JOBS AVAILABILITY SNAPSHOT

NINTH 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 ninth edition. Preferred citation:
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Introduction

For many, the idea of a fair go is a foundational Australian value. Yet for many Australians out of work, this value appears to be forgotten. Instead, thousands of people with barriers to work are forced to navigate a labour market that provides them with little or no opportunity to secure meaningful work, and in many cases, impedes their attempts to gain employment.

According to the Treasury, Reserve Bank of Australia, and many economists, Australia's labour market is staying strong. Yet hidden behind the talk of a high employment rate, a clear problem continues to exist when it comes to people who are facing barriers to work.

This year marks the ninth edition of Anglicare Australia's Jobs Availability Snapshot, which investigates how the labour market fares for people with barriers to work. Previously this Snapshot has uncovered that the jobs market is failing hundreds of thousands of Australians. This year the situation remains unchanged and prospects have not improved for people facing barriers to work.

Despite workforce shortages that continue to worsen across various growth industries, those with even slight barriers to work, or from disadvantaged backgrounds, continue to be overlooked. Employment services are failing to match those looking for work with meaningful jobs or provide pre-employment support that assists the individual. Rather than investing in skills development and improving a person's capability to be employed, government continues to invest in employment services that place people in unsuitable activities that provide no benefit. This Snapshot has shown that this has been the case for the last nine years, through three governments, three direct inquiries into the employment services system, and one set of reforms. The current approach is clearly not working.

This year's Snapshot reveals that competition for entry-level jobs is strong. So strong that people with barriers to work outnumber entry-level vacancies by 21 to one, and there are 33 people out of work for each entry-level role. These results challenge the popular belief that the inability to find a job is an individual failure. Instead, the Snapshot reveals a deeper structural problem. There is a fundamental mismatch between the skills of those looking for work and the opportunities that are available.

Such dire results have a real impact on people's livelihoods and lifetime wellbeing. This is a crisis that can no longer be ignored. It is time for the government to act to ensure every Australian who is willing and able to work has the opportunity to do so.

Methodology

Anglicare Australia's Jobs Availability Snapshot investigates whether the labour market is creating the right opportunities for people with barriers to work, and whether Government policies are helping people overcome those barriers. It compares data on the number of people with barriers to work with the number of suitable job advertisements in the chosen sample month. The 2024 Snapshot analysed jobs availability over the month of August 2024.

The Snapshot utilises 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.

People with barriers to work

This Snapshot uses data provided by the Department of Social Services (DSS) on the payment duration for JobSeeker. JobSeeker payment is utilised because it is the main income support payment for people aged 22 to the Age Pension age who are looking for work. They may be looking for work because they are unemployed, however, some are looking for new or additional jobs because they are earning too little.

This Snapshot does not consider all JobSeeker recipients to be people with barriers to work. Instead, a person is considered to have barriers to work if they have received JobSeeker payments for at least a year. To receive the JobSeeker payment people are generally required to participate in mutual obligation requirements to help them find a job. This often includes a minimum job search requirement. This means that despite actively seeking work, those who have been on the payment for at least a year haven't had success in securing or retaining a job. Hence why they are considered to have barriers to work.

There are many reasons why people experience barriers to work. Some may be re-entering the workforce after a period of caregiving, while others may have long-term health conditions or disabilities. Not completing formal schooling, poor English proficiency, seeking work later in life, and living in an area with few jobs can also be barriers to work.

In addition to the barriers these people may already be facing that hinder their employment outcomes, it is well-established that prolonged unemployment makes it harder to secure appropriate

employment. This is due to the loss of relevant skills and networks over time, as well as stigma from potential employers.[1] Ultimately, the more time people remain on income support payments, the harder it gets for them to secure employment.

Entry-level jobs

In addition to having minimal barriers to enter, making them broadly accessible for most people, entry-level jobs play a valuable role in the overall performance of Australia's labour market. These jobs provide opportunities for people to develop fundamental and transferable skills that can be used across sectors and industries, in turn enabling the workforce to remain flexible and adaptable in times of change. This mobility is key in maintaining an efficient labour market and it is well recognised in economics that labour market efficiency is a crucial factor in determining long-term changes to unemployment.[2]

This Snapshot identifies entry-level jobs using the Australia and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO). The ANZSCO is a skill-based classification system that 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 jobs typically have minimal education or experience requirements which makes them suitable for people who have been out of work for a year or more or lack formal qualifications.

