

Safe Work Australia

# **Analysis of ABS Work-related injuries survey data, 2021-22**

April 2023

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**Contact information**

Safe Work Australia | <mailto:info@swa.gov.au> | [www.swa.gov.au](http://www.swa.gov.au)

## Analysis of ABS Work-related injuries

Survey data, 2021-22

2021-22



**3.5%**

(497,300 workers)

of the working population experienced a work-related injury or illness

↓ down from 4.2% in 2017-18



**31%**

received workers compensation for the injury or illness

↑ increased from 27% in 2017-18

The overall work related injury rate:



**35.3**

injuries

per 1000 people who worked in the past 12 months.

Safe Work Australia data shows



**1.9 million**

weeks of work lost

Resulting from serious workers' compensation claims in 2020-21.

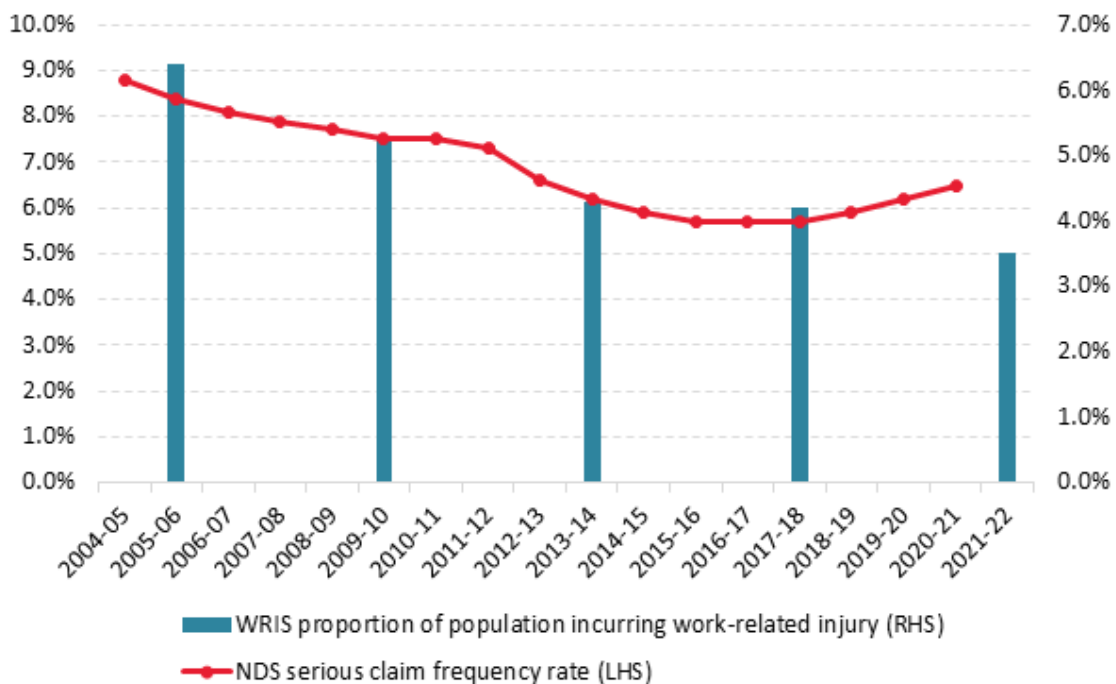
# Data report

## 1 Key statistics

In 2021-22, Australian Bureau of Statistics Work-related injuries survey data (ABS WRIS) showed that 497,300 of the 14.1 million people who had worked during the last 12 months (or 3.5% of the working population) experienced a work-related injury or illness (Figure 1), down from 4.2% in 2017-18 and 6.4% in 2005-06.

Safe Work Australia's National dataset for compensation-based statistics (SWA NDS) for 2020-21<sup>1</sup> showed the frequency rate<sup>2</sup> of serious claims<sup>3</sup> exhibits a long-term decreasing trend, with a recent period of successive increases since 2017-18.

Figure 1 compares key trends in the frequency of work-related injury and illness from these two data sources. When comparing these data, note that work-related injuries and illnesses often do not result in a workers' compensation claim and that the reference periods of the latest available data do not align. See the Background to this analysis paper for further information.



**Figure 1** SWA NDS serious claim frequency rate and ABS WRIS proportion of working population incurring work-related injury or illness, 2004-05 to 2021-22

Source: Safe Work Australia, National Dataset for Compensation-based Statistics (NDS), 2020-21p; ABS Work-related injuries, 2021-22

<sup>1</sup> The latest year of NDS data (2020-21) are preliminary and subject to revision in future years as further workers' compensation claims are finalised.

<sup>2</sup> The number of serious claims per million hours worked.

<sup>3</sup> Serious claims are defined as accepted, non-fatal, non-journey claims with time lost equivalent to one working week or more.

The ABS WRIS data show that for workers who experienced a work-related injury or illness in 2021-22:



**24%**

Just under one quarter of all injuries and illnesses were due to 'Lifting, pushing, pulling or bending'.



**66%**

had time off as a result of the injury or illness.



**31%**

received workers compensation for the injury or illness, **an increase from 27%** in 2017-18.



