

Social factors affecting youth mental health and wellbeing

A commentary on the literature and call for action

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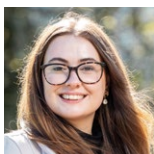
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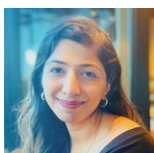
Our name, Koi Tū, was gifted by Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei. It means ‘the sharp end of the spear’. Like our namesake, Koi Tū aims to get to the heart of long-term issues challenging our future.

Authors



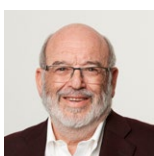
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KEY INSIGHTS

- Subjective wellbeing is declining for young people, globally and within Aotearoa New Zealand.
- To intervene effectively and improve outcomes for our youth, we must understand which factors promote and impair wellbeing.
- Youth mental health is the outcome of a complex interplay between developmental, environmental and contextual factors, some acting in the present and some occurring much earlier in life.
- Broader societal changes have had a major effect on how young people grow up and live their lives.
- Young people in Aotearoa consistently self-report that their wellbeing is significantly related to socio-cultural and systemic influences.
- We need to improve our understanding of how socio-cultural and systemic factors interact with other domains, particularly developmental influences.
- Sustainably improving youth wellbeing will require thoughtful systemic action, a holistic approach, and nuanced understanding of wellbeing and its determinants.

BACKGROUND

In 2022, the team at Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures was contracted by Te Hīringa Mahara (TMH) to review literature from Aotearoa in domains related to systemic determinants of youth wellbeing. The review was to focus on engagements with youth and on local research that prioritises young people's voices, perspectives and beliefs. We particularly focused on what young people believe is impacting their wellbeing at a systemic level, across four main themes: bleak futures, social media and digital technology, racism and discrimination, and intergenerational connection. The review did not consider other relevant factors such as early life experience.

In this commentary, we explore what the literature review tells us and what it does not – particularly, concerning trends about how we are preparing (or failing to prepare) our young people to thrive in an increasingly complex world.

AN OVERVIEW OF YOUTH WELLBEING

Trends from within Aotearoa New Zealand show that our young people are faring poorly when compared to other countries and generations.¹ The inaugural Wellbeing Report from The Treasury found that young people are most strikingly poorly impacted across three domains: housing, educational achievement and mental health. These domains are all essential not only to wellbeing in the short term – that is, how young people fare when they are young – but also to lifelong wellbeing, educational attainment, health and productivity.

Other commentaries also draw attention to the poor subjective wellbeing of young people across Aotearoa New Zealand. Data from the *Youth19* study suggests rising rates of depression, suicidal thoughts and behaviour, and a broad decline in emotional wellbeing.² Importantly, these rising rates of mental health challenges were observed even prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which by all accounts had a broadly negative impact on youth wellbeing.³ Young people report higher levels of stress, anxiety and social isolation related to the pandemic, which has also compromised access to health services and support in school. Data shows youth crime is decreasing,⁴ but concerns are nevertheless growing that antisocial acts by young people, or their impact, are rising⁵ – with such acts known to be indicative of wellbeing.⁶ These trends reflect a pattern seen around the world: young people are struggling.

To understand this picture, it's essential to appreciate the context of life in Aotearoa New Zealand. Aotearoa has a pronounced pattern of intergenerational socio-economic disadvantage.⁷ This relates to our legacy of colonisation, which, as in other colonised countries, makes our young people particularly vulnerable to difficulties.⁸ We need to deepen our understanding of how life in New Zealand, including our colonial context, contributes to youth wellbeing. This is essential to understanding these declines to youth wellbeing, which do not impact all young people equally – with rangatahi Māori, Pacific and ethnic minority young people, and young people who identify as members of the LGBTQIA+ community particularly likely to experience poor mental health.^{9,10,11}

Though the emotional strain our young people face is, and should be, reason in and of itself to take action to improve wellbeing, the mental health and wellbeing of youth does not exist in isolation from the rest of their lifespan. Three-quarters of lifelong mental health challenges begin by age 25,¹² and most young people who experience poor mental health will experience further such challenges in adulthood.¹³ Intervention at a young age is the most effective primary prevention against lifelong mental health challenges. It brings with it the potential to improve outcomes across the lifespan, and reduce suffering and the consequent strain on adult mental health and social services. A focus on youth mental health is essential to addressing mental health across the lifespan; without a comprehensive youth wellbeing strategy we cannot address lifelong wellbeing.

