

The federal government wants to build 1.2 million homes. Could fewer car parks be part of the answer?

By [Madi Chwasta](#)

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Jennifer Muir says her apartment building's car park has plenty of available spaces.

(ABC News: Madi Chwasta)

In short: Urban planners are pushing for better parking policy across Australian cities.

They say Australia has too many unused parking spots and building more is contributing to the country's housing crisis.

What's next? National cabinet has agreed on a "blueprint" to improve housing supply and affordability but it does not mention parking reform.

Jennifer Muir lives in an apartment in Melbourne's CBD, where city traffic will often slow as drivers search to find a car park.

But inside her six-storey parking garage, it's mostly quiet, and never full.

On any given weeknight, close to half the spots are vacant.

"Some of the bigger apartments have two car spots, and it's rare that people have two cars," she said.

Ms Muir has started renting out her car park to a neighbour, something she knows other people in her building do too.



; Muir and her son Jessie do not use a car. (ABC News: Madi Chwasta)

But she often sees people complaining in her local Facebook group about a lack of parking in the area.

Ms Muir is on the lookout for solutions. She says there's an abandoned plot of land down the road that could be turned into a lot, and outside her building, a caravan permanently takes up an on-street space.

But Elizabeth Taylor, a senior lecturer in urban planning and design at Monash University, said the answer to a lot of the city's parking woes lay inside its garages.

Her research shows at least one in four residential car parks in Melbourne's CBD are always vacant, with overseas studies coming to similar conclusions.

"In some places, you've got whole decks of multi-storey car parks that aren't being used," she said.



Monash University senior lecturer Elizabeth Taylor has researched the number of empty car parking spots in Melbourne (ABC News)

And she said that was also likely the case in other higher-density living areas of Australia.

Dr Taylor said better use of these empty spaces could make it easier for drivers to find a park in increasingly congested cities.

She said addressing the "waste" could also make some dwellings more affordable, particularly apartments, and social and affordable housing.

"Parking is not a small, add-on housing issue," she said.

"It directly and indirectly reduces the amount of housing we have, impacts the quality and increases the cost."

Lack of parking data available

To get an idea of how much parking space is empty in Australian cities, researchers have tried to find out how much parking there is in the first place.

But it's really hard to say — and that's part of the problem.

While the commercial car parking industry keeps track, Dr Taylor said neither federal or state governments collected detailed data on the total number of spots.

It's the same for high-density councils, with the exception being the City of Melbourne, [which has analysed all of its floor space and categorised how it's used](#).



The City of Melbourne collects detailed data on parking in the CBD. (AAP: Con Chronis)

Looking at this data can give us some indication of how much space parking takes up in a high-density area.

According to data from 2022, about nine per cent of all the square metre space across all buildings in the City of Melbourne was used for off-street parking.

This is 4.9 million square metres, which is about the same amount of space occupied by all the office floors in Melbourne's CBD, and vastly more parking than what's available on the street.

Off-street parking dominates the City of Melbourne

Number of parking spots for off-street and on-street.

On-street

6.26K

Off-street — Commercial

58.96K

Off-street — Private

150.58K

And most of the off-street parking in the city isn't available for the general public.

It's predominantly private parking — for residential and business — which has more than doubled in the past 20 years.

