

# Return to Work Survey 2021

Reference period: 1 February 2019 – 31 January 2021

## Headline Measures Report

### December 2021



Social  
Research  
Centre

**Report prepared for:**

Safe Work Australia  
GPO Box 641, Canberra ACT 2601

**Report prepared by:**

The Social Research Centre  
Level 5, 350 Queen Street  
MELBOURNE VIC. 3000  
Tel: (613) 9236 8500  
Fax: (613) 9602 5422  
Email: [info@srcentre.com.au](mailto:info@srcentre.com.au)

[www.srcentre.com.au](http://www.srcentre.com.au)



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# 1. Foreword

More than half a million Australians sustain a work-related injury or illness each year. The impacts on affected workers can be devastating and often reverberate more widely through families, communities and workplaces. In addition to the immediate personal toll, work-related injury and illness imposes significant costs on the Australian health system and economy through loss of productivity and income.

The inaugural *National Return to Work Strategy 2020-2030* (the Strategy) drives action to improve return to work outcomes for ill and injured workers. The Strategy aims to minimise the impact of work-related injury and illness, and enable workers to have a safe, durable and timely return to work. The National Return to Work (NRTW) Survey is a key data source guiding the Strategy's delivery and will assist us to measure progress throughout its 10-year life.

The NRTW Survey results provide valuable insights for workers' compensation authorities and other key stakeholders into the return to work process and factors that may influence return to work outcomes. The survey gives us a better understanding of the lived experiences of ill and injured workers returning to work, including the important role of the supervisor, co-workers and other supports.

I am pleased to present the Headline Measures Report from the 2021 NRTW Survey, the fifth NRTW Survey conducted since 2012. This report provides an early release of the primary return to work measures for national reporting and jurisdictional comparison: the Return to Work Rate and the Current Returned to Work Rate. A more comprehensive summary report will be published in 2022.

Originally scheduled for April 2020, Safe Work Australia Members agreed to delay the NRTW Survey by 12 months due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The questionnaire for the 2021 NRTW Survey was largely unchanged since the 2018 NRTW Survey, with the addition of 2 questions to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on return to work outcomes. These new questions were asked of around 10% of workers interviewed in each jurisdiction.

The results of the NRTW Survey should be considered in the broader context of the COVID-19 pandemic when comparing data over previous periods. The potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on this data is explored in the [COVID-19 and Safe Work Australia data](#) and [Key work health and safety statistics, Australia 2021](#) reports.

I would like to thank jurisdictions for providing population data and helping to fund and administer the survey, particularly during this challenging period.

I also wish to acknowledge and sincerely thank each of the 4,588 workers who participated in the NRTW Survey. Your willingness to share your stories and personal experiences will assist policy makers to drive better return to work outcomes for workers into the future.

**Michelle Baxter**

Chief Executive Officer

Safe Work Australia

## 2. Introduction

The Social Research Centre has managed the National Return to Work (NRTW) Survey on behalf of Safe Work Australia since 2012, to measure return to work outcomes of injured workers receiving workers' compensation and to better understand the experiences of those injured workers and the factors that may influence their return to work.

Various changes have occurred over time, including:

- Participation by SA, ACT and NT in some years only
- A significant redevelopment of content in 2018, and
- Inclusion in 2021 of two new questions exploring injured workers' experiences of COVID-19 on their injury and recovery.

All Australian workers' compensation authorities took part in the survey in 2021. The current NRTW Survey draws its sample from the population of injured workers who:

- had at least one day away from work; and
- had a claim reported to the workers' compensation authority or insurer between 1 February 2019 to 31 January 2021 inclusive<sup>1</sup>; and
- had either an open or closed workers' compensation claim; and
- worked in either premium-paying (including own businesses) or self-insured organisations.

This Headline Measures Report includes two key measures, namely the:

- Returned to Work Rate which reports the proportion of injured workers who state that they have returned to work at any time since their work-related injury or illness.
- Current Return to Work Rate which reports the proportion of injured workers who state that they have returned to work at any time since their work-related injury or illness AND are currently working (at the time of the survey) in a paid job.

