Emerging Pacific Drug Economies: Perspectives from Community Voices

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my late father Peniamina Meni-Trood and my late mother Aolipa Laima Meni-Trood. My first teachers in life. You both emphasised the importance of education and your love, guidance and sacrifices have shaped who I am today. My life is the manifestation of your prayers, and I hope that I am continuing to make you both proud.

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"O le tele of sulu, e maua ai figota"
More torches result in a bigger catch.

First and foremost, I want to thank God for His guidance and love on this journey - for it was His strength that carried me through this journey. Although I am undeserving, His love has walked along side me and carried me when I needed it most. In keeping with Fa'aSāmoa, I begin with gratitude to God and end with praise to Him.

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Fa'afetai, fa'afetai lava.

Contents

Abstract

This thesis explores the intersection between Pacific communities and emerging illicit drug economies in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Illicit drug economies around the world often share similar structural features, most notably their reliance on the engagement of marginalised and socio-economically disadvantaged communities. While there is limited published research on the specific nature of the illicit drug economy in Aotearoa, New Zealand, emerging evidence suggests that Pacific communities possess both historical and contemporary characteristics common to those involved in drug economies elsewhere. The aim of this project is therefore to explore how illicit drug economies are perceived, navigated, and experienced within Pacific communities in Aotearoa.

Grounded in Pacific research methodologies – Talanoa and Fonua – and informed by a thematic analysis, this project drew on interviews with six community members identifying either as elders or young adults of Samoan and Tongan descent. The interviews were structured to investigate three core areas central to answering the project aims: community awareness and knowledge of drug economies; the contextual drivers that sustain illicit activities; and the socio-economic and cultural ramifications of engagement.

Findings showed that participants held a pragmatic awareness of emerging drug ecosystems, rooted in Pacific community identity and collective values that foster high-trust environments. Historical economic marginalisation, limited employment and social opportunities, and urgent survival needs were identified as key drivers' motivating Pacific community engagement in these drug economies. Participants described the complex balance between the perceived benefits of engagement – such as access to resources – and the significant legal risks and social costs involved.

The research illustrates that Pacific communities fill a role in the existing national drug economy of Aotearoa that is filled by communities in other countries with similar histories of structural and social exclusion and with local social networks. The combination of these two factors extends existing literature on illicit markets by applying models such as the "Hubs and Haven" model to Pacific contexts. While the study provides culturally grounded insights, limitations include a small and geographically specific sample and the ethical and practical constraints of accessing individuals directly involved in illicit activities. Future research should examine long-term impacts, assess community interventions, and explore the structural inequalities across Pacific diaspora contexts. These findings have implications for both policy and practice,

advocating for interventions that are culturally responsive, community-led, and should address the root socio-economic conditions that sustain illicit economies.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The landscape of illicit drug markets is complex and multifaceted, shaped by a variety of socio-economic, cultural, and political factors. Understanding the underlying drivers of involvement in these markets, particularly within marginalized communities, is essential for both the development of policies to support affected communities and for community interventions to reduce potential harm from these illicit markets. This thesis explores the contextual drivers of illicit market participation, focusing on Pacific communities in New Zealand, where socio-economic disparities and systemic marginalization have contributed to the prevalence of such markets.

Background and genesis

This exploration of the emerging drug economy within Pacific communities has its origins in a collaborative research project with the New Zealand Drug Foundation. Initially conceived to understand the landscape of Pacific drug use and the associate harms, the project swiftly underwent a transformative journey that was prompted by the identification of community priorities by Pacific stakeholders. What began as an attempt to identify the strengths and weaknesses in existing policy responses, to formulate recommendations, pivoted towards the more urgent concern being expressed by members of the community: the escalating involvement of young people in the illicit drug market and the flow on results of these connections.

Through a series of talanoa interviews with Pacific community members, it became apparent that the prevailing narratives and priorities surrounding Pacific drug use were vastly different from the New Zealand Drug Foundation's initial assumptions. This insight necessitated changing the focus to align the scope of the project with the community's needs. Consequently, the focus transitioned from patterns of drug use towards addressing the challenges posed by the evolving dynamics of drug involvement among Pacific communities.

From this new perspective, the project was able to produce four key findings that underscored the urgency and complexity of the issue. Firstly, the emergence of what was termed the "Pacific Drug Highway" (Sousa-Santos, 2022) highlighted the increased accessibility and prevalence of drugs within Pacific communities, which was facilitated by shifts in international trade routes. Secondly, it became clear that the punitive "tough on drug" policies (Crossin et al, 2022; Sousa-Santos, 2022) exacerbated the issue through creating illicit drug markets, disproportionately impacting Pacific communities in both Aotearoa and in the Pacific Islands. Thirdly, the New Zealand Drug Foundation project highlighted the need for attention to Pacific health and that inadequate research in the area of drug and addiction hindered efforts to comprehend the

patterns of drug use and associated harms within Pacific communities. Lastly, the project shed light on a new economic paradigm wherein the illicit drug trade served as a means of economic empowerment and development for Pacific peoples in Aotearoa, offering a precarious form of upward mobility amidst the pervasive challenges faced by Pacific peoples.

In the light of these findings, the transition from the preliminary New Zealand Drug Foundation project to the current project reflects a critical progression aimed at confronting the pressing challenges faced by Pacific communities regarding drug use and its economic implications.

Transition to current thesis

The transition from the preliminary New Zealand Drug Foundation project to the current thesis represents a natural evolution driven by an imperative to understand the emergent challenges faced by Pacific communities in the realm of drug use and its economic implications. Building upon the foundational insights gained from the initial project, this thesis embarks on an exploration of underlying dynamics and complexities surrounding drugs as a catalyst for economic development within Pacific contexts. This shift highlighted the importance of understanding the drivers, impacts and implications of the expanding illicit drug economy.

The thesis seeks to delve beyond surface-level observations to explore the underlying mechanisms shaping the evolving drug landscape within Pacific communities. This approach entails not only understanding the socio-economic and cultural factors driving participation in the drug trade but also unpacking the broader implications for community well-being, resilience and socio-economic development. By delving into the complexities associated with the nexus between drugs and economic development within Pacific communities this thesis endeavours to offer insights that can inform targeted interventions, policies, and strategies aimed at addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by the growing drug economy.

Research Aims and Objectives

The overarching aim of this thesis was to develop a nuanced understanding of emerging drug economies within Pacific communities located in Auckland and Wellington. This aim was operationalised through three primary objectives:

1. Assessing Awareness and Knowledge: Investigating the depth of community understanding regarding drug economies, highlighting the prevailing perceptions and misconceptions.
2. Identifying Drivers: Exploring the multifaceted factors contributing to the growth and sustenance of these illicit economies, including socio-economic, cultural, and geopolitical influences.

3. Evaluating Impact: Examining the socio-economic and cultural ramifications on Pacific communities, discerning both the intended and unintended consequences of involvement in the drug trade.

Methodology and Method

The qualitative methodological approach adopted in this research, draws upon principles of Pacifica inquiry, participatory research and community engagement. It seeks to centre the voices and experiences of Pacific communities, and to ensure their active involvement throughout the research process. Given that the participants are of Pacific descent, the Talanoa and Fonua methodologies offer culturally grounded approaches to qualitative research, particularly within Pacific research contexts. Talanoa, meaning conversation emphasises open dialogue and storytelling, fostering trust and relational engagement between researchers and participants. Fonua, meaning "land" in Tongan, provides a framework that integrates ecological, cultural, and social dimensions, highlighting the interconnectedness of people, their communities, and their environment. Fonua methodology prioritises sustainability and well-being, reflecting the deep cultural ties to the land and advocating for research practices that respects local customs and promote well-being. Together, these methodologies emphasise the importance of building relationships, respecting cultural contexts, and considering the broader social, cultural, and environmental factors in research.

In this research project, face-to-face talanoa sessions were conducted with six participants – five located in Auckland and one in Wellington – enabling in-depth conversations that reflected lived experiences and perspectives of those engaged in the study. The data generated from these sessions were subsequently analysed using thematic analysis - a tool that offers a systematic and iterative approach to identifying, analysing, and interoperating patterns and themes within the qualitative data.

Key Findings

The findings address the thesis objectives outlined by integrating insights gathered from interviews. The exploration of the emerging drug economy within Pacific communities is organised around the following overarching themes:

1. Community identity provides the context for emerging drug ecosystems
2. Contextual drivers of illicit markets
3. The cost and benefit of engagement in illicit drug market

By synthesising the key findings and theorical insights from the literature, this thesis offers an understanding of the complex dynamics of drugs as a catalyst for economic development and

social strain within the context of Pacific communities. The following section provides an overview of the structure of the thesis.

Overview of the structure of the thesis

The first chapter introduces the thesis, outlines the research aims, summarises the research design, key findings.

Chapter two presents a literature review that serves as the foundation upon which the research is built, offering a comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge relevant to emerging drug economies. The literature review provides a nuanced understanding of the historical and contemporary context of Pacific peoples in Aotearoa. It delves into the socio-cultural, economic, and political factors shaping the experiences of Pacific communities, contextualising their interactions with drugs and the broader implications for community well-being.

Chapter three presents the methodology and methods utilised in this project. It provides an overview of the epistemological foundations of the thesis and of the research design including the principles of Pacifica inquiry, participatory research and community engagement that were key to data collection and data analysis.

Chapter four presents the findings from the research. Specifically, it highlights the critical themes that reflect drivers of Pacific community involvement in illicit drug markets evident in the interviews with Pacific community leaders and Pacific young adults.

Chapter five presents a discussion of the key findings from this project focusing on the contextual divers of illicit drug markings, including community identity and the emergence of transnational drug ecosystems in Aotearoa New Zealand. Keefe's (2018) work on hubs and havens is extended to the South Pacific and the advantages and disadvantages of engagement in illicit drug markets explored. The chapter concludes will recommendations, limitations, and suggestions for further research.

The following chapter provides a review of the literature.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review explores the use of drugs as a tool for economic development through exploring the emerging drug economies within Pacific communities in Aotearoa New Zealand. Increasing wealth within the Asia Pacific region has resulted in countries such as Australia and Aotearoa paying some of the highest global prices for illicit drugs such as cocaine, fentanyl, and methamphetamine (UNDOC, 2019) making them attractive markets for the international drug trade. However, there is a notable gap in the literature on how criminal organisations from across the Pacific work in collaboration to traffic illicit drugs to these distant but lucrative markers in Oceania. This literature review will provide an overview of current research on drug-related issues from a range of perspectives. Within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter 'Aotearoa'), Pacific communities form a significant portion of the country's population and contribute to the cultural diversity and social fabric. Like many minority communities, both nationally and internationally, Pacific peoples have not been immune to the socio-economic challenges that surround them and to the potential issues and opportunities posed by the drug trade, prompting the thesis to shift its focus from drug use to a more comprehensive look at the dynamics of drug markets. Findings from the literature review will illustrate that the historical intertwining of cultural values, migration patterns, social experiences, and socio-economic factors have contributed to the recent emergence of localised Pacific drug economies. Fourth, and finally, it is identified that the interconnectedness of drug markets and economic activity for Pacific communities in Aotearoa is a complex phenomenon that warrants investigation.

Before exploring the wider literature underpinning this area of research it is important to clarify an important factor in this thesis. Specifically, while illicit drug use and the sale of such drugs is illegal, this research does not imply moral judgement on the consumption or distribution of drugs. Instead, the aim of this study is to adopt a perspective that aims to explore and understand the local drug economy and the role of the Pacific community within this economy, while recognising that drug 'use' can result in both benefits and harms, depending on the context of use. To this end, the discussion of drug consumption and distribution is conducted from the stance of an objective observer rather than reflecting a potential social, moral or political bias within observations.

Pacific People

It is essential that, prior to exploring the nature of the drug economy within the Pacific community, we explore what the history of Pacific communities in Aotearoa, and even more importantly, what it means to be Pacific. The emergence of the term "Pacific" reflects the increased migration and settlement of Pacific Islanders from the mid-20th century and onwards (Statistics New Zealand

and Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, 2010). The adoption of the term Pacific acknowledges the shared geographical and cultural ties that these communities have with the Pacific Ocean (Tukuitonga, 2013). Over time, the meaning of this term used to describe people from Polynesian, Micronesian, and Melanesian countries has changed. Previously used as a homogenous term to describe anyone from the Pacific, the phrase has changed to recognise the distinct cultural heritage, language, traditions and experiences within Aotearoa's Pacific communities while also highlighting their relationships and commonalities as Pacific peoples (Manuela & Sibley, 2012; Statistics New Zealand and Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, 2010). This change in terminology shows that there is a now an improved understanding and respect for the different ethnic groups that form the communities within 'Pacific' enclaves, including their roles and identities (Enari & Haua, 2020). Within the context of Aotearoa, the term 'Pacific' now represents the group of diverse ethnicities and cultures that originate from the South Pacific Islands or Oceania. Specifically, those people who identify as Samoan, Cook Islands, Tongan, Niuen, Fijian, Tokelauan, Tuvaluan and Kiribati (Ministry of Social Development, 2016).

As of the 2023 New Zealand Census, the Pacific people's population is 442,632, comprising 8.9% of the total population (Statistics New Zealand, 2023). This represents a 16% increase from the 2018 census, where the Pacific population was 381,642 (Statistics New Zealand, 2023). Pacific peoples within Aotearoa are a vital part of the diverse cultural landscape and reflect one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in Aotearoa (Statistics New Zealand, 2020; Ministry of Social Development, 2016). The term Pacific peoples is fluid encompassing a wide range of identities, cultures and communities from the Pacific region. Despite this fluidity, Pacific people frequently identify strongly with their Island nation, their island, and their distinct village (Dunsford et al, 2011). A critical tenet in understanding Pacific peoples lies in recognising their inherent diversity, as the variegated ethnic groups comprising 'Pacific peoples' manifest in distinct traditions and cultural legacies and diverse migration and settlement patterns.

There is much debate surrounding the appropriateness of the use of term 'Pacific' or 'Pasifika' to categorise people with heritage linked to the Pacific Islands in Aotearoa (Enari & Fa'aea, 2020). It is largely argued that this term does not describe the distinctive, ethnic-specific nature of each Pacific nation (Enari & Fa'aea, 2020). However, for the purpose of this research the term Pacific will be used. in the context of this research, as it accurately reflects both the people and the South Pacific geographical location under discussion. Furthermore, the term best illustrates the interconnectedness and shared experiences of Pacific peoples within Aotearoa, and the collective sense of people, of the Pacific beyond individual island nation state identification.

Early Migration (1059s – 1990s)

Pacific scholar Epeli Hau'ofa (1993) underscored the enduring legacy of Pacific peoples' century old tradition of venturing across the Pacific Ocean in sear of opportunities. The early migration of Pacific peoples to countries along the Pacific rim exemplifies this time-honoured tradition and has led to a long history of migration to, and residence within, Aotearoa (Mallon et al, 2010; Hau'ofa, 1993). The recent movement of Pacific populations is closely tied to their colonial past. Colonial powers established transportation connections between themselves and the islands, facilitating both logistically and politically arrangements that enabled them to freely enter and travel through the small Pacific nations (Laupepe & Sauni, 2014). These connections in turn, spurred a significant international migration of Pacific peoples from their homelands as they were able to leverage these established links in order to migrate (Laupepe & Sauni, 2014). For example, Tahitians and New Caledonians, journeyed to France, while individuals from America Samoa relocated to America. Melanesians on the other hand tended to migrate to Australia (Leaupepe & Sauni, 2014). Those Pacific population who made their way to Aotearoa primarily originated from the closest Polynesian Islands – particularly those who had a history of colonial dependence on Aotearoa such as Samoa (Laupepe & Sauni, 2014), the Cook Islands and Nuie. Fijians and Tongans were the only Pacific people to not share a formal colonial history with Aotearoa (Teaiwa & Mallon, 2005).

The first wave of migration from the Pacific came during the 1950s, a period during which Aotearoa was experiencing a surge in labour demand due to work force shortages and a booming post-war economy (McDougall, 2020; Dunsford et al, 2011; Lee & Francis, 2009). According to the 1956 *Census of Population and Dwellings*¸ 9,416 people with one or more Pacific ethnicity resided in Aotearoa, the majority of whom were born in their respective Pacific Islands (Statistics New Zealand, 2020). While Aotearoa's economic boom facilitated this inward Pacific migration, it also coincided with increasing population growth in the Pacific Islands, and few employment opportunities, resulting in outward migration as family units travelled from across the Pacific to Aotearoa in search of work (Dunsford et al, 2011). Thus marked the start of the dream of Aotearoa as the land of "milk and honey" for Pacific people.

The 1960s marked a change in the relationship between Aotearoa and some of the Pacific Islands specifically concerning strides toward independence and the ramifications of decolonisation. Western Samoa went through a period of decolonisation and elected for complete independence from New Zealand in 1962 (Amaama, 2019). In response, the New Zealand government instituted an annual immigration quota for Samoan residents, and peoples from Samoa were no longer automatically granted citizenship and had to apply to for work or visitor visas to enter the country.

The Cook Islands and Niue opted for independence but to be in free association with New Zealand with Tokelau continuing being defined as a dependency of New Zealand (Teaiwa & Mallon, 2005). These changes resulted in a range of distinct pathways for access to, and citizenship of, Aotearoa dependent on which island in the Pacific one originated from. In parallel to these shifting citizenship pathways, and in response to the ongoing labour shortage during this period, the Aotearoa government began issuing three-month work permits to peoples from the Pacific countries such as Samoa and Tonga. As a result, the Pacific population of Aotearoa continued to swell with Pacific peoples taking on many of the unskilled or low-skilled jobs necessary to keep the country's economy booming (Mallon et al, 2012; Dunsford et al, 2011). By 1966, Pacific peoples made up approximately one percent of Aotearoa's population (Dunsford et al, 2011; Statistics New Zealand and Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, 2010).

