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COVID-19's Lasting Impacts on Workers

How Government Mismanagement Changed Working Lives in Western Sydney

REPORT

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1. Introduction

This report details the experiences of workers employed in ‘authorised’, ‘critical’ or ‘essential’ industries in Sydney’s western suburbs during the ‘Delta Wave’ of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Delta Wave—also known as the Third Wave—began in Sydney in late June 2021 and spread throughout Australia over the following three months. The Delta Wave had subsided by October 2021, leading to an easing of restrictions, before case numbers from the Omicron variant of COVID-19 began to rise again in December.

The Delta Wave pushed Sydney into a three-month lockdown from late June until mid-October, influencing lockdowns elsewhere in Australia, affecting the lives of millions and costing thousands of jobs as well as working hours and lost wages. While no one could have predicted the timing of Delta’s emergence, the lockdown was largely a consequence of the Federal Government’s mismanagement of the COVID-19 vaccine program. By mid-2021, this had left Australia with relatively low vaccination rates compared to other affluent countries.

Vulnerable groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples or those with disabilities were meant to be prioritised during the first phase of the vaccine rollout in early 2021. From the beginning, however, people from vulnerable groups reported problems in obtaining clear information and basic resources, in accessing vaccination booking systems, or barriers to physically accessing clinics (Green et al., 2021; Kavanagh et al., 2021). Public health experts summarised the situation aptly: ‘[It turns] out for most of these priority groups, there was no actual plan’ (Baxter and Kavanagh, 2021).

While vaccination rates for the wider population accelerated dramatically in the second half of 2021, this turnaround came at a huge cost to the community. Most workers understood that the only way to escape lockdowns, and to keep themselves and their loved ones safe, was to access vaccines as quickly as possible. Nevertheless, workers did not deserve to bear the economic and social costs of the government bungling which led to the extended lockdown during the Delta Wave.

As well as death and serious illness, these costs were experienced in terms of lost careers, lost working hours, lower income, gaps in education, and the loss of connection with loved ones, as well as greater exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace. A much greater burden on women resulted from the closure of schools or the withdrawal from children from Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) which was encouraged by the government. Policies which eased the burden of crisis in 2020, such as JobKeeper and the Coronavirus Supplement (which temporarily doubled the rate of JobSeeker for the unemployed), were largely absent during the Delta Wave. Government protection was significantly less comprehensive.

The crisis was worsened by the response of the NSW Government, which treated people in less affluent, working-class suburbs of Sydney very differently to people elsewhere. The Government imposed the harshest restrictions onto residents of 'Local Government Areas (LGAs) of concern'. All but two of the 12 LGAs of concern were in Western Sydney, where the highest proportion of essential workers lived and worked. Most of these workers lacked the option of working remotely or working from home; but these are the workers who kept Sydney functioning during the crisis.

This report outlines the life impacts and experiences of essential workers in Western Sydney's LGAs of concern during the Delta Wave. The report focuses on workers in four sectors: ECEC, home care, manufacturing and warehousing. Each of these sectors plays a critical role in everyday life.

Early educators are critical to the emotional and cognitive development of infants and young children, to the labour force participation of women, and to the operation of multiple industries and services which rely on workers with caring responsibilities. Food and beverage manufacturing keeps shop and supermarket shelves stocked. Warehouses are a critical link in logistical supply chains which connect goods to consumers, including everyday essentials such as groceries and pharmaceuticals.

Home care is essential to quality of life for many with disabilities and many elderly people. Disruptions to any of these four sectors undermines the functioning of our economy, the cohesion of society and the wellbeing of millions of people—a reality which, again, manifested early in 2022 as the spread of the Omicron variant led to major labour shortages.

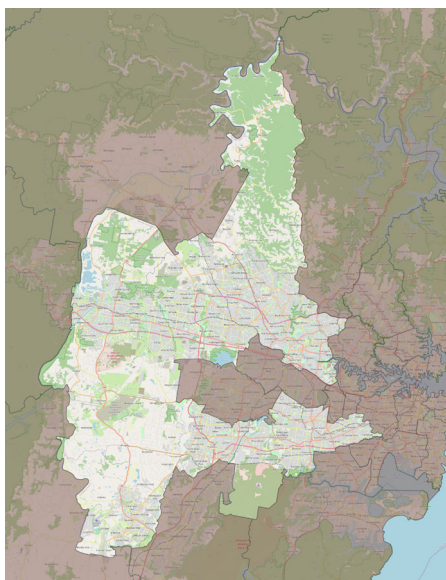
Based upon interviews with people employed in these sectors, the report addresses the following questions:

1. Did workers feel safe at work during the Delta Wave? How did this experience compare to the First Wave of the pandemic in 2020?
2. Did the lockdown undermine financial security for workers in terms of job losses, working hours lost or falling household income? How did changing financial security manifest in terms of stress and anxiety in the household?
3. To what extent did the impacts of the lockdown fall disproportionately upon women? For example, what was the impact of school closures, home-schooling and additional domestic work upon women in paid employment?

4. How did workers manage the difficulties of commuting across LGA boundaries owing to government-mandated testing and vaccination requirements during the lockdown?
5. How did workers perceive the inequalities of the NSW Government's LGA-oriented approach to the lockdown in Sydney?
6. How was the burden of lockdown rules and COVID-safety compliance experienced in the workplace? Were there positive examples of inclusive, socially responsible employers as well as negative examples of irresponsible or negligent employers? To what extent were workers treated fairly by employers during the lockdown?
7. To what extent did workers experience increased stress in the workplace during the Delta Wave, including the impacts of unreasonable workload increases?
8. How were workers in care-giving jobs, such as ECEC or homecare, expected to manage relations with clients during the Delta Wave, including relations with parents, carers and relatives? To what extent did this contribute to the burden of the lockdown or aggravate stress and tension in the workplace?
9. How did employers manage vaccination rules including, in some cases, effective vaccination mandates? How did workers respond to this process?
10. What impact did the lockdown have on workers' views about the underlying meaning and value of their work? To what extent did the lockdown influence workers' enthusiasm about their careers or occupations?

The report draws findings from interviews with workers alongside analysis of social and economic data to address these questions. Although the Delta Wave ended in late 2021, the answers to the questions remain relevant in the context of the current Omicron phase of the pandemic and the evidence of government mismanagement over the summer of 2021/22 in terms of the failure to secure an adequate supply of vaccines for eligible children and Rapid Antigen Test (RAT) kits. Both the Federal and the State Government failed to foresee disruptions to businesses and supply chains caused by the uncontrolled spread of COVID-19. This report is designed to contribute to timely public debate about the consequences and policy implications of these failures.

Interviews were conducted by phone in November and December 2021. Each participant was an essential worker and United Workers Union (UWU) member who lived and work in Western Sydney LGAs of concern during the Delta Wave. Interview questions were based on the 10 research questions listed above. Participants were asked to talk at length about their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic.



In total, 22 interviews were conducted. Sixteen of these interviews were women. Of the 22 participants, 6 were ECEC educators, 6 worked in food and beverage manufacturing, 6 were homecare workers, and 4 were warehouse workers. Participants worked in the following LGAs: Blacktown, Canterbury-Bankstown, Camden, Liverpool, Parramatta, Penrith, and The Hills Shire. These represent 7 of the 10 Western Sydney LGAs of concern. The full list of interviews can be viewed in the Appendix to this report. The report uses pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants.

Research for this study was funded by Australian Catholic University (ACU). In addition, the report presents analysis of the health impacts of COVID-19 in Western Sydney, including coronavirus case numbers, vaccination rates, and the economic impacts of COVID-19 in terms of jobs, household financial security and careers. This analysis focuses on the LGAs with the highest case numbers during the Delta Wave: Canterbury-Bankstown, Blacktown and Liverpool.¹

The report has the following sections: the next section (Section 2) documents the unequal experiences of workers in Western Sydney during the Delta Wave which resulted from the lack of financial support from the Federal Government and from the unequal LGA-based orientation of the NSW Government. Section 3 documents rising financial insecurity during the Delta Wave, including evidence of declining employment and shrinking labour force participation. Section 4 details the unequal impact on women in workplaces and households, including evidence of higher job losses and labour force withdrawal as well as the imposition of additional unpaid work due to school closures, the withdrawal of dependent children from ECEC, and months of home-schooling. Section 5 is titled 'Dumping Risk' and focuses on the exposure of essential workers to irresponsible or negligent employers who failed to take reasonable steps to protect employees or implement COVID safety measures. Section 6 concludes the report by reiterating key findings and outlining the impact of the Delta Wave on workers' sense of job satisfaction, dedication and career development.

