

# COMPENDIUM OF WORKERS' COMPENSATION STATISTICS AUSTRALIA 2004–05

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**Australian Government**

**Australian Safety and Compensation Council**

# Part E

## Feature article

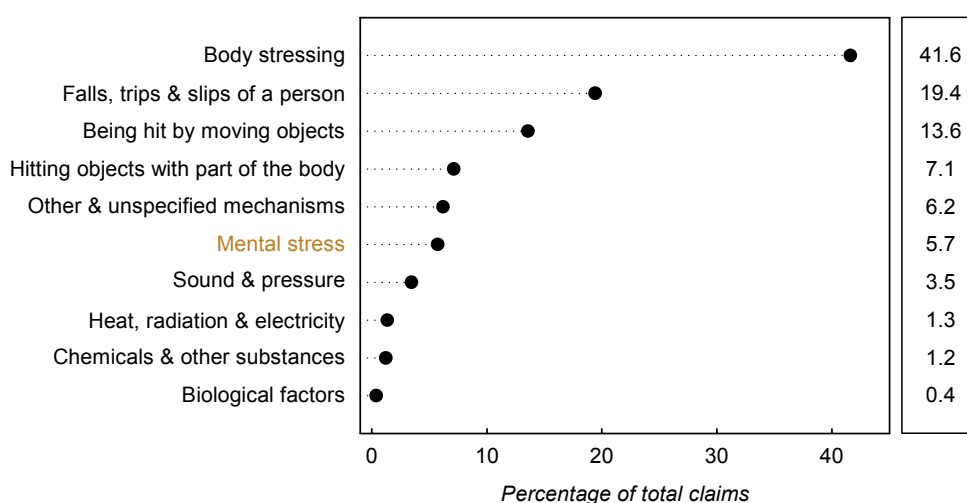
### The mechanism *Mental stress*

The Mechanism of injury or disease classification identifies the action, exposure or event that was the direct cause of the most serious injury or disease sustained by an employee for whom a workers' compensation claim is submitted. This article examines the mechanism *Mental stress*. This mechanism is assigned to claims where, as a result of mental stress or exposure to mentally stressing situations, an employee has suffered a mental disorder such as anxiety or depression. These claims generally include few compensated fatalities: with seven accepted fatality claims for 2004–05p.

As detailed in Part C: Trends over time, the annual number of new workers' compensation claims in Australia decreased by 13% between 1996–97 and 2003–04, with the decrease distributed across all mechanism categories other than the category *Mental stress*. In contrast, claims categorised as *Mental stress* increased by 83%, from 4585 in 1996–97 to 8410 in 2003–04. As a result, these claims represented 6% of all new claims in 2003–04 compared with 3% of all new claims in 1996–97. Such growth warrants an examination of the nature of these claims, which are designated here as 'mental stress claims'.

Figure 33 compares the number of new mental stress claims in Australia for 2004–05p with the numbers of new claims in other mechanism categories. Accounting for 6% of all new claims, mental stress claims represented the sixth most common mechanism, ranking behind *Body stressing* (42% of claims), *Falls, trips and slips of a person* (19%), *Being hit by moving objects* (14%), *Hitting objects with part of the body* (7%) and *Other and unspecified mechanisms* (6%).

**Figure 33** New claims: percentage by mechanism, 2004–05p



## Sub-categories of *Mental stress*

Figure 34 provides a breakdown of new mental stress claims for 2004–05p into individual mechanism sub-categories distinguished by the nature of the actions, exposures and events that might lead to disorders. These are:

*Work pressure* — disorders arising from work responsibilities and workloads, workplace interpersonal conflicts and workplace performance or promotion issues.

*Harassment* — work-related harassment and workplace bullying, sexual harassment or racial harassment, including repeated assault or threatened assault and repeated verbal harassment, threats and abuse from a work colleague.

*Exposure to workplace or occupational violence* — includes being the victim of single acts of assault or threatened assault by work colleagues; and assault, threatened assault, verbal threat or abuse by persons other than work colleagues.

