



**KOI TŪ:
THE CENTRE FOR
INFORMED FUTURES**



**Koi Tū
Evidence
Summary**

Koi Tū for Te Hīringa Mahara

A summary of literature reflecting the perspectives of young people in Aotearoa on systemic factors affecting their wellbeing

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May 2023



KOI TŪ: THE CENTRE FOR INFORMED FUTURES

We are a non-partisan, transdisciplinary think tank and research centre based at the University of Auckland with associate members across Aotearoa New Zealand and the world.

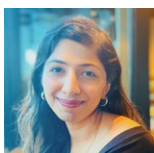
We undertake research and analysis, and generate knowledge, commentary and tools to address critical long-term national and global challenges arising from rapid and far-reaching social, economic, technological and environmental change.

Authors



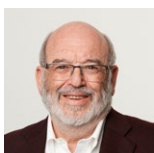
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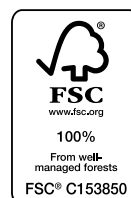


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Acknowledgements

Thanks to Research Assistant Teina Rihari for her feedback.



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FOREWORD

At Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures we are deeply concerned that subjective wellbeing is declining for young people in Aotearoa. We are focused on exploring why this is and which features of being a young person in today's world contribute to it. Answering these questions starts with an assessment of what is impacting young people's wellbeing in the modern day.

There is vast literature exploring factors that may contribute to young people's wellbeing and mental health, from around the world and here in Aotearoa. This entire body of literature is vital for understanding youth wellbeing, but it is also important to focus on some core questions. One area we share an interest in, along with the team at Te Hiringa Mahara, is what young people in Aotearoa themselves say are the core issues affecting their wellbeing.

The following limited literature review results from a collaboration between Koi Tu and Te Hiringa Mahara, during which the team at Te Hiringa Mahara contracted our team at Koi Tu to review literature from Aotearoa. This review focuses on engagements with youth and local research in which young people's voices, perspectives, and beliefs are centred. We particularly focused on what young people believe is impacting their wellbeing at a structural and systemic level, across four main themes: bleak futures, social media and digital technology, racism and discrimination, and intergenerational connection.

We refer to this as a limited literature review because of what was not part of the brief from Te Hiringa Mahara and was not reviewed. The full picture of mental health determinants is much broader and more complex than presented here; a comprehensive review would consider dimensions such as early life influences, brain development, emotional regulation, family dynamics, development of executive functions, the role of education systems, and changed sociological expectations. As such, this review should be read and interpreted as but one part of a very complex narrative.

In our separate commentary on this literature review, we explore more deeply what the review tells us, what it does not, the gaps that must be considered, and why that matters for our policy and decision makers. This commentary is available on our website at informedfutures.org/youth-mental-health-commentary.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth mental health and wellbeing is an issue of great importance to policy makers and the people of Aotearoa. However, understanding the determinants of youth mental health and wellbeing is a particularly complex task. To understand those determinants, it is important to learn about what young people themselves believe influences their mental health and wellbeing. Work exploring how young people view the determinants of youth wellbeing has been conducted within Aotearoa by ministerial groups, community organisations and researchers. A notable finding across these consultations with youth is that young people are conscious of how systemic factors influence their wellbeing. These influences often operate across many spheres: young people's broader socio-political environment; the communities they live, work, study and interact in; their whānau environments; interpersonal relationships; and internal worlds. These results suggest much can be done at a systemic level to improve outcomes for our youth, with implications for strengthening mental health, education, workforce readiness, and holistic health and safety.

Across the evidence that is available from work with youth in Aotearoa a few key issues emerge consistently. These issues, and their relation to youth wellbeing, are summarised here in four key themes: **Bleak Futures** – young people's concerns about the future in relation to COVID-19, climate change, social pressure and economic insecurity; **Social Media** – the role of social media, digital technologies and cyber safety; **Racism and Discrimination** – the impact of discrimination based on ethnicity, gender and sexuality; and **Intergenerational Connectedness** – the value of cultural and whānau connections.

Going forward, much is missing from our understanding of the determinants of youth wellbeing; there are many biological, developmental and sociological considerations that cannot be captured through these voices. It is essential to expand our knowledge base with high quality research to ensure we are capturing and responding to the full complex interplay of wellbeing determinants for young people in Aotearoa. In particular we must:

1. Promote and fund high quality research with diverse methodologies including longitudinal, critical and youth-led approaches;
2. Encourage action on key systemic factors influencing youth mental health, including poverty, housing instability, climate change and discrimination;
3. Promote research on developmental and other factors that contribute to escalating challenges for young people;
4. Prioritise research with diverse populations of young people, particularly those with disabilities, young immigrants and young people who identify within the LGBTQIA+ community;
5. Improve our understanding of how social media interacts with and affects youth wellbeing; and
6. Focus on developing nuanced, critical understandings of the complexity of youth mental health and its determinants.

INTRODUCTION: PUTTING THE DETERMINANTS OF YOUTH WELLBEING IN CONTEXT

In Aotearoa, the mental health and wellbeing of young people is consistently raised as a core issue of great importance to communities and policy makers. We continue to see rising rates of mental health challenges for our youth, including anxiety, depression and suicidal behaviour (1). As a result, many seek to understand why young people are struggling. While understanding the determinants of mental health and wellbeing is a pressing challenge, with significant implications for policy and service provision, reviewing the available evidence reveals limitations to our current understanding. As such, this literature review synthesises some of the available literature and acknowledges the limits to our current knowledge.

Given our focus on Aotearoa's youth, this review highlights findings that reflect the perspectives of young people themselves, allowing us to learn from their lived experience and better understand how determinants play out in their lives. When determining priorities and agendas for issues affecting young people, particularly issues of mental health and wellbeing, it is essential that their views are prioritised and influence decision-making (2). However, we must recognise that research provides only limited understanding of young people's worldviews, particularly when it relies on methodologies that are framed by preconceptions or operate within environments that disempower young participants.

A key limitation lies in the complexity of the determinants of wellbeing. Poor wellbeing is a 'wicked problem' – meaning the causes are many, complex and interconnected (3). Addressing a single piece of the landscape of a wicked problem may provide some positive change but is unlikely to be sufficient in isolation without sustained, systemic action across multiple determinants and influences. While it is theoretically possible to separate and examine the role of single factors influencing youth wellbeing, it is far more valuable to consider interconnections and complex relationships between and within them.

Useful approaches to conceptualising these influences and their interconnections include socio-ecological and lifespan approaches. Socio-ecological models consider interactions between determinants within different contexts and how these collectively impact wellbeing. It is generally accepted that the determinants of mental health and wellbeing reflect these nuanced interactions between factors across numerous levels, including systemic determinants and personal factors (Figure 1). Considering how systemic influences also affect young people within their communities, organisations they interact with, interpersonal relationships and personal development is vital or understanding the impacts of these systemic influences on mental wellbeing.

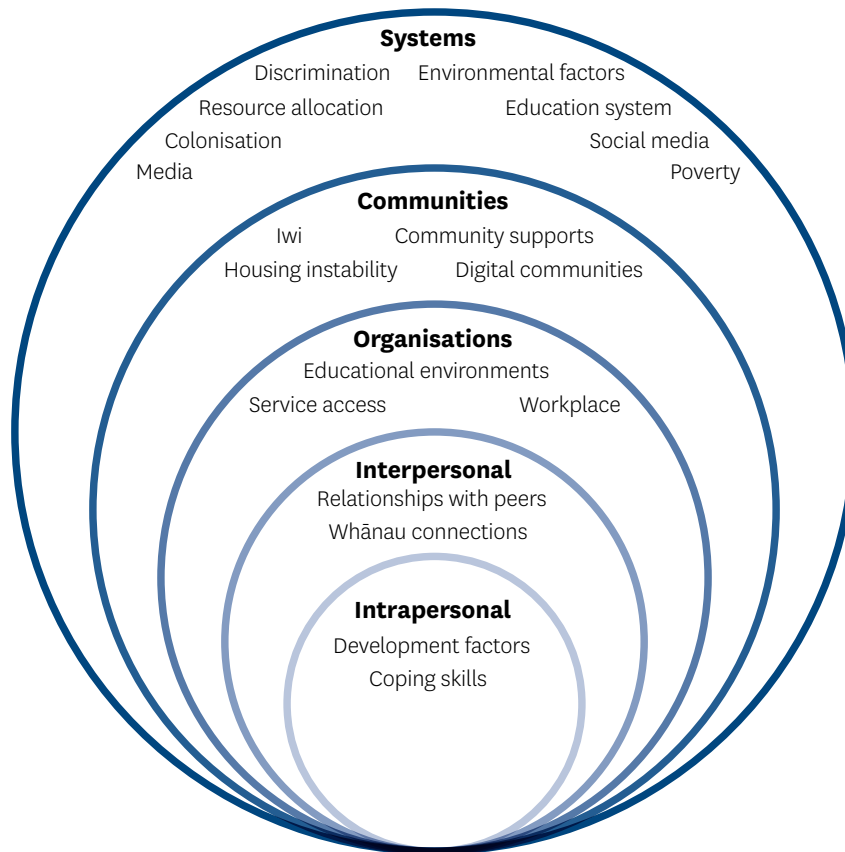


Figure 1: Socio-ecological model of mental health, based on the Ecology of Human Development (Dr Urie Bronfenbrenner)

A lifespan approach highlights the role of a person’s development and experience across time in influencing their wellbeing (Figure 2). The vast majority of mental health and wellbeing research conducted in Aotearoa has been cross-sectional rather than following individuals over time, which limits our capacity to evaluate how influences and determinants of wellbeing interact with a person’s development. This also limits our local evidence base that can guide early intervention. International research can be drawn upon to strengthen our understanding, but we should continue to explore how early experiences and development interact with contemporaneous experiences to influence young people’s mental health and wellbeing.

