

Analysis: Children and young people

Date: March 2022

Purpose

During May and June 2021, the Joint Venture engaged with people across Aotearoa New Zealand to inform [*Te Aorerekura – the National Strategy to Eliminate Family Violence and Sexual Violence*](#). A key part of this engagement was the conversation with individuals, organisations and groups who work alongside children and young people. This paper reflects the experience for children and young people with the family violence and sexual violence systems and the opportunities for improving how Aotearoa New Zealand work to prevent, respond, heal and recover from these forms of violence. Communities, organisations and individuals were generous in sharing their knowledge and experiences, and through their insight government agencies have worked to develop a 25-year Strategy designed to achieve the moemoeā, or vision: All people in Aotearoa New Zealand are thriving: their wellbeing is enhanced and sustained because they are safe and supported to live their lives free from family violence and sexual violence.

This paper sets out themes that came out of hui and written submissions that focused on the needs and wellbeing of children and young people and uses, as much as possible, the words and voices of the people who shared their pūrākau (stories) and whakaaro (thoughts).

Our engagement process with children and young people

As part of developing our engagement process the JV identified that in Aotearoa New Zealand, some groups of people are more likely to be targets of family violence and sexual violence than others. One of these groups are children and young people. The JV therefore sought advice from family violence and sexual violence non-government organisations (NGOs) that work with children and young people, Oranga Tamariki and the Office of the Children's Commissioner (the Office) on how people could best support children and young people to share their experiences, perspectives and opinions about family violence and sexual violence with us.

The Office of the Children's Commissioner is recognised as a best practice leader in how to give effect to children and young people's rights as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This includes children and young people's right under Article 12 to have their opinions and views heard in all matters and decisions affecting them. While supportive of the JV's intent, the Office was concerned that we had not allocated enough time to use their existing networks and mechanisms to facilitate the safe participation of children and young people in the engagement process. This perspective was also shared by many in the family violence and sexual violence sectors. The JV acknowledges this concern.



The Office also encouraged the JV to give greater consideration and commitment to developing a long-term plan for engaging with children and young people. This planning will be included in the JV's ongoing development and implementation of the National Strategy and Action Plan to address family violence and sexual violence.

To address the limitations of our engagement process, the JV partnered with NGOs and family violence and sexual violence practitioners and invited them to create safe, but closed spaces, for children and young people to share their experiences, views and concerns directly with us. Our feedback process was purposely made anonymous to support people (including children and young people) to feel safe if they decided to participate and provide direct feedback. This means it was not possible to quantify the number of children and young people who took up this opportunity. However, the nature of the comments make it clear the majority of concerns about children and young people were raised by adults and organisations working alongside and supporting them.

The JV also heard from people that support and work alongside children and young people and community partners such as I-Lead, Rainbow Youth, VOYCE Whakarongo Mai and family violence and sexual violence NGOs. These voices were also supplemented by:

- An insights document prepared by the Office of the Children's Commissioner on engagements they had undertaken with children and young people over the past five years
- Feedback gathered on the development of the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy and establishment of Oranga Tamariki
- The June 2021 report into the Christchurch Girls' High School survey of sexual harassment (discussed on page 10 of this report).

What we know about children and young people

At the 2018 Census, the total estimated population of Aotearoa New Zealand was about 4.96 million people. Of this total, just over 1.6 million were children (763,000) aged up to 11 years, and young people (840,500),¹ defined as 12 to 24 years.

Most children and young people in Aotearoa New Zealand are doing well and the trajectories for their lives are positive and optimistic. They live in supportive homes, surrounded by people who love and help them to thrive and they receive the care they need and deserve. This includes, for example, access to education and health care that support them to develop to their full potential and live happy and healthy lives. But this is not true for all children and young people in Aotearoa New Zealand.

¹ For the purposes of the population data presented in this paper, children and young people include every person under 24 years.

A significant proportion of children and young people need extra support and services so they can thrive. Sometimes, their struggles begin before birth and continue through to young adulthood and beyond. It is well known that a child's first 1000 days of life lay the foundations for future health, learning and social development.

