

Bullying and Harassment in Australian Workplaces 2021: Australian Workplace Barometer Fact Sheet

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To cite this publication. Dollard, M.F., Owen, M., Afsharian, A., & Potter, R. (2021). Bullying and Harassment in Australian Workplaces 2021: Australian Workplace Barometer Fact Sheet, University of South Australia, Psychosocial Safety Climate Global Observatory, <https://www.stressafe.com.au/workplace-bullying-and-harassment2021.html>

PSC Global Observatory



Australian Government
Australian Research Council



This project was supported by funding from the Commonwealth Government body Safe Work Australia, SafeWork SA, NSW Centre for WHS, Australian Research Council Discovery Grants [DP0879007, DP140103429, DP200102752,] and an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant [LP100100449]. Maureen Dollard is Professor of Work and Organisational Psychology, and Mikaela Owen PhD, Ali Afsharian PhD, and Rachael Potter PhD are Research Associates at the Psychosocial Safety Climate Global Observatory. Maureen F. Dollard is the recipient of an Australian Research Council Laureate Fellowship (project number FL200100025) funded by the Australian Government. The Laureate Fellowship provided resources for the publication.

Summary

Why has this research been done?

- Workplace bullying and harassment are workplace factors that can cause significant psychological harm and injury, and negatively affect workplace engagement, and productivity. Collecting information on the prevalence of workplace bullying and harassment nationally provides an indication of the extent of this problem in Australia.

How did we study it?

- The **Australian Workplace Barometer (AWB)** was developed to provide science-driven evidence of Australian work conditions and their relationships to workplace health and productivity. The AWB is a surveillance system that monitors and benchmarks psychosocial risk factors, including job demands, control, support and resources as well as productivity and health outcomes in Australian workplaces.
- The AWB is unique in being able to provide representative national data for Australian workers regarding workplace bullying and other psychosocial factors at work.
- The report focuses on data from the 2020/21 Australian Workplace Barometer (AWB) project. Participants ($n = 1588$) were randomly selected across all states and territories and the data were weighted by gender and age to improve representativeness of the working population across Australia. In the sample 57.3 per cent of participants had participated in a previous wave of data collection, while the remaining 42.7 per cent completed the AWB for the first time.

What did we find?

- Bullying was measured using a widely accepted international definition previously validated against Safe Work Australia's definition. On average, across Australia, 8.6% of the 2020/21 Australian employee who responded reported bullying.
- The prevalence of workplace bullying in Australia decreased from 9.7 per cent in 2014/15 to 8.6 per cent in 2020/21. In 2014/15 Australian bullying rates exceeded all European country bullying rates measured in the 2010 European Working Conditions Survey. Compared to data from the 2015 European Working Conditions Survey, Australia's current bullying rate in 2020/21 has dropped slightly to third place, behind France and Luxembourg (refer to Figure 1).
- Australian state and territory bullying rates varied from 9.7 per cent in South Australia to 5.2 per cent in Western Australia (refer to Figure 2). There has been a two-fold increase in bullying rates for South Australia.
- Nation-wide relatively high levels of bullying were reported in Government Administration and Defence (13.4 per cent), Transport and Storage (13.3 per cent), and Retail trade (12.8 per cent).
- Of the participants who reported that they were bullied, approximately 55.6 per cent were bullied at least once a week. This figure has increased from 33 per cent in 2014/15.
- Four kinds of harassment were assessed (see Figure 3)¹.
- Of the different types of harassment that were assessed, verbal abuse, being sworn at/yelled at and/or being humiliated in front of others was the most common (42.7 per cent) and threats and/or physical assault was the least common (3.3 per cent) (refer to Figure 3).
- Rates of verbal abuse and/or humiliation and threats and/or physical assault remained stable from 2014/15 to 2020/21. However, rates of gender and/or racial harassment increased from 16.2 per cent to 25.5 per cent from 2014/15 to 2020/21 while sexual harassment rates dropped from 19.5 per cent to 16.7 per cent.

- Women were more likely than men to be bullied and experience unfair treatment because of their gender or ethnicity. There were no differences between men and women in relation to unwanted sexual advances.
- Men were more likely than women to experience verbal abuse in the workplace, as well as experience being physically assaulted or threatened by a client or patient.

What do the findings suggest?

- Results suggest that current approaches to preventing bullying and harassment in Australian workplaces are having little effect.
- Self-reported bullying in Australia has decreased slightly in Australia but is still very high by international standards and doubled in South Australia over the past six years.
- Sexual harassment rates have increased and harassment by gender and race have increased significantly.