**91%**

Most work-related injuries occurred in the workplace.



**6%**

of injuries occurred while travelling on business, travelling to or from work, or while on lunchtime or break activities.



**1%**

of work-related injuries occurred while working from home.



**88%**

Of those who experienced a work-related injury in 2021-22, reported it to someone in the workplace.

The occupation major groups with the highest work-related injury incidence (percentage of workers who experienced a work-related injury or illness in the past 12 months) were:



**7.0%**

Community and personal service workers



**6.5%**

Machinery operators and drivers



**5.7%**

Labourers



**5.3%**

Technicians and trades workers

The industries with the highest work-related injury incidence (percentage of workers who experienced a work-related injury or illness in the past 12 months) were:



**5.6%**

Accommodation and food services



**5.4%**

Agriculture, forestry and fishing



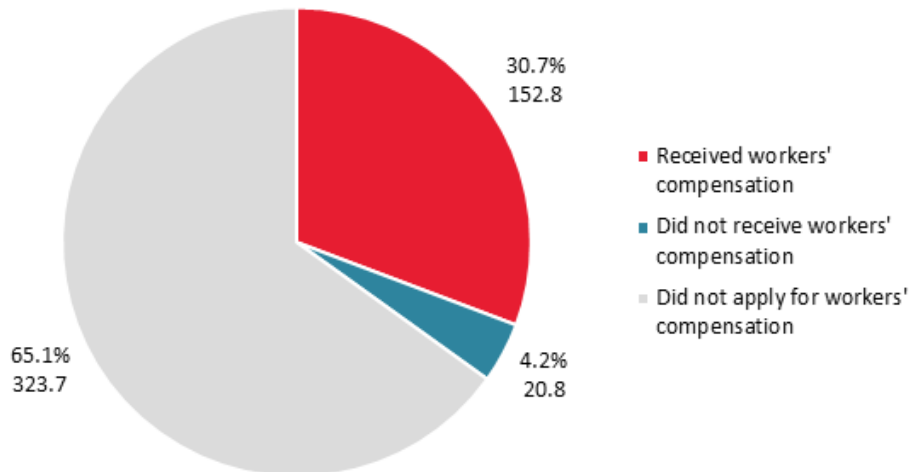
**5.1%**

Transport, postal and warehousing

The following analysis presents further detailed findings of different aspects of the information on work-related injuries and illnesses, including the sources of financial assistance received, absences from work, injury rates by cohorts, characteristics of the most recent injury or illness sustained, and whether the injury or illness was reported to someone in the workplace.

## 2 Sources of financial assistance

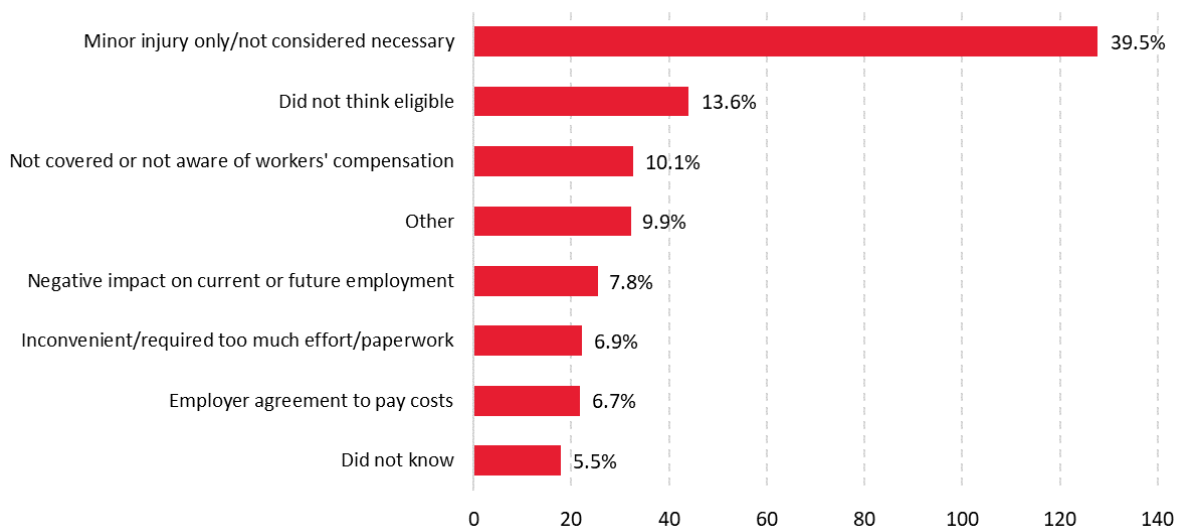
It is important to note that a minority of all workplace injuries or illnesses result in a workers' compensation claim. As demonstrated by Figure 2, over the 2021-22 financial year, approximately one third (173,600 or 34.9%) of all workers who experienced a work-related injury or illness made a workers' compensation claim. This information helps contextualise the use and interpretation of the SWA NDS data.



