommodate their superfluous ‘stuff’.

## 1. Introduction

There is an interesting term that has entered the vocabulary of financial counsellors and real estate agents in recent years: ‘Castle Hill syndrome’. It describes how some new home owners in outer suburban suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne find themselves facing ‘mortgage stress’, despite having reasonable and secure incomes. People suffering from Castle Hill syndrome spend nearly all their disposable income on loan repayments, and their houses, often new McMansions built to convey the appearance of wealth, remain largely empty because their owners can’t afford to properly furnish them after meeting their mortgage obligations.

There are other ways of spending one’s money that can seem just as misguided. According to a 2004 study by the Australia Institute, the average Australian household wasted \$1,226 in that year on items that were purchased but never used. This equates to \$10.5 billion across the nation – or more than Australian governments spent on universities and roads over the same period. As the study’s authors observed, ‘cutting this wasteful consumption would be enough for the average mortgagee to protect themselves against a 0.75 per cent rise in interest rates’ (Hamilton et al 2005, p. 6).

This paper is about the very opposite of Castle Hill syndrome: the excessive amount of ‘stuff’ that clutters up many people’s homes in an age of affluence. Rather than throwing away, recycling, selling or giving away the unwanted or unused things in our homes, we often let them accumulate. This could be because we are too lazy or too busy to deal with them; or it could be because we feel guilty for buying things that we don’t use but are unwilling to admit that their purchase was a mistake. It could even be that some of us are congenital ‘hoarders’ – that we have a natural instinct to accumulate things in case we need them one day.

There is an important difference between having a cluttered home, or ‘hoarding’, and the behaviour associated with wasteful spending. In Australia, as elsewhere, non-grocery shopping is increasingly undertaken for its own sake, regardless of whether the goods purchased are needed or wanted; indeed, modern shopping centre designs encourage consumers to linger as long as possible. Spending money is now, strangely, its own form of entertainment. This obviously has a significant impact on the environment and (in a different way) the economy, but it also affects our homes.

Psychologists have distinguished between the act of shopping (going to the shop), purchasing goods (the transaction) and consuming the goods after purchase (Campbell 2000). They have also noted differences between hoarding and shopping at the pathological end of the spectrum. Compulsive hoarding has been defined as ‘the acquisition of and inability to discard large numbers of possessions that clutter the living areas of one’s home and interfere with the ability to use the living spaces’ (Frost et al., p. 223). Hoarding is considered ‘clinically significant’ when it ‘interferes with the ability to function effectively or produces significant distress’. Compulsive buying, on the other hand, ‘involves excessive, uncontrollable, time-consuming, and repetitive shopping or buying in response to negative events and/or feelings, resulting in negative consequences such as social and financial difficulties ... It appears to be

characterized by an irresistible urge to buy, and some form of tension relief or gratification, usually temporary, follows the purchase' (Frost et al., p. 223). Only a small minority of people exhibit such extreme symptoms: in the USA, it has been estimated that between 1.8% and 8.1% of the population have a problem with compulsive buying (Frost et al, p. 223). However, it appears that a much higher proportion of people are distressed about the extent of the clutter in their home.

This study seeks to investigate the extent to which hoarding (whether compulsive or otherwise) is prevalent among the Australian population, to ascertain how clutter affects people, and to find out what people think about the clutter in their home. The manner in which the research was undertaken is described in more detail below.

## 2. Research method

### *Survey*

To ascertain how much 'stuff' is cluttering up Australian homes, and to test people's attitudes towards their clutter, an online survey was conducted in December 2007 with 1,002 respondents over the age of 18. The survey questionnaire is reproduced in Appendix A.

The sample was drawn from an online panel of 'pre-recruited' respondents, and was designed to be nationally representative by gender, age, income and state/territory. Online sampling is increasingly being used by market and social researchers as an alternative to telephone sampling, as landline penetration declines and household internet access rates rise. The growth in popularity of online survey techniques means that there are now a number of high quality panel providers operating in Australia.<sup>1</sup>

### *Interviews*

In addition to the survey, a series of telephone interviews was conducted with people who identified themselves as having problems with clutter. The purpose of the interviews was to explore matters that could not be addressed fully through the survey, and to pursue issues arising from the survey results. As well, the interviews provided an opportunity to hear from people whose problems with clutter were unusually pronounced. A total of 10 interviews were conducted, with discussions based on a semi-structured interview guide.