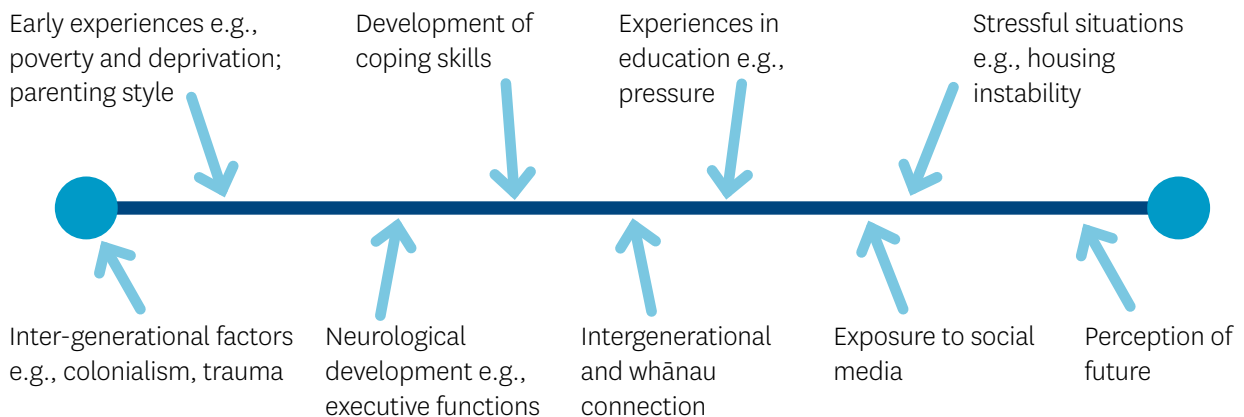


Figure 2: Example of how determinants of mental health could play out across the lifespan.

A framework from Kaupapa Māori research which can inform how we conceptualise interrelations between determinants of mental health is the Meihana model (4). This was developed for clinical assessment but can be applied to understanding systemic contexts. Within the Meihana model, influences on wellbeing are viewed as interconnected – including the connections between support networks, physical wellbeing, attachment, psychological wellbeing, physical environments and societal structures. Additionally, wellbeing is impacted by interconnected societal and historic influences including colonisation, racism, migration and marginalisation. This emphasis on the interaction between influences is central to understanding mental health and wellbeing within a Te Ao Māori worldview.

All three theoretical frameworks emphasise how determinants influence mental health in combination and across development, rather than perceiving them as operating independently at distinct time points. These framings are critical for developing a full and sophisticated model of the determinants of mental health in Aotearoa; a complex and challenging imperative.

Within this literature review, we discuss the evidence regarding how some key systemic influences impact youth mental health and wellbeing. They fall into four themes that were consistently presented by young people: perceptions of their **future as bleak**; experiences of **racism and discrimination**; **social media and digital technology**; and **inter-generational connection**. While these four issues are broadly conceptualised as systemic, these weave through many socio-ecological levels and the lifespan. For example, climate change contributes to young people's perception of their future as bleak, but it may also contribute to individuals' anxiety, and it may simultaneously cause whānau and community to experience greater stress and vulnerability. Experiencing interpersonal racism and discrimination can impact young people's mental health and wellbeing immediately and may also contribute to poorer wellbeing later in life, while systemic and structural racism may contribute to poor mental health and wellbeing through numerous mechanisms including limiting access to high-quality services.

It is impossible and likely meaningless to attempt to detach our understanding of these determinants of youth mental health and wellbeing from both their broader socio-ecological contexts, or their more individualised interpersonal impacts. Rather, we must consciously consider how each of these influences plays out across these socio-ecological spheres and the temporal dynamics of these in association with development. Throughout this evidence brief, we invite you to consider not only the individual impacts of each of the themes we will discuss, but also the ways in which these may (and do) influence each other. Additionally, while we focus on young people's perspectives of their mental health and wellbeing and, therefore current impacts observed cross-sectionally, we also encourage consideration of how these influences interact with development.

Scope

Within this literature review, we primarily present evidence derived from research conducted within Aotearoa New Zealand. While international research can be instrumental in informing our understanding of wellbeing, much of this literature was beyond the scope of this review. In addition to research identified by the Te Hiringa Mahara team which fell within this scope, the Koi Tū team have included some limited academic literature identified through keyword searches. This review does not reflect a complete literature review of all available evidence on the determinants of youth wellbeing.

THEME 1: BLEAK FUTURES

The first theme emerging from consultation with young people is the impact of the socio-political environment, and particularly young people's perception of their futures as bleak within this context, on wellbeing. Young people in New Zealand consistently report feeling worried about the future in the face of major societal challenges, alongside their individual concerns around navigating social and economic hardship in uncertain times (5-7). In discussing which issues they would like to see addressed in New Zealand, young people overwhelmingly specified the impact of issues on future generations as their primary concern (8). Many expressed a bleak outlook on the future, including feeling that their generation is set to inherit a broken world due to the actions and inaction of previous generations on important social, economic and environmental issues (5, 9). This perspective is likely to be associated with hopelessness, helplessness, distress and anxiety, all of which directly impact mental health and wellbeing.

COVID-19 and lockdown effects on mental health and wellbeing

Youth have been greatly affected by the pandemic over the last two years, having undergone considerable disruption to their daily lives. That has impacted on schooling, work and important relationships. Given the significant adjustments required and changes to day-to-day activity, researchers have begun to ask whether and how the pandemic and its mitigation strategies have impacted youth wellbeing. This research suggests considerable variation in young people's experiences of COVID-19 and lockdown.

Responses from youth during the first year of the pandemic suggest lockdown had benefits for selected young people's wellbeing, related to having more free time to connect with important people at home and to engage in hobbies and self-care activities (10, 11). Among respondents from higher decile schools, young people who reported having positive experiences of lockdown generally had good relationships with family (12). Respondents felt they had benefited from having more quality time to spend with whānau who would otherwise be working away from home, and that their relationships with their caregivers had improved during lockdown. Youth identifying as Māori, Pacific or as having a disability were more likely to think life was better or much better during COVID-19 lockdown. Thus, for these young people the early COVID-19 lockdowns may have been somewhat beneficial or protective to wellbeing.

Research on the wider effects of COVID-19 on youth in New Zealand suggests an overall negative impact on young people's mental wellbeing and sense of security (7, 11). Stress and anxiety were the most affected among respondents, greatly compounding mental health concerns among young people of all ages. For many, confinement and social distancing measures significantly limited engagement in learning and opportunities for socialisation, resulting in high levels of stress, anxiety and loneliness (7). The lack of face-to-face interactions may have impacted their ability to develop healthy relationships that are protective for mental health and resilience (13). Access to health services and educational support for certain groups of young people were also compromised (13).

There were noticeable differences in reported wellbeing across certain demographic groups, with youth from LGBTQI+ and refugee backgrounds reporting less life satisfaction during lockdown. Youth experiencing financial uncertainty due to the pandemic and rising costs of living also expressed feeling especially anxious about lockdown (7). Despite the lifting of restrictions across the country, many young people are still struggling to cope with adjusting to a 'post-covid' normal, particularly as the pandemic has laid bare and, in some instances, reinforced pre-existing social and economic disparities. Since the pandemic, concern about the ability of political institutions and society to deal with crises has remained high among adolescents transitioning into young adulthood, particularly in relation to issues of climate change (7, 19).

Research to date around the impacts of COVID-19 remains limited. There is a need to explore the broader implications of the pandemic on young people from marginalised backgrounds, including closer examination of risk and protective factors for adolescent wellbeing.

Climate change and the environment

New Zealand's natural environment has always been important to its young people. Research undertaken with New Zealand youth finds that they greatly appreciate the country's cleanliness, low levels of crowdedness and the beauty of local scenery (6, 8). Youth have described living in the presence of nature as being restorative for their emotional health (6, 14). Adolescent youth perceived that people's wellbeing and the health of the natural world are intrinsically linked, and reported that their mental health improves when they actively engage in environmental stewardship, often describing this as taking joy in caring for the environment (6, 8, 14). Across ages, youth have highlighted that living in a country where people actively care about the environment is one of the best things about being in New Zealand (8). This evidence gathered from collaborations with young people suggests that Aotearoa's natural environment, and being involved in caring for it, may be protective of their mental health and wellbeing.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, evidence from collaborations with young people indicated that climate change and the environment were among the most significant concerns for rangatahi across age groups. Young people continually reiterated that ongoing protection of the natural environment needs to be a central focus for New Zealand across different areas, including waste management, ensuring the protection of our native flora and fauna, and improving the quality of our waters (8). Young people often indicated taking a lot of pride in New Zealand's natural environment, but they also expressed serious concern that society is not doing enough to protect the natural environment or the planet. Secondary school-aged youth and young adults explicitly conveyed feeling anxious and stressed due to lack of action on climate change, and other environmental issues (6). Many wanted more ambitious action on sustainability in New Zealand, including stronger commitments from government and the agricultural industry on reducing greenhouse gas emissions (6, 15, 16). Young people emphasised that they wanted the government to take a stronger hand in implementing sustainable approaches to the management of New Zealand's natural resources, including improving laws, regulations and policies to ensure the kaitiakitanga of the environment for future generations (9).

