

# Victoria Legal Aid (VLA) Client Experience Survey 2023

Summary report

September 2023

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## Project overview

# Project overview

## Background

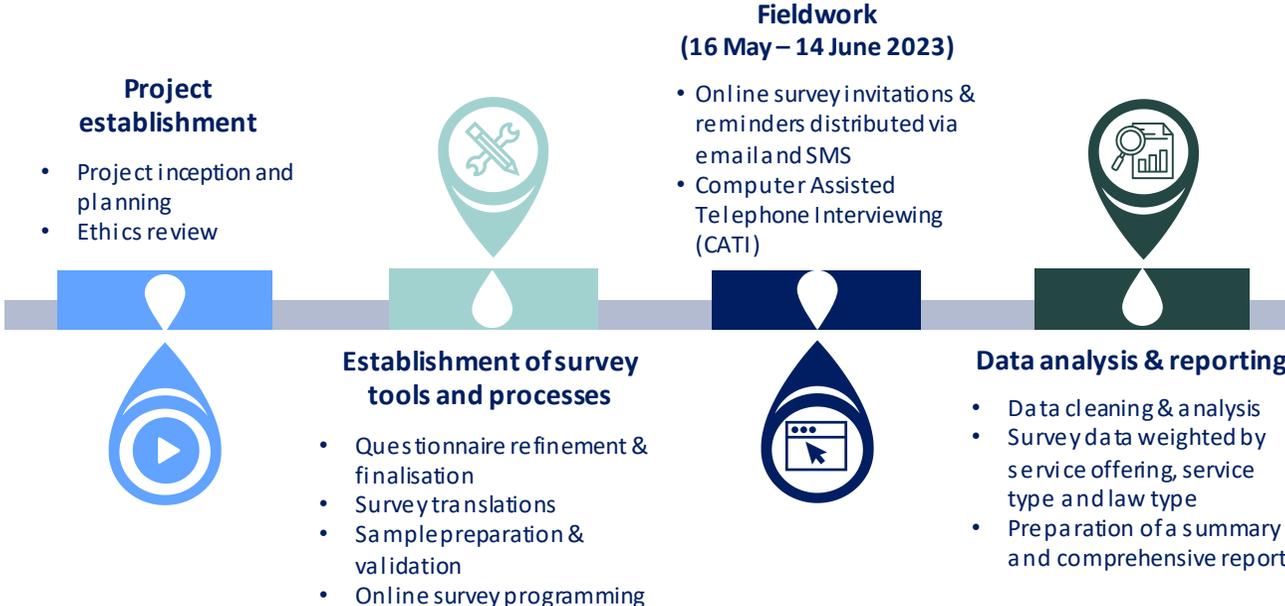
Victoria Legal Aid (VLA) is an independent statutory authority established under the Legal Aid Act 1978. VLA provides legal information, advice and representation to members of the Victorian community who are most disadvantaged and in need of support. Services provided by VLA, including through its external partner agencies, are intended to be accessible and appropriate to the person's need. While access to legal information is provided free (online information, resources, access to telephone advice including connection with other organisations to assist), access to VLA advice and representation for certain legal matters must meet an eligibility criterion.

As a publicly funded authority with a high demand for legal services, it is important that VLA operate efficiently and at a high quality for the clients it serves. This client-centric focus of VLA extends to ensuring improvements to its services are directly driven by the voice of its clients. These service areas that VLA aimed to collect client feedback on in 2023 were:

- Legal advice services (including minor work files) for clients of its Legal Help, criminal, family, and civil law programs;
- Legal representation on a grant of aid (casework) for clients of its criminal, family, and civil law programs; and
- Duty lawyer services for clients of its criminal, family, and civil law programs.

The primary objective of the survey was to engage with clients to inform tangible service improvement actions that directly respond to client experience, and to measure the outcomes clients experience as a result of VLA services.

## Research approach



# Respondent profile

## Sampling approach

The survey was sent to a stratified random sample of n=16,475 VLA clients who received services between 1 July – 31 December 2022. The sampling strata were based on service offering, service type and law type (see table below). Certain groups were oversampled to allow for more robust analysis and reporting. Survey data was then weighted by known population proportions.

## Response rate

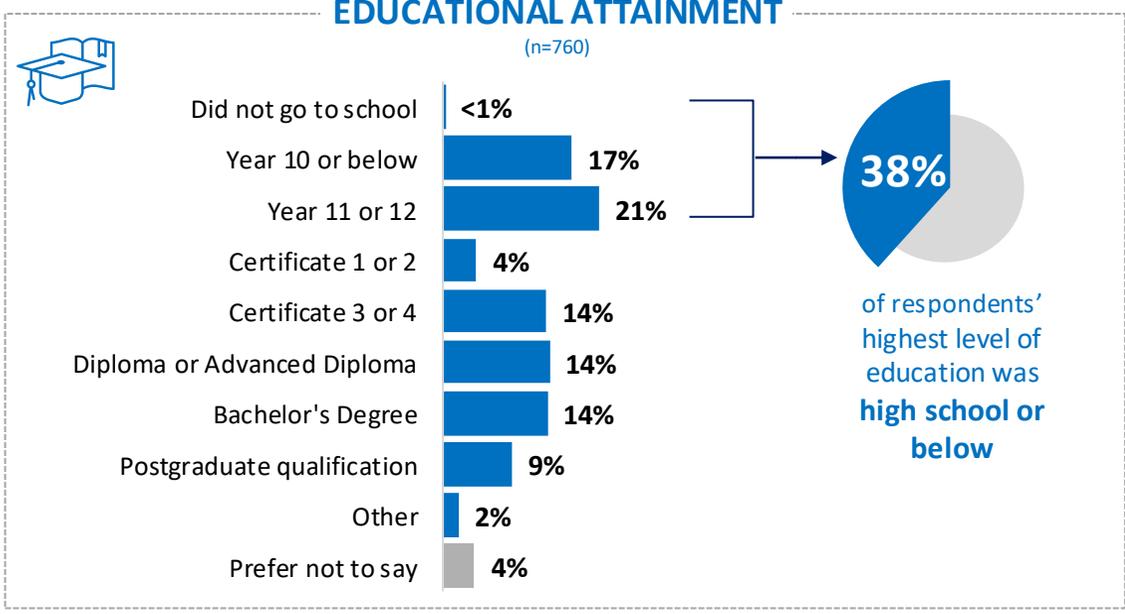
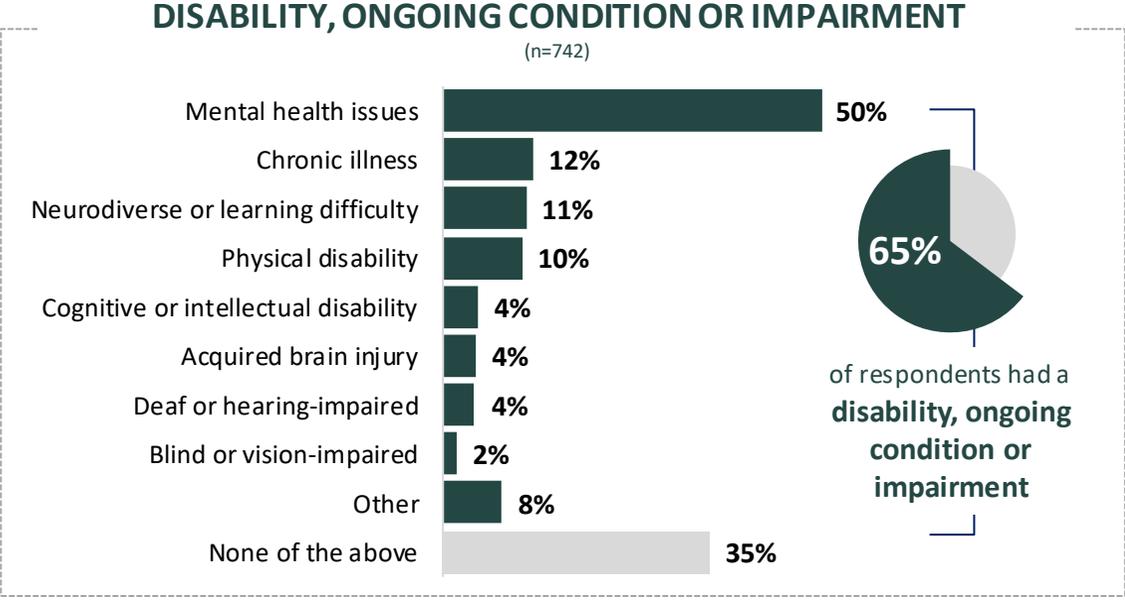
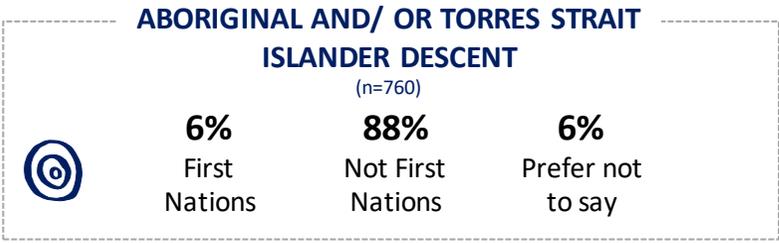
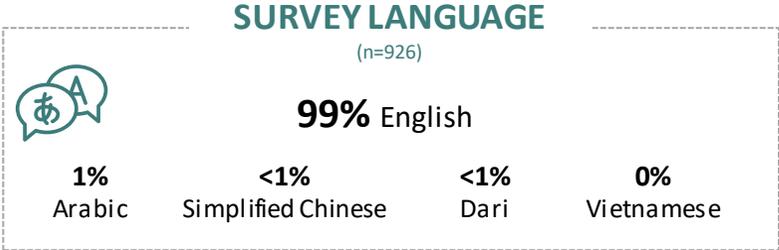
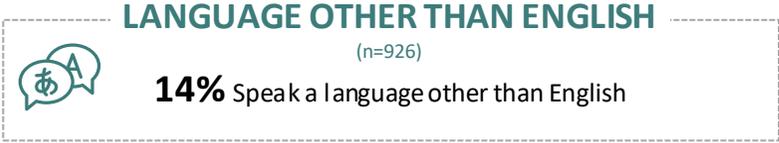
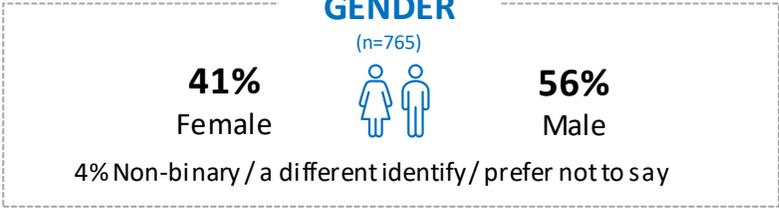
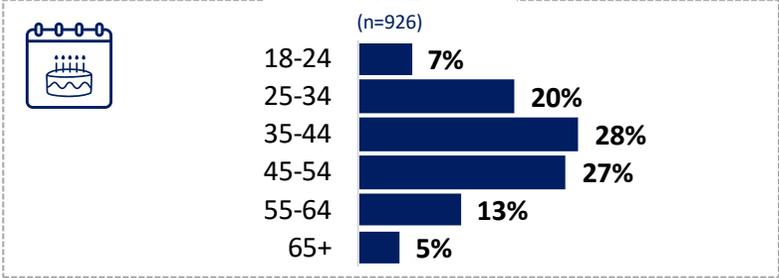


n=926 out of 16,475 clients responded in 2023.

