

SDA SOUTH AUSTRALIAN BRANCH
**SDA SUBMISSION TO
THE ROYAL COMMISSION
INTO EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION AND CARE**

Date Submitted: **19 May 2023** | Submitted by: **Josh Peak, Secretary**



About the SDA



The Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association (the SDA) is one of Australia's largest trade unions with around 210,000 members nationally and around 29,000 members in South Australia. Our members work in retail, warehousing, fast food, hairdressing, beauty, pharmacy, online retailing, and modelling.

The majority of SDA members are women (60%, approximately 131,000), under 35 years (57%, approximately 120,000 workers), and low-income. Retail and food services are two of the three lowest industries for median weekly earnings.

The SDA has a long history of advocating on behalf of members with caring responsibilities, who are predominately our women members. We do this through enterprise bargaining; making submissions regarding Awards and the NES to provide a relevant safety net; and through numerous submissions made to parliamentary and government inquiries and other important reviews.

The SDA has 10 policy principles that guide our engagement in these reviews. For a list of these, see Appendix A.



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Executive Summary

The SDA welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care.

The SDA regularly advocates on behalf of members who are constantly battling to juggle their care responsibilities with punishing and inflexible work time arrangements and lack of workplace support. This is further impacted by a lack of access to suitable formal early childhood education and care to support their family's caring needs while allowing them to participate in paid work.

SDA members make a significant contribution to our economy and society, not only through their paid work, but also through the unpaid labour they provide as carers. This valuable care contribution is unrecognized, undervalued, and unsupported in our workplaces, society and economy.

In 2021 the SDA partnered with the UNSW Social Policy Research Centre to undertake research into our members' experience of managing their work and care responsibilities. A major part of this research focused on parents of young children and the care arrangements they utilized while working, including use of formal ECEC services and informal care such as from family and friends. This significant research resulted in a Report titled '*The challenges of work, family and care, for Australia's retail, online retail, warehousing and fast-food workers*'. (**The Report**)¹.

The Report provides an insight into the daily lives of SDA members managing their work and care responsibilities and highlights the powerlessness; and lack of certainty and control they have over their working hours; the anxiety and stress this causes them, their children, and their families; and the intergenerational disadvantage that current workplace practices and the gaps in the affordability and accessibility of formal early childhood education and care entrench.

The Report found that SDA members provide care at higher rates than the general population and they do this while trying to manage work that is low paid², unpredictable and insecure. Over half of all SDA members regularly provide some form of care to another person, such as a child, grandchild, an older person, or person with a disability or long-term health condition.

Of the 6469 SDA members surveyed, 55% of survey respondents provide regular care to a child or an adult, however this was higher for women (60%) than men (43%)³. The most common form of care was for a child under 18 years (39%) and 30% of all participants were parents of a child under 18.⁴

The care provided is often complex. SDA members are more likely than the national population to be sole parents or parents providing care to a child with a disability⁵. These factors also contribute to the need for flexible, accessible, affordable, and suitable childcare.

The Report demonstrates that the needs of working parents are not being met by employers, workplace

¹ Cortis, N., Blaxland, M., and Charlesworth, S. (2021). *Challenges of work, family and care for Australia's retail, online retail warehousing and fast food workers*. Sydney: UNSW Social Policy Research Centre

² . 52% of respondents live in households with post-tax income of less than \$1000 per week. This was the case for 32% of couple parents and 80% of sole parents, and 56% of workers who were not currently parenting a child aged under 18 (see Appendix Table A.10) *ibid*, page 82.

³ *Ibid*, page 20

⁴ *Ibid*, page 20

⁵25% of participants who are parents with a child under 18 said they are sole parents. This is high: sole parent families comprise around 14% of families in Australia. 2 16% of parents with a child under 18 said they have a child with a disability or additional needs. While measured differently, ABS data indicates that in 2018, 7.7% of children under 15 had a disability.³ *ibid*, page 3

laws and the childcare system.

Work time arrangements in the retail industry are characterised by short shifts, fluctuating hours, precarious shifts and rosters, often during non-standard hours, for both casual and permanent workers. These types of working arrangements make it extremely difficult for retail workers to access formal childcare within the structure that it is provided.

The Report found that for parents of children under 12, only 9% used formal care services only, half (49%) used informal care only, and 42% used a combination of both⁶. Most relied heavily on informal care provided by immediate family or household members or extended family and friends, particularly grandparents.

The Report also found that not only is the challenge to manage work and the care of children, including the ability to access formal ECEC, impacting on the finances and mental stress of workers and their families but it is resulting in a significant impact on children. It impacts the access that children have to education and care that is critical for their pre-school development and school readiness, it also impacts on development through the primary school years. This is resulting in short and long-term disadvantage for the children of SDA members.

We welcome the recent improvements to the Federal Child Care Subsidy, which aim to make childcare more affordable, but we recognize that there will still be structural barriers for our members to access formal early childhood education and care. The accessibility of ECEC must be addressed to ensure more equal access for all families and children so that no children are disadvantaged, and we are not entrenching intergenerational disadvantage for families living in lower socio-economic households.

Improvements to the accessibility and affordability of ECEC is also vital for gender equality. Providing care is gendered. The Report found that the lack of support for workers with caring responsibilities and the difficulties accessing formal childcare has a disproportionate impact on women as they shoulder a higher burden of care. This is creating a barrier for women's access to suitable and sufficient working times, and career opportunities and progression.

Accessible and affordable childcare is vital for women's participation in paid work and for improvements in gender equality in Australian workplaces, our economy and broader society.

The Report explored the way in which work and childcare impacts families, the provision of care and the ability to participate in work. While we will touch on all of these, however, to address the terms of reference, the focus of our submission will be in relation to the childcare arrangements our members make, utilization of formal ECEC and informal care, reasons for this and the difficulties they experience using formal ECEC, including a mismatch between our members working arrangements and the delivery of ECEC. The submission will also focus on how this impacts workplace participation.

The full report and fact sheets can be found at [Challenges of work, family and care for Australia's retail, online retail, warehousing and fast food workers | SDA Union](#) and the Executive Summary is attached to this submission at Appendix B. We will highlight some of the data further in this submission.

⁶ Ibid, page 26

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

The provision of supply side funding by Government to ensure widespread availability of flexible ECEC places for children of workers with non-standard hours and unpredictable shifts. The benefits of such an approach to filling a gap in the childcare market were demonstrated by the provision of free childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendation 2

Greater availability of more adaptable childcare options such as occasional care and family day care, with incentives and supports for providers and educators to make care available to workers with non-standard, changeable hours.

Recommendation 3

Expanding access to early education. Currently early education in family day care is not recognised. Innovative approaches are needed to ensure children who only attend family day care are also able to engage in a preschool program, whether provided by an appropriately trained family day care educator, or by linking them to a standalone preschool.

Recommendation 4

Previous attempts to develop flexible ECEC floundered⁷. Further research is needed to better understand how the ECEC system can better meet the needs of workers like SDA members.

Recommendation 5

Improved access and affordability of outside school hours care, including raising the eligibility age of the Child Care Subsidy and outside school hours care into the teen years so that young people can have safe places to be cared for while their parents' work. This is a particular need for some young people with disabilities.

Recommendation 6

Provide better access and affordability of vacation care, especially for children who use no other form of care during term time.

Recommendation 7

Provide supports to ensure older children can engage in extra-curricula activities outside of school time, even when these clash with their parents' employment.

Recommendation 8

Ultimately, providing a free place for every child, regardless of the circumstances of their parents, would address many of the challenges SDA members face, while also simplifying the system for families, and addressing children's right to early education.

Recommendation 9

Consider the ECEC system including affordability, availability and accessibility for more vulnerable families such as sole parent families, families caring for children with disability or special needs, families

⁷ Baxter, J. A., Hand, K., & Sweid, R. (2016). Flexible child care and Australian parents' work and care decision-making (Research Report No. 37). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

in low socio-economic households and families in rural and regional communities.

SDA members are workers and carers

1. In 2021, the SDA commissioned the University of NSW, Social Policy Research Centre to survey our members in relation to their experience in managing their work and care. The research had a significant focus on parents of young children and the care arrangements they utilized while working, including the use of formal ECEC services and informal care such as from family and friends. In October 2021 the Challenges of work, family and care for Australia's retail, online retail, warehousing and fast food workers⁸ report (The Report) was published.
2. The Report is based on survey responses of 6469 SDA members and provides a comprehensive analysis of the extent and nature of the combination of work and care for SDA members, predominately in the retail sector. While this was a national survey, it included respondents from South Australia and is representative of the experience of retail workers across the country.
3. Retail is the largest private sector employer in the country, employing over 10% of all working Australians.
4. The survey size was large and a representative sample of our members, providing a reliable insight into the issues impacting workers in retail more broadly. This research provides solid evidence as to the challenges working parents face daily. The Report very clearly demonstrates the detrimental impact the current system of combining work and the care of children is having on workers and their families in terms of access to opportunity, financial well-being and long-term economic security, and mental health. It is also having an inequitable and profound impact on children.
5. The Report found that SDA members make significant, unpaid contributions through the labour they provide as parents and carers to children and adults in their families and communities, which is beneficial to our society and our economy.
6. Fifty-five percent of survey respondents provide regular care to a child or an adult, however this was higher for women (60%) than men (43%)⁹. The most common form of care was for a child under 18 years (39%) and 30% of all participants were parents of a child under 18. Older SDA members also provide care to grandchildren (17%) and young SDA members, 20 years and younger (14%) are providing regular care to siblings¹⁰. This data demonstrates the level of care provided to children across all cohorts of retail workers.
7. The provision of care by young workers for younger siblings can impact on their ability to participate in paid work and on the earnings of the household. Care provided by grandparents, and most commonly grandmothers, also impacts on women's participation in paid work, resulting in less earnings and retirement savings exacerbating the existing gender pay, lifetime earnings and retirement gaps between women and men.
8. SDA members care for others at disproportionately high rates when compared to the national population, particularly in relation to complex caring arrangements.

⁸ Cortis, N., Blaxland, M., and Charlesworth, S. (2021). *Challenges of work, family and care for Australia's retail, online retail warehousing and fast food workers*. Sydney: UNSW Social Policy Research Centre.

⁹ Ibid, page 20

¹⁰ Ibid, page 20

	Australia (ABS)	SDA survey participants
Care for an older person or person with disability	11%	24%
Sole parents	14% of families	25% of parents
Parent of a child with a disability	7.7% (children <15 with a disability)	16% (children <18 with a disability)
Young carer's (<25, provide regular care to elderly, person with disability)	5.6%	13%

9. Many SDA members provide care to a child or children while also caring for an older person. 16% of parents with a child aged 18 and under, and 12% of parents with a child aged 5 or under, were also providing regular elder care¹¹. Combining work while juggling multiple caring responsibilities creates even greater pressure and stress on families. Workers in this situation are also less likely to be able to rely on grandparents to provide informal care to their children.
10. Care is gendered. More women (60%) surveyed than men (43%) provide regular care to a child or an adult¹². This is more pronounced when considering the care of children, especially when children are young, and mothers are in the 26-45 years age group¹³:
11. The report found that the lack of workplace support and childcare options for working parents has a disproportionate impact on women as they shoulder a higher burden of care. This is a barrier to women's workforce participation and ability to earn an income to support their family. It also has a long-term impact on lifetime earnings, retirement savings and career opportunities. This is having a negative impact on gender equality.
12. The care provided by SDA members contributes an enormous amount to our society and economy, but often comes at great personal cost. Greater support, including better workplace rights and improved access to ECEC is needed to enable greater workplace participation and to eliminate or at least minimize the economic cost of providing care.

Working arrangements of SDA members and its impact on access to ECEC

13. The way in which employment and work time is arranged, and rosters are set; the growth in insecure work and non-standard hours; and the inability for workers to access changes to their working arrangements has an enormous impact on a worker's ability to manage their caring responsibilities and access ECEC for their children. The structure and rules around the supply and delivery of ECEC services is not well matched to the working conditions of SDA members and other workers who experience similar working arrangements.
14. The below explores the working arrangements of SDA members and the challenges and difficulties the working arrangements create for accessing ECEC services. The SDA understands that much of the problem is due to the way in which employers are managing these working arrangements and the lack of support that this provides to working parents managing their work and childcare arrangements, however, the rules around the delivery of ECEC and the structure of how it is provided also needs to be considered so that it aligns more with the working arrangements and patterns of working parents.

¹¹ Ibid, page 22

¹² Ibid, page 20

¹³ Ibid, page 21

Insecure work and the 'hunger games' model of rostering

15. One of the biggest issues facing our members is insecure work, not only for casuals but also permanent part-time workers who are engaged on low-base hour contracts but regularly work additional hours. The Report details how workers are routinely underemployed and are often in desperate need of more hours in order to financially survive. However, these additional hours are offered and rostered with little certainty or predictability, which significantly impacts on care arrangements which then need to be adjusted to allow the worker to access these additional hours. The current model of low base hour contracts, coupled with the promise of more hours has created a 'hunger games' model of rostering.
16. This model of rostering significantly impacts on the ability for SDA members to access ECEC as the rules around the supply and delivery of ECEC are not flexible enough to meet their needs. The SDA has advocated strongly for legislative changes to provide workers with more secure and stable work and rosters but there also needs to be changes to the provision of ECEC to make it more flexible to better meet the needs of workers.

