Australian National University

NATIONAL SECURITY COLLEGE

No worries?

AUSTRALIAN ATTITUDES TO NATIONAL SECURITY; RISK AND RESILIENCE

COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH REPORT
MARCH 2026

Rory Medcalf
Tim Wilford
Sally Bulkeley
Andrew Ramsay

Advisory Committee
Tom Rogers
Rebecca Skinner
Duncan Lewis
Carolyn Bull
Jennifer Westacott

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Contact us

ANU National Security College
national.security.college@anu.edu.au
+61 2 6125 2233

Crawford Building #132
1 Lennox Crossing
The Australian National University
Canberra ACT 2601
Australia

CRICOS Provider No. 00120C
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I FEEL LIKE TIMES ARE GOING SO FAST, AND SO MANY THINGS ARE CHANGING, AND THERE'S SO MUCH GOING ON.

I WOULD LOVE TO HAVE SOME TRUTH, SOME FACTS, BUT I DON'T KNOW WHERE TO GO — WHO DO YOU TRUST?

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

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INTRODUCTION

Australia is not short of analysis about the unruly world beyond our shores. But if we want to comprehend the risks we face and the opportunities to secure our future, it makes sense to look in the mirror: to know what we think and why.

To that end, between November 2024 and February 2026, the ANU National Security College conducted the most extensive public consultation on national security undertaken in this country: involving more than 20,000 Australians across three survey waves, eight deliberative focus groups, written submissions and close to 500 conversations reaching every state and territory.

What we found will challenge assumptions and can inform us all: governments, parliaments and communities alike.

Australians see security as about safety, resilience and the continuity of everyday life. They prioritise safe and peaceful communities. They rate most serious the threats they already feel, related to technology, economics, disinformation, climate and social cohesion. A threat they consider catastrophic – foreign military attack – is also the one most see as least likely, though a large minority still consider it could happen within the next five years.

We learned that most Australians feel the nation is underprepared for a whole spectrum of shocks. And most want government to share more of what it knows – though people also recognise the need to prevent panic.

Security involves physical protection, but it is also a state of mind. The word security really means 'without care', or as Australians say, 'no worries'. This does not mean ignoring danger. Security involves recognising threats but also putting them in perspective, so that we can get on with life: managing our anxieties by engaging confidently with risk.

When it comes to national security, governments are entrusted to set priorities on the public's behalf. The tradeoffs are not about security alone, but prosperity, wellbeing, justice, freedom, community, sustainability and more. Security decisions are ultimately political, enacted under the rule of law and with the accountability of democracy.

So, does it matter what the public thinks about security? More than ever. This is a connected world of confronting change, where the boundaries are eroding: between the international and the domestic, security and economics, people and technology, truth and lies, peace and war. The front line of defence is no longer just a matter of militaries and borders. Security of one kind or another is becoming everyone's everyday business, whether it is about keeping society together, the economy running, the environment liveable, democracy alive or sovereignty intact.

This report reflects community concern across a broad, even bewildering, range of issues. It does not follow that policymakers can or should treat all security concerns as equivalent. Australians have plenty of common sense and do not lack strategic awareness, as demonstrated when given analytical tools to distinguish likelihood from consequence – the risk matrix at the heart of this report. The task ahead is to help citizens and decision-makers alike understand which of these risks demands hard choices and national commitment beyond the politics of the moment.

Communities often told us, in detail, how disruptions to the infrastructure of normal life could cascade into something much larger. What they often lacked was confidence that the systems protecting them were up to the task – and that the people responsible were being open enough. Australians told us, with clarity, that they are ready for that conversation.

Professor Rory Medcalf AM

Head

ANU National Security College

Tim Wilford

Director, Community Consultations

ANU National Security College

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report arrives at a moment of compounding risk. Our security environment is changing rapidly, yet it would be wrong to assume Australians are complacent. Most are concerned and want to know more.

The findings of the ANU National Security College Community Consultations are intended to offer an evidence-based foundation for the hard conversations – and choices – a more dangerous world demands.

This report draws on three nationally representative surveys (November 2024, July 2025 and February 2026 n=20,000+) and eight deliberative focus groups conducted in November 2025, which were stratified across life stage and gender. It reveals complexity and commonalities in Australian community attitudes.

In aggregate, our survey data reveals a public where worry about security has risen rapidly, from a large minority to an almost two-third majority in little over a year.

Most Australians think our country is likely to face multiple security shocks within the next five years, and that some of these could bring major consequences or worse.

Most Australians also believe the nation is underprepared, and that government shares too little of what it knows about the threats the nation faces.

Our focus groups go further, helping explain why people disengage from security issues, how they weigh national security against economic wellbeing, and the challenge for government in communicating openly about threats without causing panic.

Australians prioritise safety over 'national security'

Safe and peaceful communities emerged as the Australian people's foremost priority over the next five years.

This was selected by more than one in three respondents (35%) from a list of four options, in our 2024 survey. Adding in second preferences, support for this priority rises to nearly two-thirds (64%). This finding largely holds across age, gender, income, education, and location – a critical point of national convergence.

The remaining three national priorities offered in our 2024 survey trailed considerably: 'increasing Australia's economic prosperity' (26%), 'upholding Australia's democratic rights and freedoms' (23%), and a somewhat abstract 'strengthening Australia's security' (15%).

This supports the view that security policies will gain greater relevance with the public when explained around the continuity of everyday life. Such was a core conclusion of the direct community engagement we conducted nationwide (set out in a companion Engagement Report), in parallel with the formal surveys and focus groups.

Anxiety is high and rising – but unevenly distributed

We tracked substantial increases in anxiety about national security. This ratcheted up with each survey in November 2024, July 2025 and February 2026.

In November 2024, 42% of respondents reported they were worried about national security. In July 2025, this had jumped to 50%. By February 2026, it had jumped again to 64%. The proportion who 'strongly agree' they are worried about national security has more than doubled since November 2024, from 10% to 23%. The sharpest movement is among younger Australians: the 18–24 age cohort shifted 33% on this question over 15 months – from 22% to 55%.

In our July 2025 survey, close to two-thirds (62%) agreed that Australia 'needs to do more' to strengthen its security, up from 52% in November 2024.

At the same time, concern concentrates among specific demographics: Australians aged 55+, regional and rural communities, lower socioeconomic groups, and the Australian-born. In our July 2025 survey, when it comes to whether Australia needs to do more to strengthen national security, there was a 33% difference between 18-24 year-olds (49%) and those aged 75+ (82%). Differences in generational attitudes are frequent across our research.

Public threat perceptions prioritise non-military threats

Of 15 issues we nominated in July 2025, people rated a range of non-military issues as the most serious threats for Australia over the next ten years. These were AI-enabled attacks (77% 'major'/'moderate' threat), severe economic crisis (75%), critical supply disruption (74%), disinformation (73%), and foreign interference in Australia's politics, government, economy or society (72%).

A further survey in February 2026 showed similarly high concerns about cyber threats (78%), violent extremism targeting part of the community (77%), a world in which no rules stop strong states (73%), and a terrorist attack (72%).

Terrorism showed the sharpest movement across the three surveys – rising from 55% rating it a serious threat in November 2024, to 59% in July 2025, to 72% by February 2026. Our third survey took place two months after the antisemitic atrocity at Bondi on 14 December 2025, the largest mass-casualty terrorist attack in the country's history.

Our focus groups, in November 2025, helped explain what was regularly on people's minds. Australia's geographic isolation, the US alliance, and the difficulty to envisage military attack leave Australians more focused on pervasive issues such as economic insecurity, cyber-enabled financial crime, algorithmic disinformation, the fraying of social cohesion and climate change.

War is not unthinkable

Australians are not oblivious to the risk of war. In our survey of July 2025, 68% consider it more likely than not that the nation would be involved in military conflict with another country within five years. Most saw such a contingency as having major (46%) or catastrophic (18%) consequences for Australia.

In the same survey, a foreign military attack on Australia rated as the lowest threat in likelihood. Even so, a large minority (45%) considered it probable within five years.

Yet Australians see military attack as the threat with the highest potential impact were it to eventuate: 43% of respondents indicated the consequences for Australia of such an attack would be major, and another 36% catastrophic.

To place this in perspective, when asked to rate the seriousness of 15 threats over the next ten years, Australians put foreign military attack last: in July 2025, 29% rated it a moderate threat and 13% a major one. By contrast, they rated military conflict with another country as seventh out of 15 threats, with 64% considering this a moderate or major threat, up from 57% in November 2024.

Australians expect intersecting shocks

Most Australians anticipate multiple and intersecting security shocks, many of them with much higher likelihood than the use of military force.

In our July 2025 survey, we asked respondents to rate 15 threats according to probability and consequences. Were they likely to occur within five years, and what would be their impact on Australia?

In every case other than military attack, more than two-thirds of respondents considered the risk more likely than not to 'happen as a threat to Australia' within five years. In six cases – climate change impacts, AI-enabled attacks, disinformation, foreign interference, economic crisis and critical supply disruption – the proportion who considered the threat more likely than not was extremely high: between 85% and 89%.

That does not mean people see all these issues as unmanageable shocks. A severe economic crisis stood out as the threat where overwhelming

majorities of respondents combined concerns about very high probability (85% likely, very likely or almost certain) and major (58%) or catastrophic (18%) consequence. How a nation might cope with the effects of such an economic contingency while handling concurrent security shocks could be a pivotal question in the years ahead.

Most Australians feel the nation is underprepared

Across every one of the 15 threats surveyed, fewer than one-in-five respondents rated the nation as 'very' or 'fully' prepared.

In no scenario did that level of confidence in national preparedness exceed 18% and on most issues it was between 4% (AI-enabled attacks) and 10% (foreign military attack on Australia). Across two-thirds of the threats, more than half the public feels Australia is 'not prepared at all' or only 'slightly prepared'.

On many issues where most respondents were concerned about some combination of seriousness, likelihood and consequence – notably climate impacts, disinformation, critical supply disruption, infrastructure attack, economic crisis and foreign interference – there was also little faith in current preparedness. Where Australians feel most vulnerable, they tend to feel the nation is least prepared.

On most issues, most Australians feel the nation is either 'slightly' or 'moderately' prepared. Confidence in preparedness was highest for issues where the nation has relatively recent experience – pandemic, terrorism, biosecurity.

Concerns about preparedness resonated in our community engagement across states and territories. As conveyed in our Engagement Report, many interviewees drew a distinction between resilience in community spirit and resilience in capability, which they perceived as inadequate and under-resourced.

For many Australians, crisis is not hypothetical – it is multidimensional and here

Our surveys and focus groups suggested a public awareness that many technological, information-based, economic and environmental challenges are looming or already here. There is wide awareness that the nation could experience multiple threats at the same time.

Our focus group discussions were designed to help make sense of the survey results on a range of security issues, so it was telling that socioeconomic hardship became a dominant theme. Some participants – particularly younger women – described a sense of crisis and insecurity as their current experience, referring to housing, employment and cost-of-living pressures as concerns that made it hard to focus on other problems.

Similarly, climate change was observed more as present reality than future shock. Focus group participants cited recent bushfires, floods, and ecosystem decline as evidence. AI and cyber threats were also felt as immediate with reference to recent data breaches and the proliferation of sophisticated scams. The focus groups also showed consistent concern about who and what to trust in the political and information environment.

The communication challenge: information gaps and trust deficits

In our focus groups, security agencies were generally described as credible, professional and mission-focused. Politicians and media, on the other hand, were often seen as having a vested interest in exploiting security issues for advantage. Focus group participants with opposing views on climate, immigration, and other issues converged in expressing mistrust about the way security issues are handled politically.

A clear finding in our July 2025 survey was that a majority (53%) of Australians believe government shares too little (41%) or far too little (12%) information about security threats. Only 4% felt over-informed.

This majority appetite for disclosure does not necessarily align with those parts of the community most concerned about security threats and preparedness.

Instead, our focus groups revealed three distinct views:

- Those who view transparency as fundamental to democracy.
- Those who believe greater openness about threats would cause panic and who thus trust agencies to manage information carefully.
- Those with deep systemic distrust who believe government always obfuscates.

The 43% of survey respondents who were neutral about levels of government information sharing could thus include a range of views including indifference and support for continued restrictions on threat communication.

More generally, an overwhelming sense of vulnerability and looming failure in the information ecosystem is a key area where all aspects of our

research converged. This was a message reflected in different ways across our focus groups, surveys and informal community engagement.

Our survey results showed very high levels of public concern over what could be defined as a cluster of related threats: disinformation, foreign interference and AI-enabled attacks. Focus group participants described information overload, algorithmic manipulation and declining capacity to distinguish reliable from unreliable sources. Many of our consultation interviewees (see Engagement Report) described a polluted information ecosystem contributing to polarisation, extremism and even violence, and along with some focus group participants called for media literacy education as a security countermeasure.

National security 'knowledge' and gender: a misleading gap

There is a large gap related to gender when it comes to self-perception on levels of knowledge about national security. Almost two-thirds of Australians do not consider themselves 'knowledgeable about national security issues,' according to our July 2025 survey, and only 34% said they would know where to find relevant information.

But the story is different for men, 46% of whom consider themselves knowledgeable about national security, than for women, where the number is just 23%.

Our focus groups made clear this 'knowledge' gap was not about competence, but the exclusionary way that national security has traditionally been perceived and practised. Women in our focus groups tended to underestimate their own 'national security' knowledge before demonstrating grounded understanding of security issues and how they affected communities, families and the nation.

In our surveys, women tended to perceived security threats as more serious, likely and consequential across many categories. For instance, in our July 2025 survey, women were more concerned than men about the seriousness of climate change, terrorism and AI-enabled attacks. Women also tended to perceive higher likelihood of military conflict, climate shocks and AI-enabled attacks, while men saw higher likelihood of foreign interference and disinformation. Women perceived higher potential impacts from economic crisis, natural disasters, biosecurity risks, AI-enabled attacks and critical supply disruption.

Civic responsibility and national security

Our focus groups suggest much of the public wants to contribute to national security but often doesn't know how. Older cohorts (55+) emphasised self-reliance and community vigilance. Younger and middle-aged Australians often expressed some wish to contribute but typically felt overwhelmed by daily pressures and a sense of powerlessness against systemic threats – with some avoiding news as a coping mechanism.

This does not mean that Australians lack civic responsibility. In our February 2026 survey, we asked people about the extent to which they agreed that 'all Australians can do more to make our communities peaceful and safe', specifically in the aftermath of the Bondi terrorist attack. In response, 71% agreed, including 32% who agreed strongly. Only 8% disagreed.

The cumulative picture is of a public that knows security risks are real, doubts the nation is prepared, and – while aware the issues are complex – is open to knowing more. That is both a challenge and an opportunity for those in a position to meet it.

THE COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS INITIATIVE

This is not the first time views have been sought from the Australian community to inform national security policy. Over the past few decades, many academic and think tank projects have contributed to an accumulating picture of Australian public perceptions across a wide range of policy issues, including foreign affairs, social cohesion and attitudes to democracy. More specifically on defence, the expert panel convened ahead of the 2016 Defence White Paper held semi-structured consultations around the country.[1] A decade on, the threat environment has changed substantially, and the security questions facing the nation have broadened far beyond military capability. This initiative therefore builds on that precedent at greater breadth and depth.

1 Australian Government 2015, Guarding Against Uncertainty: Australian Attitudes to Defence, Report of the Expert Panel on the 2015 Defence White Paper Community Consultation, Department of Defence, Canberra.

Any assumption that public opinion is too uninformed or unpredictable to meaningfully evaluate security policy does not withstand scrutiny. Systematic research into Australian attitudes to defence and foreign policy since 1945 finds that the public demonstrates consistent rationality in its security judgements – when given the opportunity to express them.[2]

Why consult the Australian community?

There is no permanently agreed definition of 'national security'. Each elected government may develop its own definition, and has a political mandate to do so. In a liberal democracy such as ours, what national security means will keep changing over time. Yet, at a fundamental level, it is reasonable to say that national security is about the way a country protects itself. This first-principles description unearths an important truth: national security is inseparable from the unique character and identity of the nation being secured. So instead of asking 'what is national security?' a better question might be 'what is Australian national security?'

All Australians have a stake in national security. Yet we don't know enough about how our increasingly diverse society thinks about security.

Most would agree it is about protecting Australia and Australians, but views differ on what that means in practice. To some, security is synonymous with defence, intelligence, terrorism and border protection. To others, it includes protection from broader challenges such as disasters, cyber-attacks, or climate change. Still others see security as linked to economic, democratic and social resilience. Many also think of it as something even larger: a sense of wanting to protect who we are, and what we value, as Australians.

There is no national-level framework or study that considers Australian perspectives across these dimensions. Existing research provides valuable insights, but we lack answers to questions of central importance to policy makers. The Community Consultations initiative aims to help fill this gap.

How were the consultations conducted?

We have used a mixed methods research design that blends quantitative and qualitative research strategies, allowing us to draw on the complementary strengths of each method and triangulate findings.

We have collected information in five ways:

1. A literature review to harvest insights from existing studies
2. three nationally representative surveys (n=20,000+), in November 2024, July 2025 and February 2026, to provide a quantitative foundation and some indication of change over time
3. eight deliberative focus groups to help explain and validate findings
4. 100 written submissions, from individuals and organisations, prompted by a widely-circulated Issues Paper released by the College
5. 480+ Australians engaged in semi-structured conversations across Australia.

This capstone report presents a synthesis of insights generated from the surveys and focus groups.

Our companion *Community Consultations Engagement Report* presents in-depth findings generated from conversations and submissions from across the nation.

A third publication in this initial series is an in-depth academic study of attitudes to national security in several First Nations communities across northern Australia, including the Torres Strait Islands.

The College is planning to build on this series through a substantial program of work, including further publications and future commissioned research, including possible additional academic studies. We are open to partnerships across all sectors, including government, academia and civil society organisations.

2 McAllister, I & Chubb, D 2021, Australian Public Opinion, Defence and Foreign Policy, Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore.

300+
MEETINGS

480+
AUSTRALIANS
INTERVIEWED

20,000+
SURVEY
RESPONDENTS

8
FOCUS GROUPS

40+
LOCATIONS
NATIONWIDE

100
PUBLIC
SUBMISSIONS


BOIGU ISLAND
SAIBAI ISLAND
THURSDAY ISLAND
TIWI ISLANDS
MILINGIMBI
DARWIN
AURUKUN
COOKTOWN
CAIRNS
INNISFAIL
HOME HILL
NORTHERN TERRITORY
YUENDUMU
YUELAMU
ALICE SPRINGS
QUEENSLAND
DALBY
TOOWOOMBA
BRISBANE
GOLD COAST
LISMORE
SOUTH AUSTRALIA
BROKEN HILL
NEW SOUTH WALES
PORT AUGUSTA
NEWCASTLE
SYDNEY
WAGGA WAGGA
ADELAIDE
CANBERRA
MURRAY BRIDGE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY
WANGARATTA
VICTORIA
MELBOURNE
TRARALGON
WYNDHAM
LAUNCESTON
BURNIE
SWANSEA
TRIABUNNA
TASMANIA
HOBART

TIMELINE

Community Consultations initiative announced at 'Securing our Future' conference The Head of NSC stated the College would lead an ambitious whole-of-nation consultation: "We will seek to comprehend the diversity of perspectives in today's Australia, identifying the risks or realities of fragmentation as well as opportunities for convergence. And we will synthesise and frame that knowledge to help government and parliament as they consider policy choices into the future."	April 2024
Scoping concluded In addition to briefing key stakeholders on the initiative, and seeking feedback, NSC also visited a range of locations including Far North Queensland, the Northern Territory and Sydney and Melbourne to meet community leaders.	October 2024
Survey 1 NSC commissioned the Social Research Centre (SRC) to collect a nationally representative sample of Australian attitudes to security using Life in Australia™, to provide a baseline for the study.	November 2024
Nationwide consultations commence Teams of NSC staff and affiliates commenced visiting every state and territory, including a range of metropolitan, regional and remote locations.	May 2025
Survey 2 A follow-up wave of survey work was conducted to build on the existing insights.	July 2025
Nationwide consultations conclude NSC had engaged close to 500 Australians by this time, from all corners of the country.	October 2025
Deliberative focus groups conducted and submissions close On behalf of NSC, SRC conducted eight focus groups to help explain key findings from the survey waves and community discussions. These were stratified by life stage and gender. Submissions closed, with NSC accepting 100 written submissions from the public.	November 2025
Survey 3 A final, more concentrated, wave of survey work was conducted following several significant shocks, notably the Bondi terrorist attack, extreme weather events, and heightened geopolitical tensions.	February 2026
Findings launched at 'Securing our Future: A Ready and Resilient Australia conference	March 2026

VOICES FROM ACROSS AUSTRALIA

Between May and October 2025, NSC staff and affiliates spoke with close to 500 Australians across every state and territory: all capital cities, and a range of regional centres, rural areas and remote communities.

Participants included officials and leaders of all tiers of government, parliamentarians, professional and volunteer emergency services, industry representatives, civil society organisations, academics, think tank experts, and engaged citizens. These conversations, while skewed toward those more open to consultation processes and not statistically representative, surfaced local perspectives that quantitative methods cannot capture and helped triangulate themes emerging from the survey data. They were also a valuable way to build networks for future engagement in an inclusive national security conversation. The present report will be launched at a major conference in Canberra in March 2026, with the purpose of informing and encouraging such activity.

Key findings from our nationwide consultations, including analysis of written public submissions, can be found in our companion *Community Consultations Engagement Report*. What follows is a summary.

One finding cut across all locations: **Australians understand national security as the peaceful continuity of daily life**. There was discussion of geopolitics and interstate war, but these were often described as feeling like distant risks. What felt proximate to many of those who we met were the systems that keep communities running – fuel, food, water, freight, health services, communications – and the fabric of trust that holds society together. A constant theme was the preference for place-based and people-first solutions, with Australians relating much more to security issues when they could see how those connected with their daily lives.

Six themes dominated these conversations:

INFORMATION INTEGRITY AND TRUST

Participants described Australia's information environment as noisy, manipulated, and increasingly vulnerable to AI-enabled deception. Disinformation was framed as a core threat to democratic trust, with community voices frequently calling for practical countermeasures including nationally coordinated media literacy education.

FRAGILE ARTERIES

Concerns about single-point-of-failure infrastructure were pervasive. Participants called for mapping these chokepoints, funding upgrades, and building redundancies. The vulnerabilities discussed were largely agnostic to cause: whether flood, accident or hostile action, the consequences are the same.

PREPAREDNESS AND CAPACITY

Communities distinguished between resilience in spirit – which they saw as reasonably strong – and resilience in capability, which they saw as weak. Emergency services are understaffed, volunteers are ageing, and systems assume bottomless goodwill from a limited number of busy individuals.

MODERN THREAT PERCEPTION

Climate volatility, AI-enabled scams, supply chain fragility, and social tensions were experienced as clear, daily threats. Traditional security concerns of war and military attack were acknowledged but felt remote.

