

Research

**PSYCHOSOCIAL SURVEY
OF THE RETAIL SECTOR**
SUMMARY OF SURVEY RESULTS

December 2024



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1.0

Summary of survey results

IN THIS SECTION:

1.1 Methodology

The psychosocial survey of the retail sector follows the *New Zealand Psychosocial Survey* (WorkSafe New Zealand, 2022). It provides a more comprehensive analysis of psychosocial health and wellbeing specifically in the retail sector. The survey is one of few New Zealand studies exploring the psychosocial work environment in this sector.

The survey used three questionnaires:

- Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ-III)¹
- 12-item Psychosocial Safety Climate (PSC-12)²
- World Health Organization Five Item Wellbeing Index (WHO-5).³

Part of WorkSafe's role is to promote and support research and education, and to publish statistics and other information relating to work health and safety. We developed this research to support retail businesses to identify and address psychosocial risks and keep their workers safe and healthy.

1.1 Methodology

The survey was conducted online between 2–15 May 2023. It included 1,036 respondents aged 18 years and over who were employees working for wages or salary, or self-employed, in the retail sector.

Comparative data on psychosocial safety climate for all New Zealand workers was obtained from the *NZ Workplace Barometer* (Forsyth *et al.*, 2021). All other data for all New Zealand workers was obtained from the *New Zealand Psychosocial Survey 2021* (WorkSafe New Zealand, 2022).

Figure 1 on the following page provides a breakdown of the psychosocial survey of the retail sector sample by gender, age, ethnicity, role, and sub-sector.

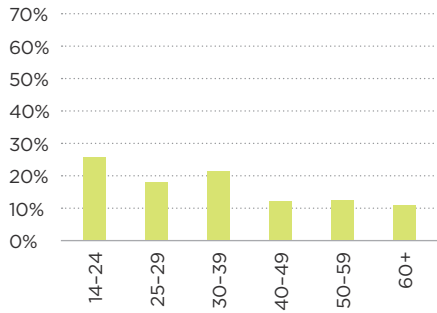
¹ For information on COPSOQ and how to use it, please check this website www.copsoq-network.org

² Dollard, M., & Bakker, A. B. (2010). Psychosocial safety climate as a precursor to conducive work environments, psychological health problems, and employee engagement. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 83(3), 579–599.

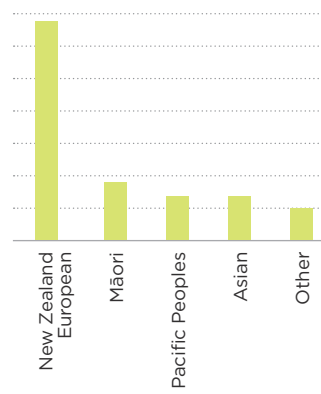
³ www.psykiatri-regionh.dk/who-5/Documents/WHO-5%20questionnaire%20-%20English.pdf