A more comprehensive *Summary Report* will be published on Safe Work Australia's website in 2022.

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<sup>1</sup> A small number of claims were submitted outside this period (40 claims from NSW State Insurance Regulatory Agency and 47 claims from Return to Work SA in February and March 2021). This was permitted under the collection method and included in analysis consistent with 2018.

### 3. Headline Measures

This section provides the headline measures for the 2021 NRTW Survey. For the 2021 Survey, a total of 4,588 interviews were completed.

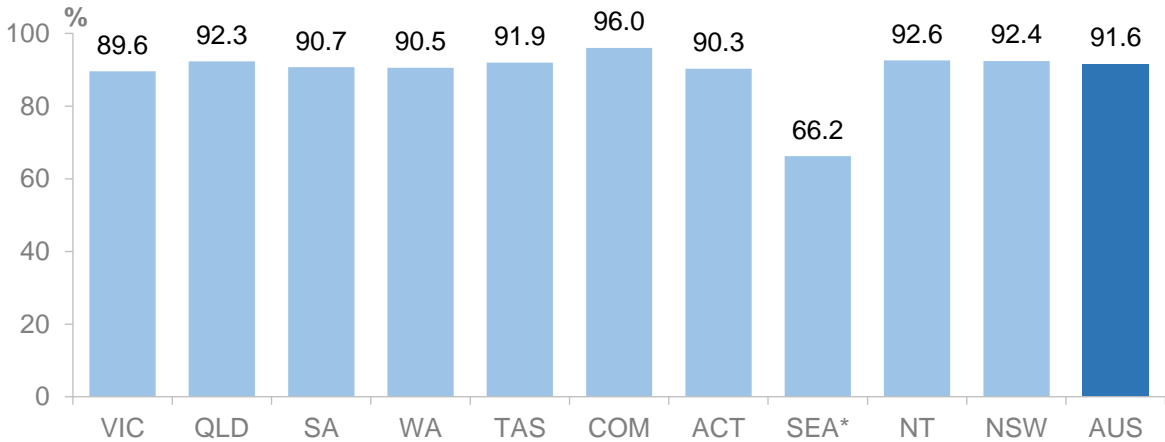
#### 3.1. Returned to Work Rate

The Returned to Work Rate is the proportion of injured workers surveyed who reported having returned to work at any time since their work-related injury or illness. It is based on question RTW1 (previously question C7 prior to 2018) ‘Have you returned to work at any time since your work-related injury or illness?’ and reports the proportion of injured workers who state ‘yes’ (refer Figure 1 and Figure 2).

The Returned to Work Rate for Australia in 2021 was 91.6% (Figure 1). The jurisdictions which recorded return to work rates above the national average were Comcare (96.0%), Northern Territory (92.6%), New South Wales (92.4%), Queensland (92.3%) and Tasmania (91.9%). The jurisdictions which recorded return to work rates below the national average were South Australia (90.7%), Western Australia (90.5%), Australian Capital Territory (90.3%), Victoria (89.6%) and Seacare (66.2%).

**Figure 1** 2021 Returned to Work rate by Jurisdiction (%)

*RTW1. Have you returned to work at any time since your work-related injury or illness?*



*Base* Total sample - those with at least one day off work and whose claim was submitted between 1 February 2019 and 31 January 2021.

