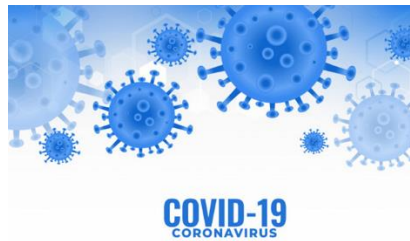


OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH SURVEILLANCE SYSTEM (OHSS)



This report summarises data for South African workplaces
from 1 October 2020 to 31 March 2021
on the OHSS platform.



HIGHLIGHTS

- During the 6th month period since inception of the OHSS (1st October 2020 – 31 March 2021), 3 111 businesses registered on the OHSS online platform. This represents 12.2% of all businesses in South Africa.
- The majority of the registrations occurred in Gauteng, followed by Western Cape and Kwa-Zulu Natal.
- There were 3 704 positive cases reported for this period.
- The majority of the positive cases were reported from the Banking and Insurance sector (57,0%) followed by the Health and Social sector (27,3%).
- Clerical support workers were the most common occupational group reporting COVID-19 positive cases.
- A workplace contact was reported from 33,0% of positive cases.
- A large proportion (89.0%) of workers were symptomatic at the time of diagnosis.
- There were 38 (1.5%) deaths reported and 195 (7.5%) employees who had been hospitalised.
- Among those with COVID-19, there were 2,617 (70.6%) workers that had returned to work.

BACKGROUND

The Occupational Health Surveillance System (OHSS) was developed to collect occupational health data related to COVID-19 collected during the State of Disaster. It uses COVID-19 surveillance digital platforms and/or taps into existing platforms (e.g. those already used by private sector employers) to collect screening, vulnerability, testing, high risk workplace contacts, health outcomes and return to work data for the surveillance system for workers in the private and public sector.

The specific **objectives** of the OHSS are to:

- Provide strategic insights through data analytics and visualization into all phases (i.e. screening, testing, contact tracing within the workplace, vulnerable employees, return to work including health outcomes) of the COVID-19 infection spectrum in the South African workforce.
- Early identification of industries/companies and occupational groups at high risk of infection so as to inform appropriate interventions (e.g. policy, programmatic, resources).
- Understand the impact of the COVID-19 interventions in the workplaces.
- Develop a framework for a COVID-19 surveillance model for monitoring workers in general that includes both public and private sectors.
- Determine the human resource and economic impact of COVID-19 on the various industrial sectors.
- Identification of key scientific questions requiring further in-depth investigation.

The OHSS was developed by the National Department of Health, the National Institute of Occupational Health (NIOH), the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD), Centre for Industrial Research (CSIR), Business for South Africa (B4SA) and occupational medicine specialists from University of Cape Town (UCT) and University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (UKZN), together with several major private sector corporations. The OHSS was piloted in August to September 2020 and officially commenced on the 1st October 2020 following the release of the Department of Employment and Labour Consolidated COVID-19 Directive on Health and Safety in the Workplace on 28 September 2020¹.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The reporting period is from 1 October 2020 to 31 March 2021. This coincided with the second COVID-19 wave in South Africa. Data from workplaces that employ more than 50 employees is reported by employers to one of three online platforms (API, CSV via NEXTCLOUD, CMORE app). Employers with less than 50 employees are still able to submit data on a voluntary basis.

¹ <https://www.nioh.ac.za/home/national-resources-directives-guidelines/>

The following employee data is currently being reported:ⁱ

1. Vulnerability information for all employees (which is a once off submission, unless the status of an employee changes)
2. Nature of symptoms of symptomatic employees, which is submitted on a weekly basis
3. COVID-19 positive data (submitted weekly where appropriate)
4. Number of high risk contacts (submitted weekly where appropriate)
5. Health outcomes and return to work of COVID-19 status of COVID-19 positive employees (submitted weekly where appropriate)

Data in the data lake are anonymised and any identifying information removed after a period of 6 weeks. All OHSS data collected by NIOH is securely stored and processed in the NIOH data centre. All systems used for data collection, storage, and processes are assessed on regular basis (every month) for any security vulnerabilities.

RESULTS

Business registrations

During this six-month period (1 October 2020 to 31 March 2021) a total of 3 111 businesses had registered. This constituted data of 1,829,897 employees, representing 12% of all formal sector employees.² (Figure 1 & Figure 2). The Manufacturing sector for food, drinks and tobacco (9%) constituted the largest proportion of businesses registered.

