Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit

superu

Patterns of multiple disadvantage across New Zealand families

JUNE 2017

Our purpose

The purpose of the Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit (Superu) is to increase the use of evidence by people across the social sector so that they can make better decisions – about funding, policies or services – to improve the lives of New Zealanders and New Zealand's communities, families and whānau.

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Introduction

1.0_ Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in understanding multiple disadvantage and how it affects vulnerable families and children. We know that the most vulnerable families in society face many challenges across a number of life domains. Often, these challenges interact and can manifest in complex ways, making it difficult for any one agency to address or resolve them.

Identifying who is experiencing multiple disadvantage and the nature of the difficulties they face has proved difficult because there are few data sources that capture disadvantage across many life domains and there is no consensus or best practice method for defining or measuring multiple disadvantage.

As the Crown entity charged with increasing the use of evidence across the social sector with expertise in family wellbeing, Superu is well placed to address these difficulties and help to fill this gap in our knowledge about an important group of social service users. It is for this reason that Superu has established a research project investigating multiple disadvantage as part of our Families and Whānau research programme. The main aims of this project are to develop a measure of multiple disadvantage and use it to understand the prevalence of multiple disadvantage across New Zealand families, the types and combinations of disadvantage most commonly experienced, and the disadvantages with the greatest impact on family wellbeing.

This paper presents the first results of this exploratory research project with a focus on four research questions:

1. How many disadvantages do New Zealand families face and do some family types face more than others?
2. What proportion of all disadvantage is borne by those experiencing multiple disadvantage?
3. For those families facing multiple disadvantage, what sorts of disadvantage are most common?
4. Do some disadvantages occur mostly on their own or with many others?

We begin by offering an explanation of what multiple disadvantage is and the value of measuring it. We then present our initial findings for each of the questions examined and discuss where we will take the project next.

02

Background

2.1_ What is multiple disadvantage?

The term 'multiple disadvantage' describes the situation of facing difficulties in a number of areas of life at the same time. Multiple disadvantage is one of many terms that social scientists and policy researchers use to study inequality in society and define the challenges faced by different groups. Similar terms include: multiple and complex needs, multiple deprivation, multi-dimensional poverty, and social exclusion. While each of these terms refers to slightly different concepts or emphasises different conceptual frameworks, they all attempt to measure social inequality with the recognition that understanding just one aspect of someone's life is not enough to understand how they are faring overall. For the purposes of this exploratory analysis, we have measured multiple disadvantage by looking at families disadvantaged in three or more of eight life domains: education, health, income, housing, material wellbeing, employment, safety, and social connectedness.

2.2_ The value of measuring multiple disadvantage

Previous experience in trying to help families facing multiple disadvantages has shown that resolving a number of problems can be far more complex than tackling just one issue on its own. Problems in one area are often interconnected with those in another (health and employment, for example) so resolving one issue depends on resolving a number of other issues as well. This complexity makes it challenging and often expensive to provide effective services for people facing multiple disadvantage. Understanding the number and characteristics of people who experience multiple disadvantage is critical to knowing when and where to deploy support services for this group and for whom they should be designed.

While we know intuitively that having many problems is more likely to leave people worse off than having none or just a few, it is not entirely clear which disadvantages have the greatest impact on a family's wellbeing or if and how disadvantages compound to create an impact greater than the sum of their parts. A better understanding of these dynamics will help policy makers target problems with the greatest impact on families and prevent problems from compounding over time.

For example, if the effect of multiple disadvantage is simply the sum of the individual disadvantages, it makes sense to focus on those disadvantages with the greatest impact on wellbeing on their own. However, if multiple disadvantage creates an effect greater than the sum of its parts, it may make more sense to target those disadvantages most easily resolved in order to reduce the overall number of disadvantages faced.

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03

How we've measured multiple disadvantage

3.1_ Learnings from the literature

We began our work with a survey of the relevant literature on measures of multiple disadvantage. This included reviewing other multidimensional measures of disadvantage such as multiple deprivation and social exclusion that use indicators across a number of life domains to understand the breadth or depth of disadvantage overall. While a detailed discussion of the entire review is beyond the scope of this paper, the following is a selection of the key take-aways that informed the development of our own measure. A Superu paper providing an introduction to some of the larger themes from the multiple disadvantage literature and a catalogue of the 42 measures we surveyed can be found online at Superu's website.[1]

The review uncovered a variety of multidimensional measures that differ considerably in their aim, sophistication, and scope. Most of these measures are made up of a collection of indicators grouped into life domains (e.g. material wellbeing, health). The results for the indicators in each domain are used to determine whether that domain is considered to be in disadvantage and the domain results are then (usually) combined to create an overall deprivation score or 'index'.

The approach taken and the domains and indicators used in any particular case depends upon several factors including: the conceptual framework being used, the intended use of the measure, and the data source available to the researchers. For example, where researchers were interested in measuring the concept of *multiple deprivation* which is used to understand differences in relative hardship between communities, they included area level measures such as home ownership and access to transport in their measures. By contrast, those interested in measuring *social exclusion*, an individual or household level measure of deprivation that includes societal participation, included indicators such as voter registration and voluntary activity in addition to more traditional measures of material wellbeing.

