JOBS AVAILABILITY SNAPSHOT

EIGHTH EDITION

Anglicare Australia
in every Community

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Anglicare Australia's Jobs Availability Snapshot attempts to show what the job market is really like for those facing the greatest barriers to work – those who may not have qualifications or experience to draw on, those trying to re-enter the workforce after a long break, or those living in regional or remote areas. Anglicare Australia's Jobs Availability Snapshot was first published in October 2016. This is the eighth edition. Preferred citation:
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Introduction

This report marks the eighth edition of Anglicare Australia's Jobs Availability Snapshot, conducted annually to show what the job market is really like for the people who face the greatest barriers to work. These are people who may be trying to re-enter the workforce after a long break, who did not complete tertiary education, have disabilities, are older, or those who are living in regional or remote areas.

This year the national unemployment rate has reached new lows. There has been an increase in the proportion of Australians engaged in the workforce, with an uptick in hours worked and a decrease in underemployment.[1] Yet this is at odds with the experience of hundreds of thousands of Australians who continue to grapple with the challenges of finding and retaining jobs, some after years of relentless searching. There is a deep disconnect between these experiences and the mainstream commentary about jobs and the economy.

This situation is unlikely to change anytime soon, and for many, it may get worse. In its efforts to tackle high inflation, the Reserve Bank of Australia has set its sights on achieving an unemployment rate of 4.5 percent by late 2024, which will see around 130,000 to 150,000 more people become unemployed. Those who have benefited the most from the strong labour market conditions will also likely be the first to face job losses as the economy contracts or slips into a recession.

The number of Australians with barriers to work has barely shifted in eight years, despite the fluctuating jobs market. There are still over 500,000 Australians who have been on JobSeeker payments for more than a year without securing work. Employers report huge workforce shortages across multiple growth industries, but those with barriers to work, or from disadvantaged backgrounds, are not getting a look in. Employment services are failing to match people seeking work with meaningful jobs or provide the kinds of pre-employment support needed to make sure people are work-ready. Instead of investing in genuine practical help for individuals to develop their skills, too often employment services trap people in aimless busywork that does little to help them gain employment.

This is happening as entry-level jobs are continuing to dry up. The Jobs Availability Snapshot this year shows that there are 18 people with barriers to work competing for every entry-level job. In all, there are 26 people out of work for each entry-level job. There simply aren't enough entry-level jobs for those who need them.

With unemployment set to rise, and fewer jobs available for those in the most need, it is time to reform this system once and for all. After years of structural failure, we owe it to Australians out of work to help them achieve their goals as part of a system that works.

Methodology

The Snapshot investigates whether the labour market is creating the right opportunities for people with barriers to work. It compares data on the number of people with barriers to work with the number of suitable job advertisements in the sample month of August.

The snapshot is based on three Federal Government datasets:

- The Australia and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations which is a typology of all potential positions in the labour market by the qualifications, skill levels, and experience required;
- The Internet Vacancy Index which examines the distribution of advertised vacancies by skill level; and
- The Department of Social Services Income Support Recipient report which provides monthly figures on income support payment recipients by demographics, such as the length of time spent on payments.

Job classification

The Australia and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO) categorises the different types of jobs available in the labour market and the skill levels they require. It lists each job type according to five skill levels:

- Bachelor degree or higher qualification, or at least five years of relevant experience
- Associate Degree, Advanced Diploma or Diploma, or at least three years of relevant experience
- Certificate IV, Certificate III with at least two years training, or at least three years of relevant experience
- Certificate II, Certificate III, or at least one year of relevant experience
- Certificate I, compulsory secondary education, or on-the-job training.

The Snapshot focuses on Level 5 jobs as these are best suited to people looking for entry-level work requiring minimal training and experience.

Job advertisements

The Internet Vacancy Index (IVI) collates job vacancies advertised online across Australia and rates them according to ANZSCO skill levels. It counts online job advertisements posted on SEEK, CareerOne and Workforce Australia online job boards during the reference month. While the IVI sometimes includes duplicates from single vacancies on multiple job sites, it can also mask the number of vacancies such as when a single advertisement is placed for a bulk recruitment round.