Most workplaces registered are located in Gauteng (46.0%), Western Cape (22.0%) and Kwa-Zulu Natal (14.0%), which represent provinces where industries are concentrated. Employees in elementary occupations (20.0%) comprise the largest proportion of jobs registered followed by Sales and Service workers (18.0%) and Clerical and Support workers (16.0%) (Figure 3).

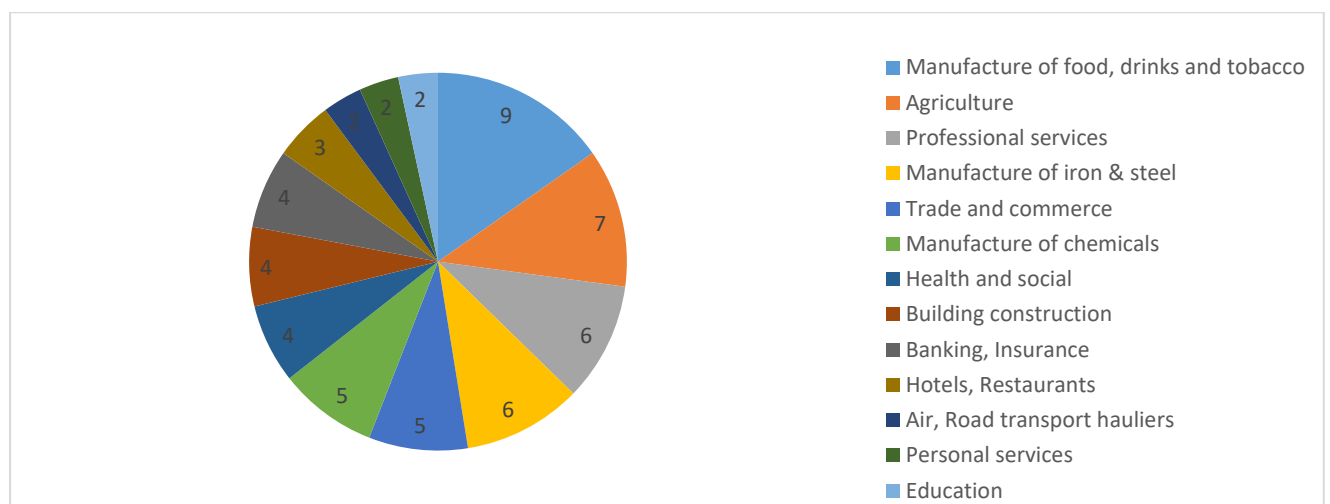


Figure 1: Industry distribution of registered businesses (59.0% of all registrations, the remaining industries not shown in the graph were <1% each) n=3111.

² <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02114thQuarter2020.pdf>

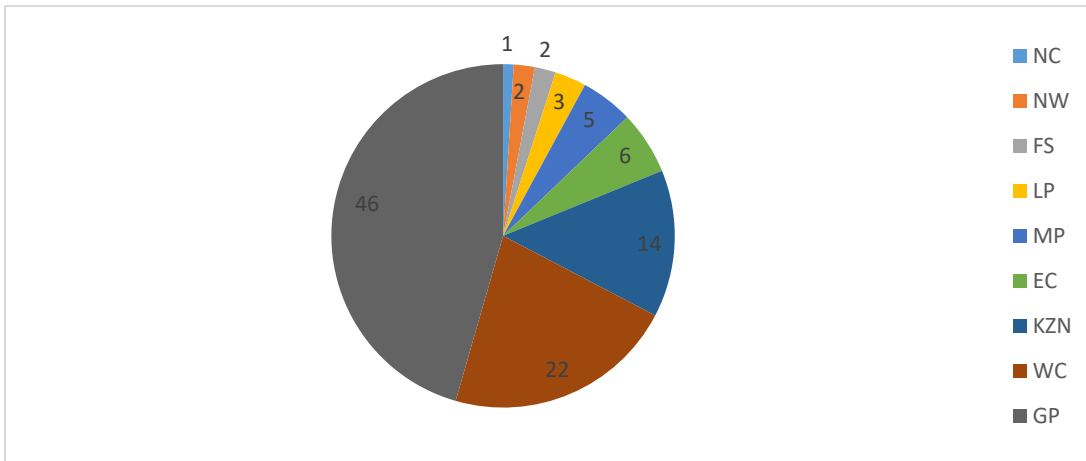


Figure 2: Provinces were these businesses located (NC: Northern Cape; NW: North West; FS: Free State; LP: Limpopo Province; MP: Mpumalanga; EC: Eastern Cape; KZN: Kwa-Zulu Natal; WC: Western Cape; GP: Gauteng) **n=3111**.

