



Migrant Key Workers and the Impact of Covid-19 on Mobility in Australia

Africa and the Middle East Briefing

Summary

- Healthcare and social assistance was the largest sector of employment for African and Middle Eastern migrants in 2021.
- 46% of African-born migrant workers and 47% of those born in the Middle East were key workers during the Covid-19 pandemic, in comparison to 40% of the Australian-born workforce.
- The number of temporary visa holders from Africa and the Middle East decreased by 32% from 79,940 visa holders in December 2019 to 54,588 in December 2021. As of September 2022, the number of temporary visa holders has recovered to just 7% below the pre-pandemic peak.

The Covid-19 pandemic reshaped global migration flows and the positions of migrants in Australian society (Guan, O'Donnell and Raymer 2024). As key workers in healthcare, agriculture and food services, migrants were essential to the national response to Covid-19 in Australia. At the same time, the economic shocks of the pandemic had significant impacts on migrants in a range of economic sectors and occupation. Undertaken during the disruptions of state lockdowns, the 2021 Census provides a unique dataset on the distribution of African and Middle Eastern migrants across the economy during the employment shocks of the pandemic and before the 2022 recovery of the labour market.

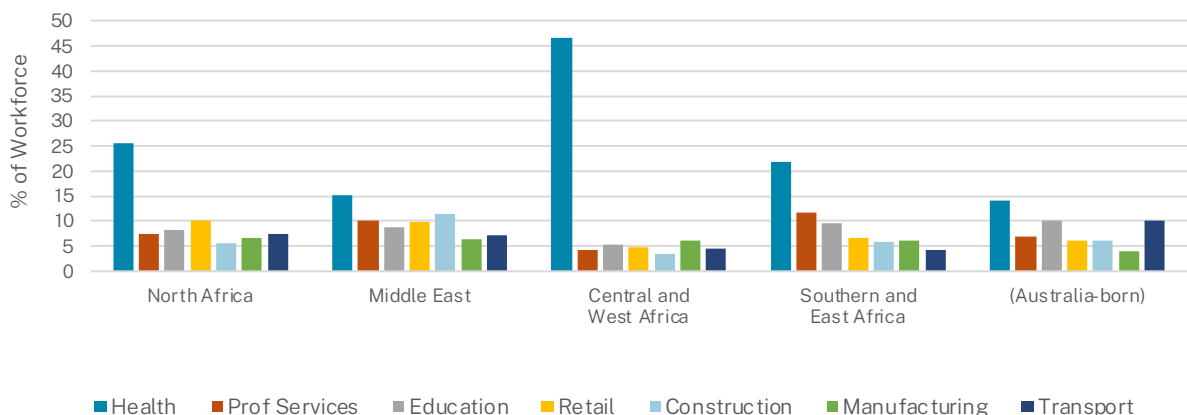
Impact of Covid-19 by Industry

The health care and social assistance sector was the largest industry of employment identified in the census by migrants from Africa and the Middle East. Almost half (47%) of all workers born in Central and West Africa were working in health sector. A quarter (26%) of North African-born workers and a fifth (22%) of Southern and East African-born workers were employed in health.