GOVERNANCE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

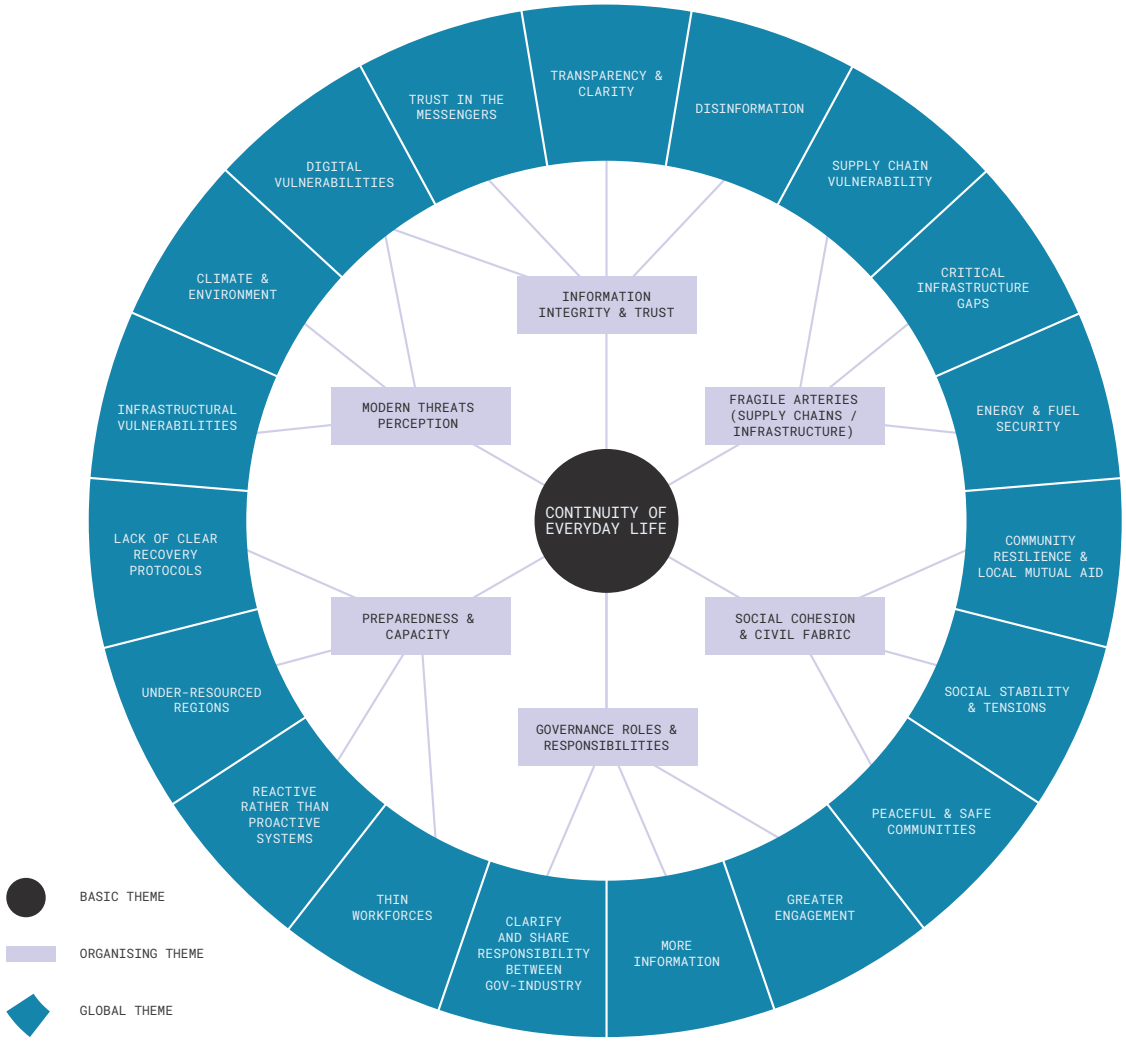
Participants expressed uncertainty and frustration about coordination between Commonwealth, state/territory and local governments. Three questions recurred: who leads when incidents occur and ensures the shift from response to recovery, who holds the information and clearances needed to plan and prepare for shocks, and who communicates to communities in ways they can trust? There were calls for more co-design rather than top-down security planning, and for place-based approaches that build local legitimacy.

SOCIAL COHESION AND CIVIL FABRIC

Australians perceived the fabric of society as a source of both vulnerability and strength. Participants reported political polarisation, harassment of parliamentarians and local officials, extremism amplified by digital platforms, and social tensions that could be exploited by malicious actors. But they also described robust mutual aid networks, practical adaptation to extreme weather, and community structures that activated during crises. Social cohesion was seen as something to protect and invest in.

Across these conversations, an implicit set of expectations on Government emerged: explain the 'why' behind security decisions, co-invest in the infrastructure that communities depend on, and recognise that everyday pressures – housing, cost of living, stretched services – erode the resilience that national security ultimately rests upon.

FIGURE 1: THEMATIC NETWORK OF CONCEPTS EMERGING FROM OUR NATIONWIDE CONSULTATIONS



NATIONAL PRIORITIES

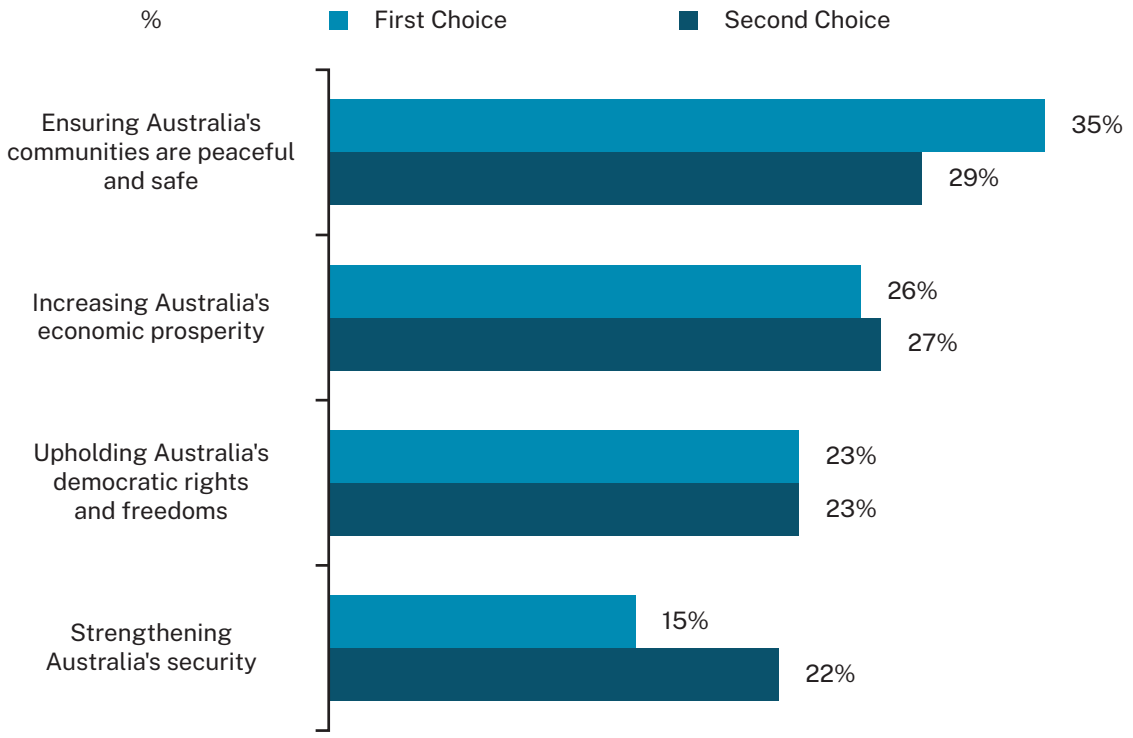
NATIONAL PRIORITIES

Australia's national interests are extensive – larger than our capacity to protect them alone. A key goal in policymaking must be to prioritise where finite resources should be allocated. In national security terms, this means prioritising what we most want to protect.

In our first survey in November 2024, we asked Australians what they want the nation to prioritise over the next five years, out of four basic choices. A second choice was then elicited.

'Safe and peaceful communities' is the clear first priority. More than one in three Australians (35%) selected this as their primary choice; when second preferences are included, support rises to nearly two-thirds (64%). This finding holds across age, gender, cultural background, education, income, and location – a rare point of national convergence. Yet the strength of that consensus varies by generation: support peaks among 18–24 year-olds (43%) and declines steadily with age, falling to 28% among those 75 and older.

FIGURE 2: NATIONAL PRIORITY FOR AUSTRALIA IN THE NEXT 5 YEARS (%)



Base: All respondents (n=6,013). November 2024.

Source: Q4a. Here is a list of aims for Australia in the next five years. If you had to choose among these aims, which one would you choose? And; Of the remaining aims for Australia in the next five years, which one would you choose?

Note: Don't know and Refused responses excluded from base (n=44).

'Economic prosperity' follows as the second priority. Just over a quarter (26%) selected it first, with 27% selecting it second. Almost half (48%) of those who chose economic prosperity first selected peaceful and safe communities second – suggesting these are seen as complementary rather than competing goals. Permanent residents (as distinct from citizens) comprise one cohort where economic prosperity ranked highest (34%). The same preference was shared by Australians born in non-English speaking countries (34%) and those who speak a language other than English at home (34%).

'Democratic rights and freedoms' received consistent support across both preference levels (23%). Among older Australians, this priority gained ground: those aged 65-74 ranked it equal with safe communities (30%), while those 75+ ranked it highest of all priorities (34%). Those who prioritised democratic rights first often paired it with peaceful and safe communities as their second choice: a social and civic cluster.

'Strengthening national security' ranked fourth – and last – at 15%. Just over one in five (22%) selected it as a second priority. Those who prioritised national security in the abstract sense were most likely to select economic prosperity as their second choice (41% of 'strengthening national security' second preferences flowed to 'economic prosperity': an economic and security cluster. This preference was notably stronger among Australians with lower levels of formal education: 27% of those with Year 10–11 or Certificate I & II qualifications selected it as their first choice, compared with 11% of those with tertiary qualifications.

Of course, framing the question with just four simplified choices does not in itself indicate what Australians understand national security to mean. But it does provide a clue regarding the types of security with which the public can identify: policies and narratives anchored in everyday life.

'Safe and peaceful communities' captures what people want protected most: the conditions that allow daily life to function, with focus groups helping to explain this framing. Participants consistently described security through such specifics as community cohesion, trusted information, confidence in institutions, economic stability, climate resilience, housing affordability and protection from criminal scams, rather than in terms of geopolitical competition or military capability.

The rest of our survey and focus group results confirm that the public is not uninterested in security – it is just that they define it on their own terms.

DEMOGRAPHIC DETAIL: FULL BREAKDOWNS BY AGE, GENDER, EDUCATION, LOCATION, SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS, COUNTRY OF BIRTH, CITIZENSHIP AND LANGUAGE SPOKEN AT HOME ARE PROVIDED IN APPENDIX (TABLE B.2).

HOW AUSTRALIANS UNDERSTAND SECURITY

HOW AUSTRALIANS UNDERSTAND SECURITY

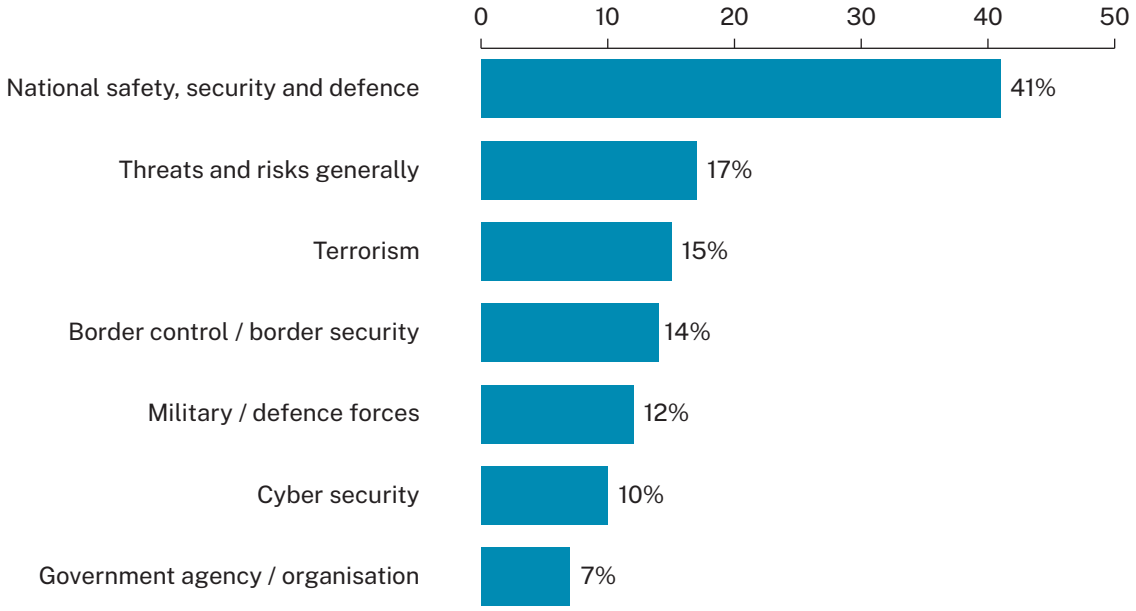
What does ‘national security’ mean to Australians? Our survey and focus group findings reveal a public that holds broad, complex concerns about security – but does not necessarily label them as such.

What first comes to mind

When asked what 'national security' first brings to mind, Australians primarily responded in the abstract. In our November 2024 survey, the largest cohort (41%) offered – in free-form responses – generalised notions of 'safety', 'protection', or 'defence' without specifying particular threats or domains. A further 17% spoke of threats and risks in general.

The pattern reflects something structural in how Australians consume information about public affairs. Australia's news avoidance rate has risen sharply in recent years, with a significant and growing proportion of the population actively choosing to limit their exposure to news – particularly on topics that feel distant from daily life[3]. When national security is framed abstractly, it becomes the kind of topic people disengage from.

FIGURE 3: TOP-OF-MIND ASSOCIATIONS WITH 'NATIONAL SECURITY' (%)



Base: All respondents (n=6,013). November 2024.

Source: Q1. When you see or hear the term 'national security', what comes to mind?

Note: Don't know and Refused responses excluded from base (n=44). Responses were coded into several themes, including themes not in this graph, therefore total does not equal 100%.

3 Park, S, Fisher, C, McGuinness, K & Lee, JY 2025, Digital News Report: Australia 2025, News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra, Canberra.

Where respondents nominated specific issues, they tend towards four familiar themes:

- terrorism: 15%
- border control: 14%
- military/defence forces: 12%
- cybersecurity: 10%

Other recently prominent threats – such as the impacts of climate change, supply chain disruption, disinformation and foreign interference – remained marginal in unprompted responses.

Across the nearly 6,000 open-text responses, three broad orientations emerged: most Australians characterised security as institutional protection – the state as a shield against external threats – while smaller but meaningful minorities framed it as societal wellbeing, or conversely, as a force turned against citizens through surveillance and political manipulation.

Focus groups further complicated this picture. When prompted, participants articulated concerns across a very broad range of domains, including economic stability, climate change, social cohesion, disinformation and housing affordability. They did not necessarily begin by labelling these 'national security', but tended to acknowledge a security dimension to these issues when they were raised by a peer in the group.

Individual experience shaped what came to mind: a student raised human rights; a young mother raised cost-of-living pressures; a data lawyer discussed cyber security; a former soldier spoke about military intelligence. As one participant observed after a focus group brainstorm:

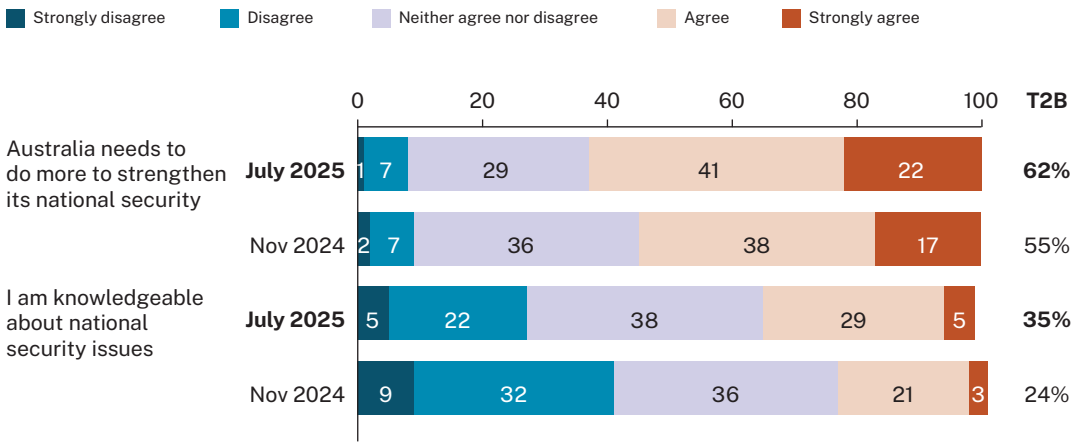
> 'When everything was brought up, I was nodding to myself – oh wow, that is definitely a concern, I hadn't been thinking about that.'
>
> **Woman, 35-54, NSW, rural**

Gender differences were notable. Men skewed toward conventional framings of security – war, terrorism, intelligence agencies, diplomatic relations. Women mentioned similar themes but were also observed as more likely to include climate change and social cohesion, and to frame issues through local impacts – such as access to childcare, in the case of economic crisis and social cohesion – rather than in general terms or through geopolitics.

ATTITUDES: ANXIETY IS RISING, BUT UNEVENLY DISTRIBUTED

Our surveys show that public concern about national security rose markedly between November 2024 and July 2025, and again by February 2026. While each survey sample consisted of different individuals, the findings of each wave can be generalised to the wider Australian population.

FIGURE 4: ATTITUDES TO STATEMENTS ON 'NATIONAL SECURITY' (%)



Base: (July 2025 n=6,049) (November 2024 n=6,013)

Source: Q2. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Note: Don't know and Refused responses excluded from base.

T2B: T2B means 'top two bands'.

Our second survey was conducted in July 2025, two months after an Australian Federal election. Security developments since the first survey had included the early geopolitical and economic impacts of the second Trump Administration, continued conflict in Ukraine and the Middle East, US-Israeli strikes on Iran's nuclear program, a brief India-Pakistan war, rising concern about social cohesion and violent extremism in Australia, and the widely-reported circumnavigation of Australian by a Chinese navy task group. We make no specific claim as to the effect of these or other developments on public perceptions, but note that throughout this period it was standard for the Australian Government – like many others – to refer openly to negative trends in the security environment.[4]

A general sense of worry about 'national security' was held by 50% of Australians in July 2025, up from 42% eight months earlier. And the view that Australia 'needs to do more to strengthen its national security' similarly increased, up from 55% to 62%.

In the July 2025 survey, it was established that these concerns are concentrated among specific demographics:

- **Age:** a substantial variation separated 18-24 year-olds (49%) from those 75+ (82%) on agreement with the question of whether Australia needs to 'do more to strengthen its national security'.
- **Location:** regional and rural residents (56%) reported greater worry about national security than urban counterparts (48%).
- **Socioeconomic status:** the most disadvantaged communities (54%) expressed greater worry than the most advantaged groups (46%).
- **Country of birth:** Australian-born respondents (53%) were more worried than those born in non-English speaking countries (41%).[5]

Focus groups illuminated the generational divide. Younger participants (18-34) focused on immediate needs such as cost of living, housing and employment. 'National security' felt distant when daily life was already a struggle. As one young woman explained:

> 'Most 18- to 24-year-olds, with my friends and people I know, politics and national security isn't our priority.'
>
> **Woman, 18-24, ACT, student**

Older participants (55+) tended to draw on historical events, and in some cases experiences, with some referring back to the Cold War or World War II. They were more likely to raise the possibility of military threats – and to feel generally worried about security. But they also expressed concern about the world their grandchildren would inherit. Many participants described Australia as 'lucky' – geographically isolated, protected by alliances, unlikely to face invasion. This provided psychological comfort, but also distance from security as an urgent concern:

> 'We're the other side of the world from a lot of conflicts … we don't have borders on aggressive countries'
>
> **Man, 55+, NSW, former soldier**

These patterns are consistent with broader measures of democratic engagement in Australia. The McKinnon Index 2025, which tracks the health of Australian democracy across multiple dimensions, identifies declining civic confidence and uneven democratic participation as structural features of the current landscape – not temporary fluctuations.[6]

4 For example, Mike Burgess, ASIO Annual Threat Assessment, 19 February 2025. https://www.oni.gov.au/news/asio-annual-threat-assessment-2025

5 In Life in Australia™, the Social Research Centre measures 'Country of birth' using the following groups, as per ABS classifications: (1) Australia, (2) main English-speaking countries [Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, UK, USA], and (3) non-English-speaking countries [other countries].

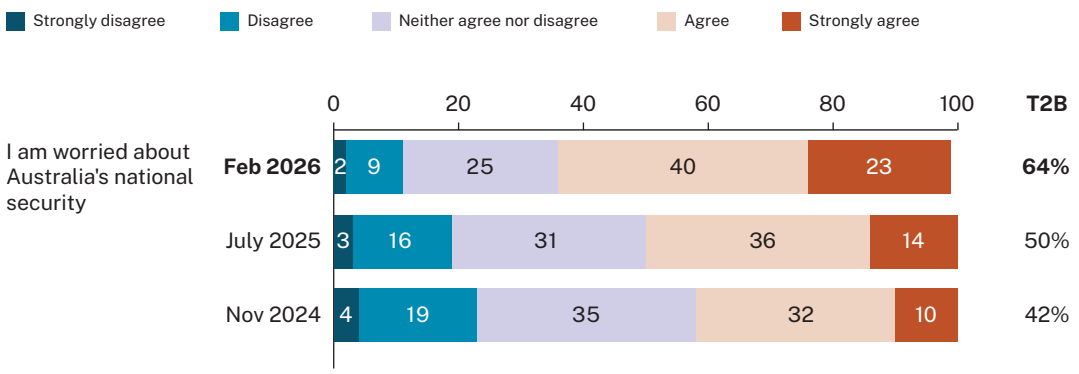
6 McKinnon Institute 2025, McKinnon Index: Detailed Findings 2025, McKinnon Institute, Melbourne.

The anxiety ratchet: three waves, one direction

By February 2026, when we returned for a third survey, with a smaller set of questions, the picture had sharpened considerably.

Worry about Australia's national security – 42% in November 2024, 50% eight months later in July 2025 – reached 64% by February 2026. More striking than the headline figure is what moved within it: the proportion of Australians who 'strongly' agreed they were worried more than doubled between November 2024 and February 2026, from 10% to 23%.

FIGURE 5: ATTITUDES TO WORRY ABOUT 'NATIONAL SECURITY' (%)



Base: All respondents (February 2026 n=8,162) (July 2025 n=6,049) (November 2024 n=6,013)

Source: To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

Note: Don't know and Refused responses excluded from base.