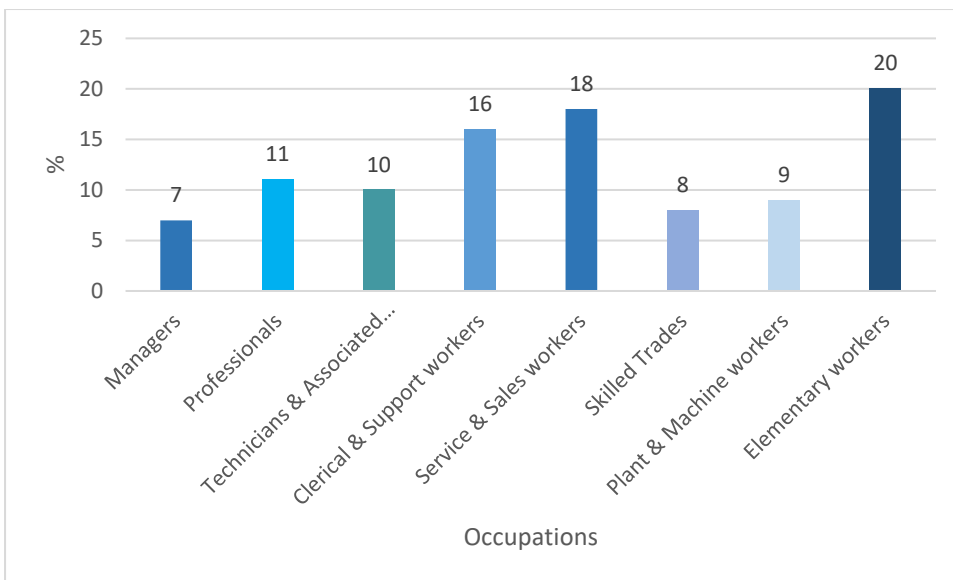


Figure 3: OHSS job category distribution

Symptoms

Approximately 201 (6.5%) businesses submitted data on symptomatic employees during this period. The most common symptoms included cough or sore throat (9.0% each), followed by anosmia or tiredness (7.0% each) (Figure 4)

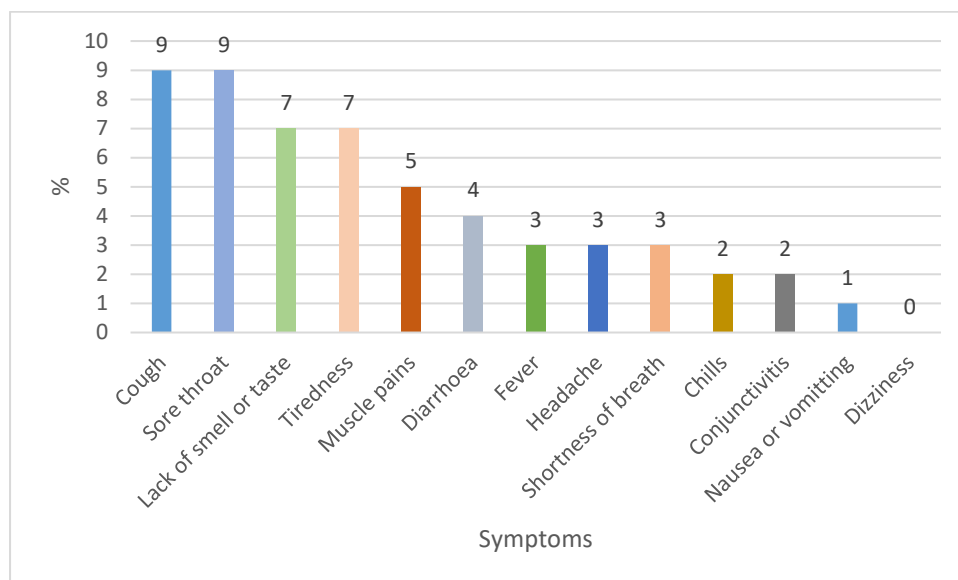


Figure 4. Prevalence of COVID-19 related symptoms reported by employees in routine symptom monitoring at workplaces.