1.0 Summary of survey results

AGE GROUP

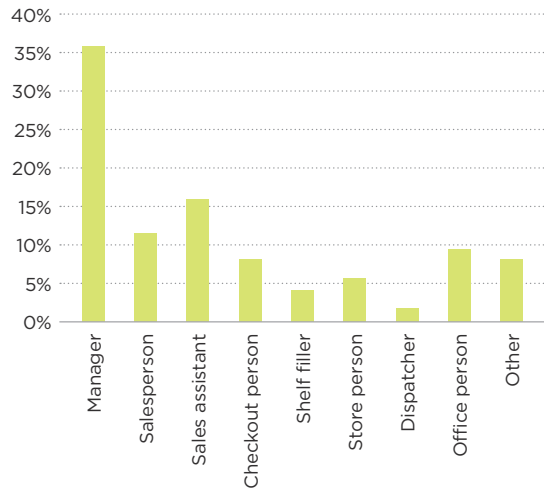


ETHNICITY

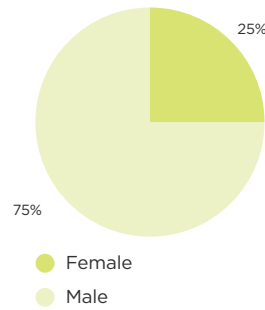


Respondents can identify with multiple ethnicities

OCCUPATION



GENDER



SUB-SECTOR

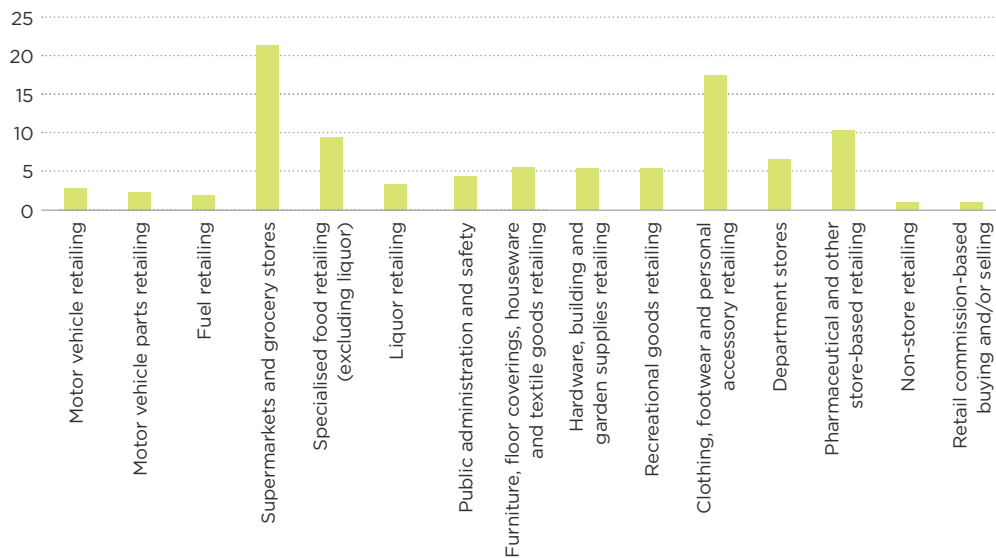


FIGURE 1: Snapshot of the survey sample

2.0

Measures

3.0

Findings

IN THIS SECTION:

- 3.1 Offensive behaviours
- 3.2 Demands at work
- 3.3 Interpersonal relations and leadership
- 3.4 Work organisation and job content
- 3.5 Psychosocial risks by occupation
- 3.6 Psychosocial safety climate
- 3.7 Psychosocial safety climate and exposure to offensive behaviours
- 3.8 Self-rated health
- 3.9 Psychological distress
- 3.10 Differences by sub-sectors
- 3.11 Workers' wellbeing in the retail sector
- 3.12 Psychosocial factors by demographics
- 3.13 Protective factors
- 3.14 Comparing between 2023 and 2021 surveys
- 3.15 Survey implications

3.1 Offensive behaviours

Offensive behaviours can cause harm to the person they are directed at as well as people witnessing the behaviour. An irregular or single exposure may have low psychological risk, but repetitive or severe exposure can cause both physical and psychological harm.

The survey focuses on five types of offensive behaviours at work:

- **bullying** (repeated exposure to unpleasant or degrading treatment in the workplace and the workers find it hard to protect themselves at work)
- **sexual harassment** (exposure to unwanted sexual-related behaviours at work)
- **threats of violence** (exposure to threat of violence at work)
- **cyberbullying** (exposure to harassment at work through social media, phone, text or internet etc)
- **physical violence** (exposure to physical violence at work).

The percentage of retail workers that reported through their survey they had exposure to offensive behaviours in the last 12 months:

| | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|---|
| 20.6% report exposure to bullying | 18.6% report exposure to cyberbullying | 16.2% report exposure to threats of violence | 14.8% report exposure to sexual harassment | 9.3% report exposure to physical violence |
|---|--|--|--|---|

Figure 3 shows offensive behaviours reported in retail workers compared to all New Zealand workers.

