

# Voices from Working Australia



## Key Findings from the ACTU Working Australia Census 2011

### Project Overview

**The aim of the Working Australia Census 2011 was to be one of the biggest surveys of workers in Australian history. The purpose was to engage with Australian workers and give them a chance to make their voice heard.**

The questions were chosen in order to collect information on how people are working, why they working, how they feel about their work and also what they see as the big issues facing them and the country.

The Working Australia Census was launched by ACTU President Ged Kearney on 2 May 2011 at the May Day Celebrations in Brisbane. The Census was open until 1 July 2011 for all Australians of working age to complete. The Census was primarily an online survey, with the questions being hosted on a temporary website [www.workingaustralia.org.au](http://www.workingaustralia.org.au).

A total of 42,085 responses were received. Following the completion of the Census the data was cleaned to remove duplicates. This resulted in the removal of approximately 500 responses. The findings are an analysis of the 41,584 valid completions of the ACTU Working Australia Census.

In conjunction with the Census, the ACTU also commissioned a public poll where the Census questions were posed to a representative sample of approximately 1000 Australians using an online public pool of people. The public poll was intended to be a benchmark, a point of comparison to the Census results.

The Working Australia Census was an enormous undertaking and

achieved the aim of being the largest survey of workers that Australian unions have ever conducted and is around 30 times larger than the standard national opinion polls used by the media and political parties.

### Key Findings

**Census respondents were overwhelmingly union members, and the results show that these people are committed to their work and to their communities:**

- Nearly half (48.3%) had spent time doing voluntary work in the last 12 months compared to the ABS figure of 34% for the overall population.
- A third (38.2%) said they remained in their current job because they felt it allowed them to positively contribute to the community.

**The Census results also show that in comparison with the Public poll, those in the majority union sample are more likely to be satisfied with and have better working conditions:**

- 70.3% of Census respondents said they were satisfied with their conditions at work compared to 61.9% for the Public sample.
- Over a quarter (27.9%) of Census respondents said that having good conditions was a key reason they remained in their current job.

**The results also show that many workers are feeling squeezed, often working additional hours in order to cope with high workloads and not enough resources:**

- 61.3% of the Census respondents regularly worked additional hours, compared to 43.1% of the Public sample.
- Close to half (47.0%) of the Census respondents working additional hours did so without receiving any additional compensation such as TOIL, Flex or overtime pay.
- The main reasons identified by Census respondents for working additional hours were so they could get all their work done (54.5%) and so they could get their work done to a proper standard (47.6%).
- One in ten (10.0%) Census respondents working additional hours received TOIL or flex time but were unable to take it because of workload pressures.
- Census respondents at the top and bottom of the income scale were the most likely to be working additional hours without any compensation.

**This demanding workload flows through to the attitudes of Census respondents towards senior management:**

- Over a third (33.8%) of Census respondents said that the senior management of their organisation does not take a genuine interest in improving conditions at work.
- Over a third (32.7%) also disagree with the statement senior management is competent and has a plan for the future.

**The Census results also show that for many workers job security and having insecure work arrangements are a concern:**

- 22.3% of Census respondents ranked job security as one of their top two industrial issues.
- One in seven (14.3%) of employed Census respondents were in a form of non-permanent work arrangement.
- One in six (16.5%) in non-permanent work part time arrangements because they cannot find full time work.

**Being able to balance work and family and the intrusion of work into personal life and time was another significant issue for many Census respondents:**

- 73.4% of Census respondents said they were contacted outside of work hours about work matters, 41.0% of these respondents said that this contact was at least once a week.
- Half (50.9%) of Census respondents had attended work while sick or while someone they care for was sick because they had too much work to do.
- One in four (25.1%) of Census respondents indicated that they did not feel comfortable taking time off to meet their caring responsibilities.

**Making ends meet financially was at the forefront of many Census respondents minds:**

- Nearly a quarter (23.6%) of the Census respondents said they were finding it difficult or very difficult to get by on their current household income.

- One in five (21.6%) of Census respondents said they regularly or fairly often used their credit card to meet normal household expenses.
- One in seven Census respondents also said that they regularly or fairly often put off getting dental treatment to meet regular household expenses.

