

Energy customers during the coronavirus pandemic

Update – observations up to week ending 30 May 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 30 May 2021, we received submissions from 26 retailers covering 98 per cent of electricity residential customers.

Key findings

- There were 1,961 completed electricity and 845 gas disconnections for non-payment between 1 and 31 May 2021 (residential and small-business customers), as reported by 12 retailers. Disconnections stopped between 27 May and 9 June in response to government announcements of movement restrictions in Victoria.

We note that in 2021, the following number of residential customers have been disconnected for non-payment¹:

- in January 2021, 119 electricity and 109 gas residential customers
 - in February 2021, 281 electricity and 175 gas residential customers
 - in March 2021, 2,055 electricity and 219 gas residential customers
 - in April 2021, 1,745 electricity and 370 gas residential customers
 - in May 2021, 1,739 electricity and 833 gas residential customers
- The number of residential customers enquiring about assistance increased in May compared to April 2021 and is currently at its highest since February 2021. Average call waiting times also decreased in May compared to April but remained high.
 - The overall number of residential customers receiving tailored assistance was unchanged in May. We note that:

¹ We note that three retailers submitted disconnection data as part of its formal quarterly reporting requirements (covering January to March 2021) that had not been reported as part of the coronavirus voluntary data submission. The figures for January to March in this report have been updated to include the additional disconnections reported in the quarterly reporting by these retailers.

- the number of customers on tailored assistance who cannot pay for their on-going usage was unchanged in May from the previous month. The average arrears of these customers increased to its highest level by mid-May. However, by the end of the month there was no change in the average arrears when compared to April.
- the number of customers on tailored assistance who can pay for their on-going usage slightly decreased in May from the previous month. The average arrears for customer who can pay for their ongoing usage decreased for the second month in a row but remains high.
- The number of small business customers on payment assistance in May 2021 slightly decreased and is currently at similar levels to November 2020. The average arrears for small business customers on payment assistance decreased for electricity and increased for gas.
- The number of customers deferring payments and their average amount outstanding have been lower since the peaks in August for residential and September for small business. In May 2021, the number of residential electricity and gas customers deferring payments slightly increased compared to the previous month, while their average arrears decreased.
- The number of other residential customers with arrears (excluding those receiving payment assistance and deferrals) was at its highest in January 2021 for electricity and in December 2020 for gas. In May, the number of residential customers with arrears increased for electricity and gas when compared to the previous month and is close to the January peak for residential electricity customers. For small businesses, the monthly average number of other customers with arrears for electricity and gas increased compared to the previous month and is at similar levels to March 2021. The average arrears decreased for both residential and small business customers and for both is currently at levels similar to mid-July 2020.
- The weekly average number of missed bill payments for residential and small business customers increased in May 2021. This is currently the highest level recorded except for small business gas customers.

Victorian-wide data summary²

Disconnections for non-payment³

Indicator	Electricity													
	Apr-20 (1 Apr to 30 Apr)	May-20 (1 May to 31 May)	Jun-20 (1 Jun to 30 Jun)	Jul-20 (1 Jul to 31 Jul)	Aug-20 (1 Aug to 31 Aug)	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)
Residential														
Electricity residential disconnections for non-payment (DNP)	5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	396	119	281	2,055	1,745	1,739
Gas residential disconnections for non-payment (DNP)	2	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	172	109	175	219	370	833
Small business														
Electricity small business disconnections for non-payment (DNP)	-	-	-	-	-	1	3	-	21	4	24	228	235	222
Gas small business disconnections for non-payment (DNP)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	1	4	8	12

