



# IN NEED OF A LITTLE **CHRISTMAS** CHEER

Christmas research report



**Christmas  
Appeal**

December 2021

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The Salvation Army's Christmas 2021 Poll.

The Salvation Army: Australia

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### Our Vision

Wherever there is hardship or injustice, Salvos will live, love and fight, alongside others, to transform Australia one life at a time with the love of Jesus.

### Our Mission

The Salvation Army Australia is a Christian movement dedicated to sharing the love of Jesus.

We share the love of Jesus by:

- Caring for people
- Creating faith pathways
- Building healthy communities
- Working for justice

### Our Values

Recognising that God is already at work in the world, we value:

- Integrity
- Compassion
- Respect
- Diversity
- Collaboration

### Our commitment to inclusion

The Salvation Army Australia acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet and work and pay our respect to Elders, past, present and future.

We value people of all cultures, languages, capacities, sexual orientations, gender identities and/or expressions. We are committed to providing programs that are fully inclusive. We are committed to the safety and wellbeing of people of all ages, particularly children.

We commit ourselves in prayer and practice to this land of Australia and its people, seeking reconciliation, unity and equity.

The Salvation Army is an international movement and our mission is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and to meet human needs in his name without discrimination.

Learn more about our commitment to inclusion at:

[salvationarmy.org.au/about-us](http://salvationarmy.org.au/about-us)

### Recognition

We would like to thank everyone who completed surveys, participated in interviews and shared their views and experiences with us. We are grateful for your time, honesty and insights.

We would also like to thank all the dedicated staff, volunteers and officers and members of The Salvation Army corps and social centres, for their extraordinary commitment and compassion towards others.



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# Overview

Christmas is a very special time of year for many Australians – a festive season celebrated and enjoyed with family and friends, a time of giving and rejoicing the birth of Christ. However, for people doing it tough, instead of hope and happiness, it can be a challenging and stressful period, with financial hardship and loneliness.

For families that are facing hardship or living on low income, Christmas can often mean the stress of expectations. Many are forced to choose between buying gifts for their children and loved ones or paying the electricity bill on time.

Christmas is also a period for heightened activity for community organisations and charities, as this is when many people seek assistance and a sense of community spirit. Last Christmas, The Salvation Army supported thousands of Australians – those struggling with unexpected bills, lack of food or a safe place to sleep. Through our emergency relief services, we also provided hampers and food vouchers, access to accommodation and presents for children to open on Christmas morning.

## Last Christmas season<sup>1</sup>, The Salvation Army provided more than:



**\$2.3 million**

in **financial assistance** to people who accessed our emergency relief services



**64,000**

**food vouchers** and **hampers** worth over \$1.89 million to people in need



**\$96,000**

worth of **assistance** to families who needed help paying essential bills



**26,000**

**toys and gifts** to families who accessed our services



**66,000**

**bed nights** and **132,000 meals** to people who accessed our Homelessness services



**10,000**

individuals and their children with **accommodation support services**

<sup>1</sup> Christmas season refers to 1 December to 31 December 2020, data extracted from The Salvation Army SaMIS internal information management system.

## In 2020-21, The Salvation Army's Doorways emergency relief services<sup>2,3</sup>:



Assisted more than  
**133,000** people



Provided more than  
**301,000** sessions of  
care to those in need



Distributed  
**\$18.9M<sup>4</sup>** in financial  
assistance to people  
in need



It is apparent that many people rely on community organisations for a helping hand in times of need. This research project was conducted to gain a better understanding of the challenges and experiences faced people accessing our emergency relief services during the Christmas period. The information gathered provides insight into the hardship and pressures many endure over this time.

The findings of this report demonstrate the financial stress and difficulties people experience in affording their rent and other essential items during Christmas. Many were worried about having enough money to pay for presents for their children and loved ones, as well as feeding their families. In addition, many people presented with a range of complex life circumstances that caused additional stress at Christmas, such as family conflict and domestic violence, deteriorating mental health and having no one to spend Christmas with. Overall, this report provides a sombre perspective of the sentiments and views of those who are struggling at Christmas time.

The Salvation Army will continue to connect with and deliver services to thousands of vulnerable Australians facing isolation, hardship or difficult circumstances this Christmas, and provide them the sense of community and critical assistance they seek. Corps officers, employees and volunteers will support people in financial hardship, those in need of food and essentials, people impacted by unemployment, and those who are isolated and alone. We will offer hope and kindness to those who need it this Christmas.

<sup>2</sup> Includes emergency relief assistance and case management.