**Respondents were asked to identify what in their opinion were the big issues facing them and the country:**

- The most important issue facing respondents and in their opinion the country was housing affordability and cost of living (41.7% Census and 48.2% Public)
- One in five of Census and Public respondents (19.0% and 22.1% respectively) said that having good secure jobs was one of the issues they ranked as important to them and the country.
- For Census respondents managing the economy to maintain a budget surplus was the least important issue (6.4% nominating this as important).

**Finally respondents were asked what they supported the union movement campaigning on:**

- An overwhelming majority, 96.6% of the Census sample and 78.5% of the Public sample support unions campaigning for wages and conditions for workers.
- A strong majority of both samples also agreed unions should be campaigning on managing the economy in the interests of working people (84.0% Census and 69.0% Public)

**The Voices from Working Australia report also includes case studies of three different groups from the Census respondents. All groups are struggling in different ways to balance the pressure of work, family and finances:**

- The Sandwich Generation;
  - This is a group of women who have caring responsibilities for children and parents while also continuing to work full time.
  - The single biggest thing they said would improve their work life was having the flexibility to balance work and family (61.5%).
- The Forgotten Blokes;
  - Are men aged between 45-64 who say they are currently not working but are looking for work and having difficulty.
  - Half (52.2%) said they couldn't find work because employers thought I was too old.
- The Insecure Youth;
  - Are workers are under the age of 25, employed and living out of home and facing labour market and financial stress.
  - 27.7% said that they were finding it difficult or very difficult to get by on their current household income.

# The Forgotten Blokes

## Men on the edge of the labour market

The 'forgotten blokes' are men aged between 45-64 who say they are currently not working but are looking for work. There were 228 men in the Census sample who were in this group.

Two thirds of this group were married (68.4%), while one in five (20.2%) were single and one in ten (11.4%) were divorced or separated. They were less likely than the overall sample to have dependent children, at 25.9%. They were also less likely to have a mortgage, 36.4% and more likely to be renting 23.6%.

### All of these men said they were currently looking for work:

- They had a range of qualifications;
  - The most common qualification was a Certificate or Diploma (29.4%).
  - A quarter (26.3%) had a Bachelor degree.
  - One in ten (11.4%) had done an Apprenticeship and a similar number, 11.0% had not completed secondary school.
- The usual occupations were;
  - Professional (39.5%), significantly less compared to the overall Census sample.
  - Technician and trades worker (18.4%).
  - Machinery operator and driver (10.5%).
- The industries in which these men were most likely to have work and be looking for work are;
  - Education and Training (19.3%), again significantly less than the overall Census sample.
  - Construction (11.0%).
  - Manufacturing (10.5%).
  - Transport, Postal and Warehousing (10.1%).

### To them the reasons for not being able to get a job were very clear:

- Half (52.2%) said it was because employers thought I was too old.
- Close to a quarter (22.4%) said it was because of my ill health or disability and the same number said because there were too many applicants for the available jobs.
- One in six (16.7%) said it was because there were just no jobs.
- One in ten (10.1%) because I did not have the required education, training or skills.

### Many indicated that they were financially struggling:

- 71.9% said they were getting by on a single income
- Over half (57.0%) said they were on a household income of less than \$60,000 a year.
- Nearly two thirds (60.6%) said they were finding it difficult or very difficult to get by.
- The expense that were of most concern for the next 12 months were;
  - Gas and electricity costs (61.0%).
  - Petrol and transport costs (39.5%).
  - Food and groceries (33.8%).
- The most common actions they had taken either regularly or fairly often to meet regular household expenses were;
  - Put off getting dental treatment (40.7%).
  - Put off buying an essential item (29.0%).
  - Use the credit card (27.7%).
- 13.2% said they had borrowed money from family or friends and 7.5% they had regularly or fairly often used the services of a charity or welfare organisation.

**These men were also asked what the most important issues to them and the country are. Their top three issues are listed below, they markedly differ from the overall Census sample:**

- Good secure jobs (31.6%) compared to 19.7% overall.
- Housing affordability and cost of living (33.3%) compared to 41.7% overall.
- Managing the economy in the interests of working people (30.7%) compared to 19.5% overall.

