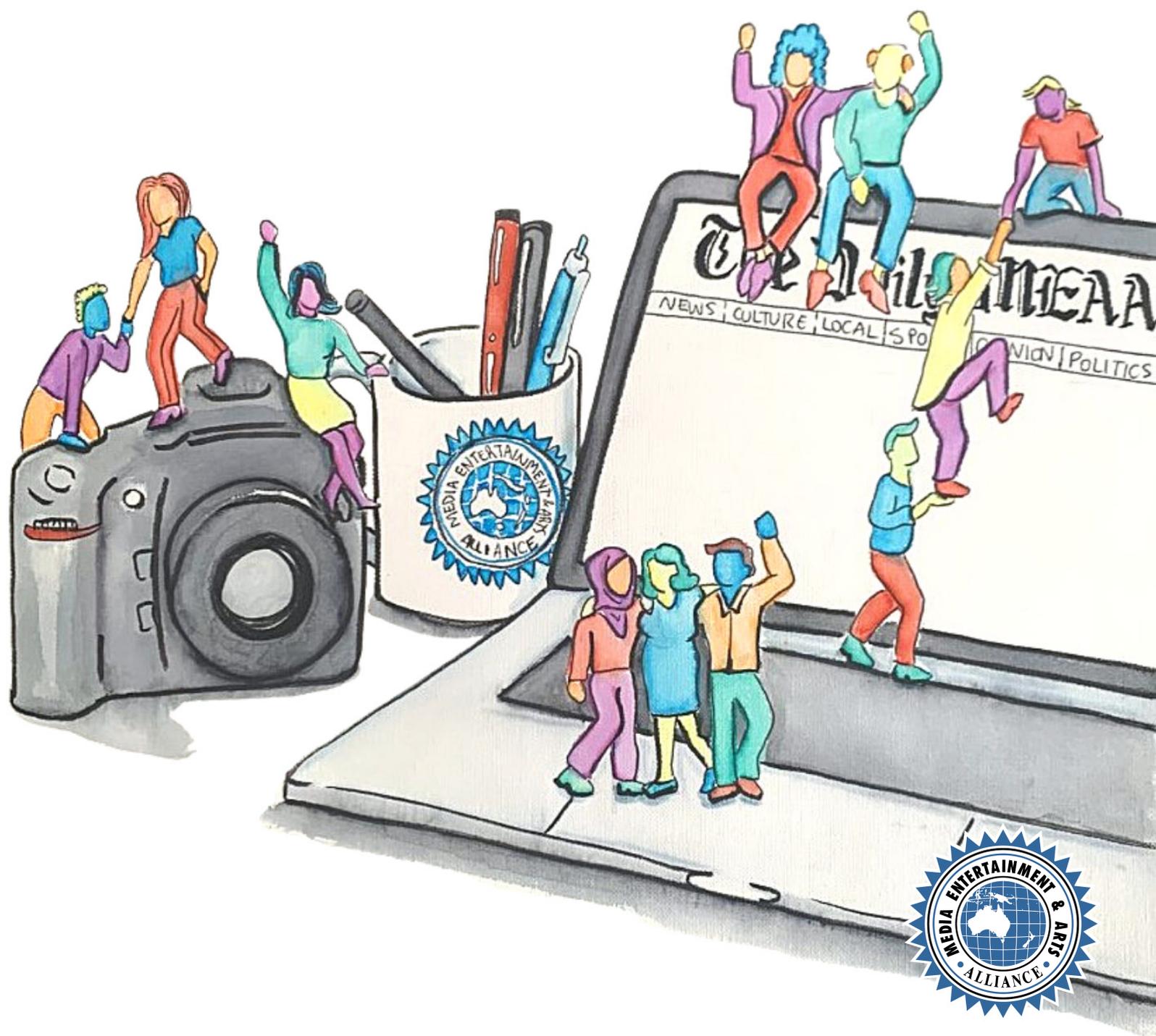


FREELANCERS FOR FAIR RATES



The state of freelance journalism in Australia
A MEAA report

A fairer deal for freelancers

There's a crisis in freelance journalism in Australia.