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.

Limitations

The Snapshot is conservative in estimating the number of people with barriers to employment, as not everyone who is out of work or earning below the JobSeeker cut-off threshold is eligible for the JobSeeker payment. Some groups ineligible for JobSeeker payments include temporary visa holders, newly arrived permanent residents who are subject to a four-year waiting period, individuals receiving alternative income support payments, and single homeowners with assets over $314,000.[3]

As the Snapshot is necessarily conservative, the experience of someone with barriers to employment is likely to be even more difficult than our findings show.

Snapshot Findings

The JobSeeker caseload

Table 1 shows the JobSeeker caseload in August 2024, which is the overall number of JobSeeker payment recipients in August 2024, inclusive of JobSeeker recipients with barriers to work. Out of the 828,545 people receiving JobSeeker payments, 62.1 percent had been on the payment for at least a year.

Table 1. People seeking work, 2024 and 2023

JobSeeker caseload	August 2024	August 2023	Percentage change
Number of JobSeeker recipients	828,545	811,020	+2.2%
Recipients with payment duration of a year or longer	514,160	559,350	-8.1%
Percentage of recipients with payment duration of a year or longer	62.1%	69.0%	-6.9%

With the Reserve Bank forecasting the unemployment rate to creep up to 4.3 percent by the end of this year,[4] increases to unemployment are already becoming evident, as seen through the growth in the overall JobSeeker caseload compared to a year ago.

The number of JobSeeker recipients who have been on the payment for at least a year has dropped by 6.9 percent since August 2023. Yet, they still account for over 60 percent of the JobSeeker caseload. In fact, since 2016 the number of people with barriers to work has remained stubbornly above 500,000.

A crisis for people with barriers to work

Over the past two decades, the percentage of jobs advertised that were classified as Level 5, or entry-level vacancies have halved. As seen in Table 2, entry-level jobs accounted for only 10.8 percent of jobs advertised in August 2024. Looking ahead, the proportion of entry-level jobs is expected to decrease by a further 0.9 percent within a decade.[5] Simply put, competition will worsen as more people will have to compete for fewer entry-level jobs.

Table 2. Number and proportion of job advertisements by ANZSCO skill level, August 2024

Skill level	No. of job advertisements	Proportion of jobs advertised
1	84,924	36.7%
2	26,059	11.3%
3	36,212	15.7%
4	58,992	25.5%
5	24,956	10.8%

Drawing upon JobSeeker recipients' data and the IVI, this year's Snapshot analysis reveals that for every advertised entry-level position there are 21 people with barriers to work. This marks the highest level of competition captured by the Snapshot since the COVID-19 pandemic.

These figures are concerning, but they don't paint the full picture. Even those without barriers to employment are not immune to employment challenges. In addition to the decrease in entry-level jobs, there has been a broader decline in job advertisements across all skill levels. Our analysis reveals a 17 percent drop in the total number of job advertisements over the past year. This general contraction in job opportunities is reflected in data on the JobSeeker caseload, which shows a 24.9 percent increase in the number of people receiving JobSeeker payments for less than a year between August 2023 and August 2024.

As all JobSeeker recipients can and do apply for entry-level roles, competition for these jobs is not just amongst those with barriers to work. Table 3 shows that there are 33 JobSeeker recipients for every entry-level job vacancy.

Table 3. Ratio of JobSeeker recipients to Skill Level 5 (entry-level) job advertisements, by duration on payment

Ratio of people with barriers to work to entry-level jobs	Ratio of all JobSeeker recipients to entry-level jobs
21:1	33:1

Throughout Australia, there is no jurisdiction with enough entry-level jobs to meet demand. The situation is worse in the Northern Territory and Tasmania, where there are 65 and 50 JobSeeker recipients competing for each entry-level role respectively.