Some of the papers, in explaining the construction of their measure, discussed common steps in the development of new multidimensional measures such as those on disadvantage, poverty, or deprivation:[2]

- selecting the unit of analysis (e.g., individual, household, community)
- selecting domains and indicators
- determining cutoffs for each indicator/domain
- determining weights for indicators within domains
- considering aggregation of multiple indicators within domains
- determining weights across domains
- aggregation method across domains (where this was done)
- decisions about weighting across domains

1 www.superu.govt.nz

2 This selection was taken from Alkire and Sarwar (2009): *Multidimensional measures of poverty and well-being*, Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative, Oxford. [online] Available from http://www.ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/OPHI-RP-6a.pdf

As can be seen from the examples given previously, the conceptual framework and intended use of the measure have a strong bearing on the decisions made at each step, particularly which domains and indicators are included. Usually these are selected on the basis of a combination of theoretical underpinnings, the available data, and accepted practice. In cases where there were few indicators available in the data, researchers frequently chose not to group them into domains, opting instead for a final measure that simply described a group with a certain number of the available indicators in disadvantage.

While the measures we reviewed shared a number of features, the review revealed to us that there was no one "right" way to construct a measure of multiple disadvantage, rather the decisions made at each step needed to be theoretically consistent with the concept being measured and fit-for-purpose to the intended use and context.

3.2_ Our approach

Although the literature revealed there was no standard or best practice approach to creating a multiple disadvantage measure, almost all the measures we reviewed shared a similar general structure but used different indicators, domains, and thresholds depending on the concept measured, its intended use, and the data available. We realised the construction of a multiple disadvantage measure for the New Zealand context would require us to make a number of critical decisions on these points and that we would need a method for making these decisions in a robust way.

Beginning with the end in mind, our aim was to create a measure that would have the greatest application for social sector policymakers in New Zealand, could serve as the foundation for ongoing research on families facing multiple disadvantage, and would provide a flexible structure for others should they want to modify it for a particular purpose.

To that end, we established some principles to help guide our decisions:

- The measure should include indicators and domains of relevance to sector practitioners in New Zealand
- It should have strong theoretical underpinnings
- It should have strong face validity
- The domain cut-offs should be broadly consistent with the other variables in the measure (i.e. the threshold should be neither too inclusive nor too restrictive)
- The measure should be broadly consistent with other similar measures

To put these in practice we asked ourselves the following questions when making a decision at any given point (e.g. which indicators or thresholds to use):

- What does the literature have to say on this? Have other researchers making similar measures addressed this question?
- What advice do we have on this issue from other social sector government agencies?
- Where there is no clear steer from the literature or other social sector agencies, does the data help us answer this question? Do our results seem reasonable and are they congruent with other measures we trust?

The remainder of this section reviews, in more or less chronological order, the key decisions we made while creating our measure and a bit about how we made them. A more detailed documentation of the thinking behind these decisions can be made available for those with a more technical interest.[3]

3.2.1_Definition of multiple disadvantage and data source

As a working definition for this project, we describe multiple disadvantage as "experiencing multiple difficulties or challenges that negatively impact family functioning." Having reviewed data sources previously for our family wellbeing work, we decided to use the 2014 iteration of the General Social Survey (GSS) because it collects information across a number of life domains and is the only official data source which captures people's social connections beyond their immediate household.

3.2.2_Unit of analysis

Since we wanted to understand the prevalence of multiple disadvantage across families in New Zealand, our intent was to use families as the unit of analysis. However, we know from previous work that most official surveys capture information on individuals or households, with only the Census weighting its results at the family level. As a work-around, we tried to use family or household measures where possible and individual-level measures where these were unavailable. As a result, our findings present the number of individuals living in particular types of families rather than the number of families themselves.

3 Please contact Eric Krassoi Peach at eric.krassoipeach@superu.govt.nz if you would like more information.

3.2.3_Selection of life domains and indicators

With these decisions made, we started to develop a list of potential domains and indicators to use in the measure. We began by considering those that were included in Superu's Family Wellbeing Framework. This framework was developed in 2013 as part of Superu's Families and Whānau Research Programme[4] and includes 29 indicators corresponding to six broad themes.[5] Since some of these themes covered multiple life domains (education and employment are together for example) we separated some of these to expand the number of domains considered for this project. After adding domains and indicators from the literature not already included in the framework, we had a list of 45 potential indicators relating to 9 life domains.

This list of potential indicators and domains was presented in a survey to a cross-sector governmental reference group made up of representatives from Superu and eight other crown agencies.[6] The survey asked respondents to select which domains they felt, from their experience, are important for identifying families experiencing multiple disadvantage, with similar questions to identify which indicators they felt were important for measuring disadvantage in a particular domain. We presented the survey results at a half-day workshop and asked participants to discuss how they had voted and whether finding disadvantage in any particular indicator was enough to declare there was disadvantage in its respective domain. This gave us a sense of which measures were most wanted across the agencies represented and the relative weighting of the indicators when identifying domain-level disadvantage.