Work time arrangements and rostering practices

17. When surveyed regarding this, *'SDA members described very poor working time security. Very high proportions of participants work non-standard hours, face challenges relating to unpredictable rosters (and income), and experience lack of consultation over changing work times. While affecting everyone, these factors exacerbate difficulties workers face in providing care'*¹⁴.
18. The report found that many workers, including those employed on a permanent basis don't have regular work times (Chapter 8 Working time and rostering practices):
 - One in ten parents (10%) said they do not have a regular workday. (Figure 3.3)
 - Only two in five (40%) work the same shifts each week 'all of the time', (fathers 48% and mothers 37%). 17% only work the same shifts 'some or a little of the time' and 6% 'none of the time'.
 - Permanent employment is not always stable or predictable with 18% of part-time and 13% of full-time workers only working the same shifts 'sometimes', 'a little of the time' or 'never'.
 - 41% of parents said their shifts can change unexpectedly, including 36% of part-time and full-time employees. (Table 8.2)
 - Unpredictable hours of work impacts workers ability to meet their financial needs. 34% agreed or strongly agreed that 'if my hours were more predictable, I would be able to work more' (53% of casual workers and 29% of permanent workers). (Figure 8.6)
 - SDA members have very limited control over their working times. Only 19% can adjust start/finish times and only 21% said they can change workdays.
 - 1 in 3 workers have to closely monitor their phone or device to receive notice of shifts.
19. Working hours in retail are highly variable, change frequently, unexpectedly and often at short notice, all of which making it difficult to plan stable care arrangements, particularly in a formal ECEC setting which predominately requires a decision to be made on set times and days it will be accessed each week. 'Irregular work times increase the work of coordinating care, especially for mothers who tend to carry the responsibility for managing, reassessing and changing care arrangements, day to day and week to week'¹⁵.
20. The impacts of these working time and rostering practices on workers, and in particular carers is

¹⁴ Ibid, page 60

¹⁵ Ibid, page 60

evidenced by the following:

Among those with a child aged 12 or under:

- 68% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'When I get my roster, I have to check it fits with the family's childcare arrangements'.
 - 69% agreed their work times affects when other family members can work.
 - 62% said they find it stressful to organise childcare around work times.
21. The Report found that *'many families pay for formal childcare that they do not use. Comments from families show that this happens for several reasons. Families sometimes book more care than they need because their child care service requires regular bookings, but their employers do not offer regular hours. So families may, for example, book regular care from Monday to Thursday because they do not know from week to week which days they will need to use. When their roster becomes available, they may discover they only need two or three of those days, but still need to pay for the days their child doesn't attend. Other times, families pay for childcare that their child doesn't use because the service will not accept a sick child, or because the parent's roster has changed with short notice, and they do not require the care'*¹⁶.
22. Building in more flexibility around the access to ECEC would benefit workers who are trying to juggle unpredictable hours and childcare.

Non-standard hours

23. A large proportion of SDA members work non-standard hours. With the widespread deregulation of shopping hours over the last two decades, and stores opening from early in the morning until late at night, and sometimes 24 hours, retail workers are increasingly being expected to work non-standard hours as part of their regular roster:
- Half work Saturdays
 - 43% work Sundays
 - 37% work evenings
 - 35% work early mornings
 - 5% work nights (night shift)
24. Many retailers have policies and in some cases model rosters that expect workers to work non-standard hours, whether it be a certain number of evening shifts and/or weekend work. For some, especially managers, this also includes a requirement to work public holidays. Arguably, these policies are a form of discrimination against workers with family and caring responsibilities.
25. The expectation that all workers must work non-standard hours puts enormous pressure on carers. This is exacerbated by the fact that we have a formal childcare model in Australia based on standard work hours leaving many workers with no way to provide care to those who need it, particularly children, while they work non-standard hours. However, it should be noted that the SDA does not support the extension of ECEC into non-standard hours of work, as this would simply create similar issues in another feminized sector, without addressing the structural and systemic workplace discrimination that is occurring in relation to working times and flexible work.
26. The supply and delivery of ECEC or other methods of supporting working parents who work non-standard hours need to be considered when determining how to resolve the gaps in access and

¹⁶ Ibid, page 43

availability of formal childcare services.

27. Members commented on the impact that working non-standard hours has on their ability to use ECEC:

It is very hard to find a childcare in the weekends, evening etc. For people like us who do shift work, it is stressful to get.

Partnered father, permanent full-time

I struggle to get back to pick my kids up on time as I finish work at 5.30pm and work 40 minutes away. The after school care closes at 6.00pm. It's also hard to find vacation care that suits early morning and evenings.

Sole mother, permanent part-time

Vacation care trading times are less than on normal school days and therefore will require an adjustment in my roster so that I can collect my children earlier than normal to avoid additional fees.

Partnered mother, permanent part-time

Length and spread of shifts

28. Rosters for permanent part-time and casuals also typically include short shifts, despite many workers preference for longer shifts. Short shifts are not well suited to formal care arrangements such as childcare. The rostering of short shifts also often results in workers being rostered over several days to meet their base hour contracts. Many members feel that their hours are spread over too many days, also impacting on their ability to provide care or find suitable formal childcare services.
29. The Report found that, *'The most commonly mentioned challenge was the need to pay for a full day of long day care, even if a child attends for short hours. This happens, especially in long day care, where families are typically required to pay for a full day of 10 or 12 hours, regardless of how long a child attends. Child care becomes affordable for SDA members as a result.'*¹⁷

I would utilise childcare except I have to pay for a whole day when my shifts are only for 3 hours it's not worthwhile.

Partnered mother of child with disability, permanent part-time

We thankfully have a great daycare but we also pay for full 12 hr days even if we don't use that but it's something I'm willing to do to give us flexibility around work.

Partnered mother, permanent full-time

30. The structure and rules on the delivery of ECEC need to be considered for parents working shifts that are less than a full day and how this can be provided, availability increased, and fairer costs applied.

Childcare arrangements used by SDA members

31. Chapter 5 of the Report looks at the childcare arrangements that SDA members who are parents of a child aged 12 or under use. Only 9% used formal care services only, half (49%) used informal care only, and 42% used a combination of both¹⁸. Most relied heavily on informal care provided by

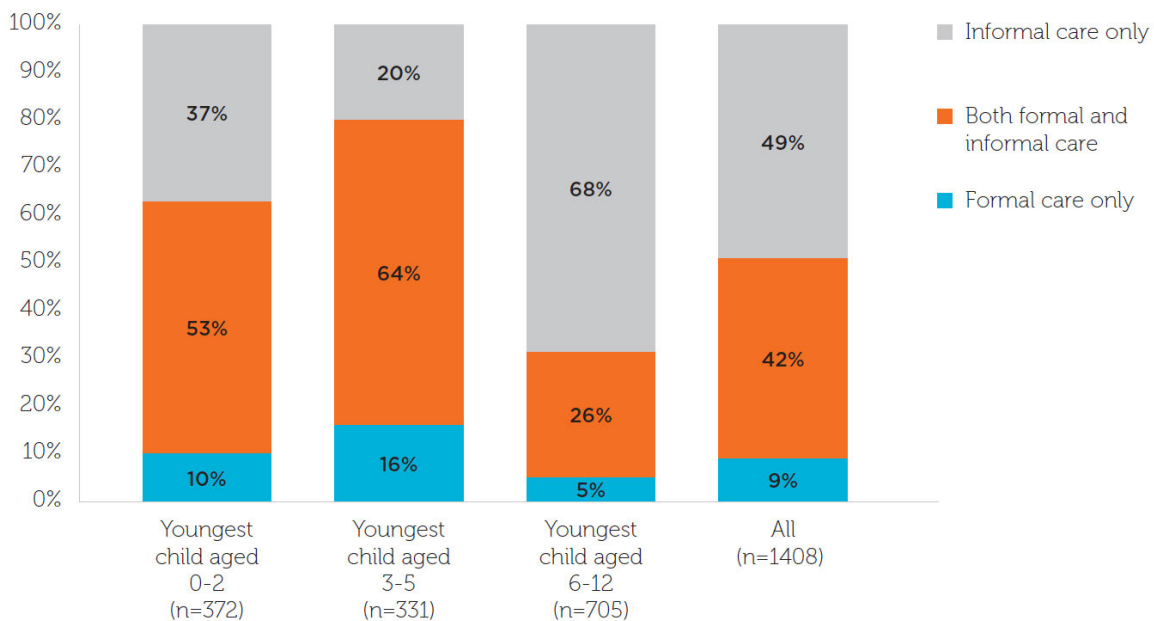
¹⁷ Ibid, page 43

¹⁸ Ibid, page 26

immediate family or household members or extended family and friends, particularly grandparents.

32. Use of formal and informal arrangements differed according to the age of their youngest child (Figure 5.1).¹⁷

Figure 5.1 Use of formal and informal care whilst working by age of youngest child



33. Appendix Table A.6 shows that there are also some differences in the type of care used depending on the number of hours worked. As parents worked more hours, use of informal care only (with no formal service) is less common. This is particularly apparent among parents with very young children (aged 0 to 2) and 3 to 5, underlining the role of formal services in enabling parents to increase their labour supply.¹⁹

Reliance on informal care

34. The Report demonstrates the significant reliance by SDA members on the informal care provided to their children by friends and family. Among those whose youngest child was aged 0 to 2, 37% reported informal arrangements only, while half (53%) reported using a mix of formal and informal care arrangements. Most parents of school aged children reported no formal care use: 68% had used only informal arrangements so far in 2021, and a further 26% used a mix of formal and informal care. Among all parents with a child under 12, 38% of parents used some form of informal care on a weekly basis.²⁰
35. Grandparents (used by 28% of families) are the most common form of informal care used followed by care from other adult relatives and older children in the family. While many use these forms of care not all (36%) didn't use grandparent care at all, and many commented on having no family nearby or in a position to help.²¹
36. Many commented on having to arrange the care of children from within the household resulting in couples working opposite shifts to cover the care of children. While this enabled families to reduce childcare costs it also means these families miss out on time together as a family.

Luckily my husband and I work at the same place and they are very flexible. But we work opposhifts each day so we barely see each other to try and save money not putting our

¹⁹ Ibid, page 26

²⁰ Ibid, page 27

²¹ Ibid, page 27

son into daycare.

Couple mother of child with disability, permanent part-time

37. Parents provided a range of reasons they rely on informal care rather than formal childcare services including that it helped fill the gaps left by employment arrangements, and by childcare services which were mismatched to their needs, not available during their work hours or most commonly that were unaffordable, or that informal care was more flexible, available at short notice and for short periods.²²
38. The below are some comments from SA parents when asked why they use informal care instead of formal childcare services:

Child care would cost me more than I earn plus travel time between child care and work and home would be too difficult

Can't afford childcare, so my parents babysit

Free care and available at short notice and weekends. Also available for short care of only a few hours without having to pay whole day fees like a normal childcare

I work longer than kindy is open

I work retail sat and Sunday and there's no childcare open and family day care said they will charge \$30 per hour for the 2 kids which makes it pointless going to work so I rely on friends and family or I cancel work

No childcare on alternative work schedule

No childcare spots available

Only option I have as I work outside of normal hours

The time of day I am starting the shift. Child care isn't available at 5/6am when I start a shift.

Utilization of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

39. Chapter 6 of the Report explores SDA members' use of formal early childhood education and care. The Report broadly found that '*Formal early education and care services, such as long day care, family day care, pre-school, kindergarten or occasional care, are an important support for SDA members and their families, although many lack access*'²³
40. The main issues they identified with ECEC services include:
- paying for unused care;
 - finding same childcare for siblings;
 - accessing extra days or swapping days when needed;
 - obtaining weekend or after normal hours care;

²² Ibid, page 30

²³ Ibid, page 34

- access to Child Care Subsidy (CCS) limited for families with short hour shifts;
- when a child is sick, paying for childcare not used and not being able to work which jeopardises eligibility for CCS;
- unpredictable shifts contribute to lack of access to CCS.