The greatest concentration of Pacific population in the 1960s was in the inner-city area in Auckland, where one-third of the Pacific people resided (McCreary, 1965). During this time, Freemans Bay, along with Ponsonby, Grey Lynn, and other adjacent suburbs housed a significant proportion of Pacific peoples and Māori, drawn to these areas due to their proximity to employment opportunities matching the types of work Pacific people typically held (Anae, 2002; Dunsford et al, 2011; McCreary, 1965). The inner-city areas offered a greater number of employment opportunities. Pacific men found work in unskilled or semi-skilled positions in the wharves, railway yards, industrial plants, and waterfront markets, while others commuted to freezing works in areas like Mount Wellington (Dunsford et al, 2011; Anae, 2002; McCreary, 1965). Pacific women were often employed in rest homes in the inner-city or worked in the laundry department of Auckland Hospital, while others were homeworkers (Dunsford et al, 2011; Anae, 2002; McCreary, 1965). The inner-city areas were attractive for Pacific migrants due to their proximity to industries but were also attractive to the criminal world due to the transient population. As a result of the changing population demographic, these areas became known as the "slums" (McCreary, 1965). Discrimination against Pacific peoples who migrated to these "slums" was rampant and overt during this time (Dunsford et al, 2011; Anae, 2002; McCreary, 1965).

Well into the 1960s, Pacific peoples began to migrate beyond the Central Auckland area and relocated closer to places of employment in the city's periphery. This resulted in an increased number of Pacific peoples relocating and residing in Southern Auckland areas like Otara, where there was a large stock of state houses available (Dunsford et al, 2011; Anae, 2002; McCreary, 1965). Surveys conducted at the time highlighted a pattern that is still seen in the present. Pacific peoples, despite newer available state housing in both this and other locations, tended to live in

the remaining pockets of older homes (McCreary, 1965). Further, research at this time reported that Pacific peoples were living in crowded houses in comparison to their non-Pacific counterparts (McCreary, 1965). Beyond Auckland, it was reported that many Pacific peoples relocated to other city areas such as Wellington or to the small regions were there were specific and growing employment opportunities such as Tokoroa (McCreary, 1965). Regardless of the eventual site of relocation across Aotearoa, Pacific communities maintained strong connections with their families in the Islands. In this manner, the migration had a dual impact; (a) there was an opportunity to migrate to Aotearoa for employment while (b) also contributing to the economic growth of both Aotearoa and Pacific Island Nations (Liava'a, 1998; Bedford, 1994).

The 1970s marked a challenging chapter in the history of Pacific peoples in Aotearoa, reflecting two international changes that had severe impacts on Aotearoa's economic climate. First, in 1973 the United Kingdom (UK) joined the European Economic Community (McDougall, 2021; McDougall, 2020). This development had a significant impact on Aotearoa's export economy, as the UK's entry into the European Union's single-market significantly reduced Aotearoa's ability to trade with the UK (McDougall, 2021; McDougall, 2020). Second, and in the same year, international oil prices soared resulting in inflation, an economic slowdown, a shift in energy policies and changes in government policies (Lonergan & Cocklin, 1990; Fisk, 1976). The severe economic downturn of the 70s coupled with a record level of immigration from the islands, created a situation that enabled Aotearoa's government – and many of the population – to unfairly scapegoat Pacific communities (Spoonley, 2018). Specifically, at a time of increasing economic and employment pressure, the populist opinion was that an increasing influx of Pacific Islanders were taking the jobs of resident New Zealanders (Spoonley, 2018).

Aotearoa's high demand for labour meant that prior to the economic shock of the 1970's the immigration quotas instituted during the 1960s had been loosely reinforced. Overstaying visas was tolerated by successive governments and encouraged for as long as there was a demand for labour (Anae et al, 2015). However, because of the economic shock of the early 1970s and growing populist concern with an increasing Pacific population, the Aotearoa government began to clamp down on people overstaying their visas, with a targeted effort focused on those from Pacific Island nations. This led to the 'Dawn Raids' of 1970s, described by Anae et al (2015) as "the most blatantly racist attack on Pacific peoples by the government in Aotearoa's history." Specifically, to clamp down on those overstaying their visa, the government instructed police to enter homes and/or stop people on the street and ask to see any form of documentation proving their right to being in the country (Anae et al, 2015; Liava'a, 1998). Despite the fact that the bulk of "overstayers" at this time were from Europe or North America (Beagle, 2015), the practice of

police-driven visa-enforcement was exclusively applied to Pacific Islanders (Anae et al, 2015; Beaglehole, 2015; Teaiwa & Mallon, 2005). While numerous Pacific communities experienced the dawn raids, the impact of the raids was not felt equally across these communities. For instance, due to their lack of historical association with Aotearoa, Tongans were particularly singled out because they lacked the citizenship rights that other Pacific Islanders could assert (Teaiwa & Mallon, 2005).

The political and social climate of the 1970s was marked by its racial tension and unrest as Pacific peoples were increasingly victimised by police and immigration authorities. It birthed in Pacific communities a sense of shame, fear, and mistrust of the government and of the political systems at large (Spoonley, 2018). Furthermore, the lack of outcry from Pākehā during this only further entrenched a sense of mistrust (Mallon et al, 2012; Liava'a, 1998). Ultimately, the raids and the lack of support let a lot of Pacific people questioning their place in Aotearoa and as 'New Zealanders'. The dawn raids ended in 1976 following public outcry and protests by activist groups such as the Polynesian Panthers (Anae et al, 2015). This group of young Aotearoa-born Pacific Islanders, who were influenced by the American Black Panthers movement, believed in advocacy for their communities as well as education as a means of fighting back against the system, and resisting the entrenched stigma and discrimination that Pacific peoples were facing whilst trying to integrate into Aotearoa (Anae, 2015; Fraenkel, 2012). After the end of the dawn raids there were periodic amnesties allowing migrants to acquire Aotearoa citizenship. For example, the late 1980's saw visa-free status for Fijians, Samoans, and Tongans with the government shortly backtracking on this policy due to the influx of Pacific people that arrived (Bedford, 1994). The dawn raids saw the rise of stereotypes of Pacific Islanders as troublesome, school-dropouts, unhealthy, and economic liabilities as a means of scapegoating Pacific people for political gain (Anae, 2015).

Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s key events (e.g. changes in migration policies; military coup d'etats in Fiji) saw an influx of Pacific Islanders into Aotearoa (Bedford, 1994). The growth of the Pacific population was a defining feature of this time, and by the 1990s most of the Pacific population increase was from those who were born in Aotearoa rather than immigrating from the Pacific Islands (Statistics New Zealand, 2020). At the same time changes within Aotearoa (e.g. restructuring of the economy and traditional industries) undermined economic opportunities and employment for these communities (Bedford, 1994). This restructure disproportionately impacted the Pacific community, as a significant number were employed in industries and occupations that experienced the greatest job losses (Statistics New Zealand, 2022). The combination of rapid population expansion and worsening economic opportunities placed the

Pacific community in an ambiguous social space. Although they now constituted the largest Pacific population outside of the Pacific Islands, they also resided in the most impoverished and substandard housing and were disproportionately present in low-wage occupations which were gradually disappearing (Cheer, Kearns & Murphy, 2002; Statistics New Zealand, 2002).

The previous two decades have seen further changes in the composition of Pacific communities in Aotearoa. First, population growth is now driven by Pacific peoples born in Aotearoa rather than immigrating from the Pacific islands (Statistics New Zealand, 2020). By 2006 most of the Pacific population was New Zealand born (Statistics New Zealand, 2020). Second, in the 2000s it was noted that a proportion of young Pacific peoples reported being multiple Pacific ethnicities (Statistics New Zealand and Ministry of Pacific Affairs, 2010). These migration patterns led to Pacific people being the youngest population in New Zealand as well as the fastest-growing ethnic minority in Aotearoa (Statistics New Zealand, 2020). As a result of the migration patterns, 97 percent of Pacific population are urbanised with 92 percent in the 25 main urban areas with 66 percent in Auckland (Statistics New Zealand, 2020). Due to these demographic changes, it is no longer accurate to consider Pacific peoples as an 'immigrant population' (Tertiary Education Commission, 2004). Understanding the demographic makeup of Pacific populations provides valuable insights into the inequalities that persist within Pacific communities. These demographic trends not only shed light on the geographical distribution and concentration of Pacific communities, but also serve as a critical lens through which we can analyse the disparities in various aspects of life, including education, healthcare, justice and economic opportunities.

The Current Context of Pacific People in Aotearoa

Pacific people have some of the worst health outcomes and social indicators in Aotearoa indicating a considerable number of unmet needs within these communities. For example, Pacific people's employment rates over from 2016 – 2020 has been much lower in-comparison to other ethnic groups (Ministry of Pacific Peoples, 2021). Furthermore, at the end of 2020, Pacific employment showed a downward trend while other ethnic groups saw an upward trend (Ministry of Pacific Peoples, 2021). Pacific people are also severely over-represented in homelessness, are more likely to live in rentals and make up a quarter of all residents in social housing (Ministry of Pacific Peoples, 2021). Pacific peoples were more likely to live in homes that are affected by dampness or mould than other ethnic groups (Ministry of Pacific Peoples, 2021). Previous research shows that cold, damp and mouldy home adversely impact health and wellbeing, and indoor dampness and the presence of mould in the home have been linked to serious health conditions (ref). Therefore, Pacific peoples are more likely to have poor health outcomes because

of living in these damp and mouldy homes. Alongside damp and moulding housing, crowding rates are highest for Pacific peoples (Statistics New Zealand, 2020; Ministry of Pacific Peoples, 2021). The leading causes of differences in lifespan between Pacific peoples and their non-Pacific counterparts are heart disease, cancer, diabetes, injuries and infections (Ministry of Pacific Peoples, 2021). Of these, heart disease is the leading cause of differences in life expectancy with Pacific peoples experiencing heart disease 6-8 years young than the rest of the population, are twice more likely to die from heart disease, and are more likely to have co-morbidities such as diabetes, infections and kidney failure (Ministry of Pacific Peoples, 2021). Many of these health outcomes and social indicators have been attributed to the economic discrepancies faced by Pacific populations. This increasing economic gap is important to consider as inequity and inequality can threaten community is social stability (United Nations, 2015). Disparities can also lead to a decline in social unity, restrict social mobility and advancement and lead to detrimental health outcomes (Nolan & Whelan, 2014). Furthermore, disadvantage has a negative impact on domestic productivity and prevents people from realising their full human capital (Topuz, 2022). Recent research reveals that while Pacific are making steady strides to catch up with their non-Pacific counterparts, across different inequality indicators (i.e. health, education, work, and economic standard of living), disparities still disproportionately affect Pacific communities (Marriott & Alinaghi, 2021; Ryan, Grey & Mischewski, 2019).

Amongst all population groups, Pacific peoples experience the most pronounced disparities in the distribution of socio-economic determinants (Ryan et al, 2019). Pacific people tended to have the lowest median household income, face higher unemployment rates and were overly represented in low skill, minimal wage employment (Marriott & Alinaghi, 2021; Ryan et al, 2019; Ministry of Pacific Peoples, 2021; Statistics New Zealand, 2020). Further, when compared to other ethnic communities, Pacific individuals are more likely to inhabit neighbourhoods characterised as 'high deprivation', exhibit the lowest rates of home ownership and have the highest rates of household crowding (Ryan et al, 2019; Statistics New Zealand, 2020; Ministry of Health, 2020). Existing research indicates that Pacific peoples have constrained economic resources and limited capacity to make optimal choices (Lilo et al, 2020). Furthermore, the research indicates that Pacific peoples' perspectives on health and well-ness are significantly influenced by a narrative of economic hardship and restricted resources (Lilo et al, 2020; Ataera-Minister & Trowland, 2018).

In a context where Pacific communities are facing increasing social and economic deprivation, it is important to examine the outcomes of inequality to understand how and why Pacific peoples,

may engage in alternative forms of economic activity. Broadly, outcomes of such disparities and inequities arise from a combination of (a) the differences in the opportunities one has access to, and (b) the individual's efforts and talents required to take advantage of such opportunities. It's important to note that separating effort from opportunity is not easy, especially in intergenerational context where families and communities often face limited choices (Topuz, 2022; Hatzenbuehler, Phelan & Link, 2013). Rawls (1971) contended that the local distribution of opportunities and outcomes are important to an understanding of the nature of inequality and inequity. In particular, intergenerational inequity consistently limits the distribution of opportunities thus impacting the outcomes for communities across time. Additionally, Galor and Moav (2004) have identified that higher inequality, particularly reduces opportunities for growth for those in lower-income households, deprives them of the ability to stay healthy and accumulate the social capital necessary for upward social mobility. This history of Pacific peoples in Aotearoa thus clearly highlights evidence of persist inequities since initial migration, and the long-lasting repercussions and outcomes of these inequities. After generations of migration, Pacific communities continue to grapple with the adverse consequences stemming from demographic shifts, socioeconomic change, and racism. However, Sousa-Santos (2021) has highlighted that in-spite of the challenges faced by Pacific communities, there is one opportunity for economic development within Pacific peoples are currently embedded in Aotearoa: The illicit drug trade.

Context of Drug Use

There exist many ways to describe a drug 'user.' While previous research has primarily focused on individuals who engage in substance use, this study aims to outline two distinct, but interrelated classes of user defined by their differing motivations and intent behind the use of drugs. Specifically, this research project categorises them into (a) those who consume drugs for personal or recreational reasons, and (b) those who employ drugs as a means of economic development, recognising that individuals may belong to both categories. Research has traditionally focused on users in the former category, particularly their experiences of drug consumption and potential for harmful outcomes such as acute and/or psychological harms, as well as the harms they pose to those around them (Barbor et al, 2018; Morgan et al, 2006; Degenhardt et al, 2004). As reported in the literature (Nosa et al, 2012; Fergusson et al, 2008; Boden et al, 2006) the personal use of drugs can sometimes be related to experiencing pleasure, altering mood, or coping with emotional distress. In contrast to this traditional focus, the current study aims to understand drug 'use' as a tool for driving economic growth, enhancement and empowerment, specifically within Pacific communities.

Drugs in the Context of Personal Use

To gain a comprehensive understanding of drug economies, it is essential to first establish a foundational understanding of the diverse contexts in which drugs are used. Illicit drugs refer to the substances that are prohibited by the law within any country or jurisdiction due to their perceived potential for abuse, harm and/or social impact (Houch & Siegal, 2010). Illicit drugs can encompass a wide range of substances which include but is not limited to cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide) and cannabis. Drugs are sought out for their psychoactive effects and have been associated with various risks that include but are not limited to addition, adverse health consequences and various levels of criminal and legal impacts (Nosa et al, 2022; Bax, 2021; Babor et al, 2018; Boden et al, 2006).

In contrast to illicit substances, are what is considered legal drugs. These are drugs that are approved by regulatory authorities for specific purposes and can be obtained within specific parameters and boundaries outlined by the law (Langedijk et al, 2015). These substances include prescription medications, over-the-counter drugs, and regulated substances such as alcohol, tobacco and vaping products. Legal drugs serve various purposes including medicinal applications such as pain relief, treatment of illness, or aiding in the management of chronic conditions (Ball et al, 2022; Marsh et al, 2022). Pharmaceutical drugs or medicinal drugs are also legal substances but are specifically developed and regulated for their therapeutic and medicinal purposes (Langedijk et al, 2015). These drugs are prescribed and accessed through healthcare professionals and are intended to prevent, treat, or manage medical conditions and their symptoms. Medicinal drugs undergo rigorous testing, clinical trials and are required to undergo a regulatory approval process to ensure their safety, efficacy and quality (Langedijk et al, 2015). Some examples of these types of drugs include antibiotics, analgesics, antidepressants, and controlled substances for pain relief such as morphine (Langedijk et al, 2015).

It is important to recognise the significant discourses surrounding the diversion of prescription drugs such as opioids to illicit drug use. First, while much of the literature on harmful substance use focuses on illegally produced drugs, there is also considerable research exploring the transition from the abuse of prescription medications to the use of illicit drugs (Kirsh et al, 2013; Grau et al, 2006; Fisher et al, 2006). For example, research from the United States has shown a pipeline to illicit drugs among opioid users that begins with the prescription of opioids for chronic pain management (Manchikanti et al, 2004). Second, further research from both the United States and Canada suggests that although there is limited empirical evidence on how this opioid crisis started, some aspects of the current state of the crisis can be attributed to the initial marketing and prescribing practices of oxycodone (Volkow & Blanco, 2021; Vadivelu et al., 2018;

Belzak & Halverson, 2018). This indicates that prescription practices have played a significant role in the development of the opioid crises that led to the increase of illicit substance users. Third, existing research has highlighted a noteworthy phenomenon wherein prescribed medical use not only acts as a potential gateway to illicit substance use but also becomes associated with distribution and sale of illicit substances (Kolla & Strike, 2020). This progression, commonly referred to as a 'harm of substance use,' highlights that individuals who were initially prescribed medications may transition into selling and distributing not only their prescription but also illicit substances. The driving force behind this behaviour appears to be the desire to secure a steady supply of opiods to sustain their substance habit and to generate income when their substance use excludes them from formal and legal means of income (Yang, Kum & Shoff, 2020; Semple et al., 2011). This hiding aspect of drug use warrants careful consideration as we explore further another potential dimension of drug use: the selling, trafficking, and distribution of illicit substances as a means of economic survival.

Drugs as an Economic Commodity

As previous discussed, discourses surrounding drug use have been primarily focused on its detrimental effects on individuals and societies at large. However, there exists a (perhaps controversial) perspective that challenges this conventional narrative; that drugs and specifically the sale of drugs – can act as a potential tool for economic development. A variety of factors have contributed to drug use and problematic outcomes, both individually and environmentally such as community dynamics, availability of drugs, and cultural attitudes, have contributed to drug use and problematic outcomes. While drugs prevention and treatment have been focused on changing individual behaviours, these initiatives have a limited impact on the social determinants of drug use (Buxton, 2015).

Throughout history, certain drugs have been substantial drives of economic activities. Examples of this can be seen in the opium trade during the 19th century that required the development of trade routes, and markets, notably between China and Western countries (Derks, 2012). The opium trade generated considerable profits for the British merchants who controlled the drug trade, while simultaneously having devasting consequences for Chinese populations who used opium (Derks, 2012). In more contemporary times, there have been debates surrounding the legislation of some substances that focus on their potential impact of making substantial economic benefits (Bhaskar et al, 2019; Shanaan & Ritter, 2014; Bretteville-Jensen, 2009). For example, a recent review of the economic benefits of cannabis legalisation in Canada by Deloittle (2021) reports that "Overall, the cannabis industry has contributed $43.5 billion to Canada's GDP – and $13.3 billion to Ontario's GDP – since legalisation. Moreover, the industry has sustained

151,000 jobs across Canada and put $15.1 billion into government coffers." In this manner, it is clear that drugs have been and continue to be discussed as potential tools for economic development around the world (Deloittle, 2021).

