Community Legal Centres Australia

VISION FOR JUSTICE

Community Legal Centres Workforce: the national picture

The community legal centres workforce is highly skilled, values-driven, and overwhelmingly comprised of women.

July 2026

INTRODUCTION

Between November 2025 and February 2026, Community Legal Centres Australia conducted its first national survey of workers across the community legal sector. The survey was open to paid workers at community legal centres, Women's Legal Services, Family Violence Prevention Legal Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services that are part of our national membership network in NSW, Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory.

Across these six jurisdictions, we received over 700 responses – a response rate of about 23%. State community legal sector peaks in Queensland and Western Australia conducted independent surveys in 2025 and 2026 respectively. This National Snapshot of Community Legal Sector Workforce Demographics integrates aggregated data from these surveys.

Results from this first national survey of community legal sector workers show that our workforce is highly skilled, values-driven, and overwhelmingly made up by women. We employ a range of allied professional workers alongside lawyers to deliver the unique model of holistic service delivery our sector pioneered and has championed for decades.

Workers in our sector are drawn to community legal centres because of their strong sense of justice and a desire to help people. However, those looking to leave are most commonly looking for better wages and opportunities for career advancement.

Our workforce is young, particularly our lawyers. Young people in our sector are more likely to hold a practising certificate than older workers, and young lawyers are more likely than workers in other professions and higher age brackets to be looking for another job. There is a visible drop-off in mid-career workers (aged in their thirties and forties) at regional and remote centres.

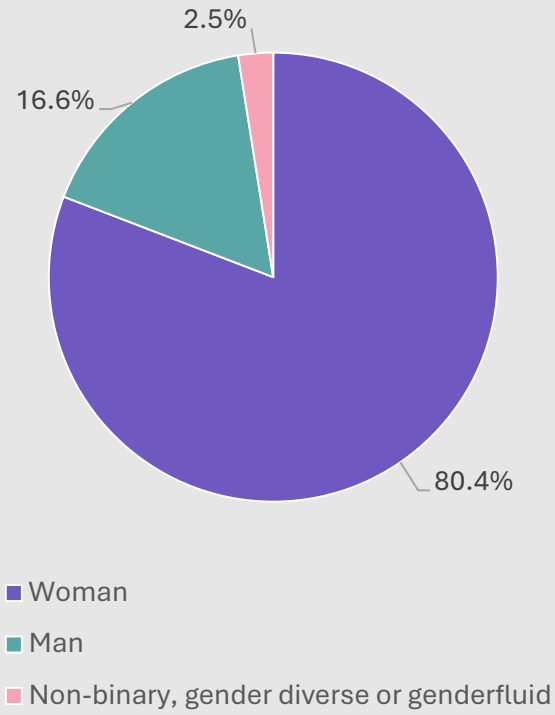
These results support empirical and anecdotal evidence we've gathered from centres over recent years about the main workforce challenges our sector faces nationally. The community legal sector attracts skilled, values driven women to our workforce. Retention starts to break down at the early to mid-career stage, driven by factors including pay, conditions and career progression. The result is a loss of experience and capability (skills hollowing out) and is most pronounced in regional and remote centres. This has direct consequences for service capacity and access to justice for people and communities.

The development of forthcoming NAJP Workforce Strategy provides an opportunity to strengthen the sector's workforce and its ability to deliver access to justice outcomes across Australia.

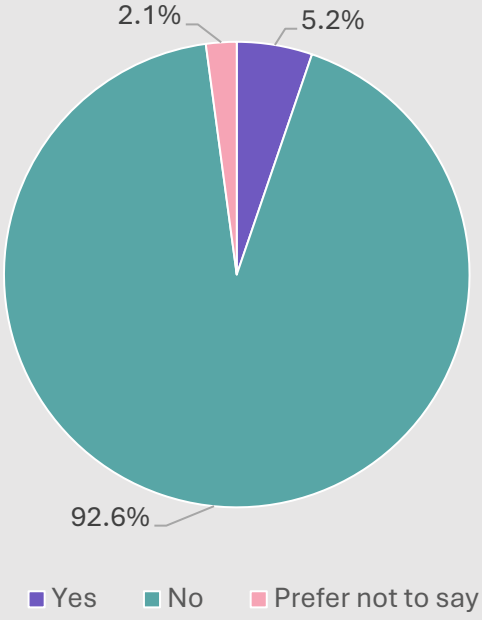
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GENDER[1]



FIRST NATIONS[2]



Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or South Sea Islander

Just over 80% of our workforce is made up by women; another 2.5% of workers are non-binary or gender diverse. This follows through into leadership: 78.6% of leaders in our sector are women and 2.1% are non-binary or gender diverse.[3] In comparison, just 42% of partners in large law firms are women,[4] despite women making up 58% of the legal professional nationally. Five per cent of our workforce is made up of Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or South Sea Islander people. This rises to above 6% for workers in leadership roles.[5]

