



MAY REPORT

30 May 2025

TSOC-MAG 25/03

Hon. Casey Costello, Minister of Customs and Associate Minister of Police

CORRUPTION IN NEW ZEALAND AND THE PACIFIC

Executive summary

Corruption is a strategic asset for organised crime

- ▶ New Zealand's reputation as a country largely free from corruption has long been a source of national pride and international credibility.
- ▶ However, this perception is increasingly at odds with a growing body of evidence suggesting that corruption—particularly as it relates to organised crime—is not only present but expanding in scope and sophistication.
- ▶ At the heart of the issue is the role of corruption as a strategic enabler of organised crime. Whether through bribery, coercion, or the exploitation of familial and cultural ties, these groups seek to embed themselves within institutions that are meant to protect the public.
- ▶ The consequences are profound: compromised police officers, immigration officials, and private sector employees in our ports and airports have facilitated drug smuggling, leaked sensitive information, and undermined the integrity of our border systems.

The challenge for the Pacific

- ▶ The Pacific region serves as both a cautionary tale and a direct source of risk.
- ▶ The discovery of multi-tonne methamphetamine shipments in Fiji and the arrest of high-ranking officials in Tonga underscore the scale of the problem.
- ▶ These developments are not isolated; they are part of a broader pattern of transnational criminal infiltration that increasingly implicates New Zealand, both as a destination and as a contributor through deportations and economic ties.

What must be done

- ▶ Under current settings, corruption is growing, it is being weaponised by organised crime, and New Zealand must act now to protect its institutions, borders, and regional stability.
- ▶ In order to respond to these challenges, we need to drive a culture shift where integrity is seen as a shared responsibility.
- ▶ To address these challenges, we recommend developing a national anti-corruption strategy, a centralised reporting and investigative body, improving vetting for high-risk

industries, and modernising corruption offences under the Crimes Act legislation. There is also an opportunity to standardise the approach to managing corruption risks across the public and private sectors with a focus on high-risk industries.

- ▶ For the Pacific, we recommend supporting the development of similar measures to manage corruption, including vetting and education, and making specialist support available to help Pacific nations respond to acute organised crime problems.
- ▶ The recommendations are detailed at the end of the report.

Steve Symon
Chair, Ministerial Advisory Group

CORRUPTION IN NEW ZEALAND AND THE PACIFIC

1. New Zealand has long enjoyed a global reputation as a nation that is largely free from corruption. That reputation is under threat, and the consequences will be severe.
2. Our March report illustrated the evolving nature of the transnational, serious and organised crime environment impacting New Zealand. In April, we demonstrated that the substantial profits generated by these groups are a key motivator to target New Zealand.
3. The combination of an increasingly lucrative market and established organised crime networks makes New Zealand more susceptible than ever to corruption and insider threats. Compounding this vulnerability is the deteriorating situation in the Pacific, which offers both a cautionary tale and a direct risk to our regional stability.
4. This is a real and increasing threat. Enforcement agencies told us that a majority of significant interceptions of illicit drugs via our ports and airports have been designed as “rip-on, rip-off” methods where trusted insiders help to retrieve concealed shipments before customs inspections. That information is consistent with an unpublished global report which estimates that 70% of maritime seizures worldwide involved links to trusted insiders.
5. We define corruption as the abuse of access or authority to advance the objectives of organised crime. It is a critical enabler of organised crime, particularly at national borders. It grants criminal networks access to protection, sensitive information, and operational impunity. This is especially concerning in the Pacific context, where expansive maritime borders, strategic trade corridors, and growing cross-border flows of goods and people increase our exposure.
6. When individuals in border security, customs, or immigration are compromised, criminal groups can exploit these weak points to smuggle drugs, weapons, other illicit goods, and people with minimal detection. Bribery, coercion, and cronyism can transform ports, airports, and checkpoints into open channels.
7. Corruption is not confined to border operations. It can poison the entire supply chain, including the transport, financial, legal, and judicial systems and extend its reach into political and corporate spheres. It can also take hold in other industries such as immigration advisors to facilitate migrant exploitation, or bank and telecommunications staff to access sensitive data.
8. These vulnerabilities are not incidental – organised crime groups actively cultivate them. Corruption strengthens these groups, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of criminal expansion and institutional decay.
9. If left unchecked, this cycle will erode the integrity of New Zealand’s institutions and undermine our collective security. We are already seeing increasing pressure on Pacific nations which have limited capacity to detect, investigate and prosecute organised crime threats.
10. Australia provides a sobering precedent. The entrenched police and political corruption of the 1980s—particularly in Sydney and Queensland—demonstrates how swiftly corruption can become systemic and how arduous the process of dismantling it can be once it takes root. Importantly, Australia’s subsequent reforms offer valuable lessons from which we can learn.

