

Returning to work during COVID-19

The 2021 National Return to Work Survey identified both positive and negative impacts for workers returning to work after an injury or illness during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2021 National Return to Work Survey asked 1,620 workers about their experience in recovering from an injury and returning to work during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Responses were mixed with 78.9% injured workers responding that the COVID-19 pandemic had “not much”, “not at all” or a “neutral” impact on their return to work while 20.2% of respondents said that it had impacted them “somewhat” or a “great deal”.

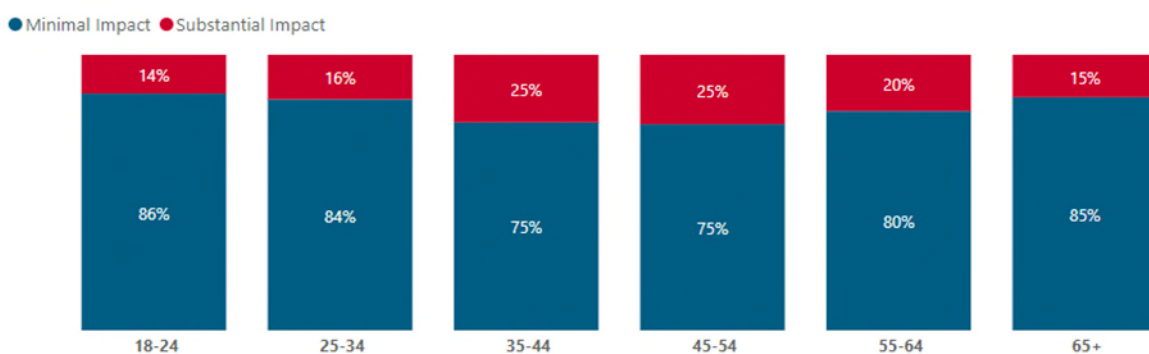
Those with musculoskeletal conditions and mental illness claims were more likely than other workers to respond that COVID-19 had impacted their recovery with 24.2% of those with a musculoskeletal condition and 27.2% of those with a mental illness claim responding either it had impacted a “great deal” or “somewhat”.

Respondents were also asked the ways COVID-19 affected their recovery and return to work. Workers were able to select multiple responses, with “COVID-19 limited my access to social and family support” (47.3% of respondents) and “COVID-19 limited my access to treatments” (40.7% of respondents) being the most frequent.

1. Age

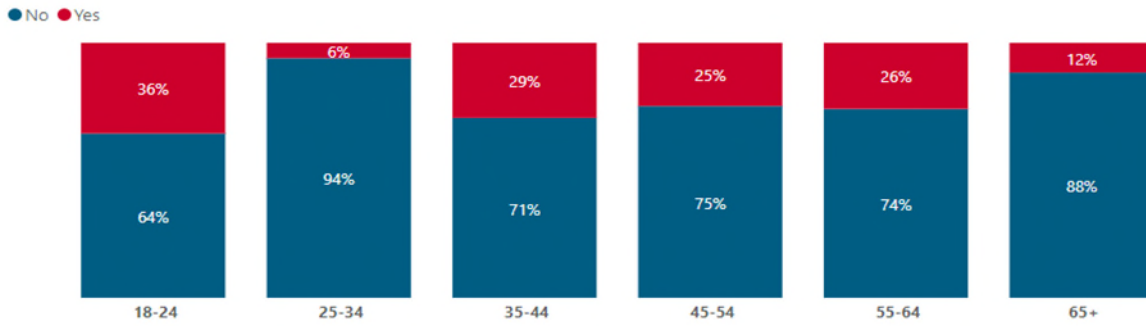
The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic was most felt in injured workers aged 35-44 and 45-54 with 24.5% and 25.2% reporting that COVID-19 had affected their return to work.

Figure 1: To what extent has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your recovery and return to work?



It was those aged 18-24 (36%) that most frequently reported having their hours reduced or being stood down from their work following a work-related injury. This is in line with the ABS Labour Force Survey which found people in younger age groups experienced larger decreases in employment and larger increases in unemployment during the COVID-19 Pandemic¹.

