

June 2001



# American Samoa

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## Drug Threat Assessment



National Drug Intelligence Center  
U.S. Department of Justice



# American Samoa Drug Threat Assessment

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## Preface

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This report is a strategic assessment that addresses the status and outlook of the drug threat in American Samoa. Analytical judgment determined the threat posed by each drug type or category, taking into account the most current quantitative and qualitative information on availability, demand, production or cultivation, transportation, and distribution, as well as the effects of a particular drug on abusers and society as a whole. While NDIC sought to incorporate the latest available information, a time lag often exists between collection and publication of data, particularly demand-related data sets. NDIC anticipates that this drug threat assessment will be useful to policymakers, law enforcement personnel, and treatment providers at the federal, state, and local levels because it draws upon a broad range of information sources to describe and analyze the drug threat in American Samoa.

# American Samoa Drug Threat Assessment

## Executive Summary

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The two drugs of concern in American Samoa, and the only two for which substantive information exists, are methamphetamine and marijuana. Quantifying the drug threat in American Samoa is difficult. Until 2000, the territory did not collect or store drug-related data; therefore, much of the information in this report is based on anecdotal reporting. Methamphetamine has recently supplanted marijuana as the most serious drug threat in American Samoa. Local law enforcement authorities point to rising methamphetamine abuse as the cause for a rise in violent crime in the territory.

Powdered methamphetamine use in the territory is limited. Most users prefer to smoke the extremely pure (90 to 100%) crystal form known as “ice,” and recent reports indicate that methamphetamine laboratories may be present on the islands.

Drug trafficking organizations and criminal groups often use the mail system and cargo vessels to smuggle drugs to American Samoa. The U.S. Postal Service (USPS) delivers mail in American Samoa. The USPS in Honolulu screens all packages bound for American Samoa from Hawaii before handlers load the packages onto aircraft. Drug trafficking organizations also use cargo vessels to smuggle marijuana from Samoa to American Samoa. The Government of American Samoa is responsible for its own customs and immigration enforcement.

The American Samoa legislature passed laws in 1999 making the possession of even small amounts of illegal drugs punishable by long jail terms with no possibility of parole. News reports widely publicize the sentences given offenders. This publicity is part of a concerted effort on the part of local authorities to combat an alarming increase in drug trafficking and use.

