

Do Pacific communities in Australia earn less? Part 1

by Huiyuan Liu and Toan Nguyen

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Jimmy from Solomon Islands is one of PB Agrifood and Labour Solutions' most productive and enthusiastic workers despite having a hearing impairment

Photo Credit: Facebook/PALMScheme-PB Agrifood and Labour Solutions

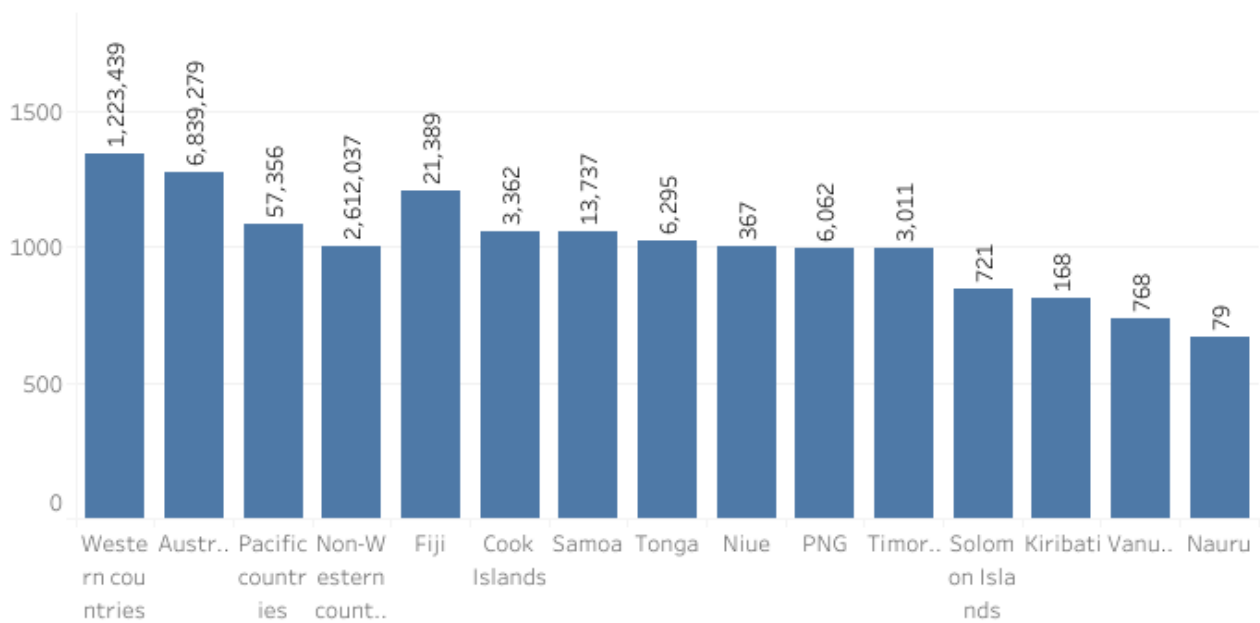
The [first topic](#) in our [Understanding Pacific communities in Australia blog series](#) was the age profiles of migrants from Pacific countries (including Timor-Leste). We compared them to those from Western and other countries in Australia. We found that the average Pacific migrant is younger than those from Western countries due to a shorter stay in Australia, but older than the typical non-Western migrant due to a longer stay.

The second topic we will examine is the labour-market outcomes of Pacific migrants in Australia. We are publishing our findings from an analysis of [Australian Census data](#) in two parts, with Part 1 covering income levels and employment status for those aged 25 to 59 years. Part 2 will focus on working hours and occupations.

Figure 1 shows that, in 2021, Pacific migrants had a median weekly income (including tax, superannuation and government support) of \$1,085 (equivalent to \$56,420 annually), lower than Western migrants (\$1,345) and Australian-born workers (\$1,275), but slightly higher than non-Western migrants (\$1,005).

However, income levels vary significantly among Pacific migrant groups. Fijians earn the highest median weekly income at \$1,205. Fiji's large share of Pacific migrants raises the overall Pacific median; excluding Fiji, the figure drops to slightly above \$1,000, aligning with non-Western migrants. Nauru, Vanuatu, Kiribati and Solomon Islands report the lowest median incomes, with Nauru's median nearly half that of Fijians.

Figure 1: Median weekly income of migrants aged 25-59 in the 2021 Australian Census



Note: Labels indicate the number of people who report their weekly income. 4% to 15% of the population in most groups do not have income data and are excluded from our calculations of medians and ratios. For Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, and non-Western countries, the shares are particularly high, about 41%, 22% and 23%. Weekly income may be understated if a person works for only part of the year.