Pre-school Care

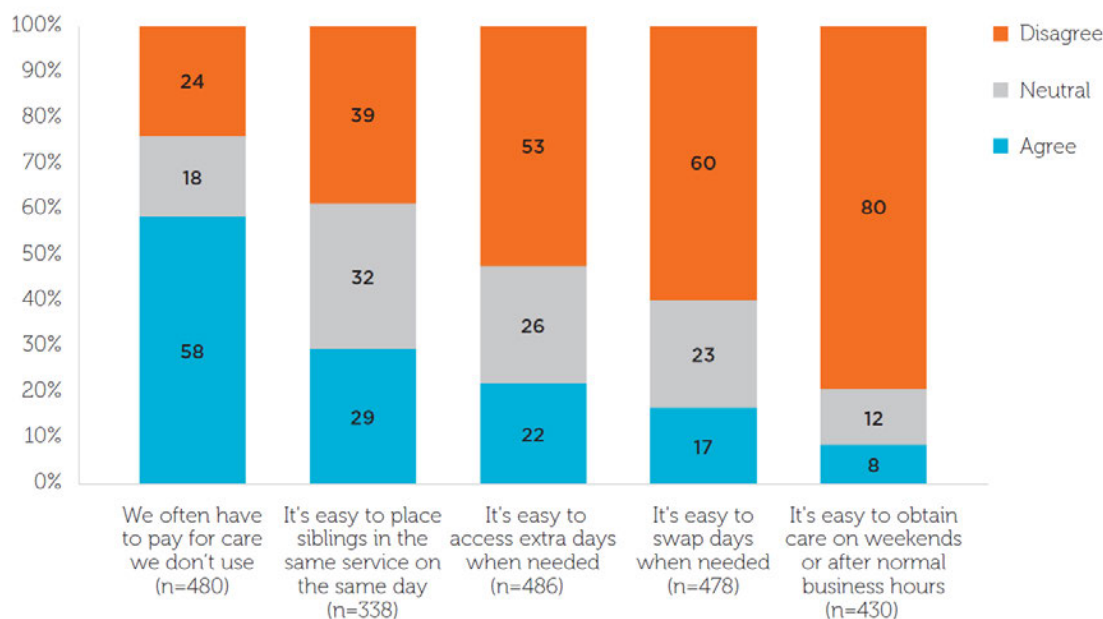
41. Among the 703 parents with a child aged 5 or under, around two thirds (68%) said they had used a formal early years service so far in 2021, either on its own or in addition to using informal care (see Table 6.2). Most often, the formal care used was long day care, which was used by 45% of parents, followed by pre-school or kindergarten, used by 28%. One in ten used family day care (10%) and 4% had used occasional care.²⁴
42. The most startling data found by the survey was that while nationally, 95% of children participate in a preschool program for 15 hours per week before they start school, among parents surveyed with a child starting school in 2022, only 72% said their child attended at least 15 hours of long day care, preschool, or kindergarten, where they might receive a preschool education. 10% said they attended but for less than 15 hours, 12% did not attend, and 5% were unsure about attendance or hours²⁵.
43. This can have a long-term impact on children. *'Research shows starting school without the skills that early education can provide, can leave children trailing further and further behind their peers throughout primary and high school'*^{18'26}
44. Children's access to education and opportunity should not be determined by their parents' employment. **The children of SDA members have unequal access to early childhood education and care and other important extra-curricular activities which impacts intergenerational disadvantage.** We must ensure work and rostering practices, and availability, access and affordability of ECEC are not exacerbating this.
45. The biggest difficulties our members faced when accessing ECEC for pre-school aged children was:
 - Affording childcare (63%)
 - Coordinating work times with childcare (46%)
 - Finding childcare that fits work schedule (35%)
 - Finding childcare at short notice (35%)
46. Parents of pre-school aged children were asked if they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements in relation to their experience with ECEC. The Report found that :

²⁴ Ibid, page 34

²⁵ Ibid, page 34

²⁶ Ibid page 34

Figure 6.2 Experiences with formal ECEC services among participants with a child below school age



47. This shows that parents are having to pay for care they don't use, exacerbating the difficulties they observed in relation to the costs associated with formal care. This is compounded if the parent is permanent and has had to take unpaid leave or is casual and missed a shift to look after their child instead of using care as not only are they missing out on an income but also have to pay for unused care.
48. Responses to these statements also demonstrate the inflexibilities associated with formal ECEC particularly in relation to accessing extra days, swapping days or obtaining care outside of standard business hours. As our members work in an environment of unpredictable and unstable rosters, flexibility of ECEC is essential for their children to have access to ECEC.
49. One member in South Australia described the anxiety of contemplating how she would be able to match childcare with work when returning from parental leave:

I am currently on maternity leave and still have 7 months remaining, but find myself already worried about finding appropriate childcare when I return to work. Seeing other parents' experiences at my workplace with not being able to work hours that suit their families in regards to drop off and pick up at childcare/school for their children makes me worry about how I will juggle getting my son to and from childcare, as my husband also works for the same company and works very similar hours to myself.

Partnered mother of young child, permanent full-time

50. Other members in South Australia made the following observations in relation to the difficulties of ECEC:

Challenge of child care being so expensive, we don't come out on top from my work wage and putting him into care.

Childcare doesn't cater for people who work after hours. Finding childcare on weekends is impossible

Would love it to be open from 5am to 6pm

51. Other members made similar comments:

From January 2020 to January 2021, We couldn't find a preschool in a convenient location. Finally got off the waiting list this year.

Partnered mother, carer for person with long-term illness, permanent part-time

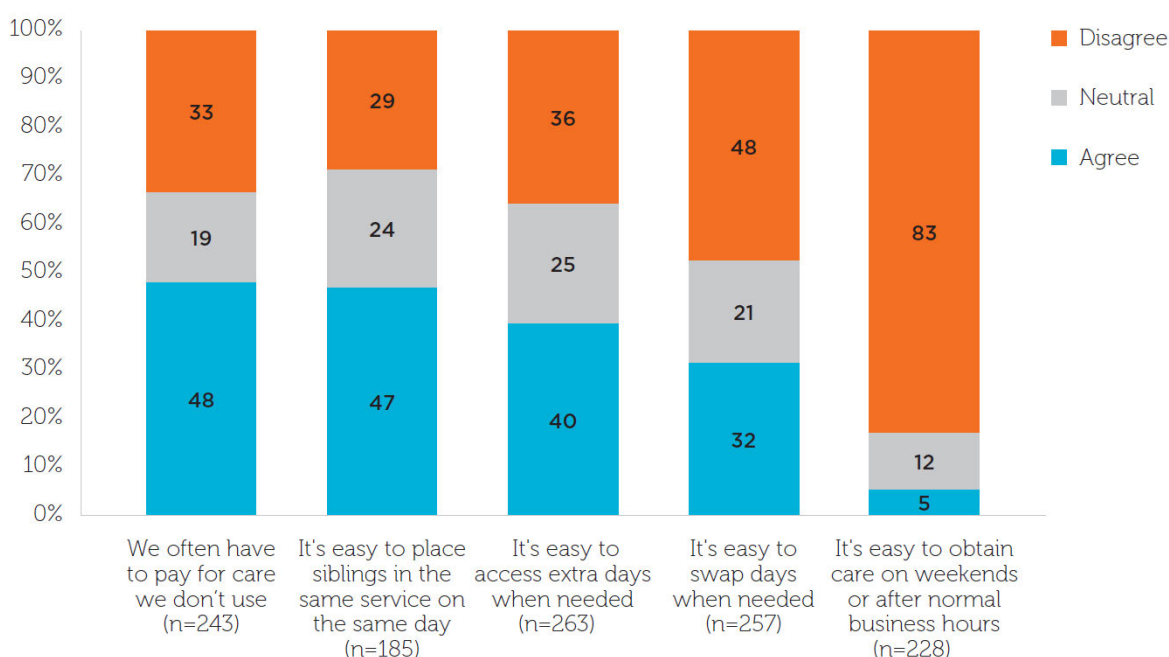
Unable to find childcare as they have no available spots.

Sole mother, permanent part-time

Out of School Hours Services

52. Among the 1000 parents in the sample with a child aged 6 to 12, 24% said their family had used before or after school care so far in 2021, and 15% had used vacation care (Table 6.3). Many had used both; 27% had used either before or after school care, or vacation care.²⁷
53. The biggest difficulties described by parents when accessing ECEC for school aged children was:
- Coordinating work times with childcare (38%)
 - Cost (37%)
 - Finding school holiday care (36%)
54. Similarly, to parents of pre-school children, parents of children aged 6-12 were also asked if they agreed or disagreed with a range of statements in relation to their experience with before and after school care:

Figure 6.3 Experiences of before and after school care



55. The experience parents have with out of school hours care is similar to the experience parents have with ECEC for pre-school children, with many parents paying for care they don't use, and difficulties swapping days or accessing extra days when needed. 83% also disagreed that it's easy to obtain care on weekends or after normal business hours.
56. Given the fairly low use of OSHC and high reliance on informal care for school aged children of the parents surveyed and the difficulties identified, it appears that OSHC for SDA members is not

²⁷ Ibid, page 34

universally available, accessible or convenient.

57. Members made many observations about the difficulties accessing OSHC:

Our before and after school care has limited numbers (due to most of the time 1 caretaker) and is generally full all the time. I have 3 kids and trying to get a spot for all 3 is difficult.

Partnered mother, permanent part-time

I struggle to get back to pick my kids up on time as I finish work at 5.30pm and work 40 minutes away. The after school care closes at 6.00pm. It's also hard to find vacation care that suits early morning and evenings.

Sole mother, permanent part-time

58. Members described particular difficulties with vacation care:

My son's school did not provide vacation care so I had to find care elsewhere.

Female, aged 26 to 40

Vacation care trading times are less than on normal school days and therefore will require an adjustment in my roster so that I can collect my children earlier than normal to avoid additional fees.

Partnered mother, permanent part-time

59. Aside from members identifying issues with availability and the operating hours of OSHC, some identified issues with OSHC rules as creating difficulties or barriers for use. For example, this parent only requires care during school holidays, but their children's service will only accept children for vacation care if they also attend before and after school care. So to have access to vacation care, they enrol their children in care during term time they don't need.²⁸

I have avoided out of school hours care as we do not require care during the school term but I'm required to send my children throughout the term in order to utilise the vacation care.

Partnered mother, permanent part-time

60. Another issue identified in the Report is the issue of supervision for children in early teenage years. 'A number of families commented on the difficulty of finding appropriate care for teenage children. Formal childcare and the Child Care Subsidy are not available for children aged over 13 years. But teenagers may require supervision, especially if an only child or having additional needs, and retail workers may need to be away from home for extended periods if their shifts do not coincide with school.'²⁹

There isn't any out of school hours care for young teenagers in high school, who cannot be left home alone, or, who do not want to be home alone.

Partnered mother of child with disability, permanent part-time

Whilst I have teenage kids, you would still like to be there before and after school, but that's impossible when doing 9 or 10hr days, no choice because the pay rates are so low, needs to change.

Sole mother, permanent part-time

²⁸ Ibid, page 43

²⁹ Ibid, page 44

61. Supervision of teenage children also creates stress for working parents. While worrying was lower among those whose youngest child was aged 13 to 17, most parents with a teenage child (56%) nonetheless agreed that they worry about what their child is doing while they work³⁰.

A new rostering system is being demanded by higher powers so now I have to work an evening shift as well as a weekend shift. This leaves my 12 and 13 year old children having to get home from school and be alone till 8pm at night. Who is going to get them dinner? My 12 year old recently had an accident whilst attempting to make his own food using a microwave that resulted in an ambulance trip to hospital. I feel it doesn't matter how responsible they seem they still require supervision.

Partnered mother, permanent part-time

What aspects of ECEC work well for SDA members?

62. The Report found that when asked 'Very few participants (6% of those who answered this question) said that formal child care meant that their work and family arrangements worked well. When they did, they most commonly pointed to issues of convenience. For some, a convenient location, near home, school or work, was helpful.'³¹

Childcare is at my children's school in the hall, so it's very convenient.

Partnered mother, permanent part-time

The childcare is very close to home.

Partnered father, permanent full-time

63. But for most, it was long day care services with early starting hours and late opening hours that made the difference.

I can drop my kids off early so I can be at work on time.

Partnered mother of child with disability, permanent full-time

It helps that the childcare open early and close late.

Partnered mother of child with disability, permanent part-time

It's open from 6.30am to 6.30pm which is within my roster.

Sole mother, elder carer, permanent part-time

Impact of a lack of availability or access to ECEC

Impact poor access to ECEC has on Workforce Participation

64. Access to suitable childcare is a barrier to workforce participation for SDA members, 43% of mothers and 35% of fathers said they want to work more hours. Access to suitable childcare is a key barrier: among parents with a child aged 12 or under, 35% of mothers and 27% of fathers agreed with the statement "If I had suitable childcare, I would work more hours".³² Agreement with the statement is higher the younger the children are who need care.
65. Parents were also asked if they had to turn down work activities or opportunities because of their caring responsibilities. 28% of members turn down work activities or opportunities because of caring responsibilities, this is higher for parents (47%) and even higher for parents of children with

³⁰ Ibid, page 77

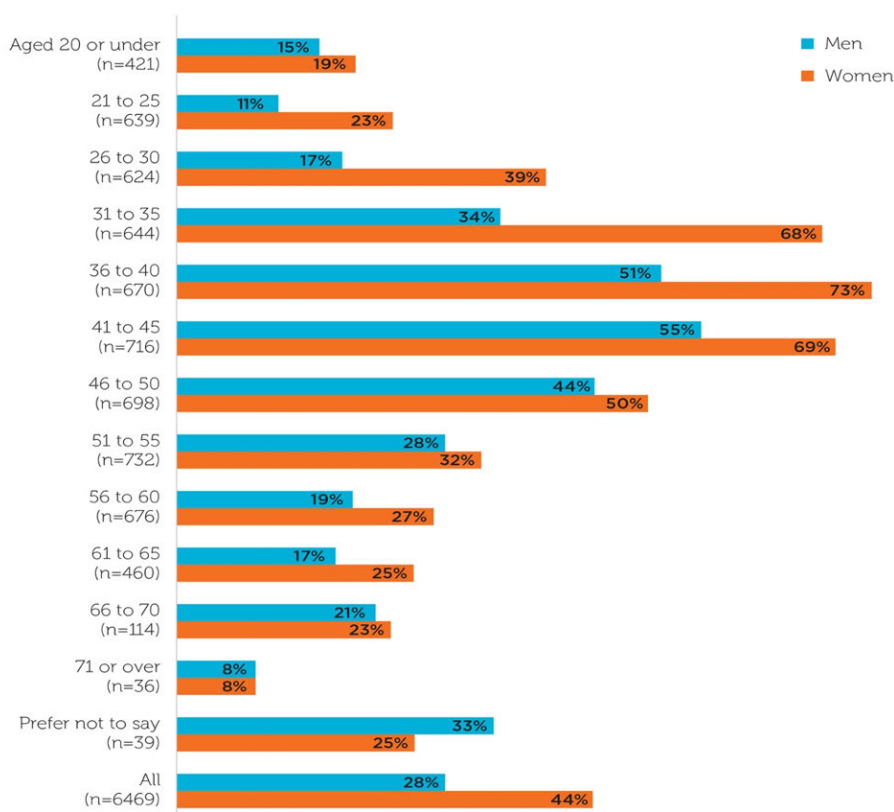
³¹ Ibid, page 50

³² Ibid, page 39

a disability of additional needs (64%) and sole parents (53%).³³

- 66. The Report highlights the gendered nature of care, with women being more likely to be providing care. Women undertake more unpaid work than men; are more likely to take breaks in employment to provide care; and more likely to work in part-time or casual roles to enable them.
- 67. The Report found that more women (60%) surveyed than men (43%) provide regular care to a child or an adult³⁴. This is more pronounced when considering the care of children, especially when children are young, and mothers are in the 26-45 years age group³⁵:

Figure 4.1 Proportion of men and women who regularly provide care to a child aged under 18 in or outside their household by employee age



- 68. The Report demonstrates that SDA members who are mothers undertake more parental care and are also much more likely to indicate that they would like more hours and if suitable childcare was available, they would work more. This demonstrates that any improvement to access to ECEC would have a positive impact on the participation of women in the workforce. This is vital for our economy and for gender equality in workplaces and society. Increasing the ability for women to participate more in paid work would also boost their earnings over their lifetime and importantly boost superannuation and retirement outcomes.