## Profile of responding sample compared to the in-scope population

Overall	Population count (#)	Population proportion (%)	Responding sample count (#)	Responding sample proportion (% unweighted)
<b>Total</b>	<b>27,222</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>926</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Service offering</b>				
In-house practitioner	23,433	86%	810	87%
Private practitioner	3,814	14%	116	13%
<b>Service type</b>				
Duty Lawyer	15,360	56%	402	43%
Legal Advice	7,761	29%	390	42%
Casework	4,291	16%	142	15%
<b>Law type</b>				
Criminal law	15,894	58%	324	35%
Family law	8,179	30%	384	41%
Civil law	3,226	12%	220	24%

# Demographic profile



Base: All respondents (base sizes noted above)

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## Summary of key results

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# Summary of key results

## ACCESS\*



**81%** agreed it was **easy to contact VLA** when they first needed help

## WELLBEING



**59%** agreed they were **less stressed** after talking to the lawyer\*\*^



Overall wellbeing improved

**67%** of those with a fully resolved matter\*\*\*^  
**34%** of those with an unresolved matter\*\*\*\*^

## EXPERIENCE\*



**80%** agreed that the lawyer **treated them with respect**^



**76%** agreed that the lawyer **listened to their legal problem**



**70%** agreed that the lawyer **took their circumstances into account**^

## LEGAL CAPABILITY\*



**80%** agreed they **know where to get help for future legal problems**



**76%** agreed they **feel more confident to get legal help in the future**



**70%** agreed that the lawyer **helped them understand how to deal with their legal problem**

## RESOLUTION\*\*



**76%** agreed that **VLA's help had a positive impact on their legal outcome**^



**75%** agreed that **VLA helped fix their legal problem**^

## SATISFACTION\*



**76%** agreed they would **recommend VLA to others**



**62%** satisfied with the **help they got from VLA**

\*Base: All respondents (n=747-884)

\*\*Base: All respondents with a fully resolved matter (n=317-344)

\*\*\*Base: All respondents with an unresolved matter (n=391)

^Excludes 'not sure' / 'I can't remember' / 'not applicable' responses.

# Sustaining or improving performance on the following service dimensions is likely to have the greatest positive impact on overall satisfaction

A regression model was developed to determine the key drivers of overall satisfaction with VLA's services from the 2023 survey. The model identified seven service dimensions that explained 85% of the variation in VLA's overall satisfaction rating among survey respondents.

The regression model indicated that sustaining and/or improving performance on the following seven service dimensions is likely to have the greatest positive impact on overall satisfaction (in decreasing order of importance):

- 1 **Client perceptions that VLA has provided them with enough help** *[resolution]*
- 2 **Client confidence to get legal help in the future** *[legal capability]*
- 3 **Clients feeling that their Legal Aid lawyer wanted the best result for them** *[experience]*
- 4 **Legal Aid lawyers taking clients' circumstances into account** *[experience]*
- 5 **Clients being able to ask all the questions they want** *[experience]*
- 6 **VLA's assistance having a positive impact on the outcome of clients' legal problems** *[resolution]*
- 7 **VLA's assistance improving clients' mental health** *[wellbeing]*

# Key takeouts

1

## **Resolution status and outcome of legal problems has a significant influence on perceptions of VLA's services**

The resolution status and outcome of respondents' legal matters had a large influence on their overall as well as most other survey measures.

2

## **Client perceptions as to whether VLA has provided them with enough help has an important influence on overall client satisfaction regardless of resolution status or the outcome of their legal problem**

The majority of respondents with a fully resolved matter agreed that VLA provided enough help for their legal problem (80%). However, just under half (46%) with an unresolved matter agreed with this same measure. Enabling staff to dedicate more time to cases would be likely to improve their interactions with clients and, in turn, improve client satisfaction – this may reassure clients that they have been provided with an appropriate level of assistance regardless of their legal outcome.

3

## **Addressing the unique challenges of clients will improve overall client experience, particularly among those with support needs or considerations**

Just over one-third (37%) of respondents indicated they had support needs or considerations. Respondents who had support needs and considerations were significantly less satisfied overall with VLA's services compared to those who did not have support needs. Additionally, only around half or less of respondents who said they have a disability, mental health, other health concerns or previous experience with violence felt that their support needs and considerations were fully met. Feedback highlighted the need for VLA to identify means to address the unique challenges of these clients so that they can be effectively supported through the legal process. A key suggestion from respondents with support needs and considerations was for VLA staff to listen more in order to understand their challenges and needs.

4

## **Clients have an improved understanding and capability to deal with future legal problems**

Survey results suggest that respondents have an improved capability on how to deal with future legal problems following their experiences with VLA – eight in ten (80%) respondents agreed they know where to get help for their legal matters in the future and just over three-quarters (76%) agreed they feel more confident to get legal help in the future.

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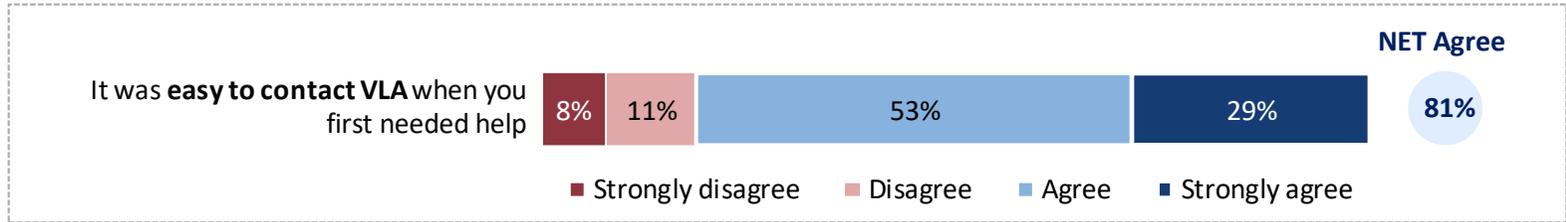
## Access

*This section of the report focuses on clients' initial contact with VLA and any difficulties they had when contacting VLA when they first needed help.*

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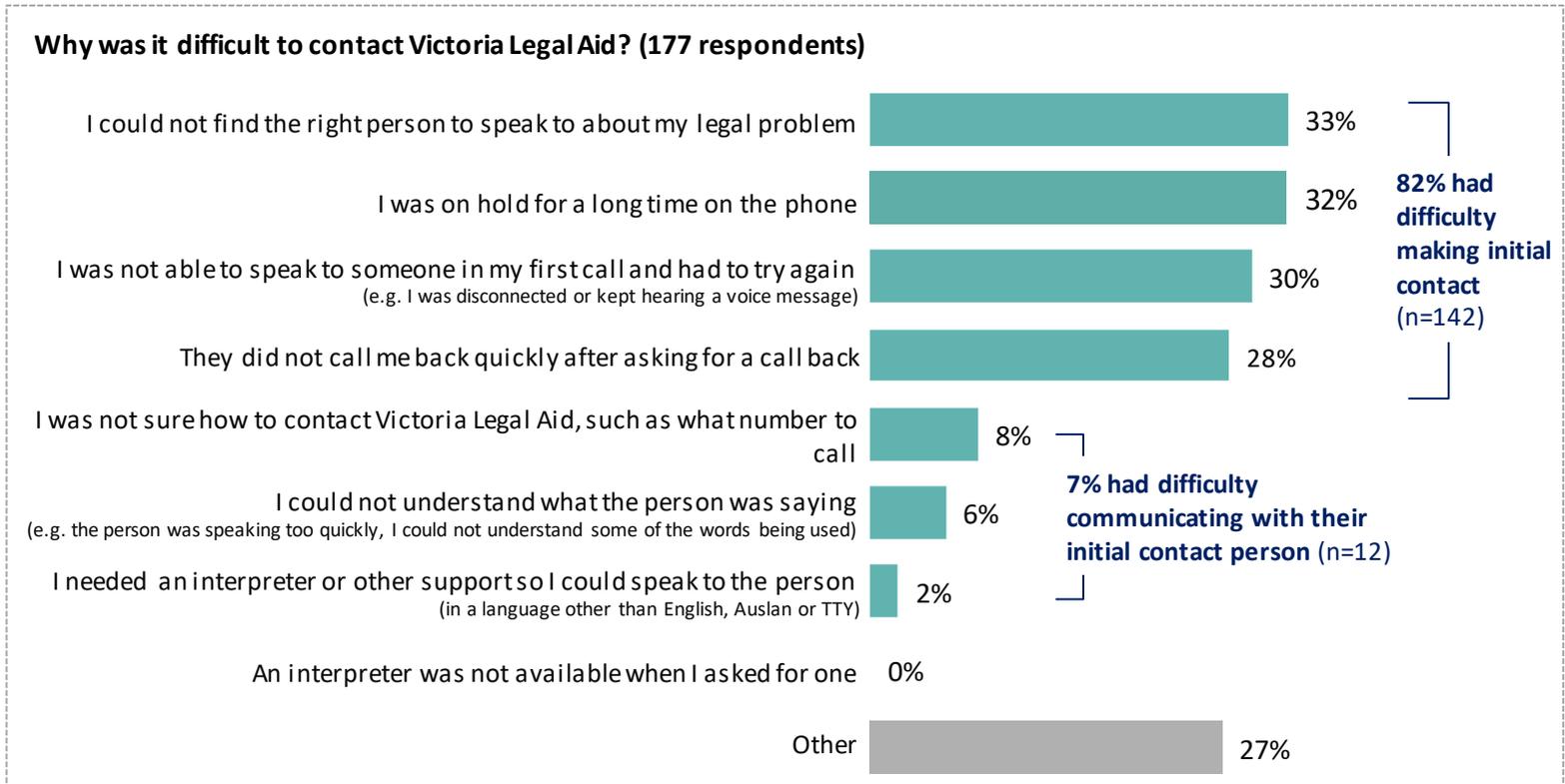
# Most respondents found accessing VLA's service straightforward

Four-fifths of respondents (81%) agreed it was easy to contact VLA when they first needed help.