Freelancers have always been an important part of the Australian media landscape but with the disruption that has taken place over the past two decades, media outlets are using freelance contributors more than ever before. Now, when we consume print, digital and broadcast media, it is just as likely to have been created by a freelance contributor as an "in house" employee journalist.

But freelance journalism is operating without the safety net of workplace rights. And because freelancers are being exploited with falling wages and declining conditions, that's holding back the ability of Australia's journalists to produce the quality journalism that our communities deserve

There are thousands of freelance journalists in Australia, working as reporters and writers, photographers, producers, subeditors, illustrators, researchers and in other editorial roles.

"I'm asked weekly to work for free or at a rate where I would earn more at McDonald's. There is no recognition of the cost of equipment to do the job. I worked for a decade in the 2000s as a freelancer, I left when the screws were being tightened by accountants and HR departments. I attempted re-entering this year. It has been a ridiculous, time-sapping bureaucratic worthless experience. For every commission I have spent countless hours, signing on, and chasing payments. It sucks."

Female freelancer, NSW

"Pay rates dropped across the board in 2020 but it had started in the few years before. I was earning over \$1 a word 20 years ago and now I rarely achieve that."

Female freelancer, Melbourne

As any freelancer will tell you: there are no minimum rates of pay; there is no job security; superannuation is almost non-existent; payments are often late; and kill fees rare. Freelancers can also struggle to retain copyright over their work and are not afforded protection from defamation that in-house journalists have under the cover of their employer.

Until now media outlets have been able to exploit the lack of any wages framework to pay what they like. This race to the bottom has to end.

Now MEAA's freelance members are coming together with a national plan to tackle the low pay, insecurity and exploitation that drags down our profession.

“Superannuation is a constant issue. During more than a decade as a freelancer, I’d say I’ve been paid superannuation fewer than a dozen times.”