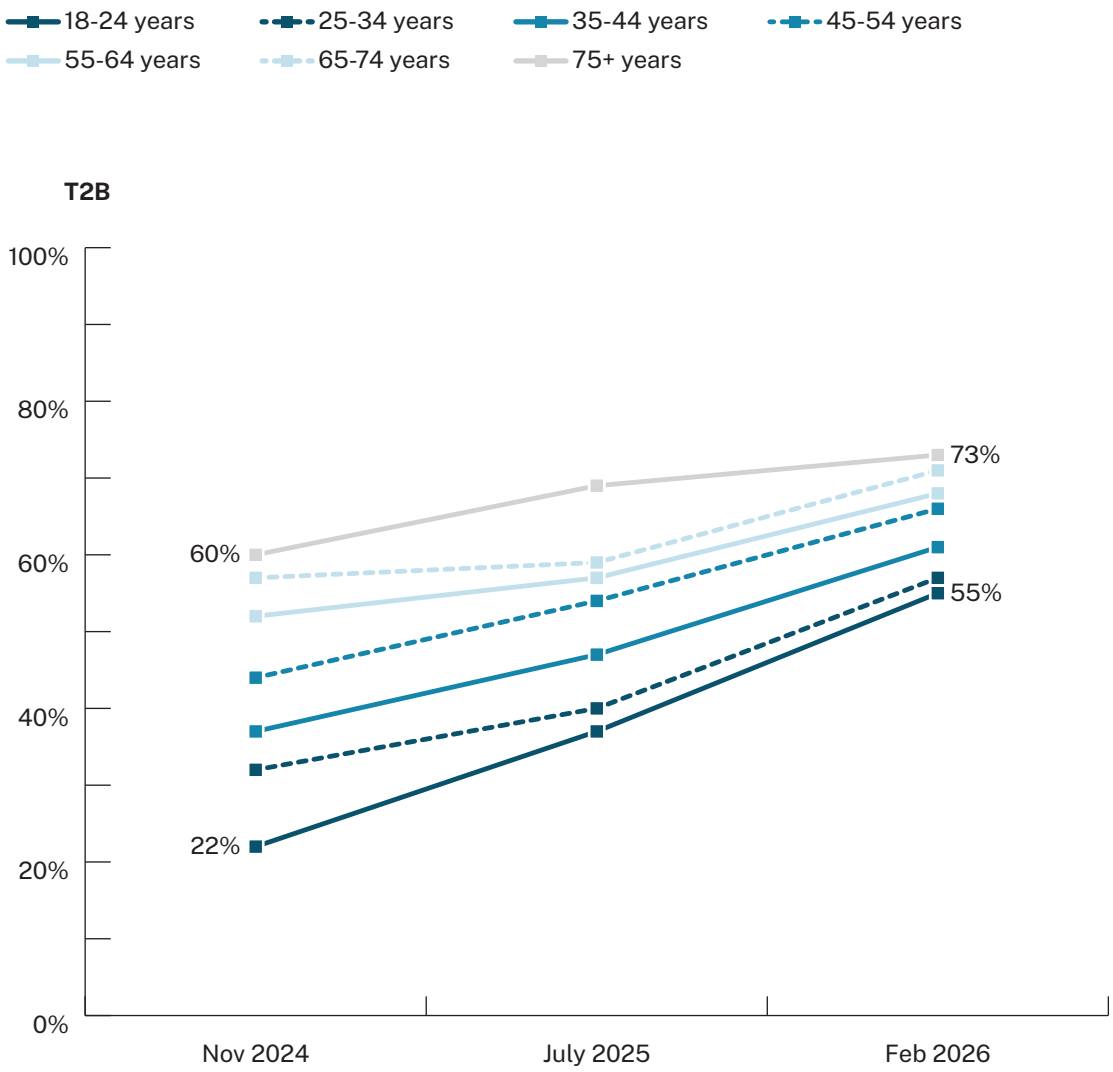
T2B: T2B means 'top two bands'.

Our third survey was conducted in February 2026: after the antisemitic terrorist attack at Bondi on 14 December 2025, a summer of extreme weather events across Australia, and the anniversary of the return of Donald Trump to the White House. The US had used force to intervene in Venezuala, President Trump's threats to acquire Greenland had brought the NATO alliance to the edge of crisis and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine had continued for four years. On the other hand, there was a fragile peace in Gaza and the February 28 US-Israeli attack on Iran had not yet occurred. Again, no single issue can explain the continued increase in Australian public anxiety about security, but disruption was prominent in global affairs.

Across our three surveys, some demographics have been consistent in their high and increasing concern about national security: regional and rural Australians, older cohorts, and those in socioeconomic disadvantage.

This time, however, the sharpest movement was among younger Australians. The 18–24 cohort moved from 22% in November 2024 to 55% by February 2026 – a 33% shift in fifteen months. The gap between youngest and oldest Australians, once nearly 40%, narrowed to under 18%.

FIGURE 6: WORRY ABOUT AUSTRALIA'S 'NATIONAL SECURITY' BY AGE GROUP



Base: All respondents (February 2026 n=8,162) (July 2025 n=6,049) (November 2024 n=6,013)

Source: To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

Note: Don't know and Refused responses excluded from base. This figure combines 'agree' and 'strongly agree' responses to the statement 'I am worried about Australia's national security'.

T2B: T2B means 'top two bands'.

Much of what follows draws on our first survey (November 2024) and second survey (July 2025) data – the foundation on which this research rests. The more limited third survey in February 2026 does not fundamentally change that picture. It updates one critical dimension: overall concern has risen. Australians are demonstrably updating their threat perceptions in response to events.

The gender knowledge gap: confidence, not competence

The July 2025 survey revealed a striking 23-point gap in self-reported knowledge about national security between men (46%) and women (23%). Focus groups revealed why this gap is misleading. Women tended to underestimate their understanding of security, yet consistently demonstrated a broad and concrete grasp of how different threats would affect their families, communities, and daily lives – often articulating concerns that extended well beyond conventional security framings. Men tended toward abstract framings – sometimes acknowledging a tendency to overstate confidence. Women's self-doubt was sometimes explicit. Referring to the research team who would be studying her observations, one woman in a focus group said:

> 'They're probably going to sit there and absolutely wet themselves laughing. [Saying:] "Those silly old ladies that don't know what the heck they're talking about".'
>
> **Woman, 55+, SA, regional**

She then proceeded to articulate sophisticated concerns about economic vulnerability, cyber threats, and social cohesion.

This is not a gap in understanding – it is a gap in who feels authorised to speak about security. 'National security' as a term may carry exclusionary connotations, sidelining perspectives that are in fact more grounded, expansive and contemporary than traditional framings. While outside the scope of this report, complementary research has examined the persistent structural barriers to women's representation in Australia's national security international affairs bureaucracies.[7]

Disengagement: protective, not apathetic

Almost half of Australians (47%) neither agreed nor disagreed when asked if they want their voice to be heard on security issues, in our November 2024 survey. Only 35% felt they knew where to find information about national security. Focus groups explained this ambivalence. For many participants, disengagement was deliberate – a coping mechanism, not apathy. Overwhelmed by daily pressures and information overload, they had concluded that engagement brought anxiety without agency. Reasons varied:

- **Time poverty:** immediate everyday concerns took precedence.
- **Information quality:** trustworthy, accessible sources were seen as scarce; news was superficial or sensationalised; official communications seemed limited or selectively released.
- **Complexity:** the interconnected, evolving nature of threats made it hard to grasp the full picture.
- **Self-protection:** several participants described deliberately avoiding news to maintain peace of mind, trusting that family or officials would alert them to genuine crises.

> 'It's not something I think about very often, Australia's national security. It's not something I think about at all.'
>
> **Man, 25-34, NSW, childcare worker**

This pattern is detectable even in brief, unprompted survey responses: thematic analysis of nearly 6,000 open-text replies, captured in November 2024, found that a minority – but a meaningful one – characterised national security not as protection offered to citizens, but as a mechanism of surveillance, political manipulation, and restriction of civil liberties. For this group, disengagement may reflect not indifference but a rejection of the framing itself.

DEMOGRAPHIC DETAIL: BREAKDOWNS BY AGE, GENDER, EDUCATION, LOCATION, SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS, COUNTRY OF BIRTH, CITIZENSHIP AND LANGUAGE SPOKEN AT HOME ARE PROVIDED IN APPENDIX (TABLE C.2.1)

7 Stephenson, E 2024, The Face of the Nation: Gendered Institutions in International Affairs, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

THREAT PERCEPTIONS

In November 2024 and again in July 2025, we asked Australians how seriously they rated 15 potential threats to the nation over the next 10 years.[8] The results reveal a public primarily concerned with technological, economic, information-based and climate-related disruption, above traditional military threats.

In terms of threats to society, disinformation and foreign interference rated higher than terrorism or violent unrest, although it must be emphasised that this data was collected prior to the Bondi terrorist attack on 14 December 2025. A subsequent survey in February 2026 showed a dramatic increase in concern about terrorism, as well as high levels of concern about violent extremism targeting part of the Australian community.

8 The list of 15 threats we nominated in November 2024 and July 2025 was reasonably comprehensive but not exhaustive. In our third survey in February 2026, we tested attitudes on several additional threats: cyber attacks, serious and organised crime, violent extremism targeting part of the community, and a world where no rules stop strong states.

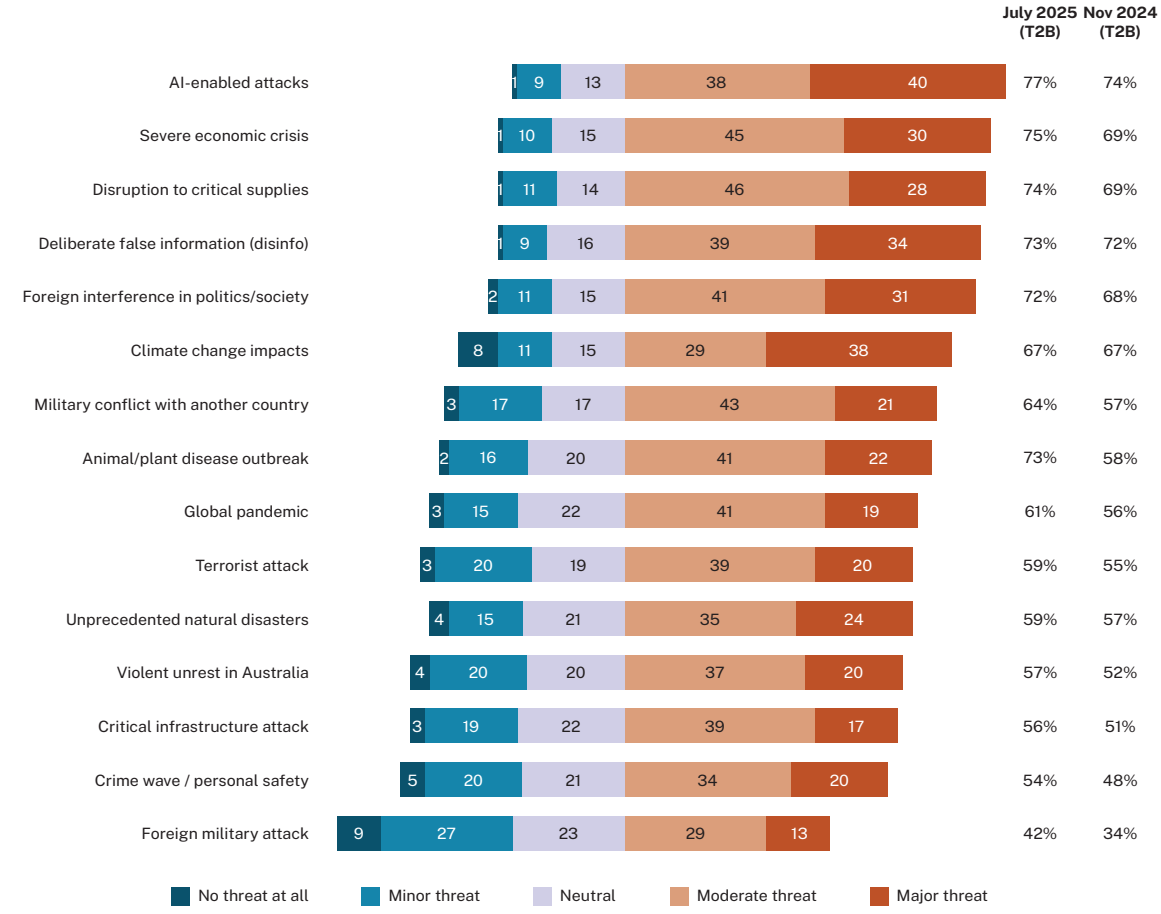
Table 1: Full threat descriptions from survey one (Nov 2024) and two (July 2025)

Original description presented in the surveys	Shortened label for charting
Australia involved in military conflict with another country	Military conflict overseas
Foreign military attack on Australia	Foreign military attack
Foreign country interfering in Australia's politics, government, economy or society	Foreign interference
Deliberate spread of false information to mislead the Australian public and harm their interests	Deliberate false information (disinfo)
Disruption to critical supplies due to a crisis overseas	Critical supply disruption
Introduced disease poses a widespread threat to Australia's animals and plants	Animal/plant disease outbreak
Attack on Australia's critical infrastructure like transport, energy or communications	Critical infrastructure attack
Use of artificial intelligence to attack Australian people or businesses	AI-enabled attacks
Terrorist attack in Australia	Terrorist attack
Violent unrest between different groups of Australians	Violent unrest
Crime wave threatening Australians' personal safety	Crime wave / personal safety
Global health pandemic	Global pandemic
Severe economic crisis	Severe economic crisis
Impact of climate change	Climate change impacts
Major natural disasters on a scale not seen here before	Unprecedented natural disasters

Table 2: Full threat descriptions from survey three (Feb 2026)

Original description presented in the surveys	Shortened label for charting
A major cyberattack targeting Australian people or businesses	Cyberattack
Serious and organised crime (homegrown or international) targeting Australian people or businesses	Serious and organised crime
Violent extremism targeting a part of the Australian community	Violent extremism
A terrorist attack in Australia	Terrorist attack
Major natural disasters on a scale not seen here before	Unprecedented natural disasters
A global health pandemic	Global pandemic
A world in which no rules stop the strongest countries doing what they want	Strong countries doing what they want

FIGURE 7: PERCEPTIONS OF THE 'SERIOUSNESS' OF THREATS TO AUSTRALIA IN THE NEXT 10 YEARS (%)



Base: All respondents (July 2025 n=6,049) (November 2024 n=6,013)

Source: Q3. In the next 10 years, how serious do you think each threat is to Australia?

Note: Don't know and Refused responses excluded from base. Note also: In Survey 1, the research used a 1 to 5 scale labelled only at the endpoints: 1 = 'Not a threat at all', 5 = 'Very real threat'.

T2B: T2B means 'top two bands'.

Please note that the original statements as asked in the questionnaire have been shortened for presentation in figures in this report. Full statements are available in the Appendix.

The top six threats remained consistent between November 2024 and July 2025, though their ordering shifted slightly. AI-enabled attacks and climate change commanded the most intense anxiety – the only two threats where 'major threat' ratings exceeded 'moderate threat' ratings.[9]

Foreign military attack on Australia ranks lowest. In July 2025, 36% considered it either a minor threat (27%) or no threat at all (9%). Even so, a more substantial 42% still considered it as a major (13%) or moderate (29%) threat. (Our various findings on public attitudes about risks of military attack and military conflict are brought together in more detail on page 44).

The Australian threat hierarchy identified in this research – with disinformation, AI-enabled attacks, and economic disruption rated among the most severe – is broadly consistent with global expert assessments.

9 We chose to identify AI-enabled attacks as a distinct threat in our first two surveys, mindful of the rapidly emerging nature of AI-related security risks, including in disinformation and military applications. We did not initially list cyber attacks as a distinct threat, given that cyber risk has long been integrated with many other security issues. In our third survey, in February 2026, we listed cyber attacks as a distinct threat, which evoked similar levels of aggregate concern (78% as a 'major' or 'moderate' threat) to AI. Our focus groups tended to combine the two threats, suggesting that the public now sees AI and cyber as connected risks.

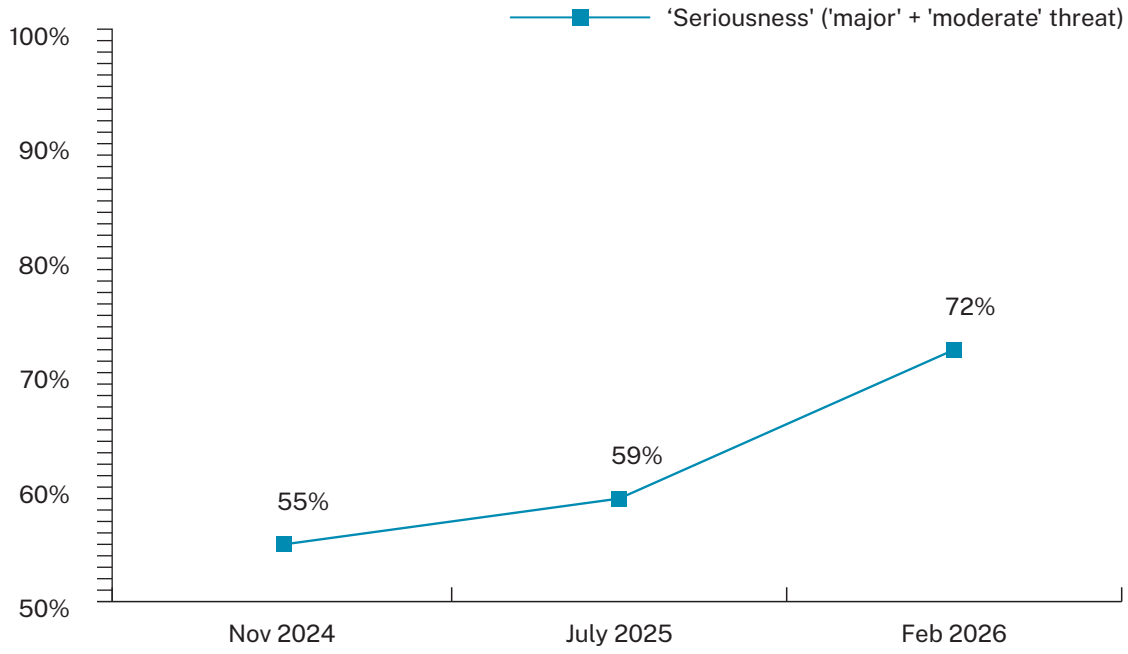
The World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2026 identifies misinformation and disinformation and adverse outcomes of AI technologies among the top short-to-medium term global risks, alongside geoeconomic confrontation and supply chain instability.[10]

Three waves of survey data reveal two distinct patterns

For many threats, levels of public concern – while high – have stayed broadly stable over the timeframe of our research. Natural disasters and global health pandemics registered almost identical ratings across all three survey waves – challenges Australians have normalised in their understanding of the world.

One threat, the fear of a terrorist attack in Australia, broke sharply from this pattern. Concern about a terrorist attack in Australia as either a major or moderate threat rose to 72% by February 2026, two months after the Bondi attack. This was up from 55% in November 2024 and 59% in July 2025. This demonstrates that Australian community threat perceptions can change rapidly in reaction to events.

FIGURE 8: TERRORIST ATTACK THREAT PERCEPTION – 'MAJOR' AND 'MODERATE' THREAT RATING (%)



Base: All respondents (February 2026 n=8,162) (July 2025 n=6,049) (November 2024 n=6,013)

Source: Q3. In the next 10 years, how serious do you think each threat is to Australia?

Note: Don't know and Refused responses excluded from base. Note also: In Survey 1, the research used a 1 to 5 scale labelled only at the endpoints: 1 = 'Not a threat at all', 5 = 'Very real threat'. This figure combines 'major' and 'moderate' threat ratings for 'a terrorist attack' in response to the question outlined in 'source'.

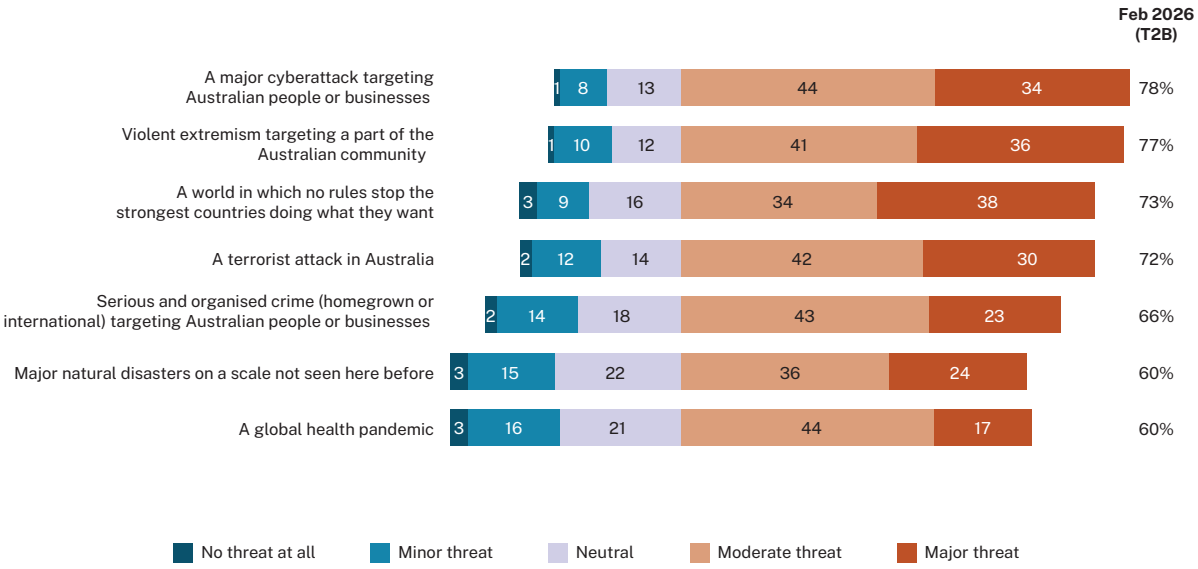
T2B: T2B means 'top two bands'..

10 World Economic Forum 2026, The Global Risks Report 2026, 21st edn, WEF, Geneva.

Our third survey, in February 2026, also established baseline figures for several threats not tracked in our earlier surveys. We introduced four topics that had not been explicitly presented in earlier surveys, even if they overlapped with some of the threats already assessed. These were cyber attacks, violent extremism targeting part of the Australian community, serious and organised crime, and a world where non rules stopped strong states doing what they wanted – a proxy for the breakdown of a rules-based international order.

Of these, cyber attacks (78%), targeted violent extremism (77%), and the breakdown of a rules-based order (73%) all registered very high levels of concern. These establish a high floor of concern regarding some of the most prominent issues in the 2026 security landscape. The high anxiety rating for cyber is on a par with the public concern we had previously measured about AI as a source of risk, and confirms that technology related issues sit persistently at the top of Australians' threat hierarchy.[11]

FIGURE 9: PERCEPTIONS OF THE 'SERIOUSNESS' OF THREATS TO AUSTRALIA IN THE NEXT 10 YEARS (%) – FEBRUARY 2026



Base: All respondents (February 2026 n=8,147)

Source: In the next 10 years, how serious do you think each threat is to Australia?

Note: Don't know and Refused responses excluded from base.

T2B: T2B means 'top two bands'.

