

Are we losing the battle: Fiji's efforts against illicit drugs

Sandhiya Gounder

University of Otago

Abstract

Illicit drugs have become a growing cause of concern in Fiji. This paper seeks to discuss the illicit drug related events and issues in Fiji. Despite diverse sentiments both negative and positive shared on the cultivation and use of illegal drugs, empowerment training, wellbeing seminars, discussions and campaigns being promoted, illicit drugs production, consumption and trade have become part of life for Fijians. To explore this reality, the paper adopts a qualitative research design in the form of media analysis of Fiji's two main daily newspapers; The Fiji Times and The Fiji Sun. The analysis draws on news stories in the two newspapers between June 2020 and May 2021. Findings provide insights into the environmental, social, political, judicial and technical factors that are preventing Fiji from eradicating or lowering illicit drugs production, consumption and trade. Commitment from the wider Fijian society including NGOs, civil society, development and technical partners and the community with the Fiji Police Force is required to successfully combat the illicit drug problems.

Keywords: illicit drugs, trafficking, marijuana, methamphetamine, cocaine, Fiji

Introduction

Illicit drug production, consumption and trading is a growing concern in Fiji and the Pacific. The illicit drug trade involves both green drugs known as marijuana (scientifically known as *cannabis sativa*) grown and traded locally, and hard drugs such as cocaine and methamphetamine. Marijuana remains the most commonly used illicit drug in the Pacific (Devaney et al., 2006) while cocaine and methamphetamine are recorded to be the most widely seized imported illicit drugs in the region (Rosenberg, 2019). Drug trafficking in the Pacific, especially cocaine and methamphetamine, has drastically increased in the last five years. New Zealand and Australia are the destination markets of the drugs transported through the region, while Fiji is the convenient transit hub facilitated by small vessels and yachts. According

to a police spokesperson in a media report, traffickers leave behind a few kilos of drugs as payment for assistance received from their networks in Fiji and the drugs end up in the local market, contributing to a marked increase in use amongst the population (United Nations Human Rights, 2020).

Statistics released by the Fiji Police Force show an increase in methamphetamine cases from two in 2013, to 113 in 2018 in Fiji (Radio New Zealand, 2020). A report released by the Fiji Police Force in 2020 shows an increase of 16 percent in the number of drug cases in 2019 (1223 cases) compared to 2018 (1058 cases) (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020). The report confirmed that 42,000 marijuana plants worth FJ\$119 million were uprooted between January to July 2020 in Kadavu alone. It was also revealed that 95-percent of the drugs seized were green drugs or marijuana while five-percent were classified as white drugs or methamphetamine in the same period. Sixty-nine percent of those arrested for drug related activities were between the ages of 18 to 35, while 28-percent were aged between 36 and 55. According to the data, approximately 80-percent were iTaukei, six-percent Fijians of Indian descent and five-percent others. Of those individuals arrested for illicit drug production, consumption and trade, 98-percent were male and two-percent were female.

Despite an increase in drug-related offences in Fiji, authorities and agencies fighting against illicit drug production, consumption and trade are adamant that they will functionally disrupt illicit drug operations in the country. There are diverse sentiments, both negative and positive shared on the cultivation and use of illegal drugs, empowerment training, wellbeing seminars, discussions and campaigns are promoted, yet illicit drugs production, consumption and trade have become part of daily lives of most Fijians. The question remains as to why Fiji is not able to control illicit drug production, consumption and trade. This paper aims to provide an insight into the environmental, social, political, judicial and technical factors that are preventing Fiji from eradicating or reducing illicit drugs production, consumption and trade.

Methods

A sample of 166 news articles (66 from *The Fiji Sun* and 100 from *The Fiji Times*) were drawn from the two leading daily newspapers in Fiji; *The Fiji Times* and *The Fiji Sun* for a period of twelve months from June 2020 to May 2021 for media analysis. *The Fiji Times* is Fiji's oldest newspaper and is perceived to be the standard bearer for fair and balanced reporting for decades. *The Fiji Sun* seems to take on the role of promoting government propaganda, subsumed under the rubric of national development issues. The news articles were explored to identify themes and analyzed using interpretive thematic analysis. Interpretive thematic analysis required the news articles to be explored in depth to make sense of the patterns and meanings emerging from the data. While drawing from the data, information and stories from the media, how the media portrays these stories is beyond the scope of this paper. There are international studies (Hughes et al., 2011; Lancaster et al., 2011; Noto et al., 2006) that look at how the media frames the news stories on illicit drugs, but it is not the intention of this research to explore this, even though there is limited research on media's engagement with illicit drugs in Fiji's context. For the purpose of this research, themes were identified from the news articles extracted from *The Fiji Times* and *The Fiji Sun* to portray the factors that constitute shocking revelations on illicit drug issues

in Fiji. Quotations from the news articles have also been included throughout the analysis section to supplement the information presented by the themes.