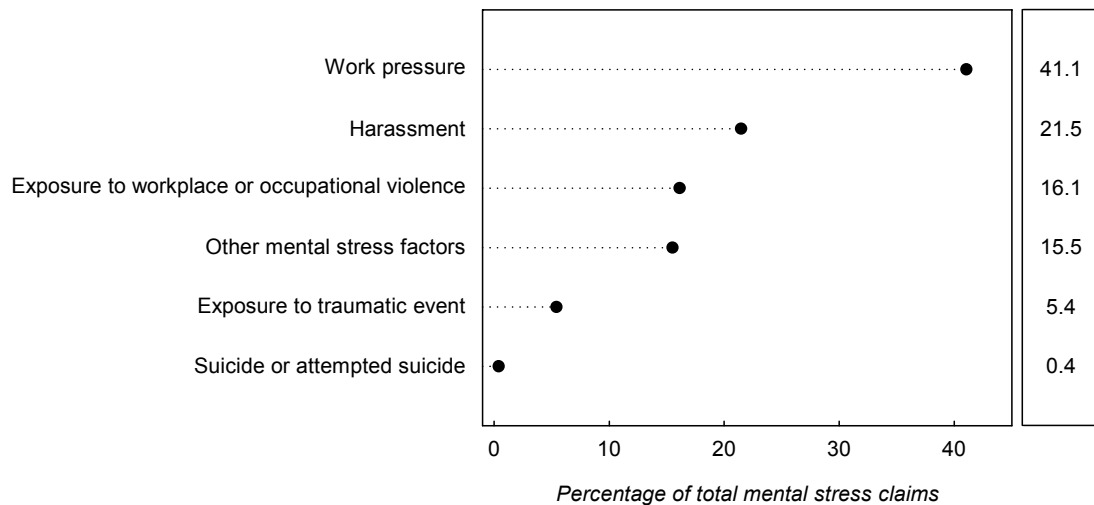
*Exposure to traumatic event* — disorders arising from exposure to a traumatic event such as the witnessing of a fatal or other accident.

*Other mental stress factors*.

An additional sub-category, *Suicide or attempted suicide*, identifies all suicides, regardless of the circumstances of death, and all attempted suicides.

In 2004–05p, the most common sub-categories of *Mental stress* were *Work pressure* (3305 claims, 41% of all mental stress claims), *Harassment* (1730 claims, 22%), *Exposure to workplace or occupational violence* (1300 claims, 16%), and *Other mental stress factors* (1250 claims, 16%).

**Figure 34** New mental stress claims: percentage by sub-category, 2004–05p



## Characteristics of employees with mental stress claims

In order to achieve counts large enough to provide reliable results, the characteristics of employees with mental stress claims are described here using data for the combined years 2003–04 and 2004–05p. There were 16 455 new mental stress claims reported in Australia for this period.

### Employee gender

Table 26 examines the employee gender breakdown for claims in each *Mental stress* sub-category for the combined years 2003–04 and 2004–05p.

In contrast to the predominance of men (68%) across workers' compensation claims in general, mental stress claims more commonly involved women (59% of

**Table 26** New mental stress claims: number and percentage by gender and sub-category, 2003–04 and 2004–05p combined

Sub-category of <i>Mental stress</i>	Number of claims			% female
	Males	Females	Total	
Work pressure	2 740	4 075	6 815	59.8
Harassment	1 205	2 315	3 520	65.8
Other mental stress factors	1 140	1 425	2 560	55.6
Exposure to workplace or occupational violence	1 045	1 485	2 535	58.7
Exposure to traumatic event	595	385	975	39.2
Suicide or attempted suicide	40	15	50	25.5
<b>Total mental stress claims</b>	<b>6 760</b>	<b>9 695</b>	<b>16 455</b>	<b>58.9</b>

all mental stress claims). The proportion of women was greatest among claims involving the sub-category *Harassment* (66%) and least among claims involving *Exposure to traumatic event* and among claims resulting from *Suicide or attempted suicide* (39% and 26% respectively). Women accounted for only one of the 17 compensated fatalities associated with mental stress.

