Koi Tū
Centre for
Informed Futures

Addressing youth mental distress in Aotearoa New Zealand

Dr Madeline Hayward, Dr Jessica Stubbing, Sir Peter Gluckman

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Koi Tū Centre for Informed Futures is an independent, non-partisan, future-focused boundary organisation dedicated to tackling the complex, long-term challenges shaping Aotearoa New Zealand's future.

We provide high-quality, evidence-based insights to address critical national and global issues arising from rapid social, economic, technological, and environmental change.

Our name, Koi Tū, was gifted by Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei. Koi means "the sharp end of an arrow" and "to be bright and clever," while Tū means "to stand" and conveys resilience. Like our namesake, Koi Tū aims to get to the heart of the most pressing long-term issues.

Koi Tū Trust is a registered charity – CC63033.

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Executive summary

Globally, youth mental health challenges are rising. Within Aotearoa New Zealand, our young people aged 15-24 are reporting rates of psychological distress higher than any other age group, and rates are particularly high among rangatahi Māori, rainbow young people and young people living in high deprivation areas.

To better understand why mental wellbeing is declining, research undertaken by Koi Tū Centre for Informed Futures explored young people's perceptions of the factors influencing youth mental health, including changing social, cultural and political landscapes. In collaborative, participatory workshops, we spoke to 176 young people in Auckland and Northland. We found that young people attributed youth mental distress to a perception of bleakness about the world around them and the future, a heavy burden of challenges and stressors, a lack of support and connection, and difficulty navigating a path through adolescence. We also connect these findings to important contributory factors operating much earlier in life, including maternal mental health during pregnancy and early bonding between parents and infants, which the adolescents themselves may not have been able to identify.

This report is a desktop review of evidence-based approaches to improve youth mental health, particularly during the adolescent period, with some consideration of the impacts of interventions in the earlier years which are ultimately key to prevention. The recommended classes of action fall under six broad areas: equipping young people with resilience, targeting sources of distress, providing opportunities to connect and belong, improving experiences at school, making mental health services more accessible, and addressing the impact of social media. Strategic action across these six areas, at the levels of national and local government, communities, schools and families, could see a meaningful reversal in our youth mental health statistics. We suggest a suite of high-level actions that would then require subsequent development through engagement with stakeholders and key delivery agencies.

This report is the second in a two-part series, and should be read in conjunction with our report *Pathways to wellbeing: A youth-led exploration of mental health in Aotearoa New Zealand.*

Key messages

- There are multiple actions that Aotearoa New Zealand should consider to better address the factors affecting youth mental health. No single action or programme alone is sufficient.
- Likewise, the task of improving youth mental health cannot be placed on one agency or on government alone. The responsibility must be shared between national and local government, between health, education, social welfare and other social agencies, and within schools, communities and families. It is only through coordinated strategic effort and long-term planning that we are likely to see a difference in the many direct and indirect factors that are impacting on the mental wellbeing of young people.
- The world and societies are changing rapidly, and providing young people with the psychological equipment to thrive in this context must be a primary focus of whānau and communities, and of health, education and social agencies and services.
- A preventative approach to youth mental health should be one that starts in early life, even before birth, taking into account the importance of the early environment and experiences, and of opportunities for prevention and resilience-building.

- Key to socioemotional and psychological resilience is the development of the executive functions, particularly self-regulation skills. For brain development, the first several years of life is a critical window during which executive skill development should be supported. A number of actions enhance executive function development and other factors impede it, and these must be addressed. Particular attention should be paid to maternal mental health before and after birth and to the interactions between caregivers and infants in the first two years of life.
- We must better address family violence, child abuse and neglect, which necessitates strong commitment from all communities and clear agreement that these are totally unacceptable behaviours.
- The education system from preschool onwards has a central role in ensuring healthy socioemotional development. Many parents are not equipped well to cope with the very different milieu young people now grow up in. The very different world, particularly a world which is increasingly virtual, creates challenges, and the education system is key to young people navigating it.
- An early approach must be applied to alleviating the stressors that a child and their family are exposed to. As young people grow throughout adolescence, supports should be provided that address the impact of social and structural factors on them and their families.

Introduction

Youth mental health challenges are rising globally.[1] In Aotearoa New Zealand, one in five young people aged 15–24 report experiencing psychological distress, a rate that is rising over time and is much higher than in other age groups.[2] There are inequities within our youth mental health statistics: rangatahi Māori, rainbow young people, and young people living in high deprivation areas are experiencing particularly high levels of mental distress.[3]

Many young people in Aotearoa New Zealand today have already lived through multiple traumatic and disruptive events, including the Covid pandemic, the Christchurch earthquakes and extreme weather events. These events can disrupt development and have negative and persistent impacts on mental wellbeing.[4] However, declining wellbeing among young people is a problem that has been reported internationally, and the incidence began rising well before the pandemic.[5]

This is a concerning situation that demands action. No society should tolerate these levels of compromise in young people, and it bodes poorly for our futures. Mental health during adolescence has myriad impacts throughout a person's life, including on the areas of education, physical health, economic outcomes, intergenerational wellbeing and substance use. Not only is there a moral imperative to act, but the rapid decline in young people's mental wellbeing across the western world in the last 20 years also creates an existential concern. It has negative impacts that create social and economic costs to society as a whole.

The well-documented consequences of rising rates of youth mental distress on productivity, financial cost, mortality, morbidity and societal wellbeing will be immense if they continue unaddressed.[6] Mental health during childhood and adolescence is one of the strongest predictors of our lifelong wellbeing and mental health, with the majority of mental illnesses having their onset before age 25.[7] Additionally, New Zealand's health and social support systems are not equipped to meet the current scale of need; the percentage of young people who say they can't access mental health support when they need it is rapidly rising.[8] Yet realistically, we can never expect our health system – or any health system – to meet endlessly increasing need. A preventative approach offers the best chance of curbing our youth mental health statistics and helping young people in New Zealand thrive. It is important on all levels that we urgently identify the factors driving the increasing rates of youth mental distress and put in place sustainable actions that will be effective in addressing these factors.

This report extends our previous work at Koi Tū which explored the factors that account for rising rates of mental distress among young people. Our research first highlighted that the factors influencing youth mental health are many, complex and interrelated. As demonstrated in the included figure, they range from biological contributions and early life experiences to wider social contexts surrounding young people.[9]

The commentary in the present report is primarily focused on the factors that young people have identified as salient to their own mental health. These are factors happening in the period of adolescence. This is only one part of the picture of youth mental health: elsewhere we have extensively reviewed the factors that indicate preventative actions much earlier in the life course.[10]

