

Fewer PALM workers seeking asylum

by Stephen Howes and Finn Clarke

24 April 2026



Screenshot from the Department of Home Affairs' protection visa campaign

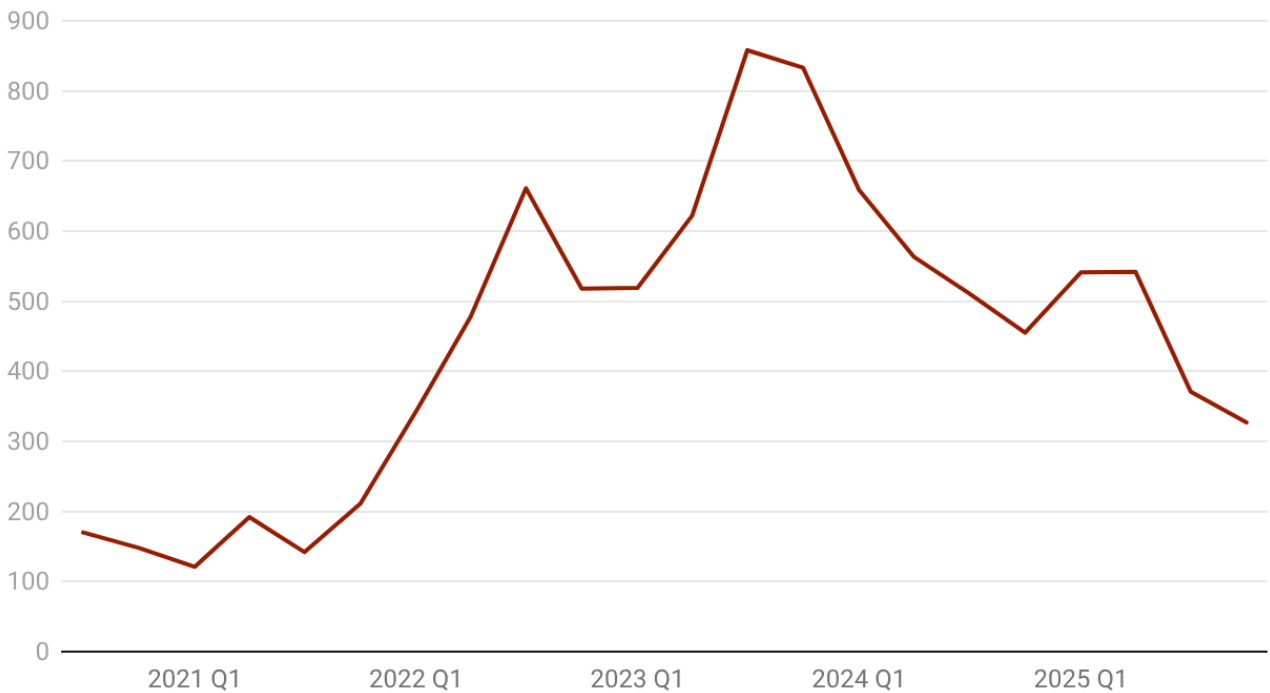
Photo Credit: [Facebook](#)

We have been writing about the growing number of Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme workers [since 2022](#), with the most recent update [in 2024](#). Now we have some good news: while asylum seeking among PALM workers is still a serious problem, the number has fallen substantially over the last couple of years.

Over the decade prior to the pandemic, there was an [escalation in the number of visitors](#) to Australia (from all around the world, not just the Pacific) lodging bogus claims for protection in order to gain unrestricted work rights and access to Medicare for several years while their claims were being assessed and appealed. That phenomenon continues to this day, with almost 2,000 onshore protection claims being made every month [according to the most recent data](#) (again, this is from all countries, not just the Pacific). To be sure, some claims are valid and upheld, but the great majority are rejected. Rejections can be appealed, however, and a protection bridging visa can easily turn into a multi-year work visa.

The same practice of applying for protection visas [took off during the pandemic among PALM workers](#), as both the number of such workers in Australia and the length of time they were in-country increased. The number of PALM workers claiming asylum peaked at almost 900 in the third quarter of 2023, but has since fallen, to just 300 in the last quarter of 2025. That is still much higher than the 100 or 200 per quarter in 2020, but certainly a big improvement relative to the 2023 peak.

Figure 1: Number of onshore protection visas lodged by PALM workers (2020 Q3 to 2025 Q4)



