

Energy customers during the coronavirus pandemic

Update – observations up to week ending 29 August 2021

The commission sent voluntary data requests to all retailers to monitor the number of energy customers receiving assistance to pay their bills. The following provides our observations on the data reported to the commission to date.

About the data

Weekly data is reported by retailers on a voluntary basis and is not audited by the commission. This data consists of a subset of the measures included in our annual performance report.

During the week ending 29 August 2021, we received submissions from 23 retailers covering 98 per cent of electricity residential customers.

Key findings

- There were 274 completed electricity and 105 gas disconnections for non-payment between 1 and 31 August 2021 (residential and small-business customers), as reported by eight retailers. Disconnections stopped from 5 August onwards in response to government announcements of movement restrictions in Victoria.

We note that in recent months, the following number of residential customers have been disconnected for non-payment:

- in June 2021: 956 electricity and 198 gas residential customers
- in July 2021: 822 electricity and 251 gas residential customers¹
- in August 2021: 238 electricity and 102 gas residential customers¹

¹ Disconnections stopped between 16-27 July and 5 August onwards in response to government announcements of movement restrictions in Victoria. One disconnection for non-payment was completed after 5 August 2021 due to a service order being raised before the movement restrictions were announced but was immediately reconnected.

- More residential customers received tailored assistance for gas and electricity in August 2021 compared to the previous month. We note that:
 - Fewer electricity customers and more gas customers were receiving tailored assistance and could not pay for their on-going usage in August compared to July. The average arrears for these customers decreased for electricity and increased for gas in August 2021, with average arrears for gas now at its highest since the payment difficulty framework began (January 2019).
 - More customers who can pay for their on-going electricity or gas usage were on tailored assistance in August compared to July. For electricity customers it is at the highest since the payment difficulty framework began (January 2019). The number of gas customers increased significantly as well (the highest since November 2020). The average arrears for these customers slightly increased compared to July.
- There was an increase in small business customers on payment assistance in August 2021 for electricity while the arrears of these customers decreased compared to July. There was a similar amount of small business gas customers receiving payment assistance in August compared to July while their average arrears increased significantly.
- There was a decrease in the number of 'other' residential customers with arrears on their electricity bills (those who are not receiving payment assistance or have not extended payment arrangements such as deferrals), in August compared to July, with the peak being in May 2021. The average amount outstanding for residential electricity increased in August to the highest it has been since February 2021. More 'other' residential customers had arrears on their gas bills in August, with the peak being in December 2020 and there was significant increase in the average amount outstanding for residential gas customers In August to the highest level it has been since November 2020.
- More small businesses, not on payment arrangements, were in arrears for their electricity bills in August. The average arrears of these electricity customers decreased compared to July. Slightly fewer small businesses gas customers, not on payment arrangements, were in arrears in August but remains high. The average arrears of these gas customers increased significantly compared to July.
- Fewer residential customers in August 2021 missed paying their bills by the due date compared to July. This peaked in May 2021 for electricity customers and July 2021 for gas customers.
- More small business customers missed paying their electricity bill by the due date in August 2021 compared to July whereas fewer small business gas customers missed paying their bill in August.

Victorian-wide data summary²

Disconnections for non-payment³

Indicator	Electricity													
	Monthly average 2018	Monthly average 2019	Sep-20 (1 Sep to 30 Sep)	Oct-20 (1 Oct to 31 Oct)	Nov-20 (1 Nov to 30 Nov)	Dec-20 (1 Dec to 31 Dec)	Jan-21 (1 Jan to 31 Jan)	Feb-21 (1 Feb to 28 Feb)	Mar-21 (1 Mar to 31 Mar)	Apr-21 (1 Apr to 30 Apr)	May-21 (1 May to 31 May)	Jun-21 (1 Jun to 30 Jun)	Jul-21 (1 Jun to 31 Jul)	August 21 (1 Aug to 31 Aug)
Residential														
Electricity residential disconnections for non-payment (DNP)	2,765	1,820	-	-	-	396	119	281	2,055	1,745	1,739	956	822	238
Gas residential disconnections for non-payment (DNP)	1,553	922	-	-	-	172	109	175	219	370	833	198	251	102
Small business														
Electricity small business disconnections for non-payment (DNP)	372	335	1	3	-	21	4	24	228	235	222	130	142	36
Gas small business disconnections for non-payment (DNP)	50	39	-	-	-	-	2	1	4	8	12	3	11	3

² These figures can change over time as retailers submit updated data. Some weeks have missing data from retailers. This can affect monthly totals as well as comparisons to other time periods. Note that average arrears are calculated by estimating total arrears divided by the number of customers receiving assistance across the market (reported data only).

