

# Journeys of resilience

## RESEARCH SUMMARY

APRIL 2017

### Introduction

This research summary looks at the importance of resilience in helping children and adults respond to adversity. It estimates how many at-risk children go on to achieve good employment and education outcomes. It also investigates the key factors that contribute to these good outcomes.

“Hope is the strongest word I know. I can literally overcome these problems. Not because of outside or inside influence, but because I have had a desire to succeed.”

(Pākehā, male, 30-39 years)

### KEY FINDINGS

Analysis of national administrative data identified 121,400 at-risk children (who made up 14 percent of all children aged 0-14 years in 2013). Just over 53,800 (44 percent) of these at-risk children were projected to have positive education and employment outcomes.

In comparison, 79 percent of the children in the low or no-risk group were projected to have positive education and employment outcomes.

Participants in our qualitative study told us that the following protective factors helped them be more resilient and achieve despite childhood adversity:

- > positive individual attitudes, beliefs and aspirations and self determination
- > close relationships and strong supportive networks
- > accessible and supportive social, community and health services, such as counselling, to support children and adults in their healing process.

These could be further enhanced by providing:

- > effective early intervention, for children and their families and whānau, to prevent adversity and to provide effective support when it occurs
- > a whole-of-family approach to address the multiple and complex issues within families and whānau
- > adult education opportunities, to build confidence and vocational capability and a pathway to strengthen positive outcomes in education and employment.

There is a cultural dimension to resilience. Māori participants shared many of the same resilience strategies as non-Māori, however, the way this was conceptualised and described was often different for Māori participants.

One of the other key themes to come out of the study was the importance of children being believed if they reported abuse, and being encouraged and supported to achieve their life goals.

## Context

This research summary outlines the key findings from the 2016 report, *Journeys of resilience: From adverse childhoods to achieving in adulthood*. This research was undertaken under the banner of the Ministerial Social Sector Research Fund, which provides Ministers with quality, commissioned research to inform their decision-making.

The research addresses two main questions:

- How many at-risk families go on to achieve positive education and employment outcomes?
- What are the key factors that influence the achievement of those positive outcomes?

## GLOSSARY

**Resilience:** The process by which individuals achieve developmental milestones, such as education and employment, in spite of adversity in childhood.

**Risk factors:** Specific stressors, events or adversities associated with poor outcomes.

**Protective factors:** Conditions or attributes in individuals, families/whānau, communities, or the larger society that, when present, mitigate or eliminate risk.

**Outcome:** An event or achievement of interest, such as an educational qualification or employment.

## Research question 1: How many of those at risk go on to achieve positive outcomes?

Recent Treasury analysis used linked administrative data to analyse the effect of an individual's exposure to adversity in childhood on their adult life outcomes. This research used Treasury analysis<sup>1</sup> to answer the first research question.<sup>2</sup>

The risk factors examined were:

- having a Child, Youth and Family Service finding of abuse or neglect,
- being mostly supported by benefits since birth,
- having a mother with no formal qualifications, and/or
- having a parent with a prison or community sentence.

The outcomes examined were:

- education – achieving school qualifications before age 21
- employment – receiving a sole parent benefit before age 21, or being on a main benefit for at least five years from age 25 to 34
- other outcomes – a referral to CYF youth justice services or serving a custodial or community sentence from age 25 to 34.

The research focused on the 873,000 children that were aged 0-14 in 2013, and it projected outcomes for two groups: a higher-risk group, and a low or no-risk group.

The higher-risk group consisted of those who experienced two or more of the above risk factors and comprised 121,377 (14 percent) of the 0-14 year olds.

1. Note these papers contain extensive analysis of Statistics New Zealand's Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) data for different age groups, cohorts, risks and outcomes. We have selected aspects of the analysis to illustrate the important general findings from this research.  
2. Since it is not currently possible to link family members together within the IDI, the following analysis is based on individuals' experiences (risks and outcomes). The findings for families are expected to be broadly similar to the current findings for individuals.