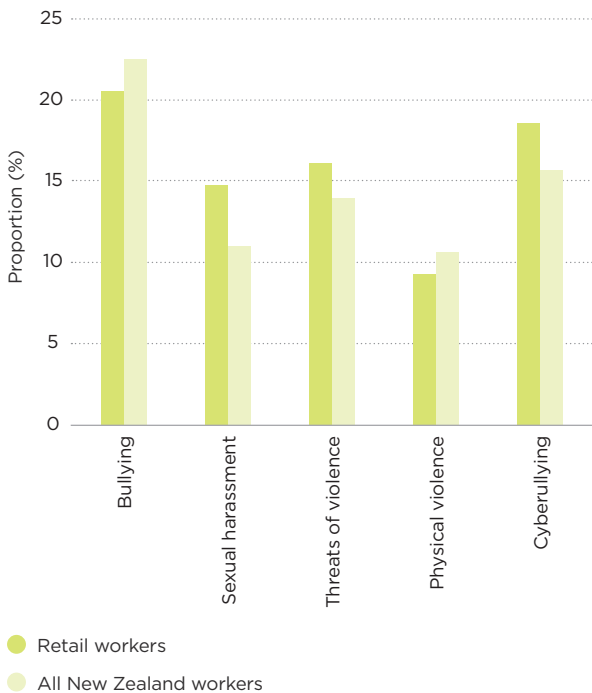


FIGURE 3: Offensive behaviours in retail sector compared to all New Zealand workers

39%

Nearly 4 in 10 retail workers report exposure to at least one offensive behaviour, either directly or as a witness, in the last 12 months.

Retail workers report that the clients/customers are the main perpetrators of these behaviours.

3.2 Demands at work

Job demands refer to any physical, psychological, social or organisational aspects of a job that require constant effort on the worker's part (Riley *et al.*, 2021). High job demands are associated with increased risk of work strain, burnout, and physical and mental health problems (Bakker & de Vries, 2020).

'Demands at work' is one of the domains within the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire. It consists of the following:

- quantitative demands (workload)
- work pace (speed and intensity of work)
- emotional demands (dealing with other people's feelings or being placed in emotionally difficult situations).

Figure 4 shows the demands at work in the retail sector. Retail workers report higher emotional demands than all New Zealand workers (47.7 compared to 41.8) and a medium/high level of work pace (64.7 compared to 62.0). Higher scores indicate higher risk exposure. Scores over 40 indicate moderate risk, and above 70 indicate high risk.

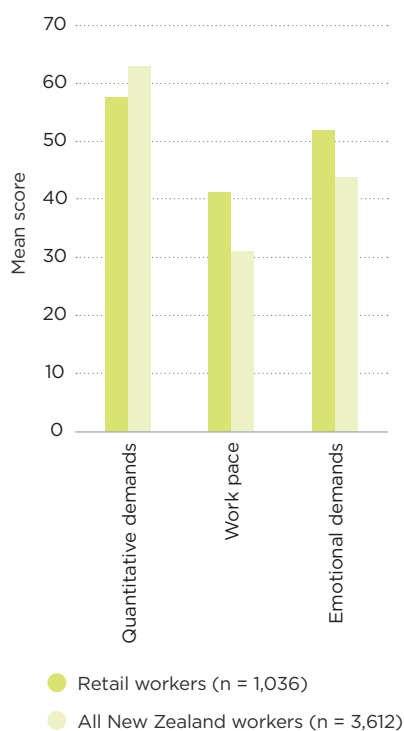


FIGURE 4:
Demands at work
for retail workers
compared to all
New Zealand workers

3.3 Interpersonal relations and leadership

Workers in retail are more likely to face risk from the following than New Zealand workers overall.

- Less support from supervisors (66.1 compared to 68.3).
- More role conflicts (when workers are given different or incompatible roles simultaneously, or their role overlaps with another worker's role) (48.4 compared to 43.4).
- Less role clarity (69.1 compared to 75.1).

3.4 Work organisation and job content

Retail workers report a medium-high level of the following:

- influence at work
- possibilities for development (opportunities for learning and career development) and
- meaning of work (56.6, 67.4 and 60.3 respectively).

Meaning of work refers to employment that gives a sense of purpose and fulfillment and creates a sense of accomplishment, impact and overall wellbeing. Perceived meaning of work is lower than the average worker in New Zealand (60.3 compared to 70.7). Low meaning of work has been shown to contribute to poor mental health in workers (Burr *et al.*, 2020).

3.5 Psychosocial risks by occupation

Psychosocial factors in the retail working environment are significantly influenced by workers' roles. There are various roles in the retail sector. Positions in the sector depend on what the retailer is selling. All roles require knowledge of the products being sold and customer needs. Positions such as sales assistants, checkout persons and shelf fillers have the most customer facing time and collectively make up the bulk of the workforce of a retail business. Retail managers are the most common role in the sector (accounting for 35% of roles). Retail managers are responsible for the day-to-day supervision of retail stores including stock, staffing and resource management.

