

AUSTRALIAN TINY HOUSE ASSOCIATION (ATHA) SURVEY REPORT

TINY HOUSES



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Executive Summary

Interest in tiny houses in Australia is very strong, although relatively few people actually live in them. This is likely due to persistent issues around legalisation, as councils are inconsistent and often very inflexible whether they permit tiny houses, particularly tiny houses on wheels. This is highlighted that only 19% of people had sought council approval for their tiny houses.

Tiny houses are found all over Australia but mostly in Victoria, Queensland and NSW. This may reflect the origin of the Australian movement in Victoria, as well as more active social media tiny house groups. Mostly older people were interested in tiny houses, but the ages of those actually living in tiny houses were more evenly spread. Women over 55 remained a strong interest group.

Most tiny houses cost upwards of \$40,000, and while most paid cash, a small proportion had obtained finance (mostly personal loans) to build them. They were constructed either by builders, by the tiny house dweller or a combination of both. Most were off-grid to some extent, and also were built out of recycled or environmentally friendly material.

Virtually all tiny house dwellers said that the experience of living in a tiny house was positive and met their expectations. The written comments stressed the importance of community, lifestyle, environment and downsizing, and that living in a tiny house freed people from debt and chores. A large proportion of respondents wished to live in some sort of community or tiny house village, often on a property with a number of tiny houses in a multi-generational arrangement. Affordability was also important, although many of the would-be tiny house dwellers felt that they could not get into a tiny house until council regulations were clarified.

Overall, tiny houses appear to provide promise to increase urban density without major impact on neighbourhood character; allow those who cannot afford a house to have their own home; and to improve environmental sustainability. Most councils are behind the times and should be more proactive in permitting tiny houses in their jurisdictions, possibly with some sort of permit and fee arrangement.

Overview

A total of 640 people completed the survey. 436 (68.1%) were community interest (not currently living in cities); 156 (24.4%) lived in tiny houses; 14 (2.2%) owned a tiny house and rented it out; and 34 (5.3%) were tiny house builders (but did not live in one).

Of community interest (i.e. not tiny house builders, dwellers etc), the majority (82.1%) wished to live in a tiny house one day and 15.42% wanted to be a tiny house builder (note, respondents could tick more than one in this question). Lesser numbers had interest in tiny houses, were from a community or government organisation or had an interest in sustainable housing.

Demographics

Overall, the majority of respondents not living in tiny houses (community interest) were aged over 41 (272 or 65.54%); but of those who lived in tiny houses, ages were evenly distributed between 15-40; 41-50; and 51-69 (See Fig. 1).

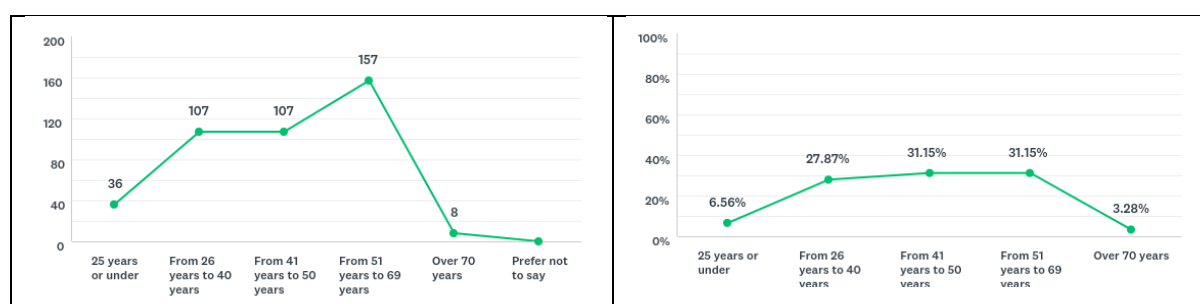


Fig. 1: Age of respondents interested in tiny houses (l) vs respondents actually living in tiny houses (r)

Over ¾ of respondents were female (76.63% or 318 people). This may reflect a greater interest in tiny houses for women, but it may also reflect that more women than men tend to fill in surveys. Tiny house dwellers were mostly couples (64), female only (33) or male (16). A very small proportion (2) identified as non-binary. Approximately 20% had children, one with 4+ but no others with more than 2¹.