**The 'forgotten blokes' wanted the union movement campaigning around the same issues as the overall Census sample:**

- On the cores industrial issues;
  - Wages and conditions for workers (97.0%).
  - Good secure jobs (95.6%).

- Addressing and preventing bullying, harassment and discrimination (95.6%)
- And these men also saw a place for unions to be campaigning around the broader issues:
  - Housing affordability and cost of living (86.4%).
  - Investing in local industries (85.9%).
  - Funding to and the quality of healthcare (84.2%).
  - Managing the economy in the interests of working people (83.8%).

**All of these men are looking for work and finding it difficult.**

**Their comments below show how they feel very much on the margins of the labour market and if the government is serious about giving everyone the opportunity to work, they should start with these forgotten blokes.**



*I am a qualified mechanic and an IT technician I have not worked for an employer for 3 years because at 57 I was considered unemployable. This age discrimination against older male skilled workers is a scourge and employers continue to get away with it.*

*After going a bit deaf, I was simply forced into what was called 'Retirement on the grounds of ill-health' - I have a good mind, current qualifications (I'm still studying) and a good work ethic. Yet as a partially deaf 64 year-old, I am repeatedly turned away by prospective employers. I do want to work, but there is now no doubt in my mind that age discrimination is alive and flourishing in Australia. There are many older Australians who would work given the opportunity.*

*As a mature aged worker from a trade background I find the lack of support and programs from government and industry in documenting and preserving of the knowledge and skills of the of industries coming to an end. I find employment (service) providers next to useless most couldn't find the door let alone a job. As for their mickey mouse training programs hopeless. Trade skills are just not valued. Why import skills when there here already.*

*Since my wife got ill, I lost my business and family home. I can't afford the costs associated with our 'free' education system, let alone dental fees and the myriad health costs we face as a family. I don't think we've got it right yet. Hope this survey does something ... preferably before I die.*

*Unions should be campaigning to encourage cross generational workplace environments - ie encouraging the employment and inclusion of older workers, especially workers seeking to change employment/careers or regain employment after redundancy etc. Workers over 50 (or 45?) are currently being told to remain in the workforce but are being denied opportunities that use there transferable skills or take account of their relative physical limitations in an equitable way.*



**For the full report and further information please visit [www.actu.org.au](http://www.actu.org.au)**



# The Sandwich Generation

## Women caring for children, parents and themselves

The 'sandwich generation' is a group of women who have caring responsibilities for children and parents while also continuing to work fulltime. The Census sample had 239 women who fitted into this group.

The majority (56.1%) of these women were aged between 45-54 years and three quarters (75.3%) said they were married or partnered. A majority (63.2%) of them indicated that they were the primary income earner and over a significant third (39.7%) said that their household had a single income.

### These women are hard workers, not only at home and work but also in their communities:

- Over one in six (18.0%) said that they were currently working two or more jobs.
- Three quarters (74.9%) of them said they regularly worked additional hours;
  - Nearly half (48.0%) do so without any additional compensation.
  - While 18.4% said that they received TOIL or flex time but because of workload were unable to take it.
- The main reasons for working additional hours were;
  - So I can get all my work done (63.1%).
  - So I can get my work done to a proper standard (56.4%).
- Over three quarters (79.5%) were contacted outside of work hours about work related matters, for nearly half (48.4%) this contact was at least once a week.
- Over half (55.6%) said that they had done voluntary work in the past 12 months.

### Why do they continue to stay in these demanding jobs?

- The main reasons these women identified why they continued to stay in their jobs were;
  - I feel like I can contribute positively to the community in this job (39.9%).
  - The work is interesting and enjoyable (33.8%).
- The main industries that these women worked in were education and healthcare (63.6%).
- The overwhelming majority (78.3%) were also satisfied with the work itself.

### Despite enjoying their work and being able to contribute positively to their community, their jobs sometimes left them feeling less than satisfied:

- Nearly half said they were dissatisfied with their workload (45.6%).
- 46.8% said they were dissatisfied with their work/life balance.
- 50.2% were dissatisfied with their opportunities for advancement.