## Four out of ten of those at higher risk go on to achieve positive education and employment outcomes

The Treasury analysis showed that:

- 44 percent of those in the higher-risk group were projected to achieve educational qualifications and to not spend significant time on the benefit as an adult, compared to
- 79 percent of those in the low or no risk group, who were projected to achieve educational qualifications and to not spend significant time on the benefit as an adult.

In other words, 53,844 children from the higher-risk group do not have poor education or employment (benefit) outcomes (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1** \_ Projected education and benefit outcomes for higher-risk 0-14 year olds (121,377 children in 2013)



If we widen this analysis by including justice outcomes, 35 percent of the higher-risk group is projected not to have any of the five poor outcomes we examined. For the no or low-risk group, 74 percent were projected not to have any of the five poor outcomes.

## Educational and employment success for those at risk is an example of resilience

As described above, at-risk individuals who do not have poor outcomes are often referred to as showing **resilience**.

Resilience is the capacity to achieve developmental milestones, such as education qualifications and employment, in spite of adversity in childhood. Resilience is based on the complex interactions between risk (adversity) and protective factors and is better thought of as a process,<sup>3</sup> rather than an event or trait. Resilience can evolve over time and draws on a range of factors to allow individuals to adapt, cope and achieve.

3. Masten coined the term 'ordinary magic' to explain the everyday things families do to maintain strong and healthy family relationships and functioning. See: Masten, A. S. (2001). "Ordinary Magic: Resilience process in development", *American Psychologist*, 56(3), 227-238.

## Research question 2: What key factors influence the achievement of positive outcomes?

### Key information on the qualitative research

Participants experienced one or more risk factors in childhood (child abuse and neglect, family violence, parental criminality, and/or a parent supported by a benefit) but had achieved educational qualifications and/or sustained employment.

Individual, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 49 participants:

- 36 were female and 13 male
- 26 identified as Māori, 18 as Pākehā, and five were of a Pacific ethnicity
- Ages ranged from 16 to 56 years

Interviews took place in Auckland and Christchurch.

Our qualitative research aimed to identify the key factors that influenced the achievement of positive outcomes despite adversity. Participants were asked to identify factors (e.g. events, people or relationships) that they felt had enabled them to overcome adversity and achieve good education or employment outcomes.

### Resilience was a process unfolding over time and taking different paths

Those interviewed talked about various programmes, people, events and experiences they felt had contributed to improving their personal growth and development. What emerged was a complex interplay of various factors that enabled participants to overcome, to some degree, the adversity they had experienced. This did not mean the adverse experiences had no lasting impact, but rather that participants were able to achieve some positive outcomes despite the adversity.

Participants' stories provided examples of the resilience pathways, briefly outlined in Figure 2, and illustrated the ways in which protective factors, and especially relationships, were drawn upon to change pathways and achieve. Often turning points had set them on a new course.