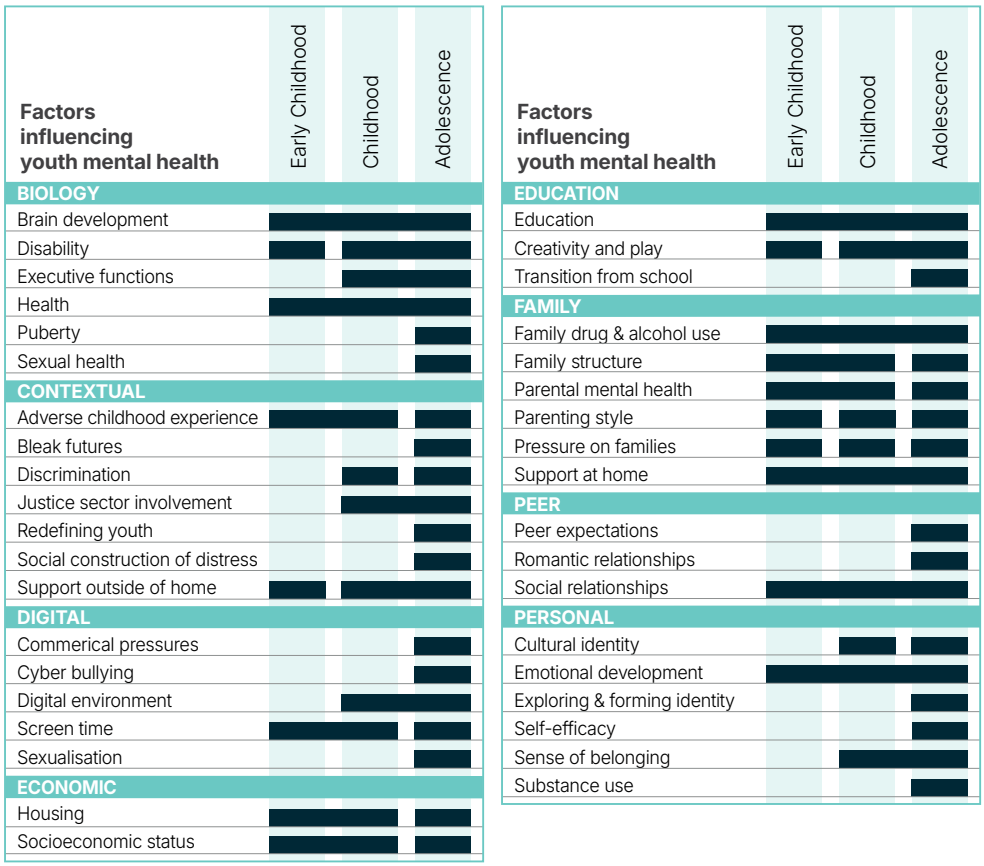

Figure 1. Summary of factors influencing youth mental health over time.

Our approach

In 2023, we worked with schools, organisations and iwi across Auckland and Northland to hold workshops where we talked to 176 young people about what impacts youth mental health in Aotearoa New Zealand. The young people we spoke to were aged 16 to 25 (average age 17.6) – see the table below for details on who participated. Taking this youth-led approach centres young people as experts in their own lives and acknowledges that adults tend to have a limited view on the complex lives of young people today, often shaped by negative and untrue stereotypes.[11] It ensures that actions we take in this space are grounded in young people's needs.

About our participants

Ethnicity*	
New Zealand European/ Pākehā	69
Māori (indigenous people of New Zealand)	53
Pacific Islander	48
Asian	23
MELAA (Middle Eastern/Latin American/African)	7
Other	3
* Many participants identified with multiple ethnicities, so these numbers do not add to 176.	
Gender	
Male	71
Female	96
Gender Diverse/Gender Queer/Non-binary	9
LGBTQIA+ Identity	37
Lived experience with mental health challenges	135
Lived experience of supporting mental health challenges	143
School and work	
Engaged in school or university	146
Engaged in work	85
Neither engaged in education or work	6

What young people told us

Four key themes were identified through the workshops: 1) the world young people live in, 2) the pressures young people experience, 3) the connections young people need, and 4) navigating a path. Each theme is briefly explained below:

1. The world young people live in

Young people articulated a sense of bleakness about the current state of the world and about their future. They experienced the world as unfair, divided and uncertain. They spoke about existential threats that made them fearful for the future, such as war and climate change, economic stressors, and inequality and discrimination around them.

2. The pressures young people experience

Young people spoke about experiencing numerous challenges. They described overwhelming pressure (academic, financial, familial), significant trauma (abuse, family violence, violence based on their identity, bullying) and significant stress.

3. The connections young people need

When young people experienced support from those around them, they described this as the most positive thing for their mental health. They received support from family, peers, community groups, trusted adults (e.g., teachers) and cultural connections. However, many young people reported feeling unsupported and isolated. They described a sense of intergenerational division, stemming from a perception that older generations were oblivious or unresponsive to the distinctive struggles that young people are now facing.

continued

4. Navigating a path

Within the context of the previous three themes, young people spoke about the difficulties that arose from trying to navigate a path through adolescence. Young people engaged in strategies to thrive (such as fitness, spirituality and connecting to nature), or merely survive (e.g., turning to substance use). Young people spoke about a process of trying to continually make meaning and form their identity in this context.

Amplifier: social media

We also established that social media acted as an amplifier on these four themes, in that it amplified the negative and positive contributors to young people's mental health.

This youth-led systematic model of the factors affecting youth mental health and the methodology through which it was created are discussed further in a recent Koi Tū report, *Pathways to wellbeing: A youth-led exploration of mental health in Aotearoa New Zealand*, and in an academic paper detailing this work.[12]

Purpose of this report

The present report's purpose is to now identify and suggest evidence-based actions we could take to address the themes identified from our previous work. We also consider factors acting earlier in life and/or intergenerationally, as these are important areas where preventative actions are possible. This report provides a roadmap for moving towards an Aotearoa New Zealand where young people are better equipped to deal with challenges, less burdened by stressors, have opportunities to find support and connection, feel hopeful about the future and can develop a strong sense of identity.

This report identifies high-level actions within six broad areas of recommendation:

1. **Targeting sources of distress**
2. **Equipping young people with resilience**
3. **Providing opportunities to connect and belong**
4. **Improving experiences and ensuring appropriate soft skill development at school**
5. **Making mental health support more accessible**
6. **Addressing the impact of social media**

Targeting sources of distress

"Even since from our childhood, so many once in a lifetime occasions. Financial crisis, global pandemic... Housing crisis, youth mental health crisis" – young person

Relevant themes: the pressures young people experience, the world young people live in, navigating a path

Young people in our research were strongly affected by the environments around them. They spoke about distress arising from financial pressure, inadequate housing and family violence. They were also affected by, and felt bleak about, inequities and discrimination in society. Targeting these sources of distress can alleviate the challenges young people experience, make them feel more hopeful about the world they live in, and help them explore and realise their unique identities.

Targeting childhood exposure to adversity

An early preventative approach must be applied to alleviating the stressors that a young person and their family are exposed to. From conception, a pregnant mother's health (including mental distress, substance use and nutrition) has a significant impact on the future wellbeing of her child,[13] as does the physical and mental health of fathers at the time of conception.[14] Exposure to adversity in infancy and childhood strongly predicts and accounts for much of adult psychopathology.[15] Adverse childhood experiences, including domestic violence, maltreatment and neglect, are strongly associated with experiencing depression and anxiety later in life,[16] and exposure to poverty has a marked negative effect on the mental, emotional and behavioural health of children and young people.[17] Children whose families are in poverty often get less social support from the adults at home with them, which negatively impacts their life satisfaction and overall health.[18]

Exposure to family violence (which includes child maltreatment, intimate partner violence and intrafamilial violence) can have lifelong negative impacts on a child's physical and mental wellbeing and also feed into intergenerational cycles of violence, neglect and maltreatment.[19] Children with these experiences are also often at educational disadvantage, both in the early years and later. Having a parent in prison or having few positive parental influences puts children at particular risk.[20]

Additionally, childhood exposure to adversity plays a strong role in later offending behaviour. We know that the majority of young people who offend have had early exposure to adversity, family violence and other traumatic experiences, and subsequently in adolescence many of these young people experience a complex interplay of mental distress, substance use and criminality.[21]

Targeting child poverty and family violence with early intervention approaches will have a significant impact on the mental health of children as they grow into adolescence and beyond. These approaches need to be key components of youth mental health policy, yet neither bottom-up nor top-down actions are adequately addressing this fundamental issue. The ongoing unacceptable rates of child maltreatment suggest some deeper issues yet to be confronted in our society.