To find suitable interview participants, a notice was placed in the regular email newsletter of a professional 'de-cluttering' service.<sup>2</sup> The notice asked readers to

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<sup>1</sup> The panel used to source respondents for the survey is the Valued Opinions panel, which is owned and managed by the Australian arm of Research Now. It is a research-only panel (i.e. panel lists are not used to carry out any non-research activities, such as marketing) recruited from a wide variety of sources, to avoid any bias associated with limited-source recruitment. The panel recruitment strategy is designed to ensure that a good mix of panel members is captured across each state and across the age, gender and income spectrums. Panel members are individually rewarded for their participation in a survey at a level that helps to ensure reliable levels of response and considered answers to the questions, but not so high as to attract 'professional' respondents. In the case of this survey, the incentive for participation was \$1.50 per respondent. A series of checks was run on survey data to safeguard against invalid completes – for example respondents completing the survey in less time than it would take to give considered responses to each question.

<sup>2</sup> The service in question was SORTED! organising & decluttering, based in Melbourne.

contact the Australia Institute ‘if your home is, or has been, full of too much “stuff” that you don't need or use, or if the clutter in your home has had a negative impact on your life, your relationships or your time at home’. In the event, interviews were held both with people who *themselves* had clutter problems and people who were affected by *other people's* clutter problems (typically parents). Because all those who contacted the Institute were female, some additional interviews were conducted with males through personal contacts.

### **3. The nature and extent of clutter in the home**

Survey respondents were asked which areas or rooms in their home, if any, were cluttered, with clutter explicitly defined as ‘too many items that you rarely or never use’. Only 12 per cent said there were no such rooms in their house – meaning that fully 88 per cent of people had at least one cluttered room in the house.

The survey findings reveal that the spare room is the most cluttered area in the home, with 46 per cent of respondents having clutter there. Cupboards are the next most cluttered area (44 per cent), followed by the garage (44 per cent) and bedrooms (37 per cent). Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents with clutter in each type of room, divided into those living in detached houses (n=689) and those in other kinds of dwellings (n=313).<sup>3</sup>

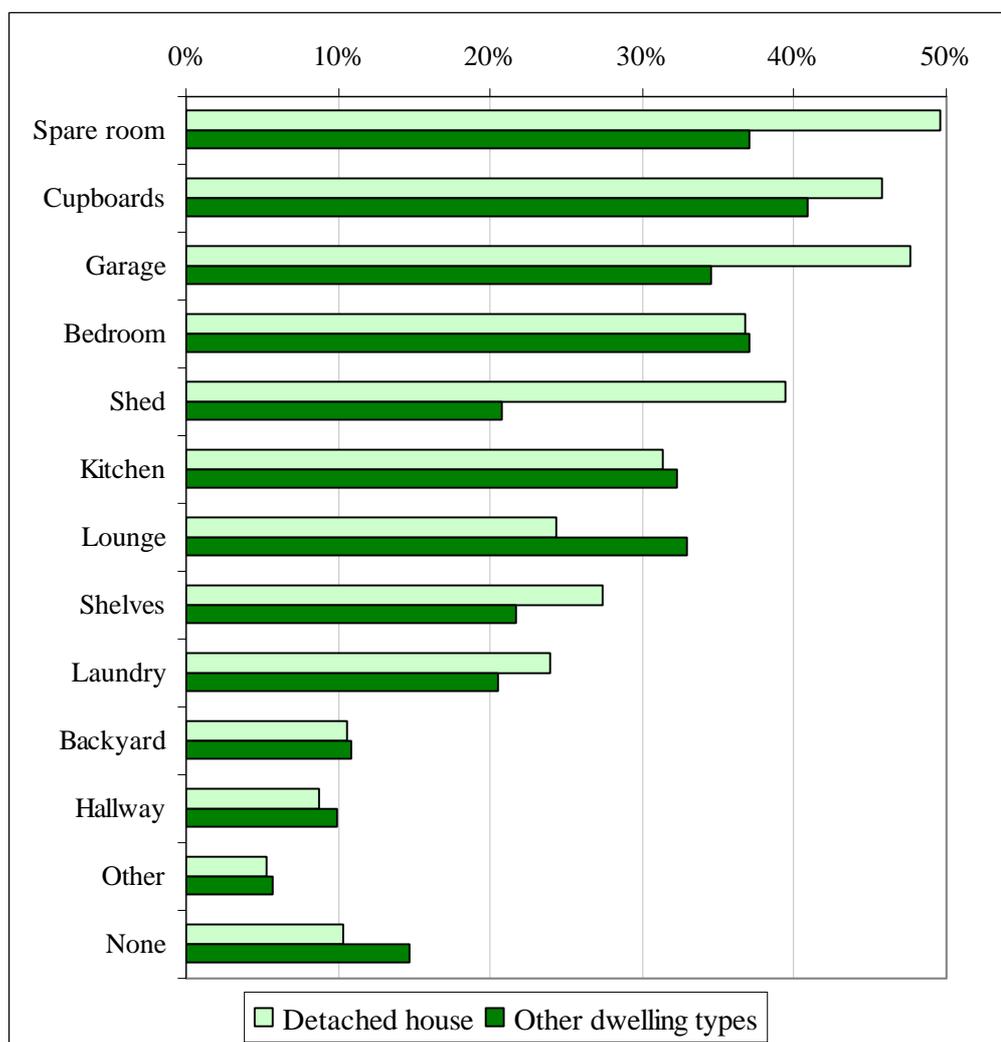
People living in detached houses had more clutter than others, with 90% of people having at least one cluttered area (compared to 85% in other dwelling types). Not surprisingly, house-dwellers had more cluttered garages and sheds than people living in townhouses and apartments. Interestingly, however, the spare rooms, cupboards and shelves of people living in detached houses were also cluttered. Bedrooms were equally cluttered across dwelling types, while townhouse- and apartment-dwellers had more clutter in their lounge rooms.