Also:

- Children and young people can live in homes that appear to be safe, but where they may still be sexually abused, and this might not be known to anyone other than the offenders and the children and young people, for some years
- That in addition to women, negative outcomes and life experiences are disproportionately borne by children and young people with disabilities, tamariki and rangatahi Māori, and Pacific children and young people
- Family violence and sexual violence are not just associated with social deprivation
- Actions to address family violence and sexual violence must meet the needs of all children, noting that non-Māori and non-Pacific children make up the majority of children sexually abused in Aotearoa New Zealand.

This paper also acknowledges the inherent tension between recognising and giving effect to the individual agency of children and young people, and their place within a collective group. In addition to whānau, hapū and iwi (for tangata whenua), the seven different cultures of the South Pacific place their children and young people within their aiga, ngutuare tangata, kainga, famili, kāiga, magafaoa Niue, vuvale and kaaiga Tuvalu. All these groups share and affirm the importance of belonging to a collective, kinship relationships, identity and sense of place. It should be noted that other non-Western cultures are also known to share similar collective approaches too.

Children and young people – needs, issues and gap analysis

One in seven children in Aotearoa New Zealand grow up in violent homes. One in three girls and approximately one in seven boys are subject to some form of sexual abuse by the time they reach 16 years.

Research has highlighted the adverse and intergenerational impacts of family violence and abuse. This includes a higher risk that children and young people who experience family violence and sexual violence will have poor outcomes in adulthood (primarily poorer health and mental health, a higher likelihood of involvement in the justice system, and poorer socio-economic status). For girls who are sexually abused, the impacts are more likely to relate to poor mental health rather than criminal justice issues which are more prevalent in males.

Research confirms, that:

- The lives of some children and young people are marked by underlying issues which must also be addressed (e.g. poverty, hardship, unstable home environments, poor housing and accommodation conditions, poor health and associated difficulties participating in education and employment opportunities)

- People impacted by violence (including children and young people) will experience significant physical and mental health challenges, particularly as a result of rape and other sexual abuse (e.g. mental health disorders, impaired personal relationships and drug and alcohol misuse). These can be compounded as they transition into adulthood (e.g. unplanned pregnancies in adolescence or early adulthood, being a single parent and/or a lifetime of economic deprivation/material hardship)
- There is a significant data gap on the lived experiences of children and young people – from their own perspectives.

Our review of the submissions on the National Strategy, as well as other information sources, confirmed that there are gaps in the family violence and sexual violence sector's responses to, for and with, children and young people. The most glaring omission is in the provision of child- and youth-centred family violence and sexual violence services – an observation that the National Strategy engagement also showed about other groups, including tangata whenua, Pacific peoples and LGBTQIA+ communities.

Other gaps directly impacting on the health and wellbeing of children and young people affected by family violence and sexual violence include:

- Lack of recognition and inclusion of the nature and extent of family violence and sexual violence that impacts children and young people, as well as violence which occurs outside household and family environments (e.g. peer to peer bullying; violence and harassment in school and recreational/sport settings; on public transport; at social events; online and through the use of sexual abuse imagery and behaviours by adults both close to or loosely connected to children and young people)
- The need to develop interventions, including awareness-raising and programmes aimed at societal change, to stop blame or judgment of people impacted by violence and to stop tolerance of any kind of sexual harassment
- Children and young people needing services and support (including appropriate and equitable levels of funding and resources for these) where their safety is paramount, and where they are at the forefront of solutions and actions that meet their needs
- The opportunity for improved workforce education and training (e.g. frontline staff and specialist practitioners) for anyone working with, and supporting, children and young people
- The need for education and awareness programmes, and information centred around a holistic approach to health and wellbeing for children and young people
- Enabling frequent and consistent use of mechanisms to for children and young people to share their views, be heard and participate in decisions and services impacting on their health and wellbeing
- The need for a Justice system approach that meets the needs of children and young people impacted by and/or using violence.

Children and young people – services and supports

When children and young people are exposed to family violence and sexual violence in their homes, neighbourhoods and communities, without help or support, intergenerational cycles of harm can be created. Inadequate investment in services and supports for people impacted by family violence and sexual violence is widely acknowledged. Service gaps are even more acute for children and young people.