<sup>3</sup> Data extracted from The Salvation Army SaMIS internal information management system.

<sup>4</sup> Cash, gift cards and food vouchers.



# Method

An online survey was conducted to examine the circumstances, general sentiments and worries of community members who access The Salvation Army's emergency relief services during the Christmas season.

Qualtrics was used to host and distribute the online survey. A random sample of 5000 people who had attended The Salvation Army's emergency relief centre in the past six months was invited via text message to complete the survey. The data was collected during October 2021. Participation was voluntary and responses were anonymous. A total of **1164 respondents** completed the online survey (23% response rate).

The Salvation Army also commissioned PureProfile, a corporate market research company, to administer a survey across the nation. The survey questions were identical to this research project for comparative purposes with the general population. The data was collected during October 2021. A total of **2000 Australians** aged 18 and over completed the online survey. PureProfile respondents were financially remunerated for participating. PureProfile conducted its own data extraction and analysis. Aggregated cross tabulation data was provided, no individual identifying details were provided or referenced in the report. It is important to note that representativeness of the PureProfile sample to the Australian population is limited only to the distribution of the sample across six states.

## Data analysis

Data was extracted and analysed using Qualtrics. Missing responses were low (<5% of sample size) and were excluded from the calculations. Significant differences between cohorts presented in this report are based on Chi-squared tests.

Where appropriate, findings from this research were compared with results from the PureProfile survey that portrays circumstances, general sentiments and worries of the general Australian population during the Christmas season. (Hereafter referred to as the 'general Australian population survey'.)



# Themes

It has been a challenging year for many Australians, and Christmas is set to add to that stress, especially for those who accessed The Salvation Army's emergency relief services for material assistance. Despite being the festive season, the results were not synonymous with Christmas cheer and strong connections with others. Key themes that arose from this research project included:

- A** Christmas added to existing financial pressures and stress for respondents already experiencing hardship

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- B** Most respondents experienced adverse circumstances and were worried about affording essentials such as food, rent or utilities

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- C** Experiences of mental health, feelings of social isolation and loneliness over Christmas were prevalent among respondents

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- D** Worries and challenges experienced were exacerbated by the COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions

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- E** People who accessed The Salvation Army's emergency relief services experienced higher incidences of hardship and adverse life circumstances compared to the general public

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# Key findings



# Main findings

## Demographic profile

More than half (55%) of respondents were households with children, four in ten were single parent families and one in eight were couples with children.



- 41%** Single parent households
- 26%** Living alone
- 13%** Couples with children
- 12%** Other group households
- 7%** Couple only households

(n=1164)

## Worries and stress

Living on limited income creates financial pressures, especially around Christmas time. **Nearly** all respondents (**98%**) were worried about the upcoming Christmas season. Having adequate finances to afford presents, a special Christmas meal and activities with their children over the holidays were the most prevalent concerns. On average, respondents were worried about at least three different things during the holiday season.

These figures were significantly different compared to the results of the general Australian population survey. The Salvation Army respondents were at least **four times** more likely to be worried about affording presents for their children or special activities over the holidays, and **five times** more likely to be concerned about affording a special meal on Christmas day compared to the general population. This indicates that respondents who accessed The Salvation Army emergency relief were considerably more concerned and stressed about Christmas approaching. It also demonstrates the high level of disadvantage and hardship experienced by those who access The Salvation Army's emergency relief services.

Worries over Christmas		
Unable to afford	The Salvation Army's emergency relief respondents	General Australian population <sup>5</sup>
Presents for children on Christmas day	60%	13%
A special Christmas day meal	56%	10%
Activities with their children over holidays	34%	7%

<sup>5</sup> Extrapolated figures based on PureProfile results.