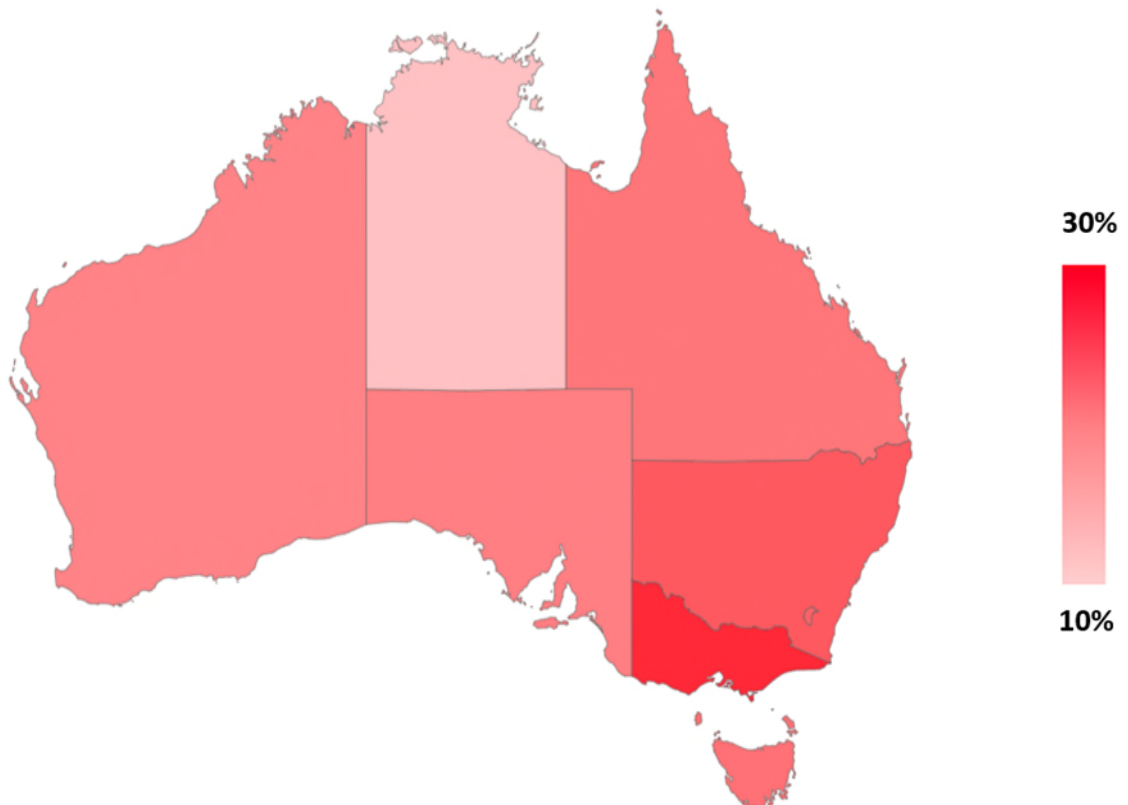
Figure 2: My hours were reduced, or I was stood down during the COVID-19 pandemic



2. Where were the impacts of COVID-19 experienced the most?

The jurisdictions with the largest proportion of injured or ill workers significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic were Victoria (26.4%), NSW (21.6%), ACT (20.6%), Tasmania (19.1%) and Queensland (18.5%). Northern Territory had fewer workers reporting they were substantially affected (11.2%) followed by Western Australia and South Australia with (17.1%) and (17.5%) respectively.

