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PANDEMIC PRESSURES

JOB SECURITY AND
CUSTOMER RELATIONS
FOR RETAIL WORKERS



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INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic is changing the nature of work and the workplace in Australia and around the world. Employees in the retail, fast-food and distribution sectors - who constitute at least 11% of the Australian workforce - are among those whose working lives have been impacted significantly by the pandemic.

From job losses and reduced working hours[1], to increased hostility and abuse from customers[2][3][4], to the heightened risks of virus exposure associated with frontline work, workers in these sectors have been among the most affected by mental health and wellbeing issues[5] as a result of the pandemic.

Furthermore, with women, young people, and other marginalised groups disproportionately represented[5][6] in the retail, fast-food, and distribution sectors, the pandemic's impacts on the sector highlights - and exacerbates - the already fragile socioeconomic position[5] of many members of these groups.

Nevertheless, the experiences and concerns of these workers have tended to be overlooked or downplayed by the media and government, relative to those of other frontline workers.

This report offers insights into the challenges faced by retail, fast-food, and distribution workers during the pandemic and recent lockdowns. In focus is the impact on job security and worker-customer relations during the pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

This report is based on work by researchers from the Australian National University and the University of Sydney, as part of the ARC Linkage Project, 'Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work' which aims to investigate how women and men understand and experience the changing nature of work and their hopes and fears for the future.

The online survey, conducted by social research company, Ipsos, in September 2021, includes a demographically representative sample of Australian retail, fast-food, and distribution workers (n=1160). The research also involved qualitative interviews with key stakeholders in the retail sector undertaken in March-April 2021.



YOUNGER WOMEN, CASUALS, AND ON THE FRONTLINE

61%

WOMEN

Three-fifths (61%) of respondents were women, while two-fifths were men (39%); one respondent reported a nonbinary gender identity.

44%

UNDER 30

The largest group of respondents were under thirty (44%). The next largest group of respondents were aged 30-50 (34%), then 50+ (22%).

19%

**NON-ENGLISH
SPEAKING
BACKGROUND**

81% of respondents spoke only English at home, while 19% speak a language other than English at home.

63%

FRONTLINE

Just under two-thirds (63%) of respondents were in customer-facing frontline jobs, the remainder worked in warehouses, distribution or head office.

60%

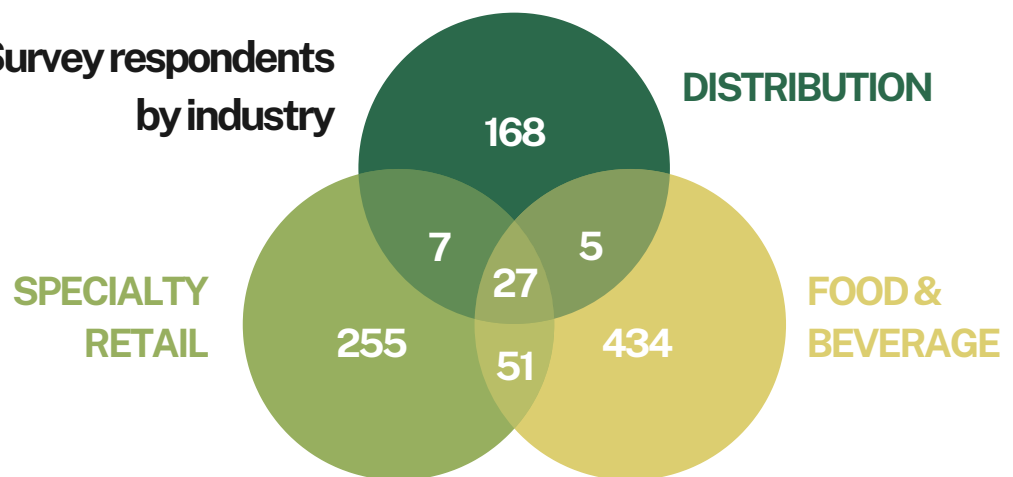
**WORKING IN A
REGION IN
LOCKDOWN**

At the time of the survey, a majority of respondents reported working in an area that was in the midst of a lockdown in NSW, Victoria and the ACT (60%).