3.2.4_Testing and domain thresholds

Armed with this feedback, we removed the indicators lacking support from the reference group and reviewed which of the remaining indicators were available in the 2014 GSS. Some indicators of interest were not fully captured in the GSS and where possible, we identified proxies to use in the next phase of testing. After looking at the data, we removed indicators where

- the data was incomplete (high proportion of missing values),
- the available proxy couldn't be stretched to measure the desired indicator,
- the indicator produced results at odds with similar indicators we thought were more accurate (safety indicators in the GSS compared with similar ones in the NZ Crime and Safety Survey for example).

4 Please see pgs. 24-30 in the 2014 Families and Whānau Status Report for an in-depth discussion of Superu's family wellbeing framework. http://www.superu.govt.nz/publication/families-and-wh%C4%81nau-status-report-2014

5 Health, Relationships and connections, Economic security and housing, Safety and environment, Skills, learning and employment, and Identity and sense of belonging.

6 In addition to principals from Superu, we had representatives from: Statistics New Zealand, Ministry of Social Development, the Investing in Children group (the precursor to Oranga Tamariki), Ministry of Education, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Health, Office of the Children's Commissioner, Social Investment Unit.

With the remaining indicators, we selected disadvantage thresholds that were either in common use within the literature or suggested by New Zealand subject matter experts. We then performed a series of tests including running correlations between all indicators to test for redundancy, checking the population-level results to test for face validity, and using alternate thresholds to test the sensitivity of thresholds to small changes in the cut-off.

Once all the tests were satisfactorily completed, we had our results checked by an internal reference group at Superu to confirm our findings and settle on our indicator and domain thresholds.

3.3_ Our first measure

The end product of our consultation and testing was a measure of multiple disadvantage containing sixteen indicators corresponding to eight life domains. For four of the domains, only one appropriate indicator was available which means that disadvantage identified in those indicators directly corresponds with disadvantage in its respective domain.[7] For the four others, there were between two and four indicators for each life domain. To identify disadvantage for these domains, we used advice from the cross-sector governmental reference group to determine the number of indicators needed to be in disadvantage for those particular domains. Figure 1 (overleaf) shows all the indicators, their thresholds, and the number of indicators needing to be in disadvantage to determine disadvantage for each life domain.[8]

While we chose to define multiple disadvantage as experiencing three or more domains in disadvantage, it should be acknowledged that this threshold reflects our best judgment with the facts available and not any universal standard as this does not exist. Another threshold could be used, and in fact some researchers in this area have opted for two thresholds – one for multiple disadvantage and one for "deep" or "severe" multiple disadvantage. Table 1 (overleaf) shows the proportion of individuals identified as experiencing multiple disadvantage at all the possible thresholds. While having two or more met the lowest bar for "multiple" disadvantages, capturing over a third of the population with this definition seemed a little too broad. The small sample size at four or more made sub-group analysis more unstable and appeared to have similar (but more extreme) patterns to using three or more. Consequently, we operationalised multiple disadvantage as disadvantage in three or more domains.

7 While Superu and the reference group were ultimately satisfied these measures could on their own be used to identify disadvantage in their respective domains, we hope to enrich these domains in future iterations as new indicators become available.

8 While we considered combining Income and Material wellbeing domains we decided to include them as separate domains for this analysis based on strong feedback from the reference group.

TABLE 01

Proportion of the total sample (individuals 15 years and older) with multiple disadvantage at different multiple disadvantage thresholds