Another way to examine the gender profile of mental stress claims is to relate the numbers of claims reported for men and women in a given time period to the total hours that male and female employees spent at work over that period. This measure (expressed here as claims per 100 million hours worked) is termed the frequency rate. Comparing differences in the relative likelihood of a mental stress claim between genders using hours worked rather than employee numbers removes the confounding influence of the higher rates of part-time work among female employees.

Figure 35 shows the male and female frequency rates of claims in each of the *Mental stress* sub-categories. For both men and women the frequency rates were highest for *Work pressure*, *Harassment*, *Other mental stress factors*, and *Exposure to workplace or occupational violence*. Women were three times as likely as men to have a claim caused by *Harassment* (21 claims per 100 million hours worked compared with 7 claims per 100 million hours worked), and they were about twice as likely as men to have a claim caused by *Work pressure*, *Other mental stress factors* and *Exposure to workplace or occupational violence*. Women were slightly less likely than men to have a claim caused by *Exposure to traumatic event*.

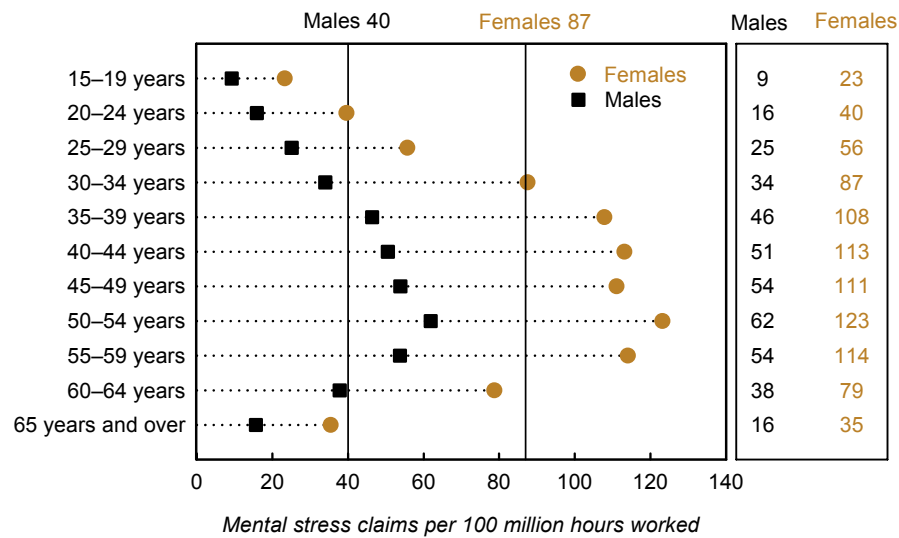
**Figure 35** New mental stress claims: frequency rate by gender and sub-category, 2003–04 and 2004–05p combined

## Employee age

Figure 36 shows how male and female frequency rates for mental stress claims varied by age group. It confirms that the female bias in mental stress claims that was noted above extends across all age groups: in every age group a mental stress claim was at least twice as likely for a woman than for a man. For both men and women a claim was most likely among employees aged 35–59 years — particularly those aged 50–54 years.

This pattern was consistent across each of the major *Mental stress* sub-categories.

**Figure 36** New mental stress claims: frequency rate by gender and age, 2003–04 and 2004–05p combined



## Employee occupation

Table 27 examines mental stress claims across broad occupation groups by gender for the combined years 2003–04 and 2004–05p. About two-thirds of mental stress claims were from three occupation groups: Professionals (27% of mental stress claims); Intermediate clerical, sales and service workers (23%) and Associate professionals (16%). Claims for women outnumbered claims for men in all but three groups: Intermediate production and transport workers; Tradespersons and related workers; and Labourers and related workers.