**Figure 2** Workers who experienced work-related injuries or illnesses ('000; %), by workers' compensation claim status, 2021-22

Source: ABS Work-related injuries, 2021-22

Further, of the 323,700 (65.1%) workers who experienced a work-related injury or illness and did not make a claim for workers' compensation, the primary reason given was 'Minor injury only/not considered necessary', which accounted for 39.5% of all such instances. Other reasons given by workers who suffered a work-related injury or illness but did not apply for workers' compensation are outlined in Figure 3.



**Figure 3** Work-related injuries or illnesses that did not result in a workers' compensation claim, by main reason worker did not apply, 2021-22

Source: ABS Work-related injuries, 2021-22

While most work-related injuries or illnesses did not result in a claim for workers' compensation, this does not mean they had no financial impact. The 2021-22 ABS WRIS data reveal that the numbers of work-related injuries or illnesses that resulted in financial assistance<sup>4</sup> being received were significant regardless of whether a claim was made for workers' compensation (161,700 receiving financial assistance, or 33.3% of all work-related injuries) or not (120,800 receiving financial assistance, or 24.9% of all work-related injuries). See Table 1 for more information.

**Table 1** Workers who experienced work-related injuries or illnesses ('000), by workers' compensation application status and receipt of financial assistance, 2021-22

Work-related injuries or illnesses, 2021-22	Received financial assistance ('000)	Did not receive financial assistance ('000)
Applied for workers' compensation	161.7	0.0
Did not apply for workers' compensation	120.8	202.9

Source: ABS Work-related injuries, 2021-22

Additionally, non-monetary economic costs are incurred through work-related injuries or illnesses, the most prevalent of which is forgone productive capacity. As highlighted in the following 'Absences' section of this analysis, many work-related injuries or illnesses result in time away from work and, as is explored in the 'Economic cost of work-related injuries and illnesses' section, the consequential forgone productive capacity combined with direct monetary costs of work-related injuries or illnesses amount to a significant economic impact.

### 3 Absences

Of the 497,300 people who had a work-related injury or illness, 65.7% (or 326,600) had time off work. The proportion who took time off was slightly higher amongst males (67.1%) than females (63.6%). The breakdown by duration of time off work is summarised in the following list:

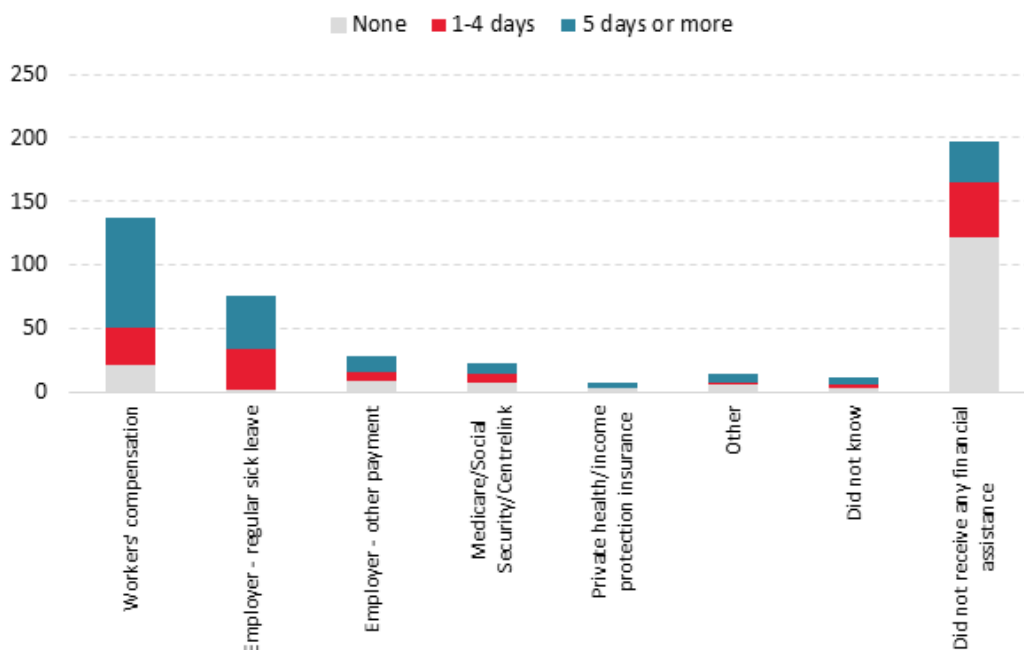
- 6.4% had part of a day off,
- 23.5% had 1 to 4 days off,
- 11.3% had 5 to 10 days off and
- 22.0% had 11 days or more off.
- 2.6% had not returned to work since their injury or illness.

Other sources of data help contextualise these impacts. For example, SWA NDS data show that serious workers' compensation claims from 2020-21p resulted in a total loss of 1.9 million weeks of work (noting that this is a preliminary figure - some claims from 2020-21p may be open and claimants may accrue more time lost in future years). In addition to the time spent off work due to work-related injuries and illnesses, there are significant ongoing effects from illness on the hours worked in the labour market. The number of people working reduced hours due to 'Own illness, injury or sick leave' increased by 85,900 (or 16.5%) over the month in December 2022 to 606,500, and is over 50% above the average level recorded in December over the previous 8 years (of 396,300)<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Non-workers-compensation financial assistance can encompass any monetary assistance received from any party to cover medical expenses or income loss, incurred due to their work-related injury or illness including paid leave entitlements, private agreements to pay costs, etc.