2. ‘They Targeted Us’: Unequal experiences of lockdown in Sydney

The return to extended lockdowns and border closures across NSW, the ACT and Victoria from late June 2021 came as a shock. Australia had grown accustomed to ‘Zero COVID’ conditions from late 2020 until mid-2021, fostering hopes of a return to ‘normal’ life and an end to the pandemic.

Sydney’s population was affected severely by the return to lockdown. Stay-at-home orders were enforced by government and police authorities, schools and other educational institutions were closed, storefront businesses were shuttered, and physical mobility and travel was curbed. Only businesses and organisations officially labelled as ‘essential’, ‘critical’ or ‘authorised’ were able to maintain in-person operations and only under strict COVID-safety conditions.

To make matters worse, the economic support rolled out by the Federal Government in response to the First Wave of the pandemic in 2020, such as JobKeeper and the Coronavirus Supplement, was largely absent during the Delta Wave. In Western Sydney, this absence was exacerbated by the NSW Government’s highly unequal lockdown policy. For all of Sydney, residents could only leave their homes for authorised reasons such as grocery shopping, essential work, or brief local exercise. Apart from essential workers, residents were not usually permitted to leave their LGAs or a radius of 5km surrounding their home address for most of the lockdown.

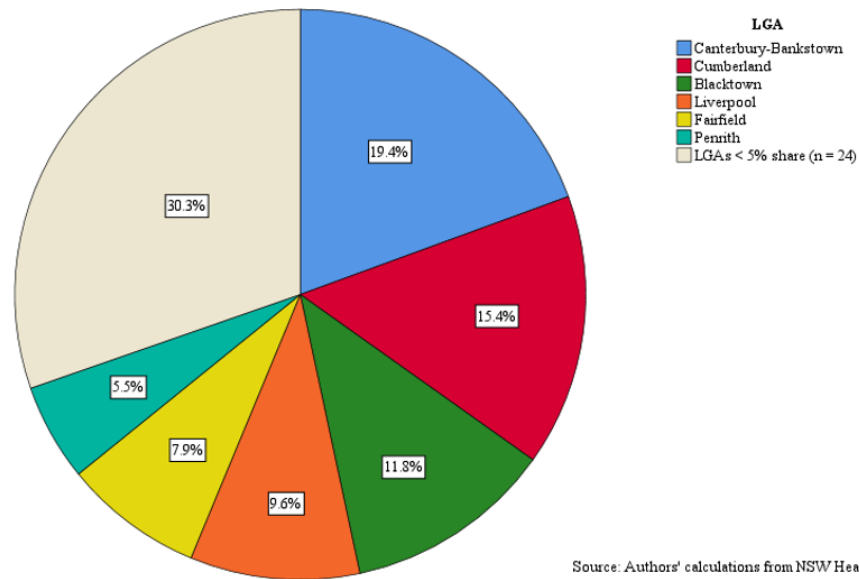
Unlike other states, however, the NSW Government deployed an LGA-oriented approach in which harsher restrictions were implemented in selected LGAs in Sydney. This went against the advice of health professionals. Leaked emails suggest that NSW Chief Health Officer, Dr Kerry Chant, recommended that the government apply consistent lockdown rules across Sydney (Cormack and Smith, 2021).

Nevertheless, from July to September 2021, the Government accumulated a list of 12 ‘LGAs of concern’: These LGAs were: Bayside, Blacktown, Burwood, Campbelltown, Canterbury-Bankstown, Cumberland, Fairfield, Georges River, Liverpool, Parramatta, Strathfield, as well as some suburbs in Penrith LGA. With the exception of Bayside and Georges River, all of these LGAs are located in Western Sydney where most Sydneysiders live and work.

Residents of suburbs in these LGAs faced stricter stay-at-home orders, a night-time curfew and more overt enforcement by government and police authorities. In July, the NSW Government stipulated that workers in Canterbury-Bankstown LGA, as well as healthcare and aged care facility employees in Fairfield and Cumberland LGAs, would have to obtain negative COVID tests every 3 days to leave their LGA for work reasons. In mid-August, the NSW Government modified this policy for all LGAs of concern so workers would only be permitted to leave their LGA for work if their workplace possessed Rapid Antigen Testing (RAT) kits or if they had received their first vaccine dose by the end of that month.

Workers in Western Sydney were also more exposed to the dangers of COVID-19. Of the nearly 58,000 cases cumulatively recorded in Sydney during the peak of the Delta Wave (21 June - 24 October 2021), over three quarters occurred in the western suburbs. Nearly 1 in 5 cases (19.4 percent) occurred in Canterbury-Bankstown LGA, with a further 15.4 percent in Cumberland LGA, 11.8 percent in Blacktown LGA and 9.6 percent in Liverpool LGA (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Distribution of Cumulative Coronavirus Cases in Sydney by LGA during Delta Wave (16 Jun - 24 Oct 2021)



Statistical modelling developed by Barnes (2022) shows that the biggest cause of high case numbers in these LGAs was the high proportion of workers in blue-collar occupations such as technicians, tradespersons, machine operators, drivers and labourers, followed by the high proportion of overseas-born workers who primarily spoke a language other than English at home. This analysis can also be applied to occupations in ECEC and homecare where work cannot be performed remotely or from home. In essential workplaces, the risk of exposure to COVID-19, and the need for protection through vaccinations and COVID-safe practices, was much greater.

This modelling shows that, on average, every 1 percent increase in blue-collar workers in a Sydney LGA led to a 0.6 percent increase in local coronavirus cases. In Sydney, this was equivalent to an additional 848 coronavirus cases per LGA on average. LGAs with the highest proportions of blue-collar workers are in the western suburbs. In the key LGAs of concern studied in this report, over a third of workers were in these occupations: in Canterbury-Bankstown, the proportion was 33.0 percent; in Blacktown and Liverpool, it was 33.9 and 35.4 percent respectively.

This is much higher than in more affluent suburbs in eastern Sydney or the north shore where, typically, fewer than 10 percent of workers are in blue-collar occupations. This configuration of Sydney's spatial inequality is strongly racialized. In the Canterbury-Bankstown LGA, for example, over 60 percent of the population primarily speaks a language other than English at home. As well as the role of class and racial inequality in worsening conditions for Western Sydney workers, vaccination rates in LGAs with the greatest need such as Canterbury-Bankstown, Blacktown and Liverpool tended to lag behind rates in the eastern suburbs and north shore in the early part of the Delta Wave.

These inequalities were met by the NSW Government with a relatively punitive approach to lockdown enforcement. Young men in Western Sydney suburbs were disproportionately fined for lockdown breaches (Knauss, 2021). In July, the government significantly expanded police numbers in Western Sydney to enforce stay-at-home orders. Around 300 Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel were mobilised to work with local police.

In July and August, it became commonplace for police and the military to roam streets, doorknock, and physically inspect residents' homes for breaches of lockdown rules (Rachwani and Zhou, 2021; Xiao, 2021). The NSW Government showed little sympathy in response to complaints about harsh or unequal treatment, with one high-profile MP even accusing locals of harbouring a 'victim mentality' (Cormack, 2021).

The lockdown influenced higher demand for vaccines and, eventually, high rates of vaccination across Western Sydney. But this improvement came at a significant social and economic cost for workers. According to 2016 Census data, nearly 7 out of 10 workers (69.6 percent) in the LGAs of concern commuted for work outside their LGA. None of these LGAs had a percentage below half of the local population. With no JobKeeper scheme and an economic imperative to commute for work, the burden on workers in these LGAs was much greater than residents in other parts of Sydney.

Restrictions on travelling created significant problems for essential workers who lived and worked in different LGAs of concern, as Lauren explained:

“*[Some] of my [workmates] were not from the [Canterbury-Bankstown] LGA so they... had to start getting travel letters [for permission to commute]. [We] were writing letters... at the beginning [of the Delta Wave] before the government got their stuff together. [The] police did call... to find out if [workers were] telling the truth... And then [these workers] had to get COVID tested... if they were coming in or out of the [LGAs of concern] every three days (Lauren, ECEC, Canterbury-Bankstown LGA).*

Jason described the burden of these testing rules:

“*[My workplace] is within an LGA that is classified as a hot area... We had to get special permission to travel into that area... from outside that hotspot. [Some] were coming from... other hotspot areas. [Some] people got pulled up and were sent home... by police because all they had was letters issued by their company stating that they are required at work. [Some] police didn't accept them.*

[They] were on night shift [but] there was a lockdown and [a night-time curfew]. It was quite surreal for some people. [They] had to get tested every 72 hours. [A] couple of blokes that I work with said that they had to line up over three or four hours just waiting to try and get [tested] just to be able to come to work (Jason, manufacturing, Blacktown LGA).