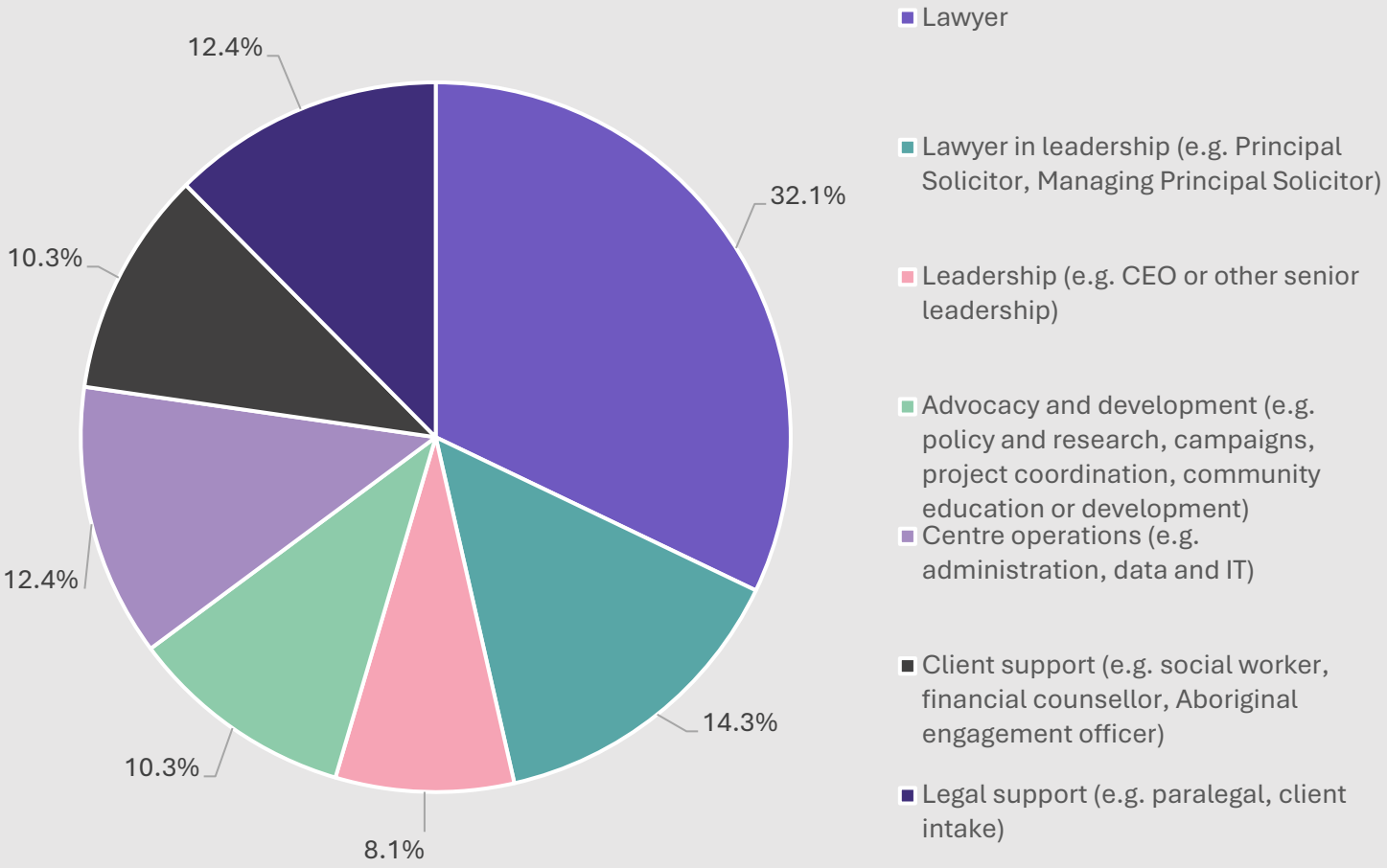
There are positives to a predominantly female workforce. However, it also means that workforce challenges including low pay,[6] disproportionately impact women and contribute to the national gender pay gap.

In the 2024-25 and 2025-26 budgets, the Federal Government provided modest injections to bring wages for workers at community legal centres, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services and Family Violence Prevention and Legal Services slightly closer to Legal Aid Commission wages. However, the small uplift fell far short of what is needed to deliver pay parity.

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ROLES[7]