Airport baggage handlers

In May 2020, while our borders were closed because of the pandemic, New Zealand Customs foiled an attempt to smuggle a suitcase containing 19.4 kg of methamphetamine through Auckland Airport. This attempt was facilitated by a baggage handler, Sese Vimahi, who had recruited workmates to divert the suitcase before it reached customs screening.

Although fired by Air New Zealand, and while on bail, Vimahi used his connections in the airport to recruit a new team of baggage handlers which successfully imported two shipments of methamphetamine.¹

Exploitation of migrants

A Samoan national, based in New Zealand, exploited migrant workers by unlawfully employing them in New Zealand while they were on visitor visas, subjecting them to long hours and poor working conditions. They were paid in cash, well below the adult minimum wage. The practice of paying workers under the table in cash is a known method of money laundering the profits of criminal activity.

The scheme was supported by a contact in Immigration NZ's office in Samoa who was paid to approve the visas for the exploited workers.²

Use of insider knowledge to assist importation of illicit drugs

Terri-Anne Bransby, an employee of Customs Support for Toll Group, used their knowledge of border controls to assist the importation of 83kg of methamphetamine into Napier Port in February 2023. Toll Group was not used for the importation.

Customs faced challenges in sharing information with the individual's employer while charges were before the court.³

Sharing Police information

A New Zealand Police officer, Vili Mahe Taukolo, was paid around \$70,000 by an organised crime group to share sensitive information from the police database. Taukolo searched the database more than 20,000 times over a 16 month period. 25 per cent of those were made on days off, which in itself is not allowed by the Police.⁴

WE ARE IGNORING THE CANARY IN THE MINE

11. Despite New Zealand's longstanding reputation for integrity, mounting evidence from multiple agencies consulted during this review indicates a growing concern: corruption and insider threats are increasing, and parts of the system are falling behind this evolving threat.

¹ Craig Kapitan (22 February 2025) ['Baggage handler Sese Vimahi gets longer prison term for repeat meth smuggling at Auckland Airport'](#), New Zealand Herald.

² Immigration NZ (7 April 2025) [Samoan national sentenced for migrant exploitation and other charges](#).

³ Sam Sherwood (25 February 2025) ['How a massive methamphetamine shipment was disguised as paper'](#), *Stuff*.

⁴ Catrin Owen (1 December 2019) ['Corrupt Auckland cop who sold police database information to gangs jailed'](#), *Stuff*.

12. The absence of data collection severely limits an accurate understanding of the size, complexity and impact of these threats. New Zealand lacks a comprehensive and consistent framework for identifying and measuring corruption and insider activity. There is no standardised national definition, mandatory reporting obligations, or unified system for tracking or analysing such incidents. Corruption and insider breaches are too often treated by employers as employment matters rather than criminal conduct. This practice conceals the size of the issue, undermines the urgency of institutional responses, and weakens national deterrence.
13. The threat is real, present, and growing. New Zealand must not underestimate the scale or significance of this challenge. Addressing it requires urgent, coordinated, and strategic action.

Escalating corruption and violence in Antwerp and Rotterdam

The ports of Antwerp and Rotterdam have become major entry points for cocaine and other illicit drugs into Europe. Competition for control over these ports has escalated rapidly.

Organised crime groups bribe or coerce port workers, law enforcement officers, logistics staff and even IT personnel to gain access to containers. While bribery is common tactic, assassinations, kidnapping and threats to port staff are becoming a regular occurrence.

OMCG tactics in Australia

Australian Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs, such as the Hells Angels, Bandidos, Comancheros and Rebels, have used a variety of methods to control both criminal and legitimate businesses. These tactics have included the recruitment and exploitation of trusted insiders working in:

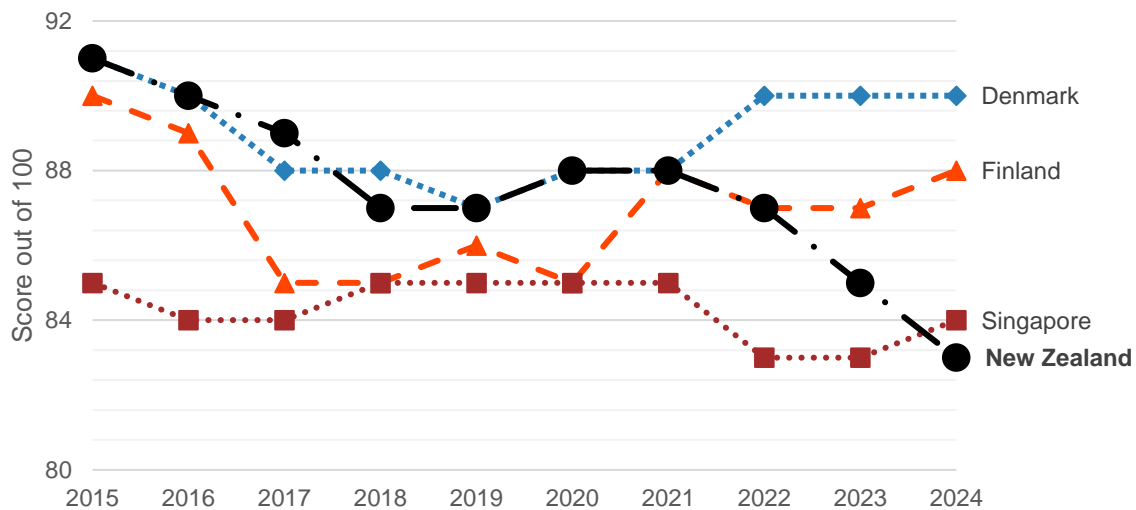
- police, border security, or customs, attempting to bribe them or exploit personal vulnerabilities (e.g. debts, addictions, or family pressure) to gain insider access
- logistics hubs, such as ports and airports, where they can assist with the movement of contraband
- private sector business, such as security firms, transport companies, financial, legal and real estate services to provide cover, and logistics and financial supports.

These groups often use more extreme forms of violence than had been seen in New Zealand in the past. This includes, for example, brawls, shootings, and firebombing in public places to send a clear message to the public, their rivals and their co-conspirators. This includes, for example, the 2009 Sydney Airport brawl that resulted in a murder in full view of CCTV and passengers.

14. In the 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index, published by Transparency International, New Zealand was ranked as the fourth least corrupt country in the world.⁵ This is a strong position, but we are trending downwards.

⁵ Transparency International (2025) [Corruption Perceptions Index 2024](#). The Corruption Perceptions Index measure how corrupt each country's public sector is perceived to be according to experts and businesspeople. It does not directly cover the key enablers of organised crime, such as illicit financial flows and money-laundering.

Figure 1: Corruption Perceptions Index score for highest performing countries, 2015-2024



15. Indeed, the fact that we have enjoyed a reputation as largely being corruption free has led to a degree of inertia, which is something we have heard from numerous officials. Julie Haggie, Chief Executive of Transparency International NZ, has commented that “New Zealand’s response to increasing corruption pressures over several years has been lacklustre and complacent”.⁶

I believe that New Zealand has not only been complacent when it comes to corruption but also naive. I don’t think there is a good understanding of the threat corruption presents to the integrity of our democratic system and the values our country is proud of.

Richard Chambers, Commissioner of New Zealand Police⁷

16. Macro-economic and geopolitical changes are also creating new pressures. Many of New Zealand’s largest trading partners have significant and ongoing problems with corruption. Eight out of our 25 largest export partners have a corruption score that is less than the average.⁸
17. Doing business with high-corruption jurisdictions increases ‘corruption contamination’ whereby unethical practices seep into New Zealand’s own systems. While this is an increasing risk generally, it has particular significance for our relationships within the Pacific, a point which we return to below.
18. The financial incentives offered by organised crime groups can be tempting – especially for those working in jobs with useful access, but low pay, in New Zealand and within the Pacific.

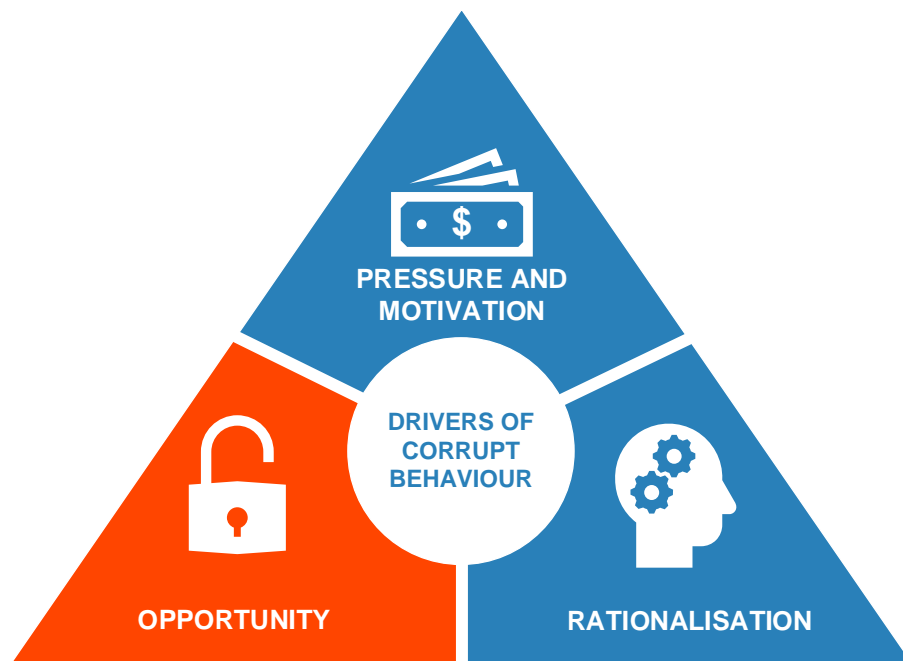
⁶ Transparency International NZ (2025) [New Zealand slides again in 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index](#).