The Drug Trade as Tool for Economic Development for Marginalised Communities

Just as the legislation of drugs at a national or federal level can lead to substantial tax revenue, a similar principle can be observed on a community level (Gallien & Occhiali, 2023; Kamin, 2015). Marginalised communities worldwide employ innovative and often unconventional strategies to cope with financial environments in which they face constant inequity, constraints and insecurity. The scale and distribution of drugs may serve as a means of wealth generation for these communities (Gutierrez, 2020; Melis & Nougier, 2011Babor et al, 2018; Silverstone & Savage, 2010; Caulkins & Reuter, 2006). Gutierrez (2010) observed that in countries such as Afghanistan, Myanmar, Colombia, and Bolivia the illicit opium and coca crops play a crucial role not only in providing stability but also in driving economic growth. Despite being labelled as 'evil' from a global perspective (Gutierrez, 2020), these crops as per Gutierrez's (2020) findings, serve as a means for marginalised communities and abandoned territories to establish themselves as economic agents in the national and global markets in the face of a lack of more traditional trading opportunities.

There are four key reasons that socially and financially marginalised communities are intimately linked with the drug trade internationally. First, contexts of social deprivation support the normalisation of the drug trade because socially deprived environments are the operating ground for such trades. Amaro et al (2021) found that when a social determinants model of health is applied to substance use and substance use behaviour, people engaged in behaviours such as selling and trafficking as a result of the influence of stressors, including socially toxic environments and discrimination. Existing research exemplifies that factors leading to drug trafficking and distribution (selling) do not occur in isolation; rather, being in these environments makes people more susceptible to such behaviours. The second reason social deprivation is closely linked with the drug trade, is that the context of social deprivation also heightens both social and economic vulnerability for key cohorts enhancing their entry into the drug trade. For example, Black (2020), found that in Ireland a high number of young people and children who live in poverty and experience social exclusion are pulled into the drug supply chain at a higher rate than their more economically secure peers. Futher, Sumter et al (2022) found that women in economic deprivation are much more susceptible to becoming drug mules (individual who traffic drugs). The presence of limited opportunities for key cohorts, compounded with their vulnerable social environment, make it an ideal hosting ground for illicit markets to grow and thrive. The third

reason poverty is closely linked with the drug trade is that social deprivation creates environments in which few other opportunities offer such potential for immediate economic growth. Whitehead et al (1994) described the potential to make income illegally the drug market as the 'hustle.' White et al (1994) found that amongst African American males in socially deprived areas, the pursuit of non-mainstream activities (such as drug trafficking and selling) is perceived as an opportunity for economic advancement in settings with growing inequities and worsening access to economic resources. Similarly, Kalunta-Crumpton (2004) found that amongst Black British populations had problematic drug use patterns that extended into trafficking and selling due to being socially deprived and experiencing high levels of social disparities. The fourth reason social deprivation is closely linked with the drug trade is that networks of socially deprived communities exist across urban and rural localities, providing opportunities to and for economic expansion and growth in a manner still controlled by and supportive of these communities. The term "County lines" represent a new and emerging development in the United Kingdom drug landscape, specifically, the shift from urban supply hubs to 'satellite' markets in coastal and rural locations (Moyle, 2019; Robinson et al, 2019; Andell & Pitts, 2018). There are multiple reasons for this shift such as rural geographical locations have a lighter police presence in comparison to urban areas. However, a key factor is that the depressed rural economic climate supports demand for drug use by rural population, including entry of many of these socially deprived people into the trade as street-level dealers. Moyle (2019) identified that in the United Kingdom illicit drug dealing was actually seen as a preferable means of generating income in the context of constrained choices and lack of alternative economic opportunities.

Worldwide there is clear evidence that social deprivation can encourage people to become a traditional user of drugs (i.e., as a consumer), but it can also encourage the use of drugs (i.e, as a dealer) as an economic tool to overcome significant economic hardship in the context of a lack of alternative options. The lack of formal employment and economic conditions in such areas can lead individuals to resort to illicit and informal ways of making money. Intergenerational cycles of economic marginalisation and feelings of exclusion can also drive individuals to perceive drug use as a means of gaining a sese of purpose or belonging within their community. Having examined the broader international context of drug use as a tool for economic development, we now turn to the specific role of Pacific peoples in the drug trade.

Pacific Peoples and the Emerging Aotearoa Drug Economy

Building on the previous discussion of socioeconomic and geographic deprivation as factors driving involvement in drug trades, it is evident that Pacific peoples in Aotearoa share similar contexts of socioeconomic and geographic deprivation highlighted in other marginalised

communities internationally. The 2015 United Nations progress report on Drugs and Crime highlighted that developing cities with rural-to-urban migrants face increasing poverty, housing shortages, crowding, limited access to clean water, disease, and street violence. Furthermore, high rates of youth unemployment in these areas contribute to vulnerabilities that lead to illicit and informal means of income (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2015; Singer, 2008). These conditions are mirrored in the experiences and living conditions of Pacific peoples in Aotearoa. Pacific peoples often reside in socially deprived areas, frequently experiencing intergenerational poverty and limited opportunities (Statistics New Zealand, 2020; Ryan et al., 2019; Tukuitonga, 2013). There is a significant concentration of youth with high unemployment rates and limited economic and social opportunities within these communities (Statistics New Zealand, 2020; New Zealand Deprivation Index, 2018). With few alternatives to drug dealing that offer immediate financial gains, the economic pressures in these deprived regions are pronounced (Marriott & Sim, 2015). Additionally, Pacific peoples have substantial networks extending across the country and back to the islands, which can facilitate involvement in the drug trade. Given these conditions, it becomes clear that local socioeconomic and geographical factors contribute to the emergence of illicit drug economies among Pacific peoples in Aotearoa. This calls for a deeper investigation into their involvement in these economies.

Drug Economies

To understand drug economies, we must briefly define and explore illicit economies. While there is no one agreed-upon definition of illicit economies (sometimes referred to as 'illicit financial flow'), there is a common understanding that the concept of illicit economies relates to the flow of money or assets associated with crime (Chowla & Falcao, 2016). Existing approaches to illicit activities and economies tend to stick to a binary and simple distinction between legal and illegal activities. To move beyond this limitation, Gregson and Crang (2016) draw on ideas from cultural economy and propose viewing illicit economies as a set of practices. Furthermore, this perspective offers a theoretical framework for viewing illicit economies by focusing on the role of customary illegality (Gregson & Crang, 2016). Customary illegality refers to the acceptance and participation in illicit activities by legal economic actors, rather than focusing solely on the illegal goods or any one criminal individual (Hudson, 2017; Gregson & Crang, 2016). Further, it involves understanding production, consumption and distribution of drugs as part of a complex set of practices. This requires considering how customary illegality plays a role in these transactions. Consequently, we could argue that the "illicitness" of drug-related activities is not an inherent property of the drugs themselves or the specific 'actors' involved, but rather a temporary quality influenced by an array of external factors such as circulation and socio-political norms (Gregson

& Crang, 2016). This perspective allows us to explore the role of Pacific peoples in the drug economy objectively, without moral judgments about drugs or illicit activities, focusing instead on how these communities adapt to deprivation and seek alternative forms of economic attainment.

In order to clarify the potential role that Pacific peoples may hold in the drug economy, it is important to understand how they have come to occupy this position. As we have seen, Pacific peoples in Aotearoa are a key population experiencing significant social and economic deprivation, making them likely to reside in areas associated with the drug trade and to consider participation in this trade as a means of economic advancement. Furthermore, the historical context of Pacific migration in Aotearoa has resulted in dispersed networks across the country, as families relocate to seek employment. Important to the establishment of a drug economy is the affordances that such relocation provides a socially connected community. Specifically, these expanding geographical networks can serve as ready-made distribution channels for the drug trade. However, there are additional factors that need to be considered. To effectively situate Pacific peoples within the framework of drug economies, it is essential to further examine the development and maintenance of these economies. This includes analysing their capacity for adaptation, the establishment of geographic hubs and havens, and the impact of treaties supporting trade, among other factors.

First, illicit networks can be defined as mobile and migratory (Keefe, 2013), in that underground networks involved in transporting illegal drugs (along with other valuable assets) are agile and widely distributed. These networks operate within a clandestine and constantly shifting environment, necessitating agility and widespread distribution to effectively navigate and overcome obstacles such as border controls, surveillance, and interdiction efforts. By being agile, these networks can swiftly adapt to changes in law enforcement tactics or shifts in demand, ensuring their continued operation and profitability. Furthermore, their widespread distribution enables them to exploit various pathways and channels, including land, sea, and air routes, as well as exploiting different transportation methods such as vehicles, cargo ships, and couriers, to successfully transport illegal drugs across different jurisdictions. The Australian government's 501-deportee policy, which mandates the deportation of individuals with criminal backgrounds from Australia to either Aotearoa or their home Pacific nation, serves as a prime example of this phenomenon. By relocating experienced individuals with established contacts in the drug trade to new markets, the policy inadvertently fuels the growth of drug-related activities in both Aotearoa and Pacific nations (Williams, 2024).

The second factor supporting the development and maintenance of robust illicit drug economics is the presence of what been termed as 'hubs' and 'havens', which are distinct geographical locations or regions within the wider network that serve different roles. Hubs function as central parts of activity, where key operations such as production, distribution, and coordination of illicit substances occurs (Keefe, 2013). They are often characterised by high levels of activities, coordination and connectivity, but can also have limiting factors such as high levels of law enforcement (Keefe, 2013). In contrast, havens, are areas or regions where illicit activities find refuge or protection due to factors such as a lack of government oversight and weak law enforcement (Keefe, 2013). Havens provide a conducive environment for illicit activities due to their geographic landscape, relaxed jurisdiction, and lack of legal enforcement. While they may not have high level of activity in-relation to consumption and money exchanging, they offer an environment for illicit activities to thrive allowing for crime syndicates and cartels to transport and distribute illicit drugs with minimal fear of law enforcement interference (Keefe, 2013). Using this framework of understanding we can see that Pacific islands serve as havens for illicit activities to thrive, facilitating inward bulk deliveries of base materials and manufacturing of drugs or coordination of delivery. In contrast, Aotearoa serves as a hub, offering strategic central positions from which imported drugs can be distributed throughout a network and funding can be coordinated, allowing crime syndicates and cartels to transport and distribute illicit drugs with minimal fear of law enforcement interference. Understanding this distinction between the hubs and havens is crucial in not only comprehending the complex dynamic of illicit economies, it also enables the mapping of Pacific nations and Aotearoa within this global network.

Aotearoa, with its strategic location and well-developed infrastructure, can be considered a hub within a Pacific drug economy. It serves a central point for various activities. The combination of the well-connected ports and international transportation networks, alongside the high economic street value of illicit drugs makes Aotearoa an attractive location. Furthermore, Aotearoa's robust law enforcement is reflective of one of the challenges within the hubs. In contrast, the Pacific Islands themselves may be viewed as havens. These islands are often characterised by factors that create a conductive environment for illicit activities. The Pacific, with its vast expanse, can be challenging areas for law enforcement to patrol effectively (Sousa-Santos, 2022; United Nation Office on Drug and Crime, 2016). This geographical complexity can provide opportunities for underworld markets to exploit remote and less regulated areas. Weak law enforcement, challenging terrain to police and limited resources for regulatory oversight can make them appealing destinations for cartels and crime syndicates to establish operations or use them as transit points. Their remote location but close proximity to Australia and Aotearoa –

one of the most expensive drug markets in the world – also adds to their appeal. The Pacific Drug Highway (pictured in Figure 2), is a major conduit for drug trafficking, significantly informs why the Pacific Islands function as havens. This route serves as direct pathway for the movement of narcotics from production hubs in South America and Asian into the Pacific region for transportation to Aotearoa and Australia (Sousa-Santos, 2022). Utilising maritime routes, traffickers exploit the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean (United Nation Office on Drug and Crime, 2016).

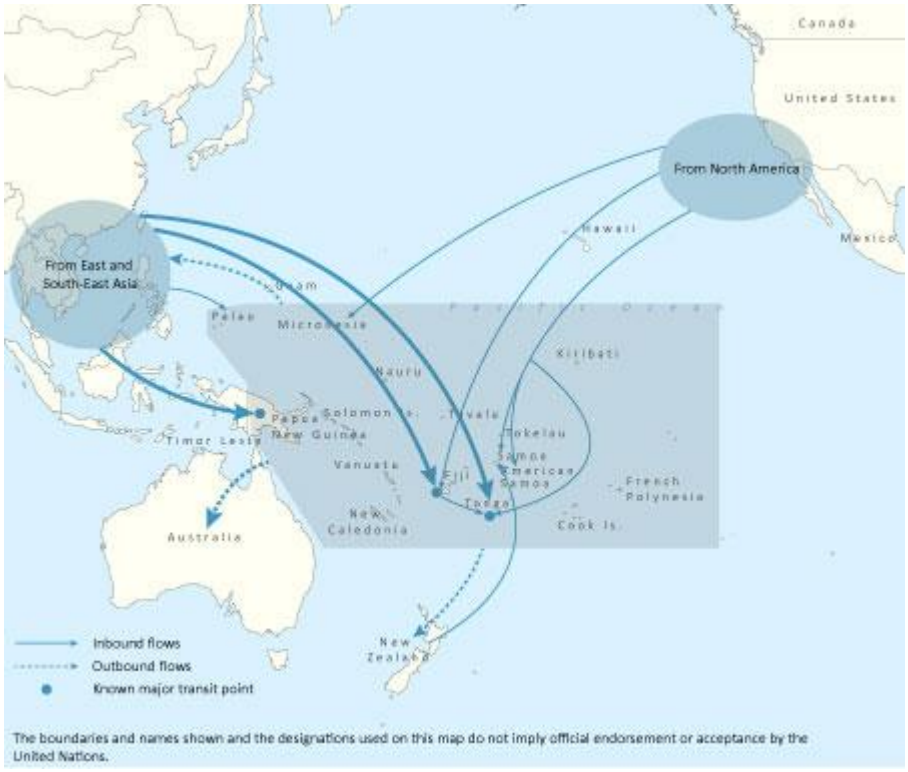

Figure 1: Pacific drug highway routes from North and South America and East and Southeast Asia (reprinted from United Nation Office on Drug and Crime, 2016).

This interplay between Aotearoa as a hub, the Pacific Islands as havens, and the Pacific Drug Highway as a critical conduit, underscores the complex dynamic of illicit economies in the Pacific region and Aotearoa. It emphasises the necessity for coordinated national and international efforts, strengthened enforcement and enhanced regulatory measures to combat the influence of illicit activities and secure the well-being of Pacific communities.

The first factor supporting the development and maintenance of robust international drug economies is the presence of legal treaties between countries that support robust trade links and population flow (Brown & Hermann, 2019; Keefe, 2013; Simmons, 2019). This increased mobility can inadvertently create opportunities for criminals involved in illicit markets, primarily because increased traffic and trade flows open opportunities for drug supply through trafficking

(Simmons, 2019; Keefe, 2013). Treaties may also influence the geographical dynamics of illicit markets (Brown & Hermann, 2019; Keefe, 2013; Simmons, 2019). Treaties can establish regulations, agreements, or restrictions on trade and commerce between countries, affecting the movement and distribution of illicit goods such as drugs. Additionally, treaties may establish cooperative efforts between nations for law enforcement and border control, impacting the routes and methods used by criminal organizations to transport illegal substances. Furthermore, treaties can create economic incentives or disincentives that influence the development of illicit markets in certain regions, leading to spatial concentration or dispersion of illegal activities. Overall, treaties serve as key mechanisms in determining the spatial patterns and geographical expansion of illicit markets. As mentioned earlier, Aotearoa has multiple agreements with different Pacific islands, and its proximity to these Pacific nations further enhances its role as a primary trade connection.

Chapter summary and Research Aims

This literature review provided an exploration of the socio-historical context of Pacific peoples in New Zealand, tracing their migration history and contemporary challenges. It also examined the multifaceted nature of drug use, distinguishing between recreational and economically driven consumption, particularly within marginalized communities. Furthermore, the review delved into the intricate dynamics of drug economies, elucidating factors such as adaptation strategies, the presence of geographic hubs and havens, and the influence of international treaties. This analysis offered valuable insights into the complex interplay between socio-economic factors, drug-related behaviours, and community well-being among Pacific populations in Aotearoa. However, it is evident that research on and with Pacific communities concerning the role of the drug economy is lacking. While international research suggests the presence of a Pacific drug highway that is geographically and socially located within Pacific communities, there is no evidence of the degree to which Pacific communities are either aware of this, are actively involved in it and for what purpose.

The overarching aim of this thesis was to develop a nuanced understanding of emerging drug economies within Pacific communities located in Auckland and Wellington. This aim was operationalised through three primary objectives:

1. Assessing Awareness and Knowledge: Investigating the depth of community understanding regarding drug economies, highlighting the prevailing perceptions and misconceptions.

2. Identifying Drivers: Exploring the multifaceted factors contributing to the growth and sustenance of these illicit economies, including socio-economic, cultural, and geopolitical influences.
3. Evaluating Impact: Examining the socio-economic and cultural ramifications on Pacific communities, discerning both the intended and unintended consequences of involvement in the drug trade.

Chapter 3: Research Design

This chapter presents a comprehensive overview of the methodology that was employed in facilitating and conducting the one-on-one Talanoa sessions with six members of the Pacific community, offering insights into the qualitative research approach adopted. Central to this discussion are the aims and objectives of the thesis, underpinned by a thorough examination of the rationale behind the incorporation of Talanoa and Fonua Pacific research methods. The methods employed in the thesis rely on a combination of Talanoa methodology as well the Fonua methodology and the utilisation of thematic analysis as the chosen method for analysing the qualitative data derived from the interviews outlined.