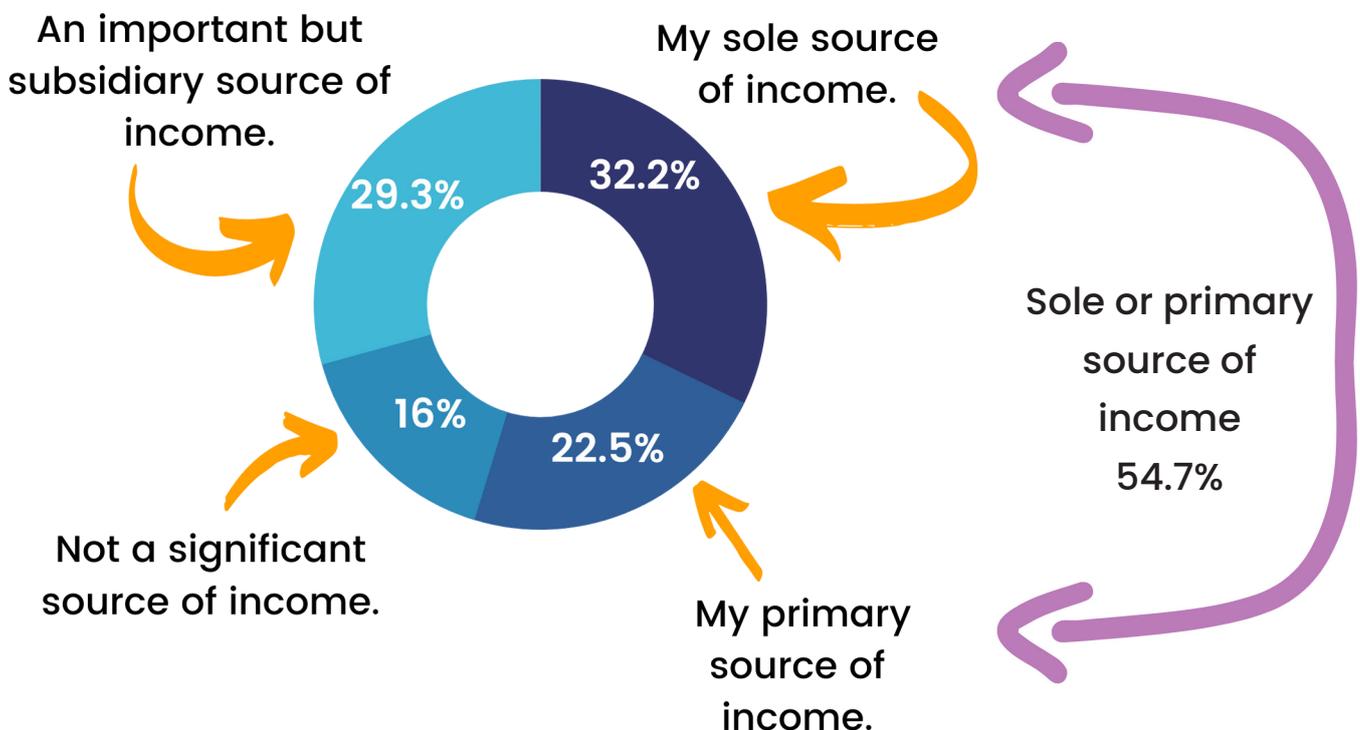
Female freelancer, Melbourne

The state of freelancing in 2021

To fix the crisis, it’s important to first understand what’s going on.

In mid-2021, MEAA surveyed Australia’s freelance journalists with 470 responses. There was a good cross-section represented in the sample. Half contributed to major media outlets, and most had more than 20 years’ experience working as a freelancer.

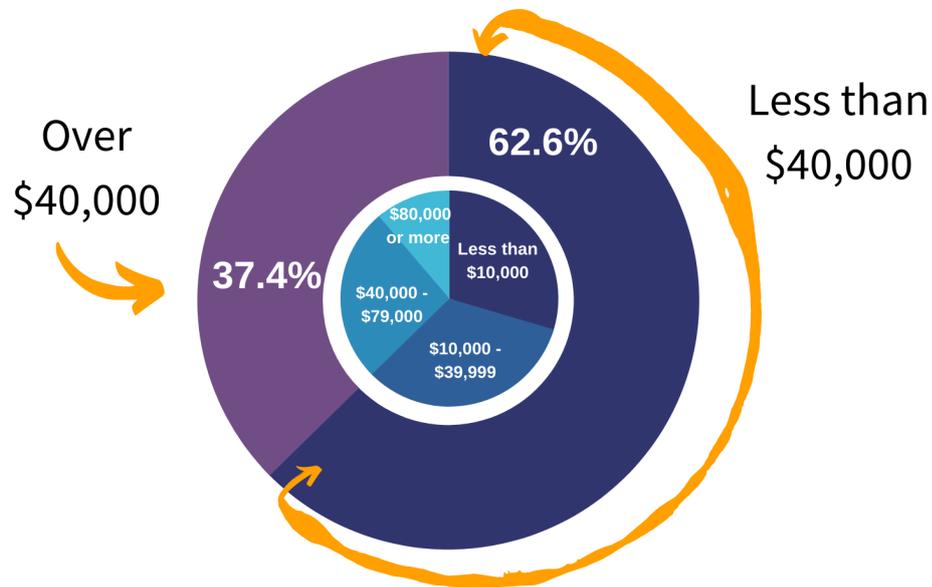
What best describes your freelance earnings?



The survey found that income from freelancing is the most immediate and greatest concern.

Freelance work is the sole source of income for a third of the survey respondents, and a primary source income for another 22%.

Freelance incomes compared to Average Weekly Earnings



62.6% of freelancers earn **less than half** the average weekly Australian wage.