Type and Location of tiny house

The majority of tiny houses were on wheels (77.86%), with the rest on foundations (17.14%) or converted caravans (5%).

Those with community interest in tiny houses (not living in a tiny house) mostly lived in Victoria, Queensland and NSW (in that order), followed by SA, WA, TAS, NT and ACT. Those living in tiny houses showed the same distribution as community interest, with very few in NT (1) and none in the ACT.

The majority (59%) of tiny houses were located in rural areas (see Table 1), with 24% in backyards, 7% on vacant residential blocks, and the remainder (11%) in cluster living arrangements. There was no relationship between type of tiny house and location, age, gender, placement or State, although there were no converted caravans in Victoria or WA (but the number of these overall was very small).

There was a significant relationship between State and location of the tiny house, with no tiny houses on vacant residential blocks in Qld, NSW or the NT (despite the high proportion of tiny houses in Qld and NSW). This may reflect different planning provisions between the States (parking a tiny house on a vacant lot in some councils in Queensland is illegal).

¹ Note, I know of one tiny house dweller with 3 children.

Table 1: Location of tiny house

Location of tiny house	N	%
On a domestic block in a residential suburb, no other dwelling on the property	8	6.56%
In a backyard of an existing home	29	23.77%
Cluster living, many tiny homes or dwellings on the one property	13	10.66%
Rural property	72	59.02%

Most had not sought council approval for their tiny houses (81.15%). Of those, there was no particular difference in type of tiny house (bearing in mind that the majority were THOW). There was no relationship with age and council approval, although nobody under 25 had sought council approval (of note, there were very few respondents in that category). Interestingly, only 3 of the tiny houses on foundations had sought council approval, and 12 of the THOW *had* sought council approval.

Cost of Tiny houses

Despite anecdotes (mostly on social media) that a person can build a tiny house for under \$20k, most cost more than \$26,000, and two cost over \$126,000.

Whilst the majority (86%) had paid for their tiny houses themselves, contrary to social media anecdotes, a few had financed their tiny houses (mostly as personal loans from banks) and one with a rent to buy agreement. Over a quarter (27%) of tiny houses were insured, with a range of insurers including RACQ, RACV, NRMA, CIL, APIA and Elders.