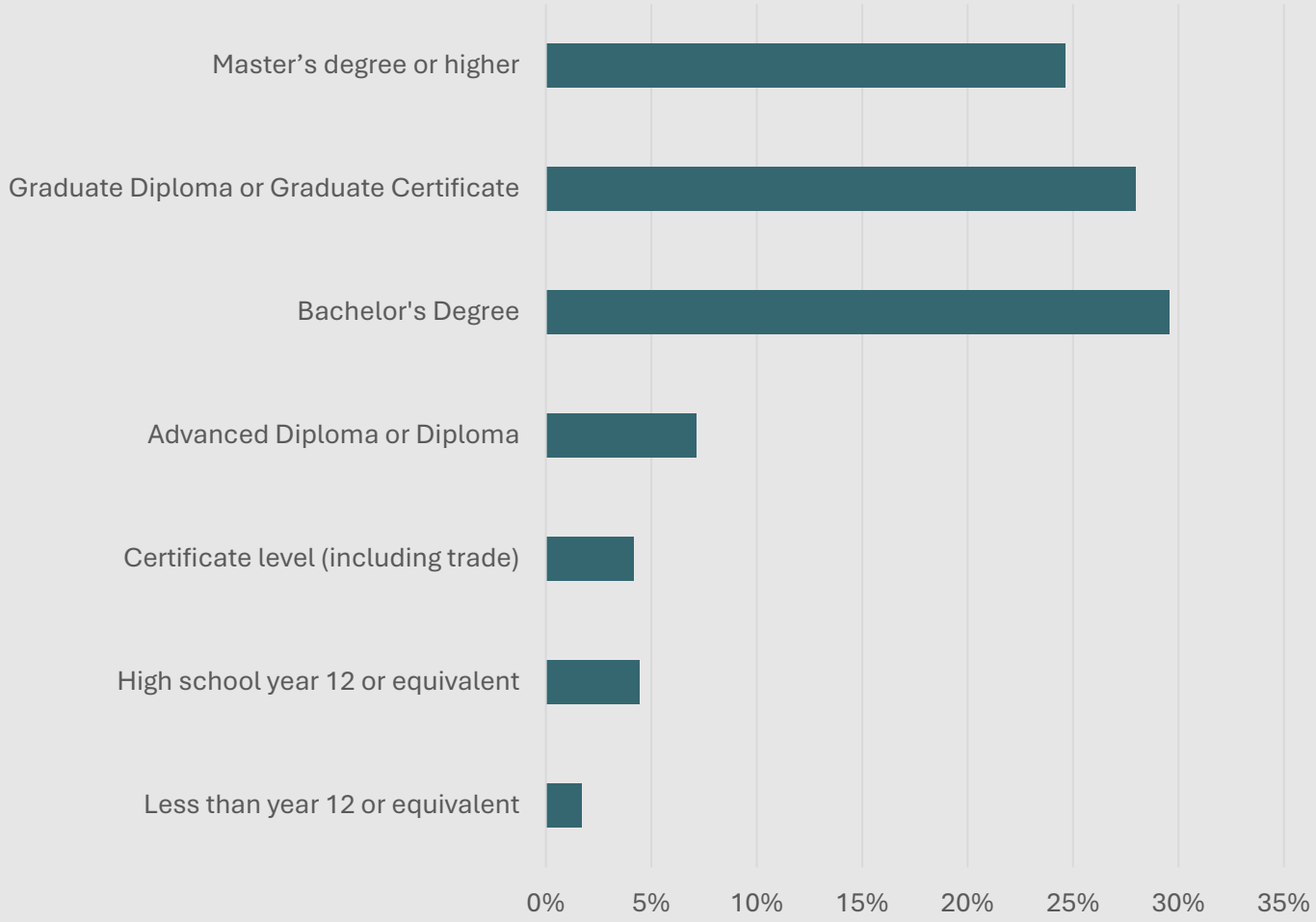


Our sector proudly champions an integrated practice model. As well as solicitors, centres employ a range of allied professionals like social workers, education or training workers, advocates (including tenant or disability advocates) and identified Aboriginal community engagement, support and development workers, to prioritise trauma-informed, holistic, culturally safe practice. Combined, over 20% of our workforce is made up of these allied professionals and advocates.

Overall, 50% of our workforce are or have been practising lawyers. In addition to the 32% of workers employed as lawyers, 14% of people in leadership roles hold a current legal practising certificate, including Principal Solicitors and Managing Principal Solicitors. A small proportion of workers in other role categories also hold a current legal practising certificate (in particular, those working in advocacy and development, which can include lawyers working in a law reform role).

People working in our sector as lawyers are more likely to work full-time than people working in other roles in our sector.[8]

EDUCATION[9]



Highest level of education

Our workforce is highly educated, with over half holding a graduate level qualification, master's degree, or higher.

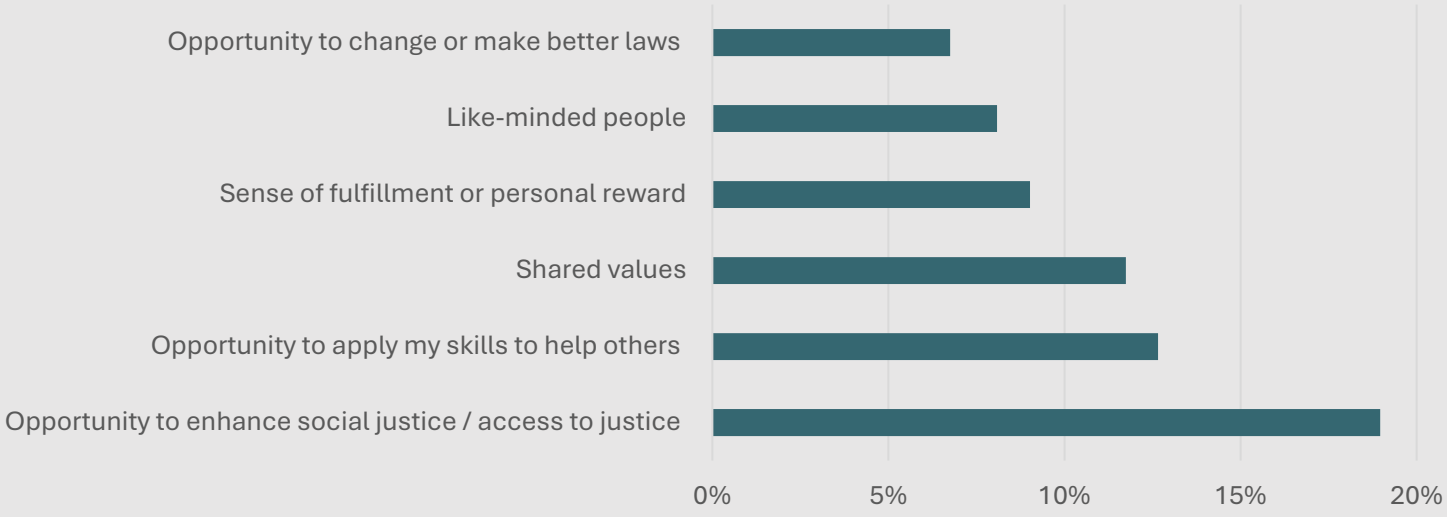
EMPLOYMENT JOURNEY

Workers tend to come to community legal centres from the broader community sector.



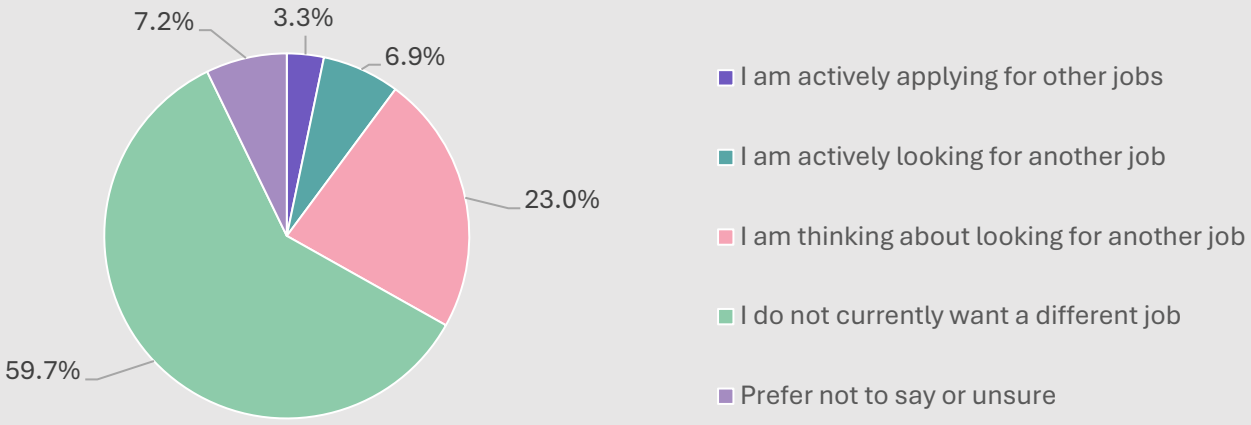
Most recent job prior to this community legal centre. Top 6 responses, as a % of respondents.[10]

Workers are drawn to community legal centres because of their strong sense of justice and a desire to help people.



