

“If I stay like this, how can I benefit my family?”

Initial findings on
disengagement from the
Pacific Australia Labour
Mobility Scheme

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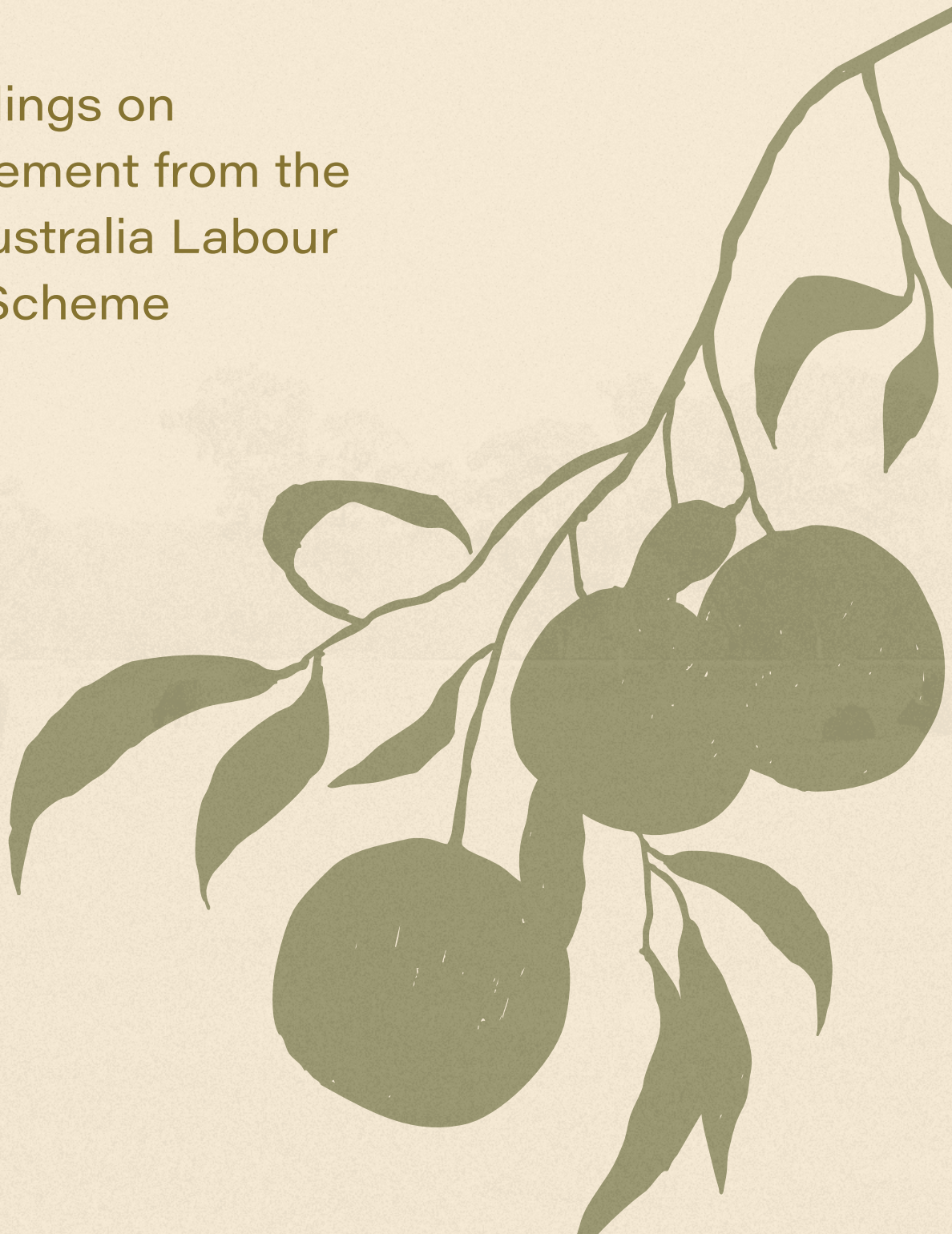




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List of Acronyms

AE	Approved Employer
CLO	Community Liaison Officer
DEWR	Department of Employment and Workplace Relations
DHA	Department of Home Affairs
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
ILO	International Labour Organisation
LMAP	Labour Mobility Assistance Program
MIA	Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area
NSW	New South Wales
PALM Scheme	Pacific Australia Labour Mobility Scheme
PICs	Pacific Island Countries
PLF	Pacific Labour Facility
PLMSP	Pacific Labour Mobility Support Program
PLS	Pacific Labour Scheme
RSE Scheme	Recognised Seasonal Employer Scheme
SWP	Seasonal Worker Programme
TPV	Temporary Protection visa
UN	United Nations

Executive Summary

This report details initial research findings on disengagement from the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme. The report is based on qualitative, in-depth interviews with over 30 people who have left the PALM scheme and remain in Australia, and seven stakeholders who provide support to disengaged workers. All interviews were conducted in the Riverina Region of New South Wales, where former PALM visa holders had travelled after leaving workplaces elsewhere in Australia.

The PALM scheme has become the backbone of labour supply for many areas in rural and regional Australia, providing much-needed labour for important but low-wage industries like horticulture and meat processing. However, the regulatory framework of the PALM scheme is out of step with many of Australia's fundamental commitments to labour standards and human rights, and 'disengagement' from the scheme is now commonplace. An estimated 7,000 people have walked out of jobs in breach of their restrictive visa conditions and into the murky landscape of living and labouring on bridging visas or without documentation, often reliant on precarious and irregular employment that pervades Australia's rural economy. Crucially, despite the extent of disengagement and the concern it has generated in both Australia and PALM sending countries, there is little publicly available research examining what informs decisions to leave the scheme or the conditions encountered afterwards.

Our study's **key findings** are:

- Significant reasons for disengaging from the PALM scheme relate to inadequate income due to a lack of hours, unreasonable deductions and wage theft, or unfair treatment by employers.
- Support services for people who have left the PALM scheme are inadequate. Access to basic healthcare and wellbeing services are largely facilitated by local community groups, not-for-profit organisations and faith leaders.
- Once people have left the scheme, there are limited visa options and many people remain in Australia without a valid visa or legal migration status.
- There are often lengthy and protracted periods of visa status uncertainty for those who remain in Australia. People often fall prey to predatory migration agents in an attempt to regularise their status.
- Not everyone who has disengaged from the PALM scheme remains in Australia illegally, and some people hold work rights.
- Most disengaged people continue to work after they have left the scheme, and are making vital contributions to economies in regional Australia.
- Disengagement from the PALM scheme extends periods of family separation to the detriment of personal and child-parent relationships.

This report details five **key recommendations** that aim to protect those who have disengaged from the PALM scheme and address the structural flaws which lead to disengagement in the first instance:

- Provide a pathway to regularise (or legalise where applicable), socially protect, and 're-engage' people who have left the scheme.
- Ensure the PALM scheme adheres to best practice in worker-initiated portability, whereby people on the PALM scheme have the right to freely change employers to redress employer dependency.
- Reduce the extent of total deductions and extend the repayment period to ease financial burdens on people in the PALM scheme and their families.
- Subsidise flights to and from Australia, including annual return visits for long-term workers, to reduce and equalise costs of participation while supporting rights to family life.
- Provide Medicare coverage to PALM scheme visa holders.



Introduction

The Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme has become the backbone of labour supply for many areas of regional Australia, filling much needed labour shortages by providing migrant workers to key industries like horticulture and meat works. The PALM visa rapidly expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic, delivering people to places that desperately needed their labour and resulting in more than 30,000 PALM visa holders employed in Australia. Yet media reports state that over 7,000 people have left the visa in recent years,¹ walking out of jobs and into the murky landscape of being an undocumented person in regional Australia, where cash-in-hand work and exploitative conditions are rife.

PALM visas are employer tied, and leaving one's designated employer – commonly referred to as 'disengaging' or 'absconding' from the scheme – is a breach of visa conditions. Employers, governments and industry have warned that disengaging has dire consequences for individuals as well as their families back home. Nonetheless, thousands of former PALM workers remain living and working in Australia without a valid visa or access to healthcare and social security. Little is known about the experiences of these former PALM visa holders beyond periodic media stories. While they are not without merit, such stories inevitably tend to sensationalise and dwell on negatives, while simultaneously failing to capture the wide-ranging experiences of disengagement and the contexts in which it takes place. There exist a handful of internal Australian government studies into disengagement, however very little research or data has been publicly released that investigates the risks and vulnerabilities that disengaged people face in day-to-day life. Without such data it is impossible to design effective solutions that address the issues around disengagement.

This report highlights some of these issues, garnered through in-depth interviews with former PALM visa holders, alongside key organisations and community members who support them. We argue that disengagement from the PALM scheme needs to be viewed as a human rights issue. Solutions need to be twofold: Firstly, the Australian Government should prioritise supporting people who have left the scheme and remain in Australia, so that they are enabled in ethical and fair ways to re-engage in employment and regularise their migration status. Secondly, the reasons and motivations that push people to disengage are important lessons that can further improve the PALM scheme and help to prevent future breaches of human rights.

This report contains three main sections. First, we consider the history of the PALM scheme and the evolution of disengagement as a pressing and persistent issue that undermines intended outcomes of the scheme. We then discuss our methodology and key findings, both of which are informed by a focus on fundamental labour standards and human rights obligations that remain unmet within the PALM scheme and intersect with disengagement: labour rights; social protection and wellbeing; and the right to family life. The report concludes with policy recommendations for addressing both the factors that lead to disengagement as well as resolving the situation that currently disengaged people find themselves in.

1 Amin, M. (2025). 'Scared' and 'helpless': Rayasi's dream of working in Australia was not what she envisioned. *SBS News*, 27 April, 2025. Retrieved from <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/palm-scheme-workers-at-risk-of-exploitation/61ytu2mt0>

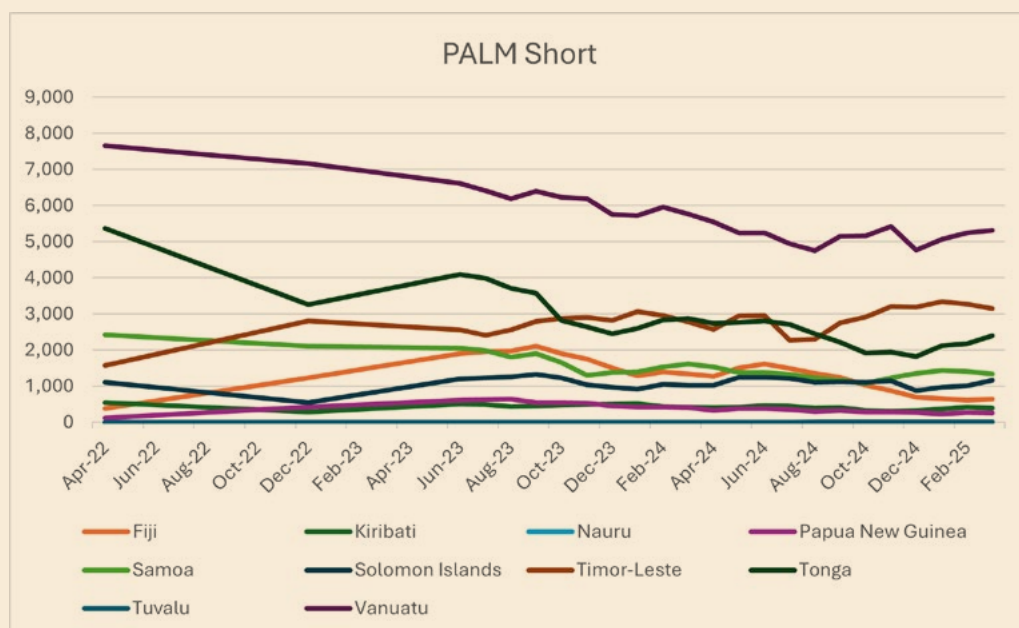
The PALM Scheme: A Case of Best Practice?