Limitations

Media analysis using newspaper data poses fundamental problems of methodology that questions the validity of a research (Barranco & Wisler, 1999). First, newspaper articles are highly likely to provide the demographic information of the events covered such as what, where, when and who are involved in an event. I observed that while some articles provided the demographic information, they failed to provide a rationale for the causes or factors that influenced illicit drug activities, which is the aim of this study. Second, the amount of attention given to an event depends on the newspaper. The newspaper decides whether it wishes to select the event for publication, and, if selected, what is the depth of information they want to relay to the general public. To reduce the validity issue, the scope of analysis could be extended to include other complementary data sources reporting on an event, so that a larger data set on a single event is achieved (Earl et al., 2004). I have applied a similar strategy in my study, to provide in depth information and quantitative evidences of events. Complementary data sources include police archives and institutional statistics. While the validity problems are acknowledged, newspaper sources are a reliable source of data since they are journalistic articles.

Literature Review

Illicit drugs production, consumption and trade is a dominant cause of concern for politicians, policy makers, community and religious leaders, and for the general public in Fiji. The *Illicit Drugs Control Act 2004* regulates, criminalizes and controls the cultivation, manufacture, importation, exportation, sale, supply, possession and use of illicit drugs in Fiji. Some of the common illicit drugs that the Act criminalizes, yet which are prevalent in Fiji, include cannabis, methamphetamine, cocaine, and heroin. This section of the paper draws on sources to provide an overview of the broad implications of illicit drug production, consumption and trade and sets the contemporary state of the drug scene in Fiji.

Drawing from Cristina Voicu's (2012) theory of underground economy, I outline the theoretical positions on the prevalence of illicit drugs existing in Fiji. The theory of underground economy defines underground economies as organized economic activities violating the social norms, and the formal legal regulatory framework aiming to generate income uncontrolled by the state. The difference between Voicu's theory of underground economy with theories of informal sector (Azuma & Grossman, 2008), and cash-in-work theory (Williams, 2004) is that the former encompasses economic activities dealing with goods or services deemed as illegal by the laws of the state, while the latter two theories define such activities as completely within the legal parameters, except for the fact that they are unregistered under the state.

An underground economy exists because it is able to provide for the real needs of the society (Frey & Schneider, 2001). The needs met are two dimensional in this sense; first, drugs as a need itself and second, proceedings from drug trade to meet other needs. The former defines the demand side of the illicit drugs. Demand drives the existence of the underground economies such as those involved in

illicit drug production and sale in Fiji. The increased number of people involved in the drug trade is a projection that illicit drugs have become a need for Fijians, which drives the demand for the product. The latter demonstrates the incompetence of the state to ensure that its citizens meet their needs for survival. Limited opportunities for employment, social services, financial incentives and government assistance compel Fijians to resort to illicit drug trade to support and meet family needs. Engaging in major agricultural commodities has also proven less lucrative for the people. This is where a rational choice (Shon & Barton-Bellessa, 2015) factor is seen to be occurring, where individuals weigh the benefits and judge the deviant pathway as better and more financially opportune.

Those involved with the underground economies have proven to have found effective ways to control powers through corruption and covert operations (Harris, 2016). Power controlled through corruption denies the cause of justice (Lavallée & Roubaud, 2019). High profile people with professional careers, businesses and elites are some of the regular names that come up in illicit drug related issues in Fiji (A. Kumar, 2019; Sauvakacolo, 2011). Lack of proper evidence and procedures due to corruption does not allow proper court proceedings for those involved. The same individuals are continuously implicated in other new drug related cases (A. Kumar, 2020). Underground economies exist, because these can operate when barriers are bypassed by the authorities, or by those who are the custodians of the legal framework (Voicu, 2012). These are done through corruption or by force such as issues with extortion and abuse of office.

Using the content from social problem literature, I draw on the social problem framework to determine the rationale of why illicit drug issue is a cause of concern and why efforts are made to lower illicit drug production, consumption and trade. Gusfield (1989), defines social problem as part of how we perceive and interpret the world around us as problematic and which can be solved with public attention and action. To identify something as a social problem first needs recognition that it exists and second, a response to deal with the issue. Dealing with a social problem is a social responsibility that requires greater commitment of public resources to achieve state welfare. There is increased cooperation between government and non-government organizations in Fiji and establishment of new agencies for control of illicit drugs are visible (Milne, 2008).

In his study on social problems theory, Schneider (1985) uses the constructionist view to define, understand and study social problems using various research as the basis of a social problem. He writes that social problems are actions by groups that assume grievances and claim alleged incidents. This may include calls for action, relying on a legal framework, asking for media attention, showing disconcert, supporting or opposing government policies. To modify the conditions that become the grounds for such claims, prevention is more important than justice or compensation, and the approach becomes the pathway to solve social problems (Crone, 2017). Professional and public regulatory bureaucracies are established to receive, and to work on social problems and citizens' complaints become part of the procedure. Professions that serve these institutions have the authority to control and even alter the way social problems are revealed and represented causing the delay in solving it (Lewis, 2017).

