Monitoring COVID-19 impacts on households in Solomon Islands

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Results snapshot from Round Three (July 2021) of the High-Frequency Phone Survey

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Introduction and Highlights

This note focuses on household level impacts of COVID-19 in Solomon Islands for the first half of 2021 based on data from the third round of the World Bank's High Frequency Phone Surveys (HFPS)[2] and UNICEF's Social-Economic Impact Assessment Survey (SIAS). [3] The survey covered topics including employment and income, COVID-19 vaccination, basic services, food security and nutrition, coping strategies, public services, and public trust and security. While widespread transmission of COVID-19 did not occur in 2021, COVID-19 preparedness measures such as border closures and precautionary public health measures, as well as weak external demand may have had an impact on the welfare of households.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Employment fell from 68 percent in January 2020 to 62 percent in January 2021 and 57 percent in July 2021. These falls were spread across industries and wealth quintiles.**
- **Incomes from non-farm enterprises and agriculture fell from December 2020 to July 2021. Non-farm incomes of households with children were more likely to contract than households without children.**
- **Households used a range of coping strategies to fulfill basic needs, such as selling assets and keeping children (aged 6-14) home from school, which will have negative long term impacts.**
- **Most people reported that social relations stayed the same or improved over the six months prior to July 2021, indicating that while economic stresses have increased, social cohesion has not deteriorated substantially.**
- **Of people who were aware of the availability of a COVID-19 vaccine in Solomon Islands but had not been vaccinated, 61 percent were vaccine hesitant. Of the vaccine hesitant, over half reported that they would be more willing to get vaccinated if the vaccine was recommended to them by a health worker.**

RECCOMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

- **A second stimulus package (including labor intensive public investment) and a well-managed reopening of the borders may bring economic recovery and employment growth.**
- **Use multiple avenues to reach all citizens to build awareness of the availability of the vaccines. Trusted parties - such as healthcare workers - are likely to be an effective avenue to communicate information about vaccination.**
- **The protection of vulnerable groups, such as children, women, people with disabilities and the elderly, should be a priority. This could include expanded outreach and welfare services to address domestic violence, including violence against children.**

[1] The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this note are entirely those of the authors. They do not necessarily represent the views of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the World Bank, UNICEF and its affiliated organizations, nor those of the Executive Directors of the World Bank or the governments they represent. The team gratefully acknowledges the Korea Trust Fund for Economic and Peace-Building Transitions for financing the data collection and analysis for the World Bank survey and the UNICEF Pacific Multi Country Office for financing the data collection and analysis of the UNICEF SIAS. The authors thank UNICEF colleagues Ronesh Prasad as well as World Bank colleagues Lodewijk Smets, Annette Leith, Shohei Nakamura, Kristen Himelein, Utz Pape, Ruth Montanes and Dung Doan for their comments on earlier drafts.

[2] Data collection occurred from June 2021- August 2021, though some statistics from this survey are quoted as representing the month of July, which accounted for over 80 percent of households interviewed.

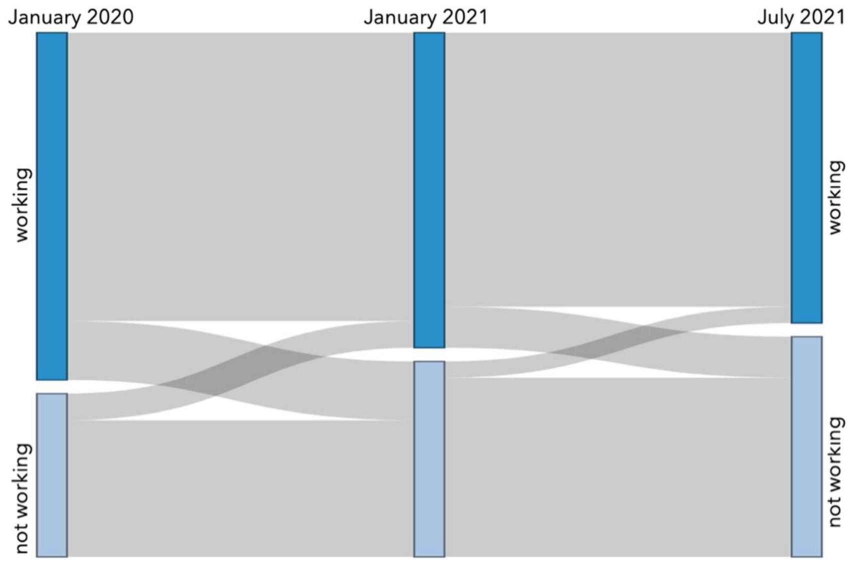
[3] Data collection occurred from August 2021- September 2021, though some statistics from this survey are quoted as representing the month of August, which accounted for over 95 percent of households interviewed.