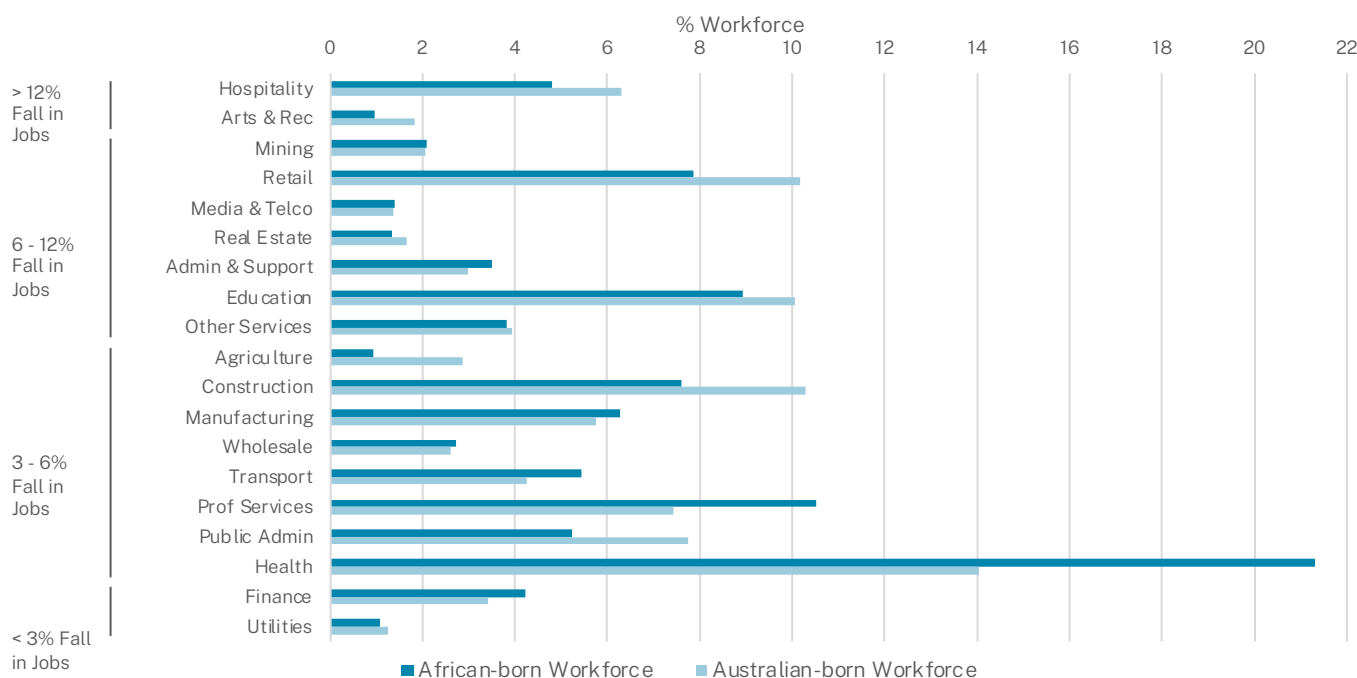
Migrants from North Africa also worked in retail (10%), education (8%), and professional services (7%). These sectors were also the focus for almost a third (29%) of Middle Eastern-born workers and Southern and East African-born workers.

Six of Australia's employment sectors, including health, professional services, education, retail,

Leading Industries of Employment by Region of Birth, 2021



Impact of Covid-19 and proportion of population employed across Australian industries, 2021



construction, manufacturing and transport, were expected to recover strongly following the pandemic (Wood 2021). While 56% of the Australian-born workforce are employed in these industries, 60% of African-born workers and 55 of Middle Eastern-born workers are.

Industries expected to have moderate post-pandemic recovery employed 23% of African migrant workers and 25% of Middle Eastern workers, similar to their share of 22% of Australian-born workforce. Notably, a higher percentage of African migrants are employed in the professional services industry.

Three sectors projected as having weaker employment growth are manufacturing, mining and construction. African-born workers participation in these industries parallels the rates of Australian-born workers.

Gender and the Covid-19 Crisis

At the national level, female-dominated economic sectors, including retail, hospitality, education and health and social assistance industries, were the most negatively impacted by the pandemic. Women workers were also more exposed than their male counterparts to casual or precarious employment and a greater burden of unpaid care during the pandemic (Wood 2021).

Health is the leading sector for women’s employment in the Australian economy. The sex ratio of the Australian-born health workforce is 25 men per 100 women. With

its over-representation in the health care workforce, migrants from Central and West Africa have one of the more balanced sex ratios in the sector with 71 men per 100 women. North African-born health workers have a sex ratio of 56 men per 100 women and from the Middle East there are 46 men per 100 women in the sector. Southern and East African-born health workers are closer to gender imbalance in the Australian-born health workforce with 37 men per 100 women. Given that healthcare workers constituted a large proportion of Australia’s key workers during the pandemic, African-born women were disproportionately employed on the frontlines of the pandemic.

Professional services, construction, manufacturing and the transport industry each have more African-born men employed than women, to parallel the sex ratios of their Australian-born workforce.

