



SACOSS

*South Australian Council
of Social Service*

Cost of Living Update No. 47

June Quarter, 2021

ISSN 1836-5248 (Print)
ISSN 1836-5256 (Online)

First published in August 2021 by the South Australian Council of Social Service
Email: sacoss@sacoss.org.au
Website: www.sacoss.org.au

© South Australian Council of Social Service, 2021

Introduction

This report is the latest in a series tracking changes in the cost of living, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged South Australians.

The first part uses the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Selected Living Cost Indexes (ABS, 2021a) and Consumer Price Index (ABS, 2021b) to show key changes in the cost of living in the last quarter and over the last 12 months.

As a summary measure, the Selected Living Cost Indexes are preferred over the better-known Consumer Price Index (CPI) because the CPI is technically not a cost of living measure. The CPI tracks changes in the price of a specific basket of goods, but this basket includes goods and services that are not part of the expenditure of all households, and low-income households in particular. This is important when considering the cost of living because if expenditure on bare essentials makes up the vast bulk (or entirety) of expenditure for low-income households, then price increases in those areas are crucial whilst price increases or decreases on other discretionary goods are less relevant. However, increases in the prices of bare essentials may be masked in the generic CPI by rises or falls in other goods and services in the CPI basket.

The Selected Living Cost Indexes also use a different methodology to CPI (see Appendix: Explanatory Note 1) and they disaggregate expenditure into a number of different household types, although this *Cost of Living Update* focuses only on the figure for "Age Pension" and "Other government transfer recipients" (hereafter "other social security recipients") as these are likely to represent the more disadvantaged households. While the Selected Living Cost Indexes also have limitations in tracking cost of living changes for these groups (see Appendix: Explanatory Note 2), they do provide a robust statistical base, a long time series, and quarterly tracking of changes – all of which is useful data for analysis. This report also adds to the Selected Living Cost Indexes by putting a dollar value on the changes, and by using disaggregated CPI data to summarise changes in prices of key items.

SECTION 1: June Quarter 2021 Cost of Living Changes

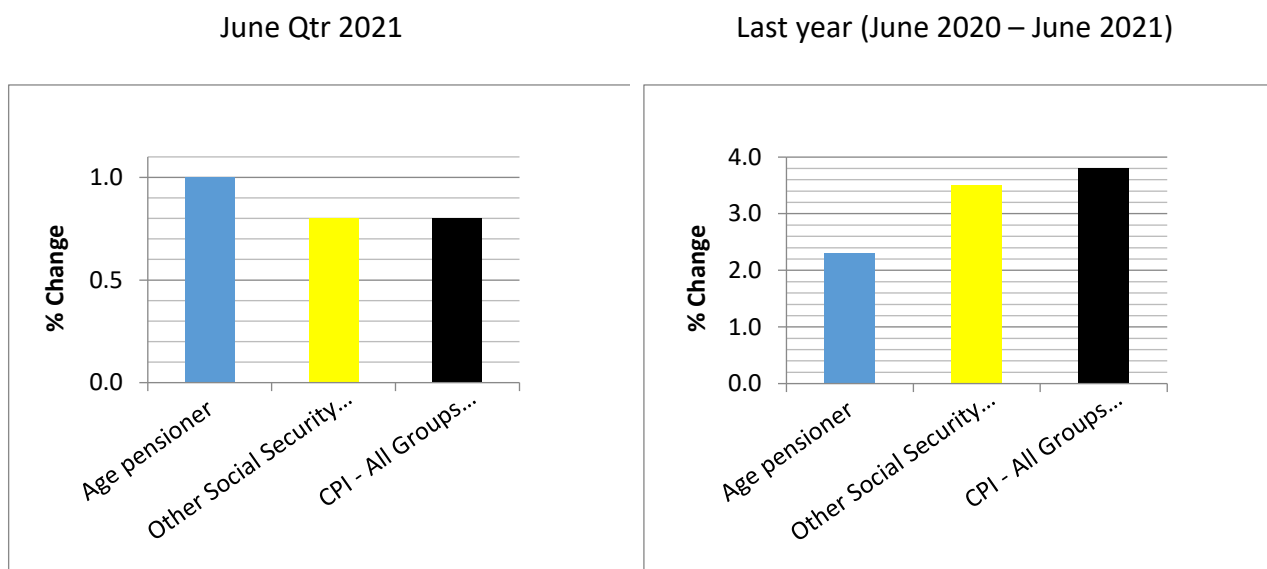
Prices

In the June 2020 quarter, the cost of living (as measured by the ABS Selected Living Cost Indexes) for age pensioners rose by 1%, while for other social security recipients the cost of living rose by 0.8% (ABS, 2021b). CPI in the same period rose by 0.5% in Adelaide and nationally by 0.8% (ABS, 2021a).