What most attracted you to working in a community legal centre? Top 6 answers shown, as a % of all answers provided.[11]

On its own, values alignment is not enough to keep everyone in the sector.



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Sixty per cent of workers in our sector are not currently looking for another role. Another 23% are thinking about changing roles and about 10% are actively looking or applying for another role. Further analysis of these figures reveals that lawyers and those who have been in the sector for 2-5 years are more likely to be thinking about or looking for a new job.

Workers who are leaving community legal centres are looking for better pay and career prospects.

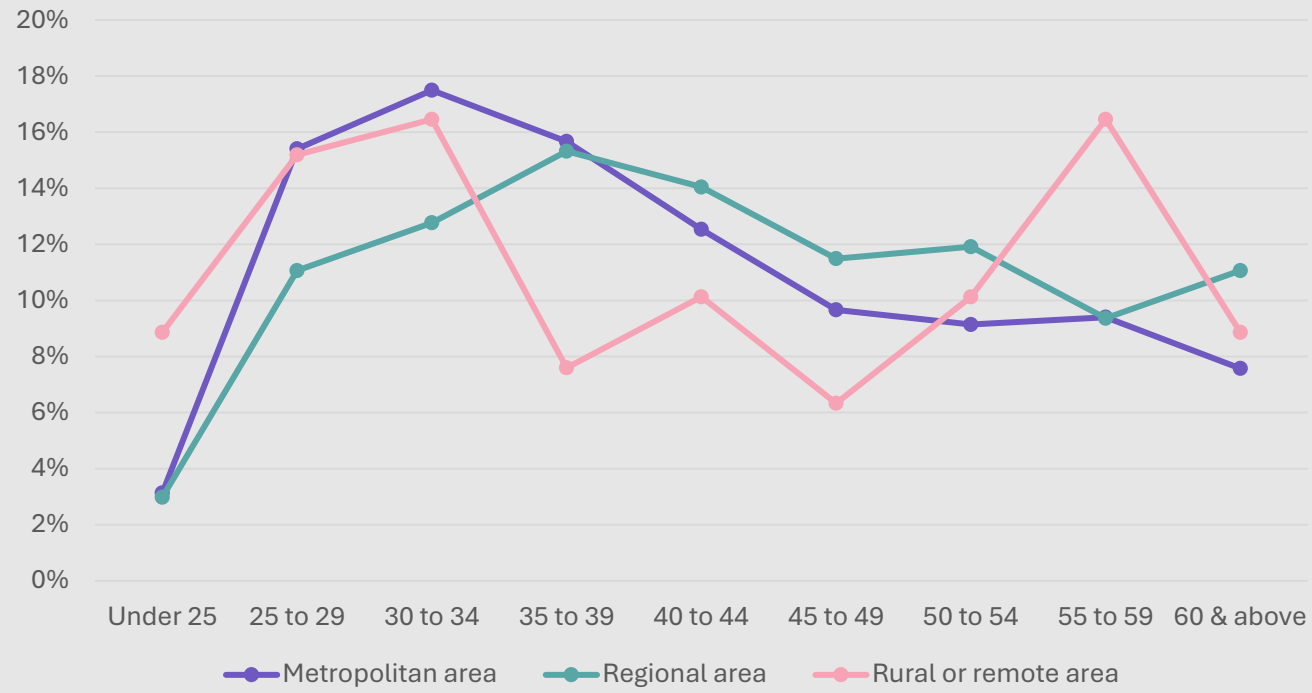


If you are looking, or applying for a different job, what are your main reasons for this? Top 6 answers, as a % of all answers provided[13]

Repeated *State of the Sector* surveys have shown that our sector struggles with high vacancies and turnover rates – particularly in regional and remote areas. Through these surveys, community legal centres consistently report 'inadequate remuneration' and 'lack of career pathways' as amongst the biggest challenges they face in attracting and retaining staff.[14] This is now reflected in responses from workers themselves, who report pay and career prospects as the main drivers for them to consider changing jobs.

People aged 35-49 are under-represented at rural and remote community legal centres.

% of the workers in each area that is each age group[15]



Anecdotal evidence from workers and centres suggests that the drop in workers aged in their 30s and 40s at rural and remote community legal centres is connected to the combination of low wages and a lack of services in those areas.

Workforce challenges are heightened for regional and remote community legal centres – especially very remote centres. The cost-of-living and rental crises contribute to this.

Rental housing is limited and what's available is often very expensive. Centres' lack of resourcing to pay sufficient wages means workers struggle to find a place to live.

Childcare can be another insurmountable barrier for regional and remote community legal sector workers – in regional remote communities there are often no childcare options at all, let alone childcare that is affordable.