⁷ Commissioner Chambers recently spent time as the Director of Emerging and Organised Crime for Interpol in Europe.

⁸ The 8 countries are (in order of export value) Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines, Algeria, India, Bangladesh and Mexico.

NEW ZEALAND IS WALKING THE SAME PATH THAT LED OTHERS INTO CORRUPTION

19. In our April report we outlined that a critical way of dismantling organised crime is interrupting illegal money flows by diminishing the use of cash and making it easier to freeze and seize criminal assets. Protecting against corruption is just as critical in the fight against organised crime.
20. Corrupt insiders are a key strategic asset for organised crime groups. Without them, crime groups face more risk, more cost, and less efficiency. With this in mind, New Zealand protecting against corruption is a powerful deterrent and arguably the best preventative measure against organised crime.
21. There are three key drivers of corrupt behaviour – motivations or incentives for people to be corrupt, the opportunity to do so through a gap or weakness in systems, and the person's rationalisation for making this choice. We know that there are plenty of incentives out there – and a portion of people can rationalise this choice (many of whom are already known to law enforcement agencies). Our focus should be on specifically targeting those who pressure and encourage corruption, removing their opportunities and reducing rationalisations by increasing education.



NEW ZEALAND'S RESPONSE IS NOT ENOUGH

22. New Zealand is poorly prepared to deter and tackle the increasing threat of corruption, but that is not to say nothing is being done. There are a number of arrangements in place to manage the risks posed by corruption.
23. Public service departments are responsible for meeting security standards under the Protective Security Requirements (PSR). The PSR provides a range of required

standards and best practice guidance. The PSR is designed to be flexible and risk-based, to ensure that agencies effectively manage the threats they may be facing.⁹

24. Compliance with the PSR is mandatory for all public service departments.¹⁰ The wider public sector and the private sector, which face many of the same threats, are encouraged to implement these requirements in support of New Zealand's social, economic and security interests, although they are not required to do so.
25. We also have legislation in place, such as:
 - a. the Official Information Act 1982 to ensure transparency of government actions
 - b. the Protected Disclosures (Protection of Whistleblowers) Act 2022 which facilitates the disclosure of wrongdoing
 - c. the anti-money laundering (AML-CFT) framework, which applies to financial institutions and other entities
 - d. regulations for Customs Controlled Areas, which include areas where people and goods are processed as they cross the border (e.g. ports and airports).¹¹

Managing corruption risk across a hugely diverse sector

26. The corruption threat posed by organised crime can take many forms. A risk-based approach allows organisations – both public and private – to tailor their response to meet the threats they are facing. The challenge is the extent to which they take the corruption threat seriously – and the level of priority it is accorded against other organisational objectives.
27. We endorse the approach taken within the PSR framework – applying a risk-based approach based on the circumstances faced by each organisation. It is not necessary to apply a “one size fits all” approach to all contexts. However, it is important to ensure that each organisation is taking adequate measures to respond to these risks as well as managing against wider organisational priorities.
28. The approach taken by the private sector should be aligned with that taken by government agencies through the PSR, or equivalent frameworks.¹² This will support the development of a cohesive security environment underpinned by shared standards and maturity targets.
29. The PSR also plays a critical role in countering corruption associated with organised crime. Criminal networks frequently exploit weaknesses in site security, information management, and personnel vulnerabilities. Broader adoption of the PSR can help fortify physical access controls, enhance pre-employment screening standards, and enforce consistent information security protocols, making it significantly more difficult for organised criminals to infiltrate organisations and undermine institutional integrity.

⁹ New Zealand Security Intelligence Service (n.d.) [Protective Security Requirements](https://www.protectivesecurity.govt.nz), www.protectivesecurity.govt.nz.

¹⁰ Including the New Zealand Defence Force, New Zealand Police and Parliamentary Counsel Office.

¹¹ This also overlaps with other security-related regulations applied by the Civil Aviation Authority (aviation security), Maritime NZ (port security) and Ministry for Primary Industries (biosecurity).

¹² Such as [ISO standard 22340:2024](#) and the [NIST Cybersecurity Framework](#).

30. A coordinated national initiative is required to promote the PSR as a cornerstone of cross-sectoral security strategy and a proactive defence against criminal infiltration and corruption.

