In Focus

What we've learned about families and whānau

superu

Since 2004, the Families Commission and, more recently, Superu[1] have done a significant amount of research on what works to improve outcomes for families and whānau, which we'd like to share.

What we've learned about the nature of families and whānau

About *In Focus*

Superu's *In Focus* series is designed to inform and stimulate debate on specific social issues faced by New Zealanders. We draw on current policy, practice and research to fully explore all sides of the issue.

Large shares of health, housing, care and protection services are provided by families and whānau, and generally neither measured nor accounted for in policy analysis.

Families play a pivotal role in our society

- Healthy individuals in healthy families are at the heart of a healthy society. Families give their members a sense of identity and belonging; they care, nurture and support their members; they provide socialisation and guidance; and they manage the family's emotional and material resources. Being part of a family is the most significant socialising influence in a person's early life. Given that childhood disadvantage strongly predicts negative adult life outcomes, a high level of family wellbeing is important both for individuals and for New Zealand.

- Most families in New Zealand are faring well. However, a portion do not do so well. This is particularly the case for a portion of single-parent families, and families from non-European ethnic groups.

- For most, being part of a family is a positive experience. In some cases, however, families do not fulfil their core functions of nurturing and supporting their members. Factors within the family (for example, family violence, household over-crowding and low household income) can place members at risk. Strong family relationships and support offer protection against life's challenges, and support to build and broaden these relationships may be needed.

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1   Since 2014, the Families Commission has operated under the name Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit, or Superu for short.

Families in New Zealand are diverse

- Families are getting smaller, older and more ethnically diverse. Although couples with children are still the most common household type they are decreasing as a proportion of the total number of households as the number of one-parent, couple only and single person households increases. A higher proportion of Māori (26%), Pacific (40%) and Asian (32%) children are living in extended family situations than is the case in the population overall (17%).

- What works for some will not work for others. For example, what works for families with an individualistic, independent view of the world typical of western cultures will not be the same as what works for families with a more collectivist, interdependent perspective usually found in non-western cultures. This represents challenges to policy makers and the delivery of services to a culturally diverse population.

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Many see 'whānau' as a distinct concept

- 'Whānau' as a distinctive concept is embedded within the context of kaupapa Māori with its own mauri (life force), nuances and complexities'.[2] Superu's Whānau Rangatiratanga Framework provides a way of thinking about whānau wellbeing from within a Māori world view. This framework builds on significant earlier work on understanding and measuring Māori wellbeing.

> *'Whānau' as a distinctive concept is embedded within the context of kaupapa Māori*

- Using data from Te Kupenga[3] to explore modern expressions of whānau we found that there are multiple contributors to whānau wellbeing. The two that have the strongest association with how people assess their whānau's wellbeing are the quality of relationships within the whānau and how satisfied individuals within the whānau are with their lives.

- Our findings suggest that supporting and strengthening whānau wellbeing is complex and needs a multifaceted approach that includes a focus on social and educational factors as well as economic ones. It is also important to take into account how the different family sizes and structures of Māori families can affect screening criteria and introduce selection bias, particularly in the area of care and protection.

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2   Kim Workman (2011), Whānau yesterday, today, tomorrow
3   Te Kupenga is a survey of Māori wellbeing carried out by Stats NZ

What we've learned about working with families and whānau

Change is achieved through families and whānau themselves with support as needed

- Change comes through people (individuals, families, whānau) doing things differently. Sometimes they need help to do this. Interventions, services and providers need the right capabilities to effectively support change. There needs to be a focus on what actually works to support this change as well as a diversity of approaches that respond to the needs of our diverse population.

- Although changing behaviour may be difficult and take time, best practice means allowing families and whānau to drive changes, engage in their own solutions and become empowered. The role of government is ideally one of supporting pathways to success through partnerships, facilitating and enabling families and whānau to move forward rather than 'delivering to' them.

- Strengthening whānau and family capacity and capability is an important area of focus. Education and up-skilling are critical to this process as are aspirational experiences.

Making a difference for vulnerable families and whānau requires whole-family, tailored and culturally-relevant approaches

- What works for families and whānau is being able to have their situation considered as a whole with the family or whānau at the centre, not the agency. Families' positive experiences with Te Puea Marae and Turuki Healthcare suggest that services work where there is an experienced provider with a holistic view of a family's needs and an ability to get things done.

