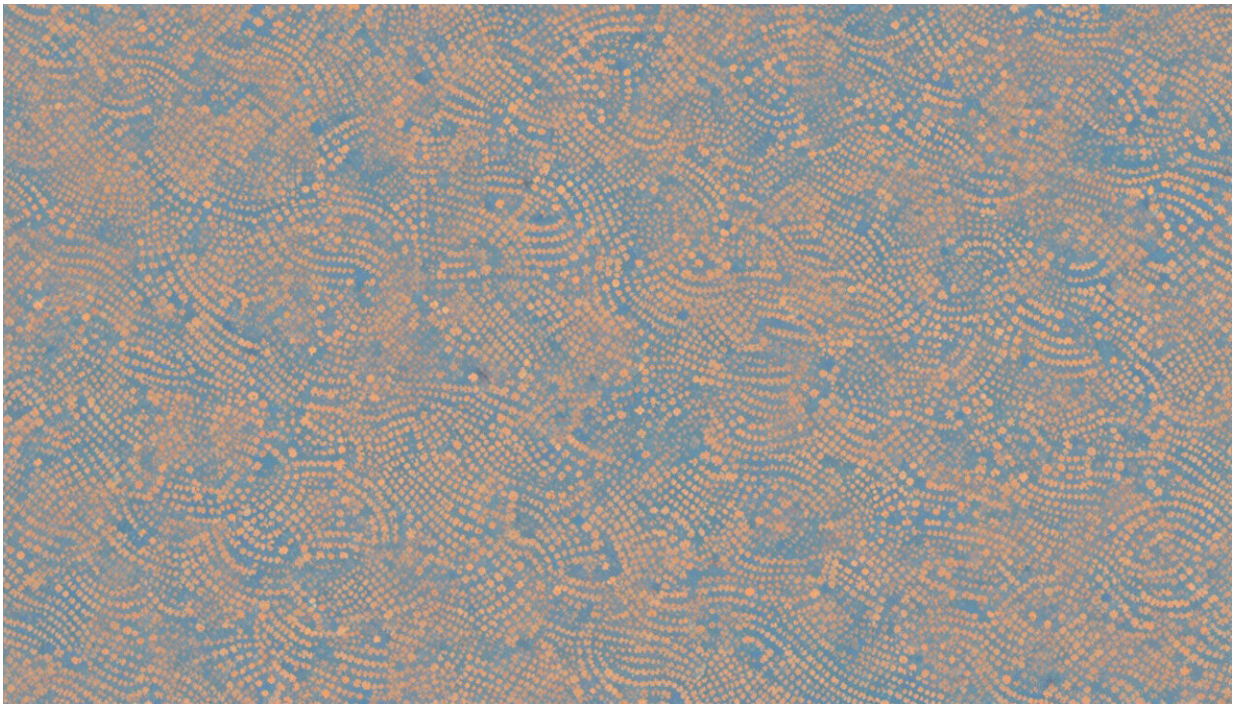


Welcome to your first job: Expect to be underpaid, bullied, harassed or exploited in some way

February 13 2019, by Carley Ruiz, David Bartlett And Emily Moir



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

A teenager's first job can be deeply rewarding, a step towards independence and building skills. But that job may also involve an early taste of exploitative workplace behaviours, including abuse, bullying and harassment.

There are numerous cases of [exploitation](#) in workplaces that offer [jobs](#) to [young people](#). Think of the systematic underpayment of [7-Eleven](#) workers, for instance, or of [Domino's](#) workers.

Young people working in hospitality – covering restaurants, cafes, bars and pubs – are particularly at risk of exploitative practices, according to the [Fair Work Ombudsman](#).

We wanted to get a more complete picture of the different types of exploitative behaviours that young workers might encounter. To do so we surveyed 330 undergraduate university students about their experiences in the workplace.

Overall, almost three-quarters (74.2%) of respondents reported experiencing some form of exploitative, abusive or harassing [behaviour](#) in their first job.

Researching workplace exploitation

Our [convenience sample](#) of university students that anonymously volunteered to participate were surveyed about their workplace experiences while aged under 18 years old. While the results may not be representative of all young peoples' work experiences, they provide a good indication of the pattern and relative frequency of different forms of exploitative behaviour.