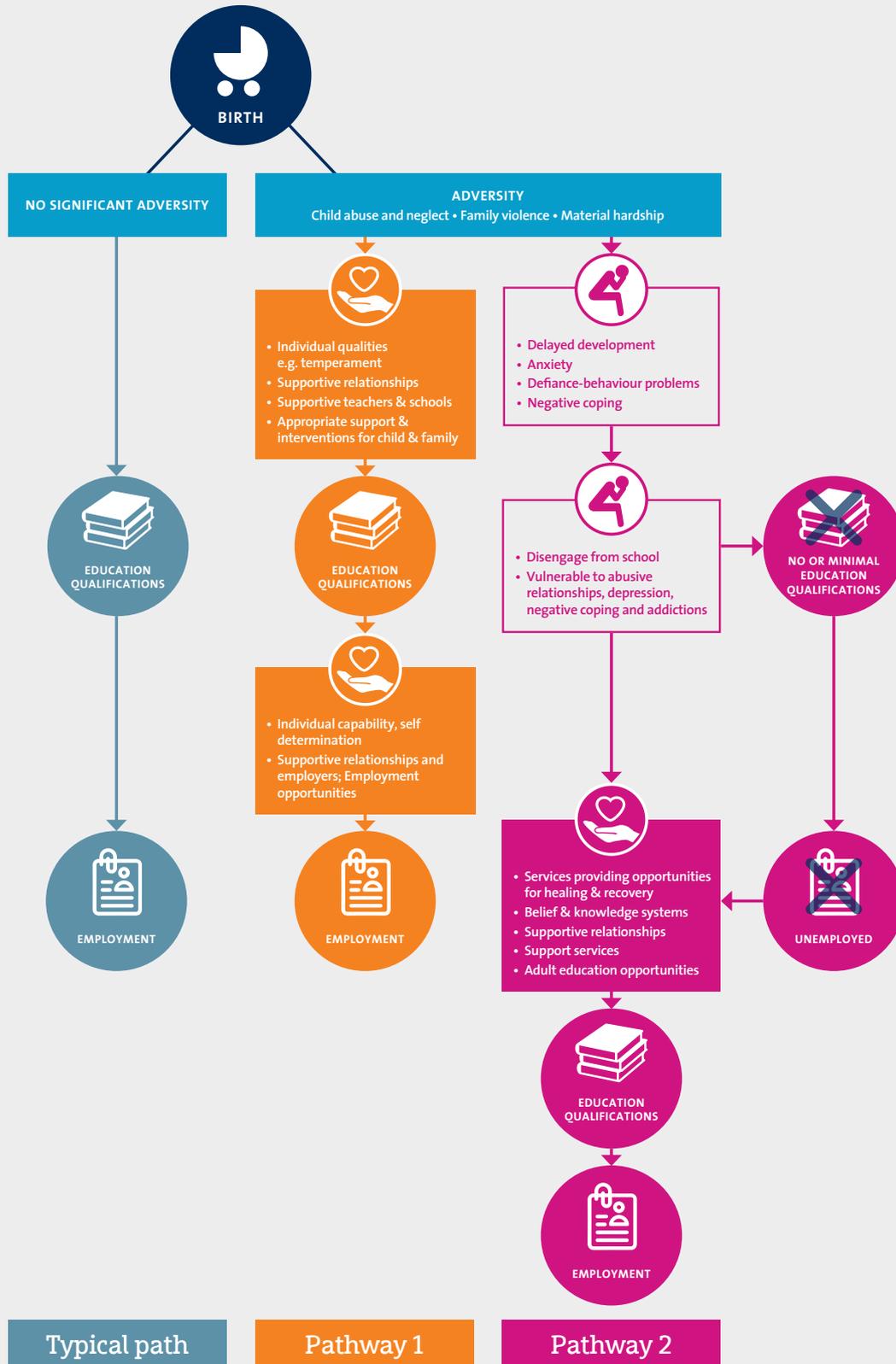
While each participant's experience was unique, the researchers were able to illustrate two general pathways from adversity to success (Figure 2). One potential pathway was where the child was able to draw on protective factors soon after experiencing initial adversity and was then able to go on to achieve at school and get employment (shown as Pathway 1). For a second, larger group, adversity often led to negative coping responses that in turn led to further adverse outcomes. However, at some later point (or points) they were able to draw on protective factors that set them back on a track to success (Pathway 2).

"I can pinpoint certain areas of my life. One being [date\*] I believe. I was at a [provider\*] hui over in [location\*]. At this time I was going through a rough patch with my life. I was still homeless and so I was grateful that I was given a chance to get a free shower and free food...I wasn't interacting with a lot of the people. So I was distancing myself. One person knocked on my shower door...He said '[participant's name\*] do you need help?' and I felt it for the first time in my life. I felt my brain reprogramming itself, resetting itself on the spot. Five seconds later after my mind said 'no, you don't need it, you don't need it', five seconds later I said, 'yes, yes I do'."

