

The NZ pathway: how and why Samoans migrate to Australia – part one



Virgin Samoa
Photo Credit: *Theen Moy/Flickr*

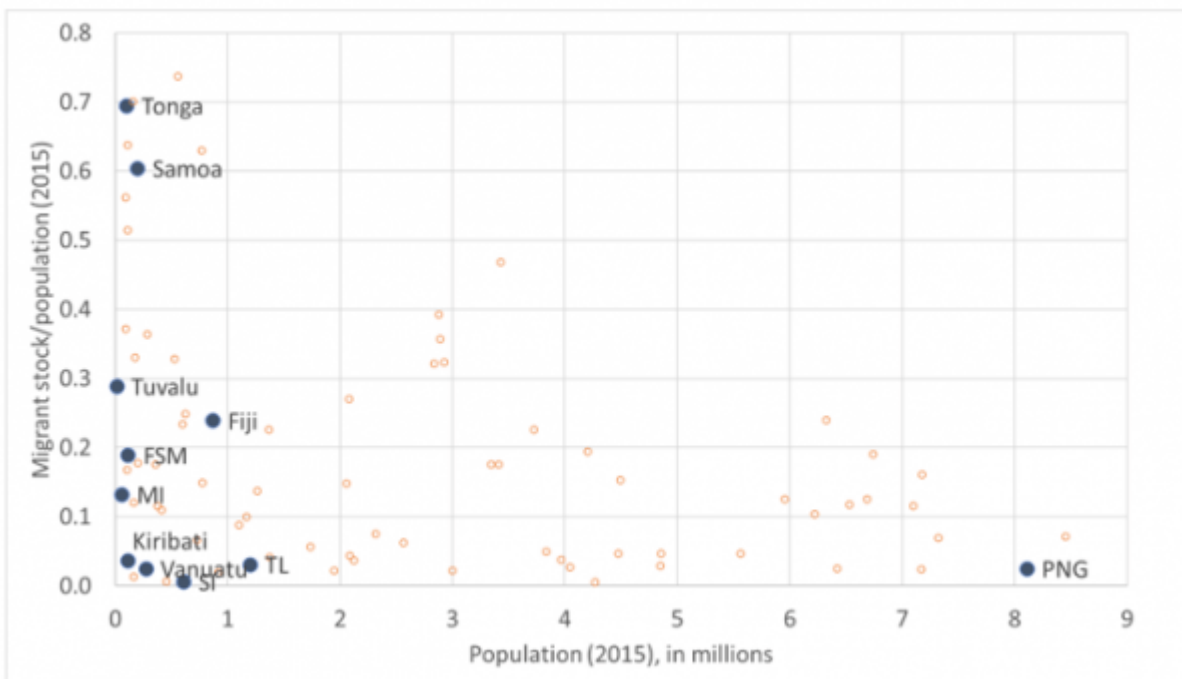
by Stephen Howes and Sherman Surandiran

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First-generation migrants make up 30% of the Australian population. But those from the Pacific make up only slightly more than half of one percent of the Australian population. Almost half of our Pacific immigrants are from Fiji, and one-fifth from Samoa. It is not surprising that Fijians dominate Pacific migration to Australia: there is a long tradition of skilled migration from Fiji to Australia. But Samoa is a very small country with a population of just 200,000. Why and how are so many Samoans migrating to Australia?

If Australia is a country of immigrants, Samoa is one of emigrants. Relative to the domestic population, the Samoan diaspora is one of the largest not only in the Pacific but in the world.

