

COVID-19 and Safe Work Australia data

November 2021

The Safe Work Australia statistical reports released in 2021¹ mark the first time the data reference year includes periods when Australia was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The wide reach of the pandemic and the different public health and economic responses implemented by both Australian and state and territory governments at different times have had varied, complex impacts for persons conducting businesses and undertakings (PCBUs), workers and workplaces. It is not possible to meaningfully attribute any single factor to explain the impact of COVID-19 on work, health and safety (WHS) or workers' compensation (WC) outcomes over the period.

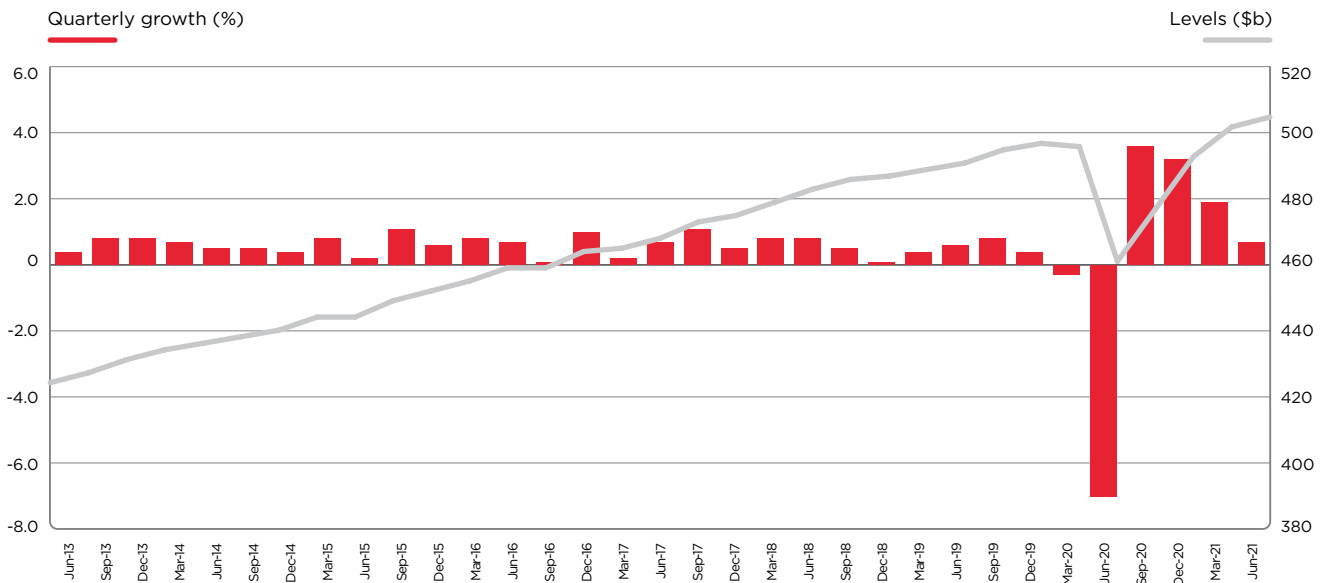
Instead, we present here some wider contextual information and invite readers to consider this when interpreting and comparing Safe Work Australia's WC, fatalities and comparative performance monitoring data in addition to known WHS and WC-specific drivers of injury and illness.

Economic activity

The emergence of COVID-19 in Australia and corresponding public health restrictions, have had numerous consequences on Australia's economic activity. In the quarter to June 2020, the GDP dropped by a record 7%, and was the second quarter to record a fall after a long streak of continuous growth (see Figure 1) (ABS, 2021 (a)).

Figure 1:

Gross domestic product, chain volume measurement, seasonally adjusted



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian National Accounts: National Income, Expenditure and Product June 2021 (ABS, 2021 (a))

There were also falls in household spending (down 12.3% in the quarter to June 2020, the first in recorded history) and large increases government expenditure (up 7.4% between December 2019 and December 2020) (ABS, 2020 (a); ABS, 2021 (a)).

The employment and value added by industries across the economy also varied considerably from previous periods (see Figure 2). There were large decreases in value in the Accommodation and food services, Arts recreation and services, and Agriculture, forestry and fishing industries between the 2018-19 and 2019-20 financial years which were significantly impacted by COVID-19 restrictions. In comparison, there were increases in Mining and Healthcare and social assistance industries (ABS, 2021 (b)).