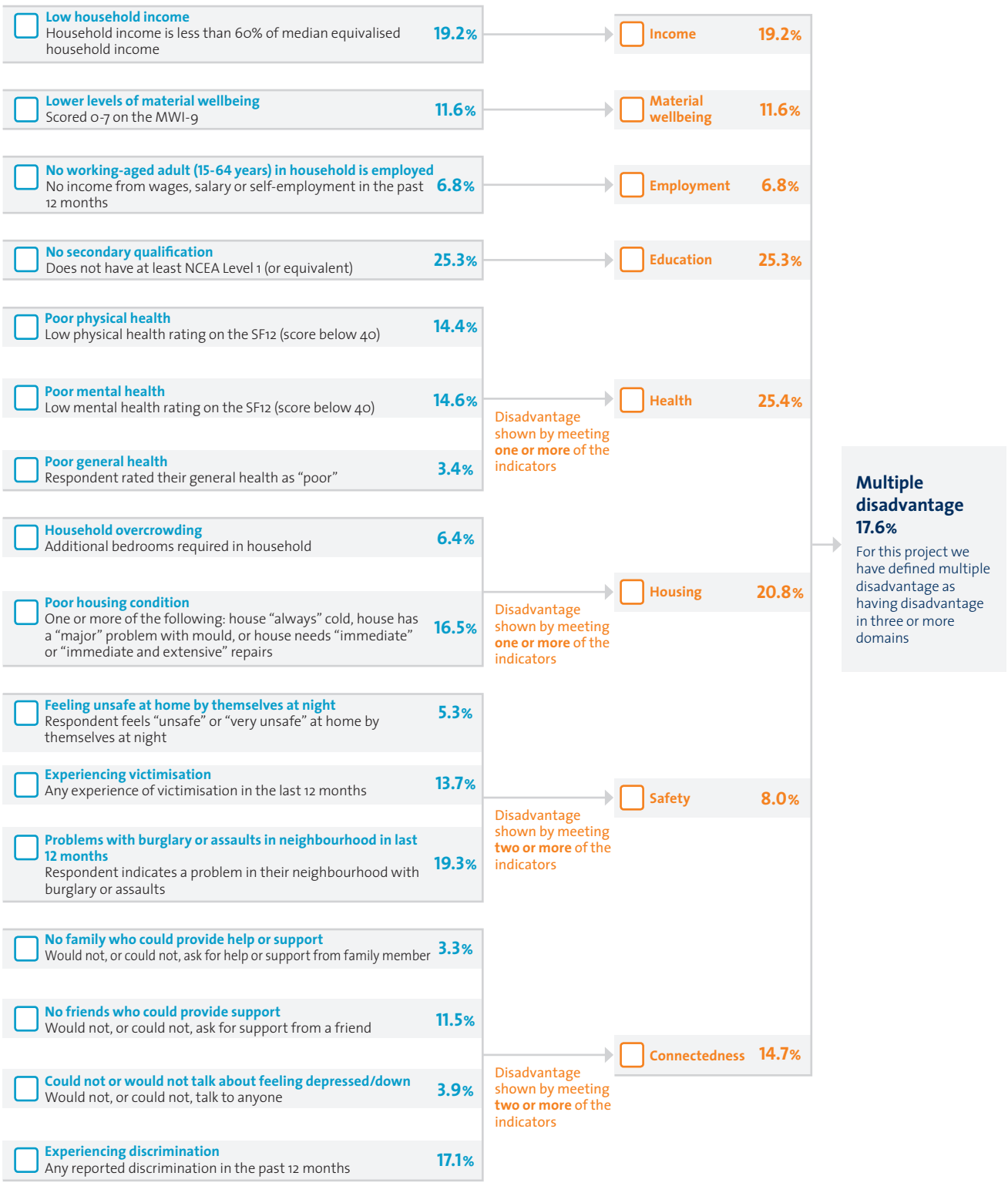
Number of domains in disadvantage	Frequency	Percent of total sample
1+	2,157,000	64.6
2+	1,160,000	34.8
3+	588,000	17.7
4+	292,000	8.8
5+	135,000	4.1
6+	55,000	1.7
7+	19,000	0.6
8	3,000	0.1

Source: New Zealand General Social Survey 2014

Where possible, our indicators reflect outcomes of the survey respondent's family. For example, disadvantage in the employment domain is defined as having no adult of working age (15-64 years old) in the household with income from employment. While some multiple disadvantage indicators in the literature have attempted to measure disadvantage in relative terms (capturing just the bottom decile for example), we opted to use absolute measures (i.e. the proportion of the population not reaching a particular benchmark level) since this better captures what we are trying to measure. This means the proportion of people experiencing disadvantage will vary from indicator to indicator depending on how common that form of disadvantage is in the total population.

Figure 1_ Indicators and life domains used to identify multiple disadvantage

Percentages show the proportion of the total population aged 15 and above



04

Results

4.1_ The number of disadvantages faced by New Zealand families

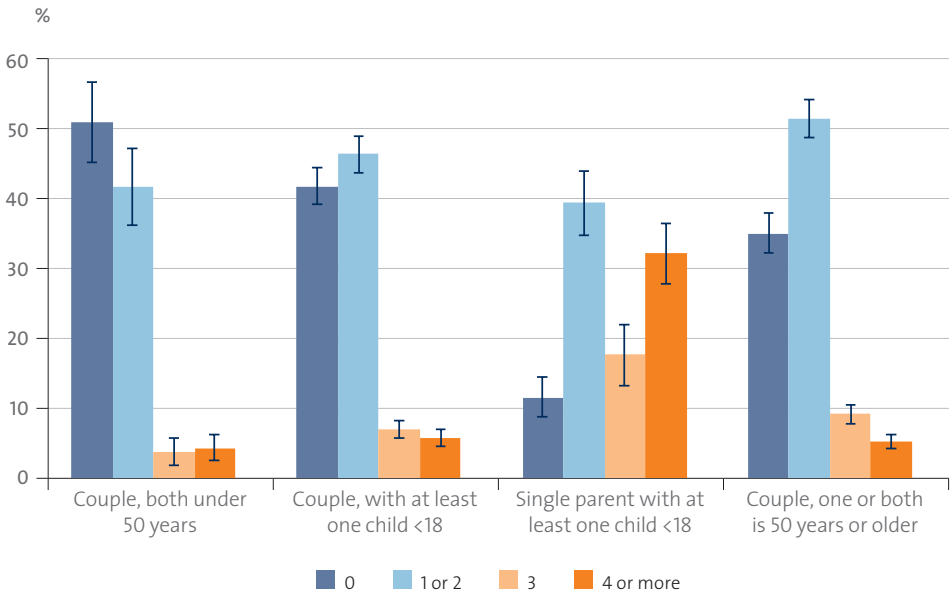
Happily, most New Zealanders lead lives that are relatively free of disadvantage. Our analysis found that the vast majority (82%) of individuals have disadvantage in two or fewer life domains, with over a third having disadvantage in none of the domains examined.

Figure 2 below shows the proportion of individuals in each family type by the number of domains in disadvantage. With the exception of single parents, families further along the life course tend to have a greater number of domains in disadvantage. Young couples face the fewest with a little over half having none; this figure drops to 41% for couples with children and to a little over a third for older couples. Where partnered families experienced disadvantage, it tended to be in just one or two domains with 14% or fewer individuals in these three family types facing three or more domains in disadvantage.