Financial Impacts - workers in low socio-economic households

- 69. As demonstrated above many of our members who are parents of children under 18 years would like to work more hours but face barriers in relation to work and finding suitable childcare. This impacts their financial wellbeing which results in lower incomes and retirement outcomes.
- 70. As previously stated, '52% of respondents live in households with post-tax income of less

³³ Ibid, page 105

³⁴ Ibid, page 20

³⁵ Ibid, page 21

than \$1000 per week. This was the case for 32% of couple parents and 80% of sole parents, and 56% of workers who were not currently parenting a child aged under 18 (see Appendix Table A.10)³⁶.

71. Of those surveyed, only 36% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that “I work enough hours to make a living”. This was lower for sole parents (25%) (Appendix Table A.11). Women were also less likely to agree, and more likely to disagree, compared with men (Appendix Table A.12).³⁷
72. This is critical given that the Report found that *‘access to suitable childcare is a key barrier: among parents with a child aged 12 or under, 35% of mothers and 27% of fathers agreed with the statement “If I had suitable childcare, I would work more hours”.’*³⁸
73. Access to ECEC is critical for low-socio economic households and this must be a driving consideration of this inquiry. It will assist to raise the household income and ensure that unequal access doesn’t contribute to entrenching intergenerational disadvantage.

The Impact unequal access to ECEC has on children

74. Retail workers are the parents to over a quarter of a million children under the age of 15 nationally
75. The combination of work and care also has a significant negative impact on the lives of children of SDA members, including increased household stress, and missed opportunities for early education and important social and community activities.
76. The Report found that *‘Working time arrangements, combined with low pay and rostering arrangements which are out of step with the routines of children and families, mean that many children of SDA members are missing out on the benefits of extra-curricular activities, and on quality early education to prepare them for school, with long-term implications for their futures’*²³. *Children’s life chances should not suffer because of their parents’ employment, and employers must ensure the arrangements they offer do not contribute to intergenerational disadvantage*³⁹.
77. As discussed earlier in our submission, only 72% of parents of children in their preschool year surveyed said their child attended at least 15 hours of long day care, preschool, or kindergarten, where they might receive a preschool education. 10% said they attended but for less than 15 hours, 12% did not attend, and 5% were unsure about attendance or hours⁴⁰. This is compared to 95% of children nationally.
78. The SDA is extremely concerned about the fact that this will be having an impact on the school readiness of the children of our members and the potential for long term impacts on their education and opportunities. Access to early childhood education must be designed for all children and families to ensure that social disadvantage is not entrenched.
79. Not only do work hours impact on access to early education, but also on children’s participation in important activities outside of school such as sport, music, medical and well-being appointments, all of which contribute to important life experiences that build skills and confidence in children. 54% of parents surveyed agree or strongly agree that work hours make it difficult for children to attend extra activities, such as swimming, sport and music.

³⁶ Ibid, page 82

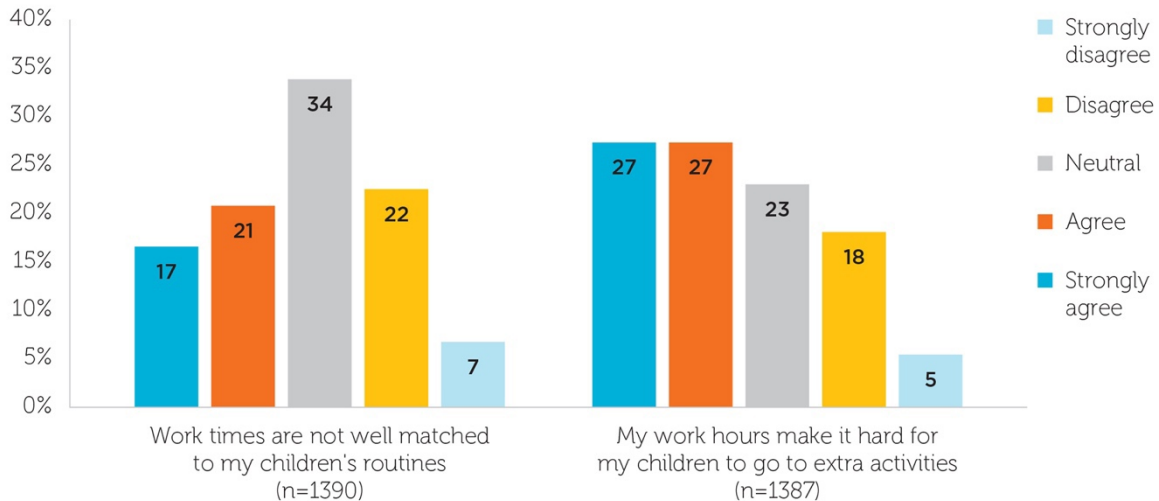
³⁷ Ibid, page 82

³⁸ Ibid, page 39

³⁹ Ibid, page 93

⁴⁰ Ibid, page 34

Figure 9.2 Agreement with statements about children’s activities and routines, parents with a child aged 12 or under (%)



As a single mother I am committed to working hard for my children. With consistent hours, I have been able to have stability. Now due to low hours of only 9 hours a week, all of a sudden I have found myself more stressed and losing sleep at night worrying about how I am going to survive. I’ve considered ...quitting their sports because me having to take them to training and their games doesn’t suit my managers idea of rostering. [But] I know it can be done, as it was managed well once before with many hours without me having to stress.

Sole mother, casual

80. The Report also found that a large majority of parents (63%) worry about what is happening with their children while they are at work, however, among mothers with a child below school age, those using formal childcare services were less likely to worry about their children compared with others, underlining the importance of formal childcare for alleviating maternal stress.⁴¹
81. Unequal outcomes for children and families must be addressed in the design of any reforms, including ensuring ECEC is affordable and accessible to all.

Impacts on the mental health and stress on workers and their families

82. Managing work and childcare is also having an impact on the mental health of workers and their families. Among all participants, **35% either agreed or strongly agreed that the way they are rostered impacts on their mental health.** This was a little higher for parents. Of those with a child 12 or under, 36% of mothers and 41% of fathers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “The way I am rostered to work impacts on my mental health” (see Appendix data Table A.7). The proportion who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement was higher for those with more complex caring arrangements. For young carers, almost half agreed or strongly agreed with the statement (47%), as was the case for sole parents (46%), those caring for a person with a long-term illness (45%) and those caring for a person with disability (44%).⁴²

*My hours affect me and my family. I have an 11 year old to care for and my husband has terminal cancer. I need to be at home of a night time, but work don’t seem to care about that.*⁴³

Partnered mother of child with disability, permanent part-time

⁴¹ Ibid, page 6

⁴² Ibid, page 76

⁴³ Ibid, page 70

The roster resets affect my mental health as I am worried about having to explain my situation often. When my kids are home I worry about them being unsupervised.

Partnered mother, permanent part-time

83. 37% of respondents with caring responsibilities (whether for children or adults), either agreed or strongly agreed that their shifts and work schedule cause stress for them and their family (**Table 8.1**). This was higher for sole parents, half of whom either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “My shifts and work schedule causes stress for me and my family”⁴⁴.
84. Among those with a child aged 12 or under, 68% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “When I get my roster, I have to check it fits with the family’s childcare arrangements”, and only 14% disagreed. Higher proportions of mothers agreed than fathers (70% compared with 61%). 69% of either agreed or strongly agreed that their work times affect when other family members can work. Most (62%) found it stressful to organise childcare around work times, and 57% of parents said it was time consuming to organise childcare around work times⁴⁵.
85. As demonstrated, managing work with the care of children creates ongoing stress and anxiety for parents and is impacting their mental health and that of their families. Access to ECEC to support the care of children is critical to alleviate some of that stress on families and children.

Cohorts requiring special consideration

ECEC in Rural and Regional Communities

86. In 2021 the SDA commissioned Essential Media to undertake research into the differences in lifestyle, opportunities and challenges for people living in diverse communities within regional Australia, to understand how the pandemic has impacted them and to establish what is needed as we plan the recovery from the pandemic to build stronger, more vibrant communities. The research was published in the SDA: State of the Regions 2021 Report⁴⁶.
87. The State of the Regions Report makes findings in relation to the casualisation of work, and concerns about unemployment and lack of opportunity, particularly in rural Australia and the difficulty in finding well-paying, secure jobs. One in seven of those in employment are engaged on a casual or contract basis, with low or zero wage growth entrenched in the system⁴⁷.
88. The research also found that only 61% of those surveyed in regional cities, 62% in country towns and 48% in rural areas rate childcare facilities as good. The research also found that there is strong support for universal childcare in regional communities⁴⁸.
89. When asked about the difficulties accessing childcare several members living in regional and rural South Australia who responded to the survey commented about the lack of available childcare:

Finding childcare at short notice for when my partner and I both return to full time, at the moment only one of us can because there are no childcare openings in our town

Partnered mother, permanent full-time

We live in a semi rural area and do not have any childcare available within 20ks. And even further on weekends

⁴⁴ Ibid, page 77

⁴⁵ Ibid, page 61

⁴⁶ Essential Media, SDA: State of the Regions 2021

⁴⁷ Ibid, page 11

⁴⁸ Ibid, page 16

Partnered mother, permanent part-time

Where I live there is a massive waiting list to get children into childcare, although my oldest child goes to kindergarten 3 days a week in the town I live in, I've had to put my youngest in childcare in the town that I work in which is 40 minutes away. So my children go to two separate childcares and they start at different times. So I have to take into account their start times, travel time and getting to work on time. I live rurally.

Partnered mother, permanent

90. Given that we know insecure work makes combining work and care difficult and access to childcare in the regions and rural areas appears a challenge, there may be even poorer outcomes for workers in regional and rural areas when combining work and care. There can also be significant additional costs associated with travel and time to get to childcare that is available.
91. The particular needs of workers in regional areas must be considered when exploring how problems associated combining work and care are resolved.
92. A copy of the SDA: State of the Regions 2021 Report is attached to this submission at **Appendix C**.

Consideration of Sole Parents

93. Twenty-five percent of participants who are parents with a child under 18 said they are sole parents. This is high: sole parent families comprise around 14% of families in Australia.⁴⁹ Among SDA mothers who were sole parents, 68% had sole custody. Among men who were sole parents, 74% had shared custody. Sole parenthood rises over time, and is higher among those with older children (Table 4.2). Among SDA members who were parents, 14% of those whose youngest child was aged 2 or under were sole parents, and this rose to 20% for those whose youngest child was 3 to 5 and 29% for those 6 or over.
94. SDA members who are sole parents are more likely than any other cohort to be living in households with incomes under \$1000 (80%) and most likely to disagree or strongly disagree they are satisfied with their take home pay (56%).
95. The Report also found that the difficulties with childcare were particularly acute for sole parents, who often found themselves with little family support to help manage the incompatibility of their work and childcare arrangements.⁵⁰

Daycare is expensive but I have no option. I asked to start work earlier and finish earlier so I could get to daycare on time. I was told no option for that and I would need to reduce my hours which I can't afford to do.

Sole mother of child with disability, permanent part-time

I am a sole parent without family. It's always a juggle.

96. The Report also found that the mental health of sole parents was more likely to be impacted by the way they are rostered (46%)⁵¹ and that their shifts and schedule causes stress for them and their families⁵².
97. The challenges that parents and carers experience managing work with caring for a child/ren is exacerbated for sole parents. ECEC should be designed to support families most in need of help

⁴⁹ Ibid, page 3

⁵⁰ Ibid, page 45

⁵¹ Ibid, page 76

⁵² Ibid, page 77

with the provision of care, including sole parent families.