Public Disclosure Authorized

Income and employment

A significant share of those who were working in January 2020 lost their jobs and were out of work in January 2021 and July 2021 (nationally, the employment rate at these times was 68 percent, 62 percent and 57 percent, resepctively). Figure 1 reports employment status for the Round Three sample in January 2020, January 2021 and July 2021.[4] Across 2020, more people fell out of employment than entered employment. Though an economic recovery may have been nascent in 2020, there is no evidence that it continued into 2021,[5] with a continued decline in the labor market in the first half of 2021. However, the vast majority of those who who were working in January 2021 were also working in July 2021.

Figure 1: Employment status, January 2020- July 2021



Source: July 2021 HFPS individual level data.

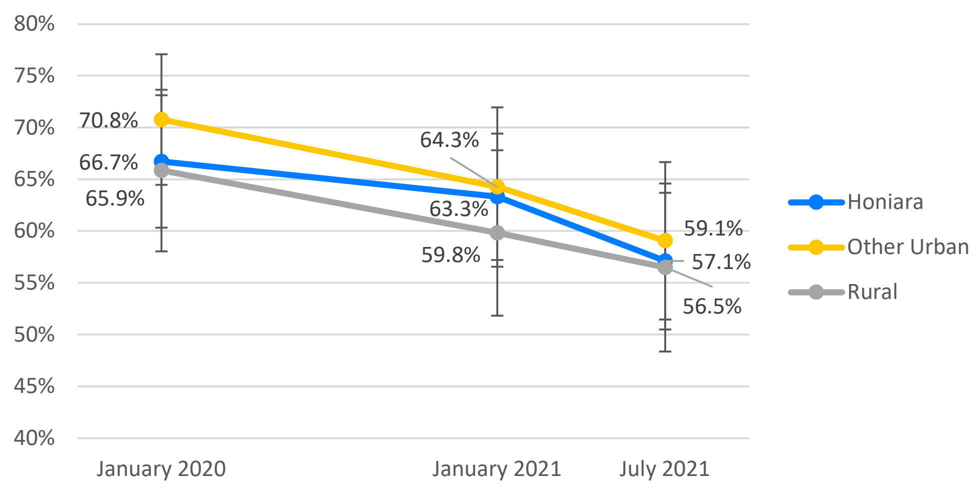
Note: Estimates based on recall data reported in Round Three for respondents and household heads.

Employment falls were geographgically widspread from January 2021 to July 2021 with employment falling to under 60 percent in Honiara, Other Urban Areas and Rural Areas by July 2021 (Figure 2). While employment rates reported in the HFPS Round Two report suggested a period of stability or nascent recovery for the second half of 2020, there is no evidence that this was followed by economic recovery in 2021. In both rural and urban areas, employment was significantly higher at the pre-pandemic baseline of January 2020 than in July 2021.

[4] The two work status categories (working/ not working) account for all respondents in Round Three, as for each time period a respondent could have reported either working or not working. Each grey-shaded line traces the group of respondents from one work status in a time period, to either a different or the same work status in the next time period. The thickness of the line represents the proportion of respondents moving from one work status to the other, or staying in the same work status.

[5] Round Three did not collect data on the change in employment from July 2020 to December 2020, so any partial recovery during this period (as reported in the Round Two results report) would be masked by the net fall from January 2020 to January 2021.

