

Sonder Insights

# Customer aggression

The risk to employees and businesses

# Australian and New Zealand workers are facing rising aggression and a lack of support

Three quarters of employees in customer-facing roles experience customer aggression, and a quarter face it every week or more. That's according to a survey of 2,007 Australian and New Zealand employees, commissioned by Sonder.

The survey also found that 29% of those workers didn't receive any support from their employer, and that people in customer-facing roles are more likely to take unplanned days off, indicating the toll this takes on the individual, and the ripple effect on businesses.

This new report delves into the stats, with expert commentary on strategies to reduce the risk and impact of customer aggression and threatening behaviour.

Source: September 2023, McGregor Tan survey of employees in Australia and New Zealand who were working a minimum of 30 hours per week.

# Contents

<b>The rise in customer aggression</b>	<b>4</b>
New statistics reveal frontline workers are facing rising aggression, often alone	
<b>The impact on employees and businesses</b>	<b>10</b>
The link between these incidents and absenteeism, turnover and psychosocial risk	
<b>How businesses can provide much-needed support</b>	<b>15</b>
The challenges faced by leaders, and an insight into Psychological First Aid	
<b>How Sonder provides support to frontline workers</b>	<b>19</b>
How forward-thinking businesses are taking preventative measures to reduce risk	

Section 1.0

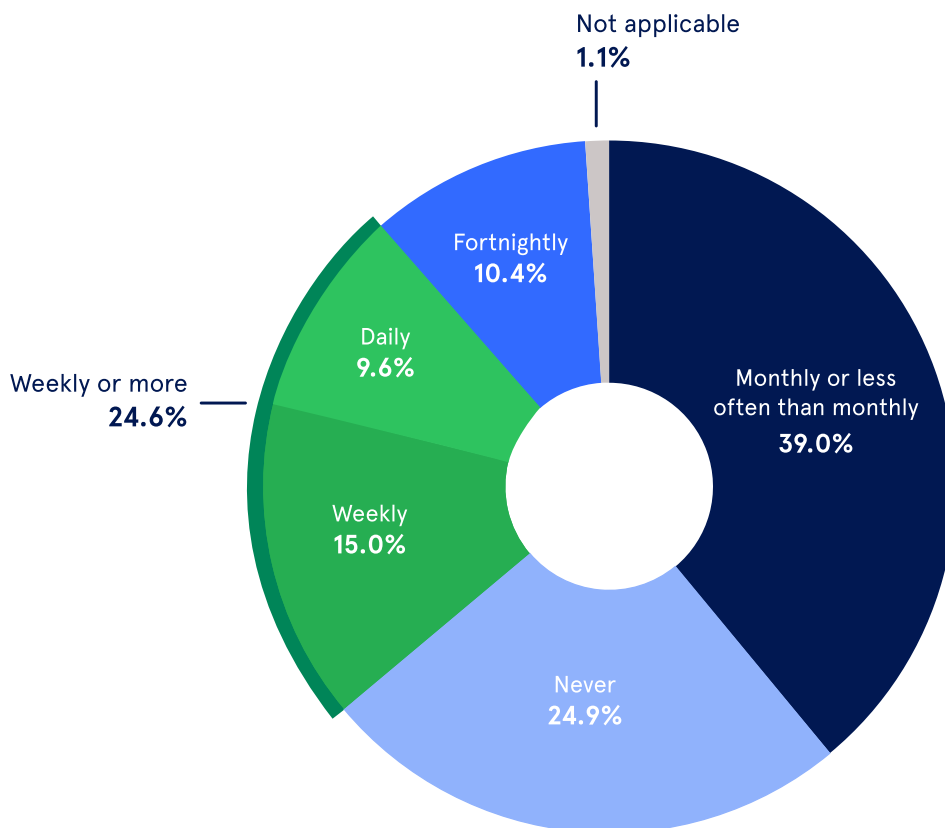
# The rise in customer aggression

# A quarter of employees in customer-facing roles experience customer aggression once a week, or more

Customer aggression is on the rise. According to our survey, 75% of employees in customer-facing roles experience customer aggression, and 25% face it at least weekly.

This is an increase from our 2022 survey data, in which 18% said they experienced customer aggression weekly or more.

## How often do you experience customer aggression?



Disclaimer: Only respondents in customer-facing roles were asked this question



## The rise in customer aggression

This trend is supported by Sonder customer data, covering the hundreds of thousands employees to which Sonder provides medical, safety and mental health support.

From 2022 - 2023, Sonder recorded 114% more 'critical incidents' year-on-year. Critical incidents are defined as 'a workplace event that has the potential to cause trauma to team members who have experienced or witnessed the event'. Not only are more of these critical incidents being recorded, the severity is also increasing. More incidents now involve a police incident, victim of assault/ violence or a safety concern.

In 2022,

28%

of critical incidents involved a police incident, victim assault or violence or a safety concern.

In 2023 that rose to

32%

This number looks set to rise further.

In January this year

40%

of critical incidents recorded involved a police incident, victim assault/ violence or a safety concern.

That's a

16%

increase vs the same period in January 2023.

90% of critical incidents reported to Sonder occurred within skilled-based workforces, which include customer-facing roles in the retail trade, accommodation and food services, transport and postal services.