Most respondents were in either a full-time permanent (39%) or a casual (38%) position, with a minority working in a permanent part-time role (21%). However, while over half of men were in full-time work (55%) (with 17% permanent part-time and 28% casual), just under a third of women were full-time (30%) (with 25% permanent part-time and 45% casual).

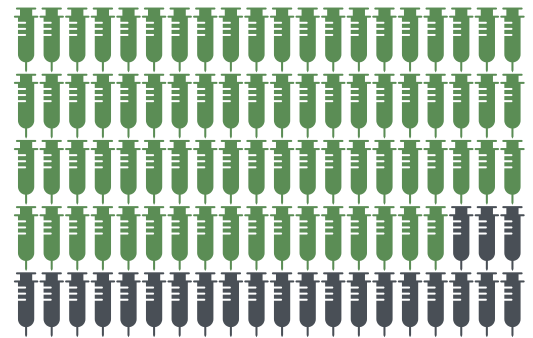
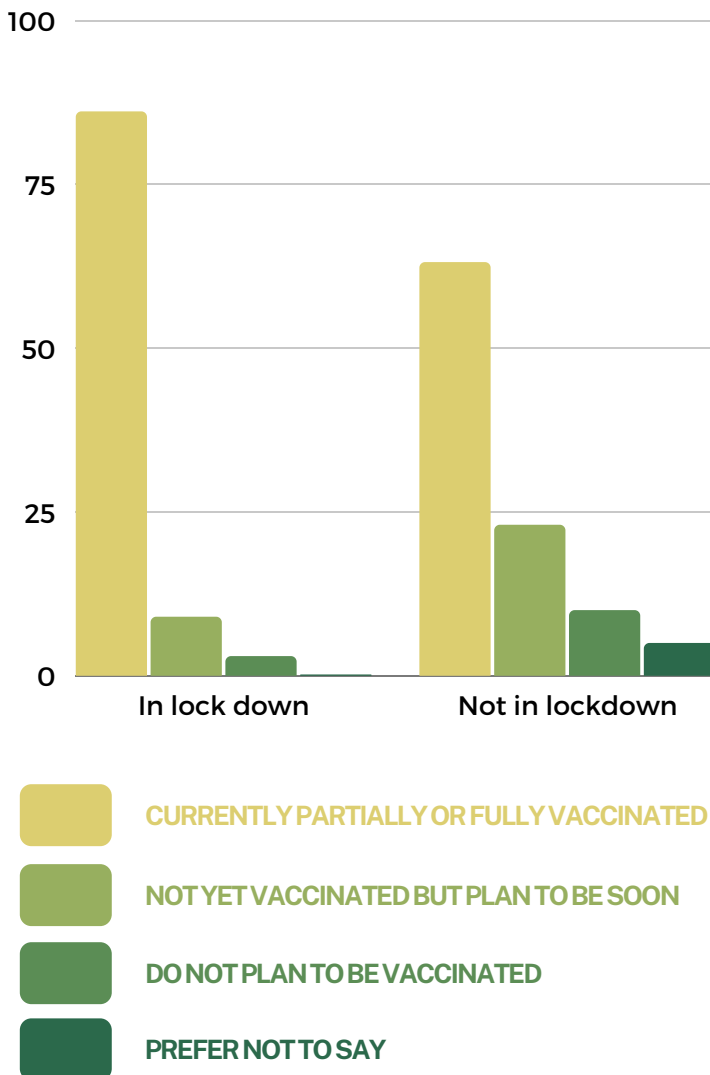
Survey respondents by industry



VACCINATION STATUS



Percentage of respondents who are vaccinated, by lockdown status



77% vaccinated

Most workers reported being either partially or fully vaccinated (77%).