The PALM scheme facilitates short- and long-term employer-tied visas for 'unskilled', 'low-skilled' and 'semi-skilled' work in rural and regional Australia. Launched in 2022, the PALM scheme amalgamated two existing labour mobility schemes: the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) and the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS). The SWP commenced in 2012 and offered seasonal employment opportunities of up to nine months in so-called low- and unskilled industries, primarily horticulture, and to a lesser extent, seasonal accommodation. The PLS, introduced in 2018, expanded temporary employment opportunities into other 'low-' and 'semi-skilled' industries including aged care, meat works, tourism, and hospitality, with contracts of up to three years. The PALM scheme reconfigures these antecedent programmes as 'short' and 'long' streams of a single labour mobility scheme with streamlined recruitment processes and administrative procedures.

Broadly speaking, the new configuration of the PALM scheme aimed to improve labour mobility experiences for both employers and participants. Among other changes, short-term PALM employment was opened to any industry in eligible postcodes (subject to occupational skill limits and labour market testing), and the maximum duration of the long term PALM visa was extended to four years. In addition, it became possible for people on the PALM scheme to transition from the short- to long-term visa stream while in Australia, rather than having to return home first. In all iterations, visas to participate in Australia's labour mobility schemes have been employer tied, with extremely limited opportunities for workers to change employer.

The PALM scheme is open to nine Pacific Island Countries (PICs)² and Timor-Leste, and whereas participation rates were once quite low, there has been a significant and rapid increase in visa grants since the COVID-19 pandemic. While PALM participation has broadly increased across all sending countries, the extent of countries' participation has varied over time. Due to factors including their early entry into the SWP and resultant employer preferences, Vanuatu and Tonga have numerically dominated labour mobility participation (Figures 1 and 2). Men have significantly outnumbered women in labour mobility participation, routinely accounting for roughly 80 percent of participants at any given time. Across all participating countries, there has been a significant increase in labour mobility participation since the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the long-term stream – which increased from 7,010 workers in country in April 2022 to 15,920 in August 2025 to overtake short-term employment as the predominant mode of participation (Figure 2). This increase reflects both the expansion of the PALM scheme, which in recent years has been driven by demand for non-seasonal work in the meat processing sector, as well as the perceived opportunities it provided for economic recovery in both Australia and sending countries during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.³

Figure 1: Short-term PALM visa Grants by Country – 08/2022 to 02/2025⁴

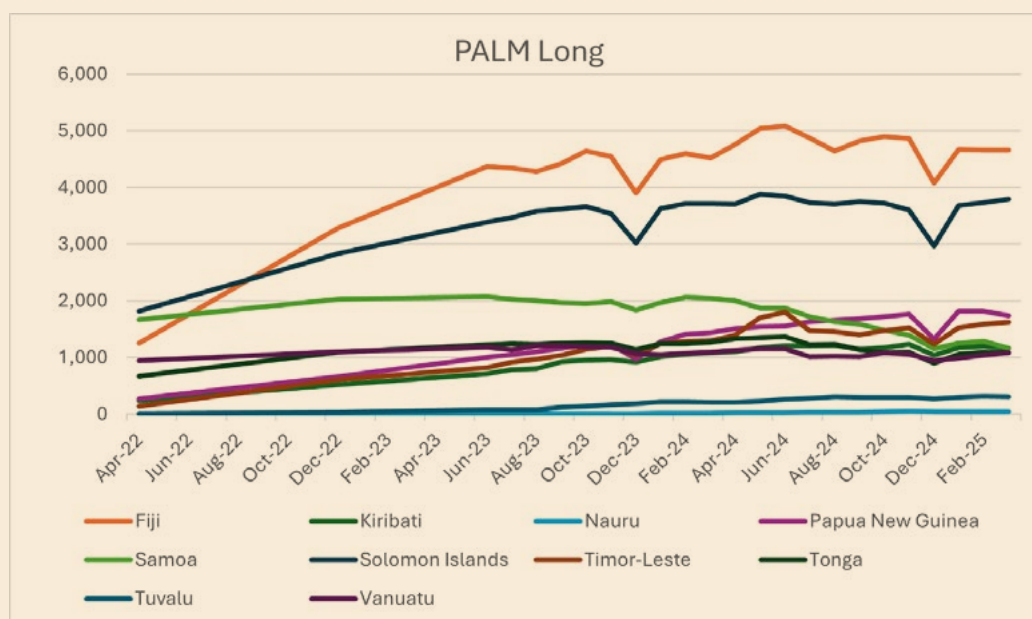


² Citizens of Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Nauru, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu are eligible to participate in PALM.

³ Stead, V., & Petrou, K. (2023). Beyond the 'triple win': Pacific farmworkers' use of social media to navigate labour mobility costs and possibilities through the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*.

⁴ Data source: Department of Home Affairs, Australia.

Figure 2: Long-term PALM visa Grants by Country - 08/2022 to 02/2025⁵



In Australia, PALM scheme implementation and governance is currently split between the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) and the Department of Home Affairs (DHA). Broadly, and while there are some important exceptions, DFAT oversees recruitment and other sending country operations, DEWR is responsible for PALM visa holders while they are in Australia, and DHA administers visa issuance and validity. In addition, and funded through DFAT, the Pacific Labour Mobility Support Program (PLMSP)⁶, supports sending countries through research, capacity building, skills development, social and economic reintegration programs, and information system management.

Rationalised as a 'Triple Win', the PALM scheme is a key component of Australia's regional development programming. The 'wins' referred to in the 'Triple Win' framing are largely economic, and based on PALM's potential to bring benefits

to Australia's economy (which gains a reliable workforce for industries with qualitative labour shortages⁷), PALM visa holders (who are expected to gain skills and income), and countries of origin (which receive transfers of social and economic remittances). It is through these projected remittances and skills transfers that 'development' in migrant sending countries is expected to occur. While the potential for increased incomes arising from labour mobility is now well-documented,⁸ as participation has grown, there has been increasing concern over the social and economic impacts of labour mobility in sending communities including family separation and loss of skilled workers from the domestic workforce.⁹ Sending country governments have also raised concerns about worker mistreatment in Australia including wage theft and living and working conditions.¹⁰ Alongside this, disengagement has emerged as a pressing issue, yet one that has never been prioritised by DHA.

⁵ Data source: Department of Home Affairs, Australia.

⁶ PLMSP is the current phase of what was previously the Pacific Labour Facility (PLF).

⁷ Qualitative labour shortages refer to instances where there is not an absolute shortage of workers, but a mismatch in expectations between employers and workers, often with respect to prevailing wages and conditions.

⁸ Doan, D., Dornan, M., & Edwards, R. (2023). *The Gains and Pains of Working Away from Home: The Case of Pacific Temporary Migrant Workers in Australia and New Zealand*. Washington DC: World Bank.

World Bank. (2017). *Maximizing the Development Impacts from Temporary Migration*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

World Bank. (2021). *Pacific Labor Mobility, Migration and Remittances in Times of COVID-19*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

⁹ Petrou, K., & Connell, J. (2025). Guestworker Schemes in Pacific Island Countries: Triple Wins but Social Costs? *International Migration*, 63(5), e70085.

Petrou, K., & Connell, J. (2023). Our 'Pacific family': Heroes, guests, workers or a precariat? *Australian Geographer*, 54(2), 125-135.

Petrou, K., & Withers, M. (2023). 'Sometimes, men cannot do what women can': Pacific labour mobility, gender norms and social reproduction. *Global Networks*, e12463.

Withers, M. (2022). *Rapid analysis of family separation issues and responses in the PALM scheme - final report*. Brisbane: Pacific Labour Facility.

¹⁰ Petrou, K., & Connell, J. (2025).

Petrou, K., & Connell, J. (2023).

A Brief History of Disengagement

Concerns about the potential for Pacific Islanders and Timorese to 'overstay' or 'abscond' from the PALM scheme and its predecessors are longstanding and must be understood within the broader historical context of Australia's Pacific migration policies. These migration policies have a long history of trying to limit and control the immigration of Pacific Islanders, who were once described as 'unsophisticated and unsuited' to the Australian way of life.¹¹ Indeed, academics Makiko Nishitani and Helen Lee¹² point out that despite their accounting for only a small proportion of overstayers across all visa categories, concerns over Pacific Islander visa overstayers have long informed Australia's contemporary migration policies.¹³ Almost a decade ago, in 2016, Australia's then Labour Mobility Assistance Program (LMAP) had already identified 'issues contributing to SWP workers absconding while in Australia ... and approaches to reducing the number of absconders'¹⁴ as priority areas for research. At the time, issues around poor living and working conditions for SWP participants were already well-documented. Rather than trying to address these issues however, and in line with a broader trend towards migration securitisation, Australian government concerns were focused on the illegality of Pacific Islanders leaving the SWP.¹⁵ Little has changed over the course of a decade, and while labour mobility to Australia has since expanded to include different industries and longer contracts, many of the issues identified by LMAP remain.

Initially quite small, the number of Pacific Islanders and Timorese leaving the SWP and PLS schemes increased dramatically during Australia's COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and border closures. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia's international borders, along with most state and territory borders, were closed, resulting in many people becoming 'stuck' in regional areas and unable to return home.¹⁶ The response from the Australian Government was to transition people whose visas had lapsed onto a 'Pandemic event visa' (subclass 408, see Box 1), as they were unable to depart the country and return home. This resulted in thousands of people on temporary visas remaining in their current employment when the borders closed in March 2020 until the staggered reopening of the international border in February 2022. Ample research has shown the emotional strain this caused for people on temporary visas,¹⁷ while also forcing people into a limbo of uncertainty about their rights and migration status.

Box 1: Pandemic Visas Explained

Temporary Activity visa (subclass 408) - Australian Government endorsed events (COVID-19 Pandemic event). This visa was introduced by the Australian government in April of 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The visa allowed temporary visa holders – such as those on SWP and PLS visas – to remain in Australia lawfully while the border was closed and they were unable to return home at the expiration of their visa. The visa cost \$405.00 to apply for and new applications concluded on 1 February 2024, at the 'end' of the pandemic event¹⁸.

For Pacific Islanders and Timorese who entered Australia on work visas, their protracted stay in the country during the COVID-19 pandemic was complicated by significant recruitment of new workers on the PALM scheme. While work opportunities boomed, these opportunities were not necessarily in the same location as or with the same employers that PALM visa holders were working through. The rigidity of the PALM scheme meant that people were unable to leave, move, or negotiate other employment opportunities during this time as horticultural seasons changed and work dried up in certain areas. State lockdowns and border closures further hindered the movement of PALM visa holders and their ability to access spatially distant employment opportunities. In addition, the transition from the SWP and PLS into the consolidated PALM scheme had begun, which meant that individuals were on a variety of different visa types with (often) individualised conditions stipulated on their visas. For both employers and employees, the 'red tape' of meeting and adhering to visa requirements was murky at best.

11 Hamer, P. (2014). 'Unsophisticated and unsuited': Australian barriers to Pacific Islander Immigration from New Zealand. *Political Science*, 66(2), 93-118.

12 Nishitani, M., & Lee, H. (2019). Becoming 'Overstayers': The Coloniality of Citizenship and the Resilience of Pacific Farm Workers. In V. Stead & J. Altman (Eds.), *Labour Lines and Colonial Power: Indigenous and Pacific Islander Labour Mobility in Australia* (pp. 159-184). Canberra: ANU Press.

