

AUSTRALIA'S PANDEMIC RESPONSE AND REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

As we enter the Christmas season, we reflect upon the injustices of forced migration, especially for those seeking refuge on Australian Shores. The journey of Mary, Joseph and the child Jesus into Egypt is a poignant reminder of this. Pope Francis reminds us that in our world today there are many involuntary migrants, displaced persons and refugees:

“Christmas is ever new, because it invites us to be reborn in faith, to open ourselves to hope, to rekindle charity. This year, in particular, we are called to reflect upon the situations of the many men, women and children of our time — migrants, displaced people and refugees — setting out in order to flee from war, from miseries caused by social injustice and by climate change. To leave everything — homes, relatives, homeland — and face the unknown, one must have suffered a very harsh situation!... When Herod’s violent rage fell upon the territory of Bethlehem, the Holy Family of Nazareth experienced the anguish of persecution and, guided by God, took refuge in Egypt. Little Jesus reminds us in this way that half of the displaced people in the world today are children, blameless victims of human injustice.”

REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN 2020

As we reach the end of a challenging year, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) reported the unprecedented and rising number of **80 million** refugees and forcibly displaced persons globally (with millions of unknown others), who have been similarly forced to flee their homelands for fear of their lives, threatened by:

- Religious persecution
- Racial persecution
- Political persecution
- War and conflict
- Environmental disasters
- Climate change



INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS DAY

UN International Migrants Day is held one week before Christmas on December 18. This year's commemorations asked us to remember that migrants have been integral in the fight against COVID-19 through their work in health, transportation and food services. At the same time, migrants have been disproportionately affected by the Pandemic through job losses, evictions and discrimination.

December 18 also marked the 30th anniversary of the 1990 adoption of the UN International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families. Only 55 countries have ratified this UN Convention - Australia is not one of them.

“EVERYONE, INCLUDING ALL MIGRANTS REGARDLESS OF THEIR MIGRATION STATUS, MUST BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF ANY EFFECTIVE PUBLIC HEALTH AND RECOVERY RESPONSE TO COVID-19. INCLUDING MIGRANTS IN THE RESPONSE TO THIS CRISIS IS THE ONLY EFFECTIVE WAY TO PROTECT NOT ONLY MIGRANTS’ RIGHTS, BUT ALSO TO AVOID FUELLING XENOPHOBIA AND ENDANGERING THE HEALTH OF SOCIETY AS A WHOLE.” ~
UN OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER ON HUMAN RIGHTS

AS IF WE WEREN'T HUMANS

The COVID-19 Pandemic has seen mixed reactions from the world’s governments to those seeking refuge and asylum, from humanitarian responses to denials of entry. The report *As if we weren’t humans: The abandonment of temporary migrants in Australia during COVID-19*, gives a glimpse into Australia’s response to temporary migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

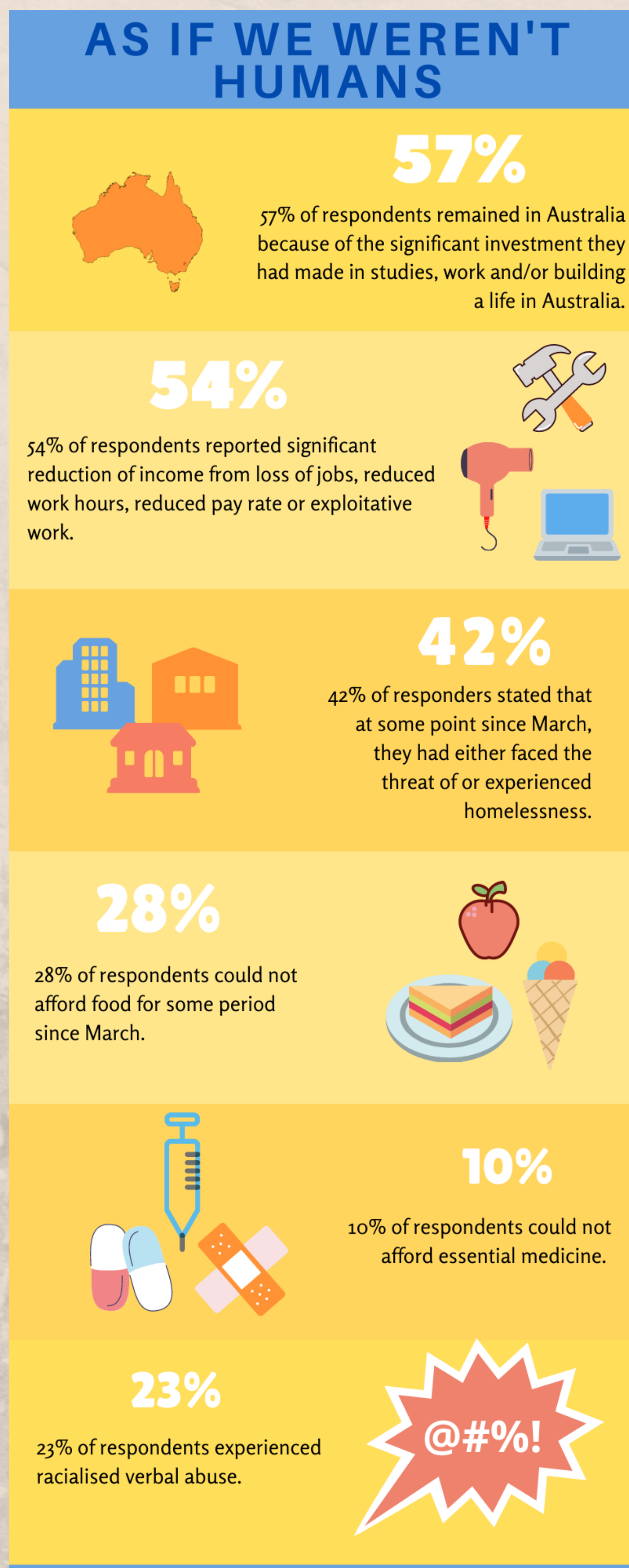
The report, published in September 2020 by the Migrant Worker Justice Initiative, surveyed more than 6,100 of the approximately 2.17 million temporary visa holders across Australia, in July 2020.

