

Te Atatū – Insights

September 2023

Wellbeing of children and young people who offend

Summary of findings

This report summarises previously published insights from the Social Wellbeing Agency's recent work to assist the Government response to youth crime.

We found:

- Young people who are most likely to offend include those who have (in order of impact): exposure to family violence and contact with Oranga Tamariki; experience of poverty; and parent(s) who have an alcohol or other drug issue, a mental health issue, and/or contact with Corrections.
- Over three-quarters of youth crime in Aotearoa New Zealand is committed by the 10% of young people who have greatest exposure to experiences of hardship and disadvantage. These young people also have repeated referrals to public service agencies for serious concerns, starting from a young age.
- Most factors correlated to offending behaviour by young people reflect the characteristics of their environment (their families and communities). This suggests solutions to youth offending should consider family and community wellbeing.



Background

Using the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI)¹, we created a measure of need based on wellbeing factors that are highly correlated to offending behaviour. Using this measure, we placed the cohort of young people in Aotearoa New Zealand who turned 18 in 2020 into four groups:

- **Very high need group:** the 1% of young people with the highest need according to the measure we developed
- **High need group:** the next 9% of young people
- **Moderate needs group:** the next 10% of young people
- **Low needs group:** the bottom 80% of young people in terms of need.

We then examined the lives of the young people in each of these groups to understand their involvement with youth crime. (Refer to Appendix 1 for further information about the method we used and a detailed description of these factors.)

Findings from this research informed Ministers' decisions and agency activity throughout 2022 and 2023 to strengthen support for young people, particularly where need was highest.

¹The Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) is a large research database. It holds de-identified (anonymised) data about people and households. The data is about life events, like education, income, benefits, migration, justice, and health. It comes from government agencies, Stats NZ surveys, and non-government organisations (NGOs).

A small group with most exposure to hardship and disadvantage do the majority of youth crime

We found the 1% of young people with the highest needs (numbering 5,394 individuals) faced many challenges. At the age of 17 years:

- Over one-third (38%) lived with families where the income per family member (equivalised income) was less than \$20,000 p.a.
- Most (92%) were supported by a main benefit
- Over half (51%) lived with an adult who had received support for a mental health or an addiction issue
- Most (83%) lived with an adult who had been convicted and sentenced for a relatively serious criminal offence.

We found the 9% of young people in our high needs group (numbering 48,548 individuals) also faced many challenges. At the age of 17 years:

- Nearly one-third (30%) lived with families where the income per family member (equivalised income) was less than \$20,000 p.a.
- Most (83%) were supported by a main benefit
- Over a third (39%) lived with an adult who had received support for a mental health or an addiction issue
- Most (69%) lived with an adult who had been convicted and sentenced for a relatively serious criminal offence.

Consistent with the international evidence, we found that these two groups of young people together committed over 75% of all crime committed by young people before they turned 18 years. On average, they began offending at a younger age, offended more often, and committed more serious offences compared to young people with fewer needs, or less exposure to hardship and disadvantage.

However, it should not be concluded that young people who have high needs will inevitably offend. The data showed that, while young people in our high-needs groups were *more likely* to offend than other young people, not all did or would be involved in sustained offending. Likewise, some young people with little or no disadvantage may also offend.

The 10% of young people with the highest needs commit over 75% of all youth crime.

Young people with high needs are known by public service agencies

Our analysis showed young people in the highest needs groups come to the attention of a range of government agencies, often repeatedly, from early in their lives, for serious concerns. For example, we found that by the time the 1% of young people with very high needs reached the age of 18 years:

- Over three-quarters (81%) had received a truancy intervention
- All (100%) had an Oranga Tamariki contact record or report of concern
- Nearly half (49%) had been reported to Police, once or more, as a victim of a crime
- Nearly one-third (30%) had received a mental health referral
- Over three-quarters (82%) had been associated with at least one reported family violence event.

Young people in the group we identified as having high needs (the 9%) were also generally well-known to government agencies. By the time they reached the age of 18 years:

- Over half (53%) had received a truancy intervention
- Almost all (93%) had an Oranga Tamariki contact record or report of concern
- A quarter (26%) had been reported to Police, once or more, as a victim of a crime
- One in around 7 (16%) had received a mental health referral
- Nearly two-thirds (60%) had been associated with at least one reported family violence event.