## Main worries about Christmas



Affording presents for children



Affording a special Christmas day meal



Affording presents for families and friends



Not seeing people due to COVID-19 restrictions



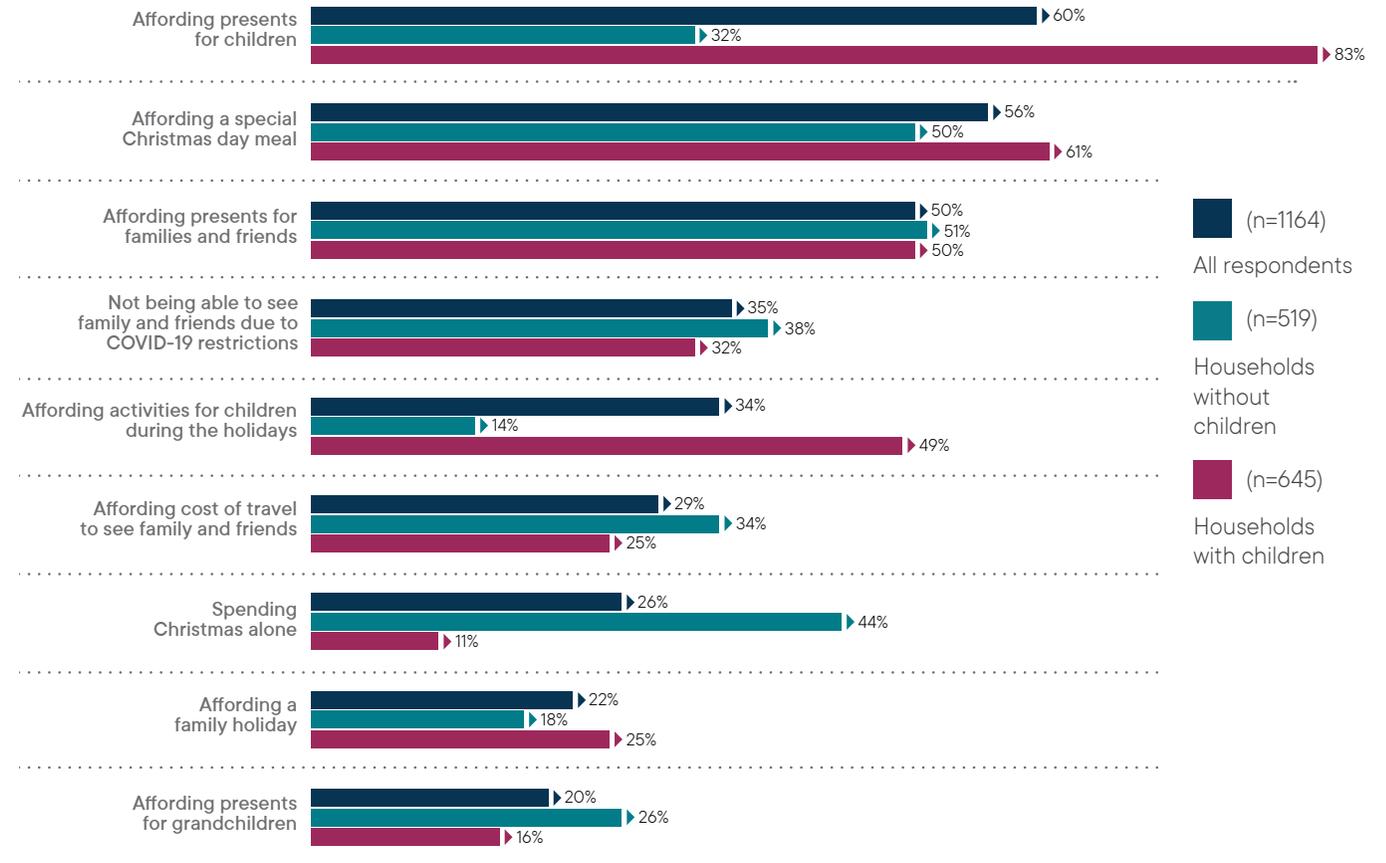
Affording activities for children during holidays

Christmas is a magical time for children, full of excitement and anticipation of Santa delivering presents and enjoying holidays with family and friends. Yet, this is not the picture for many of those surveyed.

**More than eight in ten (83%)** respondents from households with children were worried about affording presents for their children on Christmas day, with rates slightly increased for single parent households.

Of those with children, **more than six in ten (61%)** were concerned they could not afford a special meal on Christmas Day for the family, while **nearly half (49%)** were stressed about affording activities with their children over the holidays. **Three-quarters (75%)** of respondents with children were worried about not having enough food to eat over the Christmas season. These are confronting statistics, but the reality for many families in need.