**Table 27** New mental stress claims: number and percentage by gender and occupation, 2003–04 and 2004–05p combined

Occupation	Number of claims			%
	Males	Females	Total	
Professionals	1 330	3 045	4 375	26.6
Intermediate clerical, sales & service workers	1 020	2 820	3 840	23.3
Associate professionals	1 325	1 330	2 650	16.1
Elementary clerical, sales & service workers	515	820	1 335	8.1
Intermediate production & transport workers	940	170	1 110	6.7
Labourers & related workers	580	465	1 045	6.4
Managers & administrators	485	510	995	6.0
Tradespersons & related workers	480	155	635	3.9
Advanced clerical & service workers	60	355	415	2.5
<b>Total mental stress claims<sup>(a)</sup></b>	<b>6 760</b>	<b>9 695</b>	<b>16 455</b>	<b>100.0</b>

(a) Includes mental stress claims for which occupation was not stated.

**For men**

For men, Figure 37a identifies the eighteen occupation sub-categories that had the highest male frequency rates for the combined years 2003–04 and 2004–05p. These sub-categories accounted for 43% of new mental stress claims for men. Common threads running through these occupations include high levels of personal responsibility for the welfare of other people and interaction with extreme circumstances and with people in extremis. Groupings included:

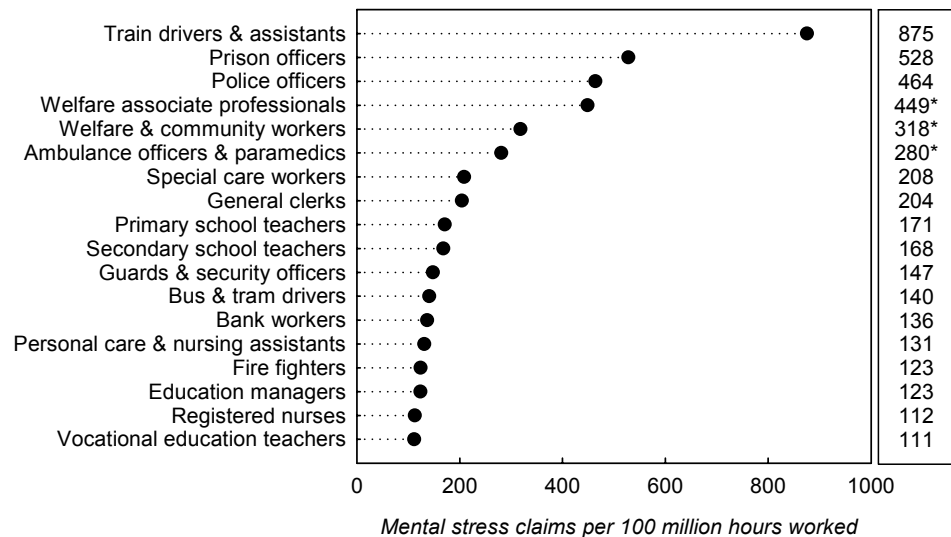
Drivers for public transport — Train drivers and assistants (875 claims per 100 million hours worked: the highest male frequency rate, about 22 times the overall male frequency rate); and Bus and tram drivers.

Law and order occupations — Prison officers (528 claims per 100 million hours worked); Police officers; and Guards and security officers.

Caring professionals — Welfare associate professionals (parole and probation officers, youth workers, residential care officers, disability support officers and family support officers); Welfare and community workers; Ambulance officers and paramedics; Special care workers (employees of residential child care establishments and carers of aged or disabled persons in their homes); Personal care and nursing assistants; and Registered nurses.

Teachers — Primary; Secondary; and Vocational education teachers.

**Figure 37a New mental stress claims for men: occupation sub-categories<sup>(a)</sup> with the highest frequency rates, 2003–04 and 2004–05p combined**



(a) Based on occupation categories of the 4th level of the Australian Standard Occupation Classification (ASCO).