Figure 2: Levels of employment by location

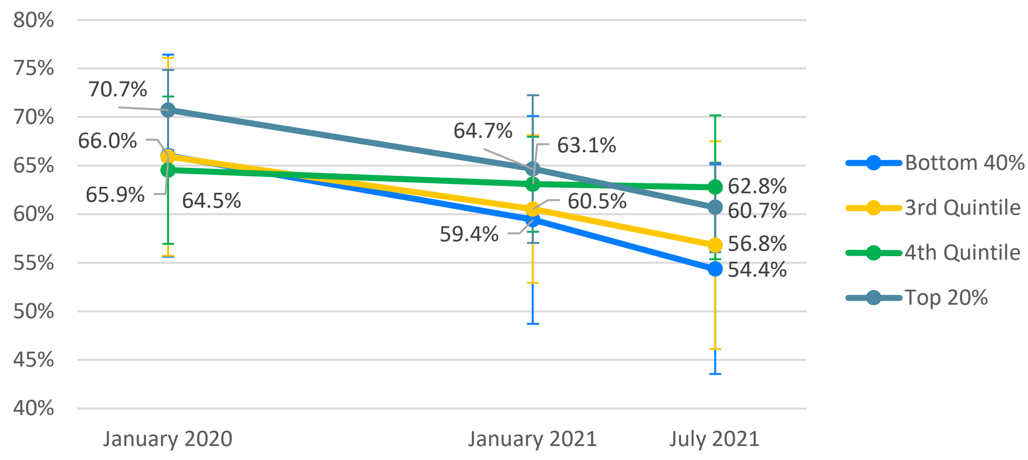


Source: July 2021 HFPS individual level data.

Note: Vertical bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

Households across the wealth distribution experienced large falls in employment between January 2020 and July 2021 (of close to ten percentage points), with the exception of the fourth quintile (Figure 3). Employment was higher at baseline (January 2020) than in July 2021 for all groups. Consistent with the national level results, there is no evidence of economic recovery and there are indications that the poorest group are being impacted the most. It is also worth noting that the drop off in employment for women was more pronounced than the drop off in employment for men in the six months to July 2021.

Figure 3: Employment by wealth status, over time

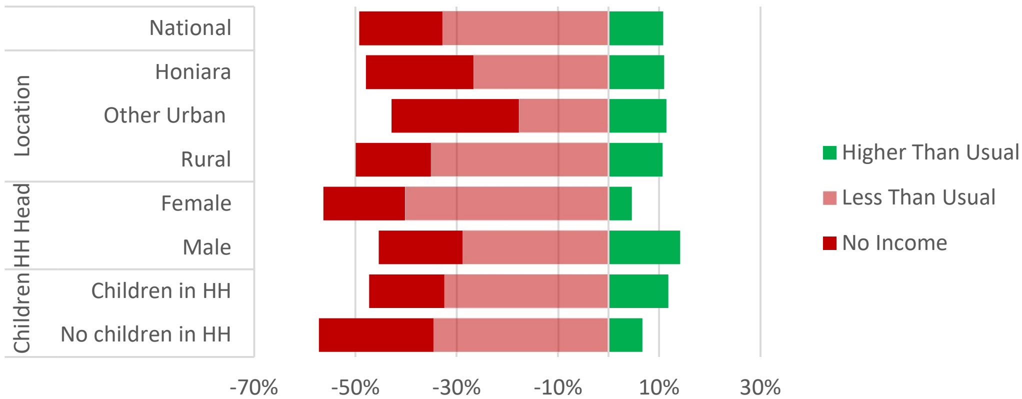


Source: July 2021 HFPS individual level data.

Note: Vertical bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

Almost half of households with agricultural income reported that income from agriculture was less than usual or zero over the previous six months, with a small share (12 percent) reporting increases, and 40 percent reporting no change (Figure 4). Female headed households were less likely than male headed households to have higher agricultural incomes than usual.