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)											
	28 Jun 2020	26 Jul 2020	30 Aug 2020	27 Sep 2020	25 Oct 2020	29 Nov 2020	27 Dec 2020	31 Jan 2021	28 Feb 2021	28 Mar 2021	25 Apr 2021	30 May 2021
Residential customers – assistance and arrears												
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving tailored assistance – who can pay on-going usage	30,495 1.1%	31,626 1.2%	33,674 1.3%	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%	35,886 1.4%	35,345 1.3%
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving tailored assistance – who cannot pay on-going usage	18,612 0.7%	18,554 0.7%	18,644 0.7%	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%	18,845 0.7%	18,719 0.7%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance, and can pay on-going usage	\$641 -	\$660 +3%	\$694 +5%	\$688 -1%	\$703 +2%	\$708 +1%	\$725 +2%	\$733 +1%	\$792 +8%	\$819 +3%	\$805 -2%	\$755 -6%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance, and cannot pay on-going usage	\$1,529 -	\$1,512 -1%	\$1,535 +1%	\$1,552 +1%	\$1,603 +3%	\$1,665 +4%	\$1,664 -0%	\$1,700 +2%	\$1,826 +7%	\$1,923 +5%	\$1,927 +0%	\$1,930 +0%
Small business customers – assistance and arrears												
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving payment assistance	2,614 0.9%	2,549 0.9%	2,595 0.9%	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%	2,542 0.9%	2,471 0.9%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance	\$1,327 -	\$1,462 +10%	\$1,581 +8%	\$1,603 +1%	\$1,554 -3%	\$1,515 -3%	\$1,503 -1%	\$1,552 +3%	\$1,442 -7%	\$1,430 -1%	\$1,489 +4%	\$1,431 -4%
Customers who deferred payments												
Number of residential customers	8,577	8,853	5,205	3,863	3,069	3,341	2,350	2,690	2,384	2,892	2,506	2,686
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by residential customers	\$610 -	\$638 +5%	\$663 +4%	\$578 -13%	\$540 -7%	\$509 -6%	\$492 -3%	\$435 -12%	\$507 +17%	\$516 +2%	\$455 -12%	\$420 -8%
Number of small business customers	2,310	2,269	1,366	448	340	372	237	381	267	275	354	264

Indicator	Electricity											
	Period (week ending)											
	28 Jun 2020	26 Jul 2020	30 Aug 2020	27 Sep 2020	25 Oct 2020	29 Nov 2020	27 Dec 2020	31 Jan 2021	28 Feb 2021	28 Mar 2021	25 Apr 2021	30 May 2021
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by small business customers	\$2,461	\$2,604	\$2,119	\$1,153	\$1,481	\$944	\$978	\$1,159	\$1,203	\$1,377	\$1,184	\$1,451
	-	+6%	-19%	-46%	+28%	-36%	+4%	+19%	+4%	+14%	-14%	+23%
Other customers with arrears (excludes customers receiving payment assistance or deferrals)⁴												
Number of other residential customers with arrears	-	268,021	271,930	276,364	284,274	283,791	287,119	286,753	278,712	288,868	283,597	294,405
Average arrears – other residential customers	-	\$455	\$485	\$507	\$512	\$528	\$544	\$562	\$531	\$495	\$494	\$471
	-	-	+6%	+5%	+1%	+3%	+3%	+3%	-5%	-7%	-0%	-5%
Number of other small business customers with arrears	-	50,787	52,833	55,052	54,751	53,424	51,154	52,940	52,107	56,285	52,169	54,272
Average arrears – other small business customers	-	\$885	\$969	\$980	\$885	\$931	\$907	\$874	\$861	\$820	\$844	\$822
	-	-	+10%	+1%	-10%	+5%	-3%	-4%	-1%	-5%	+3%	-3%

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

Indicator	Electricity											
	Jun-20 (01 Jun to 28 Jun)	Jul-20 (29 Jun to 26 Jul)	Aug-20 (27 Jul to 30 Aug)	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)
Calls waiting times												
Average call waiting time – <i>totals for both electricity and gas</i> (seconds)	89 seconds	79 seconds	93 seconds	74 seconds	64 seconds	67 seconds	59 seconds	80 seconds	98 seconds	85 seconds	170 seconds	105 seconds
Calls and enquiries (market-wide) ⁵												
Weekly average phone calls to retailers (calls to an operator) – <i>totals for both electricity and gas</i>	104,794	103,721	98,762	99,603	85,561	84,059	76,038	73,685	89,627	81,250	76,763	83,115
Weekly average residential customer calls seeking assistance	5,762	5,303	5,096	4,052	3,394	3,519	3,838	3,668	4,996	4,123	3,768	4,520
Weekly average small business customer calls seeking assistance	1,371	634	626	332	212	232	391	491	463	398	413	493
Missed bills (market-wide)												
Weekly average residential customers who missed bills	46,797	47,512	45,424	47,143	47,296	51,464	47,385	48,346	50,854	52,341	49,347	55,498
Weekly average small business customers who missed bills	8,173	8,592	9,001	8,526	8,599	8,990	8,111	8,993	8,858	8,770	8,414	9,992