Cities around the world trial solutions

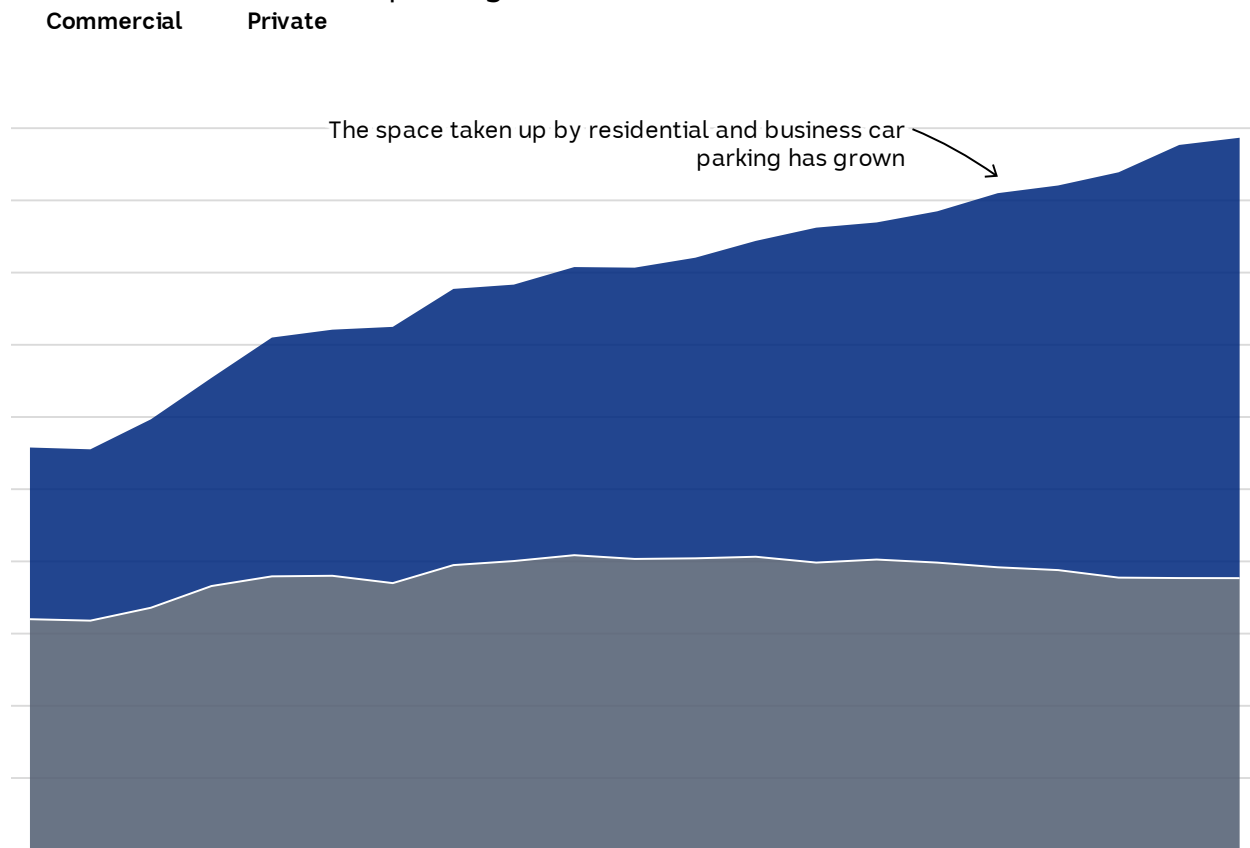
Cities in Europe, Canada, the United States and Asia have come to similar conclusions, and have trialled and implemented a number of strategies to better use these spaces and open them up to everyone.

Japan has "uncoupled" housing and parking, which means people can easily rent and buy parking spots separate to property.

Dr Taylor said while it was possible to do this in Australia, body corporate rules meant it was often too difficult.

Private car parking has more than doubled in 20 years

Floor space measured in square metres from 2002 to 2022. Private parking includes residential and business parking.



ABC News / Source: City of Melbourne / [Get the data](#)

Other cities have introduced [paid parking for every public car space](#). The price changes as demand does, and technology helps determine the cost in real time.

This idea was trialled in San Francisco and Dr Taylor said it had reduced traffic and increased parking availability.

And then there's a push to convert unused parking spots — both on-street and off-street — to green spaces, which has been done by private companies Urban Green in Sydney, and Skyfarm in Melbourne.

Call for maximum parking rates

But David Mephram, urban planner and author of the book *Rethinking Parking: Planning and Urban Design Perspectives*, said we should not be building so much parking in the first place.

He said Australia took its parking policy from the United States in the 1950s, which mandated that each new building had to have a certain number of spaces.

