

Energy customers during the coronavirus pandemic

Update – observations up to week ending 31 January 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 31 January 2021, we received submissions from 18 retailers covering 93 per cent of electricity residential customers.

Key findings

- There were 123 electricity and 14 gas disconnections for non-payment completed in January 2021, as reported by four retailers.
- There were 417 electricity and 172 gas disconnections of residential and small business customers for non-payment completed in December 2020, as reported by one retailer.
- The average number of residential and small business customers who contacted their retailers for assistance peaked in May and had been decreasing until October. It increased in November before decreasing again by the end of January (currently less than half the number of calls during the peak in May).¹
- The overall number of residential customers receiving tailored assistance have been decreasing in recent months. We note that:
 - the number of customers on tailored assistance who cannot pay for their on-going usage decreased in recent months after a slight increase in November. The average arrears of these customers is currently at a lower level compared to its peak in early December.
 - the number of customers on tailored assistance who can pay for their on-going usage has decreased in recent months after its peak in mid-October. The average

¹ The increase in November was also contributed due to one medium retailer started reporting for this indicator again starting from the week ending 29 November. Previously the retailer had a technical issue in its reporting system.

arrears of these customers is currently at a lower level compared to its peak at the end of December.

- The number of small business customers on payment assistance continued to decrease in January. The overall average arrears for small business has also decreased in recent weeks after its peak in November, particularly for gas.
- The number of customers who deferred their payments and their average amount outstanding decreased from the week ending 23 August due to significant decreases by one retailer. The number of residential and small business customers deferring payments and their average amount outstanding have been lower since the peaks in August and September.
- The number of other residential customers with arrears (excluding those receiving payment assistance and deferrals) has decreased in January after peaking in December. For small business, January 2021 had the highest monthly average number of customers despite fluctuations in certain weeks. The average arrears for residential and small business continue to be higher than in July.
- The average number of missed bill payments for electricity residential customers in January was lower than the peak in November for residential. The average missed bill payments for gas residential customers peaked in December before decreasing in January. For small business, the average number of missed bill payments have been lower since the peaks in May and September.
- Electricity distributors continued the network relief package to retailers, which allows retailers to defer the payment of network charges and payment deferrals during the pandemic. One eligible retailer applied to defer their network charges payments for November and December and received total payment deferrals of \$100,374 for 1,932 residential customers and \$2,229 for 14 small business customers.

Victorian-wide data summary²

Electricity

Indicator	Electricity										
	Week ending 05 Apr	Week ending 26 Apr	Week ending 31 May	Week ending 28 Jun	Week ending 26 Jul	Week ending 30 Aug	Week ending 27 Sep	Week ending 25 Oct	Week ending 29 Nov	Week ending 27 Dec	Week ending 31 Jan
Residential customers – assistance and arrears											
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving tailored assistance – who can pay on-going usage	34,517 1.3%	31,911 1.2%	30,921 1.2%	30,495 1.1%	31,591 1.2%	33,515 1.3%	35,669 1.3%	36,097 1.4%	36,955 1.4%	35,591 1.3%	33,010 ³ 1.2%
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving tailored assistance – who cannot pay on-going usage	21,817 0.8%	21,017 0.8%	19,268 0.7%	18,612 0.7%	18,357 0.7%	17,896 0.7%	17,781 0.7%	16,524 0.6%	18,303 0.7%	18,248 0.7%	15,734 ³ 0.6%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance, and can pay on-going usage	\$625 -	\$618 -1%	\$652 +6%	\$641 -2%	\$660 +3%	\$687 +4%	\$682 -1%	\$694 +2%	\$703 +1%	\$725 +3%	\$711 -2%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance, and cannot pay on-going usage	\$1,402 -	\$1,385 -1%	\$1,547 +12%	\$1,529 -1%	\$1,515 -1%	\$1,509 -0%	\$1,524 +1%	\$1,586 +4%	\$1,646 +4%	\$1,665 +1%	\$1,649 -1%
Small business customers – assistance and arrears											
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving payment assistance	2,278 0.8%	2,471 0.9%	2,618 0.9%	2,614 0.9%	2,547 0.9%	2,527 0.9%	2,631 0.9%	2,535 0.9%	2,301 0.8%	2,114 0.8%	2,003 0.7%

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 Note that two retailers have not yet submitted data for the end of January, which accounts for approximately 1,100 tailored assistance customers who can pay on-going usage, and 1,400 who cannot pay for on-going usage.