A lack of skilled practitioners and programmes for the specific needs of children and young people, particularly around recognising signs of abuse and providing early help in the prevention and intervention spaces, is troubling. Problems are compounded when children and young people cannot access support when and where they need it. This includes when they are separated from the people and environments where they feel safest or because they live in areas where there are neither appropriate nor targeted services for them, due to factors that may include geographical isolation.

One of the most significant barriers for young people who are sexually abused within their family or whānau is that access to services relies on parental support. For this reason, consideration should be given to locating services in or near schools and kura, or other places that are easily accessible to children and young people.

When thinking about services and support that protect, keep safe and meet the needs of children and young people, both as victims of violence and as people who use violence, consideration needs to be given to:

- Providing specialist support and services in spaces and places relevant to users of violence – including those² who behave/act in sexually inappropriate ways
- Having services and supports that meet the needs of diverse groups of children and young people³
- Reducing the amount of time children and young people wait to receive services
- Addressing the distances many children and young people have to travel to access services and support, especially with limited personal or public transport options, or the fact that their time is controlled by other family members who may be users of violence or supporting the user of violence rather than a child or young person
- Reducing the high eligibility thresholds which prevent many children and young people from accessing the services and supports they need.

Children and young people need to be protected from family violence and sexual violence and government needs to prioritise investment of resources and supports in their early and

² This section is concerned with insufficient access and service provision for children and young people. However, there is also a link to the insufficient service provision for adults who sexually abuse children and young people too. That is, there is great need to ensure children and young people are protected from the adults who hurt them.

³ Papers analysing the issues and needs for other communities are also relevant to children and young people. These papers should be read alongside this paper to gain a fuller understanding of the issues and needs of children and young people who experience and/or use family violence and sexual violence.

formative years. Without these commitments there will continue to be dire consequences for children and young people.

Emerging themes about children and young people

The wellbeing of children and young people was at the heart of many submissions, with particular emphasis on the absence and invisibility of children and young people in legislation and government policy and practice, as well as their invisibility in the earliest draft strategy.

Submissions expressed concern about the lack of tailored services and supports for children and young people, as well as actions that would help children and young people to heal and thrive. The JV has analysed the submissions received and based on our understanding of what was received, we have identified 4 key themes on pages 6-9.

Education and knowledge are key ways to support children and young people

An overwhelming number of people emphasised the need to prioritise:

- Education, knowledge and awareness raising on a range of family violence and sexual violence-related topics (e.g. healthy relationships and consent education)
- Mental health and wellbeing (e.g. support for young families and in the first 1,000 days of a child's life)
- Information about te ao Māori, Te Tiriti o Waitangi and children's rights as key ways to support children and young people.

“In my family, we live and value respect for all and physical, sexual and emotional harm is, thankfully, not a part of the way we treat those in our whānau, and we have taught our children to call out this kind of behaviour and not tolerate it.”

“Our youth need to learn about mutual pleasure, sensuality, and respect as much as STI prevention.”

“Educating our young people about healthy relationships and how to get help. Providing them with tools to break the cycle. More emphasis in our curriculum, [especially] in primary school, start there and then again in high school... ”

“There are currently zero restrictions for young people to access porn site[s] unless parents put software in place ... If our rangatahi don't have a steady diet of sexual aggression and misogynistic messaging, it will go a long way in shaping healthier attitudes.”

“As women and children are the most frequent victims and most disadvantage[d], I would like to see sexism addressed.”

“School is a great place to start ... Education around this topic so young people possibly recognise when a relationship is not ok early enough to get out before damage is done.”

“Understanding the balance of Te Whare Tapa Whā and its importance for our hauora could support our tamariki with understanding the different areas and how we can balance these. [For example], knowing who they are, where they come from, use of pūrākau to better relate, coping strategies, understanding emotions, feelings, behaviours, etc.”

“We need to teach our youth emotional literacy and relationship skills. Family harm is more than just physical, and abusers often are recreating learnt patterns from childhood. Helping all people [to] know how to communicate, listen and love will go a long way to ending the harm.”