(Pākehā, male, 30-39 years)

\* Names, dates and places have been removed to protect the identity of the interviewee.

Figure 2 \_ Examples of pathways from adversity towards good education and employment outcomes<sup>4</sup>

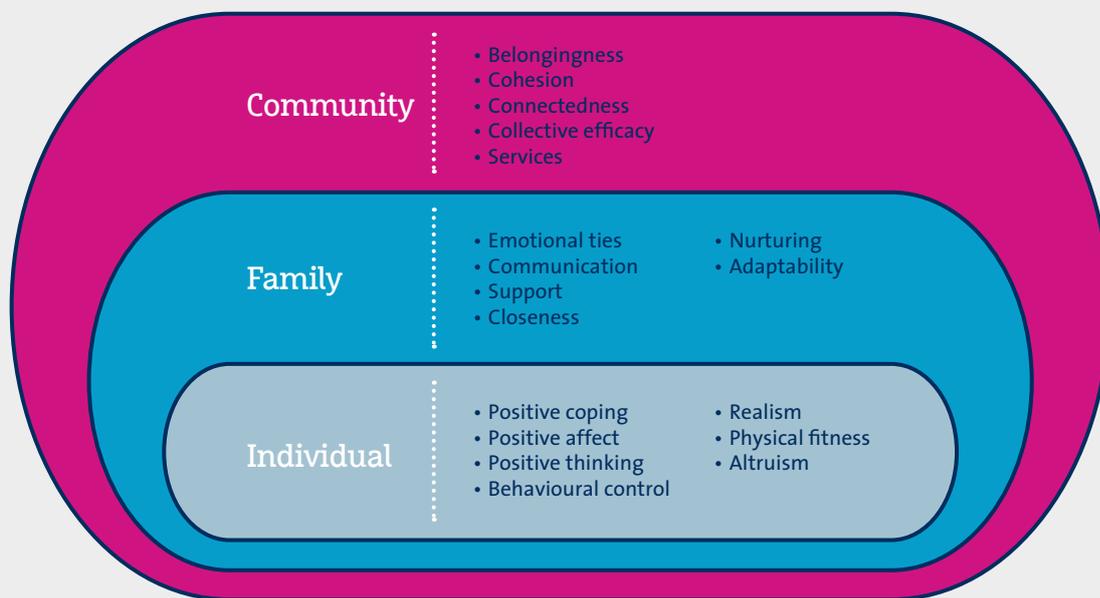


4. Note this figure does not include resilience concepts specific to Māori.

## A range of protective factors were important for the research participants

Previous research has identified a range of factors that help people cope with, and adjust to, childhood adversity. These have been categorised as falling into three domains or levels: the individual, the family or whānau and the community (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3 \_ Examples of nested protective factors classified at three levels**



Participants in the current research identified similar protective factors they said helped them cope with, and adjust to, childhood adversity and provided insights into how the factors interrelate to promote resilience.





## Individual level factors

Participants identified a number of attitudes, beliefs and aspirations that helped them cope and, to various degrees, overcome the impacts of their adverse childhoods:

- **Hope** and **desire for a better life** for them, and their family, was a strong focus. For some the desire for a better life was expressed as a desire to succeed, to be a better person than their parent[s], to achieve their dreams, to not give up.
- Some participants talked about building their **self-esteem**, **self-worth**, and **belief in themselves** as part of their healing process.
- **Self-determination** was expressed as gaining back a sense of control over their own life, body and soul.
- Some participants regarded the ability to be **reflective**, **self-aware** and to assess consequences and make choices as important in their own resilience processes.
- Many of the participants had found solace and knowledge via **religion** or through **humanist and academic understandings of the world**. These frameworks and belief systems provided participants with a deeper understanding about what had happened to them, and their families.

“It is amazing talking about it, how somebody can go through so much but yet they can make the choices as an adult of whether they want to really heal from it or not, and how far you actually can come...You may not be able to change your circumstances but you can change the way that you think about it, and how you feel about it in the way of believing – well I believe in a God – but even believing in yourself. It is internal that you can make a difference.”

