

## ‘Not a big issue – until it is’: Almost 90 per cent of apartment buildings fail fire safety standards

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Almost 90 per cent of Victoria’s multi-storey apartment buildings don’t meet fire safety standards because property owners struggle to maintain increasingly complex systems, leaving residents at risk.

The extent of the statewide problem was revealed in a survey of every building inspection undertaken by councils over a year, which showed just 13 per cent had been maintained and continued to comply.



Building surveyor Dr Stephen Scimonello found most multi-storey apartments in Victoria don’t comply with fire safety standards. PENNY STEPHENS

The survey casts doubt on the safety of the types of homes that Victorians increasingly live in, and which are central to [the state government’s signature policy](#) to increase housing density.

Building surveyor Dr Stephen Scimonello, who examined the problem as part of his PhD at Victoria University's Institute for Sustainable Industries and Liveable Cities, found that maintaining fire safety for apartment buildings had become so intricate that owners – often unaware of their obligations – were unable to maintain standards.

“It's not a big issue, until it is a big issue,” said Scimonello, the professional development manager of the Australian Institute of Building Surveyors.

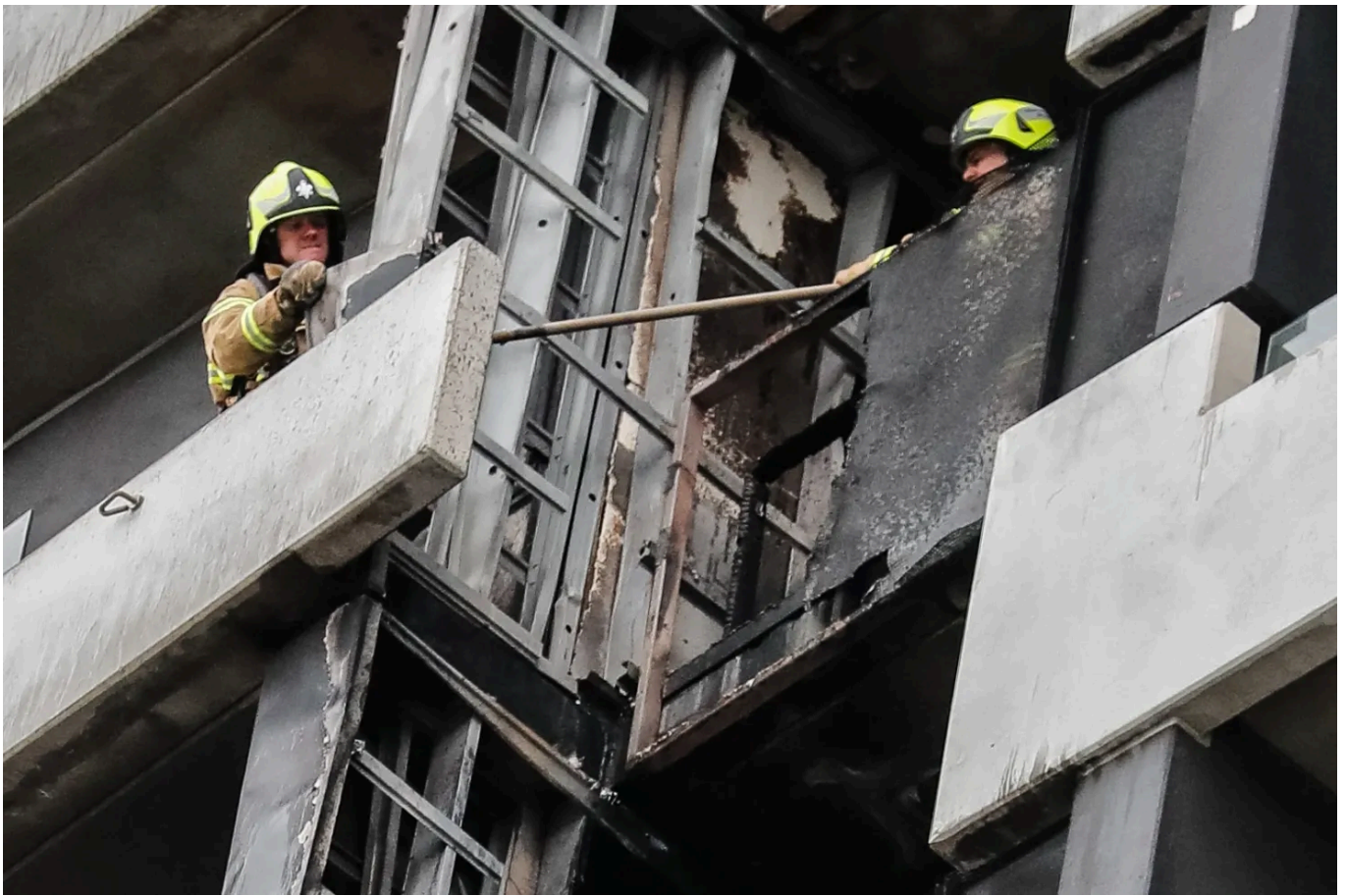
He said apartments were increasingly constructed with fewer inbuilt “passive” safety mechanisms, such as fire-proof walls or fire-rated doors, to cut costs. Instead, they were more reliant on intricate, bespoke “active” systems of sprinklers and alarms that must be maintained for the life of the building, which adds costs and complexity down the track.