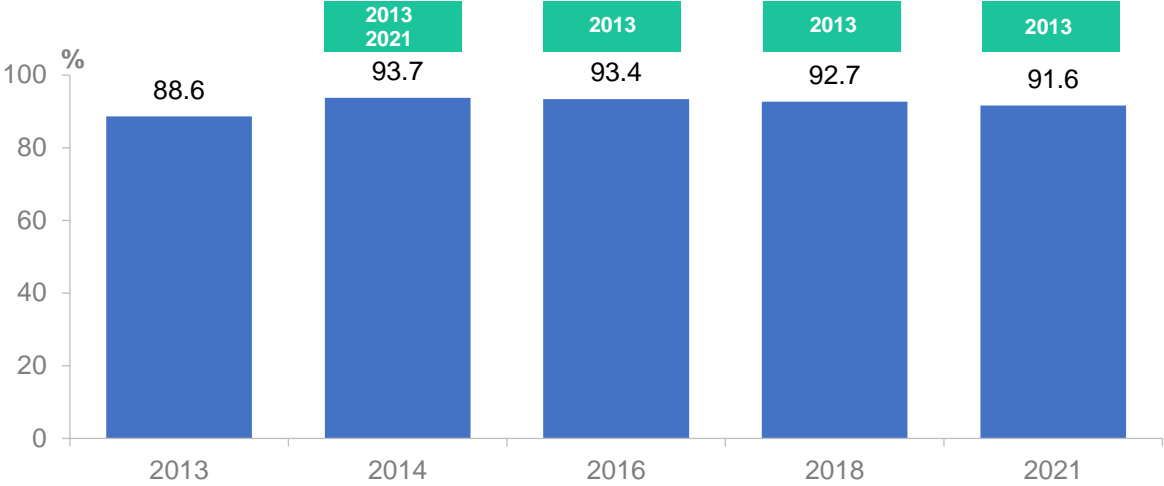
*'Don't Know' and 'Refused' responses are not excluded.*

*Sample sizes: Australia (n=4,588), VIC (n=780), QLD (n=773), SA (n=387), WA (n=485), TAS (n=443), Comcare (n=619), NT (n=150), ACT (n=144), \*Seacare (n=42 – caution small sample size), NSW (n=765)*

The national Returned to Work Rate has decreased slightly over time following a peak of 93.7% in 2014. However, the 2021 result remains significantly higher than the lowest rate of 88.6% in 2013.

**Figure 2 Returned to Work rate: National time series (%)**

*RTW1. Have you returned to work at any time since your work-related injury or illness?*



*Base Total sample - those with at least one day off work and whose claim was submitted between 1 February 2019 and 31 January 2021.*

*'Don't Know' and 'Refused' responses are not excluded.*

*Sample sizes: 2013 (n=4,698), 2014 (n=4,679), 2016 (n=5,124), 2018 (n=4,602), 2021 (n=4,588)*

*SA did not participate in 2018. ACT did not participate in 2013, 2014 or 2016. NT did not participate in 2013.*

*In 2021 there was a change in the sampling method for the survey (refer 'Methodological Overview').*

**xxxx** indicates that the return to work rate represented in the bar chart was statistically significantly higher than the years stated.