Schneider (1985) also demonstrates that many times social problems are medicalized. Medical conditions such as mental health issues among children, youths and adults cause troublesome behaviours in social problems. Higher rates of marijuana use lead to serious mental illness (Lubman & Baker, 2010). There is increased incidents of mental illness in Tonga said to be caused by side effects of consumption of marijuana and methamphetamine (United Nations Human Rights, 2020). A recent clinical study by Jenkins and Khokhar (2021) reveals evidence of a strong association between marijuana use and mental disorder. Unfortunately, some of the Pacific nations, including Fiji, are starting to see serious cocaine and methamphetamine addiction, as well as associated gang violence and crime (Sauvakacolo, 2020a). This gives reasons why efforts are made to eradicate the illicit drug production, consumption and trade in Fiji.

Drawing upon the discussions in this section, this paper adopts the theory of underground economy and theory of social problem to make sense of the narrative on illicit drugs available in Fiji media. It defines illicit drug as a social problem in Fiji and asks why the need to resolve illicit drugs as a social problem is prioritized. The theories also substantiate the reasons why Fiji has failed to control illicit drug consumption and trade. The paper in no way questions or condones the morality of individuals involved in production, consumption and trade of illicit drugs in Fiji.

Isolated landscape

There is a sharp increase in the production and trafficking of drugs in the Pacific region. Countries like Fiji, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and New Caledonia whose beaches are utilized as storage grounds for illicit drugs worth billions of dollars (Devaney et al., 2006). The vast ocean space has exhausted the surveillance capabilities for transnational drug trafficking across the region. Fiji, an archipelago of more than 300 islands, is considered to be an important port in the Pacific. While the rugged landscapes, palm lined beaches and clear lagoons have been crucial in promoting Fiji as a tourist destination, these have had serious implications for illicit drug trafficking. Fiji's location in the Pacific has heightened the threats, and prevalence of, drug traffickers, as well as drug use among its citizens. Multibillion dollars' worth of illicit drugs are transported from the United States and Latin America to Australia by sailing boats, which in turn, makes its way through to the Pacific countries including Fiji (Lyons, 2019).

The isolated coastlines away from the main central business districts are becoming increasingly susceptible to organized criminal activities. A number of boat explosions carrying more than a tonne of cocaine making a journey across the Pacific to Australia have been recorded in the past five years. Locals have discovered huge amounts of cocaine washed up to the shores, and ships wrecked on coral reefs with packets of drugs stored underwater connected to the Global Positioning System (GPS) (Rosenberg, 2019). The porous nature of the borders and limited maritime surveillance capabilities burdens the ability to effectively monitor maritime activities and transnational crimes such as drug trafficking transiting across Fiji maritime areas. These areas including the inter islands; and the maritime areas tend to be unsupervised by the security forces in the country.

Kadavu, the fourth largest island located south in the Fijian archipelago with a land area of around four hundred square kilometres and a population of about eleven thousand, is rugged with few roads and limited infrastructure. Despite being close to the main island Viti Levu, Kadavu is very isolated. For over fifty years, Kadavu has been labelled as the drug capital of Fiji in relation to the massive engagement of marijuana cultivation on the island. Kadavu has a proud history of being an island of prosperity and great wealth through *yagona* farming before the cultivation of the illicit drugs became rife on the island. There are thousands of people who are earning an honest living, while others have resorted to the cultivation of marijuana as an easy source of income (Vakasukawaqa, 2021a).

According to the data released by the Fiji Police Force, 42,000 marijuana plants worth FJ\$119 million were uprooted between January and July 2020 in Kadavu alone. About 5000 marijuana plants were uprooted in Kadavu in early November 2020, which made up 1.6 tonnes of marijuana on Kadavu alone since January 2020 (Nacei, 2020d). As many as thirty farmers were apprehended in Kadavu alone and they appeared in court for drug related activities for the same period. Between January and February 2021, marijuana plants with a street value of FJ\$28,679,682 were uprooted in two major police operations in Kadavu (Rawalai, 2021b). Children in Kadavu as young as primary school age, from six to 14-years, have either seen drugs or witnessed drugs in possession of an adult (Vakasukawaqa, 2021a).

Political Context

Insufficient resources

The isolation of the landscape prompting inadequate surveillance is not only an environmental concern but also a political one. Budget allocations to maritime areas in Fiji are not enough to translate into expected development outcomes to support surveillance of criminal activities. The Ministry for Rural and Maritime Development is responsible for maritime development and was allocated FJ\$14.5 million in the 2021-2022 Fiji budget (Fiji Ministry of Economy, 2021). There are no known programmes or initiatives by the Ministry directed towards monitoring and prevention of drug related activities in the maritime regions.