These variations do not affect the reliability of the IVI in measuring shifts in employment. It continues to be used by the Government to measure vacancies. The Snapshot uses the IVI to calculate the number of suitable jobs nationally, and in each state and territory.

People seeking work

The ABS defines unemployed individuals as those actively seeking work in the previous month and are available to start work within the survey week. Those who are out of work but do not meet this definition are categorised as not being in the labour force. This definition excludes many people who want to work but can't start work within the reference week, such as those with caring responsibilities, or people who are temporarily unable to work due to illness. It also excludes those who want to work but have given up hope of finding a job. This is why Roy Morgan's unemployment rate for Australia, which includes many more people who are long-term unemployed, is currently three times the rate of the ABS figures.[2] It is also why these figures cannot necessarily be used to understand the situation facing people who have been out of work long-term, or who face barriers to work.

In previous editions of the Jobs Availability Snapshot, data about participants in Stream C of the old Job Active system was used to estimate the number of people with significant barriers to employment. People in Stream C of the Job Active system, as determined by the Job Seeker Classification Instrument, were people determined to need the most support to find and keep work.

The new Workforce Australia employment services system which was introduced in July 2022 no longer classifies people in the same way. This means that data about Stream C participants is only available to June 2022. Instead, this Snapshot uses data from the Department of Social Services (DSS) on the number of people who have been on JobSeeker payments for 52 weeks or more to measure the number of people with barriers to work.

The JobSeeker payment is the main income support payment for people aged 22 to the Age Pension age who are looking for work. In this report, we consider people to be facing barriers to work after they have been on the payment for 52 weeks or more. This aligns with the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) definition of long-term unemployment as being unemployed for 12 months or more. It is well-established that the longer people are unemployed the harder it will be for them to gain relevant employment due to stigma and the loss of relevant skills. All comparisons in this report will therefore be based on DSS reported data on the number of people who have received JobSeeker payments for 52 weeks or more.

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Snapshot Findings

The JobSeeker caseload

Table 1 shows the number of JobSeeker payment recipients in August 2023, including long-term recipients of JobSeeker payments. Out of the 811,020 individuals who were on JobSeeker payments, approximately 69 percent were receiving JobSeeker payments for at least a year.

Table 1. People seeking work, 2023 and 2022

People seeking work	2023	2022	Change
People seeking work	811,020	875,490	- 7.4%
Long-term unemployed	559,350	624,195	- 10.5%
Percentage of long-term unemployed	69%	71%	- 2%

Source: Department of Social Services

The number of people on JobSeeker has declined compared to a year ago. A tight labour market and unprecedented demand for labour across multiple industries have contributed to more people securing work. Even those with barriers to employment have benefited from a tight labour market, with the number of people receiving JobSeeker payments for at least a year decreasing by 10.5 percent compared to one year ago.

However, looking at these numbers in isolation oversimplifies the challenges faced by people with barriers to employment, as it doesn't reveal the increasing persistence and depth of unemployment. While the number of people on the JobSeeker payment has returned to pre-pandemic levels, people are staying on the payment for longer. For example, the proportion of JobSeeker recipients on income support for over five years increased by 15 percentage points between August 2013 (nine percent) and August 2023 (24 percent).[3] Similarly, the average duration of receiving JobSeeker payments almost doubled within a decade, from 99 weeks in August 2013 to 185 weeks in August 2023.[4] Despite our strong recovery and low unemployment rate, people with the most barriers to securing work in Australia aren't enjoying the benefits. A stronger job market alone isn't enough to support them into secure work and current systems are failing to boost the employment prospects of people with greater barriers to work.