11 The Lowy Institute Poll 2025 similarly found cyberattacks to be the highest-rated threat among Australians (65%), topping their list for the third consecutive year – though the Lowy framing emphasises state-based cyber threats, while this study measures concern about attacks on Australian people and businesses more broadly.

Demographic patterns

Threat perceptions divide along consistent demographic lines:

- **Gender:** women rated most security threats higher than men. This was the inverse of gendered attitudes to 'worry' about national security generally, and the self-perception among many women of a lack of knowledge about national security. The gap is most pronounced for climate change (which 73% of women considered a 'major' or 'moderate' threat, as opposed to 60% of men), natural disasters (65% versus 53%), a crime wave (59% versus 49%), and foreign military attack (48% versus 36%), according to our July 2025 survey.

Table 1: Greatest gender variances in threat seriousness

Threat	Women (%)	Men (%)	Variance
Impact of climate change	73	60	+13
Natural disasters on a scale not seen before	65	53	+12
Foreign military attack on Australia	48	36	+12
Crime wave threatening personal safety	59	49	+10
Severe economic crisis	78	71	+7

- **Age:** Australians 55+ perceive consistently greater threats than younger cohorts. In December 2024 and July 2025, the gap was widest for the threat of terrorist attack: with major or moderate concerns among 71-74% among those 55+ versus 37-48% among 18-34 year-olds. These statistics pre-dated the December 2025 Bondi terrorist attack. Threat perceptions about terrorism among all Australian demographics rose sharply after Bondi.
- **Location:** regional Australians perceive greater threats than capital city residents across most categories. This difference was most pronounced for terrorist attacks (65% versus 56%) and foreign military attacks (48% versus 39%), based on our July 2025 survey.
- **Education and socioeconomic status:** Australians with lower levels of formal education and greater socioeconomic disadvantage tended to have higher perceptions of threat across most issues.
- **Country of birth:** Australian-born respondents perceive greater threats than those who have migrated from non-English-speaking countries – particularly on such issues as disinformation (75% versus 64%) and foreign military attack (45% versus 36%).

Climate change is the exception. Unlike every other threat – where concern rises with age and falls with education – concern about climate change as a major or moderate security threat is highest among younger Australians (77% for 25-34 year-olds) and those with higher education (75%).

What our focus groups revealed

The survey established what security risks make Australians most worried. Focus groups – stratified by life-stage and gender, with each cohort discussing their top three threats – helped explain why.

Economic vulnerability: present tense not future threat

> 'I think there is a huge social, economic, and political breakdown happening at the minute … it's changing every day in terms of national security, it's just the wild, wild west.'
>
> **Woman, 35-54, VIC, metro, business owner**

Economic hardship was the most prominent issue across all focus groups. For many participants – particularly younger women (18-34) – it is not a potential future threat but a current reality.

Housing affordability dominated. Young participants described home ownership as either impossible or requiring trade-offs like forgoing education. Rising rents compounded the pressure: lower incomes leave little capacity to save while struggling to meet daily expenses.

> 'How am I going to even afford to get basic groceries? Like it's insane the way it's all unravelling.'
>
> **Woman, 18-24, WA, student**

Gender shaped the conversation. Women articulated concerns through personal and family impact; men sometimes discussed economic problems with detachment or even scepticism regarding their relevance as national security issues.

Participants aged 55+ had their own concerns – financial vulnerability following divorce, unexpected health costs, inadequate superannuation – but also lamented the prospects facing their children and grandchildren. One described the situation as 'a nightmare'.

Australia's integration into global markets was seen as a vulnerability. Participants recognised that disruptions abroad – tariffs, trade disputes, supply chain failures – have immediate local consequences.

> 'Being so reliant on the US economy, how that performs is how our stock market performs. What can Australia do about that? I don't know.'
>
> **Man, 35-54, VIC, metro, lawyer**

Climate change: observed, not projected

For many participants, climate change is not a future projection. They referred to bushfires, floods, unpredictable weather, and ecosystem decline as evidence it is already a reality.

Women aged 18-34 expressed the greatest concern – and the greatest sense of being overwhelmed. The interconnected nature of climate impacts contributed to heightened anxiety: effects on food security, housing, health, and economic stability compound rather than existing in isolation.

> 'This is the future that we're going to live in, but also as women, we might be thinking of the possibility – if we have kids, this is the world that they're going to be coming into.'
>
> **Woman, 18-24, ACT, student**

There was frustration at perceived government inaction. Participants wanted leadership but saw political reluctance to act decisively. Individual actions felt inadequate against industrial-scale damage.

> 'We're all trying to do our bit on an individual level, when you want more government policy.'
>
> **Woman, 35-54, TAS, rural, healthcare worker**

Participants aged 55+, particularly men, acknowledged climate as an issue but viewed it as less urgent than economic or cyber concerns. As one participant described: 'more of a background matter'. This generational divide was one of the most pronounced in the research.

Technology: cyber, AI, and the information environment

Cyber security, AI, and disinformation were discussed as deeply interconnected threats. Participants saw AI as accelerating risks across several domains – enabling sophisticated scams, producing convincing disinformation at scale, and outpacing government's capacity to regulate. Our third survey (February 2026) confirmed the scale of this concern: 78% of Australians rated a major cyber attack as a serious threat.

Scams and personal data theft dominated concerns. Participants described an environment where fraudulent content was increasingly difficult to identify. AI-generated voices impersonated family members; deepfakes featured celebrities promoting fake investments; phishing emails were indistinguishable from legitimate correspondence.

> 'I think AI has got some really good qualities, like health and everything like that … but it can also be very, very dangerous and we've got no idea what it's capable of.'
>
> **Man, 55+, NSW, metro, former soldier**

Participants aged 55+ felt particularly vulnerable. Younger cohorts (18-34) expressed more confidence in identifying scams but acknowledged sophistication was increasing. Recent data breaches signalled that even major organisations cannot protect personal information.

The ambivalence was captured by one participant who acknowledged AI's potential benefits while expressing deep unease at its trajectory:

> '[My husband] had an AI scam come up on Facebook … he ended up losing about $60,000. They had all these famous people promoting it … it's so real.'
>
> **Woman, 55+, QLD, nurse**

The information environment felt unnavigable. Participants described information overload, algorithmic curation, and declining ability to distinguish truth from manipulation. Many admitted to passive news consumption through social media – aware this left them vulnerable but uncertain of alternatives. Several described deliberately disengaging from following the news to protect their mental health.

> 'I don't know who to trust. I don't know what information to believe. So, I've kind of just thrown my hands up in the air.'
>
> **Woman, 35-54, QLD, public servant**
>
> 'Information overload; the quantity is too much; the quality is uncertain … most people are uncertain which one to trust.'
>
> **Man, 25-34, NSW, accountant**
>
> 'It's just evolving a lot faster than we are being taught to counteract it and identify it, and what the problems could actually be.'
>
> **Woman, 25-34, QLD, mother**

Demand for regulation and education was explicit. Participants wanted clearer standards, stronger platform regulation, and investment in media literacy – particularly for Australians aged 55+ who felt left behind by technological change. But there was scepticism that regulation could keep pace: criminals would always be 'one step ahead'.

Foreign interference: broad concern, surface understanding

Foreign interference was recognised as serious, but understanding remained largely surface-level. Participants referred to Russian electoral interference in the United States and Europe, concerns about Chinese influence, and anxieties about disinformation campaigns – while infrequently articulating specific mechanisms or vulnerabilities in detail.

> 'Russia's influence in the Trump election the first time … electoral interference and spreading of misinformation by foreign governments, I would say probably is very concerning.'
>
> **Man, 25-34, NSW, metro, childcare worker**

The threat was framed broadly: interference in politics, economic coercion through trade dependence, and social division sown through manipulated information. Australia's multicultural society was seen by some as a strength, and by others as a vulnerability that foreign actors could exploit.

> 'In Sydney, there's a lot of cultural difference, there's a lot of people from all around the world, which is beautiful. But it makes it easier for people outside Australia to make us go against each other.'
>
> **Man, 25-34, QLD, mental health worker**

Immigration and social cohesion: contested terrain

Views on immigration and social cohesion proved the most polarised – and the most cautiously expressed. Participants often prefaced comments with qualifiers:

> 'I know it might be a little bit controversial to say, but if we're having an influx of immigration, obviously it's going to increase the cost of living and the quality of life that we have.'
>
> **Woman, 25-34, NSW, metro, healthcare worker**

The most critical positions toward immigration emerged primarily from older cohorts, characterised by concerns that some migrants did not assimilate, held dangerous ideologies, or placed strain on limited resources. One participant was blunt:

> 'Some of the people that you see coming into the country should not be here.'
>
> **Woman, 55+, NSW, metro, court administrator**
>
> 'Sydney's really great because we're diverse, but it also has that unique challenge … you've got all these differing opinions coming in, so that's great, but it's also difficult for all of us to come together.'
>
> **Man, 25-34, NSW, metro, artist**

A counter-narrative emerged, particularly from women aged 18-34. They voiced concern about rising far-right rhetoric, the dangers of divisive polarisation, and the importance of inclusion.

> 'The violent unrest between different groups, I would say the gradual change to the far right, which, like, is occurring across the globe. You kind of see that in Australia with the immigration protests and how you have a lot of violence in those protests … it's quite disturbing.'
>
> **Woman, 18-24, WA, metro, student**
>
> 'You'll have climate change refugees and then all the rage baiting in social media about … migration and people taking jobs and housing.'
>
> **Woman, 35-54, TAS, rural, healthcare worker**

The research could not fully surface the intensity of views on either side. To ensure focus group participant safety, moderators did not probe further where the topic arose. The findings therefore likely understate the range of positions held.

What is clear: both those concerned about immigration and those concerned about anti-immigration rhetoric frame their position through the lens of 'safe and peaceful communities' – identified through our survey work as the Australian people's foremost priority.

The Scanlon Foundation Research Institute's longitudinal social cohesion research provides essential context for these findings. National pride and sense of belonging have both declined significantly since 2020. Fewer than half of Australians now feel a great sense of belonging in this country (46%), down from nearly two-thirds six years ago (63% in 2020). One in three takes great pride in the Australian way of life – a 14% point fall since 2020. The bulk of this decline occurred between 2020 and 2023; levels have since stabilised, but at their lowest point since the survey began in 2007. [12]

Yet within this decline, one finding stands out. Local and neighbourhood cohesion has remained strong and appears to buffer the broader deterioration. Among Australians experiencing financial hardship, those living in cohesive neighbourhoods are between 1.7 and 3.2 times more likely to trust others, feel a sense of national belonging, and report happiness than those in less cohesive neighbourhoods.[13] The data suggest the local level is doing protective work that national institutions are not. This points to both a vulnerability and an opportunity: social cohesion is not lost, but it is concentrated in places and relationships that security policy rarely reaches.

The threat of war: geographically and psychologically distant

Among the least discussed topics in our focus groups was the threat of war, whether a military attack on Australia or our forces becoming involved in a conflict overseas. Participants acknowledged these dangers as serious in principle but remote in practice – unlikely to reach their daily lives. Geographic isolation provided psychological comfort. Participants compared Australia favourably to countries with active conflicts or volatile borders.

> 'We're fortunate enough to be kind of on our own Oceania area, and not super close to any of the big powers … And so there is sort of a sense of safety.'
>
> **Woman, 18-24, VIC, student**

Alliances were seen as double-edged. Relationships with the United States and security partners provided reassurance – some participants credited Australia's regional diplomacy, noting strong ties with Papua New Guinea, Indonesia and other Southeast Asian neighbours, and even a stabilised relationship with China. But others worried about entanglement – being drawn into conflicts not of Australia's making. The Trump presidency and geopolitical instability sharpened this concern.

> 'Australia has done a good job building solid relationships with countries that align to our values, or our nearby neighbours … Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, up through Southeast Asia, and even people we would consider our biggest adversary, China.'
>
> **Man, 35–54, QLD, metro, analyst**

Some participants aged 55+ suggested traditional invasion was being reconceptualised: the real threats were digital – cyberattacks, data theft, information warfare.

> 'The biggest threat that I see, given the rate of development of technology, is the ones we don't know about yet.'
>
> **Woman, 55+, SA, regional, public servant**

Women framed military-related concerns through family and legacy – uncertainty about the world their children and grandchildren would inherit. Men focused on geopolitics and diplomacy in more abstract terms.

Australian concern about the prospect of armed conflict, while lower than for other threat categories, sits within a wider pattern of elevated global anxiety. The Ipsos World Affairs and Security Report 2025 – surveying citizens across 30 countries – found that 53% of respondents considered their country entering armed conflict a real or somewhat real threat in 2025, with 80% agreeing the world had become more dangerous over the past year.[14]

Terrorism: from background concern to confronting reality

Of all threats tracked across three survey waves, terrorism showed the sharpest movement. Rated a serious threat (a combination of 'moderate' and 'major') by 55% of Australians in November 2024 and 59% in July 2025, that figure rose to 72% by February 2026.

12 O'Donnell, J., Falkiner, A. & Szachna, K. (2025). Mapping Social Cohesion 2025. Scanlon Foundation Research Institute.
13 O'Donnell, J., Guan, Q. & Prentice, T. (2024). Mapping Social Cohesion 2024. Scanlon Foundation Research Institute.
14 Bricker, D 2025, Ipsos World Affairs and Security Report 2025: Citizens of 30 Countries Assess Threats and Engagement in International Affairs, Ipsos, November 2025.

This third survey was conducted just two months after the terrorist attack at Bondi on 14 December 2025. The data reflects that context directly.

In the third survey we introduced a new threat: violent extremism targeting a part of the Australian community. Respondents could consider this in light of the antisemitism of the Bondi attack, mindful also of the possibility of ideological violence against other parts of the Australian community. This threat of targeted violent extremism was rated as a serious threat by 77%.

Bondi and the civic impulse: In our third survey, Australians were asked the extent to which they agreed that 'all Australians can do more to make our communities peaceful and safe' in the aftermath of the Bondi attack. A large majority, 71%, agreed – including 32% who agreed strongly. Only 8% disagreed.

The finding is not a straightforward verdict on terrorism policy. It is a signal about civic instinct: when confronted with an act of violence targeted against part of the community, most Australians agreed that all have a part to play in the response. The phrasing – 'all Australians', 'our communities' – locates agency in both individual citizens and the collective rather than in government institutions alone.

VOICES FROM ACROSS AUSTRALIA

Our nationwide consultations echoed concerns about threats to infrastructure, connectivity, supply chains and community resilience – but added geographic and logistical specificity. Participants in Darwin cited the single road connecting the city to the south; Tasmanians noted that 98% of freight moves through TasPorts; Western Australians warned of the consequences if Port Hedland's channel were blocked. These 'fragile arteries' – infrastructure chokepoints that could cascade into crisis – featured prominently in regional discussions. Multiple communities flagged that they can only sustain themselves for about three days without outside help, in the event of a significant disruption. Communications infrastructure compounds the risk: when power fails, mobile networks and emergency warnings fail with it. Concern about energy security was widespread, including the paucity of national fuel reserves and vulnerability to blockade. For many, the threats that mattered in our discussions were the ones that could disrupt the systems keeping daily life running.

See our companion *Community Consultations Engagement Report*

The worried and the knowing

Those who report being 'worried about national security' (50% of Australians) perceived threats more acutely – with variations in 'seriousness' ratings by up to 14 percentage points greater than the general population – on such issues as AI-enabled attacks (87% versus 77%), foreign interference (86% versus 72%), and economic crises (84% versus 75%). Those who self-report as 'knowledgeable about national security' also show elevated concern, although this is less pronounced than among other groups. The top threats for this group align with the general population; the difference lies in the intensity of concern. Notably, among those worried about national security, the threat rating shifts upward overall, reflecting a heightened perception of risk. In particular, this cohort is concerned about the nation's underpreparedness for a foreign military attack.

SPOTLIGHT: MILITARY ATTACK AND INVOLVEMENT IN CONFLICT

Of all 15 threats presented to respondents in July 2025, a foreign military attack is a critical outlier – rated lowest on likelihood yet highest on potentially catastrophic consequences. The threat the public considers most devastating is the one it worries about least in daily life.

- 36% rated a foreign military attack as 'catastrophic' – substantially more than any other threat.
- Yet 55% considered such an attack 'unlikely', and only 5% say it is 'almost certain'.
- 68% expected Australia to be involved in military conflict with another country within five years.
- 45% considered a foreign military attack on Australia within that time to be more likely than not.

Australians clearly distinguish between their armed forces fighting overseas (probable, and concerning) and the scenario of being attacked at home (less than probable, but a profound shock).

The preparedness picture: Australians generally feel the nation is underprepared for various possible and probable security shocks, including armed conflict. Still, they consider the nation somewhat more prepared for military scenarios (10–12% 'very' or 'fully' prepared) than for the technological, information, economic and environment shocks they see as more probable.

Among those who described themselves as 'worried' about national security, there are higher concerns about the level of national preparedness for foreign military attack. That cohort sees this as one of the issues for which the nation is least prepared, rating it third-lowest our of 15 issues for the level of preparedness (as opposed to the general public, which rates such preparedness exactly in the middle).

Demographic patterns reinforce the divide. Women perceived a higher likelihood of military conflict (33% versus 27% for men). Rural and regional Australians rated foreign military attack as as a more serious threat than did their urban counterparts (48% classifying it as a major or moderate threat, as opposed to 39%).

The focus groups added context but not urgency. Invasion and war were among the least discussed topics – in two cohorts they were not raised at all. Australia's geographic isolation and alliance structures provided a powerful psychological buffer, though alliances were seen as double-edged: reassuring but entangling. Younger participants (18-34) worried about being 'dragged into' conflict alongside the United States; older participants (55+) were more likely to discuss invasion scenarios while noting that modern threats were increasingly digital and that conflict could already be underway through means other than armed force.

One exchange stood out: A mother described her son coming home from school asking 'is there going to be a war?' and feeling unable to reassure him because the strategic environment was so unpredictable. Another participant cited an incident that questioned her confidence in the nation's defences:

> '... the things that have been standing out to me [with regard to a foreign military attack on Australia], and probably a little bit scary, is seeing on the news how China has entered our waters, and maybe doing some practice fires and things like that, but no one knew about it – it was reported by Virgin Airlines, who was flying overhead. ... those things are really scary, the fact that we weren't aware of it. ... you want to have confidence in our defence and government, and those things make you start to question a little bit.'
>
> **Woman, 25-34, VIC, metro, teacher**

SPOTLIGHT: CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change is the demographic outlier in our data. It is the only threat where concern ran counter to almost every other pattern: highest among younger Australians, women, and the university-educated.

It is also the threat Australians considered most inevitable.

- 73% rated the impact of climate change as a serious threat ('major' or 'moderate').
- 85% considered it likely within five years – the highest likelihood rating of any threat.
- 30% said it's 'almost certain' – six times the figure for foreign military attack.
- 22% rated the consequences as 'catastrophic'.

Yet concern is highest among demographics who are least likely to describe themselves as worried or knowledgeable about national security – 25–34 year-olds (77%), women (73%), and those with higher education (75%).

The policy paradox: This threat Australians judge most likely is one for which they feel least prepared. Climate sits alongside AI-enabled attacks and disinformation at the bottom of the preparedness rankings. It also commands the widest gender gap in seriousness ratings (73% of women versus 60% of men).

The lived reality: Our focus group participants referenced recent bushfires, floods, unpredictable weather, and ecosystem decline as evidence that the threat has already arrived. A woman in northern New South Wales described her sister losing her home in flooding. Younger women (18-24) linked climate to food prices, housing viability, and whether to have children at all. The connection to supply chains was also made explicit: banana shortages after Queensland cyclones, rising grocery costs, and vulnerability as a net exporter that 'ships things everywhere and doesn't eat locally'. Participants frequently described a sense of powerlessness – willing to act individually but convinced that meaningful change required government and corporate accountability that was not forthcoming.

A NATIONAL RISK ASSESSMENT BY AUSTRALIANS

A NATIONAL RISK ASSESSMENT BY AUSTRALIANS

The second round of our survey (July 2025) added a risk assessment approach – bringing together likelihood and consequence – to understand how Australians might prioritise the need for national preparedness against the same 15 threats.

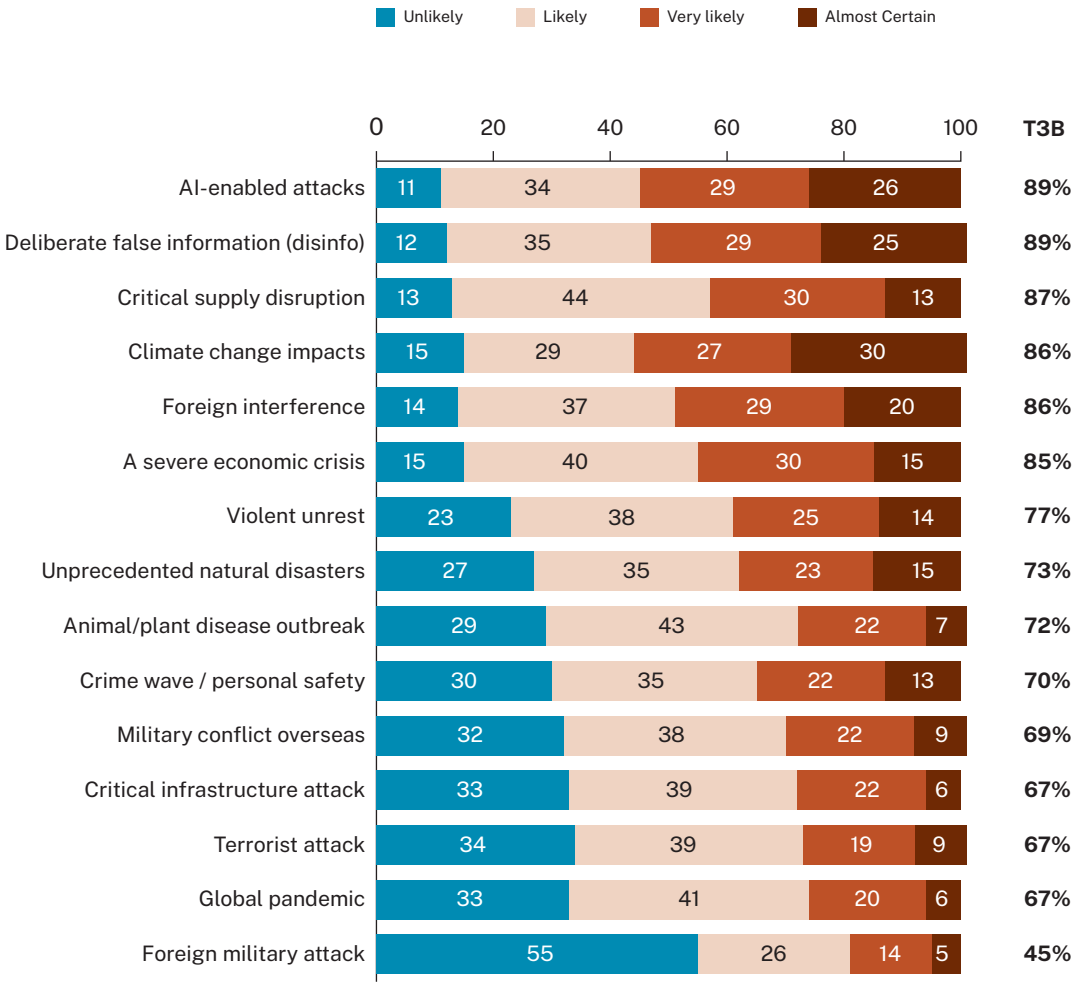
The time horizon was five years, rather than the 10-year window in the seriousness question. Each respondent was asked to consider likelihood and consequence against a randomised subset of five threats (excluding any they had previously rated 'no threat at all'). Given our large sample size, this still provided statistically significant measures for every threat.