Q3. How much do you agree or disagree that it was easy to contact Victoria Legal Aid when you first needed help?  
Base: All respondents (n=884).

Most (82%) of those who did not find it easy to contact VLA, reported difficulties in making an initial contact with someone, and a much smaller proportion (7%) had difficulties communicating with the VLA staff member when they were able to make contact.



Q4. Why was it difficult to contact Victoria Legal Aid?  
Base: All those who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "It was easy to contact Victoria Legal Aid when you first needed help" (n=177)

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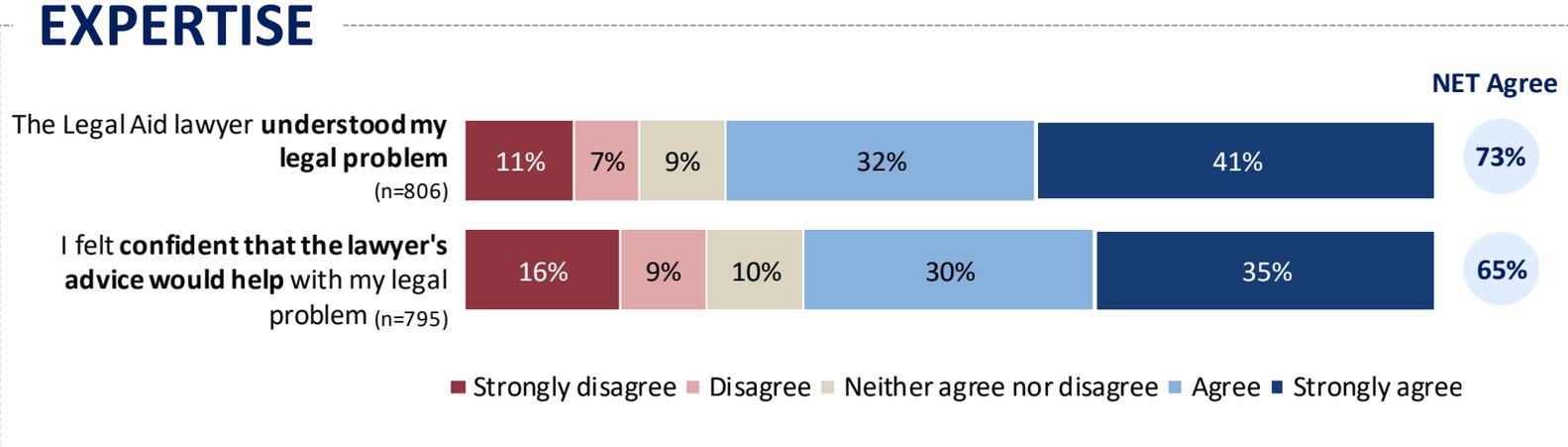
## Experience

This section of the report focuses on the various factors influencing the quality of the experience clients have while interacting with VLA. These can be summarised as:

- perceived expertise of the legal advisors;
  - quality of communication between clients and legal advisors;
  - the extent to which services are person-centred and tailored to individual circumstances; and
  - support needs and considerations of clients, and whether these were adequately met.
-

# Respondents generally felt assured about the expertise of the lawyer

Three-quarters (73%) agreed the lawyer understood their problem and two-thirds (65%) had been confident the advice provided would help them. One-quarter (25%) had not been confident that the lawyer’s advice would help them, disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement.



Q7a/Q8c. Thinking back to the last time you got help from the Legal Aid lawyer, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?  
 Base: All respondents (base size as shown). Excludes 'not sure / I can't remember' responses.

Some respondents praised the knowledge of their lawyer, and the suitability of their advice. Some also highlighted that a positive outcome came from their lawyer’s legal expertise.

*“The lawyer listened and understood the circumstances leading to what happened. Very knowledgeable in life circumstances.”*

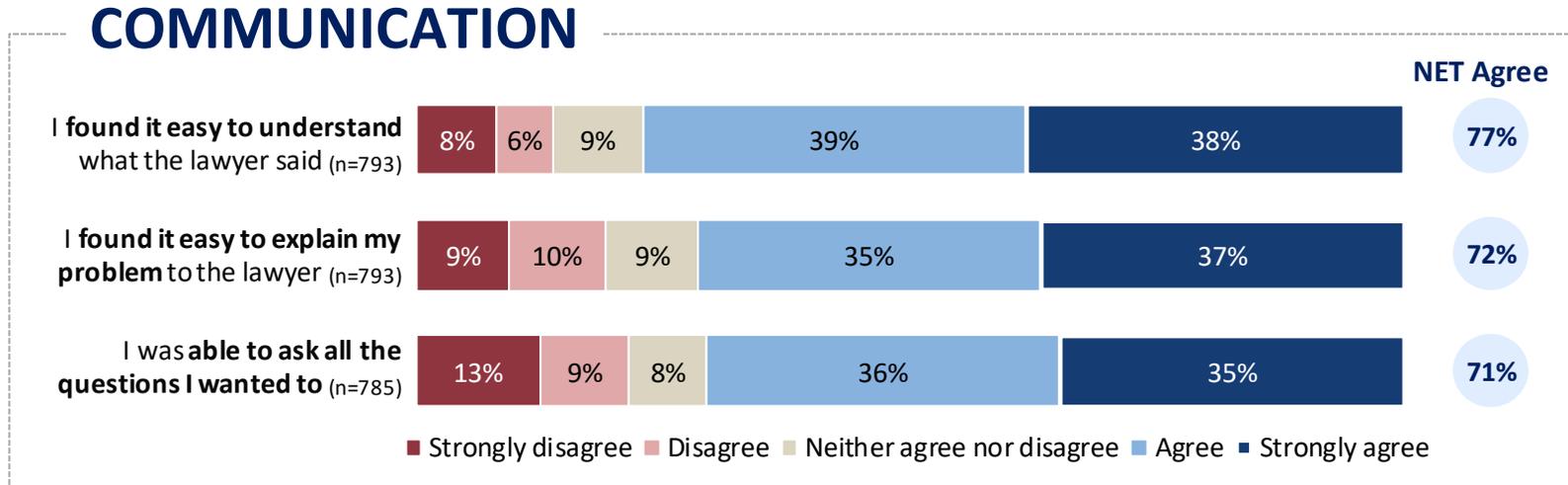
*“Because my lawyer was knowledgeable, and I received a lesser charge.”*

Some respondents also highlighted some areas of improvement regarding client confidence in the expertise of Legal Aid lawyers.

*“Ensure that the choice of Legal Aid lawyer has appropriate experience for the case.”*

# Communication between lawyers and clients was generally good, although some respondents felt they were not listened to properly

Although more than three-quarters (77%) agreed it was easy to understand the lawyer, slightly fewer found it easy to explain their problem (72%) or ask all the questions they needed to (71%).



Q8b/Q8d/Q8f Thinking back to the last time you got help from the Legal Aid lawyer, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?  
 Base: All respondents (base size as shown). Excludes 'not sure / I can't remember' responses.

Some respondents praised the positive impact of VLA's good communication skills:

*"[Name] was a saving grace, listened to me, is calm and warm, clear kind explanations and expressed my view to magistrate and facilitated an amazing outcome for me and my life."*

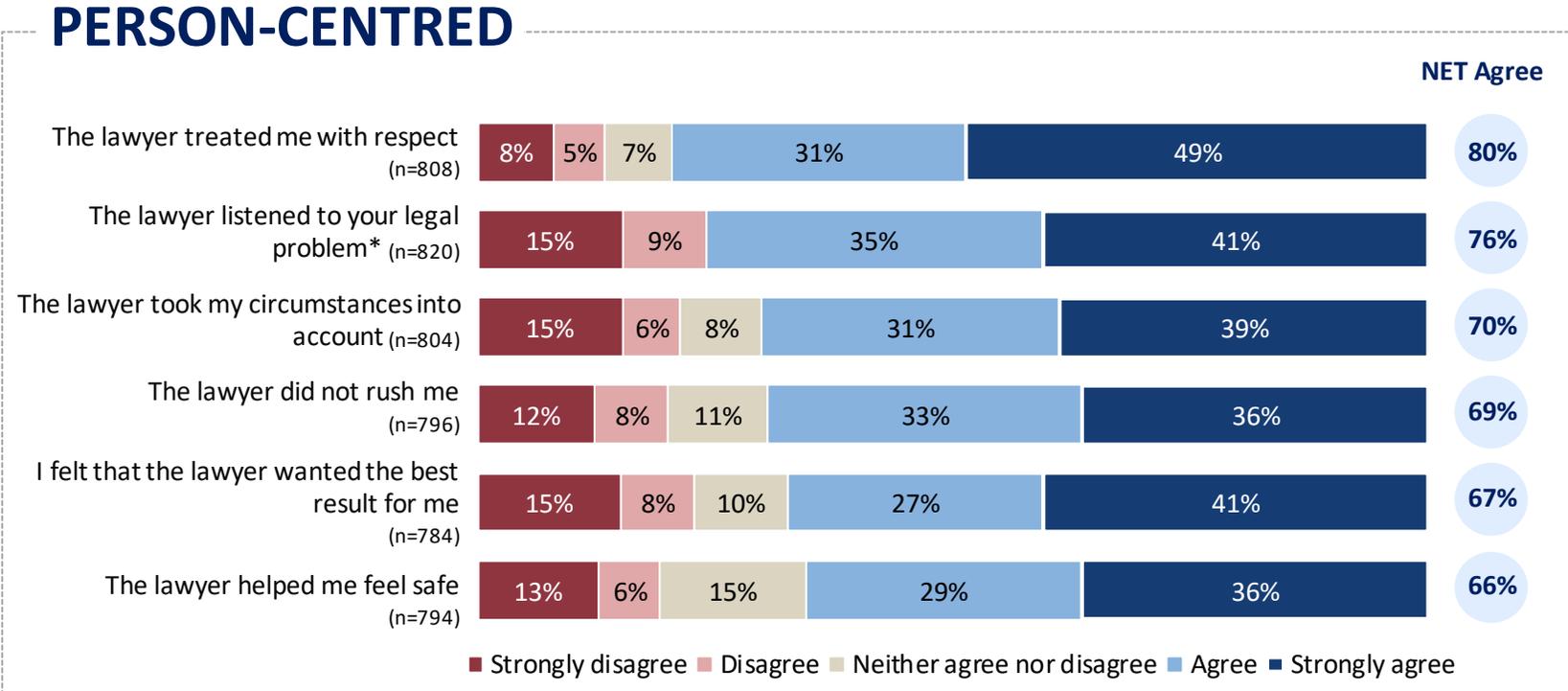
*"They were very welcoming and forthcoming, and the lawyer was helpful and relaxed and knowledgeable I couldn't thank him and her enough highly grateful."*