Over 60% of young people in the highest needs group first came to the attention of a government agency for a relatively serious issue by age 5.

Young people with high needs have early and frequent contact with public service agencies

We further focussed on patterns of contact that young people in the different need groups had with government agencies in relation to three specific serious matters:

- School non-enrolment
- Mental health assessment
- Oranga Tamariki (OT) investigation².

This analysis showed that a significant number of children with high needs are known to government agencies from a young age. However, despite frequent contact with these public service agencies for serious issues, the support they receive does not appear to be preventing the long-term consequences of their living with significant disadvantage and hardship. These consequences include involvement in offending behaviour but also poorer general wellbeing overall.

The results of this analysis are summarised in Figure 1. It shows the percentage of young people in each need group who had a first contact (blue line), second contact (orange line), third contact (green line) and fourth contact (teal line) with a public service agency for one of the serious matters we looked at.

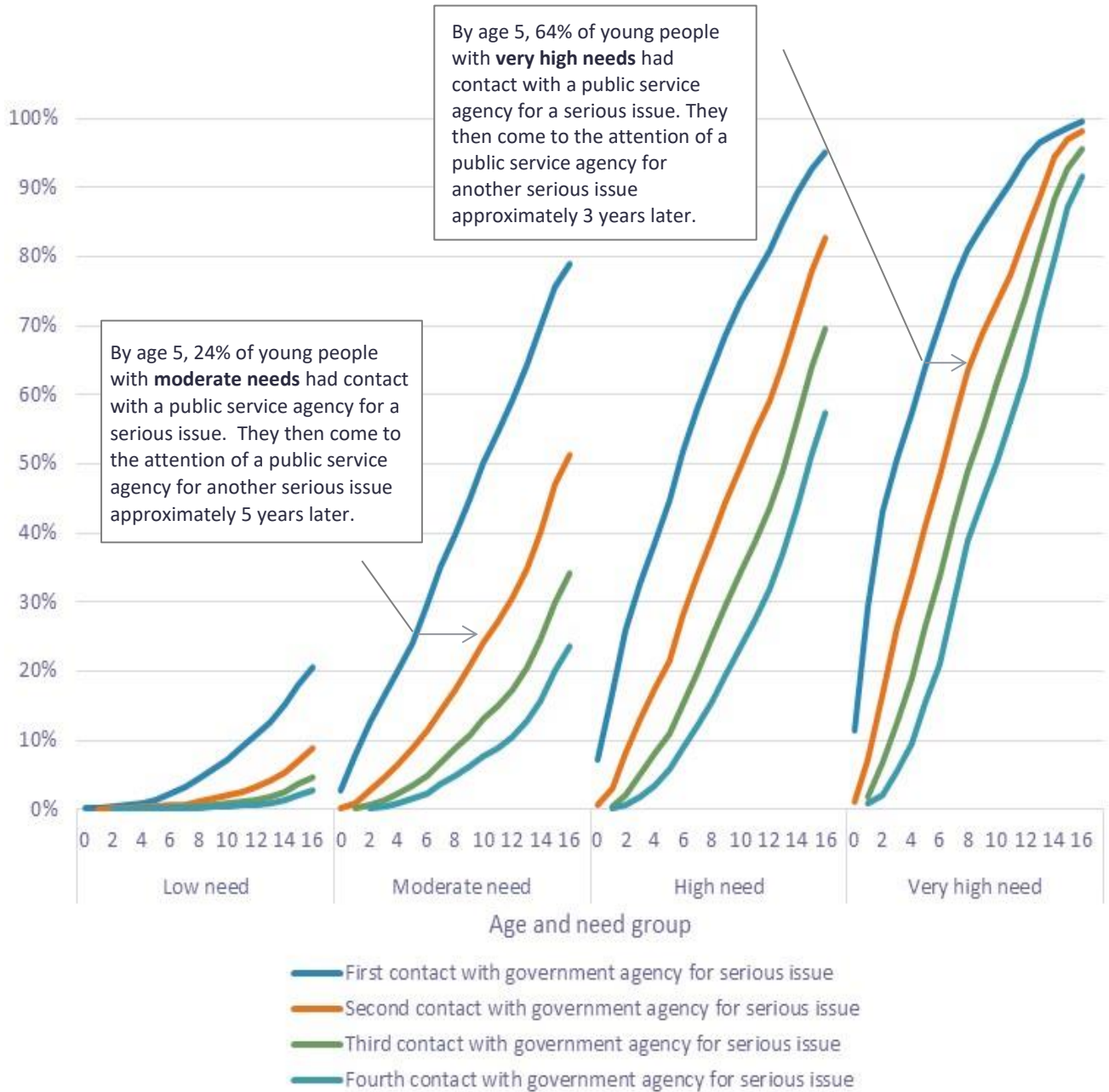
Young people in each of the need groups (the higher needs groups in particular) continued to have a fifth and subsequent contact, consistent with the pattern that can be identified on the graph. These contacts have been omitted from the graph to avoid cluttering it.

