

Energy customers during the coronavirus pandemic

Update – observations up to week ending 28 February 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 28 February 2021, we received submissions from 21 retailers covering 98 per cent of electricity residential customers.

Key findings

- There were 297 completed electricity and 44 gas disconnection for non-payment between 1 and 28 February 2021 (residential and small-business customers), as reported by nine retailers.

We note that in 2021, over two thousand residential customers have been disconnected for non-payment as follows:

- in January 2021, 119 electricity and 13 gas residential customers
 - in February 2021, 273 electricity and 44 gas residential customers
 - up to 19 March 2021, 1,487 electricity and 72 gas residential customers
- The average number of residential and small business customers who contacted their retailers for assistance peaked in May and had been decreasing until November. There were more residential customers enquiring about assistance in February, compared to the figures in January and similar to the amount of enquires in July 2020.
 - The overall number of residential customers receiving tailored assistance have increased in February. We note that:
 - the number of customers on tailored assistance who cannot pay for their on-going usage increased in February. The average arrears of these customers is currently at its highest level in February for both electricity and gas.
 - the number of customers on tailored assistance who can pay for their on-going usage increased in February after decreasing in January and peaked in mid-October. The average arrears of these customers is also currently at its highest level in February for both electricity and gas.

- The number of small business customers on payment assistance remained stable in February. The average arrears for small business customers in February 2021 decreased and is lower compared to the peak in late November for electricity and 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. By the end of February, the number of residential electricity and gas customers deferring payments had both decreased, with gas customers deferring payments the lowest we have seen.
- The number of other residential customers with arrears (excluding those receiving payment assistance and deferrals) in February has decreased and is lower compared to the peak in December. For small business, the monthly average number of customers for electricity and gas decreased in February, with small business gas customers the lowest we have seen. The average arrears for residential and small business continue to be higher than in July but has decreased since December 2020.
- The average number of missed bill payments for electricity residential customers in February 2021 is the highest we have seen, around 1,300 more customers compared to November 2020. The average missed bill payments for gas residential customers increased in February but is lower than its peak in December. For small business, the average number of missed bill payments has 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 January 2021 and received total payment deferrals of \$4,527 for 96 residential customers and \$48 for 1 small business customer.

Victorian-wide data summary¹

Electricity

Indicator	Electricity											
	Period (week ending)											
	5 Apr 2020	26 Apr 2020	31 May 2020	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
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%	36,482 1.4%	36,955 1.4%	35,591 1.3%	34,378 1.3%	36,795 1.4%
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%	17,290 0.7%	18,303 0.7%	18,248 0.7%	17,236 0.6%	18,547 0.7%
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%	\$697 +2%	\$703 +1%	\$725 +3%	\$735 +1%	\$794 +8%
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%	\$1,577 +4%	\$1,646 +4%	\$1,665 +1%	\$1,703 +2%	\$1,831 +7%
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%	2,025 0.7%	2,084 0.7%

¹ 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).

Indicator	Electricity											
	Period (week ending)											
	5 Apr 2020	26 Apr 2020	31 May 2020	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
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	\$1,553	\$1,435
	-	-5%	-3%	+16%	+10%	+5%	+2%	-3%	-3%	+2%	+3%	-8%
Customers who deferred payments												
Number of residential customers	-	-	-	8,577	8,848	5,105	3,762	2,968	3,245	2,350	2,688	2,384
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by residential customers	-	-	-	\$610	\$639	\$628	\$530	\$477	\$451	\$492	\$435	\$507
	-	-	-	-	+5%	-2%	-16%	-10%	-5%	+9%	-11%	+17%
Number of small business customers	-	-	-	2,310	2,269	1,364	439	334	370	237	381	261
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by small business customers	-	-	-	\$2,461	\$2,604	\$2,118	\$1,150	\$1,483	\$938	\$978	\$1,159	\$1,088
	-	-	-	-	+6%	-19%	-46%	+29%	-37%	+4%	+19%	-6%
Other customers with arrears (excludes customers receiving payment assistance or deferrals)²												
Number of other residential customers with arrears	-	-	-	-	268,021	271,930	275,652	283,595	283,788	286,539	286,156	277,934
Average arrears – other residential customers	-	-	-	-	\$455	\$485	\$507	\$512	\$528	\$544	\$562	\$531
	-	-	-	-	-	+6%	+5%	+1%	+3%	+3%	+3%	-6%
Number of other small business customers with arrears	-	-	-	-	50,787	52,833	54,774	54,548	53,353	50,772	52,756	51,864
Average arrears – other small business customers	-	-	-	-	\$885	\$969	\$980	\$885	\$930	\$907	\$873	\$859
	-	-	-	-	-	+10%	+1%	-10%	+5%	-3%	-4%	-2%

² This indicator includes customers with any amount of arrears over \$0, which may include small amounts owing.