The presence of police on the streets was felt acutely by many workers:

“*[Every] street you [drove] down, there was police. [It] did feel terrible; we had curfews and had to be in by 9 o'clock and couldn't go out (Paula, homecare, Parramatta LGA).*

[It] was stressful... So many people [said] 'Police [will] be out, be careful'. There were [police] helicopters. [They] would fly around at night... checking to make sure that everybody was off the streets (Lydia, homecare, Canterbury-Bankstown LGA).

Unequal treatment and examples of hypocritical behaviour by politicians angered many:

“

On Father's Day, [we weren't] allowed to have family [in our homes] right? So, [the Prime Minister flies from Canberra] to his family [in Sydney] to have a [barbeque]... Well, what the hell is that? [They're] all full of shit, you know? (Roger, warehouse, Camden LGA).

This sense of unequal treatment was worsened significantly by the NSW Government's LGA-orientation:

“

They targeted us. I'm not happy at all. Why is [Western Sydney] different from other [places in Sydney], especially the eastern suburbs? People can go out there. If they [had] locked down the eastern suburbs right from the beginning [in June 2021], it [would not have] spread to Western Sydney.² [It's] unfair treatment... Why not just [have] total lockdown [for the whole city]? (Michael, manufacturing, Blacktown LGA).

Others argued that government policy was racially biased:

“

[This] is one of the problems with the Canterbury-Bankstown LGA being labelled as 'plague central'. I thought that was really, really unfair... Sydney City Council, [the] eastern suburbs... why not them as well? And then to hear [in the media] that the Chief Health Officer suggested locking down [all of] Sydney but the government decided, 'no, it was only these ones'. It was a little bit too blatant... There's just no two ways about it. It was racist (Lydia, homecare, Canterbury-Bankstown LGA).

Marie described the sense of racial injustice in her community:

“

[We] found the politics about shutting down Canterbury-Bankstown [LGA] was particularly hard. I know I felt discriminated against. Lots of the families are [tradespeople]. They're people that can't work from home. They are people that have to leave their home to go to work... I found that my neighbours were really labelled as people that weren't doing the right thing [because they're] from another part of the world.

[But] they were doing the right thing to the best of their ability... They're doing the best they can, and they have to work. They've got mortgages, they've got businesses, they've got [to] care for elderly family members in their homes. They've gone out of their way to keep everybody safe. So I found that very offensive. [They] were doing an honest job, an honest day's work, and the way it was presented in the media was really unhelpful (Marie, ECEC, Canterbury-Bankstown LGA).

²The Delta Wave emerged in Australia following an outbreak which began in Sydney's eastern suburbs in June 2021.

3. Struggling to Make Ends Meet: Financial insecurity during the Delta Wave

Social protection for workers during the Delta Wave was much weaker in comparison to the First Wave in 2020. There is little doubt that emergency fiscal policies implemented from March 2020 limited the depth and scale of the 'COVID recession' (Barnes and Doidge, 2022). Key measures included subsidies to business, the JobKeeper scheme which subsidised employers to keep workers in jobs when there was no work, and the Coronavirus Supplement which temporarily doubled unemployment benefits under the JobSeeker scheme (previously known as Newstart Allowance).

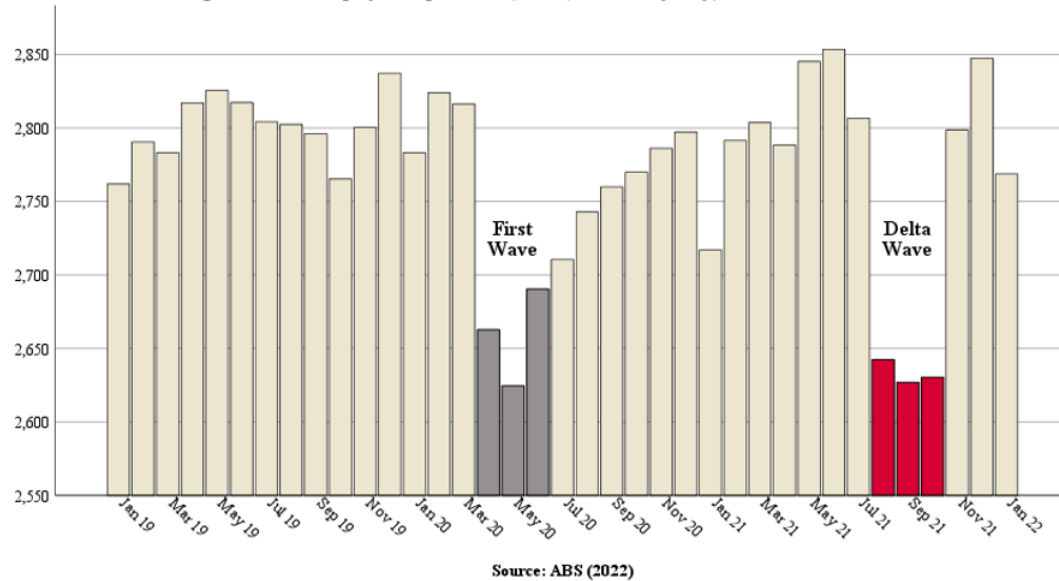
The JobKeeper scheme was highly effective in enabling businesses to retain workers in payroll jobs. In the first phase of JobKeeper from March to September 2020, eligible organisations could receive \$1,500 before tax per fortnight per worker to cover wage costs. From September 2020, the rate of JobKeeper was gradually reduced until the policy ended in March 2021.

Despite their effectiveness in 2020, these policies were not repeated during the Delta Wave. The Federal Government relied, instead, on a less comprehensive policy response centred upon 'COVID Disaster Payments'. This policy provided up to \$600 per week for those who lost paid work due to lockdown measures. While providing temporary income to some workers and households affected by lockdowns, this policy was not designed to save jobs. Furthermore, existing welfare recipients were largely excluded from COVID Disaster Payments, creating a 'two-tier' system of income support in which newly unemployed or under-employed workers could receive up to \$600 per week but existing JobSeeker recipients received a maximum of just \$315 per week (ACOSS, 2021).

Stronger job-saving measures and higher income support were desperately needed during the Delta Wave, a conclusion which is derived from analysis of official labour force data. The Federal Government has strongly promoted Australia's falling unemployment rate (Brinsden, 2022) but this statistic is misleading if interpreted in isolation from other measures because it excludes the millions of people who dropped out of the labour force during extended lockdowns. These were people who stopped looking for work because few jobs were available or accessible while the lockdown continued.

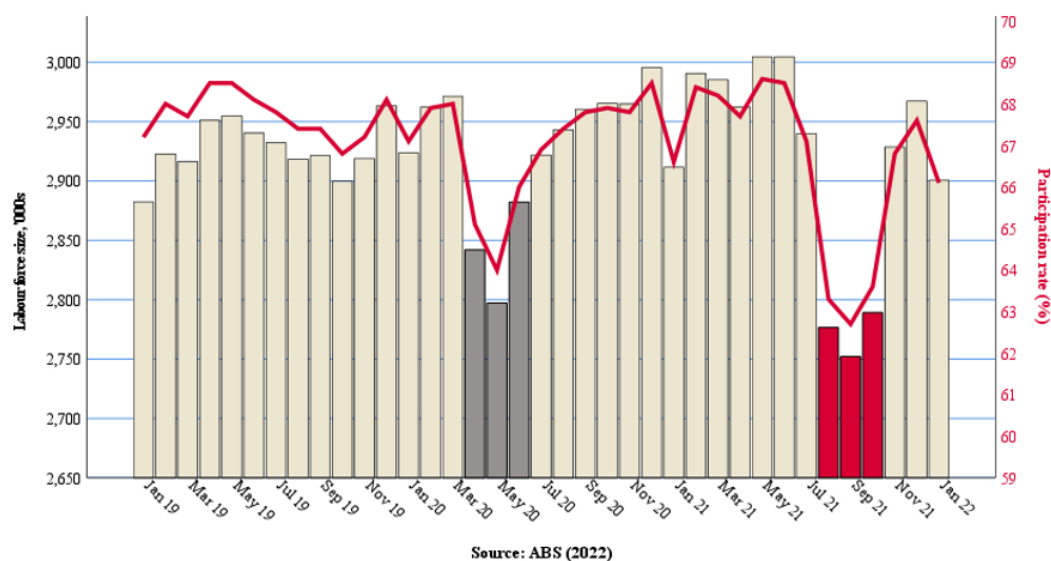
During last year's lockdown, there were significant falls in job numbers and labour force participation as the economy shrank and workers gave up job-searching. Total employment in Greater Sydney fell by 8 percent from June to September 2021 during the Delta Wave. This was even more than the huge fall in employment which occurred after the First Wave began in early 2020 (7.1 percent from peak to trough, Feb-May 2020). Although employment recovered as the Delta Wave subsided and as international borders were reopened, employment numbers remained lower in January 2022 than immediately prior to the pandemic in January 2020 (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Total Employment per month, '000s, Greater Sydney, Jan 2019 - Jan 2022



