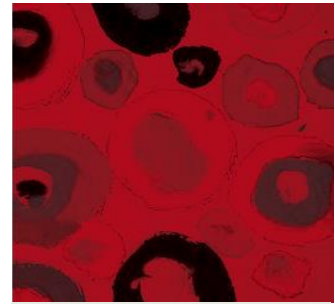


# Supplementary information regarding the impact of COVID-19 on children's rights in Aotearoa New Zealand, for the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child.



The Children's Commissioner represents **1.1 million** people in Aotearoa New Zealand under the age of 18, who make up 23 per cent of the total population.

We advocate for their interests, ensure their rights are upheld, and help them have a say on issues that affect them.

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## COVID-19 HAS BROADENED AND DEEPENED INEQUITIES FOR CHILDREN IN NEW ZEALAND

1. The Office of the Children's Commissioner welcomes the opportunity to provide a concise update to accompany our 'List of Issues Prior to Reporting' submission for New Zealand's 6<sup>th</sup> Periodic Review under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (submitted on 1 March 2020).<sup>1</sup> We also support the supplementary submissions from our colleagues at the Human Rights Commission and the Children's Rights Alliance Aotearoa.
2. Across all elements of rights and wellbeing, the COVID-19 pandemic has had, and will continue to have, an extraordinary impact on the lives of children and young people in New Zealand. Children's rights to health, education, housing, safety, play, food, culture and financial security will continue to be affected for some time as a result of the local and global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. COVID-19 has broadened and deepened inequities for children in New Zealand, bringing into sharp focus, and in some cases exacerbating, existing problems and inequities across the child rights spectrum. Urgent and persistent issues for children - documented in our LOIPR submission - such as the ongoing impact of colonisation and racism, child poverty and inequity, family violence and the lack of affordable and warm housing have been compounded by the pandemic.

## IMPACTS OF THE NATIONWIDE LOCKDOWN ON CHILDREN IN NEW ZEALAND

4. The New Zealand Government took a precautionary and preventative approach to the COVID-19 crisis, closing borders and implementing a nationwide 'lockdown' with restrictions to movement imposed in order to curb and then eliminate rates of infection. Schools, playgrounds, early childhood services and non-essential businesses were closed for eight weeks.<sup>2</sup> This approach has (at the time of writing) been successful in ending the transmission of COVID-19 in New Zealand and mitigating community outbreaks.<sup>3</sup> Thankfully, none of the 157 children (aged 0-19 years) in New Zealand diagnosed with Covid-19 died.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.occ.org.nz/publications/submissions/childrens-commissioners-views-on-priorities-for-children-in-new-zealand/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://uniteforrecovery.govt.nz/covid-19/covid-19-alert-system/alert-system-overview/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://uniteforrecovery.govt.nz/updates-and-resources/latest-updates/new-zealand-moved-to-alert-level-1-on-tuesday-9-june/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-current-situation/covid-19-current-cases#age>

5. There are a number of surveys and research projects currently underway to understand the experiences of children and young people during the lockdown. Meanwhile, preliminary and anecdotal reporting from schools, helplines, Iwi (Māori tribes), government services, non-government organisations and community groups point to a diverse range of experiences for children and young people. These experiences are likely to have been influenced by a range of economic and social determinants of wellbeing such as household income and family financial security, employment status of parents and carers and their ability to work and/or be paid during the lockdown, child care arrangements and extended family support, housing quality, and physical and mental health status of family members.
6. For children with parents or carers who were healthy, financially secure, and able to support their learning and play, the lockdown period may have had little to no impact on their long term development. In fact, some children have reportedly benefited from less rushing around and transition times as well as more time at home with their family immersed in their culture and language.
7. What we do know is that the lockdown period was particularly hard for children living in families without enough money and resources to have what they need to thrive and without the support they need. Families with inadequate or overcrowded housing and those dealing with mental health issues and disabilities had these challenges compounded. Single-parent households with no additional support faced new stressful challenges such as not being able to go shopping with their children.
8. Front line services reported dramatic increases in the need for food parcels and helplines reported increased calls from children and young people who were experiencing family violence and discrimination while at home in lockdown. Stress caused to families unable to visit whānau, participate in tangihanga, funerals and other cultural practices was widely reported. A move to online learning for children as a result of school closures revealed a 'digital divide' with internet connectivity and access to devices being a technical and financial barrier to participating in home learning.