13 These concerns were in part founded on New Zealand's long history of temporary labour migration from the PICs and historical amnesties that were offered to visa overstayers in the 1980s.

14 LMAP 2016, cited in Nishitani, M., & Lee, H. (2019).

15 Nishitani, M., & Lee, H. (2019)

16 Barry, K., Azedero, R. & Balle-Bowness. (2023). *Turbulent Times: The State of Backpacking and Seasonal Farm Workers in Australia*. Brisbane: Griffith University.

17 See for example: Ang, S., & Mansouri, F. (2023). Racialized (im) mobilities: The pandemic and sinophobia in Australia. *Journal of intercultural studies*, 44(2), 160-179.

Barry, K. & Iaquinto, B.L. (2023). Hostel frictions: backpackers living under lockdown. *Mobilities*, 18(1), 37-53.

Berg, L., & Farbenblum, B. (2020). *As if we weren't humans: The abandonment of temporary migrants in Australia during COVID-19*. Sydney: Migrant Justice Institute.

18 see: <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/getting-a-visa/visa-listing/repealed-visas/covid-19-pandemic-event-subclass-408>

For Pacific Islanders and Timorese in Australia on the PALM scheme, the COVID-19 pandemic and associated border closures magnified many pre-existing structural problems within Australia's labour mobility schemes. For people on the PALM scheme visa (and those transitioning from the SWP and PLS), the confusions and gaps in adequate provisions to ensure their wellbeing and safety was a growing concern. In addition to inadequate work hours, people faced myriad challenges including extended separation from families due to localised and international border closures, uncertainty around when and if they could return home, alongside generalised concerns about the health impacts of COVID-19 itself.¹⁹

Over the same period, various 'problems' such as pregnancy and 'misbehaviour', that had historically been dealt with by sending guestworkers home, increased.²⁰ It was in this climate, that 'absconding' began to occur in significant numbers. Between July 2020 and June 2021, an estimated 1,181 SWP and PLS visa holders left their employer as compared to 225 the previous year.²¹ The current number of people who have disengaged from the PALM scheme is unknown to the public, however it has been estimated at roughly 7,000 people.²² Recent media reports suggest that the proportion of PALM visa holders disengaging has declined from 10 percent of total PALM visa holders in 2022-2023 to around 5 percent in 2023-2024.²³



19 Petrou, K., Dun, O., Farbotko, C., & Kitara, T. (2021). Pacific Labour Mobility on Pause: Consequences of Temporary Immobility During the Pandemic. In *COVID in the Islands: A comparative perspective on the Caribbean and the Pacific* (pp. 299-319): Singapore: Springer. World Bank. (2021).

20 Petrou, K., & Connell, J. (2023).

21 Kelly, C. (2021). 'You may bring shame to your family': Australia launches campaign to stop seasonal farm workers absconding. *The Guardian*, 5 Nov, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/nov/05/you-may-bring-shame-to-your-family-australia-launches-campaign-to-stop-seasonal-farm-workers-absconding>

22 Amin, M. (2025).

23 The Fiji times. (2025). Task force for PALM absconders. *The Fiji Times*, June 5, 2025. Retrieved from <https://www.fijitimes.com.fj/task-force-for-palm-absconders/>

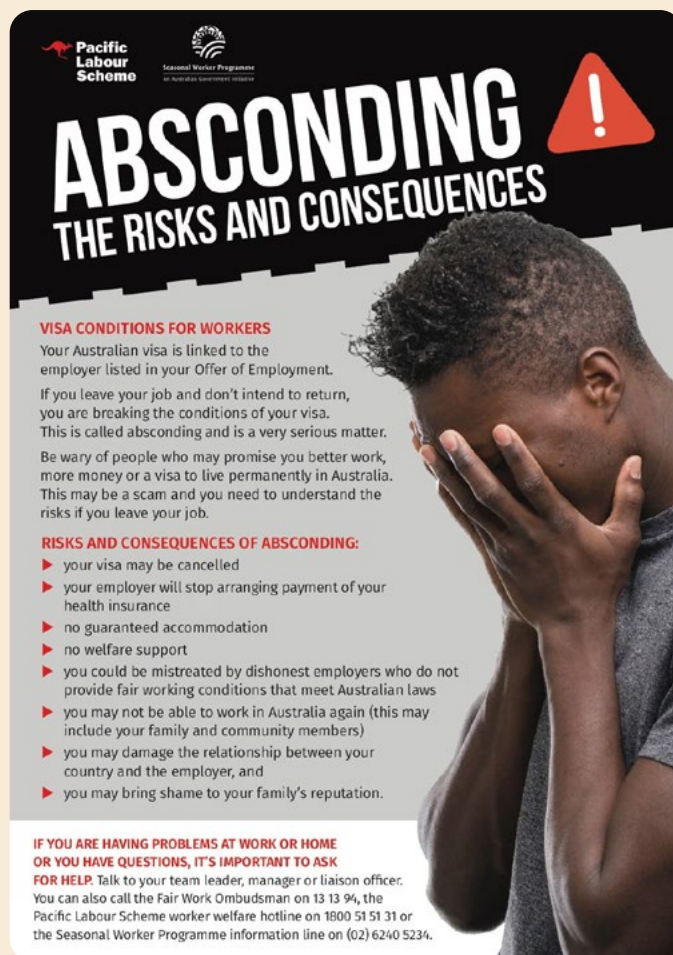
24 Nishitani, M., & Lee, H. (2019).

Rumour and Hypotheses: (Mis)understanding Disengagement

The reasons behind disengagement remain poorly understood, however media and political discourse tend to hold PALM visa holders to blame for what was once termed 'absconding'. In 2021, following concerns about reported sharp increases in 'absconding' – a term that implies 'intentional illegality'²⁴ – DFAT launched a much-criticised poster campaign: absconding, it was warned, 'may bring shame to your family's reputation' (Figure 3). This campaign conveyed a 'characteristically patronising and insulting message that ignore[d] – and abdicate[d] responsibility for – the conditions that drive SWP workers to abscond';²⁵ namely employer tied visas that disallow visa holders to walk away from poor workplace conditions. Problematic as it was, this campaign was largely in line with sending country responses to absconding, which, at the time, generally took the form of admonishments for workers to 'behave'. Much of this stemmed from very real fears that, should particular countries earn a bad reputation amongst Approved Employers (AEs), AEs would simply switch to recruiting from elsewhere, as they oft threatened.²⁶ More recently, many sending country governments have recognised that absconding occurs for a variety of reasons and may be a reasonable response to workplace challenges.

Significant discussion about the reasons and motivations for individuals disengaging from the PALM scheme has focused on Temporary Protection visas (TPV). Following the 2022 post-pandemic reopening of Australia's borders, there was widespread speculation by the media, government and researchers that people were disengaging from the PALM visa in order to apply for TPVs. Some have suggested that already disengaged people are encouraging PALM visa holders to transition to TPVs in order to facilitate their stay in Australia.²⁸ Other hypotheses focused on the fact that while a TPV is being assessed by DHA, people are put onto Bridging visas (Box 2), which gives additional time to work in Australia and possible Medicare access. The 'evidence' for this, however, is based solely on analysis of TPV application numbers²⁹ rather than empirical research with those who have applied for TPVs. Based on such analysis, academic Stephen Howes described TPV applications as 'bogus claims' and concluded that 'There can be no presumption therefore that workers disengage because they are badly treated'.³⁰ Elsewhere, Howes similarly suggests that the reason for an uptick in TPV applications is 'a problem of contagion. Word has got round that applying

Figure 3: Poster reprinted in *The Guardian*, 2021.²⁷



for asylum is a good way to improve your working rights and prospects.³¹ In New Zealand, where no alternate visa pathways are available for people who leave the analogous Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme, disengagement has been less of an issue.³² It is therefore possible that the existence of the TPV has influenced PALM scheme disengagement, however without speaking to PALM visa holders, and with limited public availability of visa application data, it is impossible to know why or by whom TPV applications have been made.³³

25 Stead, V. (2021). Australia needs better conditions, not shaming, for Pacific farm workers. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/australia-needs-better-conditions-not-shaming-for-pacific-farm-workers-171404>

26 Petrou, K., & Connell, J. (2022). *Pacific Islands Guestworkers in Australia: The New Blackbirds?* Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.

27 Kelly, C. (2021).

28 Howes, S. (2024b). Unpacking PALM worker asylum seeking. *DevPolicy Blog*, 8 Nov, 2024. Retrieved from: <https://devpolicy.org/unpacking-asylum-seeking-palm-20241108/>

29 Howes, S. (2024a). Pacific PALM workers applying for asylum in record numbers. Retrieved from: <https://devpolicy.org/pacific-palm-workers-applying-for-asylum-in-record-numbers-20241106/>

30 Howes (2024a).

31 Howes (2024b).

32 Bedford, C. (2022). Why absconding hasn't been a problem in New Zealand's RSE. Retrieved from <https://devpolicy.org/why-absconding-hasnt-been-a-problem-in-new-zealands-rse-20220318/>

33 Ferguson, A. (2024). Australia's PALM working visa scheme is a 'modern day slavery risk', advocates say. The system needs to change — and fast. ABC News, 11 Oct, 2024. Retrieved from: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-10-11/australia-palm-working-visa-scheme-exploitation-calls-reform/104450508>

Box 2: Explainer: Temporary Protection visas vs Bridging visas

There are two main categories of visa that those who have disengaged from the PALM scheme acquire – a protection visa (either subclass 785 or subclass 866) or a bridging visa (subclasses 010, 020, 030, 050, or 051). The rights and protection vary significantly depending on which visa is granted. All these visas – bar subclass 866 – are temporary visas that do not permit permanent stay in Australia. Their duration varies significantly, sometimes granted for as little as two weeks in the case of bridging visas, and each of the visas require repeated re-application.