The results were striking. In short, most Australians anticipate multiple and intersecting security shocks, many of them with much higher likelihood than the use of force.

In every case other than foreign military attack, more than two-thirds of respondents considered the risk more likely than not to 'happen as a threat to Australia' within the next five years.

And, were they to occur, all but two of the 15 threats (a 'crime wave' and 'violent unrest') would have major or catastrophic consequences, according to at least half of Australians.

FIGURE 10: PERCEPTIONS OF 'LIKELIHOOD' OF THREATS TO AUSTRALIA IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS (%)



Base: All respondents (n=6,049). July 2025.

Source: Q6. How likely is this to happen as a threat to Australia over the next 5 years?

Note: Don't know and Refused responses excluded from base

T3B: T3B means 'top three bands'.

Likelihood: what Australians expect to happen

Most Australians expect the nation to experience multiple security shocks before long. Two-thirds of Australians consider all but one of the 15 threats – the exception being a foreign military attack – more likely than not to occur within five years.

Many of the threats are given a high probability of becoming real. Combining the responses of 'likely', 'very likely' and 'almost certain', there are six threats that at least 85% of Australians think have a more than even chance of occurring within five years. Those are climate change impacts, AI-enabled attacks, disinformation, foreign interference, severe economic crisis and critical supply disruption. The implication is that some of these threats could be experienced at the same time.

Climate change is considered most inevitable. Nearly one-third rate it 'almost certain' (30%), with a further 27% rating it 'very likely.' AI-enabled attacks and disinformation follow closely – more than half of respondents consider these 'very likely' or 'almost certain'.

Foreign military attack is the clear outlier. It ranks lowest on likelihood, with 55% considering it 'unlikely' and just 5% 'almost certain'. Yet even so, a substantial 45% of Australians consider it to be more likely than not that a foreign power will launch a military attack on this country within the next five years. This finding will surprise those who assume Australians are relaxed about the possibility of military threats.

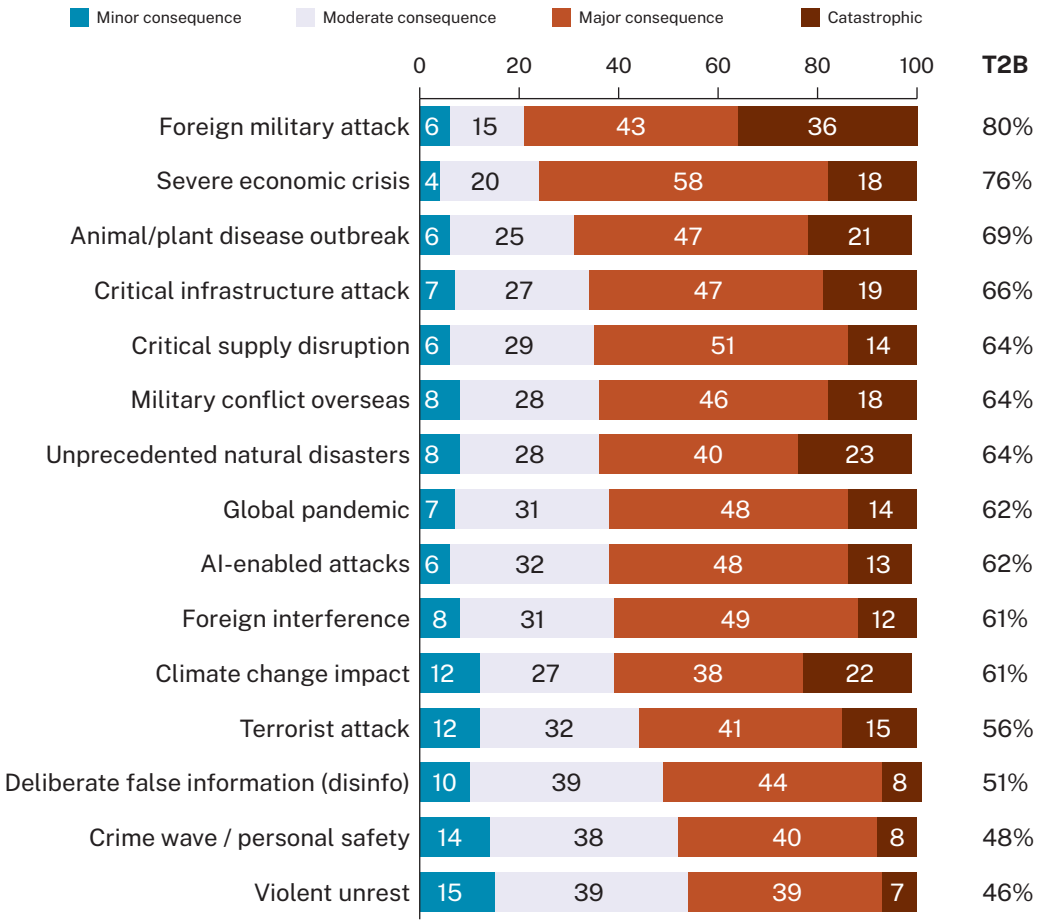
Notably, in July 2025, 68% of respondents considered Australia's involvement in military conflict with another country likely within five years – a distinction from direct attack that suggests the public clearly differentiates between fighting abroad and being attacked at home.

Environmental, technological, economic and information-based risks are viewed as more probable than military threats. The issues rated most serious are also those considered most likely – reinforcing a public expectation that Australia will face multiple intersecting challenges, with the most prominent risks emerging outside traditional defence.

Consequence: what Australians fear most

The perceived consequences of the 15 threats are overwhelmingly large. All but two scenarios are rated by more than half of Australians as carrying 'major' or 'catastrophic' consequences.

FIGURE 11: PERCEIVED 'CONSEQUENCE' OF THREATS TO AUSTRALIA IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS (%)



Base: All respondents (n = 6049). July 2025.

Source: Q7. If this threat were to occur over the next 5 years, how would you describe the consequences for Australia?

Note: Don't know and Refused responses excluded from base.

T2B: T2B means 'top two bands'.

Foreign military attack is seen as potentially the most catastrophic threat. More than one-third (36%) rate it 'catastrophic' – substantially greater than any other threat. This is striking given it ranks lowest on likelihood.

Natural disasters and climate change follow. Nearly a quarter rate unprecedented natural disasters as catastrophic (23%), with climate change close behind (22%). Economic crises, while not attracting the highest catastrophic ratings, see over three-quarters (76%) assign them 'major' or 'catastrophic' consequences.

Disinformation presents a paradox. It rates high on seriousness (73%) and likelihood (81%), but low on catastrophic consequences (8%), although an additional 44% see its effects as major. Australians see disinformation as a serious, likely threat – but its corrosive effect makes it not so easy to recognise as a shock or crisis.

The risk matrix

Plotting likelihood against consequence produces a telling picture of an Australian landscape of security risk. Almost all threats sit in the 'very likely' and 'major' consequence portion of the grid.

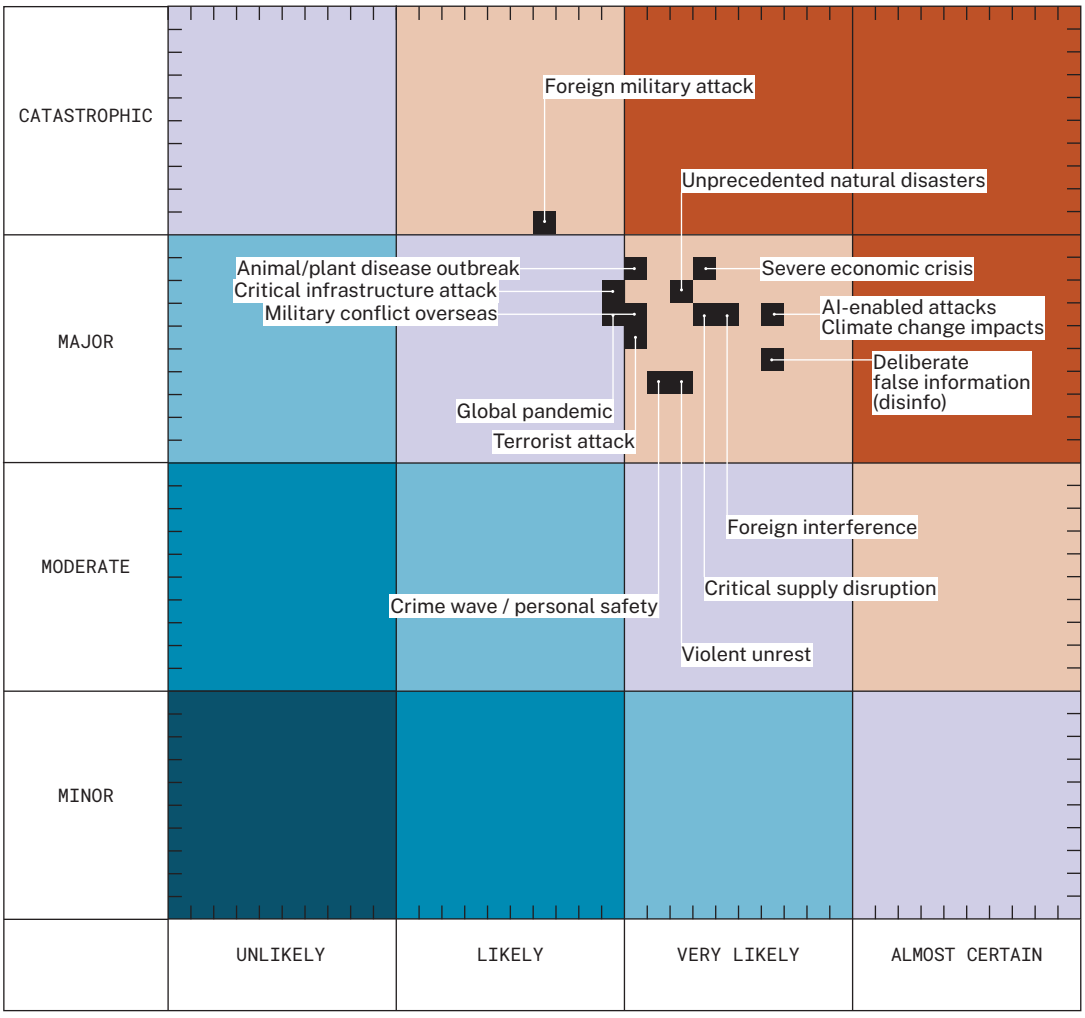
High likelihood, relatively high consequence: climate change, AI-enabled attacks, economic crisis, critical supply disruption, disinformation, foreign interference. These cluster in the upper-right quadrant – expected and feared.

Low likelihood, highest consequence: foreign military attack on Australia. The clear outlier in the upper left – unlikely but perceived by many as potentially catastrophic.

Medium likelihood, major consequence: pandemic, terrorism, crime, violent unrest. These sit in the middle – seen as pervasive and dangerous but not nationally existential threats.

The clustering is instructive. Most threats Australians expect to face are technological, economic, environmental, and information-based. The one threat judged most catastrophic – foreign military attack – is also judged least likely.

FIGURE 12: RISK MATRIX OF THREATS USING CONSEQUENCE AND LIKELIHOOD RESPONSE AVERAGES



Base: All respondents (n = 6049). July 2025.

Source: Q6. How likely is this to happen as a threat to Australia over the next 5 years?
Q7. If this threat were to occur over the next 5 years, how would you describe the consequences for Australia?

Note: Don't know and Refused responses excluded from base.

T2B: T2B means 'top two bands'.

Most threats cluster in the upper-middle quadrant – deemed on average by respondents as very likely to occur with major consequences. Foreign military attack is the outlier: judged on average by respondents as least likely but most catastrophic.

Demographic patterns

Perceptions of severe consequences (major or catastrophic) were consistently greater among certain groups:

- **Gender:** women rated consequences greater than men across most threats. The gap was most pronounced for a terrorist attack (68% vs 46%), a crime wave (57% vs 40%) and major natural disasters (71% vs 55%).
- **Worry about national security:** those 'worried about Australia's national security' perceive consequences as more severe – foreign interference (+13 points), critical infrastructure attack (+8 points), foreign military attack (+5 points).

The preparedness gap

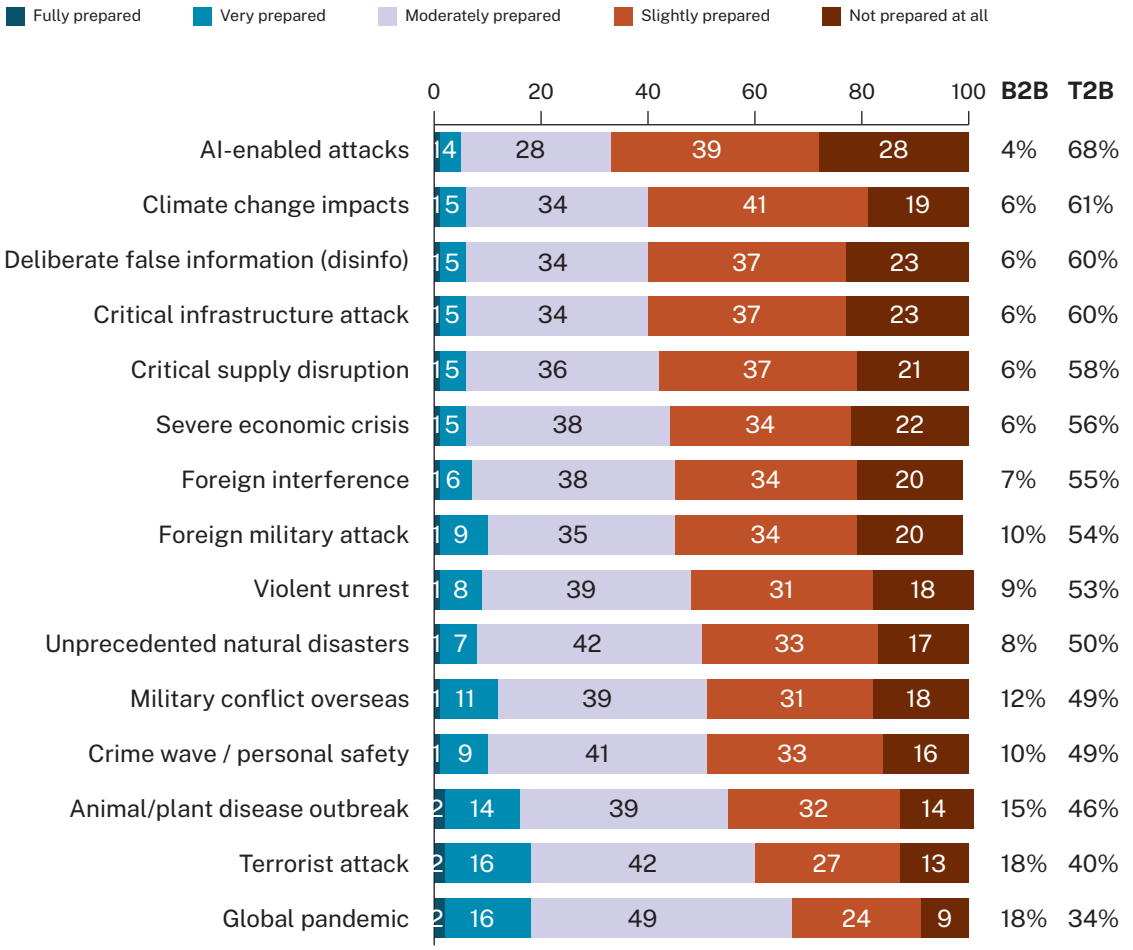
Australians expect high-impact threats to occur yet feel the nation is underprepared. Despite perceiving most threats as both likely and consequential, public confidence in national readiness is low.

A widespread sense of underpreparedness

We asked respondents how prepared Australia is to deal with the same 15 threats over the next five years. The findings are sobering: across every scenario, no more than 2% perceive Australia as 'fully prepared'.

Against most of the 15 nominated threats, no more than 10% of the public consider the nation to be 'very' or 'fully' prepared. Against none of the 15 threats did more than 18% of Australians assess the nation as 'very' or 'fully' prepared. For two-thirds of the threat scenarios, more than half of Australians feel the nation is 'not prepared at all' or only 'slightly prepared.'

FIGURE 13: PERCEIVED 'PREPAREDNESS' OF AUSTRALIA TO DEAL WITH THREATS IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS (%)



Base: All respondents (n=6049). July 2025.

Source: Q8. How prepared is Australia to deal with these threats in the next 5 years?

Note: Don't know and Refused responses excluded from base

T2B: T2B means 'top two bands'.

B2B: B2B means 'bottom two bands'.

AI-enabled attacks stand out as the area of greatest perceived underprepared – 67% feel either 'not at all' or only 'slightly' prepared. Climate change, disinformation, and critical infrastructure attack follow closely.

The preparedness paradox

Australians tend to feel relatively more prepared for threats they consider least likely, and least prepared for disruptions they expect to actually face.

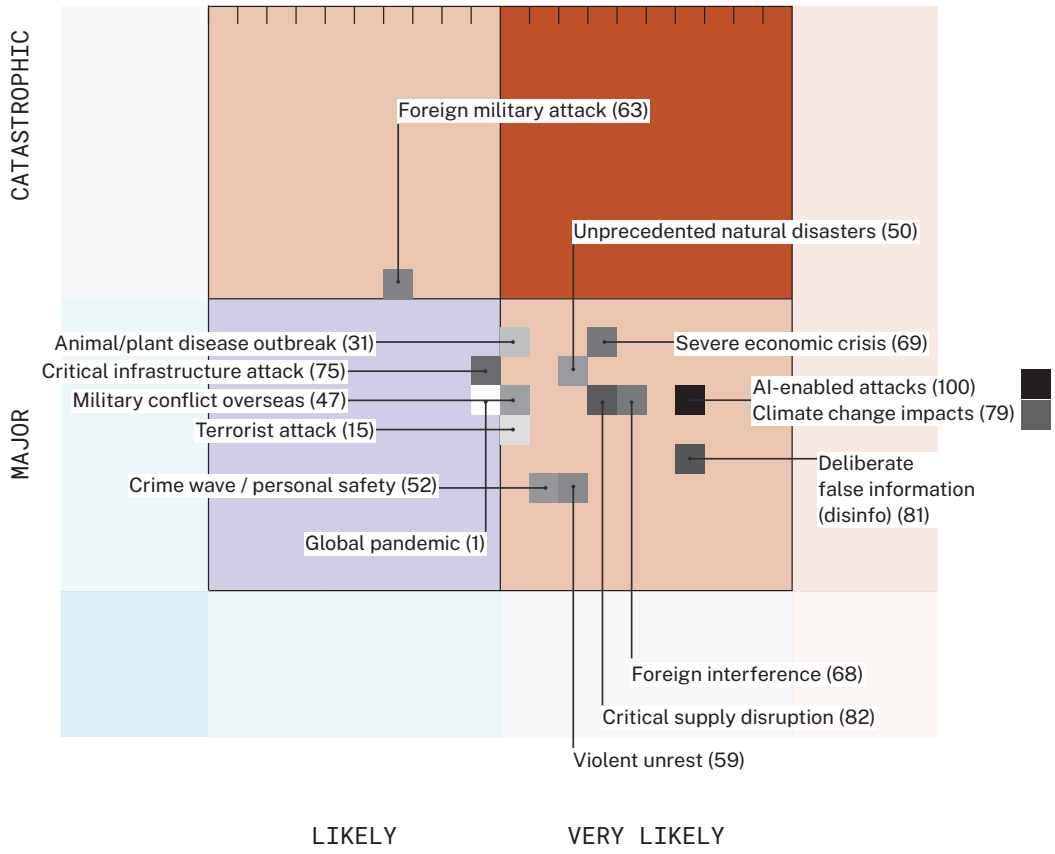
- **Military scenarios:** judged lowest on likelihood, but with mid-range preparedness ratings relative to other issues. For foreign military attack, 10% feel the nation 'very' or 'fully' prepared; for military conflict with another country, 16%.
- **Technological and information threats:** judged most likely, they receive the lowest preparedness ratings. For AI-enabled attacks (82% likely), only 5% feel 'very' or 'fully' prepared.
- **Experience matters:** the global pandemic receives the highest preparedness rating (18% 'very' or 'fully' prepared) – presumably shaped the previous national experience of COVID-19.

The 'worried' see military threats more starkly

Among those who report being 'worried about national security' (50% of Australians), the preparedness ranking shifts notably:

Foreign military attack rises from eighth to third among this group. This suggests that those most worried about security perceive military threats as more salient. They also feel less confident in the nation's readiness for them.

FIGURE 14: RISK MATRIX OF THREATS USING CONSEQUENCE AND LIKELIHOOD RESPONSE AVERAGES – PREPAREDNESS SCALE INCLUDED



Base: All respondents (n=6049). July 2025.

Source: Q8. How prepared is Australia to deal with these threats in the next 5 years?

Note: Don't know and Refused responses excluded from base. Variation between perceived preparedness for each threat is indicated by a scale of colour gradation between 1/white: Global Pandemic (highest perceived level of preparedness) and 100/black: AI-enabled attack (lowest perceived preparedness).

T2B: T2B means 'top two bands'.

B2B: B2B means 'bottom two bands'.

What the focus groups revealed

Focus groups explored preparedness broadly – not threat-by-threat, but as a question of who is responsible for keeping Australia safe and whether institutions are trusted to do so.

Individual responsibility is valued – but has limits

Older participants, particularly those 55+, emphasised self-reliance and community vigilance. 'If you see something, say something' was invoked. Being a volunteer firefighter, reporting concerns to police, making 'personal wise decisions' – these were seen as contributions everyday citizens could make.

> 'I would say we have to take a lot of responsibility for ourselves. We can't always rely that agencies will help us … there are certain things where you have to make your own personal wise decisions.'
>
> **Man, 55+, SA, regional, CFA volunteer**

But this view was not universal. Other participants aged 55+ pushed back against assumptions that younger generations were less vigilant:

> 'I often hear people say the young people today don't care, they're lazy … I've had some young guys working with me, and by God, they put me to shame. The young people of today are very vigilant and very aware.'
>
> **Man, 55+, NSW, former soldier**

Participants aged 18-54 expressed genuine desire to contribute – but felt overwhelmed. Daily survival pressures, information overload, and a sense of futility against complex global problems left many feeling that individual action was pointless.

> 'I think, for me, it's something that I'm concerned about, but it's still just a level of, like, I don't have the time or resources to do anything about it … I've got so much else going on.'
>
> **Woman, 25-34, QLD, mother**

There was discussion in the focus groups about media literacy – keeping aware of events and being discriminating in the way information sources were evaluated – as a way ordinary citizens could contribute to national security. Participants agreed it mattered in principle. But some questioned whether individuals could reasonably be expected to navigate an information environment designed to overwhelm and manipulate.