## Worries and stress over Christmas



## Top additional concerns over the Christmas season



Affording enough food to eat



Ability to pay utilities



Mental health concerns



Ability to pay mortgage/rent



Loneliness and isolation

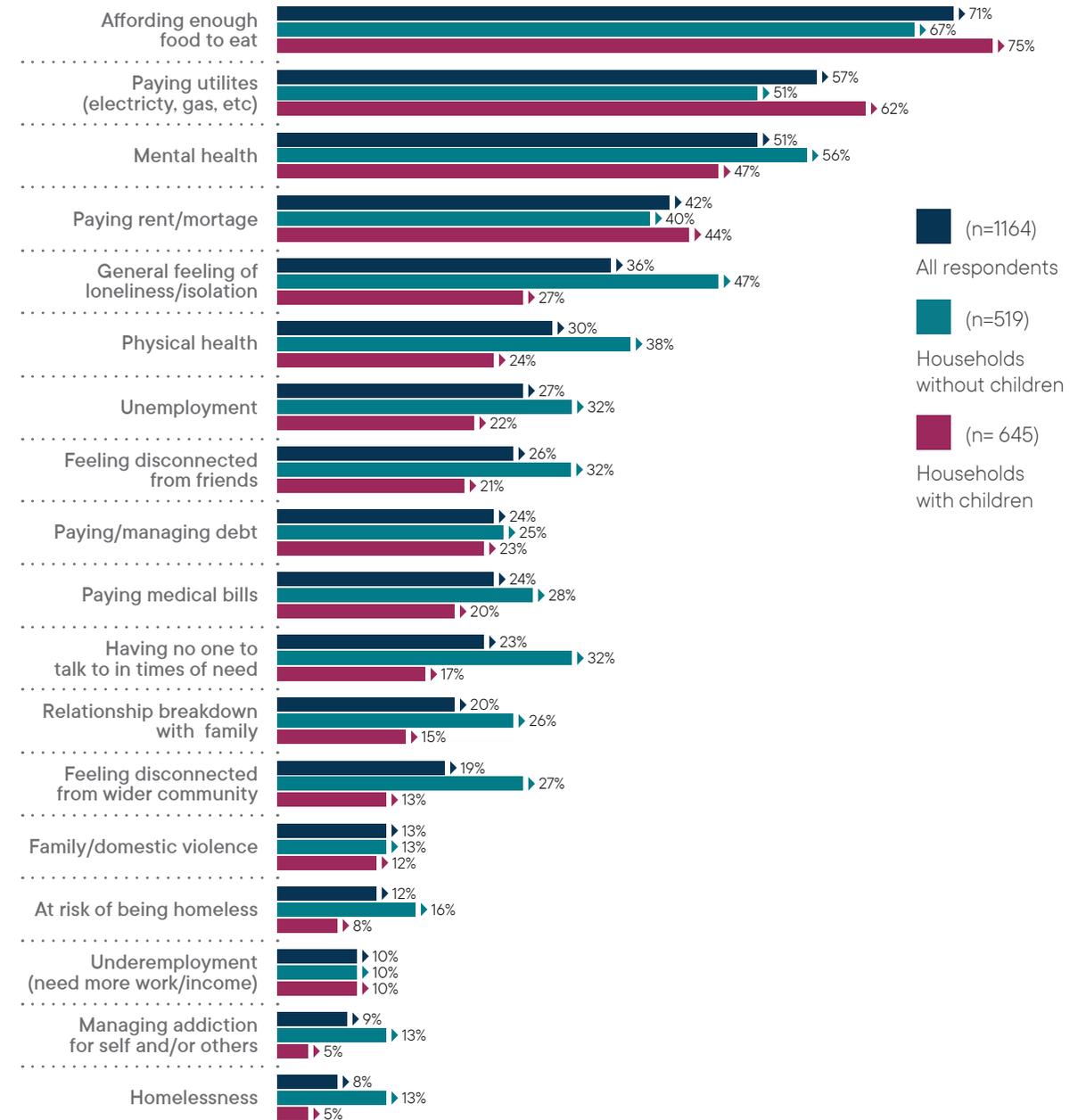
## Hardship

Many people face financial stress over Christmas. During this time of year, there is a greater focus and expectation on purchasing gifts, meals and engaging in holiday activities. Yet not everyone can afford these items or experiences. As a result, Christmas is one of the busiest times of the year, when people turn to community organisations for help.

Experiences of hardship were prevalent for respondents, in fact, all reported they experienced adverse circumstances adding to worries and stress over Christmas. On average, respondents reported five different circumstances that added to worries and stress over Christmas and were mainly concerned with providing basic home essentials. **Seven in ten (71%)** respondents were concerned about affording enough food to eat, **nearly six in ten (57%)** were worried about affording household utilities and **more than four in ten (42%)** were worried about paying the rent or mortgage.

These figures were slightly higher for households with children, indicating that families with children experienced additional financial strain and pressure during the Christmas season. Approximately **one in four (24%)** reported they were worried about managing or paying back debts and affording medical bills this Christmas. **More than one in four (27%)** reported they were stressed about unemployment and a further **10%** were worried about underemployment and needing additional work. These circumstances, coupled with the challenges faced by many Australians who had lost their jobs or had their hours reduced over the past 18 months<sup>a</sup>. Many have needed help and accessed The Salvation Army for assistance, some for the first time.