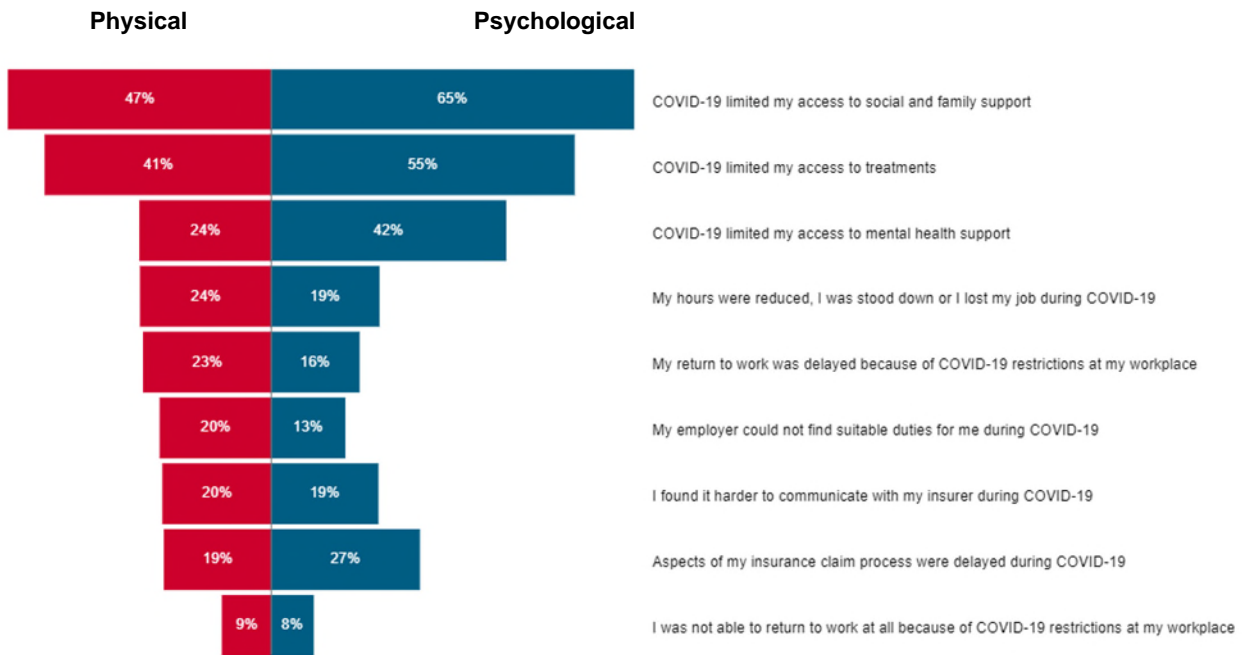
Figure 3: Did the COVID-19 pandemic substantially affect your recovery and return to work?



3. Did COVID-19 impact workers with physical and psychological injuries differently?

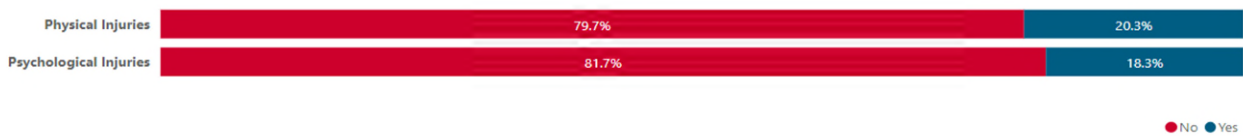
The largest impacts on workers from COVID-19 on their return to work were limited access to social and family support, limited access to treatments and limited access to mental health support. Those with a physical injury reported these COVID-19 impacts at a much lower rate than workers with a psychological injury.

Figure 4: In what ways did COVID-19 affect your recovery and return to work?



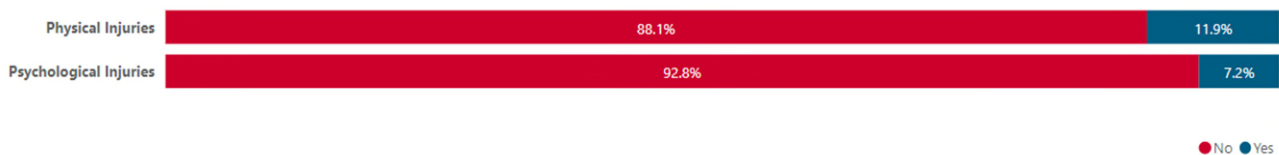
Despite the overall negative influence of the COVID-19 pandemic there were some positives. 18.3% of those with a psychological injury and 20.3% with a physical injury reported that the COVID-19 pandemic positively impacted their recovery.

Figure 5: Did the COVID-19 Pandemic have a positive impact on your recovery?