Poor communication often seemed to stem from what clients viewed as VLA personnel being rushed or holding a dismissive attitudes. Some respondents also highlighted that due to these behaviours, they could not ask the questions they wanted.

*"My questions were not answered, I was rushed..."*

*"The Legal Aid lawyer spoke to the other party's lawyer first before speaking to me, then made up her mind before asking me a single question that I would not win the case."*

# Respondents differed in their assessment of VLA engaging with them in a person-centred manner



Q7c/ Q7b/Q7e/Q8e/Q7f. Thinking back to the last time you got help from the Legal Aid lawyer, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?  
 Excludes 'not sure / I can't remember' responses.  
 Q9. How much do you agree or disagree that the lawyer listened to your legal problem?  
 Base: All respondents (base size noted above).

Some respondents noted in their comments that their lawyer seemed rushed, which was also reflected above in the relatively lower ratings about not feeling rushed by the lawyer (69%). This was associated with perceptions that their lawyer did not want the best result for them (23% disagreed that they wanted the best for them).

*"They only get your case moments before, don't have enough time to get all over your case, and truly want to win for you."*

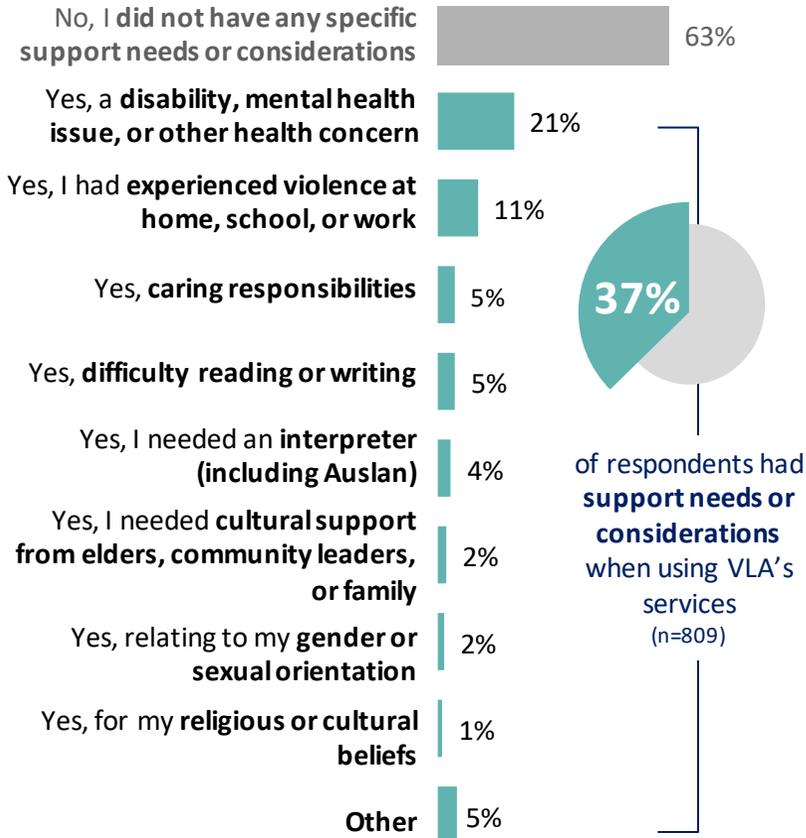
Some comments showed that respondents' perception of VLA's service as personal and tailored to individual circumstances impacted their level of satisfaction. For example:

*"Could not have asked for a better insight into supporting my personal circumstances and the relevance to the accused charges."*

*"Customise your service next time for the legal issue."*

# Overall, VLA fully met the needs for around half of those with support needs, but this varied depending on the type of request

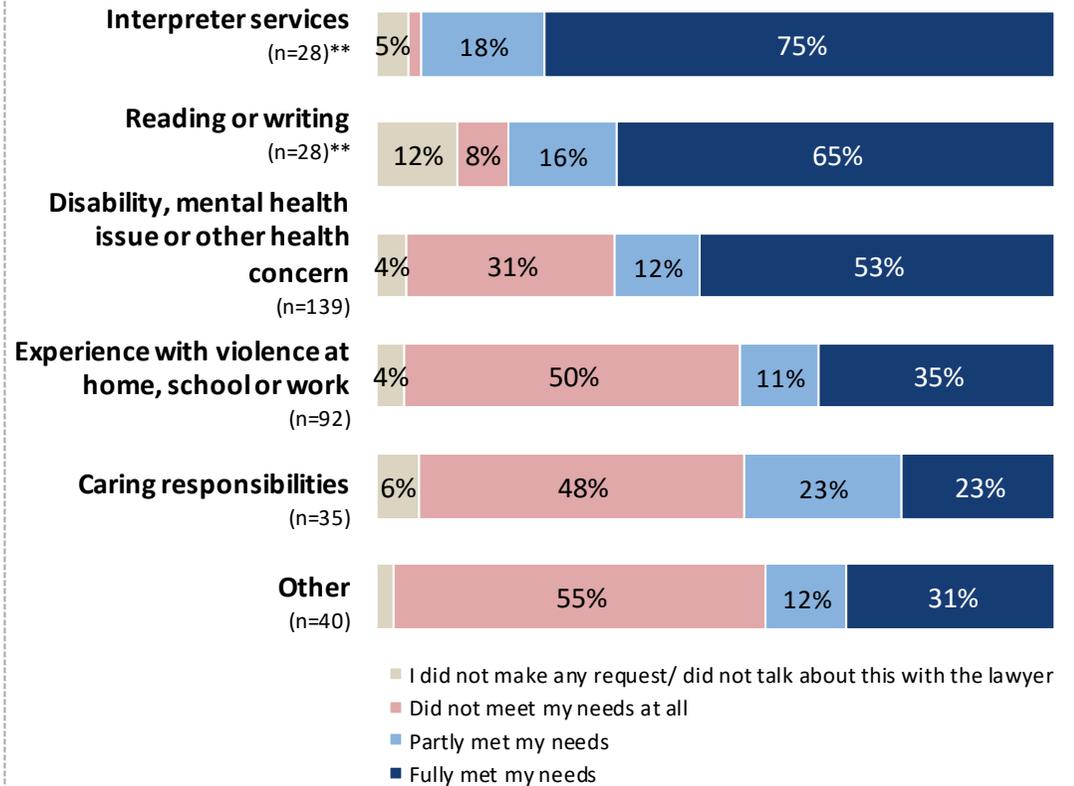
## SUPPORT NEEDS & CONSIDERATIONS



Q11. Did you have any support needs or considerations when you used Victoria Legal Aid's services? If so, what were they?

Base: All respondents (n=809).

## EXTENT TO WHICH SUPPORT NEEDS AND CONSIDERATIONS WERE MET



\*Results relating to cultural support from elders, community leaders or family, gender or sexual orientation, and religious or cultural beliefs are not shown due to very small response numbers (n=10-11)

\*\*Some caution should be used when interpreting these results due to small response numbers (n<30)

Q12. How well did Victoria Legal Aid support these needs or considerations?  
 Base: All respondents (base size noted above). Excludes 'not sure' responses.

# Comments and suggestions for assisting clients with support needs and considerations



**When respondents were asked why their support needs/ considerations were not fully or only partially met, many felt it was because VLA did not listen to them or take the time to understand their situation:**

*“Legal Aid didn't listen to anything and kept cutting me off. When I asked to be [listened] to, she said and I quote “nope, you can deal with it yourself” then she stormed out of the room, so I had a private cry before composing myself and speaking with the judge completely unsupported.”*

*“The lawyer did not even give me any time to mention my needs to the full extent, so she would actually understand the depth of my situation.”*

*“I was basically ignored and left to fend for myself.”*

*“Spoke over the phone and was rushed saying its 30 minutes and ended abruptly not taking into consideration my situation to leave a [domestic violence] situation.”*



**When respondents whose support needs were not fully met were asked how VLA could better meet their needs, many suggested that VLA could improve their communication and their quality of assistance (e.g. taking the time to listen to clients to understand their circumstances):**

*“Hire people who understand how to listen and empathise with domestic violence victims.”*

*“Just listen to me better when I was on the phone.”*

*“Understand the full picture before providing advice. I was provided general information which I already had from other sources.”*

*“Allocate A LOT more time for each client, actually have experience and get to know the client and their situation a lot better so you can represent them FAIRLY and speak with terms they can understand.”*

# Comments and suggestions for assisting clients with support needs and considerations cont.



**Improving the attitudes of VLA staff was also another suggestion offered by respondents, including having more empathy, respect and kindness towards them:**

*“Respect people [with] disability and not discriminate my faith.”*

*“Listen without assumption on initial contact. Treat each request individually.”*

*“Assume that the person seeking advice is genuine, give proper weight to the support and other service.”*



**A small proportion of respondents indicated that although they had support needs, they did not make any requests. A few explained that they were not aware that they could make requests or did not know how they could make these requests.**