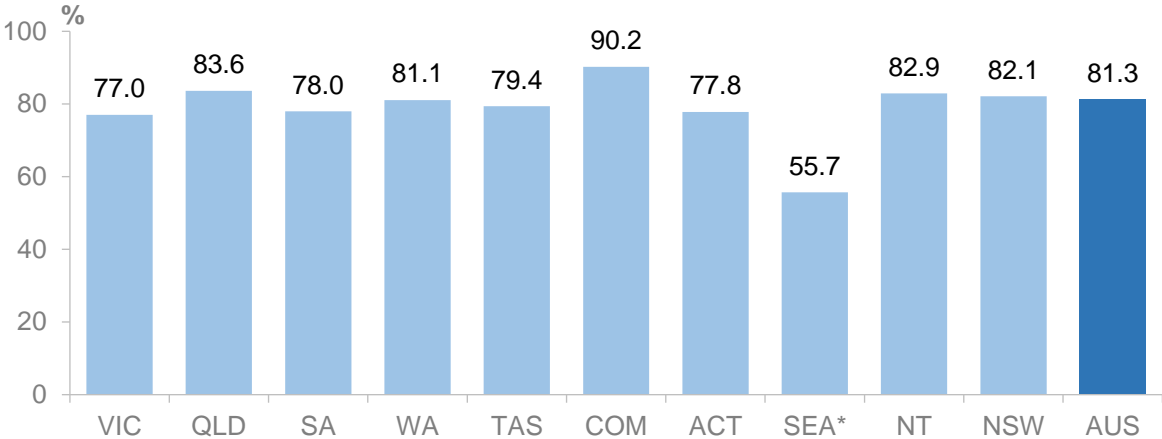
### 3.2. Current Return to Work Rate

The Current Return to Work Rate is the proportion of injured workers surveyed who reported having returned to work at any time since their work-related injury or illness **and** were in a paid job at the time of interview. This measure is based on question RTW2 'Are you currently working in a paid job?' **and** question RTW1 'Have you returned to work at any time since your work-related injury or illness?' It reports the proportion of injured workers who state 'yes' to both questions (refer Figure 3 and Figure 4).

The Current Return to Work Rate for Australia in 2021 was 81.3% which is 10.3 percentage points below the Return to Work Rate for the same period (Figure 3). The jurisdictions which recorded Current Return to Work rates above the national rate were Comcare (90.2%), Queensland (83.6%), Northern Territory (82.9%) and New South Wales (82.1%). The jurisdictions which recorded return to work rates below the national average were Western Australia (81.1%), Tasmania (79.4%), South Australia (78.0%), Australian Capital Territory (77.8%), Victoria (77.0%) and Seacare (55.7%).

**Figure 3 2021 Current Return to Work rate: by Jurisdiction (%)**

RTW1. Have you returned to work at any time since your work-related injury or illness?  
 RTW2. Are you currently working in a paid job?



Base Total sample - those with at least one day off work and whose claim was submitted between 1 February 2019 and 31 January 2021.

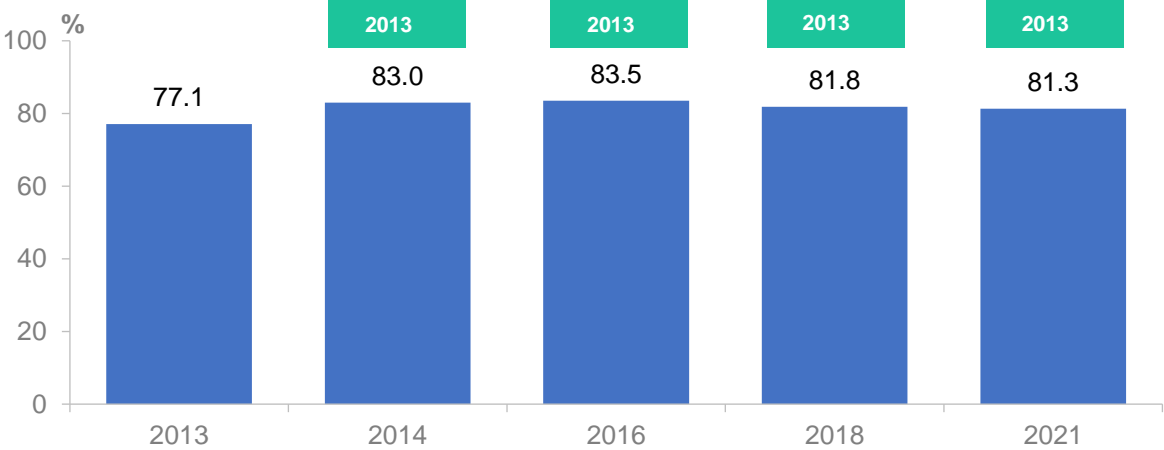
'Don't Know' and 'Refused' responses are not excluded.

Sample sizes: Australia (n=4,588), VIC (n=780), QLD (n=773), SA (n=387), WA (n=485), TAS (n=443), Comcare (n=619), NT (n=150), ACT (n=144), Seacare (n=42 – \*caution small sample), NSW (n=765)

The national Current Return to Work Rate (Figure 4) was relatively stable in 2014 (83.0%) and 2016 (83.5%), however, has recorded 0.5 to 1.7 percentage point declines since 2016. The 2021 result remains significantly higher than the lowest rate of 77.1% in 2013.