Ontology

Ontology refers to the nature of reality and what is considered to exist within particular worldviews (Rakuita, 2023). In research, ontological positioning shapes how knowledge is understood and constructed. From a Pacific perspective, reality is relational and collection, deeply embedded in genealogy, land, and spirituality (Rakuita, 2023). As a Samoan woman researcher deeply rooted within the Pacific community, encompassing my own āiga (family) and community, I position myself at the intersection of my cultural identity and academic inquiry in this project. My approach is informed by my dual identity, drawing upon both my Pacific heritage and academic training. Through the lens of my Samoan heritage, I am committed to centring Pacific voices and perspectives, ensuring that the research methodologies employed, such as Talanoa and Fonua Pacific methods, resonate with and reflect the cultural values and norms of my community. This positioning shapes every aspect of the study, from participant selection to data analysis, as I endeavour to represent and honour the lived experiences of Pacific peoples in Aotearoa.

Epistemology

In this study, the epistemological stance prioritized Pacific perspectives and values, placing the needs of Pacific communities at the forefront. Rooted in the recognition of the unique cultural, social, and historical contexts of Pacific peoples, the approach aimed to decolonize research methodologies and centre Pacific voices and knowledge systems (Anae, 2019; Naepi, 2019; Koya, 2017). Engagement with Pacific communities as active partners was prioritized, recognizing their valuable insights, expertise, and lived experiences as essential for understanding and addressing pertinent issues. The research methodology embraced the principle of by-Pacific-for-Pacific- research, advocating for Pacific researchers to lead and conduct research within their own communities. Embedded within the Pacific community, the positionality of the researcher informed every aspect of the study, ensuring cultural

responsiveness, relevance, and respect. Through community engagement and collaboration, meaningful research partnerships were fostered, built on trust, reciprocity, and mutual respect. Upholding ethical principles outlined in the Pacific Research Guidelines (Massey University, 2017) the study was committed to respecting the rights and dignity of participants and contributing positively to the well-being and advancement of Pacific communities.

Methodology

Blending Traditions: The Talanoa and Fonua Models of Research

Aligned with our research aim and objectives, this next section explores the integration of two indigenous research methodologies, Talanoa and Fonua. This qualitative research design is carefully crafted to engage with the Pacific peoples, prioritising community engagement, cultural understanding, and contextual relevance in the research process.

This study utilised a qualitative research design, incorporating Pacific research methodologies of Talanoa and Fonua to explore and understand the perspectives of the Pacific community within which this study is based. Both these research methodologies prioritise the importance of community engagement, cultural understanding, and contextual relevance in the research process. The integration of these two methodologies in the design and method aims to provide a comprehensive and culturally grounded understanding of the research.

Talanoa

The term 'Talanoa' is a deeply ingrained concept within the cultural fabric of the Pacific Islands and refers to a traditional form of communication (Matapo & Enari, 2021; Cammock et al, 2021). In its literal translation, talanoa means "to talk." While the term talanoa is deeply rooted in Samoan and Fijian languages, it is pan-Pacific in nature and encapsulates the essence of storytelling and open conversations (Cammock et al, 2021; Matapo & Enari, 2021). As a qualitative research methodology, Talanoa centers face-to-face interaction and participatory dialogue (Hindley et al, 2020; Vaioleti, 2006). The aim of the Talanoa method is to create an environment where participants feel comfortable sharing their personal narratives and experiences (Hindley et al, 2020; Matapo & Enari, 2021). This approach not only enables the collection of in-depth qualitative data but also fosters a sense of collaboration and mutual understanding based on a shared understanding of the cultural etiquette required to facilitate and hold such a space. Additionally, the Talanoa methodology places a strong emphasis on building meaningful relationships with participants (Cammock et al, 2021; Matapo & Enari, 2021).

The emphasis on building meaningful relationships within talanoa draws on another key concept within Pacific values known as the 'Va'. The 'Va' is a Samoan concept that refers to the unseen relational space between people (Anae, 2016; Anae, 2019). As a researcher in Pacific spaces, it is important one recognises the Va between themselves and participants and takes the time to 'teu le va' (Anae, 2019) which translates to 'nurturing the unseen space.' The act of both recognising the Va and employing the Talanoa method acknowledges the importance of cultural context and the significance of oral traditions in preserving, transmitting, and developing community knowledge.

In the context of researching emerging drug and illicit economies, the adoption of the Talanoa methodology becomes particularly significant. Talanoa being deeply rooted in cultural traditions, provides a culturally sensitive and community-oriented approach to understanding the complex dynamics surrounding local trends and actions (Ponton, 2018; Farelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014). Given that drug economies often operate within an intricate web of social relationships, Talanoa offers a nuanced methodology for exploring Pacific perspectives within Pacific communities. By prioritising face-to-face interactions and participatory dialogue, Talanoa enables for the exploration of the human side of drug economies that extend beyond the statistical data. Talanoa becomes a vital tool for capturing local narratives in order to understanding the drivers and impacts of emerging drug economies.

Fonua

Building on the insights from the Talanoa methodology, we transition to Fonua. Rooted within the Tongan language, Fonua transcends its literal translation of "land" or "earth" to represent a connection between individuals, their ancestral homeland, and the broader community (Churchward, 2015; Tecun et al, 2018). This qualitative methodology delves into the complex relationships between people and their environment within a Pacific cultural context. Fonua methodology enables for the exploration of the interconnectedness of cultural landscapes (Faleolo, 2020; Fonua, 2020). This facilitates the consideration of how connections to the land can shape values, perspectives, and behaviours (Ponton, 2018). Utilising the Fonua approach within a study enables for an appreciation for the ecological, cultural and social dimensions of the relationship between the individual and their surroundings. Similarly, to the Talanoa methodology, Fonua is driven by the commitment to understanding the holistic nature of Pacific communities, recognizing how the environment and land it not merely a backdrop but a dynamic and integral part of individuals identities.

In a study of emerging drug economies, the Fonua methodology is instrumental. Fonua offers a robust framework for delving into the complexities of the drug trade within Pacific communities

both here in Aotearoa and the Pacific Island nations. Fonua becomes essential in exploring how individual connections to their homeland along the 'Pacific Drug Highway' can influence their engagement with or resistance to illicit markets. Moreover, Fonua methodology stands out for its ability to avoid 'victim blaming' by prioritising the contextual analysis over attributing faults or failings to individuals. By focusing on the broader social, cultural and economic contexts, Fonua facilitates a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay of factors influencing drug-related behaviours within Pacific communities.

When investigating emerging drug economies, the application of indigenous research methodologies, such as Talanoa and Fonua, is essential for a nuanced and culturally grounded understanding of the issues within Pacific communities. Talanoa provides a culturally sensitive and participatory approach to identify the community narratives intertwined within illicit markets. This methodology enables an exploration of community responses. Fonua, also offers a holistic lens to develop and examine the interconnectedness between individuals, their environment, and the impact on emerging routes for drug trafficking through the Pacific. By recognising the ecological, cultural, and social dimensions of this relationship, Fonua methodology contributes to a nuanced understanding of the challenges and potential benefits of an emerging drug trade. Together these two methodologies provide a toolkit to explore the intricate relationships, perceptions, socio-economic as well as cultural factors influencing the emergence and sustenance of drug economies within a Pacific context.

Researching illicit drug markets presents methodological and ethical challenges, requiring careful navigation of participant vulnerability, legal risks, and researcher well-being. Qualitative research on sensitive topics highlights the emotional and ethical complexities involved, necessitating confidentiality, harm minimisation, and cultural responsiveness (Silverio et al., 2022). In drug research, stigma, legal implications, and community impacts further heighten these sensitivities. Employing Talanoa and Fonua methodologies provided a culturally grounded framework for engaging with participants in a respectful and meaningful way. Talanoa fostered open and empathetic dialogue, while Fonua contextualised these discussions within broader social and historical structures, shifting the focus from individual behaviours to systemic influences.

Participant recruitment

This study builds upon a previous project conducted with Pacific community leaders, which facilitated the initial connections and established the focus of the current research. Through this earlier engagement, valuable relationships were formed with key community figures, providing a strong foundation for the present study. The prior project highlighted the importance

of understanding the perspectives of both elders and young adults within Pacific communities, thereby shaping the type of participants targeted for this study.

Participants for this study were purposively selected based on their expressed interest in contributing to the research, ensuring a deliberate and strategic approach to capture perspectives deeply rooted within the community. Invitations were extended to community leaders who were a part of the previous New Zealand Drug Foundation study and/or were actively engaged in the sector and young people who were able to describe the 'hustle'. An inclusive approach was adopted, enabling community leaders not only to volunteer for interviews but also to nominate individuals they deemed representative of community knowledge. This dual approach ensured that community voices were not only heard but also actively contributed to the selection of interviewees. Upon receiving responses, a screening process was employed to assess whether individuals fulfilled the inclusion criteria. The option for community leaders to nominate individuals aligned with the commitment to cultural values inherent in Pacific communities. Additionally, it emphasized a commitment to a participatory and community-centric approach. All participants, who agreed to be part of the study, played pivotal roles in shaping and representing different community narratives associated with the emerging drug trade.

Elders and community play a crucial role in decision-making processes. This criterion for their endorsement or selection of representatives reflects a commitment to ensuring that the study not only honors Pacific values but also provides insights from a range of voices within the community.

Inclusion Criteria

This study aimed to capture the nuanced perspectives of individuals deeply rooted in Pacific communities, emphasizing the importance of community engagement and voice. To be eligible for participation, individuals had to meet the following inclusion criteria:

- Pacific Descent: Participants must identify as being of Pacific descent, ensuring a cultural context that aligns with the focus of the research.
- Be of consenting age: Participants must be 18 years of age or older at the time of study, as this acknowledged the legal and ethical considerations associated with adult consent and participation.
- Community Leadership and knowledge holders: This criterion recognises and incorporates the Pacific values inherent in the design of the study. It enables community

leaders and elders to nominate young adults who they believe could provide a representation of community knowledge

Final set of participants

The study included six carefully selected participants, representing a cross-section of the Pacific community. Three participants were esteemed elders within the community, aged between 50 and 65 years, who were able to provide invaluable insights from their lived experiences. The other three participants were young adults, aged 19, 21, and 22, chosen for their roles as articulate spokespeople capable of conveying the perspectives of the younger generation. The participants were a mix of Samoan and Tongan descent, ensuring cultural richness and diversity. The gender composition included four males and two females. Geographically, five participants were based in the Auckland region, and one was in the Wellington region, thereby reflecting a limited representation of the North Island's Pacific population. The participant table below outlines the demographic characteristics of the study sample, including age, residence, and ethnic background. This context is vital for understanding the perspectives shared and linking them to the research objectives.

Table 1. Overview of the participants interviewed for this project.

Participant	**Age Group**	**Residence**	**Birthplace**	**Ethnicity**
1	Young Adult	South Auckland	New Zealand	Samoan
2	Young Adult	South Auckland	New Zealand	Samoan
3	Young Adult	Central Auckland	New Zealand	Samoan/Tongan
4	Middle Aged	Wellington	New Zealand	Samoan
5	Elder	South Auckland	Samoa	Samoan
6	Elder	South Auckland	Samoa	Samoan

Data Collection and Procedure

In the development of the research questions, a key focus was placed on crafting a culturally sensitive interview guide. This guide was designed with careful consideration for the nuances of Pacific cultural values, ensuring that the Talanoa process was conducted in a manner that was not only respectful but also deeply resonant with the cultural identity of the participants. The questions embedded within the guide were purposefully aligned with Pacific knowledge bases, drawing on the context of cultural heritage inherent in the community under study. This

alignment served to establish a rapport with participants. The interview schedule was designed to focus on individual perceptions of the drivers for development and operation of the local drug economy and its impacts on the community. It is essential to emphasize that the research did not set out to collect information about illegal behaviour, such as drug importation, manufacturing, or dealing. This position is reiterated throughout the study, particularly in the participant selection section, to ensure clarity and transparency regarding the research objectives and ethical considerations. The primary aim is to understand the socio-economic and cultural factors influencing drug-related activities within Pacific communities, rather than documenting illegal behaviour

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or over Zoom where a face-to-face meeting could not be facilitated. There were two sets of interviews conducted with each participant, with the option for a third debriefing interview. The first interview was to establish rapport with the participants as per nurturing the relational space or Vā; it was an opportunity to talanoa with the participant and not only get to know them but also outline the research process and questions. All of these first interviews were conducted face-to-face. For the second talanoa sessions where the participants were interviewed, five of the six interviews were conducted face-to-face, and one was conducted via Zoom as a face-to-face meeting could not be facilitated. An opportunity in the form of a third talanoa session to debrief after the talanoa with participants was offered; however, only two participants decided to take this up, and these sessions were conducted face-to-face. The other four participants said that they did not have any follow-up questions.

The data collection instrument for this study adopted a Talanoa-style approach, which was a departure from the traditional Western interviewing techniques due to its emphasis on open-flow conversations and participant-driven narratives. The Talanoa method prioritized the establishment of rapport and mutual understanding. The interview process commenced with an introduction that involved the researcher sharing their own cultural background, fostering an environment that encouraged participants to share openly. This initial step was crucial for building commonalities and creating a space for participants to feel comfortable contributing to the conversation. This was also pivotal in ensuring that there was an equal power balance between the researcher and participant.

The interview questions were designed to be open-ended and exploratory, aligning with the principles of Talanoa. The focus was not solely on the questions themselves, but on the

responses and narratives shared by the participants. The dialogue unfolded organically, allowing for a nuanced exploration of participants' awareness of emerging drug economies. The inquiry began by ascertaining participants' awareness of the local drug trade and then delved into their perceptions of the factors driving Pacific involvement in such economies. Subsequent questions explored potential solutions, ensuring that the conversation remained participant-driven and responsive to the unique perspectives and experiences within the community.

To avoid discomfort and harm when discussing sensitive topics related to drug economies, trust and rapport with participants were established, ensuring confidentiality and voluntary participation. Conversations were approached with sensitivity, being attentive to participants' emotional cues and allowing them to steer the discussion at their own pace. By focusing on the relational aspect of Talanoa, a natural and respectful exchange was facilitated, avoiding the imposition of external judgments or pressures. This method also helped mitigate the risk of re-traumatization, as participants shared only what they were comfortable with, fostering a sense of agency and control over their narratives. Additionally, reflexivity was maintained, continuously assessing biases and the power dynamics at play, ensuring that the research process remained participant-centred and ethically sound. Through this approach, a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between individual behaviours and broader socio-economic contexts within drug economies was achieved.

Ethical Considerations

Ensuring ethical integrity is paramount in research, particularly within the unique cultural context of Pacific people. This section emphasizes the importance of cultural sensitivity and community respect in every aspect of the research process and outlines key ethical considerations such as informed consent confidentiality, before commencing the interviews, ethical approval was obtained from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee Ethics application 4000027479.

Informed Consent: In obtaining informed consent, cultural nuances need to be meticulously acknowledged. Recognising the significance of oral traditions and lived experiences, this study places equal value on verbal and signed consent, particularly when interviewing elders. Verbal consent is a culturally accepted practice within Pacific communities and is considered as equivalent to its written counterpart (Heard, 2023; Anae, 2019). This approach respects the community's preferences for interpersonal communication, promoting an inclusive and culturally sensitive process.

Community Leadership and Engagement: Ethical considerations extend to a community engagement, where the study recognises the vital role of community leaders. Engaging with community leaders fosters mutual trust and respect, aligning with Pacific values. Community leaders function as gatekeepers, advisors, conduits for information and contributors to the identification of participants, ensuring the research aligns with community values and priorities.

Cultural Appropriateness of Questions, Reciprocity and Feedback: The formulation of interview questions was approached with cultural appropriateness in mind. Initial questions were crafted and feedback requested from the community in recognition cultural norms and sensitivities around certain topics may be sensitive and require a nuanced approach. Community members requested that the wording of questions be simplified etc. Throughout the research process, guidance sought from an appointed Cultural Advisory Board made up of Pacific leaders and mentors to ensure that research was relevant, respectful, and aligned with Pacific cultural values.

A reciprocal relationship with the community was maintained throughout the research process. Preliminary findings were shared with participants and the Cultural Advisory Board, providing an opportunity for feedback and clarification. This iterative process ensures that community perspectives are accurately represented and that the study contributes positively to the community.

Privacy and Confidentiality: Respecting privacy and confidentiality through safeguarding participants' identities and sensitive information was paramount. Data was anonymised, and participants given the option to use pseudonyms to further protect their privacy – 6 number of participants took up this option. The destruction of data will be carried out in accordance with the community's preferences, ensuring that interview material is securely and ethically managed in line with their wishes.

Ethical considerations in this study must extend beyond standard protocols, recognising the importance of cultural nuances within the Pacific context. By integrating cultural sensitivity into every aspect to the research process and aligning with university ethical guidelines. This study aims to uphold the highest ethical standards while respecting and honoring Pacific values and traditions.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process within this study employs thematic analysis, a robust qualitative analytical methodology that aligns seamlessly with the narrative-based nature of Talanoa style interviews. Thematic analysis is chosen for its ability to identify, analyse, and report patterns

(themes) within the data allowing for the exploring of unique perspectives and narratives shared by participants (Clarks et al, 2015). Though adopting thematic analysis of the Talanoa sessions, this study aimed to identify the complexities of emerging drug economies within the Pacific community. Thematic analysis has been widely used in Pacific research for its flexibility and ability to capture culturally rich narratives (Meo-Sewabu & Granger, 2016). Meo-Sewabu (2015) highlights its usefulness in Pacific methodologies, particularly in preserving the relational and collective nature of knowledge. By incorporating thematic analysis within a Talanoa framework, this study ensured cultural sensitivity, reflexivity, and depth in capturing participants' lived experiences, allowing for an analysis that remains authentic to the narratives shared.

Transcription Coding and Theme Identification

The initial step involved transcribing the Talanoa sessions verbatim. This process captured not only the spoken words but also the nuances, expressions, and emotions embedded within the narratives. For instance, when participants discussed economic struggles, their tone and pauses often conveyed frustration, resignation, or determination. These subtleties were noted during transcription, ensuring that the analysis remained contextually grounded in the participants' lived experiences. Being immersed in the transcripts enabled the researcher to gain familiarity with the content and context of the discussions.