Among those who are not, 15% report that they plan to be, while 6% do not plan to be vaccinated and 3% prefer not to say.

Working in a locked-down area tended to predict vaccination status. Among those in a locked-down region, 86% were partially or fully vaccinated and 9% planned to be (95% across both groups), while 3% either did not plan to be vaccinated or preferred not to say.

Among those not in a locked-down region, 63% were partially or fully vaccinated and 23% planned to be (85%), while 15% either did not plan to be vaccinated or preferred not to say.



JOB (IN)SECURITY

Among women, 51% of respondents claimed that the pandemic had decreased their job security “to a great extent” or “somewhat”, compared with 41% of men.

Among those aged under 30, 56% of respondents claimed that the pandemic had decreased their job security “to a great extent” or “somewhat”, while the same was said by 48% of those aged 30-50, and by 30% of those over 50.

Among those workers who speak a language other than English at home, 60% reported that the pandemic had decreased their job security “to a great extent” or “somewhat”, while 44% of those who only speak English at home felt the same.

Among frontline workers, 51% claimed that the pandemic had decreased their job security “to a great extent” or “somewhat”, while the same was said by 42% of non-frontline workers.

Among those working in a locked-down region, 53% of respondents claimed that the pandemic had decreased their job security “to a great extent” or “somewhat”, while the same was said by 40% of those not working in a locked-down region.

Among casual workers, 55% of respondents claimed that the pandemic had decreased their job security “to a great extent” or “somewhat”, while the same was said by 44% of permanent part-time workers, and 40% of permanent full-time workers.

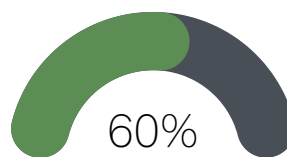
Decrease in job security

- Just under half (49%) of retail workers reported that their job security had decreased as a result of the pandemic.
- Those whose job security was most affected were women, those under 30, frontline and casual workers, those from a non-English speaking background, and those working in a locked-down region.

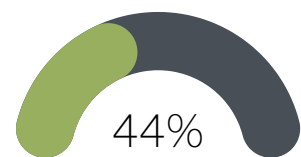
If nothing else, COVID should have taught us, who were the people that we really valued during this crisis? And it was the fact that there was someone who was stocking the supermarket shelves, and behind the checkout, and you know, we need to understand that those roles are absolutely critical roles, and that they should be valued and respected'

Retail skills expert

The pandemic has decreased my job security "to a large extent" or "somewhat"