Checkout persons

Checkout persons report significantly higher exposure to threats of violence than the average retail worker. They also appear to face greater risk from lower meaning of work and higher role conflicts.

Sales assistants

Sales assistants seem to confront risk from lower level of:

- influence at work
- possibilities for development
- predictability
- recognition
- quality of leadership.

Being sexually harassed is more commonly reported by sales assistants compared to the overall retail workers.

Salespersons

Similarly, salespersons report significantly lower predictability and recognition than the average retail worker. They also report lower sense of community at work.

Shelf fillers

Shelf fillers seem to face risk from low levels of:

- influence at work
- possibilities for development
- meaning of work.

They report the highest exposure to sexual harassment.

Managers

Managers in retail face risks from higher quantitative demands and emotional demands.

Those in managerial roles report the highest levels of:

- influence at work
- possibilities for development
- meaning of work
- predictability
- recognition
- role clarity
- quality of leadership
- vertical trust
- organisational trust.

Higher scores for these scales are considered good for workers' health and wellbeing.

3.6 Psychosocial safety climate

Psychosocial safety climate refers to the shared perceptions of workers of their organisation's policies, practices and procedures for the protection of their psychological health and safety. Figure 5 shows the four different domains of the psychosocial safety climate tool.



FIGURE 5:
Psychosocial safety climate domains

Psychosocial safety climate scores, as measured by the PSC-12 tool, range from a low of 12 (suggests the highest risk of adverse/negative outcomes) to a high of 60 (indicates lowest risk of adverse outcomes).

Published benchmarks for PSC-12 indicate a score of 41 and over is the best practice standard threshold. This is associated with a business performing well for worker psychological health and safety and low risk of depressive symptoms and job strain. A psychosocial safety climate score of 37 or below is associated with higher psychosocial risk, and negative outcomes such as depressive symptoms and job strain.

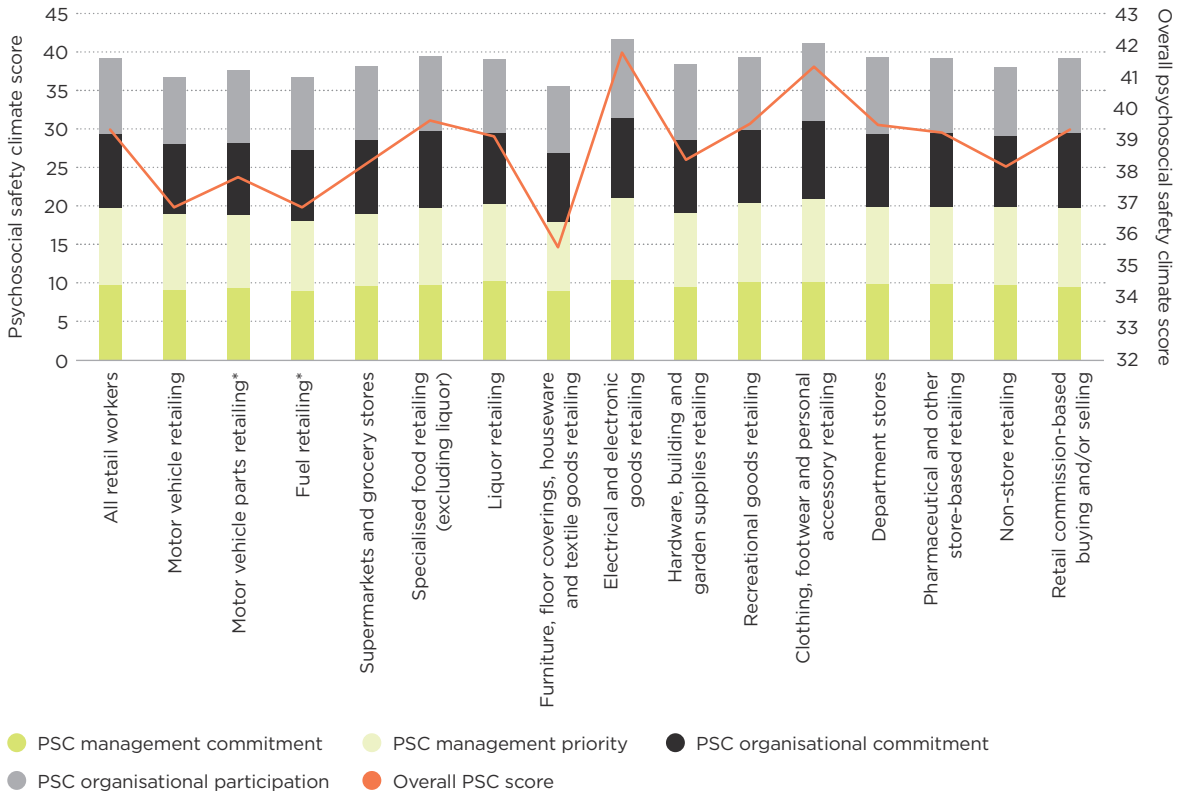
39.2 is the overall psychosocial safety climate mean score for the retail sector.

