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ANALYSIS

# Drug trafficking in the Pacific Islands: The impact of transnational crime

JOSE SOUSA-SANTOS  
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## DRUG TRAFFICKING IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS: THE IMPACT OF TRANSNATIONAL CRIME

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## KEY FINDINGS

- The Pacific “drug highway” has spilled over into domestic markets for illicit drug consumption and production in the Pacific Islands region. Drug trafficking has evolved significantly with the rise of local actors in transnational criminal networks.
- Capacity shortfalls and a disconnect between regional law enforcement infrastructure and national law enforcement agencies undermine trust and are detrimental to intelligence sharing and interoperability in cross-border policing efforts.
- The deportation policies of Australia, New Zealand, and the United States are exacerbating crime and addiction within Pacific nations. They undermine the policy objectives of development partners in the region and will need urgent review.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Transnational crime<sup>1</sup> — specifically drug production and trafficking — is one of the most serious security issues facing the Pacific Islands region. Methamphetamine, heroin, and cocaine trafficking is on the rise. The Pacific Islands have become a production site and trafficking destination as well as trafficking thoroughfare, and indigenous/local crime syndicates now work in partnership with transnational crime syndicates. The criminal deportee policies of Australia, the United States, and New Zealand are contributing to the problem, as is the Covid-19 pandemic, by exacerbating the vulnerabilities on which transnational organisations and local crime actors capitalise. The Pacific and its partners have responded by strengthening regional policing architecture and governance through enhanced law enforcement mechanisms, but challenges remain as the illicit drug trade adapts and takes root in the region.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, increased connectivity within and across the Pacific Islands region<sup>2</sup> (hereafter “the Pacific”) has enhanced its broad economic opportunities as well as exacerbated its vulnerabilities.<sup>3</sup> In particular, the period has seen a significant increase in the trafficking of methamphetamine, cocaine, and precursors. Situated along a maritime corridor utilised for legitimate trade between major economic markets on the Asian and American borders of the Pacific Rim,<sup>4</sup> the region has been a principal trans-shipment hub for drugs. It is valuable to Asian organised crime syndicates and Mexican and South American cartels as a transit route and occasional production site, targeting the lucrative markets in Australia and New Zealand where the street value of methamphetamine and cocaine is amongst the highest in the world.

Of equal significance has been the emergence of indigenous regional organised crime groups and networks with links to organised crime syndicates in Australia, New Zealand, and further afield. This growth has been driven by the spill-over effect of trafficked drugs into local markets, spreading from largely elite and expatriate populations into the wider community, and the arrival of criminal deportees from Australia, New Zealand, and the United States.

This analysis identifies the key trends and dynamics driving the drug market in the Pacific and the implications for societies, traditional power structures, and states. This paper focuses on two highly addictive stimulants — crystal methamphetamine and cocaine — as well as precursors and chemicals necessary for their manufacturing. The analysis highlights the inter-connectedness of transnational criminal activities and the need for a holistic mapping of those connections to better understand the transnational crime landscape and the intersections with national and local level Pacific criminal networks.

## TRANSNATIONAL CRIME AND DEVELOPMENT

Transnational crime in the Pacific represents a microcosm of a wider global trend. Cited as one of six key global security challenges in the United Nations Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change, transnational crime erodes human security and undermines “the rule of law within and across borders”.<sup>5</sup> In a region plagued by “unmet development challenges”,<sup>6</sup> transnational crime and illicit drugs are a cross-cutting threat to development, security, and governance in the Pacific.

At the global level, transnational crime is recognised as a multi-dimensional driver of state fragility.<sup>7</sup> In 2014, the UN Secretary-General highlighted organised crime as one of the primary factors affecting conflict and stability, obstructing economic development and legitimate commerce, and holding people, communities, and countries captive in a negative spiral of fragility and underdevelopment.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, reducing transnational and organised crime has been recognised as one of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG),<sup>9</sup> specifically SDG Target 16.4.<sup>10</sup> Drug trafficking is the largest revenue generator globally among the variety of transnational criminal markets.<sup>11</sup>

In the Pacific, there is a growing recognition that transnational crime can generate significant insecurity, disrupt traditional and cultural mechanisms, fuel corruption, weaken key security sectors, and undermine formal and informal governance. Accordingly, the Pacific Transnational Crime Network (PTCN) was established in 2002 by the Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police. More recently, and reflecting the complex challenges and growing urgency of tackling transnational crime in the region, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) elevated the issue in its Boe Declaration on Regional Security (2018), which identified transnational crime as one of four paramount challenges confronting the region.

*In a region plagued by “unmet development challenges”, transnational crime and illicit drugs are a cross-cutting threat to development, security, and governance in the Pacific.*

## THE PACIFIC DRUGS LANDSCAPE

*The Pacific is the principal transit route for the trafficking of drugs and chemical precursors bound from Asia and South America to Australia and New Zealand, where consumers pay some of the highest prices globally.*

The production and trafficking of illicit drugs are the most typical forms of transnational crime.<sup>12</sup> The Pacific's extensive and porous maritime jurisdictional boundaries, differences in governance structures, and heterogeneity in law enforcement capacity have contributed to the region's attractiveness as a transit route and, increasingly, production site. In 2019, Interpol President Kim Jong Yang stated:

*[T]here is no doubt that Pacific Islands Countries face a unique set of challenges, caught in the midst of the Pacific highway between major suppliers of illicit goods; large demand hubs; and thousands of miles of coastline to monitor. At the same time, some of the Pacific Islands are seeing the trans-shipment of narcotics through their territories devolve into a growing domestic demand for illicit drugs.<sup>13</sup>*

The illegal drug trade in Australia is estimated to be worth AU\$11.3 billion<sup>14</sup> and in New Zealand up to an estimated AU\$1.86 billion per annum.<sup>15</sup> The drugs typically arrive by air, with 85–99 per cent of seizures for heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine, and MDMA from airfreighted cargo. Alternative transport is by sea (in containers and yachts) and light plane.