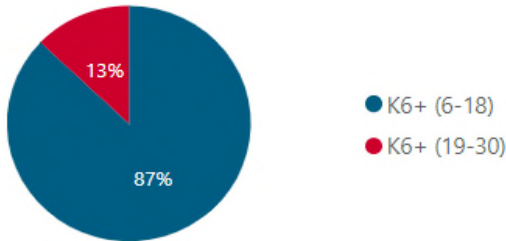
However, only 11.2% of workers said the COVID-19 pandemic made their return to work easier. This proportion was even lower for those with a psychological injury

Figure 6: Did the COVID-19 Pandemic make your return to work easier?



4. How were injured or ill workers experiencing psychological distress affected by COVID-19?

Figure 7: Kessler 6+ scores of all workers surveyed NRTWS (2021)



The Kessler 6+ (K6) provides a simple measure of an individual’s psychological distress in the preceding 4 weeks. Those who scored 19-30 are considered likely to be experiencing high levels of psychological distress, while those with a score of 6-18 were considered unlikely to be experiencing high levels of psychological distress. While there is no way to tell the source of this psychological distress, the NRTWS results showed there was a correlation between higher levels of distress and COVID-19 having an impact on recovery and return to work.

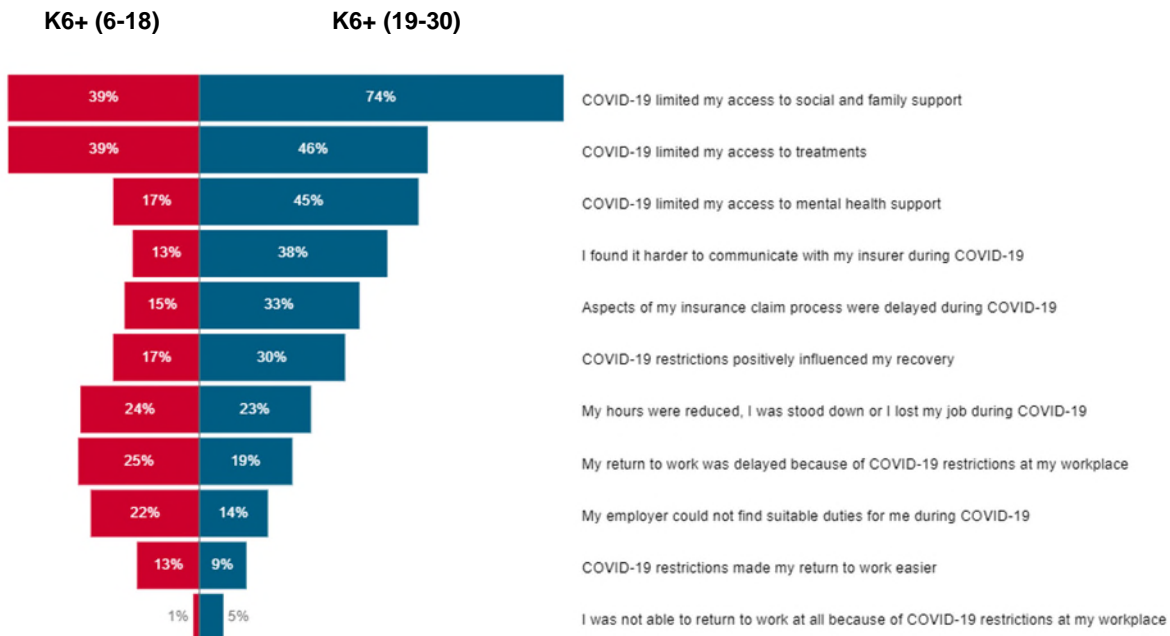
More than 45% of workers with a K6+ score of 19 or greater responded that COVID-19 had a substantial impact on their recovery and return to work, compared to just 17.1% of respondents with a K6+ below 19.

Figure 8: To what extent has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your recovery and return to work?



The overwhelming majority of injured or ill workers (74.1%) with a K6+ score of 19 or more responded that COVID-19 affected them by limiting their access to social and family support. In contrast 30% of those with a K6+ score of 19 or more responded that COVID-19 had positively impacted their recovery, but again only a small minority (9%) responded that COVID-19 made their return to work easier.

Figure 9: In what ways did COVID-19 affect your recovery and return to work?



ⁱ ABS (2021) [COVID-19: Labour market impacts on key demographic groups, industries and regions – Parliament of Australia](#), ABS website, accessed January 2023