SPEAKS A LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH AT HOME

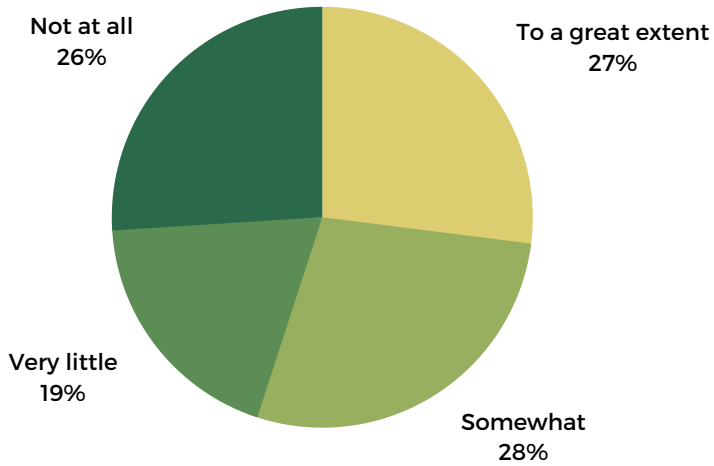


SPEAKS ONLY ENGLISH AT HOME

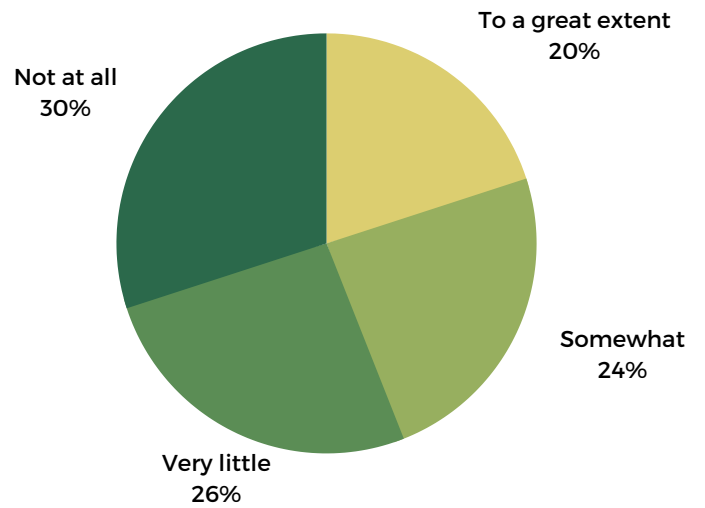


The pandemic has decreased my job security...

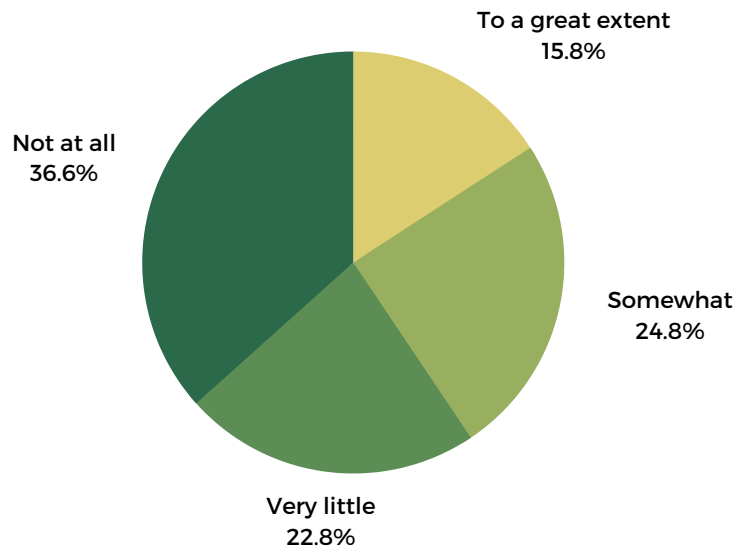
CASUAL



PERMANENT PART-TIME



PERMANENT FULL-TIME





Decreased working hours

- Around half (49%) of respondents overall reported that their working hours had been impacted as a result of the pandemic.
- Those whose hours were most affected were women, younger, frontline and casual workers, those from a non-English-speaking background, and those working in a locked-down region.

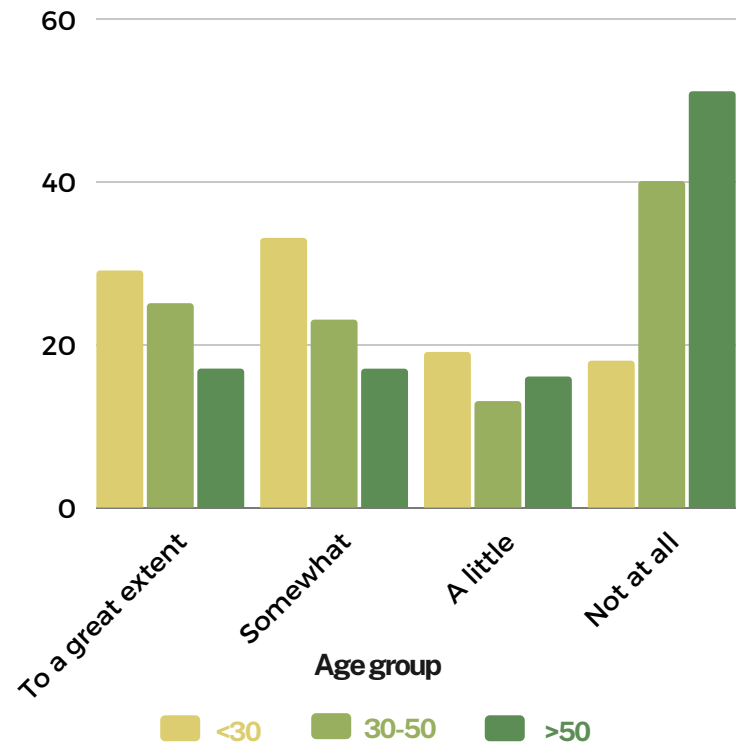
Among women, 55% of respondents reported that the pandemic had decreased their working hours “to a great extent” or “somewhat”, compared with 45% of men.