<sup>5</sup> Jobs and Skills Australia, *Labour market update*, <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/reports/labour-market-update-december-2022>

Of the 152,500 people who received workers' compensation for their injury or illness, the majority (56.8%) were absent for 5 days or more. People who took regular sick leave were also most commonly absent for 5 days or more (50.6%), while 37.9% were absent for 1 to 4 days. Most people who did not receive any financial assistance took no time off at all (56.7%). Figure 4 illustrates these differences further.

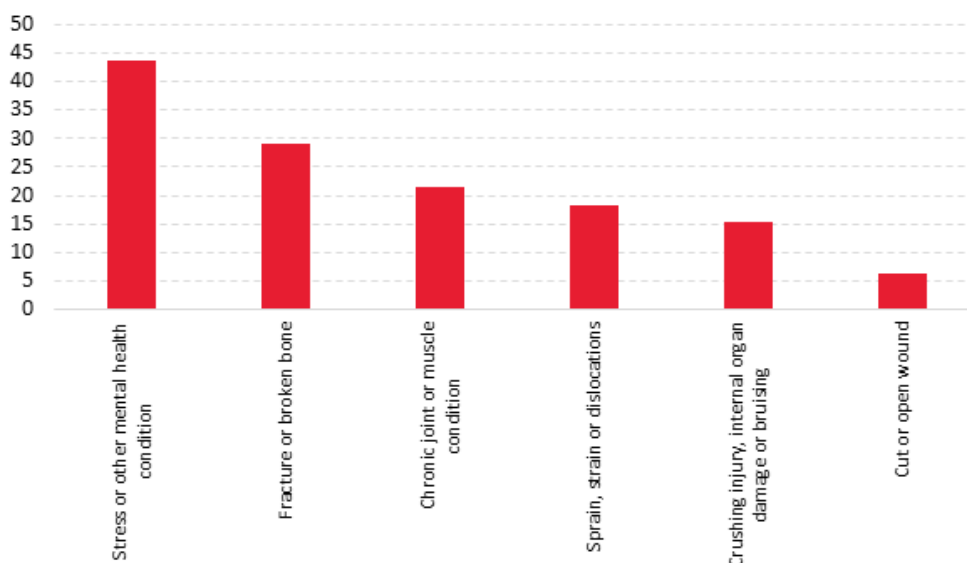


Note: This chart excludes people who had 'part of day/shift' off work or who 'had not returned to work since injury or illness occurred', as financial assistance data was not available for these categories. The 152,500 figure mentioned in the text *includes* these people.

**Figure 4** Workers who experienced work-related injuries or illnesses ('000), by type of financial assistance received and number of days absent, 2021-22

Source: ABS Work-related injuries, 2021-22

The time taken off due to work-related injuries and illnesses also varied by the type of injury or illness. Figure 5 shows the average number of days absent for each type of injury or illness. For example, 'Stress or other mental health conditions' resulted in an average of 43.7 days away from work, whilst 'fractures of broken bones' resulted in an average of 29 days away from work. 'Cuts or open wounds' only resulted in an average of 6 days away from work.



**Figure 5** Average days absent by type of work-related injury or illness, 2021-22

Source: ABS Work-related injuries, 2021-22



Of the 497,300 number of people who had a work-related injury or illness, 14.8% (73,800) ceased working in the job where they experienced their work-related injury or illness. For this group of 73,800:

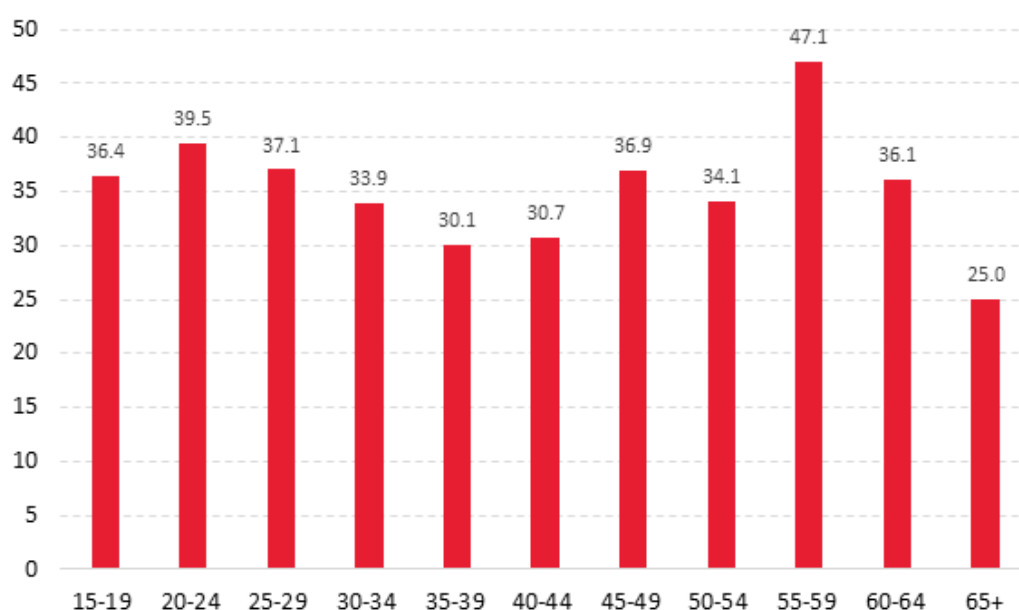
- 31.9% said it was as a result of their illness or injury
- 23.3% said it was due to unsatisfactory work arrangements
- 22.3% said it was due to 'other' reasons
- 7.9% said it was due to the job being temporary or seasonal
- 7.3% were laid off or retrenched
- 4.2% said it was because it was a holiday job or that they returned to their studies
- 3.0% said it was due to other health issues or disability