These issues continue to be a priority for young people (16-18). High-priority environmental concerns for New Zealand youth include plastic build-up and the pollution of local water bodies (19). Young people also identify the importance of indigenous knowledge in guiding sustainable management of Aotearoa's environment. At a practical level, youth express this as ensuring environmental management strategies are underpinned by Te Tiriti principles, and that these strategies are led, designed and implemented by iwi for the benefit of the community at large (9, 16, 17). Young people describe wanting sustainable solutions designed for communities, not individuals. These solutions include low-emissions homes that have rainwater tanks, space to grow kai, access to public transport and public green spaces, and are within a 15-minute bike or walk to work and shops (9). There is growing awareness of the existential threat posed by climate change among younger demographics, accompanied by a belief that adults have all the power to change things yet choose to do nothing because they are major beneficiaries of the status quo (5, 9). In a recent emissions reduction plan consultation undertaken by the Ministry for the Environment, a high proportion of young people held the view that government climate change engagement no longer felt meaningful to them. Many believed that the government have planned to respond to climate change for long enough and were now actively avoiding implementing the necessary changes (9).

Many young people continue to feel deep distress about the lack of measurable action on environmental issues they know will affect their generation in the long-term. Collaborations with youth indicate that concerns for the environment have impacted their mental health and wellbeing both before and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, including by increasing their experiences of anxiety and broader threats to safety. Young people continually stated that they believe they have less choice and autonomy than adults to influence important decisions around climate change, despite being most at risk of the consequences of today's policies (15, 16). In their view, the current decision-making powers held by youth are not proportionate to the future burden of responsibility they will face. There is therefore a sense of hopelessness and helplessness associated with this combination of limited political power and high future responsibility.

Young people are also concerned about how the current situation will impact the individual choices they are able to make in the future. For example, in selected consultations with young adults, several respondents reported feeling anxious and unsure about having children in the current climate and discussed whether it was responsible to have a large family given the 'waste' associated with it (9). Stronger political action and greater involvement of youth in determining environmental agendas could benefit youth wellbeing. More research is needed to understand how this may impact on diverse populations of youth, as well as how environmental action influences wellbeing.

Economic insecurity

Research undertaken before 2020 highlights that New Zealand youth have held concerns around economic security since well before the pandemic (15, 20). Ensuring that all members of society can achieve a good standard of living (including access to healthy food and affordable healthcare) ranks as highly important to children and young people across demographics (8). In recent years, young people have expressed awareness and concern about the cycle of generational poverty impacting on communities in New Zealand. This has generally been expressed as a desire to see policies implemented that further a more equitable wealth distribution to alleviate material hardship across society (6, 15, 16). A 'fairer economy' with a better welfare system, low cost of living and more financial freedom has been frequently raised in research with young people when discussing what they would want to see changed in society to support their happiness and wellbeing (6). There is also consensus among youth about the importance of providing quality, affordable housing catering to the population's diverse needs (6, 8).

Consistent with international literature on indigenous youth, research undertaken with rangatahi Māori in New Zealand highlights how conditions of economic insecurity can constrain the ways in which Māori youth view themselves in relation to the future. In one study, urban rangatahi Māori directly expressed their fears in terms of the experience of social and economic precarity (21). Most were focused on gaining employment and adequate income to avoid poverty and secure stable housing. In the same study, participants described deeply held fears and feelings of hopelessness in relation to being incarcerated, falling into poverty and losing custody of their children. A common worry was becoming inadvertently caught up in the criminal justice system, and many spoke about being afraid of the looming threat of prison and encountering the police. In other work undertaken with rangatahi Māori, youth who had interacted with the justice system discussed giving up on others because they felt many others had given up on them instead of providing them with opportunities to step up (22). They felt as though society had no expectations of them or that they were expected to make bad choices and eventually fail. These experiences of hopelessness and fear about the future are associated with a direct negative impact on wellbeing and can have wide-reaching implications for community engagement and

wellbeing. In general, rangatahi Māori hopes for the future were focused on addressing the immediate concerns of everyday material hardship and avoiding punitive systems, rather than broader aspirations that could lead towards hopeful future trajectories. Participating rangatahi Māori viewed themselves as having limited control or choice over their lives, which impacted on the way they were living in the present as well as their ability to envision potential futures (21). In the same study, the hopes of young Pacific participants were focused on advancing the economic good of their collective community, relating mainly to gaining good employment in order to provide for their future families, repaying their parents for the sacrifices made to give them a better life, and addressing the social needs of their communities. Compared to rangatahi Māori, the future fears of Pacific youth covered a broad range of domestic and global issues, including anxieties about natural disasters, and local and international politics. This suggests that diverse populations of young people may have different fears about the future, which impact their mental health and wellbeing distinctly, and relate to their experiences within and associated expectations of their social and political environment.

While these issues were clearly present in the perspectives of youth prior to 2020, since the COVID-19 pandemic young people have generally indicated they are more concerned about issues that were not previously at the forefront of their mind, specifically around their future prospects and the state of the society at large (13). Findings from the 2021 State of the Generation report found stress, employment, anxiety and economic uncertainty have worsened for young adults in association with the pandemic. The impacts of the pandemic on mental health have been strongly linked to future employment and job worries among young people in the 16–24-year age group, particularly for those working or transitioning to work. For youth in the 13–15-year age group, schooling and education ranked as the biggest issues to have worsened as a result of the pandemic. This evidence suggests that young people may be experiencing greater uncertainty, anxiety and stress related to their futures since the pandemic – with significant implications for their wellbeing.

Standard of living, access to services, financial security and housing stability are all associated with wellbeing of both communities and individuals. When youth live within a system of economic insecurity, this effects the support available to them within their community and their whānau and it introduces additional vulnerability and risk factors. The stress associated with financial insecurity is likely to have impacts on individual young people's emotional health. Young people, particularly rangatahi Māori, may also feel their futures are constrained by economic insecurity and associated social outcomes. As such, action on economic security is likely to have broad impacts both directly and indirectly on improving youth wellbeing in Aotearoa.

Stress and pressure

Young people describe feeling immense pressure to succeed, which they connect to meeting the expectations of family, social media and society (5, 7). While young people across demographics report stress due to educational pressures, some findings indicate this is especially so for rangatahi Māori, Pacific youth and younger teens (23). In selected engagements with youth across the country, Pacific children, as well as recent migrants and former refugees, discussed the pressure of family expectations (22). Many recognised the hardship their parents endured and endure in order to support them to access higher education with the hope of securing well-paid, stable employment and felt compelled to work hard to meet their expectations. Children and young people living in poverty felt pressured to look after their younger siblings due to their parents having to work long hours. Youth largely recognised that this pressure has a huge impact on their wellbeing and felt it ultimately impairs their ability to make good decisions. As a solution, they described wanting education designed for holistic success that goes beyond traditional measures of achievement (15, 20).

In a series of hui undertaken with young people to explore the enablers and barriers to students successfully transitioning to life after school, secondary school-aged youth and school leavers overwhelmingly reported that they felt confused and stressed about the decisions they saw as necessary for a good life following school (20). Many were often excited about the prospects of life beyond school, but they discussed fear of making the wrong choices, feeling ill-prepared, and as a result lacking confidence in their capacity to navigate life as a young adult. Young people wanted to be better supported in developing independence, resilience, confidence and critical thinking abilities to stand them in good stead for life outside school (15, 16).

General feedback from youth around education in New Zealand highlights the importance of developing a modern curriculum centred on students' diverse needs, including health and wellbeing programmes, financial literacy and civics education (8). On the whole, youth reported wanting a better balance of academic and creative subjects in their schooling with the aim of developing practical 'life-ready' skills alongside a theoretical knowledge base (17). Secondary school-aged youth and school leavers have reported a disconnection between schools, tertiary providers and employers, which seems to make it more difficult for students to transition out of the school environment (20).

The results of these engagements with youth suggest that we may be able to help mitigate the impact on wellbeing of stress and pressure associated with education and transitioning out of it by supporting young people in the education system to develop skills which can foster and facilitate this transition.

Civic engagement

Despite continued fear and anxiety about the lack of political impetus on issues important to their generation, rising numbers of young people are motivated to engage in civic action in order to influence decision-making at the highest levels. Youth are attuning to the idea that what is global is local and are increasingly influenced to participate in grassroots activism through international movements fronted by high-profile youth advocates such as Greta Thunberg. Across the country, young people are using social media to network and mobilise for various social causes, and there has been significant engagement among young people in local advocacy, including the 2021 School Strike 4 Climate, which was the largest mass climate protest movement in New Zealand. These opportunities for collective action have provided a platform for young people to connect and build community amongst each other. They have also enabled youth to have space to engage in leadership in ways that feel authentic to who they are (24).

In a Better Futures report released in 2020, 60% of secondary school-aged youth surveyed reported being interested in politics, while 70% held the belief that politicians do not take notice of young people's concerns. Young people emphasised that they want further opportunities for leadership in the civic and community spheres, which includes being respected and acknowledged for their contributions to decision-making (8, 15). For this to work effectively, youth wanted engagement in political decision-making to be more accessible and transparent, for better civics education in schools, and for the voting age to be lowered to at least 16 years of age (8, 15, 16, 24, 25). The youth-led Make it 16 Campaign highlights the importance of voting rights to secondary school-age youth, who see it as vital that they hold a democratic voice as a generation that will be most affected by the decisions of today (26). The campaign argues that there is insufficient justification to stop 16-year-olds from voting when they are legally able to drive, work full time and pay tax, and that lowering the voting age will also encourage decision-makers to consider the interests of rangatahi when addressing the communities they serve (15).

While youth in New Zealand have demonstrated increased commitment to understanding and engaging in democratic processes (19% in 2019 vs. 8% in 2018), they often described feeling like their opinions

are not heard and valued, despite having a higher stake in the future of New Zealand (8, 27). It is likely that promoting youth empowerment and agency through political action and civic engagement may counter experiences of hopelessness and helplessness. As such, an important research avenue is understanding how mechanisms like these may be able to support wellbeing when the future is perceived as bleak.