Changes to the social security system may partially account for why unemployment is increasingly entrenched. The percentage of JobSeeker recipients with partial work capacity has nearly doubled, increasing from 23 percent to 43 percent between August 2013 and August 2023, primarily due to stricter eligibility criteria for the Disability Support Pension.[5] Additionally, there has been a significant increase in the proportion of individuals aged 65 and older who are receiving unemployment benefits. In August 2013, there were no recipients aged 65 and above, but by August 2023, this

number had grown to 43,970.[6] This shift can be attributed to the gradual increase in the qualifying age for the Age Pension during this period, moving from 65 to 65.5 years on July 1, 2017, and further to 67 on July 1, 2023.

There is a growing concentration of several disadvantaged groups, including individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, refugees, First Nations peoples, ex-offenders, individuals experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity, individuals dealing with drug and alcohol issues, those with mental health conditions, and people with disabilities receiving JobSeeker payments.[7] Around 13.5 percent of the Workforce Australia caseload in July 2022 comprised of First Nations individuals, up from 9.5 percent in July 2015. Similarly, the proportion of Workforce Australia participants who were ex-offenders increased from 10.8 percent to 12.3 percent, while the percentage of individuals with disabilities and complex health conditions increased from 31.9 percent to 33.6 percent.

The entrenchment of unemployment and disadvantage may be worsened by employment services that are poorly tailored to the needs of people. The combination of a high administrative and compliance burden, along with substantial caseloads, poses challenges for staff in personalising and enhancing the quality of services provided to clients. In 2023, frontline staff reported an average caseload of 89 people seeking work, and spent a mere 45.8 percent of their working hours in direct contact with them.[8]

Adding to these challenges is an employment services workforce which has become younger, less experienced, and less qualified, despite staff having to deliver more intensive case management.[9] One in four Workforce Australia staff surveyed has worked in the sector for less than a year, and a concerning 14.1 percent of frontline staff received no training at all.[10] Additionally, the proportion of frontline staff holding at least a bachelor's degree has declined significantly, dropping from just under 40 percent in 1998 to 22.7 percent.[11]

Compounded by a turnover rate exceeding 2.5 times the national rate, people trapped in the system may not receive the stability and continuity of services necessary to build effective caseworker-client relationships and consequently, receive high-quality support.[12]

Ratio of people to jobs advertised

The IVI recorded 284,423 jobs advertised in August 2023. Of the positions advertised, 10.8 percent were classified as Level 5 vacancies, or entry-level positions, a 3.5 percent drop compared to a decade ago.

Table 2. Proportion of jobs advertised by skill level

Jobs advertised	Level 5 jobs, number	Level 5 jobs, percentage
284,423	30,791	10.8%

Source: Internet Vacancies, ANZSCO Skill Level, Jobs and Skills Australia

When comparing the number of people who have been on JobSeeker for at least a year to the number of entry-level roles advertised, we found that for every level 5 position, there are 18.2 people competing for each job.

Table 3. Ratio of Level 5 jobs to the number of JobSeeker recipients

Ratio of long-term jobseeker recipients to level 5 jobs	Ratio of all jobseeker recipients to level 5 jobs
18	26

Source: Department of Social Services, Internet Vacancies, ANZSCO Skill Level, Jobs and Skills Australia

Table 4. Ratio of Level 5 jobs to the number of JobSeeker recipients by region

Rregion	Ratio of jobseeker recipients to level 5 jobs
Australia	26
ACT	14
NSW	25
NT	66
Queensland	27
SA	41
Tasmania	43
Victoria	23
WA	27

Source: Department of Social Services, Internet Vacancies, ANZSCO Skill Level, Jobs and Skills Australia

In considering these findings, it is important to remember that people with barriers to work aren't just competing with one another for vacancies. Applicants with greater skills, including those who are seeking additional hours, also apply for these roles. This is especially true as more people struggle to make ends meet amid stagnant wages and a rising cost of living, prompting them to seek out extra work. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicate that in June 2023, 6.7 percent of employed people, or more than 950,000 people, held multiple jobs, the highest rate since 1994.[13]