Responding to corruption and insider threats like we respond to other risks to businesses

31. The risks from corruption and insider threats are significant to a number of organisations throughout New Zealand.
32. While we acknowledge some see it as too burdensome, and wish to avoid that, we think that New Zealand's approach to health and safety at work provides a useful analogy for how we should view and respond to these risks.
33. Health and safety law has been successful in encouraging New Zealand businesses to embed a health and safety culture within their organisational fabric, providing clarity on who owes duties and when, and encouraging active management and mitigation of health and safety risks.
34. A similar approach could be taken to managing the risks from corruption and insider threats in high-risk industries. Not all of these businesses will have these risks, and they will require different steps to address those risks. This may include implementing robust systems and controls, promoting transparency, encouraging safe reporting channels, and ensuring that all staff understand their role in upholding ethical standards. By embedding these responsibilities into the organisational fabric—much like health and safety obligations—businesses (whether public or private) can lead the way in creating workplaces where insider threat and corruption risks are actively managed and mitigated.

Lack of a whole-of-government anti-corruption strategy

35. Underscoring our lack of awareness of this threat, New Zealand does not have a whole-of-government national Anti-Corruption Strategy that would focus on industry sectors that are at high risk of corruption by organised crime.¹³ While work has been done in the past, it has never resulted in an agreed and publicised strategy. This creates a significant gap in the country's ability to prevent, detect, and respond to corruption risks in both the public and private sectors.
36. New Zealand is the only Five Eyes Country that does not have such a strategy in place.
37. Without a unified strategy, efforts are fragmented across various agencies, leading to limits in coordination, inconsistent standards, and no shared framework for intelligence, reporting, investigation, or accountability. This also undermines New Zealand's resilience against foreign bribery, organised crime infiltration, and reputational damage.
38. As one example, the Serious Fraud Office (SFO) is the lead law enforcement agency for investigating and prosecuting serious fraud, including bribery and corruption. The SFO has conducted a number of cases related to corruption in relation to officials

¹³ High-risk industries include: public sector agencies with law and regulatory enforcement responsibilities, companies that are involved in import and export supply chains, immigration advisers, professional facilitators, banks and telecommunications providers.

within government departments or local government organisations, particularly in relation to the improper granting of contracts.

39. The SFO has told us that it expects to play a greater role in the future as it engages with high value corruption offending across international borders. This seems to be focused on bribery of foreign officials, rather than those who are being used as insiders by organised crime.
40. While this work is important, the SFO has not been focused on insider threats and corruption related to transnational serious organised crime. Those cases involving, for example, corrupt officials, baggage handlers, or couriers, are regularly prosecuted by the Police or Customs.
41. The lack of a national strategy limits the visibility of emerging corruption trends, hinders risk-based resource allocation, and fails to promote long-term public sector integrity through preventative measures such as education, vetting, and reporting mechanisms.
42. Mandatory reporting, public reporting, education campaigns and audits requires a vehicle to support them. This should operate across the entire government apparatus, providing a satellite view of emerging themes, levels of activity, and, importantly, the ability to investigate and act on any complaints raised.

The law needs updating

43. Too often, corrupt acts are treated as employment issues when there is a clear public interest in prosecution. We have heard from a number of officials that the current Crimes Act offences relating to corruption are outdated and do not reflect the modern context. There may be challenges in prosecuting corrupt actions taken by public officials using digital systems not anticipated when current arrangements were first introduced.
44. The current corruption offences¹⁴ only apply to acts done or omitted by an official in their 'official capacity'. However, in the case of a person accessing sensitive information, for example on their day off, there may be arguments about whether it has been done in their 'official capacity'. But it is still a corrupt act.
45. These offences should be reviewed to ensure that they capture the full range of corrupt behaviours driven by organised crime, and to ensure that the penalties available reflect the seriousness of the corruption threat.¹⁵

Managing personnel security

46. People are the most important consideration when it comes to managing the risk of corruption. Effective employment screening and vetting play a crucial role in both identifying and preventing corruption by thoroughly assessing candidates for integrity, financial responsibility, and potential conflicts of interest. Strong vetting ensures that individuals in sensitive or high-risk roles are trustworthy, reducing opportunities for abuse.

¹⁴ See, for example, sections 104 and 105 of the Crimes Act 1961

¹⁵ The maximum penalty for these offences are 7 years imprisonment. However, given the seriousness of this type of offending in an organised crime context greater maximum penalties may be warranted.