**Figure 4** Current Return to Work rate: National time series (%)

*RTW1. Have you returned to work at any time since your work-related injury or illness?*  
*RTW2. Are you currently working in a paid job?*



*Base Total sample - those with at least one day off work and whose claim was submitted between 1 February 2019 and 31 January 2021.*

*'Don't Know' and 'Refused' responses are not excluded.*

*Sample sizes: 2013 (n=4,698), 2014 (n=4,679), 2016 (n=5,124), 2018 (n=4,602), 2021 (n=4,588)*

*SA did not participate in 2018. ACT did not participate in 2016, 2014, 2013. NT did not participate in 2013.*

*In 2021 there was a change in the sampling method for the survey (refer 'Methodological Overview').*

**xxxx** indicates that the current return to work rate represented in the bar chart was statistically significantly higher than the years stated.

## 4. Methodological Overview

### Sampling and weighting

From 2012 to 2018, in order to maintain the time series for two key measures reported in the Return to Work Monitor, a group of workers with 10 or more days off work and whose claim was submitted 7-9 months prior to the survey, was purposefully sampled from within the broader population. This group was referred to as the Historic cohort. Sample members who did not meet the criteria of the Historic cohort but did meet the broader criteria were referred to as the Balance cohort. In 2019, Safe Work Australia Members agreed to retire the purposefully sampled Historic cohort to focus on the total injured worker population. The Historic cohort naturally occurs in the context of the broader population, so this change does not represent a total break in the time series, however, it is important to acknowledge this change to the sampling approach.

In this context, the total population of people who could have been selected for this survey were injured workers who:

- had at least one day away from work, and
- had a claim reported to the workers' compensation authority or insurer between 1 February 2019 to 31 January 2021 inclusive<sup>2</sup>, and
- had either an open or closed workers' compensation claim, and
- worked in either premium-paying (including own businesses) or self-insured organisations.

Only a proportion of the total injured worker population, however, was selected to potentially be interviewed. The sample was proportioned (stratified and weighted) to be representative of the total population of in-scope claimants in terms of the following variables:

- Jurisdiction.
- Days compensated (1 to 9, 10 to 19, 20 to 64, 65 to 129, 130 to 259, 260 plus).
- Insurance status (whether the Employer is Premium paying or Self-insured).

### Total interviewed

A total of 4,588 telephone interviews were undertaken between 22 June and 30 September 2021.

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<sup>2</sup> A small number of claims were submitted outside this period (40 claims from NSW SIRA and 47 claims from RTW SA in February and March 2021). This was permitted under the collection method and included in analysis consistent with 2018.

Table 1 shows the profile of the final sample (i.e. those who completed the survey) for the past five collections, across a range of demographic attributes and other characteristics of the worker, their work-related injury or illness, and their employer.