But average incomes for freelancers are well below the national average (about \$90,000 a year). Only 11% of the survey respondents said they were earning more than \$80,000 from freelance journalism. A third of respondents said they earned between \$10,000 and \$39,999 from freelancing.

Another 26% said they earned between \$40,000 and \$79,999. However, almost one in three respondents, 30%, said they were earning less than \$10,000.



Two-thirds of freelancers are concerned about low/variable pay

Two out of three freelancers are concerned about insecure work



“So many magazines have switched to an ‘exposure’ model (whether or not they call it thus) that it is seldom worthwhile for me even to turn on my laptop. The blogging mentality of churning out unpaid content every single day has practically killed off the chances of experienced professionals like me getting adequately remunerated work.”

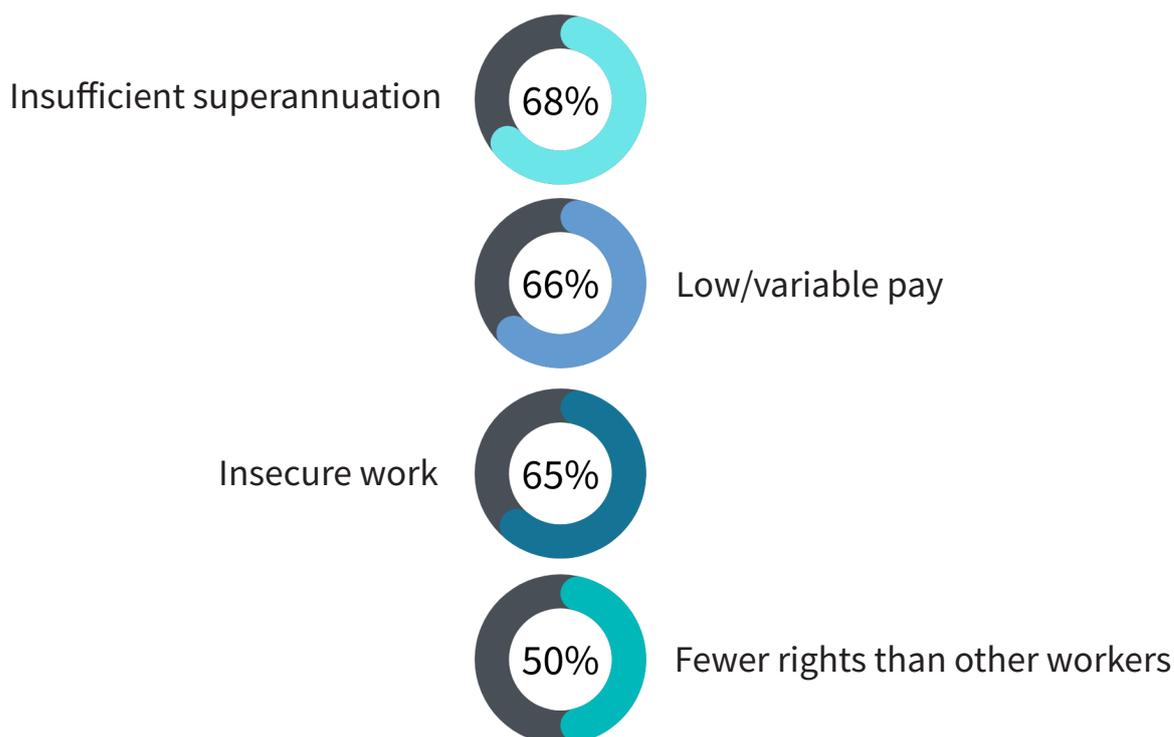
Male freelancer, Victoria

Freelancers also described how precarious their work is. Some 66% of respondents said the low rate of pay was a constant or frequent challenge; a similar number cited the insecurity of their work. Some 68% said the lack of superannuation was a major concern, 50% said they were worried about having fewer rights than other media workers.

Other issues surrounding pay were frequent concerns for freelancers.