Table 4. Ratio of all JobSeeker recipients to Level 5 jobs, by State and Territory

Region	2024	2023
Australia	33	26
ACT	17	14
NSW	34	25
NT	65	66
Queensland	29	27
SA	43	41
Tasmania	50	43
Victoria	35	23
WA	32	27

Rising cost-of-living pressures are also pushing more people to take on multiple jobs. In June 2024, 6.5 percent of working Australians held more than one job, one of the highest rates since 1994.[6] Fueling this is the increasing prevalence of insecure work, where pay is unpredictable, job stability is low, and workers often have fewer rights,[7] which forces people to hold multiple jobs just to make ends meet. On average, multiple job holders earn 15 percent less annually than individuals with a single full-time job, despite putting in roughly 13 percent more hours.[8] These factors mean the competition for entry-level jobs is likely even higher than the figures in Table 3 suggest.

An illusion of progress

Initial glances could lead some to believe that circumstances have improved for those with barriers to work, as the proportion of JobSeeker recipients who have received payments for at least a year has decreased by 6.9 percent compared to the previous year (see Table 1). However, this decrease does not tell the full story.

The notable reduction in the proportion of JobSeeker recipients who have been on the payment for a year or more can likely be attributed to changes to income support eligibility. Specifically, the change made by the Albanese Government to extended eligibility for the Parenting Payment Single to single parents with children under 14, up from the previous cut-off age of children under eight years. Ultimately transitioning a cohort of single parents from the JobSeeker Payment to the higher-value Parenting Payment Single which provides an additional $176.90 in support every fortnight.[9]

The effect of this change is quite stark. Historically the caseload for Parenting Payment Single has ranged between 220,000 and 260,000. Following legislative changes in September 2023, the Parenting Payment Single caseload surged to 323,400 by August 2024.[10]

Over the same time, the number of women receiving JobSeeker payments fell by 13 percent. As shown in Table 5, the most significant declines were among women aged between 35 and 54.

Considering that nearly 60 percent of births in Australia are to mothers aged between 30 and 39 years,[11] many of these individuals are likely single parents with children between the ages of eight and 14. This aligns with findings from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), which identified "caring for children" as the most common reason women are not participating in the workforce.[12]

In contrast, no similar decrease in JobSeeker recipients was observed among men, which reflects broader societal trends where women disproportionately shoulder caregiving responsibilities. It is also evident in that men only make up six percent of the Parenting Payment Single cohort.[13]

Table 5. Changes in JobSeeker Caseload, Female

JobSeeker Caseload	Female Recipients	Female 21-24	Female 25-34	Female 35-44	Female 45-54	Female 55-64	Female >65
August 2023	405,400	27,815	68,570	81,665	97,145	104,970	25,235
September 2023	350,915	28,010	59,235	54,800	78,830	103,280	26,765
Percentage Change	-13.4%	0.7%	-13.6%	-32.9%	-18.9%	-1.6%	6.1%

Expanded eligibility for the Parenting Payment Single payment may have shifted many people from the JobSeeker payment, but other changes to income support eligibility have contributed to a growing number of JobSeeker recipients who have been on the payment for a year or more. In August 2024, the average duration on JobSeeker payments had risen to 175 weeks, up from 99 weeks in August 2013.[14] Additionally, the number of JobSeeker recipients who have been on the payment for five to nine years has almost doubled, while those receiving it for ten years or more has quadrupled within the last decade. These trends reflect more than a decade of changes in the eligibility criteria and assessment processes for other major social security payments, notably the Disability Support Pension (DSP) and the Age Pension.

Between 2011 and 2023, DSP eligibility was tightened. Changes to DSP eligibility during this time made the payment virtually inaccessible for people with degenerative or episodic or newly diagnosed conditions, as they are unable to meet the payment criteria of being "fully diagnosed, treated, and stabilised."[15] Even when someone can meet the criteria, applications for the payment are onerous, complicated and approval takes a long time.