Exacerbating this issue is the prevailing trend towards insecure work arrangements, which is marked by unpredictable and fluctuating pay, diminished rights and job insecurity.[14] This in turn forces more people to work multiple jobs to make ends meet. On average, multiple job holders earn approximately 14 percent less annually than individuals with a single full-time job, despite putting in roughly 11 percent more hours.[15]

Australia already has the third highest proportion of non-standard workers among the advanced economies.[16] As many as 2.1 million workers, or 20.4 percent of employees do not have a guaranteed minimum number of hours each week, and approximately a third of all workers do not have access to paid sick leave.[17] At the end of 2020, only half of all jobs offer full-time hours with paid entitlements.[18]

Policy implications

Raise the rate of unemployment payments

The social security system assumes everyone of working-age should be able to find full-time, full-year work. While some people may combine part-time or intermittent work with income support, the expectation is that reliance on income support will be temporary and short term. Payments that are designed to support people through temporary spells of joblessness, while moving people into the labour market is how successive Governments have purported to solve the problems of poverty and social exclusion.

This approach has never worked. Many people lack the qualifications or experience to compete for available jobs, while others find themselves trapped in a system that cannot accommodate the circumstances of their lives. In the eight years that Anglicare Australia has released the Jobs Availability Snapshot, there hasn't been a single year where there were enough suitable jobs for people with barriers to work. On average, JobSeeker recipients remain on the payment for 3.5 years, well beyond the threshold for long-term unemployment, which is defined as twelve months. The average length of time on JobSeeker payment were even longer for people with disabilities and older Australians.[19]

With the value of income support payments deteriorating over time, they are caught in a poverty trap as they navigate a system which is not equipped to help them. The Business Council of Australia has stated that the rate of unemployment payments is so low it is acting as a barrier to work.[20] There is little time and energy left for job hunting, when so much effort is required just to survive and put food on the table.

While major reform to employment services and investment in direct jobs creation are crucial to help the many people missing out on work, so is the provision of an adequate income so that people have the security and stability to undertake retraining and other steps to help them into the workforce over the long-term.

There are many ways to lift incomes above the poverty line. One option is to increase the rate of JobSeeker and other working wage payments, as was done temporarily in 2020-21, creating a guaranteed adequate income. According to the Parliamentary Budget Office, raising the rate of key payments to the Henderson Poverty Line would cost:

- » $128.1 billion over ten years for the JobSeeker Payment
- » $39.35 billion over ten years for the Parenting Payment
- » $30.57 billion over ten years for the Carer Payment.[21]

These changes would cost $198 billion over ten years, considerably less than the cost of the proposed Stage 3 Tax Cuts. Around 1.44 million Australian adults would benefit from this change.

In addition to the adult recipients, almost 840,000 children have a parent receiving one of these payments.[22] Growing up in poverty often leads to unemployment and poverty in adulthood, as it often means missing out on early education, and poorer educational outcomes due to the lack of a conducive environment to study, missing out on enrichment experiences, isolation and hunger. The Breaking Down Barriers report by the University of Melbourne showed that children who grew up in poverty were 1.8 times less likely to be employed full-time, 2.4 times less likely to get a university degree, and on average earned an hourly rate that is 23 percent less than those who did not experience childhood poverty.[23] Increasing the rates of income support payments offers the additional advantage of enhancing the future contribution of these children and breaking cycles of disadvantage.

Whether it is achieved through a universal payment or a guaranteed adequate income for every Australian which is over the poverty line, there is enormous public support to end poverty and income insecurity across Australia. In 2020, Anglicare Australia tested the real perceptions and attitudes of Australians towards people living in poverty.[24] Respondents across all demographic groups overwhelmingly agreed that nobody should live in poverty (86 percent), and that Australia should be a country that looks after those in need.[25]

With public support and much research into possible models, it appears that policy makers are lagging behind civil society and public opinion by dismissing its potential.