### And they also felt that sometimes their workplace wasn't always a supportive environment:

- Over two in five (44.4%) said they did not feel comfortable taking time out to meet their caring responsibilities.
- A similar number (43.1%) said they did not feel comfortable speaking out if they were unhappy with their conditions at work.
- A third (32.2%) believe that employees who worked extra hours were more likely to get ahead.
- Also the majority (89.5%) had attended work while sick or while someone they cared for was sick in the past 12 months. The most common reasons why were;

- You had too much work (86.4%).
- You couldn't make it to a doctor's appointment during the clinics opening hours (61.2%).
- You felt pressured by your boss to go to work (53.7%).

**For many, making ends meet was a concern:**

- Nearly half (45.6%) said that they were finding it difficult to get by on their current household income.
- The expenses they were most concerned about over the next 12 months were;
  - Gas and electricity costs (54.8%).
  - Mortgage repayments and/or rental (49.0%).
  - Petrol and transport costs (37.2%).
- Two in five (42.3%) said they regularly or fairly often used a credit card to meet regular household expenses.
- A quarter (28.4%) said they regularly or fairly often miss or delay payment of a bill to meet expenses a similar number (24.3%) transfer money from savings accounts to meet regular household expenses.

**What do they regard as the most important issues to them and the country?**

- Housing affordability and the cost of living (54.4%).
- The quality of education, including adequate funding for public schools (41.0%).

- Funding to and the quality of healthcare (36.0%).
- Managing the economy in the interests of working people (25.9%).

**What do they want the union movement campaigning around?**

- The core industrial issues of:
  - Wages and conditions for workers (98.0%).
  - Workers' Rights (95.4%).
  - Good secure jobs (95.0%).
- These women also saw a place for unions to be campaigning around the broader issues:
  - Funding to and the quality of healthcare (89.1%).
  - Managing the economy in the interests of working people (84.9%).
  - The quality of education, including adequate funding for public schools (84.1%).

**The single biggest thing they said would improve their work life was having the flexibility to balance work and family (61.5%).**

**A number of respondents took the opportunity to comment further about their experiences, wants and difficulties, below is a selection of their comments.**



*I would like to see more flexibility in my job to deal with family matters as they arise and to assist with care of elderly parents and disabled children.*

*More flexibility with working hours to accommodate carers' responsibilities*

*Change will occur whether we like it or not, certainly life is getting harder and the family unit is struggling more and more.*

*Getting good working conditions, even in a good workplace is luck of the draw, how much you need the income and how much stamina you have to cope with being beaten down.*

*More personal leave to care for dependents/parents/children...*

*Recognition of female sacrifice (time out of workforce to care for children/elderly (loss of \$income/financial independence and \$superannuation)*

*Lack of respect from peers if choice is not to have family.*

*Being a carer for my elderly mother I need to take time off regularly. I find employers say they understand but in the long term they just see you as a burden.*

*I have never worked so hard for so little.*



**For the full report and further information please visit [www.actu.org.au](http://www.actu.org.au)**



# The Insecure Youth

## Generation Y under labour market and financial stress

Sometimes being young doesn't mean being carefree. This group of workers are under the age of 25, employed and living out of home, there were 899 of them in the Census results. Many of these younger workers are feeling the brunt of a shift towards more insecure or non-permanent forms of work as well as feeling the rising cost of living and housing.

### Their working lives are often insecure and unstructured:

- 34.8% are in a form on non-permanent work arrangements (casual, fixed term contract or temporary/labour hire)
- 16.3% are currently working two or more jobs.
- A third (33.8%) work on a part time basis.
- Over one in ten (13.7%) work an irregular schedule.
- Nearly a third (32.8%) said they had attended work while sick because they wouldn't be paid if they took a sick day;
  - 25.9% had attended work while sick because they were worried they would not be offered another shift/more work.