While deliberating on the 2020-2021 National Budget allocation to the Fiji Police Force, the Minister of Defence Hon. Inia Seruiratu reiterated the need for constructing, repairing and maintenance work for police stations in Kadavu and around the country. The majority police stations were built after Fiji's independence in 1970 (Nacei, 2020a). The resources, infrastructure, and the environment around Fiji in which the police officers work have become obsolete over the years.

The Fiji Police Force has set up a counter narcotics bureau to enable them to have adequate resources in fighting illicit drug production, consumption, and trade. The former Fiji Police Drugs Unit was restructured and transitioned to the development of a Fiji Police Narcotics Bureau (Chand, 2020). The Bureau's activities include a more coordinated effort by agencies to fight against hard drug trafficking effectively and efficiently (Chand, 2020), however the extent of advanced operations in comparison to the former Drugs Unit as well as the agencies involved is unknown at the time this research was conducted.

A frightening reality is that Fiji lacks medical experts who have knowledge to deal with drug addiction. During a drug awareness session, it was revealed by the Police Criminal Investigations Department (CID) Drug Unit that doctors in Fiji have no expertise in attending to, and diagnosing drug addicts (Nacei, 2020a; Wesley, 2020). Managing drug addiction is complex and requires a lot of testing and investigative work before a proper diagnosis can be made.

In addition, very few drug rehabilitation centres are available in Fiji. One of the sources of rehabilitation is to admit the addicts to the St Giles Psychiatric Hospital in Suva. In 2019, about 10 percent of the patients were admitted at the this hospital, as cases relating to substance abuse (Turaga, 2019). The hospital only offers traditional rehabilitation treatments which require isolating patients from all forms of drugs for thirty to ninety days. Isolation from methamphetamine is severely painful and difficult, thus 93 percent of those in traditional treatment return to its usage (Sauvakacolo, 2020a).

Abuse of office

There is significant evidence that the police officers are involved in drug related activities. The Fiji Police Force implemented the “no drug policy” that removes any officer from the Force who is found to be involved in any drug related activities. Despite the implementation of the policy, a number of police officers were charged for drug related offences. According to the serious crimes statistics released by the Office of the Director of Public Prosecution (ODPP) in January 2021, a twenty-one year old police officer was charged with the unlawful use of cannabis before reporting to duty (Kumar, 2021). Police officers, some up to the special constabulary positions, had tested positive for drug use (S. Chand, 2020).

Some of the officers of the Fiji Police Force have been alleged to have taken advantage of, and victimized the members of the general public by deliberately planting drugs at their usual surroundings. Financial extortion is a significant reason for falsely accusing, and proving that the victims had drugs in their possession. There were two separate incidents where police officers were charged and tried for extortion. In the first incident, six police officers were investigated for allegedly planting drugs, specifically methamphetamine, in a man’s vehicle. They inquired about his presence in the parked vehicle and conducted a search. Upon finding nothing, the man was taken to the police station. While the man was at the police station, another team of police officers arrived to where the car was parked and allegedly planted a bag containing methamphetamine under the seat of the car (A. Kumar & Chand, 2021).

After this case was brought to the fore, a businessman in Suva alleged that three police officers planted methamphetamine in his office during a supposed raid in 2020. The three police officers went to the office of the businessman, whose close relative was known by police to be a methamphetamine user. They searched the office once and did not find anything but asked the businessman for money. It is claimed that when the man refused to pay them any money, the three searched the office again. After the second search, a packet of methamphetamine was found, for which the police officers demanded FJ\$1500, which the businessman paid (A. Kumar, 2021). These unlawful practices by the police officers under the pretence of drug raids are not consented to, or given authoritative approval, and

they remain unrecorded at the specific police stations (A. Kumar & Chand, 2021). The drugs gathered from these unsanctioned raids are then used to victimize and extort money from people. It was further revealed that neither of the raids mentioned (drugs planted in the vehicle and the businessman's office) were sanctioned by the station officer nor recorded (A. Kumar, 2021).

Previous claims were also made by the general public about police officers ignoring the heightened incidences of drug dealings occurring in open spaces. Despite various complaints made by the public on drugs consumption and trade by individuals, there is no significant response from police (Sauvakacolo, 2021). The *Fiji Times* on 5th of August 2020 was also witness to blatant drug dealing in Nausori Town (situated approximately 19 kilometres from the capital city, Suva). The team from the newspaper present at Syria Park captured images of a group of youth openly smoking marijuana in broad daylight unfazed by the team's presence. Several businessmen in Nausori claim that drug peddlers were openly conducting their business in broad daylight because police officers were taking money from drug peddlers, in return for not apprehending them. Speaking to *The Fiji Times*, a businessman said

“I've seen it with my own eyes, these officers will come and stand next to these drug peddlers they would pass them \$10 and then they (policemen) will walk away. It's happening every day, but no one seems to bother. So many reports have been lodged to police by us and for them to say that we haven't lodged any reports is a blatant lie.” (Nacei, *The Fiji Times*, 5 August 2020)

Calls to legalize marijuana

The issues of legalizing marijuana for medicinal and other purposes (making fabric and paper) are often suggested in discussion forums, mainly in relation to economic recovery and domestic development. Submissions calling for the legalization of marijuana were received by the Government during the 2020- 2021 National Budget Consultation in Nadi. Submissions such as this have been regularly received by the Government over a number of years, in a bid to boost the manufacturing sector, and for medicinal purposes (Reddy, 2020). It was also brought up in the 'Straight Talk National Budget Consultation 2021- 2022' and 'National Development Plan post COVID-19' forums.