The Pacific is the principal transit route for the trafficking of drugs and chemical precursors bound from Asia and South America to Australia and New Zealand, where consumers pay some of the highest prices globally.<sup>16</sup> In both Australia and New Zealand, methamphetamine and cocaine usage has been steadily increasing,<sup>17</sup> and reached record levels in April and June 2020 despite the disruption of supply chains due to Covid-19.<sup>18</sup>

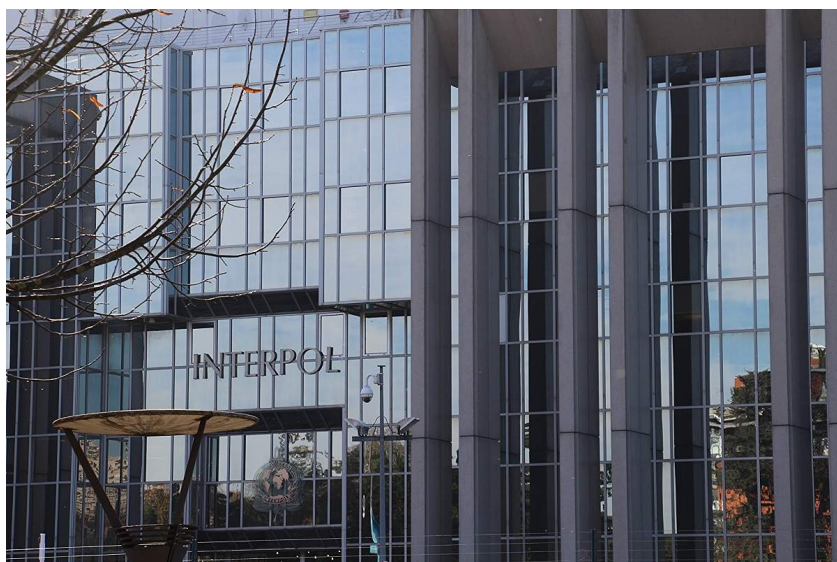
Recent growth in the Pacific drug market has alarmed the region's law enforcement officers. In Fiji, for example, there were only 148 drug-related policing cases (including arrests for cocaine and heroin) in 2009. By 2018, this had risen to almost 1400 arrests; methamphetamine cases rose from two in 2009 to 113 in 2019.<sup>19</sup> This reflects both increased drug trafficking activity and volume due to rising demand and prices in Australia and New Zealand, as well as strengthened enforcement capacity.

The trafficking and trade in drugs in the Pacific is driven by five interconnected networks of actors: Chinese and Asian syndicates;

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Mexican and South American cartels; Australian organised crime; New Zealand organised crime; and local or hybrid indigenous drug gangs.

Cocaine accounts for the largest volume of seized illicit drugs transiting through the region, with a record eight tonnes seized between mid-2016 and 2018.<sup>20</sup> In May 2018, authorities from Papua New Guinea discovered a haul of cocaine packaged in cloth bags on Wasim Island near Jinlageg Point, assessing it to weigh between 220 and 330 kilograms. Buried in the sand, the cocaine was found by a local fisherman and handed over to a radio operator. Six Chinese and one Montenegrin returned on a fishing boat to retrieve the cocaine.<sup>21</sup> The seven were later apprehended at sea by a joint Papua New Guinea police and defence operation.<sup>22</sup>



*Interpol says the Pacific Islands face a unique set of challenges, caught in the midst of “major suppliers of illicit goods, large demand hubs, and thousands of miles of coastline to monitor” (Fred Romero/Flickr)*

In July 2020, more than 500 kilograms of cocaine worth AU\$160 million was seized by the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary (RPNGC) after a twin-engine Cessna crash-landed en route to Queensland at a makeshift airfield on the outskirts of the capital, Port Moresby. A two year investigation by Australian and Papua New Guinean authorities had tracked members of a Melbourne-based criminal syndicate and were waiting to seize the aircraft on its arrival in Australia.<sup>23</sup> The incident highlighted the role of local criminal partners who had facilitated the transport of the cocaine from a yacht to the airfield and then onto the aircraft.



*In 2004, the discovery of the largest “super lab” in the southern hemisphere changed the Pacific drug landscape.*

Since late 2016, there has been a noticeable increase in the detection of cocaine in all sub-regions of the Pacific due to greater inter-agency cooperation, such as through the Transnational Serious and Organised Crime (TSOC) Pacific Taskforce agreement between Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, and Tonga. However, regional law enforcement bodies claim that the Pacific itself represents only a very small consumer base.<sup>24</sup> Factors limiting the market are the high price of cocaine, and an expatriate or elite user demographic. Yet, a critical paucity of formal data at the national and regional levels on drug trafficking, production, and distribution in the Pacific, and the lack of reliable statistics has impaired the ability of law enforcement to assess the problem accurately.<sup>25</sup>

The cultural, social, and hierarchical web of Pacific Islands families and societies serves as a further barrier, the framework creating both a frontline against illicit activities, but at times also providing a shield for actors reliant on impenetrable networks. One Pacific Islands security official said:

*It is difficult when we know an individual is involved in drug crime but is related to a family member, a minister, a judge in the courts, a senior official. Who do we question? The doors close. Conducting investigations here isn't like doing investigations in Australia...there are layers of cultural obligations and implications.<sup>26</sup>*

### **From transit point to production site**

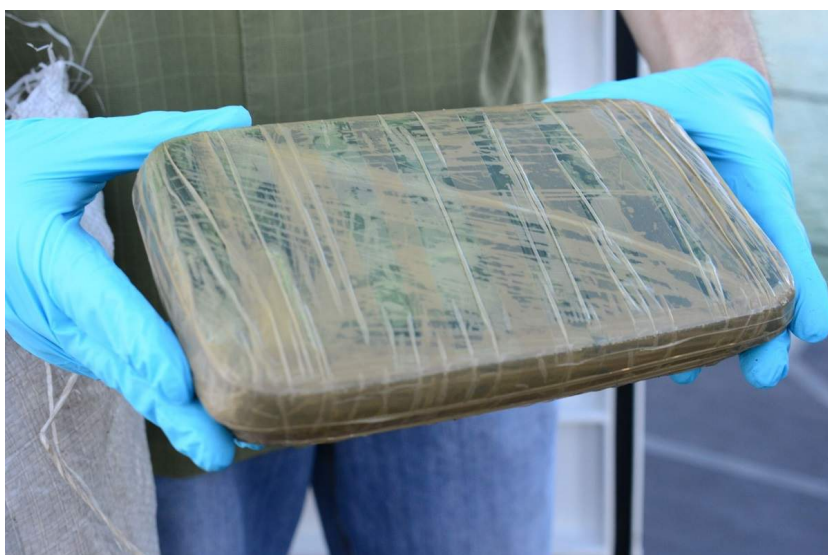
In 2004, the discovery of the largest “super lab” in the southern hemisphere changed the Pacific drug landscape. On 9 June that year, as part of Operation Outrigger, five kilograms of crystal methamphetamine, 700 litres of liquid methamphetamine, and sufficient precursor chemicals to produce an additional 1000 kilograms of methamphetamine were seized from a warehouse in Suva.<sup>27</sup> The network of drug traffickers included Chinese nationals with Chinese triad links, one Fijian national, and four Hong Kong passport holders. Key players Yuen Yei Ha and her husband Zhong Qiang had recently obtained Fijian citizenship.