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- Although there is limited research on the outcomes of integrated social services, fragmented services are associated with poor outcomes, especially for children and young people. With whānau, integrated services are best delivered as part of a whānau-centred approach. This includes focusing on whānau wellbeing, greater collaboration between state agencies and strong relationships between government, communities and providers. Integrating services that are complex is very difficult and unlikely to be resolved by top down approaches.

- Our work on Pacific families and problem debt found that effective ways of working with these families to move them out of hardship needs a multifaceted approach that includes:
  - providing education and training
  - a whole-family focus
  - leadership from the church and traditional leaders
  - identifying alternative ways of doing things
  - developing services that have Pacific workers with appropriate language skills to ensure that support is provided early and in culturally appropriate ways
  - raising awareness of the financial supports available
  - revisiting access to easy credit and finance.

> *Fragmented services are associated with poor outcomes, especially for children and young people*

We need to look at community and societal interventions as well as those focused on individuals and families

- Successfully improving social outcomes requires a focus on *people* and knowing what to do – and when – to make a difference. Individuals live within families and whānau, who in turn live within communities within a wider society. Improving outcomes will require a focus on all of these levels.

- In our work on resilience, people identified a range of factors that helped them cope with and adjust to childhood adversity. These fell into three levels: the individual, the family or whānau, and the community. Similarly, addressing family violence requires action at the societal, community, relationship and individual levels. The interplay of factors within and across the different levels needs to be acknowledged.

- Our work on community-level initiatives found that the factors associated with success include:
  - a shared vision which is owned by the community
  - community readiness
  - a focus on outcomes
  - long-term and adaptable funding arrangements
  - a focus on community capacity building
  - skilled leadership and facilitation
  - processes for addressing power imbalances
  - a focus on relationships
  - appropriate scale
  - continuous learning and adaptation.

- In addition, for Māori and Pacific communities:
  - initiatives need to be grounded in relevant cultural concepts
  - funders need to use cross-cultural engagement skills
  - there needs to be Māori and Pacific participation and leadership
  - processes are needed for reflecting on the impacts of colonisation.

- Central government can best support community-level initiatives by removing bureaucratic barriers, collaborating, enhancing capacity at both community and government levels, investing strategically and creating a supportive policy context.

To be successful our policies and programmes must be sourced in, or informed by, Te Ao Māori

- Māori are contributors to, as well as users of, social services. With an ever-increasing need to improve service delivery for whānau, policies focused on whānau must be either sourced in or informed by a Māori worldview if they are to be relevant.

- The Crown-Māori partnership is constantly evolving. Many of these relationships articulate the need for partnership in design, delivery and evaluation of social services to Māori. This requires re-evaluating and growing our social sector research and evidence base to inform effective decision-making.

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We shouldn't just focus on risk. Resilience is critical – it is a process and can be built and supported

- Many families cope successfully with difficult situations and can adapt according to their circumstances but others do not. A resilience approach involves exploring the protective factors and resources that enable individuals and families to adapt when faced with adversity.

- It is possible to help build individual resilience. It is a process that unfolds over time and takes different paths for different people, and it is important to understand these pathways if we're going to provide effective support. In our work on resilience, we identified two general pathways from adversity to success. One potential pathway is where a child is able to draw on protective factors soon after experiencing initial adversity and can then go on to achieve at school and get employment. For a second, larger group, adversity often leads to negative coping responses that in turn lead to further adverse outcomes. At some later point, however, members of this group are able to draw on protective factors that set them on a track to success.

- As noted earlier, protective factors at the individual, family and community level help people cope with, and adjust to, childhood adversity. There is also a cultural dimension to resilience with culture and identity being significant factors.

- Less is known about how to build family resilience, however this is an important area given the key role of family and whānau in improving outcomes for their members. Research into family resilience identifies protective factors such as family problem solving, effective communication, equality, shared beliefs, flexibility, truthfulness, hope, social support, and physical and emotional health.

- Understanding the processes underlying resilience can inform and help target responses for vulnerable families. Actions that can better support children and families to avoid adversity and to build resilience when facing adversity include:
  - early intervention
  - initiatives that promote strong relationships and networks
  - a child-centred approach
  - a whole-of-family approach
  - accessible social and health services
  - strengthened responses to family violence and child abuse
  - adult education opportunities
  - a strengths-based approach to getting people into employment
  - intensive strengthening of whānau capability and capacity
  - appropriate follow-up, monitoring and support.