A number of politicians and Members of Parliament (MPs) have also supported the call for the legalizing of marijuana. Opposition MPs Hon. Lynda Tabuya and Hon. Niko Nawaikula have often highlighted the importance of investing in industrial hemp (Talei, 2020b). It is believed that industrial hemp would be a good alternative to the declining sugar industry. While speaking on a motion relating to the socio-economic impacts of COVID- 19, Opposition MP Hon. Inosi Kuridrani mentioned the importance of finding an agricultural crop that will have the same market value as marijuana (Chand, 2020b).

Conversion of marijuana into a viable industry for Fiji has also been an academic discussion. Alternative income sources and industrial sustainability were discussed during a roundtable organized by The University of Fiji on Education and Economic Growth: Remodelling Fiji's National Development Plan post COVID-19. Speaking to the media, the Acting Vice Chancellor, Professor Shaista Shameem said:

“Similarly, we know from the past, that the sugar industry has also been filled with all sorts of problems and facing all sorts of difficulties and so now its whether we are going to be looking at the same industries and trying to rejuvenate them when they were already in difficulties, or are we trying and we say that we wait until they rejuvenate themselves?....It’s not about people going into the dope industry as such, but it’s marijuana for medicinal purposes, which is a big industry in the world and the suggestion was that we should look at that from that perspective so that it can earn us the export funds that we need.” (Qalubau & Bryce, *The Fiji Sun*, 21 February 2021)

Despite calls for considering marijuana production legal, the Fijian government remains committed to preventing cultivation, manufacturing, and consumption of illicit drugs. Fiji needs to develop a robust legislative and regulatory framework if any such legalization is considered. A lot of effective consultation with the stakeholders is necessary and above all co-operation of the general Fijian populace to abide by the law. Other countries across the globe such as Canada, South Africa and Uruguay have legalized marijuana production for recreational and medicinal purposes. Denmark, Finland, Czech Republic, Columbia, Chile, Brazil, Australia, Argentina, Barbados, Ecuador and Cyprus under strict conditions and licences allow citizens opportunity to produce and supply directly to pharmaceutical companies (Menon, 2020).

Speaking on the Budget Consultation 2020-2021, the Attorney General Hon. Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum said:

“There are different varieties of it, there’s one particular variety where you could get high on it but it could also be used to make fabric, paper, and other materials which could be used again.” (Cava, *The Fiji Times*, 2 March 2021)

The permanent secretary for Ministry of Health Dr. James Fong, answering queries from *The Fiji Times* mentioned that there are interests in marijuana used for anaesthetic care management:

“Medicinal marijuana has been used more specifically in managing chronic pain and the side effect of nausea and vomiting in patients on chemotherapy. Some in the medical fraternity have expressed interest in using it. Production in Fiji is of course a matter beyond that of the medical ministry but can be supported if we have a robust legislative and regulatory framework to support it.” (Rawalai, *The Fiji Times*, 3 March 2021)

Legal Flaws

Court procedures

The involvement of Fiji’s judicial services encompasses the court orders and proceedings on drug trials. Once the Police Force have confiscated illicit drugs, they are required to obtain a court order to be able to destroy the seized drugs. Talking to *The Fiji Times*, the Assistant Commissioner of Police

(ACP) conveyed his appreciation of the judicial services for their cooperation with the Fiji Police Force:

“We acknowledge the support of the judiciary as we are able to immediately apply for a court order to have the plants destroyed and all plants seized are taken to a safe location and burnt and no drugs are brought to Suva or kept in our care”. (Ratubalavu, *The Fiji Times*, 7 September 2020).

While the courts facilitate immediate applications and approvals of court orders, court proceedings on drug trials and cases often take a lot of time to be cleared from Fiji courts. Court trials take longer to begin for a variety of reasons such as delay in submitting trial papers and improper recording of evidence. Legal representatives (in this case, lawyers representing the state and accused) deliberately delay the submission of documents required for the court trials (Sauvakacolo, 2020). A court case of a suspended police officer in Rakiraki was ongoing since 2011, and had been adjourned twenty-two times (Hirst-Tuilau, 2020). The accused was acquitted in October 2020 due to no evidence on the case. Another such example is the incident where a father-son duo was arrested in February 2019 in relation to confiscation of cocaine (worth FJ\$30 million) in Fiji and for importing methamphetamine from Mexico and New Zealand (worth NZ\$7 million). One of the accused was sentenced in July 2020 by the New Zealand judiciary, while the court trial of the other accused, who was a Canadian national, began after mid-March 2021 and continued until end of April (Chand, 2020a). The accused was found guilty, but the sentencing was adjourned until October 2021. The Suva High Court sentenced him to 20 years imprisonment with a non-parole period of 14 years (Fiji Financial Intelligence Unit, 2021). These two cases show that it takes a long time for justice to run its course.