*"We're seeing more incidents in the retail and hospitality space involving the police and emergency services, which indicates a heightened level of danger and potential trauma for the employees involved."*

**Casey Doyle** - Critical Incident Manager, Sonder

Businesses in Australia have been responding to this rising aggression with initiatives like Retail Drinks' Safe to Serve. Launched in December 2023, its goal is to foster a secure, respectful environment for workers. In comments made for the launch, Gavin Saunders, CEO at Liquor Marketing Group said:

*"No one should ever feel unsafe at work. Sadly, those working in retail liquor stores experience more abuse and violence than most. Any steps to reduce crime and increase safety in the industry, particularly over the busy Christmas period, is welcome."*

**Gavin Saunders** - CEO, Liquor Marketing Group

## What's causing this aggression?

In previous years, retail and hospitality leaders have pointed to the pandemic and its restrictions as a catalyst for a rise in threatening behaviour from customers.

Now in 2024, the pressure of the high cost of living is thought to be a contributing factor. Sonder's Co-Founder and COO Peter Burnheim told HRD Magazine:



*"Frontline staff are taking the brunt of it. No doubt, the general stress in the broader community around cost of living is potentially having people act in a way that they probably would not like to with frontline workers. And that customer aggression is really impacting employee wellbeing."*

**Peter Burnheim** - Co-Founder and COO, Sonder

**Safe Work Australia** list the following as factors that increase the likelihood of violent or aggressive behaviour:

- Providing care or services to people who are distressed, confused, afraid, ill, affected by drugs or alcohol or receiving unwelcome or involuntary treatment
- Enforcement activities (e.g. the activities of police, prison officers or parking inspectors)
- Working in high crime areas
- Handling valuable or restricted items (e.g. cash or medicines)
- Poor visibility in the workplace (e.g. poor lighting or barriers)
- Restricted movement in the workplace (e.g. limited exit points)
- Working alone, in isolation or in a remote area with the inability to call for assistance
- Working offsite or in the community
- Working in unpredictable environments (e.g. where other people may pose a risk to workers' safety such as at a client's home)
- Interacting with customers, either face-to-face, on the phone or online
- Service methods or policies that cause or escalate frustration, anger, misunderstanding or conflict (e.g. low staffing levels, customer service policies, setting unreasonable expectations of the services an organisation or workers can provide).





# Workers experiencing aggression aren't being adequately supported

According to our survey

**29%**

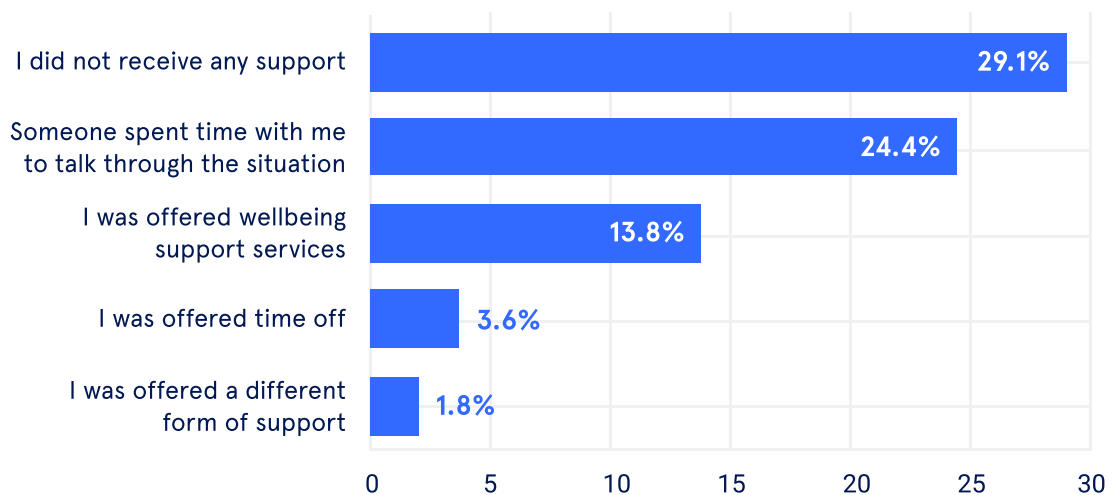
of employees who experienced customer aggression did not receive any support.

With only

**24%**

of respondents being given the opportunity to talk through the incident.

## After experiencing customer aggression, did you experience any of the following forms of support? (Select all that apply)



Disclaimer: Only respondents in customer-facing roles were asked this question

Retail, healthcare and social assistance are least likely to receive support after threatening behaviour from customers. 39.6% of those working in retail, healthcare and social assistance said they did not receive post-incident support.

## Section 2.0

# The impact on employees and businesses

# Employees

Employees in customer-facing roles represent a vast, diverse subset of people. This widespread issue is impacting those in retail, hospitality, entertainment, health care, social assistance and more.

This true story from a Sonder member illustrates how customer aggression can impact both individuals and employers.

## Sonder Member Story

A 22-year old retail worker had been verbally and physically assaulted by a customer at work. She reported the incident to her manager, who had asked her to take a 20-minute break and to call a support person. The manager stayed with the customer while the employee contacted Sonder.