Transitions are important – they can be periods of difficulty and provide an opportunity to intervene

- Most people pass through predictable transition points (from primary to secondary school, from school to work). Some also experience unexpected transitions (such as divorce). Most people negotiate these transitions successfully but some don't. It is important to understand the various transitions and how a successful transition can best be supported. Early intervention at key transition points is needed so that people are supported and don't miss out on the services they need, particularly when experiencing unexpected transitions.

- Many people leaving the welfare system do so successfully but others may need additional support to make a successful transition. Our research has found that:
  - 75% of those leaving benefits are still off a benefit two years later. Most of the 25% who return to a benefit do so within the first year. There may be an opportunity for more support to make this transition successful.
  - 5.6% of New Zealanders moved three or more times during a three-year period. Most of these people (4% of the population or 150,000 people – the size of Tauranga) are 'vulnerable transient'. Vulnerable transient New Zealanders are more likely to be female and Māori. They are quite likely to have been in contact with the social services system, which may provide an opportunity to intervene that is potentially being missed.

What we've learned about creating a social services system that uses evidence

We have done considerable work to increase the use of evidence by decision-makers in the social sector, and here's what we've learned.

Agency culture is critical and it can work against improving outcomes

• It is important for whānau and families is to be treated with respect: to be believed, understood and treated with dignity. Often they feel they are not. Our research has found that agencies need to:

   – treat people as people and provide services where families are respected

   – place families at the centre rather than system needs

   – begin at the beginning – meet basic needs first, promptly and with little hassle

   – shift the burden of navigating the system off families and require the services to 'join the dots'

   – have staff who are informed and can act as an influential 'navigator' person who helps families deal with multiple agencies

   – create accountability of services and staff to families and ensure that competing agency priorities are managed in the interests of families and not those of the agency

   – Ensure the operational policy settings of different agencies align rather than work against one another.

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We need to understand what we're trying to improve

• Developing effective policies and services starts with having a good understanding of the problem we're trying to solve, the characteristics of the population, what needs to change to make a difference and what is likely to work to achieve this change. It is also important to understand how things are likely to change in the future as the make-up of our society changes. If our policies and services are based on outdated assumptions they are unlikely to be effective.

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On-the-ground knowledge is essential – we need to draw on a broader range of evidence

• New Zealand is a diverse society. To improve social outcomes in New Zealand, we need policies, programmes and services that reflect this diversity and work for all. We must draw on a broad range of perspectives and evidence from research, experience and different world views. In government decision-making, there needs to be greater understanding of what is happening outside government.

We have more information and knowledge than we use and we need to be better at sharing it

- There are many and growing examples of evidence being used, however there is a lot of information in research and within the system that could and should be used but isn't. Knowledge and on-the-ground know-how is not drawn on to the extent possible when developing new policies and programmes. NGOs are important for generating and gathering information.

> *Knowledge and on-the-ground know-how is not drawn on to the extent possible when developing new policies and programmes*

Agency culture and capability are critical for 'evidence-informed' to become the norm

- Agencies and others have to want to use evidence and the barriers to doing so need to be removed and capability developed. This takes strong leadership

- We need interventions, services and providers that effectively support families and whānau so that they benefit from improved outcomes. To achieve this, government must work with and understand the community perspective and the service providers that government relies on to achieve social investment outcomes. Both parties need the ability to successfully commission for outcomes. This requires deeper capability to build effective relationships, respect for the knowledge on both sides of the conversation, and the use of evidence and evaluation to know about what happens on the ground, and to invest in what works.

- There are inconsistent levels of capability among both government agencies and NGOs to do this.

We are ad-hoc in our use of evidence and applying more structured processes could be useful

- When designing new initiatives, we should explore examples that have been tried overseas. For example, some jurisdictions have introduced evaluation polices that we could learn from. Others have used a rigorous evidence-informed and data-driven development approach involving public agencies and communities in development and decision-making. For example, our In Focus publication called 'Families with complex needs: International approaches' was used during the establishment of the Ministry for Vulnerable Children Oranga Tamariki.

We need to pay more attention to implementation and to transferability and scaling

- To achieve improved outcomes we need effective implementation as well as effective policies and programmes. Over the years government agencies have amassed a lot of research knowledge and practitioner know-how about what works in social services but outcomes for clients haven't necessarily improved. This is because there is often a gap between evidence of what works in theory and what is delivered in practice. A focus on implementation bridges this gap. There is an emerging body of research that defines the components and processes involved in successful implementation.