Missing evidence

Court exhibits kept as evidence have gone missing a number of times. Lack of evidence in court proceedings often leads to filing of *nolle prosequi* (a case that can no longer be prosecuted). In one of the incidents, a suspect was implicated in the shipment of 34 kilograms of methamphetamine to New Zealand when two other Fijians were arrested in New Zealand for importing the same shipment. The two were sentenced by the New Zealand court in October, 2020 while their counterpart in Fiji had his case withdrawn in the High Court due to lack of evidence (Chand, 2021).

In December 2020, Police started investigation after a report was lodged at the Nadi police station by a judicial staff member from the Nadi Magistrate Court on missing exhibits kept under the court's care. The exhibits included marijuana leaves and seeds kept in a locked and secured room for a pending case before the court (Chand, 2020d). In another incident, the Director of Public Prosecution filed a *nolle prosequi* at the Lautoka High Court, after two kilograms of cocaine went missing from the Namaka police station. This resulted in the discontinuance of a court case against two men charged for trying to export illicit drugs (Chand, 2020e). The quotes below provide accounts of three other cases withdrawn from the courts due to missing exhibits and lack of evidence:

“A 26-year-old man and a 37-year-old man were charged with the unlawful possession of illicit drugs, however, this matter was discontinued because of inconsistent evidence. A 28-year-old man and a 40-year-old man were charged with the attempted unlawful exportation of illicit

drugs, however, this matter was discontinued after the exhibits went missing from the Police station.” (Pratibha, *The Fiji Sun*, 7 January 2021).

“The court heard that the prosecution’s exhibit of the sample of substance weighing 1173.2g was missing as neither the sample, nor the exhibit record could be located.”(Qalubau, *The Fiji Sun*, 4 April 2021).

Social Catastrophes

Illicit drugs manufacture

There are concerns over local production of methamphetamine commonly known as ‘ice’ in Fiji. No significant changes were seen in the supply and use of methamphetamine even after the closure of borders due to COVID- 19 in 2020 and beyond. Pre COVID, methamphetamine was linked to the borders as the main port of entry into the country. The quotation below suggests that the consistent supply of the drug is possible through local production:

“There is a rapid increase in the usage and seizure of methamphetamine and other synthetics; this shows that methamphetamine is locally manufactured.” (Wesley, *The Fiji Times*, 24 February 2021).

The discovery of various clandestine laboratories (clan lab) in the Western and Eastern divisions signifies the extent to which the illicit drugs trade has infiltrated Fijian communities. A clan lab is a place where illegal substances including drugs, explosives, biological or chemical weapons are manufactured or prepared. Chemicals such as cleaning detergents and rat poison are used to produce drugs and manufacture pain killers (Vakasukawaqa, 2021b). Substances such as detergents and pest poison give the same high as methamphetamine but are more lethal and damaging to one's health (Ministry of Health (NZ), 2010). In general, therefore, it seems that there are members of the community who now have the knowledge to manufacture drugs using readily available precursor products.

Children involved with drugs

Children in Fiji are being exposed to drug trafficking. Shocking revelations were made by the International Labour Organization (ILO) about Fijian children engaging in drug peddling. A ILO rapid assessment survey conducted in 2016 revealed that children were engaged in drug trafficking to support their family’s food needs (International Labour Organization, 2021). The survey revealed that the youngest methamphetamine user in Fiji was a fifteen-year-old student, while the youngest person in Fiji to be found in possession of drugs was a seven-year-old student. He found drugs at home and later took them to school to show his friends (Wesley, 2021a). Upon investigation, the Fiji Police Drug Unit found out that the father of the student was a drug peddler (Vakasukawaqa, 2021c).

The 2016 Fiji Global School-based Student Health Survey reveals that 57.6 percent of all students who have used drugs, had their first drug consumption before the age of fourteen (World Health Organization, 2016). The Fiji Police force also conducted a drug awareness programme in the villages and schools in Kadavu on the request of the village headmen. Children in Kadavu as young as primary school ages between 6 to 14 years, have either seen drugs or witnessed drugs in possession of an adult

(Vakasukawaqa, 2021a). Exposure to parental drug consumption is associated with a number of adverse impacts on children. These include anxiety, emotional disorders, peer conflict and social withdrawal because parental drug use causes exposure to violence within and outside the home (Simmons et al., 2009). While children may grow up in a normal loving environment, they are prone to be neglected and abused. In July, 2020, a 38-year-old man who had a history of drug abuse was charged for allegedly trying to murder his two children by setting his house on fire (Talei, 2020a). Violent and disruptive behaviour patterns are seen in children whose parents are illicit drug users (Banwell et al., 2002).