The operation, a collaboration between police from Fiji, Australia, and New Zealand, highlighted three issues: (1) the region had shifted from transit point to production site; (2) the success of the operation was dependent on local facilitation and was therefore fuelling local corruption;<sup>28</sup> and (3) the existing legislation was outdated and did not criminalise precursors. Since 2004, small scale production labs have

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proliferated in Fiji,<sup>29</sup> Tonga,<sup>30</sup> the Marshall Islands,<sup>31</sup> the Northern Marianas,<sup>32</sup> and Papua New Guinea.<sup>33</sup>

Domestic legislation has been slow in responding to increased illicit drug production. In 2004, Fiji passed legislation to strengthen its drug laws and policing powers, and in 2019 the Ministry of Defence and National Security drafted a national narcotics strategy and framework. In 2020, Tonga amended its Illicit Drugs Control Act<sup>34</sup> with acting Justice Minister Samiu Vaipulu stating that “ice” (methamphetamine) is “Tonga’s killing virus, not Covid-19”.<sup>35</sup> The amendment, modelled on New Zealand’s Drug Act, directly targets methamphetamine usage.



*Drug traffickers use sophisticated concealment methods to avoid detection by coast guard and border protection agents (Coast Guard News/Flickr)*

National security strategies, which PIF members committed to under the Boe Declaration, have sought to align domestic focus on transnational crime with the regional architecture. The newly developed national security strategies of Samoa, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu all identify transnational crime and the spill-over of drug abuse into local communities as key security issues. A central theme across the three national security strategies is that there is considerable reliance on regional and international counter drug trafficking initiatives.

*The maritime transport sector is the main vector in drug trafficking across the region. The Pacific is heavily dependent on maritime shipping with more than 80 per cent of all international cargo transported by ship.*

### **The local drug market**

The domestic market for drugs in the Pacific has traditionally consisted of expatriate, tourist, and some local cannabis users. In the past decade, the local drug market has grown, with facilitators being paid in drugs for services, then selling them onwards. This has contributed to rising addiction amongst locals and the emergence of a local drug network. The PTCN identified a “dramatic increase” in drug-related activity between 2014 and 2017 with the rapid expansion of methamphetamine availability across all sub-regions of the Pacific due to the drug’s low cost and highly addictive properties.<sup>36</sup>

In Tonga, between 2016 and 2019, police data showed that drug-related arrests rose sharply from 25 (2016–17) to 57 (2018–19).<sup>37</sup> In parallel, weapons seizures almost doubled, from 10 (2016–17) to 19 (2018–19).<sup>38</sup> According to the Tongan Attorney General’s Office, 70 per cent of drug raids in Tonga recover weapons.<sup>39</sup> Officials reported that the increase in drug offences indicated the growing presence of methamphetamine in the kingdom, and correlated with an increase in drug-related crime such as robberies and house break-ins.<sup>40</sup>

In response, the Tongan government declared a “war on drugs” and established the Tonga Police Drug Enforcement Taskforce in April 2018. In the first year of operation, the taskforce made 263 arrests and seized more than 30 kilograms of methamphetamine with a street value in excess of AU\$24 million.<sup>41</sup> However, Tongan police claim they are “only scratching the surface”.<sup>42</sup>

### **Trafficking methods and trends**

The maritime transport sector is the main vector in drug trafficking across the region. The Pacific is heavily dependent on maritime shipping with more than 80 per cent of all international cargo (both container and non-container) transported by ship.<sup>43</sup> Containerisation is one of the primary modes of trafficking illicit drugs in the Pacific, with the trend likely to grow. Container tonnage in the Pacific is estimated to increase from the 1.7 million tons or 12.1 per cent of total seaborne cargo it represented in 2000, to 4.2 million tons or 19 per cent in 2030.<sup>44</sup> Oversight within the maritime transport sector is especially challenging and is further compounded by disparities in port infrastructure.

Yachts and pleasure craft are also highly versatile vehicles for trafficking drugs between the Pacific, Australia, and New Zealand. From December 2016 to November 2017, Pacific-based law

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enforcement agencies seized approximately 7.6 tonnes of cocaine on board 11 small craft believed to be bound for Australia; a significant increase in both the frequency and volume from previous years. Fiji's Revenue and Customs Authority manager stated in 2020 that most of the pleasure craft – approximately five to ten per day – originate from New Zealand and Australia, and that “it's like looking for the needle in the haystack of legitimacy...when you go fishing you don't expect to catch all the fish in the ocean”.<sup>45</sup>



*Drug trafficking in the Pacific is driven by actors from Asia, South America, Australia, New Zealand, and local gangs (Drew Douglas/Flickr)*

Cross-border collaboration between national and regional security agencies is critical in the effort to stem the maritime flow of drug traffic. For example, the Australian Federal Police (AFP), New South Wales Police, Australian Border Force, and United Kingdom and New Caledonian authorities cooperated to seize a large shipment of methamphetamine in 2020 from a yacht intercepted off the coast of New South Wales with links to a broader trafficking operation stretching between Mexico, New Caledonia, and Norfolk Island.<sup>46</sup>

Recent seizures reveal that Papua New Guinea remains a key transit site into Australia, including attempts to traffic AU\$90 million of cocaine through the Torres Strait in 2018 and the discovery in 2019 by a community on Budi island of 11 duffle bags of cocaine worth AU\$50 million buried at a local beach.<sup>47</sup>

*External organised crime actors have played a central role in establishing, fuelling, and maintaining the drug market in the Pacific and driving the growth of local drug production and consumption.*

## DRIVERS OF THE DRUG TRADE

The Pacific drug trade is propelled by a complex web of external and local syndicates, regional actors and hybridised networks. It is facilitated by criminal deportation policy settings in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States.

### Organised crime

External organised crime actors have played a central role in establishing, fuelling, and maintaining the drug market in the Pacific and driving the growth of local drug production and consumption.

