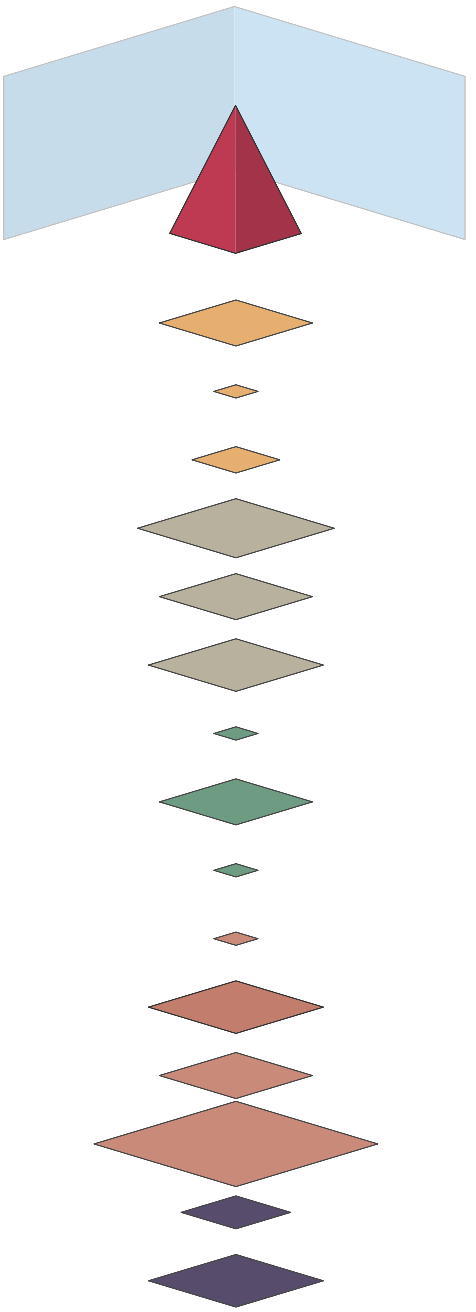
GLOBAL ORGANIZED CRIME INDEX

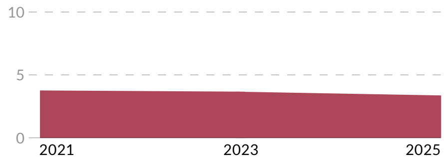
GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

TONGA



3.42 ↘0.28 CRIMINALITY SCORE

167th of 193 countries ↘4
6th of 14 Oceanian countries -
1st of 3 Polynesian countries -



CRIMINAL MARKETS	**3.03**	↘0.47
HUMAN TRAFFICKING	3.50	0.00
HUMAN SMUGGLING	1.00	0.00
EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING	2.00	↘1.00
ARMS TRAFFICKING	4.50	↘1.00
TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS	3.50	↘1.00
ILLICIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS	4.00	0.00
FLORA CRIMES	1.00	0.00
FAUNA CRIMES	3.50	0.00
NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES	1.00	0.00
HEROIN TRADE	1.00	↘0.50
COCAINE TRADE	4.00	↘1.00
CANNABIS TRADE	3.50	↘1.50
SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE	6.50	↘1.00
CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES	2.50	↗0.50
FINANCIAL CRIMES	4.00	↘0.50

CRIMINAL ACTORS	**3.80**	↘0.10
MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS	1.00	0.00
CRIMINAL NETWORKS	4.50	0.00
STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS	6.00	↗0.50
FOREIGN ACTORS	6.00	↘1.00
PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS	1.50	0.00

This project was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State.

