

# PALM hours

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PALM workers in Tasmania in March 2023  
Photo Credit: [Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme/Facebook](#)

[ABC Rural](#) recently reported that Linx Employment had agreed with the Department of Employment and Work Relations to leave the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme amid a worker mistreatment investigation affecting over 200 workers in Tasmania and Queensland. The allegation is that the firm “failed to provide workers with their legally contracted 30 hours per week”.

There is some confusion about the recent changes regarding minimum hours ([see the guidelines](#) for more details), so it’s worth summarising them here:

- From now until 31 December 2023, short-stay PALM workers (formerly Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) workers) must be offered at least 30 hours per week averaged over their full placement.
- From January to June 2024, short-stay PALM workers must be offered at least 30 hours per week averaged over each four-week period, during their placement.
- From July 2024, short-stay PALM workers must be offered at least 30 hours per week, every week, during their placement.
- Long-stay PALM workers (formerly Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) workers) must be offered full-time hours, and transition recruitments have until 1 October 2023 to do this.

This blog answers a simple question: how many hours does the average PALM worker get?

PALM workers work an average of 44.5 hours per week, well above the minimum 30 hours required. The median worker gets 40 hours per week in an average week. These numbers are based on the 1,407 PALM workers who were asked in the [Pacific Labour Mobility Survey](#), “In the last 7 days, how many hours did you work?”

The full distribution of responses is plotted in Figure 1. The vertical axis is the proportion of respondents and the horizontal axis hours worked. As you move along

the line, the graph tells you what proportion of workers reported working at least that many hours in the week before being surveyed. For example, the 40-hour point corresponds to the 50% (that is, the median) mark on the vertical axis. Less than 10% of surveyed workers reported working more than 60 hours, and about as many reported fewer than 30 hours. The spread here is the range you would expect since this question does not factor in whether people were sick or injured that week, whether mobility restrictions were in place, the season, or what part of the scheme people are in.