Australia and New Zealand’s prolific and high-profile organised crime networks — including outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMCGs) — have expanded their activities offshore and into the Pacific.<sup>48</sup> There has been a notable increase in OMCG members travelling to the Pacific since 2016 — most commonly to the Cook Islands and Fiji. One report cites an increase from 90 members travelling to seven Pacific destinations in 2016–17, to 140 members in 2017–18 — an increase of more than 50 per cent.<sup>49</sup> A regional security sector official noted in 2019 that “the outlaw motorcycle gangs are one of the key links between the syndicates and cartels and the Australian and New Zealand drug markets — the Pacific is caught in the middle”.<sup>50</sup>

Fiji is a valuable trans-shipment point, and the largest Pacific-based OMCG is the Fiji Rebels. Established by expatriates linked to the New South Wales chapter in 2012, the Fiji Rebels has chapters in Suva and Nadi consisting of both Australian and Fijian nationals.<sup>51</sup> In 2014, the Australian Crime Commission suspected that the Fiji chapter was being used as a conduit for drug shipments from South America to Australia and other countries in the region.<sup>52</sup>

The New Zealand-based Head Hunters motorcycle gang is particularly active in the Cook Islands, with a senior Head Hunters member (of Cook Islander descent) residing in the Cook Islands and well connected across both the gang and the local community.<sup>53</sup> In response to the number of gang members travelling to the Cook Islands, an operation led by Cook Islands Immigration has prevented the entry of overseas gang members and criminals, including nearly 40 individuals in 2019 alone.<sup>54</sup>



*Quizzy, an Australian born and trained customs dog, sniffs out cocaine planted on an inbound boat during a training exercise at Apia Port, Samoa (Claire McGeechan/AusAID/DFAT/Flickr)*

The Pacific Transnational Crime Coordination Centre (PTCCC) stated in 2018 that despite the increase in OMCG members travelling to the Pacific, the threat of OMCGs is no longer assessed as increasing due to “effective control measures and proactive/targeted responses”, which have contributed to better management of the associated risk of OMCGs.<sup>55</sup> Samoa’s national security strategy, however, identifies OMCGs with links to organised crime as a concern across several Pacific countries and an “emerging threat” in Samoa.<sup>56</sup>



*Crew from US Coast Guard Cutter Munro inspect a self-propelled semi-submersible in international waters of the Eastern Pacific Ocean, 19 June 2019. The US Coast Guard seized drugs worth an estimated US\$569 million between May and July 2019 (US Coast Guard/Flickr)*

Asian syndicates, notably Chinese, and Mexican and South American cartels are also principal actors in regional drug markets. Chinese criminal syndicates and triads with links to Chinese commercial interests in the Pacific have been dominant, but are now being challenged by South American and Mexican cartels – and in some cases are collaborating with them. Mexican cartels have been identified as active in Australia over the past decade<sup>57</sup> and US government reports have detected growing links between Chinese organised crime syndicates and Mexican cartels.<sup>58</sup>

### **Criminal deportees**

The criminal deportee policies of Australia, New Zealand, and the United States are a significant contributor to the growth in transnational crime in the Pacific.<sup>59</sup> The majority of deportees from these countries have criminal records and are removed to Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands. A 2014 study reported that most deportees removed to the Pacific are male, between the ages of 25 and 35, on average having spent more than 12 years away from their country of citizenship, and are incarcerated for an average of four years in the host country, with a large number separated from families.<sup>60</sup>

Available data on the deportees is not comprehensive. Deportations from Australia are difficult to disaggregate. Department of Home Affairs statistics for the period from 1 July 2019 to 30 June 2020 cited 1021 visa cancellations under Section 501, including 477 New Zealanders and 16 Fijians. The majority of offences were drug related (234), followed by assault (169).<sup>61</sup> Deportations and removals from New Zealand under the Immigration Act (2009) to the Pacific Islands<sup>62</sup> between 2013 and 2018 totalled 1040. Of the deportations, 400 were due to criminal convictions, and 640 were for non-criminal reasons.<sup>63</sup> The most common Pacific destinations for deportees are Samoa (145 in five years), Tonga (120), and Fiji (113).

Data from the United States is similarly difficult to disaggregate, however between 2004 and 2018, 321 individuals were deported to Fiji, 136 to Samoa, and 350 to Tonga.<sup>64</sup> The data on deportees to US “compact of association” territories — the Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau — is incomplete, but number 61, 514, and 101 deportations respectively.<sup>65</sup> In the 2017–18 period, US-based deportees were being returned to the Pacific in increasing numbers, with the Federated States of Micronesia being notified at least once a week of pending deportations.<sup>66</sup> Overall, more than 3500 Pacific nationals were deported from Australia, New Zealand, and the United States between 2004 and 2020. The number is likely far higher given the gaps in reporting.

Barriers to reintegration for these deportees are significant.<sup>67</sup> For example, it is unclear which country — host or recipient — bears responsibility for providing resettlement support. Communication between the departing countries and receiving countries is inadequate. As a Tongan Police spokesperson noted: “Australia doesn’t advise us when they send deportees to Tonga.”<sup>68</sup> A Tongan deportee from New Zealand said, “I’ve never been here before [as an adult]. I don’t speak the language. I grew up as a Kiwi. I don’t know how to live here. I just want to go home.”<sup>69</sup>

The lack of support for deportees in their home countries means many vulnerable individuals turn (or return) to crime and drug smuggling. This is particularly apparent when deportees are not accepted or integrated into local communities<sup>70</sup> and are forced to create their own support mechanisms and power structures. A number of deportees bring their links to the gangs and diaspora from their host countries into the Pacific.<sup>71</sup>

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The PTCN has assessed the criminal deportee threat as steady due to improved information exchange and legislative reform, which has assisted in better managing the associated risks.<sup>72</sup> Despite this, given the small population sizes of Pacific countries and territories, the impact on communities and the state itself of these deportations can be significant.<sup>73</sup>

UNESCO research in Samoa and Tonga revealed that 83 per cent of deportees had been incarcerated due to gang activities during their adolescence in the host country and 37 per cent had been investigated or charged following deportation. Of those, almost half had served prison time.<sup>74</sup> The PTCN notes instances in Fiji and Samoa of offenders who were originally deported for drug-related convictions being arrested in their home countries for drug trafficking offences.<sup>75</sup> Dependence on remittances, difficulty obtaining employment, the challenges of integration, and cultural alienation are all contributing factors. According to one Pacific Islands official, “the deportees started the fire, but now the fire is out of control”<sup>76</sup> with locals involved at all levels of importation, facilitation, sales, and trafficking.