Abandon mutual obligations

Our findings show that Workforce Australia is doing little to help those with the greatest barriers to work. With so few jobs available or attainable for people with barriers to employment, mutual obligation requirements imposed by the employment services system are pointless and demoralising for job seekers.

If these obligations are judged not to be met, people's payments can be suspended, leaving them without income. In the quarter April-June 2023, 45 percent of people with reporting requirements had their payments suspended.[26] Forcing people to engage with for-profit employment service providers, apply for multiple jobs, and complete meaningless training programs, simply isn't working.

Research also suggests that employment services have been failing in its aims for years, with a recent parliamentary inquiry reporting that "participants are gaining employment in spite of [the system], not because of it."[27] People are more likely to be unemployed longer if they are subject to mutual obligation activities or Work for the Dole, and if they participate in employment services. This is

driven by the fact that the causes of unemployment tend to be structural, and much deeper than the factors that Workforce Australia was established to solve.

This ineffective regime of punishment and compliance should be replaced with a system that is tailored and person-centred. It should look more like the system that job seekers want, with less busywork and more genuine support, including support to turn jobs into lasting opportunities.

Overhaul employment services

In a perverse set of decisions, for-profit providers have been entrusted with the responsibility to issue breaches and penalties. This occurs despite employment services job providers having a vested interest in utilising threats of payment suspensions to coerce people to participate in their own courses.[28]

To illustrate, Workforce Australia job agencies who hold training contracts can claim a $700 progress payment per person upon completion of one of their own Career Transition Assistance programs or Employability Skills Training or industry specific training courses, in conjunction with another activity. Yet there are almost no quality assurances of these courses. According to recent media reports, one job agency claimed more than $100,000 by referring people to their own courses, which included topics such as "body language" and "making decisions."

There is also widespread evidence of system errors that penalise people who have not done anything wrong. Many are unfairly enduring a loss of income as a result of flawed systems by their providers. Some have reported being breached for missing appointments that had not even happened yet. Others were breached after providers refused to reschedule appointments that clashed with training, job interviews, or even casual work. Unrealistic point requirements also contribute to this issue. For example, participation in Work for the Dole is worth 20 points per week.[29] Even if a person participated in Work for the Dole every week for a month, they would fall 20 points shy of the standard points target of 100.

The system routinely punishes people without due process, yet it has endless tolerance for mistake-prone providers. Those who bear the brunt of the system's errors cannot afford to be breached, with the JobSeeker payment already well below the poverty line. The inaccuracy of this system, and the role providers play in errors, are of major concern to Anglicare Australia.

Anglicare Australia recommends the immediate removal of breach powers from private employment service providers, returning them to Services Australia. If the Government believes this cannot be done under current contractual arrangements, then it must create real, financial consequences for providers who issue incorrect breaches, wrongly suspend payments, and fail to advise clients of their rights to appeal decisions and change providers. It must also play a more active role in which training programs can be reimbursed based on areas of actual need and employer demand, and undertake regular quality assurance of the courses that people are being directed to take.

In the longer-term, the Government must end its dependence on for-profit providers once the current round of contracts expires.

Improve the quality of entry-level jobs

The challenges go beyond the lack of suitable jobs. Jobs have become increasingly precarious and insecure, with the proportion of employees engaged in non-standard jobs increasing from 24 percent in 1971 to nearly 57 percent in 2017.[30]

People with barriers to work, especially women, are particularly affected, as insecure jobs are particularly concentrated in feminised entry-level sectors such as retail, and accommodation and food services. When people struggle to get sufficient work hours or face uncertainty about ongoing employment, it makes it difficult for them to afford essentials and plan for their future.

This volatility also creates greater competition for secure entry-level jobs; and means that achieving employment doesn't always lead to a long-term outcome, but rather 'churn' as people find themselves in cycles of obtaining insecure work. Moreover, insecure work typically provides limited access to training and career advancement opportunities, contributing to the stagnation and obsolescence of skills. Consequently, if their employment were to cease, these individuals face greater challenges in securing new employment, further deepening inequity in labour market experiences.