**Figure 1: PALM workers' weekly hours**

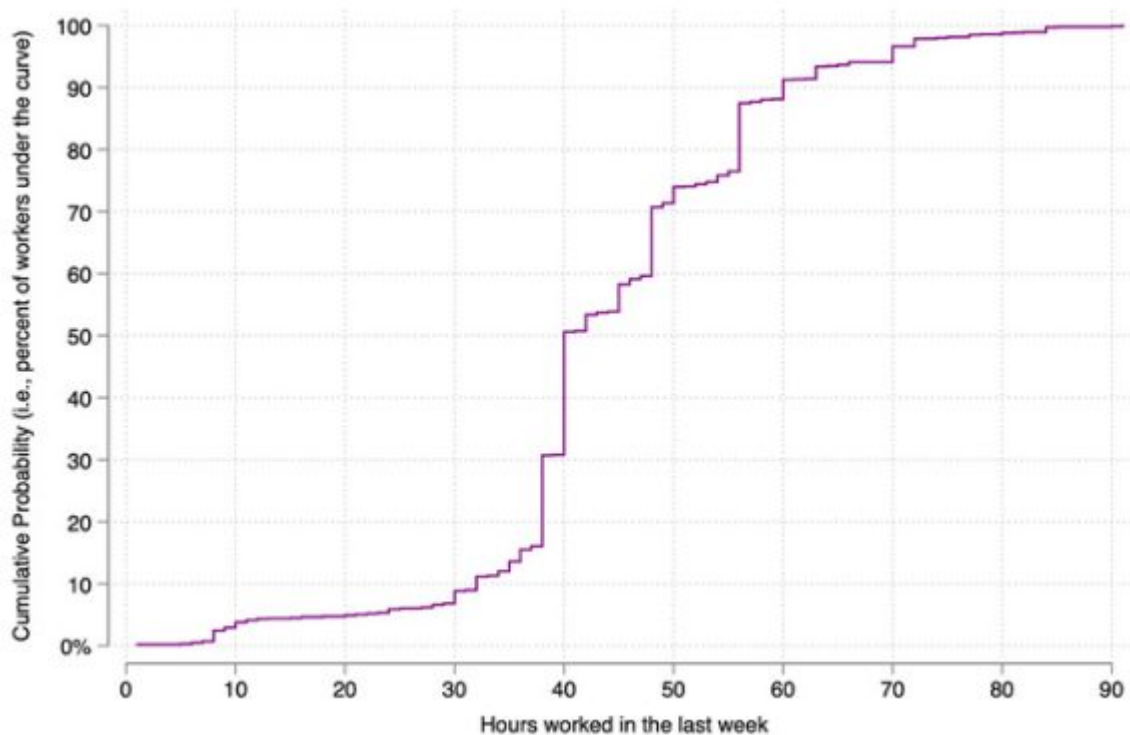


Figure 2 shows the full distribution of hours for short- (SWP) and long-stay (PLS) PALM workers separately. Notice three things. One, the mass of workers around the full-time week for the PLS, as you would expect since they are on full-time contracts. Two, to the right of this mass you see that SWP workers tend to work longer weeks than their PLS counterparts. Three, they are of similar shape on the bottom (left-hand side) end of the distribution: seasonal workers are only slightly more likely than full-time PLS workers to be getting a small number of hours in a representative week.