The deportee policies of Australia, New Zealand, and the United States undermine, and are in direct contradiction with, their stated foreign policy objectives of strengthening the stability and prosperity of the region. As a member of a Tongan civil society organisation argued, “New Zealand, Australia, and America are exporting their problems to us. How does that build trust between our countries?”<sup>77</sup>

Covid-19 and the closure of borders has disrupted the deportation of criminals to the Pacific. In 2021, New Zealand had 32 criminal deportees awaiting removal; the majority for violent offences.<sup>78</sup> What is clear is that criminal deportation policies need reviewing in light of the regional economic impact of the pandemic, and their role in the growth of local actors involved in transnational criminal organisations.<sup>79</sup>

## THE IMPACT ON SECURITY AND SOCIETIES IN THE PACIFIC

### Narco-corruption

Corruption remains a critical challenge to governance and an obstacle to development in the Pacific.<sup>80</sup> The infiltration of key government agencies and departments, corruption of public officials, and tactics from coercion to intimidation and outright violence are integral components of illicit drug markets.

In the Pacific, narco-corruption has compromised institutions and individuals across key agencies such as customs, police, and immigration; and undermined the rule of law. In 2019, for example, Tonga's "war on drugs" resulted in the arrests of a Tongan senior customs official and a police officer who were facilitating trafficking in methamphetamine, cocaine, and illegal firearms from the United States.<sup>81</sup> It is likely there are far more examples. Family networks and obligations, low wages, and intimidation tactics are all key enablers for corruption. As a young Tongan customs officer stated:

*Even if a customs officer is not involved in corrupt activities and does not want to be involved, you have criminals who have shipments coming in and the customs officer is aware of it and wants to stop the shipment coming in, but the criminals will use intimidation tactics, which customs officials can't counter due to the involvement of extended family.<sup>82</sup>*

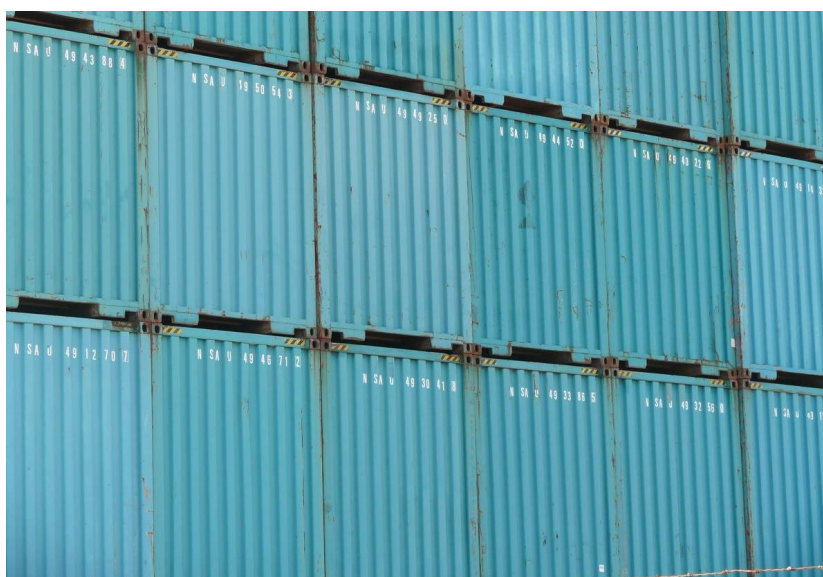
Another customs officer cited the network of kinship as an enabling dynamic as well as distrust of police: "Everyone knows who is connected to who; they have to ignore [the criminal activity] because they don't trust that police can help because they [the criminals] know."<sup>83</sup>

A third officer highlighted the sense of powerlessness: "We are not corrupt, there's just nothing we can do...we can't trust our own organisation...and we have to keep our families safe."<sup>84</sup>

The work of Tonga's anti-drug taskforce has led to the suspension of 28 police officers, with Tonga's Police Minister, Mateni Tapueluelu, warning others with status in Tongan society: "Don't think you can sit on some high places and think you're too high for the police to reach, it's just a matter of time. You deal, you pay."<sup>85</sup>

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Papua New Guinea's Police Commissioner, David Manning, has similarly highlighted the complicity of RPNGC officers, affirming that "there are criminals in uniform" and that he is committed to ridding the force of these elements.<sup>86</sup> Concerns about the infiltration of criminals into security and law enforcement agencies are also shared by the head of Fiji's Police Drug Intelligence Unit, Anare Masitabua.<sup>87</sup>



*The Pacific is dependent on maritime shipping with more than 80 per cent of all international cargo transported by ship. Containerisation is one of the primary modes of trafficking illicit drugs in the Pacific (Tina Marie/Flickr)*

### **Shadow economies and alternative power structures**

The drug trade in the Pacific has created shadow economies and contributed to the creation of criminal hierarchies, which undermine the balance of power between traditional authority, church, and state. For example, a family member profiting from crime can supplant the traditional head of the family by exercising economic influence within the family and the village by buying farming equipment, gifting large amounts of money for weddings and funerals, and lending money.<sup>88</sup>

Criminal actors and groups have created sub-cultures and power structures with their own leaders and hierarchies, rules, and regulations, effectively diffusing power away from legitimate sources of authority. This is evident in the laundering of money through local businesses, the use of import and export businesses as fronts for illicit drug trafficking, and the large amounts of money offered as gifts and donations to influential members of communities to start businesses or undertake community projects.<sup>89</sup> Shadow economies create economic

possibilities, broker political power, establish cultures, and create new, sometimes hybrid, forms of authority.<sup>90</sup> In the Pacific, the lines can become blurred between the formal, and importantly, informal, and shadow economies.