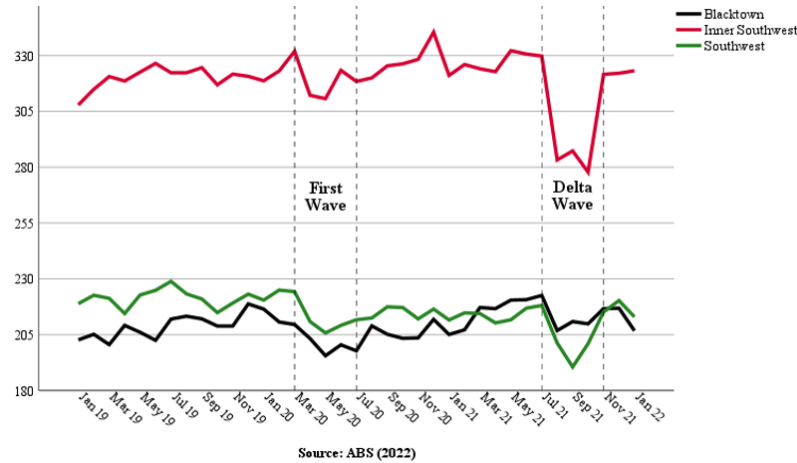
As hundreds of thousands of workers were forced to give up job-searching, the size of the labour force also fell dramatically. Across Sydney, the labour force shrank by 8.4 percent, from over 3 million in May 2021 before the Third Wave to 2.75 million in September 2021. The labour force participation rate similarly plummeted from 68.6 percent to 62.7 percent over the same period (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Labour Force Size & Participation Rate, Greater Sydney, Jan 2019 - Jan 2022



To get a stronger sense of these impacts at a local level in Western Sydney, we can look at labour force data by what are known as SA4s (Statistical Area-4s). SA4s are larger than LGAs and approximate the size of geographical labour markets. In large cities like Sydney, SA4s typically represent local populations of 300,000-500,000. While SA4s are not identical to LGAs territorially, there is sufficient overlap to enable an approximate comparison of labour market changes locally.

Figure 4. Labour Force Size, '000s, Selected Western Sydney SA4s, Jan 2019 - Jan 2022



Not all workers experienced a loss of work during the Delta Wave. For some, the pandemic generated more business for their employer, leading to greater demand for staff and working hours:

“ *I actually gained a bit more work... just because supermarkets... started pumping... because of panic buying. We're in [an] industry that actually gets busier with these... emergency situations (Aaron, warehouse, Blacktown LGA).*

Nevertheless, workers were more likely to struggle as business suffered. For example, many ECEC workers lost work as parents withdrew children from professional care during the Delta Wave:

“ *[Our] centre... was full... We were running at 98 percent capacity until [the] lockdown [started] in June [2021]. [Then] we literally went down to... half of our capacity... That happened... instantaneously... Educators that [worked] five days a week... had to drop down to three days a week.*

They took one as a COVID day and the other day was... either annual leave [or] leave without pay... It's such a shame [because it's] a pretty clear solution for the government. [Just] give educators extra support so that they don't have to use annual leave but, apparently, that's too tricky [for government] to understand (Lauren, ECEC, Canterbury-Bankstown LGA).

The stress on ECEC workers was much greater during this time, as Marie explained:

“ *It's been a very, very stressful time... I'm still paying a mortgage off. So that was my concern. What am I going to do [if they] cut [my] shifts [but I] still have a mortgage and a car to pay for? (Marie, ECEC, Canterbury-Bankstown LGA).*

Katherine explained how this stress could be worse for casual employees:

“ *I was worried... that I would be put off or my husband would be put off or both of us. [That] caused a lot of stress... I went casual just as the lockdown happened so I didn't get any work. So I just got that [COVID Disaster Payment]. So, obviously, I had to be extra careful with my money to be able to pay [my] bills and mortgage.*

[It] was like a day-by-day, week-by-week thing where I was worried, if the money got cut off from the government, what would I do? [I wasn't] getting any casual work. And even if I went back to full-time, that money [was] less than what I would normally get as a casual. So how would I get back on top of things? So, yeah, there was a lot of stress around finance, definitely (Katherine, ECEC, Blacktown LGA).

Katherine described how she began to struggle to make ends meet:

“ *I think it'd be one week a month that I would struggle because that was when all my bills and health fund [fees] came out. So... I would have to really put money... aside to make sure that I could pay those bills... That was a struggle (Katherine, ECEC, Blacktown LGA).*

Katherine's receipt of the COVID Disaster Payment was a common story among ECEC workers whose hours were cut during the Delta Wave as parents withdrew their children. Homecare workers also lost hours during this period:

“ *We lost a lot of hours because... clients were scared of us bringing things to their place. [They] didn't want anyone else to visit them, to come and do the service. So, financially, it was a bit hard for us. I'm [permanent part-time] with [a contract for] 50 hours a fortnight but we can be asked to work up to 60 hours on that contract. [They] would just give [me] only that 50 hours [but] I was quite lucky. [Some] care workers... didn't get to fulfill their contracted hours (Jennifer, homecare, Liverpool LGA).*

Even in warehousing, where the pandemic generated extra sales income for many firms, some workers found their hours cut back:

“ *Because of COVID... it was [a] bit quiet. [My] hours got reduced... Before I used to do around 35 to 40 hours and, after COVID, I was working [22-29 hours] (Rita, warehouse, Blacktown LGA).*

For workers like Rita, the income of their partner was also affected by the pandemic, creating significant financial insecurity:

“ *[My partner] was working [before the pandemic] but he used to do Uber driving [and worked in a hotel]. But because of the pandemic... he discontinued [Uber driving] and his hotel hours [were] reduced. He had to take annual leave. We had to apply for [COVID Disaster Payments] (Rita, warehouse, Blacktown LGA).*

Like ECEC, the problem of casualisation was also a major problem for workers in warehousing:

“ *[As] a casual, I [have] no choice [but to work]. Most of my workmates are casuals [too]. It's very hard on us because I'm the only breadwinner [in my household]. I prefer to be a permanent with the company, not [a casual] with [an] agency, [because] it is more secure... But as a casual, it's very tough. Right now, most of the casuals... don't have that kind of [security] (Ravi, warehouse, Blacktown LGA).*

Some workers argued that managers used the pandemic as an opportunity to cut labour costs by cutting shifts or by laying off longer-serving workers with higher-paying contracts:

“ *[When] COVID started, [my company] brought on an early retirement scheme. [Some] people took it because our demographic at work is quite aged... Now they've brought in a lower [paid] tier [of workers]. We can see that they will bring in very low skilled, low paid people. [That's] what they're after. [They] don't mind getting rid of the older staff who are higher paid... and then, eventually, they will bring in the lower paid staff on half the rate (Jason, manufacturing, Blacktown LGA).*

Job losses and reduced shifts often had the perverse effect of dramatically increasing the workloads for those staff who remained:



[Working during the lockdown] was very busy. We had to do more work. [Some] people [couldn't] get to work due to the situation [with travel permits between LGAs of concern]. [It] was a busy time for us. [Management had to] employ more people [as] agency [casuals] (Yasmin, manufacturing, Liverpool LGA).

