California Workers' Compensation Institute

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BULLETIN

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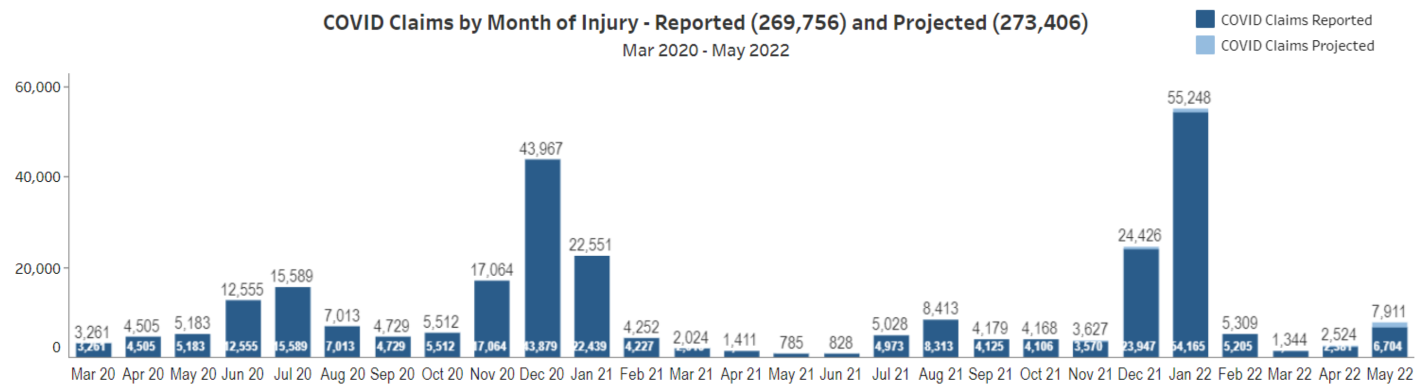
With the BA.4 and BA.5 COVID subvariants spreading rapidly across California, workers' compensation COVID-19 claim volume continued to climb in May, as the monthly COVID claim count nearly tripled from the April level. In addition, the latest data from CWCI's Non-COVID-19 Interactive Claim Application show that since the COVID claim counts bottomed out in March the COVID claim distributions by region, industry, and claimant age have all shifted.

The latest update to CWCI's application contains data on more than 2.38 million COVID and non-COVID claims with dates of injury from January 1, 2019 through May 30, 2022 reported to the state Division of Workers' Compensation (DWC) as of June 27. The latest figures show that after hitting a 10-month low of 1,303 claims in March of this year, the COVID claim tally increased nearly 83 percent to 2,381 claims in April, then jumped 182 percent in May to 6,704 claims, producing a five-fold increase in COVID claim volume during the spring surge. The DWC is still receiving COVID claims for those months, and as noted in the chart below, CWCI projections that control for late reporting show even more dramatic growth during this period, with estimated ultimate COVID claim counts of 1,344 claims for March, 2,524 claims for April, and 7,911 claims for May.



While both the reported and projected COVID claim numbers have been trending up from the March low, the number of COVID claims remains well below the all-time high recorded in January of this year, as the latest update shows there were 54,165 COVID-19 claims reported for January, while the Institute's ultimate projected claim count for that month is now 55,248 claims. The total number of claims reported in January was by far the highest monthly total recorded since the pandemic began, and even with the uptrend in claim volume since March, January's COVID claim count was 3.5 times the combined total that has been reported for the subsequent four months.

According to the latest data, from the time the governor declared the pandemic in March 2020 through May of this year, COVID claims have accounted for 17.3 percent of all reported California workers' comp claims, but breaking the results out by month highlights the wild fluctuations in COVID claim volume over that 27-month span, as COVID claims have ranged from as little as 1.5 percent of all workers' comp claims in May and June of 2021 to 56.0 percent of all claims in January of this year. The total number of COVID claims reported by accident year shows there were 119,568 in 2020 (including 278 reported for January and February of that year, before the pandemic was declared); 80,708 in 2021; and 69,758 in the first five months of this year.

Reviewing recent trends in the distribution of COVID claims by industry reveals that much of the spring surge has been in the public safety/government sector, which went from 306 reported COVID claims in March to 1,972 reported COVID claims in May, so this sector alone has accounted for nearly 31 percent of the overall increase in COVID claims over the most recent 3-month period. Since overtaking the health care sector in February 2021 (a shift that coincided with the introduction of COVID vaccines) the public safety/government sector has remained the number one industry in terms of COVID claim volume for 16 straight months, though its share of reported COVID claims has fluctuated. Just this year alone, public safety/government workers' share of the COVID claims went from 35.4 percent at the peak in January to 26.4 percent when COVID claim volume bottomed out in March, then rebounded to 32.8 percent in May as the BA.4 and BA.5 subvariants spread across the state. In contrast, the growth in COVID claims among health care workers has been more in line with the statewide growth rate during the spring surge, so after declining from 24.1 percent in January to 18.4 percent in March, the health care sector's share of the COVID claims has remained relatively stable: accounting for 19.1 percent of the claims in April and 19.3 percent in May. With public safety/government workers representing such a large share of the COVID claims, self-insured employers have accounted for a majority of the COVID claims every month this year, though their share did decline when COVID claim volume fell in March, then began trending back up again during the spring surge. The latest data show that self-insured's share of the COVID claims went from 62.5 percent in January to 67.0 percent in February; then fell to 56.6 percent in March and 57.0 percent in April before moving back up to 60.9 percent in May.

Notably, the latest regional distributions show the Bay Area has been the COVID hotspot since COVID claim volume bottomed out in March. The Bay Area's share of COVID claims doubled from 16.7 percent in January to 32.4 percent in April and remained high in May as it continued to rank first in the state with 31.3 percent of the COVID claims. In contrast, Southern California has had a disproportionately low share of the COVID claims since the beginning of the year, as Los Angeles County's share was 20.8 percent in January; 14.2 percent in February; 19.4 percent in March; 18.8 percent in April and 15.5 percent in May. Similarly, the proportion of COVID claims coming from the Inland Empire/Orange County was 20.6 percent in January; 14.6 percent in February; 14.4 percent in March; 14.8 percent in April; and 13.7 percent in May. The other region that experienced a sharp fluctuation in its share of COVID claims this year is the Central Valley, which went from 24.5 percent of the COVID claims in January to 29.9 percent in February; then fell to 21.1 percent in March and 16.3 percent in April before rebounding back up to 23.2 percent in May.

One of the most interesting demographic trends among COVID claims this year has been the shift in the distribution by age. Younger workers (under age 40) accounted for more than half (54.1 percent) of the COVID claims at the January peak, and their share edged up to 54.4 percent in March when COVID claim volume bottomed out. Since then, however, older workers (over age 40) have accounted for a majority of the COVID claims, as their share jumped from 45.6 percent in March to 51.3 percent in May, suggesting that older workers have been hardest hit by the spring surge.

The COVID claim distribution by gender has been far more stable, varying by only 1.4 percentage points since January, although males' share of the COVID claims did hit the highest point of the year as claim volume picked up in May. Males' share of the COVID claims so far this year: 53.6 percent in January; 54.2 percent in February; 53.4 percent in March; 54.7 percent in April; and 54.8 percent in May.

CWCI continues to update its COVID-19/Non-COVID-19 app on a biweekly basis. The application is available to the public, so anyone who wishes to monitor and compare COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 claim experience over time can access the app from the CWCI website by clicking here.

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