## 4 Injury rates by cohort and labour market breakdown

The incidence of work-related injuries and illnesses can be expressed as a rate of injuries and illnesses per 1000 people who had worked in the past 12 months, to enable comparisons between different demographic characteristics. This approach is adopted by the ABS when reporting work-related injuries statistics.

In 2021-22, the overall work-related injury rate was 35.3 injuries per 1000 people who worked in the past 12 months. More than half (58.1%) of the people who experienced a work-related injury or illness were men, with a markedly higher work-related injury rate for males (39.2) than females (31.0).

Looking at an age breakdown, the injury rate was highest for people aged 55 to 59 (47.1) and lowest for people aged 65 years and over (25.0). Figures 6 and 7 present further information.

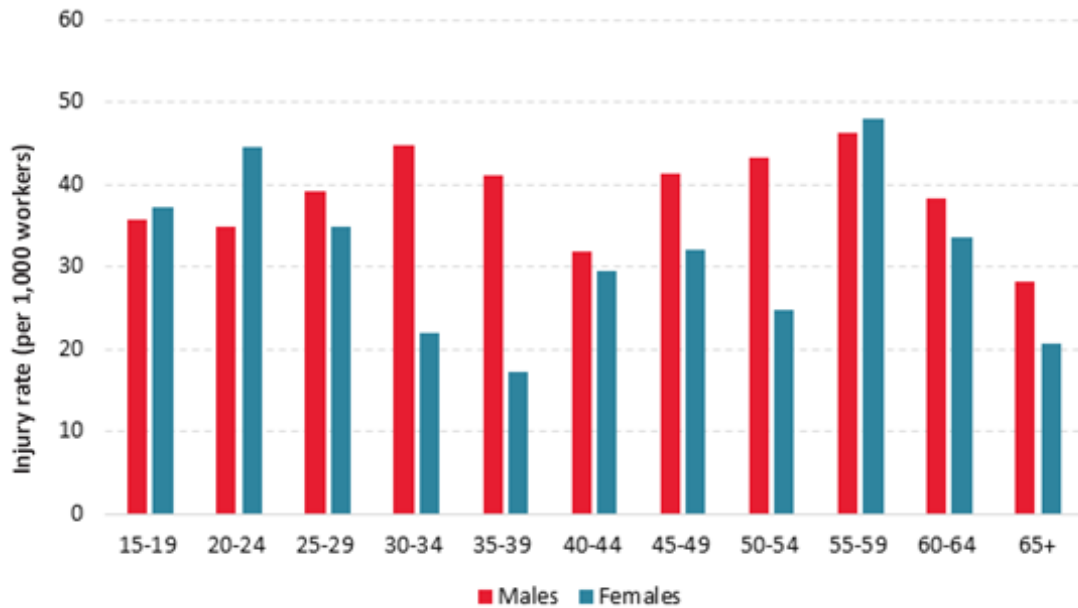


**Figure 6** Work-related injury rate, by age cohort, 2021-22

Source: ABS Work-related injuries, 2021-22

Note: Work-related injury rate represents the number of injuries or illnesses per 1,000 people who had worked in the previous 12 months.

For people aged 20 to 24 years, injury rates were much higher for females (44.5) than for males (34.9). Males had notably higher injury rates than females for people aged 30 to 39 years and people aged 45 to 54 years.