(Pākehā, female, 30-39 years)

## Family and whānau level factors

Participants spoke of the significance of supportive relationships and networks, which enabled them to increase positive experiences and strengthen their resilience:

- A strong finding was participants saying how important it was that, as children, **adults believed** them and took action to keep them safe if they reported abuse to them. Some spoke of not being believed, and subsequently no action was taken. As a result they no longer trusted the adult and developed a relative distrust of the ‘adult world’.
- It was also important for participants to have someone **encourage them**, as well as **believe in them** and their ability to achieve. They felt supported and motivated to achieve. For some, this meant returning to school to complete their education and gain qualifications.
- Participants identified **positive relationships with family members, carers and friends** as a key factor in helping them to handle significant challenges and ‘teach’ them about nurturing relationships. These relationships, based on love, stability and encouragement, were critical to the participants, regardless of whether they had been children or adults when they had developed these relationships.

“I think having somebody to believe in you is really key. Somebody who will walk your journey with you...You don’t want people telling you how to live your life. You want people who are going to walk alongside you and go ‘Okay, well, that didn’t work out so well, let’s try another way’. Not give you a hard time for it not working out.”

(Pākehā, female, 40-49 years)

- **Relationships** with people who acted as **supporters, role models and mentors** were important for providing encouragement, skill development and alternatives to the negative role-modelling many had been exposed to. Some participants were proactive in seeking positive relationships with supportive adults.
- To create a positive future, participants identified the importance of **developing their family resilience** with their partners and children. This included addressing significant personal and family issues, such as addictions and breaking the cycle of violence.

### Community level factors

“In college the one thing that was really keeping me to be in college was kapa haka. I did kapa haka for three years in college. That bond that I had with my group really kept me in and kept me on the straight. They encouraged me to keep going and keep the Māori aspect which was really good. I loved having that. I want that for my daughter...”  
(Māori, female, 20-29 years)

Those interviewed spoke of the importance of participating in cultural and sporting groups and having **positive experiences with responsive services**, such as counselling and family support services. These services, which treated participants respectfully and in a non-judgemental way, supported them as children and adults to overcome their adverse circumstances. Participants who were able to access appropriate services when they required them gained valuable support and personal strength.

Education services tended to be a positive experience. Those who re-engaged with education as an adult spoke of undertaking a variety of adult education opportunities (e.g. night classes), often leading to higher education and university degrees. Educational achievement then provided a path to full-time employment. Practical support was also important in helping some get into employment, with assistance in preparing job applications and preparing for interviews being mentioned.

### There is a cultural dimension to resilience

Māori are identified as being over-represented in the at-risk group in the Treasury analysis. Just over half of those interviewed in this study were Māori and this enabled the researchers to identify culturally-specific ways in which resilience operated.

While Māori participants shared many of the same resilience strategies as non-Māori, the way this is conceptualised and enacted can be different for whānau. Five interrelated themes emerged from the interviews: **whanaugatanga** (whakapapa/kin group relationships that can extend beyond kinship groups); **manaakitanga** (caring for and hospitality to others); **kotahitanga** (unity, togetherness, solidarity); **wairuatanga** (spirituality); and **rangatiratanga** (self-determination).

While understanding of, and access to, Te Ao Māori varied among Māori research participants, Māori culture and identity in general was considered by all participants to be a positive and enriching experience and a significant factor in terms of its contribution to their overall wellbeing.

“I was just talking to the ladies out here because I really want to learn how to do the weaving. I was like, oh man, this is no coincidence...I would love to take it further. I would love to learn how to speak Te Reo Māori. Because I feel lost as far as my background is concerned. My whakapapa.”  
(Māori, female, 20-29 years)



## The interviews also highlighted other meaningful positive outcomes in addition to education and employment

Many participants mentioned other types of positive outcomes they had worked hard towards. They discussed a variety of personal achievements they were very proud of, such as **surviving their difficult childhood** and not letting it destroy their life further, as well as **moving beyond a 'victim mentality'**. These participants had embarked on a journey of **self-discovery and personal growth** which had led them to put the past behind them, to some extent, and enable them to lead the life they wanted. For some, this had also meant **overcoming drug and/or alcohol addictions**.