## CONSIDERATION OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN THE GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO COVID-19

9. The New Zealand Government moved quickly to put in place a range of measures and supports such as wage subsidies for businesses to support them to continue paying staff during the lockdown, and a 12-week income support payment for people who lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic.<sup>5</sup>
10. In terms of child-specific policy, the government prioritised resourcing initiatives to ensure students were able to learn from home. These initiatives included increasing digital connectivity, delivering devices and hard copy school resources to those in need and broadcasting educational content on television.
11. During the lockdown the Police took a more educational response to youth offending rather than a punitive one, contributing to a reduction in youth justice cases. Numbers of young people detained on remand significantly reduced during the lockdown period so that those young people could remain with their whānau.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://childyouthwellbeing.govt.nz/community/your-stories/covid-19-response-and-budget-2020-reflect-ongoing-commitment-child-and-youth>

12. The rapid policy response to the lockdown showed how problems that seemed difficult to address prior to the pandemic, could be resolved quickly in an emergency situation, for example housing the homeless. However, in acting swiftly, the government missed opportunities to work alongside or to resource Iwi and community organisations, with the most intimate knowledge of what families need, to help deliver support. For example, Iwi and community networks were excluded and Civil Defence became the funding mechanism used to reach communities.
13. Rapid consultation, co-design and partnered responses require foundational relationships and networks to have been invested in outside of times of crisis. There is much to learn from the success of Iwi and community-led initiatives that took place during the lockdown such as community testing for COVID-19 and the delivery of essential items to whānau in need.
14. We recommend the outcomes and lessons learned from government policy responses are evaluated and shared, with a particular focus on Treaty partnership approaches, working with communities, inclusion, and how equitable the outcomes were for mokopuna Māori and children with disabilities.

#### LONG TERM IMPACTS AND ONGOING AREAS OF CONCERN FOR CHILDREN

15. The continued border closure, the impacts of mass unemployment and the closing of businesses across the country looks set to force thousands more children into poverty which threatens all elements of their wellbeing. While it is too early to know the exact impact of COVID-19 on measured rates of child poverty, the significant loss of jobs and incomes means rates of material hardship are expected to rise sharply.<sup>6</sup> Numbers of New Zealanders returning home from overseas will put more pressure on housing which is already in short supply, unaffordable and much of it of poor quality.
16. With increased numbers of families living in hardship we can expect to see an increase in domestic and family violence caused by toxic stress and an increase in demand for mental health services. In other countries research has shown that households with young children have been hit especially hard by COVID-19 with increased difficulties across a range of areas, including child social and emotional wellbeing, household economic security, the physical health of the household, access to early learning and childcare, parent mental health, and household basic needs.<sup>7</sup> The experiences of children in Christchurch who experienced traumatic events including earthquakes and a terrorist attack in 2019 have demonstrated the need to respond promptly with appropriate supports and services.
17. The immediate and long-term impacts of the pandemic will not be evenly distributed. There is likely to be a higher disproportionate impact on those cohorts of children who we know face greater challenges because of issues such as systemic racism and discrimination.
18. There is anecdotal evidence that some young people are leaving school to work to support their families in need as a result of the pandemic. Māori, Pasifika and migrant young people are more likely to work in industries which have been hardest hit by the pandemic, such as retail, hospitality and tourism. As youth unemployment rates rise, so too will mental health issues. Young people from communities with economic, housing and social deprivation and families with multiple generations of unemployment are most at risk.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://budget.govt.nz/budget/2020/wellbeing/child-poverty-report/impact-of-covid-19.htm>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.uorapidresponse.com/reports-policy-briefs>

## AN OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD BACK BETTER INFORMED BY CHILDREN'S VIEWS

19. As the focus shifts from an emergency public health response to one of economic recovery, we call for the government to listen to and incorporate children's views into policy responses. New and adapted policies must be regenerative, equitable, rights-based and built on Treaty-based strategic thinking, offering a future-proof framework for inclusion and diversity that is sustainable. This would enable partnerships with Māori to be engaged more effectively, Māori knowledge to be used as the source of innovative new solutions, and services to be delivered to a gold standard in terms of cultural intelligence and literacy.
20. We can 'build back better' by being child-centred and considering the interests, rights and wellbeing of children and young people in all policy and funding decision making. Greater attention needs to be paid to what children and young people have to say for themselves, and to build stronger partnerships with their family, whānau, iwi and communities.
21. It is vital that welfare supports provide the financial safety net needed for families to have a warm home, sufficient food and the resources needed so that children can grow and thrive. Recommendations for how to improve the welfare system were made by a Welfare Expert Advisory Group in 2019.<sup>8</sup> We recommend the government implement the recommendations from the Welfare Expert Advisory Group and explore emerging options for a changed world like a guaranteed minimum income..
22. It is critical that all children's rights are considered equally and that listening to children and considering their views and needs is central to the government's ongoing COVID-19 response. Perhaps we do not need a new plan for addressing the pandemic recovery. Instead we need to apply urgency for action to the well-researched and planned Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy<sup>9</sup> developed and published, but not yet implemented. Policy advisors need now to double-down on a rights-based wellbeing approach and invest in genuinely transformative actions for communities and government agencies to progress the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy.
23. In conclusion, in addition to the questions listed in our March 2020 LOIPR submission, we encourage the Committee to also ask the New Zealand Government:
  - *What steps are being taken to monitor the situation for children, especially those most in need and what mechanism is the government using to do this?*
  - *How are the rights of children being considered in the COVID-19 recovery?*
  - *How is the government ensuring children themselves are having their views heard and incorporated into plans for their now and for their future?*

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.weag.govt.nz/weag-report/whakamana-tangata/key-recommendations/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://childyouthwellbeing.govt.nz/>