The Living Cost Index increase for age pensioners was larger than CPI, and in fact the largest of all household types in the Selected Living Cost Indexes due to relatively higher expenditure on electricity, fruit and vegetables, which all went up by more than the CPI nationally (although not in Adelaide where electricity prices fell). However, health costs for age pensioners rose by far less than CPI during the quarter as more pensioners reached the annual expenditure thresholds triggering eligibility for Medicare and Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme subsidies. For other social security recipients, living cost increases were the same as the general inflation rate.

Over the last year (June Qtr 2020 – June Qtr 2021), the living cost index for age pensioners rose by 2.3% and for other social security recipients by 3.5% (ABS, 2021a), by comparison to the generic CPI rise of 3.8% nationally and 2.8% in Adelaide (ABS, 2021b).

Figure 1: Increases in Living Costs June Qtr 2021



These overall figures can be disaggregated to track changes in the price of key basic goods and services in the last quarter both in Adelaide and nationally. These are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Cost of Living Changes June Qtr 2021 by Expenditure Type

	June Quarter CPI Increase		Annual CPI Increase (June 2020 – June 2021)	
	Adelaide %	Australia %	Adelaide %	Australia %
Food	0.9	0.5	0.8	0.7
Fruit and Vegetables	5.4	5.2	2.8	2.6
Housing	-0.4	0.3	-1.8	-0.2
Rent	0.6	0.1	1.8	0.0
Utilities	-1.1	1.7	-7.4	-4.2
• Electricity	-2.1	3.3	-7.3	-5.9
• Water	0.0	0.0	-16.7	-2.5
• Gas	2.2	-0.3	4.2	-0.8
Health	2.2	1.5	6.1	4.8
Transport	1.2	2.8	10.0	10.7
CPI All Groups	0.5	0.8	2.8	3.8

Source: (ABS, 2021b)

Incomes

Given that social security recipients have very low incomes, it is unlikely that any (or any significant) amount of the weekly benefit can be saved – at least for those not able to supplement their government payments with other incomes. For someone on the base level of benefits (with no rent assistance), and assuming that they spend all their income, SACOSS calculates that the dollar value changes in cost of living is as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Cost of Living Changes June Qtr 2020 – June Qtr 2021

	Base Allowance + Supplements (30 June 20)	Selected Living Cost Index Change	Living Cost Change per week	Base Allowance + Supplements (30 June 21)	Change in Rates of Same Benefits	Net Result \$pw
Age Pensioner (Single)	\$472.15	2.3%	\$10.86	\$476.35	\$4.20	- \$6.66
JobSeeker with two FTB children	\$588.18	3.5%	\$20.59	\$615.93	\$27.75	\$7.16

(Source: Calculated from (Centrelink, 2020, 2021), (ABS, 2021a). See Explanatory Note 3 in the Appendix here)

The sudden jump in inflation and the indexation lag means that the cost of living for age pensioners increased by more than the pension, leaving a single pensioner \$6.66 worse off than a year ago. For a single parent on JobSeeker with two children, the cost of living went up by \$20.59 per week, while their base income increased by \$27.75 so they would have been \$7.16 a week better off than a year ago. However, this is only in terms of the base rate, but the June Quarter last year saw the introduction of the \$275 per week Coronavirus Supplement. That Supplement was reduced through the course of last year and ended this year, meaning that the JobSeeker with two children would actually be substantially worse off now by comparison to this time last year.

APPENDIX: Explanatory Notes

1. CPI and Living Cost Indexes

The ABS Selected Living Cost Indexes uses a different methodology to the CPI in that the CPI is based on acquisition (i.e. the price at the time of acquisition of a product), while the living cost index is based on actual expenditure. This is particularly relevant in relation to housing costs where CPI traces changes in house prices, while the Selected Living Cost Indexes traces changes in the amount expended each week on housing (e.g. mortgage repayments). Further information is available in the Explanatory Notes to the Selected Living Cost Indexes (ABS, 2021a).

In that sense, the Selected Living Cost Indexes are not a simple disaggregation of CPI and the two are not strictly comparable. However, both indexes are used to measure changes in the cost of living over time (although that is not what CPI was designed for), and given the general usage of the CPI measure and its powerful political and economic status, it is useful to compare the two and highlight the differences for different household types.