Because the superannuation system is linked to paid work, it overwhelmingly disadvantages people engaged in insecure work, including women who are more likely to engage in part-time or casual work to fulfill unpaid caring responsibilities. Independent contractors and gig workers are not entitled to superannuation guarantee payments, while fixed-term contract, casual, and part-time workers with irregular working patterns may fail to accrue sufficient superannuation for a comfortable retirement. As a result, people engaged in insecure work are doubly disadvantaged and are far more likely to experience poverty in old age.

Beyond its financial repercussions, insecure employment takes a significant toll on physical and mental health, and often adversely impacts family life, social connectedness, and personal relationships. For instance, it heightens the risk of developing coronary heart disease by 30 percent and depression by 60 percent.[31] Businesses should also be concerned, as ill-health impacts their productivity.

The growth of insecure work is no accident. It stems from a deliberate choice to shift financial risk from employers to workers. Despite provisions such as casual loading, average hourly earnings in most non-standard jobs are below total average hourly earnings.[32]

While the Albanese government's decision to introduce reforms that give casual employees the choice to convert to permanent employment after one year of service is welcome, it is not enough. Further measures under discussion to regulate the gig economy are vital to ensure all workers who want secure work have access to it, and minimum standards and protections are extended to all workers. In sectors like the community services industry, insecure employment can also be driven by short-term funding and contract arrangements. Governments at all levels can take a leading role as large employers and contractors of services by providing longer term funding and employment contracts.

Growing the community services workforce

This year's Snapshot results show that in every part of the country, people with barriers to work outnumber entry-level vacancies by over 18 to one. Yet across Australia, some sectors are desperate for workers. The care industry is the fastest growing industry in Australia. These are meaningful jobs, in a growth industry, with a solid career trajectory.

For example, the demand for aged and disability care workers is projected to grow by 28 percent over the five years to 2026.[33] The community mental health, family violence and youth sectors are all facing workforce shortages. The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety estimated a need for more than 130,000 additional full-time workers by 2050.[34] This would be a 70 percent increase on current levels. Experts also report that investing in early childhood education and other forms of social care would create twice as many jobs as the same investment in construction. As a female-dominated industry, job creation in the care sector can help improve the rates of women's economic participation.

This illustrates the need to create pathways for people looking for work to be trained and skilled to fill the jobs of the future. There is a real opportunity to connect people with barriers to employment with entry-level jobs, including by providing genuine and supported work placements and encouraging completion of high-quality training to ensure people have the right skills to meet the needs of employers and service users.

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Conclusion

After eight years of producing the Jobs Availability Snapshot, it is clear that the job market is leaving behind those in greatest need of secure work.

Many commentators are focusing on the positives. Rates of employment are high, the job market has rebounded after the pandemic, and the caseload in employment services has declined. In spite of this, the number of job seekers with barriers to work consistently outnumbers the number of suitable jobs available. Those who need the most help to find work, and those who are long-term unemployed, are not benefitting from the recovery in the labour force.

The consequences are clear. More and more people are being left behind in poverty, trapped in a system that cannot accommodate the circumstances of their lives.

These issues have not crept up on Australians out of the blue. Each year, the Jobs Availability Snapshot has documented the consistent shortfall of jobs for people facing the greatest barriers to work. Nor has this happened by accident. It has happened because governments have allowed it and in some cases caused it.

Reimagining this system is a challenge, but as this paper shows, it is also an opportunity to rethink our approaches. We must redesign our systems to put the needs of people, not the profitability of providers, at the centre. It is past time for Government to invest in direct job creation, overhaul employment services, and build the workforce we need – instead of forcing people to live in poverty and accept insecure work while watching industries cry out for a trained workforce.

As the Government's highly anticipated review of Workforce Australia concludes its work, our hope is that they will work with us, and with people caught up in the system, to reimagine how it looks and what it can achieve.

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