

# The production of precariousness and the racialisation of Pacific workers in the Australian horticultural industry

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## ABSTRACT

Pacific people have contributed to horticultural and agricultural industries in Australia for a long time. Some moved involuntarily or forcefully as in 'blackbirding' in the 19th century and others migrated voluntarily in more recent economic migration and under the different incarnations of temporary visa regimes. Currently, while much of the attention from researchers and the public is concentrated on temporary migration schemes, the roles of Pacific diaspora communities in horticultural areas and the experiences of long-term Pacific settlers are being largely ignored. This paper aims to address this gap by focusing on Pacific Islander residents in two regional towns and examining their experiences in regional labour markets, with a particular focus on their migration statuses. Drawing on data collected in ethnographic fieldwork between 2014 and 2019 in Northern Victoria, we argue that precariousness associated with horticultural labour is found across different migration statuses of Pacific people. This paper sheds light on the racialisation of farmwork and its implications for Pacific settlers. We argue that the experiences of Pacific Islanders in regional labour markets need to be disaggregated to gain a better understanding of the forces that shape their experience as residents and workers in regional Australia.

## BACKGROUND AND FIELDSITES

This paper draws on ethnographic research which was conducted between 2014 and 2019 in Sunraysia in northwest Victoria. The fieldwork was guided by the project's Pacific Advisory Group, comprised of leaders from Tongan, Fijian, Cook Islander, and Solomon Islander communities in the area. Through their guidance, we were able to conduct qualitative interviews with 93 participants and hold 16 focus groups. Our research participants include Tongans, Fijians, Cook Islanders, Solomon Islanders, and one ni-Vanuatu man, who have diverse migration statuses. Interviews were also conducted with 15

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representatives from health services, the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services, the education sector, community organisations, service providers, and the horticultural sector.

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According to the 2016 census, Mildura has a population of 32,738 and Robinvale 3,088. However, it is widely known in the community that census data do not reflect the reality, as many people do not complete the census form. This includes many resident Pacific people, irregular migrants from a range of countries including some from the Pacific, and mobile seasonal workers living and working in the region during the harvest season.

Sunraysia has a long history of multiculturalism. Southern Europeans moved into the area in the nineteenth century and during and after the two world wars. People of many other nationalities have migrated to the region, including recent refugee resettlement. Pacific people have moved to the region since the 1980s; initially this was primarily Tongans attracted by the job opportunities available on farms. Some of them did not have work permits and came to the area due to the relative lack of surveillance in regional communities. Over time, some were caught and deported, and others were able to get permanent residency or Australian citizenship and continue to live in the area. Other Pacific people have moved to the region since the 1990s and the number of these migrants has constantly increased. Since 2001, when NZ citizenship holders' entitlements to welfare were changed, many Cook Islanders have moved to the area to find work, when they could not find jobs in cities and welfare support was no longer available to them. Since the coups d'état in the 2000s in Fiji, many Fijians have also migrated to Sunraysia. Some Solomon Islanders and Ni-Vanuatu have also moved to Sunraysia aiming to settle permanently.

In recent years there has also been an influx of temporary workers from the Pacific through the Seasonal Worker Programme and, since July 2018, the Pacific Labour Scheme. Pacific communities provide significant in-kind support to these workers (such as food, blankets and clothing), as well as sending remittances to support family members in their island homelands and contributing to visiting Pacific fundraising groups. These financial obligations mean that for the most part, Pacific people are socio-economically

disadvantaged, increasing their marginalisation within the wider community. However, they are also culturally valued for family and community cohesion. Despite the numerous challenges they face, Pacific people make a significant contribution to the economy of the region through their hard work and horticultural skills. Many have significant and valuable roles in their own communities and the wider society.