Coding was then undertaken as a crucial component of the thematic analysis, wherein meaningful segments of the data were identified and assigned codes. In the context of Talanoa, codes were applied not only to explicit content but also to implicit elements such as tone, emphasis, and cultural nuances. For example, when participants described pathways into drug markets, codes such as *"limited opportunities," "necessity-driven decisions,"* and *"intergenerational struggles"* emerged, highlighting the structural and relational factors influencing involvement. The coding process was iterative, allowing for flexibility and responsiveness to emerging themes within the data.

Through a systematic and recursive process, codes were grouped into potential themes. These themes represented recurring patterns within the dataset. For instance, narratives around community support and resilience frequently overlapped with discussions of economic hardship, leading to the development of a broader theme on *"Survival Strategies within Marginalised Communities."* The identification of themes was conducted in a way that respected the organic flow of Talanoa conversations, acknowledging the interconnectedness of ideas and narratives.

The identified themes then underwent a review and refinement process. This involved revisiting the transcripts, cross-examining the themes, and refining their definitions. For example, an initial theme labelled *"Crime as Economic Necessity"* was later refined to *"Navigating Economic Constraints through Illicit Markets"* to better capture the agency and decision-making processes of participants. This process was conducted in collaboration with supervisors to ensure the robustness and accuracy of the identified themes, enhancing the reliability and validity of the analysis.

Finally, thematic mapping was undertaken, organizing the refined themes into a coherent and meaningful structure. This provided a visual representation of the relationships between themes and how they contributed to the overarching narrative. For example, the theme of *"Economic Hardship and Limited Opportunities"* was closely linked to *"Social Networks and Market Entry"* and *"Community Responses to Illicit Markets."* The thematic map remained dynamic, reflecting the complexity and richness of the Talanoa sessions and ensuring that the participants' perspectives were represented holistically.

Interpretation and Integration with Talanoa Principles

The interpretation phase involved weaving the identified themes into a narrative that aligns with the principles of Talanoa. This process integrates the themes within the broader social and cultural context, guided by the understanding of Pacific cultural values, oral traditions, and the emphasis on participatory dialogue. Rather than being analysed in isolation, the themes were examined in relation to the interconnectedness of cultural, social, and economic factors, reflecting the holistic nature of Pacific worldviews.

For example, the theme of economic hardship was explored through the principle of 'fa'aaloalo (respect), which helped interpret participants' experiences not just as individual struggles but as part of a larger communal context. One participant discussed how financial strain impacted their ability to contribute to extended family obligations. In Talanoa, this was understood as a reflection of the collective pressure that families face in maintaining communal ties, thus giving deeper cultural significance to the participant's narrative.

Similarly, the theme of family obligations was interpreted through the Talanoa principle of 'alofa (love), emphasizing the sense of responsibility and the moral obligation to support family members, even in difficult times. A participant shared their experience of prioritizing family over personal needs, which was seen not as a burden, but as an expression of 'alofa that binds families together. This cultural lens revealed how participants' actions in the drug economy

were often linked to the desire to fulfill these deep familial responsibilities, further complicating perceptions of moral choices.

Additionally, the theme of social exclusion was examined through the Talanoa principle of ‘fa’asinomaga (identity), highlighting how individuals’ involvement in illicit activities was shaped by a sense of marginalization and a lack of opportunities. In the context of Talanoa, this theme was not solely framed as criminality but as a survival strategy driven by systemic inequality, where personal identity and community belonging played significant roles in shaping decisions.

By grounding the themes in Talanoa principles, the interpretation process ensured that the analysis was culturally relevant, reflective of Pacific ways of knowing, and mindful of the interconnectedness of individual, familial, and community experiences.

Member Checking

Member checking, or participant validation, is a crucial process in qualitative research to enhance credibility and accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this process it involved sharing the findings and themes with participants to verify data representation and gather additional insights, ensuring that the research authentically reflects their lived experiences. This process is especially valuable in sensitive topics like drug research, where participants may offer insights not initially apparent to the researcher. In Pacific research, member checking ensures cultural nuances are accurately understood, preventing misrepresentation (Meo-Sewabu, 2021). Overall, it fosters transparency, strengthens findings, and ensures cultural relevance.

The identified themes underwent a review and refinement process, revisiting the transcripts and refining their definitions. For example, the theme “Crime as Economic Necessity” was refined to “Navigating Economic Constraints through Illicit Markets” to better capture participants’ decision-making. This process, conducted in collaboration with supervisors, ensured the accuracy and robustness of the themes. To further validate the analysis, preliminary findings were shared with participants for feedback. A participant clarified the Samoan term “fa’alavelave,” which was initially coded under themes of economic hardship. They explained that it also reflects cultural expectations of collective family support, which helped refine the theme to better capture economic interdependence in Samoan communities. This feedback deepened the analysis and ensured the research remained true to the community's voices.

Report Dissemination

The final steps in reporting and disseminating the research findings were guided by a commitment to transparency, community engagement, and the broader impact of the study.

The dissemination process was conceived as a multi-faceted approach, ensuring that the insights derived from the research reached various stakeholders.

The initial stage involved the preparation of a comprehensive final thesis, encapsulating the key findings, insights, and recommendations. This document served as the primary vehicle for reporting the research outcomes. Effort was made to enhance accessibility and readability, presenting the information in a clear and concise manner, bridging the gap between academic rigor and community relevance.

Once completed, a multi-tiered dissemination plan was implemented. Participants and community leaders, who generously contributed their time and perspectives, were provided with a copy of the findings. This approach not only honours their involvement but also enables them to engage with and validate the representation of their voices in the research.

The findings were simultaneously shared with the broader Pacific community through stakeholders with insights to the community. Again, community leaders and knowledge holders played a pivotal role in this phase, acting as conduits for information dissemination. Workshops, seminars, and community meetings were made available if communities wanted to discuss the research outcomes. Further dissemination is planned through presentation of the findings at conferences and publications in academic journals.

By adopting this holistic and inclusive approach to reporting and dissemination, the researcher endeavoured to bridge the gap between academia and the community, empowering diverse stakeholders with the knowledge needed for informed decision-making.

Chapter summary

This research adopts a culturally grounded methodology, blending Talanoa and Fonua methodologies to comprehensively investigate emerging drug economies within the context of Pacific communities. The study utilises a qualitative research design, emphasizing the importance of community engagement, cultural understanding, and contextual relevance. The Talanoa style interviews served as the primary data collection method, providing a narrative based participatory dialogue to explore the potential drivers, impacts, and solutions to drug economies. The Fonua framework is integrated into the interview guide, ensuring cultural sensitivity, and aligning questions with Pacific ways of knowing and community interconnectedness.

The research design followed a structured process involving participant selection, informed consent with cultural sensitivity, consultation with a cultural advisory group, and two rounds of

Talanoa-style interviews with a third optional debriefing interview included. Thematic analysis was employed as the data analysis method, capturing the richness of participant narratives and interpreting themes within the context of Pacific cultural values.

Ethical considerations emphasized the importance of verbal consent within the Pacific context as well as confidentiality and reciprocity. The study concluded with a dissemination plan, ensuring that findings were shared with participants, the wider community, and relevant stakeholders. This approach sought to bridge the gap between academic research and community impact and action, further contributing to informed decision-making and meaningful interventions within Pacific communities.

In crafting the research design, the Talanoa style emerged as the primary research method. Concurrently, we utilise the Fonua methodology, as a conceptual lens that emphasises the interconnectedness of individuals, community, and land. Together these methodologies lay the foundation for a holistic and culturally sensitive approach to investigating emerging drug economies within Pacific communities.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter provides a detailed analysis of emerging drug ecosystems within Pacific communities, as framed through the participants' narratives. A key insight from these voices is their pragmatic and morally neutral perspective on illicit drug economies, which they view not as a matter of moral judgement but as a necessary response to economic pressures.

The findings identify that community identity is crucial for understanding local perceptions of regional drug economies, aligning with the first objective of the research that focuses on assessing community awareness and knowledge. Participants emphasized how communal ties and support systems shape their views and experiences. Addressing the second objective—identifying drivers—the study highlights economic disparities, survival needs and limited legitimate opportunities for advancement as key motivators for engagement in illicit markets. Participants described these actions as pragmatic responses to socio-economic pressures, steering clear of moral judgments about involvement in illicit drug markets. For the third objective—evaluating impact—the reflections of participants on the benefits, such as resource access and community support, alongside the legal and social costs, underscore the complex socio-economic impacts of regional drug economies. Overall, the participant narratives provide a nuanced perspective that integrates the study's aims, offering a foundation for further exploration of community awareness, driving factors, and socio-economic effects.

Theme :1 Community Identity Provides the Context for Emerging Drug Ecosystems

The first theme that was identified from the participants interviews is related to their perceptions of their communities. Community identity, social connectedness and adaptive capacity are significant as they establish the foundational context through which subsequent themes unfold. There are three themes within this section that emerge from the talanoa sessions including:

- Home is everything to us – perceptions of community identity
- Dynamics of Social Connectedness and Community Support Mechanisms
- Community Capacity for Resilience and Adaptive Responses to Challenges

Home is everything to us – Perceptions of community identity

All the participants vividly described the communities they came from and the ways in which they were linked to each other through a common history of migration, kinship ties as well as place identity fostered through familial connections with their neighbourhoods. This familiarity with their local community gave participants a sense of identity. One participant reflected:

> *We moved to New Zealand so that we can give our kids a better chance at life and when we first moved here we decided to live in Otara because it was close to family already here. This is why I have a love for South Auckland because it's where all our people are, everything I've built here (in Aotearoa) has been around my area, so it has a special place in my heart, I'm an Otara boy through and through. (P6)*

Another participant described their sense of place and community of origin positively identifying it as 'home' or 'where I'm from,' while at the same time acknowledging that it was negatively stigmatised in public narratives as 'the hood'

> *I was raised in the same neighbourhood as my parents when they first moved to New Zealand from the islands in the 50s, even though people say it's the hood, its home to me and my family" (P1)*

The above narratives reflect deep ties to a specific community within South Auckland, particularly Otara, illustrating a profound sense of identity and belonging intertwined with the geography and socio-cultural environment of the area. In this research, understanding why these sentiments matter involves unpacking the social, cultural, psychological, and urban implications of place attachment and sense of identity.

Cultural identity and community attachment are central to the participants' narratives, as their migration stories and choice of settlement in Otara were influenced by existing familial and cultural networks. South Auckland, and Otara specifically, serve as cultural hubs for Pacific communities in Aotearoa, where the sense of belonging transcends mere geographical location and becomes a cornerstone of identity. This attachment not only fosters community cohesion but also plays a crucial role in cultural preservation, highlighting the significance of place in shaping individual and collective identities (McGavin, 2015; Freeman et al, 2023).

However, positive identification with the local Pacific community is juxtaposed against the external stigmatisation of areas like Otara as 'the hood.' This tension between perception and reality is significant, as it illustrates how stigma is constructed and perpetuated, often leading to real world impacts on residents' self-perceptions and societal engagement. Despite these external biases, the participants demonstrate resilience, maintaining pride in their community and defying broader societal narratives. This resilience is an essential aspect of their collective identity, embodying both pride and defiance in the face of negative stereotypes about South Auckland (Ministry of Social Development, 2020; Allen & Bruce, 2017) that focus on poverty, crime and violence (Allen & Bruce, 2017; Borrell, 2006).

The socio-economic challenges and urban disparities faced by communities further complicate this picture. The participants' narratives underscore the environmental and economic constraints that shape their lived experiences, from limited access to resources and infrastructure to the broader impacts on social mobility and opportunities. Participants shared a sense that the neighbourhood, despite its vibrant community, lacks the necessary infrastructure and resources to foster individual and collective success, often leaving people feeling "stuck" in an environment that rarely improves. Even when individuals do manage to escape and achieve success, they often feel a responsibility to help those still within the neighbourhood. While this sense of duty reflects the strength of community ties, it can also hinder their personal growth. The constant pull to support others diverts attention and resources away from their own ambitions, highlighting how systemic barriers not only limit opportunities for upward mobility but also create a cycle where the environment, despite producing individuals capable of greatness, does not offer the support needed for widespread success. These challenges are not merely personal but are symptomatic of broader socio-economic inequities that disproportionately affect marginalised communities.

Urban planning and community development play a critical role in shaping neighbourhood experiences (New Zealand Planning Institution, 2017). A historical overview of South Auckland, particularly Otara, reveals how planning decisions include patterns of neglect as well as inadequate support for Pacific communities, leading to the entrenchment of socio-economic disparities over time (Auckland Housing Network, N.D). However, there is potential for community-led initiatives to drive positive change, emphasising the importance of involving local communities in urban planning processes (Otara Business Association 2023, Auckland Council, 2023). Such involvement ensures that developments are culturally appropriate and aligned with the community's needs and aspirations, rather than imposing external solutions that may not resonate with or benefit the local population (Otara Business Association 2023, Auckland Council, 2023).

The psychological and emotional impacts of living in a stigmatised area are profound, particularly concerning mental health and well-being (Ministry of Social Development, 2020). While attachment to a place can provide strength and identity (Dixon et al, 2014), it can also contribute to stress and feelings of being trapped, especially when the environment is perceived as limiting (Dixon et al, 2014). The ambivalence expressed by participants – love for their home but frustration with its constraints – highlights the complex interplay between identity and place. This ambivalence impacts not only Otara residents' sense of self but also their aspirations and community involvement, illustrating the deep emotional ties that bind

individuals to their communities despite the challenges they face. Tensions between attachment to place and the constraints imposed by stigma not only shapes residents' individual identities but also influences the dynamics of social connectedness and the role of community support mechanisms in fostering resilience in the face of adversity.

The dynamics of Social Connections and Community Support Mechanisms

In this section, social connections emerge as the primary currency within the community, functioning as both a critical resource and a foundational mechanism for problem-solving. Rather than relying on formalised systems of external support, individuals and groups within the community tap into an intricate web of relationships to address challenges, foster resilience, and create pathways for success. These connections, which include familial ties, friendships, neighbourhood alliances, and broader community networks, are mobilised to access resources, share knowledge, and provide mutual aid. In contexts where material resources may be insecure or inaccessible, social networks take on heightened importance, acting as a conduit through which individuals pool resources, navigate socio-economic barriers, and sustain collective well-being.

The ability to draw up on social connections is not merely a survival strategy but a form of social capital that underpins the community's capacity to thrive (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital, as defined by Bourdieu (1986), refers to the resources individuals and communities gain from their social networks, including trust, mutual support, and cooperation, which can be mobilised to achieve collective goals and improve social well-being. These networks are fluid, evolving, and context-dependent, shaped by both historical relationships and the contemporary realities faced by the community. As such, social connections offer a flexible and adaptive means of responding to crises and uncertainties, facilitating cooperation and reciprocity in ways that formal systems may not be able to replicate. Understanding the dynamics of these networks is crucial for appreciating the ways in which Pacific communities organise themselves, solve problems, and foster a sense of belonging, even in the absence of external institutional support. Thus, the community's social and economic resilience is deeply intertwined with the strength and adaptability of these social networks, which enable them to navigate challenges and maintain cohesion.

As well as the community providing participants with a sense of identity, the participants also discussed the intricate web of social relationships and support systems within their communities. The participants delved into the various forms of social connections, including family, friends, and community organisations, and shared insights into how these networks function to provide support and a sense of belonging. By analysing the mechanisms of support -

both formal and informal – this theme seeks to understand how social connections contribute to the well-being of individuals and the collective strength of the community. The following two interview extracts exemplify the same point about social connectiveness, support mechanisms and their infrastructure:

> *Even though I don't think I had lots of fancy stuff growing up. I was always grateful for my family and friends – because those were my people. When things get tough, and we didn't have much, it was my friends that I went to for help....they understood what was going on because they from similar situations. They understand me and help me to get through the rough patches, sometimes it's through just hanging out and listening, other times it's connecting me to other people that might be able to help. A lot of the boys [work] through these connections which is pretty cool (P4).*

And:

> *Growing up, we didn't have a lot but my neighbourhood was like a big extended family – especially since a lot of our family was back in Samoa and hadn't moved over yet. We all grew up together sharing meals, helping out with jobs, going to church together and when you have not much money like money, these connections meant a lot to me. It wasn't just about getting by day-to-day for us, it was about knowing that someone had your back and they were going through it too so you could trust them (P6).*

Social connections, while often viewed as a source of resilience, can also be pivotal in shaping the trajectory of opportunities across generations. In communities that face long-standing socio-economic challenges, these networks are a double-edged sword. On one hand, they offer essential support, fostering a sense of belonging, shared experience, and mutual aid that strengthens the fabric of the community. On the other, these same connections can inadvertently limit exposure to opportunities beyond the immediate environment, especially when resources and pathways to success are scarce within the network.

Despite these limitations, it is through social bonds that individuals and families navigate adversity, drawing strength from their collective identity. However, breaking through the structural barriers that limit upward mobility can be difficult, especially when generational experiences of hardship persist within local community networks. The tight-knit nature of Pacific communities can lead to a situation where individuals feel torn between the loyalty to their roots and the need to seek opportunities elsewhere. The following interview extract

exemplifies this tension, highlighting both the pride and the difficulty in balancing love for the community with the realities of striving for something greater;

> *It sucks because I love where I'm from even though it's the hood, but it isn't made to support greatness, and the people that make it out….it must be heavy to try support us from out there…but also you kinda drown if you stay here because it rarely gets better (P3).*

Participant 3's reflection encapsulates the emotional complexity of navigating intergenerational constraints, where deep connections to community can simultaneously provide comfort and impose limitations. However, despite these barriers, communities often find ways to adapt and support one another, as explored in the following theme.

Community Capacity for Resilience and Adaptive Responses to Challenges

The resilience of communities lies in their capacity to adapt to on-going challenges, drawing on collective strengths and support systems to navigate adversity (Gero et al, 2024l; Masten, 2001). Social connections play a crucial role in this process, serving as both a safety net and a source of empowerment. These networks not only provide practical resources, such as shared knowledge or financial support, but also foster a sense of belonging and mutual responsibility that sustains the community during difficult times.