Importantly, perceptions of the future as bleak can potentially influence wellbeing in a number of ways. It is associated with community and whānau instability; limited access to resources; and several emotional states associated with poor wellbeing including anxiety, stress, helplessness and hopelessness. Within Aotearoa we must improve our understanding of how our socio-political environmental context and perceptions of this impacts youth wellbeing over time.

THEME 2: SOCIAL MEDIA, DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND SAFETY ONLINE

The second theme arising from consultation with young people is the impact of social media, technology and digital safety on their wellbeing. Social media and digital spaces are part of the fabric of many young people's everyday lives. They appear to function as an accelerator of social dynamics, some of which are beneficial and others harmful for youth wellbeing. This may be determined largely by the nature of use of these platforms, rather than use in and of itself. New Zealand youth are active and frequent participants in digital spaces, using online media at a rate that is higher than the OECD average and one of the highest in the world (28, 29). The prevalence and influence of digital tools and devices in the everyday lives of young people merits close attention, particularly in relation to the challenges and risks of these technologies for youth in New Zealand and their wellbeing.

Social media and digital spaces: An inconclusive picture

While social media and digital technologies play a key role in mediating relationships and shaping social experiences among young people, literature to date paints an inconclusive picture of their effects on children and young people's mental health (30). Some findings suggest that adolescents with either very low or excessive internet usage are more likely to report negative wellbeing and depressive symptoms, but the specific conditions under which these online behaviours transpire as well as other influencing factors are not well explained (31).

While the use of social media and online platforms can expose youth to content that may adversely impact wellbeing, the same interfaces can also support young people positively to find community, learn coping skills and access mental health support (32, 33). Some work undertaken in New Zealand found that rainbow-identifying youth see social media as a way to establish real-life connections, such as with other youth in their community, and find in-person events to attend (34). For these youth, it was important to have online spaces free from homophobia and transphobia where they were able to express themselves. Research undertaken with New Zealand youth has indicated that digital environments can enable those who may not seek face-to-face support to express their distress online (35).

Other findings observe that online spaces can provide youth with places of comfort and safety where they are free to be independent and express themselves (24). Community connection and a sense of belonging that can be fostered in these digital spaces can be protective for mental health and wellbeing. Young people have frequently raised how social media can serve as a way for them to learn and discuss issues that interest them, as well as participate in civic engagement, such as through submissions, petitions and social media communications (8).

Online spaces have been found to facilitate positive support behaviours among youth. Research has shown that youth commonly respond to peers in distress with encouragement, offers to talk and practical assistance, suggesting that social media has the potential to provide young people with immediate access to support as well as to assist in building relational empathy skills (32). Participants in one New Zealand study demonstrated high levels of emotional intelligence and maturity in relation to supportive interactions online, which included being cognisant of their own wellbeing and safety needs as well as those of others (35). Overall, these findings suggest that informal peer interactions online have great potential for supporting youth wellbeing.

Paradoxically, social media can help young people feel connected to their peers while simultaneously exacerbating feelings of mental distress, isolation and anxiety (5). Recent findings from the 2021 State

of the Generation report highlight that social media in relation to mental health is a top concern for children and young people across age and demographic groups in New Zealand (7, 33). Young people described feeling easily influenced by social media and cited experiences in relation to their use of online platforms such as cyberbullying, digital addiction, negative social comparisons and online exploitation. Many identify the issue of digital addiction as prevalent among their peers and highlighted this as a serious problem for their generation (5). For some youth, the adverse effects of online social media were connected to their physical health, for instance in relation to screen use affecting the quality of their sleep or taking away from time they would have otherwise spent exercising, both of which can influence mental wellbeing. Young people also talked about how excess screen time can limit the time they spend with friends and family, and therefore impact their ability to maintain connections with others and the significant relationships in their lives (5).

These mixed findings on social media and digital technology highlighted the importance of taking a nuanced stance on these technologies and remaining open to how they can be and are both helpful and harmful for the wellbeing of our youth. Greater attention is needed to establish the specific mechanisms by which type of content and patterns of use may be associated with mental health and wellbeing, particularly how these interact with other risk factors and the potential developmental impacts on younger users.

Online pornography

Discussions with children and teenagers highlight the complex nature of young people's engagement with online pornography. While pornography was often connected to feelings of enjoyment, relaxation and stress relief among youth, many young people also reported feeling upset, sad and uncomfortable when engaging with porn. Some findings identify problematic patterns of behaviour in relation to consumption for young people, especially in managing pornography usage (5, 36). International evidence indicates that online consumers are especially susceptible to the artificial intelligence algorithms used on commercial websites that are designed to escalate the viewing of more intensely arousing pornographic content (37). Consistent with this, the content young people in New Zealand typically report consuming involves frequent depictions of violence, domination and non-consensual sexual activity, most often directed at women and individuals presenting as female (36, 38). In New Zealand research undertaken with young men around their relationship to pornography, few participants questioned how the themes reflected in extreme content could be at odds with the ethics of consent, respect and equal gender relations (38). Notably, pornography is the primary way many young people learn about sex and sexual pleasure (36). Some young people noted how pornography is a useful and positive learning tool that can help them alleviate feelings of anxiety and pressure around not knowing what to do in a sexual context with a partner. Young people also conveyed feeling as though porn helps them accept that their sexual desires are not unnatural or immoral.

However, New Zealand research has also indicated that the vast majority of young people believe that pornography can adversely impact people's attitudes and behaviours (36). Many young people felt that porn encourages false expectations and unhealthy beliefs that negatively influence real-life experiences of sex and relationships. Girls were especially critical of mainstream porn, which they viewed as centring on male perspectives of sexual satisfaction at the expense of female pleasure. They felt that mainstream porn often lacked boundaries around consent and led to beliefs among young people that overstated the importance of sex in a relationship. Girls also discussed the ways in which porn could influence heightened feelings of body dissatisfaction and trigger mental distress, particularly around disordered eating. They were also aware of how pornography could lead to them oversexualising themselves on a daily basis out of a pressure to 'look sexy' like individuals in pornography.

Findings from New Zealand research suggest that young girls are navigating unique social pressures to produce and disseminate explicit images of themselves (39). Both boys and girls raised issues of objectification and sexual double standards pertaining to the sharing of nudes online, agreeing that girls usually faced greater judgement and shaming for doing so compared to their male peers (38, 39).

Evidence suggests that for young people in Aotearoa, the availability of online pornography has the potential to negatively impact their wellbeing through harm to relationships, sexual health, personal safety, and expectations and beliefs – but may also have benefits for reducing anxiety and normalising sexual desire. At present, we have little to no understanding of how these impacts play out over time, interact with development, or influence other areas such as social connection and interpersonal relationships. We also lack understanding of how online pornography impacts the wellbeing of gender diverse young people within Aotearoa. Within the New Zealand context, there is scope to further review how online technologies are affecting young people's development in important life domains related to relationships, sexual health and wellbeing.

Recent work with young people in New Zealand showed that youth with a long-term limiting health issue or disability reported the strongest dependence on pornography (36). They were four times as likely to view pornography to help with sadness or depression but more than twice as likely to be upset and almost three times as likely to feel sad or unhappy when consuming it. These results suggest complex unexplored links between pornography dependence and unmet wellbeing needs among youth with long-term illnesses and disabilities. Concerningly, youth with long-term health issues or disabilities were also found to be more vulnerable to being pressured into viewing pornography and more likely than their peers to report involvement in re-enacting it. Young people with long term illnesses and disabilities may be particularly vulnerable to the harmful impacts of online pornography, and greater attention is needed to understand this and how best to minimise the potential consequences.

Self-image

Young people indicate that a significant issue for them is that social media impacts how they view themselves in relation to other people, which often results in negative social comparisons that affect their self-esteem, self-image and secureness (5). Youth have commonly discussed how the intensity of high and often impossible expectations to perform or achieve success causes feelings of distress and overwhelm (7, 20). Some youth connected this to feeling like they are in competition with other youth (6). They noted that this can compound the stress they experience with school, family and work, as well as within their peer groups (7).

Youth generally recognised this online environment can fuel negative body image and body shaming as well as unhealthy behaviours, particularly around eating (6, 15). They identified that they are affected by societal expectations, often intensified in their online social circles, but ultimately want to be comfortable in themselves and feel valued for who they are, rather than being pressured into looking or being a certain way (15). In consultations, youth discussed having to abstain from social media due to anxiety around body image that was connected to the pressure to attain and showcase a specific body ideal that they are exposed to online (6). However, the extent of these impacts, including the degree to which they influence self-image and eating behaviours, is relatively unexplored in the New Zealand context. International scholarship provides strong evidence for the impacts of peer influence on the epidemic of disordered eating behaviours in westernised societies, particularly among young people (40). Recent findings from work undertaken with Australian youth of all genders finds clear association between the use of social media and the prevalence of disordered eating behaviours starting at an early age (41).

There are some preliminary New Zealand-based findings that link negative self-image and social media. Instagram, one of the most widely used media sharing platforms, was found to be the platform affecting body image most negatively, followed by Facebook and Snapchat (42). Research also suggests issues of body image are gendered within Aotearoa, affecting girls and young women more than boys and young men (42, 43). In a 2018 Youth Wellbeing survey, almost half of the youth participants surveyed chose 'body image' as one of their biggest concerns, with 82% of the respondents who chose 'body image' as a major concern identifying as female (6). One recent study undertaken in New Zealand found that young girls overwhelmingly felt that pop culture through social media influenced them in some way and associated this with feeling immense pressure to look good in real life as well as online (44).

Most of these findings are based on limited empirical evidence. There is a notable lack of research around body dissatisfaction and young males in New Zealand, which may warrant further inquiry given the rise of gym culture and fitness communities among young people online. The prevalence and ubiquity of these communities online may intersect with pressures faced by young men to conform to masculine body ideals (38, 45).