Care for children with additional needs

98. The Report found that 16% of SDA members provide care for a child under 18 years with a disability compared to 7.7% of the national population who care for a child with a disability under 15 years of age⁵³. Caring for someone with a disability can present particular challenges. Complex care often requires additional support as some of the common forms of care supports are not as appropriate or accessible.
99. The Report contains many examples of the challenges and is evidence of the considerations that must be given to better support those in our community with a disability and the people who care for them.
100. However, those parents caring for a child with disability or additional needs were more likely to be prevented from taking up work opportunities, reflecting particular lack of suitable care and supports for these families. Figure 6.4 shows that among parents of children with a disability or additional needs, 64% agreed or strongly agreed that their caring responsibilities meant they had to turn down work activities and opportunities, compared with 47% of other parents and 18% of those not currently parenting a child aged under 18.⁵⁴
101. Finding suitable childcare arrangements for children with a disability or requiring additional needs exacerbates the challenges faced with childcare. Suitable and accessible ECEC is vital for children and their families and would have a positive impact on the participation of parents in paid work, their financial and mental wellbeing.

Recommendations

102. The Report makes several recommendations to change the way that ECEC is funded and charged to make it more accessible and affordable and recommends that this begin with access to early education in the year before school, then expanding access to other ECEC services.. The SDA supports the Report's recommendations⁵⁵:

Recommendation 1

The provision of supply side funding by Government to ensure widespread availability of flexible ECEC places for children of workers with non-standard hours and unpredictable shifts. The benefits of such an approach to filling a gap in the childcare market were demonstrated by the provision of free childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendation 2

Greater availability of more adaptable childcare options such as occasional care and family day care, with incentives and supports for providers and educators to make care available to workers with non-standard, changeable hours.

Recommendation 3

Expanding access to early education. Currently early education in family day care is not recognised. Innovative approaches are needed to ensure children who only attend family day care are also able to engage in a preschool program, whether provided by an appropriately trained family day care educator, or by linking them to a standalone preschool.

⁵³ Ibid, page 22

⁵⁴ Ibid, page 39

⁵⁵ Ibid, page 94

Recommendation 4

Previous attempts to develop flexible ECEC floundered⁵⁶. Further research is needed to better understand how the ECEC system can better meet the needs of workers like SDA members.

Recommendation 5

Improved access and affordability of outside school hours care, including raising the eligibility age of the Child Care Subsidy and outside school hours care into the teen years so that young people can have safe places to be cared for while their parents' work. This is a particular need for some young people with disabilities.

Recommendation 6

Provide better access and affordability of vacation care, especially for children who use no other form of care during term time.

Recommendation 7

Provide supports to ensure older children can engage in extra-curricula activities outside of school time, even when these clash with their parents' employment.

Recommendation 8

Ultimately, providing a free place for every child, regardless of the circumstances of their parents, would address many of the challenges SDA members face, while also simplifying the system for families, and addressing children's right to early education.

Recommendation 9

Consider the ECEC system including affordability, availability and accessibility for more vulnerable families such as sole parent families, families caring for children with disability or special needs, families in low socio-economic households and families in rural and regional communities.

⁵⁶ Baxter, J. A., Hand, K., & Sweid, R. (2016). Flexible child care and Australian parents' work and care decision-making (Research Report No. 37). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Appendix A: Rationale for SDA policy positions

SDA policy is driven by providing value to our members whose work is regulated by a broken industrial framework. We seek an economic system that supports, protects and advances the interests of working people in this country.

Our predecessors built the conciliation and arbitration system which provided the foundations to our nations prosperity over a century ago, it is now our responsibility to build a system for the next generation.

Since the introduction of the Fair Work Act 2009 and subsequent radical changes to the financial and digital context inequality has grown and economic and political power has concentrated in the hands of a few.

We believe that fundamental not incremental change is needed. In contributing to policy, we seek to drive a new system that acknowledges the change that has occurred and will withstand the emerging world of work.

We engage in topics that help us drive this agenda and are guided by ten principles that we believe will create value for our members. Those principles are:

- 1. Address Inequality & Enshrine Fairness**
Minimum expectations must be set and adhered to.
- 2. Equity & Empowerment**
All workers must be supported to progress so that no-one is left behind.
- 3. Mobility & Security**
A socially successful economy must provide opportunity for all, regardless of their background. Systems must be built in a way that support success and adaptation in a rapidly changing world of work.
- 4. Delivering Prosperity & Growth For All**
A foundation for prosperity and economic growth must be achieved.
- 5. Protection in Work & Beyond**
Workplaces and the community must be healthy and safe for all workers and their families during and beyond their working lives.
- 6. Workers Capital & Superannuation**
Workers capital and superannuation must be an industrial right for all workers and treated as deferred earnings designed for dignity and justice in retirement.
- 7. A Strong Independent Umpire**
A strong, independent, cost effective and accessible industrial umpire and regulator must be central to the future system of work in Australia.
- 8. Protection & Support for Our Future**
Protecting and supporting our future requires a strong and vibrant retail industry and supply chain providing jobs with fair and just remuneration and contributing to the economy including through skilled workers.
- 9. Work & Community**
Work is a fundamental human activity that provides for personal, social and economic development. Work as it operates in community must build and protect a balance between life at work and life so that workers can contribute to society through the wider community.
- 10. Institutional Support for Collective Agents**
Institutional support must provide for collective agents (registered organisations) so that they are recognised, enshrined and explicitly supported as central to the effective functioning of the system.

Details of specific policy positions can be discussed by contacting the SDA National Office.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Challenges of work, family and care.



Who Cares?
A FAIR SHARE OF WORK AND CARE

FOR AUSTRALIA'S RETAIL,
ONLINE RETAIL, WAREHOUSING
AND FAST FOOD WORKERS

Executive Summary

This report provides information about the work, family and care arrangements of employees in Australia's retail, fast food and warehousing industries. Through the pandemic, these workers have been recognised for their essential contributions in maintaining safe access to food and other necessities for the community. Yet this recognition is not reflected in their employment conditions and supports: they remain low paid and lack access to the flexibility arrangements which assist workers in other industries to provide care to children and adults, and to manage work and family commitments.

To explore the challenges of managing work and family experienced by these workers, including their care for children and others, and their employment needs, Australia's largest private sector union, the SDA, the union for workers in retail, fast food and warehousing, commissioned this research from the Social Policy Research Centre at UNSW. Information comes from a national survey of SDA members, conducted in early 2021, which explored:

- workers' responsibilities to care for children and vulnerable adults;
- how workers arrange their care responsibilities while they are working; and
- the challenges arising from employers' working time practices and Australia's system of childcare provision.

Findings show that as well as making important economic and social contributions through their paid work, SDA members make valuable contributions through the unpaid labour they provide as parents, and as carers to children and adults in their families and communities. Yet these social and economic contributions are poorly recognised and accommodated in their working lives.

The data shows that:

- SDA members lack genuine choice about their working times and childcare arrangements and require better support structures, including access to responsive childcare services that recognise their needs, to ensure they have meaningful opportunities to shape their working and caring lives.
- Industrial relations settings and employer practices are limiting the choices and opportunities available to SDA members. Rostering and pay are shaped too strongly around employers' agendas of profitability and cost minimisation.
- The ways work is organised exacerbates difficulties faced by workers needing to organise their work and family lives, and find time for care. This impacts on the children of retail workers, many of whom cannot access early education and have constrained opportunities to fully participate in other aspects of social and community life.

Changes are needed at the level of industrial relations policy, and within employing organisations and local workplaces. Policy and regulatory changes should be aimed at promoting decent pay, job security, predictability of shifts, employees' control over work times, access to reasonable shift lengths, genuine choices about work days and times, and to ensure workers can make schedule adjustments without fear of repercussions. Changes are also needed in Australia's childcare system, to improve the affordability, accessibility and suitability of care for low-income workers.





Key findings

Care responsibilities

SDA members contribute unpaid care work that is essential to their families and communities.

- 55% of all participants said they regularly provide some form of care to another person, such as care to a child, grandchild, or to an older person, or a person with a disability or long-term health condition.
- This includes 39% who provide care to a child or young person under 18 (either in or outside their household). The vast majority of those caring for a child were doing so as parents. Indeed, 30% of survey participants were parents with a child under 18.
- 17% provide regular care to an older person, 10% care for someone with a long-term illness or health condition, and 9% provide regular care to a person with a disability.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data indicates that 1 in 9 Australians (11%) provide unpaid care to people with disability and older Australians.¹ The equivalent figure among SDA survey respondents is 24%.

"I can't use childcare until I have more regular work to accommodate childcare."

Partnered mother, casual

Complex care responsibilities

Many SDA members work and care in challenging circumstances.

- 25% of participants who are parents with a child under 18 said they are sole parents. This is high: sole parent families comprise around 14% of families in Australia.²
- 16% of parents with a child under 18 said they have a child with a disability or additional needs. While measured differently, ABS data indicates that in 2018, 77% of children under 15 had a disability.³
- 13% of survey participants aged 25 or under were young carers; that is, they are young people who provide regular care to an older person or adult with a disability or long-term health condition. This is much higher than in the wider population: the 2016 Census found that among people aged 15 to 24, 5.6% were young carers.⁴

Managing work and care

The survey shows the needs of retail workers, including parents and carers, are being left unmet by employers and employment regulations, and by Australia's childcare system.

- Many SDA members have contributed years, even decades of service to their employers. Yet their working time arrangements continue to be characterised by short, fluctuating hours, and precarious shifts. This impacts on mental health, constrains opportunities to provide care, and limits opportunities for families to spend time together.

"I made sure [my hours] would work with my family by being completely transparent and upfront about my needs. It was perfect up until recent new management. I'm constantly having to dispute my roster and my hours are getting cut because they can no longer work with my schedule. I feel like a burden, and I come home stressed out and exhausted."

Partnered mother, casual

Informal care

- Most parents use informal arrangements to care for their children while they are working. Among parents of children aged 12 or under, 9% used formal care services only, half (49%) used informal care only, and 42% used a combination of both.
- Care by a grandparent is particularly important. It enables mothers in particular to extend their working hours and earnings, and to reduce or avoid the costs of formal care. Among mothers with a child aged 12 or under, 30% used grandparent care each week and a further 10% used it most weeks. However, access to grandparent care cannot be assumed: over a third of mothers with a child under 12 (36%) did not report using grandparent care.
- As well as drawing on grandparent care, many SDA members are themselves providing care as grandparents. Among those aged over 50, 17% were providing regular unpaid care to a grandchild.
- Young workers also provide care. Among those aged 20 or under, 14% provided regular unpaid care for a younger sibling.

"Having my eldest son (13 years) watch my younger son after school allows me to work just a little bit longer each shift so I can afford bills etc; My parents don't charge if I need them to watch or pick up an unwell child."

Sole father, permanent part-time

Formal care services

- Use of early education and care services (ECEC) or formal childcare is most common among families with a pre-school aged child, however, it is usually used in combination with informal arrangements.
- Comments from workers highlight the ways some families have to make extraordinary efforts to co-ordinate family schedules around work and care, in ways that avoid or reduce their use of formal paid childcare or use of non-parental care. This is largely due to the cost of childcare, including the charging of fees in blocks which do not correspond well with working hours, and because childcare hours do not accommodate the non-standard hours which are prevalent in retail.
- A commonly mentioned challenge is the need to pay for a full day of long day care, even if a child attends only for short hours.
- Difficulties accessing childcare are resulting in inequitable participation in early education among children of SDA members. This can have enduring consequences for children's learning. Nationally, 95% of children participate in a preschool program for 15 hours per week before they start school.⁵ Among surveyed parents with a child starting school in 2022, 72% said their child attended at least 15 hours of long day care, preschool, or kindergarten, where they might receive a preschool education. 10% said they attended but for less than 15 hours, 12% did not attend, and 5% were unsure about attendance or hours.

"It is very hard to find a childcare in the weekends, evening etc. For people like us who do shift work, it is stressful to get."

Partnered father, permanent full-time

Even where SDA members use ECEC services, they experience difficulties.

- For those with a child 5 or under, the most common childcare difficulties were affording childcare (reported by 63% of participants engaged with formal services); coordinating work times with childcare (reported by 46% of those using formal services); finding childcare that fits work schedules (35%); and finding childcare at short notice (35%).
- For those with a primary school-aged child, the most common childcare difficulties were coordinating worktime with childcare (38%), affording childcare (37%) and finding childcare during the holidays (36%).
- Where childcare arrangements were perceived to work well, success was attributed to informal care arrangements, ability to co-ordinate work times within the family, and the predictability of shifts.

Labour supply

Difficulties accessing suitable childcare are reducing labour supply, and particularly impacting on the participation of women in the workforce and their working hours. This impacts on family earnings.

- Among parents with a child aged 12 or under, 43% of mothers and 35% of fathers reported wanting to work more hours, but access to suitable childcare is a barrier: 35% of mothers and 27% of fathers agreed with the statement "If I had suitable childcare, I would work more hours".
- A third of parents with a child 12 or under (33%) said they turn down extra shifts because they won't earn much more after tax and childcare costs.

"I changed my work hours so that I can be home during the day and my husband is home at night with the children. It was too hard trying to work around childcare and school and then what to do when someone is sick"

Partnered mother, permanent part-time

Parental leave

Paid parental leave helps support parents around the time of childbirth or adoption of a child, and when a child is very young. SDA members with a child aged 5 or under were asked about whether they had taken parental leave for their most recent birth, and the type of leave they used.