The effect on the Pacific's traditional societies is significant. Tongan church leaders believe the decreasing number of young men in church congregations is due to high levels of involvement in drug-related crime and increased usage of illicit drugs in the demographic, all of which leads to a sense of "shame" and "separation within communities".<sup>91</sup> Criminal power structures, dependent on fear, money, and addiction, have contributed to the erosion of the moral authority of traditional sources of power. As one traditional Tongan leader stated:

*Families are angry with young people stealing family mats et cetera to sell or swap for drugs ... this shames families within communities ... having a child or parent on drugs impacts the family's status in the community...it's not just the individual but the family which is impacted and can lead to families pulling away from village life.*<sup>92</sup>

Conversely, robust traditional power structures, such as village authorities and the church, can be a frontline against the drug trade. Village councils in Samoa, for example, known for supporting police conducting gun amnesties, have partnered with police to bolster anti-drug campaigning. Then Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Lupesoliai Sailele Malielegaoi noted in 2015 that "in some villages, they have zero tolerance for these [drug-related] activities and have imposed stiff penalties — including banishment".<sup>93</sup>

However, there are limits to the effectiveness of community and church organisations in combating drug-related crime. These include moral and religious sensitivities on certain topics, and the patriarchal nature of traditional and church hierarchies that inhibits leaders from engaging with vulnerable women and girls. In other cases, village councils have also been reluctant to become involved where family members were implicated.

### **Health security is a human security issue**

Rising drug addiction in the Pacific has contributed to an increase in mental health issues and risky sexual behaviours. Intravenous drug use has led to a rise in HIV/AIDS and other communicable diseases.<sup>94</sup> In Tonga, 30–40 per cent of mental health hospital admissions have been linked to drug addiction.<sup>95</sup> Many Pacific health systems lack the

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*There is also a clear correlation between drug usage and domestic violence; and the incidence of drug-related domestic violence in the Pacific is rising.*

necessary resources to provide appropriate and qualified treatment to combat the addiction and the health complications caused by methamphetamine use.<sup>96</sup>

The Salvation Army in Tonga has seen an increasing number of women seeking drug addiction counselling, noting that rising drug use (particularly methamphetamine) has correlated with a cultural disapproval of women consuming alcohol.<sup>97</sup> A health advocate in Fiji cited increasing numbers of girls and young women prostituting or exchanging sexual favours for drugs.<sup>98</sup> Teachers and parents in Tonga, for example, have reported that “the use of [methamphetamine] in Tonga is rampant — to the point where dealers are encouraging kids to try it because they know they’ll have a client for life”.<sup>99</sup>

Drug awareness, recovery, and rehabilitation programs are either non-existent or ill-equipped to respond to the rapid increase in drug addiction. The Salvation Army Alcohol and Drugs Awareness Centre (ADAC) conducts the only recovery and rehabilitation program in Tonga. In 2018, ADAC reported the average age of people committing alcohol and drug-related crime was 15, compared with 22 in 2000, and 49 in 1950.<sup>100</sup> The Samoan addiction services program, funded by the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, has worked with more than 330 clients between 2018 and 2019.<sup>101</sup>

There is also a clear correlation between drug usage and domestic violence; and the incidence of drug-related domestic violence in the Pacific is rising. Survivors and their families are often intimidated into silence — not just by the perpetrators, but also by their affiliates.<sup>102</sup> The rise of methamphetamine use has also increased the severity and brutality of the violence.<sup>103</sup> As Ned Cook, leader at Tonga’s Salvation Army ADAC, stated in February 2019: “We are used to dealing with alcohol-related violence; drug-related violence is completely different, we are unprepared.”<sup>104</sup>

Ned Cook was murdered in Nuku’alofa, Tonga, on 17 May 2020. As the only trained drug counsellor in Tonga with expertise in methamphetamine abuse and recovery, Cook was on the frontline of Tonga’s war on drugs. As he increasingly confronted the drug trade, the death threats against him multiplied. His murder reflects the scale and complexity of challenges that Tonga confronts in addressing drug crime.<sup>105</sup>

## THE REGIONAL RESPONSE

Recognising the growing threat of the Pacific drug trade as well as other transnational crimes, the region has rapidly elevated its response over the past three years. However, limited policing capacity means that those responses are often insufficient.<sup>106</sup> As Fiji's Commissioner of Police, Brigadier General Sitiveni Qiliho, argues: "Just as crime is borderless, our approach therefore must not be confined to our borders, but aligned to a regional and international level if we are to effectively combat serious and transnational crime."<sup>107</sup>

### Regional security architecture

A range of regional mechanisms have been established to combat transnational crime, including the 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security, the Pacific Transnational Crime Network, and the Pacific Methamphetamine Action Plan. The Boe Declaration recognises transnational crime as one of four primary security threats to the region, as did earlier regional security declarations,<sup>108</sup> although their limited success demonstrates the need for corresponding national policies and political will. The Boe Declaration's Action Plan<sup>109</sup> may prove better at aligning regional and national-level efforts. It identifies eight proposed actions to combat transnational crime in the Pacific, ranging from strengthening national capacities to increasing information sharing.<sup>110</sup>

Tonga's national-level response is an example. In June 2019, Tonga requested assistance from the PIF Secretariat to draft its national drug policy. This is the first time a Forum member has requested assistance from the PIF to address drug-related issues and is a test case for both PIF leadership and oversight in supporting national-level policy and legislative initiatives.

### Regional governance

Governance and implementation of the Boe Declaration Action Plan is overseen by several regional organisations. The Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police (PICP) is the umbrella organisation representing 21 Pacific countries and territories with its secretariat based in Wellington, New Zealand.

The Pacific Transnational Crime Network (PTCN) consists of 28 Transnational Crime Units located across 20 Pacific countries, and leads regional efforts on transnational crime. The PTCN is supported

*"Just as crime is borderless, our approach therefore must not be confined to our borders, but aligned to a regional and international level if we are to effectively combat serious and transnational crime."*

*In a show of solidarity in 2018, these three organisations representing more than 60 national Pacific Islands law enforcement agencies signed a Declaration of Partnership.*

by the Australian Federal Police and New Zealand Police. Its secretariat, the Pacific Transnational Crime Coordination Centre (PTCCC) is based in Apia, Samoa, and performs the central coordination role of managing, enhancing, and disseminating law enforcement intelligence products produced by the PTCCC, PTCN member countries, and other international law enforcement partners. The PTCCC is tasked with producing the annual PTCN Transnational Crime Assessment to provide a broad operational-level overview of transnational crime across the region. The PTCCC also produces a suite of intelligence products to specifically inform the law enforcement community of the current trends in the Pacific. The PTCCC works closely with those law enforcement organisations that also have intelligence networks for information sharing, including the Pacific Immigration Development Community (PIDC) and the Oceania Customs Organisation (OCO).<sup>111</sup>