*“They did not ask. Very little communication, if any. I was disappointed.”*

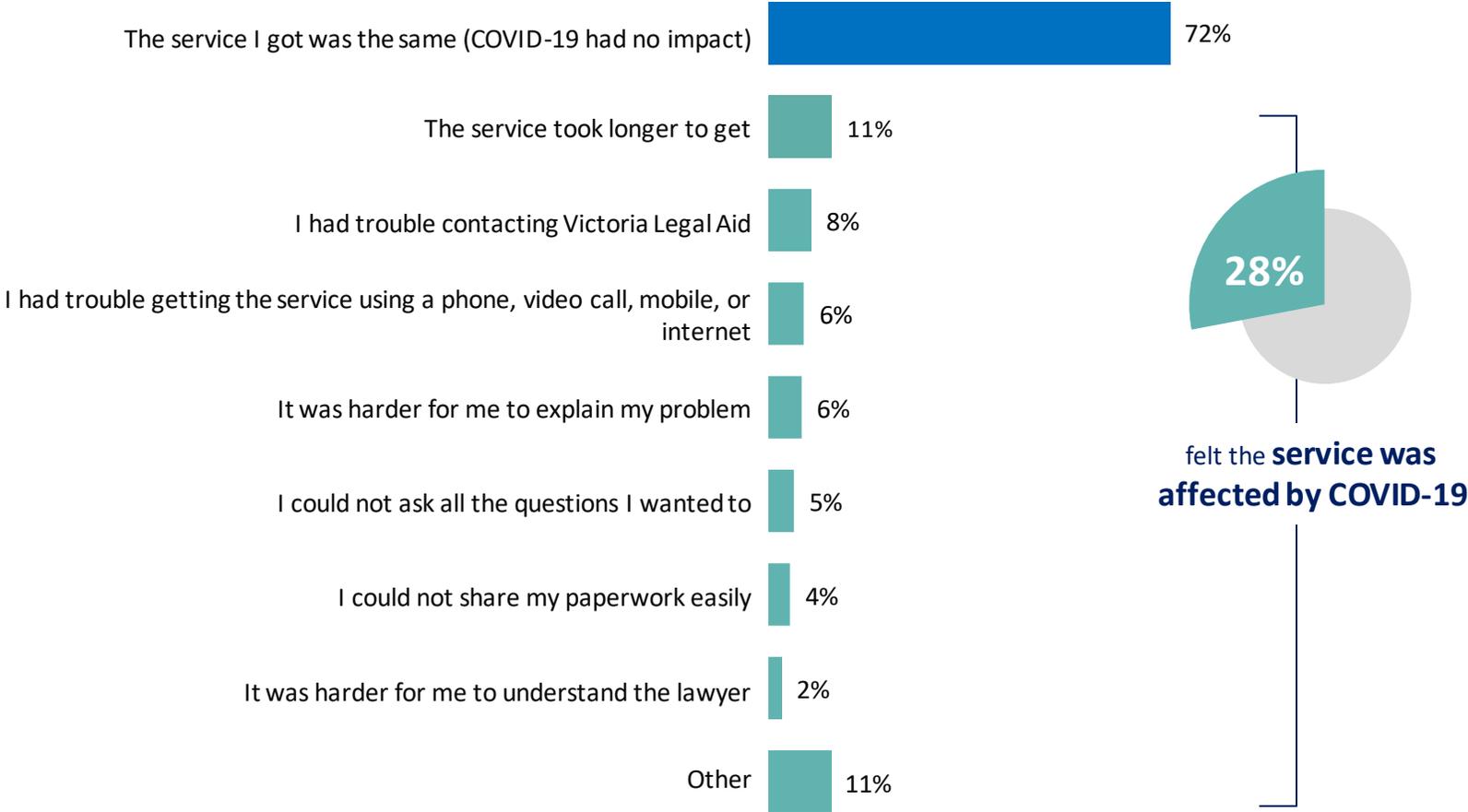
*“I wasn't aware I could.”*

*“I was not aware that this was something I could do. I made the lawyer aware of my disability at the start of the conversation (for the demographic questions).”*

*“I didn't know I could ask for help on those areas.”*

# Few respondents felt VLA's service had been impacted by COVID-19

## IMPACT OF COVID-19



Q26. What impact did COVID-19 have on the service you received from Legal Aid?  
Base: All respondents (n=745; multiple response).

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## Legal capability

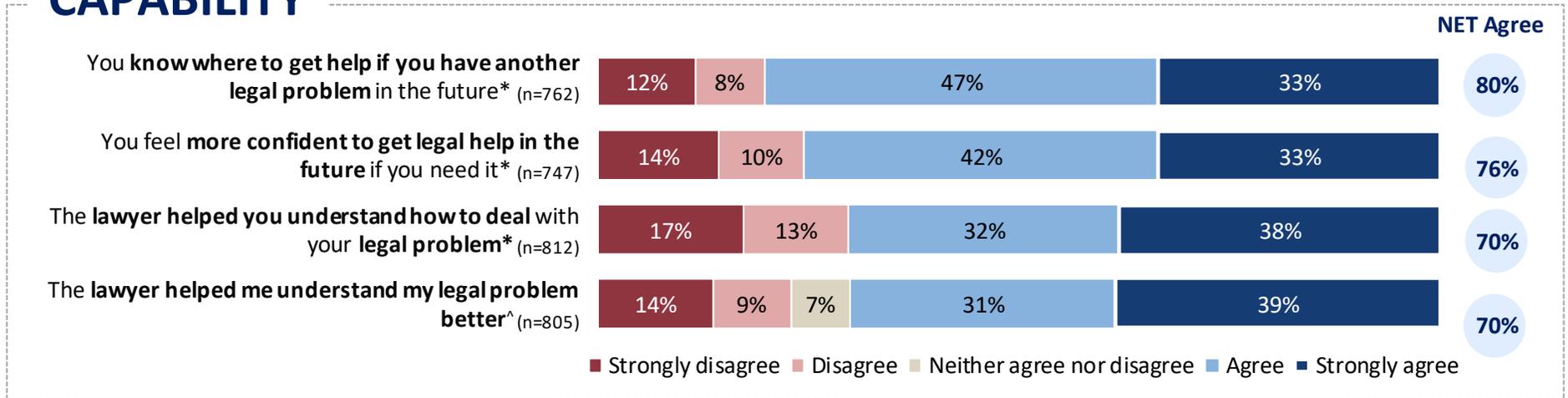
*This section describes the impact of VLA's assistance on clients' ability to understand their most recent legal problem, how to deal with it, as well as their impact on building client capability in dealing with future legal problems.*

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# The experience of interacting with VLA left most respondents feeling more capable of dealing with legal problems in the future

Eight in ten (80%) agreed they would know where to get help with future legal problems, and three-quarters (76%) felt more confident in getting legal help should they need to do so in future. Respondents also agreed the lawyer was instrumental in helping them to understand (70%) and deal (70%) with their legal problems, but to a slightly lesser extent.

## CAPABILITY



\* These questions were asked on a 4-point agreement scale without a mid-point (e.g. 'neither agree nor disagree').

Q25. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Q10. How much do you agree or disagree that the lawyer helped you understand how to deal with your legal problem?

Q7d. Thinking back to the last time you got help from the Legal Aid lawyer, how much do you agree or disagree with...the Legal Aid lawyer helped you understand your legal problem better?

Base: All respondents (base size noted above).

^Excludes 'not sure / I can't remember' responses.

When respondents commented on their satisfaction with VLA's service, they often referred to the value of the lawyer helping them understand the legal problem, and providing them with confidence to address it, rather than simply resolving it for them:

*"I felt more confident about resolving my legal issue and I had more knowledge so I wasn't as worried about what would happen as I had a clear idea and understanding of what could happen and how."*

*"They helped me in so many ways, made me understand more better as well."*

Some respondents, however, did not feel so empowered following their experience with VLA:

*"I am going through some stuff at the moment, so I might need to reach out to Legal Aid again. I don't know. I have no idea. I am not very smart. I don't know how they could help you. They would have to tell me how they could help me."*

*"Just explain how the process works."*

*"I find I get different information on how I apply for a grant each time I try. It would be easier and less stressful if someone could step me through over the phone."*

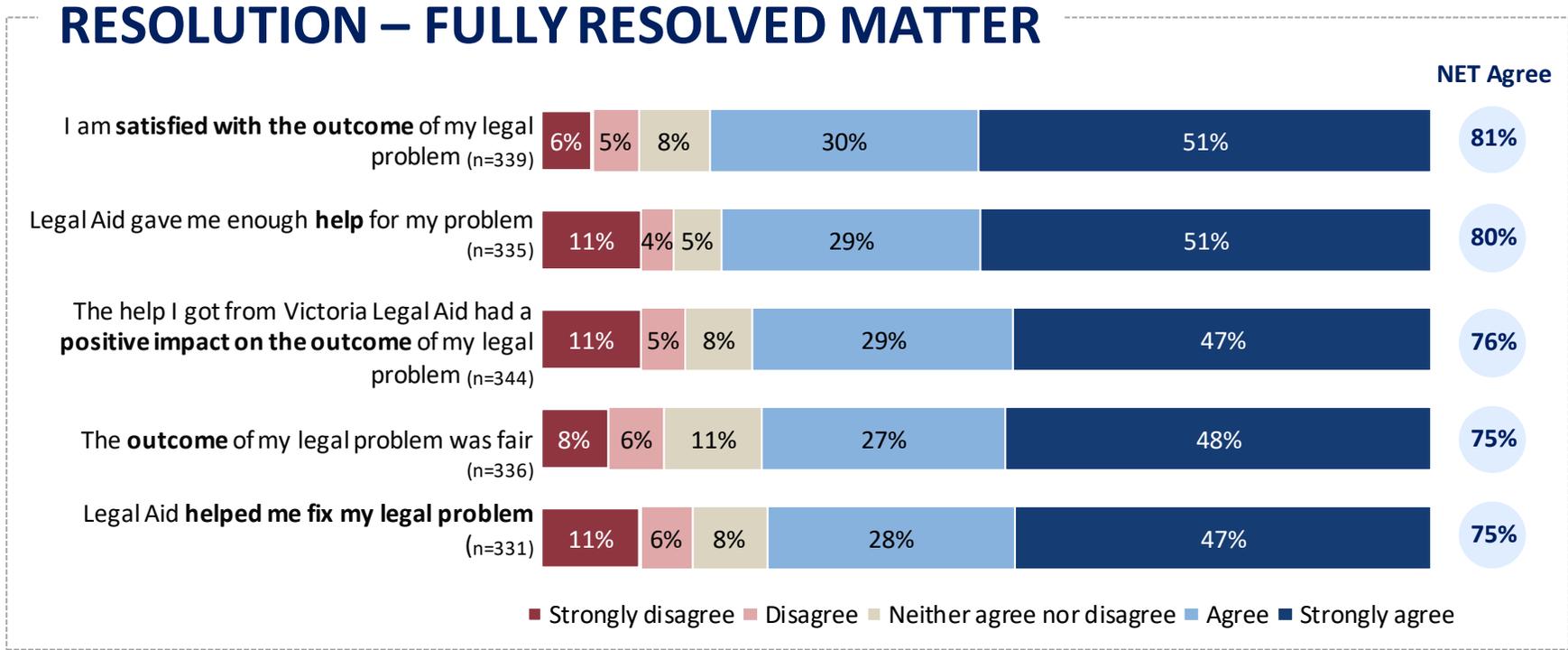
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## Resolution