Figure 4: Agricultural income in July 2021, nationally, by location, by sex of head of household and by children in household



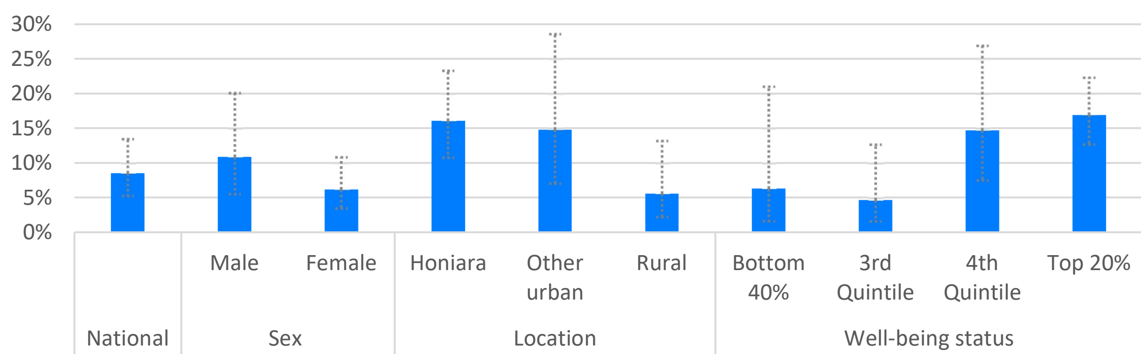
Source: July 2021 HFPS household level data.

Note: the category "no change in income" was recorded but is not reported in Figure 6.

Vaccination

Men were roughly twice as likely as women to have been vaccinated by July 2021 (Figure 5). People living in urban areas had higher vaccination rates than those living outside of Honiara. The Government's vaccine strategy prioritised people in urban areas and frontline workers were also prioritised. People in high income households were more likely to have been vaccinated than people in low income households. Fewer than one in ten people had received a dose of a COVID-19 vaccine by July 2021. This is likely an overesimate, as the level of vaccination reported by the Pacific Community's Public Health Division for July 2021 is around four percent of people aged over 18.[6]

Figure 5: COVID-19 vaccination rate nationally, and by sex, geographic area and household wealth



Source: July 2021 HFPS household level data.

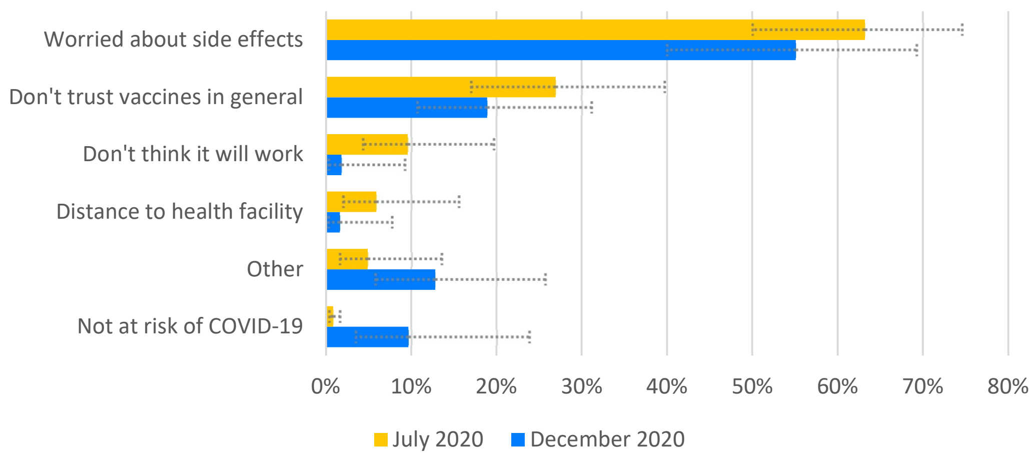
Note: Dotted lines represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

Of people who were aware of the availability of a COVID-19 vaccine in Solomon Islands but had not been vaccinated, 61 percent were not planning to be vaccinated or not sure of being vaccinated. Men were much more likely than women to be planning to take the vaccine, as were people who had more than a primary school level of education. These relationships were confirmed by regression analysis. There were only minimal differences in willingness to take the vaccine when responses were disaggregated by location or household wealth.