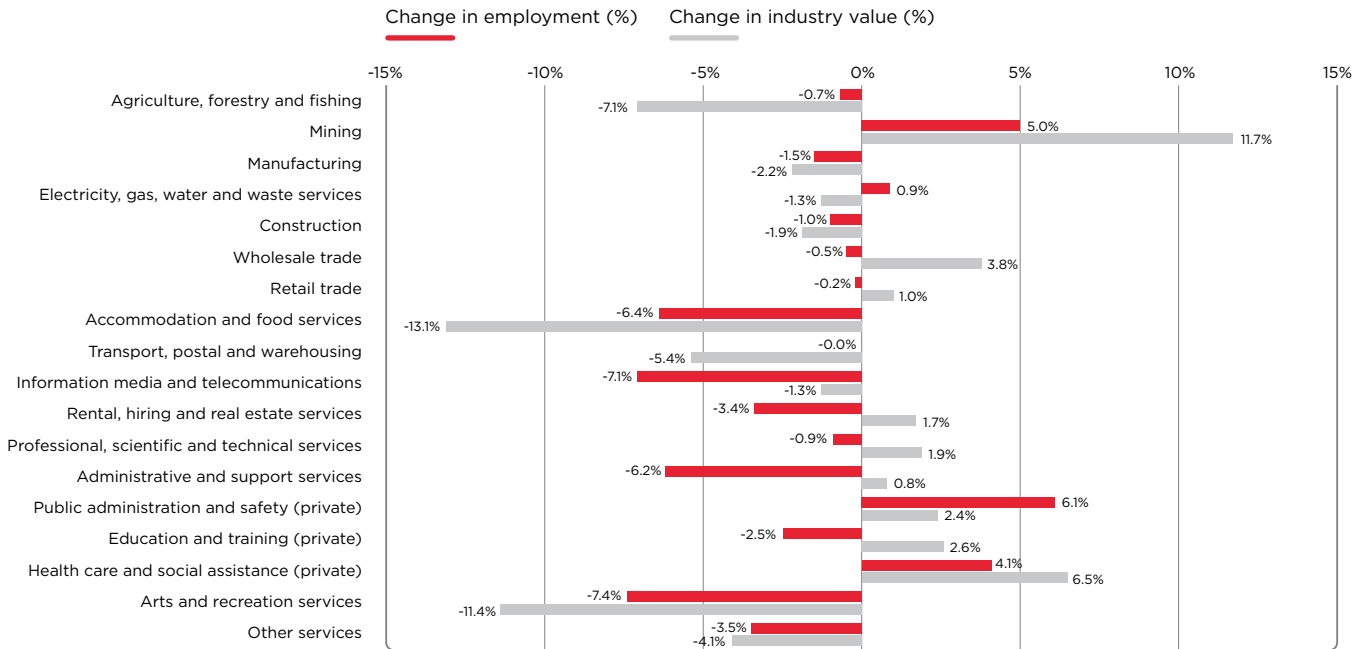
¹ Safe Work Australia's annual statistical reports include the: 2021 Key WHS statistics; 2020 Work related Traumatic Injury Fatality Report, 2019-20 Australian Workers' Compensation report; 23rd edition of the Comparative Performance Monitoring Report; and the 2021 National Return to Work Survey

COVID-19 and Safe Work Australia data

November 2021

Figure 2:

Change (percentage) in employment and industry value added by industry (2018-19 to 2019-20)



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Industry 2019-20 financial year (ABS, 2021 (b)).