Among those aged under 30, 62% of respondents reported that their work hours had decreased “to a great extent” or “somewhat” as a result of the pandemic, compared with 48% of those aged 30-50 and 34% of those over 50.

Among those workers who speak a language other than English at home, 65% reported that the pandemic had decreased their working hours “to a great extent” or “somewhat”, while 47% of those who only speak English at home reported the same.

Among frontline workers, 54% of respondents reported that their working hours have decreased “to a great extent” or “somewhat” as a result of the pandemic, compared with 44% of non-frontline workers.

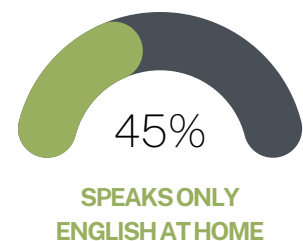
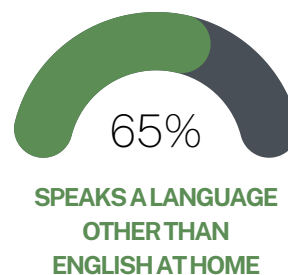
The pandemic has decreased my working hours... (%)



Among those working in a locked-down region, 57% of respondents reported that their working hours had decreased “to a great extent” or “somewhat” as a result of the pandemic, compared with 40% of those not working in a locked-down region.

Among full-time workers, 40% of respondents reported that their working hours had decreased “to a great extent” or “somewhat” as a result of the pandemic, compared with 49% of permanent part-time and 62% of casual workers.

The pandemic has decreased my working hours "to a large extent" or "somewhat"



CUSTOMER RELATIONS

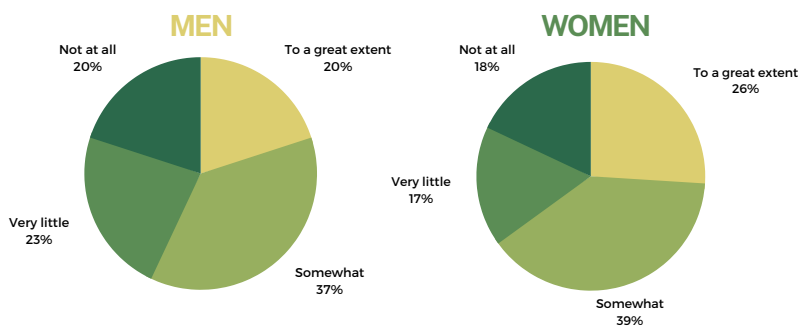
'As you've seen the toilet paper wars of 2020 meant that that concept of the human condition - of building your nest and filling it up with stuff - that still exists very strongly. It's one of those kind of fight or flight things to drag as many things back to your nest as what you can. Sometimes that manifests itself in some funny ways...'

Retail centre manager

Decreased quality of customer interactions

- Most respondents reported a notable decrease in the quality of interactions with customers during the pandemic.
- Those particularly impacted by this decrease were women, younger, frontline workers, those from a non-English-speaking background, and those working in locked-down regions.
- Respondents' work status made little difference to their experience of customer interactions

The pandemic has decreased the quality of my interactions with customers...