*This section focuses on client perceptions of VLA's impact on their legal matters. In the survey there was a separate set of questions for those who had a fully resolved legal matter to those whose legal matter was yet to be resolved. The former focused on the perceived impact of VLA assistance on the outcome, and the latter focused on the perceived impact of VLA assistance on the progress of their case or anticipated outcome.*

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# VLA's involvement was generally perceived to have had a positive impact on the outcomes of respondents' legal problems where the legal matter had been resolved



Base: All respondents with a fully resolved legal matter (base size noted above). Excludes 'not sure' / 'not applicable' responses.

Respondents who perceived VLA to have a positive impact on their legal matter praised VLA's communication and support which helped them to achieve their outcome:

*"I'm very happy with the help I received and the outcome."*

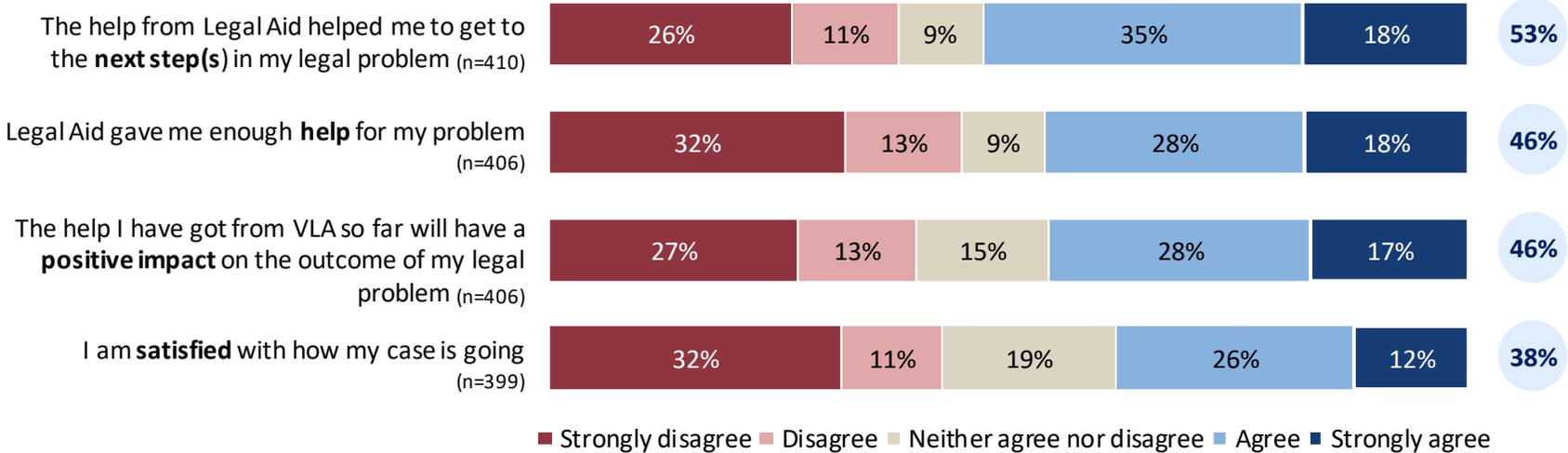
*"Outcome was in my favour and they were very understanding and supportive."*

*"They helped me prove my [innocence]."*

# Clients were generally less positive if their matter had not been fully resolved

## RESOLUTION – UNRESOLVED MATTER

NET Agree



Base: All respondents with an unresolved legal matter (base size noted above). Excludes 'not sure' / 'not applicable' responses.

Respondents who were not satisfied with their overall experience and whose legal problem had not been resolved described concerns about the level of communication, support and advice from VLA:

*“I have been left in the dark, I'm unsure of the plan by my lawyer, I have made 5 attempts to contact my lawyer they didn't return my phone calls.”*

*“No result or progress with them, they contradict what they initially say.”*

Although most clients were generally less positive if their matter had not been fully resolved, a few expressed satisfaction with VLA despite their case not being resolved due to the assistance they had received with their legal problem.

*“My case is still ongoing, but I'm still getting the help I need and I'm happy with how things are going.”*

*“In some ways I'm unhappy as there's no resolution but I'm satisfied that the lawyer tried and that's all I can ask for.”*

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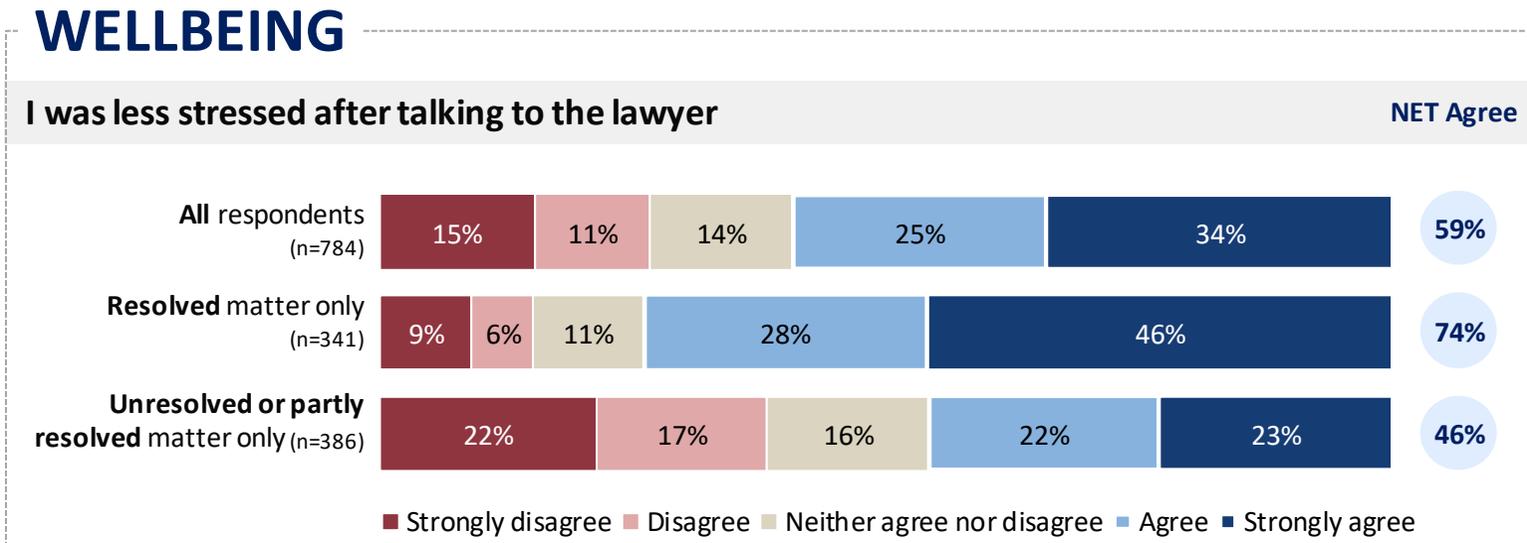
## Wellbeing

*This section discusses VLA's impact on the wellbeing of clients. In the survey there was a separate set of questions for those who had a fully resolved legal matter to those whose legal matter was yet to be resolved.*

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# VLA's services had a positive impact on wellbeing where the legal matter was resolved, and less so where it was partially or unresolved

Three-quarters (74%) of those with a resolved legal matter agreed they were less stressed after talking to the lawyer, but this was less than half (46%) for those without a resolved matter.

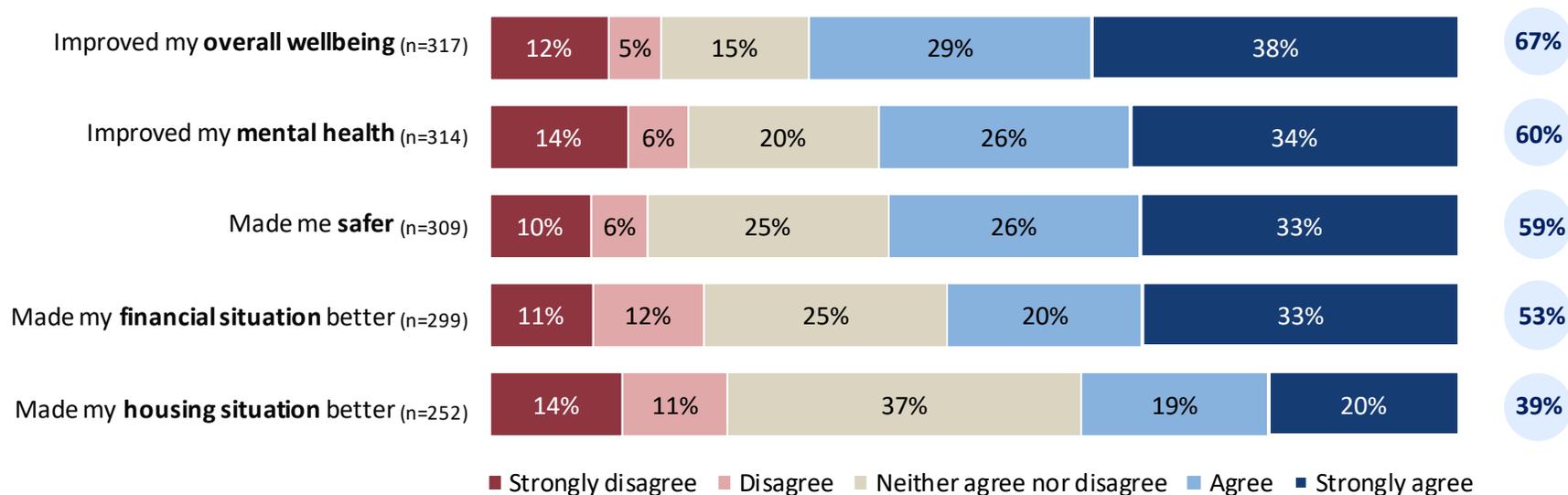


Q8a. Thinking back to the last time you got help from the Legal Aid lawyer, how much do you agree or disagree with... I was less stressed after talking to the lawyer?