**Figure 2: Weekly hours, SWP vs PLS**

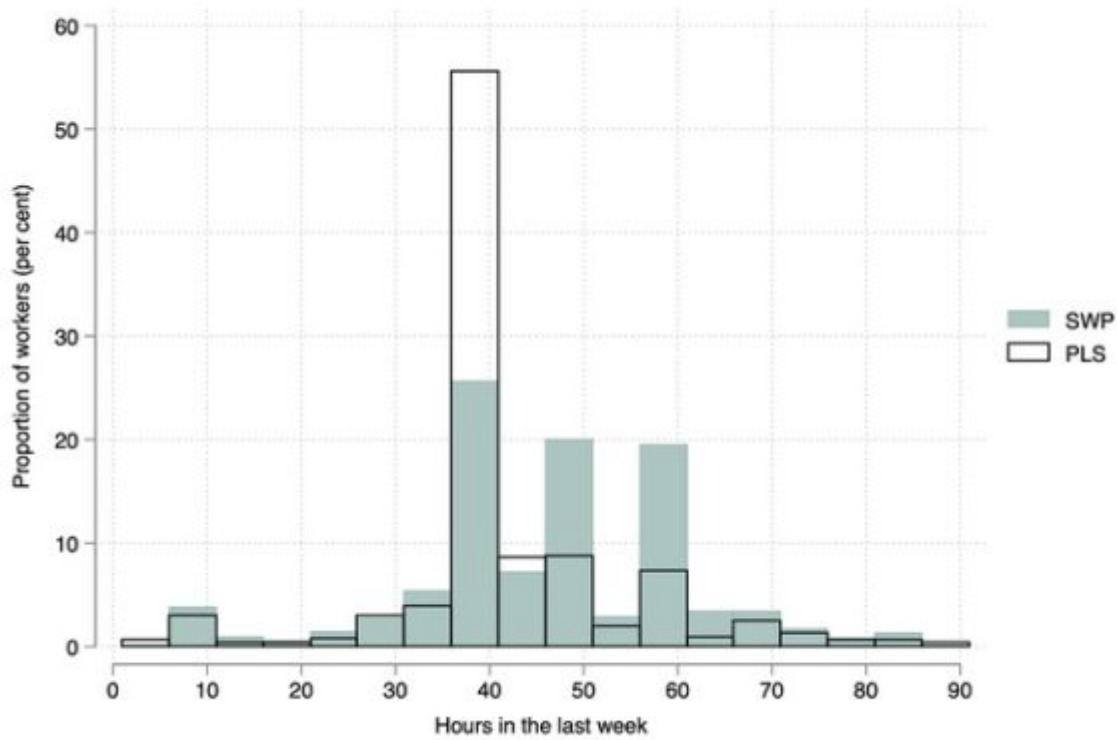
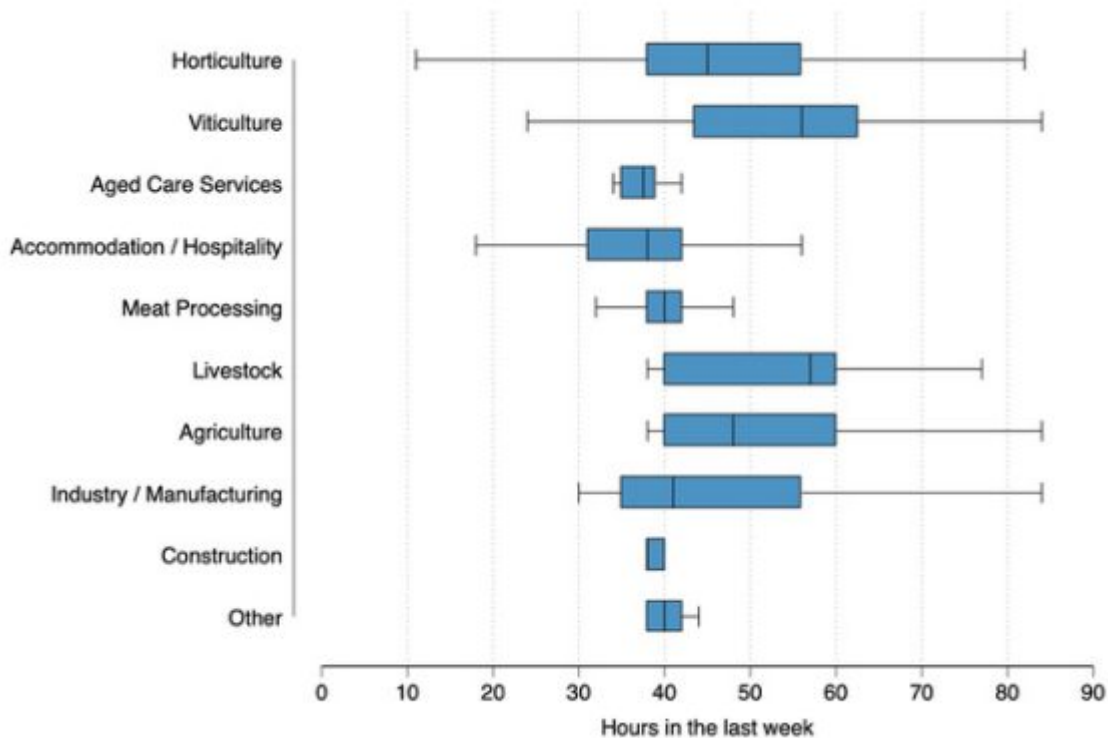


Figure 3 disaggregates the data by sector. The left and right sides of the boxes are the 25th and 75th percentiles. Key PLS sectors like meat processing and aged care are tightly centred on a full-time week. Ranges are larger in seasonal sectors. In every sector, over 75% of workers got more than 30 hours per week the week before they were surveyed.