Bullying and unwanted communication

Online bullying is often cited as a particularly pervasive issue among youth, particularly as harmful behaviours can follow someone everywhere they go, rather than being restricted to one environment. School-aged youth have frequently cited cyberbullying as a significant issue for them, and this appeared to be more prevalent among the 13–15-year age demographic (5, 6, 22, 46). Social media plays a hand in exposing minority youth to discriminatory and often anonymised abuse (47). Young people identifying as part of the LGBTIQ+ community frequently mentioned online bullying (7). Rangatahi Māori and Pacific youth reported bullying as one of biggest issues for them, with especially high cyberbullying rates for rangatahi Māori (7). Experiences of bullying among tamariki and rangatahi Māori are linked to racism (22). Importantly, experiences of bullying intersect with other vulnerabilities including discrimination, which can directly impact upon young people's wellbeing.

A recent report showed that around 70% of teens in New Zealand reported experiencing at least one type of unwanted digital communication in the past year, most often through social media (48). This most commonly involved being contacted by a stranger or inadvertently being exposed to inappropriate content online. Māori, Pacific and female-identifying teens were more likely to report receiving unwanted digital communications. It is important to note that not all instances of unwanted online contact result in mental harm or distress, but nearly twenty percent of New Zealand teens recently reported that unwanted digital communication has negatively impacted on their everyday activities (48). These responses and the emotions they evoke in affected youth also appear to be gendered, with more girls reporting feeling insecure, anxious, unsafe and shocked. Girls were also at a greater risk of emotional distress and harm to the extent that they were unable to carry on with normal life or participate online as they ordinarily would. This is likely to have a direct impact on mental health and wellbeing, and may also influence how young people interact with peers and their broader communities. Little is known about the longitudinal impact of digital victimisation on young people's wellbeing within Aotearoa.

Youth have reflected a range of experiences, competencies, attitudes and behaviours in relation to online safety and digital harm. Some survey findings suggest that youth with disabilities report less knowledge regarding online safety, which may put them at risk (29).

In general, youth tend to disagree on whether protective measures such as internet restrictions help them or support their wellbeing. Some state that being subject to online media controls would frustrate

them and they would view this as an infringement on their independence and privacy (29). Given the mixed nature of responses to protective measures, there is currently no clear evidence-based approach for responding to the role social media and digital technology play in youth wellbeing.

We need a comprehensive review of how young people use these technologies, the kinds of content consumed, the impacts and mechanisms of these, how these intersect with other vulnerabilities, and the developmental impacts of social media use. A review of this kind could help us understand how these technologies can be both helpful and harmful. Importantly, young people are deeply attuned to the potential harms and impacts of social media as well as how it can provide a supportive and engaging community. As such, any decision-makers working to influence policy on social media and digital technology should consult young people to ensure the challenges being addressed are consistent with the concerns of youth.

THEME 3: RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION

The third theme arising from consultations with young people is related to the impact of discrimination and racism on their wellbeing. Across consultations, young people connected interpersonal experiences of racism and discrimination to broader, structural-level causes. For example, they identified institutionalised racism as the root cause of prejudice, alongside inequitable distribution of resources and lack of understanding about diversity in Aotearoa (6, 15, 49). Within this theme we therefore capture how both individual experiences of discrimination and structural and systemic discrimination impact wellbeing from young people's perspectives.

Racism as a determinant of wellbeing

Rangatahi Māori, Pasifika and youth from ethnic minority backgrounds (Asian, African, Middle Eastern, Latin American) experience markedly poorer mental health and wellbeing compared to Pākehā and European youth (50, 51). Racism is well established as a key determinant of adverse population mental health for indigenous and ethnic minorities globally. Research in New Zealand finds that self-reported experiences of racial and ethnic discrimination are strongly associated with a range of poor health outcomes, as well as reduced access to and quality of healthcare (53-55). New Zealand longitudinal research also demonstrates a strong link between important mental health indicators (psychological distress and the likelihood of a diagnosed chronic mental health condition) and a range of measures of racism, including physical and verbal attacks, unfair treatment at work and housing discrimination (54).

In response to these trends, researchers have increasingly focused on understanding the impact of societal systems on health in addition to individual-level risk factors, thereby considering structural-level explanations for poor health and wellbeing among youth from minority backgrounds in New Zealand. This report draws on Alvidrez and Tabor's (2021) work in defining structural discrimination as "macro-level societal conditions that limit opportunities, resources, and well-being of less privileged groups on the basis of race/ethnicity and/or other statuses, including but not limited to, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability status, social class or socioeconomic status (SES), religion, geographic residence, national origin, immigration status, limited English proficiency, physical characteristics, or health conditions."

Youth perspectives on discrimination in New Zealand

On the whole, children and young people have ranked diversity as one of the best things about living in New Zealand and discuss the different cultures that make up New Zealand society as being enriching for communities (8). However, since 2014, young people have increasingly highlighted racism as one of the biggest issues facing their generation (37% in 2021 compared with 23% in 2014) (7). They consistently expressed deep concern about the prevalence of racism and other forms of discrimination in Aotearoa, identifying the impacts of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and ableism in their communities and media (5, 15, 49). Youth also described how commonplace racism is in Aotearoa and the significant impacts discrimination has on their day-to-day lives, including at school, in employment and in their community. The direct psychological distress of these experiences has significant implications for wellbeing, even before considering their far-reaching ramifications.

New Zealand research highlights concerning patterns in the way minority youth describe their personal experiences of being treated by peers and adults in their communities, starting at a very young age. Racism has generally been linked to the personal experiences of tamariki and rangatahi Māori, and to children and young people from Pacific, refugee and ethnic minority backgrounds (22). This frequently

involved being bullied and subject to demeaning stereotypes due to their ethnicity. Findings from the New Zealand context also highlight experiences of discrimination and interpersonal racism among minority youth based on physical appearance (52). Compared to Pākehā or minorities perceived as white, young people perceived as Māori, Middle Eastern, Latin American or African reported higher levels of discrimination by teachers, health providers and the police. They are also at a greater risk of bullying due to their ethnicity compared to racialised migrants perceived as white and those who are Pākehā.

Children understand what it means to be included and excluded on the basis of difference, including how this looks and what it makes them feel. In a series of consultations undertaken with children and youth across the country, being of a different ethnicity was the most common reason given for children/tamariki being treated differently in a negative sense, ranging from a lack of understanding to overt racism (46). However, class differences were also reported: children/tamariki from higher socio-economic status families expressed that they felt they were more likely to be treated preferentially on the basis of class, including access to better opportunities, and that other people would also have higher expectations of them and their abilities (46). In comparison, children/tamariki from lower socio-economic backgrounds discussed feeling stigmatised and expected to fail, as well as being treated more harshly for wrongdoings compared to their high-status peers.

Across consultative engagements, youth overwhelmingly expressed wanting an end to oppression and discrimination of all kinds in New Zealand (6, 8, 15, 17, 56). They expressed that they understand how discrimination results in a range of negative social experiences for affected minority groups, including isolation, stigma and social alienation, as well as underrepresentation in wider society. Acceptance in relation to different kinds of diversities, including ethnicity, culture, gender and sexual identity, have commonly been identified as important for wellbeing among children and young people of different age groups and demographics (5, 7, 22, 46, 57). Young people described wanting to be accepted by their whānau, peer groups and communities for who they are, but also for who they want to be (22). They also discussed wanting adults with professional backgrounds — including teachers, health workers, police officers and social workers — to be more accepting of them during interactions (22). Acceptance and a sense of belonging are likely to have positive ramifications for youth wellbeing, in addition to the reduction of harm to wellbeing associated with reduced experiences of discrimination.

A common theme addressed by youth was the need for suitable support services for youth of diverse backgrounds. Rainbow youth feared being discriminated against by mental health providers and expressed concern about providers' lack of knowledge (6, 56, 58). They expressed that their families, peers, teachers and support services do not understand or respond to them appropriately (6). Students from low income neighbourhoods, low decile schools and rural areas, as well as rangatahi Māori, Asian and Pacific youth were more likely to report difficulty accessing health services compared to Pākehā youth (59, 60). Support services need to be accessible to diverse groups of youth, taking into consideration the intersections of culture, language, ethnicity, ability and other salient identities (61). Inadequate provision of appropriate services, particularly for our most vulnerable young people, is a critical issue for youth mental health and wellbeing.

Young people recognise that racism and other forms of prejudice influence decision-making in institutions that can significantly influence the lives of diverse youth: different levels of government, workplaces and places of education. In their view, the solution is to fundamentally change institutions that hold the most political and economic power in society, including government agencies, the justice system, businesses and the media (6, 49, 62). These consultations with young people capture how institutional prejudice has broad ramifications for wellbeing and quality of life. This highlights the

importance of addressing these determinants at the institutional level to improve youth wellbeing in terms of less interpersonal discrimination, a greater sense of belonging and safety, and improved access to high-quality and appropriate services.

Experiences of rangatahi Māori and Pacific youth

Racism can intersect with other forms of structural discrimination, such as poverty, to adversely impact on health among minority groups. It is widely accepted that present day ethnic inequities in New Zealand have largely been instated and reinforced through European colonisation, affecting the distribution of and access to material resources for indigenous communities – such as income, land assets, employment and housing – which cumulatively impact on health status and mortality across generations (63). Hobbs et al. (2019) describe these upstream drivers of structural health inequities as part of a broader discriminatory societal context that is biased against indigenous peoples in New Zealand, reflected in principles such as the colonial basis of dominant culture, as well as prevailing economic, political and legal systems built around European worldviews and way of life.