---

### Following the incident:

- The worker:
  - Wasn't eating or attending work as she didn't feel safe
  - Was experiencing consequent financial issues
  - Revealed that she had experienced sexual harassment by a customer at the same store six months earlier, and that the incidents had triggered her to restart using drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism
  - The member's manager also sought support as they felt they had let the worker and wider team down
  - The member's colleagues noted that she was struggling to come back to work, so their perception of workplace safety had also decreased



*"This member needed support to get her back on track and back to work. But we also supported management so that they could improve on the culture in the workplace and also improve on their knowledge about mental health."*

**Louise Butler** - Psychology Manager, Sonder

While Sonder was able to work with the member and manager to address these issues, it's clear the results of the incident were far reaching. The ripple effect of this incident was felt in the members personal life, professional life and the workplace as a whole.



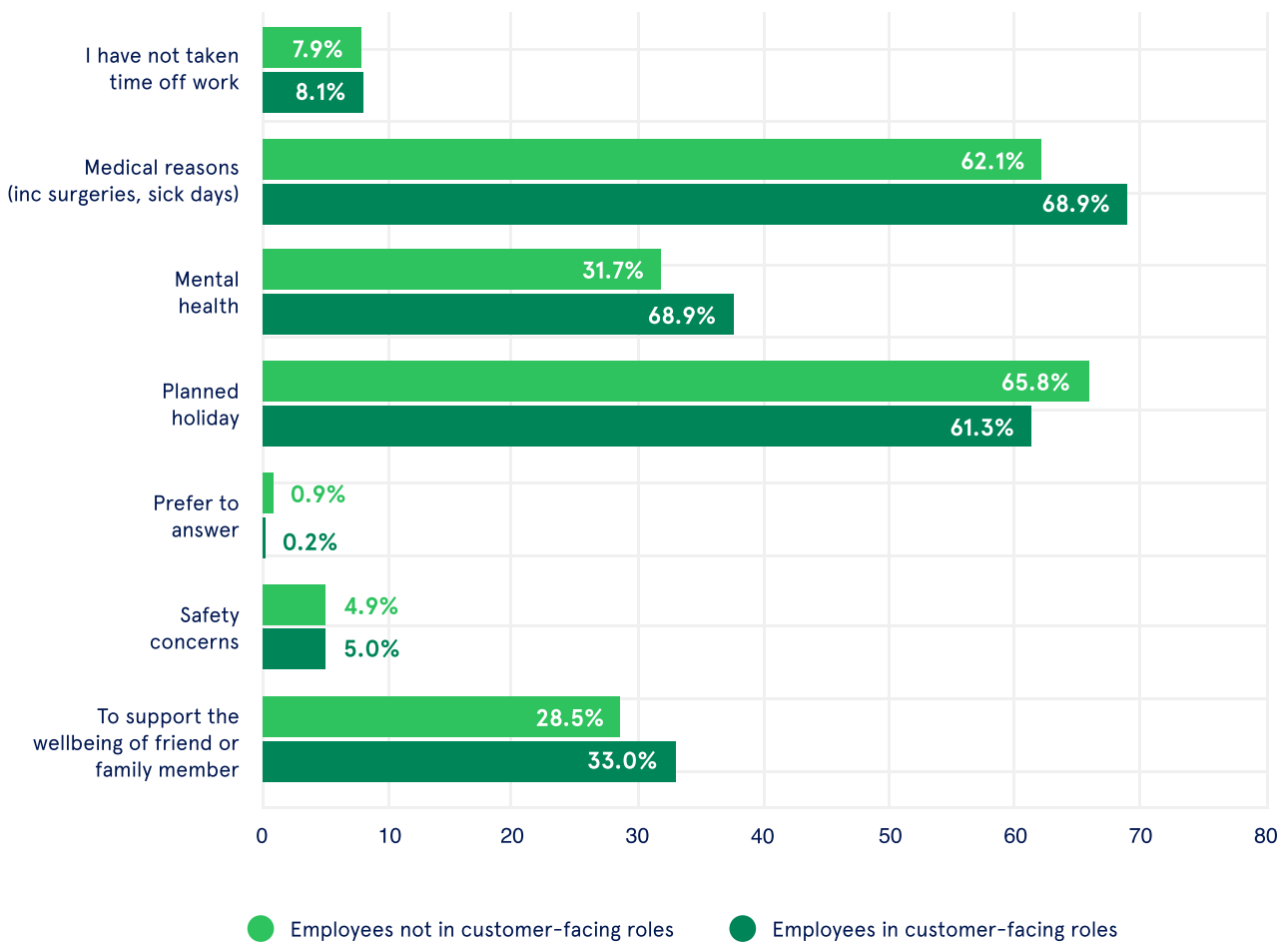
# Businesses

## Absenteeism

Employees in customer-facing roles are more likely to take unplanned days off than those who don't deal directly with customers or clients.

According to our survey, 68.9% of those in customer facing roles took time off work for medical reasons in the past twelve months, (vs 62.1% in the non customer facing cohort) and 37.6% took time off for mental health reasons (vs 31.7% in the non customer facing cohort).

### In the past 12 months, have you taken time off work for any of the following reasons?





This has a huge impact on businesses. In Australia, absenteeism costs, on average, \$3,500 per employee per annum, according to [data from Direct Health Solutions](#). In addition to leave entitlements, organisations can incur significant costs to cover shifts. This may include paying more for agency staff or overtime, plus the administrative costs associated with managing sick leave and absence processes.