Children and young people require tailored services and workforces that can meet their specific needs

People told us the National Strategy and Action Plan had to include services and the development of a sustainable workforce that could meet the specific needs of children and young people.

The sexual violence sector submitted that it is important to stop sexual abuse by investing significantly in the capacity to track and trace those using, or providing, images of children and young people on the internet. They told us that to protect children and young people, and stop the abuse, government needs to put international agreements in place to remove online sites and channels enabling the exchange of images or live content. Government must also continue the critical work required to hold people who have used or supplied these images to account.

On the requirement for child and youth services with workforces that can meet their specific needs, people said:

“In order to make a real change, a child-centred approach must be taken which requires key professions who have contact with children and young people to be adequately trained to identify the signs of family violence and respond accordingly.”

“Training for those who are around tamariki and rangatahi (teachers, caregivers, ECE educators) so they can detect first signs of family or sexual violence and be able to act in consequence.”

“Whilst we are very supportive of community response mechanisms, it is important that child-specific experts, experienced in responding to and supporting children who witness or are victims of family violence and/or sexual violence, are easily accessible for children who need that level of support.”

“Improved workforce capability, including mandatory child rights and child development training the [family violence and sexual violence] workforce and those that work with and for children and whānau on a regular basis, including

but not limited to: MSD, WINZ, Justice – Police, Courts, Education – teachers and support staff, Health – nurses, doctors, specialists (staff at all levels).”

“Support schools to be safe communities where people are treated as equals, children are nurtured, and the notion of seeking consent for touch and restorative practice are embedded in the curriculum and the processes and procedures of the schools.”

“One important reason why children are often invisible in the response is that whilst Barnardos staff receive training around interacting with children and young people, many staff working across the family violence system do not. This lack of training means that staff can be ill-equipped to communicate with children and young people in an age-appropriate way, to understand their experiences and to ensure that their voices and concerns are heard.”

Agencies (government and NGOs) must change and work cohesively to support holistic needs of children and young people

People and organisations expressed frustration and concern about the barriers imposed by the failure of government agencies to work collaboratively – among themselves and with service providers and NGOs. People also wanted agencies to work together to ensure the basic needs of families are met – children and young people having warm and safe homes, enough food and warm clothing to enable health and wellbeing.

The family violence and sexual violence sectors talked about the potential to improve the culture within schools, with a holistic and inclusive approach for all children, to address bullying and sexual harassment. People identified the need for teachers to be trained to recognise signs of abuse, understand trauma, and to be able to respond to the needs of children and young people impacted by family violence and sexual violence in age-appropriate ways.

The treatment of children in both the family and criminal courts systems was a huge concern for people in the sexual violence sector. Submissions received recommended removing children altogether from the criminal justice system because it is designed by adults, predominantly for adults, and can retraumatise children. Some people and organisations felt the current systems were inappropriate and that children and young people needed to be prioritised in a system where their safety and wellbeing is paramount. Others focused specifically on issues with protection orders and the need to ensure they include parenting orders, so children are protected from further violence.

On the theme of cohesion and having a holistic approach, people told us:

“... children and survivors are forced to defend themselves, not only from abusers, but from the systems themselves ... the 12 years of abuse was bad enough ... but WINZ, family court, the police, lawyer for the child, Oranga Tamariki, child support and the rest of it was even worse.”

“It’s important that agencies work together well to ensure a holistic response to the needs of tamariki. Myths and misunderstandings around information sharing and privacy can create barriers to agencies and individuals having conversations about doing their best for children.”

“Holistic working also means ensuring a strong focus on prevention and ensuring that children aren’t missing out on support because they don’t meet a certain threshold of need ... the threshold for intervention by Oranga Tamariki is very high and response times can be long, which can result in children being excluded from accessing preventative support and other, lower levels of support services at the time they need them.”

“To enable community service providers to be successful will also require a continued focus on the commissioning of services ... engaging with multiple government funders working in isolation from each other ... makes reporting and auditing processes much more complex and time-consuming for our staff who are already stretched under large workloads. Rigid funding and commission approaches can also create barriers to access for whānau seeking help and promote competition or disjointed working between organisations supporting the same whānau.”