**For women**

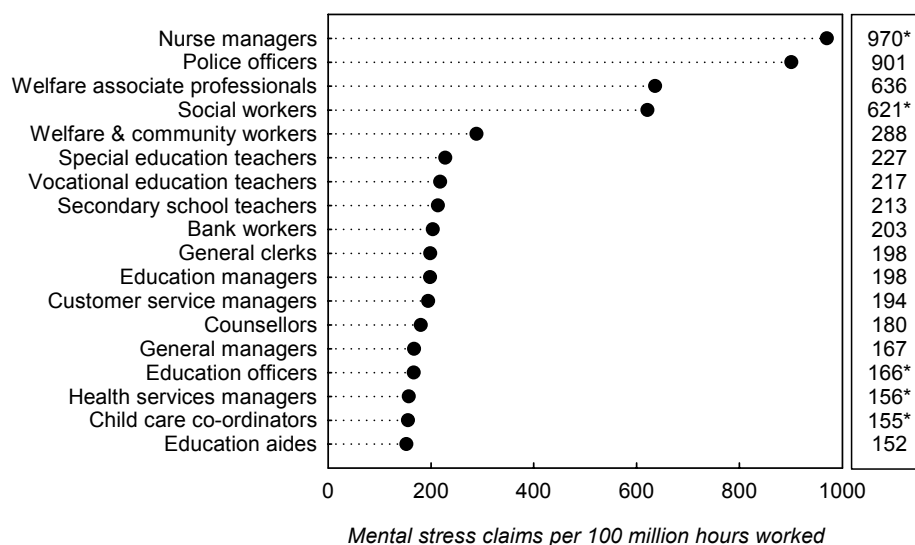
For women, Figure 37b identifies the eighteen occupation sub-categories that had the highest female frequency rates for the combined years 2003–04 and 2004–05p. These sub-categories accounted for 36% of new mental stress claims for women. They were similar to those for men, with discrepancies between the male and female listings stemming primarily from the fact that the listings are limited to solely eighteen sub-categories and from the exclusion of sub-categories with small numbers of employees resulting in frequency rates with unacceptable standard errors. Groupings included:

Caring professionals — Nurse managers (970 claims per 100 million hours worked: the highest female frequency rate, about 11 times the overall female frequency rate); Welfare associate professionals; Social workers; Welfare and community workers; and Counsellors.

Teachers — Special education teachers; Vocational education teachers; Secondary education teachers; and Education aids.

Managers — Education managers; Customer service managers; General managers; Health services managers; and Child care co-ordinators.

**Figure 37b New mental stress claims for women: occupation sub-categories<sup>(a)</sup> with the highest frequency rates, 2003–04 and 2004–05p combined**



(a) Based on occupation categories of the 4th level of the Australian Standard Occupation Classification (ASCO).

## Employee industry

Table 28 examines mental stress claims across broad industry groups by gender for the combined years 2003–04 and 2004–05p. About two-thirds of all mental stress claims were from five industry groups: Health and community services (21%), Education (19%), Personal and other services (11%), Government administration and defence (9%) and Retail trade (8%).

### For men

For men, Figure 38a identifies the eighteen industry sub-categories that had the highest male frequency rates for the combined years 2003–04 and 2004–05p. These sub-categories accounted for 63% of new mental stress claims for men.

**Table 28 New mental stress claims: number, percentage and frequency rate by gender and industry, 2003–04 and 2004–05p combined**

