

CLIMATE ADAPTATION PROJECT

Research paper 5

Moving home to escape the climate

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This research paper is the fifth in a series reporting the results of a new public opinion survey exploring what Australians think and how they feel about life on a warmer planet, and how to prepare for it. Carried out by Roy Morgan Research for Clive Hamilton, Professor of Public Ethics at Charles Sturt University in Canberra, the survey sampled the views of almost 2,000 adults, chosen to be representative of the Australian population. An overview of the survey method can be found at the end of this paper, with full details available in a separate technical report.

Summary

Research in the United States predicts that mounting climate risks will see millions of people migrating out of parts of the country that have become too dangerous. Commentators speak of a ‘demographic upheaval.’ Yet in Australia there is little public discussion of the likelihood of a similar upheaval here and what it would mean.

Our survey explored the role of climate change in decisions to move home. It reveals early signs that climate change is already reshaping Australian society. Among Australians who moved home over the last six years, 14% say climate change influenced their decisions. Climate factors play a stronger role in regional NSW, Brisbane, and regional Queensland than elsewhere. They also count for more among those who have lived through extreme weather events. Among those whose moving decision was influenced by climate change, the climate forces that most often prompt people to move are rising temperatures, nominated by 33%, more floods, 24%, and more bushfires, 11%.

Compared to the 14% who have moved in part because of climate change, 22% of those who *intend to move* in the next 12 months say their decision is influenced by climate factors, more

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so for Australians living in the regions rather than in the capital cities. Among those who have lived through extreme weather events the figure rises to 36%.

When Australians are asked whether they *think about moving* because they are worried about the climate changing where they live, over a third say they do, with around 15% thinking about it sometimes or often. However, those who are most concerned about climate change think about it much more frequently. As Australia warms and more households live through extreme weather events, concern about climate change will escalate and many more Australians will look to relocate to safer parts of the country.

Introduction

In this paper we explore climate-induced migration within Australia. We asked Australians whether climate change and extreme weather events are a factor in their decisions to move home. As Australia warms and more households experience wild weather, we might be in the early stages of a great migration, with Australians moving away from regions becoming too hot or unsafe to regions that will remain cooler, safer, and more habitable in the decades to come.

Public discussion of climate-induced internal migration in Australia lags behind the United States where books, scholarly articles, and news reports have multiplied in recent years. For example, *The Great Displacement* by Jake Bittle has been widely discussed. He argues that the changing climate will bring mass migration within the United States, a shift already observable.² Abraham Lustgarten, in his best-selling book *On the Move: The Overheating Earth and the Uprooting of America*, describes the first signs of an ‘epochal slow-motion exodus out of inhospitable places’, with experts predicting a northward population shift into a ‘shrinking triangle’ of habitable land from Tennessee to Maine to the Great Lakes by mid-century.³

Even though powerful political forces denounce climate science, the migration debate has become so mainstream in the United States that in March 2025 the *New York Times* published a long and detailed guide for readers to help them assess the climate risks of a place or

² Jake Bittle, *The Great Displacement: Climate change and the next American migration*, Simon and Schuster, 2023.

³ Abraham Lustgarten, *On the Move: The Overheating Earth and the Uprooting of America*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024. See also Jeff Masters, ‘*On the Move* is a must-read account of U.S. climate migration,’ Yale Climate Connections, 25 April 2024.

dwelling they intend to move to. It is a manual for ‘how to shop for a home that won’t be upended by climate change.’⁴

For those who want to escape climate hazards, selling up and relocating (or just relocating in the case of renters) is a big decision, contingent on factors like family and community attachments, employment, and affordable housing. In the US, migration patterns are not always as we might expect, with some leaving zones after a climate disaster only to settle in places with higher risk of other extreme events. One study found that ‘people have moved away from areas most affected by heat waves and hurricanes, but toward areas most affected by wildfires.’⁵ Some of America’s hottest cities, such as Phoenix, are seeing rapid population growth. That more people are moving into harm’s way speaks to the complexity of motives but also to ignorance or indifference about climate risks in some segments of the population.

It is likely that in the United States and Australia those who are best informed and most worried about the changing climate are moving to safer areas while those less concerned about climate change are more relaxed about moving to areas the scientists say are becoming hotter and more prone to extreme weather events.

Nevertheless, internal migration has begun and over the decades will see people leaving hotter areas in the north and inland and moving away from zones prone to floods, drought and rising sea levels. zones and desert areas and moving back from oceans. The implications of such a demographic upheaval are far-reaching—for community dislocation, economic activity, urban planning, local taxation, public services, and much more.