Include children, young people and those who support them in the work to address family violence and sexual violence

Some people observed that children and young people were absent (i.e. not mentioned or adequately recognised) in the draft National Strategy and Action Plan. Others urged us to be more inclusive of the needs and views of children and young people to successfully address family violence and sexual violence in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Specific feedback was received on the value of creating and sustaining opportunities for children and young people to form healthy connections with older people. People also talked about addressing the safety needs of those supporting children and young people (e.g. child- and adolescent-to-parent violence).

“To achieve the vision [in the draft national strategy], the safety and nurturing of children has to be central to all decisions made.”

“The principles are good, but I think you need to specifically mention tamariki and mokopuna in oranga whānau, otherwise they become the forgotten voice.”

“The end of FV and SV depends mainly on men no longer harming women and children. These people seem to have been lost from sight, again.”

“... using the terms family violence and sexual violence were not inclusive for particular types of violence and groups of people who experience violence, including children.”

“Protect our children, our mokopuna, our futures ... where are the rangatahi voices?”

“There needs to be wraparound services so when those people [who use violence] come out [of prison] and are going back to family, there are services in place to make family safety plans and to do the kind of therapeutic work with the non-offending parents, with the children, with other siblings, so that any kind of reintegration can function healthily and safely ... At the moment it’s just luck – very few people coming out of prison have access to therapeutic services for their family.”

The emergent themes from submissions on children and young people’s experience were:

- Education – education and knowledge are key ways to support children and young people
- Tailored - children and young people require tailored services and workforces that can meet their specific needs
- Cohesion – agencies (government and non-governmental organisations) must change and work cohesively to support holistic needs of children and young people
- Inclusion – include children and young people, and those who support them in the work to address family violence and sexual violence.

2021 Survey of sexual harassment: Christchurch Girls’ High School⁴

The findings from the 2021 survey of sexual harassment at Christchurch Girls’ High School, conducted by students at the school found that there is significant, ongoing sexual harassment experienced by most students of all ages at the school.

Common examples of harassment identified by the survey participants included cat-calling, body shaming and being rated on looks. Participants also identified other examples, including being followed or surrounded by students from other schools when walking home, being asked for nude photographs, being taken advantage of while drunk, and being raped.

Other information from the report included that:

- More than half the participants described feelings of discomfort, nervousness, degradation, upset, embarrassment, fear, and intimidation as a result of the harassment they experienced

⁴ Gordon L. June 2021. Survey of sexual harassment. Christchurch Girls’ High School. Accessed at <https://cghs.school.nz/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Sexual-harassment-survey-Christchurch-Girls-High-School-June-2021.pdf>

- Sexual harassment was most likely to take place outside school⁵ while socialising or attending events, and on public transport
- The vast majority of participants did not report incidents of (sexual) harassment, citing being ashamed or embarrassed or fearing being blamed as barriers that hide potentially serious crimes.

The participants called for their school and society to be more supportive through better education, services and acknowledgment of the issues – meaning that there is a need to stop tolerating and allowing any kind of sexual harassment. The participants also observed that sexual harassment degrades girls/people of different sexualities and opens the door further to abuse.

People working in the JV are aware of other schools sharing the same or similar experiences of sexual harassment as the students from Christchurch Girls' High School. However, the experiences of children and young people are varied. The survey and report highlight why children and young people need to be at the centre of government actions to eliminate family violence and sexual violence.

Office of the Children's Commissioner – voices of children and young people

In 2019, the Office of the Children's Commissioner and Oranga Tamariki released their joint report, *What makes a good life?*⁶ The report drew together the voices of more than 6,000 children and young people who shared their views on what wellbeing means for them as they grow up in Aotearoa New Zealand. In that report (and subsequent reports in that series), children and young people talked about feeling physically and emotionally unsafe. They described the physical and emotional trauma caused by events, such as being separated from their parents, living in a 'broken home', or experiencing violence in their homes.

In the report, children and young people said they wanted:

“A safe place with no drugs and alcohol and no violence.”