## Things that added to worries and stress at Christmas





Again, number of causes of additional stress and worries over Christmas were considerably higher for respondents compared to the general Australian population. Worries related to affording essential items like enough food to eat, paying utilities and the rent were most noticeable. Compared to the general public, respondents were **five times** more likely to be concerned about affording enough food, **nearly three times** more concerned about paying their utilities and **more than twice** as worried about affording their rent/mortgage. Respondents were at least **three times** more worried about unemployment this Christmas, compared to the general public.

**Other factors adding worries and stress over Christmas**

	TSA emergency relief respondents	General Australian population <sup>6</sup>
Affording enough food to eat	71%	14%
Paying utilities (e.g. electricity, gas)	57%	21%
Paying the rent/mortgage	42%	19%
Unemployment	27%	8%

<sup>6</sup> Extrapolated figures based on PureProfile results.



## Impact by COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns



Mental health



Homelessness



Sense of loneliness



Disconnection from friends



Enough food to eat

## Impact of COVID-19 restrictions

The pandemic has had crippling effects for many Australians, with many struggling on limited incomes and turning to community organisations for help. **Eighty-five per cent** of respondents reported they were negatively impacted by COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns. Respondents reported that enforced restrictions and lockdowns either exacerbated or had caused their situation to become worse for those who were experiencing:

### Negative impacts of COVID-19 restrictions

Mental health	74%
Homelessness	71%
General feeling of loneliness/isolation	68%
Feeling disconnected from wider community	67%
Feeling disconnected from friends	67%
Family/domestic violence	67%
Underemployment (needing more work/income)	65%
Paying utilities (electricity, gas, strata etc)	64%
At risk of being homeless	63%
Physical health	63%
Enough food to eat	63%
Paying rent/mortgage	62%
Paying medical bills	61%
Unemployment	61%
Having no one to talk to in times of need	61%
Relationship breakdown with family	59%
Managing addiction for self and/or others	58%
Paying/managing debt	53%

Percentages are based on the number of respondents who reported experiencing adverse circumstances that added to their worries and stress at Christmas.



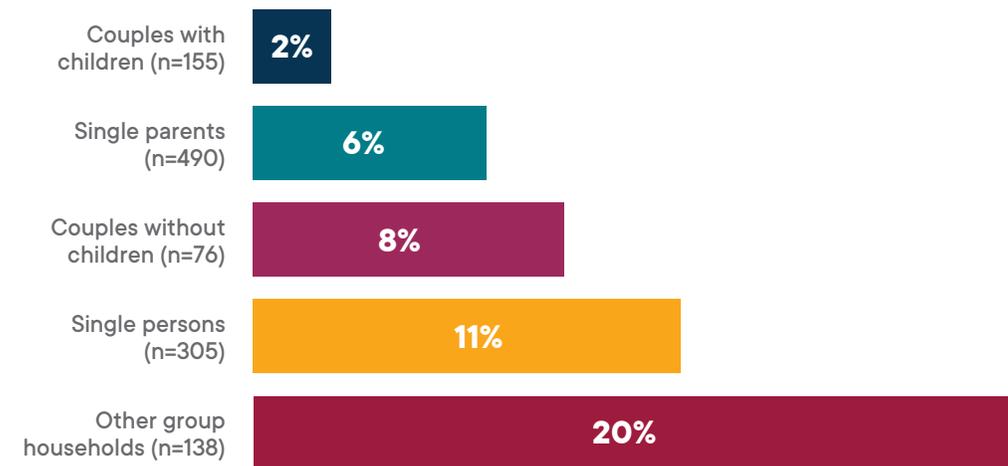
## Family and domestic violence

Family and domestic violence continues to be an insidious and abhorrent problem, impacting thousands of Australians each year.<sup>8</sup> For some, Christmas is a time of family conflict, breakdown and violence. It can be a time of risk for many women and their children.<sup>9</sup> Approximately **one in eight (13%)** respondents were worried about family and domestic violence this Christmas and of these, **more than six in 10 (67%)** reported that their stress was intensified because of COVID-19. The proportion of respondents from households with and without children who were worried about family and domestic violence was nearly identical. These rates are concerning, given the sample of people who completed the survey were those who accessed emergency relief services for food and material assistance.