“Unfortunately, some systems that are being installed by developers that allow them to reduce construction costs of buildings are also outside the scope, expertise and technicalities of building owners and maintenance managers,” his thesis said.

The national [\*Building Confidence\*](#) report by the federal government made similar findings in 2018.

Under Victorian law, building owners must maintain fire systems and ensure their compliance over the course of the property's life under the state's Building Act (1993). But it is self-regulated and there is no obligation for them to certify compliance to councils, which are responsible for enforcing the standards in Victoria.

As part of his research, Scimonello surveyed every local government in Victoria. After screening out those with inaccuracies or omissions and municipalities with no multi-storey apartments, he used the responses from 34 councils to quantify the scale of the problem for the first time.



Firefighters survey the damage on the Neo 200 tower block in Melbourne's Spencer Street in 2019. JASON SOUTH

Those 34 councils did a combined 964 fire safety inspections of multi-storey apartments in 2021. Just 127 of the inspections – 13 per cent – found the buildings continued to be compliant. In NSW, 36 per cent of the 612 buildings inspected over 12 months were compliant.

Unlike Victoria, NSW requires building owners to certify compliance annually. But compliance and enforcement is still patchy in the burgeoning space.

Many councils were not certain of how many multi-storey apartments were in their jurisdictions, but Scimonello estimated there were 36,726 in Victoria and NSW.

The [41-storey Neo 200 building](#) on Spencer Street was evacuated for more than a week in 2019, when the Melbourne CBD apartment tower went up in flames from a discarded cigarette. While it had a small amount of flammable cladding, Metropolitan Fire Brigade Commander Mark Carter later told an industry function that most of the building's [fire and safety systems were dysfunctional](#).

More than 40 per cent of fire alarms and smoke detectors within apartments weren't operating, which increased evacuation times, and maintenance schedules were found to be too complex or unrealistic. *The Age* contacted the Neo 200 building manager but didn't receive a response.

The state government's focus on the housing crisis has homed in on encouraging more apartment-living and higher density, particularly in its "[activity centres](#)" next to transport connections.

On Tuesday, Premier Jacinta Allan proposed to [strengthen the powers of the Victorian Building Authority](#) and announced the Department of Transport and Planning would consult on whether buildings should have their own manuals.



Some developers already do this. Mirvac circulates details to owners corporations, and all of its apartments have a fixed QR code manual inside “allowing critical information to be passed on to future owners and/or occupiers of our properties”, a spokeswoman said.



A resident's view of the Neo 200 building fire in Spencer Street in 2019.

Wayne Liddy, the national president of the building surveyors institute and a Victorian board director, said building manuals were an important step, as long as they didn't have “unnecessary and complex planning and architectural details”.

“If it's too complex, people just don't do it,” he said.

Liddy said Scimonello had quantified the extent of the problem in his PhD and that the serious findings “should be a wake-up call for all apartment owners and residents”.

“This is a life-safety problem,” Liddy said.

“Those consulting on and providing essential safety measure advice should be regulated via a registration and licensing scheme with an auditing and compliance mechanism to ensure their work meets appropriate standards.”

The Municipal Association of Victoria said it was aware of the challenges and that local governments had been calling for building reform, but that the state needed to invest in training qualified inspectors.

“Put simply, there are not enough qualified inspectors in the state to fulfil the role required,” an association spokesperson said.

“We also need councils to be appropriately resourced to be able to employ them to create a fundamentally sound regulatory system that pays its own way rather than getting subsidised by ratepayers.”

The Property Council's Victorian executive director, Cath Evans, said the state government needed to work with the sector if it wanted to enforce manuals for multi-storey apartment buildings, and that more certainty was needed around fire-safety maintenance requirements.

"If there is a problem with fire safety compliance, the responsible authority needs to examine its current processes and work with industry to improve compliance rates and the appropriate methodology to deliver improved outcomes," Evans said.

State Building Surveyor Steven Baxas said his office provided councils with expertise and advice on their enforcement role and responsibilities regarding essential safety measures.

"The Victorian government has introduced a suite of reforms to protect home buyers which will improve safety for the increasing number of people living in residential apartment buildings," Baxas said.

Strata Community Association general manager Susan Chandler said strata managers supported owners corporations – which are ultimately responsible – to meet their obligations.

"Fire safety is a key priority for the strata sector, and we recognise the challenges that come with managing complex building safety requirements," Chandler said.

"However, greater clarity around reporting requirements and enforcement mechanisms would help improve compliance rates and ensure safer outcomes for residents."

Scimonello, a registered building surveyor with the [Victorian Building Authority](#), will next month host information sessions at Victoria University for building owners and managers.

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