VOICES FROM ACROSS AUSTRALIA

Our nationwide consultations focused closely on community-level resilience as an element of national preparedness. These conversations added a crucial distinction. Participants distinguished between resilience in spirit, which they saw as typically strong in their communities, and resilience in capability, which they saw as stretched or even weak. Communities were confident in their willingness to help each other; they were far less confident that systems, infrastructure, and institutions would hold. Single-point-of-failure infrastructure – roads, ports, fuel storage, communications – featured prominently. Participants described a nation that was one accident, one storm, or one hostile act away from cascading disruption.

This distinction between resilience in spirit and resilience in capability is not simply a qualitative impression. Longitudinal social cohesion research finds that more than four in five Australians consistently agree that people in their local area are willing to help neighbours – a figure that has held steady for 15 years.[15] The social infrastructure for national resilience exists at the community level. What some see as missing is the institutional architecture to harness it.

See our companion *Community Consultations Engagement Report* for more.

15 O'Donnell, J, Falkiner, A & Szachna, K 2025, Mapping Social Cohesion 2025, Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, Melbourne.

Trust divided between agencies and politicians

Our focus groups consistently found that national security agencies were widely trusted, but political actors – defined as politicians and media – were not.

Agencies like the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD), and the Australian Federal Police (AFP) were described as professional, mission-focused, and credible. Participants trusted them to do their jobs – even without knowing the details.

> 'We don't need to understand everything that's going on, all we need to care about is whether we're being kept safe or not.'
>
> **Man, 35-54, QLD, metro, analyst**
>
> 'Because [the security agencies'] core value is supposed to be protecting us. And [Mike Burgess] has said enough publicly to have earned a level of trust from me.'
>
> **Woman, 55+, SA, regional, public servant**
>
> '[ASD] are really nice young men and women who do great things for our country. What do they do? We don't need to know. They just do their jobs, and they get on with it.'
>
> **Man, 55+, ACT, retired**

Politicians and media received no such praise in the focus groups. Across nearly every group – regardless of the political stances that participants had expressed on other issues – there was convergence on mistrust. Politicians were seen as exploiting security issues for electoral advantage:

> 'The word national security is a really, really good sales pitch for all kinds of stuff … you win an election through making something a big topic in national security, even though it may not be such a huge threat to Australia. But if I really blow it up in the media, and everybody jumps on it, all of a sudden, I can have massive political gain out of it.'
>
> **Man, 55+, SA, regional**

This trust architecture has implications for the way security information and policy is communicated. The public may want information while being suspicious about who delivers it or how it is delivered. Agency-led, depoliticised communication may land where political announcements and arguments cannot.

SPOTLIGHT: ECONOMIC CRISIS

Economic crisis is the threat that united Australians across every demographic divide in our data. It was the only issue among the top five threats where concern did not fragment along the usual lines of age, gender, education, or geography.

The numbers are striking – and accelerating: 75% rated a severe economic crisis as a serious threat – up 10% in just eight months from November 2024 to July 2025. In July 2025, 76% assigned it 'major' or 'catastrophic' consequences, and among 18–24 year-olds, 31% rated it 'catastrophic' – the highest of any age group. Women were significantly more likely than men to view it as 'major' or 'catastrophic' (81% versus 70%).

The likelihood signal is clear: 30% of Australians considered a severe economic crisis 'very likely' within five years, with a further 15% saying 'almost certain'. Combined with the related issue of critical supply disruption (74% serious, +9 points), economic vulnerability dominated the public's near-term threat horizon.

Present tense, not future threat: the focus groups were clear: for many Australians, across all age cohorts, economic crisis is not hypothetical. It is the experience of unaffordable housing, rising cost-of-living, stagnant wages, and deferred family formation. Younger women were the most direct – describing a cycle where education costs preclude saving, saving is impossible without education, and home ownership has become, in the words of one participant, 'an outright impossibility'.

Participants did not discuss economic crisis in isolation: they connected it to climate change (food prices, insurance costs), AI disruption (job displacement), supply chain fragility (dependence on global markets), and social cohesion (competition for housing and services fuelling resentment). Economic insecurity was a threat that made other disruptions harder to absorb and social fractures wider.

The security framing tension: on the other hand, some focus group participants – predominantly men – questioned whether economic crisis constituted a 'national security' issue at all. This highlights a definitional tension at the heart of the data: the threat Australians feel most acutely sits uneasily within conventional definitions of security. Here our survey evidence is illuminating. Australians rank 'safe and peaceful communities' as their top national priority (35% first choice, 64% including second preference), with 'increasing economic prosperity' second (26%). Nearly half of those who chose economic prosperity first selected safe communities second. This finding suggests these priorities are experienced as complementary, not competing – and both sit well above a more abstract aim of 'strengthening national security' (15%).

A policy implication: economic hardship is not adjacent to security – for many Australians, it is a kind of security concern. Policy framed around 'future threats' potentially misses people who are already living through disruption.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION

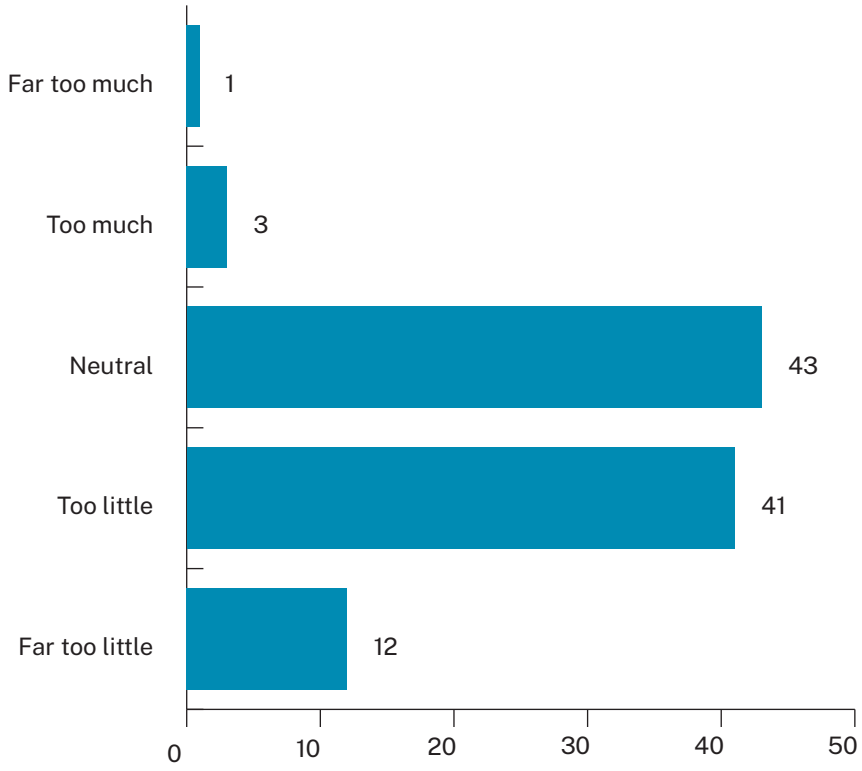
INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION

What Australians want: more security information, but within limits

In our July 2025 survey, we asked Australians whether government shares too much, too little, or the right amount of information about the 15 national security threats.

A majority (53%) believe government shares too little. Only 4% feel over-informed. The 43% neutral position is harder to interpret. It may signal quiet satisfaction with current levels, disengagement from the topic, or genuine uncertainty.

FIGURE 14: SATISFACTION WITH LEVEL OF AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT THREAT COMMUNICATION



Base: All respondents (n = 6049). July 2025.

Source: Q5. In relation to the overall risks and threats just presented, do you think that the Australian Government is generally sharing too little or too much information with the Australian public?

Note: Don't know and Refused responses excluded from base.

Who feels most kept in the dark

Perceived information deficits concentrate among those already reporting highest threat concern:

- **Education:** Autralians with higher academic education are less likely to feel that government is withholding information from them on national security. A 17% gap separates those with Year 10–11 or Certificate I & II qualifications (63% of whom want government to share more information) from postgraduate degree holders (46%).
- **Age:** a clear gradient exists – 50% of those aged 25-44 want more information, rising to 60% among those 75+.
- **Country of birth:** Australian-born respondents (55%) are more likely than those born overseas (48%) to feel under-informed by government.

The demographics most worried about security are also those who feel most that government does not tell them enough.

What the focus groups revealed: three distinct perspectives

Focus groups explored not just how much information people wanted, but why – and what they thought would happen if they got it. Three distinct positions emerged.

- **Perspective 1: more transparency would cause hysteria**

  Some participants believed the public cannot handle full and frank information about national security threats. Reasons varied: low panic thresholds, information overload, fatigue from everyday concerns. Many placed themselves in this category – they didn't want to know everything.

  > 'I think the government's definitely withholding information and I think it's because they think knowing is just going to cause hysteria … but do I want to know all of it? Probably not.'
  >
  > **Woman, 25-34, SA, regional**
  >
  > 'You would probably have a nation that half the time are in panic about stuff that's never going to happen. They'd be clearing the supermarket shelves, they'd be absolutely in panic.'
  >
  > **Man, 55+, NSW, metro, former soldier**

  Others cited strategic risks: disclosing threats or vulnerabilities could provide intelligence to hostile actors, signal gaps in capability, encourage copycat behaviour, or strain diplomatic relations. For these participants, selective disclosure was not paternalism but prudence. This group implicitly trusted security agencies to manage information appropriately. They saw limits on disclosure as reasonable – even protective.

- **Perspective 2: transparency as democratic bedrock**

  Other participants saw government communication as a central tenet of democracy. More information would bolster public trust and confidence while empowering individuals to contribute to national security.

  > 'I think the more the public have, it helps everyone to stay safe and secure … the fact is, the more you know is the better, obviously, for everyone.'
  >
  > **Man, 35-54, NSW, business owner**

  But these participants weren't naive about the information environment. They acknowledged that simply increasing the volume of official communication could have unintended consequences – misinterpretation, media distortion, public confusion.

  Their solution: pair greater transparency with investment in media literacy. Rather than withholding information because the public might misunderstand it, government should equip citizens to navigate complex information. This group generally expressed lower levels of faith in government and frustration at feeling patronised by a system that assumed they couldn't handle the truth.

- **Perspective 3: government actively obfuscates**

  A third group harboured deeper distrust of government and of mainstream media. They believed government deliberately concealed information the public had a right to know – such as corporate dealings or relations with countries with poor human rights records.

  > 'I think more could be done … all of the news companies are quite biased. I think it would be good to have … more dedicated to just straight news. No emotion behind any of it, no political agenda, just pure: this is what has been done.'
  >
  > **Woman, 18-24, VIC, rural**
  >
  > 'There'll be news reports, politicians saying all these different things … it's hard sometimes to understand what should be taken seriously, or what is just a government or opposition party trying to make a political game.'
  >
  > **Man, 35-54, QLD, metro, analyst**

For these participants, the issue was not how much information should be shared but whether any official or establishment source could be trusted. Media were seen as biased or captured; government and politicians as serving interests other than the public's.

Media literacy as the common thread

Across all three positions, media literacy emerged as a critical bottleneck.

- Those who favoured continued limits on disclosure worried about how greater releases of threat information could be distorted.
- Those who favoured transparency saw media literacy as the solution to that distortion.
- Those who distrusted all sources wanted 'straight news' that they believed didn't currently exist.

The tension played out within focus groups themselves. One young woman described watching media literacy decline in real time:

> 'We just kind of believe the first thing that we see … I find sometimes when I'm having a conversation with people, and I'm like, that's not what they're talking about. But people [are] kind of just losing that media literacy now.'
>
> **Woman, 25–34, NSW, metro, financial accountant**

Yet others maintained that individual effort could bridge the gap:

> 'I think it's within the individual's capacity to try to stay informed on what really is happening … it's easy to search something up after you hear something that's happened.'
>
> **Man, 18–24, NSW, metro, teacher**

The implication: more disclosure without improved literacy may not build trust – it may simply provide more material for distortion. Investment in media literacy is not peripheral to security communication; it may be foundational.

Independent assessment of Australian adults' media literacy skills confirms that capacity to evaluate online information varies significantly across age, education, and socioeconomic groups – with older Australians and those with lower formal education most vulnerable to misinformation.[16]

16 Notley, T, Chambers, S, Park, S & Dezuanni, M 2024, Adult Media Literacy in 2024: Australian Attitudes, Experiences and Needs, Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University, Parramatta.

SPOTLIGHT: DISINFORMATION

Disinformation occupies a distinctive position in the data. It was recognised as both serious and highly likely – yet Australians rated its catastrophic potential far below threats like military attack or climate change.

- 73% rated disinformation as a serious threat.
- 81% considered that disinformation was likely to 'happen as a threat to Australia' within five years, with 25% saying 'almost certain'.
- But only 8% rated the consequences as 'catastrophic' – the lowest catastrophic rating among the top five most serious threats.

The demographic profile is unusual: men rate disinformation more seriously than women (57% versus 49%) – one of the few threats where men expressed greater concern. Worry rose sharply with age, peaking at 59% among 65–74 year-olds, while 18–24 year-olds are least concerned (37%). Australian-born respondents perceive significantly greater threat than those born in non-English-speaking countries (75% versus 64%).

The attribution gap: across all focus groups, participants could describe the problem vividly – feeling overwhelmed by information volume, unable to distinguish truth from falsehood, distrustful of media, platforms, and political actors. But when it came to identifying who was generating and spreading disinformation, understanding was shallow. Foreign election interference and state-sponsored information operations were referenced – particularly by men in the 25–34 and 55+ cohorts – but rarely with specific mechanisms or vulnerabilities articulated.

The gendered experience: men emphasised the manipulative and political dimensions: propaganda, manufactured consent, state-sponsored operations. Women focused on personal impacts: emotional exhaustion, distrust, and the difficulty of navigating the information landscape for their families. Several women described 'doom-scrolling' spirals followed by complete withdrawal from news – disengagement as self-protection.

The connective tissue: disinformation does not operate in isolation. It amplifies other anxieties, stokes division, political polarisation and extremism, and erodes the institutional trust upon which security responses depend in a democracy. It is the threat that makes every other threat harder to address. Two gaps are notable: the low catastrophic rating suggests Australians conceive of disinformation as a pervasive problem but not quite a structural threat to democratic resilience. And the attribution gap means a threat that is widely felt remains poorly understood.

In sum, our findings suggest disinformation is a threat whose cumulative damage is hard to see or measure until it has already corroded the foundations of an open and trust-based society.

SPOTLIGHT: STATE AND TERRITORY PERCEPTIONS

Concern about national security is not uniformly distributed across Australia. Our survey data reveals meaningful divergences between jurisdictions. The Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory sit at opposite ends of almost every measure. Queensland and South Australia lead the mainland states on anxiety about national security. Tasmania's concerns cluster differently from every other jurisdiction. These are not statistical noise: they reflect the distinct geographic, demographic, and economic circumstances that shape how Australian's dispersed and diverse population experiences and thinks about security risks.

The Northern Territory: highest threat anxiety, lowest confidence

The Northern Territory is the clearest outlier in the State and Territory data. NT respondents recorded the highest seriousness ratings of any jurisdiction for 9 out of the 15 threats presented in our July 2025 survey. AI-enabled attacks (89% reported this as a 'moderate' or 'major' threat), disruption to critical supplies (88%), severe economic crisis (86%), introduced disease threatening animals and plants (76%), terrorist attack (73%), and deliberate spread of false information (84%) were all rated more seriously by NT residents than by any other state or territory. This concentration is unique – no other jurisdiction led across so many categories simultaneously.

- Disruption to critical supplies: NT 88% – 17-percentage-point spread from highest to lowest jurisdiction
- Terrorist attack: NT 73% – 23-percentage-point spread, the second-largest divergence of any threat measured
- Severe economic crisis: NT 86% – 14-percentage point spread
- Use of AI to attack Australians: NT 89% – 14-percentage-point spread

The knowledge gap compounds this picture. Just over a quarter (26%) of NT residents felt knowledgeable about national security – the lowest result across jurisdiction, and 15 percentage points below ACT residents, where the highest level of knowledge was self-reported.

The ACT: a different security lens

ACT respondents offered a markedly different profile. They were the most likely of any jurisdiction to feel knowledgeable about national security (41%) – yet the least likely to report being worried about national security (46%) or to believe Australia needs to do more to strengthen its national security (55%). The ACT is the jurisdiction where security policy is made. The impact of climate change (80%) and the deliberate spread of false information (80%) attracted their highest seriousness ratings in this jurisdiction, and attack on critical infrastructure (65%) also sat above the national average. By contrast, ACT residents recorded the lowest seriousness ratings of any jurisdiction for a terrorist attack (50%), foreign military attack (33%), and a crime wave (33%). The last of these represents a 30-percentage-point gap with Tasmania – the largest jurisdictional divergence of any threat in the dataset.

- Crime wave: ACT 33% versus TAS 63% – a 30-percentage-point spread, the largest divergence of any threat
- Impact of climate change: ACT 80% versus QLD 62% – an 18-percentage-point spread
- Violent unrest between groups: ACT 41% versus TAS 61% – a 19-percentage-point spread

Tasmania: crime, climate, and low confidence

Tasmania's threat profile was dominated by two concerns that at first glance may appear confounding: crime and climate. Tasmanians recorded the highest seriousness ratings for perceptions of a crime wave as a potential security threat (63%), and of violent unrest between groups of Australians (61%). They also held some of the highest concerns about the impact of climate change (75%). This combination suggests a population whose security concerns are shaped more by social and environmental experience than by geopolitical threat. Tasmania also had the lowest self-professed knowledge levels about national security of any jurisdiction outside the NT (26%), and the weakest demand for government action to strengthen national security (56%).

Queensland and South Australia: the most security-anxious mainland states

South Australia and Queensland consistently led the mainland states on attitudinal questions about national security. South Australia recorded the highest worry about national security of any jurisdiction (55%), the strongest demand for government action to strengthen national security (67%), and the highest seriousness ratings for foreign interference (77%). Queensland led the mainland on seriousness ratings for the potential threat of foreign military attack (48%).

Where Australians agree: the limits of Federal divergence

Jurisdictional divergence should not obscure a more fundamental finding: there are generally high threat perceptions across all jurisdictions. Even the lowest jurisdiction ratings on severe economic crisis (TAS 72%), foreign interference (ACT 70%), and disinformation (VIC 71%) represent clear majorities. The geographic variation in this data exists within a context of broadly shared security anxiety. The narrowest spread in the jurisdictional dataset is on government communication: the gap between the jurisdiction most likely to say government shares too little security information (WA 56%) and the one most accepting of current information-sharing levels (ACT 49%) is just 7%.

However, a single national resilience narrative will not reach all Australians equally. The variations observed point towards the need for communication, engagement and policy approaches suited to each jurisdiction – just as our parallel community engagement interviews around the country showed a widespread localisation of security concerns.

A note on jurisdictional sample sizes

State and territory breakdowns are provided to illuminate regional patterns, but findings for smaller jurisdictions should be treated with appropriate caution. Sample sizes vary considerably across states and territories: New South Wales (n=1,849), Victoria (n=1,554), Queensland (n=1,191), Western Australia (n=564), South Australia (n=522), Tasmania (n=178), the ACT (n=150), and the Northern Territory (n=33).

For larger jurisdictions – NSW, Victoria, and Queensland in particular – the sample is sufficient to support confident interpretation of findings. For Tasmania and the ACT, findings are indicative and directionally reliable, though margins of error are wider. For the Northern Territory, the sample is relatively small and findings should be treated as preliminary. Despite this, the patterns warrant attention – potentially as a prompt for further research.

Weighted data has been used throughout to correct for sampling imbalances relative to the Australian population, but weighting cannot fully compensate for very small base samples.

DETAILED STATE AND TERRITORY BREAKDOWNS ARE PRESENTED IN THE APPENDIX (TABLE E.1. AND E.2.)

NATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

This research identifies where public sentiment, perceived preparedness gaps, and trust dynamics create openings for policy action. The opportunities identified below are grounded in converging evidence across the national surveys and focus groups. They are not prescriptions, but areas where evidence suggests fertile ground exists for action by governments and parliaments at all levels.

1. Reframe security communication around community safety and everyday resilience

Australians are clear on what security means to them: safe and peaceful communities, selected as the top priority by 35% (64% including second preferences) and consistent across every demographic measured. The abstract 'strengthening national security' rates a distant fourth. The threats rated most serious – AI-enabled attacks, economic crisis, supply chain disruption, disinformation, the impact of climate change – are generally those that touch daily life, not distant geopolitics or direct military threats. Focus groups confirmed this hierarchy and revealed its logic. Participants framed security through housing stability, cost of living, protection from cyber scams and community cohesion – not great power competition.

The opportunity: security narratives anchored in protecting everyday life may gain broader purchase than those emphasising military capability or strategic competition. This is not about abandoning conventional security concerns at a time when geopolitics is become more perilous – it is about meaningfully connecting them to what Australians already care about.

2. Address the preparedness gap through visible action and clear communication on plausible risks

Australians expect disruption but feel the nation is underprepared. No threat in our survey achieved even 20% 'very' or 'fully' prepared ratings. AI-enabled attacks – rated among the most serious threats at 77% – are also the area of greatest perceived vulnerability, with 67% feeling 'not at all' or only 'slightly' prepared. Many other issues, including climate change, disinformation, infrastructure attack, economic crisis and critical supply shocks also show large preparedness deficits and even the highest rating of 16% for the nation being 'very' or 'fully' prepared for military conflict is cold comfort.

Focus groups reinforced this finding. Recent data breaches were cited as evidence that institutions cannot protect people. There was widespread agreement that technology is outpacing government's capacity to regulate. And our community engagement reinforced this: participants distinguished between resilience in spirit – which they saw as strong – and resilience in capability, which they saw as struggling or weak.

The opportunity: investment in preparedness measures, coordination and communication could focus on the range of threats Australians most expect. At the same time, if public perceptions of risk and preparedness are at odds with government's own assessments, this gap could

inform a dialogue to reframe public expectations. The objective is neither alarm nor complacency, but public confidence across plausible risk scenarios. Ultimately, projecting preparedness is a part of reassurance and deterrence alike.

3. Leverage agency credibility for security communication

A majority of Australians (53%) believe government shares too little information about security threats. But focus groups revealed a caveat: trust depends on who delivers the message. Security agencies such as ASIO, ASD and the AFP were described as professional, mission-focused, and credible. Politicians and media, by contrast, were seen as exploiting security issues for advantage.

The opportunity: agency-led, depoliticised communication – such as ASIO's Annual Threat Assessment – may land where ministerial announcements or political speeches cannot. This does not mean removing democratic accountability – rather engaging a range of trusted messengers to shape whether the message is heard and believed.

4. Invest in media literacy as a security-adjacent capability

Australia's information environment has deteriorated. News avoidance is rising, trust in media institutions is falling, and algorithmically curated content has made it harder for Australians to distinguish reliable from unreliable sources. These are not perceptions unique to our research – they are documented trends that provide context for our findings on government communication.[17]

Across all focus groups, media literacy emerged as a bottleneck. Participants described information overload, algorithmic manipulation, and declining capacity to distinguish reliable from unreliable sources. Only 35% of survey respondents agreed they would know where to find information about national security; only 34% reported being knowledgeable about security issues.

