



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

### The Americas Briefing

#### Summary

- Health care and social assistance was the largest sector of employment for migrants from the Americas in 2021.
- 45% of migrants born in the Americas were in key worker occupations compared to 40% of the Australian-born workforce.
- The number of temporary visa holders from the Americas decreased by 55% from 170,331 visa holders in December 2019 to 77,419 in December 2021. As of September 2022, the number of temporary visa holders from the Americas was 32% lower than the pre-pandemic peak.

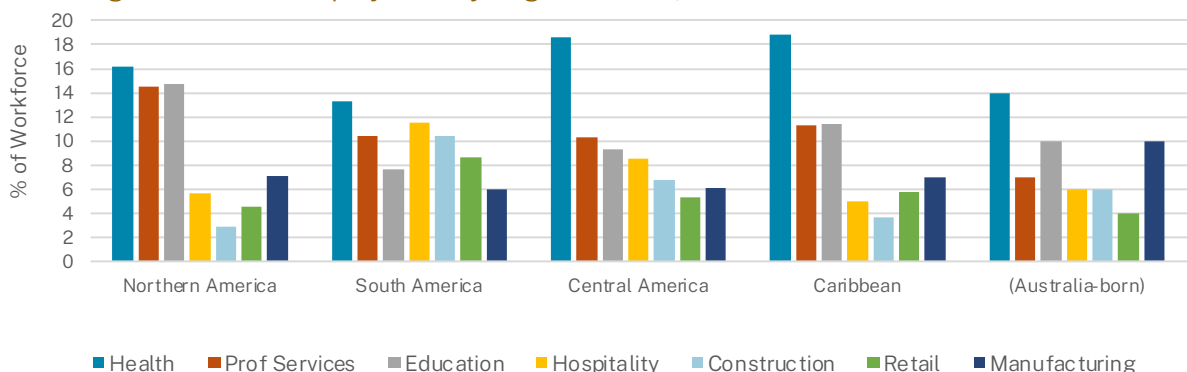
#### Impact of Covid-19 by Industry

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 migrants from the Americas across the economy during the employment shocks of the pandemic and before the 2022 recovery of the labour market.

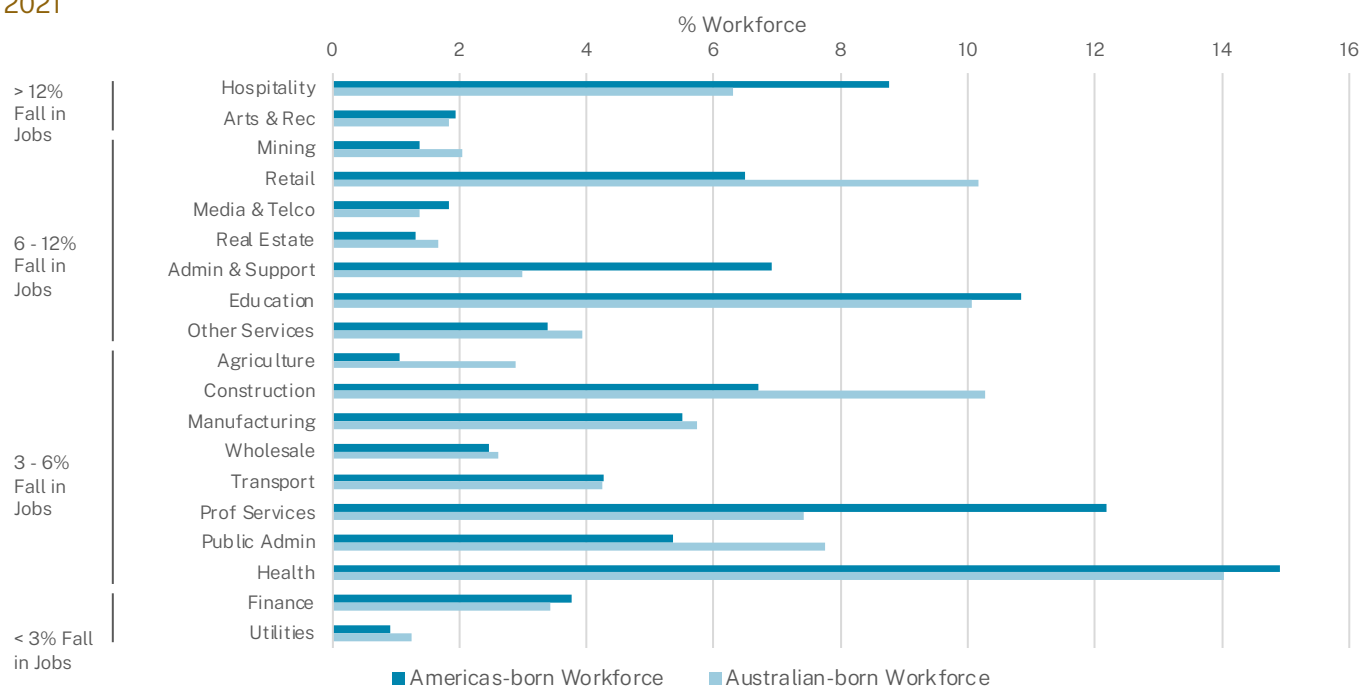
The health care and social assistance sector was the largest industry of employment identified in the census by migrants from the Americas. Almost a fifth (19%) of migrant workers born in Central America and the Caribbean, 16% of Northern American-born migrants, and 13% of South American-born migrants were employed in the health sector.