[6] Using data from the Pacific Community's Data Explorer website (https://stats.pacificdata.org/) for 6 July 2021. This website was accessed on 14 March 2021.

Of people who weren't vaccinated and weren't planning to get vaccinated, six in ten were concerned about side effects (Figure 6). This may suggest that a COVID-19 vaccine information campaign involving health workers clarifying the risks of side effects could meaningfully reduce vaccine hesitancy. Relatively few people – around one in four – had a general distrust of vaccines. Despite very few cases of COVID-19 being reported in Solomon Islands in July 2021, only a small number of people cited a perceived low risk of COVID-19 as a reason for not wanting to become vaccinated.

Figure 6: Reason for not wanting to receive the vaccine



Source: December 2020 and July 2021 HFPS household level data.

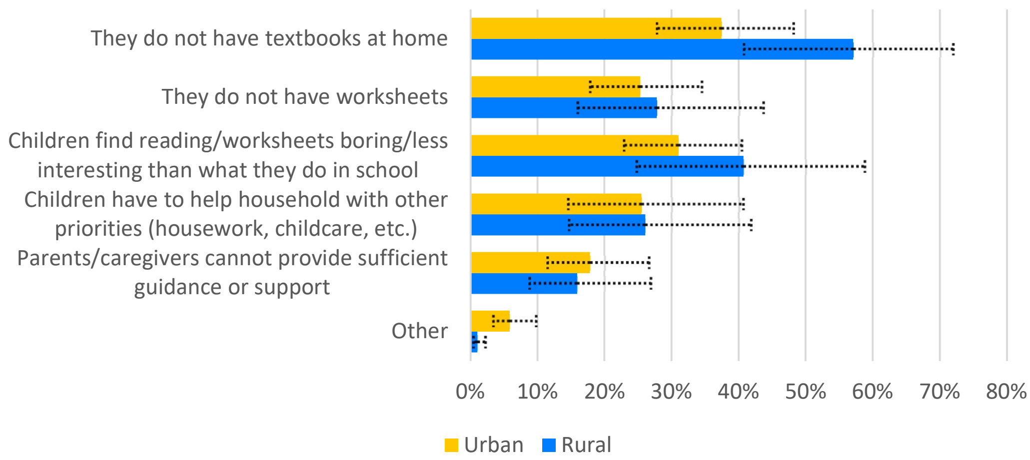
Note: Dotted lines represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

Around two thirds of households said they would be more likely to receive the vaccine if it was recommended to them by a healthcare worker such as a nurse or a doctor. One in seven people said they would be more likely to receive the vaccine if it was recommended to them by friends or family. These views suggest that healthcare workers could be utilized to decrease vaccine hesitancy in Solomon Islands.

Education and schooling

Lockdowns in Solomon Islands have been uncommon, but when they have occurred, they caused disruption to education. 74 percent of surveyed households with school-aged children (aged 6-14) who reportedly could not attend school because of a lockdown continued their education at home. However, only around one third of surveyed households with school aged students who were undertaking remote learning had remote support, and this figure was somewhat lower for female headed households. The most commonly referenced challenges of home based learning were a lack of textbooks, and children finding the work boring (Figure 7). Over 90 percent of surveyed households with school aged children were concerned about a child's performance and learning during the lockdown. Given the significant range of challenges to home based schooling identified when lockdowns were uncommon and short-lived, there may be even greater educational challenges for children in the 2022 context of widespread transmission of COVID-19.

Figure 7: Main challenges of learning at home.



Source: September 2021 UNICEF SIAS.

Note: Dotted lines represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

Coping Strategies

Most of the strategies used by households to make ends meet became more common between December 2020 and July 2021. The most common strategies were finding ways to earn extra money, by reducing non-food consumption, as well as reducing food consumption (Table 1). This trend is consistent with a further deterioration of economic conditions over this period. Households with children were twice as likely to have sold assets than households without children.