Single parents have a rather different pattern to the other family types shown. They are less likely to have none or only a few domains in disadvantage - just 12% have none and 39% have one or two. Correspondingly, around half of single parents face multiple disadvantage with most of these (nearly a third of all single parents) showing disadvantage in four or more domains.

For families with children, those whose youngest child is below school age (under five years) are more likely to experience multiple disadvantage than those with older children aged 13 to 17 years. This was particularly the case for single parents, where nearly two thirds with a child under five faced multiple disadvantage compared with 36% of those whose youngest child was between 13 and 17 years old.

Figure 2_ Family type by number of domains in disadvantage (% of group)



Source: New Zealand General Social Survey 2014

4.2_ Half of all disadvantage is borne by those experiencing "multiple disadvantage"

Another way of exploring the prevalence of multiple disadvantage is to ask: of all the disadvantage experienced, what proportion is borne by those with multiple disadvantage? Answering this question helps to give a sense of the relative need for resources to be directed toward services that are designed for those with multiple disadvantages.

To answer this, we looked all the instances of domain disadvantage in the sample and identified where the disadvantage was found with two or more others and where it was found by itself or just one other disadvantage. We found that while multiple disadvantage affected just 18% of the total population, it made up half (51%) of all disadvantage experienced. This shows that while multiple disadvantage is concentrated in a minority of the population, addressing it effectively would impact a much larger proportion of overall disadvantage than might have been expected.

4.3_ Types of disadvantage faced by multiple-disadvantaged families

We wanted to investigate whether multiple disadvantage takes on different forms for different types of families – i.e. do some disadvantages occur more commonly in one sort of family facing multiple disadvantage than another?

One way we tried to answer this question was to look at all families facing multiple disadvantage (having three or more domains in disadvantage), and identify which disadvantages were most common for each family type. The results of this analysis can be seen in Figure 3 with highlights detailed below.

We found that some life domains are more likely to be in disadvantage across all the family types than others. Education, Health, and Income are the most common overall while Employment, Social connectedness, and Crime are the least common.

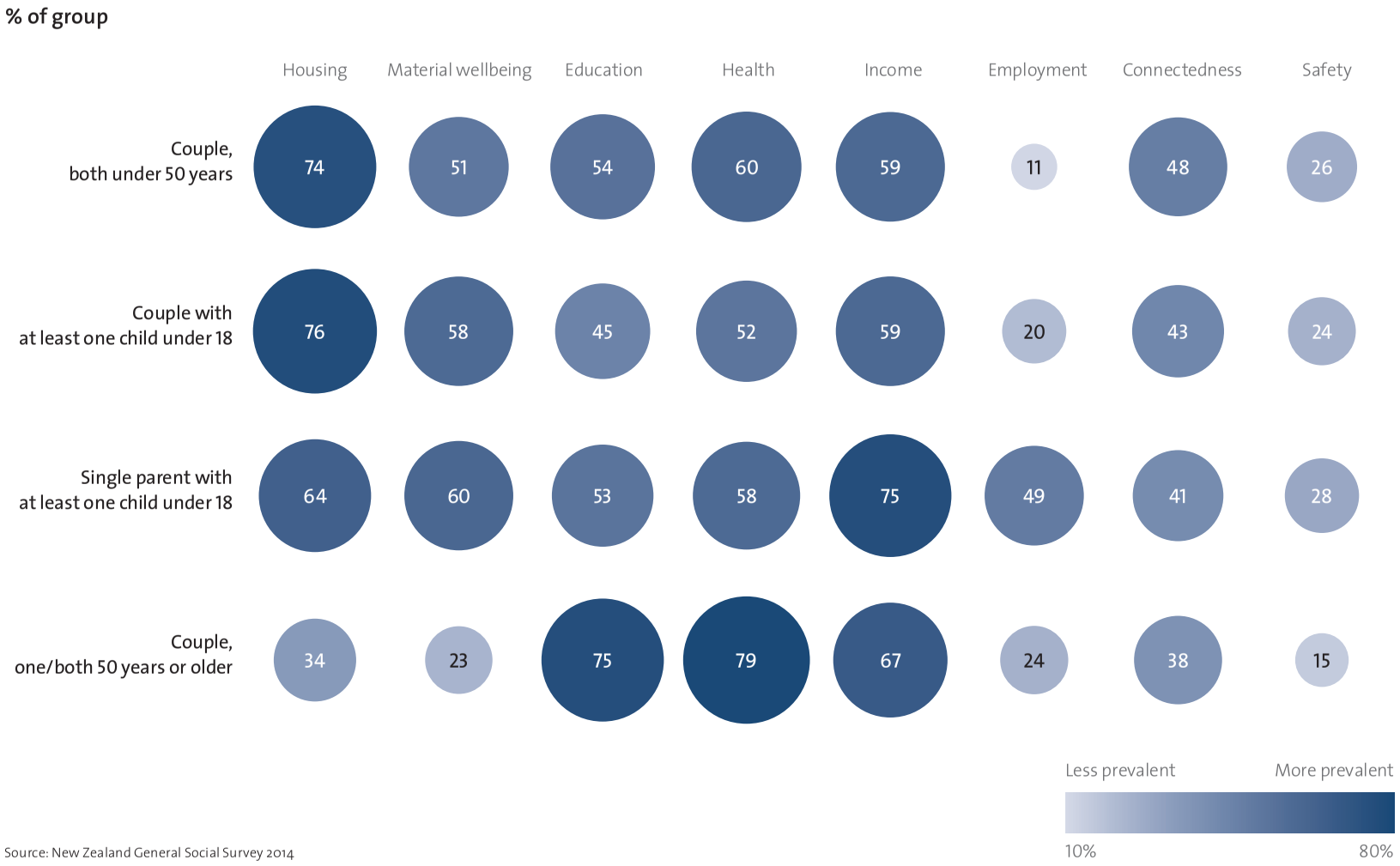
Looking across the life course, we can see that the composition of disadvantages faced by multiply-disadvantaged young couples is quite similar to that for couples with young children. For these family types, Housing and Income were the domains most commonly in disadvantage followed by Health, Material wellbeing, and Education.