In a show of solidarity in 2018, these three organisations representing more than 60 national Pacific Islands law enforcement agencies signed a Declaration of Partnership.<sup>112</sup> The Declaration provides a formal foundation for collaboration to combat transnational and organised crime and enhance border security in the Pacific. Citing the Declaration, the former Executive Director of the PICP Secretariat, Superintendent Carl McLennan, emphasised the importance of collaboration:

The Declaration sends a strong and clear message of the intent of the three organisations and provides a roadmap for us to implement going forward. Now we need to ensure that we develop activities and promote a culture of multi-agency collaboration at both national and regional levels.<sup>113</sup>

The PICP’s Pacific Methamphetamine Action Plan sets out several key goals: improving border security by collaborating with Pacific partners and their border enforcement agencies; leveraging existing government programs and resources; and focusing on prevention by delivering training to impede — and in some Pacific Islands countries mitigate — the spread of methamphetamine within the region.<sup>114</sup>

The Action Plan also highlights the importance of holistic public health and community-driven responses to drug crime and addiction. However, such responses are constrained by the anaemic public health systems in the Pacific, which struggle to provide basic health services, let alone address the complex challenges of drug addiction rehabilitation and recovery.

Unlike the PTCCC, which no longer characterises criminal deportees and outlaw motorcycle gangs as rising threats, the Action Plan argues that these two groups may increase the drug trafficking threat in the region.<sup>115</sup> This reveals a critical disconnect in perceptions about the level and nature of threat posed by different criminal actors and a lack of trust in regional law enforcement to effectively curtail drug trafficking. This lack of trust is fuelled by frustration that the Pacific is often treated as the source of “the problem”,<sup>116</sup> instead of focusing on Australian and New Zealand drug markets and criminal deportee policies that enable local and transnational criminal activities.

The Transnational, Serious and Organised Crime (TSOC) Pacific Taskforce, launched in 2019 following discussions at the PICP Meeting in Nauru in August 2018, involves the AFP, New Zealand Police, Fiji Police Force, and Tonga Police. The purpose of the TSOC Pacific Taskforce is to increase targeting capabilities, improve sharing of operational intelligence, and strengthen cooperation to conduct expanded and complex investigations.

### Donor responses

Australia, New Zealand, and the United States are the principal donors combating the illicit drug trade in the Pacific and have increased their assistance bilaterally to Pacific states and multilaterally through regional efforts to combat drug trafficking over the past three years.

Australia and New Zealand collectively provide support to the PICP, PTCCC, and the TSOC. Other examples include Australia’s AU\$2 billion Pacific Maritime Security Program, the successor to the Pacific Patrol Boat Program, which was created in the 1980s to provide Guardian-class patrol boats to 12 Pacific countries to support maritime and aerial surveillance and interdiction. The US Drug Enforcement Administration has provided training to Fijian police and customs officials, and the US Diplomatic Security Service has provided agents from the US embassy in Suva to run drug awareness sessions with students and parents.<sup>117</sup> In 2019, during Operation Aiga, the US Coast Guard deployed a cutter to Samoa for six months to replace the Guardian-class *Nafanua*, which included ship rider arrangements and exploration of the prospect of permanent coast guard basing in American Samoa.<sup>118</sup>

*Australia, New Zealand, and the United States are the principal donors combating the illicit drug trade in the Pacific and have increased their assistance bilaterally to Pacific states.*





*The US Coast Guard conducts a patrol in and around American Samoa, covering 8169 nautical miles, 14 October 2021 (PACOM)*

There are also significant partners within the Pacific, albeit with a limited footprint. Fiji has a memorandum of understanding with Indonesia’s National Narcotics Board to facilitate intelligence sharing — building on earlier agreements with Indonesia to provide training and information sharing;<sup>119</sup> and since 2018, Fiji has sought counter-narcotics training from Chinese law enforcement.<sup>120</sup> While these initiatives are relatively minor compared to Australian and New Zealand programs, concerns over interoperability have been raised.<sup>121</sup> Chinese initiatives are also likely viewed in the broader context of strategic competition in the Pacific, however to do so potentially accords them with greater success than warranted. The intersection between transnational crime and grey-zone activities is, however, an issue that warrants increased attention.

### **Gaps and limitations**

Despite the regional, subregional, and donor actions that draw on a “criminal justice supply-chain intervention approach”<sup>122</sup> to address drug-related crime, challenges remain. These range from a lack of information sharing, inadequate equipment, and limited resources to issues of local corruption and an increasingly crowded security sector.

The PTCCC has concluded that Pacific Islands law enforcement officers have a limited understanding of the drug trade and its impacts on public health,<sup>123</sup> which is affecting the quality of the policing and health responses.

Differing threat perceptions about the risks posed by illicit drugs among various regional and local institutions are also impairing efforts. Law enforcement and security sector specialists in Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji have articulated their frustration about inadequate intelligence sharing between and across agencies,<sup>124</sup> citing lack of reciprocation between the PTCCC and the national-level Transnational Crime Units.<sup>125</sup> One customs official expressed frustration with the lack of intelligence sharing even between his own national agencies, forcing him to rely on intelligence from his customs investigators rather than the police.<sup>126</sup> This issue is common across the region. It is unclear yet whether the addition of facilities such as the Australian-led Pacific Fusion Centre (PFC) will successfully address the challenge.

National agencies cite problems with insufficient equipment, lack of logistical support, and inadequate capacity-building efforts. With new security sector donors such as China providing assistance, interoperability gaps have opened between Australian, New Zealand, and US law enforcement and Pacific law enforcement.<sup>127</sup> Joint operations with traditional partners are critical for developing capacity and cross-border interoperability, as are culturally appropriate engagement and cultural training for Australian and Pakeha New Zealand police officers.

A further deficiency is the inability to test illicit drugs, which impedes convictions. As a Tongan official stated:

*For a long time, drug cases wouldn't go to court because Pacific Island states had to pay for the drugs to be tested back in New Zealand and the cost was borne by the Pacific Island states, so only drugs from cases which they thought they would get a conviction out of would be sent back to New Zealand. This could also be used as an excuse not to prosecute officials or those with connections.<sup>128</sup>*

Moreover, as the PTCN has identified, Pacific law enforcement agencies face systemic challenges in investigating financial crime, including money laundering. Limited resources and capacity have impeded financial investigations, increasing both the vulnerability to and likelihood of financial crime not being properly detected or reported within the region.<sup>129</sup>

*With new security sector donors such as China providing assistance, interoperability gaps have opened between Australian, New Zealand, and US law enforcement and Pacific law enforcement.*

## CONCLUSION: A PACIFIC-LED, PARTNER-SUPPORTED APPROACH

*Transnational drug crime is a protracted problem, but not one that is of the Pacific's own making — rather the region is a casualty of the criminal greed of organised crime and the drug appetite of Australia and New Zealand.*

The illicit drug trade is proving to be one of the most serious security issues facing the Pacific. The region is now both a trafficking destination and a production site — notably for local markets — as well as a thoroughfare. As a result, indigenous criminal networks have emerged in partnership with transnational criminal organisations. Moreover, the economic fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic is exacerbating existing vulnerabilities in the Pacific, which transnational criminal organisations and local crime actors are exploiting.