COVID-19 Positive Cases and Health Outcomes

During this reporting period 3 704 positive COVID-19 cases were reported (Figure 5) with the majority from Gauteng (48,2%), followed by Western Cape (18.6%) and Kwa-Zulu Natal (12.4%). These proportion are very similar to the proportion of businesses that registered from these provinces. Industrial sectors reporting the largest number of cases included the Banking and Insurance sector (57,0%) followed by the Health and Social sector (27,3%). The majority of COVID-19 positive workers were employed as clerical support workers (n=1111, 30%) followed by managers (n=671, 18.0%) and health care workers (n=525, 14.0%).

A workplace contact was reported in 33.0% of positive COVID-19 cases. Eighty-nine percent (89%) of those that tested positive were symptomatic at the time of diagnosis.

There were 38 (1.5%) deaths and 195 (7.5%) employees had been hospitalised during this period.

Among those with COVID-19, there were 2 617 (70.6%) employees that had returned to work.

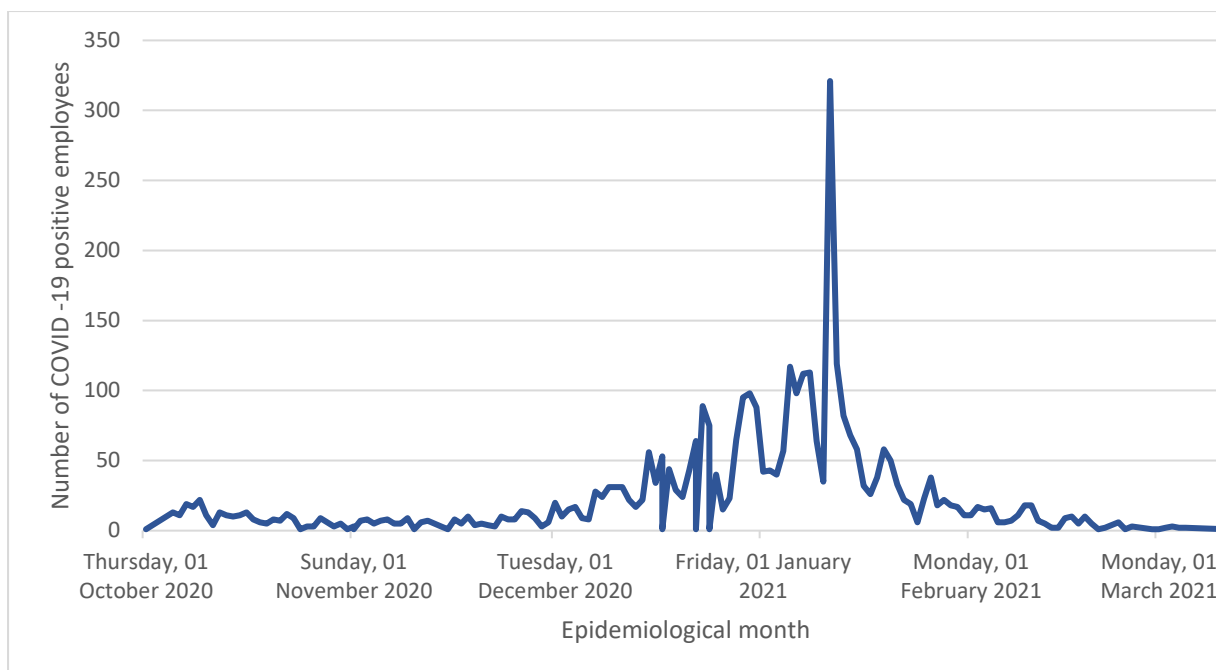


Figure 5: Number of reported COVID-19 positive employees by epidemiological month in South Africa (1 October 2020 to 31 March 2021)

Limitations

The data presented here is dependent on employers reporting the legally required information, which currently stands at 12.2% of all businesses. The data presented does not represent the true disease burden experienced by workers in the country, however it does give some insight into patterns of distribution of the pandemic among industries affected since there are no studies reported for the country to date.

The absence of reliable denominator data to calculate infection rates per sector prevents optimal utilisation of the data. The under-reporting of data despite its legal requirement has recently been addressed by engaging with the Compensation Fund, and the Unemployment Insurance Fund requiring mandatory reporting for businesses to qualify for TERS benefits for their workers.³

Further data from the OHSS is available on the on-line dynamic dashboard.⁴

³ <https://uifecc.labour.gov.za/covid19/loginJsp>

⁴ <https://datastudio.google.com/embed/u/0/reporting/bd5b8307-e349-418d-af3b-39b34bff6607/page/jfi1B>

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