39.7 is the overall psychosocial safety climate mean score for all New Zealand workers (Forsyth *et al.*, 2021).

46.6% of workers in retail report overall psychosocial safety climate scores greater than or equal to 41, indicating a lower risk of adverse psychosocial outcomes.

As shown in Figure 6, the overall mean psychosocial safety climate score differs significantly by retail subsector. Workers in furniture, floor coverings, houseware and textile goods retailing report significantly lower psychosocial safety climate scores than the average retail worker (35.5 compared to 39.2).

People working in furniture, floor coverings, houseware and textile goods retailing (35.5) and motor vehicle retailing (36.8) report significantly lower psychosocial safety climate scores than those in electrical and electronic good retailing (41.7) and clothing, footwear and personal accessory retailing (41.3).



Note: Mean scores are reported

* Due to a small sample size, results are indicative only

FIGURE 6: Psychosocial safety climate (PSC) mean score by retail sub-sector

As described in Table 1, most retail workers report a medium-risk range of the psychosocial safety climate score.

Table 1 shows the psychosocial safety climate (PSC) risk level derived from the PSC mean score rated by workers within retail sub-sectors.

| RISK LEVEL | PSC SCORE RANGE | SUBSECTOR |
|----------------|-----------------|--|
| Very high risk | ≤26 | |
| High risk | ≥27 and 36 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Motor vehicle retailing - Furniture, floor covering, houseware and textile goods retailing |
| Medium risk | ≥37 and 40 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Motor vehicle parts retailing - Fuel retailing - Supermarkets and grocery stores - Specialised and food retailing (excluding liquor) - Liquor retailing - Hardware, building and garden supplies retailing - Recreational goods retailing - Department stores - Pharmaceutical and other store-based retailing - Non-store retailing - Retail commission-based buying and/or selling |
| Low risk | ≥41 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Electrical and electronic goods retailing - Clothing, footwear and personal accessory retailing |

TABLE 1:
Psychosocial safety climate risk level within retail sub-sector

Psychosocial safety climate by occupation

Figure 7 shows the mean psychosocial safety climate score within retail occupations. All of the mean scores are within the medium risk level. However, managers report significantly higher PSC scores than salespersons, sales assistants and office workers.

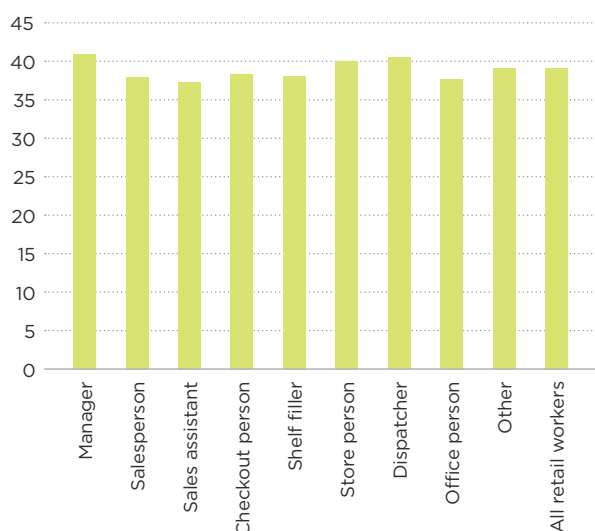


FIGURE 7:
Psychosocial safety climate by retail position

3.7 Psychosocial safety climate and exposure to offensive behaviours

A lower psychosocial safety climate score is strongly associated with higher risk of exposure to offensive behaviours. Workers with a very low psychosocial safety climate score (less than or equal to 26) are more at risk of experiencing offensive behaviours.