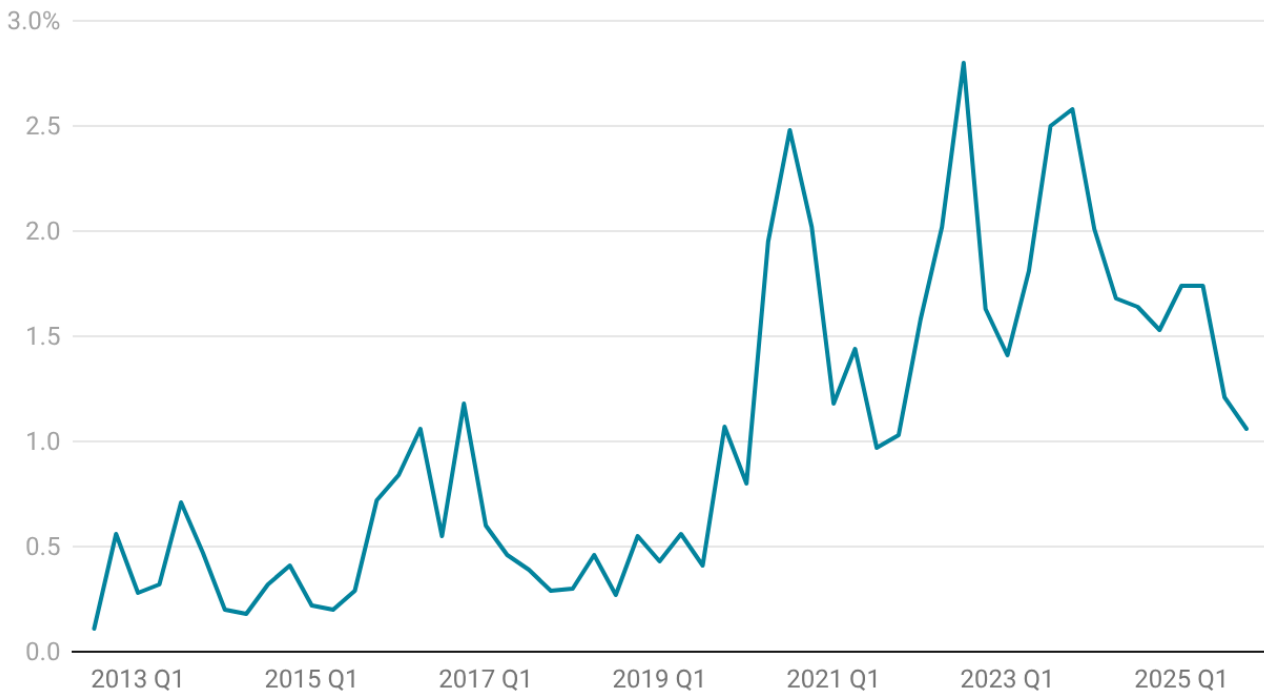
Values masked as '<5' have been converted to '2'. This is necessary for our analysis and could be a small source of error. We also assume that all subclass 403 visa holders from PALM-sending countries are PALM workers.

Source: Department of Home Affairs data released to Devpolicy • Created with Datawrapper

[View interactive chart](#)

The number of claims is still well above the pre-COVID levels. The next figure gives a longer-term perspective. Up until COVID, in most quarters around 0.5% of PALM workers in Australia applied for protection. That share went as high as 2% or even 2.8% between 2020 and 2023. It has fallen sharply in the last couple of years, but it still remains just above 1%.

Figure 2: Share of PALM scheme cohort that applied for protection visa (2012 Q3 to 2025 Q4)



Source and notes: Department of Home Affairs data released to Devpolicy and PALM scheme official statistics ; Data up to 2023 Q1 is based on this blog (Figure 2) and on all temporary workers from PALM-sending countries, so could include a small number of non-PALM asylum applications. Quarterly PALM scheme size calculated by averaging the relevant monthly figures. Q2 2023 is based on June 2023 data only.

Created with Datawrapper

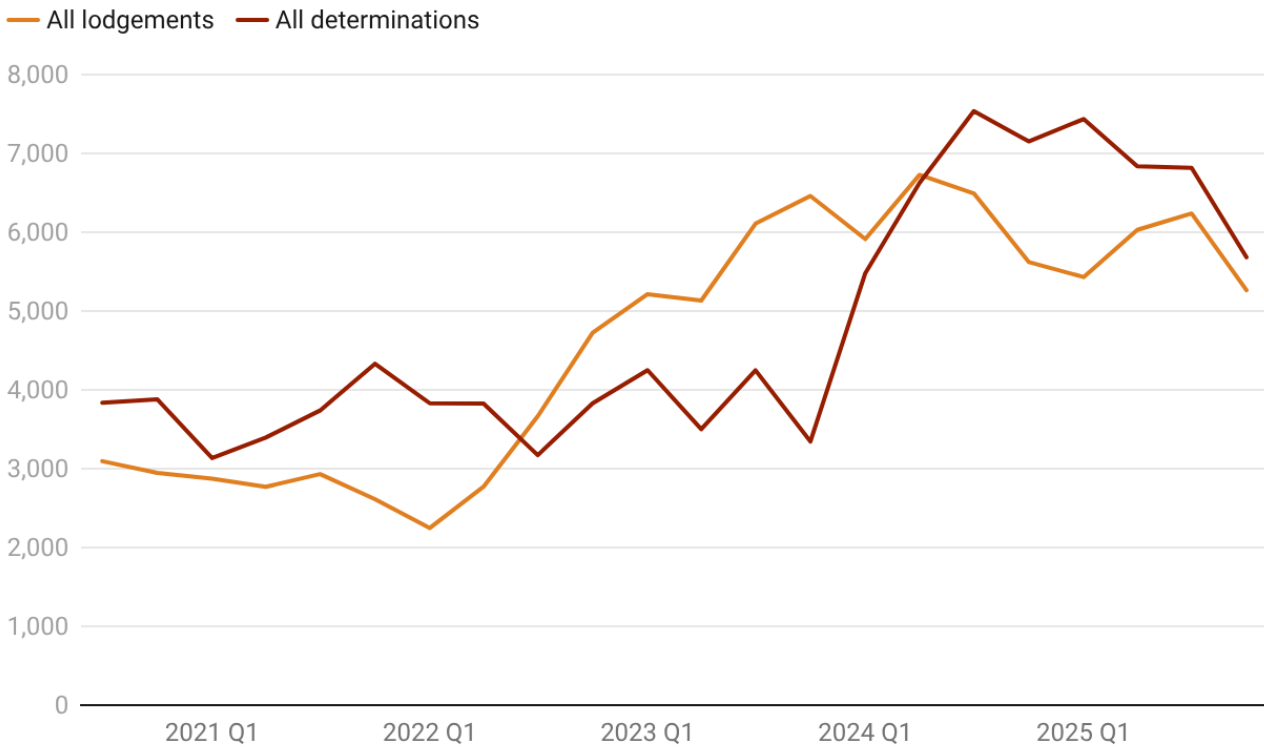
[View interactive chart](#)