What can be done?

- Greater attention should be placed on the prevention of workplace bullying and harassment through targeting the contributing risk factors within the work environment.
- There is ample research evidence that incidences of workplace bullying and harassment can be predicted from organisational climate for worker psychological health (the psychosocial safety climate, PSC), poor working conditions and poor job design^{2,3}.
- Monitoring PSC within organisations is recommended. As a leading indicator of workplace issues, PSC levels can provide early signs of risk for bullying and harassment occurring.
- Interventions to reduce bullying and harassment should focus on improving PSC and the regard for psychological health in the workplace.
- Workplaces should establish and enact policies, procedures, practices and guidelines for respectful behaviour, particularly toward women and people from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Workplaces should also devise safe communication processes and should make clear how workers can communicate with the organisation about bullying and harassment if they are targeted. Workers should be able to participate in designing systems to prevent bullying and harassment².
- Workplace bullying and harassment is against work health and safety and industrial laws in Australia. Higher numbers of workers and employers need to become educated with their rights under the law. For victims of workplace bullying and harassment there should be accessible and supportive pathways for action against their perpetrators.
- A greater number of workplaces and labour inspectors need to be trained on dealing with workplace bullying and harassment. More education and discussion needs to take place to address bullying behaviours. Evidence-based tools for both workplaces and inspectors would assist in developing a more consistent approach to addressing workplace bullying.
- Government and industry campaigns should communicate and educate about having a no-bullying culture in Australia.

Footnotes

1. To match the results reported from the AWB in 2014/15, very rarely/never was coded as 0 for no harassment, and all other responses ranging from rarely to very often/always were coded as 1 for exposure to harassment behaviour.
2. Afsharian, A.; Dollard, M.; Miller, E.; Puvimanasinghe, T.; Esterman, A.; De Anstiss, H.; Ziaian, T. Refugees at Work: The Preventative Role of Psychosocial Safety Climate against Workplace Harassment, Discrimination and Psychological Distress. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* 2021, *18*, x.
3. Potter, R. E., Dollard, M.F., & Tuckey, R.E. (2016). Bullying and Harassment in Australian Workplaces: Results from the Australian Workplace Barometer Project 2014/2015, SafeWork Australia Canberra

<https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/system/files/documents/1705/bullying-and-harassment-in-australian-workplaces-australian-workplace-barometer-results.pdf>

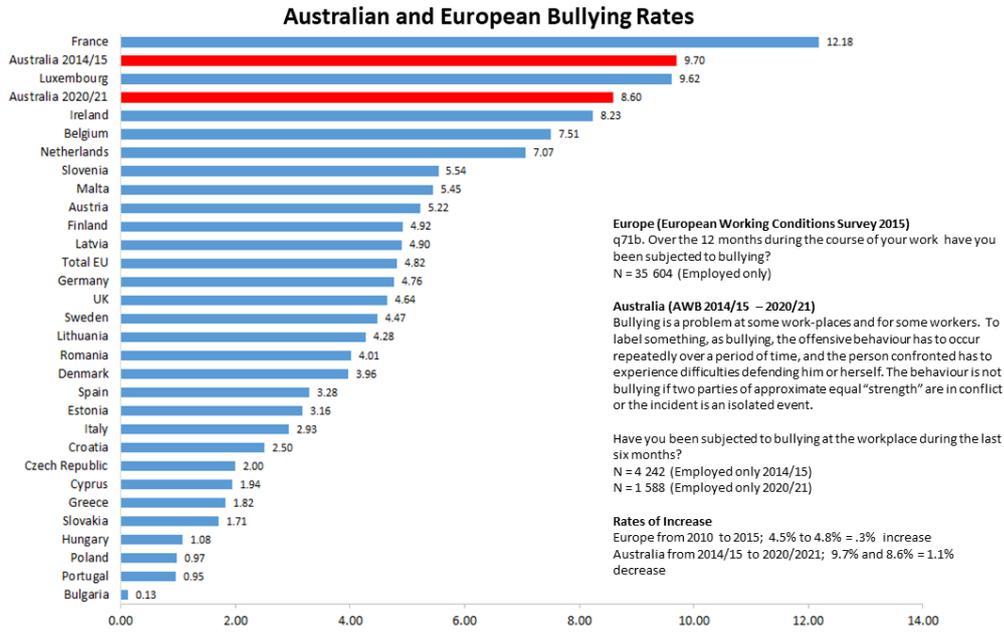


Figure 1. Bullying rates in Australia (in 2014/15 and 2020/21) and across Europe in 2015.