Yet there is no public debate, little research, and minimal interest evident from the authorities.⁶ When a popular demographer wrote about how Australia will change this

⁴ Ron Lieber and Tara Siegel Bernard, ‘How to shop for a home that won’t be upended by climate change,’ *New York Times*, 18 March 2025.

⁵ Mahalia B. Clark, Ephraim Nkonya and Gillian L. Galford, ‘Flocking to fire: How climate and natural hazards shape human migration across the United States,’ *Frontiers in Human Dynamics*, December 2022, 4.

⁶ A 2023 report on internal migration prepared for the Australian Treasury contained no discussion of how global warming might affect internal migration (in fact, global warming is not mentioned). This was despite its survey showing that ‘climate’ is an important factor for many who move. See Centre for International Economics, *Internal migration in Australia and the impact of government levers*, CIE, 2023. There has been some research on ‘planned retreat’ (e.g., Mark Ellis and Bhisna Bajracharya, ‘Reducing community risk to coastal erosion with managed relocation,’ *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, October 2023). Also, a research paper published in 2024 made several heroic assumptions to estimate that ‘an annual average of 22,261 Australians’ were displaced by climate-induced housing damage between 2009 and 2022. See A. Bernard, F. Perales and E. Charles-Edwards, ‘Climate migration in Australia: Level and socio-economic predictors’, Queensland Centre for Population Research, Preprint, May 2024.

century, he did not mention climate change once, let alone the large demographic shifts that it will likely bring.⁷

The energy transition seems to soak up all the climate policy oxygen. As vital as cutting our emissions remains, what Australia does can have only a small impact on the global climate and therefore the living conditions Australians will face in the decades ahead.⁸ We should be preparing for what we know is coming, yet it seems that the only organisations paying attention are the real estate and insurance industries. However, our study suggests that a significant minority of individuals and families are in the vanguard, pointing us to the future.

Past moves

A study for the real estate industry found that 8.1% of residential properties in Australia are at risk of serious flooding.⁹ Properties in high-risk zones number 141,000 and have a total value of \$99 billion. Queensland has a disproportionate number of at-risk homes (13.8% of homes in the state), but the six highest-risk regions are all in NSW, five in the north-east of the state. Ballina tops the list. The report warns that despite the growing risks there is a worrying trend of building more homes in zones at high risk of flooding.¹⁰

We asked respondents whether they had moved home since 2019 and 40% said they had. Adults under 40 are much more likely to have moved (61%) compared to those in the 40-59 age group (36%) and the 60 and over age group (19%). Those with children are less likely to have moved (33%) than those without children (49%). Respondents reporting a high level of exposure to extreme weather events are significantly more likely (47%) to have moved home than those with no exposure (32%).

We asked those who had moved in the last six years whether their experience of climate change or extreme weather had played a role. It can be seen from Table 1 that only 14% of those who had moved said it had influenced their decisions (86% said it had no influence). There are some interesting locational deviations from the average, shown in columns 3-6. Bear in mind that when people move in part to escape climate hazards, they often move to a

⁷ Bernard Salt, 'Fast forward,' *The Australian Weekend Magazine*, 28-29 June 2025.

⁸ Clive Hamilton and George Wilkenfeld, *Living Hot: Surviving and thriving on a warming planet*, Hardie Grant, 2024, Chapter 3.

⁹ Nicola Powell, Sid Jain and Tristan Meuross, 'Flood: The risk to Australia's property market,' a report for Australian Property Monitors (Domain), n.d.

¹⁰ Powell et al., 'Flood: The risk to Australia's property market'.

safer area in the same town or region.¹¹ Few people in Sydney moved to escape climate change, but the role of the weather is a stronger factor for those living in regional NSW, Brisbane, and regional Queensland, where around a quarter say the climate influenced their decision to move.

We developed a metric measuring the number of exposures to extreme weather events since 2019 for each respondent (explained in Research Paper 1). In the last two columns of Table 1 we can see a marked difference between the behaviour of those with no exposure to extreme weather events and those with high exposure, with almost a quarter of those with high exposure saying climate had an influence.