**Figure 7** Work-related injury rate, by age cohort and gender, 2021-22

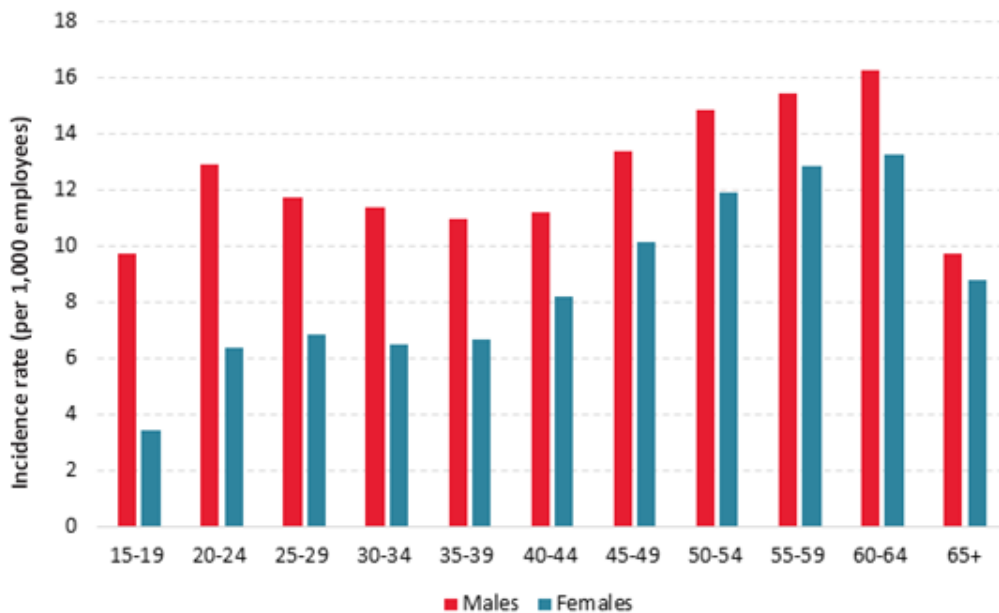
Source: ABS Work-related injuries, 2021-22

Note: Work-related injury rate represents the number of injuries or illnesses per 1,000 people who had worked in the previous 12 months.

## Comparison to Safe Work Australia’s serious claim incidence rates

Safe Work Australia reports on the incidence rate of serious claims – that is, the number of serious claims per 1000 employees. The claim incidence rate is far lower than the rate of injuries or illnesses because only a portion of work-related injuries and illnesses result in serious compensation claims.

The serious claim incidence rate by gender and age, as summarised in Figure 8, showed a slightly different pattern to the ABS WRIS data. The rate of serious claims was higher for males than for females for all age groups. In addition, for both males and females, the incidence rate was highest for those aged 45 to 64 years.



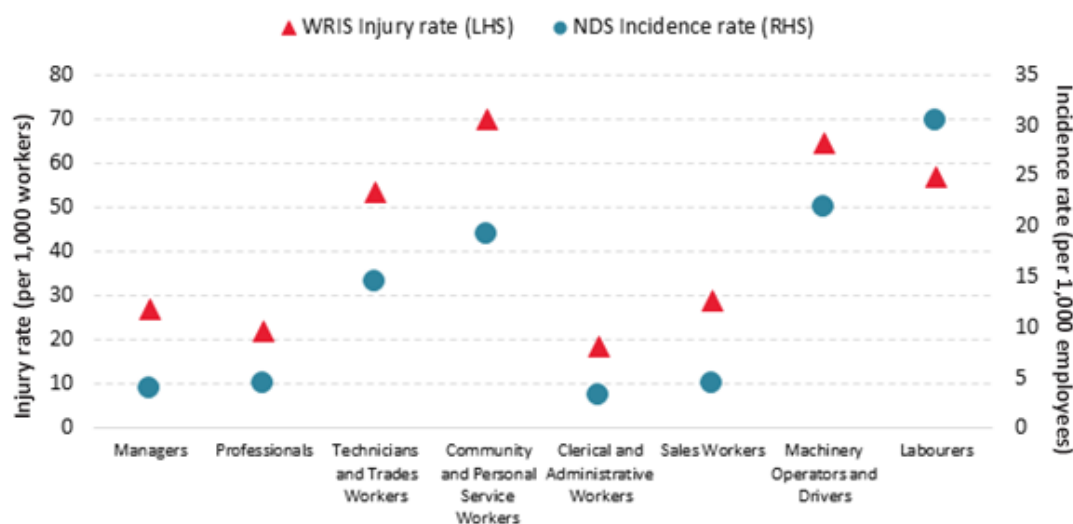
**Figure 8** SWA NDS incidence rate of serious claims, by age cohort and gender, 2020-21p

Source: Safe Work Australia, National dataset for compensation-based statistics, 2020-21p.

Note: NDS Incidence rates are defined as the number of serious claims per thousand employees

According to the ABS WRIS data, work-related injury rates for occupation major groups were highest for Community and personal service workers (69.8), Machinery operators and drivers (64.5), and Labourers (56.9).

This differed slightly to the pattern of serious claim incidence rates in the SWA NDS data, shown by the blue circles in Figure 9. The serious claim incidence rate was highest for Labourers (30.5), followed by Machinery operators and drivers (21.8).



**Figure 9** Work-related injury rate (WRIS 2012-22) and incidence rate of serious claims (SWA NDS 2020-21p), by occupation major group

Source: Safe Work Australia, National Data Set for Compensation-based Statistics (NDS), 2020-21p, ABS Work-related injuries, 2021-22

The industries with the highest work-related injury rates (per 1,000 workers) were Accommodation and food services (56.4), Agriculture, forestry and fishing (53.6), Transport, postal and warehousing (50.8), Public administration and safety (49.4) and Construction (49.3). Comparing this finding with the serious claim incidence rates, we can see that 3 of the top 5 industries with the highest work-related injury rates are also in the top 5 for incidence rates. Interestingly, while the Accommodation and food services industry had the highest work-related injury rate, it had a below-average serious claim incidence rate.