Substantive research has identified how we can alleviate child poverty and family violence.

Alleviating child poverty demands an early and holistic investment approach. The most effective time to intervene is from the beginning of pregnancy and throughout childhood, when actions must be taken so that a child and their family have their needs met and are protected as much as possible from excessive stress. The systems surrounding a child and their family, ranging from maternity and mental health services to social work and education, must be accessible, effective and culturally appropriate. Such an approach is proven to be cost-effective as it has ongoing positive ramifications throughout a child's life and beyond, halting intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.[22]

Reducing rates of family violence means recognising trauma from intergenerational disadvantage, discrimination and dislocation, and ensuring that services are equipped to support people through this lens. It requires every community and whānau to make it clear that such violence is unacceptable. Practically, it requires initiatives that support positive parenting and strong relationships within families, target addiction and meet parents' psychological needs. Ensuring families' financial needs are met is also crucial. Financial stress increases household stress, and it can inhibit a parent's ability to leave a violent relationship or keep their child safe.[23]

Ongoing socioeconomic support

While an early preventive approach to alleviating structural stressors is essential, support around such sources of stress should continue throughout adolescence, including for older adolescents who are generally independent (e.g., financially) from their families.

Young people told us they were stressed about money and the rising cost of living. Financial stress is associated with mental distress,[24] and hence actions that alleviate financial stress will improve youth mental health. Social and educational policy needs to take into account these issues, for example in considering the basis of educational and welfare support, and in ensuring where possible all young people are in employment, training or education. It has been suggested from studies in low income, post-conflict environments that unconditional cash transfers may positively impact young people's mental health.[25]

Policies that support young people with housing and employment can also improve their mental health. Examples of these sorts of policies include promoting job creation for young people, incentivising the hiring of young people (e.g., through hiring subsidies and job retention support), increasing housing affordability, expanding support for young people seeking quality rentals, and supporting young people who face vulnerable circumstances (e.g., homelessness).[26]

When young people are navigating socioeconomic challenges (such as debt, involvement with the welfare system, housing and employment), access to free advice services can help them cope with these stressors.[27] Recognising the complex interactions that exist between socioeconomic challenges and wellbeing, these services can be most beneficial when they are co-located with primary health services, such as GPs or wellbeing hubs.[28] For young people, these services might be most accessible and impactful when they are co-located at Youth One Stop Shops, discussed on page 22.

Targeting polarisation, discrimination and inequity

Young people told us that a sense of polarisation within society negatively impacts their mental wellbeing. This finding speaks to a broader need to address social cohesion within society. In our past research at Koi Tū, we have examined how New Zealand, along with many other countries around the world, is experiencing threats from polarisation and division, eroding institutional trust and social trust.[29] The causes of this have been multifaceted, including rapid social, economic, technological and environmental challenges. However, there are actions that can be taken to improve social cohesion, such as improving parliamentary processes and political discourse, and reducing the tolerance of ad hominem attacks whether at school or in broader society; social media has played a disappointing role in effectively promoting such attacks.

Young people in New Zealand are also negatively impacted by inequity and discrimination, both from being aware of these occurring in society around them and being personally affected (e.g., through discriminatory interpersonal violence). Inequity and discrimination have the potential to threaten young people's identity formation. For example, Māori participants in our research talked about intergenerational disadvantage, including post-colonisation and racism, and they related this to experiences of structural challenges and also more subtle challenges to their sense of identity.

Identity formation is at the fore during adolescence, and it strongly influences future success and wellbeing. Identity formation is the process by which young people develop confidence in who they are through exploring their values, beliefs and goals.[30] Being able to undertake this task during adolescence and developing a strong identity can itself be a protective factor in the face of discrimination.[31] Young people in New Zealand must have the ability to explore their identity without challenges from discrimination. This points to the need to prioritise policies that tackle inequity and discrimination, both within New Zealand society generally and in the environments young people spend time in (including digital environments[32]).

Elevating youth voice in decision-making

Young people's voices need to be meaningfully factored into decision-making about the structural issues that impact their mental health. Young people in our research told us they felt like they had little say over the decisions that affected their future, and that even where mechanisms existed for youth consultation, these were often tokenistic and their perspectives were ultimately dismissed. More broadly, participants felt that older generations were oblivious or unresponsive to many of the struggles younger people today are facing, which was a source of distress and anger. This sense of generational disconnection is by no means uncommon for each successive generation of adolescents. However, given the pace of change in technology and society, today's adolescents are experiencing a disconnect that is larger and more material than previous generations. There is a strong bidirectional relationship between young people's wellbeing and the extent to which they are meaningfully involved in the decisions that affect them.[33]

Equipping young people with resilience

"Any setback towards that goal, it's completely damaging towards how you feel about yourself. So, you'd be like, 'I have to get here, here's my track to get here. I didn't get that, I failed." – young person

Relevant theme: The pressures young people experience

Young people in our research spoke to the difficulty of coping with overwhelming pressure and stress. They named tangible stressors in their lives that can be alleviated, discussed above. The focus of this section is on the growing and compelling evidence that there are preventative actions that can increase young people's ability to cope with challenging situations.*

From the very beginning of a child's life, we must support their access to the experiences and conditions that foster resilience. This is an essential preventative approach to strengthening youth mental health. Early investment in resilience gives people access to tools and resources that help them cope with challenges, stress and pressure at each stage of their life.[34]

Resilience is often thought of as a personality trait, but in reality, it is a skill that is strongly influenced by the experiences and resources available to a person. One of the key building blocks of resilience is the acquisition and development of executive functioning skills (basic mental capabilities such as working memory, inhibitory control, self-regulation, planning and organising, and cognitive flexibility) and socio-emotional regulatory capabilities. The acquisition of these skills is strongly influenced by the interactions that young children have with the people around them and starts even before birth.[35]

Parents and caregivers are a key influence, and maternal influences on brain development begin in utero.[36] When parents and caregivers interact with young children in a warm and responsive way (often called 'serve and return' interactions), this facilitates the child's development of the cognitive skills that build resilience.[37] Moreover, having at least one supportive relationship with a parent, caregiver or significant adult is in and of itself a fundamental tenet of children's development of resilience.[38] However, when caregivers are experiencing mental distress or a lack of time and energy, particularly arising from socioeconomic deprivation, this can undercut their ability to bond and have high-quality interactions with children,[39] highlighting an imperative to support the wellbeing of families more broadly.

