

# Psychosocial health and safety and bullying in Australian workplaces

## Indicators from accepted workers' compensation claims

Annual statement, 6<sup>th</sup> edition, 2021

### Introduction

Psychosocial health is the physical, mental and social state of a person. Workers exposed to adverse workplace culture are at greater risk of developing a psychological injury caused by mental stress.

This is the sixth annual national statement issued by Safe Work Australia to identify trends in psychosocial health and safety and bullying in Australian workplaces. This statement presents information from Safe Work Australia's data sets on accepted workers' compensation claims involving mental stress; that is, claims when the work-related injury or disease results from the person experiencing mental stress or being exposed to stressful situations.

The incidence of these types of claims provides one indicator of the psychosocial health and safety status of Australian workplaces.

Another indicator is the rate of claims for work-related harassment and/or workplace bullying. This sub-category is assigned to claims when the employee was a victim of:

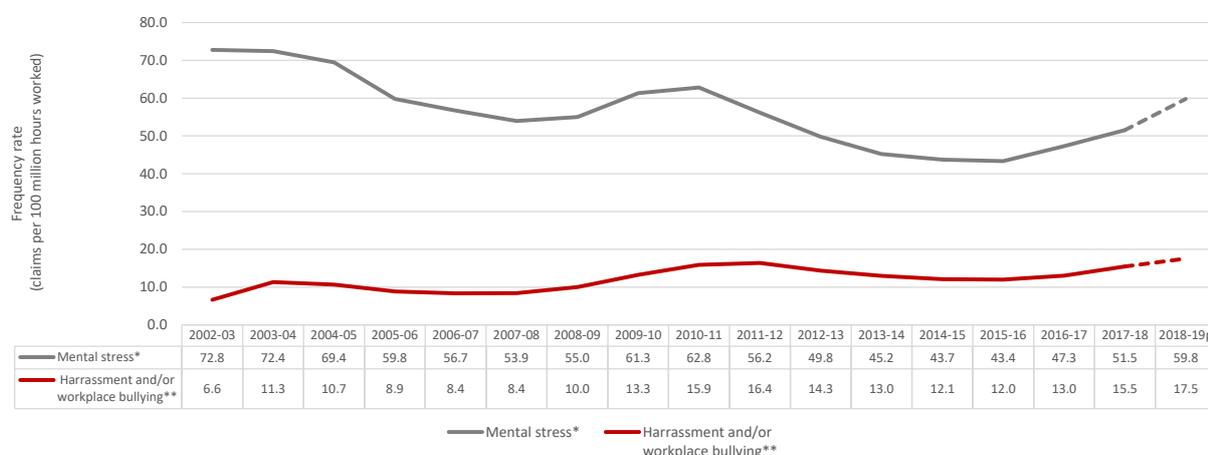
- repetitive assault and/or threatened assault by a work colleague or colleagues, or
- repetitive verbal harassment, threats, and abuse from a work colleague or colleagues.

This sub-category of mental stress broadly aligns with the nationally accepted definition of workplace bullying, which is repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or a group of workers that creates a risk to health and safety (*Fair Work Act 2009*, s.789FD(1)). Assault cases where the physical injuries were deemed more serious than the mental stress involved in the incident are excluded.

### Work-related mental stress claim trends

Figure 1 shows that the frequency rate (claims per 100 million hours worked) of mental stress claims has declined from 2002–03 to 2015–16, before rising again in recent years. The rate for harassment and/or bullying claims has increased over the same period reaching 17.5 in 2018–19p. The 2018–19 rate is likely to be higher once claims numbers are finalised. These trend data provide one indicator of the psychosocial health and safety status of Australian workplaces over time and should be interpreted with caution. Factors such as changes to jurisdictional legislation, and an increased willingness to report and claim for work-related mental stress, will also have influenced the number of claims over the reporting period.

**Figure 1: Mental stress and sub-category harassment and/or bullying: Frequency rates, 2002–03 to 2018–19p\***



Note: 2018–19 data are preliminary and subject to change.

\* Mental stress data includes information from Victoria. See explanatory notes for further details.

\*\* Harassment and/or bullying data is a subset of mental stress claims. The data excludes information from Victoria. See explanatory notes for further details.