- Despite the benefits of transferring solutions into new contexts and/or scaling, many interventions fail to do this successfully. Neither transferability nor scaling is a straightforward task. NGOs in particular raise concerns about how local context factors prevent the application of their services in other areas but little work had been done to scrutinise how local context factors can be addressed.

- Continuous improvement is an important aspect of implementation and ongoing delivery of effective services. It is comparatively weak in the social sector, government and NGOs.

> *There is often a gap between evidence of what works in theory and what is delivered in practice*

We need to focus on existing spending as well as new money

- We have a tendency to apply our evidence-informed thinking to new investments, however most government spending is on existing services and programmes. The real challenge is thinking about the effectiveness of existing spending and improving its quality.

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An overreliance on big data may mean we miss things, limiting our effectiveness

- Big data on its own does not address questions that lead to understanding both the why and how – research and evaluation are needed. For example, the characteristics of people who generate the need for services are wider than the criteria used to test eligibility. These differences will affect take-up rates and the effectiveness of policy initiatives. This won't be picked up by an analysis of big data, which is often gathered for purposes others than evaluation.

> *Big data on its own does not address questions that lead to understanding both the why and how – research and evaluation are needed*

There are gaps in our data that we urgently need to fill

- There are several measurement and data challenges facing the social sector, many of which are being worked through. Some of the concepts we're talking about (family, whānau, wellbeing) are difficult to define, measure and collect good data on. Our family and whānau wellbeing frameworks provide a foundation. Given the importance of family and whānau to New Zealand, it is essential that progress is made in this area.

> *There is a significant lack of quantitative evidence about whānau, hapū and iwi wellbeing*

- While there is a solid body of qualitative research on whānau wellbeing, there is a serious lack of quantitative data. Official data collection has focused on the individual or household rather than whānau. More work on building quantitative data on whānau wellbeing is needed to support the development of initiatives like Whānau Ora.

- The collection of new data (for example, Te Kupenga) and the use of new technologies (such as the Integrated Data Infrastructure) provides us all with an opportunity to harness relevant data and information in a way that works best for those with whom we work. Greater flexibility in data access is also fostering new opportunities for partnerships between government agencies and the community and voluntary sector.

Summary of some things we've learned from a systems perspective

Identifying and engaging with families who need support from the social sector

The system doesn't always identify and engage with those most in need

- There is no single agency that holds a complete overview of a family's use of services and their needs. Agencies share a wide range of justice-related information but do not share information about social support needs
- Support networks and agencies must work to access families and engage them in a way that is appropriate and empowering: work *with* the whole family and not *to* them

New Zealand has a highly mobile population that makes connection with services difficult for some

- 5.6% of New Zealanders moved 3 or more times during a 3 year period we studied. Most of these people (4% of the population or 150,000 people) are vulnerable transient

In many cases there are services on offer but some people don't know about them, don't get the information or don't participate in them

- Pregnancy is when most parents make decisions about immunisation, yet over half (56%) of pregnant women do not receive relevant information before their child is born
- Despite the creation of more resources, some parents, teachers and health professionals still don't know what to do or how to help young people with mental health issues
- 25% of families with children aged 4 hadn't scheduled a B4 School Check

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Screening, assessing and referring families

Screening and assessment is an opportunity to look at the whole picture

- Families positive experiences with Te Puea Marae and Turuki Healthcare suggest that services work where there is an experienced provider who has a holistic view of families' needs and has the ability to get things done
- The result of the lack of information sharing and a whole-of-service view by agencies is that families have to keep repeating their stories to different agencies, which is often a negative experience
- Look at the whole person and the whole family within their community. Screening and assessment processes should use an understanding of resilience when looking at risk
- The Integrated Safety Response (ISR) to family violence provides a successful example of information sharing, risk assessment and safety planning

Intervention design needs to look at the whole system including potential bottlenecks

- The first iteration of ISR had significant blockages with inter-agency assessment which had flow-on effects to government and non-government providers. These were subsequently ironed out
- Services provided through the Youth Mental Health Project experienced some bottlenecks at points of transition for youth being referred to other services