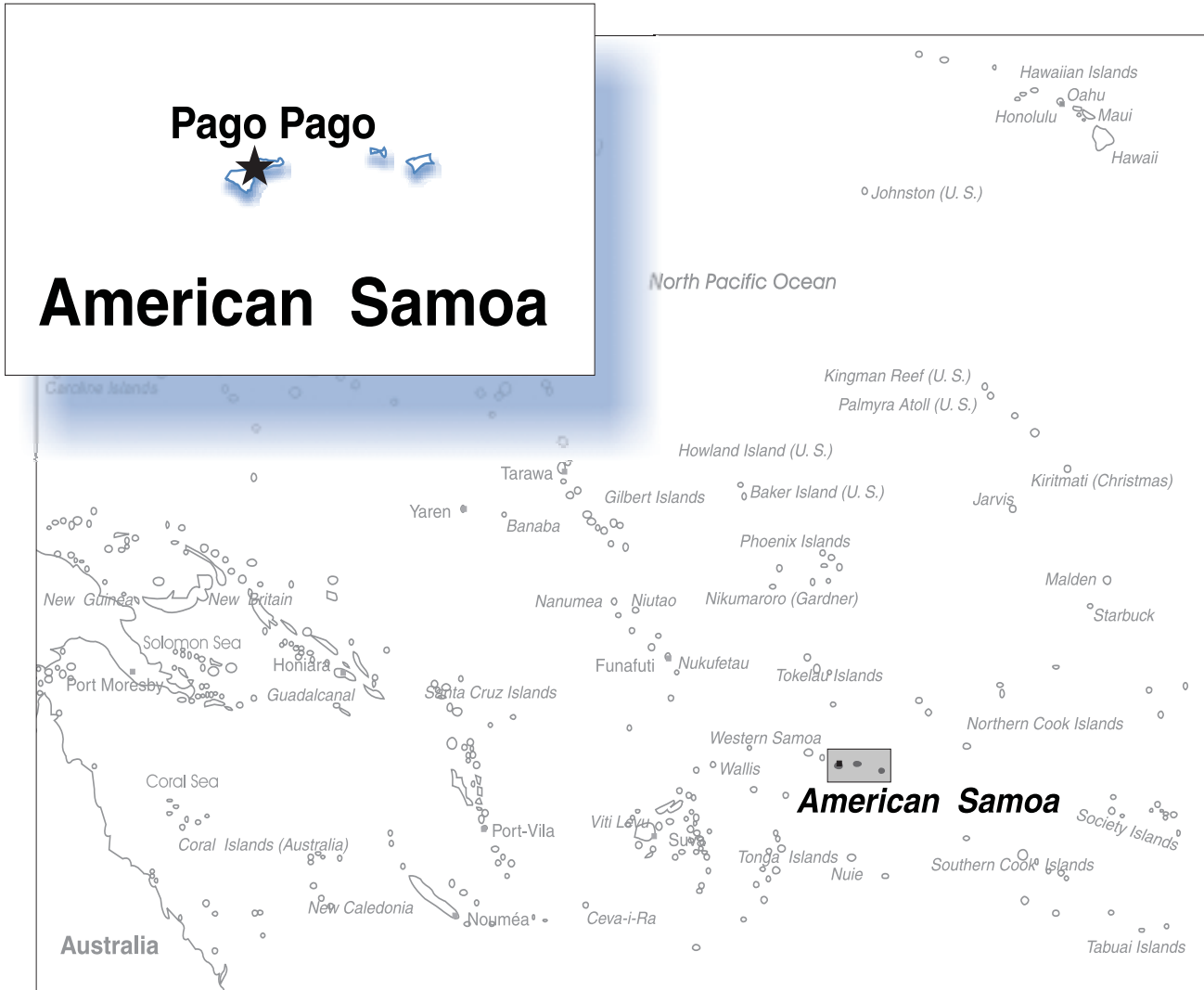
Intelligence gaps concerning the drug threat are numerous and extensive in American Samoa, which has begun only recently to computerize local records. Officials do not have a central repository for drug-related data. While American Samoan authorities recognize the growing threat that illegal drugs pose in the territory, many express frustration at the perceived lack of attention paid to the islands by federal authorities. Recent visits to the island by officials of the U.S. Department of Justice have provided encouraging signs to local authorities.

In most cases, national databases such as the Treatment Episode Data Set, the Drug Abuse Warning Network, Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance and Monitoring the Future do not include population surveys of American Samoa. The territory is given only cursory mention, which makes quantification of the drug threat difficult.

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## Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	iii
<b>Overview</b> .....	1
<b>Methamphetamine</b> .....	2
Abuse .....	2
Availability .....	2
Violence .....	3
Production .....	3
Transportation .....	3
Distribution .....	4
<b>Marijuana</b> .....	4
Abuse .....	4
Availability .....	4
Violence .....	4
Production .....	4
Transportation .....	5
Distribution .....	5
<b>Cocaine</b> .....	5
<b>Heroin</b> .....	5
<b>Other Dangerous Drugs</b> .....	5
<b>Outlook</b> .....	6
<b>Sources</b> .....	7



American Samoa.

Note: This map displays features mentioned in the report.



# American Samoa Drug Threat Assessment

## Overview

American Samoa, the southernmost U.S. territory, has been an unincorporated possession of the United States for the past century. The U.S. Department of the Interior administers the island territory. Located 2,600 miles southwest of Honolulu, Hawaii, American Samoa is halfway between Hawaii and New Zealand. The territory consists of seven volcanic islands totaling 76 square miles—slightly larger than Washington, D.C.

The estimated population in April 2000 was 65,446. American Samoans are U.S. citizens who may enter the United States or other U.S. territories freely. Nearly 90 percent of the population is Polynesian. While English is the official language, most Samoans are bilingual.

The island of Tutuila is home to the territorial capital of Pago Pago, where most American Samoans live. Tutuila has an excellent transportation infrastructure, including the Pago Pago International Airport and one of the best strategically located natural deep-water harbors in the world. The airport includes two paved runways that accommodate all types of commercial aircraft.

The territorial economy is strongly linked to that of the United States, with which American Samoa conducts over 80 percent of its external trade. The local government is the largest single

### Fast Facts

#### American Samoa

Population (2000)	65,446
Land area	76 square miles
Capital	Pago Pago
Principal industries	Government services, tuna processing, tourism

employer. Major industries consist of tuna processing plants, including canneries owned by industry giants Van Camp and Star Kist, and the port and dry dock facilities of Pago Pago. Tourism is a slowly developing industry.