Table 1. Top ten most common coping strategies, December 2020 and July 2021.

	December 2020	July 2021
Find ways to earn extra money	71.7%	78.5%
Reduce food consumption	58.5%	65.4%
Reduce non-food consumption	54.9%	63.2%
Receive other assistance from friends or family	47.5%	63.1%
Spend from savings	60.3%	57.7%
Receive cash or borrow from friends or family	47.5%	50.6%
Purchase items on credit	49.6%	49.3%
Sell assets	26.9%	42.5%
Delay making re-payments	35.9%	40.1%
Reduce the number of children attending school	17.0%	26.8%

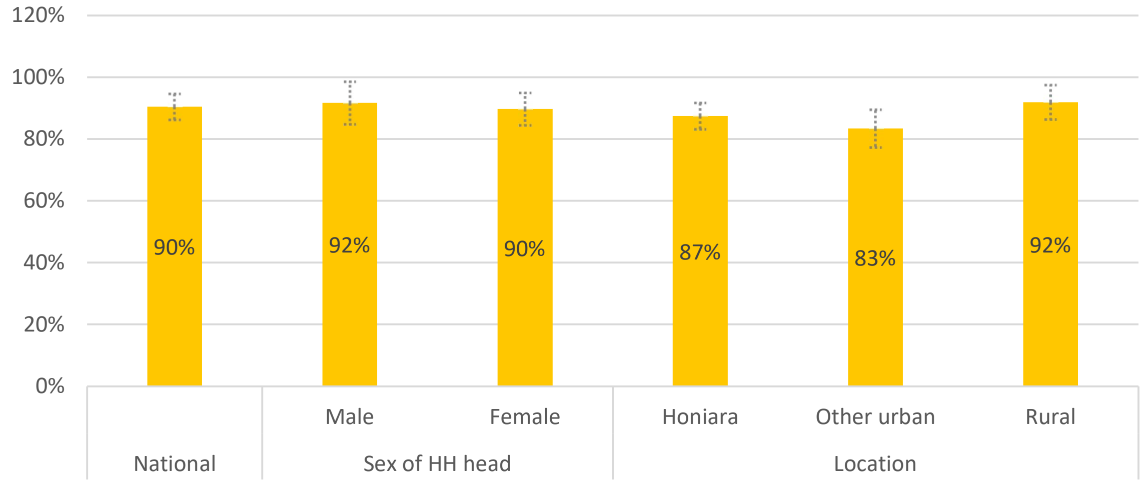
Source: December 2020 and July 2021 HFPS household level data.

Of particular concern is that households are increasingly using the sale of assets as a coping strategy. While the sale of assets and purchases on credit can help to smooth consumption, these actions can reduce the resilience of households to potential future economic shocks, for example from changed commodity prices or a health crises induced by COVID-19.

Food Security

Food insecurity was prevalent across Solomon Islands in July 2021. About 90 percent of households reported at least one indicator of food insecurity in the month leading up to the survey (Figure 8). There was no measured variation between male and female headed households or across geographic areas. Food insecurity is measured here as a household experiencing any of the full set of eight indicators derived from questions recommended by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to measure food insecurity.

Figure 8: Reporting at Least One Indicator of Food Insecurity, by Sex of Household Head and Location