A number of incidents highlighted the discovery of drugs in schools around Fiji. A student from a prominent high school in Suva was asked to change school while seven others reprimanded for consuming drugs while in school uniform (S. Chand, 2020a). Drug use at this same school led to a change in the school's Principal. A team of police officers were sent to another Suva school where students recorded a video of themselves smoking marijuana. In the video, five students were seen walking along a park walkway with a bong (apparatus for smoking marijuana), and, later one of them is seen opening an aluminium foil with marijuana. Four students from a different high school in Suva were suspended for allegedly smoking marijuana in school and having the narcotics in their possession (S. Chand, 2020b).

Source of income

Drug trafficking has become one of the most profitable sources of income for drug peddlers in Fiji. Illicit drug activities were raking in more than FJD\$10 million per annum while local drug traffickers are making between FJD\$5000 to FJD\$10000 (Daucakacaka, 2021) per day from the domestic market sale of illicit drugs (both hard and green). Speaking to *The Fiji Sun* on the condition of anonymity, methamphetamine users revealed that a gram of methamphetamine was sold for FJ\$600 in the local market (Koroi, 2020). This is far more than the average income of sugarcane farmers per year, sugarcane being the highest earning agricultural commodity in Fiji. According to Singh (2020), farmers earn an average of FJ\$2442 per year from sugar cane. The cultivation of drugs is becoming prevalent in Fiji due to its lucrative nature, yet without the nation fully comprehending the consequences on communities.

There is a growing concern with how poverty influences drug cultivation and trafficking in Fiji (M2 Presswire, 1998; McCusker, 2006). According to the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2019-2020, based on the national basic needs poverty line (BNPL) of \$2,179.39 per adult equivalent (PAE) per year, the 29.9 percent of Fijians live in poverty (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2021). This is equivalent to 258,053 of the total population, or 45,724 households (22.9 percent of all households) living in poverty during the survey period (Gounder, 2021). Out of the four divisions, Eastern division recorded the highest poverty rates with 42.7 percent (Northern 35.2 percent, Western 32.4 percent and central 24.3 percent) (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Eastern division covers Kadavu, Lau, Lomaiviti and Rotuma provinces. High poverty rates in the outer islands and the rural areas resonate with people being attracted to the lucrative benefits they reap from the cultivation of drugs in order to cater for their needs. The Fijian Government is considering various laws before a decision on legalizing the cultivation, sale and export of marijuana is made (Pratap, 2022).

“A 52- year old man from Tailevu who claimed that he had unlawfully cultivated 201 marijuana plants to help pay for his daughter’s university tuition will be sentenced on Friday by the High Court in Suva.” (V. Kumar, *The Fiji Times*, 11 February 2021b).

As indicated in the above quote, many Fijians are unable to meet the needs of their families. For farmers, drug cultivation is an easy source of money, especially when there is no alternative agriculture crop that could provide as much as they earn from drug cultivation. This is evident by the efforts farmers have made to transform their farms so they are suitable for marijuana cultivation. The Police Force used drones to monitor the inaccessible areas around Fiji. Drone surveillance images easily picked up irregularities on the farms, and upon searching the area, several pot plants with marijuana were found in Kadavu. Another farm had vegetation where it was made to appear that crops had recently been uprooted but after removing dead grass and branches from each mound, police discovered marijuana plants hidden underneath (Chaudhary, 2020). The plants are buried in dead leaves and meticulously concealed from human sight. Large polyvinyl chloride (PVC) pipes run along mountain sides to water plants kept in seclusion on top of the mountains (Rawalai, 2020). These are evidence of the great lengths taken by farmers to run these pipes along rough terrains in order to grow marijuana.

Role of the community

With the huge number of financial benefits involved, the drug eradication issue poses a lot of challenges to the communities on their roles and responsibilities. A reasonable approach to tackle this issue could be for religious leaders, chiefs and village elders to strategize and identify a common goal that they can implement at various traditional and communal units to address the drug issue. According to police, it seemed that community leaders were colluding with those involved in the cultivation and sale of illicit drugs to evade legal prosecution (Rawalai, 2021a). Cultivators were aware of the exact day police intended to wage their operations in a particular village. This was apparent where farms were cleared of marijuana plants before the police conducted raids.

However, a major attitude change has been noted among the ordinary citizens who are supporting the efforts of the Police Force by voluntarily providing information about the location of marijuana farms. Support from the members of the public led to successful raids (Delaibatiki, 2021). Moreover, a farm full of marijuana plants were discovered by people from a village in Kadavu who later turned the plants to the officers based at a police station on the Island (Ratubalavu, 2020).