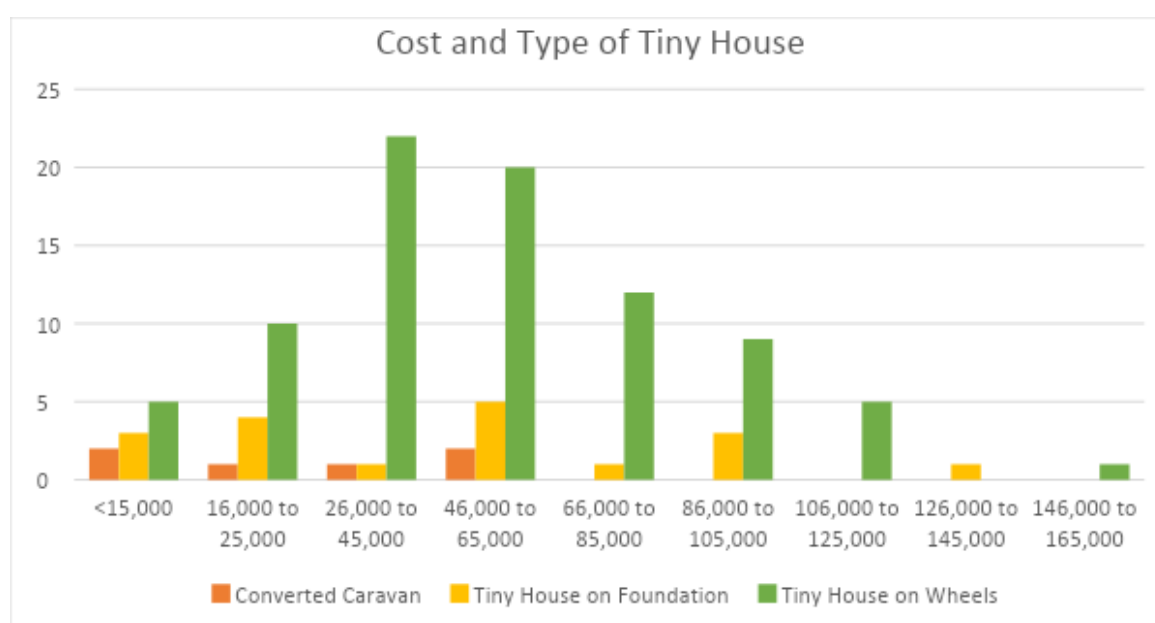


Fig 2. Cost and type of tiny house

Tiny house Construction

People sourced their trailers from a variety of sources, predominantly new with a compliance plate (43%), constructed from a caravan manufacturer (20%) and new without a compliance plate (12%). Somewhat disturbingly, over a quarter sourced theirs second-hand, and of those, 8% did not have a compliance plate.

Most tiny houses were off grid on solar (47%), another 29% had a mix of solar and mains power and 21% were on mains power. The location of the tiny house had no relationship with the source of power. There were similar proportions for water; with slightly more on tank water only (54%). Another

80% used LPG, predominantly for hot water and cooking, and for BBQs and heating. Commercial composting toilets were commonest (57%) with the remainder homemade (21%), septic tank (13%) and 9% had no toilet (presumably they used the toilet in another building).

Weight of tiny houses was evenly distributed between 'have not weighed it', to under 3.5 tonnes and 3.6 to 4.5 tonnes. The commonest length by far was 7–8m (35%), then 8-9m (16%) and 6-7m (14%). 18% were larger than 9m and 17% under 6m. Most were built from a hybrid of recycled, environmentally friendly and conventional building material, then recycled or environmentally friendly materials where possible and available. Only four were built entirely from recycled/sustainable materials.

Despite the common complaints on social media about loft beds, the majority had a loft bedroom (see Fig. 3). This is likely a result of the common tiny house on wheels configuration, that has limited width to ensure the dwelling is road legal.

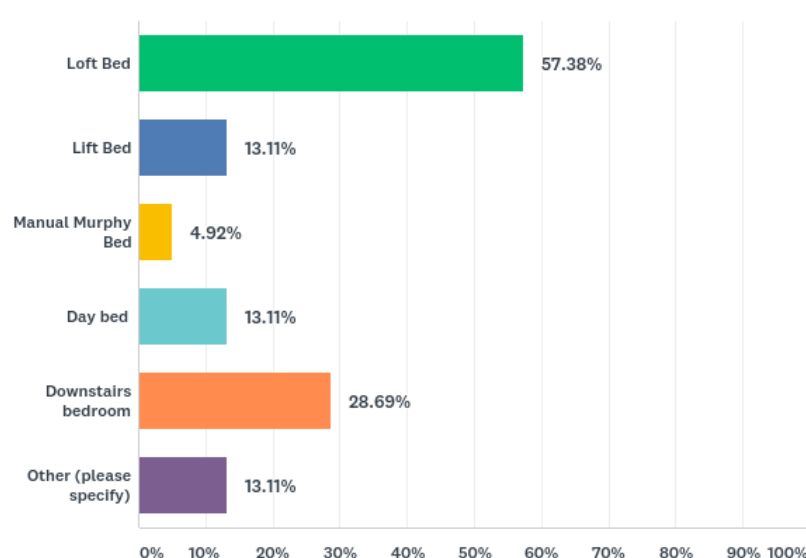


Fig. 3: Type of bed in tiny house

Building the tiny house

32 respondents said they were also tiny house builders, differentiated as per Table 2 (below). Others included 'owner builders', 'own a tiny house company, employ a 'registered builder' and 'building designer'. Four respondents said they were architects and/or designers.

Type	Number	Percentage
Registered Builder	13	24.53%
Registered Caravan manufacturer	1	1.89%
Carpenter and/or a DIY handyperson	29	54.72%
Other (please specify)	13	24.53%

Table 2. Type of tiny house Builder

Most (29 or 55%) had been building tiny houses from 12 months to 5 years. Five (9%) had been building them for longer than 5 years, and the remainder for less than 12 months. The majority (74%) had built less than 5 tiny houses and then 13% between 6 and 10. A few had built more than 10, with 3 people stating that they had built more than 40 tiny houses. Two thirds did not manufacture their own trailers, one quarter did, and the remainder did not build tiny houses on wheels.