The demand signal was explicit. Participants called for practical countermeasures, including nationally coordinated media literacy education tailored to different age groups. There was recognition that individual vigilance has limits when the information environment is structurally compromised.

The opportunity: investment in media literacy – across age cohorts, through schools, workplaces, and community channels – would build public capacity to evaluate threat information, resist disinformation and manipulation, and engage more constructively on security issues and the broader direction of our democracy.

5. Broaden who feels invited into the national security conversation

Security concern is not evenly distributed – and neither is the sense of being heard. Older, regional, less educated, and Australian-born citizens report the highest anxiety about security. They are also the demographics most likely to feel the government shares too little information. Meanwhile Australians born in non-English speaking countries tend to hold lower threat perceptions, as do young Australians on most issues, creating a type kind of distance from the national security debate.

The gender dimension is also important. A 23% gap separates men (46%) and women (23%) on self-reported security knowledge. Women consistently underestimated their understanding while demonstrating rich, grounded analysis of how threats affect families, communities and the nation.

The opportunity: broaden national security consultation and communication to include and encourage the widest range of voices. Articulate security in ways that more explicitly encompass day-to-day or emerging concerns that different parts of the population hold but may not see narrowly as 'security'. This is both democratically valuable and strategically necessary – consent or 'social licence' for difficult decisions cannot rest on a narrow demographic base or tactical assumptions about political constituencies.

6. Polycrisis is here — and security policy must reckon with it

For many Australians, a sense of crisis is not hypothetical – it is here. Economic crisis was rated as a serious threat by 75% of respondents, up 10% between November 2024 and July 2025. Among 18-24 year-olds, 31% said the consequence of an economic crisis would be 'catastrophic'. Our focus groups confirmed that economic hardship is already the day-to-day experience of many Australians. Meanwhile in our surveys, climate change was judged the most inevitable threat. Our surveys show that Australians' concerns about many other security risks are also rising, and that multiple

17 Park, S, Fisher, C, McGuinness, K & Lee, JY 2025, Digital News Report: Australia 2025, News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra, Canberra.

high-consequence shocks are anticipated.

Looking beyond our shores, it is widely viewed that global order is deteriorating with cascading disruptions that span politics, war, economics, energy and technology. The term ‘polycrisis’ became fashionable a few years ago. It applies more than ever.

This confluence of risk and risk awareness presents not so much an opportunity for policymakers as an acute challenge. When citizens frame cost-of-living pressures and, say, military preparedness as equivalent security concerns, governments face unrealistic pressure to treat them as such. This could mean potentially trading investments to counter long term, low probability risk for short term, politically visible gains. An expansive security framing, uncritically adopted, risks obscuring government's responsibility to act as insurer of last resort for catastrophic but unlikely events, and to make intergenerational bets that markets and electoral cycles will not.

The challenge is therefore one of framing with precision. Acknowledging current economic and climate hardship as security-relevant is both honest and necessary – Australians are not wrong to feel insecure. But policymakers should be alert to the temptation to treat all security concerns as equivalent. When Australians were given analytical tools to distinguish likelihood from consequence – as in our risk matrix – they demonstrated exactly this capacity, identifying foreign military attack and severe economic crisis as the most high-impact threats while making meaningful distinctions between them. The task is not to validate every concern equally, but to help citizens and decision-makers alike understand which risks demand sustained, long-term investment precisely because no short-term political incentive will ever adequately price them.

PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS

This initiative has established a baseline on how Australians understand national security. The ANU National Security College will build on this foundation through the following activities.

Return findings to communities: presenting results back to a selection of communities visited during our consultations – demonstrating reciprocity and testing whether findings resonate with those who contributed.

Produce state and territory briefs: building tailored summaries drawing on consultation data to highlight jurisdiction-specific concerns, perceived preparedness gaps, and opportunities for state/territory policymakers and local governments.

Explore research collaboration: exploring research collaboration opportunities with other organisations with complementary goals, networks or insights.

Contribute to policy processes: offering findings to relevant reviews, strategies, and parliamentary inquiries as independent evidence on public attitudes.

Investigate a longitudinal tracking program: exploring interest in regular survey waves using consistent core questions, enabling measurement of how attitudes shift over time – potentially transforming this one-off study into an enduring national resource.

Institutionalise community engagement: moving from time-bound consultations to a standing program of regional engagement – annual visits to a rotating selection of communities, maintaining relationships and capturing how local perspectives evolve.

Deepen demographic understanding: commissioning specialised academic research into parts of the Australian community with distinct security perspectives, modelled on a report on First Nations voices that was generated alongside the present study.

Test communication approaches: exploring partnership with government to pilot and evaluate different approaches to security communication – testing what messengers, framings, and channels may best assist understanding, trust, and preparedness.

Track the preparedness gap: working with government, emergency management, and resilience agencies to correlate public sentiment against objective preparedness indicators.

Build international partnerships: collaborating with counterpart institutions in Five Eyes, Indo-Pacific and likeminded partner nations to enable comparative analysis of public attitudes across democracies facing similar security and geopolitical pressures.

Inform parliamentary briefings: leveraging our existing program of trusted briefings for parliamentarians and their staff to ensure lawmakers have direct access to these insights.

Engage young Australians: utilising insights from this research to inform the College's ANU academic teaching as well as engagement with university students and other youth cohorts, including via the National Security College's online professional development program for high school teachers.

Supplement professional development for public officials: embedding this research into the curriculum of our core program of executive and professional education for government officials across the Australian national security community.

TEAM

Advisory Committee

Tom Rogers AO

Distinguished Advisor
ANU National Security College

Tom Rogers is the former Australian Electoral Commissioner, serving from 2014 to 2024. He is a member of the Advisory Board for the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.

Rebecca Skinner PSM GAICD

Distinguished Advisor
ANU National Security College

Rebecca Skinner is the former CEO of Services Australia. She also served in the Department of Defence as Associate Secretary and as Deputy Secretary for Strategic Policy and Intelligence.

Professor Duncan Lewis AO, DSC, CSC

Professor in the Practice of National Security
ANU National Security College

Duncan Lewis is Professor in the Practice of National Security at NSC. He is the former Director General of ASIO, Commander of the Australian Army's Special Operations Command, Secretary of the Department of Defence, National Security Advisor to two Prime Ministers and Ambassador to Belgium, Luxembourg, the European Union and NATO.

Dr Carolyn Bull

Distinguished Advisor
ANU National Security College

Carolyn Bull is the Executive Director of RAND Australia – the Indo-Pacific arm of the world's largest policy research organisation, RAND. Carolyn previously served as the ANU National Security College's Deputy Head.

Professor Jennifer Westacott AC

Distinguished Advisor
ANU National Security College

Jennifer Westacott commenced as Chancellor of Western Sydney University in January 2023. Prior to this, she spent 12 years as Chief Executive of the Business Council of Australia.

Authors

Professor Rory Medcalf AM FAIIA

Head of College
ANU National Security College

Professor Rory Medcalf AM FAIIA has been Head of the College since 2015. He has led its expansion into policy impact, futures analysis, parliamentary engagement, international dialogue and community consultations, in addition to its core activity in executive development, academic education and research. This builds on a career spanning diplomacy, intelligence, think tanks and journalism.

Tim Wilford

Director, Community Consultations
ANU National Security College

Tim Wilford joined the College in January 2020, from Four Corners, the ABC's flagship investigative journalism program. He is Director of the Community Consultations initiative at NSC, leading Australia's most comprehensive study of public attitudes to national security, risk and resilience.

Strategic engagement and research

Sally Bulkeley

Deputy Head of College
ANU National Security College

Andrew Ramsay

Director, Program Design and Delivery
ANU National Security College

Aisling Philippa

Policy Officer
ANU National Security College

Isabella Zhao

Policy & Engagement Coordinator
ANU National Security College

Brooke Mayfield

Senior Engagement Officer
ANU National Security College

Angus Smith

Research and Administration Assistant
ANU National Security College

METHODOLOGY

This study builds on a tradition of systematic survey research into Australian attitudes to defence and foreign policy stretching back to 1945, most comprehensively documented by McAllister and Chubb (2021), while extending that tradition to encompass the broader conception of national security – including economic, environmental, information, and social dimensions – that Australians themselves describe.

Comparable research exists at both the international and domestic level. The World Economic Forum's annual Global Risks Report tracks expert assessments of systemic threats; the Ipsos World Affairs and Security Report – produced in partnership with the Halifax International Security Forum – measures public attitudes to security threat salience across 30 countries. Within Australia, the Lowy Institute Poll has tracked public attitudes to foreign policy and selected security threats since 2005 – the most consistent longitudinal baseline available. Each of these contributions is valuable. What distinguishes this study is its integrated design: nationally representative survey data combined with deliberative focus groups, community consultation at scale across every state and territory, and written public submissions – examined together to understand not only what Australians think about security, but why, and on what terms they are prepared to engage with it.

Accreditation and ethical compliance

All aspects of this research were conducted in accordance with ISO 20252:2019 (Market, Opinion and Social Research Standard), The Research Society Code of Professional Behaviour, the Australian Privacy Principles, and the Market and Social Research Privacy Principles. The Social Research Centre (SRC) is an accredited Company Partner of The Research Society, with all senior staff full members and several holding Qualified Professional Researcher (QPR) accreditation. SRC is also a member of the Australian Data and Insights Association (ADIA). From an ethical practice perspective, all elements of the research were undertaken in compliance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

Survey

To date, three waves of survey data collection have been conducted.

- Wave 1 of the research was conducted in 2024 (12 November – 25 November 2024)
- Wave 2 was undertaken in 2025 (14 July – 28 July 2025)
- Wave 3 was conducted in 2026 (2-15 February 2026)

The primary in-scope population is Australian residents aged 18 years and older, to collect data that is nationally representative of the Australian public.

The Social Research Centre's Life in Australia™ was the primary data collection mode to provide NSC with high-quality and defendable population estimates for Australians aged 18 years and older. More than 20,000 surveys have been completed via Life in Australia™ across Wave 1 (n=6,013), Wave 2 (n=6,049) and Wave 3 (n= 8,162).

Life in Australia™ is Australia's first and only national probability-based online panel, established by the Social Research Centre in November 2016. Panel members are randomly recruited via landline telephone, mobile telephone, or postal address – rather than being self-selected volunteers – and agree to participate in surveys on a regular basis. Unlike opt-in research panels, Life in Australia™ includes Australians with and without internet access; those unable or unwilling to complete surveys online may do so by telephone, ensuring the offline population is represented. Because recruitment uses probability-based sampling methods, every Australian has a chance of being invited to join the panel, enabling the calculation of sampling errors and confidence intervals that accurately reflect the precision of population estimates. Research conducted by the Social Research Centre demonstrates that Life in Australia™ produces survey estimates of comparable accuracy to other major probability survey approaches in Australia.[18]

A weight was calculated for each respondent to the survey, to account for differences between the demographic profile of respondents and that of the general Australian community. These weights should be used in any analyses undertaken of the dataset to ensure that the survey results represent the population. Respondents were aligned with the population on a broad range of socio-demographic characteristics – age, gender, education, household structure, language spoken at home, and state of residence. The population distributions for these characteristics were obtained from the 2021 Census (ABS, 2021).

Please note: for ease of reading, responses for values less than 5% have generally been omitted on charts. Results are shown to zero decimal places. Due to rounding, some results in charts or tables may not add to 100%.

Limitations

The survey question wording for AI-enabled threats – 'the use of artificial intelligence to attack Australian people or businesses' in Waves 1 and Wave 2, and 'a major cyberattack targeting Australian people or businesses' in Wave 3 – was designed for accessibility to a general public audience rather than technical precision. Focus group discussions confirm that respondents held concrete referents for these threats, including scams, deepfakes, and AI-generated disinformation, suggesting the high concern ratings reflect considered threat perception rather than generalised anxiety about emerging technology. Readers should nonetheless note that some respondents may have interpreted these items through the lens of familiar cyber threats more broadly.

Focus Groups

The following outlines the sampling and recruitment approaches used for the research presented in this section, the design and implementation of data collection, the analytical approach as well as limitations.

Sampling and recruitment

The qualitative research used a purposive sampling strategy. The sampling frame was designed with reference to survey findings, to allow for qualitative analysis of how perspectives on national security differed across the two variables where the greatest divergence emerged in the quantitative data – gender and age. A total of eight focus groups were conducted with participants grouped according to their gender and age categories. This approach allowed for more cohesive conversations amongst groups – with the working hypothesis being that life stage was likely to significantly influence an individual's perspectives on national security – but also allowed us to unpack divergence and diversity within different cohorts.

All participants selected for focus groups were drawn from the pool of respondents who completed Wave 2 (July 2025) of the *Securing Our Future* survey. An additional question was added at the end asking participants if they would be interested in potentially being contacted for a follow-up qualitative study attached to the project. Those who consented were filtered according to the cohorts of interest and 6 participants were selected for each of the eight groups. Participant selection strived to achieve a reasonable mix of representation across secondary characteristics such as state of residence, geographical location, income bracket and industry/occupation.

The table below summarises the final characteristic of participants recruited:

18 Social Research Centre (2022), Results of the 2022 Australian Comparative Study of Survey Methods (ACSSM). Available at: https://csrm.cass.anu.edu.au/research/publications/results-2022-australian-comparative-study-survey-methods-acssm. Further information about Life in Australia™ is available at: https://srcentre.com.au/lifeinaustralia/panel/

Despite careful screening and confirmation of availability during recruitment, a small number of participants were unable to attend due to last-minute changes in personal circumstances (e.g. illness or competing commitments). As is standard practice for focus groups, we over-recruited to mitigate this risk, however, this resulted in a slight variation between the target of six participants and the final attendance numbers.

Table 2: Focus group composition

Group	Characteristics	Participants
1	Women, 18-24 years old	• Participant 1, VIC, rural, retail worker • Participant 2, WA, metro, student • Participant 3, ACT, metro, public servant • Participant 4, VIC, metro, student • Participant 5, ACT, metro student
2	Men, 18-24 years old	• Participant 1, NSW, metro, teacher • Participant 2, VIC, metro, airport staff • Participant 3, ACT, metro, student
3	Women, 25-34 years old	• Participant 1, QLD, metro, mother • Participant 2, NSW, metro, financial accountant • Participant 3, VIC, metro, teacher • Participant 4, NSW, metro, healthcare worker • Participant 5, SA, regional, business partner
4	Men, 25-34 years old	• Participant 1, NSW, metro, childcare worker • Participant 2, QLD, metro, mental health worker • Participant 3, NSW, metro, artist • Participant 4, NSW, metro, accountant
5	Women, 35-54 years old	• Participant 1, NSW, rural, mother • Participant 2, VIC, metro, business owner • Participant 3, TAS, rural, healthcare worker • Participant 4, SA, metro, quality specialist • Participant 5, QLD, rural, public servant • Participant 6, SA, metro, logistics manager
6	Men, 35-54 years old	• Participant 1, NSW, metro, barber • Participant 2, VIC, metro, lawyer • Participant 3, QLD, metro, analyst • Participant 4, NSW, regional, teacher • Participant 5, NSW, metro, business owner
7	Women, 55+ years old	• Participant 1, SA, regional, public servant • Participant 2, QLD, metro, nurse • Participant 3, NSW, metro, court administrator • Participant 4, NSW, metro, retired
8	Men, 55+ years old	• Participant 1, SA, regional, tradie • Participant 2, NSW, metro, former soldier • Participant 3, NSW, metro, retired • Participant 4, ACT, metro, retired • Participant 5, QLD, metro, business owner

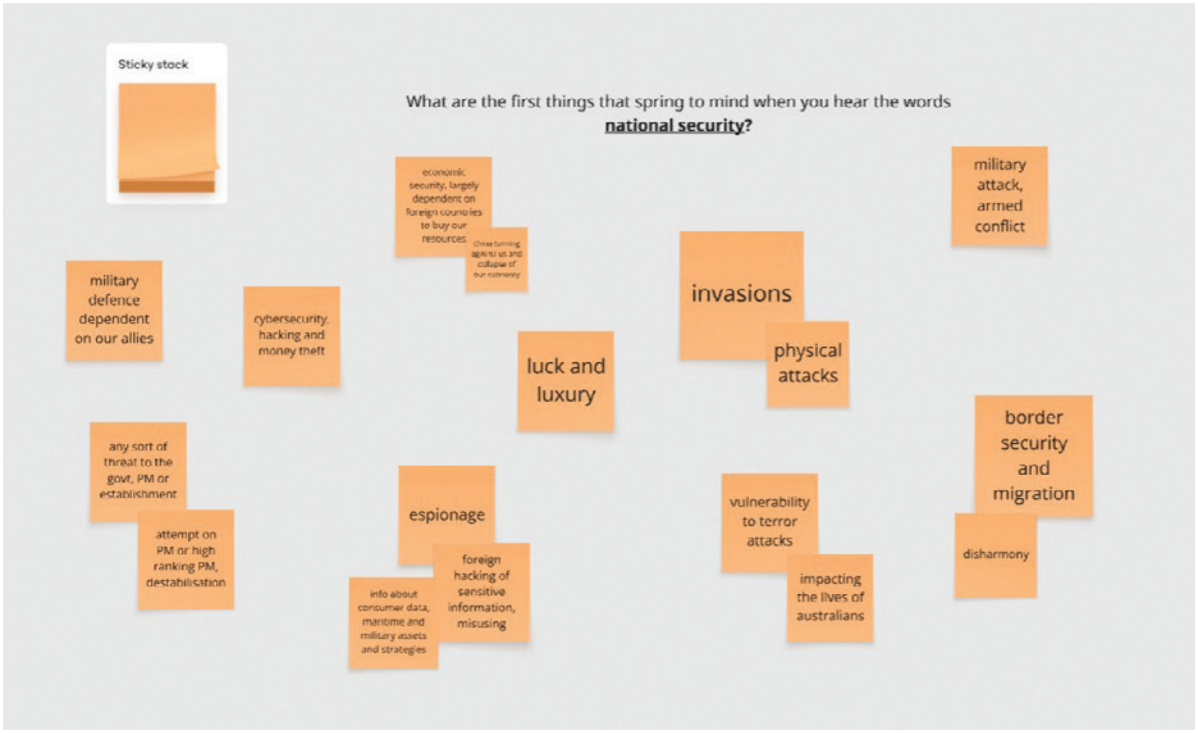
Study design and implementation

Focus groups were conducted virtually over Zoom using videoconferencing and lasted for approximately 90 minutes. A Miro board was also used by the SRC moderators to show participants stimulus and to document brainstorming activities.

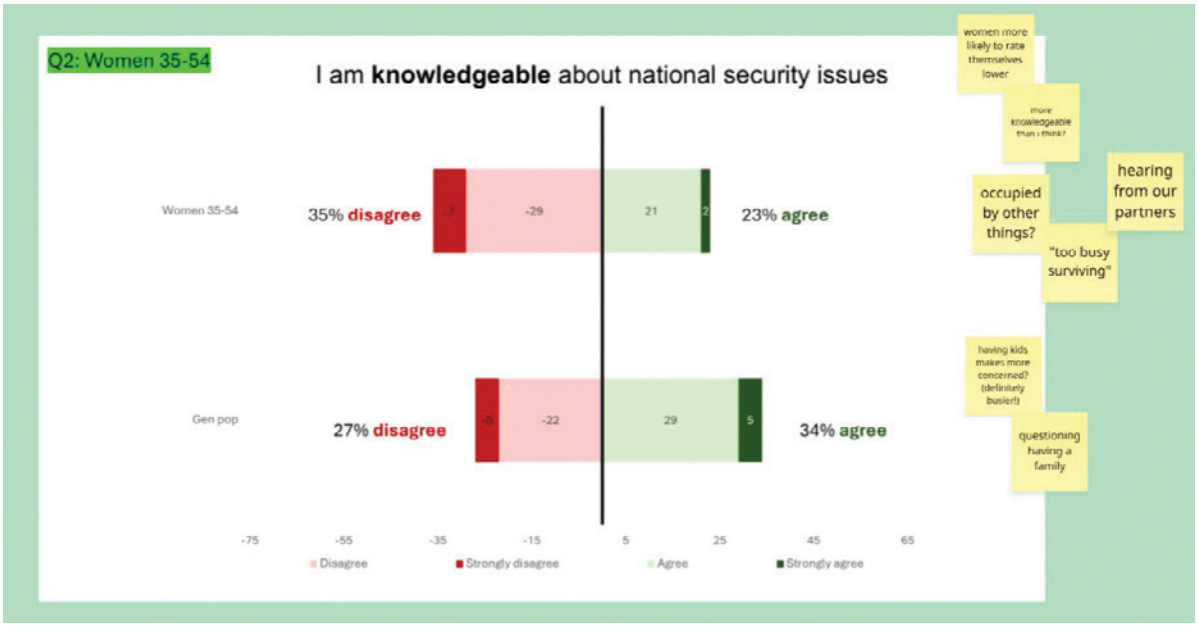
Each focus group involved three stages, guided by tailored stimulus drawn from Wave 2 (July 2025) of the survey. The overarching structure of each group discussions was as follows:

Top-of-mind, knowledge and worry

Each focus group began with a top-of-mind response to the question *"What are the first things that come to mind when you hear the words national security?"*. Each respondent was given ample time to list out the initial ideas and reactions. Moderators kept the conversations about specific security topics general at this point. Participants were then asked how knowledgeable they thought they were about national security and how concerned they were about national security.



Miro excerpt from top-of-mind brainstorm



Miro excerpt from self-perceived knowledge comparison

Participants were then shown charts from the survey findings that compared how their specific cohort answered questions about self-perceived knowledge and level of worry compared to the general population. The participatory analysis underpinning this section allowed for respondents to put in their own words why people like them think the way they do about national security.

Threats of greatest concern

The second stage varied according to the moderators' discretion of what would work best for the group.

Participants were asked to respond to the question "Thinking about what might happen in the next 10 years, what types of threats or concerns are at the top of your mind?". Differentiating from the top-of-mind brainstorm, the purpose of this question was to zoom in on the security issues for which participants had the greatest level of concern and the ones they thought would be most likely to impact them in the next 10 years. This section differed in length for different groups – some groups were ready to unpack specific issues in detail, while for other groups, the conversation did not vary far from the initial brainstorm.

Participants were then shown the full 15 items examined in the Wave 2 survey. Discussion at this section was usually brief and was primarily an opportunity to allow any other issues to surface that respondents had not yet considered, and to examine whether participants felt that the list of items was sufficient, sensible or in some way inappropriate. Note that respondents were not immediately offered specific definitions of each of these items – rather, they were asked to interpret them independently. The intention here was to limit the extent to which the moderator might influence particular attention on any given topic.

Miro excerpt on 15 national security threat items

Participants were then told the top three threats for which their cohort attributed the greatest level of threat in the survey findings. Typically, this was used to elicit deeper reflections on specific kinds of security threats, in which participants were asked how concerned they were about the issue, what they thought the specific consequences of the issue would be in their own life, and the extent to which they believed Australia was prepared to deal with this threat. In most focus groups, participants largely aligned with the top 3 threats presented to them. Where this was not the case, the moderator chose the topic that had garnered the most traction in prior conversation.