Indicator	Electricity										
	Apr-20 (30 Mar to 26 Apr)	May-20 (27 Apr to 31 May)	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)
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	75 seconds	70 seconds
Calls and enquiries (market-wide) ³											
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	83,426	83,375	75,738	73,353	89,066
Weekly average residential customer calls seeking assistance	6,298	7,134	5,762	5,298	5,022	3,930	3,251	3,396	3,834	3,659	4,979
Weekly average small business customer calls seeking assistance	1,738	2,332	1,371	633	623	326	200	225	388	489	453
Missed bills (market-wide)											
Weekly average residential customers who missed bills	38,535	43,768	46,797	47,137	44,067	44,773	44,262	49,027	47,273	48,199	50,391
Weekly average small business customers who missed bills	8,192	9,548	8,173	8,576	8,923	8,336	8,267	8,707	7,970	8,865	8,638

³ 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)											
	5 Apr 2020	26 Apr 2020	31 May 2020	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
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%	34,134 1.7%	33,489 1.6%	31,378 1.5%	26,237 1.3%	26,331 1.3%
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%	13,702 0.7%	13,935 0.7%	13,855 0.7%	12,828 0.6%	13,907 0.7%
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%	\$559 +3%	\$555 -1%	\$566 +2%	\$567 +0%	\$608 +7%
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%	\$1,303 +5%	\$1,324 +2%	\$1,314 -1%	\$1,307 -1%	\$1,404 +7%
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%	778 1.2%	691 1.1%	601 0.9%	569 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%	\$2,104 +16%	\$1,898 -10%	\$1,939 +2%	\$1,770 -9%	\$1,534 -13%
Customers who deferred payments												
Number of residential customers	-	-	-	7,072	7,594	4,919	3,147	2,497	2,604	1,763	1,613	1,571
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by residential customers	-	-	-	\$442 -	\$497 +12%	\$507 +2%	\$459 -9%	\$415 -10%	\$342 -18%	\$389 +14%	\$421 +8%	\$383 -9%

Indicator	Gas											
	Period (week ending)											
	5 Apr 2020	26 Apr 2020	31 May 2020	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
Number of small business customers	-	-	-	908	933	515	236	129	153	77	116	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
	-	-	-	-	+12%	+8%	+36%	-48%	-1%	-27%	-8%	+46%
Other customers with arrears (excludes customers receiving payment assistance or deferrals)⁴												
Number of other residential customers with arrears	-	-	-	-	208,688	220,345	224,481	229,475	228,390	236,286	229,681	215,246
Average arrears – other residential customers	-	-	-	-	\$368	\$420	\$436	\$435	\$436	\$424	\$425	\$406
	-	-	-	-	-	+14%	+4%	-0%	+0%	-3%	+0%	-4%
Number of other small business customers with arrears	-	-	-	-	9,657	10,105	9,798	9,380	10,001	9,242	9,553	8,690
Average arrears – other small business customers	-	-	-	-	\$1,237	\$1,388	\$1,540	\$1,555	\$1,475	\$1,505	\$1,451	\$1,389
	-	-	-	-	-	+12%	+11%	+1%	-5%	+2%	-4%	-4%

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

Indicator	Gas										
	Apr-20 (30 Mar to 26 Apr)	May-20 (27 Apr to 31 May)	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)
Calls waiting times											
Average call waiting time – <i>totals for both electricity and gas</i> (seconds)	Refer to electricity										
Calls and enquiries (market-wide) ⁵											
Weekly average phone calls to retailers (calls to an operator) – <i>totals for both electricity and gas</i>	Refer to electricity										
Weekly average residential customer calls seeking assistance	4,064	4,656	4,224	4,035	3,763	2,983	2,503	2,373	3,171	2,562	3,296
Weekly average small business customer calls seeking assistance	265	257	189	121	96	62	52	43	69	90	61
Missed bills (market-wide)											
Weekly average residential customers who missed bills	27,432	28,085	32,264	32,244	32,603	33,302	33,412	34,048	36,092	31,079	35,135
Weekly average small business customers who missed bills	1,876	1,905	1,703	1,740	1,822	1,968	1,770	1,757	1,651	1,672	1,733

⁵ The number of customers seeking assistance have been revised due to a retailer updating its methodology to produce the figures for this indicator.