Single parents with young children showed a similar pattern to these two family types but were more likely to have disadvantage in Employment and Income domains and less likely to have disadvantage in Housing. Since disadvantage in the Employment domain is defined as having no adults of working age in the household in employment, the difference in Employment disadvantage for single parents can be partly explained by the heightened odds that they meet this criterion.

Single parents also seem to be more likely than other family types to experience disadvantage for most of the domains – in half of the domains, single parents have the highest proportion of any family type experiencing disadvantage in that domain. However, we must be careful in drawing too many conclusions as this may be due to single parents tending to have more domains in disadvantage overall than multiply disadvantaged people in other family types, increasing the likelihood of them being disadvantaged in any particular domain. On average, single parents with young children have 2.7 domains in disadvantage, compared with a range of .08 to 1.2 domains for the other three family types investigated.

One of the clearest differences between multiply-disadvantaged families is how the pattern of disadvantage for older couples compares to the other three family types shown. Disadvantage in the Education and Heath domains is far more common for multiply-disadvantaged older couples relative to the other three family types. This may be because older people are more likely to suffer from health problems generally and that changes to education and the labour market in previous decades have resulted in higher average levels of educational attainment for younger generations than older ones.

Figure 3_Prevalence of domain disadvantage faced by families with multiple disadvantage (three or more domains in disadvantage)



Source: New Zealand General Social Survey 2014

The opposite pattern can be seen in the results for Housing and Material wellbeing where disadvantage in these domains is much less common for older couples than for the other family types. This reflects a greater degree of home ownership among older couples, particularly those without a mortgage on their house. Owner-occupied homes tend to be of higher quality than rentals and having a home without a mortgage means that while an older couple may have a low income (particularly those relying solely on superannuation), their housing costs are also significantly lower, improving their material wellbeing.

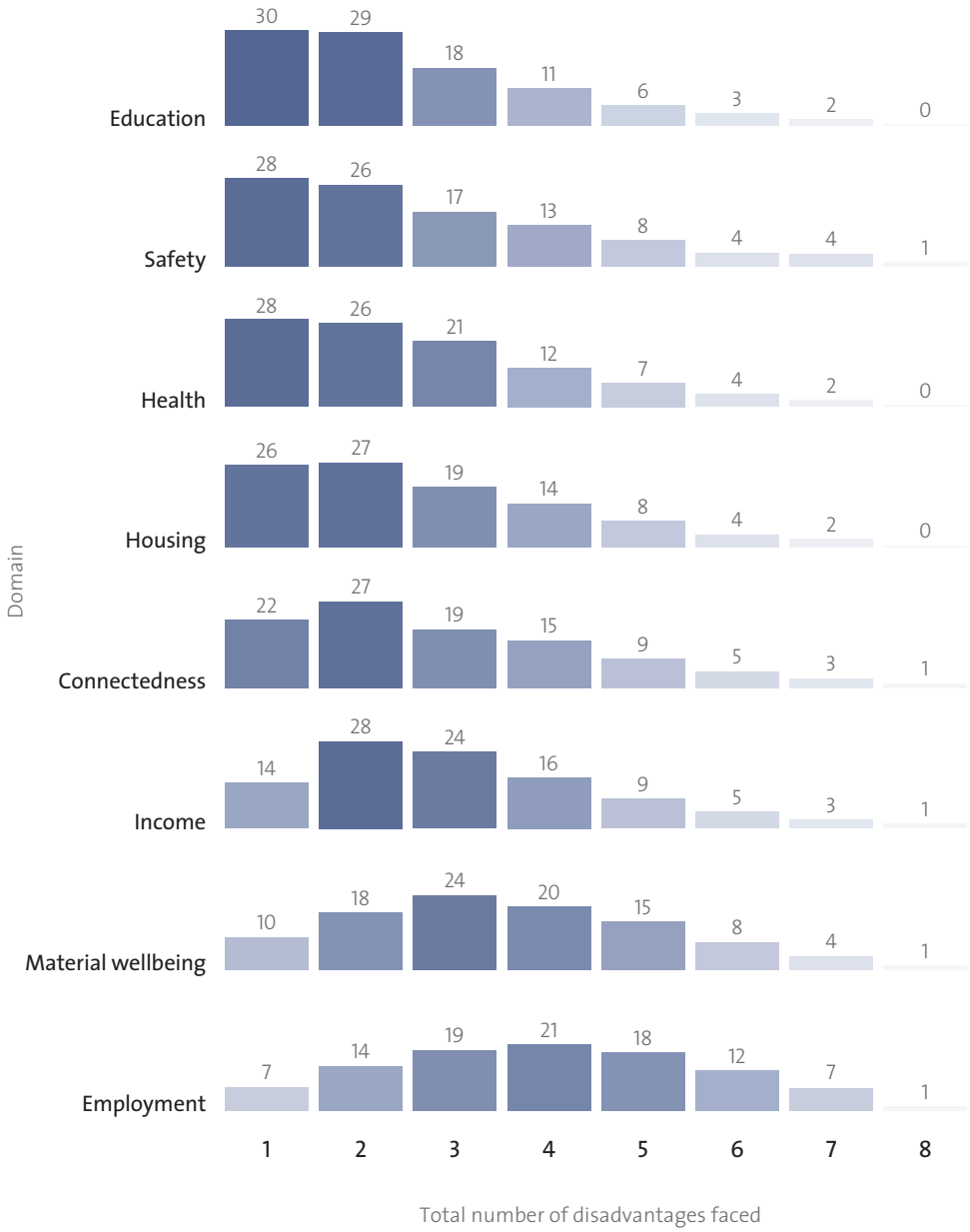
4.4_ Do some disadvantages occur mostly on their own or with many others?