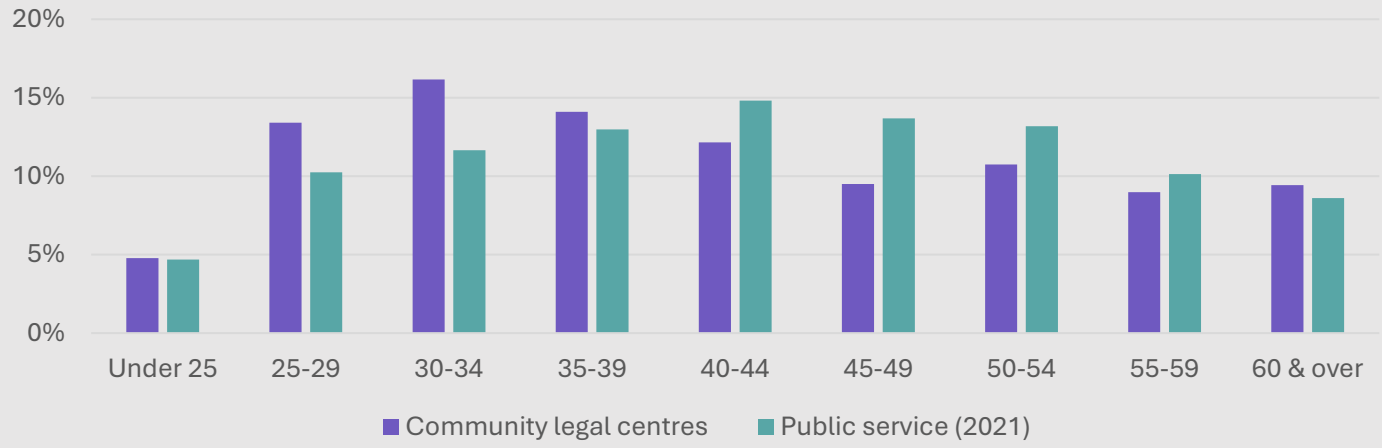
These factors make it very hard for many workers in our sector in rural and remote areas to juggle work and caring responsibilities while they're raising a family. This can force workers to relocate to cities or change jobs.

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JUNIORISATION OF OUR LEGAL WORKFORCE

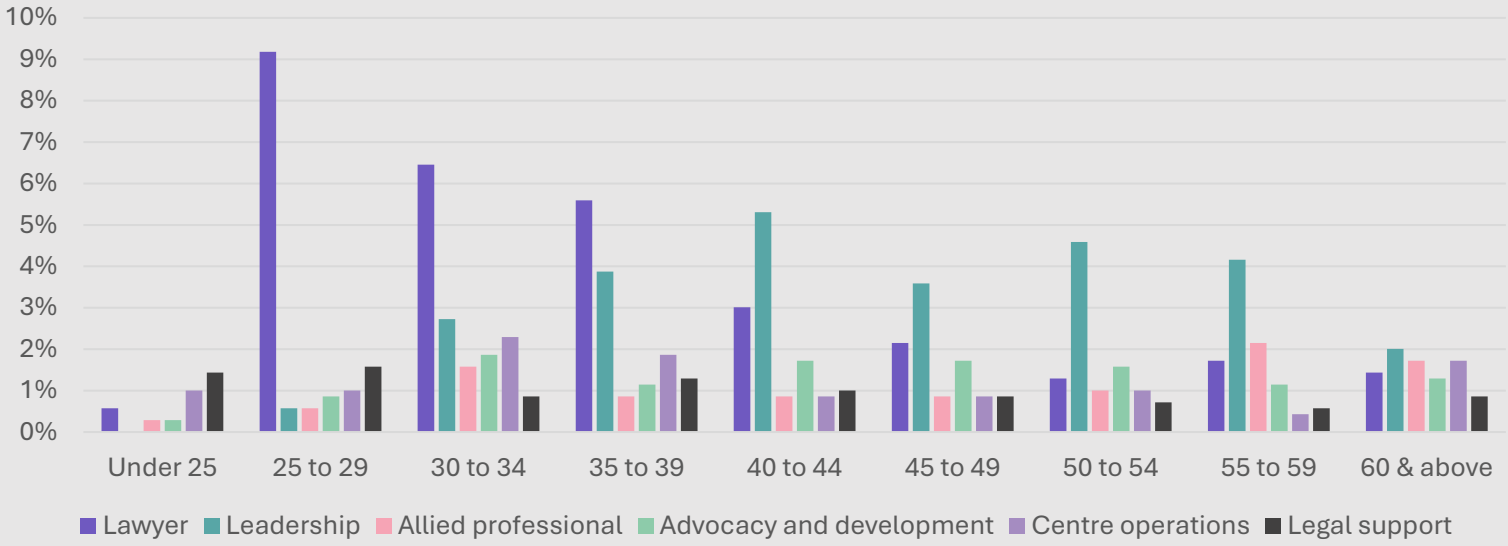
Our workforce is younger than the public service workforce.



Workers in each age bracket, as a % of each sector's workforce[16]

Proportionally, our sector has many more workers aged between 25 and 39, as compared to the public service workforce. The public service has proportionally many more workers aged between 40 and 59 than the community legal sector.