Positive mental health and wellbeing in youth does not only improve emotional wellbeing in adulthood, but also lifelong health, educational attainment, and victimisation.¹⁴ As a result, it has been well established in similar economies around the globe that youth mental health is a 'best buy', meaning that supporting young people's wellbeing and mental health is a cost-effective action with potential for positive downstream results, including in domains like productivity and the economy.¹⁵

Our literature review conducted for THM explored some of the core issues which young people believe are impacting their wellbeing. Young people's perspectives are vital to exploring and richly understanding their wellbeing. Prioritising youth perspectives on issues related to their wellbeing is now promoted as best practice by the World Health Organisation¹⁶ and International Association of Youth

Mental Health,¹⁷ and it is consistent with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹⁸ Young people's perspectives give us insight into youth culture and the realities of modern life for young people – perspectives that cannot be researched or understood solely from an external gaze. As such, youth voices are one essential component of developing our understanding of youth wellbeing.

However, while young people are the experts on their worlds, they may not be able to comment on parts of their lives they do not remember such as their early development, or processes of which they are not aware, such as the interaction between neural development and emotional resilience. We must therefore consider their concerns in the context of other perspectives: those of experts, caregivers and family, and those from other domains of expertise, including neuroscience, sociology and child development. This allows us to capture a far broader picture of youth wellbeing: not only that of a more complex world, but also a world we are not preparing or equipping young people to thrive in.

In this commentary, we discuss how the systemic influences described by young people interact with other domains and what this means for youth mental health.

DETERMINANTS OF DECLINING SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING

If our youth are experiencing rising rates of mental health challenges and declining subjective wellbeing, we must ask *why*. The answers to this question can shape the approaches we take to prevention, which is widely regarded as the most impactful and cost-effective way to improve wellbeing.¹⁹ If preventative action is to effectively meet community needs whilst efficiently using resources, we must understand how the problems at hand have developed.

Today's declining wellbeing cannot be explained by conventional bio-medical models or psychiatric accounts of mental ill-health. While biomedical processes may play a role, these alone cannot independently explain the rapid and widespread decline. It has progressed too rapidly and there have been no fundamental changes to human biological development that could account for it. We must therefore expand our focus to societal, social and educational domains, including interactions between these spheres. A broad answer to the *why* is that young people live in an increasingly challenging world that we are not adequately supporting and preparing them to thrive in.

Modern life is becoming increasingly complex and expectations and opportunities for young people have also changed. Our literature review for THM identified that young people in Aotearoa New Zealand are deeply aware of several broad social issues which impact their worlds and their wellbeing. Among these, climate change, inequality, racism and discrimination were consistently highlighted by young people as issues of significant concern. Improving youth wellbeing will likely require addressing the issues that feel most burdensome to them.

The literature we explored for THM consistently identified that young people in Aotearoa perceive their futures as bleak. Concerns about the future among youth are directly related to challenges including climate change,²⁰ the COVID-19 pandemic,²¹ and the economy.²² Young people reported feeling hopeless about their futures even prior to the COVID pandemic.

Rangatahi Māori in particular reported troubling concerns about their personal futures and the futures of their whānau and wider communities, including their economic prospects and their likelihood of engagement with the justice sector.²³ Young people reported that their perspective of a bleak future relates partly to feeling frustrated that they are helpless to contribute to social and political change.