Indicator	Electricity											
	Week ending 05 Apr	Week ending 26 Apr	Week ending 31 May	Week ending 28 Jun	Week ending 26 Jul	Week ending 30 Aug	Week ending 27 Sep	Week ending 25 Oct	Week ending 29 Nov	Week ending 27 Dec	Week ending 31 Jan	
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance	\$1,241	\$1,180	\$1,141	\$1,327	\$1,463	\$1,542	\$1,570	\$1,515	\$1,469	\$1,503	\$1,552	
	-	-5%	-3%	+16%	+10%	+5%	+2%	-3%	-3%	+2%	+3%	
Customers who deferred payments												
Number of residential customers	-	-	-	8,577	8,848	5,105	3,762	2,968	3,245	2,458	2,635	
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by residential customers	-	-	-	\$610	\$639	\$628	\$530	\$477	\$451	\$484	\$435	
	-	-	-	-	+5%	-2%	-16%	-10%	-5%	+7%	-10%	
Number of small business customers	-	-	-	2,310	2,269	1,364	439	334	370	237	380	
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by small business customers	-	-	-	\$2,461	\$2,604	\$2,118	\$1,150	\$1,483	\$938	\$978	\$1,161	
	-	-	-	-	+6%	-19%	-46%	+29%	-37%	+4%	+19%	
Other customers with arrears (excludes customers receiving payment assistance or deferrals)⁴												
Number of other residential customers with arrears	-	-	-	-	268,021	271,930	275,652	283,595	283,788	286,539	279,753	
Average arrears – other residential customers	-	-	-	-	\$455	\$485	\$507	\$512	\$528	\$544	\$541	
	-	-	-	-	-	+6%	+5%	+1%	+3%	+3%	-0%	
Number of other small business customers with arrears	-	-	-	-	50,787	52,833	54,774	54,548	53,353	50,772	52,475	
Average arrears – other small business customers	-	-	-	-	\$885	\$969	\$980	\$885	\$930	\$907	\$867	
	-	-	-	-	-	+10%	+1%	-10%	+5%	-3%	-4%	

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

Indicator	Electricity									
	April (30 Mar to 26 Apr)	May (27 Apr to 31 May)	June (01 Jun to 28 Jun)	July (29 Jun to 26 Jul)	August (27 Jul to 30 Aug)	September (31 Aug to 27 Sep)	October (28 Sep to 25 Oct)	November (26 Oct to 29 Nov)	December (30 Nov to 27 Dec)	January (28 Dec to 31 Jan)
Calls waiting times										
Average call waiting time – <i>totals for both electricity and gas</i> (seconds)	111 seconds	75 seconds	89 seconds	80 seconds	95 seconds	76 seconds	66 seconds	70 seconds	60 seconds	67 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>	90,765	98,783	104,794	103,367	98,573	99,110	82,349	83,375	75,738	71,627
Weekly average residential customer calls seeking assistance	6,298	7,134	5,762	5,298	5,022	3,930	3,230	3,396	3,730	3,517
Weekly average small business customer calls seeking assistance	1,738	2,332	1,371	633	623	326	200	225	390	480
Missed bills (market-wide)										
Weekly average residential customers who missed bills	38,535	43,768	46,797	47,137	44,067	44,773	44,071	49,027	47,273	46,989
Weekly average small business customers who missed bills	8,192	9,548	8,173	8,576	8,923	8,336	8,262	8,707	7,970	8,759