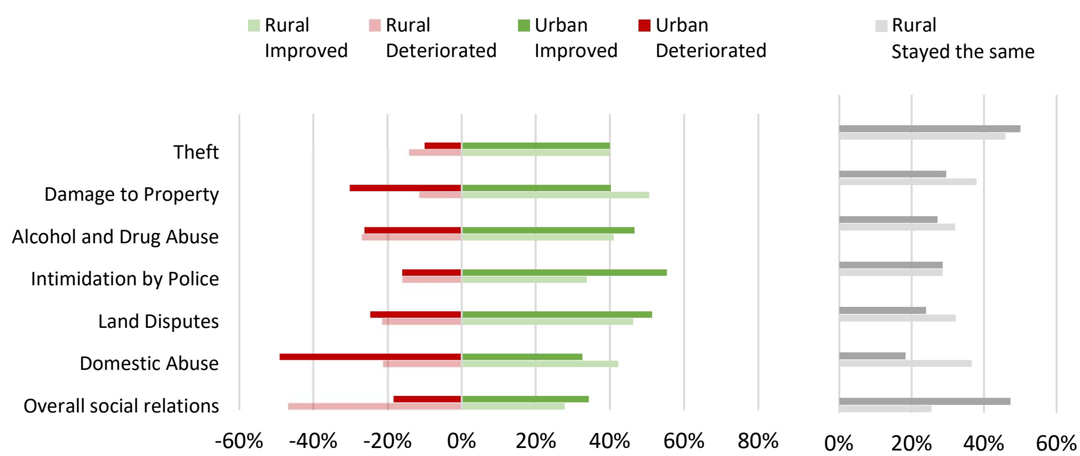
Source: July 2021 HFPS household level data.

Note: Dotted lines represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

Community security

There was no widespread deterioration in community security between December 2020 and July 2021. Indeed, more than half of households thought that theft, damage to property, alcohol and drug use, intimidation by police, and land disputes had improved or stayed the same in the six months leading up to the survey (Figure 9). However, half of urban households thought that domestic abuse had gotten worse. There is no clear explanation for this result, especially given that far fewer people in rural areas thought that domestic violence had gotten worse. Gender differences were not significant in the reporting of gender violence.

Figure 9: How community security changed between December 2020 and July 2021



Source: July 2021 HFPS household level data.

ANNEX: SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Round Three of the World Bank HFPS interviewed 2,503 households, on topics including employment and income, coping strategies, public services, and public trust and security. It follows rounds of the HFPS in June 2020 and in Dec 2020-January 2021. The dates of implementation for HFPS Round Three were between June 29, 2021 and August 11, 2021. Telephone interviews were conducted through a Solomon Islands call center run by Tebbutt Research.

As the objective of the HFPS was to measure changes as the pandemic progresses, Round Three data collection sought to re-contact the 2,882 households in Round Two. Of the Round Two households, 1182 were successfully re-contacted and completed interviews. In addition, 693 households from Round One were recontacted and completed interviews. To reach the target sample size of at least 2500 households 980 new replacement households were added to the World Bank survey. The total final sample of completed interviews was 2503. The employment questions were asked for both the respondent and the household head by proxy (if different from the respondent), yielding a total sample size for the individual-level employment analysis of 3188.

The third round of the HFPS was complemented by the second UNICEF Social-Economic Impact Assessment Survey (SIAS) This survey was designed to provide more detailed information of a subsample of households from the HFPS. The SIAS collected data on children, access to health care, family arrangements, education, and water and sanitation. For the SIAS survey, recontact was attempted with all 2503 households from the HFPS Round Three sample, between August 16, 2021 and September 5, 2021. In total, 1770 households were successfully recontacted and completed interviews.

Table A

	UNICEF	World Bank	2019 Census
Province	% of sample	% of sample	% of population
Choiseul	3.2	3.0	4.2
Western	14.6	14.8	13.1
Isabel	3.2	3.2	4.2
Central	2.8	2.7	4.2
Rennell-Bell	0.2	0.2	0.6
Guadalcanal	20.2	20.9	21.4
Malaita	12.8	13.2	24
Makira-Ulawa	3.3	3.4	7.2
Temotu	1.9	1.7	3.1
Honiara	37.6	36.9	18

Despite geographic quota targets, re-weighting was necessary to compensate for areas where targets were not reached. Honiara was over presented in the sample (see table A). Compensating factors for these differences were developed and included in the re-weighting calculations. Further information regarding weighting can be found in the HFPS Round One and HFPS Round Two reports. Because of considerable attrition between rounds, most statistics showing changes through time reflect data from repeated cross sections rather than panels. Exceptions to this are detailed in notes under each chart.