The cohort of PALM workers has been virtually unchanged over this time, with 29,955 in Australia at the end of 2022 and 28,535 at the end of 2025. So the drop in protection visa lodgements has not been caused by a change in the size of the PALM scheme. Rather there are a range of possible explanations.

First, if someone is submitting a bogus protection claim, the value of the bridging visa they are given is dependent on the length of time they hold it until it is rejected. As a result of a government **funding package** announced in October 2023, the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) has accelerated its processing times for the assessment of all protection claims in the last two years. DHA increased its number of determinations by 80% from 2021-23 to 2024-25, and, since the second quarter of 2024, determinations have exceeded lodgements.

From the graph below, it is not clear what impact this had. The total number of lodgements (from all countries) is still in excess of 5,000 a quarter. One significant problem is that a departmental rejection can be, and often is, appealed — and waiting lists at the Administrative Review Tribunal **remain extremely long**.

Figure 3: All protection visa lodgements and determinations (2020 Q3 to 2025 Q4)



Source: Humanitarian program statistics, Department of Home Affairs

Created with Datawrapper

[View interactive chart](#)

There was an even bigger increase over the same period (106%) in the number of determinations relating to PALM-country citizens (the great majority of whom are PALM workers). The number of PALM workers awaiting a departmental decision on their protection claim has been much reduced, from 300 at the end of 2022 to just 50 at the end of 2025. It is plausible that this has had a strong discouragement effect.

Second, the Department of Home Affairs has run a publicity campaign over the last couple of years to “[change the conversation](#)” about protection visas, essentially to discourage people from applying for them in order to work. This message has been shared through [social media](#) and [industry groups](#), as well as in-person [community events](#).

A similar anti-absconding campaign run by DFAT [was launched in 2021](#), but seemed to have little impact on reducing protection visa lodgements. However, perhaps this one has had more impact, especially with [sending-country governments joining in](#).

Third, the [2023 reforms to the PALM scheme](#), which regulated the scheme more

tightly and gave greater protections to PALM workers, might have helped. The fall in PALM workers applying for protection is consistent with a fall in the number of PALM workers leaving their employers. According to [Peter Mares's recent PALM report](#) (p. 48), this was as high as 10% in 2020-1, but only 3% in 2024-25.

Fourth, PALM workers can now apply for a [Pacific Engagement Visa](#), but not if they are on a [Bridging Visa E](#) (subclass 051), the bridging visa given to asylum applicants.

Finally, there is just the passage of time. The rapid rise in the number of protection claims coincided with the pandemic. With PALM workers in Australia for longer when borders were closed, there was more opportunity for word to get round that a protection visa could be applied for, and for unscrupulous agents to help (and charge) PALM workers to submit an application. Some PALM workers struggled financially during the pandemic but couldn't go home, and so had an incentive to change their visa status. And some didn't want to go home at the end of the pandemic, and saw a protection visa as a way of further extending the stay.

In summary, there is no single factor clearly driving the fall in PALM workers claiming protection. Rather, there are probably multiple reasons. (Another one, not explored here, could be changes in sending-country composition.) In any case, continued high levels of disengagement and large volumes of applications for protection visas were an existential risk to the PALM program. Those risks are now reduced, but have not disappeared. According to the latest data, and as shown in Figure 2, more than 1% of PALM workers in the country are still submitting protection claims each quarter. 10% of all protection applications worldwide come from PALM-sending countries, and 8% from PALM workers. The number of protection claims being made by PALM workers will need to fall further before victory can be declared.

Disclosures:

This research was supported by the [Pacific Research Program](#), with funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The views are those of the authors only.

Author/s:

Stephen Howes

Stephen Howes is Director of the Development Policy Centre and Professor of Economics at the Crawford School of Public Policy at The Australian National University.

Finn Clarke

Finn Clarke is a research officer at the Development Policy Centre.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/fewer-palm-workers-seeking-asylum/>