## Work-related mental stress sub-category breakdown

Table 1 provides key statistics for claims involving mental stress as the main mechanism of injury or disease for 2017–18, presented by mechanism sub-category. It shows that, while mental stress claims only make up a small proportion of overall claims, the associated time lost and costs are significantly higher compared to those observed for all workers' compensation claims.

**Table 1: Number, time lost, direct cost, frequency rate and incidence rate for mental stress claims, 2017–18\***

Sub-category of mental stress**	Number of claims	Median time lost (working weeks)	Median direct cost	Frequency rate (claims per 100 million hours worked)	Incidence rate (claims per 10,000 employees)
Work related harassment and/or workplace bullying	2,280	14.8	\$34,600	15.5	2.6
Work pressure	2,075	14.2	\$32,700	14.1	2.3
Exposure to workplace or occupational violence	1,130	5.0	\$10,600	7.7	1.3
Exposure to a traumatic event	820	8.4	\$24,300	5.6	0.9
Other mental stress factors	715	9.0	\$24,000	4.9	0.8
Other harassment***	190	7.5	\$18,300	1.3	0.2
Suicide or attempted suicide	20	17.4	\$19,400	0.1	0.0
<b>Total all mental stress</b>	<b>10,050</b>	<b>12.2</b>	<b>\$25,000</b>	<b>51.5</b>	<b>8.5</b>
<b>Total all accepted claims</b>	<b>226,625</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>\$3,000</b>	<b>1,161.5</b>	<b>191.9</b>

\*Data are presented for 2017–18 rather than 2018–19p because the time lost from work and the direct cost associated with a compensation claim are generally not finalised until after the end of the financial year in which the claim was submitted. Note that workers' compensation data reflect the year the claim was lodged, not the year in which the incident occurred. There may be a significant lag for mental stress claims because of the lengthy assessment process and the difficulty proving work-relatedness.

\*\*Mental stress sub-category data excludes information from Victoria. However, the total mental stress data includes Victoria and therefore shows national figures. See explanatory notes for further details.

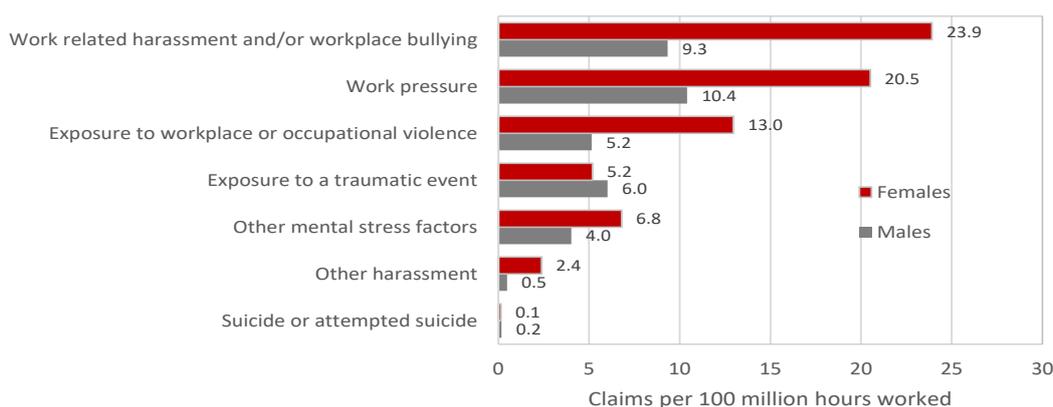
\*\*\*The *Other harassment* sub-category includes victims of sexual or racial harassment by a person or persons including work colleague/s.

**Note:** The *mechanism of incident* classification identifies the overall action, exposure or event that best describes the circumstances that resulted in the most serious injury or disease.

## Work-related mental stress sub-categories by sex

The frequency rates of workers' compensation claims for harassment and/or bullying and exposure to workplace or occupational violence made by female employees were more than twice the rates of these claims made by males over the three years 2016–17 to 2018–19p combined. Similarly, the rate for claims made by females relating to work pressure was almost twice that of similar claims made by males.