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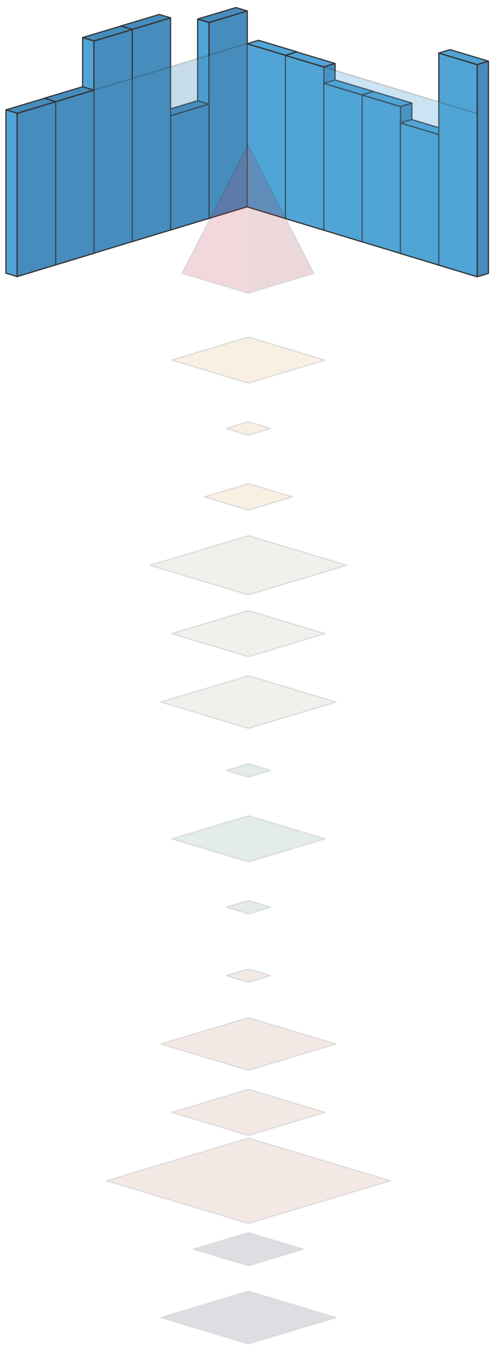
Funded by the European Union

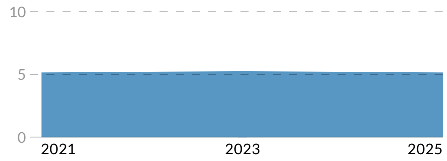
ENACT is funded by the European Union and implemented by the Institute for Security Studies and INTERPOL, in affiliation with the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

TONGA



5.17 ↘0.13 RESILIENCE SCORE

75th of 193 countries ↘2
8th of 14 Oceanian countries ↗1
3rd of 3 Polynesian countries -



POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE	5.00	0.00
GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY	5.00	↘0.50
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	6.50	0.00
NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS	6.50	0.00
JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION	3.50	0.00
LAW ENFORCEMENT	6.00	0.00
TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY	5.00	0.00
ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING	5.00	0.00
ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY	4.50	↘0.50
VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT	4.50	↘0.50
PREVENTION	4.00	0.00
NON-STATE ACTORS	6.50	0.00

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CRIMINALITY

CRIMINAL MARKETS

PEOPLE

Tonga is a source and a destination country for human trafficking. Tongan nationals, men and women, are mainly trafficked to Australia and New Zealand for forced labour in the agriculture, dairy, construction, food service and hospitality industries, as well as domestic servitude. Domestic trafficking is reportedly on the rise, with crisis centres receiving more cases. Organized trafficking networks recruit and exploit vulnerable foreign nationals, mainly from East Asia, who are trafficked into Tonga for sexual exploitation. Trafficked victims, including Fijians and Chinese nationals, face exploitative conditions in the domestic service, construction and hospitality industries, while Tongans remain vulnerable to fraudulent migrant labour schemes. However, there is no evidence of human smuggling in Tonga.

Extortion and protection racketeering have been observed within the Asian business community, with anecdotal reports of Chinese business rivals hiring enforcers, sometimes involving local Tongans. However, there is no substantial evidence of transnational organized groups being active in extortion and racketeering in Tonga.

TRADE

Tonga is a transit country for arms trafficking, with illicit firearms shipments originating from the US, China and Latin American ports. Although Tonga's per capita firearm ownership is low, the illicit firearms trade has raised concerns. Firearms are frequently linked to drug trafficking, as Tongan police often seize illegal weapons and drugs during regular drug raids. A recent case of corruption within the customs police demonstrates potential vulnerabilities in border security.