A steep line indicates a greater proportion of young people in the relevant group are having contact with a public service agency for a serious issue, and generally they are having this experience comparatively early in their lives. The closer the different lines are to each other, the shorter the intervals between contacts and the more contacts there are.

Public services are not providing enduring solutions for young people with high needs.

² OT investigations are conducted in response to reports of concern received by the agency. Members of the public as well as professionals such as Police and teachers may make a report if they think a child has been harmed or abused or neglected (including emotional harm), or if they have concerns about the child's wellbeing.

Figure 1: Percentage of young people who have had a 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th school non-enrolment notification OR mental health assessment referral OR OT investigation



Some experiences of hardship increase the risk of offending more than others

Using a different statistical technique ('clustering' analysis³), SWA found that experiences that are most highly correlated with future offending include, in order of impact:

- Exposure to family violence and contact with Oranga Tamariki
- Experience of poverty
- Parent(s) who have an alcohol or other drug issue and/or a mental health issue; and/or contact with Corrections.

This analysis suggests that repeated exposure to these experiences throughout their lives compounds the risk of offending by young people.

The greater the exposure of young people to hardship and disadvantage, the more likely they are to offend.

Young people in highest need are unevenly distributed

Consistent with previous research we found the young people in the groups who we identified as having the highest needs were concentrated in the lowest socio-economic status areas around Aotearoa New Zealand. However, the actual numbers of these young people in different areas varied significantly, depending on population.

We saw three types of distribution:

- High concentration of need but low numbers of young people: e.g., Kawerau, Wairoa, Ōpōtiki, Whakatāne, South Waikato, Gisborne
- Lower concentration of need but high numbers of young people: e.g., Auckland City, Christchurch City
- High concentration of need and high numbers of young people: e.g., Counties Manukau – there were more high

Young offenders are concentrated in areas of higher deprivation.

³ This clustering analysis simultaneously assessed the correlation between various distinct childhood hardship experiences during each year of age, considering them collectively and accounting for potential mutual influences, and an individual's reported involvement in a serious offense by the age of 18.

needs children and youth in Counties Manukau than all the other areas noted above.

Appendix 2 gives the distribution of children and youth we identified as being in the groups with the highest needs (the 1% and 9% groups) in selected areas of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Risk factors reflect community wellbeing

Most of the factors we observed as highly correlated to youth offending do not relate to any inherent characteristic of the individual young people who appear in the crime statistics. Rather, they reflect the characteristics of the environments in which they are being raised. For example:

- We can assume that abuse and neglect are not experiences that young people invite upon themselves – they are more likely a reflection of the functioning of their families and wider community.
- The provision of household and community resources is not something that young people have control over – they are, again, reliant on their families and communities for these.

This suggests solutions targeted at individual young offenders are unlikely to be sufficient to prevent offending and re-offending by young people. Solutions also need to address the wellbeing of their families, whānau and communities.

Many solutions to youth crime lie in better support to families, whānau and communities.

What can policy-makers and communities take from this?

Our evidence suggests that, without additional and better support, young people from families in high need will continue to offend at relatively high rates.

The young people who experience the worst hardship and disadvantage make up a relatively small group. They mostly live in areas of higher social deprivation and are, in the main, known to public service agencies. However, repeated referrals to the social system suggest that current approaches are not addressing their underlying needs to stop their offending or prevent resulting harm to communities.