- **Subclass 866: Protection visa:** Given to those who have a valid claim for protection under Australia's human rights obligations, and who arrived in Australia holding a valid visa. The visa offers permanent stay in Australia with access to full government services, work, study, as well as family reunification.³⁴
- **Subclass 785: Temporary Protection visa (TPV):** The TPV is a visa given to those who do have a valid claim for protection under Australia's human rights obligations yet who *did not*, at the time of arrival in Australia, have a valid visa. The visa is only valid for three years, and at the time of expiry, must either be reapplied for, or the holder must be transitioned to another visa (most often Subclass 851, Resolution of Status). At the expiration of a TPV, the holder *cannot* apply for a subclass 866 protection visa directly. Rendering their stay in Australia perpetually temporary. The visa offers work and study rights, as well as full access to government services. There are travel restrictions attached to the 785, whereby written permission from the department is required for the holder to travel anywhere outside of Australia. Furthermore, there is no family reunification offered as part of the TPV.³⁵ People who have been on the PALM scheme *are not eligible* for TPVs as their arrival in Australia was accompanied by a valid visa. Yet, despite the visa's limiting conditions, and those who have disengaged being ineligible, a substantial amount of discourse surrounding disengagement has centred around the TPV.
- **Bridging visa A – BVA – (subclass 010):** Must have held a substantive/valid visa at the time of application. This visa is generally granted automatically when there is a period between the expiration of a person's previous visa, and the granting of their subsequent visa. Work rights are generally granted in accordance with the rights of the persons expired visa or in cases of demonstrable financial hardship.³⁶
- **Bridging visa B – BVB – (subclass 020):** A person must already hold a BVA or a BVB to apply for a BVB. The applicant may be permitted to travel while holding a BVB and may be given work rights determined by their previous visas' conditions or their subsequent visas' conditions, or in cases of demonstrable financial hardship.³⁷
- **Bridging visa C – BVC – (subclass 030):** BVC is granted – generally automatically – in cases where a person has made a valid application in Australia for a substantive visa but *does not* already hold a substantive visa, i.e. a long-term visa. Work rights are conditional on the type of visa the applicant is awaiting a decision on. If the subsequent visa does not meet the criteria – which for disengaged PALM workers, it would not – the applicant must be able to prove financial hardship to be given work rights on a BVC.³⁸
- **Bridging visa E – BVE – (subclass 050):** BVE is used to rectify a person's immigration status, generally in cases where the person is currently in Australia without a valid visa. This visa is granted in cases where a person is: making plans to leave Australia, in the process of applying for a substantive visa, waiting for a judicial review, or seeking ministerial intervention in their application. The granting of work rights is arbitrary, and at the minister's discretion.³⁹

34 Australian Government Department of Home Affairs. (2025b) *Subclass 866 Protection visa*. Retrieved from: <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/getting-a-visa/visa-listing/protection-866>

35 Australian Government Department of Home Affairs. (2025a) *Subclass 785 Temporary Protection visa*. Retrieved from: <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/getting-a-visa/visa-listing/temporary-protection-785>

36 Australian Government Department of Home Affairs. (2025c) *Subclass 010 Bridging visa A (BVA)*. Retrieved from: <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/getting-a-visa/visa-listing/bridging-visa-a-010>

37 Australian Government Department of Home Affairs. (2025d) *Subclass 020 Bridging visa B (BVB)*. Retrieved from: <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/getting-a-visa/visa-listing/bridging-visa-b-020>

38 Australian Government Department of Home Affairs. (2025e) *Subclass 030 Bridging visa C (BVC)*. Retrieved from: <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/getting-a-visa/visa-listing/bridging-visa-c-030>

39 Australian Government Department of Home Affairs. (2025f) *Subclass (050) Bridging visa E (BVE)*. Retrieved from: <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/getting-a-visa/visa-listing/bridging-visa-e-050-051/subclass-050>

Another commonly held belief about disengagement relates to diaspora and/or unscrupulous employers luring PALM visa holders away from their AE with promises of better wages. Claims about diaspora members – and, to a lesser extent, unscrupulous employers – ‘luring’ people away from the PALM scheme with either misinformation or promises of higher wages are widespread.⁴⁰ By contrast, in-depth research conducted by Nishitani and Lee⁴¹ found that Tongan and Fijian diaspora attitudes to disengagement varied with context; in some situations people were described as ‘stupid’ for disengaging and risking their country’s reputation in the scheme. However, in cases where people had experienced poor working conditions, diaspora members considered disengagement to be a valid decision. While PALM visa holders may be ‘lured away’ in some instances, it is certainly not always the case.

By contrast, limited research into Pacific diaspora interactions with people on the PALM scheme suggests that they can play a vital pastoral care role, filling gaps left by official systems. Around Australia, diaspora members provide important cultural and practical support to people on the PALM scheme ranging from assistance navigating complex bureaucratic systems, to clothing and food drives, to holding worship services.⁴² This has, to some extent, been recognised via the PALM scheme ‘Community Connections Program’,⁴³ which contracts Pacific diaspora organisations and the Salvation Army as official providers of pastoral care and support. Nonetheless, fears about diaspora ‘meddling’ persist.

Issues around poor living and working conditions for people on the PALM scheme have been well-documented in the media and qualitative literature, however they are rarely considered a cause of disengagement in public discourse. While it is difficult to quantify the extent of the problem, research and media reporting around the PALM scheme points to recurrent issues around unsuitable accommodation. This is often linked

to broader issues related to housing scarcity in regional and rural Australia, alongside documented wage theft and chronic underpayments.⁴⁴ In their study into safety and wellbeing, Lindy Kanan and Judy Putt found that some people were disengaging from the PALM scheme due to poor conditions.⁴⁵ Similarly, they noted that Pacific Labour Facility (PLF) data showed welfare issues are disproportionately concentrated in certain workplaces and that disengagement tends to be higher from such workplaces. These findings are supported by the NSW Anti-Slavery Commissioner⁴⁶ who identified working conditions and wages; accommodation, transport and other living conditions; gender-based violence and access to healthcare; and, social marginalisation and isolation as all contributing to PALM scheme disengagement in NSW.

While people on the PALM scheme are often lauded for their contribution to host communities, popular discourse around disengagement fails to recognise that these contributions may continue even after people have left the scheme. Writing about Pacific Islander visa overstayers more generally, Makiko Nishitani et al. observed that while they may be ‘illegal’, Pacific peoples were making important contributions to the Australian economy.⁴⁷ Indeed, as was well demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, without migrant workers willing to undertake dirty, dangerous and demeaning work, certain sectors of the Australian horticultural industry face severe challenges in meeting labour needs.⁴⁸ Furthermore, many people from the Pacific Islands who have overstayed continue to make significant contributions to local communities through church membership and participation, performing in local multicultural festivals, and playing in sports teams. Excluded from the legal-political system, in an everyday sense, scant research indicates that people who have disengaged from the PALM scheme continue to make vital contributions to the Australian economy and cultural life.

40 The Fiji times. (2025). Task force for PALM absconders, June 5, 2025. Retrieved from: <https://www.fijitimes.com.fj/task-force-for-palm-absconders/>

41 Nishitani & Lee (2019).

42 Nishitani, M., Boese, M., & Lee, H. (2023). The production of precariousness and the racialisation of Pacific Islanders in an Australian horticultural region. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49(15), 3900-3919.

Barry, K. (2023). Reaping what we sow: Cultural ignorance undermines Australia’s recruitment of Pacific Island workers. *The Conversation*, Jan 20, 2023. <https://theconversation.com/reaping-what-we-sow-cultural-ignorance-undermines-australias-recruitment-of-pacific-island-workers-197910>

Petrou, K., & Connell, J. (2022).

Petrou, K., Dun, O., Farbotko, C., & Kitara, T. (2021).

Kanan, L., & Putt, J. (2023). *Safety and wellbeing in Australia’s Pacific labour mobility scheme*. Canberra: ANU.

43 See: <https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/worker-support>

44 Jones, T., et al. (2025). *Safe and secure accommodation solutions for seasonal and vulnerable workers in regional industries*. AHURI Final Report No. 447. Melbourne, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.

SBS News. (2025). Pacific workers face ‘appalling’ housing, fear deportation if they seek medical care, inquiry told. SBS News, 2 June, 2025. Retrieved from: <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/pacific-workers-face-appalling-housing-fear-deportation-if-they-seek-medical-care-inquiry->

Barry, K., Azedero, R. & Balle-Bowness. (2023).

Thompson, A. (2022). Coles joins call to lift housing and pay standards for seasonal workers. Sydney Morning Herald, Dec 9, 2022. <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/coles-joins-call-to-lift-housing-and-pay-standards-for-seasonal-workers-20221207-p5c4cw.html>

45 Kanan, L., & Putt, J. (2023).

46 Office of the NSW Anti-slavery Commissioner. (2024). *Be Our Guests: Addressing urgent modern slavery risks for temporary migrant workers in rural and regional New South Wales*. Sydney: NSW Anti-slavery Commissioner.

47 Nishitani, M., Boese, M., & Lee, H. (2023).

48 Ernst & Young. (2020). *Seasonal horticulture labour demand and workforce study*. Sydney: Ernst & Young.

While the highly regulated nature of the PALM scheme is often portrayed as a source of security for PALM visa holders, as detailed above it also severely restricts basic rights and freedoms. For many people, the lack of sufficient pastoral care and basic freedoms associated with Australia's labour mobility schemes 'compares poorly' to leaving the scheme 'and having the freedom to move and select employers as an irregular worker'.⁴⁹ While disengagement can lead to isolation and poor outcomes, the lived experiences of extensive PALM scheme regulation can itself be unpleasant. There are many documented examples of overzealous employers taking their responsibilities 'too far' and imposing unreasonable restrictions on workers to protect them. This ranges from restricting their movement within Australia,⁵⁰ to excessively fining workers for consuming alcohol.⁵¹ Faced with such conditions, disengagement may seem like the only option where limited options for portability are reliant on slow bureaucratic processes (Box 3).

Much remains unknown about why people disengage from the PALM scheme, and without robust evidence, it is difficult to effectively target interventions and dispel myths. The design of interventions to address disengagement will vary greatly depending on whether one positions disengaged PALM visa holders or broader structural factors to be at fault. In the following sections we outline our research methods and approach and provide important rights-based context to the research before outlining key findings from this project to date. We conclude with evidence-based recommendations to address both the issue of disengagement itself and the situation currently disengaged people find themselves in.

Box 3: Explainer: Portability on the PALM Scheme

Portability refers to the movement of people on the PALM scheme between approved employers, either temporarily, or permanently. Crucially, portability is framed as a way for employers to manage 'their workforce needs and to respond to unforeseen circumstances'⁹³, *not* as a way for people on the PALM scheme to gain more agency and control over their circumstances. Cases for changes in employment can be made either onshore (when the PALM employee is in Australia) or offshore (when the employee is in their home country). In all cases - be it temporary, onshore, or offshore - the request for a portability arrangement must be initiated by the employer.



49 Nishitani et al (2023), p.9.

50 Tazreiter, C., Weber, L., Pickering, S., Segrave, M., & McKernan, H. (2016). Tongan Seasonal Workers: Permanent Temporariness. In *Fluid Security in the Asia Pacific* (pp. 103-127): Singapore: Springer.
Office of the NSW Anti-slavery Commissioner (2024).

51 McKenna, K. (2025). McCrystal Agricultural Services fined more than \$20,000 for unlawfully docking seasonal worker pay. *ABC News*, 1 September 2025. Retrieved from: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-09-01/mccrystal-agricultural-services-fined-unlawful-pay-docking/105721656>

52 Protect title *Understanding PALM worker experiences in Australia* (GU Reference: 2025/252).



Methods and Approach

This study was designed according to the research team's extensive expertise in qualitative methods, specifically an ethnographic and 'on the ground' approach to engaging with potential participants. Our scope was to capture a snapshot of timely insights into the lived experiences of people who had previously held a PALM scheme visa, with in-depth interviews conducted with two key participant groups:

- people who have previously been on the PALM scheme, and who are living in a regional or rural location;
- stakeholders from the community, industry, or government, who have been directly involved with PALM scheme visa holders, including (but not limited to) people who are involved with community support organisations, civic services, government representatives, current or former employers, managers, accommodation providers, faith leaders, and volunteers.

All participant details, including country of origin, have been de-identified due to the sensitive nature of the data collected. Interviews with people who have disengaged from the PALM scheme were conducted in groups, with a total 31 former PALM visa holders (nine women and 22 men), in attendance across various sessions conducted by the report authors between May and October 2025. Some participants chose to disclose personal information and others did not. Several participants joined the group interviews more than once, sharing their information and experiences in segments across the group discussions. These interviews were complemented by insights provided through in-depth interviews with seven stakeholders.

The research team was introduced by word-of-mouth referral to former PALM visa holders and key stakeholders in the Riverina region for initial conversations and interviews. The Riverina region is the starting point for this project, with the aim to expand future research and data collection into other regions across Australia. Snowball sampling was used, as participants referred on potential participants who were either former PALM scheme visa holders or stakeholders. Interviews were conducted in-person by the research team in English or, where possible, local Pacific languages, recorded as audio, and ranged from 30 minutes to 1.5 hours duration.