Table 2 shows the reported exposure to offensive behaviours and psychosocial safety climate risk level.

| Risk level | OFFENSIVE BEHAVIOURS (%) | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------|---------------|
| | Bullying | Sexual harassment | Threats of violence | Physical violence | Cyberbullying |
| Low risk (very high PSC score) | 11.3 | 10.4 | 11.1 | 4.8 | 14.7 |
| Medium risk | 20.3 | 13.5 | 16.2 | 14.9 | 20.7 |
| High risk | 27.0 | 18.1 | 20.2 | 11.5 | 19.0 |
| Very high risk (very low PSC score) | 42.3 | 26.3 | 27.4 | 14.2 | 29.8 |

TABLE 2: Offensive behaviours and psychosocial safety climate (PSC) risk level



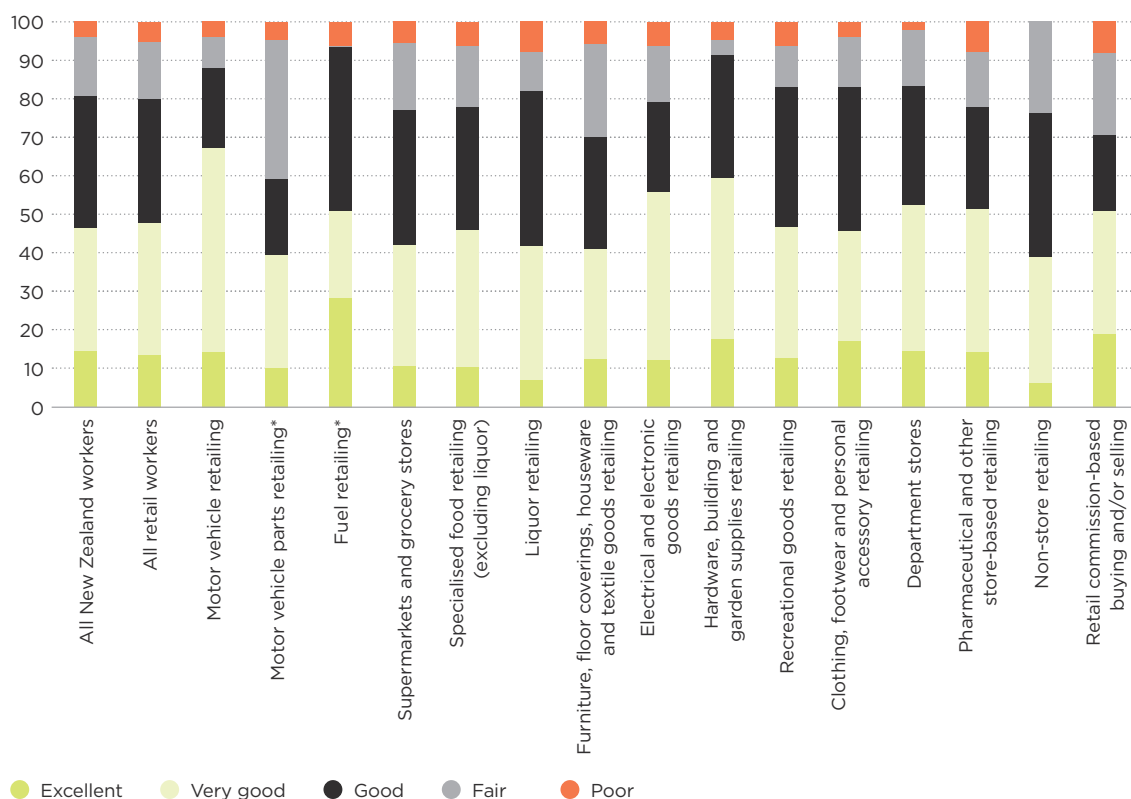
3.8 Self-rated health

Self-rated health is a widely used indicator for monitoring quality of life and population health. It measures a person's perception of their overall health and is an alternative source of data from objective measures of health status.

80% of retail workers rate their health as being 'good' or above, which is similar to all New Zealand workers.

Nearly 60% rate their health as 'very good' or 'excellent' (Figure 6).

Figure 8 shows self-rated health scores in retail sub-sectors.