Religious and community leaders have joined the Police Force in organizing and attending awareness programmes. Religious groups in Fiji strictly forbid the consumption of drugs, and use of illicit drugs are seen to be against the religious principles (Puamau et al., 2011). The Methodist Church in Fiji and Rotuma conducted training and awareness sessions focussing on harmful effects of drugs through the biblical teachings (Vakasukawaqa, 2021b) because they believe that the hike in illicit drugs consumption and trade was directly related to people having lack of faith in God. The Fiji Evangelical Fellowship believe that the church needed to take responsibility to address the drug issues (Cava, 2019). Religion has always played an influential role in the lives of Fijians and religious organizations are often looked upon as institutions to help reset lives.

Technical advancement

Advancement of technology has drastically changed the landscape of organized and serious crimes such as the illicit drugs production, trafficking and consumption. Producers and traffickers adopt new and advance technologies as it comes into their modus operandi (M2 Presswire, 2002). Drug pushers, farmers and dealers have similar technologies as police officers such as mobile phones, access to internet, vehicles and drones. Mobile phones facilitate easier communications. Affordable vehicles allow for flexibility and accessibility for delivery of illicit drugs. Internet access has had the greatest impact or influence among all other technological advancements. It is a source of information across a spectrum of interests. Internet data bundles in Fiji have become very competitive and readily available, and this enables communication lines to remain open for communities of like-minded individuals to connect (Wesley, 2021b). This technical advancement ensures greater connection between illicit drug producers, peddlers and users to carry out illicit drug operations in Fiji.

Conclusion and Way Forward

On the basis of the qualitative data that I collected for the purpose of this study, specific generalizations cannot be made, but there are concluding observations that are worth noting.

Trade in, and consumption of illicit drugs in Fiji is a serious concern. The two most common drugs, marijuana and methamphetamine are prevalent in urban, informal and rural settlements and maritime areas which could lead to strife in criminal activities in the Fijian societies. Statistics released by the Fiji Police force show 4902 drug related cases recorded between 2016 and 2020, from a total of over 90,000 crimes recorded for the same period. The isolated landscape around the country makes it easier for drug production and trade. Insufficient resources and development further facilitate these activities. Corruption plays an integral role, as law enforcers fail to realize the importance of their roles in eliminating illicit drug activities in Fiji. Law enforcers (in this case police officers and court officials) are involved in illicit drug consumption, deliberately planting illicit drugs to extort financial gains, improper recording of cases, turning a blind eye on illicit drug related activities and destroying evidence for judicial processes.

Political leaders have called for the government to introduce marijuana as an industrial commodity to replacing the ailing sugar industry. There is a general expectation that Fiji will need to develop a robust legislative and regulatory framework if any such legalization is considered, but the elimination of illicit drugs is questionable. It will not prevent people from consuming marijuana or being involved in trade of other illicit substances. Hard drugs such as methamphetamine is locally produced using substances readily available in pharmacies and the home. The insidious influence of illicit drugs has penetrated the Fiji communities and even educational institutions affecting children, youth, and adults. There are adverse effects on the health of the individuals' consuming drugs and also keeps them financially burdened, whilst the farmers, distributors and traders remain the beneficiaries. Overcoming challenges posed by illicit drugs in Fiji requires concerted efforts from all stakeholders including market vendors, public service vehicle (PSV) drivers, business houses, the government, community and religious leaders and ordinary Fijians as a whole.

Fiji as a nation appears to be slowly finding itself gripped by the illicit drugs scourge that has destroyed thousands of lives around the world. Issues relating to illicit drugs cannot be fought by the government or the security forces alone. To effectively combat the prevalence of illicit drugs production, consumption and trade, Fiji needs support and assistance from the NGOs, civil society, development and technical partners and the community at large. Fijians need to advocate strongly on issues of drugs at home, school, in the workplace, and in places of worship and hospitals. Advocacy should be backed by science and reliable data as well as understanding and compassion. Illicit drug production, consumption and trafficking seem to be areas that require more research within Fiji. Mutual support will provide a pillar of effective response against drug abuse.

Fiji lacks a proper system, treatment plans and facilities to address drug abuse and to rehabilitate those who want to come out of drug abuse. There is a need for rehabilitation centres that can assist Fijians through drug addiction, education, and factual awareness. Awareness is a critical element of the campaign against hard drugs. Awareness and training on health and wellbeing will empower and enable communities to choose healthy lifestyles and to acquire skills that enable them to contribute to their societies. Having a drug free workplace can be a deterrent for illicit drugs. Cultivation of drugs may be an easy source of income, but the social and health consequences could damage lives which cannot be replaced by money. It is important that every Fijian embrace the reality of risks that the illicit drugs pose to lives now and in future.

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Author’s biography

Sandhiya Gounder is a student at University of Otago where she is pursuing PhD in Sociology. Sandhiya is from Fiji and holds a Master of Arts degree in Governance and Public Policy from the University of Fiji where she is a Lecturer in Social Science, since 2009. Her research interests are public policy, governance, ethics, national development, ethnic studies, culture and identity. Believing in values of an inclusive society, she exploring the unknown sense of oneness and unity among Fijians through her PhD research.