Executive functions can also be fostered in the interactions children have outside of the home. Educational settings can be a key area for intervention.[40] Quality early childhood education (ECE) and schools-based programmes are essential as these reach all children and young people in a school. Pre-school programmes that target mindfulness, for example, have been shown to have a powerful impact on children's acquisition of executive functions such as self-regulation and perspective taking.[41] In New Zealand, the ENGAGE programme is a play-based intervention for ECEs that significantly improves children's self-regulation.[42] Programmes in later years of schooling can also enhance young people's resilience.[43]

Alongside acquiring executive functions, developing resilience also requires protective factors in a young person's social environment: social support, positive experiences and a sense of belonging.[44] Schools can again play a key role as environments that promote resilience through connection and belonging.[45] Resilience can also be fostered through experiences young people have outside of school and the home that promote belonging, such as adventure sailing

* Elsewhere we have argued that early life factors can also make adolescents *more* sensitive to stressors (Hanson & Gluckman, 2025).

programmes, which have demonstrated particularly strong effects on resilience and sense of belonging for rangatahi Māori.[46] Sources of faith, hope and cultural traditions can all enhance resilience.[47]

It is important to note that exposure to adversity has the potential to harm young people's wellbeing irrespective of their resilience, and to also undercut their access to the conditions that facilitate the development of resilience.[48] Strengthening young people's resilience and targeting sources of distress are approaches to youth mental health that must go hand in hand.

Providing opportunities to connect and belong

"The 12 to 24 period is a really important period mentally for interacting with people... I think being stuck at home during that time, and not making social bonds, the isolation is not helpful."– young person

Relevant themes: the connections young people need, navigating a path, the world young people live in

Young people told us that when they did have support, whether from connections with their peers, families, community or culture, this was the most important thing for their wellbeing. However, many young people felt unsupported and isolated. This may reflect the consequences of rapid sociological change, including large changes in family structure.[49] These findings suggest the importance of providing more opportunities to young people to connect with others, receive support and experience a sense of belonging.

A sense of belonging is highly important for mental wellbeing, particularly during adolescence, when young people are building their social identity.[50] Enhancing young people's connectedness to others is a key way to enhance their health and wellbeing.[51] In general, the more social groups a person belongs to, the better protected they are against experiencing depression.[52] Connecting with others, particularly influential adults, can also help young people develop their identity. The support young people receive from adults in their family, neighbourhood and school contexts is significantly and positively associated with their identity development.[53] Additionally, the support that youth receive from social services or mental health services can also aid with their identity development, as long as the staff involved at these services, such as social workers or mental health professionals, help them forge safe and secure connections with others, take time to see the young person as a 'whole person', explore pathways where they can test out their identities (e.g., re-engaging with education), and build a sense of agency.[54]

Social support in early adulthood is somewhat protective against the negative impacts of childhood adversity on mental health in later adulthood.[55] Strong peer relationships in adolescence help young people develop resilience through a sense of belonging and purpose.[56] Conversely, loneliness and social isolation are harmful to mental health.[57] Giving people opportunities to find connection and belonging through positive avenues can also make them less likely to seek belonging through antisocial contexts, such as involvement with extremist groups or gangs.[58]

Key ways to give young people access to support and belonging are through extra-curricular activities, family support, mentoring programmes and youth spaces.

Extra-curricular activities

A tangible way of giving young people opportunities to connect with others and experience belonging is by enhancing their access to extra-curricular activities. Extra-curricular participation in adolescence is well-established to be associated with mental health benefits.[59] Young people in New Zealand who participate in community-based extra-curricular activities feel more connected to their community and school, and report better wellbeing, social support and life satisfaction.[60] Extra-curriculars can put young people in contact with peers and with supportive adults who act as mentors or role models; the presence of such 'natural' mentors (i.e., those developed within communities rather than being formally introduced in mentoring programmes), such as sports team coaches, is associated with positive developmental and wellbeing outcomes.[61] Additionally, extra-curricular activities can help young people with identity formation. Participating in extracurriculars can, for example, make young people feel confident and competent, which can help them develop identities around leadership and agency.[62] Young people may not feel confident to explore their identity or try new things within school due to a sense of fear or failure, so opportunities for self-expression outside of school are important.[63]

Extra-curricular activities can include a wide range of activities, including sports, creative activities, volunteering, youth clubs, religious groups and cultural activities.

Participation in sports can be particularly beneficial to young people's mental health.[64] Exercise can be effective for improving young people's self-esteem and reducing depression symptoms.[65] Group sports, in particular, can enhance feelings of peer belonging.[66] Having participated in team sports during adolescence is somewhat protective against depression and anxiety for adults who experienced adverse childhood experiences.[67] Sports participation can also have a positive impact on social cohesion and educational outcomes.[68]

Participation in cultural activities can foster the development of young people's cultural connection and cultural identity, which is important for mental wellbeing and resilience.[69] Supporting young people to engage in group activities centred around cultural activities, such as Polyfest, kapa haka or creative arts, gives them access to culturally safe environments and can enhance feelings of belonging, cultural connection and cultural identity.[70]

Volunteering is a kind of extra-curricular which can not only help young people find supportive connections with others but can also help their sense of connectedness to their community.[71] Volunteering and activism can be associated with a sense of identity and belonging for young people,[72] and volunteering in adolescence is associated with psychological benefits later in life.[73] Opportunities for volunteering and activism might also target young people's sense of bleakness about the world around them. For example, there is some evidence that the negative effects of climate change anxiety on young people's mental health can be mitigated when they engage in collective environmental activism,[74] as this can instead engender optimism.[75] Several case studies capture the mental health benefits (on sense of empowerment, self-esteem and sense of connection to others) when young people are supported to identify and act together on a community issue.[76] For these positive effects to occur, it appears to be important that the community issue is seen to be meaningful for the young people involved.[77] Similarly, volunteering in adolescence needs to be truly voluntary for psychological benefits to occur.[78] This implies that young people need to have options and agency in selecting to participate in causes.

Many other types of extra-curricular activities are beneficial for young people's mental health. For example, involvement in community-based creative activities positively impacts their self-confidence and self-esteem.[79] Activities where young people can connect with others who have a shared experience (e.g., a long-term illness or disability) can be particularly beneficial.[80] For young people in New Zealand who attend church, this is an important place for them to experience belonging, social connections and identity development. Church is centrally important for many Pasifika young people in particular, and can be a space where they develop leadership skills and connect with adult role models.[81]

Realistically, each young person will gravitate to the available extra-curricular activities that best suit them. Young people will be motivated to engage with different activities at different times for different reasons,[82] so what is important is making sure that diverse extra-curricular options are available, including in rural areas, and that barriers to access are removed. It is also important that young people retain agency about which extra-curriculars they participate in and how often, so as to avoid extra-curriculars contributing to a sense of pressure and exhaustion.

