

Middle Eastern migrants aren't 'piling on to the dole queue'

Written by John van Kooy, Research Fellow, Research & Policy Centre, Brotherhood of St Laurence and Honorary Researcher, Melbourne Social Equity Institute, University of Melbourne

Claims that Middle Eastern migrants are [‘piling on to the dole queue’](#) are misleading. The data actually shows that, after an initial period of relatively high unemployment, labour force participation and employment rates amongst migrant communities eventually reach parity with the rest of the population.

Recently released [labour force data](#) indicates that people born in North Africa and the Middle East have unemployment rates of 33.5% during the first five years of settlement in Australia.

Settling well in Australia often takes time for people from migrant backgrounds. The first few years can involve significant [personal, social and economic transition](#). Refugees, in particular, can [face challenges](#) in dealing with the trauma of forced displacement.

Discrimination based on race in the Australian labour market is also real, as evidenced by [study](#) after [study](#). A [‘visible difference’](#) (such as skin colour or religious attire) can negatively affect candidates’ chances for a job.

Not surprisingly, then, recent arrivals from North Africa and the Middle East have low labour force participation rates during early settlement - just 38.2% for those who arrived within the last five years. But this rises rapidly to 54.6% for those who arrived 5-9 years ago. By the time they have been in Australia 15-19 years, labour force participation (66.2%) approaches the overall rate in Australia (67.9%).

The chart below shows that unemployment rates for migrants from North Africa and the Middle East also falls dramatically over time. Those who have been in Australia 15-19 years had an unemployment rate of 4.8% in December 2016, which was lower than both the rate for people born in Australia (5.5%) and the current overall unemployment rate (5.7%) of the country.

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Time makes a big difference for new migrants to Australia. It takes several years to build English language competency and meaningful engagement with education and employment.

Up to 2,000 hours of training [may be needed](#) for people with no prior background to learn English. After completing 500 hours of free language tuition in Australia, [only 7%](#) of migrants achieve a level of English which satisfies basic social and work needs.

It's often not until the second generation that the biggest “ [demographic dividends](#) ” from refugee resettlement are realised. The children of refugees commonly have [higher levels](#) of labour force participation and educational attainment than other migrants and even the rest of the Australian-born population.

To find and secure a job, migrants also need time to develop knowledge about the Australian labour market and how recruitment works. This employment know-how is [usually acquired](#) through formal and informal contacts. Because migrants [typically rely on](#) ethnic or diaspora networks, which have weak ties to the mainstream, developing contacts which can positively impact job opportunities is a longer-term project.

Unemployed migrants are not necessarily on the dole

High unemployment rates among particular migrant groups doesn't necessarily mean that they are disproportionately drawing on public resources.

Participation in the labour force can be affected by caring responsibilities, educational status and age, among other things. Centrelink payment eligibility also varies across visa subclasses.

When someone responds to the labour force survey indicating they are [‘unemployed and looking for work’](#); it doesn't mean they are receiving a Centrelink payment. Unemployment rates drawn from this data are different from [Department of Social Services administrative data](#)

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on people receiving income support.

Reducing the lag between migrant arrival and economic integration

Having a job is not just a good thing for migrants - Australia needs migrant employment to stimulate economic growth. The Australian Government's [intergenerational reports](#) and the [Productivity Commission](#) have called this the "3Ps" - population, participation and productivity. With an ageing population, migration is needed to boost Australia's labour supply and contribute to innovation.

Making the labour market more [inclusive](#) of people from all cultural backgrounds will help to reduce recruitment and workplace barriers for migrants.

As current [research](#) has shown, this requires an appropriate mix of enabling policies, tailored jobseeker support and engagement with employers. Such measures are critical for Australia to continue to realise the social and economic benefits of migration.

John van Kooy is a Research Fellow in the Research & Policy Centre at the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

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