Among women, 63% of respondents claimed that the quality of interactions with customers has decreased "to a great extent" or "somewhat" as a result of the pandemic, while 55% of male respondents felt the same.

Among those aged under 30, 65.5% of respondents claimed that the quality of interactions with customers has decreased "to a great extent" or "somewhat" as a result of the pandemic, while the same is true of 58.8% of those respondents aged 30-50, and 49.8% of those aged over 50.

Among those workers who speak a language other than English at home, 68% reported that the quality of their interactions with customers had decreased "to a great extent" or "somewhat" during the pandemic, while 60% of those who only speak English at home felt the same.

64% of frontline workers claimed that the quality of interactions with customers has decreased "to a great extent" or "somewhat" as a result of the pandemic, while 58% of non-frontline respondents felt the same.

Among those working in locked-down regions, 68% of respondents claimed that the quality of interactions with customers has decreased "to a great extent" or "somewhat" as a result of the pandemic, while 53% of respondents not working in a locked-down region felt the same.

Among full-time workers, 60% of respondents claimed that the quality of interactions with customers has decreased "to a great extent" or "somewhat" as a result of the pandemic, while the same is true of 64% of respondents in permanent part-time positions, and 64% of those in casual positions.



Stress of enforcing customer Covid-19 safety regulations

- Most respondents experienced a fair degree of stress in relation to enforcing Covid-19 safety compliance.
- Those impacted most were women, those from a non-English-speaking background, those under 50, frontline workers, those working in locked-down region, and those in permanent part-time positions.

'Not only were those people delivering an essential service, they were also putting their health at risk'

Workforce skills expert

When asked whether they have felt stressed enforcing customer COVID-19 safety compliance, 66% of women reported feeling stressed “to a great extent”, or “somewhat”, while 58% of men reported feeling the same.

66% of those under 30 years old, 67% of those 30-50, and 48% of those over 50, have felt stressed “to a great extent” or “somewhat” while enforcing customer Covid safety compliance.

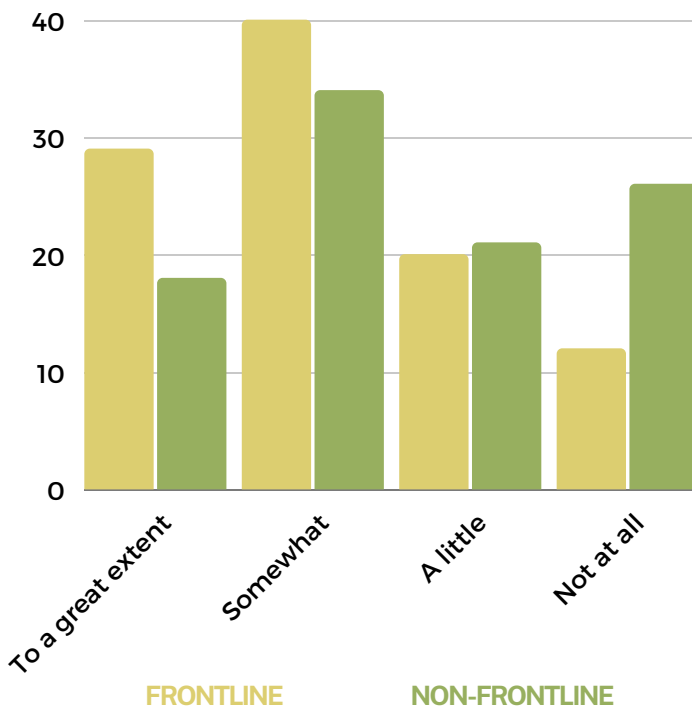
Among those workers who speak a language other than English at home, 67% reported that they felt/feel stressed enforcing customer Covid-19 safety compliance “to a great extent” or “somewhat”, while 62% of those who only speak English at home felt the same.

Among frontline workers, 69% of respondents reported having felt stress “to a great extent” or “somewhat” while enforcing customer Covid safety compliance, while 52% of non-frontline workers reported feeling the same.