Design it with your now and future needs. If this is to be your forever home, then make sure you can physically live in it forever.

Design for the way you love not a perception of how society expects you to live.

Council Regulations

Although design had more comments, these were quite diverse, and included aspects of building design. The issue of council regulations on the other hand, had long and detailed comments, mostly around the difficulties that people have had with local councils and their complicated and often confusing regulations. Many people said that they wanted councils to be more proactive with tiny houses, for example:

I wish the councils in Australia were more progressive, open-minded and understanding of the need for some people to want to live in a tiny house, a less traditional and more alternative housing option. Not everyone can afford to buy a traditional house nor would that style of housing appeal to all.

Many reported having problems with councils and often inconsistent and illogical rulings about tiny houses:

We really wanted to live legally full time in our tiny house however are not able to right now due to council regulations- we find it amazing that family members can live in a 'caravan', however we cannot legally do it ourselves without having another 'primary dwelling' on the property.

This is in keeping with the information that most people have not sought council approval for their tiny houses:

Neighbors cannot see it, so will not complain, therefore Council will never know. If I asked Council, they would say NO.

This respondent summed up the issues very well:

The biggest challenge for THOW dwellers/future dwellers is the local Council rules which vary widely. There should be no reason why a tiny house cannot sit on a piece of land as the only dwelling as long as it meets certain safety codes. Why should it be necessary to have a primary non-THOW dwelling on the land? It's absurd! The non-THOW dwelling could be falling down while the THOW dwelling could be in pristine condition and completely safe. Living in a THOW should not in any way depend on another "permanent" dwelling being on the land. If it's about collecting Council taxes, then tax the THOW owner as most would be happy to pay to live on their land in their own home.

Environment and Community

The themes of environment, community, lifestyle and minimalism have been combined as there were many overlaps. Wishing to live in some sort of community was a strong theme, with several respondents wanting to live in a tiny house community or village with like-minded people, generally with an environmental focus.

We are a young couple looking to build our ideal home. Fulfilling our sustainable values, ideally in a like-minded community. We aren't doing this because of financial reasons but rather in search of a meaningful lifestyle.

The concept of community included eco villages and the like, but also suggestions for multigenerational clusters of dwellings on the same property, and often located, not in rural areas, but in the inner-city suburbs where people could access employment, services etc. Older people did

not want to move to a retirement village, but to multigenerational communities, often with other family.

With regard to the environment, many spoke of how they saw tiny houses as a more sustainable option than the standard detached house (or high rise). They spoke of how tiny houses could improve urban density without impinging on neighbourhood character, for example:

Very interested in tiny houses integrated into current urban environments. Density without loss of connection, community and amenity. Specifically, multi-generational living in shared environments. Supported aging in place. Protecting suburbs / local character.

Lifestyle and minimalism/downsizing were also evident, and people also spoke of the simpler lifestyle living in a tiny house, and how quick it was to clean, heat and cool. People also said they had more time to concentrate on important things in life, rather than paying mortgages and looking after less stuff.

Interested in the concept of tiny houses in terms of affordable accommodation and minimalist lifestyle. Would consider living in one if legislation was created to minimize risk involved with location of such dwellings.

Affordability

Finally, affordability was extremely important, and respondents often mentioned that tiny houses were their only option to have a home of their own.

It would be nice to have a community setting where one can either buy or rent a piece of land. Buy your tiny house and put it there. I know of a few people who simply cannot afford to buy properties for whatever reason. This option will make it VERY possible to own a house they can call home.

People frequently spoke of the interaction between the affordability of tiny houses and the (unaffordable) cost of land which precluded them from going into a tiny house.

The only obstacle, but it's a huge one, is finding a small affordable parcel of land in a location that still allows me to make a living. If I could solve that problem I would be a tiny house owner within 90 days.

Those who could not afford land, and who wished to be closer to the city (for health, work or other reasons), felt that the lack of clarity in council regulations was the biggest drawback.

I would like to see tiny houses legalised as a viable affordable housing option so that it is legal to put them in backyards without being a family member.

Finally, many older respondents, particularly women over 50, mentioned that tiny houses were an affordable option to live in their own home, perhaps with a small garden, and to allow pets.

Women over 50 who find themselves without a partner and low superannuation/savings are very interested in tiny house living. Affordable option.