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											
	Week ending 05 Apr	Week ending 26 Apr	Week ending 31 May	Week ending 28 Jun	Week ending 26 Jul	Week ending 30 Aug	Week ending 27 Sep	Week ending 25 Oct	Week ending 29 Nov	Week ending 27 Dec	Week ending 31 Jan	
Residential customers – assistance and arrears												
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving tailored assistance – who can pay on-going usage	24,547 1.2%	22,125 1.1%	20,542 1.0%	21,030 1.0%	23,315 1.1%	28,133 1.4%	31,682 1.5%	33,890 1.7%	33,217 1.6%	31,378 1.5%	25,373 1.2%	
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving tailored assistance – who cannot pay on-going usage	16,346 0.8%	15,606 0.8%	14,108 0.7%	13,588 0.7%	13,893 0.7%	13,706 0.7%	14,060 0.7%	13,204 0.6%	13,377 0.7%	13,853 0.7%	11,900 0.6%	
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance, and can pay on-going usage	\$512 -	\$498 -3%	\$489 -2%	\$474 -3%	\$496 +5%	\$532 +7%	\$541 +2%	\$557 +3%	\$553 -1%	\$566 +2%	\$555 -2%	
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance, and cannot pay on-going usage	\$1,108 -	\$1,092 -1%	\$1,141 +4%	\$1,138 -0%	\$1,157 +2%	\$1,215 +5%	\$1,243 +2%	\$1,308 +5%	\$1,329 +2%	\$1,314 -1%	\$1,300 -1%	
Small business customers – assistance and arrears												
Number and proportion of Victorian customers receiving payment assistance	656 1.0%	696 1.1%	687 1.1%	700 1.1%	746 1.2%	723 1.1%	821 1.3%	777 1.2%	691 1.1%	599 0.9%	568 0.9%	
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance	\$1,164 -	\$1,139 -2%	\$1,436 +26%	\$1,648 +15%	\$1,478 -10%	\$1,681 +14%	\$1,815 +8%	\$2,109 +16%	\$1,898 -10%	\$1,945 +2%	\$1,774 -9%	
Customers who deferred payments												
Number of residential customers	-	-	-	7,072	7,594	4,919	3,147	2,554	2,604	1,847	1,579	
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by residential customers	-	-	-	\$442	\$497	\$507	\$459	\$414	\$342	\$382	\$415	
	-	-	-	-	+12%	+2%	-9%	-10%	-17%	+12%	+9%	

Indicator	Gas											
	Week ending 05 Apr	Week ending 26 Apr	Week ending 31 May	Week ending 28 Jun	Week ending 26 Jul	Week ending 30 Aug	Week ending 27 Sep	Week ending 25 Oct	Week ending 29 Nov	Week ending 27 Dec	Week ending 31 Jan	
Number of small business customers	-	-	-	908	933	515	236	136	153	76	116	
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by small business customers	-	-	-	\$1,623	\$1,813	\$1,962	\$2,659	\$1,389	\$1,373	\$984	\$926	
	-	-	-	-	+12%	+8%	+36%	-48%	-1%	-28%	-6%	
Other customers with arrears (excludes customers receiving payment assistance or deferrals)⁶												
Number of other residential customers with arrears	-	-	-	-	208,688	220,345	224,481	230,185	228,390	236,261	224,683	
Average arrears – other residential customers	-	-	-	-	\$368	\$420	\$436	\$435	\$436	\$424	\$416	
	-	-	-	-	-	+14%	+4%	-0%	+0%	-3%	-2%	
Number of other small business customers with arrears	-	-	-	-	9,657	10,105	9,798	9,453	10,001	9,242	9,566	
Average arrears – other small business customers	-	-	-	-	\$1,237	\$1,388	\$1,540	\$1,549	\$1,475	\$1,505	\$1,449	
	-	-	-	-	-	+12%	+11%	+1%	-5%	+2%	-4%	

⁶ This indicator includes customers with any amount of arrears over \$0, which may include small amounts owing.

Indicator	Gas										
	April (30 Mar to 26 Apr)	May (27 Apr to 31 May)	June (01 Jun to 28 Jun)	July (29 Jun to 26 Jul)	August (27 Jul to 30 Aug)	September (31 Aug to 27 Sep)	October (28 Sep to 25 Oct)	November (26 Oct to 29 Nov)	December (30 Nov to 27 Dec)	January (28 Dec to 31 Jan)	
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) ⁷											
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	4,064	4,656	4,224	4,035	3,763	2,983	2,504	2,349	3,088	2,458	
Weekly average small business customer calls seeking assistance	265	257	189	121	96	62	52	43	69	90	
Missed bills (market-wide)											
Weekly average residential customers who missed bills	27,432	28,085	32,264	32,244	32,603	33,302	34,208	32,853	36,076	30,081	
Weekly average small business customers who missed bills	1,876	1,905	1,703	1,740	1,822	1,968	1,827	1,709	1,651	1,671	

⁷ The number of customers seeking assistance have been revised due to a retailer updating its methodology to produce the figures for this indicator.