According to the 1997 Youth Risk Behavior Survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the percentages of lifetime and past 30-day marijuana use by American Samoa students are approximately half those of U.S. nationwide percentages. The percentages for all other drug use categories, except steroid use and inhalant use, were equal to or less than U.S. nationwide percentages.



The Samoan culture is based on family relations and family-owned lands. Chiefs (known as *matai*) serve as leaders of extended families and guide decisions about land and other family resources. These village chiefs choose a total of 18 senators to serve in the territorial legislature. The CDC administered a survey to 1,000 high school students in six different high schools in American Samoa to measure the relationship between the adoption of traditional *Fa'asamoa* (Samoan way) norms and customs and drug abuse. The CDC included a scale to assess the students' identification with *Fa'asamoa* values and culture and mastery of the Samoan language. A supplement to the survey determined the students' opportunity to use drugs. The survey results showed that students who identified with *Fa'asamoa* were less likely to use drugs or to have an opportunity to use drugs than were students who did not.

**Table 1. American Samoa and U.S. Students Reporting Drug Use in 1997 (By Percent of Students Surveyed)**

Category	United States	American Samoa
Marijuana use, lifetime	47.1	25.1
Marijuana use, within 30 days	26.2	13.9
Cocaine use, lifetime	8.2	6.1
Cocaine use, within 30 days	3.3	3.2
Crack/freebase use, lifetime	4.7	3.9
Steroid use	3.1	4.8
Injected drug use	2.1	2.1
Other (including methamphetamine)	17.0	6.2
Inhalant use	16.0	17.1

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Adolescent and School Health, *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States, 1997*.

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## **Methamphetamine**

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Methamphetamine use is rising in American Samoa. Most methamphetamine users prefer to smoke the pure (90 to 100%) crystal form, commonly known as “ice.” Recent reports from the Criminal Justice Planning Agency point to the threat of methamphetamine production laboratories on the islands. Previously, any laboratories simply converted powdered methamphetamine to ice.

### **Abuse**

Territory officials do not report methamphetamine-related abuse statistics to Health and Human Services agencies. Prior to fiscal year 1997, there was no facility on American Samoa that tested arrestees for the presence of illegal drugs. The Drug Testing and Treatment Program became fully functional in 2000 but

has not yet begun to report data. According to recent reports, both federal and local agencies suggest that methamphetamine abuse is rising in American Samoa.

### **Availability**

High purity crystal methamphetamine (90 to 100%) continues to dominate the drug market in American Samoa. One ounce equals 28.35 grams, and one gram provides about 30 hits. During a recent trial, an American Samoan police captain testified that the street price of ice on the island is five times the price in Honolulu. The local street price can range from \$50 to \$75 per one-fifth of a gram, versus \$50 for a gram in Honolulu. During FY 2000, territorial customs officials confiscated over 200 pounds of methamphetamine.

## Violence

Increased crystal methamphetamine use has been linked to an increase in violent crime. Local authorities generally tie rising crime rates to alcohol and illegal drug abuse. While in recent years violent incidents in villages involving alcohol consumption decreased, violent crime and methamphetamine use increased, especially among juveniles. The Juvenile Division of the Department of Public Safety reported 10 arsons, 267 burglaries, 2 homicides, more than 300 assaults, and 4 rapes committed by juveniles in 1997, the last complete reporting year.

Violence is also associated with individuals in the so-called tweaking stage experienced by chronic methamphetamine abusers. As euphoria from methamphetamine use diminishes, abusers enter the tweaking stage during which they experience delusions and paranoia, and are likely to be violent. Tweaking occurs at the end of a binge when nothing—even more methamphetamine—can counteract a user's feelings of emptiness and dysphoria. Tweaking is very uncomfortable, and many abusers try to buffer the effect of the methamphetamine crash with other drugs like cocaine or heroin. The physical and psychological effects, in combination with severe sleep deprivation, can result in an unpredictable, uncontrollable individual. A methamphetamine abuser is most dangerous when tweaking.

Recently enacted territorial laws impose harsher penalties for drug possession. First-time offenders receive a mandatory 5-year sentence with no possibility of parole.

## Production

The most recent report from the Criminal Justice Planning Agency states that methamphetamine production laboratories exist on the island. This new trend is attributed to enforcement efforts that disrupted methamphetamine smuggling to the islands. Some distributors also convert powdered methamphetamine to ice.