Figure 1: Migrant stock/population and population in 2015

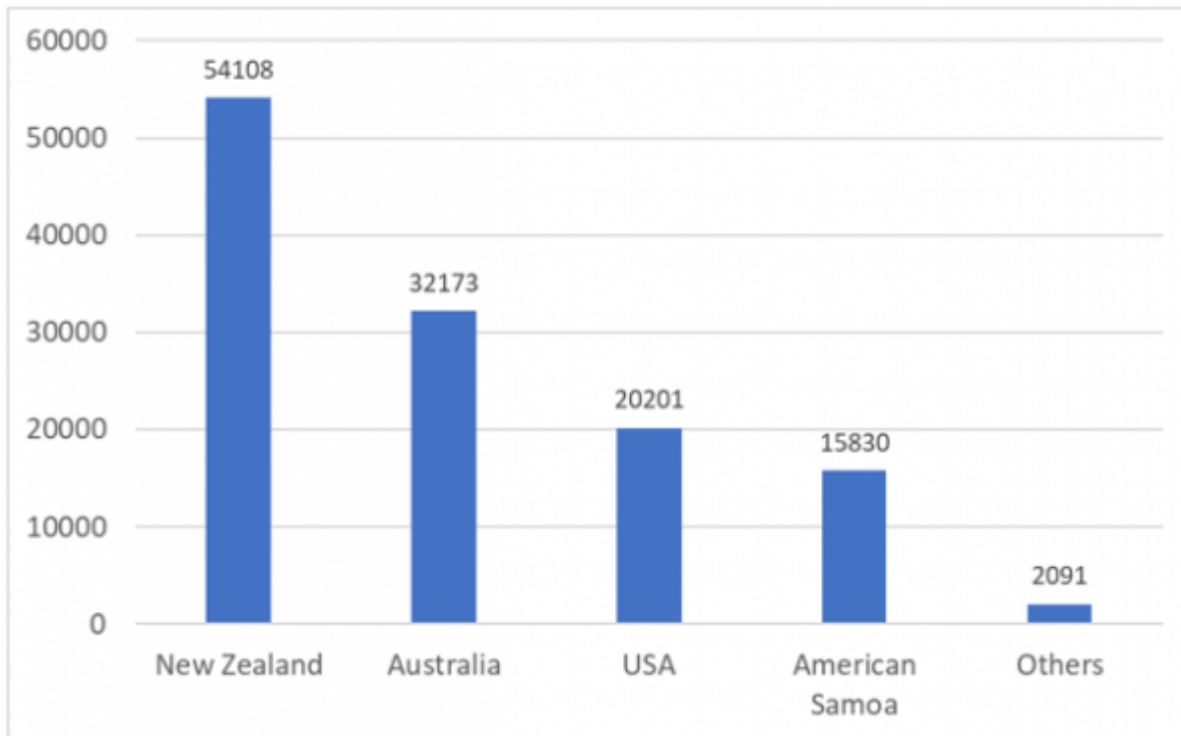


Source:

Migrant stock data is taken from the *UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs*; population data is taken from the

According to [UN data](#), Samoa's diaspora of 124,400 migrants in 2019 (some 60% of its domestic population) is concentrated in New Zealand, Australia, mainland USA, and American Samoa.

Figure 2: Samoan migrant distribution in 2019

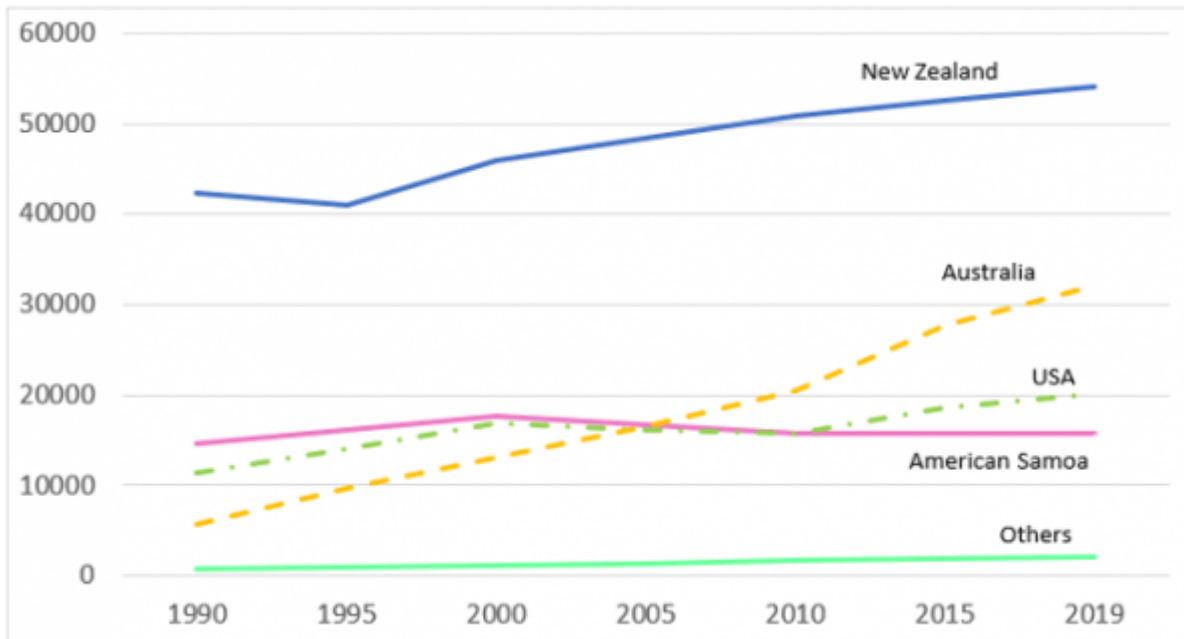


Source:

UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs

The Samoan diaspora is growing steadily. Between 2010 and 2019, it increased on average by 2,176 a year. As the graph below shows, the composition of the diaspora is also changing. The number of Samoans in American Samoa is flat. The number in New Zealand, the US and Australia are growing, but the number in Australia is growing much more quickly.

