

Youth mental health and wellbeing

Long-term opportunities and challenges for Aotearoa New Zealand

Briefing for the incoming Prime Minister and Government

October 2023



Introduction

The emotional and psychological wellbeing of children and youth affects all aspects of our society and is critical for the future of Aotearoa New Zealand. A sustainable, cross-sector and evidence-based approach is needed to ensure long-term improvement to the wellbeing of the present generation and all future generations of young New Zealanders.

Key points

- Fewer young people report having good wellbeing, more are experiencing mental health challenges and our youth suicide rates remain high.
- Mental health and wellbeing when young have significant lifelong and intergenerational effects.
- Young people's mental health and wellbeing affects educational attainment, community wellness, social cohesion, community safety, productivity and health services.
- Focusing on youth wellbeing only in crisis terms limits long-term thinking and the potential for improvement.
- A sustainable mental health action plan is needed that deals with the social determinants of youth mental health and targets prevention and early intervention.
- A whole-of-society approach to wellbeing will be an essential component of any effective mental health strategy.

Context

Young people in Aotearoa New Zealand have high rates of mental health challenges by international and historic standards and fewer young people than ever report having “good” wellbeing. We have seen significant declines in mental wellbeing for young people in the past decade. This substantive decline was well documented even before Covid. We continue to face some of the highest youth suicide rates in the OECD.

The state of youth mental health is unacceptable for all New Zealanders. There are specific populations of youth, however, who are particularly vulnerable to experiencing mental ill health. This includes rangatahi Māori, Pacific youth, disabled youth and rainbow youth, including transgender and gender-diverse young people. Intergenerational disadvantage and economic and emotional poverty add other major risk factors. This reality requires us to consider both broad approaches to improving wellbeing and the potential role of targeted intervention.

In addition to the distress poor mental health causes young people, their families and communities, youth mental health affects all domains of wellbeing and productivity throughout life. Mental health in the young affects their education and work prospects, physical health, sexual and reproductive health and susceptibility to substance use among many other aspects of their lives. Its lifelong effects are critical. More than three-quarters of lifelong mental health challenges will be present by age 25. It is clear that primary care for adult mental health starts with attending to the problem in the young.

Youth mental health affects the future of our society. Adequately responding to youth mental health as a nation is essential for productivity, public safety, educational attainment and reducing a future burden on the health sector. Importantly many of today's young people will become the parents and guardians of future generations of New Zealanders. The mental health of today's youth will affect future generations. Responding to the state of youth mental health is essential for supporting young New Zealanders now and in the future to live long, meaningful and fulfilling lives.

The ambulance at the bottom of the cliff

Mental health action has largely focused on mental health services and care. Although essential, this is just one piece of a much larger puzzle. Improving our mental health system must be accompanied by putting in place sustainable strategies to address the substantive causes of declining youth mental health and wellbeing.

Some key stresses are consistently identified within the mental health system. These include a significant workforce shortage, long wait times and difficulty accessing the right care. An essential issue recently highlighted is the lack of appropriate youth services (Cross Party Mental Health and Addiction Wellbeing Working Group). A very small proportion of young people with mental health challenges will even attempt to access care principally because they don't see the available services as relevant or able to meet their needs. A responsive mental health system must be grounded in stakeholder engagement and in particular the perspectives and needs of young people.

Mental health policy often emphasises crisis-focused actions aiming at near-immediate effect such as changes to crisis response, proposals to change risk assessment practices or attempts to improve access to community services. However, the focus on short-term strategies has not had the desired effect mainly because issues of wait times, access and poor responsiveness to community needs are symptoms of larger problems in the sector. Failed attempts at short-term fixes have eroded public trust in the government's capacity to respond to young people's mental health and wellbeing. It is far more important to define a long-term mental health strategy that genuinely meets the needs of today's New Zealanders, which responds to the recommendations of the mental health and addiction inquiry and that can be adapted over time so a future overhaul isn't necessary. Transparent communication of goals and measurable outcomes are essential.

A significant barrier to evidence-based policy making for mental health and wellbeing in New Zealand is the absence of any comprehensive evaluation of governmental or third sector services despite many receiving public funding or being part of the public mental health sector. A culture of evaluation is essential for ensuring we understand which strategies are working and where new approaches are needed. Importantly any evaluation must not only consider outcomes of services but also young people's perspectives on and engagement with these.