Higher workloads led to higher stress, an effect worsened by the extra burden of managing COVID-safe work practices during the lockdown:



[Working during the lockdown] was stressful because we had a few staff [who] because of health reasons... were not gonna work during that period. And it was a bit tight getting casuals in... I felt like my workload doubled ... It was literally me running around trying to sort everything out. [It] was just a lot of duties... piling up... I was just like, 'Oh my gosh, what am I doing?'

The company has [an] EAP [Employee Assistance Program] [to assist with stress and mental health]. But that workload is still there. [I'd say] 'I need the day off', but if I have the day off, I'm going to fall back behind more. So [the EAP was] really just putting a band-aid over the problem...

More than half of [the fulltime staff members here] are struggling with their mental health... The amount of times the girls would cry or [say], 'I don't know how much I can take this anymore.' It's just so stressful. A few of them have just said, 'I'm going through depression' (Jacqueline, ECEC, Blacktown LGA).

4. ‘It Just Went on For Too Long’: Unequal impacts on women at work and home

Job loss and labour market insecurity since early 2020 have been significantly worse for women than men (Carson et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2021). Women are more likely to be employed in sectors with the highest rates of job loss, such as accommodation and hospitality or the arts and recreation. During the Delta Wave, these concentrations were reflected in a greater fall in total employment as well as labour force participation.

From July to October 2021, total female employment in Greater Sydney declined by 10.2 percent. This was almost double the 5.9 percent fall for men. Over the same period, the female labour force declined by 9.0 percent compared to 5.6 percent for men (Table 1). The data in Table 1 also demonstrates that gender inequality was more pronounced in job market terms during the Delta Wave in 2021 than during the First Wave in 2020. From March to May 2020, female employment declined by 7.1 percent. While significant, this was a lower fall than the decline in female employment during the Delta Wave and, also, slightly lower than the 7.2 percent decline in male employment over the same period.

For the same period, the female labour force decline in size by 5.7 percent. This was only slightly above the 5.6 decline for men. The relatively worse outcome for women during the Delta Wave underscores the much greater shock to Sydney’s economy overall in the latter phase and the much less comprehensive nature of emergency fiscal support from government (see Section 3).

Table 1. Monthly Change (%), Total Employment and Labour Force Size, Women and Men, Greater Sydney, Jan 2019 – Jan 2022

Month	Totally Employment		Labour Force Size	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Jan-2019	-0.8	-1.7	-0.8	-1.4
Feb-2019	0.2	1.7	0.9	1.8
Mar-2019	-0.2	-0.3	-0.2	-0.2
Apr-2019	0.7	1.7	1.1	1.2
May-2019	-0.1	0.7	-0.8	1.0
Jun-2019	-0.5	-0.2	-0.4	-0.6
Jul-2019	-0.8	-0.1	-0.4	-0.2
Aug-2019	-0.4	0.2	-1.3	0.2
Sep-2019	0.1	-0.5	0.7	-0.4
Oct-2019	-0.8	-1.3	-0.7	-0.8
Nov-2019	1.2	1.4	0.5	0.8
Dec-2019	1.6	1.1	1.4	1.6
Jan-2020	-1.1	-2.6	-0.6	-1.9
Feb-2020	0.9	2.0	0.9	1.7
Mar-2020	0.9	-1.3	1.1	-0.4
Apr-2020	-6.6	-4.5	-4.9	-3.9
May-2020	-1.4	-1.4	-1.9	-1.3

(cont'd)				
Month	Totally Employment		Labour Force Size	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Jun-2020	2.5	2.5	2.9	3.2
Jul-2020	0.6	0.8	1.2	1.5
Aug-2020	1.8	0.7	1.5	0.1
Sep-2020	0.7	0.5	0.2	0.9
Oct-2020	0.9	-0.1	0.3	0.1
Nov-2020	-0.1	1.2	0.1	-0.1
Dec-2020	0.4	0.4	0.9	1.2
Jan-2021	-3.4	-2.4	-2.9	-2.7
Feb-2021	3.6	2.0	3.2	2.3
Mar-2021	1.2	-0.3	0.9	-1.1
Apr-2021	-1.4	0.2	-1.9	0.2
May-2021	3.2	1.0	2.2	0.7
Jun-2021	0.8	-0.2	0.7	-0.6
Jul-2021	-2.7	-0.7	-2.9	-1.5
Aug-2021	-6.6	-5.2	-6.5	-4.7
Sep-2021	-0.4	-0.7	-0.2	-1.4
Oct-2021	-0.5	0.7	0.6	2.0
Nov-2021	7.6	5.4	6.0	4.2
Dec-2021	2.1	1.4	1.5	1.2
Jan-2022	-2.7	-2.8	-2.0	-2.5

Source: ABS (2022)

These economic impacts combined to worsen health and quality of life for many women. Globally, the impact of the pandemic on mental health has been most apparent among women (McArthur et al., 2021). In Australia, major survey research has found that most parents and carers experienced worsening mental health during the pandemic. For parents and carers of younger children, the proportion who reported symptoms of declining mental health was over 60 percent and, for older children, 71 percent (Biddle and Gray, 2021).

These worse mental health impacts flow from a sharpening of prevailing inequalities in households as well as workplaces. Perhaps predictably, women shouldered most of the additional burden of unpaid work in the household during lockdowns due to the closure or reduced use of ECEC centres and home-schooling as well as paid work outside the home (Craig and Churchill, 2021). In Western Sydney, women were also more likely to provide unpaid care for children than the rest of Sydney (Barnes, 2022). A further dimension was a reported rise in domestic and family violence, including an increase in coercive and controlling behaviours while victims of violence were forced to cohabitate with perpetrators during lockdowns (Berg and Farbenblum, 2020).

Sixteen of the 22 participants in the study for this report—nearly three quarters—were women. The experience of most of these women confirms the bigger statistical picture about the gendered impacts of the pandemic and the unequal burden on women. As well as the prevailing inequalities of occupational divisions, wages and reproductive work, the pandemic increased the burden on women, especially those in working class occupations.

The following vignette describes the multiple pressures of work on women in essential workplaces alongside greater household demands during the Delta Wave:

I just found the pressure of everything that was going on [at work] and then [the] pressure of being on top of my kids, making sure all their [home schooling] was getting done, so hard; [of] making sure that they were getting everything done... and keeping them entertained and getting them outside [to exercise] every day. [Mental] health for them [is important]. They were locked up for... nearly four months. They [wanted] to see their friends so it was very difficult for them...

I had to sort of stretch my arms and legs to be everywhere at the same time. [It] was very draining... I just found [that] by the [evening] I was exhausted. I didn't want to talk [or] deal [with tasks]. I just wanted peace and quiet...

I was constantly working... I was an essential worker. I couldn't just put my hands up in the air and say, 'I'm not going to go to work today' because I had to go. There was no choice and my husband is an essential worker as well [who works] really, really long hours (Lauren, ECEC, Canterbury-Bankstown LGA).

Lauren explained how these pressures manifested unequally in the household:

Men] are men; that's another story for another day [laughs]. [As] much as [my husband] was feeling a bit of the struggle, [the] majority of the time, I was sort of working out who was going to be with the kids at what time or where the kids were going, and all of that... I'm one of those mums that got them up early in the morning. They had to have breakfast [and] I listened to all of their [zoom school meetings] before I left for work. So I had to change my work hours... as well. So, yeah, there was lots of impact (Lauren, ECEC, Canterbury-Bankstown LGA).

The following exchange with Lydia echoes this problem:

Lydia: I enjoy working now because my husband's working from home. I would have killed him by now [laughs].

Interviewer: Did he take up more of the housework while you were out?

Lydia: [laughs]

Interviewer: I'll take that as a 'no'?

Lydia: [laughs] Yeah... Let's just say the cobwebs are winning.

(Interview with Lydia, homecare, Canterbury-Bankstown LGA).

As Lauren suggests, home-schooling during the pandemic was a particularly sharp manifestation of this inequality. This was echoed by women working in other industries such as manufacturing and homecare:

“

[Parents] are really having a hard time... They have to keep the kids [at home]; they are all on the computer and it is... very, very hard... And if they don't have any computer, the kids have no learning (Naomi, manufacturing, Blacktown LGA).

[Home schooling] was very challenging... I had to help [my child] the best I could [and] still go to work. [That] was probably the hardest part for me [of] the whole thing. Working wasn't the [biggest] problem. [It] was just hard getting [my child] to stay focused... on home learning. It just went on for too long... It was really stressing the kids out (Paula, homecare, Parramatta LGA).