On 3 April 2020, shortly after introducing the JobKeeper and JobSeeker support packages from which temporary migrants were excluded, Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced to any international student or Australian Visitor who could not support themselves during the COVID-19 Pandemic, “it is time to make your way home.”

Refugees on permanent visas (granted under the offshore humanitarian program) or asylum seekers who have been granted permanent protection visas, have been able to access the full range of government support packages. Those who cannot access JobKeeper and JobSeeker include:

- Asylum seekers living in the community on bridging visas awaiting processing of their claim
- Refugees who have been granted temporary protection visas
- International Students
- Working Holiday Makers
- Temporary Graduate visa holders
- Temporary Skill Shortage visa holders

The impact has been devastating, with many of those surveyed in *As if we weren't Humans* reporting job loss, homelessness, lack of food, electricity and medical supplies and an upsurge in racialised verbal abuse.





IMMIGRATION DETENTION

According to the Australian Human Rights Commission's recent report *Inspections of Australia's immigration detention facilities 2019*, in 2020 the average period that an individual was held in Australian immigration detention was higher than ever before: 581 days. This represents an increase of 81 days since 2019. Australia's immigration detention population has also increased to over 1,500 people in 2020.

Closed detention facilities, where non-citizens without a valid visa are detained until they are granted a visa or leave the country, have been shown to facilitate the easy spread of COVID-19. This is exacerbated by Australia's immigration detention facilities:

- Operating over their operational capacity
- Having overcrowding in some compounds with dormitory-style accommodation.
- Using communal bedrooms, toilet, and shower facilities.
- Holding in detention individuals with pre-existing conditions that would put them at a higher risk of severe illness if they contracted the virus.
- Having staff able to move through the wider Australian community.

The Australasian Society for Infectious Diseases in March this year urged the Government to:

“Consider the release of detainees into suitable housing in the community if they do not pose a significant security or health risk. As a minimum standard, we would recommend that detainees should be held in single rooms with their own bathroom facilities. While this would not fully address the risk associated with COVID-19, and it certainly would not be as effective as reducing the overall numbers in immigration detention facilities, it would go some way to reducing the risk and could be considered the absolute minimum necessary step.”

ALTERNATIVES TO DETENTION

The Human Rights Law Centre suggests that the Australian Government could be:

- Granting Bridging Visas to permit community living for a specified time.
- Moving people into community detention.
- Expediting the consideration of ongoing visa applications, to fast-track the release from detention of people who are set to be released in the near future
- Ensuring in the above scenarios that people receive adequate social support.



FINAL DEPARTURE BRIDGING VISAS



Since the middle of the year, the Department of Home Affairs has begun moving an estimated 515 people from community detention onto Final Departure Bridging Visas. Whilst this visa allows them to work and study, it removes the financial assistance received by those in community detention. Refugee Council of Australia chief executive officer, Paul Power, said:

“While it is a good thing that people have been granted the right to work after being denied it for seven years, it will be very difficult in an economic recession for many refugees in this group to be able to find a sustainable income at short notice, with no prior Australian work experience and no opportunity to gain local qualifications... While some members of the group are fluent in English, others have limited English, having been denied access to programs such as the Adult Migrant English Program.”

What Can You Do?

As we approach Christmas, let us ponder the message of Pope Francis in *Fratelli Tutti*:

“We are obliged to respect the right of all individuals to find a place that meets their basic needs and those of their families, and where they can find personal fulfilment. Our response to the arrival of migrating persons can be summarized by four words: welcome, protect, promote and integrate. For “it is not a case of implementing welfare programmes from the top down, but rather of undertaking a journey together, through these four actions, in order to build cities and countries that, while preserving their respective cultural and religious identity, are open to differences and know how to promote them in the spirit of human fraternity.”

So may we welcome, protect, promote and integrate...

Educate Yourself:

Temporary is an 8-part series launched in November by UNSW’s Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law. Using words, audio, music and art, *Temporary* tells the stories of individuals who came to Australia seeking refuge. It shines a spotlight on their attempts to navigate Australia’s refugee system, and their struggles to gain secure permanent protection. You can access *Temporary* at: <https://temporary.kaldorcentre.net/>

Buy Some Bread:

The Bread & Butter Bakery invest 100% of their profits into providing baking training and employment opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers. Through a 6 - 8 month traineeship, trainees receive on-the-job bakery training; TAFE accreditation and language tuition; equipping them for future employment. You can support the Bread & Butter Project by purchasing their baked goods from Harris Farm Markets and Woolworth Metro Stores.

Send a Christmas Card:

Jesuit Refugee Services are providing a way to “share season’s greetings with a social justice twist.” They invite you to send a Christmas message to your local MP and remind them that those seeking asylum will not be so lucky this holiday season. Choose a card design, make a donation, add your MP’s email address and the card will be emailed. All donations will go directly to JRS’ support services, including specialist casework and employment support, emergency relief payment, life-saving medication and housing support. Visit <https://aus.jrs.net/en/take-action/christmas-cards-of-action/> to choose your card.