## Homelessness

Everyone has a right to safe and affordable housing. It is difficult to think this Christmas, many people will not have a place to stay. **Eight per cent** of all respondents were worried about being homeless at Christmas. This increased to **one in five (20%)** for respondents living in group households; **twice** the rate compared with other households. The impact of COVID-19 restrictions further exacerbated the issue for **seven in ten (71%)** respondents, who were experiencing homelessness. This highlights the vulnerable position and tenuous circumstances some respondents experience.

### Worries about experiencing homelessness over Christmas (based on household type)





## Wellbeing

While Christmas can be financially burdensome, it can also be a triggering time for deteriorating mental health, drug and alcohol misuse, interpersonal and family conflict.<sup>9</sup> Hence, not everyone looks forward to the festive season. In fact, **more than half (53%)** of respondents were not looking forward to Christmas, most notably single person households. Rates for the general population were much lower, with only **one in ten (10%)** not looking forward to Christmas. It is not surprising that **more than half (51%)** of the respondents were worried about their mental health this Christmas season, double compared to the general population (**25%**).

During Christmas, there is usually a sense of family, feeling valued and cared for by others. However, when asked, most respondents reported negative perceptions of themselves. **Approximately four in ten** respondents reported that they **did not** feel important to others (**44%**), feel valued (**43%**), or loved (**36%**), and **more than half (52%)** reported not feeling good about themselves. It is confronting to see how many people are struggling, especially at Christmas time.



**51%**

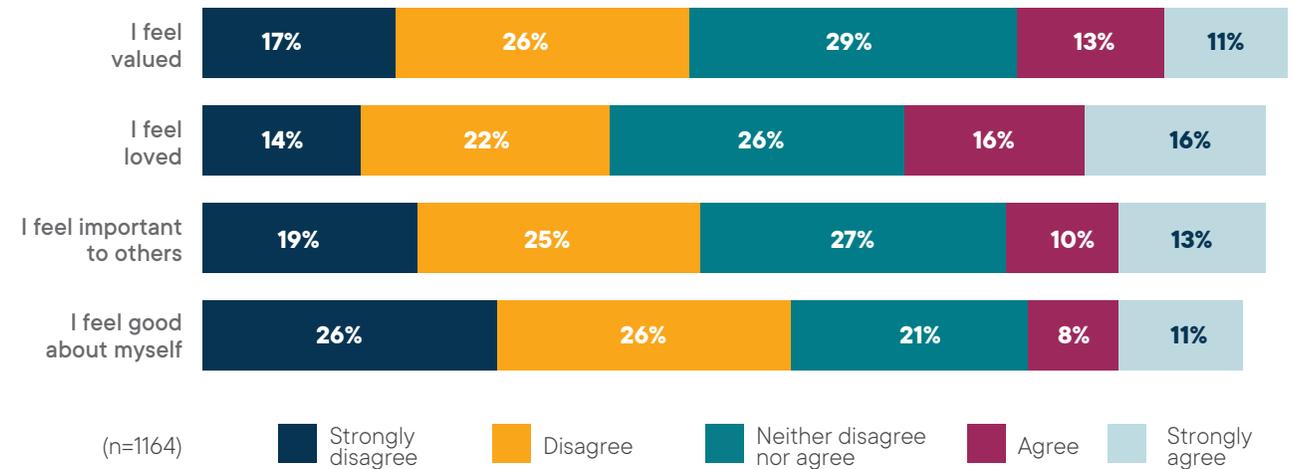
were worried about their mental health over Christmas



**53%**

were not looking forward to Christmas

### Respondent self perceptions





## Isolation and loneliness

A lack of social connections and engagement with others, particularly around Christmas time or other significant holidays, can further exacerbate feelings of social isolation and loneliness. Seeing others enjoy the festive season may be hard to bear, especially when a person has no one to share these special occasions with or is mourning the loss of a loved one.

**More than one in four respondents (26%)** were worried about spending Christmas alone and **over one in three (36%)** respondents were worried about being lonely and isolated over Christmas. The situation was worse for single person households, who were almost **three times** more likely to be worried about spending Christmas alone (**56%**) and **more than half (56%)** were concerned about experiencing loneliness and isolation. Approximately **one in four** respondents expressed feeling additional worry and stress over Christmas and feeling they were disconnected from friends (**26%**) with no one to talk to in times of need (**23%**). A further **one in five** reported additional concerns regarding relationship breakdowns with family (**20%**) and feeling disconnected from their wider community (**19%**).

Incidences of loneliness, disconnection and relationship breakdown were considerably higher for The Salvation Army respondents compared to the wider Australian population. This suggests that people who access emergency relief centres have experienced higher occurrences of isolation, with fewer people to turn to in times of need, and higher rates of family breakdown compared to the general population.

