

Exploring factors influencing youth mental health:

What we know and don't know
about the determinants of
young people's mental health

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KOI TŪ: THE CENTRE FOR INFORMED FUTURES

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We address complex, long-term national and global challenges arising from rapid and far-reaching social, economic, technological, and environmental change.

Our name, Koi Tū, was gifted by Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei. It means ‘the sharp end of the spear’. Like our namesake, Koi Tū aims to get to the heart of long-term issues challenging our future.

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This document is designed to be read with an interactive infographic called '**Youth Mental Health Infographic.**'

Our interactive *Youth Mental Health Infographic* is designed to be used on a desktop computer, using Adobe Reader 8.1 or above, available for free here:

<https://www.adobe.com/nz/acrobat/pdf-reader.html>

This will allow you to engage with the interactive functions.

To access the infographic, open the camera app on your phone. Hold your phone so that the QR code appears. Tap the notification to open the link to the infographic.

Alternatively, you can visit this link:

informedfutures.org/youth-infographic

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What we know and don't know about the determinants of young people's mental health

Key insights

- Young people's mental health is influenced by many factors that interact with each other.
- These factors begin influencing young people before birth and continue to affect them during their early childhood, childhood and adolescence.
- We lack detailed understanding of how important these factors are to young people in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- A rich, nuanced understanding of the determinants of youth mental health in Aotearoa New Zealand will help us to find the best way to improve the well-being of the country's young people.

Executive summary

When we discuss rising rates of mental-health challenges for young New Zealanders many people's first question is why? Why is young people's mental health declining? In the face of such an important question it is tempting to seek simple answers that offer clear solutions. However, mental health is inherently complicated. It relates to many things: early-life influences; supports a young person has; difficulties they face as they grow up. We cannot simplify or reduce these influences to a handful of issues that affect all the young in the same way.

To understand young people's mental health, we must understand this complexity. With this report and interactive infographic we hope to make visible some of that complexity and highlight the many factors affecting their mental health. The infographic – found by following the QR code or going to informedfutures.org/youth-infographic – demonstrates how different influences can play out, interact and affect a young person's mental health at different ages.

What's apparent is how important the early years are to the development of mental well-being. Also important is to not delay attempts to improve youth mental health until the teen years. Good mental health is about much more than access to mental-health treatment and we need other forms of intervention in such spheres as education, the economy, housing and health. Priority should be given to developing a systemic approach to improving youth mental health starting with early intervention, promotion of support and actions that strengthen well-being, and helping our young people to face the challenges of the world they live in.

An introduction to our infographic

Youth mental health is complex. This graphic identifies some of the many factors that might influence a young person’s development and mental well-being. Some of these factors are introduced very early in a young person’s life – for example, brain development begins prenatally and continues throughout childhood and adolescence. Other factors might play a much bigger role in the lives of adolescents – for example, the challenges of transitioning from secondary school.

Depending on how young people experience these influences, their mental health may be protected or they may be more likely to experience mental-health challenges. For example, supportive family members in the home environment can be protective for young people’s mental health. For others, limited support might mean they do not experience the positive mental-health benefits of family. Others still might experience unsupportive environments or family violence where their household could harm their mental health.

Depending on a young person’s identity(ies), these factors may influence them very differently. For example, rangatahi Māori, Pacific and migrant youth may experience racism and discrimination that affects their mental health. Young people with disabilities may find it much harder to access the support they need to thrive.

No young person’s mental health is the result of any single factor but rather the complex ways these interact and overlap. Such factors as colonisation, migration, intergenerational trauma and the Covid-19 pandemic can also have an influence. To understand how these factors work together to influence youth mental health, visit our interactive infographic at informedfutures.org/youth-infographic.

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	██████████	██████████	██████
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			██████

Summary of factors influencing youth mental health over time.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, increasing numbers of young people are experiencing poor mental health.¹ Helping young people enjoy day-to-day emotional well-being is reason enough to intervene. Additionally, young people's mental health does not only affect them when they are young. Mental health challenges during youth can lead to mental health challenges in adulthood,² limit lifelong education and vocational attainment and lead to poorer health and social outcomes.³ Early intervention not only improves the quality of life of young people but also protects their well-being into adulthood.

To intervene effectively, we must understand what contributes to the development of mental-health difficulties. Understanding determinants offers avenues for both prevention and intervention earlier in the development of mental-health challenges. Prevention and intervention early in life are essential to dealing effectively with mental-health difficulties.⁴

A transdisciplinary approach is essential to the understanding of the determinants of youth mental health. This means going beyond traditional psychiatric accounts of mental health. We must look at the effects of influences like the digital environment, education system, discrimination and social relationships. We need to better understand how systems within our nation and communities affect the young.