Table 1 (Q9) ‘Was your decision to move influenced at all by your experience of changing climate or extreme weather events?’ (Asked of those who had moved since 2019, n = 739) %

	Total	Selected regions				Exposure to EWE	
		Sydney	NSW excl Sydney	Brisbane	Qld excl Brisbane	None	High
Not at all	86.0	<u>92.4</u>	<u>76.2</u>	<u>73.4</u>	<u>70.3</u>	<u>94.4</u>	<u>77.1</u>
A little	9.2	<u>4.7</u>	9.3	<u>20.6</u>	<u>17.5</u>	<u>4.4</u>	<u>14.0</u>
Somewhat	2.8	2.0	7.4	1.2	7.6	1.2	<u>5.3</u>
A great deal	2.0	0.9	<u>7.2</u>	4.8	4.6	0	3.6
<i>Somewhat or a great deal</i>	<i>4.8</i>	<i>2.9</i>	<i>14.6</i>	<i>6.0</i>	<i>12.2</i>	<i>1.2</i>	<i>8.9</i>

Notes: Underlined numbers differ from the average at a 95% significance level. EWE – extreme weather events.

Although not shown, those expressing higher levels of concern about climate change are more likely to identify climate change as a reason for their move. Among those ‘extremely concerned’, 21% were influenced by climate factors as against only 6% of those ‘not at all concerned’ and 9% of those only ‘slightly concerned’.

¹¹ At least in the case of floods, bushfires, and coastal erosion and storm surges. One cannot escape excessive heat, drought, or cyclones by staying local. An innovative US study of where a town’s population relocated after the infamous Camp Fire of 2028 found many stayed and rebuilt. Older residents, households without children, and poorer residents were more likely to move away from the town, either within the district or further afield. See Peter Hansen, ‘Mapping a displaced population,’ *Chico State Today*, 7 November 2019.

Escaping what?

We asked those whose experience of extreme weather played a role in their decision to move what kind of event most influenced their decision. The results are shown in Table 2.

Noting that sample sizes here are small, and some caution is necessary, ‘getting too hot’ was the most common reason, chosen by 33%, followed by increased floods, 24%, more bushfires, 11%, and more intense storms, 8%. Although the data do not allow firm conclusions, women are more likely to nominate increased floods compared to men (30% versus 18%), while men are more likely than women to nominate ‘getting too hot’ (37% versus 27%) and ‘worse cyclones’ (13% versus 0% of women). The reasons for these differences are not apparent.

Table 2 (9a) What kind of climate change or extreme weather event in your region most influenced your decision to move? (Asked of those who said decision to move since 2019 was influenced by climate change or extreme weather events, n = 113) %

Type of EWE	Total	Influence of climate on decision to move			Selected regions			
		A little	Some-what	A great deal	Brisbane	Qld excl Brisb	Vic excl Melb	Melbourne
Increased floods	24.0	<u>16.2</u>	19.5	<u>66.3</u>	<u>47.0</u>	21.4		<u>8.6</u>
More intense storms	8.2	11.0	2.4	3.5	11.8	4.5		8.2
Worse cyclones	6.5	9.1	2.9			<u>25.3</u>		
More bushfires	11.0	13.2	8.6	4.0	10.8	<u>2.5</u>	57.2	12.3
Getting too hot	32.8	36.4	32.4	16.7	25.9	35.1	27.9	<u>57.0</u>
Becoming too dry	5.4	4.0	13.5					
Storm surges or coastal erosion	4.4	2.6	6.5	9.5		3.4		7.8
Other EWE	7.7	7.4	11.3		4.5	7.8	14.9	6.1

It is striking that, of those who say climate change or extreme weather events had ‘a great deal’ of influence on their decision to move, two thirds (66%) identify increased floods as the reason.

Shrinking sample sizes as we cut and dice the population mean we cannot put too much stock in regional breakdowns. However, the data do suggest that an outsized role is played by

flooding in Brisbane (47%), cyclones in regional Queensland (25%), and bushfires in regional Victoria (57%). Flooding appears to be a much less influential factor in deciding to move in Melbourne (9%) compared to Brisbane (47%) and Sydney (32%).

Future moves

Next, we asked about intentions to move and the role of climate change. We limited our inquiry to those planning to move within the next 12 months to focus on those who have already set the process in train or who are thinking seriously about it. We found that 12% say they intended to move in the 12 months after the survey, with higher shares among younger adults than older ones—23% of those under 30 compared to 6% of those 60 and over—as we would expect.

Having established intention to move, we asked this sub-sample if their intention to move home is influenced by climate change or extreme weather events. Table 3 shows that 22% said that their decision is influenced by climate factors, which compares to the 14% of those who moved in the previous six years and said climate played a role.