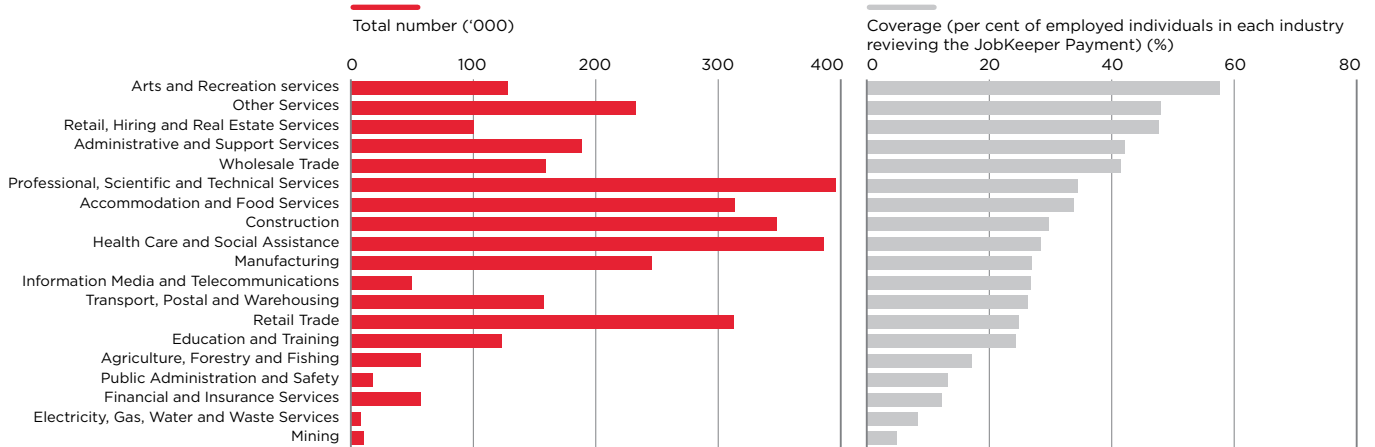
Labour Force

On 30 March 2020, the Australian Government introduced the JobKeeper scheme which paid a wage subsidy to businesses impacted by COVID-19 to assist them to pay their employees regardless of whether the employees were able to work.

Individuals paid through the JobKeeper scheme were classified as employed in the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Labour Force Survey. This is relevant because this data is used to calculate injury and fatality rates in the Agency's annual statistical reports (ABS, 2020 (b)). Rates that are expressed on a per 100,000 worker basis are likely to underestimate the level of risk of injury or fatality to workers. This is because the number of individuals who received payments through the JobKeeper scheme may not have been working at the time. As the pandemic and the JobKeeper scheme affected industries differently, this may impact some industries more than others (see Figure 3).

Figure 3:

Individual recipients in April 2020 — total number and share of private sector employment by industry



Source: Department of Treasury, The JobKeeper Payment: Three month review 2020 (Department of Treasury, 2020).

COVID-19 and Safe Work Australia data

/ November 2021

Traffic flow

Overall, the number of kilometres travelled by vehicles in the 12 months to 30 June 2020 decreased compared to the 12 months to 30 June 2018 (ABS, 2020 (f)). This decrease was led by falls in travel by passenger vehicles, motorcycles and buses. However, travel distance for trucks increased over the same period. Increased demand for products (e.g. household essential goods) and for delivery services by consumers in response to COVID restrictions implemented are likely to have contributed to this increase.

WHS Enforcement Activities and Legal Proceedings

Restrictions on movement and the need to socially distance had impacts on WHS regulators and the courts during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For many jurisdictions, restrictions resulted in reduced industry activity and limited their capacity to undertake compliance and enforcement visits and activities (as they balanced the safety of their inspectors and workplaces). There was also an increasing focus on compliance with COVID-19 health advice and activities. Some jurisdictions adapted to the restrictions by conducting their enforcement activities in innovative ways (e.g. reactive desktop audits).

Courts across Australia also closed or reduced their operating hours in early 2020 to allow for the implementation of COVID safe practices to be introduced (e.g. video conferencing procedures).

Workers' Compensation

Information on COVID-19 workers compensation claims for the calendar year 2020 are contained in Safe Work Australia's COVID-19 workers' compensation claims report.

As restrictions ease, WC claims submitted from workers who have contracted COVID-19 are likely to rise across Australia. Claims may be submitted by workers who can either prove that COVID-19 was contracted in the course of work or who work in an occupational group deemed to have contracted COVID-19 in their workplace under presumptive clauses in their state's WC legislation (e.g. Western Australia).

Worker sentiment

One in 4 employed Australians surveyed in 2020 thought it was probable that they would lose their jobs in the next 12 months (almost double what it had been since 2001) (Biddle, Edwards, Gray, & Sollis, 2020). Research shows that workers in less secure employment are less likely to access medical treatment or make a compensation claim following an injury (Quinlan, 2015). This bias has likely always existed within Safe Work Australia data but has likely increased as a result of COVID-19, given that permanent employment arrangements were impacted by shut downs, stand downs, reductions in hours and changes in working environment.

Psychological health and wellbeing

During the pandemic, a significant number of survey participants have reported a decline in overall mental health. Feelings of nervousness and restlessness in April 2020 were almost twice that found in 2017 18 (see Figure 4) (ABS, 2020 (e)). In particular, the population groups reporting higher levels of psychological stress were those that were disproportionately affected by the pandemic (e.g. people without a job, women, young people, people residing in Victoria and people with a disability) (ABS, 2021 (c)).