47. However, there is considerable variation in how government agencies and private sector organisations conduct employment screening. It can be difficult to access relevant information to make informed employment decisions:
- a. Most employers rely on a criminal record check from the Ministry of Justice. This only shows information on criminal and traffic convictions, and does not provide information on an individual's patterns of behaviour (for example, if they have previously been dismissed because of corrupt behaviour).
 - b. Police vetting provides additional information on an individual's previous interactions with Police. But it is only available for certain roles, such as the care and protection of children, elderly or disabled people, national security and where required by law.¹⁶
 - c. Finally, national security clearances are required for people who require access to classified information, assets or work locations.¹⁷ But those that require security clearance of this kind, are not the at-risk audience targeted by organised crime.
48. People's situations can also change after commencing employment, which may affect an individual's motivation and rationalisation of corrupt behaviour. This may include, changes in personal circumstances, new business relationships or changes in work responsibilities. It can also include changes in work responsibilities where access to sensitive locations or systems is no longer needed. While conflicts of interest must be declared, most agencies rely on voluntary updates by their employees.
49. We think there is scope to review and adjust vetting requirements and strengthen reporting on known corruption risks in order to better manage the emerging threat in high-risk industry sectors at risk of corruption by organised crime. This includes: public sector agencies with law and regulatory enforcement responsibilities, companies that are involved in import and export supply chains, immigration advisers, professional facilitators, banks and telecommunications providers. Those adjustments will need to balance the level of risk with the practicalities, including the costs involved, of strengthening these processes.
50. The Auscheck system,¹⁸ which provides background checking services for security-sensitive critical infrastructure sectors, provides a helpful framework.
51. Funding was provided through Budget 2025 to strengthen Customs' capacity to counter insider threats at New Zealand's ports and airports. We understand that further work is underway on updating the framework for managing security within Customs Controlled Areas, and there is a separate review of access controls for workers at New Zealand's ports. We endorse this work.

¹⁶ NZ Police (n.d.) [NZ Police Vetting Service](#), Police website.

¹⁷ Vetting for these clearances is undertaken by NZSIS. This included background checks to determine whether the person is trustworthy and responsible. The higher the clearance level sought, the more in depth the checks.

¹⁸ Department of Home Affairs (Australia) (n.d.) [AusCheck](#) auscheck.gov.au.

AusCheck also issues credentials for other critical infrastructure sectors and declared Major National Events.

Australia's National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC)

The NACC was established in 2023 as an independent agency to investigate allegations of serious or systemic corrupt conduct across the public sector of the Commonwealth of Australia. It replaced the Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity, which only had a remit to investigate law enforcement agencies.

Federal agencies have a mandatory obligation to refer allegations of serious or systemic corruption to the Commission as soon as reasonably practicable.

The NACC focuses on six corruption priorities, including one that is focused on corruption at the border, which “exposes Australia to serious national security, criminal, economic, environmental and social harms”.¹⁹

There is an investigation process, which includes a hearing, after which the Commission must prepare a report, setting out its findings or opinions, a summary of the evidence, and recommendations. The NACC does not make findings of criminal guilt. If evidence of a criminal offence is found, this can be referred to relevant agencies for prosecution.

The Commission's investigation reports must be shared with relevant agencies and are usually published. This ensures there is a record of the Commission's findings, even if there is no conviction.

TROUBLE IN PARADISE: ORGANISED CRIME ON THE RISE

52. A recent United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Report²⁰ notes a variety of risk factors confronting Pacific Island nations including endemic corruption. While there are variations between different Pacific nations, many ‘share common forms of corruption, including bribery, nepotism, cronyism, and political corruption’.²¹
53. These factors are present in the agencies ostensibly in place to enforce the law – including within police and customs.
54. Various officials – both in New Zealand and working in the Pacific – have described how this corruption has been escalating in recent years due to influences of serious organised crime groups. While there are many types of organised crime being committed in the Pacific the most obvious concern is around illicit drugs.
55. Drug cartels from the Americas, organised crime groups from New Zealand and Australia, as well as Asian criminal networks are all increasing their involvement in the Pacific.²² Fiji, in particular, has emerged as a key transit point for major drug shipments.

¹⁹ The other corruption priorities relate to complex procurements; senior public official decision-making; contractors and consultants; the environmental sector; and actions affecting vulnerable people.

²⁰ UN Office on Drugs and Crime (2024) [Transnational Organized Crime in the Pacific: Expansion, Challenges and Impact](#).

²¹ Transparency International NZ (2 May 2023) [Corruption and Money Laundering across the Pacific](#).

²² UN Office on Drugs and Crime (2024) [Transnational Organized Crime in the Pacific: Expansion, Challenges and Impact](#).

Record-breaking seizure of illicit drugs in Fiji

In late January 2024, Fijian authorities seized almost five tonnes of methamphetamine in raids on two houses in Nadi, close to Fiji's main international airport. This is approximately 3.5 times the total amount of methamphetamine consumed in New Zealand over 2024.

While not directly involved in the importation, a Fijian police officer was arrested after they scooped up methamphetamine crystals from the crime scene.