In New Zealand, young people's rates of extra-curricular participation are generally high.[83] However, rates of sports participation tend to reduce quite steeply at around 15 years of age.[84] A number of factors might account for this drop-off. For example, in the later years of high school, young people typically face increased expectations on their academic performance, and many face increasing financial pressure that influences them to spend time at employment rather than leisure activities. Additionally, the context in which young people participate in sport often changes, with sport often becoming more competitive (even at schools) and expensive to participate in.[85] Other known barriers to participation in extra-curriculars include lack of time, energy or motivation, and financial barriers.[86] Understanding and addressing these barriers is important, particularly through transition points such as the first years of tertiary education. During these years, the loss of established support structures can leave young people feeling lonely and disconnected, but participation in physical activity and leisure activities can bolster mental health.[87]

Family support

During adolescence, peer relationships become increasingly important to young people.[88] Nonetheless, family connectedness remains a central influence on their wellbeing.[89] In general, when children have warm and affectionate relationships with their parents or caregivers, this protects their mental health.[90] Connection to at least one caregiver or significant adult protects young people from a host of negative outcomes, including emotional problems, low self-esteem, suicide attempts, and involvement in violence and substance use.[91]

Having support from parents may protect young people from negative experiences in other contexts – for example, a 2017 Ministry of Education report found that young people who were not supported by their parents when they had difficulties at school were more likely to be bullied regularly.[92] By contrast, when families aren't functioning well, this is linked to poor adolescent mental health. In turn, adolescent mental or behavioural health challenges can negatively impact upon family functioning.[93]

Connection to other whānau members, such as siblings, grandparents and cousins, is also important to young people in New Zealand.[94] For rangatahi Māori, family relationships protect them against the declines in wellbeing that often happen in adolescence, regardless of the whānau structure – i.e., it is the quality of the relationships within a family that are important, not

whether the family has a nuclear structure.[95] Reflecting this, young people in our research spoke about the importance of connection with members of their wider whānau.

Programmes for parents and caregivers can promote and protect adolescent mental health.[96] In general, these interventions should target the communication between caregivers and adolescents,[97] mental wellbeing of caregivers,[98] caregivers' skills (such as positive discipline),[99] time spent in joint activities,[100] and the family's connection to their community and support services.[101] However, it appears that these programmes are most effective when they include diverse forms of support and hence can be tailored to individual families' needs.[102] Parents' attitudes towards adolescent mental health have an impact on the mental wellbeing of their children, so there is an important role for parental education about mental health and adolescent development to enhance intergenerational understanding and protect adolescents' mental health.[103] Young people in our research told us that difficulty speaking openly with family members, particularly about mental health, could undercut their sense of connection.

However, we know that when families are experiencing stress (such as unemployment, poverty, violence or substance abuse), this is very likely to reduce the degree of connectedness between parents and adolescents.[104] Accordingly, there is an imperative to reduce the stressors around young people and their families, as discussed earlier in this report.

Mentoring programmes

Involvement in youth mentoring programmes is generally associated with positive outcomes for young people, such as better wellbeing, better attitudes towards school and improved school attendance, improved interpersonal relationships, and lower likelihood of starting to use alcohol and drugs.[105] Research shows that mentoring programmes are more likely to be effective if they involve one-on-one relationships, long-term mentoring relationships, trained staff, an alignment with evidence-based principles, and a focus on a small number of goals.[106] Mentoring can be particularly valuable at certain points in a young person's journey, such as the transition out of high school,[107] or for young people who have been exposed to difficult life experiences.[108] Young people in New Zealand would likely benefit from access to mentoring as needed, with the proviso that mentoring services should be supported to partake in robust evaluation to support best-practice and ensure young people's needs are being met.[109]

Youth spaces

Young people in our research told us that having safe and supportive spaces to explore their identity was essential for their wellbeing. This is consistent with the literature – we know it is developmentally important that young people can freely access spaces where they can express themselves outside of the influence of family or societal pressure. This assists in the construction and affirmation of their social identity.[110] When spaces are commercialised, young people's access is inequitable depending on financial resources, so there must be free public spaces where young people can spend time.

Some young people simply need access to spaces outside of home or school where they can meet others (both peers and supportive adults) and be themselves. Dedicated youth centres can benefit young people – these centres are often staffed by youth workers and provide young people with access to group activities, courses and work experience. These sorts of youth centres exist around New Zealand, and young people's feedback about these spaces is usually positive,[111] but robust evaluation is generally lacking. Dedicated youth centres should be

supported with resources to robustly evaluate their services in order to identify whether they are best meeting the needs of young people in the community.

Other physical spaces in a young person's community can facilitate their mental wellbeing. The built environment can affect access to participation in sports, physical activity, cultural activities and volunteering, for example by making sure infrastructure is accessible and barriers (e.g., cost) to accessing public and green spaces are removed.[112] This is particularly important for disabled young people, who encounter additional barriers to actively participating in the community.[113]

The public spaces available to a young person can also enhance their feeling of community connectedness, which is strongly linked to their wellbeing and behaviours.[114] To feel connected to their communities, young people need to feel the community around them is safe, they are welcomed in public spaces, their interactions with adults are positive and caring, they have opportunities to creatively engage with the community around them, and they can meaningfully provide input into community policies.[115] It is therefore helpful to consider how community spaces for young people can fulfil these needs; for example, by facilitating workshops where young people are supported to make submissions during policy consultations. Additionally, spaces that are culturally safe and culturally sustaining enhance young people's sense of belonging and connectedness.[116]

Improving experiences and ensuring appropriate soft skill development at school

"I'd say being around friends too [helps mental health]. 'Cause when I come to school in the morning and I'm moody and I get to school and I just start laughing and it makes it feel better" – young person

Relevant themes: the connections young people need, the pressures young people experience, navigating a path, the world young people live in

Schools form a nexus within communities and are often the most suitable place to implement actions targeting youth mental health.

Social and emotional learning

As discussed earlier, schools are settings where the development of young people's executive functioning and resilience can be supported. Additionally, schools can support young people in the development of social and emotional skills, beginning as early as ECEs.[117] Social and emotional learning (SEL) is important to help young people acquire the competencies that help them connect to others and find a sense of belonging – skills such as relating to others, respecting social norms, behavioural regulation and effective communication.[118] SEL programmes also give young people the skills to strengthen their mental health, while preventing and reducing poor mental health, suicidal behaviour, challenging behaviours and substance use.[119] SEL programmes that begin in preschool have a sustained positive impact on social-emotional functioning.[120] They are recognised as a cost-effective intervention.[121]

The World Health Organization recommends SEL programmes should be delivered universally to all adolescents.[122] This means that all adolescents (e.g., all students at a school) receive the

intervention regardless of individual mental health risk. Notably, the WHO also states that such interventions need to be evidence-based and delivered with fidelity. This may not currently be the case for SEL programmes that are delivered through schools in New Zealand. A recent survey of staff from New Zealand schools found that school-based wellbeing and mental health interventions, including SEL programmes, tended to be regarded positively by teachers but that evidence for the efficacy of these programmes for the adolescents was extremely limited and the quality of their delivery was variable.[123] Additionally, the international literature tells us that not only is the evidence base for universal school-based mental health programmes currently very limited by methodologically weak evaluations, but that their effectiveness varies considerably; there are some instances of these programmes not making a difference or possibly even being detrimental to students' mental health.[124]

To improve all students' access to high-quality, effective SEL programmes, there is a need to review the evidence of effectiveness for the wide range of SEL programmes currently being delivered in New Zealand to identify which are evidence-based. While it is certainly positive that teachers are enthusiastic about school-based mental health interventions, they should be supported to effectively deliver interventions that are shown to work for students. As part of this process, there must also be consideration of how SEL programmes can be culturally and developmentally responsive.[125]