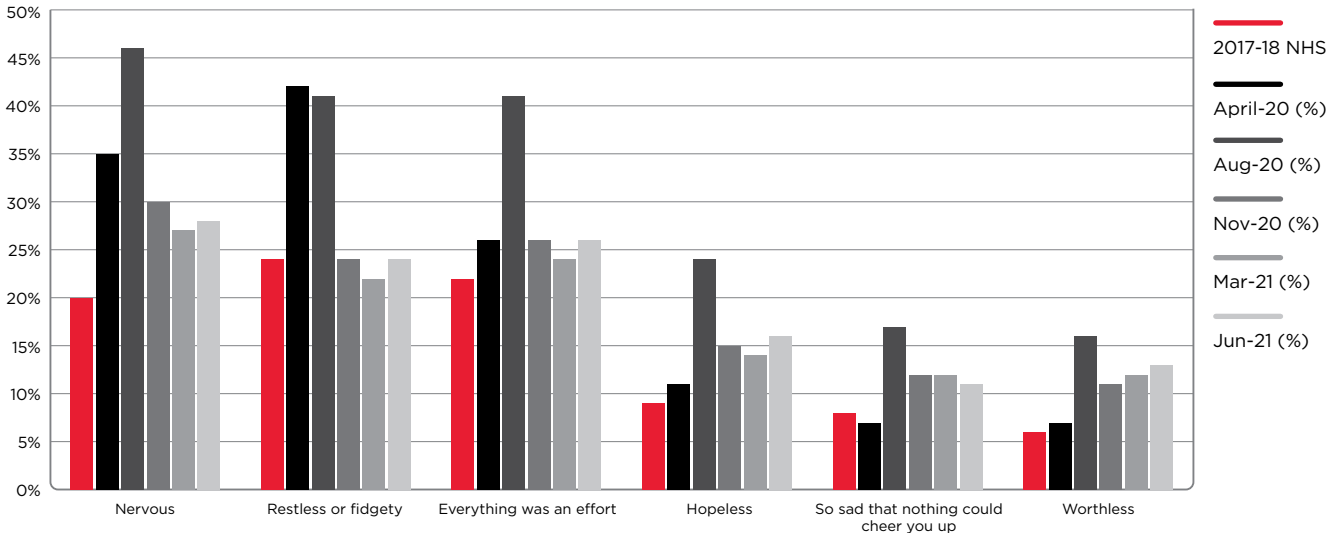


COVID-19 and Safe Work Australia data

November 2021

Figure 4:

Persons aged 18 years and over, by selected feelings that impacted on emotional and mental wellbeing at least some of the time* and reporting period



*Includes feelings experienced in the last four weeks at the time of interview. At least some of the time includes responses of some, most or all of the time (ABS, 2018; ABS, 2020 (c); ABS, 2020 (d))

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, ABS National Health Survey 2017-18 (ABS, 2018); Australian Bureau of Statistics, Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey April 2020 (ABS, 2020 (c)); Australian Bureau of Statistics, Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey June 2020 (ABS, 2020 (d)).

High levels of psychological distress substantially increased the demand for psychological services, with 15 million Medical Benefit Schedule subsidised services processed between March 2020 and April 2021 and an increase of between 18-30% for online telephone support lines (AIHW, 2021). Only 17% of respondents who reported feelings that impacted mental wellbeing (see figure 4) discussed them with a doctor or other health professional (ABS, 2020 (d)).

High levels of psychological distress in the population (driven by a wide spectrum of individual, household and societal factors) are likely to have impacted workplaces in a range of ways including worker absences due to poor mental health (whether work-related or not) and a knock-on heightening of workplace stressors and psychosocial risks (potentially for both for PCBUs and workers). Working from home by workers almost doubled during the pandemic (ABS, 2021 (d)). Almost half of parents who were working from home during COVID-19 reported finding it difficult to combine work and care responsibilities, which may have contributed to high levels of psychological distress (AIFS, 2021).

Return to work

The impact of COVID-19 on access to medical services to treat a work-related injury or illness is also difficult to define. Access to non-urgent elective surgeries was cancelled for a period in 2020 due to COVID-19. Initial feedback from the current National Return to Work Survey is mixed, with some workers reporting work from home arrangements assisted them to return to work sooner, while others noted that workplaces in suspension made it easier for workers to concentrate on their recovery. More information is expected when the NRTW Survey reports are released in late 2021 and early 2022.

Implications for Safe Work Australia data

The impact of the pandemic on Australia's WHS is multi-faceted and complex in nature. Interpretation of Safe Work Australia annual statistics in isolation from the broader effects of the pandemic risks oversimplifying the work health and safety environment during this time. Broader context assists to demonstrate that individual workers, workplaces and industries had different experiences during the pandemic, particularly in the early months of the public health emergency, which this period of data covers. It also demonstrates that care must be taken in making comparisons to previous periods of data.

COVID-19 and Safe Work Australia data

/ November 2021

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