The impact of these changes is evident in the numbers. As people who would have previously received the DSP payment transferred onto the JobSeeker payment, the proportion of JobSeeker recipients with a partial capacity to work rose by 18 percent over the past decade. Partial capacity to work refers to those with an assessed physical, intellectual or psychiatric impairment, preventing them from working 30 or more hours per week.[16] Meanwhile, the success rate for DSP applications has significantly declined from 63 percent in 2010-11[17] to 47 percent in 2021-2022.[18]

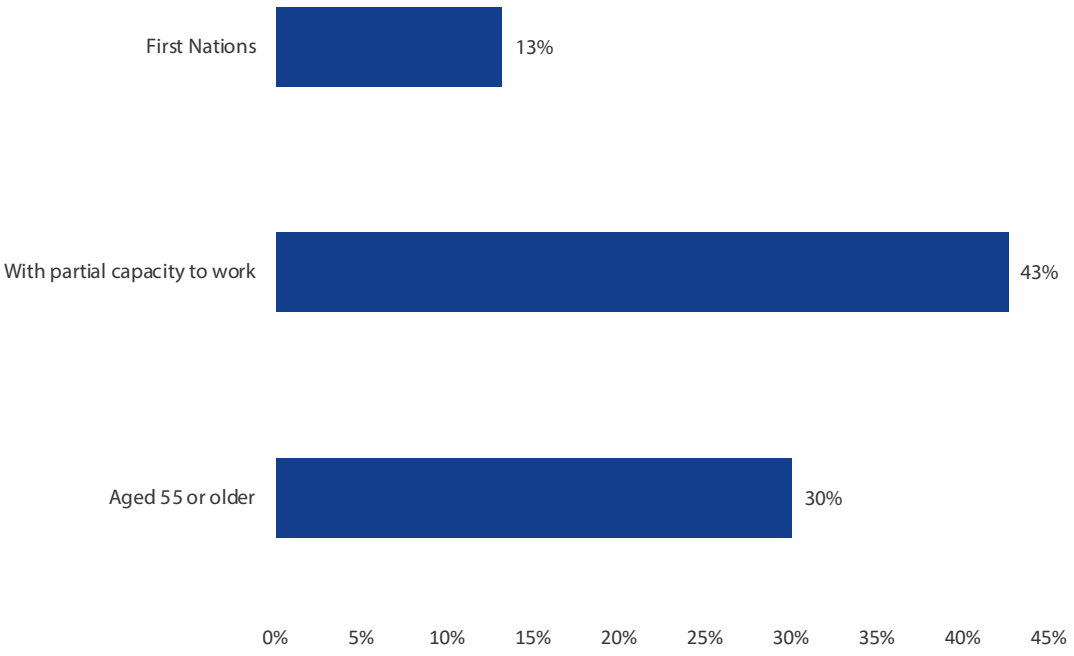
The April 2023 changes to DSP assessments were a step in the right direction, replacing the "fully diagnosed, treated and stabilised" criteria with "diagnosed, reasonably treated and stabilised."[19] Since then, the number of DSP recipients has increased by over 35,000 to 803,820 in August 2024.[20] However, the payment is not yet entirely accessible for people with disability as eligibility still fails to fully accommodate individuals with limited capacity to work due to co-morbidities.

Similarly, the qualifying age for the Age Pension was raised from 65 to 67 years to encourage older Australians to stay in the workforce longer.[21] As a result, the number of JobSeeker recipients aged 65 and over has grown significantly from none in August 2013 to 54,540 in August 2024, or 6.6 percent of the JobSeeker cohort.

These consecutive changes to eligibility have meant that certain groups are now overrepresented in the population of JobSeeker recipients. These groups include people with disability, older people, and First Nations people (Figure 1). Further, these people are more likely to experience higher barriers to employment. For example, the 2022 Priority Investment Approach model projects that First Nations people aged 22-30 receiving the JobSeeker payment will remain on the payment for an average of 3.08 years over the next five years, compared to 2.12 years for their non-First Nations counterparts in the same age group.[22] Similarly, young people aged 22-30 with partial capacity to work and receiving the JobSeeker payment were projected to remain on the payment for 2.98 years over the next five years compared to 2.32 years for their peers with full capacity to work.[23]

It is clear that these policy changes were not aimed at enhancing the employability of disadvantaged groups. Rather, they were introduced to curb the number of people transitioning onto the more expensive DSP and Age Pension, with the goal of reducing government spending on social security.