Among those working in locked-down areas, 65% of respondents reported having felt stress “to a great extent” or “somewhat” while enforcing customer Covid safety compliance, while 59% of non-frontline workers reported feeling the same.

Among full-time workers, 59% reported feeling stressed enforcing customer Covid safety compliance “to a great extent” or “somewhat”, while 69% of permanent part-time and 64% of casual workers felt the same.

Felt/Feel stress at enforcing customer COVID-19 safety compliance... (%)





Among women respondents, 61% reported that customer abuse during the pandemic had increased “to a great extent” or “somewhat”, while the same was reported among 48% of men respondents.

Among those aged under 30, 67% of respondents reported having experienced an increase of customer abuse, while 60% of those aged 30-50 and 50% of those aged over 50 felt the same.

Among workers who speak only English at home, 62% reported that customer abuse had increased “to a great extent” or “somewhat” during the pandemic, while the same was said by 55% of those who speak a language(s) other than English at home.

Among frontline workers, 59% of respondents reported having experienced an increase in customer abuse “to a great extent” or “somewhat” during the pandemic, compared with 50% of non-frontline workers.

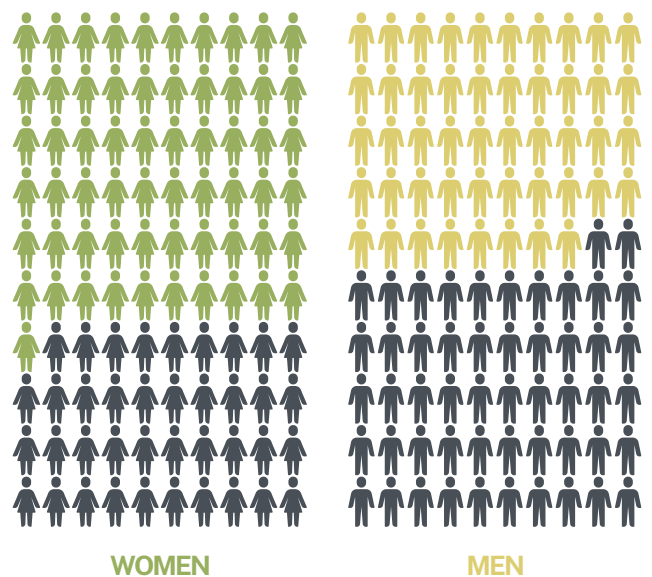
63% of those working in a locked-down region, and 59% of those not working in a locked-down region, reported that customer abuse had increased “to a great extent” or “somewhat”.

Among full-time workers, 59% of respondents reported having experienced customer abuse “to a great extent” or “somewhat” during the pandemic, compared with 68% of permanent part-time and 59% of casual workers.

Experience of customer abuse

- A majority of respondents (56%) reported having experienced a notable increase in customer abuse during the pandemic.
- Those particularly impacted by this increase were women, those from a non-English-speaking background, those under 50, and frontline workers,
- Whether respondents worked in a locked-down region made no difference to their experience of abuse, suggesting this is an issue larger than the pandemic.


Experienced an increase in customer abuse “to a great extent” or “somewhat” during the pandemic





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- [4] Silmalis, L. 2021, “Action plan to protect retail staff from abusive shoppers snubbing Covid conditions”, *Daily Telegraph*, 17 July.
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- [6] Wahlquist, C. 2021, “‘Using Afterpay to buy food’: *Guardian* readers who lost work tell how they are surviving Melbourne’s lockdown”, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/05/using-afterpay-to-buy-food-guardian-readers-who-lost-work-tell-how-they-are-surviving-melbournes-lockdown>.

The background image is a dark, semi-transparent overlay on a photograph of an indoor space. On the left, there are several large potted plants, including what appears to be a peace lily. A sign is partially visible, with the words "e In", "RE", and "EN" legible. The ceiling has recessed lighting. The overall tone is dark and professional.

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