In the past year, 40% of respondents said they had been asked to work for the “exposure” (i.e., for free); 17% said they had been paid less than the agreed amount; 34% said they had been paid a lower rate than previously from the same publisher for the same work; and 18.8% said they had been caught out by sham contracting and paid as a contractor rather than an employee.

Freelancers are concerned about:



Our plan to fix the problem: it starts with a collective voice for freelancers

Right now, Australian journalism is in a precarious state. By constantly slashing the pay rates of freelance journalists, media outlets are increasingly outsourcing their editorial content. That means they can employ fewer journalists in-house, continue to cut costs, pay lower salaries, slash resources. Media outlets are on a gradual slide to the bottom.

It doesn't have to be that way.

"It is almost impossible to make a living wage as a freelancer without killing yourself. I work full time in another field, and I also think there are unreasonable expectations from media orgs that freelancers have all the time in the world to undertake commissions when actually, many of us fit this work around 'real jobs'."

Female freelancer, Victoria

"Freelancers are not insignificant, or unemployed. They are a legitimate part of our industry and deserve to be treated as such."

Male freelancer, NSW

MEAA has a plan to fix the problem. The 2021 freelance survey shows that the issues with pay, insecure work, freelancers' rights and conditions, and superannuation demand action.

But highest on the list of remedies is minimum rates of pay. Right now, there is no floor to freelancers' pay, there is no transparency in how much they are paid or even when. Freelancers want pay rates to be clear and understood.

Campaigning for a fairer deal for freelancers is already under way.

MEAA freelance members contributing for media outlets have already begun working with MEAA members employed at those outlets to stand together to have freelancers included in negotiations for new enterprise beginning agreements in those workplaces.

It's a way of acknowledging that unless all journalism that is produced for a media outlet is properly acknowledged, appreciated and accounted for, there will be a steady erosion in pay and conditions for all. That not only affects all media workers, but it also has a dangerous impact on the ability to produce the high-quality ethical journalism that serves our communities.

Take action

The MEAA Freelance Committee made up of freelance journalists, writers, editors, and photojournalists is developing an industry charter that MEAA members will vote on, and outlets and employers will be called upon to sign up to.

The charter will acknowledge that freelance contributors are an integral part of a media outlet, that the business and the freelancer are committed to quality journalism, and that fair remuneration and working conditions are integral to upholding editorial standards.

It will outline the need for fair base rates of pay, payment on time, kill fees, superannuation, retention of copyright and protection from liability for defamation.

“[There needs to be a] general understanding that freelancers have very little protections and that we can’t just take leave like other people, that we can’t just take a public holiday because of course, we don’t get it paid out. That even though I will have worked 10 years in public service I will not be eligible for LSL. That we are expected to provide our own equipment, htat we are forced to work to unrealistic deadlines and do more overtime than I’ve ever had to do elsewhere.”

Female freelancer, Tasmania

By endorsing and campaigning for these as minimum standards for engagement, and then refusing to accept less, MEAA members can build a new floor for an industry that leaves no one behind and keeps quality at the forefront.

“[Freelancers need] higher rates, given no other benefits are afford to freelancers. If companies are using freelancers more than hired staff, the rates should also be higher.”

Male freelancer, NSW

Now is the time to stand together. A mass member meeting will be held in early 2022 to launch the campaign and endorse the charter. We need all members to spread the word and make this the biggest meeting of Australian freelancers ever, so that freelancers can finally have a powerful voice in our industry.

To get involved contact members@meaa.org. If you’re not yet a MEAA member join today at meaa.org/join or call MEAA Member Central on 1300 65 65 13.

“The only way to fix the situation faced by freelancers is to include provisions in EBA’s at major news organisations that make sure minimum standards of pay and conditions are set for freelancers ... Anything less than this is not going to make a dent. This is the only way to ensure the greatest benefit for the greatest number.”

Female freelancer, ACT



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