**Figure 2: Frequency rates by sex and mental stress sub-category, 2016–17 to 2018–19p combined**



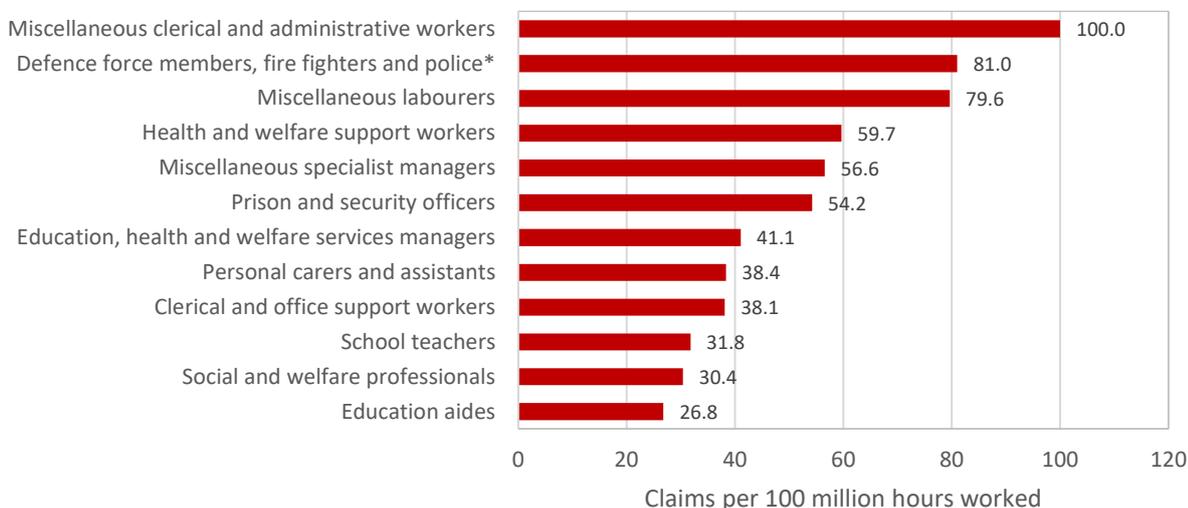
### Notes:

- Mental stress sub-category data excludes information from Victoria. See explanatory notes for further details.
- Three years' data has been used for Figure 2 because a breakdown of mental stress claims by sub-categories and sex would result in very high relative standard errors.

## Work-related harassment and/or bullying by occupation and industry

Occupations with a higher risk of exposure to work-related harassment and/or workplace bullying include *Miscellaneous clerical and administrative workers; Defence force members, fire fighters and police; and Miscellaneous labourers.*

**Figure 3: Occupations with the highest frequency rates of work-related harassment and/or bullying, 2016–17 to 2018–19p combined**



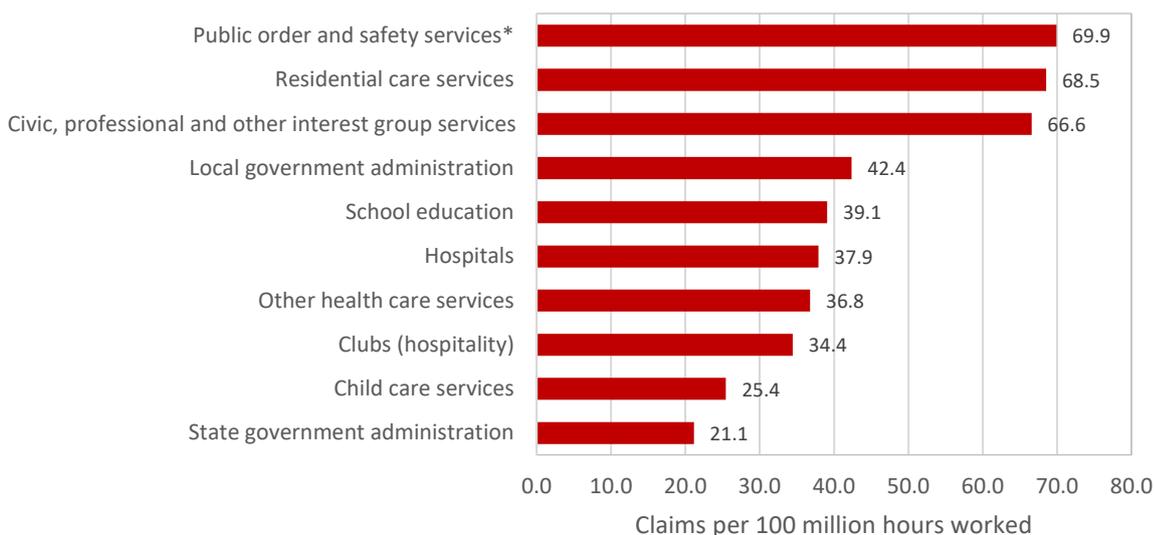
\*Excludes Western Australian police.