**Table 1 Sample characteristics by survey year (%)**

	2013	2014	2016	2018	2021
<b>Age</b>					
15 - 20 years	3.4	2.4	2.1	2.8	2.8
21 - 30 years	15.2	16.4	14.7	17.4**	20.2**
31 - 40 years	18.0	17.2	17.1	15.0	20.6**
41 - 50 years	26.1	26.1	23.9	22.4	20.6
51 - 60 years	27.2	26.8	28.9	29.5	22.3*
61 - 79 years	10.1	11.1	13.3	12.9	13.6
<b>Gender</b>					
Male	59.5	61.0	60.6	62.2	62.3
Female	40.5	39.0	39.4	37.8	37.7
<b>Injury type</b>					
Fractures	11.1	9.2	9.2	12.4**	11.9
Musculoskeletal disorders	60.4	59.6	58.6	57.1	55.6
Other trauma	19.2	22.6**	23.7	22.0	23.9
Mental illness	5.9	5.1	3.8	4.5	4.1
Other diseases	3.4	3.5	4.6	4.0	4.5
<b>Claim duration</b>					
Average claim duration (days)	344	443**	438	445	537**
<b>Employer size</b>					
Small (Less than \$1m)	21.8	23.2	24.4	25.8	37.2**
Medium (Between \$1m and less than \$20m)	37.2	38.5	36.5	34.9	33.1
Large (\$20m or more)	41.0	38.3	39.1	39.3	29.7*
<b>Cohort</b>					
Historic (purposeful sampling in 2013-2018, natural fallout in 2021)	8.8	4.3*	4.3	4.5	5.3
Balance	91.2	95.7**	95.7	95.5	94.7
<b>Industry</b>					
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing	2.2	2.4	3.2	2.7	3.2
Mining	2.6	1.9	2.6	1.8	2.0
Manufacturing	12.8	13.1	11.3	11.0	11.6
Electricity, Gas, Etc. Services	1.3	1.4	1.1	1.0	0.7
Construction	9.3	9.8	8.5	9.8	14.8**
Wholesale Trade	4.5	4.1	3.9	4.2	4.6
Retail Trade	6.4	8.5**	9.2	7.4	5.3*
Hospitality	4.1	5.2	5.7	4.7	4.9
Transport, Postal, Warehousing	11.4	7.9*	8.3	8.1	6.2*
Media and Telecommunications	1.0	0.4*	1.0	0.3*	0.8
Financial/Insurance Services	1.6	0.8	0.8	0.6	1.8**
Rental/Real Estate Services	0.8	1.1	0.7	1.4	1.8
Scientific/Technical Services	2.6	2.0	1.6	2.2	1.8
Administrative Services	2.5	3.3	2.2	3.9**	3.3
Public Administration	8.5	8.9	11.9**	7.5*	6.7
Education and Training	9.4	7.9	9.0	10.6	7.0*
Health Care/Social Assistance	14.5	15.4	15.1	18.0	19.1
Arts and Recreation Services	2.1	1.8	1.2	2.0	1.4
Other Services	2.3	4.0**	2.9	2.8	3.0

Notes: Data taken from sample provided by jurisdictions.

Weighted data shown. The unweighted sample contained a disproportionate mix of Historic and Balance cohort respondents across years (especially in 2021), and smaller jurisdictions were over-represented in data collection compared to their actual size (vice versa large jurisdictions). Weighting was applied to adjust for variance between the sample and the population. The weighting design included jurisdiction, claim type (self-insurer or premium paying) and number of days compensated.

Asterisks indicate statistically significant difference from the previous year (single asterisk (\*) indicates a lower proportion; double asterisk (\*\*) indicates a higher proportion) (p-value <=0.05).

Table 2 summarises the total completed interviews by claim type and jurisdiction.

**Table 2 Total completed Interviews by claim type and jurisdiction**

	Premium Payer	Self-Insurer	Total
Victoria	733	47	780
Queensland	558	215	773
South Australia	387	0	387
Western Australia	372	113	485
Tasmania	428	15	443
Comcare	172	447	619
Australian Capital Territory	133	11	144
Seacare	0	42	42
Northern Territory	89	61	150
New South Wales	416	349	765
<b>Australia</b>	<b>3,288</b>	<b>1,300</b>	<b>4,588</b>

### Survey length

On average the telephone interviews were 29.5 minutes in duration.

### Response rate

A total of 54.1% of injured workers who were successfully contacted and in scope for the survey participated. The response rate is calculated as the 'number of interviews' / ('number of interviews' + 'number of refusals').

### Significance testing

Throughout this report, statistically significant differences have been reported for year-on-year comparisons. Significance testing has been conducted at the 95 per cent confidence level (i.e., a p-value of  $\leq 0.05$ ).

### Quality assurance

All aspects of this research were undertaken in accordance with:

- The Privacy Act (1988) and the Australian Privacy Principles contained therein
- The Privacy (Market and Social Research) Code 2014
- The Research Society's Code of Professional Behaviour, and
- ISO 20252 standards.