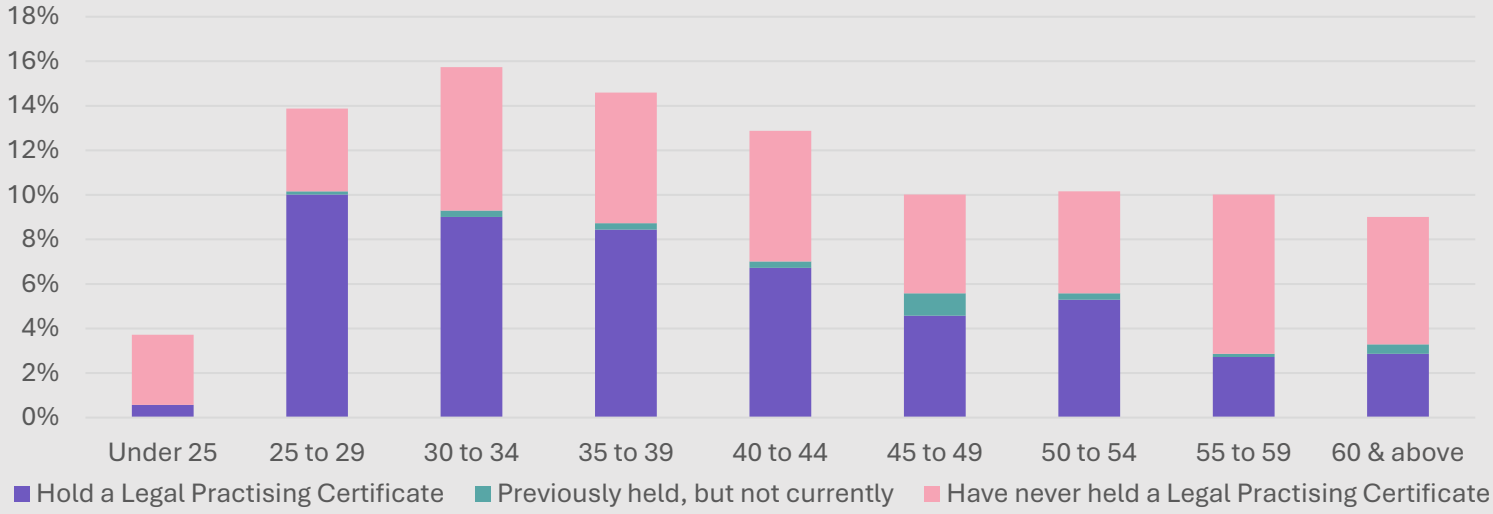
Lawyers in our sector are more likely to be younger.



Age of community legal sector workers by role type, as a % of total community legal workforce.[17]

This is not just explained by lawyers becoming 'leaders' as they get older.

Proportion of the community legal sector workforce that holds a legal practising certificate, by age.[18]



People who hold practising certificates are more likely to be younger workers in our sector.

The largest number of practising certificates in our sector are held by workers aged 25-29. The drop off in practising certificates with age suggests that lawyers are leaving the sector altogether as they progress further into their careers, rather than just changing roles.

However, the proportion of people who hold a practising certificate increases again slightly amongst workers aged 50-54.

Practising certificates in our sector are also held by newer lawyers.

Time since admission, as a % of those who hold a practising certificate[19]

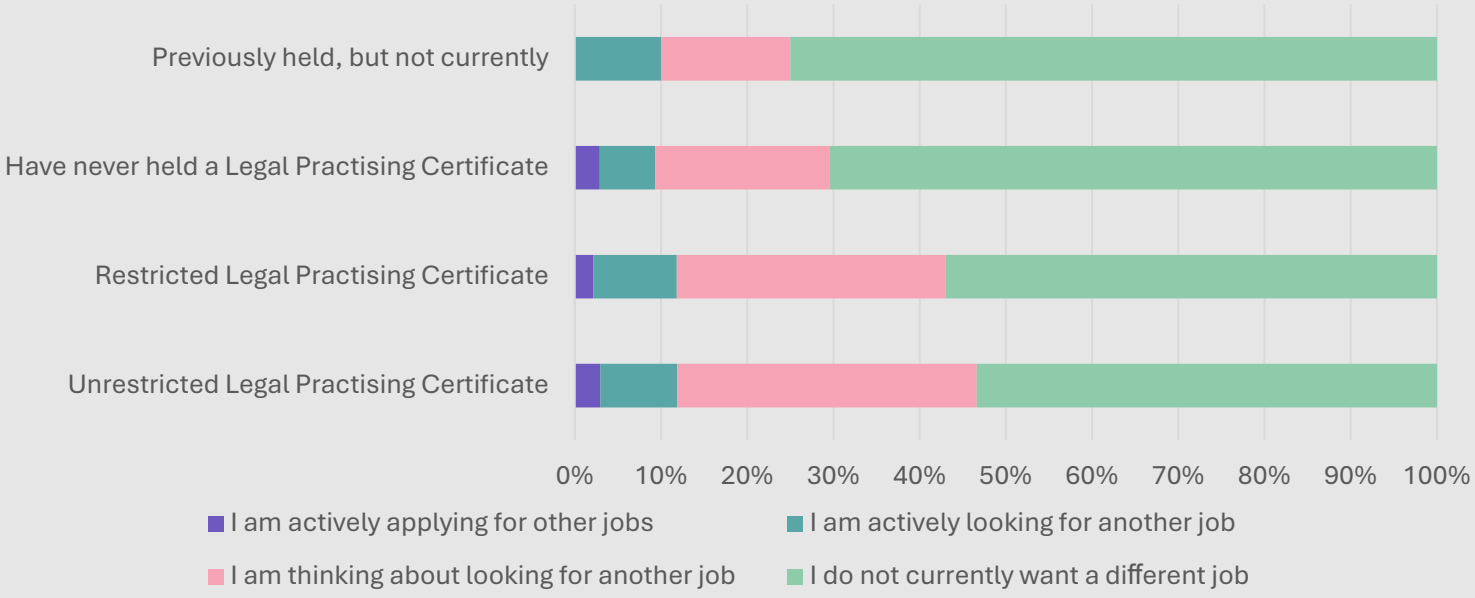


We know that age is not a good proxy for experience. However, workers in our sector who hold legal practising certificates are also more likely to be newer lawyers.

