

How many PALM workers are in Australia?

by Stephen Howes

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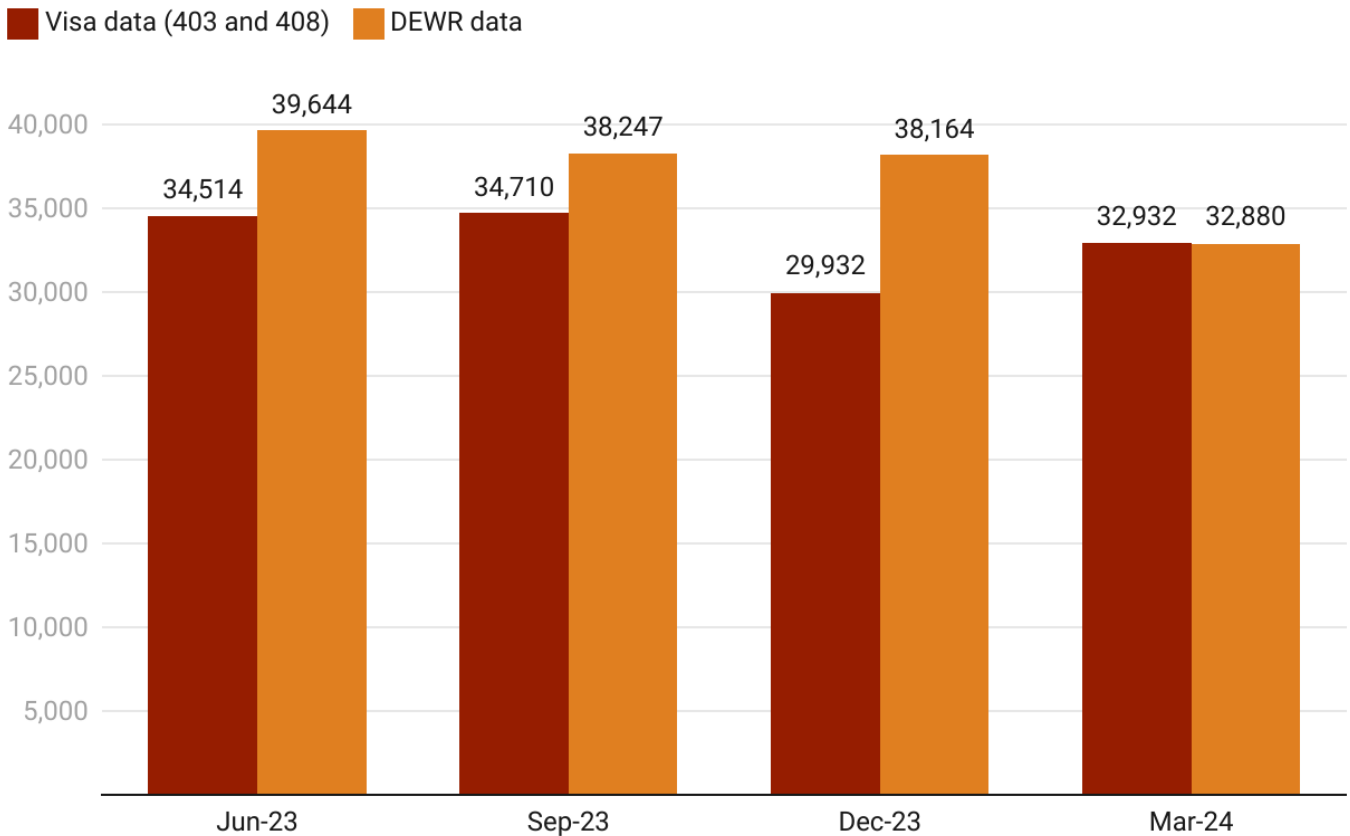
Department of Employment and Workplace Relations Secretary Natalie James, Senate Estimates, 3 June 2024

Photo Credit: [ParlView](#)

A few months ago we noticed a large discrepancy between the number of Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme (PALM) workers reported by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) and the number of PALM workers in country according to visa data from the Department of Home Affairs, with the latter number being significantly lower. And now DEWR Secretary Natalie James has admitted, in her opening statement to [Senate Estimates \(3 June\)](#), to an “incorrect calculation of worker data”. Further questioning revealed that the number of PALM workers had been overestimated by about 5,000.

The graph below compares visa data with data DEWR (which has responsibility for PALM) has been reporting. The March 2024 figure is the number revealed at Senate Estimates and vouched for by the Department. The other DEWR figures, [released earlier](#), have now been labelled by the Department as incorrect. Prior to March 2024, the visa data consistently indicate significantly fewer PALM workers: the average gap prior to March is 5,633.

Figure 1: PALM workers in Australia: visa v DEWR data



Source: Visa data from DHA download "Temporary entrants visa holders pivot table", 30 April 2024. 403 (PALM) and 408 (COVID) visas from the PALM-sending countries are included, as well as a small number on the older SWP and PLS visas (now rolled into PALM). DEWR data from this blog. • Created with Datawrapper

The visa data are not perfect. Some PALM visa holders have absconded. If their visa has not been cancelled, they will still be counted. A few multi-year PALM workers will, at any time, be out of Australia, on holiday or due to a family emergency.

There are also 10,000 **bridging visa** holders from the Pacific countries — these are people in Australia seeking to move to a visa type that will allow them to remain. This is a surprisingly large number, but it is about the number from these countries that have applied for asylum since November 2019, when **monthly data was first made available**. However, I have heard from some employers that some PALM workers have reportedly moved from the 408 visa (issued to prolong their stay during the COVID period) to a bridging visa. If true, this is a further complication.

These caveats notwithstanding, the visa data are the best we have, and DEWR's new, corrected number for March is itself only a tiny fraction (0.2%) off the visa number. That's not surprising: what better data source can there be than visas to work out how many people are in Australia on a particular visa?

Here is what the visa data show about the growth of the PALM scheme over the

COVID period. It has certainly been impressive, but that growth is clearly over, at least for now.

Figure 2: Visa data on PALM workers over time



Source: See previous graph. • Created with Datawrapper

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/how-many-palm-workers-are-in-australia/>