Figure 1. JobSeeker recipients, by demographics August 2024



Policy implications

Overhaul employment services

Australia's employment services systems exist in recognition that people may need support to move into secure employment. Although the rationale for this system is to assist people with barriers to work, the employment services system is not working. A fundamental flaw with employment services is that it prioritises reducing welfare dependency over empowering Australians to find and sustain employment that provides them with fulfillment and financial security.

For example, the current model of employment services emphasises short-term pre-employment interventions, which is reflected in how providers are paid. Providers receive outcome-based payments when individuals remain in a job for four, 12, and 26 weeks. These payments are made with little regard for the quality of assistance provided, the long-term stability of the job, or whether the job aligns with the individual's career goals and aspirations.

Moreover, Australia's employment system is replete with short-term courses that do little to secure work or ensure there are jobs available for those who compete for them. Instead, they often serve to boost the profit margins of providers. For example, providers can receive a $500 placement fee for every JobSeeker they place in the Work for the Dole Program, with at least $250 going to the host organisation.[24] Providers can also receive multiple payments for the same JobSeeker recipient.

As identified in our Repeat Failure report, which analysed whether Australia's workforce programs are achieving their goals, these short-term programs do not address the structural causes of unemployment nor are they supported by evaluations that shows that these programs work.[25] This works directly against the kind of ongoing support and depth of reskilling we know is necessary to ensure that people find and keep jobs.

As Australia shifts toward a higher-skilled, services-based economy, post-secondary qualifications are increasingly essential. However, the system is currently unlinked to vocational education, where people can gain real qualifications to advance their employment prospects. Instead of focusing on short-term, often ineffective courses, redirecting funding toward assisting JobSeeker recipients to gain more advanced skills and qualifications, and making it easier for people to retrain at a TAFE or institute of technology, would yield higher success rates.

Vocational Education and Training (VET) has proven effective, with VET graduates seeing a median income increase of $11,800 in the year following completion of their certificate.[26] Furthermore 39 percent of VET students who were on income support before commencing studies were no longer dependent on it two years after completing their qualifications.[27]

Anglicare Australia Network members have also showcased the benefits of vocational education and training. As one example, WorkVentures, a member of the Anglicare Australia Network, is an expert in creating traineeship programs for young people and those with barriers to employment. They have demonstrated that building the capacity of and creating a career pathway for people with barriers to work is not only achievable but can provide benefits to employers.

Case Study: WorkVentures

The WorkVentures traineeship program was launched in recognition that young people are more likely to secure sustained, long-term employment if they have at least one year of paid work experience related to their field of study. The traineeship runs over 12-24 months and offers young people employment, support and training in a role matches their interests, including office administration, customer service, legal services, community services, IT support and helpdesk roles, human resources and marketing. During their 12-24 month traineeship, trainees complete a nationally recognised qualification that reflects the practical skills they are developing, while receiving support every step of the way.

Over 80 percent of WorkVentures trainees have completed the program, a rate far higher than the national completion rates for traineeships of approximately 56 percent. The high completion rate is attributed to the positive impact of the wraparound support provided throughout the traineeship. Trainees benefit from a dedicated support consultant, access to the Employee Assistance Program, and specialised support for First Nations trainees through the Barranggirra program.

Following the program, many people go on to secure employment or pursue further training. In 2023, 78 percent of those who completed the traineeship were promoted and remained with their host employer. Another 11 percent moved on to further study while the remaining 11 percent of young people secured other employment. Some of those who stayed with their host employer have also taken on roles mentoring and training new trainees.

The Federal Government already recognises the importance of vocational training and has partnered with states and territories to deliver 180,000 Fee-Free TAFE places in 2023, and another 300,000 over three years from 2024.[28] It has also recently announced plans to introduce legislation making free TAFE a permanent fixture of the national VET system, funding at least 100,000 Fee-Free TAFE places a year from 2027.[29] This legislative change is subject to cross-party support. Fee-Free TAFE has already benefitted over124,000 people seeking work[30] and integrating similar programs into employment services would build on the progress made in aligning Australians skills with the needs of the job market, and would create pathways for people with barriers to work to secure better-paying, stable, and meaningful employment.