In this context, community support is a core part of the response to external pressures, as individuals rely on each other to create adaptive solutions. The ability to mobilise social networks in response to crises demonstrates the community's resourcefulness and its capacity to overcome barriers that might seem insurmountable without such collective efforts. The following interview extracts exemplify how these connections become vital tools for resilience, highlighting the utility of social support in addressing challenges and sustaining the well-being of the community.

One participant, for example, emphasised how critical peer networks are in overcoming hardships;

> *We've faced tough times, but I reckon anytime we've had tough times, I would just go to the boys really, they've always had my back. I reckon when you have boys who go through similar things like we do, we have to adapt to the problems that only we understand ya know. (P2)*

This statement underscores the importance of shared experiences and mutual support within peer groups, illustrating how such networks are instrumental in developing adaptive solutions to common challenges.

Additionally, the role of extended family networks further illustrates the depth of community support, transcending geographic boundaries;

> *Luckily for me and lots of people I know, we have our families in the Islands and even if they can't provide us with financial help, they help in other ways. Like we go to the islands often and never have to worry about where we're staying cause we know we can stay with our fams. (P3)*

This extract highlights the global dimension of community support, where familial ties across borders contribute to a sense of security and belonging, even in the absence of financial resources. Together these narratives reflect the multi-faceted nature of community resilience, demonstrating how local and transnational social connections function as vital resources in navigating and adapting to challenges. They identify the intricate ways in which community support systems are leveraged to foster resilience and enhance well-being.

The exploration of community identity and social connectiveness provides a crucial foundation for understanding the emergence and operation of drug ecosystems within Pacific communities. The participants' profound attachment to their communities suggests how deeply embedded their sense of belonging and identity is, shaping their experiences and responses to socio-economic challenges. This place-based attachment is marked by a strong sense of pride and connection, despite external stigmatisation and systemic limitations. Such community identity not only fosters resilience but also high-trust environments that influence the dynamics of local settings where drug ecosystems may take root.

The role of social connections extends to shaping the capacity of communities to deal with ongoing challenges. The ability to mobilise support from within and beyond the local environments underscore the community's resourcefulness and adaptability. This mobilisation reflects how entrenched social networks can influence the operational context of drug eco-systems, providing both a safety net and means of navigating the complexities of socio-economic disparities. Overall, understanding community identity and social connection is essential for contextualising the emergence and functioning of drug ecosystems within Pacific communities. These elements provide a framework for examining how communities respond to and manage socio-economic challenges, influencing the development and persistence of drug-

related activities. By acknowledging the role of community identity and social networks, we gain valuable insights into factors that shape and sustain drug ecosystems, highlighting the need for interventions that address these underlying social and economic dynamics.

Theme 2: Contextual Drivers of Illicit Markets

The first theme of community identity and social connections provides a foundational context for understanding the environment in which emerging drug ecosystems develop. It highlights how deep-seated community ties and socio-economic conditions shape individual experiences and responses to external pressures. This context is crucial for framing the subsequent examination of specific drivers that propel the growth and sustenance of illicit markets within these communities.

Building on this contextual understanding, the second theme shifts focus to the contextual drivers of illicit markets. This theme delves into the economic and social factors that influence the prevalence and dynamics of drug-related activities. By examining the underlying drivers, we gain insights into why illicit markets thrive in certain environments and how they are sustained despite regulatory and legal frameworks.

The exploration of this theme encompasses the following three sub-themes:

- Economic disparities and illicit activities
- Survival and income supplementation
- Lack of opportunities and urgency of need

Economic disparities and illicit activities suggest how socio-economic inequities create fertile ground for drug markets to flourish. Survival and income supplementation present examples of how people engage in illicit activities as a means of financial stability. Finally, a lack of opportunities and the urgency of need examine the pressures and constraints that drive individuals towards illicit markets in search of immediate relief.

Together, these -themes offer a view of the factors that contribute to the development and persistence of illicit markets. Understanding these drivers is essential for developing effective strategies to address and mitigate the impact of drug-related activities within Pacific communities.

Economic Disparities and Illicit Activities

Economic disparities, which often stem from broader socio-economic and political factors beyond the community's control, can drive individuals towards illicit activities as a mean of

financial survival. In context, where legitimate economic opportunities are scarce and income inequality is pronounced, the allure of illicit markets increases as individuals seek alternative ways to bridge the gap between their immediate financial needs and available resources. This theme explores how significant economic disparities create conditions that push people towards illegal activities.

One participant, for example, illustrates the economic rationale behind engaging in illicit activities:

> *..I know that there are drugs here and there aye…but most people (in gangs) I know use it to make money not to get high…we can't afford to be using it to get high when we can use it to survive. (P4)*

This interview extract highlights the stark reality that, in economically disadvantaged contexts, the primary motivation for involvement in drug markets is not recreational but survival. The participant's observation underscores the economic value of illicit activities as a means of meeting financial needs, suggesting a pragmatic approach where drugs are commodified as a financial resource rather than for their hedonistic potential.

Further elaboration on the motivation for involvement provided by additional participants, also reflect the pervasive impact of economic disparities:

> *There's always been a lack of opportunities and jobs I know people turn to the options that [are] available to them. I know a few people who have gone into underground sh*t like selling, or sourcing because it's the only way to get money quick. (P1)*

This statement underscores the harsh reality that, in the absence of viable employment opportunities, individuals often turn to illicit markets as a means of immediate financial gain. The lack of legitimate avenues for earning a living creates an environment where illegal activities become a necessity for those struggling to meet basic financial needs. This extract further illustrates how economic deprivation drives individuals towards underground economies, which are perceived as more accessible and immediate compared to legal employment options.

The following participant highlights how systemic economic inequality exacerbates the push towards illicit activities:

> *We've seen economic inequality create a solution where people feel pushed towards illegal activity because they don't have other options…. like young people leave school*

and feel the pressure to help out family but don't have many options except to see what their friends are doing. (P6)

This observation sheds light on the generational and systemic nature of economic disparity, where young individuals, facing limited prospects and familial pressure, are drawn into illegal activities as a means of supporting themselves and their families. The participant's comment reflects a broader pattern where economic inequality not only influences immediate choices but also shapes long-term trajectories, perpetuating cycles of poverty and reliance on illicit markets.

Together, these insights illustrate how economic disparities, and a lack of opportunities create a fertile ground for illicit activities, driven by necessity rather than choice. The interplay between limited legitimate options and systemic economic challenges highlights the critical need to address broader socio-economic issues to mitigate the reliance on illegal markets as a survival strategy.

Survival and Income Supplementation

This theme delves into how poverty and financial hardship compel individuals to engage in illicit markets as a means of survival and income supplementation. While the previous theme addressed how economic disparities drive individuals toward illicit markets, this section focuses on the private financial struggles that differentiate personal struggles from public economic conditions. These insights underscore the critical distinction between macro-level economic conditions and micro-level financial troubles (Mills, 1959).

In contexts marked by pronounced economic inequalities, legitimate opportunities for earning a living are often scarce, pushing individuals towards illicit markets. However, it is the acute personal financial crises that often compel people to engage in illegal activities. For some, the illicit market is not a choice but a necessity when traditional means of earning a livelihood are unavailable or insufficient.

One participant describes this reality succinctly;

In times of financial hardship, there's a bit of a blurring of what's right or wrong and like the kind of money we need we get out of the situations we need to do what's necessary. All of us have had these times where we were desperate and our families needed it and we had no other options – like we can't go to a bank or to a loan place, so we do whatever is available. (P3)

The above statement underscores the moral and practical complexities individuals face when confronted with financial desperation. Participant narratives highlight how financial distress necessitates engagement in illicit markets, not out of choice but out of immediate need and longer-term survival.

The following participant, for example, reflects on a specific case;

> *I remember asking on of the boys why he started doing some of the stuff he did and he said he had 2 kids and was living at home with mum and dad, and was the only one working. The benefit wasn't going to go far, he already had cashied a few loans and was getting pretty desperate, then he just did the odd errand to get enough money to be able to do the basics like feed the kids and the [parent's] rents (P4).*

This observation illustrates the practical necessity driving individuals towards illicit activities. The participant's reflection on his friend's account of financial strain and the lack of viable alternatives to meet basic needs identifies how private financial hardships can push individuals into illegal markets as a means of economic survival. The exploration of survival and income supplementation within illicit markets reveals a critical distinction between macro-level economic conditions and micro-level financial hardships. This theme underscores how personal financial crises, distinct from broader socio-economic disparities, drive individuals towards illicit activities as a means of survival and financial support. These finding highlight that while public economic conditions, characterized by systemic income inequality and lack of opportunity, set a broad framework for economic deprivation, it is the acute personal financial crises that precipitate a turn to illicit activities. Participants' experiences, such as the blurring of ethical boundaries during financial hardship (P3) and the desperation leading to illicit activities to meet basic needs (P4), illustrate how immediate, personal financial pressures catalyse engagement in illegal markets.

Additionally, the participant narratives suggest a notable distinction in wealth transfer dynamics. In the context of Pacific communities, there is often an upstream transfer of wealth where younger family members support older generations. This contrasts with Western models where wealth typically flows downward from older to younger generations (Benton & Keister, 2017). This upwards wealth transfer further complicates financial pressures and heightens the urgency to engage in illicit markets as younger individuals bear the brunt of economic support for their families.

Insights from this research delineate the interplay between macro-economic factors and micro-level exigencies, emphasizing that while structural inequalities contribute to a broader context of economic hardship, it is the acute personal financial crises that necessitate a turn to illicit activities. This distinction is crucial for understanding the drivers behind illicit market participation, revealing that effective solutions must address both systemic economic reforms and targeted interventions to alleviate personal financial distress. Building on this understanding, the next -theme explores how the lack of educational and economic opportunities further exacerbates the sense of urgency and drives individuals toward illicit markets, focusing on the systemic barriers and immediate needs that shape their choices.

Lack of Opportunities and Urgency of Need

This theme delves into how the scarcity of educational and economic opportunities steers individuals towards illicit markets, driven by an acute urgency of need and constrained choices. It is crucial to recognise how systematic barriers – such as limited access to quality education and well-paying jobs – catalyse this shift, fundamentally shaping individuals' economic trajectories. The focus here is on how structural limitations restrict economic advancement, compelling individuals to turn to illicit activities as a means of achieving financial stability and social mobility.

The immediate consequences of these structural barriers are evident in individual economic decisions and career pathways. One participant articulated this saying:

> *Lots of us finish school and kind of have to decide what we're going to do aye, I couldn't really go to university because my family needed the money so I get why people don't go to uni. You take the first job you can where you can make alright money and for us that's in places like the meat works and at the ports or airports. (P2)*

This observation underscores the critical impact of financial constraints and familial responsibilities on education and career choices. The inability to pursue higher education due to pressing economic needs forces individuals into immediate, less secure employment. The resultant limitations on career progressions enhance their susceptibility to illicit markets as a practical means of economic survival. Another participant also commented that the pressure to generate income when paid employment is scare was a driver for engagement in illicit activities noting that *"You don't have time to wait for a job. You go with what's quickest,"*

Furthermore, the following participant reflects on the practical difficulties associated with accessing support services:

> *I mean there are services around but a lot of those services I've noticed will make it out like you don't need much except time commitments but that's a big ask….you're asking me to give up time I could be using to make money, to do something like a course and I get it will be better but right now, that's not really a priority for us if our families need us. (P3)*

This insight highlights the conflict between immediate financial demands and the long-term advantages of personal development opportunities. The imperative to generate income quickly outweighs the potential benefits of investing time in educational or skill-building initiatives, thus perpetuating a cycle of economic instability and restricted options.

Moreover, the existence of pre-established networks and systems that facilitate participant involvement in illicit markets further complicates the economic landscape. The infrastructure for illicit activities is embedded within social and digital frameworks and the markets persist and evolve independently of formal economic systems. One participant illustrated how entrenched and adaptable these networks are:

> *…the boys always say if white people are going to buy it, the market is already there…it seems like 1+1 at that point, what I know about drugs in the community is that it is a way to make money. The way I've seen done is through connecting people to different apps that have burner accounts and numbers, like I know some white dudes who hit up my friends and they're given the burner insta to follow. (P1)*

This quote highlights the seamless integration of illicit markets into existing technological and social networks. The use of burner accounts and anonymous communication channels illustrates how drug markets leverage digital platforms to maintain operations and expand markets. The ease of with which these networks adapt to consumer demands, notedly those from outside Pacific communities, reflect the entrenched nature of the market and its infrastructure. Another participant noted the role of social media in facilitating these activities:

> *Young people use social media as a way to network and I think that's a powerful way for our young people to push product because they know how to use it in a way that they can be anonymous…. but like anything I think our youngins just use what they have access to. (P5)*

This observation emphasises the dual role of social media: as both a tool for maintaining anonymity and a platform for market expansion. Social media's accessibility and functionality enable individuals to engage in illicit activities while circumventing traditional regulatory frameworks. The strategic use of social media platforms by young people demonstrates how existing systems are repurposed to facilitate illicit transactions, reinforcing the persistence and adaptability of illicit markets.

This theme distinguishes between broader economic conditions and acute personal crises, showing that immediate financial pressures can often override ethical considerations and drive individuals towards illegal means of income. The personal narratives underscore the urgent nature of these financial struggles and their direct impact on decisions to engage in illicit activities. Exploration of opportunities and need underscore how structural barriers intensify the drive toward illicit markets. Systemic constraints on economic advancement and career development push individuals to seek alternative sources of income, with illicit markets often providing a viable, albeit risky, solution. Furthermore, it highlighted the way in which existing markets and the role of social and digital networks can be leveraged to facilitate these activities, further exemplifying that this means of economic development requires very little capital.

Insights into dealing reveal an understanding of the complex drivers behind illicit market activity. They illustrate how economic disparities, personal financial crises, and systemic barriers intersect to sustain participation in illicit markets, emphasising the need for multifaceted strategies to address these issues. This insight paves the way for the exploration of the costs and benefits of engagement in illicit drug markets in the next section.

Theme 3: The Cost and Benefits of Engagement in Illicit Drug Markets

Theme three examines the complex interplay between the economic benefits of illicit drug market participation and the significant legal and social costs that arise. It highlights the duality of engagement in these markets, where short-term financial stability is weighed against long-term legal risks and personal sacrifices. The theme is structured around two key dimensions:

- Access to resources and community benefits
- Legal consequences and social costs

These dimensions reflect the intricate decisions made by individuals and communities facing economic marginalization, where involvement in illicit markets is often seen as a pragmatic, albeit high-risk, survival strategy rather than a moral transgression.

Access to Resources and Community Benefits

Illicit drug markets offer a financial alternative for those who find themselves excluded from formal economic opportunities. The resources gained from such activities often fill critical gaps, particularly for individuals and families encountering bureaucratic hurdles that limit access to government assistance or formal employment. As P6 articulates:

> *From what we've gathered, there are instances in which the resources from these activities help to fill some gaps with fewer barriers to obtaining those assistances. It's truly about letting people decide the risk factor for themselves, but it does fill a gap that sometimes services aren't able to because of their own red tape. (P6)*

Here, P6's statement reflects the notion that engagement in illicit markets is often driven by the failure of state systems to provide for basic needs. This analysis goes beyond individual choice, situating the decision to engage in illicit activities within a broader structural context. The notion of "fewer barriers" is crucial, as it underscores the accessibility of resources through informal and illegal channels, in contrast to the layers of bureaucracy that complicate access to legal forms of assistance. This gap between formal systems and actual need speaks to broader critiques of neoliberal governance, which often prioritizes efficiency and cost-cutting over the provision of robust social safety nets (Azevedo et al, 2019). Illicit economies thus emerge as alternative forms of income redistribution, filling voids left by weakened welfare systems.

The impact of proscribed earnings extend beyond individual survival, supporting community resilience and fostering local economic initiatives. The reinvestment of illicit market profits into businesses and social programs enables a form of community-driven economic development. As P3 shares:

> *I've seen a lot of the boys create businesses and opportunities from their profits' aye – it's businesses built by us, for us – where the capital comes from isn't my business. (P3)*

P3's statement highlights the transformative potential of illicit profits in fostering legitimate forms of entrepreneurship within Pacific communities. This insight invites a rethinking of how illicit activities are framed—rather than being purely destructive, they can generate forms of economic empowerment that are culturally aligned with community values. The phrase "built by us, for us" underscores a sense of ownership and autonomy, where Pacific communities are actively resisting economic marginalization by creating legal self-sustaining businesses that serve their own needs. This reflects broader theories of informal economies, which posit that illicit markets often emerge in response to formal market failures, providing alternative

mechanisms for capital accumulation and redistribution (Gutierrez, 2020; Bonnet & Venkatesh, 2016).

Furthermore, the use of illicit money to incubate legal business opportunities challenges traditional assumptions about the morality of capital origins. In many Western contexts, the source of capital is often less scrutinised, with large businesses frequently benefiting from questionable practices, such as illicit money transfers to tax havens or other forms of financial misconduct (Gutierrez, 2020; Zucman, 2015). These practices highlight a paradox, where legal frameworks may condone certain types of capital accumulation, despite their questionable moral or ethical implications. However, P3's statement reflects a different cultural logic, one that prioritizes the tangible benefits to the community over concerns about the legality of the means. This cultural pragmatism, which values outcomes over the ethical purity of methods, is deeply embedded in the socio-economic realities of Pacific communities, where survival often trumps moral abstraction.

Similarly, P2's account demonstrates how illicit profits are channelled into initiatives that directly benefit the community:

> *We have things in our communities now that we didn't use to have like I know the local boys (alluding to gang members) run events like a weight-loss events where we can win cash prizes. (P2)*

This narrative speaks to the reinvestment of illicit market earnings into social capital, fostering community cohesion and well-being. The weight-loss event is not merely a form of recreation; it is an example of how illicit economies can foster health and wellness initiatives that might not otherwise exist within communities. This outcome counters dominant narratives that depict gangs and illicit activities as solely violent and harmful. In this case, the profits from illicit markets are used to sponsor wellness programs that provide both health benefits and economic incentives. This example highlights the paradoxical role of illicit markets in creating social goods that align with the community's needs and values, suggesting a more nuanced understanding of the function these markets serve.

