

AUSTRALIA'S SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICES WORKFORCE

Characterisation, classification and value

REPORT SUMMARY



The Australian Services Union (ASU) commissioned researchers Dr Natasha Cortis and Dr Megan Blaxland of the UNSW Social Policy Research Centre to conduct a comprehensive study into Australia's social and community services workforce.

Over 300,000 people work in Australia's social and community service industries, predominantly women in non-government organisations. These roles are crucial to meeting the social, economic, health and cultural needs of our communities, and to promoting wellbeing and inclusion.

This research, Australia's largest survey of pay and conditions in social and community services, captured the experiences of 3,122 workers in late 2023.

The resulting report, 'Australia's social and community services workforce: characterisation, classification and value' (UNSW) provides a highly detailed insight into the more than 300,000 workers in the sector.

It examines what these workers do in the course of their employment, and how their work is characterised, classified, and paid in the context of the Social, Community, Home Care & Disability Services (SCHADS) Award.



KEY FINDINGS

THE SECTOR IS FEMALE DOMINATED AND WORK IS INCREDIBLY BROAD AND VARIED

- **73% of the study participants were women.**
- **More than 70% are frontline practitioners**, working with people with disability, women affected by domestic and family violence, vulnerable children and young people, and people needing housing, health, and other supports.
- Common positions include disability support workers, case managers, caseworkers, counsellors, youth workers, lawyers, project officers, and team leaders.

SOCIAL, COMMUNITY & DISABILITY WORKERS (SACS) ARE HIGHLY QUALIFIED, EXPERIENCED, AND SKILLED

- Half of SACS workers hold a university bachelor's or postgraduate degree (50%), and a further 44% hold a relevant certificate or diploma (eg. Certificate IV, diploma, or associate degree level qualification).
- 39% have at least a decade of experience. **Yet their skills are not adequately articulated, and the complexity of their work is not valued in the SCHADS Award.**

UNDER CLASSIFICATION IS WIDESPREAD

- Most disability support workers are classified by their employers at the lower levels of the SCHADS Award – predominantly at Level 2 (notably low, given the potential for classification up to level 8) – even though 43% of disability support workers in the study have over 10 years of experience.
- No disability support workers are classified above Level 4.
- Other practitioners are distributed across the levels, with the majority employed around the middle of the classification structure, at either Level 4 (30%) or Level 5 (29%).

There is no higher level. People who have worked for a few months are getting paid the same as regular full-time staff that have been here for many years.

Support worker,
Disability service,
Enterprise agreement



...Anyone working in the social and community services space takes on a huge level of responsibility, requires a huge number of skills beyond any role scope, and takes on a huge mental strain due to the complexities of working with individuals, and as such, deserves to be better compensated. When we work every day with people on their deepest hurts, struggles and life adversities the level of award pay should reflect that better.

Alcohol and Other Drugs
Counsellor/Case Manager,
Health related service,
SCHADS Award SACS Level 4

MANY SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICE WORKERS ARE PERFORMING WORK ABOVE THEIR CLASSIFICATION-PAY LEVEL

- **Workers frequently work independently with little supervision, and provide some supervision and guidance to others - even at the lower classification levels.**
- Almost half of disability support workers provide some form of downward authority.
- Across all Social and Community Services (SACS) Levels of the SCHADS Award, significant proportions of respondent say they work independently, with limited direction.
- **Many practitioners make complex decisions while working autonomously with little supervisory support.**

UNDER CLASSIFIED = UNDERPAID

- Over half of survey participants (56%) feel they should be classified at a higher level.
- Among those classified at Levels 1 and 2, this figure was more than 70%, but even among those at Level 6 and above, some felt their classification was low given the work that they do, and their qualifications and experience.
- **The report suggests 67% of workers are under-classified according to the SCHADS Award, broken down as follows:**
 - **43% based on experience and qualifications**
 - **18% based on the supervision and support they provide to others**
 - **43% based on the supervision they receive.**

THERE ARE FEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR PAY OR CAREER PROGRESSION

- Lack of pay progression is a critical concern.
- Only a minority of workers progressed up a pay point in the last year (41%) and expectations of future pay progression are low - less than a third though they would see any pay progression in the next year.
- Under the SCHADS Award, only some disability workers at Level 1 automatically progressed to Level 2, receiving an associated pay rise.
- Most workers, especially those at lower levels, do not access regular pay point progression.

Poor progression opportunities undervalues skills, qualifications, and experience, and disincentivises further upskilling.

There seems to be no pay progression, even though my skills have increased, my experience has increased, the amount of senior type duties have increased. Unofficial leader duties have increased. There is a ceiling on pay that is not matched by a ceiling on required work.

Social worker,
Mental health service,
SCHADS Award SACS level 5

FRONTLINE WORKERS ARE STRUGGLING FINANCIALLY

- Workers are under personal financial pressures, with 29% of all workers sometimes needing help from family or friends to meet living costs.
- 18% of survey participants saying they don't work enough hours to make a living.
- While casual workers face the most difficulty, even among full-time workers, 1 in 10 feel their hours are insufficient to make a living, suggesting low rates of pay.

Pay rates are not reflective of the work we undertake or the cumulative stress and burnout as a result of this work. As much as I enjoy the work I do and have been doing so for many years, I worry that it is not financially viable for me to stay in the industry long term.

Case manager,
homelessness service,
SCHADS Award SACS Level 4

ADDRESSING UNDERVALUATION

For too long community and disability workers have been undervalued and underpaid.

The community sector relies heavily on government funding to operate its essential services and to pay the wages of the workers. The sector is underfunded for the critical care infrastructure that is required in Australia. This problem is compounded by unclear classifications in the SCHADS award which leads to incorrect and under-classification of workers.



Community and disability workers make a difference every day. They are advocates, support workers, carers, counsellors, case workers and so much more to the clients and communities they work with.

Community and disability workers deserve recognition for the experience and depth of skill they bring to their work. Recognition means fair pay, career pathways, training and job security.

Recognition of the critical value of their skills is crucial to building a sustainable workforce.

We need a classification structure for community and disability services employees that ensures fair minimum rates of pay for all workers, accurately reflecting their duties, skills, experience, and qualifications.

**COMMUNITY
& DISABILITY
WORKERS
DESERVE
BETTER!**