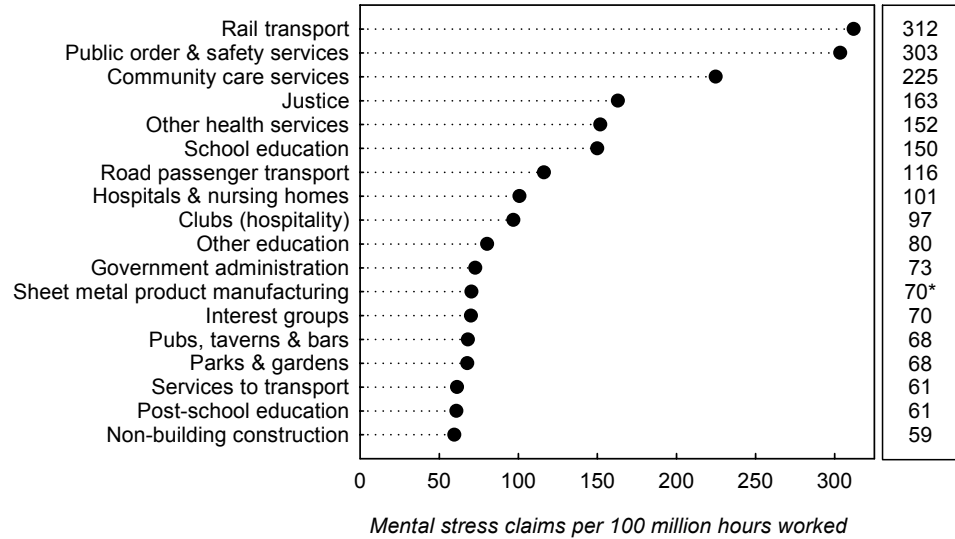
Industry	Number of claims			%	Frequency rate <sup>(a)</sup>	
	Males	Females	Total		Males	Females
Health & community services	805	2 675	3 480	21.1	122	135
Education	920	2 145	3 065	18.6	116	151
Personal & other services	1 050	750	1 795	10.9	177	181
Government administration & defence	605	840	1 450	8.8	74	120
Retail trade	460	800	1 260	7.7	23	51
Property & business services	450	640	1 090	6.6	20	44
Transport & storage	805	210	1 015	6.2	70	67
Manufacturing	550	340	895	5.4	20	43
Accommodation, cafes & restaurants	270	360	630	3.8	42	57
Finance & insurance	130	460	585	3.6	22	77
Wholesale trade	200	170	370	2.2	19	48
Construction	240	50	285	1.7	13	29
Cultural & recreational services	105	120	225	1.4	31	42
Communication services	50	65	115	0.7	14	38
Mining	55	15	65	0.4	15	34
Agriculture, forestry & fishing	30	35	65	0.4	6	24
Electricity, gas & water supply	45	15	60	0.4	19	36
<b>Total mental stress claims<sup>(b)</sup></b>	<b>6 760</b>	<b>9 695</b>	<b>16 455</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>87</b>

(a) Calculated as the number of claims per 100 million hours worked.

(b) Includes mental stress claims for which industry was not stated.

The highest male frequency rate (312 claims per 100 million hours worked) occurred in Rail transport: a rate almost eight times the overall male frequency rate of mental stress claims. Also prominent were the male frequency rates in Public order and safety services (primarily police services and corrective centres, 303 claims per 100 million hours worked), Community care services (225), Justice (163), Other health services (primarily ambulance services and community health centres, 152) and School education (150).

**Figure 38a** New mental stress claims for men: industry sub-categories<sup>(a)</sup> with the highest frequency rates, 2003–04 and 2004–05p combined

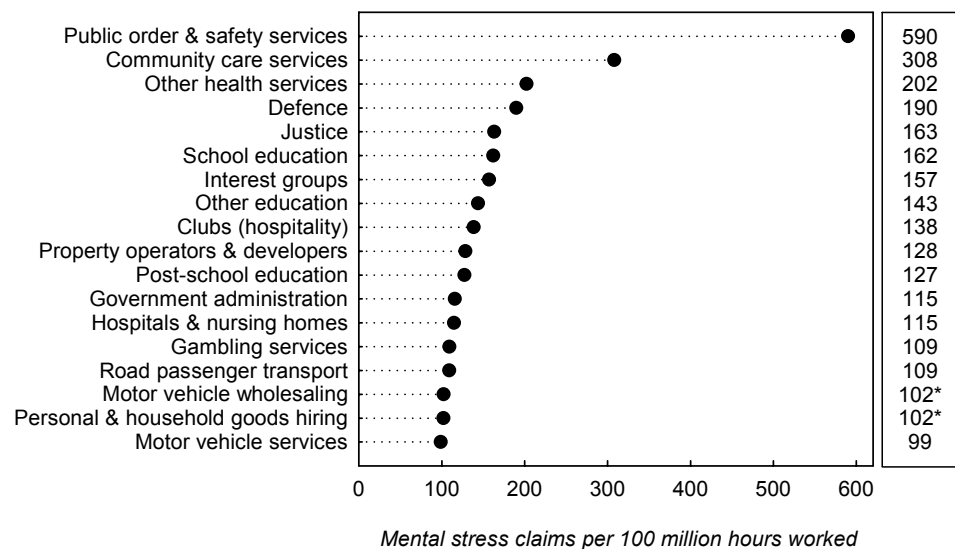


(a) Based on industry categories of the 2nd and 3rd levels of the Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification (ANZSIC).