People in customer-facing roles are

6.8%

more likely to take time off for medical reasons and

5.9%

more likely to take time off for mental health reasons - than employees in non customer-facing roles.

In 2022, [HR Leader](#) found that in an ASX-listed company, the total cost of employee absence (excluding turnover) was over \$33m.

Another ripple effect of unplanned leave is the risk to a business' reputation. If shifts can't be covered, then services can't be performed adequately. A restaurant might lack the staff it needs to deliver high customer service. A delivery company might fail to deliver packages as promised. Both could attract customer complaints and potentially lead to more threatening behaviour.

## Psychosocial Risk

Following the release of [ISO 45003](#) in June 2021, amendments to the Work Health and Safety Act 2011 were introduced and new regulations came into force for a Person Conducting a Business or Undertaking (PCBU) in Australia, regarding the identification and management of hazards and risks to workers' psychological health and safety.

From late 2023, the new regulations stipulate that employers must take reasonable, practical steps to manage psychosocial risks. Since both the 'exposure to traumatic events' and 'violence and aggression' fall into this category, businesses must take steps to control these risks in the workplace.

There are serious implications for failing to do so, which include financial, legal and reputational risks. Penalties differ from state to state, but in NSW, if a company is found to have failed to eliminate, or minimise, psychosocial risks so far as is reasonably practicable, it may be subject to enforcement action by [SafeWork NSW](#).

Employers can be prosecuted for not providing appropriate working conditions or support, and it can cost a business thousands of dollars.

Section 3.0

**How businesses  
can provide  
much-needed  
support**

# What's standing in their way?

Businesses want to reduce the frequency and severity of customer aggression incidents and provide greater support to their teams. But two key challenges remain.

## 1. Providing nuanced care at scale

To fulfil workplace health and safety duties and mitigate psychosocial risk, businesses need to provide personalised care to their people, particularly following an incident of customer aggression. However, it's unlikely that leaders have the time or skills to provide the nuanced care needed at such scale. It's also possible that they might be struggling to cope with this aggression themselves.

Sometimes, threatening behaviour can even trigger complex issues for an employee, who will then need specialist, professional care.

## 2. 'The customer is always right'

This slogan is used as a motto by many well-meaning organisations looking to deliver excellent customer service. And as the prevalence of online reviews continues to grow, businesses are under pressure to keep their customers happy at all costs. This can make managers reluctant to side with staff when incidents with customers arise.



*"Industry-wide, we need to challenge the notion that the customer is always right. At a certain point, a customer stops being a customer and starts becoming a risk."*

**Rebecca Goulter** - Former Director of Marketing and Events, National Retail Association

'Repeat offending' is still a significant issue for workers. In 2023, The Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association (SDA) found that 52% of workers reported that the same customer was abusive or violent towards them on more than one occasion (compared to the 2021 result of 38.5%). This illustrates the importance of setting boundaries for acceptable behaviour from customers, to prevent reoccurring issues.

Ahead of the 2023 Christmas period the SDA, the National Retail Association (NRA), and the Shopping Centre Council of Australia (SCCA) partnered to combat the rising incidents against retail workers. In-centre digital advertising in 150+ shopping centres delivered messages including "Don't abuse staff" to customers.



# How businesses can provide support

Customer aggression can be traumatic. However it is a myth that all employees need psychological debriefing after a critical incident at work.

In fact, psychological debriefing has been found to be not the best clinical practice, and the evidence suggests that, "psychological debriefing is ineffective and has adverse long-term effects. It is not an appropriate treatment for trauma victims."

While workplaces may call upon counsellors to offer immediate assistance after traumatic events, more profound benefits can be found by offering employees help when they truly need it, often weeks or months later.

Casey Doyle, Critical Incident Manager at Sonder says the lack of support provided by employers after a critical incident can be fuelled by outdated assumptions of when and how employees might be affected or need supporting.



*"It's clear from the incidents we manage that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to post-incident support. It's not uncommon for us to see affected employees reach out and engage in Sonder's support via chat at 2am, up to three or four weeks after an incident."*

**Casey Doyle** - Critical Incident Manager, Sonder

## Psychological First Aid (PFA)

PFA is the modern approach Sonder takes to critical incidents. This involves helping people feel safe, connected to others, calm and hopeful, and ensuring access to physical, emotional and social support. It aims to reduce initial distress, meet current needs, promote flexible coping and encourage adjustment.

"Most people recover naturally from trauma, without the need for formal mental health intervention. For individuals who might benefit from trauma support, this is best provided in a style, on a timeframe, and by a practitioner who best suits the needs of that individual," says Sonder's Dr Phillips.