In addition to material deprivation, Māori and Pacific youth continue to be impacted by institutional and interpersonal racism on the basis of cultural attitudes stemming from colonial-era beliefs. Both forms of racism have a significant effect on mental health outcomes: analysis of national survey data from the mid-2000s suggest that the combination of deprivation and discrimination account for significant health disparities between Māori and Pākehā/Europeans (53, 64). Findings from the Youth19 survey undertaken with secondary school students in New Zealand indicate that emotional and mental wellbeing declined noticeably between 2012 and 2019 among rangatahi Māori and Pacific young people, consistent with worsening trends for the general Māori and Pacific populations overall (65). Other recent findings from the Youth19 surveys highlight distinct differences in reported wellbeing and discrimination among rangatahi Māori based on physical appearance (52). Among rangatahi Māori, those perceived as white had better social and interpersonal experiences, and this perception mattered more than whether they were from high income backgrounds. Rangatahi Māori and Pacific young people also face a higher risk of violence and are more likely to be vulnerable to risky health behaviours, which exposes them to a greater risk of psychological harm (66, 67).

Rangatahi Māori are exposed to high levels of racism. They have frequently described how stereotypes present a barrier to them being able to be their best selves as Māori without judgement (22, 68). Some findings highlight how Māori and Pacific children and young people view ‘the system’ as impacting their ability to achieve a good life (22). For these youth, ‘the system’ generally meant state institutions, including Oranga Tamariki, the police, health providers and WINZ, as well as places of education (22, 69). They described being mistreated and feeling let down by the important adults in their life, including not being guided to receive support that would help them. These youth discussed feeling stigmatised and set up to fail at school, and frequently raised negative interactions with police and social workers. Stigma has often been raised by children and young people in contact with Oranga Tamariki, who discussed being bullied and judged as less capable by those around them and feeling that they are not extended the same opportunities as their peers (22). A number of tamariki and rangatahi shared experiences of being overly scrutinised or subject to physical force by police officers and felt that ‘brown’ police understood them better (68). Many of these youth experienced negative feelings as a consequence of incidents of judgment and discrimination from the world around them.

Other findings show that Māori and Pacific students encounter everyday racism in educational settings, which affects their wellbeing and academic performance (68, 70). They are far more likely to report

ethnicity-based discrimination from adults than from their peers, with unfair teacher behaviour the most frequently reported issue (71). There are other reports, too, of racism by teachers towards rangatahi Māori and young Pacific learners, often manifesting as low expectations for their educational success (68, 70). These teachers laid blame on the students for not being competent compared to other ethnic groups and often blamed the students' families. Racism continues to impact on the experience of young Māori at university, who described feeling as though their academic success was often met with surprise from non-Māori (72). In one engagement, rangatahi described how low expectations from teachers made them feel demotivated and unsupported in school (68). In comparison, rangatahi Māori supported by kaiako Māori reported better education outcomes compared to their peers, which may be related to the ability of kaiako to provide a culturally safe space for young Māori to engage in learning with the absence of racism and low expectations (70).

Cultural identity has been shown to have a protective effect on the wellbeing of Māori and ethnic youth (50). In a nationally representative study of Māori students, a strong sense of a Māori cultural identity was associated with improved wellbeing and fewer serious depressive symptoms, but this relationship was disrupted by ethnic discrimination. This suggests that facing race-based discrimination puts young Māori at risk of cultural alienation and thus adverse mental health outcomes. Cultural alienation can also occur when rangatahi Māori feel pressured to behave differently to be accepted socially, and it can result in a loss of connection from whānau and culture. This lost connection can increase psychological distress, and rangatahi Māori may feel tension between the strength of their cultural identity and the pressures and stress of living in a bicultural society. Ethnic discrimination was also associated with higher rate of suicide attempts among young Māori.

Experiences of discrimination among ethnic, migrant and refugee youth

Migrant and refugee young people have often reported high levels of racism and xenophobia, contributing to feelings of exclusion (82). They have frequently cited their culture, ethnicity and refugee status as reasons for being bullied and describe how it makes them feel distressed and unsafe (22, 71, 83). While ethnic youth are a highly heterogeneous group, many represent communities connected to recent histories or experiences of colonisation, war and economic underdevelopment, particularly in the case of refugee youth and youth hailing from low- and middle- income countries.

Recent exploratory findings in the New Zealand context add to the body of literature on the effects of colourism and perceived whiteness among young people, including how these interact to influence everyday experiences of discrimination. Young people who are both economically disadvantaged and perceived as non-white are among the worst affected, experiencing higher levels of forgone healthcare and depressive symptoms compared to their peers (52). Economic advantage is protective, but there are evidently diverse experiences of racism among minority youth based on physical appearance and cultural background. The international profile of Black Lives Matter overseas has seen a recent focus on and interest in understanding the experiences of Black (African-descent) people in Aotearoa, including the impacts of anti-Black racism on Black youth (84). There are reported instances of racial profiling and serious racist harassment from police officers not reported by other ethnic minority youth.

Concerningly, compared with other migrant youth in New Zealand, secondary school students from Africa were three times more likely to report that they were bullied at school, and students from lower-income Asian countries (predominantly South Asian) were almost twice as likely to say they experienced ethnic discrimination (85). These groups, along with Pacific migrant youth, were also less likely to live in affluent neighbourhoods or attend well-resourced schools and were more likely to report concerns about

meeting daily basic needs (52). However, there is an unclear relationship between mental health and attempted suicide for some racialised groups. For example, Africans and South Asian youth experience high levels of depression but low levels of attempted suicide, which points to a need for further analysis. Researchers have highlighted the need to improve educational interventions and diversity training around the impacts of perceived 'whiteness' and specific forms of racial bias to mitigate the effects of discrimination (52).

Asian youth in New Zealand have reported high rates of mental distress, discrimination and safety concerns (86). Asian youth often discussed their cultural identity in New Zealand as being linked to experiences of racism and racial discrimination, as well as difficulties integrating into New Zealand culture while meeting family and community expectations (83). They have also reported concerns about being able to access support because of a lack of culturally specific support services or lack of knowledge about the New Zealand health system. For some Asian youth, accessing support was difficult due to the 'model minority' stereotype, which associates certain immigrant groups as being high achievers and free of psychological issues (61, 87). Asian health researchers have stated that the perception of migrants as successful and well-off is part of the reason for the neglect of their youth's mental health needs, such as the absence of any strategic priority areas for Asian and ethnic minorities in the New Zealand Health Research Strategy 2017–2027 (87). They noted that aggregating diverse groups of Asian people into a single category can obscure heterogeneity and mask significant differences within the group, particularly in relation to mental health and healthcare access (86).

Experiences of discrimination among sexual and gender-minority youth

For sexual and gender minority youth, feeling accepted and safe is especially important (24, 25). Findings from the national Youth19 survey highlighted that trans and gender diverse school-aged students reported extremely high levels of social exclusion, isolation at schools, discriminatory treatment in community and healthcare settings, and being in unsafe environments compared to cisgender youth (73, 74). Sexual minority youth experienced similar challenges, with the largest disparities evident in reported mental health and wellbeing. Sexual and gender minority youth collectively are more likely to have current or recent experiences of housing precarity and homelessness compared to the general youth population (75). According to support organisation Rainbow Youth, family conflict contributes to high homelessness rates among rainbow youth in New Zealand, often in relation to parents rejecting or lacking understanding of their child's sexual or gender identity (76). Trans and gender-diverse youth are far more likely to feel not accepted by a parent in their own homes (64% acceptance compared to 93% of cisgender youth) (73, 74).

Experiences of discrimination and rejection on the basis of sexual or gender identity are often amplified for those with multiple marginalised identities, such as belonging to a particular cultural identity or socioeconomic class. Ethnic young people who publicly embrace a queer identity can face conflict with their extended family and community (77), and be forced to contend with issues at the intersection of culture, religion, ethnicity and migration status, in addition to being at risk of losing important social and financial support systems. Nakhid et al. (2022) note that family rejection can be particularly difficult for queer ethnic youth to navigate because of the close familial and communal ties among ethnic communities that act as a protective buffer against the racism experienced in wider society. This can compromise the wellbeing of rainbow ethnic young people, particularly as cultural connectedness is often associated with improved mental health (50, 56, 78). While rainbow ethnic youth proactively search for safe spaces to exist as queer, being housed and secure are generally their

primary considerations in deciding whether to disclose their queer identity (77). However, the decision not to disclose it can cause stress, anxiety and other negative emotions. Comparatively few ethnic young people have publicly disclosed their identity as a member of the rainbow community, which can increase difficulty finding communal support and connecting with individuals sharing similar experiences.

Māori and Pacific rainbow young people also face high levels of inequity on a range of measures relevant to mental health, including socioeconomic status, food and housing security, healthcare access and ethnic discrimination (50, 59, 79, 80). Recent Youth19 findings indicate a particularly large disparity in areas of mental health and wellbeing, with higher rates of depressive symptoms and suicidal thoughts reported by rangatahi Māori and Pacific rainbow youth when compared to non-Rainbow youth (56). Similar to rainbow ethnic youth, Māori and Pacific rainbow young people reported greater difficulties with family compared to non-rainbow youth from the same cultural background. Some interviews with Pacific young people identifying as LGBTIQ+ reflected a feeling of being able to explore sexual identity more openly in a school context than at home (22). Concerningly, very low numbers of rainbow Pacific youth and rangatahi Māori reported seeing a positive future for themselves in Aotearoa (56). For rangatahi Māori, reclaiming a takatāpui identity can also involve navigating trauma associated with colonial-era mores around sexuality and gender fluidity (81).

Exposure to high levels of discrimination and stress are linked to increased rates of depression, self-harm and suicide attempts among sexual and gender minority youth (73, 74). In New Zealand, research demonstrates that social and school environments need to support the wellbeing of rainbow youth. LGBTIQ+ young people highlight how important it is for them to feel accepted and safe, which includes being referred to by their preferred pronouns, having gender-neutral accessible toilets, and access to pastoral care, practical guidance and mental health support (6, 56).