The interview data was manually transcribed and thematically analysed by the research team. A selection of quotations have been included in this report as well as summarised key points of findings related to the three key themes of labour rights, social protections and wellbeing, and the right to family life. The research was conducted in line with the National Statement of Ethical Conduct in Human Research and received ethics approval by approval from Griffith University.⁵²



The Riverina Context

The Riverina Region in southern NSW is located on Wiradjuri Country, and has long been home to the Wiradjuri people, the traditional owners and custodians. Today, the region is known for its diverse agricultural landscape and abundant local produce: it is often referred to as Australia's 'food bowl'. The agricultural industry in the Riverina is largely serviced by the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area (MIA) and records over \$2 billion in produce each year, making it one of the most valuable agricultural regions in NSW.⁵³ Many of the towns that make up the region were purpose-built for agricultural production as part of the MIA, and it is this access to water sources that makes the area's diversity of agricultural production so fruitful. In economic terms, the region's agricultural sector employs a workforce of over 18,000 people.⁵⁴ This figure is only representative of those who are employed on a formal basis; our research has shown that the region is home to networks of unregulated employment which boosts this number significantly.

The Riverina region is not only diverse in terms of its agricultural outputs, but also in terms of its population. This diversity is often credited to - both historic and contemporary - government migration policies and visa schemes that aim to promote resettlement in regional and rural areas of the country.⁵⁵ The region has witnessed more permanent forms of migration and resettlement, as well as transient migrant populations who come to the region to seek work based on the seasons, often gaining employment picking and packing the fresh produce that grows in the region.⁵⁶ Recognising this demand for labour in the agricultural sector, the Riverina region was part of the SWP Regional Pilot in May of 2019. The pilot highlighted the need for

additional workforce in the area, recognising the agricultural contribution of the region, as well as reflecting broader country-wide patterns of youth mobility away from the regions⁵⁷. Further, it has been noted that the region 'remains one of the few places in Australia where people with little English and no recognised qualifications, or even citizenship, can obtain a start'⁵⁸. This is largely due to the demand for so-called 'low- and unskilled' industries within the region's agricultural sector.

The region's diversity means that creating strong and supportive communities is key to the success of the Riverina; 'one of the goals of the Riverina Murray Regional Plan 2036 is to build strong, connected and healthy communities'⁵⁹. Indeed, the region has been showcased in media reporting and by many stakeholders we spoke with as a 'welcoming' region for migrants of all kinds, a feature of the robust multicultural and community support and advocacy⁶⁰ that this report also highlights.

Although this report focuses only on one region, **many of the issues that we identify in the following sections can be traced to various locations across the continent**. The PALM scheme necessitates the mobility of a workforce to be deployed in locations where labour sources are scarce; therefore, we stress that the participants in this study reflect conditions in a range of locations from which they may have originally been employed or contracted, or through which they have travelled since disengaging from the scheme. The role of this report is to highlight how some members of the Riverina region's diverse population are pushed to the fringes, and where this might reflect broader Australia-wide issues.

54 NSW Government. (2023).

55 Radford, D., Krivokapic-Skoko, B., Hetz, H., Bandara, Y., & Tan, G. (2022). *Learning from Leeton: a case study of refugee settlement in Rural Australia: full report*. University of South Australia. <https://doi.org/10.25954/6bfw-d491>

56 Radford, D. et al. (2022).

57 Radford, D. et al. (2022).

58 Kabaila, P. R. (2013). *Leeton: a thematic history*. Canberra, ACT : Canprint Publishing, p.61.

59 NSW Government. (2023).

60 Ferguson, A. (2024). Modern slavery report uncovers dark side to PALM visa scheme leaving vulnerable workers homeless and destitute. ABC News, 23 September, 2024. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-09-23/palm-visa-scheme-exploitation-modern-slavery/104382194>

61 See: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/international-relations/themes/human-rights>

62 See: <https://www.dewr.gov.au/>

Disengagement as a Human Rights Issue

The PALM scheme is a self-proclaimed 'best practice' guestworker program, however it fails to meet fundamental human rights and labour standards in certain circumstances, which influence how and why people disengage from the scheme. DFAT's website states that human rights are 'an underlying principle of Australia's engagement with the international community'.⁶¹ DEWR similarly state their support for 'people in Australia to have safe, secure and well-paid work'.⁶² However, extensive analysis of the PALM scheme and its predecessors demonstrates that Australia's guestworker schemes fail to meet important human rights and labour standards including those outlined below.⁶³ As detailed in the findings of this report, these failures are instrumental in causing disengagement from the PALM scheme. Disengagement must therefore be understood as a human rights issue and requires rights-based solutions.

In the key findings that follow, we focus on three broad categories of human rights issues that our research shows contribute to PALM scheme disengagement: fundamental labour rights; the right to social protection and wellbeing; and, the right to family life. Notably, these rights deficits and omissions are inconsistent with key United Nations (UN) human rights treaties and International Labour Organisation (ILO) labour conventions to which Australia is a signatory, including:

United Nations Human Rights Treaties

- the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
- the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD)
- the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)
- the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

International Labour Organisation Fundamental Labour Conventions

- the Forced Labour Convention (C29)
- the Equal Remuneration Convention (C100)
- the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention (C105)
- the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (C111)
- the Violence and Harassment Convention (C190)

The PALM scheme moreover exhibits several inconsistencies with the ILO Model Agreement on Temporary and Permanent Migration for Employment which, while non-binding, provides best practice guidelines for bilateral labour agreements (ILO 2021).

Labour Rights

The restrictions placed on PALM scheme visas are inconsistent with Australia's commitments to just and favourable conditions of work. Most significantly, employer-tied visa status and a lack of opportunity for worker-initiated job changes creates a significant power imbalance between visa holders and employers, creating PALM-specific vulnerabilities that undermine entitlements to freedom from abusive conditions and access to appropriate remedies (ICESCR Art. 7). Without freedom to exercise agency over 'exit' (the right to leave exploitative employment) and insufficient opportunities to use 'voice' (the ability to report abuse and seek redress without fear of retribution), PALM visa holders are more unfree than other labourers in Australia⁶⁴ and uniquely vulnerable to forced labour and other forms of Modern Slavery.⁶⁵

Insofar as the PALM scheme allows or creates conditions where visa holders cannot exit abusive employment because of visa dependency and threats of job loss, Australia is failing to meet the positive obligations under C29/C105 to prevent, identify, and remedy forced labour. Employer-tied visas condition differential wages and entitlements that contravene Australia's commitments to equal remuneration and anti-discrimination standards. PALM scheme visa holders face a unique suite of income deductions⁶⁶ that significantly reduce de facto wage earnings and enable commonplace price gouging. Restrictions on occupational classifications limit opportunities for career development and implicitly confine participants to low-wage industries, while isolation associated with employer-tied work in remote settings heightens risks of mistreatment and inhibits access to justice. Given the PALM scheme's specific eligibility to certain PICs and Timor-Leste, these inconsistencies with Australia's broader industrial relations framework run the risk of flouting commitments to non-discrimination on the grounds of national origin (C100/111) and obligations to workplace safety (C190).

63 International Labour Organisation (ILO). (2022). Seasonal worker schemes in the Pacific through the lens of international human rights and labour standards: Technical Report. Suva: ILO.

64 Withers, M. & Kagan, S. (2024). Free Agency Is a Right, Not an Option. *Devpolicy Blog from the Development Policy Centre*, November 20. <https://devpolicy.org/free-agency-is-a-right-not-an-option-20241121/>.

65 Moolchand, E. & Marshall, S. (2025). *Meat the Reality: Unpacking the exploitation of PALM Scheme workers in Australia's meat industry*, RMIT University Business and Human Rights Centre.

66 See: <https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-01/Worker%20deduction%20guidelines%20-%20English.pdf>

67 Kanan, L. (2025). It's not illegal to be pregnant": Research report on reproductive justice and the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme. *Development Policy Centre, Australian National University*.

Social Protection and Wellbeing

PALM visa holders are left vulnerable by a lack of Medicare coverage, despite contributing taxes that help fund Australia's social protection system. Mandatory private medical insurance is an additional income deduction that further erodes PALM visa holders' wages and denies access to a public health system that their taxable contributions help sustain. This can result in delays in recouping out-of-pocket expenses, may entail excess payments for certain medical treatment, and creates an acute lack of coverage for those who disengage from the scheme. This is inconsistent with Australia's recognition of the right to social security and the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health (ICESCR Art. 9 and 12) and guarantee of equality before the law in the enjoyment of the right to public health and medical care (ICERD Art 5).

Women participating in the PALM scheme face heightened vulnerability at the intersection of gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health, and access to appropriate care. Though DFAT has made commitments to mainstreaming gender equality in the PALM scheme, to date this has been framed through equality of opportunity to participate, with less attention given to implicit and explicit forms of gender-based discrimination that participation may entail. Existing research reports that inappropriate accommodation, geographical and social isolation, and poor access to support services within the scheme can exacerbate risks of gender-based violence and sexual coercion.⁶⁷ Unintended pregnancies – whether consensual or not – can result in fears of job loss, unsafe abortions, and childbirth without access to medically adequate or culturally safe reproductive healthcare and family planning services.⁶⁸ These outcomes contravene Australia's commitments to ensuring gender equitable health and safety at work (CEDAW Art. 11 and C190), as well as equal access to reproductive health, family planning, and guaranteed maternity protections (CEDAW Art. 12).

The Right to Family Life

The PALM scheme has the potential to separate visa holders from their families for periods of up to four years, placing significant strains on intimate relationships that are linked to adverse social and economic outcomes for all. The PALM scheme is Australia's only designated 'working and skilled' visa that does not allow for family accompaniment of partners and children⁶⁹, necessitating periods of transnational family separation that disrupt and reorganise the relational ties and care practices that sustain family life in ways that are gender inequitable⁷⁰ and detrimental to the wellbeing of children.⁷¹ Previous research has shown that the social and economic issues of family separation are mutually constituted, such that relationship breakdowns can disrupt remittance flows to dependent family members, while unanticipated economic hardship in Australia might also provoke suspicion among remaining family if remitted income is less than expected.⁷² For workers who have disengaged from the PALM scheme but are still sending remittances to financially dependent family members in their countries of origin, returning home to reconnect with family is not an option, compounding pressures associated with separation. These restrictions fail to adhere to Australia's commitments to the right to respect for the family and the child-parent relationship,⁷³ which require non-discrimination (ICERD and CEDAW), acting in the best interests of the child (CRC), and support for family reunification (CRC).

68 Womens Health Tasmania. (2025). *Reproductive Health and Rights for PALM Scheme Workers*. <https://australianwomenshealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/20250512-Reproductive-Health-Conference-Call-to-Action-1-1.pdf>

69 A family accompaniment pilot of 200 households is currently underway, but has yet to be evaluated and depends upon employer approval, further contributing to the implicit power imbalance of employer-tied visas.

70 Chatter, P. (2019). Beyond Development Impact: Gender and Care in the Pacific Seasonal Worker Programme. *Gender & Development*, 27(1), 49–65.

Withers, M. & Hill, E. (2023). Migration and Development, without Care? Locating Transnational Care Practices in the Migration-development Debate. *Population, Space and Place*, 29(3): e2648.

71 United Nations Children's Fund, The University of the South Pacific, and Western Sydney University. (2024). *The impact of Pacific labour mobility schemes on children left behind in Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu: An initial study*. UNICEF Pacific Multi Country Office.

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). (2025). *Enhancing the Human Right to Family Life for Migrants and Their Families in the Asia-Pacific Region*. United Nations.