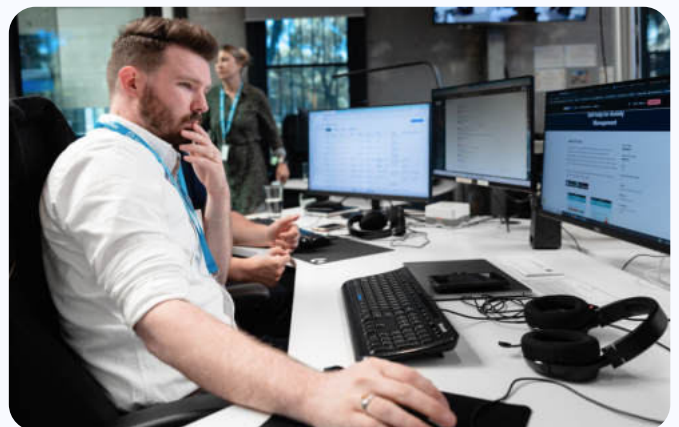


## Section 4.0

# How Sonder provides support to frontline workers

# **Sonder provides support during and after incidents of customer aggression with 24/7 access to preventative tools and a nationwide on-the-ground response team.**

This unique combination of proactive digital services and responsive human support reduces harm, drives early intervention and restores the health and safety of employees quickly.



## During an incident

### In-app support

With the Sonder app, members have access to support in their palm, 24/7. This provides peace of mind for shift or lone workers, who know they can reach out and speak to a real person in seconds.

Via instant chat or a phone call, Sonder's member support team can help them with de-escalation tactics, or coordinate with emergency services as needed.

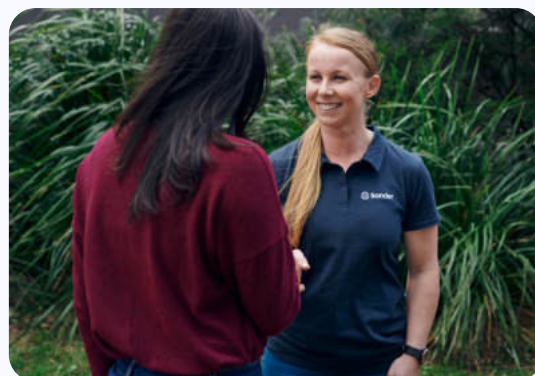


*"We had an incident overnight with an aggressive customer. Sonder was used at about 1am this morning. After helping our employee call the Police, the support staff performed hourly check-ins. Our employee described his Sonder experience as being very good and they were very appreciative of the support."*

**Sonder Customer**

### On-the-ground responders

Sonder has a network of highly-trained responders who are ready to travel and provide in-person assistance in times of critical need. Across Australia, New Zealand and the UK, Sonder has 148 responders, many of whom have a background in the emergency services, medical, or the military and all are trained in psychological first aid.



# 93%

of Sonder members were satisfied with Sonder's response to critical incidents, which included customer aggression. (Sonder Customer Satisfaction Score survey)

Sonder members on the support they received following critical incidents:

*"The process was very easy to follow. Sonder was very responsive and able to attend one of our sites with short notice."*

*"The response was prompt and the gentleman they sent was nothing short of amazing"*

*"They were very supportive of the horrible situation we were experiencing in one of our stores. Very attentive to the needs of the situation and responded to all aspects of support requested."*

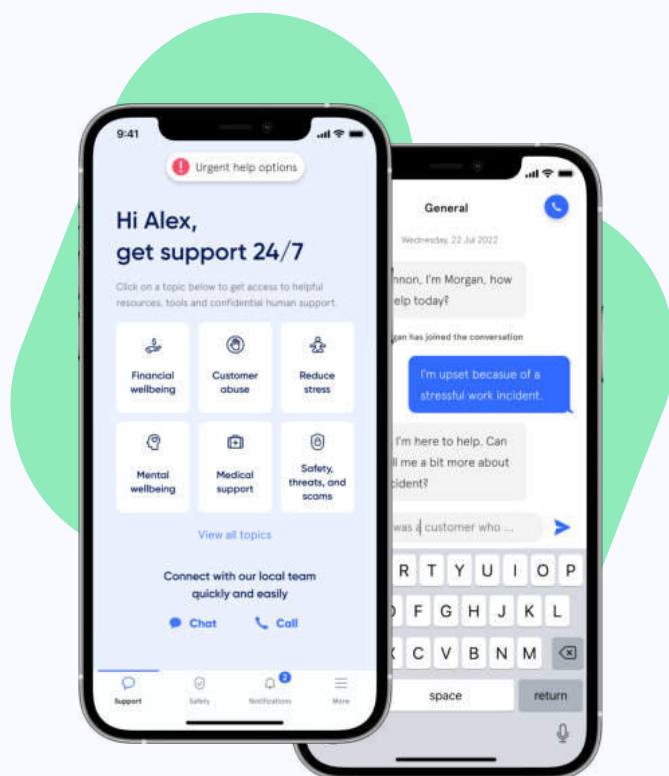
## After an incident

### In-app support

Whether it's the next day, week or month, Sonder members can use the app to access medical and mental health support. Sonder's highly-trained member support team will then triage the request, to determine the most helpful path forward and follow up with the member, to see how they're getting on.

### On-the-ground responders

Sonder responders can visit a site following an incident of customer aggression to provide teams with face-to-face support. Responders will work with the local management team and with those affected to deliver personalised care, depending on the issues that member is dealing with, as well as providing them the knowledge of pathways to further support.