While the number can vary, in general a two-bedroom dwelling would get one park, and a three-bedroom two parks.

Australia largely has a minimum parking policy, where each dwelling has to have a certain number of parking spaces. (ABC News: Christa Hill)

Dr Mepham said the policy became the norm across Australia, with very little evidence behind it.

"It was convenient for people to believe in the policy because we wanted to drive, and we were invested in the car."

But he said the situation was different now as Australia's population has grown to 27 million people, and with it, the number of cars.

"In 1950 we had 1 million cars — today we have over 20 million cars, and the cities are very densely occupied."

He said this policy has made housing more expensive.

"Each car park in a basement probably adds about \$100,000 to the cost of a unit," Dr Mepham said.

Dr Mepham, an urban planner and parking expert, says Australia's parking policy is not evidence-based. (Supplied by Dr Mepham)

Dr Mepham said action needed to be taken urgently, [given the federal government had an aim to build 1.2 million homes by 2029, and was projected to fall short of the target.](#)

He said to reduce the cost of housing and increase the amount built, minimum compulsory parking requirements should be replaced with a maximum number.

Under this model, developers would determine how much parking they would build, and then homebuyers could decide whether they wanted to purchase it with their property or not.

"It's a different set-up, but what you're getting is cost transparency, so people can actually have a choice about what they want to buy," he said.

"Do they want to have a cheaper unit and use a car share? Maybe have a bike? Maybe they catch the train to work?"

Mepham says building a car park for an apartment building can add thousands of dollars to each housing unit. *(ABEs: Christa Hill)*

This policy change isn't something new — the City of Melbourne and the City of Sydney removed minimum parking requirements years ago, and the City of Brisbane overhauled its policy in May.

But Dr Mepham said it should be extended beyond Australia's CBDs.

'Tension' around parking reform

The concept has attracted public opposition.

Some developers who have proposed to build parking under the minimum requirements, such as not-for-profit Nightingale Housing, have been [knocked back by councils](#) or have ended up before administrative tribunals for not providing enough.

Nightingale Housing developments, such as the one in Sydney's Marrickville, has little or no allocated parking in an effort to reduce cost. *(ABC Radio Sydney: Rosemary Bolger)*

And ultimately, the policy would result in less parking.

David Clark, president of the Municipal Association of Victoria, said managing parking was a "tough" issue for councils because people were worried about parking availability with the increase of high and medium density developments.

"If you're a developer, the less parking you build the better," he said.

"But there's a real tension in that for council, because that pushes parking onto the street, especially in a residential area where you're not close to a train station."

He said Australians living outside of the inner city were still reliant on cars, and that was unlikely to change any time soon.

But Dr Mepham said the desire for "cheap, easy" parking had become an "expectation".

"There's this angst about people losing their parking," he said.

"It comes at the cost of attractive and accessible places ... this has meant that a whole lot of American and Canadian cities are doing some great innovative stuff, and Australia is not."

Parking reform not in housing blueprint

Dr Mepham called on the federal government to include parking reform in its housing policies.

He said it would set a precedent for state and local governments when making planning decisions and alleviate worries they would "lose votes".

The federal government's housing blueprint is intended to help states and territories increase the amount of housing. (ABC News: John Gunn)

A federal government departmental spokesperson told the ABC that its target of building 1.2 million homes was supported by the [National Planning Reform Blueprint](#).

This was agreed to by national cabinet in 2023.

"Under the [blueprint]... states and territories are making progress on reforming planning, zoning and land release systems and streamlining approval processes to support more housing supply," the spokesperson said.

However, the blueprint does not specifically address parking reform.

Dr Mepham is optimistic the federal government will address parking reform in the future, but said it would require a mindset shift.

"We have to shift this anxiety about, where am I going to park?" he said.

"We need to think rationally about what is a good solution that joins up the dots on these different policy objectives and gives us better housing and better transport.

"Offering better data and a better vision of our cities will be part of the process in helping people come on board with this reform."