³ The number of disconnections for non-payment in 2020 was based on the Compliance and Performance Reporting Guideline (CPRG) data from retailers. The 2021 disconnections figures are from the voluntary submission from retailers.

Electricity

Indicator	Electricity											
	Period (week ending)											
	27 Sep 2020	25 Oct 2020	29 Nov 2020	27 Dec 2020	31 Jan 2021	28 Feb 2021	28 Mar 2021	11 Apr 2021	30 May 2021	27 Jun 2021	25 Jul 2021	29 Aug 2021
Residential customers – assistance and arrears												
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving tailored assistance – who can pay on-going usage	35,843 1.3%	36,657 1.4%	37,115 1.4%	35,608 1.3%	34,511 1.3%	36,923 1.4%	37,221 1.4%	35,921 1.4%	35,345 1.3%	34,256 1.3%	36,079 1.4%	37,289 1.4%
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving tailored assistance – who cannot pay on-going usage	18,859 0.7%	18,368 0.7%	19,052 0.7%	18,543 0.7%	17,658 0.7%	18,971 0.7%	19,389 0.7%	18,825 0.7%	18,719 0.7%	18,440 0.7%	18,499 0.7%	17,770 0.7%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance, and can pay on-going usage	\$688 -	\$703 +2%	\$708 +1%	\$725 +2%	\$733 +1%	\$792 +8%	\$819 +3%	\$809 -1%	\$755 -7%	\$738 -2%	\$734 -1%	\$744 +1%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance, and cannot pay on-going usage	\$1,552 -	\$1,603 +3%	\$1,665 +4%	\$1,664 -0%	\$1,700 +2%	\$1,826 +7%	\$1,923 +5%	\$1,921 -0%	\$1,930 +0%	\$1,910 -1%	\$1,919 +0%	\$1,877 -2%
Small business customers – assistance and arrears												
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving payment assistance	2,738 1.0%	2,647 1.0%	2,391 0.9%	2,146 0.8%	2,053 0.7%	2,118 0.8%	2,593 0.9%	2,443 0.9%	2,471 0.9%	2,676 1.0%	2,593 0.9%	2,689 1.0%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance	\$1,603 -	\$1,554 -3%	\$1,515 -3%	\$1,503 -1%	\$1,552 +3%	\$1,442 -7%	\$1,430 -1%	\$1,393 -3%	\$1,431 +3%	\$1,423 -1%	\$1,334 -6%	\$1,294 -3%
Customers who deferred payments												
Number of residential customers	3,863	3,069	3,341	2,350	2,690	2,384	2,892	2,483	2,686	2,794	2,942	2,583
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by residential customers	\$578 -	\$540 -7%	\$509 -6%	\$492 -3%	\$435 -12%	\$507 +17%	\$516 +2%	\$455 -12%	\$420 -8%	\$460 +10%	\$449 -2%	\$421 -6%
Number of small business customers	448	340	372	237	381	267	275	509	264	305	289	328

Indicator	Electricity											
	Period (week ending)											
	27 Sep 2020	25 Oct 2020	29 Nov 2020	27 Dec 2020	31 Jan 2021	28 Feb 2021	28 Mar 2021	11 Apr 2021	30 May 2021	27 Jun 2021	25 Jul 2021	29 Aug 2021
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by small business customers	\$1,153 -	\$1,481 +28%	\$944 -36%	\$978 +4%	\$1,159 +19%	\$1,203 +4%	\$1,377 +14%	\$898 -35%	\$1,451 +62%	\$1,412 -3%	\$1,619 +15%	\$1,293 -20%
Other customers with arrears (excludes customers receiving payment assistance or deferrals)⁴												
Number of other residential customers with arrears	276,364	284,274	283,791	287,119	286,753	278,712	288,868	280,240	294,405	287,360	290,516	285,585
Average arrears – other residential customers	\$507 -	\$512 +1%	\$528 +3%	\$544 +3%	\$562 +3%	\$531 -5%	\$495 -7%	\$503 +2%	\$471 -6%	\$482 +2%	\$473 -2%	\$500 +6%
Number of other small business customers with arrears	55,052	54,751	53,424	51,154	52,940	52,107	56,285	48,507	54,272	50,323	43,012	50,989
Average arrears – other small business customers	\$980 -	\$885 -10%	\$931 +5%	\$907 -3%	\$874 -4%	\$861 -1%	\$820 -5%	\$887 +8%	\$822 -7%	\$849 +3%	\$865 +2%	\$816 -6%
Submissions rates for report												
Percentage of residential customer count covered in report	98%	98%	98%	98%	98%	98%	98%	98%	98%	98%	98%	98%