To investigate this question, we isolated those with a particular life domain in disadvantage (Education for example) and created a histogram of the total number of domains in disadvantage for those individuals. The histograms for all eight life domains are shown in Figure 4 below. At the extremes, the first column in each of the histograms shows the proportion of those who have disadvantage in that domain and in no others (just education, for example), while the column on the far right shows the proportion with disadvantage in all eight life domains (Education plus seven others).

The domains broadly fell into one of two patterns. For four of the domains (Education, Safety, Health, and Housing) disadvantage in that domain tended to occur either on its own or with just one other disadvantage. In contrast, disadvantage in Material wellbeing and Employment tended to co-occur with two or more others. Income and Connectedness fell somewhere between the two, with a small majority of those facing disadvantage in Income and Connectedness having one or two other domains in disadvantage. Although we tried to replicate this analysis for each family type to see if this pattern was uniform across all families, unfortunately the sample size was not large enough for us to identify differences between the family types with certainty.

Consistent with previous experience, these results suggest that where social sector practitioners find disadvantage in Material wellbeing and Employment, they are likely to also find disadvantage in a number of other life domains as well. Of note is the result for Connectedness as this domain is less frequently included in multiple disadvantage measures. While Connectedness was not as strongly associated with multiple disadvantage as other measures such as Employment and Material Wellbeing, we were somewhat surprised that experiencing disadvantage in Connectedness was associated with multiple disadvantage about half of the time. Further investigation of how social connections and relationships impact disadvantage in other life areas and the direction of the effect are needed to better understand this phenomenon.

Figure 4 _ Those with disadvantage in a domain by the number of total disadvantages faced (% of group)*



Source: New Zealand General Social Survey 2014

* For example, the first row breaks down the group of individuals that have disadvantage in Education by the total number of disadvantages they face. Starting at the far left, we can see that 30% of this group have disadvantage in Education and in no other domains, 29% have disadvantage in Education plus one other domain, 18% have Education plus two other domains, and so on.

05

Future research

Our exploratory analysis has shown that people in some family types are more likely to experience multiple disadvantage than others and that half of all disadvantage is borne by those with three or more life domains in disadvantage. We also found that the kinds of disadvantages faced differ depending on the type of family and that disadvantage in some domains, in particular Employment and Material Wellbeing, is associated with having a greater number of disadvantages overall.

The work presented in this paper provides a platform for future research on multiple disadvantage in New Zealand. Superu will continue our research in this area over the 2017/2018 financial year and partner with other government agencies to answer policy questions in their domains of work. The following are some of the areas we hope to expand to next.