“Alcoholism and drug addiction just poisons every aspect of your life and it did in all of my family member’s lives. But we all, my immediate family, have recovery. It is a miracle when one person gets recovery. When that happens within a family that is amazing stuff.”

(Māori, female, 40-49 years)

For some participants, a key achievement was **having children** and doing the best they could to raise them as good people. They nurtured and loved their children, with some taking up parenting courses to increase their knowledge and skills in this area.

Another significant achievement was some participants’ ability to **break the intergenerational cycle of violence** they had been part of. They had made a conscious decision to change their attitude and behaviour on violence, and had learned from positive situations and opportunities, such as having a non-violent partner.

“I don’t hit my children. I don’t use violence towards them...I want to see a smile on my children’s face.”

(Pākehā, male, 30-39 years)

**Giving back to others** was another achievement for some participants who wanted to show their gratitude at overcoming adversity and being supportive of others to enable them do the same.

“Giving back to the community and people that helped you...paying back to the community. That is a good thing for me. Helping them out instead.”

(Māori, female, 30-39 years)



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## These research findings have implications for government and community services

Based on what participants told the researchers, it is possible to identify actions that can better support children and families, both to avoid adversity and to build resilience when facing adversity.

- Early intervention for children and their families and whānau, both to prevent adversity and to provide effective support when it occurs.
- Positive, supportive relationships are key to facilitating resilience for children, young people and adults, therefore the findings support initiatives that promote strong relationships and networks.
- A child-centred approach is important, especially for child protection, justice, education and health services. It has implications for policy and workforce development to ensure workers have the guidance and skills to implement this approach. This includes listening to, and believing, children's concerns.
- Appropriate follow-up, monitoring and support of children, their families and whānau are vital after a child protection intervention takes place to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children.
- A whole-of-family approach is required to address the multiple and complex issues within families and whānau.
- Accessible social and health services, such as counselling, are important to supporting children and adults in their healing process.
- Responses between all forms of family violence and child abuse have to be strengthened as they are closely connected, putting children at risk of abuse and negative long-term impacts.
- Adult education provides opportunities to build confidence and vocational capability and a pathway to strengthening positive outcomes in education and employment.
- A strengths-based approach to getting people into employment with the provision of encouragement and practical help was supported by the findings.
- Implications for policies and services for Māori – the findings support the whānau ora approach and the need for intensive strengthening of capability and capacity of whānau to grow in all the areas of resilience noted.





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This report has been commissioned through the Ministerial Social Sector Research Fund, which is managed by Superu. The topic has been determined by the Minister of Social Development to meet policy concerns that might be addressed by expanding the available evidence. Superu is responsible for ensuring that appropriate research methods were used, including peer review and quality assurance. The Office of the Minister has managed the release of this report, including the preparation of associated communications materials. Once released, all reports commissioned through the Fund are available on the Superu website [superu.govt.nz](http://superu.govt.nz) and further information on the report can be provided by Superu.



## Our purpose

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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, New Zealand’s communities, families and whānau.

## What we do

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We work across the wider social sector to:

- **promote** informed debate on the key social issues for New Zealand, its families and whānau, and increase awareness about what works
- **grow** the quality, relevance and quantity of the evidence base in priority areas
- **facilitate** the use of evidence by sharing it and supporting its use in decision-making.

### Related publications:

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*Journeys of resilience: From adverse childhoods to achieving in adulthood* report (December 2016)



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Superu Level 7, 110 Featherston Street P: 04 917 7040  
PO Box 2839, Wellington 6140 W: [superu.govt.nz](http://superu.govt.nz)

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