The trade in counterfeit goods exists in Tonga, but recent evidence of counterfeit products circulating within, to and from the country is limited. Although counterfeit items, such as clothing, pharmaceuticals, pesticides and electronics (primarily from China), have surfaced in commercial and e-commerce markets, there is no substantial indication of a pervasive market for counterfeit goods within the country. Illicit trade in excise consumer goods, particularly tobacco, has made Tonga a source country for smuggling operations into New Zealand. Organized networks, including outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMCGs), exploit Tonga's limited enforcement capacity to traffic illicit goods. The local market for illicit tobacco has declined due to increased excise taxes on imported products, but international smuggling continues, with some reports suggesting links between contraband tobacco networks and larger organized crime groups.

ENVIRONMENT

Apart from isolated and anecdotal illicit trade in sandalwood, Tonga does not have any flora crimes due to its limited forests. However, fauna crimes do occur, especially illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing in Tonga's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Foreign vessels, mainly from China, engage in illicit fishing activities, exploiting the country's vast maritime territory. Despite legislation and other measures aimed at safeguarding Tonga's fisheries, destructive fishing practices continue and include dynamite fishing and fish poisoning.

Non-renewable resource crimes are largely absent in Tonga, although sand mining for construction purposes is a growing concern. Nevertheless, there is no evidence of organized criminal involvement in such activities.

DRUGS

In Tonga, cannabis remains the most widely used illicit drug, which is cultivated domestically on remote islands. Local production meets much of the demand, but some cannabis is imported from the US. The Tongan police continue to make arrests related to cannabis possession, reflecting strict national drug policies.

Synthetic drug trafficking, particularly methamphetamine, has become a major concern in Tonga, with a surge in seizures of methamphetamine in recent years. The country acts as a transit hub for methamphetamine shipments, and reports of local production are increasing. The Comancheros, an OMCG, has reportedly established a presence in Tonga, further embedding organized crime in the drug market.

Heroin consumption is virtually non-existent in Tonga, which has no local market or reports of transnational criminal involvement in the drug trade. However, the country serves as a transit point for cocaine trafficking, particularly for shipments destined for Australia and New Zealand, as organized criminal groups exploit Tonga's strategic location to trans-ship drugs. Cocaine packages occasionally wash ashore and, in some instances, lead to arrests. Allegations of corruption among officials, including customs and law enforcement personnel, point to systemic weaknesses in curbing drug trafficking.

CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

In Tonga, cyber-dependent crime is relatively minor but is expected to grow as digital threats evolve. Ransomware attacks, hacking and the use of malware have been reported, with one telecommunications company recently falling victim to a ransomware attack. Tonga's cyber-infrastructure is weak, and many institutions lack formal security policies. The government has taken steps to strengthen cybersecurity through legislative updates and international cooperation initiatives, but vulnerabilities persist.

FINANCIAL CRIMES

Financial crimes in Tonga are largely opportunistic and domestic in nature. Corruption within public institutions is a challenge, with instances of fraud and embezzlement reported in recent years. Cases of counterfeit currency, ATM fraud and fraudulent business transactions have also surfaced, highlighting gaps in financial oversight. Furthermore, reports indicate occurrences of phishing and other cyber-enabled financial scams in the country.

CRIMINAL ACTORS

There is no evidence of traditional mafia-style groups operating in Tonga, where crime is largely perceived as an external phenomenon introduced by foreign actors or nationals returning after prolonged stays abroad. The absence of these groups suggests that organized crime operates through decentralized criminal networks rather than hierarchically structured entities.

Although detailed information about their structure and operations are scarce, at least five syndicates are reportedly active in the drug and arms trafficking markets in Tonga and have strong connections to expatriate communities in the US, Australia and New Zealand. Domestically, indigenous criminal groups collaborate with transnational syndicates to facilitate illicit activities in the Pacific region, including Fiji, Papua New Guinea and the Northern Marianas. These partnerships enable contraband to move across borders, reinforcing Tonga's role as a logistical hub for organized crime in the Pacific. In addition, many of the criminals deported from Australia, New Zealand and the US have histories of gang activity abroad and, upon returning, either integrate into existing syndicates or establish new criminal enterprises. Studies indicate that a significant percentage of deportees from the Pacific region have previous gang affiliations and were investigated for crimes after their return. Furthermore, although not all deportees are involved in organized crime, their socio-economic vulnerabilities make them susceptible to recruitment by criminal networks. Lastly, in 2023, the Comancheros OMCG formally established a chapter in Tonga, underscoring growing concerns regarding gang activity in the country.