2. Limitations of the Selected Living Cost Indexes

The Selected Living Cost Indexes are more nuanced than the generic CPI in that they measure changes for different household types, but there are still a number of problems with using those indexes to show cost of living changes faced by the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in South Australia. While it is safe to assume that social security recipients are among the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, any household-based data for multi-person households says nothing about distribution of power, money and expenditure within a household and may therefore hide particular (and often gendered) structures of vulnerability and disadvantage. Further, the living cost indexes are not state-based, so particular South Australian trends or circumstances may not show up.

At the more technical level, the Selected Living Cost Indexes are for households whose *predominant income* is from the described source (e.g. aged pension or government transfers). However, the expenditures that formed the base data and weighting (from the 2015-16 *Household Expenditure Survey*) add up to well over the actual social security payments available (even including other government payments like rent assistance, utilities allowance and family tax benefits). Clearly many households in these categories have other sources of income, or more than one social security recipient in the same household. Like the CPI, the Selected Living Cost Index figures reflect broad averages (even if more nuanced), but do not reflect the experience of the poorest in those categories.

Another example of this “averaging problem” is that expenditures on some items, like housing, are too low to reflect the real expenditures and changes for the most vulnerable in the housing market – again, because the worst-case scenarios are “averaged out” by those in the category with other resources. For instance, if one pensioner owned their own home outright they would generally be in a better financial position than a pensioner who has to pay market rents – but if the market rent were \$300 per week, the average expenditure on rent between the two would be \$150 per week, much less than what the renting pensioner was actually paying.

The weightings in the Selected Living Cost Indexes are also based on a set point in time (from the *Household Expenditure Survey*), but over time the price of some necessities may increase rapidly,

forcing people to change expenditure patterns to cover the increased cost. There is some adjustment of weightings for this, but these can't be checked without a new survey. Alternatively, or additionally, expenditure patterns may change for a variety of other reasons. However, the weighting in the indexes does not change and so does not track the expenditure substitutions and the impact that has on cost of living and lifestyle.

Finally, the Selected Living Cost Indexes' household income figures are based on households that are the average size for that household type: 1.51 people for aged pensioners, and 2.46 for other social security recipients (ABS, 2021b). This makes comparison with allowances difficult. This *Update* focuses on single person households for age pensioners, and a single person with two children (to align to the other social security recipient household average of 2.46 persons). However, this is a proxy rather than statistical correlation.

It is inevitable that any summary measure will have limitations, and as noted in the main text, the Selected Living Cost Indexes provide a robust statistical base, a long time series, and quarterly tracking of changes in the cost of living which is somewhat sensitive to low income earners.

3. Income Support Payment Calculations – December 2020

Even using the base rate of benefits, the calculation of the relevant weekly incomes is difficult because of the complexity of the income support system which means that payment eligibility and rates change depending on the exact circumstances of the household (e.g. age of children, assets). The calculation is also complex because of changes over time in eligibility and available benefits. However, based on an assumption of a single Aged Pensioner and a single Newstart recipient with two children (aged 10 and 14) – with neither receiving Commonwealth Rent Assistance, the basic income supports payments are as follows:

Rates at 30 June 2020

	Base Rate	Pension Supplement	Energy Supplement	FTB A Child u13	FTB A Child 13-15	FTB B	Pharmac Benefit	TOTAL PAYMENT
Aged Pension	\$430.30	34.80	7.05					\$472.15
Newstart - 2 children	\$306.00		4.75	94.78	123.27	56.28	3.1	\$588.18

Rates at 30 June 2021

	Base Rate	Pension Supplement	Energy Supplement	FTB A Child u13	FTB A Child 13-15	FTB B	Pharmac Benefit	TOTAL PAYMENT
Aged Pension	\$434.15	\$35.15	\$7.05					\$476.35
Newstart - 2 children	\$333.75		4.75	94.78	123.27	56.28	3.1	\$615.93

Sources

ABS, (2021a), *Selected Living Cost Indexes, Australia, March 2021*. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.

ABS, (2021b), *Consumer Price Index, Australia, March 2021*. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.

Australian Government (2021), *Guide to Social Security Law, 5.2 Historical Rates*, website at <http://guides.dss.gov.au/guide-social-security-law/5/2/2/10>

Centrelink (2021), *A guide to Australian Government payments*, Australian Government, Canberra

DSS, (2021) *DSS Payment Demographic Data – December 2020*, Department of Social Services, Australian Government. <https://data.gov.au/dataset/ds-dga-cff2ae8a-55e4-47db-a66d-e177fe0ac6a0/details>