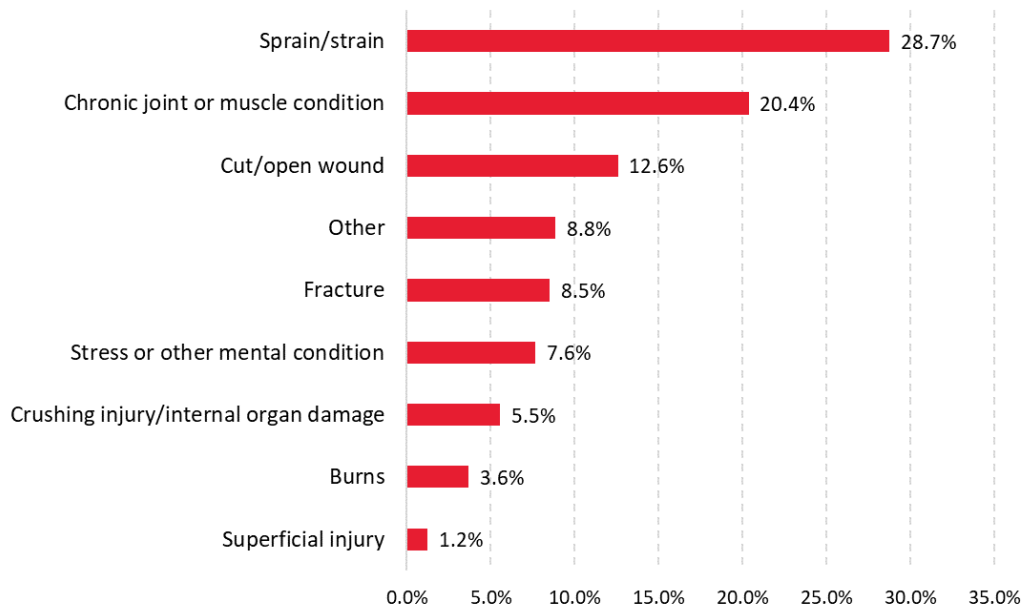
**Table 2** Highest work-related injury rates (ABS WRIS 2021-22) and incidence rate of serious claims (SWA NDS 2020-20p), by industry

ABS WRIS 2021-22		SWA NDS 2020-21p	
Industry	Injury rates	Industry	Incidence rate
Accommodation and food services	56.4	Agriculture, forestry and fishing	20.2
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	53.6	Manufacturing	17.6
Transport, postal and warehousing	50.8	Construction	16.9
Public administration and safety	49.4	Transport, postal and warehousing	15.8
Construction	49.3	Wholesale trade	14.7

Source: Safe Work Australia, National Data Set for Compensation-based Statistics (NDS), 2020-21p, ABS Work-related injuries, 2021-22

## 5 Characteristics of the most recent injury or illness sustained

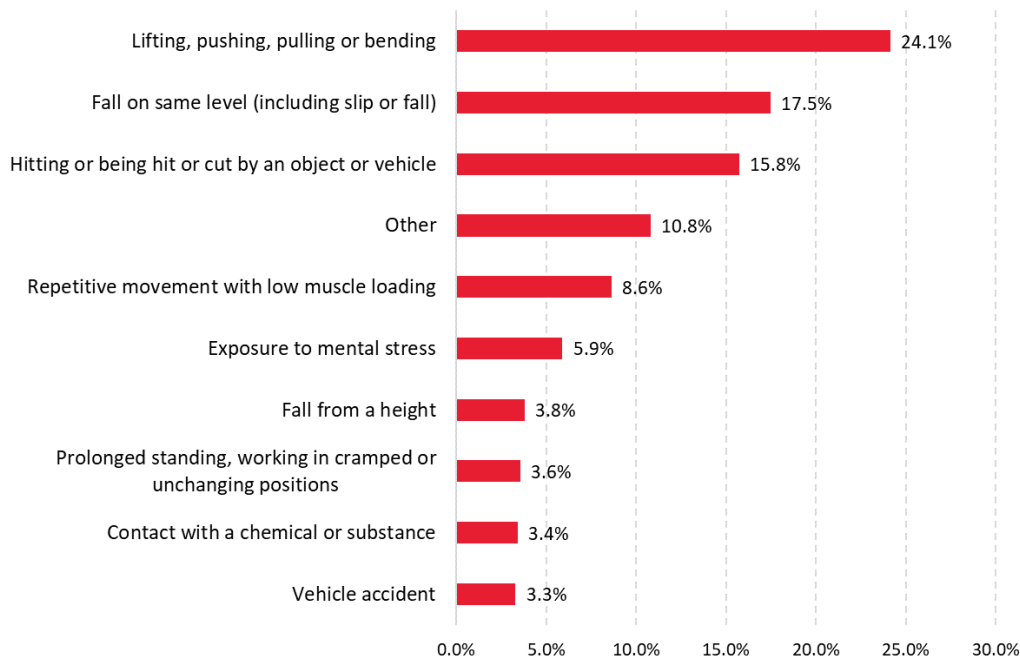
In 2021-22, the most common work-related injury or illness *sustained* among workers was a sprain/strain (28.7%), followed by a chronic joint or muscle condition (20.4%) and cut/open wound (12.6%) (Figure 10).