Table 3 (Q9b) Is your intention to move influenced at all by your experience of changing climate or extreme weather events? (Asked of those intending to move in the next 12 months, n = 238) %

	Total	Selected regions				Exposure to EWE	
		Sydney	NSW excl Sydney	Brisbane	Qld excl Brisbane	None	High
Not at all	77.6	81.4	58.3	74.2	71.9	<u>88.4</u>	<u>64.2</u>
A little	14.0	9.0	31.8	25.8	12.4	8.4	<u>22.4</u>
Somewhat	4.5	6.5	10.0	0	3.0	3.2	4.7
A great deal	3.9	3.1	0	0	12.7	0	<u>8.7</u>
<i>Somewhat or a great deal</i>	<i>8.4</i>	<i>9.6</i>	<i>10.0</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>15.7</i>	<i>3.2</i>	<i>13.4</i>

Among Australians intending to move home, the data indicate that in New South Wales climate change weighs much more heavily on planned moves among those living outside Sydney. For 13% of Queenslanders outside Brisbane the changing climate is having ‘a great deal’ of influence on their decision to move. Although not shown, that figure is 25% for Western Australians living outside of Perth.

Among those intending to move home, and who have had a high level of exposure to extreme weather events, one third (36%) say that their plans have been influenced by climate change, with 13% saying they have been influenced somewhat or a great deal.

Summing up these results, it's fair to say that aiming to escape extreme weather such as floods and heatwaves is not yet playing a large role in the decisions of most Australians to move home. Overall, only 5-10% say that climate change was influential somewhat or a great deal, although for some groups it counts for more. This seems to contrast with the situation in the United States where a 2021 survey of 2,000 Americans found that, of those planning to relocate in the next 12 months, half said that natural disasters and extreme temperatures were a factor in their decision to move.¹² And three-quarters said they would be hesitant to buy a home in an area with climate risk. The difference may be due to a higher proportion of the American population being exposed to extreme weather events.¹³

There are several reasons to believe that the changing climate will play a larger, and probably much larger, role in future decisions of Australians to move. We have seen that those with high exposure are already substantially more likely to give climate change as a reason for moving, naming heat and floods as the predominant reasons. Exposure to these will increase as the Earth warms. Awareness of the risks of living in more hazardous zones is likely to spread.

We can also expect the authorities to start taking the demographic implications of extreme weather more seriously and to issue advice and warnings about the dangers. Public discussion of the issue, although muted now, may grow louder, helping to raise public awareness. Perhaps the legal system will become involved if new homeowners sue former owners, real estate agents, and local councils for failing to provide full disclosure of climate risks.¹⁴

¹² Lily Katz, 'Nearly half of Americans who plan to move say natural disasters, extreme temperatures factored into their decision to relocate: Survey,' *Redfin News*, 5 April 2021. A 2022 survey found that almost a third of Americans named climate change as a reason to move. Samantha Allen, '30% of Americans cite climate change as a motivator to move in 2024,' *Forbes*, 5 January 2024.

¹³ A 2022 survey in the US found that 78% of Americans reported experiencing severe events in the previous five years. (Julia Jacobo, '78% of adults in US report being affected by severe weather caused by climate change: Report,' ABC News (US), 21 June 2022.) On the other hand, we saw in Research Paper 3 that around 80% of Australians said they had experienced heatwaves or severe storms since 2019.

¹⁴ This is taking place in the United States, see <https://tinyurl.com/3pz5zv69>.

Thinking about moving

Our survey provides a pointer to the future. In addition to asking about *actual moves* over the last six years and *planned moves* over the next 12 months, we asked respondents whether they at times *think about moving* because they are worried about the climate changing where they live. The more it plays on people’s minds, the more we can expect them to act on their concerns at some time in the future, while bearing in mind that the decision to move can be a major life change and is always based on a range of considerations.

Looking at Table 4 below, 63% of Australians say they never think about moving because they are worried about the climate changing where they live. That means more than a third do think about it at times; for 15% it’s on their minds quite a bit. As we would expect, those more concerned about climate change contemplate such a move more often, to the point where those who are extremely concerned are preoccupied by it, with half of them thinking about it sometimes or often.

