



Safe Work Australia – Data insights

Snapshot: Psychological health and safety in the workplace

February 2024 | Our Data. Your Stories.

Exposure to psychosocial hazards at work may cause psychological and physical harm. This snapshot focuses on work-related mental health conditions using data from the National Dataset for Compensation-based Statistics (NDS), People at Work (PAW) survey and the National Return to Work (NRTW) survey.



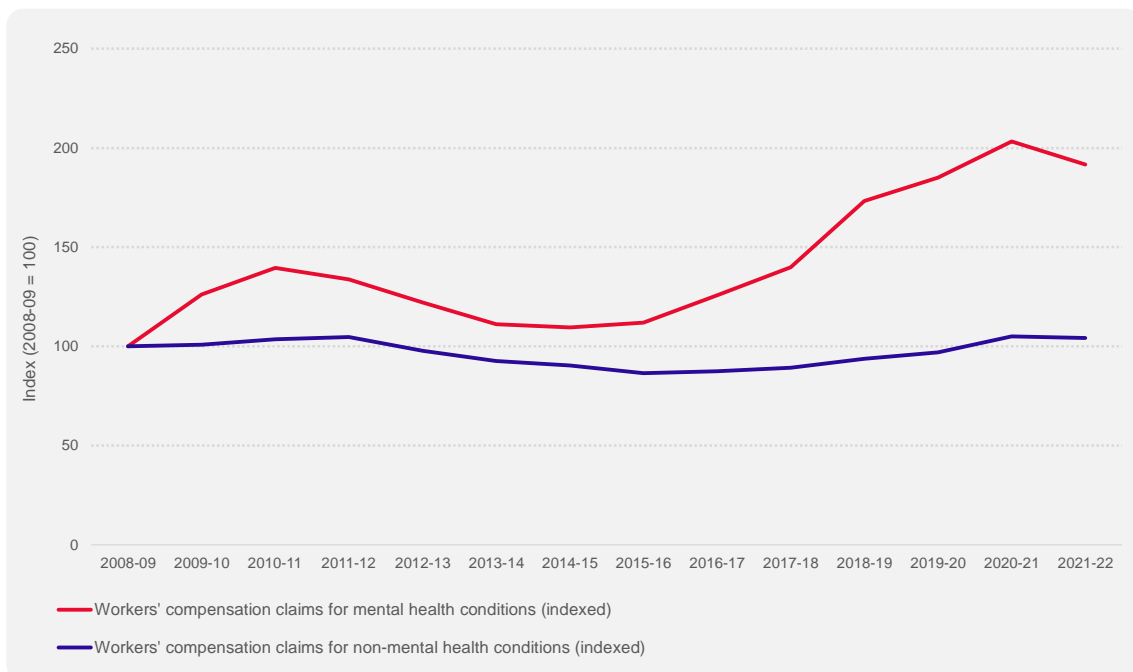
Of the approximately 10,000 serious mental stress claims in 2021-22p,

52.2%

were due to work-related harassment or bullying, and work pressure

In 2021-22, mental health conditions accounted for 9% (11,700) of all serious workers' compensation claims¹ and 7% of all work-related injuries and illnesses². This represented a 36.9% increase in claims since 2017-18, compared to an increase of 18.3% for all serious claims over the period. There may be a number of causes behind the increase in claims and it is possible that destigmatisation and increased awareness of mental health conditions may be a contributor.

Figure 1: Indexed number of serious claims for work-related mental health conditions, compared to indexed number of all other serious claims for work-related injuries and illnesses, NDS (2017-18 to 2021-22p)



Source: Safe Work Australia National dataset for compensation-based statistics.

¹ This figure is based on preliminary data. Serious claims are defined as accepted workers' compensation claims which have resulted in one or more working weeks lost (excluding fatalities and journey claims).

² Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021-22), Work-related injuries, Includes all work-related injuries or diseases, irrespective of time lost or application for workers' compensation.


Workers' compensation claims identify the mechanism as the action, exposure or event that best described the circumstances that resulted in the most serious injury or disease.³ Between 2017-18 and 2021-22p, the majority of claims for mental health conditions identified the mechanism as mental stress (92%). Of the remaining 8% of claims, the main mechanisms identified were being assaulted by a person or persons (2.9%) and vehicle accidents (1.4%).

Of the approximately 10,000 serious mental stress claims in 2021-22p, the highest proportion were attributed to:



The cost of mental health workers' compensation claims tend to be much higher than claims due to other work-related injuries or conditions. In 2020-21, the median compensation paid for mental health conditions was \$58,615 per serious claim compared to \$15,743 per serious claim for all injuries and diseases. Mental health conditions are also associated with a greater time away from work. The median time lost for mental health conditions over the same period was 34.2 working weeks per serious claim compared to 8.0 working weeks per serious claim for all injuries and diseases.