While the bulk of such shipments are destined for New Zealand and Australia, some of it is spilling into Fiji's villages. This is fuelling addiction, and a rapid increase in HIV cases due to intravenous drug use.²³

3.9 tonnes of cocaine floating in the Pacific

In February 2023, a joint operation by police, defence and customs led to the discovery of 81 bales of cocaine floating in waters between Tonga and New Zealand. Floating transit points are a common method for transferring shipments between vessels. It is likely that this shipment was destined for Australia.²⁴

Senior bank official and sister caught with 15kg methamphetamine

In February 2024, Tēvita Nonu Kolokihakaufisi, a senior official at the National Reserve Bank of Tonga was arrested, along with his sister, after Police seized a total of 15kg of methamphetamine at their family residence and Kolokihakaufisi's office at the bank.²⁵

56. Organised crime in the Pacific has also been accelerated by deportees from Australia, the United States and New Zealand. These have directly led to the formation of chapters of Australasian gangs such as the Rebels, the Mongrel Mob, and the Comancheros in the Pacific.

Breaking transnational crime connections in Tonga

Police in Tonga say an alleged Comancheros gang member deported from Australia was behind moves to establish the outlaw motorcycle group in the Pacific Island - an attempt they say was disrupted in a drug bust in August 2024.

They arrested 17 people and seized several kilograms of methamphetamine in raids across Tonga's main island amid warnings of increased illegal activity involving the gang. This included shipment of 2.6kg of methamphetamine imported from the United States, as well as guns and ammunition.

A customs officer and a prisons officer were among those arrested in the raids.²⁶

²³ Nick Sas and Lice Movono. (1 September 2024) '[Cartels' trafficking of crystal meth through 'Pacific drug highway' sees addiction spread to Fiji's villages](#)', *ABC News Australia*.

²⁴ Justin Wong (24 February 2023) '[Half a tonne of cocaine added to Pacific Ocean drug bust total](#)', *Stuff*.

²⁵ Talanoa (14 February 2024) '[Senior bank official and sister caught with 15kg methamphetamine](#)', *Talanoa 'o Tonga*.

²⁶ Mackenzie Smith et al (22 August 2024) '[Deportee from Australia tried to start branch of Comancheros gang in Tonga, police say](#)', *Radio New Zealand*.

57. American deportations are set to make the problem significantly worse. Recent initiatives focused on deportations are set to create a Pacific tsunami, with somewhere around 1,000 deportations set to occur, with 500 arriving in Fiji alone.²⁷
58. The inflows of high-level criminality within small populations will always create problems, but these are exacerbated in the Pacific by cultural norms.
59. With generally low wage economies, Pacific nations are susceptible to nefarious actors with deep pockets, but there are also cultural specific factors at play. One of the most detailed studies of corruption in the Pacific, highlighted numerous corruption cases in the Cook Islands and found that kinship, tribal obligations, bloodlines and political affiliations are enabling corrupt decision making and rationalisation. While corrupt actions are individual, it is argued they are triggered or supported by collective social and cultural pressures, which make them difficult to address.²⁸ The same observations could be made of other countries within the Pacific.
60. Organised crime groups are exploiting these cultural vulnerabilities. This not only makes them both difficult to combat but also directly threatens New Zealand as cultural connections are tightly interwoven between Pacific nations and the large Pacific population in New Zealand.
61. As with New Zealand, for a long time the Pacific Islands were largely seen as immune from high levels of international organised crime due to their remoteness. This is no longer the case. While the direct consequences for Pacific nations of organised crime is already appearing – the influx of drugs, for example – there is a real risk the nurturing corruption environment will lead to organised crime groups becoming entrenched and dominating all aspects of society to the point where it becomes impossible to stop a series of narco-states being established on New Zealand's doorstep.
62. Such transformations can and do occur. Ecuador should serve as a warning and a reason to take strong action.

Ecuador's descent into the grip of organised crime

In 2019, Ecuador was one of the safest countries in South America. But in the last six years, Ecuador has seen a dramatic rise in violence, driven by the influence of transnational organised crime groups. The homicide rate surged from 6.7 per 100,000 in 2019 to 45 per 100,000 by 2023, as drug gangs like Los Choneros expanded their operations. These gangs, supported by Mexican and Albanian cartels, have turned Ecuador into a key hub for cocaine trafficking, leading to widespread violence and corruption.

The Ecuadorian government, under President Daniel Noboa, has responded with stringent measures, including deploying the military and classifying gangs as terrorist organisations. However, the pervasive corruption within government and law enforcement has complicated these efforts, with high-profile assassinations highlighting the dangers faced by those opposing organised crime.

²⁷ Henrietta McNeill (4 February 2025) '[As Trump deportations intensify, Pacific Island nations worry they could be overwhelmed](#)', *The Conversation*.