72 Withers, M. (2022).

73 Jayasuriya, R. (2021). *Children, Human Rights and Temporary Labour Migration*. London: Routledge.

Key Findings

Findings from initial interviews with people who have disengaged from the PALM scheme, as well as the community stakeholders involved in the support of these individuals are summarised around the three human rights concerns: labour rights and working conditions, rights to social protection and wellbeing, and the right to family life.

Labour Rights

Participants in this study had disengaged from employment in horticulture and meat works, and many of those who specified had been employed in PALM via labour hire firms on a mixture of short- and long-term contracts (Table B). There is limited publicly available data on PALM visa holder disengagement by industry of employment. Nonetheless, data collected by the PLF for NSW, Queensland and South Australia for the period 2nd December 2020 to 5th December 2022, indicates that 'critical incidents'⁷⁴ tend to be concentrated in certain locations. Over this period, the three locations with the highest ratio of 'critical incidents' to PALM visa holders were all located in NSW, and all were home to abattoirs that recruited PALM visa holders via large labour hire firms. Across all three locations, 'end of employment', often in the form of disengagement, accounted for roughly half (48.5 percent) of all reported critical incidents.⁷⁵ Similarly, research by the NSW Anti-Slavery Commissioner indicates that agriculture, horticulture and meat processing are key industries associated with poor workplace conditions and modern slavery risks and that these risks may be associated with the use of labour hire.⁷⁶ Stakeholders we spoke with confirmed that debate about disengagement has tended to relate to labour hire firms and the horticultural industry. While this is perhaps a reflection of the proportion of PALM visa holders employed in these industries, our own findings indicate that disengagement seems more likely to occur from horticulture and meatworks employment for both short- and long-term visa holders (Table B).

The most important reason people cited for PALM scheme disengagement was inadequate income whether as a result of lack of hours, unreasonable deductions or wage theft. Issues around wage theft and unreasonable deductions have been widely reported upon in the media and the academic literature.⁷⁷ Nonetheless, much of the discourse around disengagement and wages tends to imply that PALM visa holders simply want 'a better deal',⁷⁸ the implication being that their current situation is already reasonable and thus the 'better deal' amounts to greed. This was not the case among the disengaged people we interviewed.

Nearly everyone interviewed as part of this research reported receiving a take-home (net) pay below the minimum wage, which led to their disengagement and put them on a distinct 'disengagement journey' (Figure 4, expanded upon below). Some participants reported consistently receiving weekly incomes as low as \$0, but more typically participants reported they regularly received around \$80-200. In addition, we sighted several payslips of individuals where they had received a \$0 net pay during their time employed on the PALM scheme. These low incomes were attributed to lack of work hours and high or unreasonable deductions for items including transport, accommodation and paying back airfares. While it is difficult to discern whether participants' regular pay for the majority of their time on the PALM scheme was at such a low wage, these figures were reported to us consistently and did not seem to be associated with a particular time period (i.e. the pandemic). Many people queried their deductions with their employer prior to their decision to disengage from the scheme. Former PALM visa holders told us that they did not want a 'better deal', they simply wanted to be paid a living wage.

Table B: Participant's Initial Visa Duration

Previous labour mobility visa duration	Number
'Short' (up to 9 months seasonal)	15
'Long' (up to 4 years)	5
Unspecified	11
Total	31

"We do [work] but it's like with the deductions, we are left with \$100 every week ... we didn't have enough to support our family back home." (Male).

"I only get \$80 sometimes, only \$80 a week. ... I start at seven and finish at seven in the evening as well. That's disgusting. So that's the reason why I leave the contract" (Male)

"Deductions ... if I stay like this, how can I benefit my family." (Male)

"When we tell, or complain back to who is looking after us, but they say they deduct for the transport and airfare and accommodation ... they say we have to deduct for three months then deductions finish but after three months they keep on deducting until 8 months." (Male).

"This is one of my payslips ... I will show you, zero dollars. I have no money." (Male)

"And when you've been here a long time, you just understand that the company has been stealing from you. They're just scamming us. So, I left." (Male)

74 According to the PALM Deed and Guidelines, a critical incident is defined: as a death of a worker; any serious or significant accident injury or illness of a worker; any serious or significant accident, injury, illness or death of any other employee or member of the public on a PALM scheme employer's or host organisation's site; significant industrial action taken by workers that has community-wide implications, an action involving large number of workers and/or has service-wide repercussions; when a worker is: arrested, charged with a criminal offence, a victim of a criminal offence, evacuated or evicted from accommodation; or, any other incident that may negatively impact upon the department or bring the PALM scheme employer or the scheme into disrepute.

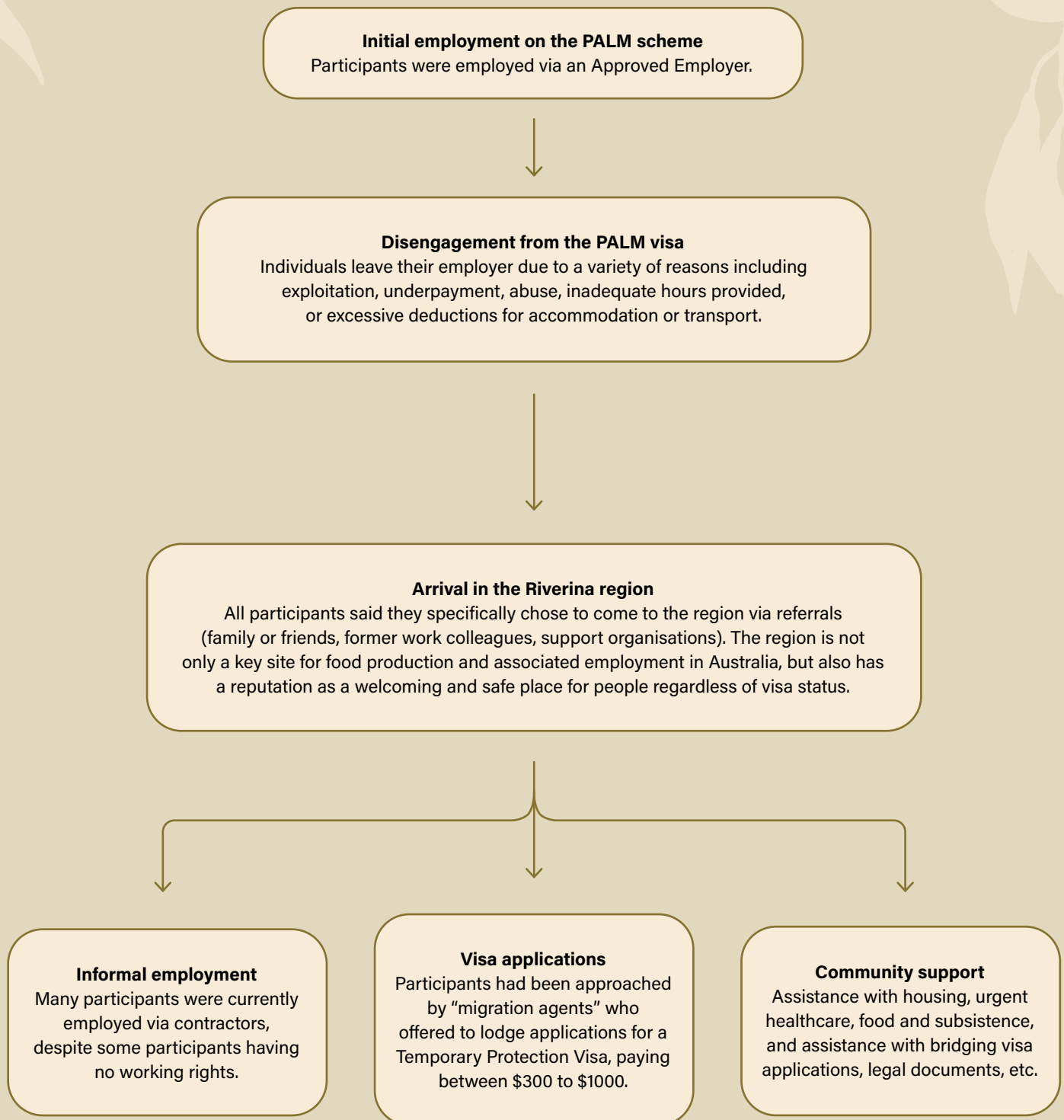
75 Kanan & Putt, (2023).

76 Office of the NSW Anti-slavery Commissioner. (2024).

77 Petrou, K., & Connell, J. (2022)

78 Howes, S. (2024a).

Figure 4: Flow Chart of Disengagement Trajectories



Many of the participants in this study had disengaged from the PALM scheme several years ago, before minimum hour requirements were updated. Under the SWP, employers were required to provide a minimum of 30 hours work per week, averaged over the duration of an SWP visa holder’s contract. While this was intended to accommodate seasonal variations in work availability such as weather events and peak picking times, it meant SWP visa holders could experience significant fluctuations in their take home pay. In January 2024 (after the SWP had transitioned to the PALM scheme), the minimum hour requirements were updated. This meant that employers had to provide a minimum of 120 hours of work over a four-week period for short-term PALM visa holders, while PALM long visa holders were required to be offered full-time hours for the duration of their work placement (Box 4).

Given these changes, it is possible that some of the issues around low hours leading to inadequate pay, which provided the overwhelming prompt for disengagement among participants in this study, were reduced during October 2025; many research participants had arrived in Australia more than two years ago (Table C). Of those who specified, most had disengaged between one and five years ago. We note, however, that despite these changes, compliance and enforcement remains a problem throughout the scheme, and several of the reported circumstances prompting disengagement would not be consistent with current guidelines. Furthermore, given the challenges those who have disengaged from the PALM scheme face in acquiring a valid visa following disengagement, it is important to consider these historic issues in order to examine best case practice moving forward.

Table C: Participants’ Year of First Arrival to Australia

Year of Arrival	Number
2023	2
2022	4
2021	9
2020	2
Pre-2020	2
Unspecified	12
Total	31

Box 4: Updates to PALM Scheme Deed and Guidelines

- In April 2022 a minimum hourly wage for casual Horticultural workers came into effect, which removed use of piece-rate wages that led to underpayment for many workers.⁷⁹
- Approved Employers are currently required to provide each PALM employee with an average of 30 hours per week in a four-week period (120 hours minimum), which came into effect in 1 July 2024.⁸⁰
- A ‘minimum net pay guarantee (to ensure a worker’s weekly take home pay is at least \$200)’⁸¹ was adjusted in 2023 and again in July 2024, which ensures that a worker’s deductions cannot exceed their net wages to be paid.
- The PALM deed and guidelines now state: ‘If hours offered are less than 20 hours a week, the AE: must cover the cost of the worker’s accommodation and transport for that week ... and may deduct other expenses up to the \$200 minimum net pay guarantee’⁸²
- The July 2023 changes to the PALM deed and guidelines states that accommodation arranged by the AE must meet new criteria, including: ‘The cost must be fair and provide good value for money and be comparable to market rates.’ This now offers the ability for workers to query their accommodation provided as to whether it is comparable to market rates.
- In October 2025 it was announced that the PALM scheme would revert to a minimum of 120 hours averaged over four weeks with no minimum weekly hour requirement.