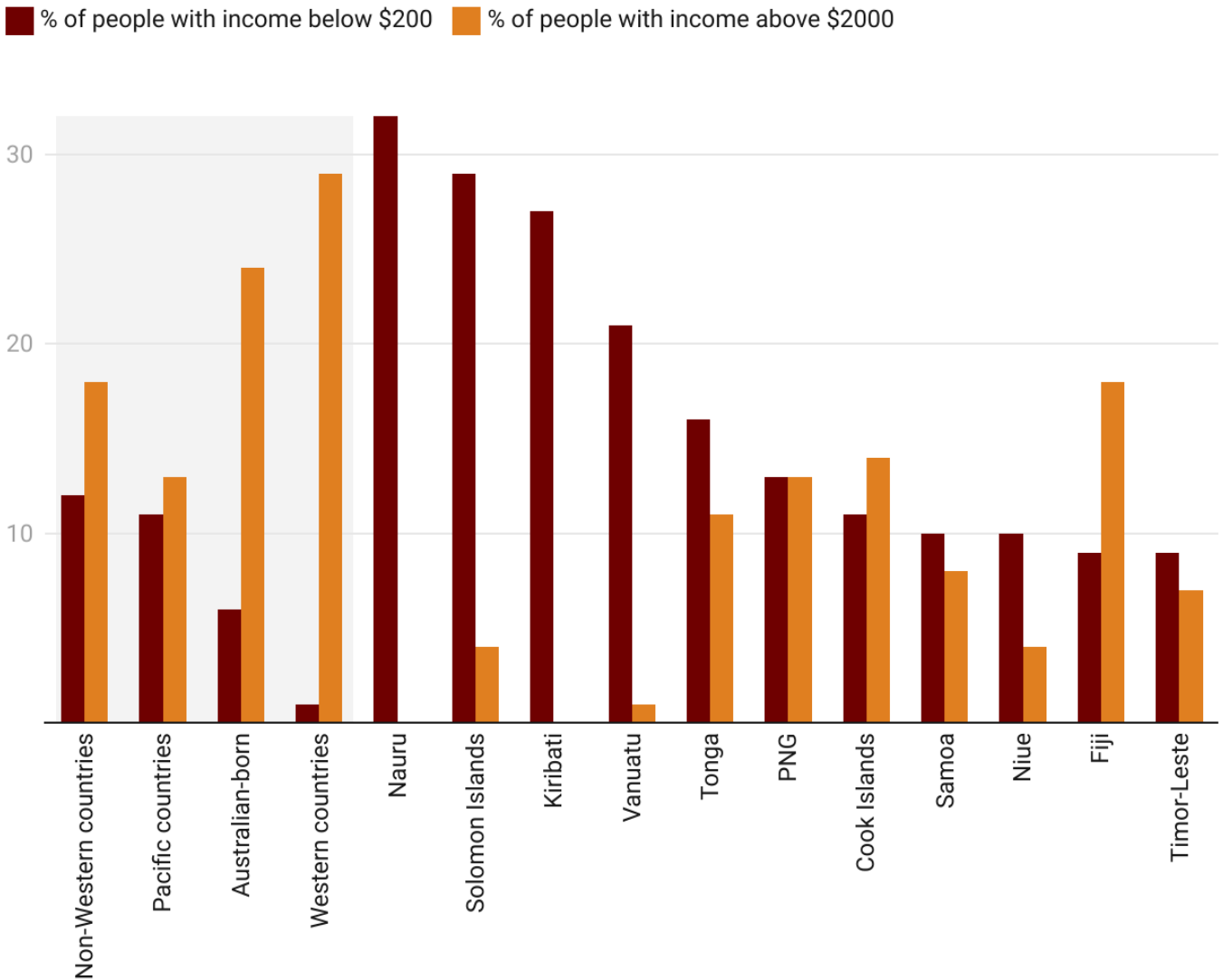
Source: Administrative data on total weekly personal income (including all sources of income, tax, and superannuation) linked to 2021 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census.



When restricting the population to those with Australian citizenship (to exclude temporary migrants), the median weekly income increases — by 8% for Pacific migrants, 7% for Western migrants and 18% for non-Western migrants. While the income gap between Pacific migrants (including Fijians) and the Australian-born population narrows, Pacific migrants still earn the least among the four groups.

A key driver of the income gap is the lower share of high earners among Pacific migrants. Only 13% of Pacific migrants earn over \$2,000 per week (\$104,000 annually), half the rate of Australian-born individuals and Western migrants, and lower than non-Western migrants (18%). Meanwhile, 11% of Pacific migrants earn less than \$200 per week (just over \$10,000 annually) — a level often regarded as insufficient for living in Australia (see Figure 2). In contrast, only 6% of Australian-born individuals and 1% of Western migrants fall into this category. Non-Western migrants have a slightly higher share in this category (12%), but this group also has a larger proportion of students compared to Pacific migrants (13% vs 8%).