Other leading sectors of employment for migrants from the Americas were education and professional services. For migrant workers born in Northern America 29% were split between these two sectors, and they represented a fifth of migrant workers born in the Caribbean (22%), Central America (19%) and South America (19%).

Leading Industries of Employment by Region of Birth, 2021



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



Hospitality and construction were also important industries for migrants from South America. A fifth of migrant workers born in South America (20%) were split between the two sectors. Workers employed in hospitality were the most likely to lose work during the first months of the pandemic (ABS 2021). Hospitality was particularly affected by travel restrictions and subsequent state lockdowns.

Six of Australia’s employment sectors, including health, education, professional services, retail, hospitality and public administration, were expected to recover strongly following the pandemic (Wood 2021). While 56% of the Australian-born workforce are employed in these industries, this is paralleled by 59% of workers born in the Americas.

Industries expected to have moderate post-COVID recovery employ 26% of the migrant workers born in the Americas, compared to 22% of Australian-born workers. Notably, a higher percentage of migrants from the Americas are employed in professional services and administrative services.

The professional services sector employs 12% of migrant workers from the Americas, compared to only 7% of the Australian-born workforce. The professional services sector was one of the least impacted by COVID-19 and is expected to see the third-strongest recovery post COVID-19.

Three sectors projected as having weaker employment growth are manufacturing, construction, and mining. Workers born in the Americas are under-represented in each of these industries compared to the Australian-born workforce.

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. For migrant workers from the Americas, the health industry has a similar composition. There are 27 South American-born men per 100 women in the health sector, 32 Central American-born men per 100 women, 40 Northern American-born men per 100 women and 51 Caribbean-born men per 100 women in the sector. Given that healthcare workers constituted a large proportion of Australia’s key workers during the pandemic, migrant women born in the Americas were similar to Australian-born women in their role on the frontlines of the pandemic.

In hospitality, the sex ratio for Australian-born workers is 76 men per 100 women. This compares to 80 men per 100 women for hospitality workers from Northern America, 85 men per 100 women for those from South America and 103 men per 100 women for hospitality workers from Central America.

## 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

Based on these occupation categories, 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 and a similar share (45%) for migrants born in the Americas. Half (50%) of South American-born workers were in the key worker occupations listed above, with 47% of Central American-born, 42% of Caribbean-born and 39% of Northern American-born workers in these essential occupations.

Three groups of key workers that were a focus for Australian policy-makers during the pandemic were health-related occupations, food-related occupations and transport and technology.

Health professionals, health and welfare support workers, carers and aides represented 11% of the occupations registered by the Australian-born in the 2021 census.

Nineteen countries from the Americas had a higher share of health-related key workers than the Australian-born workforce. El Salvador and Nicaragua were over-represented as health-related key workers with 19% of their migrant workforce in health-related occupations.