More broadly, attention to community benefits underscores the capacity of Pacific communities to adapt and leverage available resources to build economic infrastructure and social initiatives. The notion of reinvesting illicit market profits into community businesses and programs is not specific to Pacific communities (Corbett et al, 2021) and reflects a collective resilience that aligns with traditional Pacific values of mutual support and communal care

(Ratuva, 2021). This form of economic agency, though occurring outside legal frameworks, challenges conventional notions of economic empowerment by centring culturally specific modes of capital generation and redistribution. In this way, the theme identifies how communities navigate the limitations imposed by formal systems to create alternative pathways for economic advancement and social well-being.

Legal Consequences and Social Costs

While the economic benefits of illicit market participation are clear, the legal risks and social costs cannot be ignored. Involvement in dealing exposes individuals to the threat of incarceration, which often disrupts familial roles and fractures the social fabric. As P5 reflects:

> *While the money can be good, we do have to ask our young people about the cost of it all when they end up in jail or in the criminal justice system… this takes them away from their families and that costs more. (P5)*

P5's reflection highlights the deeper personal and social costs of illicit market engagement, particularly the disruption to family structures when individuals are incarcerated. The removal of fathers and providers from households due to legal consequences has profound implications for Pacific communities, where family cohesion is central to social identity and well-being. The economic gains, while providing short-term relief, are offset by the long-term damage of familial separation, where men are unable to fulfil their roles as providers and caretakers. This dynamic reveals the inherent tension in illicit market engagement: while it provides immediate resources, it simultaneously undermines the social stability that Pacific communities value.

This tension is further complicated by the absence of widespread moral condemnation of those who engage in illicit drug economy within Pacific communities. P6 reflects:

> *I know about the drug involvement because I see and hear stories of our young people going to jail for selling or having it on them, but I don't think that makes them bad kids – they're just trying to help the only way some of them can. (P6)*

This extract reflects a pragmatic understanding of economic survival within Pacific communities, where the decisions to engage in illicit activities are not judged through a moral lens. Rather, they are seen as rational responses to economic deprivation and limited opportunities. This perspective challenges dominant Western narratives that equate criminal behaviour with moral failure and social ostracism. Within Pacific contexts, the absence of stigma is indicative of a broader cultural pragmatism that recognizes the structural barriers individuals face. The community's lack of moral judgment reflects an understanding that

engagement in illicit markets is often a necessity driven by socio-economic realities rather than a voluntary choice indicating a lack of decency.

The privatisation of social costs—where families bear the emotional and social consequences of incarceration without broader community condemnation—further reinforces this pragmatic view. This contrasts sharply with external narratives that frame illicit market engagement as a personal failure (Western & Pettit, 2010). In Pacific communities, the costs are understood as part of a broader systemic failure, where individuals are left with few alternatives to provide for their families. This perspective highlights the limitations of external interventions that focus on moral or legal deterrence without addressing the root causes of economic exclusion.

Moreover, the lack of stigma within Pacific communities suggests that the social costs of illicit market engagement are not as visible or collectively felt as one might assume. This challenges criminological theories that emphasize the stigmatizing effects of criminal behaviour (Huebner et al, 2019), particularly in tight-knit communities. Instead, Pacific communities appear to operate with a different set of social norms, where the focus is on survival and pragmatism rather than moral policing. This cultural difference underscores the need for context-specific interventions that consider the unique socio-economic and cultural logics of Pacific communities.

Theme three illuminates the complex and often contradictory dynamics of engagement in illicit drug markets within Pacific communities. On the one hand, these markets offer vital economic resources that enable individuals and communities to navigate systemic barriers to formal economic participation. The reinvestment of profits into businesses and community initiatives reflects a form of economic resilience and self-determination that challenges mainstream assumptions about illicit markets as purely harmful. On the other hand, the legal and social costs of engagement—particularly the threat of incarceration and the disruption of familial roles—pose significant risks that complicate the benefits of these activities.

The absence of moral stigma and the pragmatic approach to survival reveal a cultural logic that prioritizes immediate economic needs over abstract ethical considerations. This understanding challenges dominant narratives of criminality and offers a more nuanced view of illicit market engagement as a response to structural inequalities. By highlighting the dual realities of economic empowerment and legal vulnerability, this theme calls for more comprehensive approaches to addressing the root causes of illicit market participation, including the need for viable economic alternatives and the dismantling of structural barriers that limit access to formal economic systems.

Chapter summary

The results and findings provide an understanding of illicit drug markets within Pacific communities by exploring the interplay between community identity, socio-economic drivers, and the impact of engagement in the drug trade. The findings from the three central themes—Community Identity and Social Connections, Contextual Drivers of Illicit Markets, and Cost and Benefits of Engagement in Illicit Drug Markets—collectively address the research aims of assessing awareness and knowledge, identifying drivers, and evaluating impact.

Community Identity and Social Connections lays the groundwork for understanding the environment in which illicit drug markets develop. It highlights how deeply embedded community ties and socio-economic conditions shape individuals' awareness and responses to drug-related activities. This theme underscores that community identity significantly influences how individuals perceive and interact with illicit markets, thereby addressing the objective of assessing awareness and knowledge. The community context serves as a backdrop for understanding the subsequent drivers and impacts of drug markets.

Building upon this foundational environment, the study shifts focus to the Contextual Drivers of Illicit Markets, through delving into the socio-economic factors influencing the growth and persistence of drug markets. The exploration of economic disparities reveals how pronounced income inequality creates fertile ground for illicit activities, as individuals often turn to these markets out of economic necessity rather than choice. These findings address the research objective of identifying the underlying drivers behind illicit market participation.

Moreover, the analysis of Survival and Income Supplementation highlights how acute personal financial crises compel individuals to engage in illicit markets as a means of survival. This - theme provides insight into how immediate financial pressures override ethical considerations, demonstrating the practical implications of economic hardship on drug market involvement. The theme also examines Lack of Opportunities and Urgency of Need, revealing how systemic barriers, such as limited access to education and well-paying jobs, exacerbate the drive toward illicit activities. This analysis underscores how structural limitations restrict economic advancement, pushing individuals to seek alternative sources of income in the form of illicit markets. This focus on systemic constraints complements the broader exploration of drivers by showing how structural factors shape economic choices and contribute to drug market proliferation.

The final theme, Cost and Benefits of Engagement in Illicit Drug Markets, synthesizes the findings from the previous themes to evaluate the overall impact of participation in drug

markets. It highlights how economic disparities, personal financial crises, and systemic barriers not only drive individuals to engage in illicit activities but also shape the costs and benefits associated with such engagement. This theme addresses the research objective of evaluating impact by examining the tangible and intangible consequences of involvement in drug markets.

Taken together, the themes identified in this research provide a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of illicit drug markets within Pacific communities. The study identifies how community identity, socio-economic drivers, and structural barriers intersect to influence drug market participation and its consequences. By integrating these insights, the research offers a foundation for developing targeted strategies to address the challenges posed by illicit drug markets, emphasizing the need for both systemic reforms and interventions to alleviate personal financial distress and mitigate the impact of drug economies.

In conclusion, this study offers a holistic perspective on illicit drug markets, linking community context, socio-economic drivers, and the impact of engagement to the research aims. The findings underscore the complexity of the factors influencing drug market involvement and highlight the importance of addressing both structural and individual-level issues to effectively combat illicit drug economies within Pacific communities.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the underlying factors driving the participation of Pacific communities in illicit drug markets in Aotearoa. The review of international literature identified how the context of Pacific peoples in Aotearoa reflects the situation of marginalised communities worldwide who are also involved in and to some extent in control of illicit drug markets. Interviews with key Pacific community members highlight that the community is aware of this drug market and that Pacific involvement is driven by three overarching rationales: (1) Community Identity as the Context for Emerging Drug Ecosystems, (2) Contextual Drivers of Illicit Markets, and (3) The Cost and Benefits of Engagement in Illicit Drug Markets. Each of these themes and their relevance to international literature will be discussed in turn.

Community Identity Provides the Context for Emerging Drug Ecosystems

This overarching theme in community participants' narratives suggest that Pacific capacity to support and strengthen community identity is a primary driver and consequence of Pacific people's involvement in illicit drug markets. Specifically, the illicit drug trade is identified as an economic mechanism that may be utilised to support Pacific families, strengthen Pacific ties to networks and build economic and social capacity in Pacific communities, all factors critical to a healthy and robust Pacific cultural identity.

Participants reflected that community identity is central to their worldview and plays a significant role in framing their engagement with illicit activities. A morally neutral argument suggests that the illicit drug trade supports the development and maintenance of robust Pacific identities not because this is reflective of criminal activities but because it is one of the only viable economic platforms that provides Pacific communities the ability to do so at scale. This finding aligns with existing literature on the interplay between social networks and involvement in illicit economies. For example, Dwyer and Moore (2010) show that trust-based relationships and informal social processes within Australian heroin markets can reinforce community ties and sustain local economic systems. More recently, digital transformations in illicit drug markets have introduced new social dynamics, as participants use internet platform technologies not only for trade but also to build and maintain social relationships, reinforcing a sense of collective identity (Childs & Bernot, 2024; Oksanen et al, 2021). These examples from the literature demonstrate that drug markets can serve as alternative social and economic infrastructures anywhere that marginalised communities develop, sustain, and express identity. The results of the present study also offer new insights into the complex ways in which community identity not only shapes but is also shaped by the emergence and durability of drug markets within these communities.

Participants consistently emphasized the centrality of home and community in their lives, with statements like, "Home is everything to us," highlighting a strong sense of place and connection to their local environment (Nakhid, 2009). Strong relationships with family and friends, as described by participants, were a source of both emotional and material support. This mirrors findings by Wacquant (2008), who describes how people in marginalised urban environments often rely on informal networks for economic survival. This finding also echoes Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital, where strong communal ties serve as vital resources that enable individuals to navigate social challenges and improve life outcomes. Putnam's (1994) work on social capital further supports this idea, arguing that cohesive networks of trust and reciprocity foster a sense of belonging and social solidarity, which, in turn, contribute to individual resilience and overall well-being. In the context of illicit economies within communities, these networks of social capital can be viewed as integral not just for survival but also for the development of collective identities within communities, offering a form of social cohesion amidst socio-economic challenges.

However, the research findings further complicate this social capital interpretation, as the same sense of community solidarity also acts as a facilitator to illicit markets. While many participants relied on their communities for both emotional and material support, the same communities were often involved in illicit markets, creating a tension between collective survival and the moral and legal boundaries of these actions. Sampson and Groves (1989) argue that while strong community bonds can protect against social disintegration, they can also facilitate the normalization of illicit behaviours if no alternative legitimate avenues are available for success. Similarly, this tension between community connection and drug market engagement can be understood through the lens of the social ecology of crime (Lanfear, Matsueda & Beach 2019), where informal social controls can either mitigate or exacerbate criminal activity depending on the wider social context (e.g., lack of employment opportunities, systemic inequality).

Resilience emerged as a key component of community identity, with participants identifying their community's capacity to adapt to economic and social challenges. Wright (2021) suggests that resilience encompasses various forms, including planning, response, recovery, adaptation, and transformation, each relevant to different types of threats such as financial hardships, disasters and climate change. However, the form of resilience described in the current study is often reactive rather than proactive. Participants spoke about resilience as a means of survival, rather than a deliberate strategy for long-term community development or social change. This contrasts with the idealized notion of resilience as an adaptive strength capable of overcoming

adversity (Ungar, 2013). As Patterson et al. (2002) note, while resilience in the face of adversity is often lauded as a strength, in contexts where structural opportunities are limited, this resilience can become a form of coping rather than empowerment.

This finding regarding resilience also highlights a key limitation in understanding community capacity. While resilience may strengthen social capital, it does not necessarily provide a pathway out of illicit markets. In fact, as participants noted, the absence of legitimate opportunities for economic advancement leads to a reliance on illicit activities to meet basic needs. This suggests that community resilience, in this context, is more about managing scarcity rather than overcoming it. Fleming (2017) argues that communities that lack access to resources and opportunities for economic mobility are often trapped in maladaptive cycles of resilience, where their capacity to adapt is limited to the status quo. The following section considers some of the structural factors that lead to the emergence of illicit markets.

Contextual Drivers of Illicit Markets

This theme explores the broader socio-economic and structural conditions that shape Pacific communities' involvement in illicit drug markets. Participants emphasised that economic hardship, social exclusion, and systemic marginalisation created environments where illicit markets became one of the few accessible options for income generation and survival. Engagement in the drug trade was often not viewed as a moral or criminal failing, but as a rational response to a lack of viable alternatives.

Participants described a landscape of limited legitimate opportunities—particularly well-paying, stable employment—which forced many to consider the drug trade as a practical means of supporting themselves and their families. This dynamic reflects a broader international pattern, where precarious labour markets and neoliberal economic policies disproportionately impact marginalised groups, pushing them toward informal or illicit economies (Gutierrez, 2020; Guy & Chomczyński, 2023; Beckert & Dewey, 2017). These findings echo the work of Sampson and Wilson (2013), who argue that macro-level forces such as poverty and racial segregation shape the legitimacy and normalisation of informal economies in structurally disadvantaged communities.

The reliance on illicit markets was frequently described as a coping strategy, rather than a choice freely made. Participants explained that, in the absence of alternative pathways, illicit markets provided the immediacy and flexibility that formal economies could not. As Gallien and

Occhiali (2023) and Kamin (2015) have shown, communities facing persistent economic constraints often turn to informal or illegal strategies out of necessity, not preference. In this study, participants reinforced this view, describing how drug markets were used to meet immediate needs and support long-term financial obligations. These narratives reveal a form of economic logic in which the trade-off between risk and reward is shaped by urgent material need rather than criminal intent.

Social exclusion further compounded this economic vulnerability. Participants shared that limited access to education, employment, and social mobility left them with few options outside the illicit economy—especially for young people and women. These experiences resonate with Amaro et al. (2021) and Sumter et al. (2022), who demonstrate how discrimination and exclusion increase susceptibility to illicit involvement. The appeal of the drug trade, then, often emerged not from aspiration, but from constrained opportunity structures.

A recurring motif in participants' narratives was the idea of the "hustle"—a term used to describe the resourceful, improvised strategies individuals use to survive in the absence of stable, formal income. As Whitehead et al. (1994) and Kalunta-Crumpton (2004) observe, hustling is often less about criminal ambition and more about resilience and adaptability within structurally disadvantaged settings. Participants described how, for many in their communities, the hustle was a necessity shaped by intergenerational poverty, underemployment, and the normalisation of informal economic practices.

Two key subthemes - *Economic Disparities and Illicit Activities and Survival and Income Supplementation* - emerged from participants' accounts. First, many pointed to the persistent gap between their economic needs and available legitimate opportunities. This mismatch often led individuals to seek out quicker, more flexible forms of income through the illicit market. Second, the urgency of meeting immediate needs—such as food, rent, and childcare—often outweighed concerns about legality or long-term consequences. These findings align with Keefe (2013), who argues that illicit markets function as essential tools for social survival rather than mere criminal enterprise.

While some participants acknowledged the risks involved, they framed engagement in the drug trade as a rational survival tactic, not a freely chosen lifestyle. As research suggests, in contexts where structural inequality and economic precarity persist, illicit economies can become necessary lifelines—reflecting economic desperation more than deviance (Benton & Keister, 2017; Bonnet & Venkatesh; Fitzgerald, 2015).

These findings underscore the interconnectedness of economic deprivation, systemic exclusion, and the proliferation of illicit trade, where marginalised individuals are forced to navigate a landscape of limited opportunities, relying on illicit means as a form of social and economic survival. This is further supported by Desmond and Travis (2018), who explain that such survival strategies often become ingrained in the social fabric of disadvantaged communities, influencing different aspects of life such as political involvement while reinforcing the persistence of illicit economies into the community's socio-economic structure.

Exploring these contextual drivers of illicit markets sheds light on the structural and socio-economic factors that drive the emergence and persistence of illicit drug markets. The findings underscore how economic deprivation, limited opportunities, and geographical factors contribute to individuals' involvement in illicit markets as a means of survival, income supplementation, and social mobility. These drivers are situated within a broader context of regional inequalities, migration dynamics, and social exclusion, which intersect to create conditions conducive to engagement in illicit trade. The next section considers the advantages and disadvantages associated with engagement in illicit drug economies.

The Costs and Benefits of Engagement in Illicit Drug Markets

This theme explores the complex trade-offs faced by individuals involved in illicit drug markets, highlighting the perceived economic benefits of participation alongside the considerable legal and social risks. Participants described perceiving the involvement in the drug trade as a pragmatic response to economic deprivation rather than a reflection of criminal intent. Whilst such engagement often provided necessary financial support, it also exposed individuals to punitive legal systems and social stigma, underscoring the precarious balance between survival and risk that characterises life in marginalised contexts.

Participants framed illicit markets as one of the few accessible avenues for income in environments where legitimate employment opportunities were scarce or insufficient. The dual reality of benefit and harm is well captured by Keefe's (2013) 'Hubs and Havens' framework and the 'County Lines' model (Coomber & Moyle 2018; Moyle, 2019), which describes how illicit networks can simultaneously offer economic refuge and social cohesion, while also exposing individuals to danger and legal vulnerability. In this context, Aotearoa was frequently positioned as a "hub" – the centralised site of activity and profit, while the Pacific Island functioned as a "haven", offering logistical advantages due to limited enforcement capacity and structural disadvantage.

Participants echoed this geographic distinction, noting that while New Zealand offered greater infrastructure for illicit operations, the Pacific Islanders provided concealment and lower law enforcement visibility. These patterns of mobility and distribution were shaped by transnational migration and economic inequalities, further embedding drug networks within broader socio-political and geographic structures. As Keefe (2013) argues, such networks do not merely respond to demand but are sustained by the special and economic unevenness across regions.

Trust within illicit networks also emerged as a key enabler of participation. Participants described that within their communities lay strong relational ties and mutual obligations, this governed informal economic transactions – resembling, and at times overlapping with the social capital of community life. Trust in informal economies serve not only as a mechanism of cooperation but as a substitute for formal support in contexts of systemic exclusion (Lawler & Hipp, 2010). In these accounts, it was assumed that participation in the drug market was not merely transactional but relational, reinforcing collective responsibility and emotional solidarity particularly within tight-knit communities.