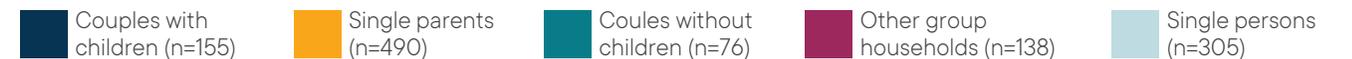
Other factors adding to stress and worry over Christmas		
	TSA emergency relief respondents	General Australian population <sup>7</sup>
General feelings of isolation and loneliness	36%	16%
No one to talk to in times of need	23%	7%
Relationship breakdown with family	20%	9%

<sup>7</sup> Extrapolated figures based on PureProfile results.

### Rates of worry, loneliness and isolation over Christmas (based on household type)



### Worried spending time alone at Christmas (based on household type)





## Main impacts from receiving assistance from The Salvation Army



Provision of food



Support towards reducing in reducing stress and anxiety



Support to feel more hopeful



Referrals to other Salvos services



Support with paying bills

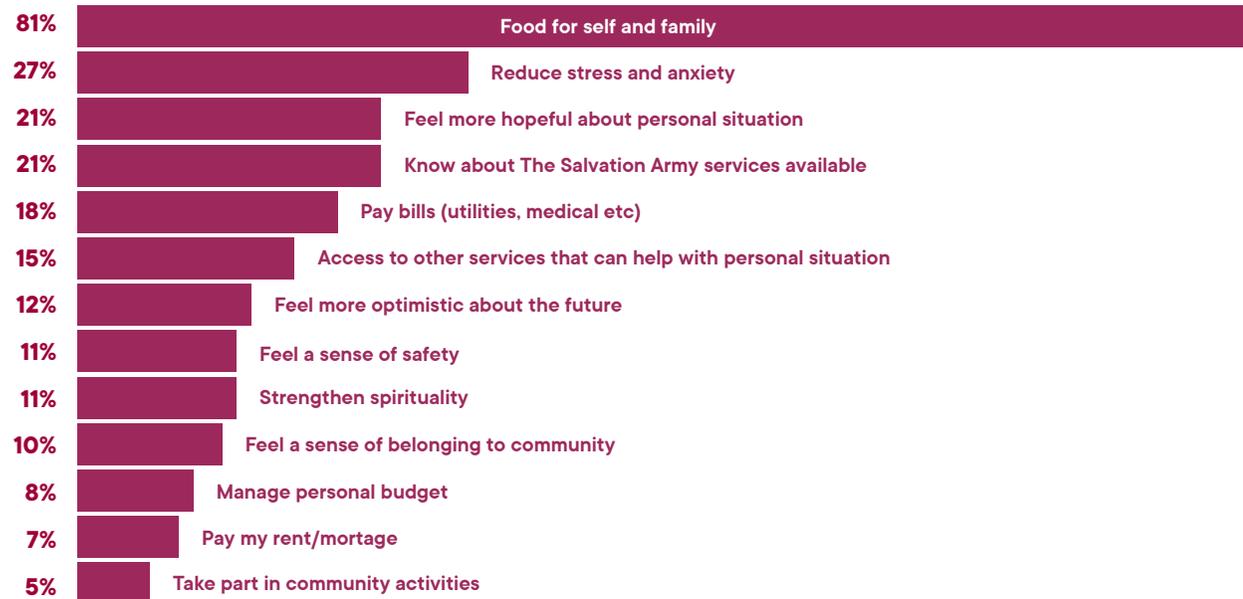
## Seeking assistance

Many those people who access Salvos services are grappling with adverse life circumstances and struggles at times. This emphasises the importance of reaching out for help when needed. **Nearly all (96%)** respondents reported positive impacts after receiving assistance from The Salvation Army.

## Hope

Some of the findings were surprising. Despite many community members struggling financially and experiencing hardship, there was also a sense of hope and Christmas cheer. Even though almost all respondents had worries over Christmas, **one in three (34%)** reported they were looking forward to Christmas. This was particularly evident for households with children. Furthermore, when respondents were asked about themselves, **nearly one in three (32%)** felt loved, **one in four** felt valued (**24%**) and important to others (**23%**), and nearly **one in five (19%)** felt good about themselves. These figures are reassuring. In the face of adversity, people still had a positive reflection of themselves, felt appreciated and well regarded by those around them.