²⁸ Talaia Mika (24 April 2025) '[Deep-rooted cultural influence behind Cook Islands corruption - former audit director](#)', *Radio New Zealand*.

For Pacific countries, Ecuador's situation underscores the need for enhanced border security and international cooperation to combat transnational crime. Strengthening anti-corruption measures and law enforcement capabilities will be crucial to prevent similar issues from arising.²⁹

63. New Zealand, therefore, not only has a moral obligation to assist its Pacific neighbours, but a very practical reason to do so, as the Pacific is a front door for the physical trade in illegal goods to New Zealand.
64. New Zealand currently delivers a range of support through its International Development Cooperation programmes funded by Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Whilst these programmes build institutional capacity and community policing, they aren't directly targeted at the threat of organised crime. As the challenges in Pacific become more urgent, we need to consider what more can be done to counter the threats now.
65. We think that there is scope to review the current approach, alongside Australia, to create a more complete and sustainable solution. This should include providing vetting services, education, and the establishment of a specialist team that provides investigative and prosecutions support on the ground.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

Setting a national anti-corruption strategy

1. We recommend developing a National Anti-Corruption Strategy to:
 - a. align New Zealand's domestic responses with international best practices
 - b. provide strategic direction
 - c. strengthen governance and system oversight
 - d. encourage inter-agency collaboration
 - e. provide for accountability.

Centralised authority to manage system wide corruption risks

2. We recommend establishing a central authority responsible for managing system-wide corruptions risks. That could be assumed by a larger agency such as Public Service Commission (PSC), Police or SFO or a new entity, along the lines of Australia's National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC).
3. This should involve a centralised reporting mechanism which is responsible for receiving and disseminating reports on corruption risks within New Zealand. This should include gathering:
 - a. reports on employment issues involving an element of corruption or bribery from:
 - i. all government agencies

²⁹ The Americas (13 January 2024) '[How Ecuador became Latin America's deadliest country](#)', *The Economist*.

- ii high-risk industries that are vulnerable to organised crime activities
 - b. protected disclosures related to organised crime
 - c. reports from all contact lines on suspicious and corrupt behaviour (e.g. Crimestoppers, Border Protect etc).
4. This central authority should also have responsibility for:
- a. investigating systemic corruption based on received reports
 - b. sharing information to facilitate employment screening for high-risk industries
 - c. referring evidence of criminal offending on to relevant authorities, (for example the Police or SFO)
 - d. coordinating training and awareness campaigns to help people recognise the signs of corruption, and how to report them, for:
 - i high-risk industries
 - ii communities and business in New Zealand
 - e. conducting proactive checks alongside NZSIS to ensure PSR compliance across the system (see recommendation 6 below).

Review and update legislative settings around corruption offending

5. We recommend a review of the relevant law that considers:
- a. the definitions of “corruption” and “bribery” to make them fit for the modern environment
 - b. capturing corruption by people employed in trusted positions in the private sector
 - c. increasing the maximum penalties for corruption and bribery offences (currently 7 years) to reflect its seriousness
 - d. treat corruption or bribery as aggravating factors under section 9 of the Sentencing Act 2002.

Standardising the approach to managing corruption risks

6. We recommend that Government consider positioning the PSR as a foundational element of New Zealand’s broader anti-corruption strategy that ensures a nationally aligned approach:
- a. establish a public–private security forum for high-risk industries to share intelligence, align practices, and support PSR implementation (similar to the existing Insider Threat Working Group for government agencies)
 - b. develop sector-specific or ‘PSR-Lite’ models that tailor the PSR to accommodate for the different industry risk levels especially small and medium enterprises
 - c. mandate or incentivise uptake in high-risk industries by using regulatory tools or incentives such as procurement eligibility or licensing conditions to promote PSR

adoption (e.g. a business would need to be able to demonstrate compliance with PSR to be licensed in their industry)

- d. embed PSR Standards into existing oversight frameworks, such as audit, licensing, and compliance regimes through sector regulators and professional bodies, ensuring consistency without new legislation.
7. To maintain trust and confidence, agencies should:
- a. strengthen pre-employment screening standards
 - b. improve processes for disclosing changes in personal circumstances that may present integrity risks
 - c. proactively gather information to identify corruption threats associated with employment positions in high-risk sectors.

Pacific

8. We recommend the Government:
- a. create a Pacific Anti-Corruption Strategy together with Pacific countries and Australia
 - b. provide support to the Pacific to introduce the same standards of vetting that we have recommended for our high-risk industries in New Zealand
 - c. review the support offered to the Pacific to focus on projects which address the problems of organised crime, including corruption. This should include making available a specialist team of investigators and prosecutors to respond to acute issues in the Pacific.