Perceptions of actors, roles and responsibilities

The final stage of the discussion focused on participants' perceptions of actors, their roles and responsibilities, and the extent to which they were satisfied with communications provided by official actors on matters of national security. In some conversations, this section naturally blended with the discussion on specific threat items, but where possible, efforts were made to ask generally about the government's communication on national security matters.

Analytical approach

A deductive thematic analysis was employed to interpret the qualitative data collected from focus group discussions. This approach began with a set of predefined themes, informed by the research objectives and the quantitative findings from earlier survey waves. All focus group sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed and systematically coded, with researchers mapping participant responses to the relevant thematic categories.

Data were organised within an analytical matrix, capturing both summary insights and direct participant verbatims relevant to each theme. This process enabled the ability to identify patterns, compare perspectives across demographic groups, and ensure that the analysis remained closely aligned with the Initiative's core questions. The deductive approach also allowed for the recognition of unexpected insights, which were incorporated as sub-themes where appropriate, enriching the overall interpretation of the findings.

Limitations

While this section provides valuable insights into Australians' perceptions of national security, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, as with all qualitative research, the findings reflect broad perspectives and experiences, but are not intended to be statistically representative. The focus group sample was purposively constructed to capture diversity across age and gender, but the relatively small number of participants in each group means that the results reflect the views and experiences of those who took part, rather than the entire Australian community. This is particularly true regarding geographic spread. While efforts were made to include participants from across Australia, daylight saving time zone differences can hinder participation from some states. Similarly, representation within the groups skews towards metro centres.

Additionally, the voluntary nature of participation may also have resulted in a sample skewed toward individuals with a particular interest in national security issues.

Finally, the dynamic and evolving nature of national security means that attitudes and concerns may shift over time, and the findings should be interpreted as a snapshot of views at the time of data collection. These limitations are inherent to qualitative research but are balanced by the depth of understanding and contextual nuance that this approach provides.

Research context

The eight months between survey Wave 1 (November 2024) and survey Wave 2 (July 2025) were marked by a succession of domestic and international events that could have plausibly contributed to the heightening of public anxiety measured between survey waves.

Donald Trump's return to the White House in January 2025 brought uncertainty about Australia's most important alliance. Economic disruption followed in April 2025 when Australia received no exemption from sweeping US tariffs. In late February 2025, unannounced Chinese naval live-fire exercises occurred in international waters between Australia and New Zealand, followed by a circumnavigation of Australia by the Chinese naval task group. The war in Ukraine and conflict in Gaza continued, with the latter triggering reverberations through Australian communities. These include large-scale pro-Palestinian protests, arson and vandalism targeting Jewish-owned businesses and synagogues, and heightened political tension regarding foreign interference. A federal Australian election in May, fought substantially on cost-of-living pressures, both reflected and amplified public economic anxiety. This research cannot attribute the measured increases in worry and threat perception between waves to any specific event. Nonetheless, readers should interpret the Wave 1 to Wave 2 changes in this context: Australians were surveyed at two distinct moments in an unusually turbulent period, and the ambient conditions of public life shifted considerably between them.

APPENDIX

A. Survey instruments

Table A.1 Questionnaires

SURVEY ONE: NOVEMBER 2024

Q#	Question	Response frame
Q1	When you see or hear the term 'national security', what comes to mind? *Open-ended. Recorded verbatim (500 characters). Asked in Wave 1 only.*	Free text
Q2	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? a) I am worried about Australia's national security b) I am knowledgeable about national security issues c) I would know where to find information about national security d) I would like my voice to be heard on national security issues e) Australia needs to do more to strengthen its national security *Statement (a) tested in Waves 1, 2 and 3.* *Statements (b) and (c) tested in Waves 1 and 2.* *Statements (d) and (e) tested in Wave 1 only.*	Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree (Don't know) / Not sure (Refused) / Prefer not to say *Statements randomised.* *Response frame rotated.*

Q3	Thinking now about each of the following possible threats to Australia. In the next 10 years, how serious do you think each threat is to Australia? 1. Australia being involved in military conflict with another country 2. A foreign military attack on Australia 3. A foreign country interfering in Australia's politics, government, economy or society 4. The deliberate spread of false information to mislead the Australian public and harm their interests 5. Disruption to critical supplies due to a crisis overseas 6. An introduced disease that poses a widespread threat to Australia's animals and plants 7. An attack on Australia's critical infrastructure like transport, energy or communications 8. The use of artificial intelligence to attack Australian people or businesses 9. A terrorist attack in Australia 10. Violent unrest between different groups of Australians 11. A crime wave threatening Australians' personal safety 12. A global health pandemic 13. A severe economic crisis 14. The impact of climate change 15. Major natural disasters on a scale not seen here before *Statements randomised and displayed in three banks of five. Asked in Waves 1 and 2.*	1. – No threat at all 2. 3. 4. 5. – Very real threat (Don't know) / Not sure (Refused) / Prefer not to say *Response frame rotated.* **Note: response frame updated in Wave 2:** 1. No threat at all 2. Minor threat 3. Neutral 4. Moderate threat 5. Major threat (Don't know) / Not sure (Refused) / Prefer not to say
Q4a	Here is a list of aims for Australia in the next five years. If you had to choose among these aims, which one would you choose? 1. Increasing Australia's economic prosperity 2. Strengthening Australia's security 3. Upholding Australia's democratic rights and freedoms 4. Ensuring Australia's communities are peaceful and safe *Options randomised. Asked in Waves 1 only.*	Single selection from list (Don't know) / Not sure (Refused) / Prefer not to say
Q4b	Of the remaining aims for Australia in the next five years, which one would you choose? *Shown in same order as Q4a, without option selected in Q4a. Only asked if a substantive option was selected in Q4a.*	Single selection from remaining options (Don't know) / Not sure (Refused) / Prefer not to say

SURVEY TWO: JULY 2025

Q#	Question	Response frame
Q1	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? a) I am worried about Australia's national security b) I am knowledgeable about national security issues e) Australia needs to do more to strengthen its national security *Statements randomised.*	Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree (Don't know) / Not sure (Refused) / Prefer not to say *Response frame rotated.*
Q2	Thinking now about each of the following possible threats to Australia. In the next 10 years, how serious do you think each threat is to Australia? 1. Australia being involved in military conflict with another country 2. A foreign military attack on Australia 3. A foreign country interfering in Australia's politics, government, economy or society 4. The deliberate spread of false information to mislead the Australian public and harm their interests 5. Disruption to critical supplies due to a crisis overseas 6. An introduced disease that poses a widespread threat to Australia's animals and plants 7. An attack on Australia's critical infrastructure like transport, energy or communications 8. The use of artificial intelligence to attack Australian people or businesses 9. A terrorist attack in Australia 10. Violent unrest between different groups of Australians 11. A crime wave threatening Australians' personal safety 12. A global health pandemic 13. A severe economic crisis 14. The impact of climate change 15. Major natural disasters on a scale not seen here before *Statements randomised and displayed in three banks of five.*	1. No threat at all 2. Minor threat 3. Neutral 4. Moderate threat 5. Major threat (Don't know) / Not sure (Refused) / Prefer not to say *Response frame rotated.*

Q3	How likely is this to happen as a threat to Australia over the next 5 years? *Five threats randomly selected from Q2 items rated as minor threat or above were displayed.*	Unlikely Likely Very likely Almost certain (Don't know) / Not sure (Refused) / Prefer not to say *Response frame rotated.*
Q4	If this threat were to occur over the next 5 years, how would you describe the consequences for Australia? *Same five threats as Q3.*	Minor consequence Moderate consequence Major consequence Catastrophic (Don't know) / Not sure (Refused) / Prefer not to say *Response frame rotated.*
Q5	How prepared is Australia to deal with these threats in the next 5 years? *Same five threats as Q3.*	Not prepared at all Slightly prepared Moderately prepared Very prepared Fully prepared (Don't know) / Not sure (Refused) / Prefer not to say *Response frame rotated.*
	In relation to the overall risks and threats just presented, do you think that the Australian Government is generally sharing too little or too much information with the Australian public? *Respondents could click to redisplay the 15 threat items from Q2.*	Far too little Too little Neutral Too much Far too much (Don't know) / Not sure (Refused) / Prefer not to say *Response frame rotated.*

SURVEY THREE: FEBRUARY 2026

Q#	Question	Response frame
Q1	In the next 10 years, how serious do you think each threat is to Australia? 1. A major cyberattack targeting Australian people or businesses 2. Serious and organised crime (homegrown or international) targeting Australian people or businesses 3. Violent extremism targeting a part of the Australian community 4. A terrorist attack in Australia 5. Major natural disasters on a scale not seen here before 6. A global health pandemic 7. A world in which no rules stop the strongest countries doing what they want	1. No threat at all 2. Minor threat 3. Neutral 4. Moderate threat 5. Major threat (Don't know) / Not sure (Refused) / Prefer not to say
Q2	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (a) I am worried about Australia's national security (b) Thinking about the antisemitic terrorist attack at Bondi on 14 December 2025, all Australians can do more to make our communities peaceful and safe	Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree (Don't know) / Not sure (Refused) / Prefer not to say *Statements randomised.* *Response frame rotated.*

B. National priorities

Table B.1 Preference flow – second preference by first preference

		Second choice			
		Increasing Australia's economic prosperity	Strengthening Australia's security	Upholding Australia's democratic rights and freedoms	Ensuring Australia's communities are peaceful and safe
First Choice	Increasing Australia's economic prosperity	0.0%	29.6%	22.3%	48.1%
	Strengthening Australia's security	40.7%	0.0%	25.1%	34.2%
	Upholding Australia's democratic rights and freedoms	28.5%	24.3%	0.0%	47.2%
	Ensuring Australia's communities are peaceful and safe	39.0%	23.1%	37.9%	0.0%

Source: Q4a. Here is a list of aims for Australia in the next five years. If you had to choose among these aims, which one would you choose? And; Of the remaining aims for Australia in the next five years, which one would you choose?

Table B.2 Demographic breakdown

	First preference				Second preference			
	Peaceful & safe communities	Economic prosperity	Democratic rights & freedoms	Strengthening security	Peaceful & safe communities	Economic prosperity	Democratic rights & freedoms	Strengthening security
All respondents	**35%**	**26%**	**23%**	**15%**	**29%**	**27%**	**24%**	**21%**
GENDER								
Men	32%	28%	25%	15%	29%	26%	24%	21%
Women	39%	24%	20%	16%	28%	28%	22%	22%
AGE GROUP								
18-24	43%	30%	18%	7%	32%	25%	26%	17%
25-34	37%	33%	18%	10%	31%	27%	22%	19%
35-44	37%	32%	19%	12%	29%	29%	21%	20%
45-54	33%	27%	23%	16%	29%	28%	20%	23%
55-64	36%	21%	24%	19%	25%	27%	24%	24%
65-74	30%	16%	30%	23%	27%	25%	25%	23%
75+	28%	14%	34%	24%	26%	20%	28%	26%
LOCATION								
Capital city	36%	27%	22%	14%	30%	27%	22%	21%
Regional/rural	34%	24%	24%	17%	27%	25%	25%	23%
SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS (SEIFA quintiles)								
SES Q1 (most disadvantaged.)	37%	25%	20%	16%	29%	28%	21%	22%
SES Q2	34%	24%	23%	19%	29%	27%	20%	23%
SES Q3	35%	27%	23%	15%	27%	25%	27%	21%
SES Q4	36%	26%	23%	15%	29%	27%	21%	23%
SES Q5 (least disadvantaged)	35%	27%	25%	12%	29%	27%	25%	19%
EDUCATION								
Tertiary (Diploma and above)	38%	28%	23%	11%	30%	27%	23%	20%
Year 12 / Cert III & IV	34%	25%	23%	17%	28%	27%	24%	22%
Years 10–11 / Cert I & II	30%	19%	23%	27%	26%	25%	18%	30%
Year 9 or below	22%	22%	27%	26%	23%	24%	24%	29%
COUNTRY OF BIRTH								
Australian-born	35%	24%	24%	15%	27%	25%	24%	23%
Non-English speaking countries	35%	34%	15%	15%	33%	30%	18%	18%
Main English speaking countries	34%	21%	30%	15%	28%	27%	23%	21%
AUSTRALIAN CITIZENSHIP								
Australian citizen	35%	25%	23%	16%	28%	26%	24%	22%
Permanent resident	33%	34%	22%	11%	36%	30%	14%	20%
LANGUAGE SPOKEN AT HOME								
Speaks language other than English at home	37%	34%	15%	13%	32%	29%	19%	20%
English only at home	35%	23%	25%	16%	28%	26%	24%	22%

Source: Q4a. Wave 1 (Nov 2024), Life in Australia™ panel, Social Research Centre. Base: all respondents (n=6,013 first preference; n=5,969 second preference). Don't know/Refused excluded. Percentages rounded to whole numbers; rows may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

C. How Australians understand security

C.1 Associations

FIGURE C.1.1 MOST FREQUENT TOP-OF-MIND WORDS ASSOCIATED WITH 'NATIONAL SECURITY'

Source: Q1. When you see or hear the term 'national security', what comes to mind?

C. 2 Attitudes

Table C.2.1 Agreement with national security statements – Survey 2 (July 2025) demographic breakdown

	I am worried about Australia's national security	I am knowledgeable about national security issues	Australia needs to do more to strengthen its national security
All Australians	**50%**	**35%**	**62%**
GENDER			
Men	53%	46%	67%
Women	48%	23%	59%
AGE GROUP			
18–24	37%	27%	49%
25–34	40%	31%	49%
35–44	47%	35%	58%
45–54	54%	35%	66%
55–64	57%	38%	69%
65–74	59%	38%	73%
75+	69%	40%	82%
LOCATION			
Capital city	48%	36%	60%
Regional/rural	56%	33%	66%
SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS (SEIFA quintiles)			
SES Q1 (most disadvantaged.)	54%	32%	66%
SES Q2	52%	36%	63%
SES Q3	53%	34%	63%
SES Q4	48%	33%	61%
SES Q5 (least disadvantaged)	46%	38%	59%
EDUCATION			
Postgraduate	41%	38%	54%
Bachelor degree	43%	37%	54%
Diploma/Adv. Diploma	53%	39%	64%
Cert III & IV	56%	32%	67%
Cert I & II	81%	9%	71%
Year 12	45%	28%	58%
Years 10–11	63%	32%	77%
Year 9 or below	61%	33%	74%
COUNTRY OF BIRTH			
Australian-born	53%	34%	64%
Non-English speaking countries	41%	37%	59%
Main English speaking countries)	48%	33%	60%
AUSTRALIAN CITIZENSHIP			
Australian citizen	52%	35%	63%
Permanent resident	39%	32%	56%
LANGUAGE SPOKEN AT HOME			
Speaks language other than English at home	42%	36%	59%
English only at home	53%	34%	63%

Source: Q2. (Jul 2025), Life in Australia™ panel, Social Research Centre. Base: 6,028–6,041 respondents. Values show net 'agree' (Strongly agree + Agree). Percentages rounded to whole numbers. Q2. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

D. Threat perceptions

Table D.1. Perceived seriousness of threats to Australia in the next 10 years – Survey 1 (November 2024) and Survey 2 (July 2025)

	Wave 1 Nov 2024 (%)	Wave 2 Jul 2025 (%)	Change (pp)
AI-enabled attacks on Australians or businesses	74%	77%	+3
Severe economic crisis	69%	75%	+6
Disruption to critical supplies overseas	69%	74%	+5
Deliberate spread of false information	72%	73%	+1
Foreign interference in Australian politics/society	68%	72%	+4
Climate change	67%	67%	–
Military conflict involving Australia	57%	64%	+7
Introduced disease threatening animals/plants	58%	63%	+5
Global health pandemic	56%	61%	+5
Terrorist attack in Australia	55%	59%	+4
Major natural disasters	57%	59%	+2
Violent unrest between groups of Australians	52%	57%	+5
Attack on critical infrastructure	51%	56%	+5
Crime wave threatening personal safety	48%	54%	+6
Foreign military attack on Australia	34%	42%	+8

E. State and Territory attitudes and threat perceptions

Table E.1. Attitudes

Indicator	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	NT	ACT	*Var.*
Worried about national security	49%	49%	53%	**55%**	50%	48%	49%	**46%**	*9pp*
Feels knowledgeable about national security issues	36%	37%	33%	32%	30%	26%	**26%**	**42%**	*15pp*
Australia needs to do more to strengthen national security	61%	61%	64%	**67%**	65%	56%	63%	**55%**	*12pp*
Government shares too little information about threats	54%	50%	54%	55%	**56%**	53%	54%	**49%**	*7pp*

% who 'agree' or 'strongly agree'

Table E.2. Threat seriousness

Threat	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	NT	ACT	*Var.*
AI-enabled attacks	77.0%	76.2%	79.6%	78.4%	**74.8%**	75.1%	**89.3%**	79.5%	14.5pp
Severe economic crisis	73.7%	73.9%	75.5%	77.3%	74.6%	**72.2%**	**86.4%**	73.4%	14.2pp
Critical supply disruption	74.2%	**70.8%**	76.4%	74.9%	75.4%	75.2%	**87.8%**	72.0%	17.0pp
Deliberate false information (disinfo)	73.7%	**70.8%**	73.4%	75.3%	74.3%	74.5%	**84.1%**	80.1%	13.3pp
Foreign interference	71.0%	69.7%	74.1%	**77.3%**	73.6%	73.4%	72.3%	**69.5%**	7.8pp
Climate change impacts	67.3%	69.0%	**61.7%**	66.1%	65.6%	75.2%	64.7%	**80.4%**	18.7pp
Military conflict overseas	**60.5%**	61.9%	68.2%	67.1%	66.8%	66.5%	**70.9%**	62.0%	10.3pp
Animal/plant disease outbreak	62.7%	60.6%	63.3%	67.9%	64.7%	65.1%	**75.5%**	**58.2%**	17.3pp
Global pandemic	**58.6%**	59.7%	62.4%	64.1%	63.1%	61.3%	**66.4%**	59.5%	7.8pp
Unprecedented natural disasters	60.1%	58.5%	60.6%	58.9%	**55.2%**	**65.6%**	56.3%	66.0%	10.8pp
Terrorist attack	56.7%	55.4%	61.9%	62.2%	64.5%	60.7%	**73.3%**	**50.1%**	23.2pp
Violent unrest	56.7%	58.8%	58.2%	58.8%	53.4%	**60.5%**	48.0%	**41.2%**	19.3pp
Critical infrastructure attack	55.6%	52.8%	59.9%	56.8%	57.9%	**51.3%**	62.4%	**64.8%**	13.4pp
Crime wave / personal safety	**49.7%**	58.9%	58.4%	51.5%	50.3%	**62.9%**	53.8%	32.9%	30.0pp
Foreign military attack	40.9%	38.6%	**47.7%**	44.6%	41.3%	42.9%	43.5%	**33.4%**	14.3pp

% who rate as 'moderate' or 'major' threat

F. Myth vs Fact: what Australians really think about security

Myth 1: Australians are panicked about national security

Fact: Concern is real but nuanced. In February 2026 64% of Australians said they were worried about national security, reflecting a level of concern but not panic. Focus groups illuminated how many chose to limit how much they engaged with the news as a way of managing information overload and day to day pressures. Stepping back from constant updates was a coping strategy, not panic or apathy.

Myth 2: The public is obsessed with war and military threats

Fact: Most Australians saw direct military attack as unlikely (a foreign military attack was rated the least likely of 15 threats) in July 2025. Day to day concern focused more on issues such as economic pressure, technological disruption, disinformation, and climate impacts. These are risks people already encounter in daily life.

Myth 3: Australians do not care about national security

Fact: Australians indicated they care deeply about safety (safe and peaceful communities was the top national priority in November 2024: 35% of first preferences, rising to 64% when second preferences are included) but they tended to describe it in everyday terms. When security is framed through stability and daily life, it will likely gain greater relevance with the public.

Myth 4: Anxiety is evenly spread across society

Fact: Concern varied across the community. Older Australians, regional communities, and lower income households reported higher levels of worry. Younger Australians were often more focused on cost of living and housing pressures. Many Australians registered those concerns as immediate security challenges.

Myth 5: Women know less about security issues

Fact: The difference lay in a sense of exclusion, not knowledge (46% of men said they are knowledgeable about national security, compared with 23% of women). Women frequently underestimated what they knew, yet focus groups showed they often expressed a deep understanding of how threats affect families, communities and the nation.

Myth 6: Australians want constant threat warnings

Fact: People did want information but were not alarmed. Focus groups revealed different views about how transparent government should be. What most people agreed on is the need for trusted voices and stronger media literacy, rather than politicised or sensational communication.

Myth 7: People expect government to handle everything

Fact: Australians in our focus groups valued personal and community responsibility, but they recognised its limits. Many felt overwhelmed by large scale risks such as economic instability, technological change, and climate disruption. Few believed individuals alone can manage those pressures.

Myth 8: Australia feels broadly well prepared

Fact: Australians expected disruption and felt there were gaps in preparedness. Concerns focused particularly on cyber threats, AI enabled risks, disinformation, and climate related shocks (67% felt Australia is ‘not at all’ or only ‘slightly’ prepared for AI enabled attacks). Focus groups uncovered these views likely reflect questions about capability, not expectations of collapse. On balance, Australians see the nation as underprepared for security shocks, but not entirely unprepared.

Key takeaway

This report does uncover a concerned public. However, it also describes a pragmatic one. Australians are living with pressure, expecting disruption, and looking for leadership that protects everyday stability rather than amplifying alarm.

What this report does not say

- It does not say Australia faces imminent collapse or crisis. Australians expect disruption and overlapping pressures, not breakdown. Concern reflects realism about change rather than panic.
- It does not single out any government or political party. The research does not attribute public concern to one administration or another. Focus groups show a broader pattern: security agencies are widely trusted, while politicians and media organisations attract more scepticism.
- It does not portray Australians as panicked or unstable. Many people actively regulate how much security information they consume. This behaviour reflects self-management, not alarm.
- It does not suggest war is likely or dominant in public thinking. Foreign military attack is generally seen as unlikely, even though its consequences are recognised as severe.
- It does not suggest Australians reject national security. Australians support safety and stability, but they relate to it through everyday concerns such as housing, cost of living, trusted information, and community cohesion.
- It does not say people want constant threat warnings. Australians prefer clear, credible information delivered by trusted sources, alongside stronger support for media literacy.
- It does not say responsibility sits only with individuals. People value personal and community responsibility but recognise that large systemic risks require coordinated responses.
- It does not say institutions are widely distrusted. Security agencies retain strong credibility. Distrust is concentrated around political and media handling of security issues.
- It does not call for radical or emergency measures. The report does not set out a policy program. It identifies areas where evidence suggests opportunities for action, and notes clearly that these are observations rather than prescriptions.
- It does not become irrelevant when events change. The strategic environment can shift quickly, and conflicts may rise or fall in prominence. This report should be read as evidence about underlying public attitudes - how Australians prioritise risks, manage information overload and judge trust and credibility - rather than as commentary on any single unfolding event.

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