Base: All respondents with a fully resolved or unresolved legal matter (base size noted above). Excludes 'not sure / I can't remember' responses.

# WELLBEING – FULLY RESOLVED MATTER

## The help I got from Victoria Legal Aid... (respondents with a fully resolved matter) NET Agree



Q18. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Base: All respondents with a fully resolved or unresolved legal matter (base size noted above). Excludes 'not sure / not applicable' responses.

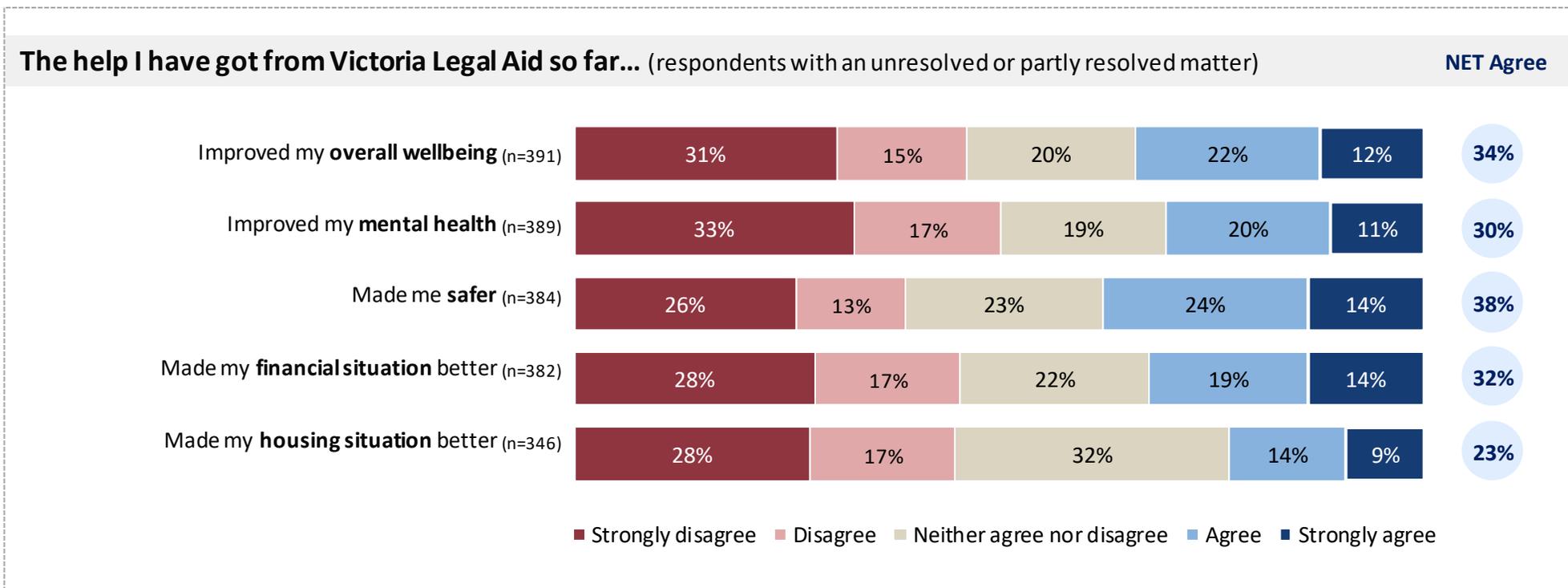
Respondents who felt that they had good mental health outcomes, praised VLA's assistance:

*"I feel blessed that my experience was as good as it was and that my mental health has improved and feel I have a second chance for a better life. Thank you VLA for the support! So much gratitude."*

*"The service I got was fantastic. It really made a difference to my mental and emotional wellbeing."*

*"That dark cloud floating over my head was gone. There was only sunshine left. Anyone with very little legal training deserves this level of support I received."*

# WELLBEING – PARTLY RESOLVED OR UNRESOLVED MATTER



Q19. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Base: All respondents with a fully resolved or unresolved legal matter (base size noted above). Excludes 'not sure / not applicable' responses.

Some felt their poorer mental wellbeing was related to the attitude that the lawyer had towards them and their case, with some feeling that their lawyer had limited time to help, had a limited understanding of their personal circumstances or did not follow through with the legal assistance discussed.

*“More time to speak with duty lawyer, more understanding of my anxiety and the stress that the process creates.”*

*“... Actually provide the assistance you say you offer. Because all I got was stress and upset. I was not listened to or offered any real legal advice. Just provided a list of lawyers that I could not afford.”*

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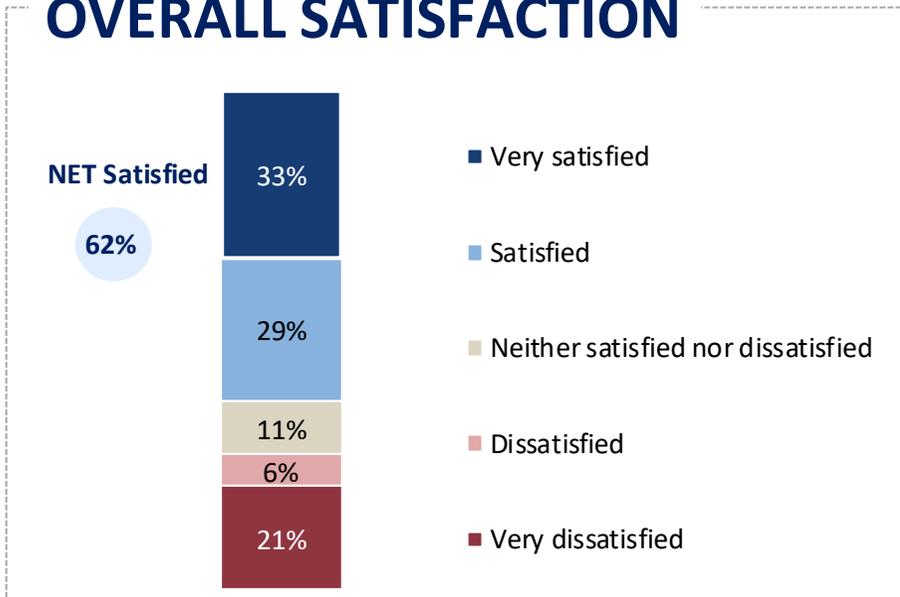
## Overall client satisfaction

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# Many respondents were satisfied with the help they received from VLA, although there has been a declining trend since 2015

Six in ten (62%) respondents were either very satisfied or satisfied with the service they received. This is lower than all previous years since 2013.

## OVERALL SATISFACTION



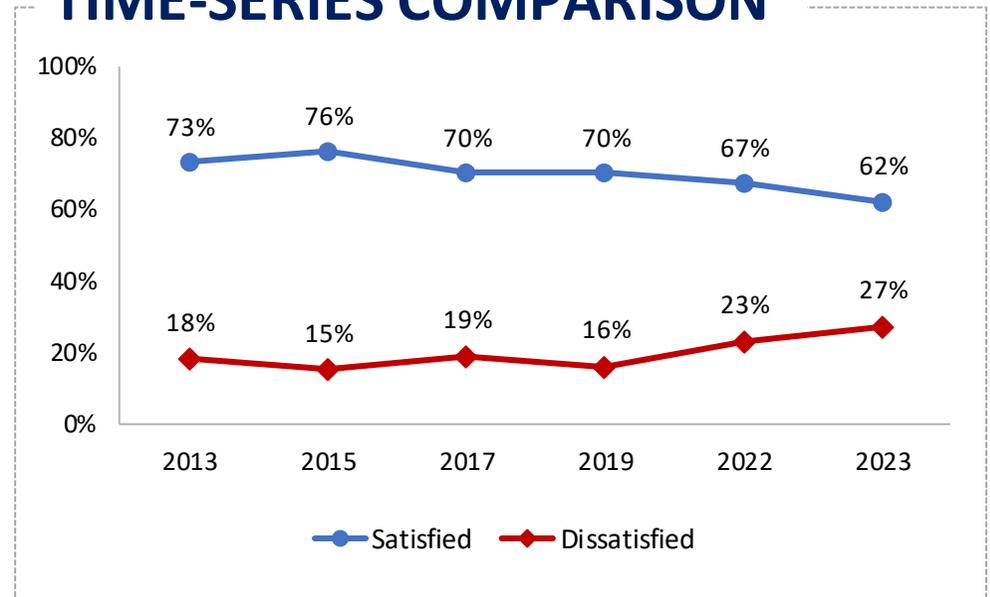
Q23. Overall, how do you feel about the help you got from Victoria Legal Aid?  
Base: All respondents (n=783); 2023 results weighted.

Respondents were asked the reason for their level of satisfaction. The top reason among those satisfied with the help they received from VLA was to note that their request for services was fulfilled (i.e., they felt VLA helped) and/or were satisfied due to the outcome of their legal problem:

*“Outcome was in my favour, and they were very understanding and supportive.”*

*“The outcome was better than expected.”*

## TIME-SERIES COMPARISON<sup>^</sup>



<sup>^</sup> Base sizes are not available for 2015-2022 results. Base size for 2023 is n=783 and 2023 results are weighted.