School connection and belonging

It is important to young people's mental health that they feel connected to their school as a place where they belong.[126] Increasing school connectedness can enhance resilience[127] and reduce young people's depressive symptoms through various mechanisms such as improving their self-esteem[128] and improving their relationships at school.[129] It is also a factor that can increase the likelihood that a young person will engage with school.[130] Additionally, young people who feel belonging at school are less likely to experience bullying.[131] In New Zealand, there is currently a high percentage of secondary school students who report they do not feel a sense of belonging at school.[132]

School connectedness can be enhanced through interventions that target increased provision of social support, promote participation in school-based activities and promote students' social skills.[133] There is also some evidence that suicide prevention programmes in schools, when led by peers, can not only enhance protective factors for suicide but also improve inclusivity in the school environment.[134] Additionally, school-wide anti-bullying programmes can be effective at reducing young people's exposure to bullying at schools. They can also promote inclusivity and acceptance of rainbow young people, ensuring belongingness is not precluded by discrimination within schools.[135] However, as with SEL programmes, it is important that anti-bullying programmes are high-quality, evidence-based and developmentally appropriate.[136]

Connection to teachers often improves young people's experiences with school, and young people in our research told us this was often the factor that helped them feel connected to their school community. Feeling supported by adults in their school can enhance young people's belonging and resilience,[137] and make them feel that school is a helpful and positive space.[138] Knowing a teacher believes in them makes young people feel more motivated to achieve,[139] while on the other hand, young people who leave school early can be motivated to do so because they feel that teachers did not want them at the school.[140]

Teachers need support to have the knowledge and resources to connect with young people.

The mental health of teachers is linked to the social and emotional wellbeing of students.[141] The OECD recommends that teachers should be supported, resourced, trained and incentivised to support the evolving and diverse needs of students.[142] The demands upon schools and teachers in New Zealand are already high, and adding the delivery of interventions targeting youth mental health is unlikely to be successful until there is a commitment to sufficient resourcing.

Academic pressure and curricula reviews

Young people told us they felt exhausted and overwhelmed by pressure to succeed academically and by frequent assessment. Academic pressure is well-established as a factor that is associated with negative mental health outcomes, though limitations in the research base do leave questions remaining about the directionality of this relationship and whether confounding factors may be at play.[143] Interventions for reducing academic stress at high school and university level typically focus on teaching students skills to re-appraise stress, such as mindfulness or cognitive behavioural therapy techniques. However, their effectiveness remains unclear due to methodological weaknesses in the research.[144]

It is possible that young people's sense of academic stress is being amplified by a sense of disconnection between young people and their education system. It has long been noted that Aotearoa New Zealand's education system is under strain, with a growing gap between what young people today need from formal education and what formal education systems are delivering.[145] School may seem all the more stressful to young people if it is hard to see a real-world benefit to what they are being taught and tested on. This points to the need to review school curricula with respect to the needs of today's learners. We note the opportunities for improvement created by the proposed move away from the NCEA system.

In reviewing curricula, there is a tangible opportunity to target young people's sense of bleakness about the world and the future. Enhancing education about civics and environmental action has been identified as a need for today's learners.[146] Teaching young people about environmental changes and the political systems through which decision-making occurs could make them feel more hopeful about the future as it can help identify tangible strategies through which they can affect positive change.[147] Supporting this approach is research showing that students' hopefulness about facing climate change challenges is directly influenced by their belief that people in society can take actions that will make a difference in the future of the climate.[148] There is also a small amount of research suggesting that the way teachers approach subjects such as climate change has an impact on young people's sense of hope. When teachers talk about climate change in a hopeful and constructive way, students are more likely to feel self-efficacious, have an action-oriented outlook, feel taken seriously by teachers, and engage in environmental actions.[149]

Education about civics can enhance young people's knowledge about political systems and individuals' abilities to affect change in the world around them via these systems. This might also help young people feel a sense of agency about the future rather than bleakness. The OECD recognises civic participation and empowerment as a key dimension of wellbeing, and civic education programmes can enhance students' political self-confidence and trust in political systems.[150]

Schools can also embed opportunities for young people to get involved with local causes, for example through the concept of 'Student Action Teams'. In this approach, students are supported to adopt a community issue they care about and research what actions need to be

taken on this issue. When students work on Action Team projects that feel meaningful and purposeful to them, it enhances their sense of connection to others (their school, teachers and peers) and their self-esteem.[151] Additionally, opportunities for volunteering can be provided through schools-based programmes.[152] Situating opportunities for service and leadership within schools can remove access barriers for young people in low socioeconomic conditions,[153] who may already be involved in high levels of service at home without this being recognised as 'volunteering'.[154]

Support for post-school transitions

Schools can play a role in equipping young people with information about what comes next in life (whether this is further education and/or employment) and helping them feel excited about navigating a path to the next phase of their life. When secondary school students engage in thinking about their future careers, explore options and gain experience, they demonstrate lower levels of unemployment, higher wages and more career happiness as adults.[155] The OECD suggests a number of policies that schools can adopt to support post-secondary transitions.[156] When schools meet benchmarks for how well they prepare students for post-secondary transitions (for example, by providing career guidance and workplace experiences), students are more likely to secure positive post-secondary outcomes.[157]

However, it is important that post-school transitions are discussed in a positive way, presenting multiple options for the future, rather than placing pressure upon young people to be immediately productive and successful. The young people in our research told us this pressure was common and was adding to a feeling that the future was daunting. Parental pressure is a factor, so there should be consistency in this messaging between schools and homes.

Making mental health support more accessible

> *"I tried talking to my mum once about it and it just turned into an argument. It just didn't work out. And then she called me crazy and just said it wasn't normal" – young person*

Relevant theme: The connections young people need

Young people in our research spoke more about the social determinants of mental health than the need for formal mental health support. However, several participants linked feelings of isolation to experiences where professional support had been inaccessible for them. There is therefore a need to explore how mental health support can be made more accessible to young people. The type of support young people need also depends on context and severity. It is important to recognise that most young people with symptoms of anxiety or depression do not have a mental illness. Nevertheless, these symptoms, left unaddressed, can have a negative impact during adolescence and into the future.