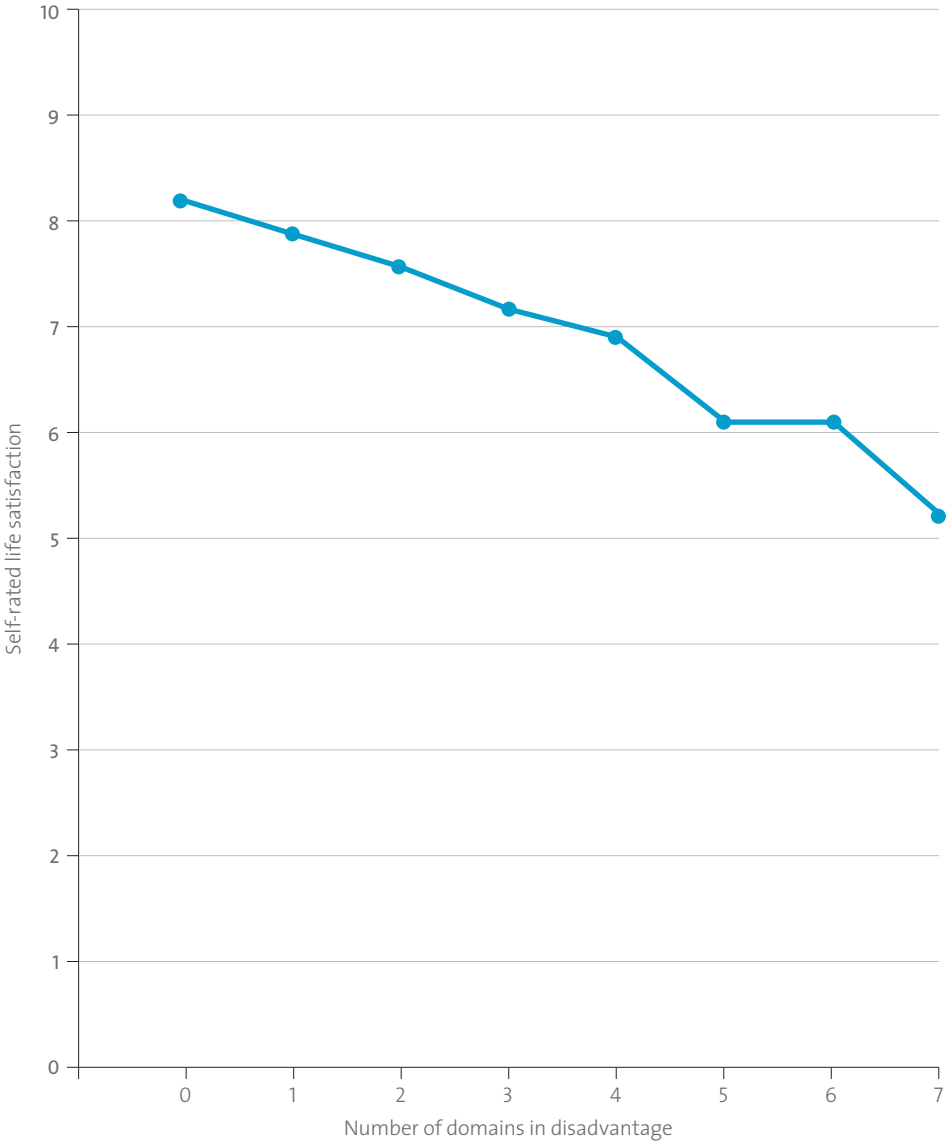
5.1_ Investigate the effect of multiple disadvantage on subjective wellbeing

We believe that understanding how multiple disadvantage affects important outcomes, such as individual and family wellbeing is a valuable next step for this research. A basic descriptive analysis of life satisfaction and the number of domains in disadvantage (shown in Figure 5) reveals a difference of a full three points (on a ten point scale) between those with no domains and those with seven domains in disadvantage. Considering the literature to date on subjective wellbeing, this is a relatively large effect. To put it into perspective, the difference in mean life satisfaction between countries globally is about five points, meaning a three point difference is equivalent to 60% of the difference in mean life satisfaction scores between a country like Denmark with one of the highest scores and a country with one of the lowest such as Togo or Benin.[9]

We would like to further investigate whether there are certain types or combinations of disadvantage that have a greater impact on subjective wellbeing than others and test if and how disadvantages combine to have a greater impact on subjective wellbeing than the sum of their parts.

9 See OECD (2013), OECD *Guidelines on Measuring Subjective Well-being*, OECD Publishing. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264191655-en

Figure 5 _ Average life satisfaction score, by number of domains in disadvantage



Source: New Zealand General Social Survey 2014

5.2_ Use new data to conduct deeper analysis of sub-groups disproportionately affected by multiple disadvantage

Statistics New Zealand is currently processing the results of the 2016 iteration of the General Social Survey and will release these data in July of 2017. Combining the 2014 and 2016 results may allow for a more fine grain analysis of work done thus far including breakdowns of subgroups within families and other characteristics such as ethnicity and region.

Our results show that multiple disadvantage disproportionately affects certain groups, particularly those in single parent families. Further research is needed to better understand this phenomenon and which groups of single parents are at greater risk than others. Additionally, understanding those who have managed to avoid multiple disadvantage and their associated resilience factors will assist policy makers in targeting preventative interventions to those at greatest risk.

Given the finding that about half of all disadvantage is multiple disadvantage, it is important to investigate when and how particular disadvantages connect with each other in order to provide services in the appropriate way. For example, if resolving a disadvantage in one domain is contingent on resolving one in another as well then sequencing and coordinating service provision will need to be a feature of the services provided. Identifying the groups and types of disadvantage that would benefit from this kind of approach will be a focus of the work in the longer-term.

5.3_ Connect with other sector measures that use administrative data

In 2017, the GSS is scheduled to be added to the Integrated Data Infrastructure, a linked database of administrative data from a host of government agencies. Linking our results with the administrative data will allow us to investigate the types of services being accessed by those with and without multiple disadvantage and understand how well the use of services matches with the needs identified. This linking will also allow us to compare our findings with those from other measures being created by agencies using this administrative data and help provide a family perspective to that work.

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Families Commission Kōmihana ā Whānau

The Families Commission operates under the name Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit (Superu)