Experiences of discrimination among disabled youth

Discrimination is widely experienced by disabled children and young people in New Zealand. During engagements with disabled youth they frequently reported being subject to ableist bullying and harassment, both in-person and online, which they associated with feelings of anxiety, exclusion and unhappiness. Young people with visible disabilities described being made to feel different because of their appearance (88, 89). Disabled youth often reported being negatively judged and condescended for their disability (88-90) and being viewed as less capable or competent compared to able-bodied people in places of education and employment, which they felt affected their ability to lead an independent and purposeful life (88). In addition, the high cost of living as a disabled person was highlighted as a significant barrier to leading an independent life. Education and work were highlighted as especially important to these youth, especially for building a good future for themselves. However, many indicated feeling concerned that they were not afforded equal opportunities to work, learn and develop professionally compared to their able-bodied peers, despite having meaningful aspirations like everyone else. Disabled young people continually emphasised how these forms of daily discrimination negatively impact on their mental health.

Ableism in the context of accessibility was also frequently discussed by disabled young people (88, 90). For disabled youth, accessibility is closely linked to how accepted and safe they feel in society. Many felt restricted in what they were able to do or where they were able to go because of limits to the physical environment. One young disabled person described how accessibility being viewed as an afterthought felt very dehumanising, particularly if it meant they could not access venues or facilities like everyone else. Without proper access and support, disabled young people are excluded from participating

in everyday activities that enable them to feel like they belong (90). This was often discussed in the context of interactions with members of the public, such as being faced with negative attitudes when needing assistance to ride public transport. Other disabled young people who did not have a visible disability described instances of facing harassment and questioning when attempting to access reserved spaces. While accessibility was identified as very important for disabled youth to live with dignity, their responses highlight the overwhelming prevalence of ableist attitudes and behaviours that are significant barriers to their full participation in society.

Representation, identity and wellbeing

Young people have often highlighted a lack of visible positive representation for groups such as gender diverse, Māori, Pacific and Asian youth, and they have expressed that it contributes to racism and negative self-identity in New Zealand (6, 15). A lack of positive role models alongside negative media portrayals can lead to feelings of internalised racism even for those growing up in multicultural environments (6, 91). Some consultations have identified how the pressure to belong can cause some youth to dissociate from who they are and where they come from in an attempt to distance themselves from negative stereotypes associated with their cultural background (91). Young people of ethnic minority heritage experiencing this may desire acceptance and belonging in the New Zealand context, where the standard for being an ‘authentic’ New Zealander is most often associated with an Anglo-European identity. Selected research with Asian minority youth in New Zealand found that the majority of participants expressed deep shame for not being white enough, because of the racist view that restricts being accepted as true ‘Kiwi’ to exclusively acting and being ‘white’ like Pākehā New Zealanders (92). Pacific young people also discussed feeling pressured to assimilate to a western cultural identity in order to be accepted in New Zealand (93). In one study, a number of Pacific youth participants described suppressing their cultural identity or code-switching to sound ‘white’ in order to be viewed more favourably and not looked down on. Other youth expressed the desire to be treated and seen as a white person because they viewed this as being associated with privilege and able to enjoy life. Some youth reported low self-esteem, self-doubt and limited confidence in their ability to achieve success, apply for opportunities or communicate effectively with others. Despite themes of negative self-identity in relation to culture and ethnicity recurring across a number of engagements undertaken with youth of diverse backgrounds, internalised racism has not been well explored in the New Zealand context, particularly in relation to mental health and wellbeing.

Youth view positive representation of minority groups as being key to dismantling institutional racism, and they want to see more of it in the media, government and higher leadership (15, 24, 49, 94). For young people, it is highly important to have role models to aspire to who closely reflect their own experiences which affirms young people’s capabilities and self-confidence. In one youth engagement, a rangatahi who had previously been in state care talked about getting rid of the stigma of being in care by “showing more of the kids who have come out of care on top” (68). Representation may also serve to challenge racialised and cis-heteronormative standards of beauty or ability that influence self-esteem (95, 96). Visible representation of minorities promotes a positive self-concept, signalling to diverse youth that they belong in places of influence, and that rather than the systems working against them, they have the opportunity to create beneficial change in their own lives and society at large. Youth therefore see it as an important priority that the government works collaboratively with local groups to promote, educate and celebrate cultural diversity in mainstream New Zealand (15).

Tokenism, however, should be avoided; young people are cautious about it in institutions that may otherwise continue to reinforce ignorant attitudes and beliefs (15, 22, 68). They gave examples of

instances where adults were happy to engage with rangatahi Māori when a whaikōrero or pōwhiri was needed, but were otherwise unlikely to consider their opinions or learn about tikanga when it was not convenient (22). One young rangatahi described school as being “unfair” and “they use us, they use our spaces, our culture but don’t respect it” (68). Tokenism can undermine how young people feel about themselves in relation to their cultural identity and abilities in both education and work. Some young people discussed tokenism in institutions that recruit many Māori and ethnic members and express a commitment to diversity, but do not represent diversity in the highest and most influential ranks of the organisation or provide ethnically diverse members with opportunities to progress (62, 94).

In relation to representation, youth have also stated the importance of investing in the arts to allow young people to express their identity and culture (17). Young people want to be able to see the vast diversity of all minority groups and cultures that call Aotearoa home represented, encompassing LGBTQIA+ communities and ethnic minorities alongside other traditionally underrepresented groups in the media. They identified a lack of access to resources and spaces that would enable them to create, view and share art to positively affirm their identity.

THEME 4: INTERGENERATIONAL CONNECTION AND SUPPORT FOR AND BY WHĀNAU

Intergenerational connectedness in relation to wellbeing has surfaced as a common theme in engagements with children and young people across different age and demographic groups, but particularly in research undertaken with tamariki and rangatahi Māori and Pacific youth. Challenges to maintaining intergenerational connectedness among rangatahi Māori and Pacific youth are foregrounded by a history of colonisation and generational deprivation (97). Among migrant youth, New Zealand research has highlighted the challenges of belonging to a ‘migration generation’ (52). This has suggested that second-generation migrant youth, including ethnic and Pacific youth, are as vulnerable as first-generation migrants to socioeconomic and health inequities, which counters the dominant view on acculturation and integration with regards to migration. However, this has not been well explored or recognised in New Zealand research.

Connectedness and rangatahi Māori

Māori were dispossessed of their whenua and livelihoods and compelled to assimilate to a lifestyle displaced from their original culture. Being displaced from whenua destabilised place-based whānau, hapu and iwi identities, disrupting significant kin-based relationships as well as important cultural practices such as the passing down of mātauranga, language and tikanga around land use (98). Disconnection from the whenua had tremendous impacts on cultural and spiritual wellbeing among Māori, resulting for many in long-standing psychological trauma due to culture and identity loss, alongside separation from social support systems. Iwi who experienced greater land alienation have seen a greater loss in Māori knowledge and te reo over generations (99). Under these conditions, many Māori communities have had less opportunity to affirm and practise their culture freely. It has also resulted in Māori as a collective being unable to equitably develop and benefit from generational wealth in the same manner as Pākehā.

Outside of material deprivation, kaupapa Māori researchers identify the long-lasting effects of colonisation as contributing to the ongoing mental health crisis among rangatahi Māori, connected to a loss of culture, acculturative stress and breakdown of traditional kinship-based cultural support systems. This trajectory parallels the experience of racialised and minority groups in settler colonial societies globally (100). In combination, these factors can render rangatahi Māori vulnerable to despair, feelings of hopelessness and lack of purpose (100). Despite these challenges, it is important to underscore that a large proportion of tamariki and rangatahi Māori have reported positive home, family and community environments with high levels of cultural connectedness (56). However, other findings suggest an unmet need for cultural connectedness among a significant number of rangatahi Māori compared to pakeke Māori (51). Establishing a meaningful identity through whānau, whakapapa, language and culture is integral to enhancing rangatahi Māori wellbeing (24, 97). This is also closely linked with physical connections to place (whenua) that represent belonging (tūrangawaewae) based on ancestral ties, within which rangatahi Māori can be positively affirmed (6, 101).

Young people have identified how important it is for their wellbeing that they receive whānau and community support (23). They indicated that they feel equipped to navigate life when they receive ongoing mentorship and guidance from important kaiārahi in their lives, whether that support is provided by a whānau member or a teacher (91). With many young people living with their whānau until their late teens and beyond, there is a clear relationship between the health and wellbeing of their whānau and how

they fare as an individual. Young people want to be able to access support from their whānau, and this support greatly predicts their wellbeing, resilience and ability to cope with life's difficulties.

Interviews with tamariki and rangatahi Māori highlighted that they prioritise the immediate and basic needs of their whānau and communities when asked what they need to have a good life (68). Some rangatahi discussed how it was challenging for their whānau to be in financial need, and that they did not know where to go to access support for their family. Many rangatahi also expressed feeling the burden of responsibility for the happiness of their whānau, and rarely discussed their individual aspirations. Other rangatahi talked more explicitly about their desire to end the cycle of poverty experienced by them and their families (21). They described wanting to be able to improve their circumstances by becoming financially secure in the hope that later generations would not have to experience similar hardship (21, 22). Some of the rangatahi interviewed connected this to success in education and employment. Money was viewed as instrumental to economic security for the household, which would help relieve their caregivers of the stress of paying bills and allow them to spend more time together as a family (68). For lower income households in particular, everyday economic constraints limit rangatahi Māori and their whānau's capacity to strengthen the meaningful family bonds that are beneficial for both rangatahi and whānau wellbeing.