Making professional mental health support more accessible for young people includes addressing barriers such as low availability and awareness of services, inflexibility of services, wait times, costs, mistrust of services and negative expectations of providers' attitudes.[158] It also means designing services with a view of what young people want and need from mental health services. Young people in New Zealand have expressed that they want mental health services to encompass a range of characteristics, including being accessible, welcoming, flexible, embedded in the community, respectful of their agency and holistic.[159]

The youth 'One Stop Shop' model is highly aligned with what young people want from mental health services – care that is holistic, accessible and community-based.[160] Youth One Stop Shops provide integrated support for a range of needs, typically including primary healthcare, sexual healthcare, mental health support and support for alcohol and other drug use.[161] Access to One Stop Shops can provide early intervention for mental distress[162] and lead to favourable outcomes such as enhanced help-seeking, and symptomatic and functional recovery.[163] However, in New Zealand, One Stop Shops often receive inconsistent funding support, providing challenges for service delivery.[164]

E-therapies are another way of providing a highly accessible form of mental health support.[165] There are promising digital mental health resources and treatments in development. However, claims of their effectiveness are not well-validated in many cases. There is generally still a need to research their effectiveness and safety, and a need to find solutions to known barriers to their success such as high levels of drop-outs.[166]

Helplines can also be a key form of mental health support for young people,[167] so investment into research and development of such services is also warranted – for example, identifying young people's preferred forms of communication and the efficacy, accessibility and safety of these.[168] The same is true regarding other digital platforms that young people use for support, such as online forums and message boards.[169]

It is important that young people have access to a range of mental health services that align with their needs. Focused engagement with young people can inform service design, particularly for groups of young New Zealanders whose needs and preferences are less understood. A key and often largely ignored group is young Asian New Zealanders, for whom mental distress is rising rapidly.[170] Asian people in New Zealand tend to have low rates of engagement with mental health care. This may arise due to barriers around language or cultural needs, stigma, and a clash of collectivistic values with the Western individualistic paradigms that dominate mental health care.[171]

The cultural needs of rangatahi Māori and Pacific youth also need to be explored through focused engagement, given that a lack of culturally appropriate services and a dominance of Western models of health have also previously been noted as barriers to mental health care for Māori and Pacific people.[172]

Young people of diverse cultures may feel more seen and that it's safer to discuss issues if mental health services are supported to embrace cultural practices and offer diversity in therapeutic paradigms, for example through offering psychological interventions that recognise holistic paradigms of wellbeing and collectivistic values.[173] Increasing diversity within New Zealand's mental health workforce is also important, as young people in New Zealand have expressed the importance of being able to work with mental health clinicians who share their cultural background or other aspects of their identity, such as lived experience of mental distress or being part of the rainbow community.[174]

Addressing the impact of social media

"Talking to my friends online, it's a lot easier than talking in person... like you can send something to them and only they get it" – young person

Social media as an amplifier

Young people told us that social media had both negative and positive influences on their wellbeing. For instance, many participants used social media to foster deep connections with others and overcome isolation, while on the other hand, the process of curating their online presences amplified struggles associated with identity and senses of pressure and comparison. This is consistent with what the available and evolving research tells us. There is no conclusive evidence that social media is by default harmful for young people's mental health, and overall it seems to present both risks and opportunities for them. Multi-faceted factors, like usage patterns and social contexts, seem most likely to determine the impact of social media on mental health.[175]

The best thing for young people's wellbeing may be to determine how they can be supported to use social media in a positive way that is not harmful to themselves or others. Such an approach upholds the agency of young people, acknowledging their position (in contrast to previous generations) as digital natives who are discerning of the risks and benefits of social media and want to learn the skills to navigate it safely.[176] There is no consensus yet about how best to support young people's safe social media usage, but this section offers some suggestions for how to prevent social media from being a negative influence.

It is important to support young people to develop the skills to navigate social media safely.[177] There have been calls for New Zealand to develop a national strategy that gives young people the skills to be resilient to 'polluted information' (mis-, dis- and mal-information) online, particularly in the context of rising ubiquity of Artificial Intelligence (AI).[178] These skills would include media literacy, information literacy and digital citizenship, and such programmes should start in primary school. Schools and families have a role to play here and should themselves be provided with guidance and resources about what safe social media use looks like.

To be most effective, such education likely needs to start relatively early in the educational journey, before adolescence is reached. Schools-based programmes to enhance digital skills are in development around the world, and some are showing promise in their ability to increase young people's resilience to challenging experiences online and their skills to navigate digital spaces safely.[179] However, the evidence base about how to most effectively teach young people the skills to be resilient to digital harms is currently very small.[180] Additionally, it will be worth further exploring how parents can foster safe social media usage; there is some evidence that adolescents' problematic social media usage is less when they experience positive parenting and when parents proactively set age-appropriate rules about when, where and how long adolescents are allowed to use social media.[181]

While total social media bans for young people have been called for in some parts of the world, including in New Zealand, the reality of such bans needs to be understood. They drive young people to engage in illicit behaviours to get around the bans. Further, other internet-based modalities such as gaming and the misuse of generative AI also create similar risks. Bans would mean young people miss an opportunity to learn how to engage with social media, ill-equipping them for the digital world they will inevitably have to navigate throughout their lives;[182] it would

be the equivalent of leaving other basic skills out of the curriculum. It may also have direct negative impacts by increasing social isolation. Social media has multiple purposes, and issues appear to arise from excessive, addictive or inappropriate use rather than from all forms of social media by default. Additionally, from what we know of resilience, being able to navigate digital harms is something that will develop with skill and learning, not age.

There have been calls for increased regulation of social media platforms, such as making algorithms less addictive and shielding young people's exposure to harmful content, shifting the responsibility for young people's safety back to the platforms themselves.[183] There have also been suggestions that social media companies should be levied, with revenue from this being fed back to youth mental health research and services.[184] Given these are trans-jurisdictional issues, governments must work together to find solutions.

Overall, a strengths-based approach rather than a restrictive one may be the best way to achieve the goal of young people using social media less frequently and in safer ways. The other actions recommended throughout this report, while not specifically about social media, may have the benefit of encouraging safe social media use. It is possible that investment in developing children's resilience, underpinned by strong self-regulatory skills, may future-proof adolescents against problematic social media usage. More generally, young people with better mental health appear to be less susceptible to using social media in harmful ways.[185] Similarly, young people with strong socio-emotional skills, and who are culturally connected and supported within their communities, are more likely to be resilient to harmful content online and more likely to seek help when they encounter it.[186] Additionally, given young people use social media to find support and connection, increasing access to offline spaces where young people can spend time and meet others might mean social media loses dominance as a place young people find connection and belonging. Building an understanding of why problematic behaviour or digital harm is occurring offers a better opportunity to reduce harm than removing access to social media platforms with the assumption that mental health will consequently improve. We must acknowledge that the factors influencing youth mental health will still exist in the offline world.[187]

Actions for consideration

This report points to a wide range of evidence-based domains to consider for improving the mental wellbeing of young people in New Zealand, with direct reference to the factors that young people have identified as impacting their mental health. It acknowledges the complexity of the challenge, and elsewhere we suggest ways to analyse and address such challenges that are often referred to as 'wicked problems'.[188] The Social Investment Agency may have a key leadership role in addressing youth mental health given that no single agency or action will make a fundamental difference. Acknowledging the complexity rather than claiming simple solutions will accelerate progress.

The list of possible high-level classes of action below is intended only as a starting point. Refining these high-level actions will require further work, including engagement with stakeholders, delivery agencies and different cultural groups to hone their detail.

Policy

- Take a broader view of the issues rather than leaving their responsibility to a single ministry.
- Take a robust approach to evidence-informed actions.