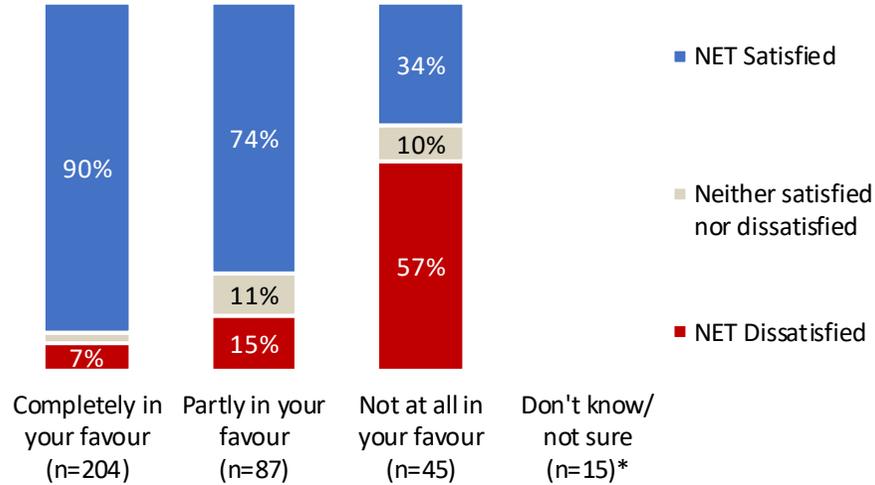
Among respondents who were dissatisfied with VLA’s services, some explained that this was due to the lack of access to legal assistance from VLA, including not being able to access a lawyer in court, being referred to private/ fee-paying services, or not qualifying for legal support or being refused services

*“Limited on what they can do.”*

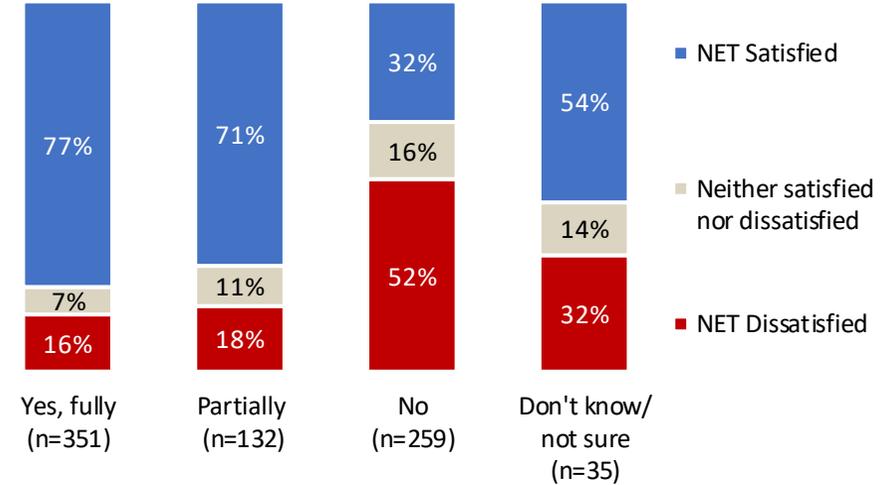
*“I was told that they cannot help me and [sent] me to private lawyer.”*

# Overall satisfaction comparisons by cohorts

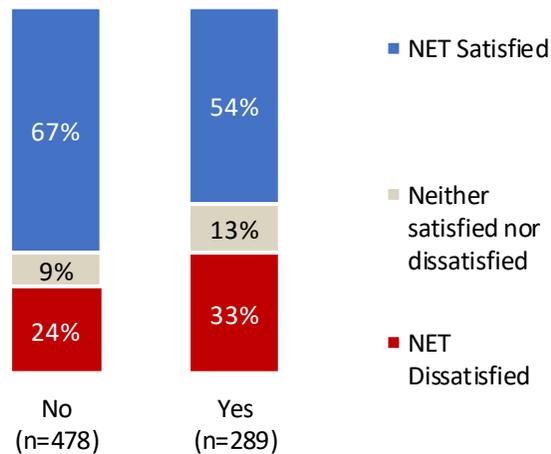
## Overall satisfaction by outcome of legal problem



## Overall satisfaction by resolution status of legal problem



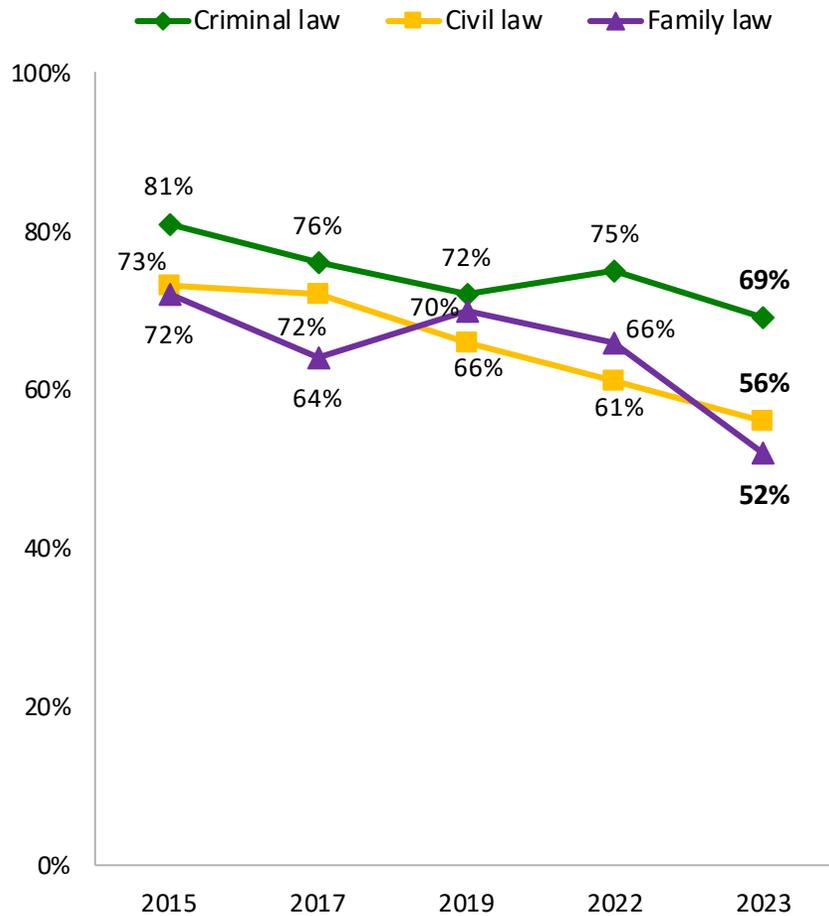
## Overall satisfaction by clients who needed support or considerations



Base: All respondents (base size noted above). \*Results are not shown due to small response numbers (n<30).

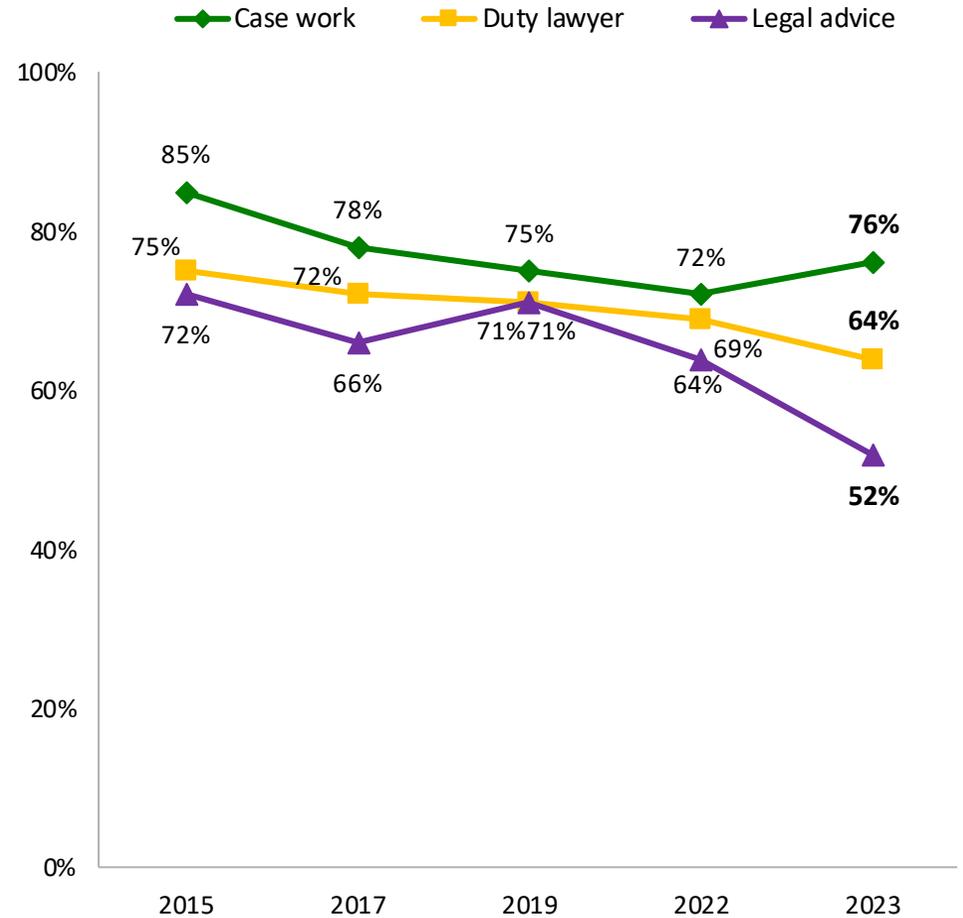
# Overall satisfaction trend

Overall satisfaction by program area and time-series comparison



Base: All respondents (2023 results are weighted). Base sizes are not available for 2015-2022 results. 2023 (weighted): Criminal Law (n=269), Civil Law (n=189), Family Law (n=326).

Overall satisfaction by service area and time-series comparison



Base: All respondents (2023 results are weighted). Base sizes are not available for 2015-2022 results. 2023 (weighted): Case work (n=127), Duty Lawyer (n=334), Legal advice (n=329).

# Thank you

*We would also like to acknowledge and thank all the participants who were involved in the research for their valuable contribution and input.*

This project will be conducted in accordance with the international quality standard ISO 20252, the international information security standard ISO 27001, as well as the Australian Privacy Principles contained in the Privacy Act 1988 (Cth).

-  Communications and marketing research
-  Client and stakeholder research
-  Employee research
-  Community research
-  Policy development and program management research
-  Program evaluations and reviews
-  Data analytics
-  Data portals and ballots
-  PGPA Compliance services
-  Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research
-  Disability services research
-  Education research
-  Consulting and advisory services
-  User-centred design