**For women**

For women, Figure 38b identifies the eighteen industry sub-categories that had the highest female frequency rates for the combined years 2003–04 and 2004–05p. These sub-categories accounted for 66% of new mental stress claims for women.

**Figure 38b** New mental stress claims for women: industry sub-categories<sup>(a)</sup> with the highest frequency rates, 2003–04 and 2004–05p combined



(a) Based on industry categories of the 3rd level of the Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification (ANZSIC).

The highest female frequency rate (590 claims per 100 million hours worked) occurred in Public order and safety services (primarily involving police services and corrective centres). This rate was almost seven times the overall female frequency rate of mental stress claims. Other high female frequency rates occurred in Community care services (308 claims per 100 million hours worked), Other health services (202), Defence (190), Justice (163), School education (162) and Interest groups (associations mainly engaged in promoting the interests of employees and self-employed persons, 157).

## Median time lost from work and median direct cost of claims

Table 29 shows the median time lost from work and median direct cost of claims by gender in each sub-category of mental stress claim. Factors influencing the direct cost of a workers' compensation claim include the medical expenses, the length of any absence from work, and the employee's salary level. Data are presented for 2003–04 rather than for 2004–05p because the time lost from work and the direct cost associated with a compensation claim are generally not fully ascertained until some time after the end of the financial year in which the claim was submitted.

In 2003–04, mental stress claims had a median time lost from work of 9.7 weeks and a median direct cost of \$12 800, more than double the median time lost of 4.0 weeks and the median direct cost of \$5800 for all new claims.

For both men and women, substantially greater median times lost from work and substantially higher median direct costs occurred with the three most common sub-categories of mental stress claim (*Work pressure*, *Harassment* and *Other mental stress factors*) than with the other sub-categories of mental stress (*Exposure to workplace or occupational violence*, *Exposure to traumatic event* and *Suicide or attempted suicide*). Claims involving the sub-category *Harassment* had the greatest median time lost from work (11.0 working weeks). Claims involving *Work pressure* had the highest median direct cost (\$14 500).

Claims for women had a greater median time lost from work than did claims for men in all *Mental stress* sub-categories other than *Work pressure* and *Suicide or attempted suicide*. Claims for women had a higher median direct cost than did claims for men in all sub-categories other than *Work pressure* and *Exposure to traumatic event*.

**Table 29** New mental stress claims: median time lost from work and median direct cost by gender and sub-category, 2003–04

Sub-category of Mental stress	Males	Females	Total
<b>Median time lost (working weeks)</b>			
Work pressure	11.6	10.0	10.6
Harassment	9.9	12.0	11.0
Other mental stress factors	9.4	11.6	10.3
Exposure to workplace or occupational violence	5.4	7.0	6.4
Exposure to traumatic event	5.7	7.0	6.3
Suicide or attempted suicide	2.2	1.8	2.0
<b>Total mental stress claims</b>	<b>9.2</b>	<b>10.0</b>	<b>9.7</b>
<b>All claims</b>	<b>3.7</b>	<b>4.7</b>	<b>4.0</b>
<b>Median direct cost (\$)</b>			
Work pressure	16 000	13 400	14 500
Harassment	12 900	13 900	13 500
Other mental stress factors	13 400	14 000	13 800
Exposure to workplace or occupational violence	8 200	9 100	8 900
Exposure to traumatic event	7 800	7 700	7 800
Suicide or attempted suicide	5 000	7 300	6 100
<b>Total mental stress claims</b>	<b>13 000</b>	<b>12 700</b>	<b>12 800</b>
<b>All claims</b>	<b>5 700</b>	<b>6 100</b>	<b>5 800</b>