- The Australian Government's provision of Parental Leave Pay is the most important source of support for SDA members. Parental Leave Pay was the most common form of leave taken, reported by 72% of mothers and 34% of fathers with a child under 5. Although eligibility and the reasons for non-use are not clear from the data, the information nonetheless indicates that many SDA members have missed out.

Overall, 19% of parents of young children said they had not accessed any paid or unpaid leave for their last birth. This was higher for fathers (35%) than mothers (14%).

- Among parents with a child under 5, 19% of mothers and 47% of fathers had not received any paid leave to support their most recent birth.
- Comments on parental leave and transitioning back to work showed mothers faced challenges securing appropriate conditions when returning to work, and also felt they were missing important milestones in their children's lives.

"It was hard to jump straight back into full-time work [while] juggling a sick baby. No sick leave entitlements...was hard. I was made to feel like I had to get straight back into it full force or they would find someone to replace me."

Partnered mother of child with disability,
permanent part-time



Working time and rostering practices

SDA members described very poor working time security. Poor working time security affects all workers, and is very adverse for parents and others with caring responsibilities, impacting on their access to formal and informal care.

- Only two in five (40%) of participants work the same shifts each week 'all of the time'. This is higher for fathers (48%) and lower for mothers (37%).
- Although casual work is most unstable, many of those employed permanently report that their employment does not provide stable, predictable hours
- One in ten parents (10%) said they do not have regular work days.

Most workers report that rosters are set by a manager who they have regular contact with. Those who are satisfied with their working times frequently attribute this to 'luck' in having a good manager, rather than systemic practice. Workers described substantial challenges, including:

- working times which emphasise business priorities and do not accommodate personal needs and circumstances. These affect everyone but make life particularly difficult for workers with complex care responsibilities;
- low hours, short shifts and insecurity, contributing to underemployment and financial difficulties and stress.
- mismatch between working times and childcare availability;
- changing schedules, often at short notice and without adequate communication from employers;
- repercussions and being penalised, including loss of hours, when workers refuse shifts or seek to change them.

"We had to change our start and finish times on night fill so the company can save on penalty rates. We were not given a choice just told it was changing so all our contracts had to change too. There was no consideration for night fill members that have to pick their children up from school etc. Now we also get paid less because of this."

Sole mother, permanent part-time

Impacts on workers and families

Rostering practices contribute to financial difficulties in low-income families, make it difficult for families to access childcare, and make it difficult for families to spend time together. Rostering practices also prevent workers from working more hours. Employers' rostering practices add to parents' unpaid workload. Among those with a child aged 12 or under:

- 68% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "When I get my roster, I have to check it fits with the family's childcare arrangements".
- 69% agreed their work times affect when other family members can work.
- 62% said they find it stressful to organise childcare around work times.

Rostering also impacts on family stress and the mental health of the worker and members of their family:

- Of those with a child 12 or under, 37% of mothers and 42% of fathers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "The way I am rostered to work impacts on my mental health".
- 63% of parents with a child aged 12 or under agreed or strongly agreed that they worry about what's happening with their children whilst working (69% of mothers and 57% of fathers).
- Among mothers with a child below school age, those using formal childcare services were less likely to worry about their children compared with others, underlining the importance of formal childcare for alleviating maternal stress.

Financial security

Many workers find that low pay makes it difficult to meet the needs of their families.

- 55% of respondents live in households with post-tax income of less than \$1000 per week. 32% of couple parents and 80% of sole parents live in households with incomes under \$1000.
- A substantial proportion of parents caring for children find their wages are too low to meet their needs. 46% of parents in couple relationships and 56% of sole parents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they are satisfied with their take home pay.
- Many find they work fewer hours than they need. Only 20% of casuals agreed (or strongly agreed) that they work enough hours to make a living, as was the case for 29% of those employed on a permanent part-time basis. Problematically, only 57% of permanent full-time employees said they work enough hours to make a living, reflecting the low hourly rates received.
- Half of participants agreed that they rely on penalty rates to make a living (50%). This was not restricted to casuals, 53% of permanent part-time workers and 50% of those with permanent full-time hours said this was the case.
- Around a third of parents agreed with the statement "I turn down extra shifts because I won't earn much more after tax and childcare costs".
- Parents commented on difficulties of living on low incomes. They described trying to work hours that enabled them to contain childcare costs. Pay was seen as low given the nature and complexity of the work.
- While a quarter of participants (26%) were unsure about the adequacy of their retirement savings, around half (51%) disagreed with the statement "I expect to have enough superannuation when I retire", and only 23% agreed.
- Mothers' expectations of retirement savings are particularly low: only 18% of mothers with a child under 18 agreed they would have enough superannuation when they retire.

"I'm a single mother that gets no child support and live week to week on my wages."

Sole mother of child with disability, permanent full-time

"It shouldn't be about working extra hours, it's about the hourly rate. 42 hrs per week to struggle paying bills!"

Sole father and carer of adult with disability, permanent full-time

Improving work and care

The research demonstrates that formal child care options and industrial relations regulations are not meeting the work and family needs of SDA members. In particular, rostering arrangements and low pay are impeding the ability of workers to organise the time needed to provide care for their children, extended families and communities. This is affecting children's access to early education and opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities.

Reform is needed to improve working time arrangements in retail, fast food and warehousing industries, so that SDA members have control over their working hours and have predictable shifts so they can organise care and other aspects of their lives. Better job security and pay are also needed, to support all workers to fulfill their care responsibilities, and to enable families to engage with formal care services.

Changes are also needed to ensure child care is available to SDA members in ways that are affordable and suitable for their working hours. Childcare reform should be oriented around principles of children's universal rights to early education and care, to enable access for every child regardless of parents' incomes or employment arrangements.

This Executive Summary has been taken from the Who Cares Survey Report:
Challenges of work, family and care for Australia's retail, online retail, warehousing and fast food workers.

To view the entire report go to: www.national.sda.com.au/care



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Cortis, N., Blaxland, M., and Charlesworth, S. (2021). *Challenges of work, family and care for Australia's retail, online retail, warehousing and fast food workers.* Sydney: Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW Sydney.

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¹ ABS (2019) Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings
<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/disability/disability-ageing-and-carers-australia-summary-findings/latest-release#carers>

² ABS (2020) Labour Force Status of Families
<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-status-families/jun-2020>

³ ABS (2019) Disability, Ageing and Carers Australia: Summary of Findings
<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/disability/disability-ageing-and-carers-australia-summary-findings/2018#children-with-disability>

⁴ ABS (2018) 20710 - Census of Population and Housing: Reflecting Australia - Stories from the Census, 2016
<https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@nsf/Lookup/2071.0main+features1432016>

⁵ Through the Council of Australian Governments', all jurisdictions have agreed to aim to provide 15 hours per week of early education for all children in the year before school. This reflects that 15 hours is considered the minimum amount of learning needed to develop the skills needed for a successful start at school.



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State of the Regions Report

September 2021

A snapshot of regional Australia
in a time of pandemic





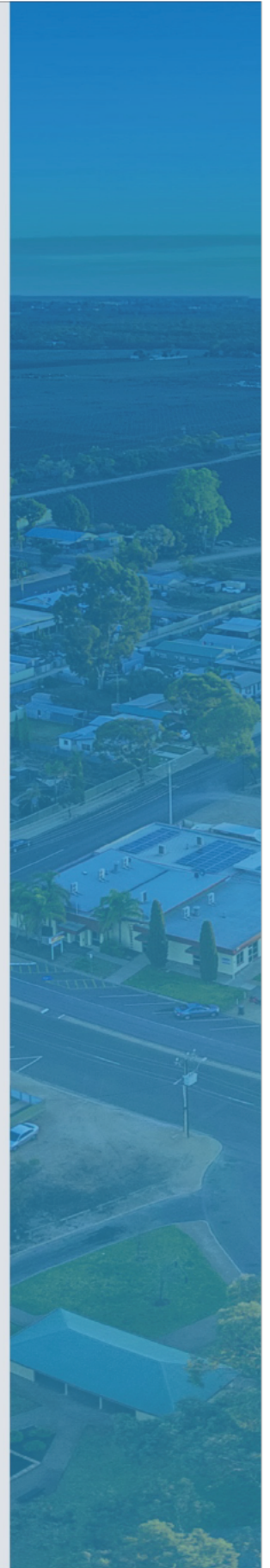
64%
of regional renters
are concerned about
housing affordability



44%
worry about job
opportunities for
young people



43%
see recovery
from the pandemic
in their area



Report Findings at a Glance

The pandemic experience has been largely positive for regional Australia - communities are growing and residents acknowledge they have not borne the same impact as major cities.

Migration from urban areas is both transforming regional areas and intensifying pressure on over-stretched, under-funded regional services and amenities.

People who are entering these communities are younger - providing opportunity to harness energy and enterprise to create thriving communities.

Rising housing prices are fueling a growing divide between renters and owners as regional property markets heat up, with lower income families particularly vulnerable to increased rental prices.

There is added demand for services as populations expand with particular concerns about access to health and education.

The future prosperity of regional Australia must be built on secure, well-paid jobs and supported by targeted government services.

Major retail outlets are an anchor point of regional economies and people recognize that supporting local retail flows brings benefits through the community.

There is a residual sense that government focuses on the cities not the regions, but the increased general trust in government through the pandemic provides an opportunity to reset the relationship between regional Australia and their elected representatives.

There is a generally positive attitude towards the unions and the role they can play in supporting regional communities by advocating for more secure, well-paid jobs.

The future is not about recovery it is about making the most of new opportunities for regional Australia to thrive.

Background and Research design

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the demographics of regional Australia is changing at an unprecedented rate.

Regional Australia is becoming more enticing for metropolitan residents to live in as movement restrictions implemented during the lockdowns has highlighted how achievable remote working is for many jobs. Regional communities are already seeing an impact, with housing prices increasing, along with demand for services.

This change creates opportunities and challenges for SDA and its' members across the nation, as more retail jobs will be required to support the growth in regional areas.

This report summarizes the findings of online overtime focus groups with general public members in regional communities and SDA members; and an online survey of regional communities.

Objectives

- Investigate the differences in lifestyle, opportunities and challenges for people living in diverse communities within regional Australia
- Understand how the pandemic has impacted the lives of people living in these communities
- Establish the demands of regional areas as leaders plan the recovery from the pandemic to build stronger, more vibrant communities
- Provide an overriding framework and messaging for SDA to engage with regional communities about the issues affecting them

QUALITATIVE MODULE Online overtime focus group	QUANTITATIVE MODULE Standalone poll
<p>Fieldwork: Tuesday 8th June – Thursday 10th June</p> <p>Sample: n= 20 nationally</p> <p>Recruitment: All soft-voters Good mix of gender, age, levels of education and locations Approximately 90 minutes time investment on behalf of participants \$120 incentive per person</p>	<p>Fieldwork: 6th June – 23rd June 2021</p> <p>Sample: n= 1,088 nationally</p> <p>Recruitment: Australian residents aged 18+ living in three pre-designated regional areas. These areas were defined using population data obtained from the Australian Bureau of statistics 2016 Census data.</p> <p>The sample was stratified to include a minimum of n=330 participants within each regional area. Quotas are applied within each stratum to be representative of the target population by age and gender. RIM weighting is applied to the data using information sourced from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). The factors used in the weighting are age and gender.</p> <p>The weighting efficiency of 84% provides an effective sample size of n=912 and a maximal margin of error of ±3.2% (at a 95% confidence level).</p> <p>This project was administered by Essential Research with sample provided by Qualtrics from online panels. The survey took an average of 10mins to complete. Participants were invited to participate and completed the survey online without an interviewer present and incentives are offered for participation.</p>

This report contains the findings from both research modules.

There is no one 'regional Australia'

This research was completed by allocating respondent to three main areas within regional Australia based on their residential postcode.

All states and territories (excl. ACT) were included, though may not have been eligible for all areas (e.g. no cities in WA or SA fit the eligibility criteria for the 'Regional Cities' definition).

Capital Cities, Remote and Very remote areas were excluded from this project.



Regional Cities

Major metropolitan areas including Wollongong, Central Coast, Newcastle, Gold Coast, Sunshine Coast and Geelong



Country Towns

Individual Postal Areas with population greater than 20k. and in inner/outer regional Australia* e.g. Muswellbrook (NSW), Cairns (QLD), Mt. Gambier (SA), Geraldton (WA)



Rural Areas

All other areas in inner/outer regional Australia

*Population by Postcode and definition of inner/outer regional areas sourced from Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Remoteness Structure: <https://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/D3310114.nsf/home/remoteness+structure>

Life in regional Australia is a Good Life



Regional Australia is a great place to live. Whether you live in a regional city, a country town or a rural area, the good far outweighs the bad.

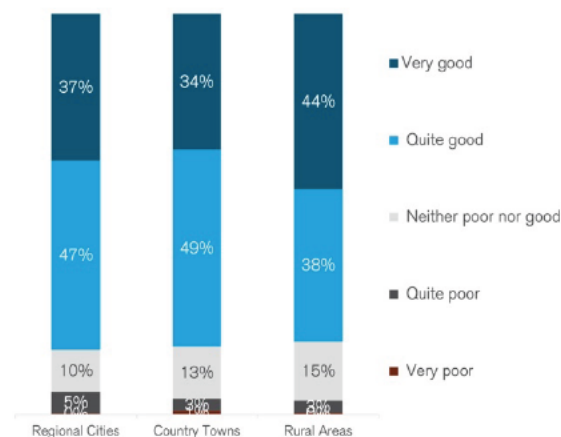
It all begins with community, the simple things in life like open spaces and a clean environment.