An abundance of evidence from Aotearoa New Zealand and overseas identifies things that work to prevent youth crime. Examples of these types of initiatives are present in Aotearoa New Zealand although, arguably given our results, there are not enough of them (and some may be of inadequate quality). They include:

- Early intervention and prevention programmes – programmes that aim to identify and support young people and their families, whānau and communities before they engage in criminal behaviour (e.g. family and parent support services, early childhood centres, early diagnostic and therapeutic support where there may be mental illness or cognitive disability, mentoring).
- Positive youth development programmes – programmes that focus on building the social and emotional skills, resilience, and positive relationships of young people (including by engaging in sports, cultural, and other activity that help them develop positive identities).
- Restorative justice – an approach that aims to repair the harm caused by crime by involving victims, offenders, and the community in the process of addressing the harm caused by offending behaviour.
- Strong community partnerships – high levels of collaboration between and among government agencies, community organisations and Iwi to ensure the right services are provided in the right way at the right time over the right time period to young people and their families and whānau.
- Providing positive education and employment opportunities to young people – including giving them a sense of purpose and a confident future outlook.

We cannot expect that providing these types of services for those in most need would eliminate all youth crime. Our data shows that youth crime is not the exclusive province of those who experience the most hardship and disadvantage.

Nevertheless, it can be expected that if we focus on improving services for young people and their families in most need it would, over time, make a very real and significant difference overall. This difference would be experienced in both improvements to public safety as well as improvements in the lives of some of our most vulnerable young people, and their families, whānau, and communities.

Targeting better support to young people and their families, whānau and communities in most need would make a big difference in reducing youth crime.

Appendix 1: How we did this analysis

We used the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) to track the lives of 60,024 young people who turned 18 in 2020. The IDI is a secure research database that brings together data collected by government agencies, including records from the criminal justice, education, health, and care and protection systems. We used this data to identify 15 factors across four areas of wellbeing that research consistently identifies as being highly correlated to offending behaviour by young people:

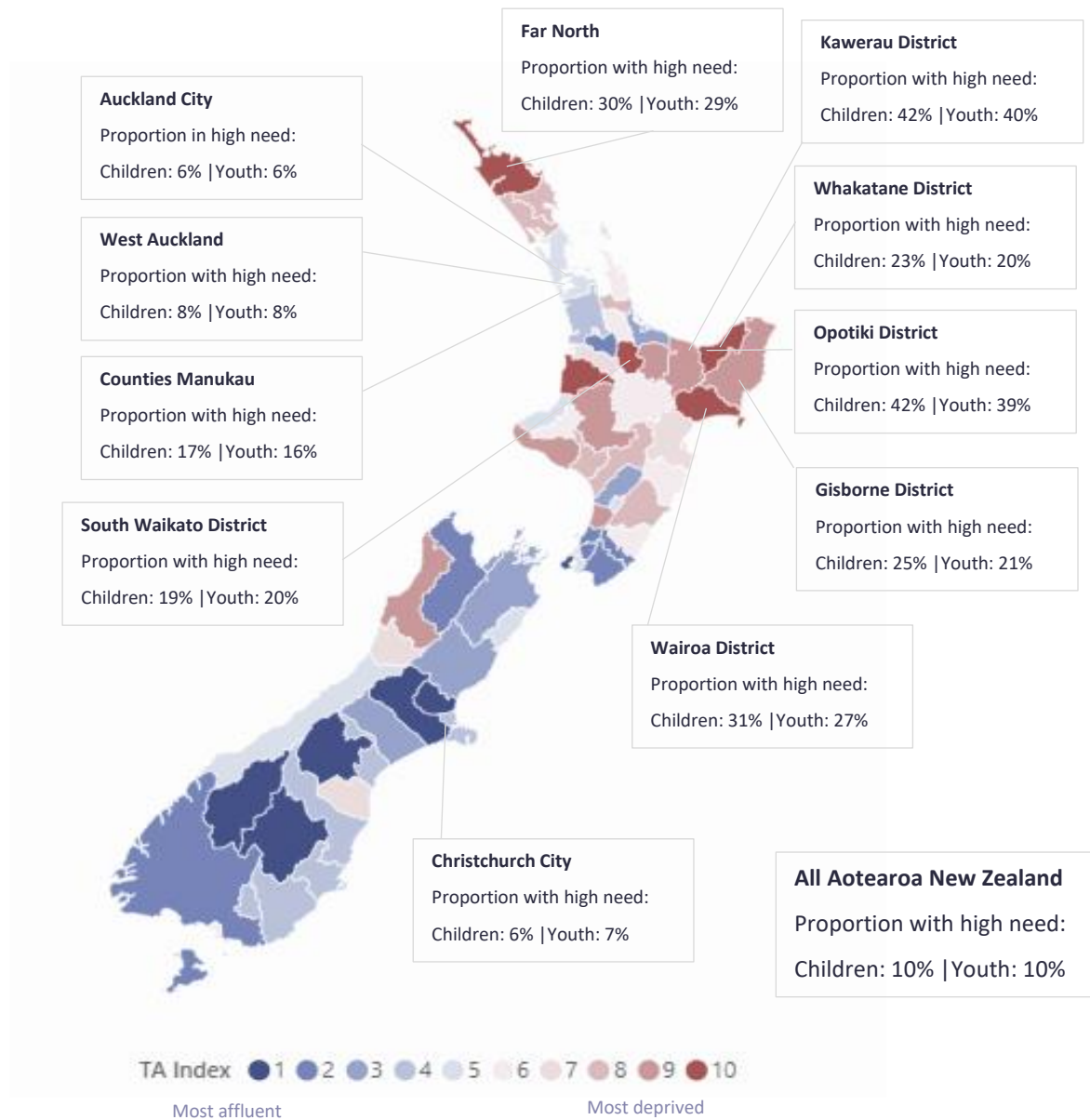
- **Abuse and neglect:** Child is subject of previous Oranga Tamariki contact and/or report of concern; child is subject of previous Oranga Tamariki investigation; child has had a care and protection placement.
- **Early offending, victimisation and contact with the justice system:** Child has a prior non-serious offence; an adult in the same household has experience with Corrections.
- **Poor mental health:** Child has received support for mental health or addiction; an adult in the same household has received support for alcohol or drug abuse/dependence; an adult in the same household has received a mental health specialist service.
- **Lack of household and community resources:** Household income; whether household income is below \$20,000; household income relative to neighbourhood average income; whether the household has 4+ children; whether household is supported by main benefit; whether the child lives in low or high deprivation (NZDep) community; whether the last school the child attended was low or high decile.