⁵ 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)											
	28 Jun 2020	26 Jul 2020	30 Aug 2020	27 Sep 2020	25 Oct 2020	29 Nov 2020	27 Dec 2020	31 Jan 2021	28 Feb 2021	28 Mar 2021	25 Apr 2021	30 May 2021
Residential customers – assistance and arrears												
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving tailored assistance – who can pay on-going usage	21,030 1.0%	23,315 1.1%	28,274 1.4%	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%	22,571 1.1%	22,116 1.1%
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving tailored assistance – who cannot pay on-going usage	13,588 0.7%	13,893 0.7%	14,190 0.7%	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%	13,385 0.7%	13,375 0.7%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance, and can pay on-going usage	\$474 -	\$496 +5%	\$535 +8%	\$544 +2%	\$561 +3%	\$558 -1%	\$566 +1%	\$567 +0%	\$608 +7%	\$625 +3%	\$614 -2%	\$574 -6%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance, and cannot pay on-going usage	\$1,138 -	\$1,157 +2%	\$1,214 +5%	\$1,241 +2%	\$1,299 +5%	\$1,319 +2%	\$1,314 -0%	\$1,307 -1%	\$1,404 +7%	\$1,442 +3%	\$1,428 -1%	\$1,434 +0%
Small business customers – assistance and arrears												
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving payment assistance	700 1.1%	746 1.2%	723 1.1%	821 1.3%	778 1.2%	691 1.1%	601 0.9%	569 0.9%	568 0.9%	732 1.1%	711 1.1%	709 1.1%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance	\$1,648 -	\$1,478 -10%	\$1,681 +14%	\$1,815 +8%	\$2,104 +16%	\$1,898 -10%	\$1,939 +2%	\$1,770 -9%	\$1,534 -13%	\$1,438 -6%	\$1,389 -3%	\$1,436 +3%
Customers who deferred payments												
Number of residential customers	7,072	7,594	5,005	3,229	2,579	2,686	1,763	1,613	1,571	1,716	1,521	1,892
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by residential customers	\$442 -	\$497 +12%	\$525 +6%	\$488 -7%	\$453 -7%	\$380 -16%	\$389 +2%	\$421 +8%	\$383 -9%	\$344 -10%	\$306 -11%	\$281 -8%

Indicator	Gas											
	Period (week ending)											
	28 Jun 2020	26 Jul 2020	30 Aug 2020	27 Sep 2020	25 Oct 2020	29 Nov 2020	27 Dec 2020	31 Jan 2021	28 Feb 2021	28 Mar 2021	25 Apr 2021	30 May 2021
Number of small business customers	908	933	515	236	129	153	77	116	75	93	174	75
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by small business customers	\$1,623	\$1,813	\$1,962	\$2,659	\$1,393	\$1,373	\$1,005	\$926	\$1,349	\$882	\$808	\$2,150 ⁶
	-	+12%	+8%	+36%	-48%	-1%	-27%	-8%	+46%	-35%	-8%	+166%
Other customers with arrears (excludes customers receiving payment assistance or deferrals)⁷												
Number of other residential customers with arrears	-	208,688	220,345	224,481	229,475	228,390	236,286	229,681	215,246	221,406	220,165	226,758
Average arrears – other residential customers	-	\$368	\$420	\$436	\$435	\$436	\$424	\$425	\$406	\$367	\$364	\$354
	-	-	+14%	+4%	-0%	+0%	-3%	+0%	-4%	-10%	-1%	-3%
Number of other small business customers with arrears	-	9,657	10,105	9,798	9,380	10,001	9,242	9,553	8,690	8,931	8,683	8,918
Average arrears – other small business customers	-	\$1,237	\$1,388	\$1,540	\$1,555	\$1,475	\$1,505	\$1,451	\$1,389	\$1,300	\$1,270	\$1,209
	-	-	+12%	+11%	+1%	-5%	+2%	-4%	-4%	-6%	-2%	-5%

⁶ We note this increase was due to a large arrears associated with one small business customer.

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

Indicator	Gas											
	Jun-20 (01 Jun to 28 Jun)	Jul-20 (29 Jun to 26 Jul)	Aug-20 (27 Jul to 30 Aug)	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)
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	4,224	4,035	3,824	3,085	2,618	2,476	3,171	2,562	3,296	2,714	2,446	2,953
Weekly average small business customer calls seeking assistance	189	121	96	62	52	43	69	90	61	57	62	73
Missed bills (market-wide)												
Weekly average residential customers who missed bills	32,264	32,244	33,156	34,171	34,555	34,876	36,138	31,201	35,240	34,663	34,100	37,996
Weekly average small business customers who missed bills	1,703	1,740	1,825	1,971	1,773	1,757	1,651	1,672	1,733	1,659	1,604	1,762

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