⁴ This indicator includes customers with any amount of arrears over \$0, which may include small amounts owing.

Indicator	Electricity											
	Sep-20 (31 Aug to 27 Sep)	Oct-20 (28 Sep to 25 Oct)	Nov-20 (26 Oct to 29 Nov)	Dec-20 (30 Nov to 27 Dec)	Jan-21 (28 Dec to 31 Jan)	Feb-21 (01 Feb to 28 Feb)	Mar-21 (01 Mar to 28 Mar)	Apr-21 (29 Mar to 25 Apr)	May-21 (26 Apr to 30 May)	Jun-21 (31 May to 27 Jun)	Jul-21 (28 Jun to 25 Jul) ⁵	Aug-21 (26 Jul to 29 Aug)
Calls waiting times												
Average call waiting time – <i>totals for both electricity and gas</i> (seconds)	74 seconds	64 seconds	67 seconds	59 seconds	80 seconds	98 seconds	85 seconds	170 seconds	105 seconds	122 seconds		
Calls and enquiries (market-wide) ⁶												
Weekly average phone calls to retailers (calls to an operator) – <i>totals for both electricity and gas</i>	99,603	85,561	84,059	76,038	73,685	89,627	81,250	76,763	83,115	88,112		
Weekly average residential customer calls seeking assistance	4,052	3,394	3,519	3,838	3,668	4,996	4,123	3,768	4,520	4,237		
Weekly average small business customer calls seeking assistance	332	212	232	391	491	463	398	413	493	436		
Missed bills (market-wide)												
Weekly average residential customers who missed bills	47,143	47,296	51,464	47,385	48,346	50,854	52,341	49,347	55,498	50,719	55,349	51,541
Weekly average small business customers who missed bills	8,526	8,599	8,990	8,111	8,993	8,858	8,770	8,414	9,992	8,307	8,579	9,719

⁵ Call wait times and enquires about assistance were removed from the voluntary reporting for July 2021 onwards

⁶ The number of customers seeking assistance have been revised due to a retailer updating its methodology to produce the figures for this indicator.

Gas

Indicator	Gas											
	Period (week ending)											
	27 Sep 2020	25 Oct 2020	29 Nov 2020	27 Dec 2020	31 Jan 2021	28 Feb 2021	28 Mar 2021	11 Apr 2021	30 May 2021	27 Jun 2021	25 Jul 2021	29 Aug 2021
Residential customers – assistance and arrears												
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving tailored assistance – who can pay on-going usage	31,825 1.5%	34,276 1.7%	33,631 1.6%	31,378 1.5%	26,237 1.3%	26,331 1.3%	24,557 1.2%	23,076 1.1%	22,116 1.1%	22,409 1.1%	24,552 1.2%	30,277 1.5%
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving tailored assistance – who cannot pay on-going usage	14,541 0.7%	14,184 0.7%	14,417 0.7%	13,855 0.7%	12,828 0.6%	13,907 0.7%	13,763 0.7%	13,503 0.7%	13,375 0.7%	13,635 0.7%	13,720 0.7%	14,281 0.7%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance, and can pay on-going usage	\$544 -	\$561 +3%	\$558 -1%	\$566 +1%	\$567 +0%	\$608 +7%	\$625 +3%	\$624 -0%	\$574 -8%	\$551 -4%	\$549 -0%	\$562 +2%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance, and cannot pay on-going usage	\$1,241 -	\$1,299 +5%	\$1,319 +2%	\$1,314 -0%	\$1,307 -1%	\$1,404 +7%	\$1,442 +3%	\$1,417 -2%	\$1,434 +1%	\$1,429 -0%	\$1,449 +1%	\$1,472 +2%
Small business customers – assistance and arrears												
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving payment assistance	821 1.3%	778 1.2%	691 1.1%	601 0.9%	569 0.9%	568 0.9%	732 1.1%	705 1.1%	709 1.1%	739 1.1%	768 1.2%	775 1.2%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance	\$1,815 -	\$2,104 +16%	\$1,898 -10%	\$1,939 +2%	\$1,770 -9%	\$1,534 -13%	\$1,438 -6%	\$1,386 -4%	\$1,436 +4%	\$1,550 +8%	\$1,523 -2%	\$1,725 +13%
Customers who deferred payments												
Number of residential customers	3,229	2,579	2,686	1,763	1,613	1,571	1,716	1,471	1,892	2,217	2,622	2,514
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by residential customers	\$488 -	\$453 -7%	\$380 -16%	\$389 +2%	\$421 +8%	\$383 -9%	\$344 -10%	\$304 -12%	\$281 -7%	\$318 +13%	\$340 +7%	\$403 +18%