“A home to feel safe in and a loving and supporting family to encourage you to do things you enjoy.”

“No family violence and no court. Kids have rights don't force kids to do stuff they don't want to.”

“They need to keep bullying away from little kids and people and abuse needs to stop NOW!!!”

“A safe community and environment. A lot of support for mental health (and) for parents who can't handle stress as well with their anger. Lots of counselling

⁵ It should be noted this report concerned students in a single-sex school. In co-ed schools, much of the violence happens at or in close proximity to the school (i.e. primary, intermediate and secondary)

⁶ Office of the Children's Commissioner and Oranga Tamariki. *What Makes a Good Life?* [Online] February 2019. <https://www.occ.org.nz/assets/Uploads/What-makes-a-good-life-report-OCC-OT-2019-WEB2.pdf>

at school and at home for young people. We need to break the cycle by providing these needs ...”

“Being in a place of acceptance and to feel safe wherever you go.”

“I think what kids need is a safe place and safe surroundings and a safe home ... Supportive people, positive people, caring people.”

“Living in a safe environment where everyone is treated how they want to be treated, having a trusted adult, friend or sibling to talk to when you need help with something or if you are being bullied.”

They also talked about the support they receive from whānau and, in some cases, how they wished their whānau could support them more. There was a strong emphasis on supports for parents, especially from children and young people living in sole parent families. They talked about how they wanted their parents to be the best parents they could be and how sometimes that means needing services like counselling or addiction support, or support to make better choices. In the report, children and young people said:

“A better environment for our whānau and parents creates a positive and better environment for our children.”

“Families are the most basic social unit of society and with better more concrete support from the start, children would feel more included, loved and valued.”

For some young parents⁷, cycles of abuse and poverty were part of their upbringing. These young parents talked about wanting to break away from these cycles but often found it hard to do so. Many were determined not to have their own children experience the same upbringing that they had. In a summary report about what makes a good life, young parents said:

“Stop bad unhealthy cycles.”

“Kids will blame themselves – carry cycle on and become what they have been through.”

“Supporting parents with anger management.”

“Stable homes surrounded by positive people.”

⁷ Office of the Children’s Commissioner and Oranga Tamariki. What Makes a Good Life?: Summary report: What makes a good life for young parents?. [Online]. November 2019. <https://www.occ.org.nz/assets/Uploads/FINAL-WMAGL-YoungParents-Nov2019.pdf>

Bottom lines for children and young people

To inform the development of the National Strategy and Action Plan, the bottom lines are:

- Children and young people having prompt and humane justice sector responses (i.e. frontline law enforcement, court processes, care and protection and youth justice), which do not retraumatise children and young people impacted by violence and/or children and young people using violence, while maintaining a focus on accountability (i.e. users of violence taking responsibility for the harm they cause, with a variety of justice responses such as restoration of relationships through real apologies and amends)
- Children and young people being actively involved in the development, implementation and monitoring of solutions and actions to address family violence and sexual violence, supported by a long-term plan for government engagement with children and young people
- Children and young people having prompt access to services and supports (including from specialists) that meet their specific needs, wherever they live and whenever they need them
- Children and young people being supported by a workforce trained to address their specific needs (including in relation to their physical, emotional and cognitive development)
- Children and young people having access to education and information in a broad range of settings, that addresses all aspects of their health and wellbeing (i.e. not just a narrow focus on family violence and sexual violence)
- Children and young people being included and heard in plans to reunite and integrate other family members (e.g. parents and other siblings) back into their lives in ways that protect and preserve their safety
- Children and young people at the forefront of research programmes and planning, to develop a comprehensive data collection and information system disaggregated by age (and other factors) that facilitates analysis on the experiences of children and young people
- Children and young people being afforded individual agency as well as being placed at the centre of the contexts of their family and whānau groupings
- Adults in government and non-government organisations - and within the wider community – building safer homes and communities. Giving greater consideration to the environments, circumstances and attitudes which contribute to adults targeting children and young people to fulfil unhealthy sexual and abusive behaviours or actions (e.g. in their neighbourhoods and communities, through social events and on public and private transport, including taxi and ride-share services).