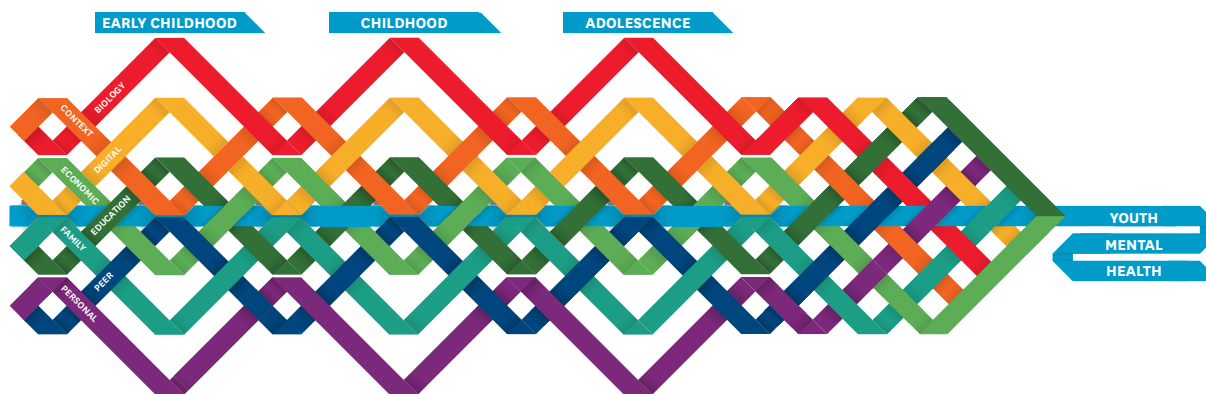
Our infographic ranges over eight different domains of factors that can affect youth mental health. How these different domains might interact with each other and affect a young person over the course of their development and early life is particularly informative.

A developmental, life-span view is essential to understanding the determinants of mental health for our young people. Adolescence is a natural period of shift during which young people have new experiences, develop their identities, go through changes in their relationships with peers, family, communities and authority figures and attempt to find themselves in complex social worlds.⁵ As this is going on they are experiencing biological, neurological, cognitive and emotional development.⁶ Some youth struggle more during this period than others and mental-health challenges have typically increased throughout adolescence.⁷ However, life itself is getting more complicated. Today's young are having to confront the difficulties of living in an increasingly demanding and changing social context for which they are rarely adequately prepared or supported. How this influences their development and affects their mental health needs to be understood.

Development: Why the life course matters

When we talk about youth mental health, our minds often first turn to things we see in the lives of the teenagers we know. These are proximate factors, which can directly influence the young and their mental health. Proximate factors might increase stress and anxiety or create challenging environments in which it can be difficult to thrive. These factors can vary for different demographics – for example, depending on the identities a young person holds they might be more or less likely to come across particular stressors. Proximate factors are shown in the infographic's "adolescent" column.

Research has identified proximate factors relevant to the young people's mental health. Exploration of our infographic reveals many "contextual" factors that can influence a young person's mental health. These include the changed and rapidly changing social world they live in. Today's world has very different societal, educational, familial and social boundaries. Young people also interact with a complex digital environment with the changes it brings to socialising, relationships, leisure, identity formation and bullying.⁸ How children are raised has also changed, with parents often struggling to set boundaries and have the confidence to support young people in coping with the new challenges



Interwoven factors influencing youth mental health

of adolescence.⁹ Young people are also experiencing puberty at a younger age¹⁰ increasing their vulnerability to mental-health challenges and prolonging adolescence. In this context, young people are trying to develop their identity, choose pathways and navigate complex peer relationships. Today's young people often describe feeling overwhelmed by stress and pressure.¹¹ Along with everything else, Covid-19 may have exacerbated that stress.¹² It is essential to factor in the effect of these changes on young people's well-being.

However, young people do not all enter adolescence and experience these proximate factors equally. Different young people are more and less equipped to respond to adolescence's challenges, which is influenced by what are called distal factors. These affect whether or how young people acquire psychological resilience, how they learn to process and express emotions, how they perceive the world, the supports around them, the likelihood they will experience stressors, and how they seek help. Distal factors can have an influence from very early in life, even prenatally, and appear in the "early-childhood" and "childhood" columns of our infographic.

Socio-economic factors are critically important distal influences. Child poverty remains concerningly high and is strongly linked to mental-health outcomes.¹³ Stress, particularly maternal stress, plays a highly significant role in childhood brain development and psychological resilience.¹⁴ Those who experience adverse childhood events such as abuse are much more likely to develop mental-health challenges in later years.¹⁵ These distal influences affect the development of executive function and identity, including establishing children's capacity to manage and flexibly respond to stress.¹⁶ Children are raised very differently within varied family structures and boundaries that often deemphasize unstructured play,¹⁷ which is essential to child development.¹⁸ Early childhood education is important in laying the foundations for emotional, social, and psychological development;¹⁹ however its quality in Aotearoa New Zealand is inconsistent.²⁰ Though not fully understood, screen time, too, may play a role in how children develop.²¹ The infographic illustrates how factors related to families, biological development, economic status and education influence youth mental health from early in development. Many of these factors are beyond the control of families or communities, including the effects of intergenerational trauma and migration on child development.