5. Dumping Risk: How government bungling exposed workers to bad employers

Academics who study poorly paid or precarious work have increasingly found that insecurity is not a static condition but, rather, a process in which the risks of economic life and survival are transferred from governments and large employers onto workers and households. Precarious work has, therefore, become synonymous with the idea of precarisation as a process that happens over time (Alberti et al, 2018; Barnes and Weller, 2020). This process is widely seen as cumulative; it involves risk ‘dumping’ in which costs and consequences become more concentrated over time.

The experience of many workers during the Delta Wave shows how this process of risk dumping occurs in acute situations. The health crisis and the economic shutdown posed workers with questions of economic survival; for example, how to get by without work or with a dramatic decline in household income? How to work while having to care for dependent children who were forced to home-school? How to work and care for family members at the same as minimising the risk of infection for the most vulnerable such as loved ones with compromised immune systems or older relatives?

The response of government was key to the management of these risks by workers. JobKeeper and related emergency measures helped to mitigate the impact of the crisis in 2020 (see Section 3). By contrast, the absence of JobKeeper during the Delta Wave in 2021 dumped more of these everyday risks onto workers living and working under lockdown.

For example, a common complaint among workers was that changing government rules about COVID safety measures unfairly pushed the burden of compliance onto workers:

“*[We were] always in the dark and then left to pick up the mess that the government [made]. It was horrible. [We] were only given notice [about changes] as soon as the main population of NSW was given notices, so it wasn't like we were given a 24-hour period to figure out what we had to do. We were listening to [the NSW Premier] every day to see what was going on... It was pretty much an 'on the day' evaluation, so it was very, very unfair, very uncalled for, because we're the ones that deal with families [and] their children.*

[Parents] were relying on us for answers and we didn't have any answers. They would turn around and [say], 'Oh, but I just saw [the Premier] said this, this and that.' But it wasn't even updated on the NSW services website... So it was very, very difficult. [Sometimes we] didn't have answers and [we] had to say to families, 'Look, we haven't been notified. We have to wait till we get our official email [from management]'. The government just does not seem to care about anything that we do and don't recognize that we're actually educating children. [It's] absurd (Lauren, ECEC, Canterbury-Bankstown LGA).

For educators in ECEC, one of the key risks concerned relations with parents and carers:

“*[We didn't feel safe] because we had [multiple] exposures by [children]. So we all had to go into isolation. [We] kept these families out but we had families showing up to the front door, dropping their children off and [saying], 'Oh, I don't have a mask' or 'Oh I don't have my mobile phone'. [They were] just being really inconsiderate... We were...*

constantly reminding them [to] put your masks on [and] social distance in the waiting area.

[A] lot of the families were bringing in children with runny noses and then that was causing... coughs. [We'd] call them and say, '[You've] got to pick your child up, [they] need to get a negative COVID test to return [and have] no symptoms. [The] amount of times I [was] yelled at... because of doing what the government's asked...

We didn't really feel respected... We were coming to work putting ourselves at risk every single day. [A] lot of [parents] would [say] 'Oh, that's okay, I'll come and get them'. But others would just turn their phones off and not collect their child until the end of the day... It got to a point where parents wouldn't answer their phone (Jacqueline, ECEC, Blacktown LGA).

Jacqueline emphasised educators' awareness of the common struggles faced by parents and carers, including those who were also essential workers or those in a perilous financial situation:

I think because a lot of them were going through financial hardship. They were wanting to stay at work and earn as much as they could because their spouses have lost work... Or they... were stuck at home with their child and... just weren't coping... We had a few parents just turn their phones off and say, 'Oh, I'm going to sleep for the day'... They were just extremely tired and exhausted those parents. But, still, it's not an excuse. [They] put us all at risk (Jacqueline, ECEC, Blacktown LGA).

The response of employers was critical to the resolution of this tension between individual responsibility and collective wellbeing. Jacqueline argued that this risk could be managed if employers responded in a socially responsible way. Unfortunately, this did not happen in her workplace:

[It] just seems like [management] didn't want to make families and parents mad by sending their kids home all the time. But us educators, if we were sick... you had to get sent home. [We] were expected to take time off if we were sick... I just feel like we didn't have... support from... management to help [us] dealing with parents. [The] parents could be quite unreasonable sometimes... I can understand how if particularly both parents are working full time and they're working as an essential worker... that would be a bit of a nightmare. [But] there should be strategies... to help educators [and management didn't] respect us (Katherine, ECEC, Blacktown LGA).

The burden of compliance with COVID safety measures was also a problem in other sectors, including homecare:

[We] go into different clients' houses. [We go] from house to house. We help elderly [people] to maintain their independence at home. [But] I never [felt] 100% [safe]. Some clients] do not fully [comprehend] what's going on. Some of them are upset: 'Why are you not taking me out?' [they say. Some] clients [say], 'I can't understand [you] with that mask on your face. Take it off' [laughs]. And [it's] not just the client that we need to worry about. [Sometimes] the family members [are] still allowed to come over. [To] me, that is a risk... So, we have to be vaccinated, right? It's mandated... But we don't have information about which clients are vaccinated... We're trying to keep everybody safe, but we don't have that information (Eveline, homecare, Liverpool LGA).

The response of employers in each phase of the crisis was key to the way risks were imposed onto workers and households. Some employers and managers were relatively socially responsible in recognising the needs and rights of employees while others were relatively negligent in ignoring or undermining workers' interests. In between these two poles of 'good' and 'bad' employers (Kalleberg, 2011) are workplaces where protections and entitlements are experienced unevenly—sometimes workers' rights were protected and sometimes not.

Some workers reported that their employer made genuine efforts to observe COVID safety measures in the workplace during each wave of the pandemic:

“ *[Management] did the right thing. [The] company do their proper procedures with wiping down the door handles and providing sanitation and PPE to cover us. [We] have a dangle that records when we're too close to each other over a certain period of time. [That's] taken in and recorded so that we know who's been in close contact with anybody within the company which has worked quite well because there has been a couple of instances where people have been required to isolate (Jason, manufacturing, Blacktown LGA).*

Some educators in ECEC reported a similar experience:

“ *[Management] were really good. [They] were always on top of everything, making sure that we were safe... They supplied... more safety equipment than we needed (Anne, ECEC, The Hills LGA).*

My boss would try and stay on top of [the COVID safety rules] just to give us a bit of a sense of security [about] what's happening around us... My boss is very supportive (Melanie, ECEC, Canterbury-Bankstown LGA).

More participants, however, reported mixed responses to workplace safety by employers. Michael's company wanted to reduce costs over PPE despite experiencing a significant increase in business sales:

“ *[On a] day-to-day basis, [I did] not really [feel safe]. We have [hand] sanitisers everywhere [but] they don't want to give us the disposable [masks] because it's too expensive... I said to [management], 'It's part of PPE, it's a safety thing'. And they said, 'It's not'. [Then] they checked with HR [and] they [provided them] but, after a few months, they stopped it because, they said, 'it's too expensive'... So I just bought my own (Michael, manufacturing, Blacktown LGA).*

In some cases, poor management of workplace safety was addressed through swift responses by workers and unions:

“ *[Management treated us with] fairness [but there was] a bit of naivety about... meetings. I had to... contact SafeWork [NSW because] there were too many people in these meetings. I said to [management], 'You are going beyond the bounds here'. SafeWork... contacted the company and told them straight that, 'No, you can't have these meetings' (Jason, manufacturing, Blacktown LGA).*

Unfortunately, there were many cases of workplaces in which COVID safety rules were routinely broken or ignored by employers. For homecare workers, poor management was a common refrain in impacting upon worker-client relations. For example, Jennifer explained the difficulties of providing homecare services for elderly or disabled clients while trying to maintain COVID-safe workplace practices.

“

We have to wear all the PPEs [in their homes, such as] masks [and] aprons. [Wearing] the mask during summer [when] it's really hot... It was hard (Jennifer, homecare, Liverpool LGA).

Jennifer explained that management did not provide enough safety equipment for workers to do their jobs:

“

[We] didn't get enough PPE from the office... You have to wear a mask... and [an] apron for each client and gloves... You have to change [for each client]. Let's say, you've got 15 clients in a week and you have to take your PPE for a month, so... you need at least 60 aprons, 60 [masks etc]. But at one point, they were giving us only 40. You are stressed because when you go and ask, they say '[That's] all we have'. Sometimes we have to buy [our own] gloves [and] masks (Jennifer, homecare, Liverpool LGA).