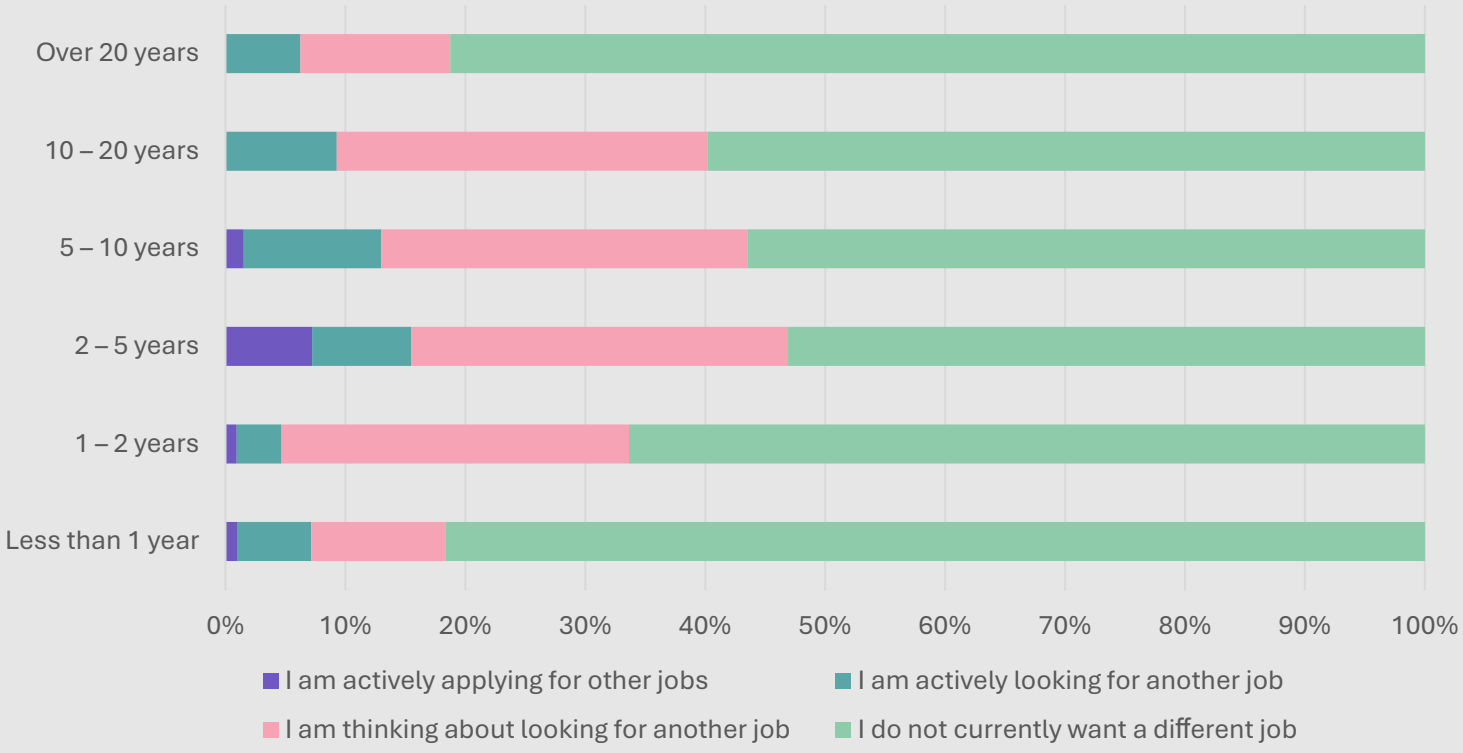
Amongst community legal sector workers, more than 2 in 5 (42%) people who hold a practising certificate have done so for less than 5 years. Only around 1 in 5 (22%) have held a practising certificate for more than 15 years. By comparison, of all solicitors in Australia, over 2 in 5 (41%) have held a practising certificate for more than 15 years.

People thinking about changing jobs, are most likely to hold a legal practising certificate and to have been in the sector for 2-5 years.

% of workers within each practising certificate status that are considering (or taking steps towards) a change in jobs [20]

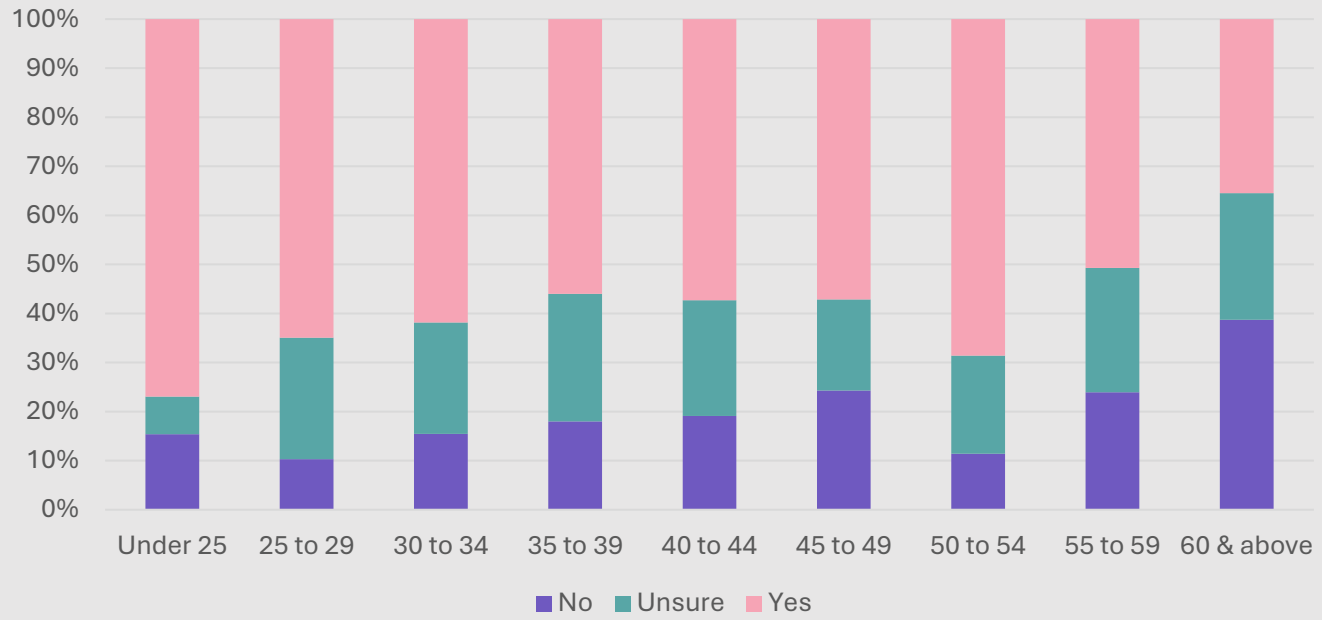


% of the workers at each duration in the community legal sector that are considering (or taking steps towards) changing jobs[21]



Younger workers are most likely to believe they will be able to build a future career in our sector. This decreases with age.