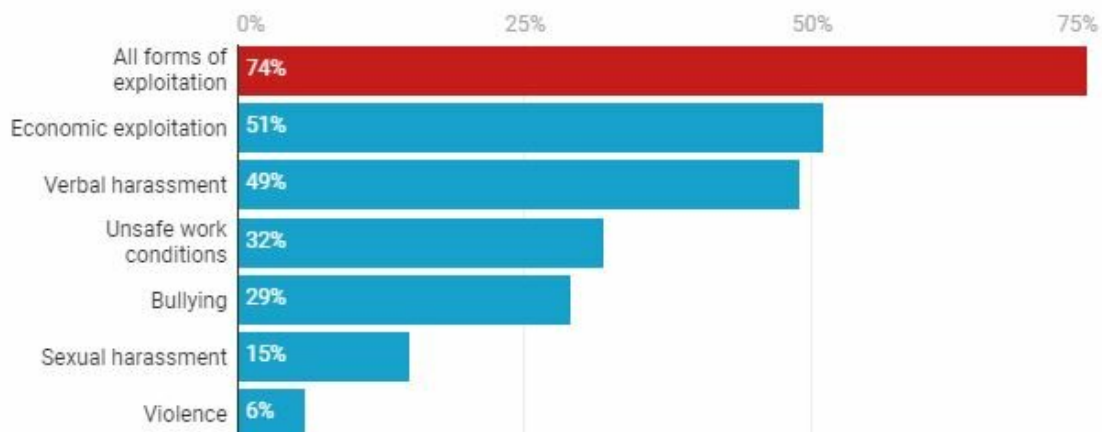
Importantly for prevention, the study also indicates who is most likely to be a perpetrator and who is most at risk. The results of this exploratory study show that workplace exploitation is common enough to warrant future research on a national level to understand the extent and consequences.

In our study, we defined exploitation as the following behaviours:

- economic exploitation, such as not receiving the correct pay, superannuation, breaks, holidays, or being unfairly dismissed
- exposure to unsafe work conditions, including not being properly trained or supervised, or being required to carry out tasks breaching workplace health and safety rules
- bullying, involving repeated behaviour that humiliates and intimidates the victim
- sexual harassment, involving all unwelcomed sexual behaviour such as touching, as well as jokes or unwanted communication
- verbal harassment, such as being sworn at, insulted and berated
- physical violence, including threats of a physical attack.

Young and exploitable

The experience of our study participants during their first job.



What we found

The age at which our respondents were first employed in Queensland ranged as low as 11 years old to 17 years old. The majority of respondents (84.0%) were first employed in retail or hospitality.

Just over half (51.5%) of our participants reported some kind of economic exploitation in their first job, including incorrect pay and not being allowed proper breaks.

Verbal harassment was also a common experience (49.1%), followed by exposure to unsafe work conditions (32.1%), sexual harassment (14.5%), and violence (6.4%) in their first job.

Nearly a third (29.4%) experienced ongoing incidents of workplace bullying in their first job.

About a quarter (25.8%) of respondents reported no form of workplace exploitation in their first job.

Victims and perpetrators

Our results indicate there is a statistically significant association between (1) the age respondents are first employed and exploitation and (2) gender and exploitation.

Those who started their first job when aged under 16 were significantly more likely to report verbal harassment (55.3%) and bullying (35.2%) than older respondents aged 16-17 (39.7% and 20.6%, respectively).

This is consistent with other research showing younger teenagers are more [vulnerable](#) to being exploited, because they may not understand workplace agreements and laws, and be more frightened to report incorrect pay or incidents.

Females were significantly more likely to report economic exploitation (49.1%) and [sexual harassment](#) (16.6%) compared to their male counterparts (34.5% and 5.2%, respectively).

Co-workers, supervisors and employers were largely responsible for bullying and exposing teenagers to unsafe work conditions.

Customers were largely responsible for harassment and physical abuse.

Respondents also reported many instances where other workers or managers (including owners) witnessed exploitative behaviour but failed to intervene.

Reducing workplace exploitation

Our analysis of survey data indicates workplaces can do much more to protect young people from victimisation.

Low management supervision in retail and hospitality settings, for example, puts females under 16 at high risk of [harassment](#) and economic exploitation.

To improve the situation, governments and workplace regulators should more actively monitor, investigate and enforce the laws and regulations. Specifically those surrounding child employment, fair work, pay and superannuation, and [workplace](#) health and safety.

Governments and industry groups also need to more effectively engage with employers to make them more aware of their legal obligations.

There is also a role for technology that can help young people monitor their working conditions. The Fair Work Ombudsman's ["Record My Hours"](#) smartphone app, for example.

Apps like this can help young staff track their hours and pay. They could also be modified to enable the reporting of incidents of abuse or incorrect pay.

In recent years we have lurched from one worker underpayment and exploitation scandal to another. Our research indicates this problem may be more grave and pervasive than we have imagined. If that is the case, we must do better.

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