Survey participants were asked if there were any boxes that they hadn't unpacked since last moving house. Even excluding those who had moved in the last six months, more than a quarter of respondents (26 per cent) said they had some unpacked boxes. Among these people, the average number of unpacked boxes in the home was seven.

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Other dwelling types’ include ‘townhouses/duplexes/terraces’ and ‘apartments/units/flats’.

**Figure 1 Which areas or rooms in your home would you describe as cluttered?**



Base=1,002

The actual items that constitute clutter are extremely varied, and depend on the circumstances and personalities in each household. Items commonly mentioned by those participating in phone interviews included clothes (to be repaired, thrown out, given away, or simply never worn), paperwork (including old letters, junk mail and old newspapers), books, and things for children (such as old toys or craft items). Interview discussions also revealed a number of different categories of clutter, depending on the nature of a person's 'attachment' to things:

- *Emotional clutter* – things with sentimental meaning but little financial value – including children's toys or drawings, (unused or unwanted) gifts, school or university notes, and personal possessions of absent loved ones;
- *Just-in-case clutter* – things with little or no sentimental value but that 'might come in handy one day' and that are therefore kept for some time, such as old bills or bank statements, tools and stationery;
- *Bought clutter* – impulse purchases, often acquired recently, that end up never being used, commonly including clothes, fashion accessories and books;

- *Bargain clutter* – free or very cheap things acquired at sales, from friends or family or ‘by the side of the road’ which are discarded only reluctantly because they were so cheap.

Different kinds of people tend to acquire different types of clutter. Some of those interviewed confessed to being strongly attracted to bargain clutter, while those who identified themselves as ‘hoarders’ said much of their clutter is of the ‘just-in-case’ kind. Other people said their spending habits meant their homes accumulate bought clutter.

‘Part of it is my shopping. I have a whole cupboard dedicated to presents I buy for people in advance or things I buy for myself that I don’t necessarily need. Sometimes I’ll even forget that I bought it in the first place and end up replacing it with something similar.’

‘There is a major issue with the way I shop. I’m an emotional spender. The more broke I am the more likely I am to buy something.’

#### **4. The more cluttered and the less cluttered**

Because such a high proportion of respondents (88 per cent) said they have at least one cluttered room in their home, it is difficult to distinguish between the types of people who tend to have more clutter and those who tend to have less. A better measure of the amount of clutter in the home is the number of rooms that respondents reported as being cluttered. Across the survey sample, there was an average of 3.4 cluttered rooms per home.