In response to this threat, partners, particularly Australia and New Zealand, have stepped up initiatives to counter transnational crime over the past three years. Working closely with Pacific governments and societies, the international collaboration has led to a number of significant drug hauls in the region and a growing awareness of the complexities associated with countering transnational crime in the Pacific.

The consensus among Pacific law enforcement officers, security officials, civil society, and government officials is that successful responses to transnational crime and drugs need to be Pacific-led and partner-supported. As one official argued: “No one knows the Pacific like the Pacific...this concept must be developed and driven by the Pacific with the support and expertise of the Pacific's traditional partners.” Responses also need to be calibrated to particular circumstances in individual Pacific states. Tonga's Chief of Defence Staff emphasised that, “the Pacific is not the arc of instability but the arc of diversity, and one solution or one approach will not work in every Pacific island”.<sup>130</sup>

Transnational drug crime is a protracted problem, but not one that is of the Pacific's own making — rather the region is a casualty of the criminal greed of organised crime and the drug appetite of Australia and New Zealand. The response by Pacific states and traditional partners must be rapid, proactive, and adaptive. Conventional policing initiatives in the Pacific demonstrate that the “one size fits all” response will not work in such a diverse and intricate region. Innovative strategies are required now, or parts of the Pacific run the risk of becoming “semi-narco” regions due to their position between transnational criminal syndicates originating in Asia and the Americas, and the lucrative drug markets of Australia and New Zealand.

## NOTES

*Dedicated to Ned Cook, Salvation Army, killed in Nuku'alofa, Tonga, 20 May 2020.*

This analysis is informed by a desk-based literature review and interviews with government officials, regional and national law enforcement agencies, civil society, regional organisations, academia, and the private sector. Interviews were conducted in Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Tonga, Vanuatu, Samoa, Hawai'i, Australia, and New Zealand during the period November 2018 to December 2019. Due to the highly sensitive subject matter and the implications for individuals and communities, some interview participants have not been identified.

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**Cover image:** Flags from the Pacific Islands countries fly on the final day of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Nauru-Pacific Summit, 5 September 2018. On this day, PIF members signed a security agreement promoting cooperation on issues such as transnational crime, illegal fishing and cybercrime. The agreement, called the Boe Declaration, also recognised the need for joint action on “non-traditional” threats, primarily climate change (Mike Leyral/AFP via Getty Images)

- <sup>1</sup> This analysis uses the term “transnational crime” as distinct from “transnational organised crime” following Bruinsma’s clarification that “transnational crime is not synonymous with organised crime, even when organised crime groups are very active crossing borders with their crimes. States, governments, armies or business corporations, and many entrepreneurial individuals also have a long tradition in committing and facilitating transnational crimes.” See Gerben Bruinsma, *Histories of Transnational Crime* (New York: Springer, 2015), Chapter 1: Criminology and Transnational Crime, 1.
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<sup>71</sup> For example, from the United States alone, street gangs such as the Tongan Crip Gang (TCG), the Sons of Samoa (SOS), Tongan Style Gangsters (TSG), Salt Lake Posse (Tongans and Samoans), Park Village Crip (PVC), Samoan Pride Gangsters (SPG), the Baby Regulators, and Park Village Compton Crips have all had members deported back to the Pacific.

<sup>72</sup> Pacific Transnational Crime Network, *Transnational Crime Assessment 2017–2018*, 17; Interview with Tongan police officer, Nuku'alofa, Tonga, 27 February 2019.

<sup>73</sup> Tim Fadgen, Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand's Deportation Policy and Practice in Regional Context, Australian Outlook, Australian Institute of International Affairs, 20 April 2021, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/australia-and-aotearoa-new-zealands-deportation-policy-and-practice-in-regional-context/>; Henrietta McNeill, “Oceania's 'Crimmigration Creep': Are Deportation and Reintegration Norms being Diffused?”, *Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 54, No. 3, 305–322.

<sup>74</sup> Natalie Pereira, Return[ed] to Paradise. The Deportation Experience in Samoa and Tonga, Policy Papers 21, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.

<sup>75</sup> Pacific Transnational Crime Network, *Transnational Crime Assessment 2017–2018*, 17.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Pacific Islands official, Suva, 2019.

- <sup>77</sup> Interview with Tongan civil society member, Nuku'alofa, Tonga, 27 February 2019.
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- <sup>84</sup> Ibid.
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jose Sousa-Santos

Jose Sousa-Santos is the Pacific Policy Fellow at the Australia Pacific Security College and managing director of Strategika Group. His area of expertise and research is transnational crime, security, and non-state actors in the Pacific Islands and Southeast Asia. In June 2021, he was appointed to the Global Initiative against Transnational Crime panel of experts. Sousa-Santos has previously held positions as the subject matter expert (crime-terror nexus) with the executive cadre for the United States Pacific Command and Special Operations Command Pacific 'Cooperation Against Transnational Threats' programme and Pacific Area Security Sector Working Group (2015–2019); the Senior Associate Regional Security Southeast Asia and the Pacific at Victoria University (2019–2020); and in 2020 was a Visiting Fellow with the Australian National University Cyber Institute. Prior to this, Sousa-Santos has held roles as an analyst with the New Zealand Police National Intelligence Centre, as an adviser on conflict mediation and transformation to HE Dr Jose Ramos-Horta during his terms as prime minister and president, and as a lead analyst with the United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT) Joint Mission Analysis Centre focussed on conflict, non-state actors and spoilers. He formerly served with the Australian Defence Force. Sousa-Santos is currently undertaking doctoral studies at Massey University on the nexus between transnational crime and climate insecurity in the Pacific Islands region.

# LOWY INSTITUTE

31 Bligh Street  
Sydney NSW 2000

Tel. +61 2 8238 9000  
Fax +61 2 8238 9005

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