Note: Proportions are reported

* Due to a small sample size, results are indicative only

** Data for all New Zealand workers is obtained from the *New Zealand psychosocial survey 2021* (WorkSafe New Zealand, 2022).

FIGURE 8: Self-rated health in retail sub-sectors and New Zealand workers

3.9 Psychological distress

Psychological distress is associated with fluctuations in levels of psychological arousal and mood. High distress can be a precursor to, or part of, a more serious mental health condition.

High psychological distress can be associated with:

- burnout (physical and emotional exhaustion resulting from chronic stress),
- stress (high arousal), and
- cognitive stress (problems concentrating, high distractibility).

The percentage of retail workers report experiencing the following all the time:

| | | | |
|-------------------------|------------------------|--------------|---------------------|
| 12.4% | 12.1% | 11.3% | 8.5% |
| emotional exhaustion | physical exhaustion | stress | cognitive stress |

23%

of retail workers report experiencing at least one form of psychological distress all the time

3.10 Differences by sub-sectors

In addition to occupation, psychosocial factors in the retail working environment are markedly different by sub-sector that are higher or lower compared to all workers. Table 3 shows the key psychosocial risks and protective factors by retail sub-sector. Protective factors can mitigate the impact of risk factors and may enhance mental wellbeing.

| SUB-SECTOR | PSYCHOSOCIAL RISKS | PROTECTIVE FACTORS |
|--|---|---|
| Liquor retailing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Higher emotional demands - Higher exposure to sexual harassment - Higher exposure to threats of violence - Higher exposure to physical violence | |
| Supermarkets and grocery stores | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lower predictability - Lower recognition - Lower influence at work - Lower meaning of work - Lower horizontal trust - Lower organisational justice - Higher work pace - Higher emotional demands | |
| Specialised food retailing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Higher work pace - Higher emotional exhaustion - More sleep troubles | |
| Clothing, footwear, personal accessory retailing | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Higher social capital - Higher recognition - Higher role clarity - Higher quality of leadership - Higher sense of community at work |
| Motor vehicle retailing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Higher exposure to physical violence - Higher exposure to cyberbullying | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Higher meaning of work |
| Pharmaceutical | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Higher meaning of work - Higher horizontal trust - Lower insecurity over working conditions |

| SUB-SECTOR | PSYCHOSOCIAL RISKS | PROTECTIVE FACTORS |
|--|--|---|
| Recreational goods retailing | - Higher cognitive stress | |
| Hardware, building and garden supplies | - Lower horizontal trust - Lower recognition - Lower quality of leadership | - Less sleep troubles - Less emotional exhaustion - Less problems concentrating - Lower role conflicts |

TABLE 3: Psychosocial factors in retail sub sectors compared to all New Zealand workers

3.11 Workers' wellbeing in the retail sector

The World Health Organization Five item Wellbeing Index (WHO-5) is a self-report measure of current mental wellbeing. It consists of five statements about how well the person felt over the previous 14 days. The total score ranges from 0 (worst possible quality of life) to 100 (best possible quality of life). A score of 50 and below indicates poor mental wellbeing. Scores at or below 20 are indicative of depression.

| | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|--|
| 60.1% is the mean score for retail workers | 30.8% of retail workers report a wellbeing mean score of 50 and below | 4.0% of retail workers report a wellbeing score less than or equal to 20, indicating a higher risk of clinical levels of depression | 56.2 is the mean score for sales assistants, significantly lower than the average retail worker | 7.3 of sale assistants report a mean overall wellbeing score of 20 and below |
|--|---|---|---|--|

Retail workers with mean WHO-5 wellbeing scores less than or equal to 50 appear to face more risks from:

- emotional demands
- work pace
- insecurity of working conditions
- work-life conflicts.

3.12 Psychosocial factors by demographics

Age

Young workers aged 24 years and under are more likely to report exposure to higher work pace, role conflicts, work-life conflict, burnout, stress, cognitive stress, and sleep troubles.

| | |
|---|---|
| 24.5% of young workers report exposure to sexual harassment | 21.8% of young workers report exposure to threats of violence |
|---|---|

However, young workers report higher quality of leadership than do retail workers overall.