Corruption remains a persistent issue within Tonga's public sector, particularly in law enforcement, customs and political institutions, with repeated reports of mid- to high-level officials being involved in drug trafficking, fraud, bribery and money laundering. The elite appears to be the most involved state-embedded actors, exploiting regulatory gaps and leveraging influence to facilitate illicit activities. Corruption within customs agencies exacerbate border control vulnerabilities, with officials reporting that they feel powerless against criminal intimidation and familial pressures. Tongan politicians have been implicated in receiving payments from Colombian drug cartels to facilitate drug trafficking through the country, while some law enforcement officials have been prosecuted for assisting in the smuggling of drugs and firearms. Instances of seized drugs going missing and bribery within law enforcement highlight the entrenched nature of corruption, which continues to hinder efforts to combat organized crime effectively.

Foreign criminal organizations have a significant presence in Tonga, particularly in the drug and fisheries sectors. Asian criminal networks are among the most active groups operating in the Pacific, establishing bases that reinforce the region's role as a strategic trans-shipment point. Chinese nationals have been implicated in a range of illicit activities, including human trafficking, prostitution, drug smuggling, visa fraud, bribery and arson. Reports suggest that newly arrived Chinese individuals engage in criminal enterprises within their communities and sometimes enlist local Tongans as enforcers or proxies for illicit operations. The insularity of the Chinese community makes enforcement efforts particularly challenging.

Unlike other criminal actors, private-sector entities in Tonga have not been systematically involved in organized crime. However, the country's poorly regulated informal economy creates opportunities for illicit financial activities to go undetected.

RESILIENCE

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Tonga is generally considered a politically stable country, with no reported incidents of political violence in recent years. The country is a constitutional monarchy, with a Legislative Assembly that includes both elected members and appointed nobles, and a prime minister who holds executive authority. The monarchy retains significant power, including the ability to veto legislation and appoint judicial officials. Elections in Tonga are regarded as free and fair, but governance challenges persist, especially related to transparency and accountability. In December 2024, political tensions were evident when the Prime Minister resigned ahead of a no-confidence vote. The new leader took office amid mixed public reactions, highlighting ongoing uncertainty in the political climate.

Despite having a structured government system, corruption remains a notable concern in Tonga. In recent years, there have been multiple high-profile convictions of politicians for bribery-related offences. Transparency mechanisms are weak, with no legal guarantees for public access to government information and limited enforcement of disclosure requirements for public officials. Public scrutiny of government actions is often resisted, further weakening accountability. While anti-corruption laws exist, their enforcement has been inconsistent due to operational inefficiencies and political influence. Reports indicate that bribery is a common practice, particularly in public service transactions and electoral processes.

Internationally, Tonga actively participates in efforts to combat transnational organized crime, engaging with treaties and conventions, including agreements on drug control, corruption and environmental protection. The country is a member of regional security frameworks, such as the Pacific Islands Forum and the Pacific Transnational Crime Network, which facilitate the sharing of intelligence and joint law enforcement operations. Tonga also collaborates with New Zealand and Australia on maritime surveillance, immigration controls and law enforcement. However, although Tonga has signed the Palermo Convention, it has yet to ratify key protocols on human trafficking, arms smuggling and organized crime, which could strengthen its legislative framework.