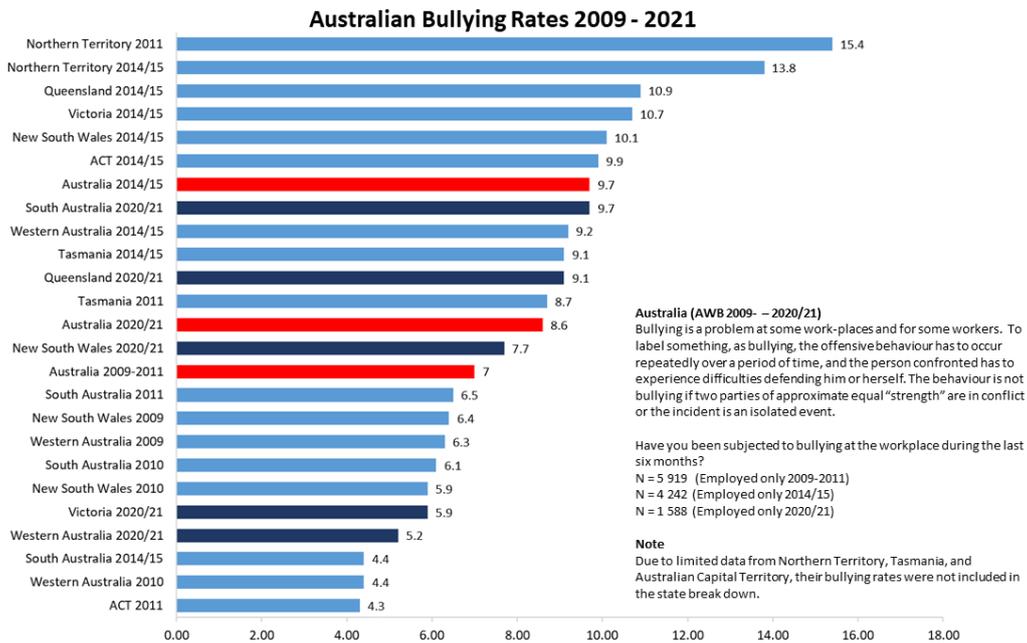


Figure 2. Bullying rates in Australia across the states from 2009 to 2020/21.

Exposure to harassment behaviours in Australia from 2014/15- 2020/21

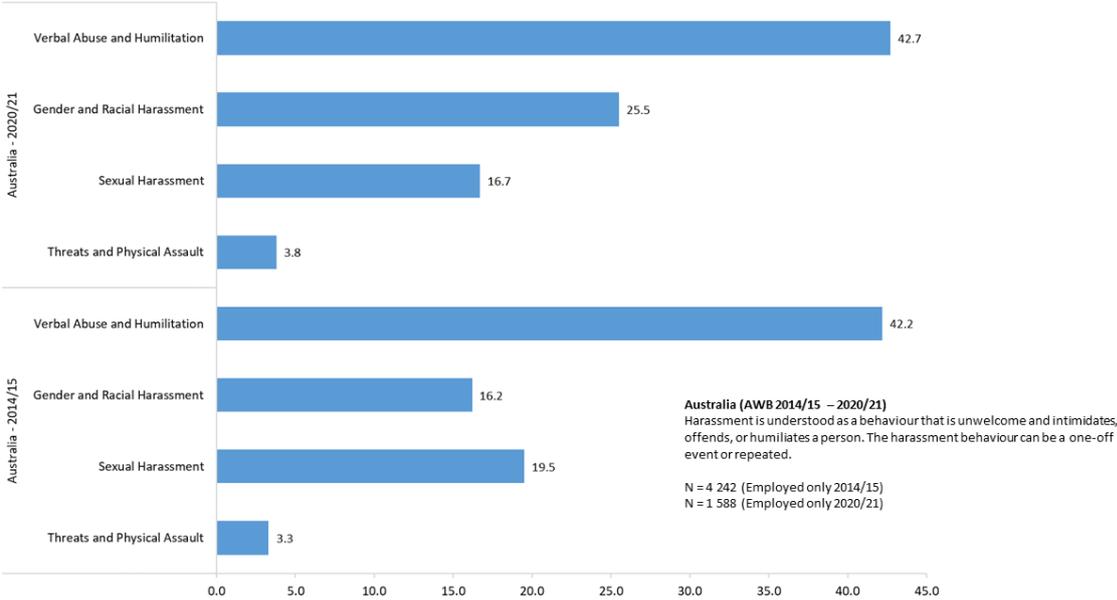


Figure 3. Harassment behaviours in Australia from 2014/15 to 2020/21.