79 Fair Work Commission decision in 2022: https://www.fwc.gov.au/documents/decisionssigned/html/2022fwcfb4.htm?_gl=1*zljggh*_ga*MzY3MTMyMzMzLjE3Mzk3NzI3OTY*_ga_956VPMXW21*czE3NTA1NTM4NTMkbzQkZzEkDE3NTA1NTQyODQkajYwJGwwJGgw

80 Minimum hours setting. PALM Scheme. Available at: <https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-05/Minimum%20hours%20settings%20frequently%20asked%20questions%20-%20May%202024.pdf>

81 Minimum hours requirement and interaction with minimum net pay guarantee. PALM scheme, 21 February 2025. Available at: <https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-02/Minimum%20hours%20requirement%20and%20interaction%20with%20minimum%20net%20pay%20guarantee%20factsheet%20-%20February%202025.pdf>

82 PALM scheme Deed and Guidelines - Frequently Asked Questions. DEWR, 24 August 2023. Available at: <https://www.dewr.gov.au/download/15535/palm-scheme-deed-and-guidelines-faqs/34530/palm-scheme-deed-and-guidelines-faqs/pdf>

Unreasonably low take-home pay not only pushes PALM visa holders into poverty while in Australia, but means they cannot remit money home to their families as intended, or meet their savings goals. The potential economic benefits of participating in PALM are a key reason that people join the scheme; paying school fees, investing in land and housing and starting a small business are all common goals. In some instances, PALM visa holders will minimise their own expenditure in Australia in order to support family at home through remittances and meet these goals⁸³. Many participants in this study described how inadequate take home pay not only meant they could not meet their own basic living expenses, but also meant they could not support family back home through remittances. Many people worried that they would not meet their goals, such as investing in housing, as they had expected.

"I think the last pay was \$250, it's low. How can I help my family at home then? That's like nothing ... I sent \$150 [home], I [was] left with only \$100." (Male)

"When I come over here, [my family members] expect something from me. But then if I go back with nothing, even people who stayed back at home, they[re] still better than me." (Male)

"We had a dream back home, to support our families and help with school fees and things like that and we decide to come here. But we didn't earn the money that we want to." (Female)

Wage theft, unreasonable deductions and inadequate pay are not the only challenges PALM visa holders can face, and in a few instances participants reported they had disengaged due to other workplace issues. While some had attempted to find new employment within the PALM scheme, none had been successful. Issues around health and safety, workplace conflict, unexplained or unfair employment terminations and over-zealous provision of pastoral care have been widely reported upon⁸⁴ and were cited by a minority of disengaged people as primary reasons for leaving the PALM scheme. For example, one participant recounted that their contractor had fired them over an argument that took place with a colleague outside the workplace. Another reported falling ill as a result of the cold conditions within the meatworks where they were employed, and another was terminated for consuming alcohol. These participants reported that attempts to contact the PALM helpline and secure new employers within the scheme were unsuccessful.

"I had an issue with my workmate we have an argument, but not at work, outside. But then my contractor hears that, and ... they say we cannot let you work again" (Male).

People who had disengaged from the PALM scheme had a range of visa statuses; some were working legally, while others were not (Table D). While there is often an assumption that disengaged people remain in Australia illegally, some of the participants in this study either held a Bridging Visa or were still within the validity timeframe of their original PALM visa. However, there was a huge variety in terms of the Bridging Visas held, and the rights they afforded (Box 2); while some people were granted work rights, others were not. Similarly, some people had Medicare access, while others did not. The process of granting particular rights (or not) was considered entirely opaque by both disengaged people and the local stakeholders who sought to assist them, further adding to the trepidation that many disengaged people felt about navigating Australia's visa system.

Table D: Participants Work Rights Status at Time of Interview

Work Rights	Number
Work Rights	5
No Work Rights	17
Unspecified	9
Total	31

People who had disengaged reported they were eager to regularise their visa status ('return to the PALM visa'), but many had a poor understanding of the Australian visa system and have fallen prey to predatory migration agents. The issue of predatory migration agents is not new. A 2018 inquiry found that while most migration agents were 'diligent and professional', there were numerous reports of migration agents charging exorbitant fees, preparing TPV applications with little understanding of the legal requirements, producing bogus documents and so forth.⁸⁵ Nishitani and Lee⁸⁶ similarly note that in an attempt to legalise their status, some Pacific Islander visa overstayers can fall victim to predatory migration agents.

83 Petrou, K., & Connell, J. (2022).

84 Office of the NSW Anti-slavery Commissioner. (2024). Kanan, L. & Putt, J. (2023) Petrou, K. & Connell, J. (2022) Tazreiter, C., Weber, L., Pickering, S., et al. (2016).

85 Joint Standing Committee on Migration. (2019). Report of the Inquiry into efficacy of current regulation of Australian migration and education agents. Parliament of Australia.

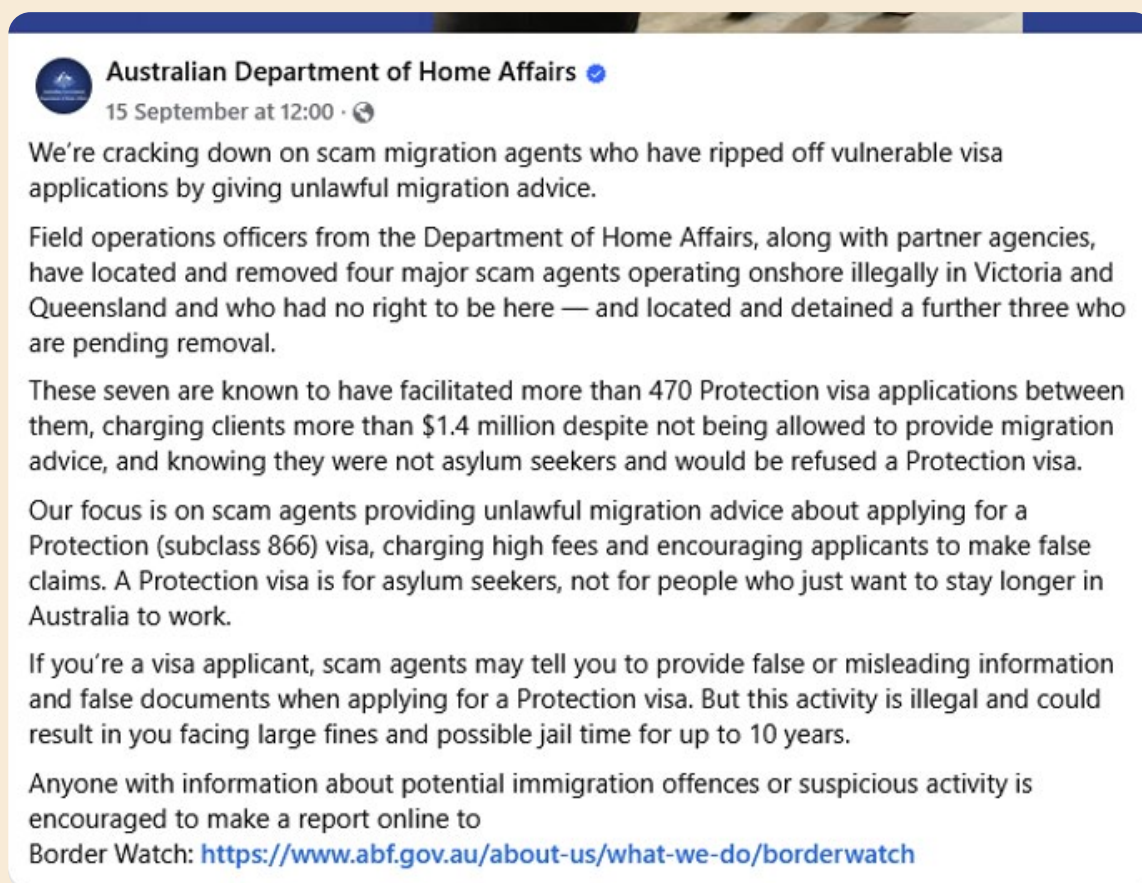
86 Nishitani and Lee. (2019).

In late 2025, the research team observed the PALM scheme Facebook page periodically posting warnings from DHA about predatory migration agents, indicating an awareness of the issue at the federal level (Figure 5). Unfortunately, many of the disengaged people in this study had fallen prey to such agents. We heard numerous stories of people who had been overcharged by migration agents – sometimes multiple times – who then disappeared with the money and never produced a visa. Many of these stories involved migration agents who did not inform disengaged people which visa they were applying for – although very often it appeared to be a TPV. While it is likely that some disengaged people do decide to apply for a TPV of their own volition, our findings indicate this is certainly not the case in all, or even most, of the time.

"The lady who was applying for me for the protection she was doing it by herself, so I didn't know what she put in the story and everything, even my email my password she didn't give me. Eventually I didn't know how to contact her. The lady didn't give me the story, password, everything. So that's why they refuse my visa." (Female)

"I already work, but I need [a] visa. I want to pay tax, something like that. To be legal." (Male)

Figure 5: Screenshot of the Department of Home Affairs Facebook post, 15 September 2025.



While people who had disengaged shared information with one another about work opportunities, there was little evidence to suggest they were 'luring' others to disengage from the PALM scheme. By contrast, a few people reported that they actively discouraged other PALM visa holders from disengaging. Indeed, one participant reported that when asked by others, they always advised:

"don't abscond, complete the season, go back [home] and then you will come back [to Australia]" (Female).

Only two participants in this study reported that others had encouraged them to leave the PALM scheme, and this was only after they were struggling with poor employment conditions. Research participants reported that once they had disengaged, they learned about work opportunities from others, however there was little evidence to suggest that people were being routinely lured away from the PALM scheme. Nor did participants appear to be encouraging others to follow them.

Social Protection and Wellbeing

Community stakeholders and service providers identified pregnancy as an issue that could either lead to disengagement and/or exacerbate vulnerabilities for women who had already disengaged from the PALM scheme. Pregnancy as a trigger for disengagement, and the resultant issues women can face in accessing adequate peri- and post-natal care have been identified as significant issues for women who have left the PALM scheme.⁸⁷ One stakeholder estimated that between 2023 and 2024 their local hospital delivered babies for eleven disengaged women; almost one every month. Local communities had made various arrangements with health services to ensure, as much as was possible, women were not left with large medical debts as a result of pregnancy. One hospital had an informal agreement that they would deliver any babies free of charge, but the mother and baby had to leave straight after the birth. In other situations, community stakeholders assisted women to fill in hardship waiver forms to write off medical costs. In a few cases, women were not allowed to leave the hospital with their baby as they were considered unable to provide adequate care for the infant. These children were removed from their mother and taken into state care. However, if the mother has no valid visa status or application at the time, these children are born as stateless and their 'stay in Australia is not lawful'.⁸⁸

"It's so complex because some [women] had spouses back at home and have disengaged as they can't readily go back home and they're getting into new relationships here. We don't know the nature of the relationship, [whether it is] exploitative ... but they end up pregnant and having children ... This is the most difficult aspect within this disengagement situation. ... the children are unregistered, are born in Australia, their mothers are essentially out of status. Who are these people? And yet they're in [our] community ... So, what's their name? ... Who are they? ... are we effectively talking about stateless population?" (Male stakeholder)

"[A mother and her child] can't leave hospital unless the hospital can ensure [a woman is able to] care for the baby ... But I mean, the child was made a ward of the state ... [the mother] certainly rang me and several times said I want my baby back ... And it worries me because I don't know whether she now has a partner. I don't know whether she's likely to get the children back." (Male stakeholder)

A lack of access to Medicare and no health insurance meant that many disengaged people faced large medical bills if and when they needed to access health services. While employed through the PALM scheme, visa holders must pay compulsory private health insurance which (with some exceptions) then covers their medical costs. Once they leave the PALM scheme, disengaged people void their medical insurance, and have no access to Medicare, therefore they must pay out of pocket for any medical costs or services (such as ambulances).

