

Energy customers during the coronavirus pandemic

Update – observations up to week ending 27 September 2020

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 27 September 2020, we received submissions from 20 retailers covering 96 per cent of electricity residential customers.

Key findings

- There have been no disconnections because of non-payment since April as reported by distributors.
- The average number of residential and small business customers who contacted their retailers for assistance peaked in May and has been steadily decreasing in recent months – and the weekly average during September has been the lowest recorded to date.
- The number of residential customers receiving tailored assistance reached its lowest number in June before increasing in recent months, while the average arrears has been gradually decreasing since the peak in May. However, we note that:
 - the number of customers who cannot pay their on-going usage continues to steadily decrease since April
 - the number of customers who can pay their on-going usage have been increasing since July
- There are more small business customers on payment assistance compared to April and their average arrears is at the highest since April.
- The number of customers who deferred their payments and their average amount outstanding have been decreasing since the week ending 23 August due to significant decreases from one retailer. Some retailers have reported increases in the number of gas small business customers with high average amount outstanding in the last week of September (although early data for the week ending 11 October 2020 indicates that the average amount deferred has since decreased by 37%).

- The total number of other residential and small business customers with arrears (excluding those receiving payment assistance and deferrals) has gradually increased since mid-July. Their average arrears have also been increasing in recent weeks.
- The average number of missed bill payments for electricity customers has been lower since the peak in May for residential and in July for small business. However, the average number of missed bill payments is at its highest in September for gas residential and small business customers.
- Electricity distributors continued its network relief package to retailers, which allows retailers to defer the payment of network charges and payment deferrals during the pandemic. In September, eligible retailers applied to defer their network charges payments for August 2020 and received total payment deferrals of \$134,033 for 1,680 residential customers and \$3,740 for 51 small business customers.

Victorian-wide data summary¹

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
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%	35,660 1.3%
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%	17,774 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%
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%
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%	2,628 0.9%
Average arrears and change from previous month (%) – customers receiving payment assistance	\$1,241 -	\$1,180 -5%	\$1,141 -3%	\$1,327 +16%	\$1,463 +10%	\$1,542 +5%	\$1,570 +2%

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						
	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
Customers who deferred payments							
Number of residential customers	-	-	-	8,577	8,848	5,105	3,762
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by residential customers	-	-	-	\$610	\$639	\$628	\$530
	-	-	-	-	+5%	-2%	-16%
Number of small business customers	-	-	-	2,310	2,269	1,364	439
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by small business customers	-	-	-	\$2,461	\$2,604	\$2,118	\$1,150
	-	-	-	-	+6%	-19%	-46%
Other customers with arrears (excludes customers receiving payment assistance or deferrals)²							
Number of other residential customers with arrears	-	-	-	-	268,021	271,930	275,641
Average arrears – other residential customers	-	-	-	-	\$455	\$485	\$507
	-	-	-	-	-	+6%	+5%
Number of other small business customers with arrears	-	-	-	-	50,787	52,833	54,770
Average arrears – other small business customers	-	-	-	-	\$885	\$969	\$980
	-	-	-	-	-	+10%	+1%

² 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)
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	60 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	98,843
Weekly average residential customer calls seeking assistance	6,298	7,134	5,762	5,298	5,022	3,926
Weekly average small business customer calls seeking assistance	1,738	2,332	1,371	633	623	322
Missed bills (market-wide)						
Weekly average residential customers who missed bills	38,535	43,768	46,797	47,137	44,067	44,430
Weekly average small business customers who missed bills	8,192	9,548	8,173	8,576	8,923	8,283

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						
	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
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 1.6%
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%
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%
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%
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%
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%
Customers who deferred payments							
Number of residential customers	-	-	-	7,072	7,594	4,919	3,147
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by residential customers	-	-	-	\$442 -	\$497 +12%	\$507 +2%	\$459 -9%
Number of small business customers	-	-	-	908	933	515	236

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
Average amount deferred and change from previous month (%) by small business customers	-	-	-	\$1,623	\$1,813	\$1,962	\$2,659*
	-	-	-	-	+12%	+8%	+36%
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
Average arrears – other residential customers	-	-	-	-	\$368	\$420	\$436
	-	-	-	-	-	+14%	+4%
Number of other small business customers with arrears	-	-	-	-	9,657	10,105	9,798
Average arrears – other small business customers	-	-	-	-	\$1,237	\$1,388	\$1,540
	-	-	-	-	-	+12%	+11%

* Note: Early data for the week ending 11 October 2020 indicates that the average amount deferred has since decreased by 37% to approximately \$1,700.

⁴ 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)
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) ⁵						
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
Weekly average small business customer calls seeking assistance	265	257	189	121	96	62
Missed bills (market-wide)						
Weekly average residential customers who missed bills	27,432	28,085	32,264	32,244	32,603	33,302
Weekly average small business customers who missed bills	1,876	1,905	1,703	1,740	1,822	1,968

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