Table 4 (Q10) Do you at times think about moving home because you are worried about the climate changing where you live now? %

	Total	Level of concern about climate change					Exposure to EWEs	
		Not at all	Slightly	Moderately	Very	Extremely	None	High
Never	62.7	<u>96.2</u>	<u>78.6</u>	64.5	<u>53.9</u>	<u>40.9</u>	<u>75.2</u>	<u>54.0</u>
Rarely	22.2	<u>2.8</u>	<u>15.6</u>	21.0	<u>32.0</u>	<u>28.2</u>	<u>17.6</u>	23.6
Sometimes	12.7	<u>1.0</u>	<u>5.7</u>	12.7	12.3	<u>24.4</u>	<u>6.9</u>	<u>19.2</u>
Often	1.6	0	0	1.2	1.8	<u>23.7</u>	<u>0.3</u>	<u>2.4</u>
Very often	0.8	0	0	0.6	<u>0.1</u>	<u>2.8</u>	0	0.9
<i>Sometimes, often or very often</i>	<i>15.1</i>	<i>1.0</i>	<i>5.7</i>	<i>14.5</i>	<i>14.2</i>	<i>50.9</i>	<i>7.2</i>	<i>22.5</i>

Those who have experienced extreme weather events more frequently (the last column of Table 4) think about moving much more often than those who have had not had those intense experiences. Although not shown in the table, there is a sharp political divide too. Among Labor voters (and Independents), 15% think about it sometimes or more often, compared to 7% of Liberal voters, 9% of Nationals, and 29% of Greens voters.

These numbers suggest that as the world warms, as exposure to extreme events spreads across the Australian population, and as levels of concern about climate change escalate, many more Australians will think more deeply about whether they should move to somewhere safer for themselves and their families. Those who take climate science more seriously will be at the forefront.

If, over the next decade or two, many more Australians become keen to relocate to places less exposed to climate hazards, where will they want to go? Where in Australia will it be safe? That question is considered in the next paper in this series.

Implications

Although only 14 percent of recent movers cite climate as a factor in their decision, the share jumps to 22 percent among those planning to relocate within the next year—and to 36 percent for people who have experienced weather extreme events. This suggests that climate considerations will become a primary driver of internal migration, creating new ‘climate corridors’ from high-risk zones. Taken together, the results indicate that climate change is quietly rewiring Australian social attitudes toward place, risk, and mobility. While the actual numbers of climate-driven moves remain modest today, the sociocultural groundwork is being laid for a future where relocation becomes a common response to an increasingly volatile environment.

Frequent relocation driven by climate anxiety can erode long-standing social networks and place-based identities. As people move more often—especially those who have lived through extreme events—the fabric of local communities may become more transient, eroding civic participation, support systems, and cultural continuity.

Over a third of respondents say they think about moving because of climate worries. Those most concerned about climate change think about it much more often. This preoccupation of some signals the formation of a kind of mental map of Australia in which certain regions are seen as too risky and others are deemed ‘climate-safe’—desirable places to live on a warming globe. This will likely embed climate change considerations into everyday conversations about moving, belonging, and security. The implications for government are profound.

The ability to move is unevenly distributed. Wealthier households can more readily purchase or rent in safer locations, whereas lower-income families may be ‘trapped’ in high-risk areas

due to affordability constraints. Such a dynamic risks deepening socio-economic divides, with wealthier groups clustering in climate-resilient suburbs and towns, while disadvantaged populations remain exposed to heat, floods and bushfires, amplifying health and economic inequities. As certain regions acquire a reputation for being climate-safe, property in those areas may gain symbolic value akin to those recognised as prestige districts. Owning a home in a ‘safe zone’ could become a status marker.

Survey method summary

The survey, carried out by Roy Morgan Research, had an overall target of 2,000 completes, aiming for a mix of 1,700 completes broadly representative of the Australian population by age, gender, and region, and 300 additional completes from Australians living in areas affected by one or more extreme weather events since 2019 (see below). Non-interlocked quotas were set for the sample based on the distribution of the adult Australian population for each of age, gender, and region.

Participants were invited to participate in the survey online via e-mail and SMS with a personalised link. A total of 2,099 respondents completed the survey, reduced to 1,955 after cleaning the data set to exclude poor-quality responses. The survey was carried out between 22 May and 22 June 2025.

To better assess the effects of direct exposure to extreme weather events, additional respondents were sought from Australians living in postcodes that had been affected by extreme weather events since 2019 (before the Black Summer Bushfires). The National Emergency Management Agency database, which lists severe events (floods and bushfires only), was used to define the areas so affected.

The average interview length for the survey was just under 10 minutes. Participants were given an incentive to complete the survey through a combination of ‘panel points’ redeemable in gift-vouchers and entry to a quarterly prize draw.

Full details of the survey methodology and the questionnaire can be found in the technical report posted on this website.

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