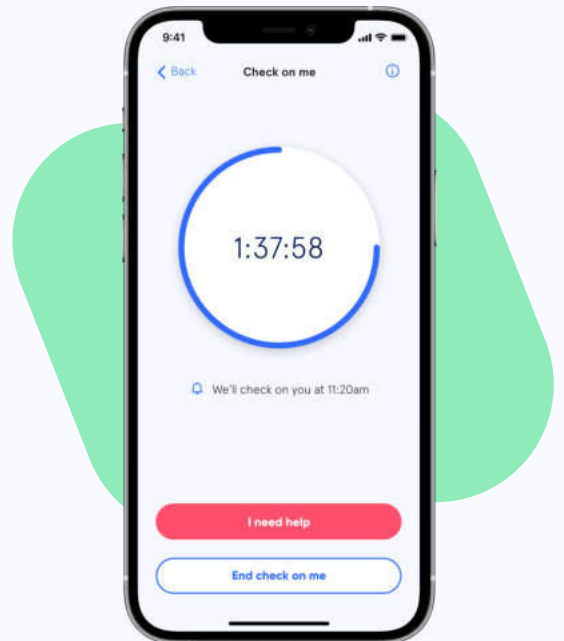


# Early intervention

## Check on me

Sonder's safety features, like the 'Check on me' tool, are being used by businesses to prevent the occurrence and severity of customer aggression, among other workplace risks.

'Check on me' is a discreet safety check-up. Members can set a time that suits (1am is the average 'Check on me' start time). When that time comes, the member can confirm they are fine, otherwise someone from Sonder's 24/7 member support team will reach out, and escalate the case as needed.



## Sonder Case Study

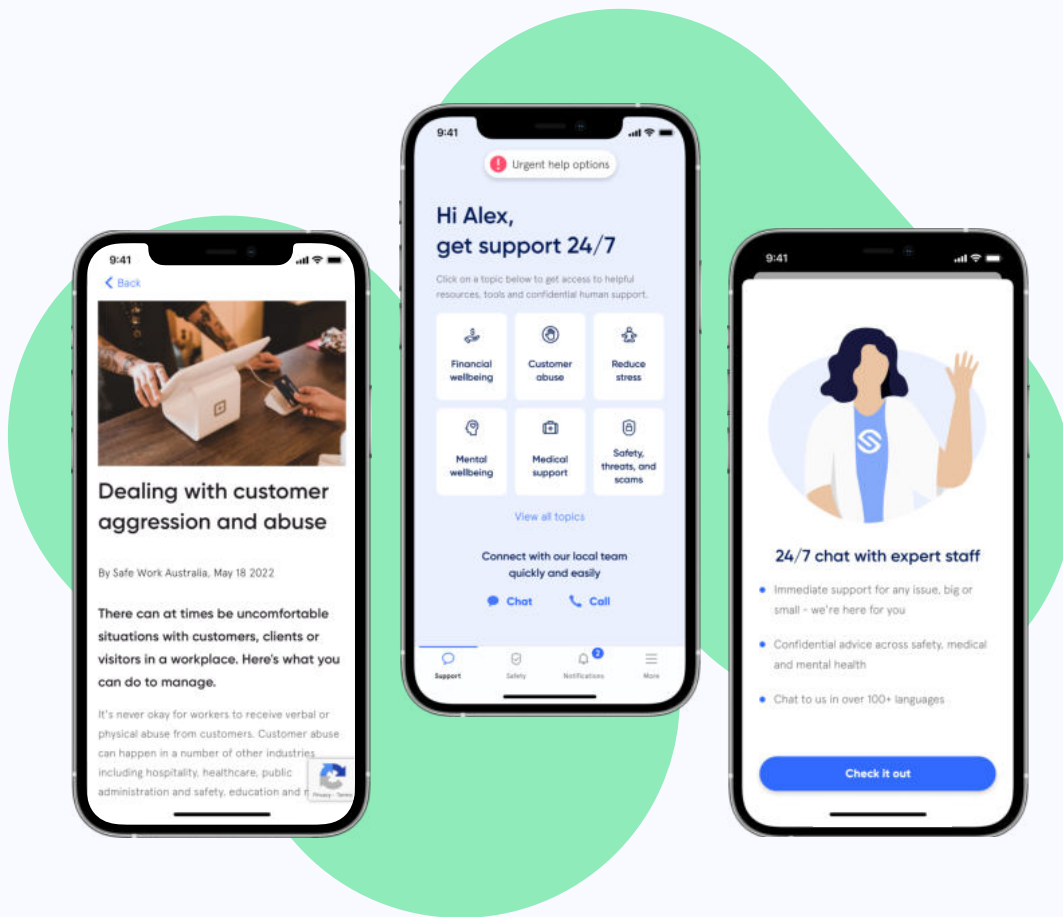
### TFE hotels

Sonder customer TFE Hotels has mandated that the 'Check on me' safety feature is used every 30 minutes when shift managers are working alone. Phil Rice, Director of Safety and Wellbeing, notes that this straightforward process has proven to be a simple yet effective way to reduce their risk against key safety and wellbeing hazards.

"The mandated use of Sonder's 'Check on me' is our preferred approach because if someone is unwell or unsafe in some way we want to minimise the length of time as much as practically possible. This approach works well for our people and our business."

At TFE, the use of 'Check on me' has brought peace of mind to both employees and the wider business, and has been used a staggering 65,865 times in the last 12 months. In tandem, TFE Hotels actively encourages the adoption of the 'Track my journey' app feature, especially for team members commuting to and from work.