Migrant Key Workers

The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in countries identifying a range of occupations as key workers that were essential to their societies. Based on European Commission guidelines, researchers defined 17 occupation groups as key workers which enabled comparison across the OECD (Fasani & Mazza 2020). Covering a range of skills and sectors these included cleaners, teaching professionals, personal care workers, agricultural workers, transport workers, ICT professionals and engineers.

Categorising Key Workers in Australia

Applying Fasani & Mazza (2020) to ABS (2022b)

Health Professionals
Health and Welfare Support Workers
Carers and Aides
Farmers and Farm Managers
Food Trades Workers
Farm, Forestry and Garden Workers
Food Preparation Assistants
Skilled Animal and Horticultural Workers
Road and Rail Drivers
Mobile Plant Operators
Design, Engineering, Science & Transport Professionals
ICT Professionals
Engineering, ICT and Science Technicians
Education Professionals
Construction Trades Workers
Construction and Mining Labourers
Machinery Operators and Drivers
Machine and Stationary Plant Operators
Cleaners and Laundry Workers

During the pandemic, policy makers focussed on key workers in the health, food, transport and technology industries. One third (36%) of Australia's key workers in 2021 were born overseas. The above occupations represented 40% of employment held by the Australian-born population, 46% of the occupations of the African-born workforce and 47% of the occupations of migrants born in the Middle East. Key workers were two-thirds (66%) of the migrant workers born in Central and West Africa, half (52%) of those born in North Africa (52%), and 42% of those born in Southern and East Africa.

Key Workers by Country of Birth	Health	Food
Australia	11%	6%
Middle East		
Bahrain	14%	2%
Palestine	12%	3%
Iran	15%	2%
Iraq	17%	3%
Israel	10%	4%
Jordan	12%	3%
Kuwait	15%	2%
Lebanon	9%	5%
Oman	17%	3%
Qatar	12%	2%
Saudi Arabia	19%	3%
Syria	14%	6%
Turkey	8%	6%
UAE	12%	3%
Yemen	13%	1%

Key Workers by Country of Birth	Health	Food
Australia	11%	6%
North Africa		
Algeria	15%	5%
Egypt	22%	2%
Libya	18%	4%
Morocco	14%	5%
Sudan	27%	3%
Tunisia	14%	1%
Central and West Africa		
Cameroon	38%	3%
Central Af.Rep.	29%	0%
Rep. Congo	32%	9%
Dem.Rep. Congo	38%	6%
Cote d'Ivoire	31%	3%
Gambia	31%	0%
Ghana	35%	3%
Guinea	41%	4%
Liberia	55%	2%
Nigeria	52%	1%
Senegal	16%	6%
Sierra Leone	51%	2%
Togo	37%	8%
Southern and East Africa		
Angola	17%	2%
Botswana	28%	2%
Burundi	38%	7%
Djibouti	19%	0%
Eritrea	23%	3%
Ethiopia	30%	4%
Kenya	38%	2%
Lesotho	23%	0%
Madagascar	15%	5%
Malawi	23%	1%
Mauritius	14%	5%
Mozambique	13%	2%
Namibia	15%	2%
Reunion	10%	6%
Rwanda	46%	5%
Seychelles	13%	2%
Somalia	31%	2%
South Africa	12%	2%
Eswatini	24%	2%
Tanzania	23%	5%
Uganda	33%	3%
Zambia	22%	2%
Zimbabwe	26%	2%



Health professionals, health and welfare support workers, carers and aides represented 11% of the occupations registered by the Australian-born in the 2021 census. Health-related key workers represented half of the occupations held by migrants from Liberia (55%), Nigeria (52%) and Sierra Leone (51%). For nine other African countries health-related key workers represented at least a third of migrant workforce.