**Figure 3: Weekly hours by sector**

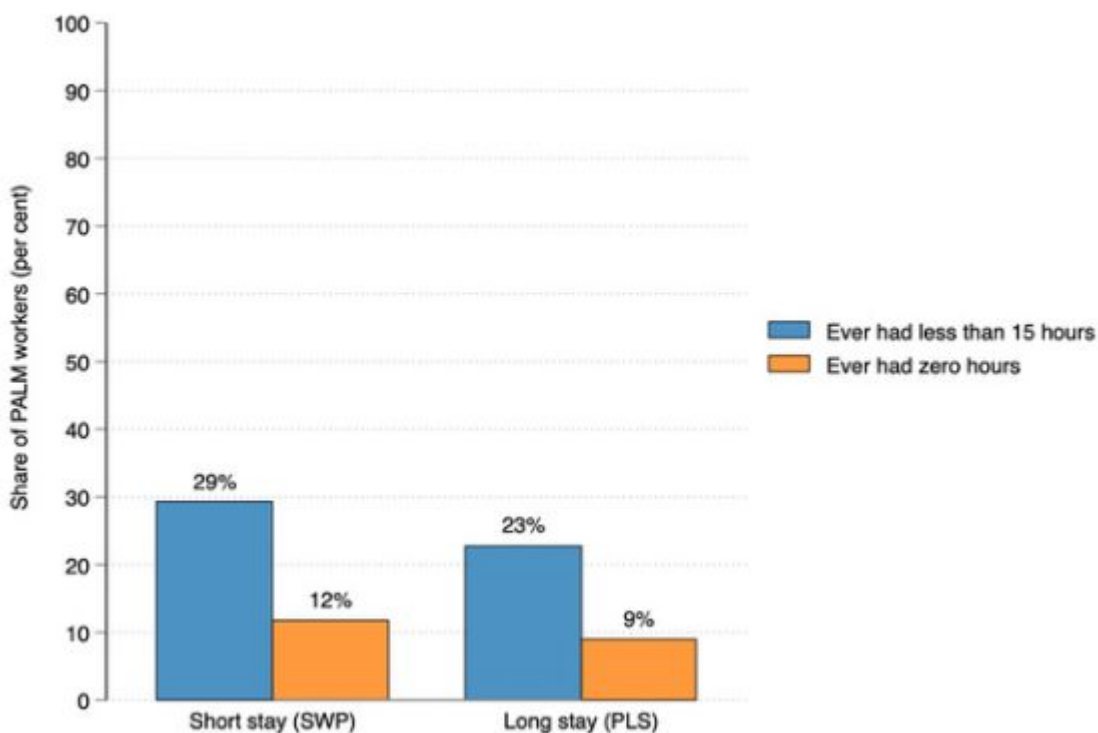


To examine the possibility of a lack of hours more explicitly, we also asked workers “While in [host country] this trip, have you ever received less than 15 hours work in a week not by choice?” and “While in [host country] this trip, have you ever received zero hours work in a week not by choice?”

Under the prior arrangements for short-stay workers, the answer to these questions should be “Yes” for some workers some of the time. However, the frequency and extent are important, especially if workers have limited ability to smooth their expenditures.

Figure 4 plots the responses. Long-stay PLS workers provide an important baseline here. Since they are on full-time contracts, the levels for PLS workers are what you would expect the proportion of workers receiving zero or less than 15 hours to be in a situation of full-time employment or with less seasonality (that is, a natural rate that might be attributable to illness, COVID-19, or other things, such that comparing the short-stay seasonal workers to this level gives a crude picture of how much more prevalent these episodes are for the more volatile sectors). Almost a third of SWP workers had at least one week with less than 15 hours of work, compared to almost a quarter of long-stay PLS workers. SWP workers are 6 percentage points more likely to ever have a week with just 15 hours than their long-stay PLS counterparts, and only 3 percentage points more likely to report ever receiving zero hours.

**Figure 4: Share of workers who ever had low hours**



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Employers who recruited seasonal workers before the recent changes will still have some workers who at some point in time receive fewer hours than the new arrangements allow, since they planned their workforces based on the old arrangements. However, during this period, most PALM workers received more than – many double, in fact – the minimum 30 hours per week.

The new arrangements shift the risk of low workloads from migrant workers to employers. This will likely affect hiring decisions, especially in highly seasonal sectors as PALM becomes a less seasonal worker program.

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/palm-hours-20230810/>