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Providing services

Universal services need to work for all – one-size-fits-all is unlikely to work

- Some groups miss out on available services or need more support. For example, youth mental health initiatives are reaching many young people through general services but some groups miss out or need more support such as youth experiencing multiple unexpected transitions, who are not in school, LGBT youth, youth with disabilities and those who live in Christchurch

- Flexible, practical support that comes to the family or is in one place is most helpful

Making a difference for vulnerable families and whānau requires whole-family, tailored and culturally-relevant approaches

- Our work on measuring the effectiveness of 'whole-of-system' responses to prevent family violence found a multi-faceted approach is needed to move them out of hardship

The world is changing and how people access services is too

- Deliver through the channels that people use, such as digital tools to deliver wellbeing services to young people

- Take services to the people

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Discharging and following up

Many families leaving the social services system do so successfully but others may need additional support to make a successful transition

- 75% of those leaving a benefit are still off a benefit two years later. Most of the 25% who return to a benefit do so within the first year. There may be an opportunity for more support to make this transition successful

- We have 150,000 people vulnerable transient New Zealanders. They are more likely to be female and Māori. Many have been in contact with the social system in the past. This provides an opportunity to intervene that is being missed

This is underpinned by

- Treating people as people – provide services where families are well treated

- Improving the culture of agencies (understanding, attitude and behaviour)

- Having staff who are informed and can act as an influential 'navigator' when dealing with multiple agencies

- Creating accountability of government services and staff to families where competing agency priorities are managed in the interest of families, not the agency. Ensure the operational policy settings of different agencies align rather than work against one another

- Beginning at the beginning – meet basic needs first, promptly and with little hassle

- Placing families at the centre of the system rather than the agency's needs

- Shifting the burden of navigating the system off family – require services to 'join the dots' and not families

- Building capability to generate and use evidence to continuously improve services and to decide where to invest

Selected publications

These are some of the publications we've touched on in this In Focus. For a complete list of Superu's publications, please visit our website: superu.govt.nz/research-evidence

About families and whānau

Whānau yesterday, today, tomorrow
August 2011

Growing Up in New Zealand[4]: Now we are born
March 2012

Pacific families and problem debt
November 2012

Families and Whānau Status Reports
2013-2017

Growing Up in New Zealand: Vulnerability Report 1: Exploring the definition of vulnerability for children in the first 1000 days
July 2014

At a glance: Early vulnerability and health outcomes for New Zealand children
July 2015

In focus: Family resilience
August 2015

What works: Integrated social services for vulnerable people
November 2015

In focus: Families with complex needs: International approaches
November 2015

Measuring the effectiveness of 'whole-of-system' response to prevent family violence
December 2015

Effective community-level change: What makes community-level initiatives effective and how can central government best support them?
December 2015

Youth Mental Health Project – Summative evaluation report 2016
December 2016

Off-benefit transitions: Where do people go?
February 2017

Subjective whānau wellbeing in Te Kupenga
April 2017

Youth Mental Health Project – Improving youth mental health: What has worked, what else could be done
May 2017

Growing Up in New Zealand: Now we are 4
May 2017

Journeys of resilience: From adverse childhoods to achieving adulthood
May 2017

Patterns of multiple disadvantage across New Zealand families
June 2017

Families: Universal functions, culturally diverse values
July 2017

Early education participation: Getting New Zealand children ready for school
August 2017

Evaluation of the family violence Integrated Safety Response pilot
August 2017

About evidence and evaluation

Evaluation standards for Aotearoa New Zealand: Evaluating with integrity
May 2015

In focus: Standards of evidence for understanding what works: International experiences and prospects for Aotearoa New Zealand
June 2016

Evidence rating scale
April 2017

Lessons on evaluation capability and preconditions for undertaking evaluation
May 2017

Making sense of evaluation
July 2017

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4   Growing Up in New Zealand reports have been produced by the University of Auckland with Crown funding managed by Superu.

About Superu

Superu is a government agency that focuses on what works to improve the lives of families and whānau.

What we do:

- We advocate about what works to improve family and whānau wellbeing.
- We generate evidence that helps decision-makers understand complex social issues and what works to address them.
- We share evidence about what works with the people who make decisions on social services.
- We support decision-makers to use evidence to make better decisions to improve social outcomes.

We also provide independent assurance by:

- developing standards of evidence and good practice guidelines
- supporting the use of evidence and good evaluation by others in the social sector.

For more information about the work of Superu contact enquiries@superu.govt.nz

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Families Commission Kōmihana ā **Whānau**

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