### However this insecure and temporary employment pattern is not always a choice:

- Of those paid to work less than 35 hours per week;
  - 48.4% do it because they study.
  - 15.2% because they could not find full time work.
- A third (36.7%) would like to work more paid hours.
- Over a quarter (27.9%) said one of their top two industrial issues was having a greater say/certainty about the hours they worked.

### The often heard view that younger workers are not reliable or committed to their work is challenged by this group of workers:

- Over half (58.7%) have been in their current job for between 1-5 years.
- Half (50.4%) said they regularly work additional hours;
  - 47.0% of them receiving no compensation to do so.
- Main reasons for working the additional hours;
  - 'So I can get all my work done' (49.0%)
  - 'There is a lack of staff and excess workload that I work extra hours to complete' (43.9%)
- The majority (75%) said they were not currently look for work, the main reasons for staying in their job were;
  - 'The work is interesting and enjoyable' (37.3%)
  - 'It offers a good career path' (34.7%)

### Financial pressures were a significant issue for many of these younger workers:

- Nearly three quarters (74.0%) rent;
  - 33.3% alone or with a partner.
  - 40.7% with another adult/s.
- Three out of five (61.5%) said that one of their top two industrial issues was a wage rise;
  - One in ten (9.1%) had never received a pay increase.
  - 22.2% said there was no set pattern to their pay increases.
- 27.7% said that they were finding it difficult or very difficult to get by on their current household income;
  - Nearly half (48.7%) had an annual household income of less than \$60,000.

- The top three areas of concern for expenditure were the basic necessities;
  - Over half (53.2%) were concerned about housing costs, rent or mortgage payments.
  - 43.2% were concerned about petrol and transport costs
  - Two in five (39.5%) were concerned about food and grocery costs.
- Many were also relying on stop gap measures regularly or fairly often to meet normal household expenses;
  - A third (32.0%) had transferred money from savings.
  - 30.5% had put off getting dental treatment.
  - One in five (21.3%) had used a credit card.

**The labour market and financial stress being experienced by these younger workers, also shows through in the issues they**

**highlight as being most important to them and the country:**

- The following issues were the ones this group of workers was most likely to rank in their top three;
  - Housing affordability and cost of living (59.5%).
  - Wages and conditions for workers (40.3%).
  - The quality of education, including adequate funding to public schools (38.5%).
  - Funding to and the quality of healthcare (34.7%).
  - Good secure jobs (20.7%).

**These young workers are feeling under stress and insecure not only in their work but also in their financial situation, a small selection of their comments below communicates this experience.**



*I'm 24 and since the age of 16 I have worked casually for various companies while studying. This is the first time I am working for a company that does not pay: A) award rates, and B) penalty rates for public holidays. I feel disillusioned because my workers' rights have gone backwards since I started working.*

*I work in 3 different casual jobs, 2 of which are through different labour hire companies. Some weeks I work nearly 60hrs, others only 7.5hrs or not at all. I enjoy construction work, yet local builders only want workers on ABNs which I refuse because it's illegal and immoral. I also have experience as a short-order cook but restaurants and fastfood joints will hire teenagers instead of me, even for the most menial of kitchen duties. I might have very slow weeks but I'm exhausted and my health is suffering from the constant stress of uncertainty. I recently injured myself outside of work and have no sick leave. Once I recover I fear that declaring an injury will mean I'm discriminated against when applying for jobs. Queensland is meant to be booming but it certainly isn't for me.*

*Temporary contracts for New Graduate RNs are awful, many people have to relocate for their job but have no security in 12 months as to whether they maintain their position or relocate for a new job.*

*As a young person of Victoria, I feel that at this time, it would be virtually be impossible to buy a house and this is very daunting as I do not want to rent for the rest of my life but I do not see how with the amount of money I earn and the cost of living could support mortgage repayments.*

*I feel that being a full-time student, and a casual worker my hours I work are not working for me. My work is not responding to me when I ask for less hours, instead they try to black mail me to work by saying that If I don't do the hours I won't get shifts next week. I don't feel secure in this job even though I have been there for so long. I feel the work is looking out for themselves rather than employees. I feel if I wasn't a part of the union they would fire me straight away and hire someone else. However I do suggest that the union do something about this like trying to make a deal between employers and student employees.*



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