Many expressed frustration at their limited capacity to contribute meaningfully to change on issues that matter to them and are relevant for their generation.²⁴ This points to two key themes: young people are aware of how social and political issues interact with their personal futures and are eager to contribute to change which will tangibly impact them.

Young people also consistently reported deep concern about discrimination within Aotearoa. Their concerns include how discrimination impacts wellbeing for rangatahi Māori, Pacific and ethnic minority youth, disabled youth, and young people who are members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Data suggests these minority populations within Aotearoa do have poorer wellbeing on average.^{9,10,11} International and local evidence has consistently that minority groups' experiences of stress and discrimination, whether interpersonal or systemic discrimination, negatively impacts their wellbeing and access to support services.²⁵ We need further detailed research on how discrimination impacts wellbeing in New Zealand, including ways we can meaningfully intervene.

The literature also identified that youth believe social media and digital technology impact their wellbeing. But the beliefs are mixed, with some young people finding that social media supports their mental health and wellbeing²⁶ while others find it harmful.²⁷ This discrepancy is broadly consistent with evidence from around the globe.²⁸ Typically, research has found that social media use can be associated with poor self-efficacy,²⁹ body image and eating disturbances³⁰, and hyper-sexualisation.³¹ However, other research has found that social media offers community and supportive environments that can be protective for mental health, particularly for young people within the LGBTQIA+ community.³² Social media is often blamed for poor wellbeing among young people, but according to the evidence there is no straightforward relationship between digital technology and young people's wellbeing. Social media may be partly but not solely responsible for the current crisis of youth mental health.

EQUIPPING YOUNG PEOPLE TO SURVIVE AND THRIVE IN A CHALLENGING WORLD

The literature we reviewed for THM highlighted that young people are acutely aware of factors that help and hinder their capacity to navigate modern challenges. Addressing youth wellbeing means not only intervening with systemic issues that young people may face, but also ensuring we adequately prepare and support them to thrive. Broad systemic change, like reducing discrimination and addressing social and economic hardship, takes time and sustained effort. In the meantime, we can work to equip our young people for the world they find themselves in.

Our literature review showed that young people around Aotearoa reported that intergenerational connection is protective for their wellbeing. Broadly, we identified that young people report benefiting from intergenerational connection.³⁰ This was particularly so for rangatahi Māori,³³ Pacific young people,³⁴ and young people with disabilities.³⁵ These findings are, again, consistent with what has been reported around the world. Connection is one of the strongest protective factors for wellbeing across the lifespan, including for marginalised youth.³⁶ Fostering connection, particularly within cultures and communities, can be powerful for promoting wellbeing broadly and as a specific intervention, such as for suicide prevention.³⁷ Intergenerational connection is therefore promising for both prevention and intervention, so it is important to learn more about how we can facilitate intergenerational connection and how this can support youth wellbeing in Aotearoa.

As life becomes more challenging for young people, we should be increasing our support for them, but the opposite is happening. As the challenges of youth have increased, parallel changes have negatively

impacted the support available to young people. This includes reduced formal and informal social support, fewer youth-focused spaces, and exacerbated intergenerational divides. Young people report feeling under-supported, that seeking help is too challenging, and that the education system is not adequately preparing them for life after school.³⁸ We must urgently increase our responsiveness to this.

However, preparing young people to cope with adolescence cannot consist solely of intervention in adolescence; it must begin in early life. When young people discuss feeling under-prepared for adolescence and the transition to adulthood, we can turn to other bodies of research to deepen our understanding of why that is. How a young person will navigate the difficulties they face is established very early in life, even prenatally, because a youngster's experiences then are associated with how they develop neurologically, cognitively, emotionally and socially. Longitudinal evidence from local research highlights that the first 1000 days of life have particularly important implications for later wellbeing.³⁹