Figure 2: Percentage of people with weekly income below \$200 vs above \$2000 (2021 Australian Census)



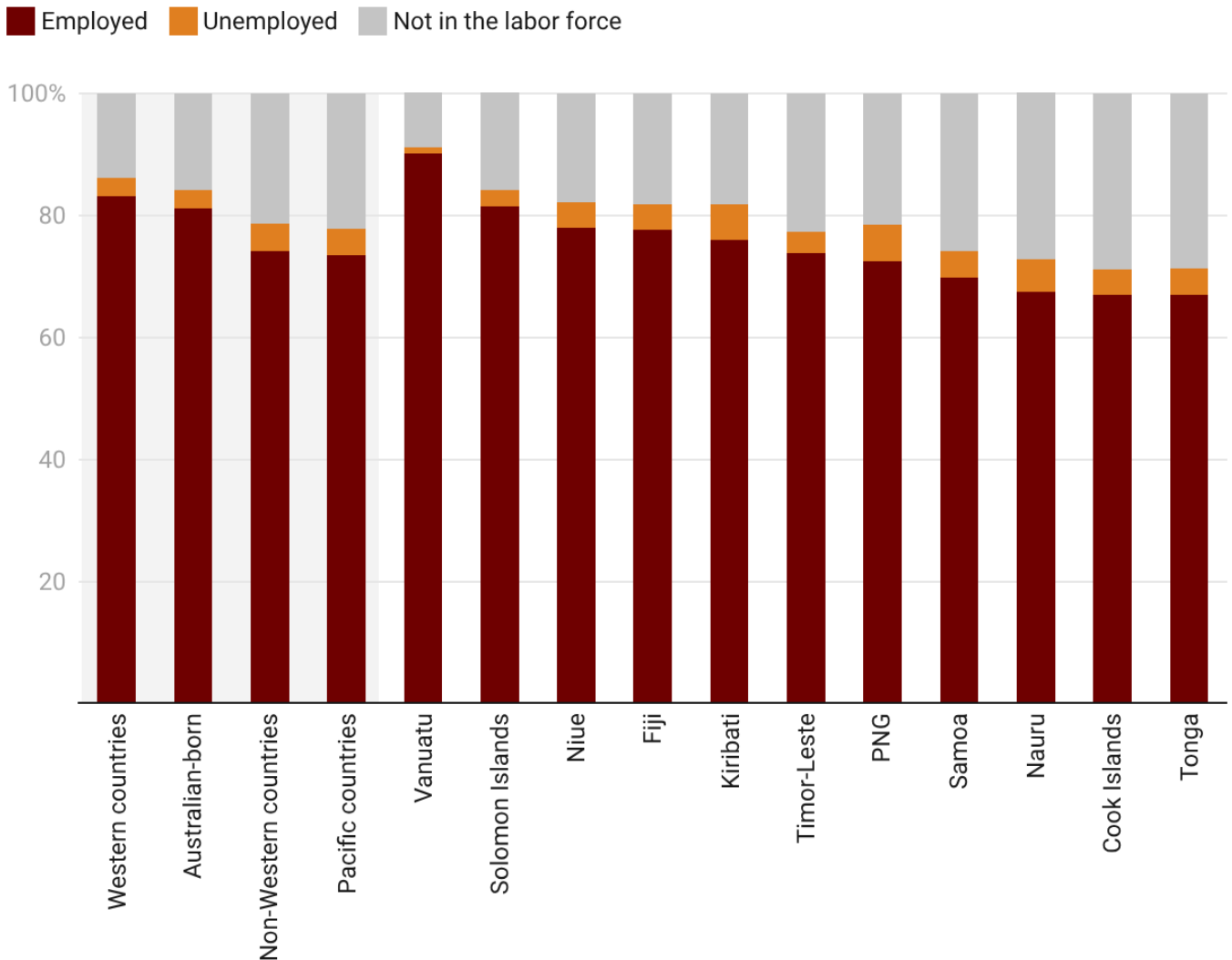
Note: Administrative data on total weekly personal income (including all sources of income, tax, and superannuation). Weekly income may be understated if a person works for only part of the year.

Source: 2021 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census data • Created with Datawrapper

Among Pacific migrants, low-income rates are highest for migrants from Nauru (32%), Solomon Islands (29%), Kiribati (27%) and Vanuatu (21%). Even for Fijian migrants, over 9% earn below the low-income threshold, highlighting the financial challenges many Pacific migrants face in Australia.

The share of the population who are unemployed is similar across migrant groups, at around 4%. Low labour-force participation is a key barrier to Pacific migrants’ income performance, with 21% not working (either unemployed or not in the labour force) — higher than for Australian-born and Western migrants (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Employment status by place of birth for people aged 25-59 (2021 Australian Census)



Note: 1% to 4% of the population in most groups fail to report labour force status and are excluded from our calculations of ratios. For non-western countries, 18% do not have data.

Source: 2021 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census data • Created with Datawrapper

Over 25% of migrants from Tonga, Cook Islands, Nauru and Samoa are not participating in the labour force: they are neither working nor seeking work. Many of them rely on government support — 21% of Nauruans, 20% of Cook Islanders, 19% of Samoans and 16% of Tongans — all above the 14% average for Pacific migrants and Australians.

In contrast, migrants from Vanuatu and Solomon Islands have high employment rates but lower wages. Most rely on wages and salaries, with nearly all earning below \$200 per week while engaged in agricultural work.

In summary, Pacific migrants in Australia generally earn less than Australian-born individuals and migrants from Western countries, with Fiji being a notable exception.

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They have a higher share of low earners, so are underrepresented in high-income groups. This is driven by low labour-force participation and lower wages in occupations where Pacific workers are concentrated. Part 2 will explore these occupations in more detail.

Read *Part 2*. Read the *Understanding Pacific communities in Australia blog series*.

Disclosures:

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