## Resources

Within the app, articles on de-escalation tactics and advice from Safe Work Australia give people in customer-facing industries practical, actionable advice. This kind of information empowers teams to take the steps they need to protect themselves before an event occurs.

## Data

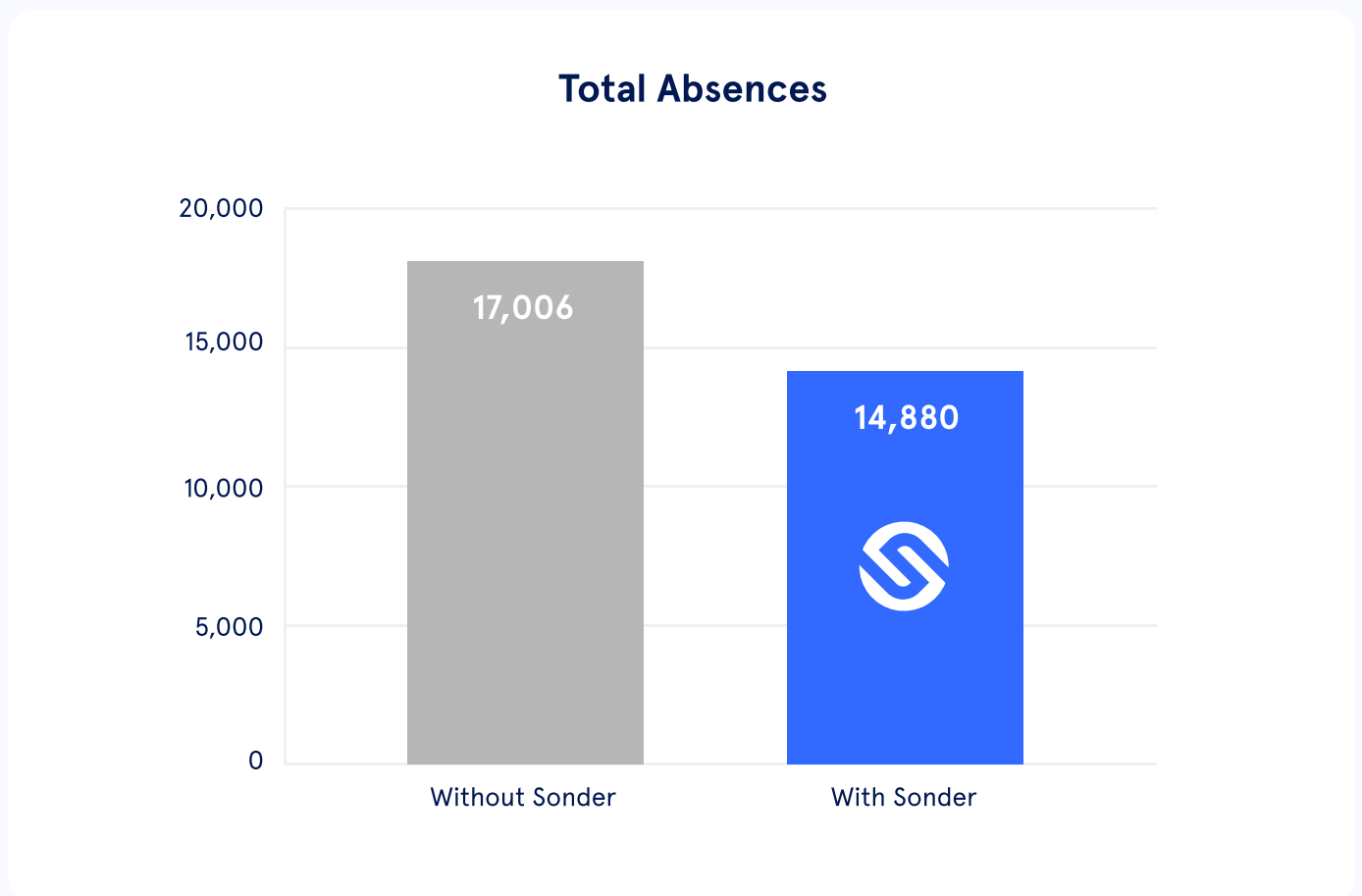
Businesses can use Sonder's real-time data to get ahead of their workforce health, safety and wellbeing challenges. Through a dashboard, businesses can track the health and safety status of their dispersed teams, helping them to identify trends and respond to the unique needs of their people. Armed with this information, leadership teams may bolster the support for locations, or shifts, that appear to be at a higher risk of aggressive customer incidents.

# Reduced absenteeism and turnover

Through proactive digital services and responsive human support, Sonder customers have been able to reduce absenteeism and turnover within their organisation.

## Absenteeism

Self-reported data from Sonder members indicates an average reduction in unplanned absences by up to 12.5% for those who engage with our platform.