1. Industry and occupation



Health care and social assistance industry

had the highest number of serious claims for work-related mental health conditions than any other industry over the last five years.

This outcome aligns to the higher than average exposure to psychosocial hazards such as high job demands, workplace bullying, and work-related occupational violence shown in the People at Work (PAW) data⁴.

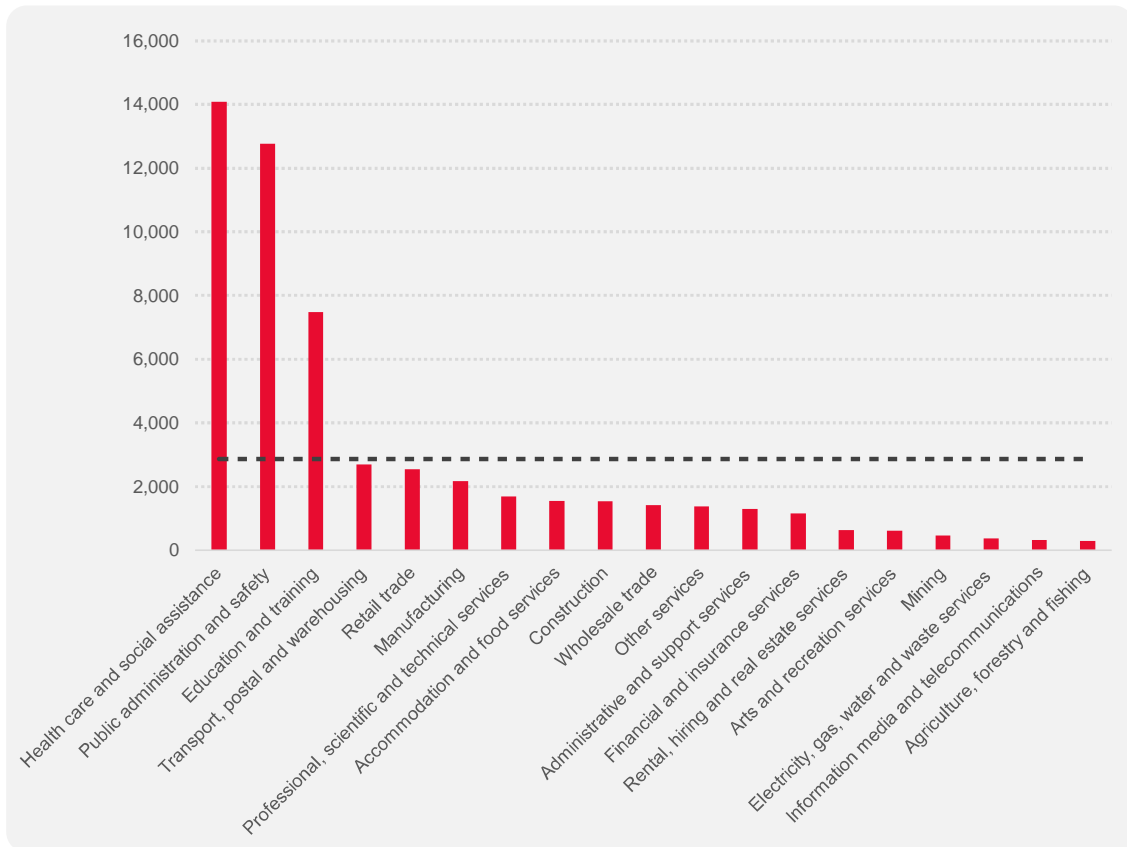
Workers in the Public administration and safety and Education and training industries also accounted for a high proportion of serious workers' compensation claims for mental health conditions. This aligns to the PAW data, which shows workers in both industries reported higher than average exposures to psychosocial hazards (e.g., high job demands, low job resources, work-related bullying) and poor associated outcomes (e.g., job burnout and psychological distress). From the PAW data, a higher than average number of workers in the Retail trade industry also suffer from high or very high levels of psychological distress; however, we do not see this industry feature prominently in the NDS mental health condition claims data.

³ Type of Occurrence Classification System (TOOCS), 3rd Edition

⁴ *People at Work* is an Australian psychosocial risk assessment survey where respondents self-select to participate as part of an organisation that is using the tool.

The cause of the high levels of psychological distress in this industry is unclear from the data collected in the PAW survey and may be a result of selection bias; however, higher than average incidence of sexual harassment in this industry are noted in other national surveys.⁵

Figure 2: Number of serious claims for mental health conditions by industry, NDS (2017-18 to 2021-22p).



Source: Safe Work Australia National dataset for compensation-based statistics.

Community and personal service workers, Professionals and Clerical and administrative workers were the occupations that accounted for the highest proportion of serious workers' compensation claims for mental health conditions from 2017-18 to 2021-22p.

2. Gender



57.8%

of serious claims for mental health conditions were among women, between 2017-18 and 2021-22p

The higher incidence of mental health claims among women may be due to a range of factors but the data provides two key insights.