Indicator	Gas											
	Period (week ending)											
	27 Sep 2020	25 Oct 2020	29 Nov 2020	27 Dec 2020	31 Jan 2021	28 Feb 2021	28 Mar 2021	11 Apr 2021	30 May 2021	27 Jun 2021	25 Jul 2021	29 Aug 2021
Number of small business customers	236	129	153	77	116	75	93	172	75	93	145	94
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by small business customers	\$2,659	\$1,393	\$1,373	\$1,005	\$926	\$1,349	\$882	\$791	\$2,150	\$2,592	\$946	\$1,883
	-	-48%	-1%	-27%	-8%	+46%	-35%	-10%	+172%	+21%	-63%	+99%
Other customers with arrears (excludes customers receiving payment assistance or deferrals)⁷												
Number of other residential customers with arrears	224,481	229,475	228,390	236,286	229,681	215,246	221,406	227,289	226,758	230,148	224,947	229,453
Average arrears – other residential customers	\$436	\$435	\$436	\$424	\$425	\$406	\$367	\$363	\$354	\$374	\$385	\$434
	-	-0%	+0%	-3%	+0%	-4%	-10%	-1%	-2%	+6%	+3%	+13%
Number of other small business customers with arrears	9,798	9,380	10,001	9,242	9,553	8,690	8,931	8,663	8,918	8,619	12,086	11,656
Average arrears – other small business customers	\$1,540	\$1,555	\$1,475	\$1,505	\$1,451	\$1,389	\$1,300	\$1,310	\$1,209	\$1,261	\$995	\$1,129
	-	+1%	-5%	+2%	-4%	-4%	-6%	+1%	-8%	+4%	-21%	+14%

⁷ This indicator includes customers with any amount of arrears over \$0, which may include small amounts owing.

Indicator	Gas											
	Sep-20 (31 Aug to 27 Sep)	Oct-20 (28 Sep to 25 Oct)	Nov-20 (26 Oct to 29 Nov)	Dec-20 (30 Nov to 27 Dec)	Jan-21 (28 Dec to 31 Jan)	Feb-21 (01 Feb to 28 Feb)	Mar-21 (01 Mar to 28 Mar)	Apr-21 (29 Mar to 25 Apr)	May-21 (26 Apr to 30 May)	Jun-21 (31 May to 27 Jun)	Jul-21 (28 Jun to 25 Jul)	Aug-21 (26 Jul to 29 Aug)
Calls waiting times												
Average call waiting time – <i>totals for both electricity and gas</i> (seconds)	<i>Refer to electricity</i>											
Calls and enquiries (market-wide) ⁸												
Weekly average phone calls to retailers (calls to an operator) – <i>totals for both electricity and gas</i>	<i>Refer to electricity</i>											
Weekly average residential customer calls seeking assistance	3,085	2,618	2,476	3,171	2,562	3,296	2,714	2,446	2,953	3,037		
Weekly average small business customer calls seeking assistance	62	52	43	69	90	61	57	62	73	73		
Missed bills (market-wide)												
Weekly average residential customers who missed bills	34,171	34,555	34,876	36,138	31,201	35,240	34,663	34,100	37,996	37,889	38,137	37,140
Weekly average small business customers who missed bills	1,971	1,773	1,757	1,651	1,672	1,733	1,659	1,604	1,762	1,708	1,723	1,650

⁸ The number of customers seeking assistance have been revised due to a retailer updating its methodology to produce the figures for this indicator.