Targeting sources of distress

- Target and ensure support for children and their families, beginning from pregnancy, that tackles structural sources of stress and protects against experiences of adversity. This may include material transfers but extends well beyond that to holistic wraparound services.
- Provide adolescents with support that alleviates stress arising from finances, housing and employment. Review options offered to young people – e.g., youth job seeker benefits, student allowances – with a focus on whether these meet needs. Ensure young people have access to advice and practical support through integrated services in accessible locations.
- Focus on improving social cohesion in society and reducing inequity within New Zealand. Uphold policies in the environments that young people spend time in, such as schools, universities and workplaces, that accept no tolerance for discrimination, hence giving young people the opportunity to explore and realise their unique identities.
- Ensure mechanisms exist whereby young people can have their voices heard on the issues that affect them, giving young people the ability to have an active say in shaping the world around them and bridging divides between generations. Strengthen youth consultation on policy decision-making at local and national levels in ways that are sincere and not tokenistic, for example through continued engagement beyond one-off workshops.

Equipping young people with resilience

- Promote maternal mental health during and after pregnancy. Support parents and caregivers to build relationships with their children that foster resilience and raise awareness about the importance of serve-and-return interactions.
- Provide families with wraparound support to ensure their needs are met and caregivers are able to bond with children. Invest in early childhood education and parenting programmes. Consider where opportunities may exist to screen executive function development to identify children needing more support.
- Implement evidence-based programmes that support young people's acquisition of the skills underlying resilience (such as self-regulation), particularly in educational settings, and ensure all programmes are evaluated for effectiveness. Explore funding models for resilience-building programmes.

Providing opportunities to connect and belong

- Facilitate young people's access to diverse extra-curricular activities and volunteering opportunities, and reduce known barriers such as time and cost, particularly in high deprivation areas. Supports might include grants for club fees, uniform costs or transport, and more broadly ensuring young people's families are alleviated from financial pressure so young people can choose whether to spend time on extra-curricular activities and volunteering or employment.

- Support connectedness within families through programmes that target communication, parents' mental health, confidence with positive parenting strategies, linkages to support services, and educating parents about youth mental health challenges. Recognise the undermining effect of socioeconomic stress on family connectedness and put in place structural supports for families experiencing adversity.
- Ensure young people's access to evidence-based mentoring programmes and uplift the ability of current mentoring programmes to scientifically evaluate the effectiveness of their services.
- Enhance the accessibility of spaces that meet young people's needs for connection, support, agency and cultural connection.

Improving experiences at schools

- Provide SEL programmes in schools, but ensure these programmes are strongly evidence-based, culturally responsive and delivered with fidelity. Improve oversight and monitoring of the range of programmes offered to schools. Coordinate, evaluate and scale what works.
- Support schools to implement actions that enhance students' sense of belonging and connection at school. Elevate youth voice in these actions through mechanisms such as student advisory boards. Support teachers: ensure resourcing and training adequately meets teachers' needs so that they are able to provide support to students.
- In reviewing curricula, consider more the future needs of today's students. Incorporate aspects of the curricula that help young people develop their agency to affect the world around them and feel more hopeful about the future. Incorporate youth perspectives into curricula review.
- Help young people through the transition out of school by continuing to enhance the information provided to them about future options and by offering support to explore different paths without pressure to settle on the 'right' path immediately.

Making mental health support more accessible

- Ensure young people's adequate access to mental health services and resources that align with their needs. Fund service design based on what young people need from mental health services, particularly for groups whose engagement is low and whose needs and preferences are not well understood. Close the loop by funding evaluations for youth-aligned mental health services that appear promising, including e-therapies.

Addressing the impact of social media

- Provide young people with support to safely engage with social media. Further our understanding of young people's social media use and the most effective ways to enhance their resilience online. Invest in young people's wellbeing more broadly and provide offline opportunities for connection and belonging

None of these actions in isolation will provide a solution, so a suite of actions is needed. Many will have significant cost, but the cost of inadequate action is obvious. No society can cope with 25% or more of its human capital being poorly equipped psychologically for their future. We are also conscious many of these actions require changes across multiple systems. As this report has illustrated, the solutions extend well beyond the Ministry of Health. Collaboration will be required across the welfare, education and health systems, and many actions require community and whānau engagement. One of the most important groups to reach with these actions will be influential adults in young people's lives, such as parents, teachers and coaches. Koi Tū is currently developing resources aimed at these groups.

There may be much to learn from Iceland. Three decades ago, Iceland was faced with an epidemic of alcohol and drug abuse in teenagers. Through commitment and linkages between national and local government, community, family action, and engagement with young people, Iceland has now effectively eliminated the issue. Our context in Aotearoa New Zealand is different, but Iceland's example shows what is possible through a long-term strategic approach.[189]

The reinvigoration of the Social Investment Agency provides an opportunity to look holistically at what New Zealand might take from this report and to develop an urgent and effective suite of actions to tackle what has become an existential risk for our society.

It will also be necessary to consider how these actions can be responsive to diverse cultural backgrounds and needs. Mental health cannot be understood in isolation of the contexts that surround young people. New Zealand's young people are culturally diverse, so there is no 'one size fits all' approach that will work to support their wellbeing. Work will need to be undertaken with people from different cultural backgrounds to ensure these actions, and their systems of delivery, are adapted to aligned with the cultural aspirations and norms of different groups.

Other considerations

This report is not a conclusive document, and there are other actions that will be necessary for improving youth mental health in New Zealand.

One of these must be addressing drug and alcohol use. There is strong evidence that drug and alcohol use in adolescence can precipitate mental distress.[190] Reducing it must be part of a preventative approach to youth mental distress. Elsewhere there has been commentary into how we could achieve this, for example through reducing adolescents' access to alcohol, increasing the purchase age, increasing the price of alcohol, and building the capability of those working with young people to address issues related to alcohol and other substance use.[191]

This report is grounded in the perspectives of young people, based on themes that were heard across the groups of young people we spoke to, but there is no singular 'youth perspective' we could claim to represent, and specific issues emerged more strongly in some of our workshop discussions than others. Future analyses from our team will explore the needs of specific sub-populations within our sample, such as rangatahi Māori and young people with disabilities.

Conclusion and next steps

Across this report, there is a strong theme about the need to take early preventative approaches. From the very beginning of a child's life, we can make changes that will tangibly impact their psychological resilience and mental health in the future. In a fast-changing world, resilience will be a core asset. We must also recognise the broader structural factors that impact the wellbeing of young people and their families. Policies that alleviate poverty and other structural stressors must be recognised as mental health policy.

Another strong theme is the need to involve young people in decision-making at the policy level, as well as involving stakeholders at all levels of young people's developmental context (from parents, school, to community and material infrastructure). Given that society has rapidly changed even over the past decade, policymakers should strive to put themselves in the position of the next generation, rather than making decisions based solely on their own experiences. It is worth remembering that policy not only tangibly impacts young people's day-to-day lives, but also shapes how they perceive their future.

This report also highlights that it is necessary to take steps to strengthen the quality of the evidence landscape in New Zealand. Of the services that currently exist in New Zealand to support young people, many are theoretically in line with the suggestions included in this report, yet it is difficult to identify what impacts they are having on young people in practice. New Zealand would strongly benefit from an evaluation infrastructure that facilitates services to engage in robust scientific evaluation processes to ensure services are effective in meeting their goals of supporting young people. All publicly funded programmes that claim to benefit youth wellbeing should be evaluating outcomes.

This document should serve as a starting point. It will next be necessary to go back to young people and other relevant stakeholders (including schools, whānau, iwi and policymakers) to explore their views on whether the suggested actions meet young people's needs and how they could be implemented in our communities.

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