This was a common report among homecare workers and reflected some of the most egregious examples of poor management during the Delta Wave, such as cleaners in hospital COVID units being forced to stop work due a lack of PPE (SBS, 2021).

ECEC workers commonly complained about employers putting profits before people and safety. Jacqueline explained that poor management in her workplace had persisted throughout the pandemic, beginning during the First Wave in 2020:

[We] were doing [enhanced] cleaning procedures [and] social distancing to an extent... but it was never that serious. A few of us [asked] if we were allowed to wear masks, and we were told, 'anywhere that we weren't with the children we could, but if we were with the children we couldn't'.

I have a [medical] condition and I said to them, 'I'm vulnerable. I want to wear a mask'. [Management] said, 'Well, if that's the case, you need to go and get a letter from your doctor if you want to wear a mask.' We had to get [temperature] checked but the children and the parents didn't need to get checked. [We] were trying to push for that, just for our own safety as well. We tried to ask for the parents to stay outside and we would bring their [children inside].

“

Management was like, 'No, it's too hard'. [So we organised] a COVID safety meeting... because we wanted to get the educators' voices heard. And after that meeting, we were allowed to wear the face masks and the parents weren't allowed to enter the building. [But we] didn't temp check the children or the families because [management] said it was... too hard.

[Everything was] quizzed: 'Oh, no, it's going to cost too much or it's too hard', [management kept saying]. They were thinking money-wise. I felt really annoyed at that... Management didn't act on anything until it was classed [as] mandatory... We felt like we were putting ourselves at risk [by] coming to work every day and working so hard... Management wasn't really caring about us. It was more, 'We need to keep the kids coming so we can keep getting the money' (Jacqueline, ECEC, Blacktown LGA).

Jacqueline's company looked to cut costs on COVID safety measures while simultaneously expanding their business:

“*[The company] bought new centres... during the lockdown but we weren't allowed to spend [on workers]... The [existing] centres were being told they have to use all their leave and take time off because they couldn't afford to pay them. [We responded that] 'You just bought [these] new centres and now you're telling your old staff, "Hey, use all your leave because we can't afford to pay you"'. It was just really disgusting [and] made us so angry. [A] lot of people resigned [because] they weren't being looked after... There was no recognition [of us] (Jacqueline, ECEC, Blacktown LGA).*

Despite this poor record, the behaviour of Jacqueline's employer continued during the Delta Wave. First, there was a general expectation that workers should routinely work unpaid overtime during the crisis.

“*I have been coming in [one hour early] just... to keep on top of my workload. And that was out of my own pocket; I wasn't being paid for that. But if I didn't go in, I was never going to catch up on my workload (Jacqueline, ECEC, Blacktown LGA).*

This experience was common among ECEC workers in this study and reflects broader trends in the sector (UWU, 2021). Katherine explained that:

“*[The] expectations that [management] set just [weren't] achievable at all. [You] get these rules from NSW Health [about cleaning]. [It's] all good on paper... but for people who are on the floor, [the educators] had to do all the extra cleaning at night because the cleaners only have a certain time to clean certain things and have so many centres to do. [All we received was] a general [message] from higher up, an email... thanking everyone for their work, saying 'It's been a hard year'... but nothing [that addressed the problem].*

“*[They should have] allowed centres to be able to hire at least one extra educator over the [educator/child] ratio, just so that one person is there to help when educators need to go out and get children... from the gate, [or do] all that extra cleaning... or [the] extra paperwork [or planning] procedures to keep our families and children and [workmates] safe. [Lots] of times we asked for extra staff... I believe they were still... making money. [We] didn't really get listened to (Katherine, ECEC, Blacktown LGA).*

Katherine continued that cost cutting, under-staffing and extra workloads put greater pressure on people in the workplace:

“*Because we don't have an extra staff member, there was always an educator who felt like they were doing more than everyone else. So that caused a bit of tension and conflict [among workers]. It began to feel like a toxic environment because everyone had their stresses at home, but then you have now this added stress at work and everyone kind of was turning against each other as well (Katherine, ECEC, Blacktown LGA).*

As well as pushing unreasonable workloads onto staff, Jacqueline's employer did not take proactive steps to encourage vaccinations among workers:

“*We weren't encouraged [to get vaccinated]. I remember having this discussion in the staff room. [Most of us said] 'yep, we'll get it'. But we needed a letter from management [so we could get it during the first rollout of vaccinations in 2021]. [It] took about three weeks to get that letter! [raises voice] [At first, they said] 'Oh, just use your contract or just use your badge' and we [replied], 'No, that's not enough. We need [an official letter]'. [So] it was very much all us educators just pulling together to get the job done (Jacqueline, ECEC, Blacktown LGA).*

Second, management at Jacqueline's workplace did not respond to COVID cases within a reasonable timeframe, leading to major breaches of COVID safety rules:

“*[We] had to go into lockdown [several times due to COVID cases]. [In one case], all the children and the other... staff in there, including myself... had to stay [inside the building]. [Our director] wouldn't let us out of the room until she heard from HR. This all happened [early in the morning] and we still hadn't heard from HR by [lunchtime] if we were allowed to exit the room.*

“*We're in there like, 'We need to go use the toilet. What are we meant to do? We've got to feed the children'. [We] still hadn't heard anything [by lunchtime] so the director said, 'That's fine. You guys can come into the yard. We haven't heard anything.'*

[Two days later] we all got text messages... that the [children] had tested positive. So we had to isolate for two weeks and that whole room was shut down. But... what about all of us that were allowed to... mix with the rest of the class because we hadn't heard back from management to say if we were allowed to leave the classroom? That put everyone at risk. We felt the whole centre should've been shut down but again [the response was] 'No, we can't afford to do that'. [It] was just really risky [and came] down to money again... (Jacqueline, ECEC, Blacktown LGA).

This example reflects prevailing trends in ECEC in Australia—a sector which is typified by poorly paid, over-worked staff, high staff turnover, exorbitant fees for parents and carers, and the dominant role of profit-oriented corporations. A survey of 3800 educators employed in ECEC in early 2021 found that around three-quarters intended to leave the sector within three years, highlighting the low pay and lack of career development encouraged by poor employment practices. Three-quarters reported excessive workloads and nearly two-thirds reported that low pay made their work unsustainable in the long run, including reports of widespread financial stress. Nearly half felt 'under-valued' in their work (UWU, 2021). Our interviews suggest that these trends worsened during the Delta Wave.

Currently, around half of ECEC services Australia-wide, and more than two thirds of long day care services, are run by for-profit providers. In the last six years, around three-quarters of official complaints about non-enforcement of rules and protections have been directed at these for-profit providers. Recent analysis has found that poor quality management is rampant, with one in six providers failing to meet National Quality Standards (NQS) for the sector. As this analysis concludes, 'The workforce crisis, and COVID-19, which has intensified the problem of understaffing, have further undermined safety in ECEC, and are putting children and educators in danger (UWU, 2021a).

This conclusion is reflected strongly in this study's interviews with educators. For example, Jacqueline's story reflected a negligent attitude towards COVID safety rules by employers:

“

There was a lot of cases where those rules weren't followed. I recall an email coming out from the [senior manager about new rules that] anyone who resides in ['LGAs of concern' outside Blacktown LGA] had to get tested every three days. [The email] basically said... 'Don't worry about doing that. You can still come to work.'

Then all the union representatives... replied back [with] a screenshot from the government website to the [senior manager] and said, 'We do come under this...' [They] backtracked really quickly... All those staff members could have got in a lot of trouble if they hadn't gone to work without being tested every three days (Jacqueline, ECEC, Blacktown LGA).

Poor management of this kind was a common reflection among workers in different essential industries, not just in ECEC:

“

I'm not happy with the way [my employer responded]... [During] the first [COVID] case [in] our factory, the company [didn't] want to shut down... Because I'm a member of the union, we decided, 'Okay, for the health and safety [of workers], we have to shut down'... We [walked] outside... and told other employees it's not safe to work there, so we have the right to stop working under Section 84 [of the NSW Work Health and Safety Act 2011]. So the next day, the management decided, 'Okay, we [will] shut down'.

There's [been other cases] as well. The company [didn't] want to shut down... because they said [it was] a casual contact... So we [walked] outside again [and] told the other workers, 'It's not safe'... That worker [was] still there, working... So we decided, 'Okay, we're not [coming] in. It's not safe to work there' (Michael, manufacturing, Blacktown LGA).