'Do you think there are opportunities for you to build a career within the community legal centre sector?'



% of the workers within each age group that report each answer[22]

Young people in our sector believe they can build a future career with us. But low wages and a pay gap that widens with seniority are driving some workers – especially lawyers – to look to change jobs after a few years in the sector.

The *Independent review of the National Legal Assistance Partnership*[23] found that lawyers at junior levels earn similar amounts across organisations in the community and public sectors, although workers at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services experience some pay disparity even at this level.

By the time lawyers have 3-5 years' experience, there is substantial pay disparity between the community and public sectors, with lawyers at community legal centres earning on average 7% less than those at Legal Aid Commissions.[24]

This increases to a 14% wages gap for community lawyers with 5-7 years' experience and then to 19% for those with 7+ years' experience. Principal Lawyers at community legal centres earn 22% less than Legal Aid lawyers with equivalent levels of experience and seniority.

As older leaders in our sector look towards retirement, and young lawyers move on to better paying roles with more prospects for career progression after a few years, there's a real risk that the community legal centre sector will experience a major skills shortage soon that may be hard to recover from.

METHODOLOGY

Community Legal Centres Australia conducted its survey between November 2025 and February 2026 and received 710 responses, one of which was invalid and excluded. The survey was opt-in, that is workers across the sector self-selected to participate. We communicated the survey to workers through a range of channels.

- Our monthly sector e-newsletter in December 2025, and January 2026, which has a subscription list of 500 individuals working at community legal centres across all jurisdictions.
- Our CEO's monthly email to CEOs, Coordinators and Directors at the 164 centres that make up our national membership network in November and December 2025, and January and February 2026. These emails encouraged sector executives to distribute the survey to their staff and promote participation.
- Our National Community Legal Sector Networks, which bring together workers from across the sector who share a common interest in a particular area of practice (employment law, disaster legal services), or support workers in specific roles (social workers) or demographics (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers, workers at regional and remote centres).
- State and territory peaks and associations across the six jurisdictions that participated in Community Legal Centres Australia's survey also promoted the survey to their member centres via direct communications or regular newsletters between November 2025 and February 2027.

Community Legal Centres Queensland and Community Legal Centres Western Australia each provided aggregated state-level data from a selection of the questions in their workforce surveys (conducted in September 2025 and March-April 2026 respectively) that aligned with the national survey instrument to Community Legal Centres Australia for inclusion in a national dataset.

Integrating and weighting data

Data weighting is a statistical technique used to adjust a dataset so that it more accurately reflects the target population. It compensates for imbalances, such as over- or under-representation of a particular demographic group, by aligning sample data with known population data. In weighting our data, we took external advice from an expert in data and mathematics.

For our national dataset we applied weighting to the aggregated data supplied by Community Legal Centres Queensland and Community Legal Western Australia, to adjust for the variance in response rates between the three surveys. We considered applying further weightings to adjust for other slight imbalances in responses but decided against as this would have substantially increased complexity without substantially improving the quality of the dataset.

Data referred to as 'National data', is the national dataset and includes Community Legal Centres Australia's data from six jurisdictions plus weighted data from Queensland and Western Australia.

Data referred to as 'Community Legal Centres Australia data', is the data gathered by Community Legal Centres Australia from workers in the ACT, NSW, SA, NT, Victoria and Tasmania, and does not include data from Queensland and Western Australia.

[1] National data
[2] National data
[3] Community Legal Centres Australia data.
[4] Tufvesson, A. (2026), 'Closing the gender leadership gap in law', *Law Society Journal*, 30 March 2026, **https://lsj.com.au/articles/closing-the-gender-leadership-gap-in-law/**
[5] Community Legal Centres Australia data.
[6] Mundy, W. (2024), *Independent Review of the National Legal Assistance Partnership 2020-20 – Final Report*, **https://www.ag.gov.au/legal-system/publications/independent-review-national-legal-assistance-partnership-2020-25**
[7] National data
[8] Community Legal Centres Australia data.
[9] National data
[10] National data
[11] National data
[12] National data
[13] National data
[14] Community Legal Centres Australia (2023), *A sector in crisis*, **https://clcs.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/SotS22-23SurveyReport_ASectorInCrisis.pdf**
Community Legal Centres Australia (2024), *More than legal services: Preventing crises, strengthening communities,* **https://clcs.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/2024-11-25-More-than-legal-services-2023-24-state-of-the-community-legal-sector.pdf**
[15] Community Legal Centres Australia data.
[16] National data
Australian Public Service Commission, *APS Employment Data 30 June 2021*, **https://www.apsc.gov.au/employment-data/aps-employment-data-30-june-2021**
[17] Community Legal Centres Australia data.
[18] Community Legal Centres Australia data.
[19] Community Legal Centres Australia and weighted Community Legal WA data
Law Society of NSW (2025), *2024 National Profile of Solicitors*, **https://www.lawsociety.com.au/sites/default/files/2025-06/2024%20National%20Profile%20of%20Solicitors%20-%20Final.pdf**
[20] Community Legal Centres Australia data.
[21] Community Legal Centres Australia data.
[22] Community Legal Centres Australia data.
[23] Mundy, W. (2024), *Independent Review of the National Legal Assistance Partnership 2020-20 – Final Report*, **https://www.ag.gov.au/legal-system/publications/independent-review-national-legal-assistance-partnership-2020-25**
[24] Ibid.