Where pre-employment interventions remain, they should focus on removing immediate barriers, such as financial support to complete a police check, a working with children or vulnerable people check, first aid, or support to obtain a driver's licence, rather than the more nebulous training options currently on offer.

Abandon mutual obligations

Mutual obligation was introduced as a social contract with expectations placed on both the government and individuals. It requires the government to provide income support to people experiencing unemployment or earning low incomes, and offer services to improve their employability. In return, people are expected to take steps to secure paid work when able.

Yet, the concept of "mutual" obligation is a misnomer. JobSeeker recipients are subjected to excessive compliance measures that often have little or no positive impact on their ability to find work. Meanwhile, Workforce Australia job providers are rarely held accountable for failing to meet their obligations to help improve the employability of job seekers.

The evidence of failure is clear. The average time people remain on JobSeeker payments is 3.4 years, well beyond the average job search duration of three to six months.[31] In fact, the number of JobSeeker recipients who have been on the payment for five to nine years has almost doubled, while those receiving it for ten years or more has quadrupled within the last decade.

In some cases, mutual obligations have made people less employable, as the focus on compliance undermines people's intrinsic motivation to seek work, replacing it with a frustrating cycle of busywork. A study of the impacts of mutual obligation on 6,253 unemployed people showed that people who were not subjected to mutual obligations found work more quickly.[32] Where mutual obligations activity did help JobSeeker recipients find work, the jobs were typically lower paid, lower skilled, and offered fewer hours.[33]

One of the most concerning aspects of mutual obligation is the liberal use of punitive measures to enforce compliance. Research by ACOSS shows that 38 percent of people in Workforce Australia have been subjected to payment suspensions.[34] More troubling, however, is that missing meetings with providers, which is often the main trigger for compliance actions in the Workforce Australia face-to-face service, does not always reflect a legitimate breach of requirements. Only 26 percent of suspension threats related to missed meetings in the face-to-face service were later upheld as valid demerits.[35] This suggests that compliance actions are often applied inappropriately, penalising people who did not breach their obligations at all.

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 people want, one with less busywork and more genuine, personalised support. This includes support to turn jobs into lasting opportunities as identified in our Asking Those Who Know report.[36]

Investment in job creation

This year's Snapshot shows that once again, the number of people with barriers to work outstrips the number of entry-level jobs available. Yet the Federal Government has shied away from direct job creation, treating it as the work of the private sector.

The focus on obligations and short-term pre-employment programs highlights a general government aversion to being seen to be intervening in the market, which is a major impediment to helping people into work. This manifests in the reluctance to spend funds on direct job creation. This approach is confusing when considering that the training packages announced in recent federal budgets amount to hundreds of millions of dollars, yet unless these are linked directly to actual jobs, will not see many people gain employment as a result. If a similar amount of funds was spent on direct job creation it would have a far greater positive impact.

Opportunities for job creation exist across sectors and can assist community development as well. In smaller communities, there is the potential to support local businesses, councils, and people to work together to create the right jobs. Programs that support Indigenous Rangers, Indigenous Protected Areas, and caring for country, offer an outstanding example. This place-based job creation is critical, particularly for regional and remote Australia, as these areas tend to experience weaker labour market conditions. For example, in the remote region of outback South Australia, 12.7 percent of the population receives JobSeeker payments, while in the metropolitan region of the Australian Capital Territory, this figure is just 2.7 percent.[37]

Job creation programs offer pathways for people with barriers to employment. Job creation simply cannot be left to a market that is current failing to meet the needs of those looking for work. Further, across Australia, some sectors are desperate for workers. The care industry is the fastest growing industry in Australia. Jobs and Skills Australia projects that the current Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) workforce would need to grow up an extra eight percent to satisfy current estimated demand for early childhood services and another eight percent to meet unmet demand for qualified workers.[38] Likewise, The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety reported an estimated need for more than 130,000 additional, full-time equivalent workers by 2050.[39] This would be a 70 percent increase on 2021 levels.[40]

These are meaningful jobs, in a growth industry, with a solid career trajectory. As a female-dominated industry, job creation in the care sector can also help close the gender wage gap and improve the rates of women's economic participation. This presents a real opportunity to connect people with barriers to employment with entry-level jobs, which in turn lead to long-term careers in sectors with a high demand for workers.