Naomi explained that their employer's approach worsened over time:

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It is hard at the moment because the company doesn't cooperate with COVID [safety measures]. The first lockdown [in 2020 was] okay. But the [Delta Wave was] a bit different. [A new manager] didn't want to follow [the rules]. If there [were] any COVID cases in the workplace, [they] tried to hide it. [We had] cases at work and they [didn't] want to do [anything]; they just [pretended] that it's okay... They still [operated] because they [didn't] want to stop [production]. But because [of the union's intervention], the company was forced to send [almost] everyone home (Naomi, manufacturing, Blacktown LGA).

Poor management was a common reflection among homecare workers. Eveline explained that her employer pressured workers to drop hours in response to the pandemic:

“

[Many] care workers... in my branch [were] asked to drop their contract hours. [Management said] 'there's no work available'... They were changing [workers'] availability... We brought the union in. [Everything had] become more about profit rather than care. [The union explained] that you cannot be forced [to cut contracted hours]. Availability can be changed but both parties have to [agree] on it. [But] some care-workers, you know, got scared... So they would just... give in (Eveline, homecare, Liverpool LGA).

6. Conclusion: The costs of government mismanagement

This report has outlined the personal and financial costs of the COVID-19 Delta Wave and extended lockdown on essential workers in Western Sydney during the second half of 2021. These impacts, the report has argued, were significant and lasting. Nationally, the Morrison Government failed to protect workers and households from the dangers of new outbreaks by mismanaging the vaccination rollout in the first half of 2021.

Once the Delta Wave began in June, the Federal Government responded by forcing the economic risks of business closures, job losses and labour force decline onto workers by failing to repeat the protective policies of 2020 such as JobKeeper and the Coronavirus Supplement. At a state level, the crisis was compounded by the NSW Government's decision to impose the burden of lockdown unequally and unfairly onto the communities of Western Sydney.

Residents of Western Sydney and other LGAs of concern were forced to contend with tougher restrictions on physical mobility and night-time curfews than elsewhere in Sydney. Without the option of working remotely, essential workers had to absorb the burden of testing and vaccination mandates in July and August 2021 even though health infrastructures could not meet initial demand. LGAs with higher numbers of blue-collar workers were more likely to have the slowest rates of vaccination while also recording the highest coronavirus case numbers. Punishment rather than social assistance was the norm in Western Sydney.

Essential workers tended to be less financially secure, to feel less safe at work, and to feel more stressed. Many also experienced higher workloads and unpaid overtime as vulnerable staff withdrew from work or as casuals and agency staff were laid off. These impacts were even greater for women, who were co-burdened with the additional stress of school closures and home-schooling. Women tended to be less financially secure than men, to experience greater job losses and greater labour force withdrawal.

Government management of the Delta Wave shifted the health risks of exposure to COVID-19 and the economic risks of lockdown onto workers, especially those in essential workplaces. This process of 'risk dumping' meant that the response of employers and managers became central to the experience of millions of people during the lockdown. While some employers took a proactive or socially responsible approach to staffing or COVID safety measures, the evidence from this study indicates that more employers were inconsistent in protecting workers' rights and interests or, worse, negligent in failing to protect workers or in expecting workers to manage the burdens of compliance. These burdens included the management of relations with clients, maintaining physical distancing or workplace cleaning, contending with coronavirus outbreaks in the workplace, or absorbing the economic costs of lost working hours or unreasonable workloads.

These experiences led many workers to question the meaningfulness of their work and the value of their careers. Homecare workers, for example, typically emphasised the satisfaction, the sense of fulfillment and the pride that they derived from their work and careers hitherto:

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I love [this job], I love it. [The] difference you can make in people's life... it's amazing (Jennifer, homecare, Liverpool LGA).

I love my job. [I love] the fact that I go out to work and I know I can help somebody with their everyday tasks like personal care (Eveline, homecare, Liverpool LGA).

However, many participants emphasised that experiences during the pandemic had undermined these views. As Janet suggests, the primary rewards from homecare work were not financial:

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This is absolutely one of the most rewarding jobs you can have, as long as you don't think you're going to do it for money. [This] job doesn't pay enough... You don't [work for the money], you work for the people (Janet, homecare, Parramatta LGA).

For ECEC, Katherine's story typifies the contrast between career dedication and the impacts of pandemic life. In this sector, labour turnover, workplace stress and employee burnout were already serious problems before the pandemic. The outbreaks and extended lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 made matters significantly worse (UWU, 2021):

“

I love the job even though the pay is not good [laughs]. I [enjoy] my time... with the children... I have done [trials] in... an occupation [that is] totally different [to ECEC]. But then I get worried that I'm going to miss it. [It's] what I love... It's one of those things where I don't want to leave because I feel like if everyone keeps leaving, it's not going to get any better... If you keep losing all the passionate educators, [workplace conditions in the sector are] not going to get better and the children aren't going to get what they deserve.

[I am] damned if I do [leave and] damned if I don't. [It'd] be really hard for me to walk away... I don't really know what else is out there for me or what I'm going to feel as passionate about. [It's] definitely not for the money because I would have left a long time ago [if it was] (Katherine, ECEC, Blacktown LGA).

Despite the passion for her career, Katherine decided to move to a casual position during the pandemic after decades of service as a permanent fulltime employee due to stress in the workplace. As she explains, stress had undermined her love for the job:

“

[I] just [had] burnout from the expectations... There are more expectations that were put on us to keep everyone safe but without getting any extra educators or extra time to [do the work. Just] the stress level for me [meant] I wanted to step back and... find the love for what I do again...

I didn't feel like it was a safe environment to work [in] during COVID... I feel like safety and [the educator/child] ratio was compromised. [Everyone] was running around and stressed because we [were] trying to keep the children safe... as well as filling out other jobs that we had to do within the room and our paperwork...

I've seen a lot of other educators leave as well. [It's] a bit of a domino effect. One person leaves and then everyone gets the confidence to leave as well, where you were

staying for each other, where it got to a point where no one could do it anymore... I just got to a point where [I wasn't] happy. I [needed] to leave my position... I just got tired of trying to make things better and trying to fight for things that we needed (Katherine, ECEC, Blacktown LGA).

The burden of the pandemic and lockdowns reinforced the importance of trade unions and workplace delegates in giving voice to workers. In ECEC, Jacqueline story (see Section 3) showed how workers fought for PPE as well as employer support for vaccinations at work. In other sectors, the role of unions was also central to safety compliance and employee wellbeing. In manufacturing, Jason and his workmates fought successfully for physical distancing in the workplace while Michael and other workers walked off the job in response to unsafe workplace practices (also see Section 3). Yet, despite the efforts of unions and workplace representatives, the NSW Government, the Federal Government, and a multitude of private businesses failed to ensure the financial, physical, and psychological safety of Australian workers during the Delta Wave lockdown. Interviews with workers in Western Sydney LGAs have revealed a sense of racial discrimination by the NSW Government towards those targeted by the lockdown. Routine cost-cutting by employers and governments at the expense of workers has been a major issue throughout the pandemic, with many workers being forced to the point of desperation because of an absence of support in both the workplace and at home. This study has revealed substantial shortcomings in State and Federal Government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as shortcomings in government policies which have allowed workplaces to mistreat and underpay employees without repercussions. In the event that Australia experiences future pandemics on or above the scale of COVID-19, Western Sydney's workers cannot afford a repeat of this inadequate response from government and big business.

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Appendix

Table A1. Interviews with workers in Western Sydney

Sector	No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Local Government Area (LGA)
Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)	1	Melanie	F	Canterbury-Bankstown
	2	Lauren	F	Canterbury-Bankstown
	3	Jacqueline	F	Blacktown
	4	Marie	F	Canterbury-Bankstown
	5	Katherine	F	Canterbury-Bankstown
	6	Anne	F	The Hills Shire
Food and Beverage Manufacturing	7	Michael	M	Blacktown
	8	Jason	M	Blacktown
	9	Nick	M	Liverpool
	10	Naomi	F	Blacktown
	11	Wendy	F	Liverpool
	12	Yasmin	F	Liverpool
Homecare	13	Lydia	F	Canterbury-Bankstown
	14	Janet	F	Parramatta
	15	Margaret	F	Parramatta
	16	Paula	F	Parramatta
	17	Jennifer	F	Liverpool
	18	Eveline	F	Liverpool
Warehousing	19	Roger	M	Camden
	20	Aaron	M	Blacktown
	21	Rita	F	Blacktown
	22	Ravi	M	Blacktown

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REPORT

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