During the course of our research, we heard about and witnessed various medical issues. Some of these were workplace injuries that resulted in large medical fees. In other instances, delayed or inadequate medical treatment led to serious consequences, such as amputation or infected wounds and extended periods of hospitalisation. When such situations became known, community stakeholders provided assistance to disengaged people, including helping them travel to medical services and, where possible, applying for and filing hardship waiver forms to wipe medical debt that could reach tens of thousands of dollars.

"It's like some of our people ... are like dying and they didn't have insurance, so we had to come together and contribute for their fare to get home. And it's so much money." (Female)

Many community stakeholders went out of their way to assist disengaged people yet all reported receiving little to no support from the federal agencies responsible for implementing the PALM scheme. Under the PALM scheme, visa holders are provided with pastoral care and support through their AE, Country Liaison Officers (CLOs) and the Community Connections Program. Once people disengage from the PALM scheme, they are no longer eligible for this support. Community stakeholders stepped in to fill the gap, including in ways described above. Support was provided informally, by volunteers from local communities, as well as through more formal programs such as multicultural and community centres, libraries and non-government organisations (NGOs). In all of these cases, community stakeholders tended to accommodate the needs of disengaged people within existing structures and funding sources. Many stakeholders have advocated for more support and involvement from the federal agencies responsible for bringing PALM workers to Australia. However, beyond a handful of token visits to the region, stakeholders reported that requests had largely been ignored.

87 Kanan, L. (2025). Office of the NSW Anti-slavery Commissioner. (2024).

88 See: <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/change-in-situation/had-a-baby>

Stakeholders emphasised that disengaged people, most of whom were in full employment, were making valuable contributions to rural communities, but due to their precarious legal status, faced extreme vulnerabilities. Writing about Mildura, Nishitani and Lee⁸⁹ described how visa overstayers continued to make important contributions to their host community. The same was true of disengaged people in this study. Some were legally in full employment, while others were working under the table doing, as one stakeholder observed, ‘the jobs no Australian wants to do nowadays.’ We heard stories of a few disengaged people who had become so valuable to their employers, that, we were told, the business would not be able to run without them. Yet due to their precarious situations, some disengaged people were being targeted by loan sharks and others who saw them as an easy mark. Stakeholders expressed frustration that they had members of their community who were contributing to the economy and community life, but who were not afforded the same rights and protections as other community members.

“They are being a productive part of the Australian community here. So why not? Allow for their productivity, you know to continue here and instead of sending them back home where there is nothing for them... I think it’s very sensible suggestion to provide some sort of visa status and recognition for the people you’re talking about ... That would solve a lot of problems, give some people a second chance and also help the farmers out there.” (Male stakeholder)

The Right to Family Life

The lack of family accompaniment meant disengaged people experienced protracted disconnections from family members who were often financially dependent on them. Family separation has been identified as a key and growing issue faced by PALM visa holders and their family members who remain at home, particularly (though not exclusively) for those participating in the long-term stream.⁹⁰ Most of the disengaged people we interviewed had children at home who they had not seen for years. Many had missed important milestones in their children’s lives: one man confided that he was yet to meet his now 5-year-old child who was born shortly after he arrived in Australia. For some, stigma about their status as disengaged made returning home difficult. Similarly, and as noted above, women who had given birth in Australia or people who had started new relationships sometimes felt they could not return home. Some participants reported that their spouse had divorced them while they were in Australia. Disengagement added another layer to the issues associated with family separation.

“My sister knows that I’ve absconded, I tell her picking oranges is too hard so don’t ask [for] a lot of money. And then she said don’t worry about money just come back home and I say no but I have to make some money to support my son and my siblings.” (Female)

“And then some of them are also kind of the joke back home, you know, so do you want to go back to that? ... They can talk badly about that person, but in the meantime, this person’s sending money back to his family there.” (Male stakeholder)

Due to their precarious visa status, many disengaged people planned to remain in Australia until they achieved their goals, further extending periods of protracted family separation. Most people participate in the PALM scheme with particular goals, such as building a house, in mind.⁹¹ Participants in this study often explained that the low wages they received on the PALM scheme meant they would not have been able to achieve the goals they had in mind if they stayed with their original AE. Similarly, once they had disengaged, people understood that leaving Australia would possibly mean never being able to return. Consequently, most people did not plan to return home until they had achieved their goals such as building a house or establishing a small business. Some disengaged people had a clear timeline in mind for their return, while others were unsure how much longer they would need to stay in Australia.

“All of us we came here, we come with dreams. We see our family back at home ... at least we build something for our families. So, for me, I think when I [have] finished my house I [will] do something like [start] a small business.” (Male)

“For myself, if my plan is done, I can go back. ... I’m not staying here for nothing; I’m staying here to work.” (Male)

“We have a plan back home ... so we still working to finish some plans.” (Female)

“The main challenge [about the PALM scheme and disengagement] is family. You’re far away from your family ... I’m here on my own, I work to feed my family at home, my wife looks after our family... But long-distance relationships are really challenging.” (Male)

89 Nishitani and Lee (2019).

90 Withers, M. (2022)

91 Petrou, K., & Connell, J. (2022).

Directions for Policy Reform

Our findings suggest that disengagement from the PALM scheme is significantly informed by pervasive human and labour rights issues that are inherent to the design of the scheme and undermine its claims to best practice. Given the dire consequences for the wellbeing of disengaged workers and their families, and the importance of the scheme's sustainability as a major pillar of Australia's regional foreign policy, there is pressing need for reforms to redress existing harm and prevent further disengagement. This presents a unique opportunity for Australia to pioneer genuine best practice in the design and governance of guestworker migration schemes that are, the world over, widely condemned for withholding fundamental rights and treating participants as 'workers' and not 'people'. The evidence presented in this report, consistent with empirical findings from comparable guestworker schemes globally, shows that labour mobility is neither *a priori* a 'triple win' nor self-regulating: the PALM scheme requires sufficient resourcing and careful governance to achieve its stated objectives. The following discussion is informed by our research findings outlined above as well as existing policy debate and research around the PALM scheme.

Key Recommendations

- **Provide a pathway to regularise (or legalise where applicable), socially protect, and 're-engage' those who have left the scheme.**
- **Ensure the PALM scheme adheres to best practice in worker-initiated portability, whereby people on the PALM scheme have the right to freely change employers to redress employer-dependency.**
- **Reduce the extent of total deductions and extend the repayment period to ease financial burdens on PALM visa holders and their families.**
- **Subsidise flights to and from Australia, including annual return visits for long-term workers, to reduce and equalise costs of participation while supporting rights to family life.**
- **Provide Medicare coverage to PALM scheme visa holders.**

Regularisation and Re-Engagement

A necessary, though by itself insufficient, first-step toward addressing the growing problems associated with disengagement from the PALM scheme is to regularise (or legalise) and 're-engage' those who have left the scheme. Regularisation would entail granting a provisional visa status for those who have disengaged from the PALM scheme but are currently residing in Australia with or without a valid visa and legal working rights. Regularisation could be achieved, for example, by allowing disengaged workers to apply for an amnesty visa with a defined period of working rights and Medicare entitlements, subject to the requirement that they register to 're-engage' in the PALM scheme or otherwise return to their country of origin upon lapse of the amnesty period. Similar legalisation processes – such as the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in the United States – have been shown to be highly efficacious in redressing humanitarian concerns associated with undocumented migrant status⁹². Re-engagement, on the other hand, could entail in-country retraining and the prioritised recruitment of those participating in the amnesty visa – with subsidies extended by the federal government to reduce upfront costs and incentivise approved employers to recruit from this pool of visa holders.

It is essential that regularisation and re-engagement is accompanied by broader PALM reforms to address underlying problems and prevent further disengagement. A common argument against the concept of an amnesty visa is the concern that associated rights and entitlements, such as unrestricted working rights and Medicare coverage, will encourage existing PALM scheme participants to disengage in order to gain better conditions. A logical approach would be to implement substantive parallel reforms to the PALM scheme, both to reduce any real or perceived disparity between existing visa holders and amnesty visa holders, and to address the rights issues that are the root cause of disengagement. The IRCA again serves as a useful comparison, as the short-term success of legalisation was diminished by subsequent and persistent undocumented migration occurring in response to a lack of wider immigration reform.

⁹² Linder, Joshua. 2011. *The Amnesty Effect: Evidence from the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act*. "The Public Purpose"

⁹³ See: <https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/resources/portability-arrangements>



Failing to address the key reasons for disengagement outlined in this report will undermine re-engagement efforts, as regularised visa holders and new PALM participants arriving in Australia will continue to encounter the same structural and institutional problems that cause a significant number to leave the scheme. The remainder of our recommendations speak to these necessary reforms.

PALM Scheme Reform

People on the PALM scheme must have the ability to freely change employers to break the dependency that is central to other rights issues. The employer-tied nature of the PALM scheme ingrains imbalanced power relations between employers and employees, undermining Australia's commitments to just and favourable working conditions by creating discriminatory aberrations from the labour rights held by Australian residents and other migrant workers. Without rights to 'exit' employment when encountering mistreatment, people on the PALM scheme are likewise impaired from exercising their 'voice' due to fear, as termination infers deportation. This vulnerability is compounded by approved employers having designated responsibility for worker welfare and visa holder's evident distrust of official support services. At present, disengagement is often the only meaningful redress available to people on the PALM scheme who are experiencing legitimate grievances in their employment. By contrast, the right to freely change employers – what has elsewhere been termed 'worker-initiated portability' – would introduce consistency with the rest of Australia's migration system and provide a fundamental safeguarding against employer-associated rights infringements.

Worker-initiated portability has international precedents and could be implemented within the current architecture of the PALM scheme. At present, Australia lags behind many other countries in extending such rights. For instance, following sustained criticism for migrant rights violations, Qatar recently implemented legal reforms that replaced longstanding requirements that portability require employer consent with a worker-initiated notice period. Similar flexibility exists among other Gulf Cooperation Council states – including Kuwait, Oman, and Saudi Arabia – while South Korea's Employment Permit Scheme and Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program both contain provisos for worker-initiated portability if mistreatment is reported. The PALM scheme could readily achieve best practice in worker-initiated portability by creating an in-country recruitment facility for workers seeking to

change employers and introduce a notice period instead of the employer consent currently required. Such a facility would create pressure for current employers to retain their staff, while encouraging prospective employers to hire experienced in-country workers with fewer recruitment costs, thereby introducing an important system of incentives to strengthen existing rights commitments that are more considerable on paper than in practice.

We found that many people disengaged from the PALM scheme due to income deductions that are both too costly and too quickly repaid. The net pay of PALM participants during the initial deduction period is exceedingly low and insufficient to meet the material needs and financial expectations of PALM workers and their dependent family members, creating financial and social pressures that inform decisions to disengage. Deductions should be reduced by subsidising international travel costs and universalising Medicare access. Subsidising international travel costs, including annual return flights to visit family, would mitigate location-based inequities in the cost of participating in the scheme and extend vital support for family life.

Obligations to protect family life and the child-parent relationship could be further addressed by standardising rights to family accompaniment for long-term PALM visa holders and reframing the availability of appropriate accommodation and schooling as a prerequisite for approved employer status, rather than as a matter of employer discretion as in the current family accompaniment pilot. As tax-paying workers, PALM scheme visa holders should have access to Medicare coverage to simplify the availability and affordability of care, while additional resourcing for culturally appropriate sexual and reproductive health is an urgent matter for gender equity. Residual deductions to be borne by PALM participants should be made more gradual to avoid acute periods of income shortage. This could be achieved by coordinating repayments through a centralised agency like the Australian Tax Office: approved employers could have their upfront costs reimbursed under the existing timeframe, while people on the PALM scheme make repayments prorated to the duration of their contract, with the Australian Government providing necessary liquidity to manage the difference.



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