## Impacts as a result of receiving assistance from The Salvation Army



(n=1164)



# Conclusion

It has been another difficult year, with many Australians still experiencing the adverse impacts of the pandemic – unemployment, isolation and financial hardship to name a few. And the situation will continue to remain grim for many in this predicament. This research report illustrates some of the struggles and hardship people who accessed The Salvation Army Doorways emergency relief centres experienced over the Christmas season, particularly the added financial strain on those living on limited economic resources during the festive season.

The findings demonstrated that most respondents experienced financial difficulties and stress over the Christmas season. Many struggled to afford basic needs such as feeding their families or paying their rent. There were concerns of overspending at Christmas time, creating increased financial pressure and carrying over debt into the following year. Perhaps that is why **more than half** of respondents were not looking forward to the Christmas season.

Christmas time can be a financially burdensome for many, especially those already experiencing hardship. The majority **(83%)** of households with children were worried about affording presents for their children and **six in ten (61%)** worried putting on a special meal for Christmas. The report highlights that many respondents grappled with other

stressors and worries over Christmas in terms of their housing situations, safety and unemployment.

It was noted that experiences of social isolation and feelings of loneliness were further exacerbated by COVID-19 lockdowns. **Nearly three in four** reported COVID-19 lockdowns had adversely impacted or further exacerbated their mental ill-health. Single person households were most concerned and worried they would be spending Christmas alone this year. Notably, those who were not looking forward to Christmas experienced more adverse circumstances compared to respondents who were more optimistic about Christmas.

Encouragingly, despite adversity, some respondents were more hopeful about the year ahead. **One in four** reported a sense of positive self-perceptions and felt important and cared for by others.

It will take time for people to get back on their feet financially and emotionally. The Salvation Army will continue to support those experiencing hardship through the Christmas period. All Australians can help create a greater sense of community, hope and happiness, and contribute towards a brighter future for those in need.

Please consider donating to The Salvation Army this Christmas, to make the festive season a cheerful one for those doing it tough.

## More information on:

**Events this Christmas** [Events](#)

**Needing help at Christmas** [Food hamper and gift assistance](#)

**Volunteering over Christmas** [Individual and community volunteering](#)

**Donating this Christmas** [Donate Online](#)



## Case scenario

# Simmi's story

Simmi is a single mum raising three boys – the eldest in his teens and two others aged under ten. Simmi lives on the NSW south coast and discovered earlier this year that she had to leave her private rental property. The house was going to be sold, and she had already received a notice to vacate. Moving after seven years and finding a new home for her family was a huge shock to Simmi – an emotional and financial setback. Trying to find a suitable rental property within her budget would be a battle, especially with Christmas coming up.

Happy with where they were living, and with no significant rent increases, Simmi was shocked when she began searching for a new place to live. Properties similar to the ones she had been living in and was looking for ranged between \$450 - \$550 – much higher than the \$390 per week she was paying. To make matters worse, competition for rentals was fierce, and for someone on a limited budget like Simmi, this was crushing news.

With no savings, Simmi scrambled to find work and managed to get a part-time job as a cleaner. She started saving furiously to pay for the bond and first month's rent in advance. While it was difficult to balance work and look after the children, Simmi was on track to save enough money for the move.

With the vacate date approaching, the resulting stress took an immense toll on her mental and physical well-being. With no family in NSW to help her, fear and uncertainty made it difficult for her to put on a brave face for her boys.

The prospect of becoming homeless was a looming threat, one that Simmi was desperate to avoid. She didn't want her kids to wake up on Christmas morning in their car, but she felt she had failed as a parent and was worried there wasn't much more she could do.

In despair, she reached out to The Salvation Army where Levi, the Doorways emergency relief caseworker assisted her to find a rental property within her budget. He also provided Simmi with food vouchers and assisted her in paying her utility bills, so she could concentrate on saving the rest of her money for the move.

With the right support, Simmi was able to find another rental property. It was a little further out, but at least the kids didn't have to change schools. Levi arranged for a truck to help the family move, and some volunteers from the local corps helped on moving day. Simmi said the volunteers 'were a blessing' and she couldn't have done it without them.

Relieved to be in her new home, it didn't take the family long to settle in. Simmi said that 'having a Doorways caseworker to support her has been a lifesaver'. She didn't feel she had to face hard life challenges alone, and it was comforting to know she had people she could turn to when she needed them.

Simmi continued working part-time and planned to put some money away for a 'rainy day'. Most importantly, she was able to buy a special present for each of her children for Christmas.

\* Case scenario is reflective of the experiences many people face who access The Salvation Army for assistance. Names and some details have been changed to respect the privacy of individuals. The image is a stock photo—the model is not associated with this case scenario.



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