Table 1 presents the average number of cluttered rooms by a range of respondent characteristics. It shows that:

- women nominated a much higher number of cluttered rooms than men, perhaps because women tend to *notice* clutter (rather than actually having more clutter);
- people under 35 had fewer cluttered rooms than those over 35, suggesting that clutter tends to accumulate over a lifetime;
- couples with children had more clutter than couples with no children, while single parents had more clutter than single people without kids – indicating that children have a major impact on the amount of clutter in the home;
- working people had fewer cluttered rooms than those not working, so additional time at home does not necessarily prompt people to clean up their clutter;
- people who own their home have more clutter than those with a mortgage, who in turn have more than renters – again suggesting the cumulative nature of clutter over time;

- people living in detached houses have more clutter than those in townhouses or apartments, presumably because they have more rooms (and more space) to leave things;
- Victoria has the most cluttered homes in Australia, while NSW has the least.

**Table 1: Average number of cluttered rooms per home**

	Average number of cluttered rooms	n
Male	2.92	487
Female	3.78	515
18-34	3.07	327
35-54	3.51	372
55+	3.50	303
Single parent	3.31	87
Parent with partner	3.76	304
Partner no kids	3.14	325
Single no kids	3.21	286
Working full time	3.20	371
Working part time/casually	3.19	269
Not working	3.65	362
Rented	3.24	402
Owned (paying a mortgage)	3.33	314
Fully owned	3.54	269
Detached house	3.51	689
Townhouse/duplex/terrace	3.07	86
Apartment/unit/flat	2.88	189
NSW	3.21	323
Vic	3.60	248
Qld	3.43	203
SA	3.42	86
WA*	3.28	101
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.36</b>	<b>1,002</b>

\* Scores for Tas, ACT and NT have been excluded due to small sample size.

Several of those interviewed by phone said their own habits were heavily influenced by their upbringing, and often involved an element of rebellion against their parents. People who had experienced excessive clutter in their parents' homes said they were deliberately neat and conscious of the need to keep their 'stuff' under control, while people with their own clutter problems sometimes recalled that their parents were 'neat-freaks'. When discussing the clutter in their parents' homes, several people referred to a 'Depression-era mentality', suggesting that the propensity to accumulate is a distinctive characteristic of people born at a particular time in history.

'Mum and Dad were born and raised during the Depression, so they want to keep everything.'

'Not wasting was drummed into me as a child. My parents went through the Depression and the Second World War, and if you didn't eat your beans then

that was a waste. Only irresponsible people would throw things out that they might need to buy in the future.’

## 5. How clutter affects people

More than a quarter of survey respondents (29 per cent) said that clutter stops them enjoying their time at home, while one in five (21 per cent) said that clutter in their home impedes their ability to move around the place. Almost half of all respondents (48 per cent) said there was an area or room in their home that they don’t like visitors to see due to clutter. Indeed, about 28 per cent agreed that ‘the clutter in my home makes me feel embarrassed’. According to some of those interviewed:

‘It means I can’t have people over. There’s nowhere for them to sit, and we can’t have dinner because there’s too much stuff on the table.’

‘You don’t want visitors to come over. It’s all over the yard and all over the house.’

Women were more embarrassed about their clutter: 32 per cent of female respondents agreed that their clutter makes them feel embarrassed, compared with 23 per cent of male respondents. People with children in the home were also more likely to feel embarrassed than those without children (33 per cent versus 25 per cent), although (as already noted) people with kids also tend to have more clutter to begin with. In addition, people appear to become less embarrassed about their clutter as they grow older, even though older people live in more cluttered homes. Only 21 per cent of respondents older than 55 agreed that they felt embarrassed, compared with 29 per cent of 35-54 year olds and 33 per cent of respondents under 35 years.

Survey respondents were also asked whether the clutter in their homes makes them feel anxious, guilty or depressed. Twenty-one per cent agreed that it makes them feel anxious; 26 per cent that it makes them feel guilty; and 23 per cent that it makes them feel depressed. A total of 42 per cent of respondents said that their clutter makes them feel at least one of these things.

In fact, almost half of all female respondents (46 per cent) agreed that the clutter in their home makes them feel anxious, guilty or depressed, compared with 38 per cent of males. People with children in the home (who, as we have seen, tend to have more clutter) are more likely to feel anxious, guilty or depressed about their clutter than people without children (47 per cent compared to 39 per cent). Younger people are much more likely to feel anxious, guilty or depressed about their clutter, despite generally having *less* clutter than older people, with more than half of respondents under 35 (58 per cent) agreeing that they felt at least one of these things. By contrast, 41 per cent of 35-54 year olds, and only 26 per cent of people over 55, say they felt anxious, depressed or guilty about the clutter in their home. Reflecting the emotional dimensions of clutter in the home, comments from those interviewed for this study included the following:

‘It manifests in every aspect of my life. I feel overwhelmed and out of control.’