## Transportation

Generally, smugglers use two methods to transport drugs to American Samoa—commercial aircraft and cargo vessels. American Samoa officials rarely seize illicit drugs entering the territory via ports and docks due to the sheer volume of commodities imported and the lack of manpower. Local law enforcement agencies reported no methamphetamine seizures from commercial vessels, but the methods used to smuggle marijuana might also be used to ship methamphetamine to the territory. Smaller quantities are smuggled to the islands via the postal system. Officials believe that most of the methamphetamine available in American Samoa comes from Hawaii.

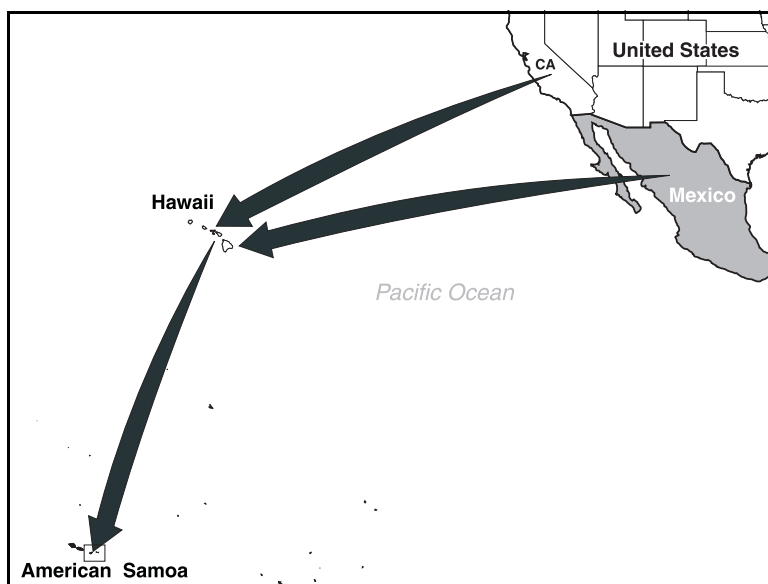


Figure 1. Methamphetamine smuggling route.

Couriers carry methamphetamine to American Samoa aboard commercial airlines. In March 1999, law enforcement officers apprehended a 15-year-old boy at Pago Pago International Airport traveling from Hawaii carrying a sandwich bag full of methamphetamine and two sandwich bags full of cocaine.

In June 1999, officials seized a shoebox sent through the mail that contained approximately 13 grams of crystal methamphetamine. The intended recipient of the package told local customs officials the shoes were for a school

graduation, but the officials believed the box was too light for the purported contents.

Local authorities now believe that more methamphetamine enters American Samoa territory on purse seiners and other commercial fishing vessels that frequent local canneries than through any other smuggling method.

### Distribution

Extensive research revealed no information regarding groups responsible for distributing methamphetamine in American Samoa or their methods of operation.

## Marijuana

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Marijuana is the most widely abused illegal drug in American Samoa. However, its use does not pose the same problems to local authorities as methamphetamine.

### Abuse

According to the 1997 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, just over one-quarter of all youth in American Samoa have used marijuana at least once during their lifetime. This number is slightly more than half the national average of 47 percent. Although low by comparison with the U.S. national average, the level of marijuana use is disturbing to a society based on traditional Polynesian values and culture. Distributors and users barter marijuana for crystal methamphetamine and cocaine.

American Samoa officials do not yet report marijuana abuse statistics to Health and Human Services agencies.

### Availability

Marijuana is widely available in American Samoa. Aside from local cultivators, much of the marijuana in American Samoa comes from the neighboring independent nation of Western Samoa. Recent seizures of marijuana caused prices to rise. A single joint of Western Samoan marijuana costs from \$25 to \$35. During the

American Samoa fiscal year 2000 (July 1, 1999 to June 30, 2000), territorial customs authorities confiscated over 10,000 pounds of marijuana in 22 seizures at the airport and ferry terminals.

### Violence

Examples of violence associated with drug use or possession are relatively rare in American Samoa. A man reportedly on parole for a previous murder of a police officer was arrested in August 1999 after he tried to pull a gun on a local police officer. He was also charged with possession of illegal drugs (marijuana and methamphetamine) and the discharge of a firearm.

Territorial legislation passed in 1999 imposes harsh penalties for drug possession. First-time offenders receive a mandatory 5-year sentence with no parole. In October 1999, a man received the mandatory 5-year sentence without parole or probation upon conviction for one count of possession of marijuana. Well-publicized arrests are meant to deter potential offenders.