Key Workers by Country of Birth	Health	Food
<b>Australia</b>	11%	6%
<b>Northern America</b>		
Bermuda	9%	2%
Canada	15%	3%
USA	10%	3%
<b>South America</b>		
Argentina	8%	5%
Bolivia	15%	2%
Brazil	10%	7%
Chile	13%	4%
Colombia	9%	6%
Ecuador	11%	4%
Guyana	16%	0%
Paraguay	14%	2%
Peru	16%	5%
Suriname	17%	0%
Uruguay	12%	2%
Venezuela	9%	5%
<b>Central America</b>		
Costa Rica	12%	4%
El Salvador	18%	3%
Guatemala	17%	4%
Honduras	14%	6%
Mexico	8%	7%
Nicaragua	18%	4%
Panama	8%	2%
<b>Caribbean</b>		
Bahamas	9%	0%
Barbados	14%	1%
Cayman Islands	7%	0%
Cuba	16%	2%
Dominican Republic	11%	5%
Grenada	13%	0%
Haiti	11%	0%
Jamaica	16%	3%
Trinidad and Tobago	17%	2%
Curacao	16%	0%



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. Brazil and Mexico provided 7% of food-related key workers in 2021.

**Mobility and Temporary Migration**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, migration from the Americas declined significantly. From the peak in December 2019 to the trough in December 2021, the number of temporary visa holders from the Americas decreased by more than half (55%) from 170,331 to 77,419. This number recovered to 116,291 in September 2022, but remains 32% lower than the pre-pandemic peak

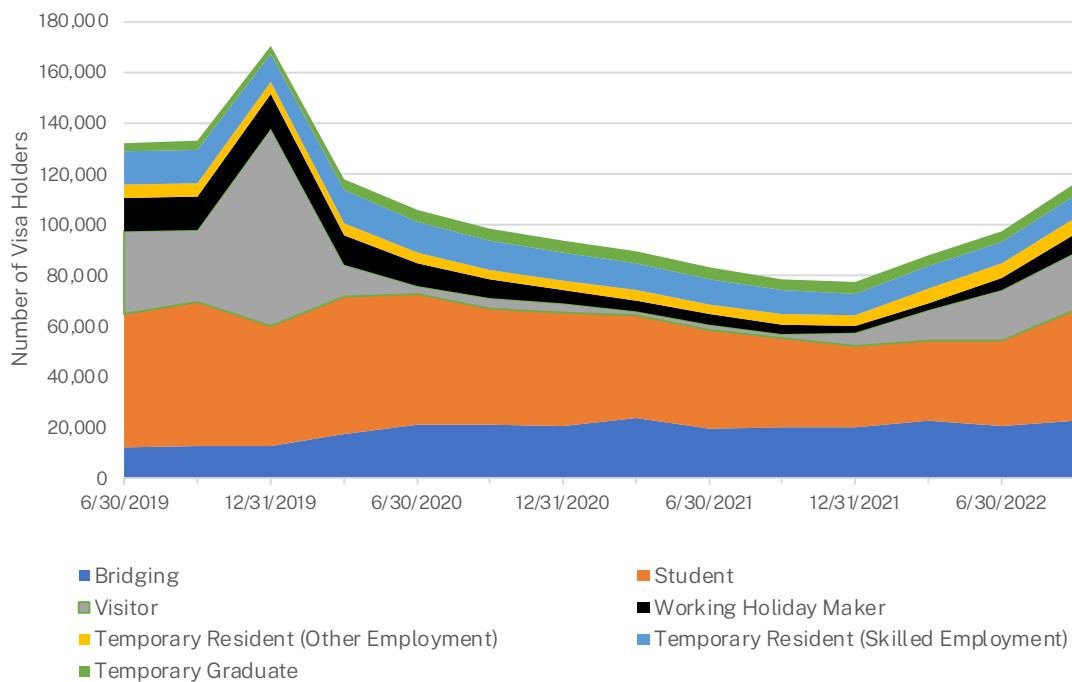
Prior to the pandemic, 46% of temporary visas held by migrants from the Americas were Visitor visas, 28% were Student visas and 8% were Working Holiday Maker

visas. During the migration trough, 41% of temporary visas were Student visas, 26% were Bridging visas and 11% were Temporary Resident (Skilled Employment) visas.

Between March 2020 and March 2022, the number of migrants on Student visas decreased by 42%. As of September 2022, migrants from the Americas held 43,424 Student visas. Similarly, the number of Temporary Resident (Skilled Employment) visa holders in September 2022 was 29% lower than two year earlier.

The number of Bridging visas held by migrants from the Americas increased by a third (36%) between March 2020 and March 2021. Additionally, there were more Temporary Resident (Other Employment) visa holders from the Americas in September 2022 than prior to the pandemic (6,189 compared to 4,747).

Mobility from the Americas by Visa Category during the Covid-19 Pandemic



**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”.

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