Far fewer people see the downsides, but those who do feel disconnected from their community and concerned about social issues.

Its a simple equation: harnessing the upside will addressing the concerns, is the key to maximising happiness across regional Australia.

Regional Australia is considered a great place to live

Rating of local area (%)



The vast majority of people living in regional Australia are positive of their local area. Over 80% in each area rate their area either quite or very good.

People with the highest opinion of their area include older people (46% of those aged 55-74 rate their area very good, 57% of those aged over 75), people owning, or living in their property (46%).

I enjoy our community as friends are loyal and work together to help each other out.
(Male, Regional City, VIC)

I enjoy the slower pace of life even though I work longer hours. Its peaceful and you can be as involved in the community as you wish. We are much more social and have joined the social club at the hotel, play bingo, have joined the bowls club and entertain friends here often.
(Female, Rural Areas, SA)

Q. Overall, how would you rate your local area as a place to live? Base Size. All participants

Those who rate their community highly love the free perks of living in regional Australia

“ We love the small town, lots of outdoor activities and closed to the beach. Not too much traffic. Everyone is very friendly and helpful. (Female, Country Town, VIC)

“ I enjoy the climate, plenty of work opportunities and friends and family. (Male, Regional City, QLD)

“ I enjoy the slower pace of life even though I work longer hours. Its peaceful and you can be as involved in the community as you wish. We are much more social and have joined the social club at the hotel, play bingo, have joined the bowls club and entertain friends here often whereas back in Adelaide we never had people over. (Female, Regional Area, SA)



Q. What are the best things about where you live? OPEN ENDED. Base Size. All participants who rated their area quite good/very good (n=906)

The few that are unhappy feel disconnected from their community and are concerned about social issues

“ Since moving here, we’ve noticed crime rates are pretty bad with armed hold up and shootings not too far away. Not sure if it’s been this bad previously, but it is very scary being in a new state. (Female, Regional City, TAS)



“ The drawbacks can be lack of public transport which means more and more traffic. There are more and more drugs in the community. (Male, Country Town, VIC)

“ Lack of activities. There is little on offer in the community, especially for young people. Higher council rates (Female, Regional Area, NSW)

Q. What are the best/worst things about where you live? OPEN ENDED. Base Size. All participants

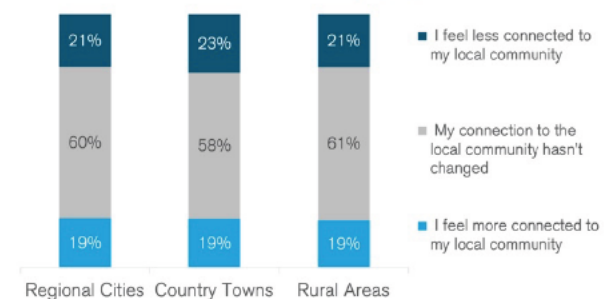
The few that are unhappy feel disconnected from their community and are concerned about social issues

For most people, their connection to community has remained unchanged through the pandemic. In all areas, around 60% of people say their connection with the community is unchanged. There has been no overall shift in connectedness of communities, as similar proportions feel more and less connected.

Older people’s connection most likely to be unchanged (70% among 55-74 and 77% of those aged over 75). However younger people more likely to be both less connected (28% 18-34) and more connected (25% 18-34).

Renters are most likely to feel less connected to the community (26%), along with those who have lived in the area less than 5 years (27%).

Closeness with community (%)



Q. Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic do you feel any more or less connected to your local community? Base Size. All participants (n=1,088)

The hidden impacts of the pandemic will change regional Australia forever

The lived experience of the pandemic was, on the surface, less intense than the cities; there were fewer cases, shorter lockdowns and many parts of Australia had very limited lived experience.

But there were broader impacts that sit below the surface, particularly the impact of the flight from the cities to the regions as people realised they could work remotely.

This had an impact on property prices as well as on employment and demands on government services.

These trends are unlikely to revert back to pre-pandemic levels - the reality is that significant parts of regional Australia will become busier, more dynamic and younger as a result of these changes.

Meanwhile there are low levels of confine that authorities are planning for life after Covid.

The lived experience of the COVID pandemic was less intense for many people in regional Australia

50%
of regional Australians agree that their area was 'largely unaffected by the pandemic'

Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the planning and recovery from Covid-19 in your area? My area was largely unaffected by the pandemic. Base Size: All participants

“ We have been quite insulated from most things being so far from Melbourne and have plodded along pretty much as before covid. We missed some of the tourist trade during the year, but it wasn't too bad at Christmas time.

(Female, Rural Area, VIC)

“ To be honest I don't think there has been much change in the last 12 months. Apart from being able to work from home I haven't felt much difference.

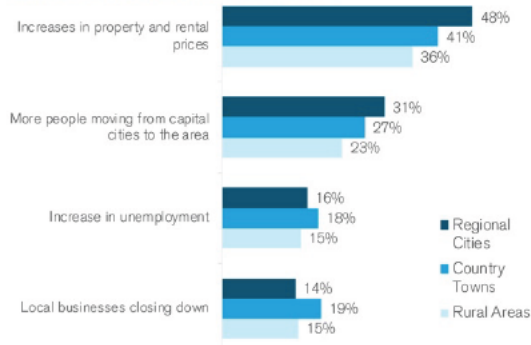
(Female, Country Town, SA)

“ We've adjusted quite well; kids have struggled missing out on sports and events but all in all we've been lucky compared to others. Work hasn't been impacted.

(Male, Regional City, QLD)

The main impact of the pandemic has been on the cost of housing, not on the local economy

Effect on area (Significant effect %)



Q. Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, how much of an effect have each of the following had on your area? Base Size: All participants

New arrivals to regional Australia are a different demographic to existing residents

New arrivals to regional areas are more likely to...



BE YOUNGER

34% are aged 18-34, compared to 18% of existing residents



BE RENTING

53% are in rental accommodation, compared to 31% of existing residents



HAVE NO CHILDREN, OR HAVE A YOUNG FAMILY

33% do not have children and 14% are a young family with mainly pre-school children (26% and 8% of existing residents)



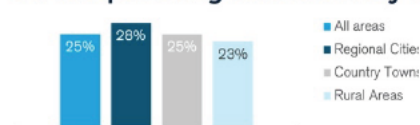
BE MORE CULTURALLY DIVERSE

24% are born outside of Australia, compared to 14% of existing residents.

13% prefer to speak a language other than English at home or with close family members, compared to 8% of existing residents.

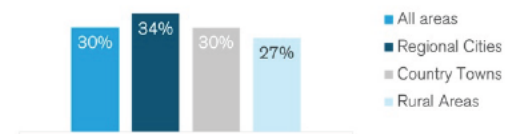
There is low confidence that authorities are planning for life after COVID

COVID planning and recovery (% TOTAL: Agree)



Area is busier now

COVID planning and recovery (% TOTAL: Agree)



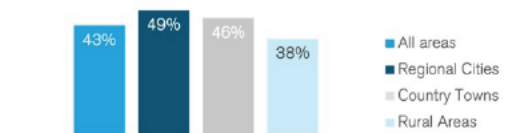
Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the planning and recovery from Covid-19 in your area? My area is busier now than it was before the pandemic. Base Size: All participants

"I live in a pretty good spot on the coast, but more people are moving up here - it's getting a bit busy. That means more congestion on roads more competitive environment in terms of looking for work."
(Male, Regional City, NSW)

"Large growth in the population in the last 6 months with has resulted in childcare getting full, doctors booked out for days."
(Female, Country Town, VIC)

Begun to see recovery in my area

COVID planning and recovery (% TOTAL: Agree)



Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the planning and recovery from Covid-19 in your area? I have already begun to see recovery in my area. Base Size: All participants

"The council have finally just agreed to build a swimming pool because of new people moving to the local area."
(Female, Country Town, VIC)

"Positive change is some new shops and business have opened and some interesting restaurants have come to our community."
(Male, Regional City, VIC)

Working in the regions



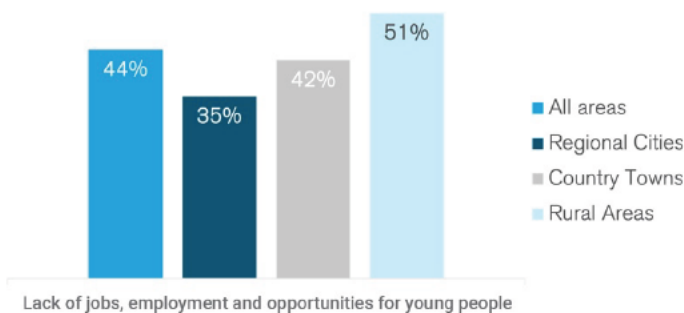
The restrictions on international borders through 2020-21 has created demand for labour in the larger population centres in the region.

However, unemployment remains a persistent problem in more sparsely populated rural areas.

Meanwhile, one in seven of those in employment are engaged on a casual or contract basis, while low or zero wages growth is entrenched in the system.

Unemployment continues to be a significant problem for many others – particularly in Rural Areas

Concerns for future liveability (Top 3 %)



44% say a lack of jobs, employment and opportunities for young people are a major concern in their area

“ I was made redundant during covid as I was an international flight attendant. I have since found work in a new industry, but the pay isn't close to what I was making before.

This has resulted in me having to move locations and make a lot of lifestyle changes. This change has created a lot of stress around my future and my security.

(Female, Regional City, NSW)

“ The drawbacks of my community is unemployment is high and opportunities limited. Historically we are a manufacturing community, most of the larger businesses have declined or closed down, there is growth in the age care sector coming up, but most positions are casual or permanent part-time, which are not great options for younger people trying to set up a family and buy a home. Our community does not appear to have the ability to attract any new business of any size which employ good numbers.

(Male, Regional City, VIC)

Q. Which of the following are your main concerns about the future health and liveability of your local area? - Lack of jobs, employment and opportunities for young people. Base Size. All participants



Casualisation has been an issue in regional Australia for a long time and this problem has been exacerbated by COVID

“ There is work if you want it around problem is most of it is casual through employment agencies with no security and no one cares about you – you’re just a number. While we’re alright for now, jobs will be a problem in the future I believe.
(Male, Regional City, NSW)

“ I would say that employment has remained about the same. There are not enough full-time opportunities going forward, there are a lot of people who would like more hours of work but can’t achieve it at a sole employer and are having to work multiple casual or permanent part time.
(Male, Country Town, VIC)

“ I have noticed a lack of full-time jobs. Everyone seems to be hiring casually or part-time but full time has become limited. I believe there are enough jobs, but I think the pay has really dropped how do we keep up with the housing market when we struggle to find well paying and secure jobs?
(Female, Regional City, NSW)

In addition to that, the pandemic has further entrenched already low wage growth in regional Australia

“ Wages have been the same for years. Family and friends work in the area and have not received pay increases in the last few years. Business can not afford to keep staff and due to covid having a financial strain on most businesses.
(Female, Regional City, QLD)

“ There has been minimal to no wage growth in my area. I hope this changes as the cost of living is so much higher currently.
(Male, Regional City, QLD)

“ I believe that covid has certainly had an impact on many businesses, particularly small local businesses, as a decrease in income has meant there is less money to pass on to workers.
(Male, Regional City, NSW)

“ I have been retired for a while, but I haven’t seen any wages growth in years. I know the cost of living has gone up in general which is hard. As self funded retirees, it is a concern.
(Female, Regional City, QLD)

The Great Regional Housing Divide



The influx of new arrivals has created a new economic divide between homeowners and renters, particularly in regional cities.

While home owners have seen a significant increase in the value of those assets, those in rental are struggling with rising rent prices and escalating barriers to entry for home ownership.

While housing affordability was an issue in some parts of regional Australia before the pandemic, there is growing concern about future housing affordability.



Increases to the cost of housing is contributing to an emerging split between homeowners and renters

While some homeowners are pleased to see the value of their property increase...

“ The house/land sales have been wonderful. Houses that have been on the market for 5 years or so are all selling or sold now.

(Female, Rural Area, SA)

“ A positive change is work has started to pick up again and house prices are on the rise which will hopefully sort out the drug problem that was setting in.

(Male, Regional City, QLD)

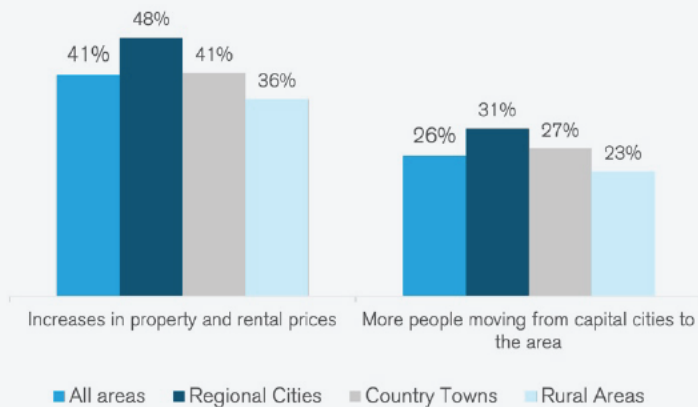
“ Surprisingly the market has skyrocketed in the past 12 months. We were all waiting for the post covid crash but the way the market is it's not looking that way. Properties are going fast.