Older workers aged 60 years and above appear to have risk from fewer possibilities for development and lower quality of leadership. However, older workers appear to face less psychosocial risk factors. They report:

- lower quantitative demands
- lower work pace
- lower emotional demands
- lower role conflicts
- lower job insecurity
- lower insecurity over working conditions
- lower work-life conflict
- higher meaning of work
- higher job satisfaction
- lower exposure to sexual harassment
- lower exposure to threats of violence
- less health problems such as sleep troubles, burnout, stress and cognitive stress.

Gender

In this survey, three-quarters of workers are female.

Compared to men, women working in the retail sector are more likely to report:

- high work pace
- sleep troubles
- burnout
- stress
- cognitive stress
- poorer wellbeing.

More men than women working in the retail sector were more likely than their female coworkers to report exposure to:

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| 21.1% | 13.9% | 23.6% |
| threats of violence (compared to 14.4%) | physical violence (compared to 7.6%) | cyberbullying (compared to 16.6%) |

Ethnicity

Compared to their European colleagues, Asian workers in the retail sector report significantly higher overall psychosocial safety climate mean scores (40.6 compared to 38.4).

Compared to the average retail worker, Pacific people seem to face more psychosocial risks from higher:

- work pace
- role conflicts
- work-life conflict.

As a result, sleep difficulties and burnout are more commonly reported by Pacific workers.

There are some positives in their working environment – they appear to face less psychosocial risk in some areas, including:

- lower quantitative demands
- higher possibilities for development
- higher recognition
- higher role clarity
- higher quality of leadership
- higher social support from supervisors
- higher social support from colleagues
- higher sense of community at work.

Compared to overall retail workers, Māori retail workers report higher:

- emotional demands
- work-life conflict.

Positively, Māori seem to report a higher level of possibilities for development than the average retail worker, which is known to be one of important contributors to a healthy organisation.

3.13 Protective factors

Protective factors can mitigate the impact of risk factors and may enhance mental wellbeing. Compared to all New Zealand workers, those working in the retail sector report significantly higher:

- possibilities for development (67.4 compared to 64.7)
- quality of leadership (67.3 compared to 55.5)
- support from colleagues (70.6 compared to 68.4)
- job satisfaction (71.7 compared to 66.1)
- sense of community at work (79.7 compared to 76.1)
- vertical trust (trust built between managers and workers) (68.0 compared to 65.2)
- organisational justice (fair treatment at work) (62.7 compared to 60.5).

3.14 Comparing between 2023 and 2021 surveys

There are some significant differences in psychosocial factors between the 2021 survey data and the data collated at the height of this survey. In this survey, retail workers face more risks from higher emotional demands and less role clarity than 2021. Please note that the 2021 survey was conducted in the height of the COVID-19 pandemic with huge impact on retail and hospitality people.

This survey did however find significant improvements in the retail psychosocial working environment since 2021, including:

- influence at work
- possibilities for development
- predictability
- quality of leadership
- social support from colleagues
- sense of community at work
- job satisfaction
- job security
- security over working conditions.

3.15 Survey implications

These survey results help to build a picture of the current psychosocial risks that retail workers are exposed to. The results also help to identify psychosocial factors which may be having a positive impact on workers.

Retail workers are exposed to a range of different psychosocial factors in the workplace. Emotional demands are one of the most common sources of psychosocial risks in the retail sector in New Zealand. Emotional demands can stem from exposure to aggression, violence or harassment, supporting people in distress, or displaying false emotions such as being friendly to challenging customers (Safework Australia, 2024). These experiences can negatively impact the health and wellbeing of retail workers (Duarte *et al.*, 2020).

These survey findings contribute to the information available for retail business owners, managers and workers about psychosocial risks that are common in the retail sector.

Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015, businesses have a primary duty of care to ensure that the health and safety of their workers and others is not put at risk from work carried out. This means finding a balance that ensures the health and safety of workers and others affected by the risks arising from work, so far as is reasonably practicable.

Businesses that prioritise workers' mental health have higher rates of job satisfaction and engagement among workers. As well as helping to create a positive working environment, managing psychosocial risks can help improve productivity and organisational resilience.

WorkSafe has resources to support businesses with managing some common risks in the retail sector [What risk looks like in your industry: retail store](#)

WorkSafe also has case study videos showing how businesses can manage psychosocial risks in retail [Mentally healthy work in retail: Case studies](#)

Appendix

IN THIS SECTION:

Appendix 1: References

Appendix 1: References

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