This approach makes good economic sense. Experts report that investing in childcare and other forms of social care would create twice as many jobs as the same investment in construction.[41] It is also an opportunity to respond to two problems at once – a dearth of entry-level roles for people who want them, and a workforce shortage in some of Australia's most critical sectors. Job creation at the entry-level could be critical to addressing both.

This program demonstrates that traineeships can be an effective solution for young people looking to build a sustainable and rewarding career. By combining education with practical skills development, traineeships provide a valuable pathway for career growth.

Improve the quality of entry-level jobs

Beyond ensuring that entry-level jobs are available and people with barriers to work are supported into these roles, more must be done to address the growing prevalence of insecure work. Many entry-level positions are insecure, meaning they offer short-term contracts or unstable hours, and therefore provide little stability in wages. If left unaddressed, many people with barriers to work who take on such jobs could find themselves trapped in a yet another cycle of financial insecurity.

Insecure employment also affects job satisfaction and overall quality of working life. It is frequently associated with several challenges, including low wages, the lack of leave entitlements, limited access to training and professional development, and a lack of career advancement or promotional

opportunities.[42] Workers in these roles often face higher risks of occupational hazards and injuries, and are more vulnerable to workplace inequality, sexual harassment, bullying, and wage theft.[43] A recent survey of over 1,300 backpackers, for example, revealed that 78 percent of respondents had been underpaid, with some piece-rate workers earning as little as $9 per day.[44] The majority of these workers were employed as casual workers or contractors.[45]

Insecure work not only has financial consequences but also takes a toll on physical and mental health, and often strains family life, social connections, and personal relationships. For instance, workers in insecure roles are 30 percent more likely to develop coronary heart disease and 60 percent more likely to experience depression.[46] Government should also be concerned, as ill-health can reduce economic 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.[47]

While the introduction of reforms that give casual employees and independent contractors more rights is welcome, it is not enough. "Employee-like" platform workers still do not have all the rights and minimum standards that employees have. For example, the Fair Work Commission cannot set orders and guidelines regarding overtime rates and rostering arrangements of "employee-like" workers.[48] Further measures under discussion to regulate insecure work are vital to ensure all workers who want secure work have access to it, and universal 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.

Raise the rate of income support payments

Australia's social security system is built on the assumption that most people can find work, with payments designed to support temporary unemployment while encouraging re-entry into the workforce. However, for the past nine years, Anglicare Australia's Jobs Availability Snapshot has shown that the number of people facing barriers to work far exceeds the number of entry-level jobs. As a result, many people are trapped in a social security system that punishes them for circumstances beyond their control, such as limited job opportunities and an employment services system that is failing them.

The current JobSeeker rate is insufficient to provide the security and stability people need while searching for work. Anglicare Australia's Cost of Living Index demonstrates that it is impossible for a

single person to live on the JobSeeker payment. After covering basic living costs, a single person on JobSeeker would fall behind by $331 a week.[49] Even if they were to live in a sharehouse, they would be short of $69 each week.[50] This is important to note as the largest cohort of people on the JobSeeker payment are over the age of 45, and may find it difficult to access and live in shared accommodation.

Expecting individuals to bear the repercussions of this structural failure is unjust. Most Australians agree that no one should live in poverty, and there is widespread recognition that the current JobSeeker payment is too low.[51] The inadequacy of JobSeeker payments is not only recognised by the general public but also in government-commissioned reviews, which consistently conclude that current JobSeeker payment rates fall well below all established poverty lines used in Australia. Depending on the poverty line used, the payment amounts to just 57-72 percent of the poverty line.[52]

Poverty scars people. The Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre's Child Poverty in Australia 2024 report compared the life outcomes of young people who grew up in poverty to those that did not. In doing so it revealed that people who grew up in poverty were up to 11 percent less likely to secure future employment and up to eight percent more likely to remain in poverty as an adult compared to their peers who did not grow up in poverty.[53] They were also more likely to experience long-term mental ill-health, such as nervousness or unhappiness, for up to ten years after leaving home.[54] This demonstrates the scale of economic return from raising income support payments above the poverty line, as well as the intangible positive social, psychological and health benefits from doing so.