(Female, Regional City, NSW)

→ Renters say that they are facing an increasingly tight housing market and significant increases in rent over the past year.

The pandemic has had a notable effect on housing prices in regional areas

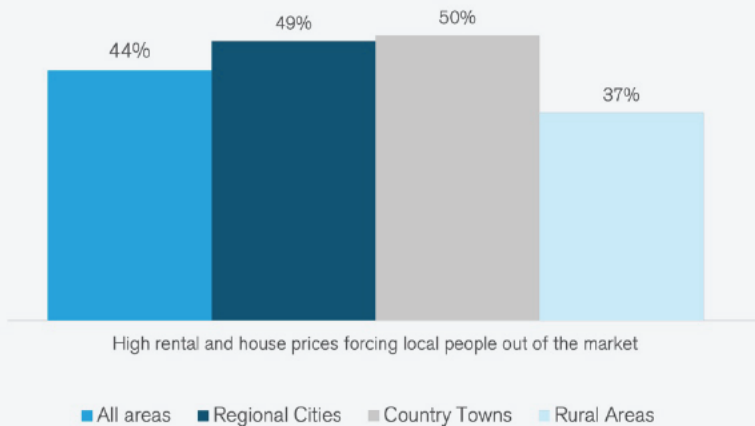
Effect on area (Significant effect %)



Q. Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, how much of an effect have each of the following had on your area? Base Size. All participants

And there is high concern about unaffordable housing in the future

Concerns for future liveability (Top 3 %)



Q. Which of the following are your main concerns about the future health and liveability of your local area? Base Size. All participants

64% of renters rate the high rental and house prices as a main concern for the future health and liveability of their local area

“ Overall, we have not had any major changes, however we were required to move rental homes due to our old landlord selling their property. This meant finding a home in a very tight market and were fighting 50+ applicants for homes. Our rent went up by around 20-25% at our new place. (Male, Regional City, QLD)

“ We have had a large increase in rent prices, very low rental vacancy rates and increasing house prices. This has been very tough for the communities, particularly for struggling families. (Male, Regional City, QLD)

“ Rents are sky high, and Tasmania had a big housing shortage, so more homelessness is happening. (Female, Regional City, TAS)

Squeeze on Government Services and Support



Growing populations place increased demands on government services and the cracks are beginning to show, especially in smaller rural areas

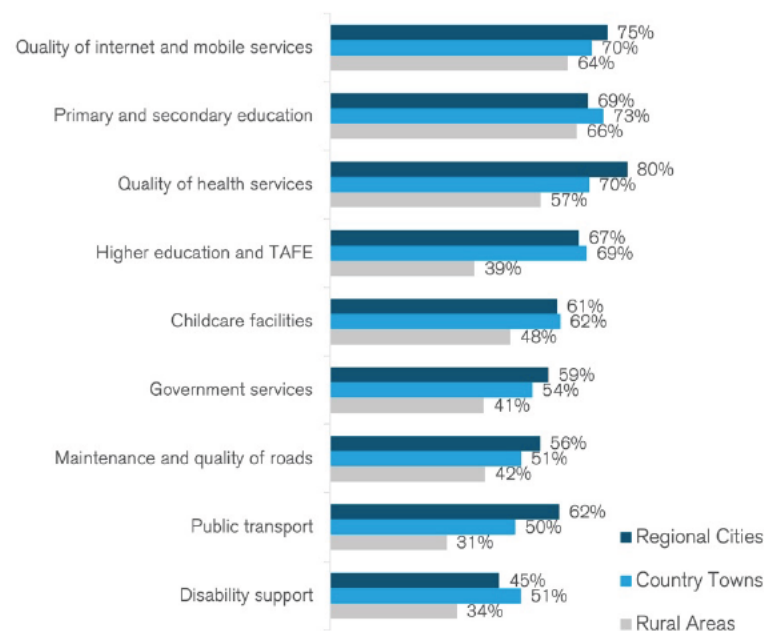
Access to childcare, higher education and TAFE and disability support are particular areas of particular concern across regional Australia.

The smaller an area's population, the more challenges are faced access services, with only half of people able to access health professionals within a week.

People in regional areas feel they are missing out on their fair share of government support

Transport and Disability services are areas of particular concern

Rating of services and amenities (TOTAL: Good %)



Rating of healthcare facilities is high in Regional Cities **80%** but this drops to **70%** in Country Towns and **57%** in Rural Areas.

While around two thirds rate higher education and TAFE as good in Regional Cities **67%** and Country Towns **69%**, just **39%** of those living in Rural Areas feel the same.

Q. How would you rate the following services and amenities in your local area? Base Size. All participants

Many regional Australians say the lack of available health services in their area is a major concern

“ Medical services are definitely lacking in our community. It takes minimum 2-3 days to get into a GP and the hospitals are doing their best but struggle with the needs of the community. (Male, Regional City, QLD)

“ To see a GP, we have to drive to the next town, but for the elderly or lower socioeconomic households it is difficult to drive 90km each way to the larger town and they also have a real shortage of GPs there. (Female, Rural Area, NSW)

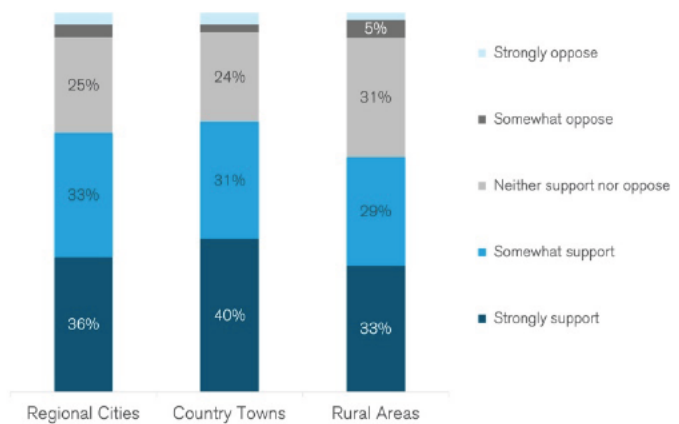
“ Due to COVID it has definitely been more difficult to access GP's, which I understand. In my mind the most important community service is health care and there is certainly not enough GP's and health care professionals in the community. (Male, Regional City, QLD)

“ We don't have much childcare, we don't have a dentist in town anymore and as I said before only one good doctor, who is hard to get into see. (Female, Rural Area, VIC)

There is strong support for universal childcare in regional communities

“ We definitely need more childcare you can't get a spot at them moment and most have very long waiting lists. (Female, Country Town, VIC)

Support for universal childcare (%)

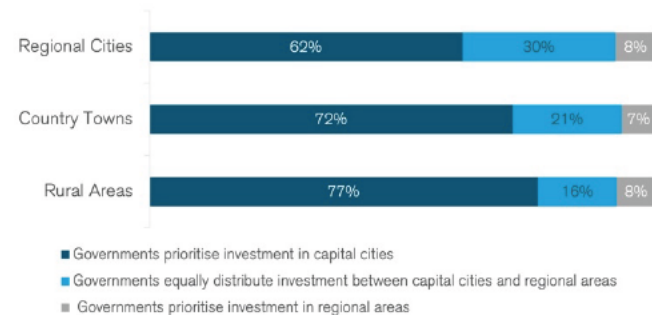


Q. How strongly do you support or oppose introducing a universal high-quality early childhood education system? A universal high-quality early childhood education system would be available at low or minimal cost to any parent who wants to access play-based learning for their child. Base Size: All participants. Labels removed for any results <5%

Regional Australians feel they are missing their fair share of government investment

“ I don't believe that state and federal gov have much real interest in developing industry in our area, there is always lots of talk and false hopes that rarely amount to anything. (Male, Country Town, VIC)

Treatment of regional areas (%)



Q. How do you think regional areas and capital cities are treated when governments are investing in core services and amenities (like infrastructure, healthcare and education)? Base Size: All participants

Retail Emerges a Regional Economic Anchor



When thinking about the future, people in regional Australia see the retail sector - along with healthcare and education - as a driver of future prosperity

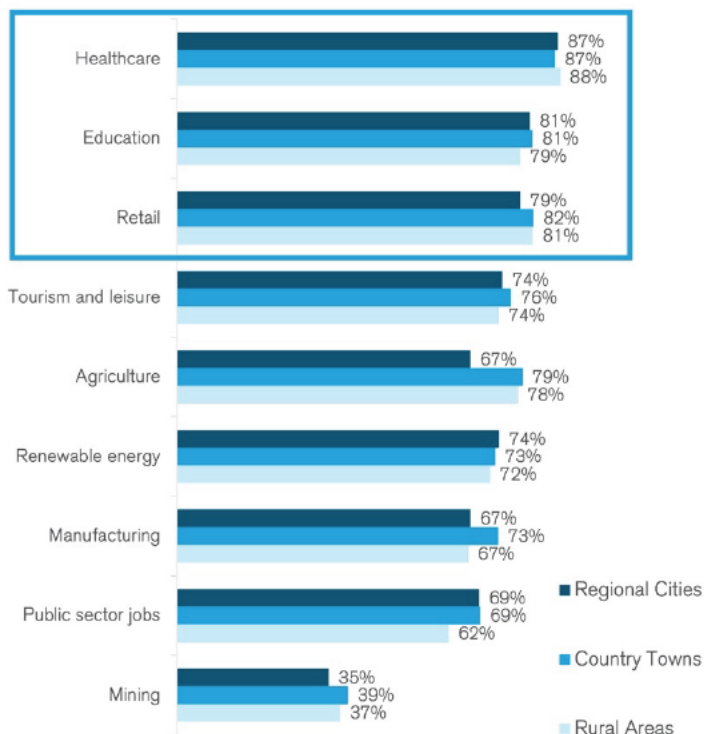


Local people buying local goods from their own community, whether in malls stores or supermarkets, creates a virtuous cycle, where consumers support each other. In fact, of all the plans for the future, 'Buy Local' is the most warmly embraced.

While some have shifted to online shopping through the pandemic, the vast majority recognise that vibrant retail precincts are essential for strong regional communities - regardless of their size.

Regional Australians see healthcare, education and retail as key

Support for local economies (TOTAL: Support %)



The three industries with highest support to help grow local economies are healthcare, education and retail.

Tourism and leisure is also seen as a key industry in all three areas.

“Biggest priority should be health and education. Kids don't stay in the country to have an advanced education and career, and therefore we end up losing generations of families to bigger centre.”

(Female, Rural Area, NSW)

“Shopping centres are important because they not only provide local employment but also help to keep people in their own community. If people have to go elsewhere they are likely to spend at other businesses rather than locally.”

(Male, Regional City, WA)

Q. How would you rate the following services and amenities in your local area? Base Size, All participants

People recognise that supporting local retailers provides long-term economic benefits to regional communities

“ Everything spent in town stays in town and is often put back into the community through grants and donations or sponsorship to the schools, sports clubs etc.

(Female, Rural Area, VIC)

“ Buying local and supporting local has a huge impact on the local economy in a positive way! It keeps local business running who may draw in tourism/visitors into the area who are interested in that particular business which in return will create business for the next local business and work as a domino effect.

(Female, Regional City, NSW)

Online shopping has increased since the start of COVID and some expect these changes to be permanent

“ I used to never shop online. Then during covid I started doing grocery shopping for pick up the next day, found I was spending less because there wasn't the usual chucking things in the trolley. I am not going back to pushing the trolley myself anymore.

(Female, Rural Area, NSW)

“ Before covid we only occasionally used online , this has changed dramatically in the last 12 month with online shopping being the first point of call. I don't think we will revert back to the way we were as it is just so convenient and cost effective, we don't use it for groceries etc.!

(Male, Regional City, VIC)

Some older people, however, are looking forward to return to the shops.

“ We did a few online shops for groceries, and it was such a pain and would rather have gone into the store. Not a big online shopper at all as I would like to see what I am buying.

(Male, Country Town, WA)

“ Before covid I used to only go to the shops but with the pandemic I have been buying online from Coles and Woolworths, but after the pandemic I will go back to the shops as I like interacting with people.

(Male, Country Town, VIC)

They see local people buying from local shops as key to the recovery of their community

40%

think there would be significant benefit to their local area by businesses providing secure jobs and higher wages for local people

SDA's Vision for

This report shows the rich opportunities to reimagine our regions as we recover from the pandemic over the coming years.

Commitment from all levels of government is required to share the benefits of a diaspora from the cities across thriving communities.

This should be anchored in an all-of-government regional approach anchored on:



A thriving retail sector

Government needs to recognise the contribution of retail precincts and supermarkets, not just as a point of transaction but as a point of connection.

Actively supporting retail centres to deliver local produce and goods with 'buy local' campaigns keeps local communities growing.



Services accessible where they are needed

As communities grow, governments must commit to essential services such as health, childcare and disability support across regional Australia. All levels of government should look at opportunities to deliver services through major retail hubs.

Regional Australia

Regional Australia's best days are ahead of it - the SDA stands ready to support our members, their families and their communities to build great lives right across this great nation.



Fair and affordable housing

Government must confront the reality that rising house prices produces both winners and losers. Federal and State government must partner to developing more affordable rentals through a Regional Community Housing Program.



Fair wages, secure jobs

Government must champion policies that actively encouraging job security and collective workplace bargaining, including using government procurement policy to award good employers and embracing workplace laws that give workers an even playing field.



Secretary Josh Peak