‘It makes me feel anxious and overwhelmed. I feel like I’m never on top of my life.’

‘My wife has a lot of clutter, which affects me emotionally. It just gets me down.’

‘I have to have a clear space to have clear thoughts. Clutter affects me emotionally.’

‘At one stage I actually wanted my home to burn down in a bushfire – it was that cluttered.’

‘It causes anxiety and a sense of self-castigation. You know you should have things organised, so why don’t you?’

‘Keeping a whole lot of stuff that’s not properly sorted – I feel self-conscious and guilty about that. I feel like I would have organised it if I was a proper person.’

## 6. What people think about clutter

Survey respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of attitudinal statements; their responses are summarised in Figure 2.

When asked to indicate on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), two-thirds of respondents (66 per cent) agreed that ‘It makes me feel better when I get rid of some of the clutter in my home’. Women were more likely to agree, with a mean score of 4.2, as against 3.8 for men. Interview participants commonly regarded throwing out excess items as a triumph, whereas they described not dealing with clutter as a personal failure. As one person put it: ‘I put a lot of stuff in the garbage this week. I felt very evangelical.’

More than half of survey participants (55 per cent) agreed that ‘I keep items I have never used because I might need them someday’. This was a common theme for those interviewed:

‘I’m a garbage queen. I find things on the sidewalk and reinvent them. Furniture, pot plant holders, old tennis rackets. I collect all these things for my projects, but often I never end up using them.’

‘Because I’ve had them for so long, I can’t bring myself to get rid of them.’

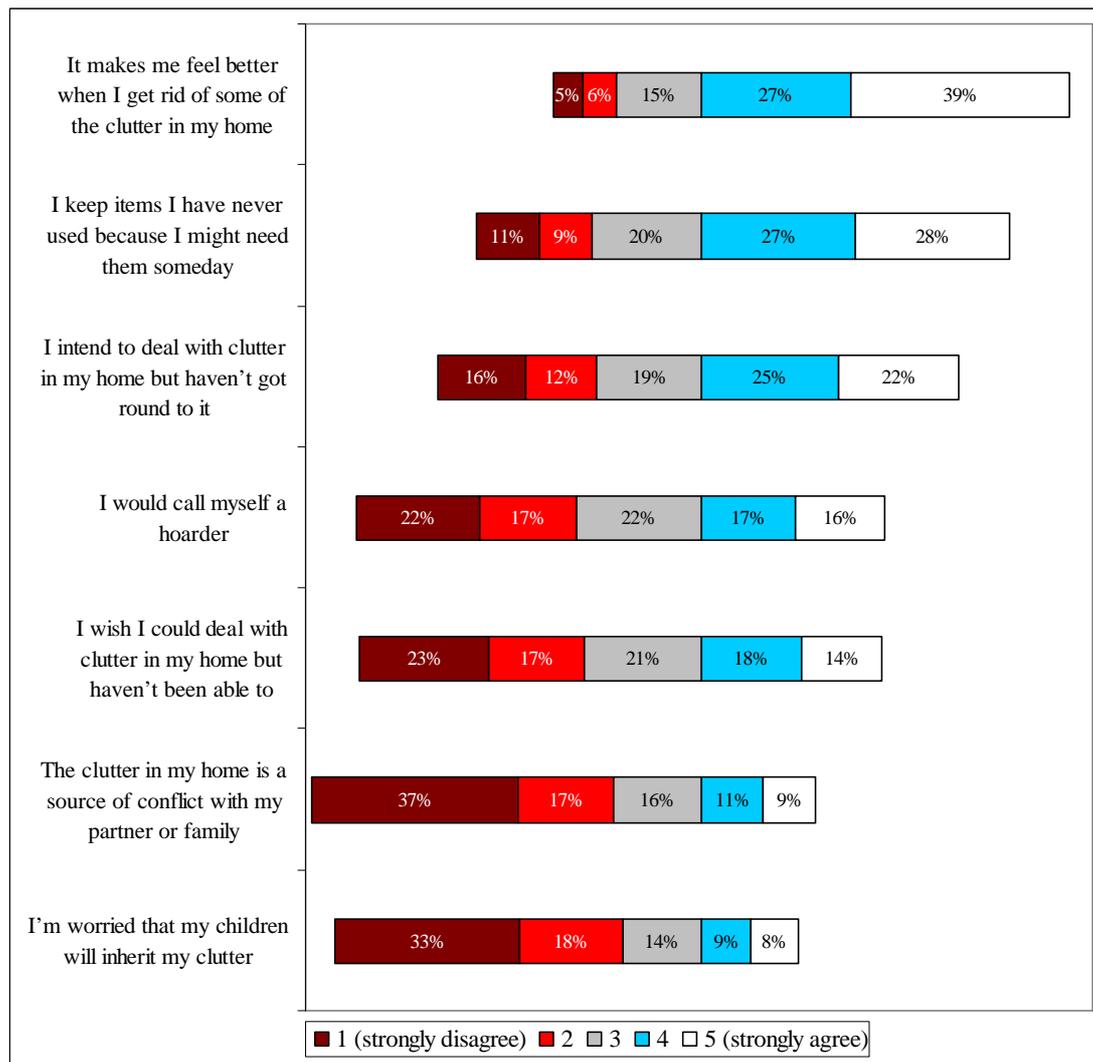
‘I just can’t throw anything away. If people throw things away I’ll actually take them home.’