While Government's may be concerned that higher payments could discourage work, the Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee (EIAC) assessed that the negative impact on employment would be minimal. Even with an increase to 90 percent of the Age Pension, JobSeeker recipients would still earn less than 97.5 percent of employed Australians.[55] The financial incentive to seek employment would remain strong, alongside the non-financial benefits of work, such as social inclusion and personal fulfilment.

Past policy decisions show that raising government support payments can effectively eliminate poverty. For example, increases to family assistance payments under the Hawke government resulted in a 30 percent reduction in child poverty. This progress was unfortunately reversed under subsequent governments. Similarly, for a short time in 2020, JobSeeker payments were doubled through the Coronavirus Supplement. Almost immediately, poverty among people on JobSeeker payment fell by 80 percent, from 76 percent in 2019 to 15 percent in June 2020.[56] Research, including by Anglicare Australia, has documented the profound impact this had on poverty levels and on people's lives. People were able to afford fresh food, fill their prescriptions, pay their bills on time, and secure decent homes.

By ignoring expert recommendations and failing to raise JobSeeker payments, the government is neglecting its responsibility to provide for its people. Raising payments above the poverty line is both a financial necessity and a moral imperative. An immediate increase in income support, above all poverty lines used in Australia, would ensure no one is left to bear the financial consequences of the systemic failure of the labour market.

Lower the assets test thresholds

Current rates of income support in Australia are widely acknowledged to be below the poverty line. However, less attention has been given to the way the social security system forces people on the lowest incomes to deplete their savings and sell assets just to access support.

To qualify for income support, people must navigate several waiting periods imposed by Services Australia, including the ordinary waiting period, income maintenance waiting period, and the liquid assets waiting period.[57] These delays mean that people with modest savings are forced to spend them down, leaving them without a financial buffer and compromising their long-term economic security. Additionally, new Australian permanent residents must serve a four-year waiting period before they are eligible for the JobSeeker Payment.[58]

These policies ignore the inherent vulnerability of all those who qualify for income support benefits. Over the long term, this system entrenches poverty and disadvantage. Older workers who have lost work make up the largest cohort of people on JobSeeker payments and this system forces them to exhaust any retirement savings before they can get access to payments. It's particularly tenuous for older women who have found themselves out of work. Many older women are already in difficult situations with little superannuation and insecure accommodation. These challenges are often due to career interruptions caused by caregiving responsibilities. Many women would have also been financially set back by the gender pay gap favouring men. Data from the Workplace Gender Equality Agency Australia shows that the gender pay gap peaks at 31.9 percent for employees aged 45-64.[59] If they lose work close to retirement age, they will lose a badly needed financial buffer at a time they need it most.

Anglicare Australia recommends amending the Social Security Act to abolish both the Liquid Assets Waiting Period and Ordinary Waiting Period, and to reduce the newly arrived resident's waiting period. These changes would help protect the financial security of already disadvantaged people.

Conclusion

Once again, Anglicare Australia's Jobs Availability Snapshot shows that for people with barriers to work, there simply aren't enough job vacancies.

After nine years of the Snapshot producing consistent results, it is clear that Australians are not given equal opportunities for employment. There is no truth to the underlying belief among governments that anyone who wants a job can get one. However there is an urgent need for the government to act on ensuring our labour market has jobs for the people who need them.

Not only can we improve outcomes for people with barriers to work by giving them secure work and opportunities for development, but we can also improve outcomes for the country. Providing opportunity for those with barriers to work can improve financial security, in turn decreasing poverty and helping build a prosperous Australia.

This change is needed from multiple fronts. The Federal Government should reform employment services, shifting away from a system that subjects people to meaningless cycles of mutual obligations that do not lead to real job prospects. Instead we need to build a system that actually helps people find the work they want. This must be done alongside investment in direct job creation to address the root cause of the problem; that is, a dearth of entry-level jobs.

Every step must be taken to ensure the very system that is meant to support people in times of need, doesn't itself become a barrier to work. There is an urgent need to raise the rate of income support payments, including the JobSeeker payment, over the poverty line. Until this issue is addressed, people would not have the resources, time and mental energy needed to secure employment.

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