Tonga's legal system includes comprehensive laws addressing organized crime, including counterterrorism and transnational crime legislation. However, enforcement remains a challenge, with gaps in funding and implementation affecting the effectiveness of anti-drug laws (notwithstanding Tonga's 'war on drugs' and the introduction of increased penalties and police powers) and other crime prevention measures. The country has strict gun control laws but lacks robust human-trafficking legislation, as current laws require evidence of transnationality for trafficking offences. Environmental laws are fragmented, with enforcement primarily focused on fisheries regulation. Efforts are underway to introduce regulatory measures that promote sustainable harvesting, but enforcement continues to be inconsistent.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

Tonga's judicial system generally upholds the rule of law and includes protections for due process and equality before the law. However, gaps remain in addressing organized crime and substance abuse-related offences. The prison system is largely adequate, but overcrowding has been reported in the main detention facility, Hu'atolitoli Prison. Substance abuse and mental illness among inmates have increased, and recent investigations uncovered corruption among prison officials, including drug smuggling activities within detention centres. Despite concerns over prison conditions, international human rights observers have been permitted to conduct monitoring visits.

Law enforcement in Tonga benefits from support and training from Australia and New Zealand. The Australian Federal Police has provided equipment and training to enhance the Tonga's capacity to combat transnational crime. Tonga also benefits from regional policing initiatives aimed at addressing drug trafficking, domestic violence and border security. Tongan law enforcement has been effective at maintaining internal security, but community engagement and social protection measures are limited.

Territorial integrity remains a challenge, as the country's extensive EEZ makes it difficult to monitor and to prevent illegal activities, such as drug trafficking and illegal fishing. Cooperation with regional partners has helped, but resource constraints and coordination challenges persist. Cybersecurity is another area of concern, with Tonga's infrastructure vulnerable to cyberattacks. Recent initiatives, including collaboration with Australian authorities on cyber-safety programmes, aim to strengthen the country's resilience to digital threats.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Tonga's anti-money laundering (AML) framework is relatively strong but faces implementation challenges. The Financial Action Task Force has not listed Tonga as having problems with money laundering, but concerns remain regarding the effectiveness of financial crime investigations. Tonga's reliance on remittances increases its vulnerability to money laundering and terrorism financing, particularly given the limited oversight of financial transactions. Although the country has enacted AML laws, resource constraints and the lack of specialized investigative capabilities hinder enforcement. The financial sector's ability to detect and report suspicious activities remains limited, with gaps in understanding money-laundering risks at the institutional level.

Tonga's economy is largely dependent on remittances, agriculture and tourism. It has a large informal sector and a high percentage of the workforce in casual or temporary employment. The 2022 Hunga Tonga–Hunga Ha'apai volcanic eruption caused supply-chain disruptions and infrastructure damage, which further strained the economy and contributed to inflation and unemployment. Although the government has prioritized private sector development and investment, economic recovery remains slow. Regulatory weaknesses in the informal economy create opportunities for illicit financial activities, including tax evasion and unregulated cash-based transactions.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Tonga provides limited victim and witness support services, primarily through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community organizations. The government has established a Family Protection Legal Aid Centre that provides legal assistance to victims of gender-based violence, but services for victims of human trafficking are inadequate. Tonga does not have a formal victim identification framework, and its law enforcement lacks the necessary training and resources to systematically screen vulnerable populations for trafficking indicators. Some efforts have been made to improve victim support, such as issuing guidelines for trafficking investigations, but the lack of funding and trained personnel continues to hinder progress. Victims of trafficking are often at risk of being arrested or deported due to the lack of protective measures. Despite the existence of drug prevention and rehabilitation programmes, access to treatment remains scarce, particularly for methamphetamine addiction, which continues to rise.

Crime prevention initiatives in Tonga focus on community outreach and education programmes. Authorities provide briefings to seasonal workers travelling abroad to raise awareness about labour rights and potential exploitation. The police force has introduced a prevention strategy aimed at addressing the root causes of crime and improving community engagement. However, funding for prevention programmes is limited, with many initiatives relying on external donations or church-based support. Moreover, implementation of these measures remains inconsistent.

Non-state actors, including NGOs and media organizations, operate with relative independence in Tonga. The country is classified as a 'free' society, with a strong tradition of press freedom. However, government officials have been known to exert pressure on journalists and media outlets critical of government policies. Recent cybercrime regulations have raised concerns about potential restrictions on online expression and press freedom. Civil society organizations do contribute to crime prevention and social support initiatives, but funding shortages and a lack of institutional support limit their impact.

This summary was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.