Just under half (46 per cent) agreed that ‘I intend to deal with clutter in my home but haven’t got around to it’, with more women than men agreeing (with a mean of 3.4 for women and 3.1 for men). Younger respondents (18-34 years) were much more likely to agree with this statement than older people.

One in three respondents agreed that ‘I would call myself a hoarder’. Single people were more likely than those with a partner to identify as hoarders, while people who owned their own homes were more likely to call themselves hoarders than renters.

Around a third (32 per cent) agreed that ‘I wish I could deal with clutter in my home but haven’t been able to’; more women agreed than men. Respondents under 35 years were more likely to agree with this statement than those aged 35-54 or those over 55. People with children in the home were also more likely to agree than those without.

**Figure 2: Responses to attitudinal questions<sup>4</sup>**



Base=1,002

Seventeen per cent of respondents agreed that ‘I’m worried my children will inherit my clutter’. Surprisingly, younger people (2.5) were more likely to agree than 35-54 year olds (2.3) or those over 55 (2.0). Some of those interviewed referred to the difficulties of dealing with clutter – some of which naturally has sentimental value – after the death of a parent:

<sup>4</sup> Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each of these statements on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is strongly disagree and 5 is strongly agree. Those who responded ‘don’t know’ or ‘not applicable’ have been excluded from Figure 2.

‘The only thing that will stop it is Mum’s death. At some stage the kids will need to sort all the stuff out.’

‘You can keep a few things as a memento, but you don’t need all that stuff. It distorts your memory of the person.’

One in five survey participants (20 per cent) agreed that ‘The clutter in my home is a source of conflict with my partner or family’. Respondents under 35 were more likely to agree with this statement, as were people with children in the home. Many interview participants discussed the strains that clutter has placed on their relationships.

‘My husband accumulates stuff like I do, but he thinks he doesn’t. So he’s very quick to criticise me, but he absolves himself of it.’

‘I’ve recently broken up with a partner. The clutter wasn’t the particular issue but it was one of his issues. He could never bring himself to move in with all the mess. It was something we fought over quite a bit.’

‘A little while ago my husband went absolutely mental at me. He said he just can’t stand all the stuff. “Why do we need all this stuff?” he says.’

‘Mum and Dad both blame each other for the clutter. They’re each not going to get rid of their own stuff.’

‘The children have followed my clutter – it’s learned behaviour. And then when I get upset about it, they say, “Mum, calm down, take a chill pill.” So it’s my anxiety that causes others to be anxious.’

## 7. What people do about clutter

Survey participants were asked what they had done so that they could keep or store things. One in five (20 per cent) report having built a shed or garage, while one in eight (13 per cent) say they had moved to a bigger house or apartment. (One woman interviewed by phone said, ‘Every time we moved house we had to get bigger and bigger trucks.’) Significant numbers of respondents had moved things into storage (11 per cent), moved things to a friend’s or family member’s house (11 per cent), or renovated/extended their current dwelling (8 per cent). A small number (1 per cent) had bought or built an investment property. Almost half of all respondents (46 per cent) had done at least one of these things in order to keep or store things.