⁵ Time for respect: Fifth national survey on sexual harassment in Australian workplaces, Australian Human Rights Commission 2022



Women are more likely to work in industries and occupations where workers are exposed to above average rates of psychosocial hazards

According to the 2021 ABS Census, the Health care and social assistance and Education and training industries had a high proportion of female workers (78% and 73% female workers respectively). Given the exposure to psychosocial hazards and high number of claims for mental health conditions discussed in this paper for these industries, it is unsurprising that we observe poor outcomes resulting from exposure to psychosocial hazards in females, including a higher number of serious claims for mental health conditions.

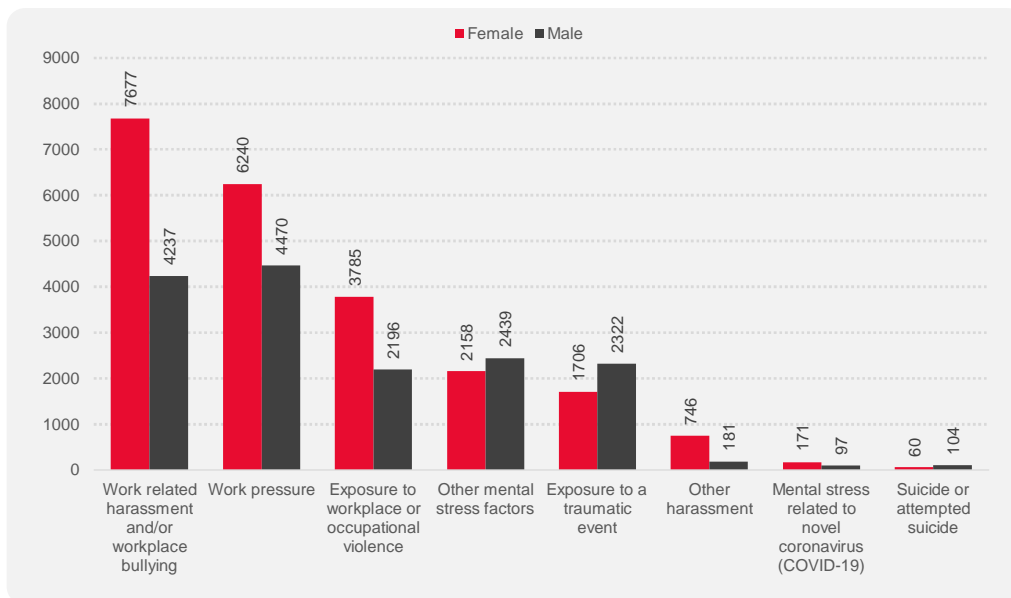


Women are more likely to be exposed to harmful behaviours at work

Data shows that women are more likely to be exposed to harmful behaviours at work such as harassment including sexual harassment, bullying and work-related violence and aggression.

NDS data for 2021-22p shows that 31.1% of women with a mental stress claim had experienced work-related harassment and/or workplace bullying compared to 22.6% of men. 3.4% of women with a mental stress claim had experienced other harassment (which includes sexual and racial harassment) compared to 0.9% of men. However, data from the most recent National Survey on Sexual Harassment in the workplace⁶ suggests that workers' compensation claims data underrepresents the incidence of work-related harassment, with 41% of women in the survey reporting being sexually harassed at work in the last five years. Recent data from the ABS Personal Safety Survey also indicates the estimated number of women who have experienced work-related sexual harassment in the last 12 months is over 2.5 times the estimated number of men (332,400 women compared to 127,600 men).⁷

Figure 11: Number of mental stress claims by subcategories and sex, NDS (2017-18 to 2021-22p)



Source: Safe Work Australia National dataset for compensation-based statistics.

⁶ Australian Human Rights Commission. *Time for respect: Fifth national survey on sexual harassment in Australian workplaces*, 2022. Available at https://www.respectatwork.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-11/2022.11.18_Time%20for%20Respect%202022%20%28Full%20Report%29.pdf

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021-22), Personal Safety, Australia, 2021-22. Available at <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/personal-safety-australia/2021-22>

3. Return to work outcomes



The return to work rate for people with mental health condition claims in 2021 was

79.1%

compared to 91.6% for all injuries. Workers with mental health condition claims were also more likely to require additional time off work.

Safe Work Australia also collects data about the experience of workers following a work-related mental-health condition. Return to work outcomes were poorer for workers with claims for mental health conditions compared with those workers who had a workers' compensation claim for another reason.

These workers were also more likely to believe that they would be treated differently by people at work, that their supervisor thought they were exaggerating or faking their injury/illness, that they would be fired if they submitted a claim and that their employer discouraged them from putting in a claim. The process of returning to work was also reported by workers with a mental health claim as being more difficult compared with those with a claim for other reasons.