Other research related to connectedness highlights the challenges for urban rangatahi Māori who do not have access to a stable home. For those without a place to call home, belonging was linked to significant relationships rather than a specific place (21). However, efforts to build community were often met with difficulty as there were few places available where they could connect and socialise with one another safely and without the scrutiny of police or gangs. These young people also described feelings of loss and displacement following the closure of a community centre they had previously been able to access, which had served as an important place of social contact for them. A lack of stable, long-term housing is often linked to a loss of community connectedness and therefore whānau wellbeing because it forces families to relocate regularly, preventing rangatahi and their whānau from establishing meaningful and supportive community ties in their local neighbourhoods (21).

Disabled youth have discussed similar challenges related to feeling that their family relationships are impacted by financial hardship. They indicated that as a result of their disability their families often do not have enough money to afford things they otherwise would be able to (88). Some also described difficulties accessing specialist support that would help them day-to-day because their families were unable to cover the costs of such services. These children and young people emphasised wanting their whānau and communities to be well supported to in turn be able to support and spend time with them, which they felt was important for their wellbeing (88).

Connectedness and Pacific youth

Similar to rangatahi Māori, Pacific youth connect to their culture and identity through their significant relationships with family, friends and communities (93). For them, positive cultural identity and family connectedness are important to cultivating wellbeing (56). In one study undertaken with Pacific youth, participants discussed having to contend with conflicting value-based systems and cultural settings as a result of growing up in New Zealand (93). Many were aware of the cultural differences between Pacific and Western cultures. While they embraced Pacific cultural values, some described difficulties in moving between the two cultures and held conflicting views about religion and tradition.

For Pacific young people, the idea of home is related to a diasporic experience connected to their Pacific homelands as well their sense of belonging in Aotearoa New Zealand (21). Culture, identity and

belonging are closely interlinked within this framing (93). Maintaining cultural values and traditions as well as ensuring collective wellbeing are important to Pacific cultures. Some youth believe the younger generation has a duty to ensure cultural values are passed on and future generations are well connected to their culture and identity (93).

Most Pacific young people discussed the importance of understanding and speaking ancestral languages to connect with one's culture (93). There was a sense among participants that being able to converse in their language represented respect and the strength of cultural identity, and also reflected how well their parents raised them. Some youth equated the loss of language to a loss of self-identity and described this as sad and embarrassing. Many bilingual youth expressed concern about the extent of language loss among their New Zealand-communities, which they attributed to not growing up in a traditional household and predominantly moving in Western-dominated spaces. Ensuring language was spoken by the current generation and passed down for posterity was viewed as very important to these young people.

Pacific youth who did not speak their native language also highlighted the significance of speaking Pacific languages but were generally unlikely to view this as a loss of self-identity or culture. For these youth, pride in one's culture was reinforced through their involvement in other aspects of their cultural identity, such as in performing arts, songs, and connecting with families and communities. Findings suggest that mental health programmes designed for Pacific youth should provide culturally appropriate vocational support focused on individual skills and strengths, alongside interventions aimed at enhancing cultural resilience and engagement, including language classes, opportunities to learn Pacific ethnic history and culture, and spaces to practise cultural skills (102).

Strikingly, findings from the Youth19 survey highlight that compared to other migrant youth, Pacific youth were more likely to report enjoying school and feeling like they belong and are cared for there, despite being most likely to attend low decile schools. This may be due to the high levels of ethnic density and social connectedness for Pacific students attending low-decile schools, where they are more likely to be in schooling environments with other Pacific students (85, 93). Pacific youth who felt more accepted were also more likely to perform well and be less at risk of suicide compared to Pacific youth reporting not feeling accepted at school. Similar findings underline the importance of familial connections for wellbeing among Pacific youth. Unhappy family relationships and not having family members available to talk to about problems and worries (particularly parents) were significantly associated with an increased risk of suicide in Pacific youth. Conversely, having a supportive family member proactively monitoring an individual had a protective effect on Pacific youth suicide attempts (103).

Across the literature, cultural resilience emerged as an important theme. Connectedness to cultural identity has been linked to improved wellbeing, lower rates of suicide, reduced depressive symptoms and positive psychological health among rangatahi Māori (50, 104). This also been found to have beneficial effects in other life domains, for both the individual and wider whānau. Recent research found that young Māori learners from households that strongly emphasised identity, language and culture had the highest reported whānau wellbeing and better educational achievement rates at school (105). Other work undertaken with rangatahi Māori wāhine and female-identifying Pacific youth found that individuals who report strong attachment to their cultural identity, beliefs and practices are less likely to develop body image dissatisfaction, which can buffer against negative body image and eating disorders (42).

Connection across generations within families, communities, schools and within cultures is important to young people and particularly to rangatahi Māori and migrant youth. These youth have reported that connection is protective for their wellbeing, while disconnection is associated with poorer outcomes. Further research on connection of different kinds across varied contexts is needed, particularly to develop our understanding of how connection and inter-generational support impacts wellbeing over time.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH PRIORITIES

Throughout this literature review, we have discussed the limits to our current body of literature regarding youth mental health and wellbeing within Aotearoa. Limited literature continues to restrict our capacity to richly appreciate the complexity of this landscape and to comprehend the scale of the determinants within young people's lives. While there are numerous gaps to our understanding, we highlight a few critical ones:

- Minority populations continue to be under-represented or excluded from most research, despite evidence suggesting these young people are more likely to experience poor mental health and wellbeing. It is important that **we prioritise research with young people traditionally excluded from or under-represented in research, particularly ethnic minorities, those within the LGBTQIA+ community and those with disabilities**. We must also **prioritise research focused on young people with intersectional (i.e., multiple marginalised) identities** – for example, rangatahi Māori within the rainbow community. These young people's unique worldviews and experiences must be taken into account when determining strategy if we wish to see significant wellbeing improvement for our most vulnerable youth.
- Researchers have more recently taken a community-driven approach, grounded in meaningful partnership with young people and the communities involved, but there continues to be a **limited body of partnership-focused and critical research conducted with young people**. This research is important to ensure we are critically engaging with young people and adequately meeting community needs. It is important that action reaches where it is needed most and remains relevant to youth.
- Young people are increasingly articulating their concerns about social media and its impact on their mental health and wellbeing. However, we lack comprehensive evidence regarding the kinds of content youth are interacting with and how this content and the engagement process influences wellbeing. To understand how best to respond to the challenges posed by social media we must **prioritise research seeking to understand social media and digital technology broadly, and the roles it plays in the lives and wellbeing of youth**.
- As discussed in our parallel commentary, the perspectives of youth are critical in detailing the pressures they are under. However, these operate against a background that is formed much earlier in life and is influenced by prenatal, infant and developmental factors. Research on developmental, biological, environmental and sociological factors is vital as it may be essential to intervene earlier to promote psychological resilience against the pressures of adolescence and thus reduce future adolescent mental health morbidity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The literature sharing young people's perspectives on their wellbeing suggests that young people in Aotearoa's wellbeing is closely interlinked with systemic factors. These influences operate within young people's lives in numerous complex ways such as through their perception of safety, psychological development, support networks and sense of community. Action addressing these systemic influences is likely to broadly improve wellbeing. Certain action points are likely to resonate with youth:

- **Stronger climate action and policy** is an important issue for young people. Many of them directly associate their mental health and wellbeing with concerns about the climate and limited political action. As the effects of climate change become more apparent, the stress it will cause to individuals and communities will have continuing implications for youth mental health. Political action addressing climate change will potentially improve mental health and wellbeing, both direct and indirectly. Youth also often report that their wellbeing is improved by interacting with the environment in ways that promote guardianship and pride. Protecting our unique landscape will ensure generations of young people continue to benefit from this unique protective factor of life in Aotearoa.
- **Action on poverty and economic inequity** is likely to positively impact the wellbeing of youth in Aotearoa. Housing instability, economic insecurity and limited resources have a clear inverse relationship with the wellbeing of youth and their whānau. Such ongoing concerns induce stress and anxiety. International research suggests that early deprivation impacts mental health and wellbeing in the long term. Action on poverty and economic inequity will therefore not only improve the wellbeing of youth and whānau but also positively impact future generations. This key systemic issue must be addressed if we wish to create sustained improvement to mental health and wellbeing, particularly for our most vulnerable youth.
- **The education system** is consistently linked by youth to their experiences of pressure to succeed, as well as stress in transitioning out of school. The Ministry of Education's ongoing work, such as the school leaver toolkit, should remain a priority, with additional emphasis on understanding how we can best support our young people, reduce pressure and facilitate the transition from education. Additionally, the education system is an opportunity to foster protective community support networks and address experiences of discrimination. These actions are likely to benefit youth wellbeing and should be prioritised within schools.
- **Racial inequity and injustice** have far-reaching detrimental impacts on youth wellbeing. This encompasses the intergenerational and structural impacts of colonisation and intergenerational trauma as well as interpersonal racism and discrimination. Systemic action focused on upholding Te Tiriti continues to be core to addressing the impacts of colonisation on rangatahi Māori. Additionally, action focused on addressing racism and discrimination is key to the wellbeing of many youth, including young people of ethnic minorities and those within the LGBTQIA+ community. Actions including positive media representation and stronger action against discrimination within the education system may help reduce racism and discrimination.
- **Social media** and safety online are increasingly raised as sources of concern by young people, but conclusive recommendations are challenging to draw based on the available evidence. As such, we recommend a comprehensive review of social media in Aotearoa, including the kinds of content young people are exposed to and its influences.

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THANK YOU TO OUR SUPPORTERS

Andrew and Elle Grant

Anita Baldauf

Bernard Pesco

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David Levene Foundation

The Gluckman Family

Graeme and Robyn Hart

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