**Figure 10** Work-related injury or illness by type, 2021-22

Source: ABS Work-related injuries, 2021-22

Lifting, pushing, pulling or bending was the most common *cause* of work-related injury or illness (24.1%), followed by Fall on the same level (including slip or fall) (17.5%) and Hitting or being hit or cut by an object or vehicle (15.8%) (Figure 11).



**Figure 11** Work-related injury or illness by cause, 2021-22

Source: ABS Work-related injuries, 2021-22.

## 6 Reporting injury or illness to someone in the workplace

Of all workers who had experienced a work-related injury or illness, 88.3% reported their injury or illness to someone in the workplace. Women were more likely to report their work-related injury or illness than men (91.0% compared to 86.4%) (Figure 12). Of those who reported their work-related injury or disease, the majority reported it to their Supervisor/Line manager (77%), followed by their Health and safety representative (17%) and Employer (13%).



**Figure 12** Whether reported work-related injury or illness to someone in the workplace, by gender, 2021-22

Source: ABS Work-related injuries, 2021-22

## 7 Economic cost of work-related injuries and illnesses

*Safer, healthier, wealthier: the economic value of reducing work-related injuries and illnesses* is a research study commissioned by Safe Work Australia that quantified the economic impact of all work-related injuries and illnesses using computable general equilibrium (CGE) modelling.

This modelling accounted for factors such as direct compensation costs (reflected in the ABS WRIS *financial assistance* counts and the SWA NDS compensation paid figures) and forgone productivity costs (accounted through ABS WRIS *absences* and SWA NDS time lost data as well as permanent workforce separations resulting from work-related injuries or illnesses), as well as the broader industry and economic impacts flowing from these consequences of work-related injury or illness.

This research revealed that if all work-related injuries and illnesses were avoided, Australia's economy would be, on average each year over the 2008-18 reference period, \$28.6 billion (1.6% of GDP) larger, with 185,500 additional jobs and a 1.3% increase in wages.

In total, 2.2 million full time equivalent (FTE) jobs were foregone due to productivity losses from work-related injuries and illnesses, and further, \$37.6 billion in costs were incurred by the health system (Table 3).

**Table 3** Costs of work-related injury and illness, 2008-18

<b>Component</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Total impact</b>
<b>Absenteeism</b>	Short term productivity losses from time off work	835,770 FTEs
<b>Presenteeism</b>	Reduced productivity upon returning to work	331,000 FTEs
<b>Reduced employment</b>	Permanent withdrawal from labour force following work-related injury or illness	605,789 FTEs*
<b>Premature mortality</b>	Loss of labour due to work-related injury or illness resulting in death	63,568 FTEs*
<b>Informal care</b>	Productivity losses from informal carers taking additional time off of work to care for a person with work-related injury or illness	408,061 FTEs*
<b>Health system costs</b>	Costs incurred by the health system following work-related injury or illness	\$37.6 billion
<b>Efficiency costs</b>	Costs incurred by the employer following work-related injury or illness	\$49.5 billion

\* Total impact is measured from 2008-2065.

Source: Safe Work Australia (2022), *Safer, healthier, wealthier: The economic value of reducing work-related injuries and illnesses, Technical Report*

## 8 Background

The Australian Bureau of Statistics Work-related injuries survey (ABS WRIS) collects information on the types and rates of work-related injuries, as well as job details and demographic information about the worker. This includes the nature of injury or illness experienced, absences from work, sources of financial assistance received and whether the worker reported their injury or illness to someone in the workplace.

The ABS WRIS is a subset of the Multipurpose Household Survey (MPHS) conducted throughout Australia, with Safe Work Australia providing support to the ABS every four years to collect work-related injuries data. The 2021-22 ABS WRIS was released on 15 February 2023. The ABS WRIS scope is persons aged 15 years and over who worked at some point in the last 12 months. See [ABS WRIS methodology](#) for more information.

Safe Work Australia's (SWA) primary source of information on work-related injury and illness is workers' compensation claims data provided by workers' compensation authorities in each Australian jurisdiction. These data are collated by SWA into the National Dataset for Compensation-based Statistics (NDS).

While SWA NDS data provide valuable insights into the work, health and safety (WHS) landscape in Australia, it is important to acknowledge that not all work-related injuries or illnesses result in a workers' compensation claim. For example, some workers are ineligible for compensation, may be unwilling to lodge a claim, or use personal leave if they experience a work-related injury or illness. The ABS WRIS data are hence an important complement to the SWA NDS data as it provides information about the wider labour market impacts of work-related injuries or illnesses.

### Interpreting the data

Note that the reference period of this release of the ABS WRIS does not correspond to the latest data available from the SWA NDS, which covers the 2020-21p financial year. Comparisons between SWA NDS and ABS WRIS data in this analysis should therefore be interpreted with caution and the analyses of both datasets together are provided for general contextual purposes.

Further, the ABS also advise caution in analysing the incidence of work-related injuries over the 2021-22 reference period, as the reduced level of economic activity due to the COVID-19 pandemic may have contributed to a lower likelihood of experiencing a work-related injury.