Figure 3: Composition of the Samoan diaspora



Source:

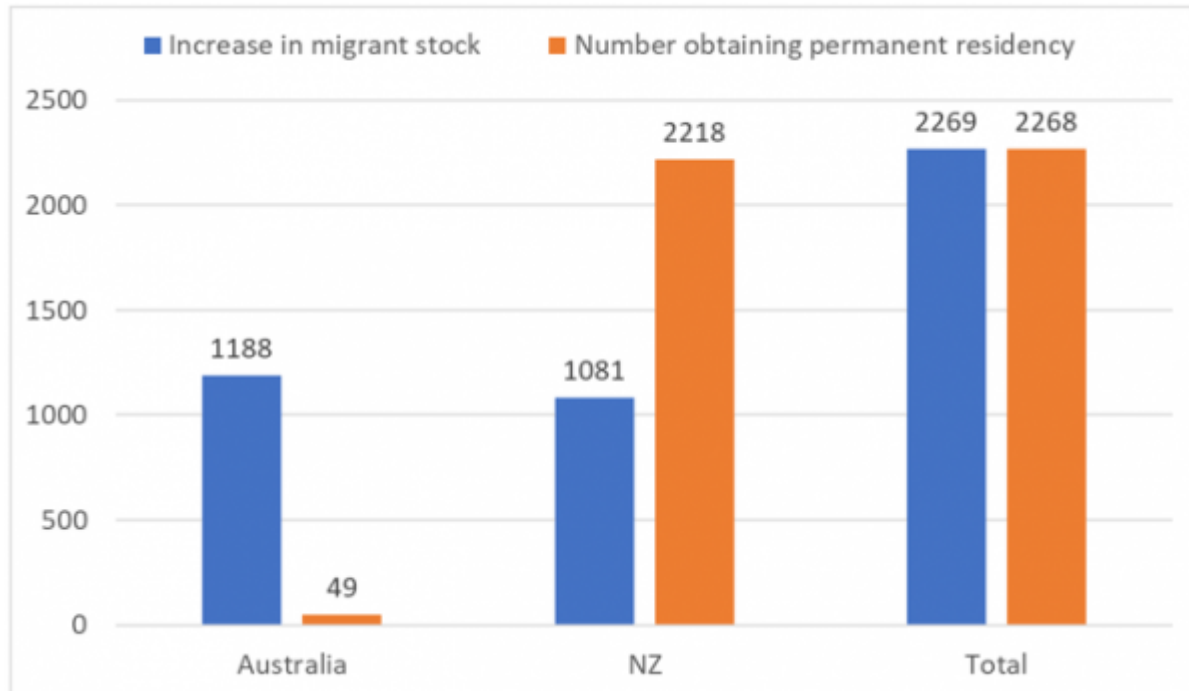
UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs

The rapid growth in the stock of the Samoan diaspora in Australia brings us back to our initial question: how are so many Samoans migrating to Australia? The short answer is: via New Zealand.

To quantify the importance of this indirect route, we use national data from Australia and New Zealand. We focus on the period from about 2013 to 2018, for which we have data both on the number of Samoans that obtain permanent residency in Australia and New Zealand, and the number of migrants in each.

The graph below summarises what we have found. There is in fact hardly any direct migration from Samoa to Australia. For the period, on average only 49 Samoans gained permanent residency in Australia: 5 as skilled migrants, and 44 through a family visa. (Though not shown in the graph, the average annual increase in the number of Samoan temporary migrants excluding tourists was only 59 over the same period.) But the migrant stock of Samoans in Australia is increasing much more rapidly, by 1,188 a year.

Figure 4: Migrant stock and permanent residency (PR) trends, c. 2013 to 2018 averages



Note

and sources: See notes at the end of the [second blog](#) for more information, including exact years.

New Zealand shows the reverse pattern. On average 2,218 Samoans gained permanent residency in New Zealand each year over the period 2013 to 2018. 1,058 migrated on average each year from Samoa to New Zealand under the Samoa Quota, a lottery system which allows about 1,100 Samoans every year to migrate to New Zealand if they can find a job. Another 1,109 moved under a family visa, and a much smaller number, 50, did so under a skilled or business visa. But the number of Samoan migrants in New Zealand increased annually by only about half that total of 2,218, that is, by 1,081. What happened to the other 1,037? That number is almost identical to the 1,139 (1,188 minus 49) Samoa-born who started living in Australia without getting permanent residency. These are the migrants born in Samoa who lived in New Zealand for long enough (at least five years) to get Kiwi citizenship before deciding to migrate to Australia. (Note that New Zealanders who migrate to Australia do not gain PR status.)

Given that this graph utilises four different data sources, it is remarkable that the numbers are so consistent. There are a range of other reasons why PR flows (“direct migration”) and changes in the diaspora (“net migration”) might diverge apart from onward migration to third countries, including deaths and return to the home country. So the result is somewhat coincidental. But it is nevertheless clear that a number of Samoans equal to about half of the rate of gross migration to New Zealand leaves annually from New Zealand for Australia. Hence the two countries have approximately the same rates of net migration of Samoans by birth.

That Samoans come to Australia via New Zealand is well-known. But the extent to which this pathway predominates is perhaps less understood: only 4% of Samoans

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who migrate to Australia come directly from Samoa. And it is interesting to see the extent to which New Zealand is used as a long-stay transit point. It illustrates well how dynamic a process migration is.

In the [next blog](#), we turn to the question of why, consider Pacific island countries other than Samoa, and look at the policy implications.

Data notes are at the end of the [second blog](#).

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Link:

<https://devpolicy.org/the-nz-pathway-how-and-why-samoans-migrate-to-australia-part-one-20210201-1/>