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Most children and young people say they are experiencing wellbeing,
but some are facing significant challenges

'What makes a good life?', a report from the Office of the Children's Commissioner and Oranga Tamariki drawing together the voices of more than 6000 children and young people, has identified a clear vision of what wellbeing means for children growing up in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The report found that most children and young people are enjoying many elements of wellbeing right now.

But up to a third indicated they are facing challenges in some aspects of their life, and one in ten face multiple challenges. Those challenges include racism, discrimination, bullying, poverty, violence and drugs.

What is wellbeing to children and young people?

The children and young people who took part in the project said that wellbeing is all about "having a good life". To them, a good life is one where they can feel accepted, valued and respected, be happy, have the support of family and friends, have their basic needs met, enjoy good physical and mental health, have a good education and feel safe.

"To be accepted. To be understood and taken seriously. It's important because it gives you confidence in your uniqueness." Young person from Whangārei

"Really just people who really believe in you is the most essential thing to having a good life. And people who support you no matter what." Young person from Wellington

"There are lots of people telling us what "child wellbeing" looks like, says Children's Commissioner Andrew Becroft. "But the difference with this work is that we have gone to the source and asked children and young people themselves what "wellbeing" means to them. And they're painting a pretty clear picture."

Oranga Tamariki Chief Executive Gráinne Moss says listening to the voices of children is critically important. "We want our work to be informed by a deep understanding of the experiences and aspirations of children and young people. We need New Zealand to listen to these children and young people, taking them into their hearts and into their communities."

Young people highlighted a range of issues many believe need to be addressed if a good life is to be a reality for all children and young people.

Children and young people want more than just a minimum standard of living. They want a home, an education and a safe community. But they strive for a little more too: choice and opportunities.

The report notes a strong call for genuine acceptance of diversity: cultural, ethnic, sexual, gender, and disability. Young people wanted to be able to celebrate their unique identities.

What gets in the way of wellbeing?

There was also a plea to recognise that life is really hard for many children and young people. Many spoke about their experiences of racism, bullying, poverty, violence and drugs.

"Bullying is hurtful, you feel like nothing inside." Young person from Auckland

"At our school people find mocking Māori culture to be a joke. 'Māoris go to prison', or 'Māoris do drugs.'" Young person from Auckland

"If you were a young disabled person in a wheelchair and there wasn't a ramp at the front of a building, [you would have to] go around the back entrance just to get in. As much as you have the accessibility it's almost dehumanising to be forced to go through that back entrance." Young person with a disability from Auckland

"The experiences young people shared with us are distressingly dehumanising", Children's Commissioner Becroft says. "They highlight aspects of our culture that make wellbeing impossible. If our young people are to enjoy a good life we need to knock these barriers down."

A number of young people also talked about being let down by the "system" in its varying forms, particularly with regard to education, health and social support.

"Something I always have to deal with at school is the stigma. When people find out you're a foster kid they're like 'oh you're an orphan, whose house did you burn down.'"
Young person living in state care

Gráinne Moss says that while these stories are difficult to hear, they underline the importance of making real, lasting change. "We are absolutely listening, and we are working hard to improve the experience of children and young people in our care."

Significantly young people saw themselves as part of a wider community. To support them, we need to support their whānau, family, friends and community too.

"What helps? People who will stay in your life." Young person living in state care

The findings from this report will inform the government's Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy.

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About the project

The Office of the Children's Commissioner's Strategy, Rights and Advice – Mai World team worked in partnership with the Oranga Tamariki Voices of Children and Young People team in the planning, engagement, analysis and writing of the report. The project was supported by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. It would not have been possible without the assistance of OCC's community partners – NGOs, community groups, alternative education providers, iwi social services – as well as Oranga Tamariki sites.

The project was carried out in October and November 2018 and engaged with more than 6000 children and young people. 5607 children and young people completed an online survey and 423 were spoken with face to face through a series of focus groups and interviews in 19 towns and cities across New Zealand.

Media note: Comment can also be arranged from spokespersons from two of the community groups who helped facilitate the project.