Despite these relational and economic benefits, participants were highly aware of the legal and social consequences of involvement. Arrest, incarceration, and intergenerational repercussions were described as ever present-risks they are aware of. The participants reflections highlight an ongoing negotiation they witness between short-term necessity and long-term cost, a negotiation that is shaped by systemic disadvantage rather than personal deviance.

The spatial dynamics of the drug trade were further reinforced by reference to geographic deprivation and limited formal economic infrastructure in many Pacific communities. As the United Nation Office of Drugs and Crimes (2015) have noted, areas undergoing rapid urbanisation or facing persistent poverty, particularly where youth employment is high, are more likely to see the emergence of informal or illicit economies (Singer, 2008). Within Aotearoa, Pacific communities face higher rates of employment and economic marginalisation, reinforcing participants' accounts of constrained opportunity and limited legal alternatives (Statistics New Zealand, 2020; Tukuitonga, 2023).

In this environment, illicit markets often functioned as a rational strategy for income supplementation and survival. These illicit economies fill the void left by inadequate formal structures (Marriott and Sim, 2015). Participants described knowing about individuals who relied on informal networks to meet basic needs such as rent, childcare, and food – particularly in communities where welfare systems or employment schemes were perceived as inaccessible or inadequate.

These dynamics were intensified by the presence of expansive transnational networks. Family and kindship ties across the Pacific were highlighted as playing a role in facilitating distribution, offering logistical support, storage, and communication channels. Such transnational flows mirror broader discussions of mobile illicit networks, which adapt to shifting legal pressures and exploit gaps in state regulation (Keefe, 2013). The 501-deportee policy and similariton deportation laws in Aotearoa were identified as further amplifying these dynamics, with deported individuals re-establishing criminal operations in their home countries, often leveraging established drug trade expertise and connections (Sousa-Santos et al, 2022a).

The geographical distinction between hubs and havens are used to explain the strategic placement of drug activity. While Aotearoa, with its infrastructure and export capacity, facilitated the movement of drugs, Pacific Island nations—due to their remoteness and under-resourced law enforcement—offered ideal conditions for concealment and transit. The Pacific Drug Highway (Sousa-Santos, 2022) was referenced as a key route through which illicit substances are transported between Asia, the Pacific, and Australasia.

Legal frameworks and free-movement treaties between Pacific nations and Aotearoa further facilitate these flows. While intended to promote kinship and trade connection, these mechanisms also enabled illicit actors to operate with greater mobility and less scrutiny (Brown & Hermann, 2019; Simmons, 2019). These socio-legal conditions contributed to the entrenchment of drug economies within broader transnational networks.

Drawing on Gregson and Crang's (2016) concept of illicit economies as "practices" rather than strict binaries of legal/illegal, the findings suggest that participants described decisions that were shaped by structural conditions, not solely by a knowledge of an individuals choice. Bourdieu's (1990) theory of practice also offers a useful lens, framing these actions within a field of constrained opportunities, where social, economic, and cultural capital are unequally distributed. In this way, involvement in illicit markets reflects not deviance but rather adaptation – an enactment of "practical sense" within marginalised economic realities.

Ultimately the decision to engage in the drug trade was described not as a pursuit of criminality, but as a calculated response to exclusion. While the benefits such as access to income, social support and upward mobility were clear, they were continually weighed against the legal and relational costs. Participants' accounts reveal how engagement in illicit markets is not static, it is a dynamic and ongoing calculation, constantly re-evaluated as circumstances shift (Piquero et al, 2010). These findings underscore the importance of understanding illicit drug economies not only through a

criminological lens, but also through the lends of structural inequality, community dynamics, and economic survival.

Study limitations and future areas for research

Study Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of illicit drug markets within Pacific communities, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size was small, consisting of only 6 participants from specific Pacific communities within Aotearoa and the Pacific Islands. This limits the generalisability of the findings to the wider Pacific population and its diverse sub-groups. Second, the study's geographical scrope was confined to Pacific communities in Aotearoa, with some references to their connections to the Pacific Islands. As a result, the findings may not fully capture the experiences of Pacific diaspora communities in other regions or the broader realities within the Pacific Islands themselves.

In addition, the study was based on qualitative data, which, while rich in detail and nuance is inherently subject to limitations such as social desirability bias and selective reporting. These factors may have influenced the accuracy and depth of the information shared by participants. Time constraints also posed a limitation, as the research represents a snapshot in time. A longitudinal approach or additional follow up would help to offer a more comprehensive understanding of how these illicit markets develop and change over time.

Finally, gaining access to individuals directly involved in illicit drug activities proved challenging due to the secretive nature of such activities, and the ethical and legal concerns associated with researching them. As a result, the study primarily drew on the perspective of those with peripheral or second-hand knowledge. While this still offers valuable context, it may not fully represent the lived experiences of those at the core of these illicit economies.

Future Areas for Research

The findings of this study give rise to several important research questions that are potentially worthy of future research exploration. One key area involves examining the long-term consequences of engagement in illicit markets, particularly in relation to social mobility, health outcomes, and broader community well-being. Research could explore how sustained involvement in these activities' shapes individuals' life trajectories and resilience, and how these outcomes differ across communities based on factors such as family support, community cohesion, and access to

employment opportunities. Another important area for future research is the effectiveness of community-led initiatives designed to disrupt illicit networks. Future studies could evaluate programmes aimed at providing sustainable alternatives – such as employment pathways and social integration – and identify the success factors including community leadership, cultural relevance and local engagement.

Further research should also focus on the structural inequalities that underpin participation in illicit markets. Systemic barriers such as limited access to education, employment, and social services, along with experiences of institutional racism and economic exclusion, are key drives that require deeper investigation. Comparative research across different regions within the Pacific diaspora would also be valuable, offering insights into how illicit market dynamics vary between urban and more rural contexts or across different countries, helping to identify region-specific drivers and inform tailored responses. Additionally, more work is needed to understand the role of social networks in shaping involvement in illicit economies. Kinship ties, peer influence, and the role of community leaders may significantly affect both engagement and disengagement and could inform strategies for community-based prevention and intervention. Finally, future research should aim to generate policy-relevant insights that support the development of more inclusive, effective approaches to addressing illicit market participation. This includes balancing law enforcement strategies with investments in social support systems that address root causes and offer viable economic alternatives to at-risk individuals and communities.

Conclusion

This study has provided insights into the complex factors driving Pacific community involvement in illicit drug markets in Aotearoa, with a particular focus on the role of community identity and socio-economic conditions. The findings suggest that while Pacific community identity and strong social networks can offer support and solidarity, they can also facilitate the perpetuation of illicit activities, particularly in contexts where legitimate economic opportunities are lacking. The dual nature of these networks—as both protective and enabling of illicit market engagement—offers a nuanced perspective on the role of social capital in marginalized communities.

Additionally, the study highlights how systemic barriers, such as economic disparities and limited access to education and employment, push individuals toward illicit markets as a means of survival. The tension between the immediate benefits of participation in illicit economies and the long-term legal and social consequences underscores the complex decision-making processes faced by individuals in these communities.

These findings contribute to the broader literature on illicit economies, offering new perspectives on how community dynamics and economic exclusion intertwine to shape participation in illegal markets. This study also underscores the need for targeted interventions that address not only the immediate risks of illicit activities but also the structural factors that drive individuals to seek alternative means of economic stability. By applying theoretical frameworks such as Keefe's (2018) and Moyles (2019) is county lines model to Pacific communities in Aotearoa and the Pacific Islands, this research extends existing literature, demonstrating how these concepts operate in unique socio-cultural and geographical contexts. It highlights how Aotearoa functions as a hub for illicit networks while Pacific Islands serve as havens, where economic and social exclusion intersect with the expansion of drug markets, adding a critical dimension to these models.

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Appendences

Appendix A: Approved Ethics Application

From: humanethics@massey.ac.nz <humanethics@massey.ac.nz>
Sent: Friday, May 5, 2023 11:58 AM
To: Taumaoe.Meni.1@uni.massey.ac.nz; Andy Towers <A.J.Towers@massey.ac.nz>; Suzanne Phibbs <S.R.Phibbs@massey.ac.nz>
Cc: Human Ethics <gmhumeth@massey.ac.nz>
Subject: [HE007] - Human Ethics Notification - 4000027479

Kia ora,
Link to the application
HoU Review Group
Ethics Notification Number: 4000027479
Project Title: Tali o le nofoaga: community responses to emerging alcohol and drug challenges
Thank you for your notification which you have assessed as low risk.
Your project has been recorded in our database for inclusion in the Annual Report of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.
The low risk notification for this project is valid for a maximum of three years.
Please notify me if situations subsequently occur which cause you to reconsider your initial ethical analysis that it is safe to proceed without approval by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees.
Please note that travel undertaken by students must be approved by the supervisor and the relevant Pro Vice-Chancellor and be in accordance with the Policy and Procedures for Course-Related Student Travel Overseas. In addition, the supervisor must advise the University's Insurance Officer.
A reminder to include the following statement on all public documents:
"This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.
If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Professor Craig Johnson, Director (Research Ethics), email humanethics@massey.ac.nz."
Please note that if a sponsoring organisation, funding authority or a journal in which you wish to publish require evidence of committee approval (with an approval number), you will have to complete the application form again answering yes to the publication question to provide more information to go before one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. You should also note that such an approval can only be provided prior to the commencement of the research.
You are reminded that staff researchers and supervisors are fully responsible for ensuring that the information in the low risk notification has met the requirements and guidelines for submission of a low risk notification.

If you wish to print an official copy of this letter:

1. Please login to the RIMS system (https://rme.massey.ac.nz).
2. In the Ethics menu, select Ethics Applications.
3. Using the Advanced option, select Ethics Applications (Area), Application ID (Search On), enter the ethics notification number in the Value area and select Find on the toolbar.
4. With the application the Results Tab, tick the empty box on the far left of the application and select Reports from the toolbar.
5. Select the "Human Ethics - Low Risk Notification Letter" link, this will open the report viewer.
6. Select the application code from the Report Parameters dropdown and submit. You can then select an export option from the top toolbar (Print, Save).

Yours sincerely
Professor Craig Johnson
Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and
Director (Research Ethics)

Appendix B: Interview Schedule

This interview schedule was designed using a Talanoa/Fonua methodology and metaphorically follows the structure of building a *fale*, a Pacific House.

'Preamble'

Talofa lava, firstly I want to extend my sincerest gratitude for joining me in this conversation. I appreciate your willingness to engage in this talanoa. *(Offer to start with a prayer.)* To provide some context and background, this talanoa is part of my thesis, which stems from a previous collaboration with the Drug Foundation. Initially, the project with the praxis placement, sought to gain insights into drug use and its associated harm within Pacific communities.

During this project, I have the privilege to connect with community leaders and various Pacific individuals to learn about the landscape of Pacific drug use within the community. However, throughout those conversations the scope of the talanoa changed and I adapted the questions to that change. A recurring theme that emerged was the distinctive way in which our communities define harm. While conventional perspectives often focus on individual-level acute harms and the economic repercussions for communities, our peoples articulated a different understanding of harms as well as a different perspective of engaging with drugs. The key insights from this project highlighted a growing economic reliance on the drug trade, that is rooted in constrained choices and a historical backdrop of disenfranchisement and systemic oppression.

This reflection prompted me to shape my thesis around understanding these ecosystems or as we know it as 'the hustle.' I believe that addressing drug-related issues necessitates taking a bold look at how we perceive the problem. The involvement of Pacific peoples is crucial for gaining insights into how these economies develop and thrive.

The questions I'll be posing today revolve around three central themes. Firstly, we'll delve into awareness and knowledge – what do you understand about this ecosystem and its existence within the community? Following that, our discussion will shift towards exploring the drivers behind community involvement in this trade and the expansion of these economies? Lastly, we'll focus on the impact of these dynamics on communities, having a talanoa about their effects on an individual, familial, and community level.

If you have any questions about this, I'm happy to answer them at any stage of our talanoa sessions.

<u>Interview script</u>

Introduction to Interview Schedule (Framing the Talanoa/Fonofua Approach with the Fale Metaphor)

In keeping with a Talanoa/Fonofua approach, this interview is intended to be a respectful and open-ended conversation that centres your experiences and knowledge. I like to think of this process as being similar to building a *fale* (house) — where we begin by laying a strong foundation and gradually construct the structure together. Just as every *fale* begins with its base, our starting point is your community — the place where everything is grounded.

Foundation (Community as Context – Setting the Scene)

Theme 1: Assessing Awareness and Knowledge

"Can you paint me a picture of your community?"
I'm interested in hearing your thoughts, experiences, and the overall vibe of your community.

Follow-up prompts (if needed):

- What are some of the strengths or values that define your community?
- Are there any challenges your community faces that you feel comfortable sharing?

Posts and Pillars (Revealing What Exists)

Theme 1: Continued – Awareness of Drug Economies

"Within this community – are you aware of the presence of drugs or illicit substances? Have you noticed any ways in which the drug trade has manifested in your community?"

Optional prompts:

- How visible or invisible is this activity?
- Are people open about it, or is it more hidden?
- Are there stories or concerns that people often talk about?

Walls (Understanding the Drivers)

Theme 2: Identifying Drivers

"I appreciate you sharing your community with me…" *(here you recap or reflect on what they shared)*.
"Are you comfortable exploring what you believe the causes of this might be? What, in your view or based on your observations, contributes to or drives involvement in the drug trade?"

Prompt if needed:

- Are there wider systemic issues you believe might play a part in this?
- What role do things like employment, education, housing, or income play?
- Are there any cultural, historical, or political dynamics you think are relevant?

Roof (Exploring the Consequences and Impact)

Theme 3: Evaluating Impact

"Thank you for sharing that with me…" *(acknowledge specific insights they've shared so far)*.
"Building upon our discussion of what drives involvement, I'd like to explore the broader consequences and impacts. How would you describe the effects of this involvement on different parts of the community?"

Prompt:

- Let's start with the family – how does this affect families you've seen or known?
- What about wider effects – like on youth, the church, schools, neighbourhood safety, or leadership structures?

Final Reflections (Optional Closing)

- “Is there anything else you think is important for me to understand about your community and the challenges or strengths it has around these issues?”
- “What hopes or changes would you like to see for your community going forward?”

Appendix C: Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Project Title: Tali o le nofoaga: Community responses to emerging drug challenges

Researcher: Taumaoe Andrea Meni

Supervisor: Dr Andy Towers and Dr Suzanne Phibbs

Supervisor contact details: A.J.Towers@massey.ac.nz | S.R.Phibbs@massey.ac.nz

Institution: Massey University

Contact: a.meni@massey.ac.nz | [redacted]

Talofa lava, Malo e lelei, Kia orana, Fakaalofa lahi atu, Bula vinaka, Taloha ni, Fakatalofa atu, Warm Pacific greetings,

My name is Taumaoe Andrea Meni, and I am a Master of Public Health student at Massey University. I am conducting research for my thesis that explores how Pacific communities understand the presence of illicit drug economies. This project is focused on exploring people's awareness and perceptions, not personal involvement.

What is this research about?

This research seeks to understand how Pacific communities perceive and respond to the presence of emerging drug markets — why they may be growing, and what might be contributing to their existence. It centres around collective knowledge, observation, and discussion, rather than individual experience.

Why have I been invited?

You have been invited because your community insights are valued. You may have been recommended by a respected elder or leader, or you may have been identified as someone with important knowledge about the wider social or economic issues affecting your community.

What will happen if I take part?

There are three steps:
1. Introductory Meeting (30 mins) – we get to know each other, I explain the project, and answer your questions.
2. Main Talanoa (1–2 hours) – we have a relaxed, respectful kōrero where we explore your thoughts and awareness.
3. Debrief (20–30 mins) – we reconnect to check how you feel, clarify anything you've said, and close the loop.

Participation is voluntary. You can skip any question or withdraw at any time. You may also bring a support person if you wish.

How will my information be used?

- Your talanoa will contribute to my academic thesis.
- Your name and personal details will not be shared.

- Information will be safely stored and only accessed by the research team.
- Findings may be shared with Pacific health and community organisations and may be published, but your identity will be protected.

Consent

You may give consent either in writing or orally. We will go through this together, and you will choose the option that feels right for you.

Ethics Statement

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk (Ethics Notification Number: 4000027479). Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact:
Professor Craig Johnson
Director (Research Ethics)
Email: humanethics@massey.ac.nz

Appendix D: Consent Sheet

Participant Consent Form

Project Title: Tali o le nofoaga: Community responses to emerging drug challenges

Researcher: Taumaoe Andrea Meni

Supervisor: Dr Andy Towers and Dr Suzanne Phibbs

Supervisor contact details: A.J.Towers@massey.ac.nz | S.R.Phibbs@massey.ac.nz

Institution: Massey University

Contact: a.meni@massey.ac.nz | [redacted]

Consent to Participate

Please read the statements below and tick, initial, or verbally confirm as appropriate. You may also withdraw at any time before or after the interview, and up to two weeks afterward.

- I understand the purpose of this research and what participation involves.
- I know I am not being asked about personal or illegal involvement.
- I know I can stop at any time or skip any question.
- I understand my identity will be kept private.
- I agree that my kōrero can be used in the researcher's thesis and future research presentations.
- I know that I can give either oral or written consent.
- I understand my interview may be audio recorded (only if I give permission).

Consent Options (tick or initial)

☐ I give written consent to take part in this study.
☐ I give oral consent (the researcher will confirm this at the time of interview).
☐ I agree to my interview being audio recorded.
☐ I do not agree to being recorded, but I am still happy to participate.

Participant Name (if written consent): _____
Signature: _____
Date: ____ / ____ / _____

If oral consent is given, the researcher will record:

☐ Oral consent provided on: ____ / ____ / _____
☐ Audio record of consent stored with the interview
☐ Participant confirmed understanding of all aspects of participation

Researcher Declaration

I confirm that I have explained the study, answered all questions, and obtained voluntary consent.

Researcher Name: _____

Signature: _____
Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Ethics Statement

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk (Ethics Notification Number: 4000027479). It has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. For concerns, contact Professor Craig Johnson, Director (Research Ethics), at humanethics@massey.ac.nz.