The survey also asked what respondents had *purchased* in order to get their clutter under control; the great majority (84 per cent) said they had bought something. The most common purchase was containers to store things in (68 per cent), followed by furniture such as shelves or cupboards (56 per cent). More than half (54 per cent) had bought stationery products, such as folders or organisers, while around a quarter (23 per cent) reported purchasing vacuum storage bags. Around five per cent had bought books on home management, while one per cent had had a consultation with a specialist (e.g. professional organiser, psychologist, interior designer). A number of those interviewed said that they were constantly reading books on how to organise their lives. As one such person put it:

‘How many books can I read on the subject, rather than actually doing something about it?’

Some people who had successfully taken steps to address their clutter problem said that it was a radical change of mindset that allowed them to do this. They said it was the mental aspects of their clutter, rather than the physical items in question, that they had needed to address.

‘You can’t take it with you if you die – so why hold onto it?’

It’s not a bargain if you don’t need it.’

‘Now I have my shopping list and I stick to it. I don’t buy things immediately; I go and think about it. I have a picture in my head of moving house. If I were to move house, I should be able to do it reasonably easily.’

One person talked wistfully of the day when they would overcome their clutter for good.

‘I’d feel so free if I could fully de-clutter – like when I traveled the world in my twenties.’

## **8. Discussion**

This research shows that the great majority of Australian homes have some clutter, and many have a lot of clutter. Our findings also indicate that significant numbers of people are affected emotionally by their clutter yet are still unable to rid themselves of the problem.

Cluttered homes can perhaps be seen as an analogue of the obesity epidemic. Most of us don’t want to buy things we won’t end up using, just like most of us would like to be slimmer and fitter than we actually are. Yet the results of this research suggest that Australian homes are often cluttered with things that are rarely or never used. We may not want to live in ‘fat houses’, but we do.

Of course, the alternative to cluttering up our homes is simply to avoid acquiring unwanted or useless items in the first place. Among other things, this requires a more conscious approach to shopping, one that is about purchasing what we really need and will use, rather than shopping impulsively or as a way of entertaining ourselves. It also requires a healthy scepticism towards commercial messages trying to convince us to buy things that we don’t really want or need. If we follow these principles, perhaps we can reclaim our homes.

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## Appendix A – Survey questionnaire

Q1. Which areas or rooms in your home, if any, would you describe as cluttered? In other words, which areas or rooms contain too many items that you rarely or never use? [Multiple response]

- Bedroom
- Lounge
- Hallway
- Kitchen
- Laundry
- Spare room
- None – skip to QC5
- Garage
- Shed
- Backyard
- Cupboards
- Shelves
- Other (specify)

Q2. Is there an area or room in your home that you don't like visitors to see due to clutter?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Q3. Does clutter in your home ever stop you enjoying your time at home?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Q4. Does clutter in your home impede your ability to move around the place?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Q5. Have you ever done any of the following so that you could keep or store things? [Multiple response]

- Moved to a bigger house or apartment
- Renovated or extended your current dwelling
- Built a shed or garage
- Bought/built a holiday house or investment property
- Moved some things into storage
- Moved some things to a friend's or family's member's house
- Other (specify)
- No, none of these

Q6. Have you ever purchased any of the following in order to get your clutter under control?  
[Multiple response]

- Containers to store things in
- Furniture, such as shelves or cupboards
- Stationery products, such as folders or organisers
- Vacuum storage bags
- Books on home management
- Consultation with specialist (e.g. professional organiser, psychologist, interior designer etc)
- Other (specify)
- None of these

Q7. How long since you moved house? Please answer in only one of the boxes below. [Allow answer in only one category]

- [Enter number] Days/weeks/months/years

Q8. Do you have any boxes that you haven't unpacked since you last moved house?

- Yes
- No – skip to Q10
- Not sure – skip to Q10

Q9. How many boxes are there that you haven't unpacked since you last moved house?

- [Enter number]

Q10. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements, on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is disagree strongly and 5 is agree strongly. [Randomise, include N/A option]

- The clutter in my home makes me feel anxious
- The clutter in my home makes me feel guilty
- The clutter in my home makes me feel depressed
- The clutter in my home makes me feel embarrassed
- I intend to deal with clutter in my home but haven't got round to it
- I wish I could deal with clutter in my home but haven't been able to
- The clutter in my home is a source of conflict with my partner or family
- It makes me feel better when I get rid of some of the clutter in my home
- I keep items I have never used because I might need them someday
- I would call myself a 'hoarder'
- I'm worried that my children will inherit my clutter