**Notes:**

1. Victorian data is not included. See explanatory notes for further details.
2. Three years' data has been used for Figure 3 because a breakdown of mental stress claims by sub-categories and sex would result in very high relative standard errors.

Industry groups with the highest rates of claims for work-related harassment and/or workplace bullying include *Public order and safety services; Residential care services; and Civic, professional and other interest group services.*

**Figure 4: Industry groups with the highest frequency rates of work-related harassment and/or bullying, 2016–17 to 2018–19p combined**



\*Excludes Western Australia.

**Notes:**

1. Victorian data is not included. See explanatory notes for further details.
2. Three years' data has been used for Figure 4 because a breakdown of mental stress claims by sub-categories and sex would result in very high relative standard errors.

## Other data sources

The [Bullying and Harassment in Australian Workplaces: Results from the Australian Workplace Barometer 2014–15](#) report shows that in 2014–15, 9.4% of Australian workers participating in the survey reported being bullied at work in the previous six months.

In 2018 the Australian Human Rights Commission conducted a [national survey](#) to investigate the prevalence, nature and reporting of sexual harassment in Australian workplaces and the wider community. The survey found that 23% of women and 16% of men had experienced sexual harassment at work in the last 12 months.

## Creating a safe workplace

Under the model WHS laws, persons conducting a business or undertaking must eliminate risks to health and safety in the workplace as much as is reasonably practicable. This includes risks to workers' psychological health, and work-related bullying and harassment.

A worker who is covered by the *Fair Work Act 2009* and reasonably believes they have been bullied at work may apply to the Fair Work Commission for an order to stop the workplace bullying. More information is available at [www.fwc.gov.au](http://www.fwc.gov.au).

## Other related Safe Work Australia publications

These and other reports are available at [safeworkaustralia.gov.au](http://safeworkaustralia.gov.au).

- *Guide for preventing workplace sexual harassment*, January 2021
- *Preventing workplace sexual harassment – guidance for small business*, January 2021
- *Workplace sexual harassment – advice for workers*, January 2021
- *Guide for preventing workplace violence and aggression*, January 2021
- *Preventing workplace violence – information sheet for small business*, January 2021
- *Workplace violence and aggression – advice for workers*, January 2021
- *Family and domestic violence at the workplace – information sheet*, January 2021
- *Infographic: Four steps to preventing psychological injury at work*, March 2020
- *Work-related psychological health and safety: A systematic approach to meeting your duties*, January 2019

- *Guide for Preventing and Responding to Workplace Bullying*, May 2016
- *Dealing with Workplace Bullying - A Worker's Guide*, May 2016
- Work-related mental disorders profile, 2015
- *The incidence of accepted workers' compensation claims for mental stress in Australia*, April 2013

## Data source and explanatory notes

Data are sourced from the National Dataset for Compensation-based Statistics (NDS) and include all accepted workers' compensation claims for temporary incapacity, permanent incapacity and fatalities made under state, territory and Commonwealth Government workers' compensation Acts. Claims are coded according to the *Type of Occurrence Classification System 3rd Ed. Revision 1* (TOOCS). Industry and occupation level data are presented using the *Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification (ANZSIC) 2006* and *Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO) 2006*. Data presented for mental stress are national figures but data for subcategories of mental stress (including work-related harassment and/or bullying) exclude Victoria because its data are not coded to that level of detail. Data for 2018–19 are preliminary (denoted by the letter 'p') and subject to future adjustment. Workers' compensation statistics provide the only national administrative data indicators for psychosocial stressors in Australian workplaces. The hours worked data used to calculate frequency rates were provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2020.

Please note that the data included in this report relates only to accepted workers' compensation claims for mental stress. The data does not include incidences where a worker is not covered by workers' compensation arrangements, ineligible to make a claim, or has otherwise experienced work-related mental stress or bullying and harassment but decided not to make a claim. It also excludes bullying and harassment claims where the worker experienced physical injuries that were perceived to be greater than the psychological impact. As such, the data is likely to under-report the true incidence of work-related mental stress.