### Production

American Samoa authorities report that cannabis cultivation is a significant local problem. A depressed local economy, weakened even more by sugar plantation closings, increased the probability that some residents would engage in

cannabis cultivation or the importation and distribution of marijuana. Most cannabis grown in the territory is for local consumption. Local authorities believe that many independent entrepreneurs cultivate cannabis and distribute marijuana on the islands.

Cannabis growers are adapting to law enforcement efforts. The growers plant crops in small patches in remote mountainous areas, which makes the plots difficult to locate and time-consuming to eradicate. Growers also use camouflage techniques to impede detection. American Samoa officials also report the presence of a hybrid plant that is denser and more difficult to detect from the air. Laws allowing forfeiture of private real estate prompted growers to plant cannabis on public lands, such as parks, to avoid such penalties.

## Transportation

Criminal groups, which law enforcement officials have not identified, use cargo vessels and commercial airlines to smuggle marijuana to American Samoa. In October 2000, local customs officials seized over 35 pounds of marijuana from the M/V *Lady Naomi*, a Western

Samoa government-owned cargo vessel. The marijuana was compacted in five plastic bags, wrapped in duct tape, and stored inside large vinyl bags. In September 1999, officials seized several sandwich bags of marijuana from the same vessel. Over a 3-month period in 1998, customs agents intercepted 11 shipments of marijuana at the territory's airport and dock. Smugglers generally conceal marijuana inside shipments of taro plants, hide it in bundles of fine mats, or mix it with dry goods and food.

## Western Samoa

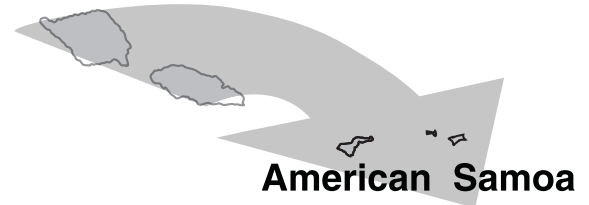


Figure 2. Marijuana smuggling route.

## Distribution

Local independent growers distribute marijuana, but tend to distribute the drug in their own areas. There is no information on the distribution of marijuana from Western Samoa or other extra-territorial sources.

## Cocaine

Other than the seizure of cocaine smuggled by courier from Hawaii mentioned in the methamphetamine section, extensive research revealed no recent evidence addressing the

abuse, availability, production, transportation, distribution, or violence associated with cocaine in American Samoa.

## Heroin

Extensive research revealed no recent information regarding the abuse, availability, production,

transportation, distribution, or violence associated with heroin in American Samoa.

## Other Dangerous Drugs

Extensive research revealed no recent information regarding the abuse, availability, production, transportation, distribution, or

violence associated with other dangerous drugs in American Samoa.

## Outlook

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Methamphetamine use will continue to increase in American Samoa, with a corresponding rise in violent crime. Law enforcement officials may find some small-scale methamphetamine laboratories on the islands, but most supplies of the drug will be smuggled from Hawaii, as in the past.

Marijuana use will increase despite harsher penalties for its possession, distribution, and use. Western Samoa will continue as the primary source of supply of marijuana to American Samoa.

Intelligence gaps regarding the drug threat in American Samoa will continue. There are some indications that local authorities recognize that the drug problem is becoming more serious. This may lead to efforts to better quantify the drug situation in the territory. These efforts, in turn, will lead to additional, more accurate information on which to base future assessments.

## ***Sources***

### **Territory and Regional Sources**

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#### *American Samoa Headline News*

#### Territory of American Samoa

Criminal Justice Planning Agency

Department of Health

Drug Testing and Treatment

Department of Human and Social Services

Department of Public Safety

Department of Treasury

Customs

High Court of American Samoa

Probation Division

Office of Attorney General

Office of Territorial and International Criminal Intelligence and Drug Enforcement (OTICIDE)

### **National and International Sources**

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#### U.S. Coast Guard

District Fourteen

#### U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

National Institutes of Health

National Institute on Drug Abuse

Community Epidemiology Work Group

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Division of the National Center for Adolescent and School Health

#### U.S. Department of Justice

Drug Enforcement Administration

Honolulu District Office

Office of Justice Programs

Bureau of Justice Assistance

Edward Byrne Memorial State and Local Law Enforcement Assistance Program

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