The essential role of prevention

It is clear internationally that no mental health system can cope with a continued decline in wellbeing such as is evident in New Zealand. Prevention is needed to improve the lives of as many young people as we can. Prevention is not only socially and ethically motivated but also the most effective approach to improving wellbeing long term and the most cost-effective at a whole-of-society level.

To date our intended "top of the cliff" focus has shifted away from true prevention. Actions supposedly taken in the name of this goal, such as improving primary-care support, only come into play when wellbeing is already declining. True prevention is urgently needed to reduce the burden on our health sector over time. This requires us to be more strategic in heading off the causes of declining mental health and wellbeing in society.

Prevention requires us to deal with the social determinants of mental health and wellbeing. Biological and psychiatric accounts of mental health do not explain the rapid decline in wellbeing. We don't need to look further than the changing world young people are living in. They inhabit a complex social milieu that has shifted at a rate far greater than can be adapted to. Long-term action in response to some of the most significant issues facing young people, including the rising cost of living, the state of education (see [The future of education](#)), the housing crisis and climate change, is necessary. New Zealand research consistently indicates that these issues are critically important to our young.

Factors influencing youth mental health	Early Childhood	Childhood	Adolescence
BIOLOGY			
Brain development	■	■	■
Disability	■	■	■
Executive functions	■	■	■
Health	■	■	■
Puberty	■	■	■
Sexual health	■	■	■
CONTEXTUAL			
Adverse childhood experience	■	■	■
Bleak futures	■	■	■
Discrimination	■	■	■
Justice sector involvement	■	■	■
Redefining youth	■	■	■
Social construction of distress	■	■	■
Support outside of home	■	■	■
DIGITAL			
Commerical pressures	■	■	■
Cyber bullying	■	■	■
Digital environment	■	■	■
Screen time	■	■	■
Sexualisation	■	■	■
ECONOMIC			
Housing	■	■	■
Socioeconomic status	■	■	■

Factors influencing youth mental health	Early Childhood	Childhood	Adolescence
EDUCATION			
Education	■	■	■
Creativity and play	■	■	■
Transition from school	■	■	■
FAMILY			
Family drug & alcohol use	■	■	■
Family structure	■	■	■
Parental mental health	■	■	■
Parenting style	■	■	■
Pressure on families	■	■	■
Support at home	■	■	■
PEER			
Peer expectations	■	■	■
Romantic relationships	■	■	■
Social relationships	■	■	■
PERSONAL			
Cultural identity	■	■	■
Emotional development	■	■	■
Exploring & forming identity	■	■	■
Self-efficacy	■	■	■
Sense of belonging	■	■	■
Substance use	■	■	■

Table 1. Summary of factors influencing youth mental health over time.

Early developmental influences, including the state of early childhood education, parental stress and poverty, have left many young people ill-equipped for the challenges they are now experiencing. In increasingly unstable social and economic times, it is more important than ever to focus on supporting early childhood development so young people gain the resilience they need to survive and thrive. Notably we must take steps to end intergenerational disadvantage (see [Intergenerational disadvantage](#)). This is the domain of early intervention, which at a community level in Iceland, for example, has proved effective in helping reduce harmful substance use.

Any sustainable mental health strategy must be grounded in cross-sector action and requires us to remember that many of the desired gains will come from outside the health sector (see Table 1). Although efforts to reduce siloed approaches to wellbeing have been under way in many agencies, this is an ongoing issue. Work is needed to promote systems-focused, multi-agency action. In particular the role of education as a setting for both prevention and intervention cannot be overstated.

Actions for consideration

- **Create a mental health strategy with clear, measurable outcomes and goals to strengthen the sector, deal with social determinants of mental health, promote early intervention and improve evaluation.**
- **Recognise that prevention lies largely with other agencies than Health, particularly with Education and social agencies and that communities should be engaged in ways that promote wrap around actions for vulnerable families.**
- **Shift from crisis thinking to a sustainable plan to create a responsive, whole-of-society approach.**
- **Strengthen cross-sector collaboration that includes tackling child poverty, the housing crisis and climate change.**

- **Act early and involve the community in increasing support for families and the mental health of new parents and bolster our early childhood curriculum.**
- **Build evaluation into the sector so the efficacy of services is transparent.**
- **Revise the mental health system so it is evidence-based, has youth consultation and co-design at its core and is more responsive to a rapidly changing world.**

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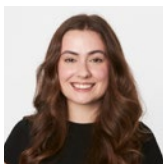
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This document was developed as part of a comprehensive briefing to the incoming prime minister and government. The full document is available informedfutures.org/briefing-to-incoming-government-2023

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