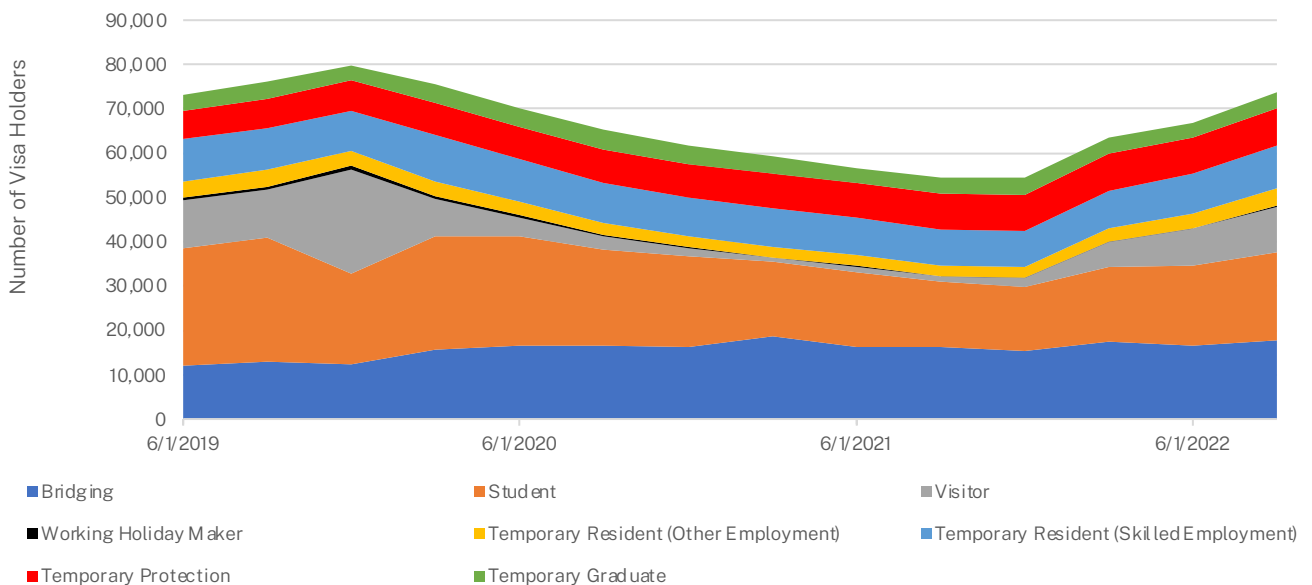
Food-related key workers included farmers, farm managers, food trades workers, farm workers, forestry workers, garden workers, food preparation assistants, skilled animal workers and horticultural workers. These occupations represent 6% of the Australian-born workforce. Migrants from Syria, Turkey and Lebanon each paralleled the native-born level of participation as food-related key workers. Congo, Togo, Burundi, Senegal and Reunion also had a similar share of food-related key workers.

Mobility and Temporary Migration

As the pandemic disrupted global travel, the number of temporary visa holders from Africa and the Middle East in Australia decreased by 32% by December 2021. This was followed by a recovery to only 7% lower than the pre-pandemic peak. Prior to the pandemic, 29% of temporary visas held by people from Africa and the Middle East were Visitor visas, 26% were Student visas and 15% were Bridging visas. During the migration trough, 28% of temporary visas held by people from these regions were Bridging visas, 26% were Student visas, 15% were Temporary Resident (Skilled) visas and 15% were Temporary Protection visas.

Student and Temporary Graduate visas have returned to pre-pandemic levels. As of September 2022, 27% of temporary visas held by African and Middle Eastern migrants were Student visas. Temporary Resident (Skilled Employment) visas held by Africa and the Middle East migrants increased by 20%. Similarly, there were 7% more Temporary Protection Visa holders and 14% more Temporary Resident (Other Employment) Visa holders than prior to the pandemic.

African and Middle Eastern Mobility by Visa Category during the Covid-19 Pandemic, 2019-2022



Sources:

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022a), Census of Population and Housing, 2021; Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022b) ANZSCO - Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations; Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021), “A year of COVID-19 through payroll jobs and wages statistics”; Home Affairs (2022), BP0019 Number of Temporary visa holders in Australia at 2022-09-30; F. Fasani & J. Mazza (2020), “Immigrant key workers: Their contribution to Europe’s COVID-19 response”; A. Gamlen (2020), “Migration and mobility after the 2020 pandemic: The end of an age?”; D. Wood et al. (2021), “Women’s work: The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on Australian women”; Q. Guan, J. O’Donnell and J. Raymer (2024), “Changes in International Migration to and from Australia During the COVID-19 Pandemic”.

Author: Cecily Reid **Design:** Lucinda Antcliff **Editor:** Laurence Brown