We then used a statistical technique (principal component analysis) to combine these measures into a single indicator of need. We ranked all young people in our sample by this measure of need, and constructed four groups:

- **Very high need:** The 1% of young people with the highest need (99th percentile of need)
- **High need:** The next 9% of young people (90th-98th percentile of need)
- **Moderate needs:** The next 10% of young people (80th-89th percentile of need)
- **Low needs:** The bottom 80% of young people in terms of need.

Appendix 2: Proportion of young people with high needs in selected areas

The figure below shows the proportion of young people SWA originally⁴ identified as being in the groups with the highest needs (the 1% and 9% groups) in selected regions of Aotearoa New Zealand. Shading also indicates a deprivation score (TA Index) for each region, using the New Zealand Index of Deprivation (NZDep) as the measure.



Source:

Map – DOT Loves Data, 2022

Other data – SWA, 2022

Definitions:

Children = young people aged 7 – 13 years

Youth = young people aged 14 – 17 years

⁴ Numbers quoted in this figure are for the cohort of New Zealand young people who turned 18 years in 2017. Numbers quoted elsewhere in this report relate to the cohort of New Zealand young people who turned 18 years in 2020.

Authors

Craig Wright and Megan Davis

Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) disclaimer

Access to the data used in this study was provided by Stats NZ under conditions designed to give effect to the security and confidentiality provisions of the Statistics Act 2022. The results presented in this study are the work of the author, not Stats NZ or individual data suppliers. These results are not official statistics. They have been created for research purposes from the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI), which is carefully managed by Stats NZ. For more information about the IDI please visit <https://www.stats.govt.nz/integrated-data>.

Atatū – Insights

Ka pō, ka ao, ka awatea is a well-known tauparapara (traditional incantation) within te ao Māori, which refers to the separation of Ranginui (the sky-father) and Papatūānuku (the earth-mother) which brought light into this world. It talks about ‘coming from darkness to light’ or ‘transiting from a place of not knowing to knowledge’. Te Atatū, indicates the morning light and acknowledges this series of events, and the importance of light representing knowledge in te ao Māori.