

COVID-19 Impact Insights Paper #7

Pacific connectedness and wellbeing in the pandemic

Summary

Being connected and valued is important to wellbeing. Connectedness, to aiga, fanau, famili, whānau, family, community, faith and culture, is particularly inherent in the key values, beliefs and practices that shape Pacific peoples experience of wellbeing.

Connectedness manifests as a focus on collective consensus, practices, needs and outcomes and is driven by clear expectations about respect, reciprocity and love and a sense of responsibility to self, others, environment and cultural protocols and practices. (Thomsen et al., 2023).

This paper¹ explores the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Pacific wellbeing, with a focus on how connectedness was both impacted by the pandemic, and a key feature in Pacific communities' responses that served to protect families and helped mitigate the challenges faced.

Pacific peoples in Aotearoa are a thriving, connected and culturally rich people despite the structural inequities and barriers to wellbeing they face.

Pacific populations are diverse, young, growing, primarily urban and increasingly born in Aotearoa. Each Pacific Island culture is unique and Pacific communities are a diverse group of people, encompassing a range of backgrounds and experiences, as well as ethnic, spiritual, religious and gender identities.

In Aotearoa, Pacific peoples experience some of the worst inequities in social determinants of health, evident in education, employment, housing and health outcomes. Despite these challenges, Pacific peoples report high levels of wellbeing and survey data shows Pacific people hold stronger community connections, bonds of trust and religious identity than the population as a whole.

¹ This paper is the seventh in a series of eight short, focused insights reports that highlight key elements of the wellbeing impacts of the pandemic in Aotearoa. For greater detail on the methodology, references, and findings of this paper, and the rest of the series, please see our website <https://www.mhwc.govt.nz/our-work/covid-19-insights/>

“We believe our collective nature is not only what we do but an integral part of who we are.” (Enari & Fa’aea, 2020), p.79)

The COVID-19 pandemic completely disrupted the way of being for Pacific peoples.

Pre-existing inequities were magnified by COVID-19, and challenges for Pacific communities further entrenched. Families experienced increased stress and anxiety from fear of COVID-19, reduced income, food insecurity and caring for vulnerable family members. They were unable to access their usual sources of support within the community, including extended families and church; and it was not possible to return to Pacific homelands or see relatives who live overseas.

In the face of these threats to wellbeing, families and communities drew on the values innate to Pacific culture and met challenges with the collective strength of Pacific relationships and connections.

“As people who cherish collective lifestyles, regularly gather in large groups, and entertain deep-seated interconnections with friends and family, our way of being has been completely disrupted by COVID-19” (Enari & Fa’aea, 2020, p.78).

Pacific communities, churches and providers used connections and networks to rapidly meet the needs of Pacific families and developed new ways of maintaining connectedness. This agility and innovation were seen throughout the pandemic and provides lessons for ways in which Pacific wellbeing can be supported, both during a crisis and more generally.

The pandemic highlighted the importance of connection, as families and communities engaged in opportunities to improve wellbeing for themselves and others

During lockdown, the importance of family vā (relationships) and being part of a collective was reconfirmed, with a renewed appreciation for life and more time for relationships with family, friends and with God. Pacific people, along with Māori, reported higher life satisfaction and family wellbeing in 2021, than in 2018.

The connectedness of Pacific communities enabled them to come together to both receive and provide support to one another and remain strong during times of social distancing and physical isolation.

“For Pacific peoples, wellbeing is holistic, and in times of crisis, the needs of others are just as important as one’s own needs: when every person is well, the entire community thrives.” (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2021, p. 20)

Understanding and supporting pan-Pacific approaches is valuable, given shared values, common interests, and cultural similarities. In the regions, and other locations where the Pacific population is lower, this is particularly helpful. However, each Pacific community is different, and where they can identify their own needs and are supported to respond appropriately, wellbeing is even better supported.

Churches and Pacific service providers had a pivotal role in supporting Pacific families and communities during the pandemic.

Faith and spirituality are key components of Pacific wellbeing, and communities are connected through faith-based networks. Church leaders supported the work of government agencies during the pandemic and were key partners in ensuring community resilience and recovery after the first lockdown.

Many churches were well prepared to respond, and lockdown provided an opportunity to transform how they did things to further support families, such as adapting digital platforms for service delivery. From the outset of the lockdowns, church, community and social events swiftly moved to online platforms, enabling people to stay connected.

“The impact of the pandemic throughout the last three years has highlighted the strength and resilience of Pacific communities and families. The ability of the Pacific community to consistently utilise local resources to respond to external threats, such as that posed by the pandemic, demonstrated a high degree of resilience, innovation and responsiveness across all communities at both regional and national levels.” (Thomsen et al., 2023, 48)

Pacific health service providers played an integral role in supporting communities throughout the pandemic, communicating with families, providing information and social, emotional and practical support.

Innovation among providers flourished as Pacific providers worked collaboratively with agencies, DHBs and public health units. Pacific providers' level of preparedness prior to COVID-19 taking hold in Aotearoa and the factors inherent within Pacific organisations, created the conditions to respond to community needs quickly, effectively and holistically.

“Pacific health providers are unique in that they are both trusted by their communities and deliver the full spectrum of outbreak management activities.” (Ministry of Health, 2021a, p.4)

Pacific providers became a bridge between the community and government agencies. High trust models enabled providers to establish flexible, adaptive responses that allowed them to better meet the needs of their communities.

We should learn from the experience of Pacific communities, to support wellbeing

Pacific communities are well connected, flexible and supportive. The pandemic highlighted that connectedness, to culture and community, is critical to Pacific wellbeing, and should be recognised and supported. As well as its intrinsic value, connectedness is an important strength of Pacific communities and is key to supporting health and wellbeing and addressing inequitable wellbeing outcomes experienced by Pacific peoples and communities in Aotearoa.

Pacific peoples need to be involved in decision-making that affects them. Pacific communities used the knowledge, resources and networks available to them to support their own wellbeing through the pandemic. Communities of belonging need to make their own choices, have resources, and be trusted to develop solutions for themselves.

It is important that government agencies recognise this, and learn from it, in designing future policies and responses. This will mean ensuring the Pacific communities and expertise are better involved in government decision-making.

Trusting and supporting Pacific organisations who know their communities will support wellbeing. Pacific peoples trust the Pacific providers that are embedded in their communities – and this trust is key to providing support.

During the pandemic, we saw how a high-trust model worked, including to support households with necessities and food, digital technology to enable connectivity, and accommodation. These high-trust models will work outside of the pandemic too, enabling communities and providers to spend more time and energy supporting local wellbeing, in a way that works for them.

More research and data is needed to better understand wellbeing. We need a comprehensive understanding of Pacific wellbeing to better inform policy, including collecting social survey data with greater granularity to understand and reflect different experiences of unique cultural and ethnic Pacific populations.

Further exploring the wellbeing impacts of the pandemic for Pacific peoples will be necessary to support ongoing wellbeing now, and to plan for future challenges to wellbeing.