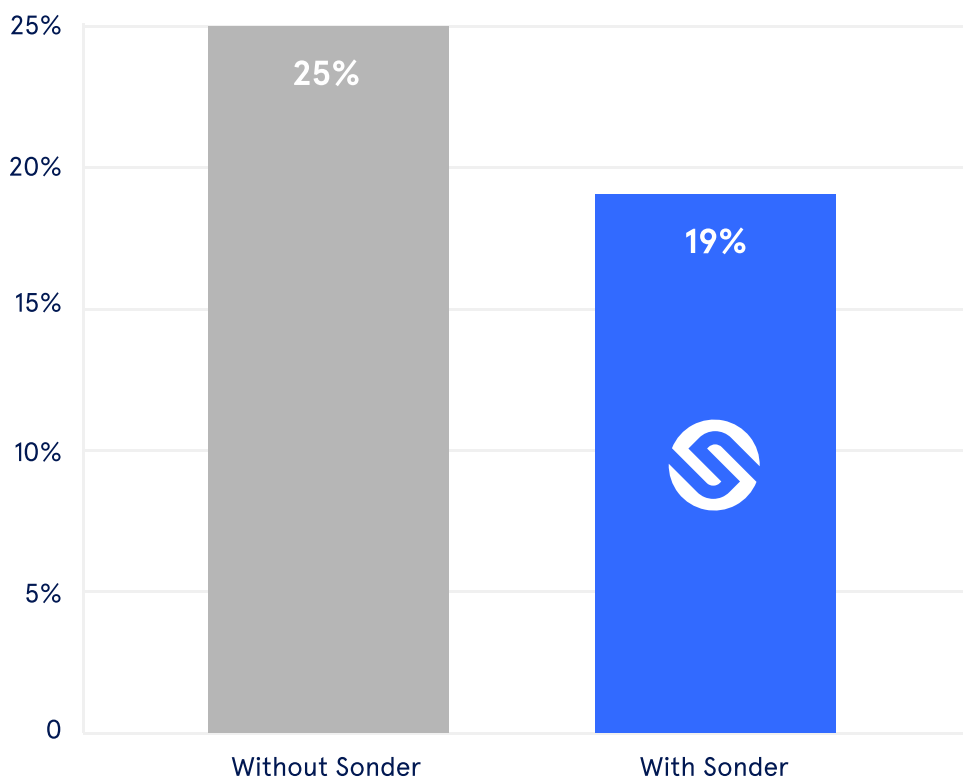


## Turnover

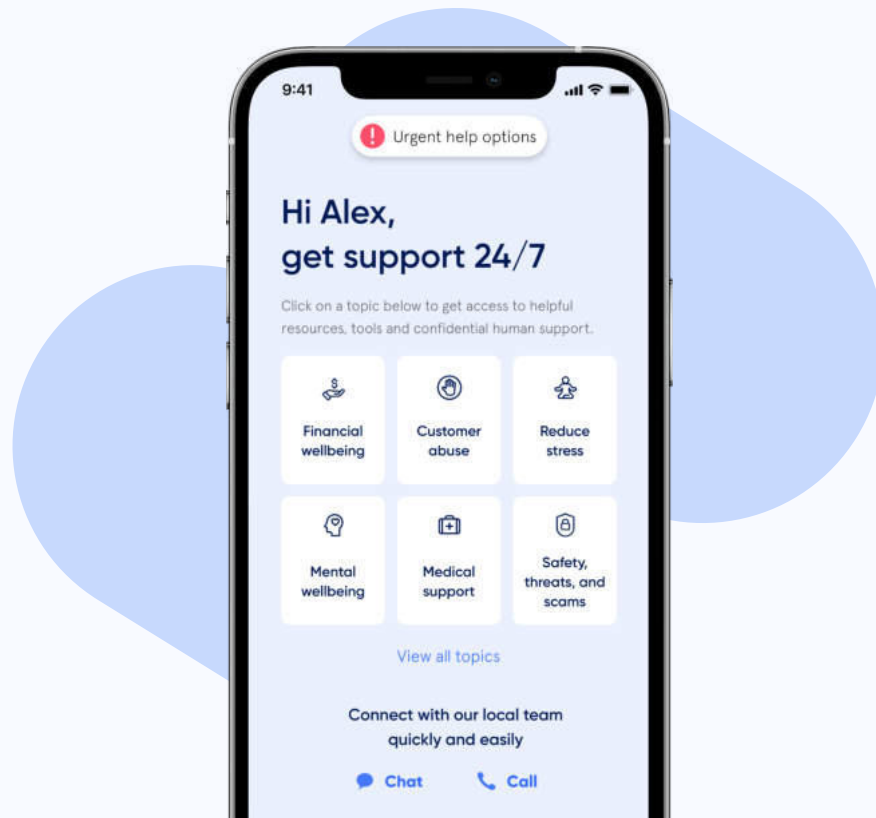
Employee turnover can be costly. With recruitment fees, time spent interviewing and training, not to mention the knowledge loss, it's easy to see why an employee choosing to leave can impact a business' bottom line.

Impact to retention: Using data matching between client HR labour turnover data and Sonder usage data, analysis of current Sonder clients has shown to improve retention by 6% - an ROI of around \$3.50 - \$4 for every dollar spent on Sonder (see graphic below - analysis from a mid-sized client).

### Labour Turnover Impact



**\$1 spent on Sonder = \$3.50-\$4 saved**



## Book a demo to see Sonder's features in action

Discover how Sonder's proactive digital services and responsive human support reduces harm, drives early intervention and restores the health and safety of employees.

[Book a demo](#)

## Trusted by



DiJONES

Best&Less



Aje.



Charter Hall



## Accreditations



Australia



Australia



New Zealand



Te Kaunihera  
Rata o  
Aotearoa

Medical  
Council of  
New Zealand

New Zealand



United Kingdom