Psychological resilience protects mental and emotional wellbeing when stress and challenges arise. It helps people respond to and cope with challenging events they experience.⁴⁰ It involves processes like recognising and regulating emotions, cognitive flexibility and problem solving, and coping strategies.⁴¹ The development of psychological resilience is closely tied to executive function⁴² – cognitive and emotional processes that allow us to think flexibly, modulate behaviour and act towards our goals. A young person's psychological resilience and emotional development are influenced by early experiences that impact the development of executive function, including their parents' mental health and intergenerational deprivation,⁷ early experiences in education,⁴³ neurological development⁴⁴ and traumatic experiences.⁴⁵ It is important to remember that psychological resilience is also related to broader socioeconomic and historical contexts, and that people from backgrounds that confer power and status in society are best positioned to develop psychological resilience.⁴⁶ To prepare young people, including our most vulnerable young people, to cope with the challenges of modern adolescence, we must think beyond conventional interventions in adolescence and towards addressing these very early influences.

It is clear that limited psychological resilience and poor coping capacity negatively impact young people's ability to thrive. This is particularly concerning given profound changes to adolescence and young adulthood. The transition from childhood to adulthood has become increasingly prolonged and unstructured across western societies, including New Zealand. This transition is impacted by the age at which young people undergo puberty, with its associated hormonal changes and brain development, as well as today's increased challenges of psychosocial and emotional maturation.⁴⁷ In all cases, these processes are influenced by genetic determinants and environmental factors, including the role of the social world. Young people are on average experiencing puberty earlier, yet their transition to adulthood is longer, along with the strain and pressure they face during this life stage. Developmentally, adolescence is associated with the formation of identity and relationships, and with transitioning from school to the workforce. Young people today have great difficulty transitioning to adulthood, related to the great emotional and cognitive maturity required to navigate life and the high level of financial stability necessary for independent functioning.¹⁶ Additionally, young people today are confronting insecurity at an early age due to societal shifts globally and locally, particularly in relation to economic uncertainty, social movements, online technologies and climate change.

Children and adolescents learn how to display and regulate their emotions from very early in life through their social experiences and interactions. At the same time, they develop executive function. Emotions are experienced richly during adolescence, and when young people do not learn to understand and manage their emotional experiences, these can quickly become overwhelming. Young people benefit from support to learn how to respond to and deal with difficult emotions, especially if that support is

effective, respectful and appropriate. Those who have poor experiences seeking help or who are offered limited support are particularly likely to struggle.

Our literature review for Te Hiringa Mahara identified that young people are aware their worlds are becoming more complex. However, it is not enough to understand why young people's worlds have become more challenging. We must also understand why it has become even harder for today's young people to manage and respond to these challenges. It is likely that reduced informal social support and protective factors in childhood and adolescence have contributed to the decline in youth wellbeing, with few young people being able to access effective support. It is also likely that developmental factors from early in life, and even prenatally, including high levels of intergenerational deprivation, are contributing to reduced psychological resilience for young people.

WHAT'S MISSING?

Our literature review of local research highlighted that young people in Aotearoa have strong perspectives on how social issues contribute to their wellbeing. Their perspectives are broadly consistent with findings from international research and expert opinions. However, reviewing this literature also draws attention to certain knowledge gaps. One of these is a detailed understanding of how (and the degree to which) systemic influences differentially impact diverse demographics of young people, particularly those with intersecting marginalised identities, who are most vulnerable to mental health challenges, poor wellbeing and inequitable health outcomes.^{9,10,11} Targeted interventions addressing these young people may be necessary. In this area there is a paucity of available New Zealand literature grounded in community perspectives and experiences, particularly for youth who fall outside the reach of traditional services, such as young people experiencing housing instability.

While many features of modern life, including social media and digital technology, are believed to impact youth wellbeing, we lack detailed data richly exploring these relationships. For example, we do not fully understand how, when or for whom social media is harmful for mental health in Aotearoa. This highlights a core issue: it is very challenging to respond to a wellbeing crisis we do not fully understand. It is essential that we invest in high quality research and in establishing a clear evidence-base within Aotearoa, which draws on international evidence, and that we incorporate research and evaluation processes into our wellbeing strategy.