We can see that both distal and proximate factors are important influences on youth mental health. If an adolescent experienced more protective factors early in life, they might feel more equipped and supported to navigate the challenges of their teen years and consequently enjoy better mental health. Equipping young people early in life to respond to the challenges of adolescence is particularly important for those more likely to experience stress, including young people with multiple marginalised identities. Limiting the effect of proximate factors can also support young people to navigate adolescence. If a young adolescent with fewer protective factors is propped up by a strong and well-

resourced education system, supportive adults within and outside the home and relative economic security, their mental wellbeing may be improved.

Clicking through our infographic can show you how different factors play out across a young person's life and how this might interact with their socio-historic context. By understanding the lifespan development of mental-health challenges, we can grasp the importance of early intervention in ensuring young people are prepared and supported to survive the challenges of adolescence.

Where to from here?

The infographic shows the many influences on young people's mental health. What we don't know is how important these influences are to young people and their communities. What factors do they notice the most? Where do they think the biggest gaps are between their needs and the support they get? Understanding what young people think influences their mental health will allow us to focus on the issues most important to the community when developing and targeting interventions.

With so many factors in play it is clear there can be no silver bullet. Any interventions must relate to the determinants of mental health. Understanding distal factors informs strategies from early childhood to protect and strengthen mental well-being as young people enter adolescence. This is known as prevention. With an understanding of proximal factors, we can intervene to promote well-being and prevent or reduce mental ill-health. Ultimately, by fine-tuning the development of emotional resilience and at the same time reducing the shocks of adolescence, we can help more young people to navigate youth positively.

Intervening in distal factors could involve a number of solutions: support for developing young people's executive function; increasing access to adequate housing; addressing inter-generational economic disadvantage; providing clear advice for parents on screen time; providing maternal mental-health support especially during pregnancy; and prioritising support and education for parents. These measures can strengthen young people's capacity to respond to the challenges of adolescence as well as strengthening the support systems that can be crucial to teens. Additionally, positive experiences of support outside the home earlier in childhood, such as through promoting emotional well-being and supportive, positive environments in school, might boost young people's awareness of and willingness to seek help later in life.

Proximal interventions should be designed to reduce both the shock waves and the impact of these shock waves which young people can face in adolescence. This could and should involve social change focused on reducing burdens on our young people, for example, addressing economic insecurity, easing the transition from secondary school, and action against hate speech and discrimination. Additionally, interventions must include tools, strategies, and support to cope with stressors when these do occur such as peer mentoring; app-based and other digital aids for skill acquisition; provision of structured, supportive youth environments; increased education focused on critical thinking; and lifting the knowledge of teachers, counsellors and clinicians about youth mental health.

Intervening effectively in youth mental health includes improving and expanding present treatment options for young people. This should include expanding mental-health support through Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and dedicated youth-focused services, improving emergency services for young people with acute mental-health challenges and making it easier to get face-to-face treatment including Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. However, a mental-health response that primarily focuses on increasing access to treatment is too limited in scope to be truly effective for most young people and early intervention must be a priority.

Most interventions, however promising, will fail in isolation, which is an indicator of the scope and complexity of the challenge. It tells us we must prioritize the development of a cohesive response-system designed to deal with the many factors that influence youth mental health. We must work across systems and beyond the traditional health care sector. Additionally, some interventions may work in one context but not others. Young people with different backgrounds and identities will have different needs, world views and experiences that both affect their mental health and their response to efforts to help. Therefore it's necessary to keep in mind the context in which interventions were developed and for whom. It is important to develop and introduce a broad range of interventions to support the diversity of young people, particularly rangatahi Māori, Pacific and ethnic-minority youth, LGBTQIA+ young people and youth with disabilities.

Young people have only rarely been involved in developing our understanding of their mental-health needs. When young people are involved, there is little consideration of intersectionality and few actions are taken based on the recommendations of the very people we are trying to help. We must recognise that different populations of youth within Aotearoa New Zealand will have diverse concerns, challenges and experiences. It is essential we understand what is common about their needs and what is specific. Here we must turn to young people themselves. We must ask them during adolescence what they perceive is affecting them and how we can make the biggest difference in improving their lives. This involves understanding the issues as young people see them. How do youth see these factors? How important are they to young people? Answers to these questions can guide us in finding the best ways to intervene, which is crucial when we have limited resources and must ensure they meet the needs of the community .

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