AOTEAROA'S RESPONSE

In Aotearoa, central government's intention to address the youth wellbeing crisis has been documented extensively, including with the introduction of the Wellbeing Budgets⁴⁸ and clear positioning from parties across the political spectrum.^{49,50,51} There is widespread desire to reduce suffering among young people, with disagreement mostly centred on the most effective responses to take and who should be responsible for these actions.

Most wellbeing spending and the bulk of most parties' policies are currently targeted primarily towards adults – at the far end of life from where resources can have the greatest impact. This is broadly inconsistent with parliamentary intention to focus on prevention and 'top-of-the-cliff' solutions. Strategies focused on therapeutic interventions for adults *can* be top-of-the-cliff solutions, but current primary care models are typically only intended for those already struggling. True early intervention reaches people before they approach the cliff. It has been well documented internationally that protecting and promoting mental wellbeing early in life and intervening in adolescence are more

impactful and cost-effective. This points to a focus on intervention earlier in life: altering systemic influences, promoting psychological resilience in childhood and improving support for young people.

Importantly, improving support for youth mental health must extend beyond addressing long waitlists and access to treatment.⁵² Increasing individuals' access to therapeutic and medical interventions is important, but insufficient. New Zealand literature highlights the importance of adequately supporting whānau and communities so they can meet the wellbeing needs of their children and adolescent youth. Integrative approaches to mental health are needed, prioritising co-ordinated and cross-sectoral efforts to support systemic and societal contributions to wellbeing among youth, not just in the field of health. This includes developing support systems in collaboration with communities that are culturally responsive, trusted and accessible.

Importantly, while the trends in Aotearoa are broadly consistent with international data, it is likely that our challenges with youth wellbeing may exceed those of similar nations – evidenced by our alarmingly high youth suicide rates compared to other OECD nations. Local solutions are much needed, with the proviso that intervention is only one part of a holistic wellbeing strategy. Such a strategy must also strengthen resilience in early life and address systemic determinants of poor wellbeing at the source.

WHERE TO FROM HERE? SYSTEMIC RESPONSES TO SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES

There is consistent theoretical and empirical evidence demonstrating that systemic factors impact wellbeing, particularly for vulnerable populations of young people with marginalised identities. Addressing these influences is likely to positively impact lifelong wellbeing. However, we currently lack much of the information that would be needed to make strong, evidence-based recommendations regarding systemic level policy change.

To our knowledge, there has been no comprehensive exploration into whether and how systemic level policy change affects youth wellbeing over time. Investing in policy change must be accompanied by investment into measuring indicators of youth wellbeing over time, and continuing to prioritise tracking progress such as through the Treasury Wellbeing report.

Importantly, action must be consistent to create true, significant, and sustainable change to young people's wellbeing and improve their lifelong outcomes. The results of policy change or action taken at a central government level are likely to be revealed over longer periods of time than a single parliamentary term. Such sustained action will require significant cross-parliamentary action and collaboration across successive governments.

Loss of wellbeing often manifests in later childhood and adolescence. Facilitating optimal emotional health is a progressive path from the beginning of life. Young people's wellbeing affects their lifelong wellbeing and productivity, so all political parties must prioritise it and commit to shared action.

CONCLUSIONS

The perspectives of young people help us understand the realities and pressures of their lives in Aotearoa. Young people consistently indicate that systemic influences including those discussed in our literature review for THM impact their wellbeing. The intense pressures facing our young people are situated within a landscape of prenatal, infant and developmental influences which can make young people more vulnerable to mental health challenges. Youth wellbeing therefore depends on an interplay of developmental, biological, environmental, societal, and cultural factors. Our interventions must be multi-pronged and, at a minimum, include early interventions to promote psychological resilience against the pressures of adolescence, alongside efforts to strengthen support and minimise pressure on youth. However, even when we bring together all these fields of knowledge, there are sizeable gaps to our knowledge base. Any sustainable youth wellbeing strategy must also at its core prioritise funding high quality research, including evaluation of interventions and strategies.

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