

2023 NEW ZEALAND GENERAL ELECTION



PRESSING ISSUES.



Te Ope Whakaora

Social Policy & Parliamentary Unit

Working for the eradication of poverty in New Zealand

HELPING CHILDREN & YOUTH TO THRIVE

ELIMINATING CHILD POVERTY AND HARDSHIP—THE JOB IS NOT FINISHED

If all children in this country are thriving, then that is a sign that our country is doing well. But that is not the case in Aotearoa New Zealand. Too many children miss out on the good food, warm and dry housing and healthcare they need. Tens of thousands of children live in households that simply do not have enough income or material resources to meet their needs. Māori and Pasifika children, and children with a disability are among those most affected by poverty.

The five years since the Child Poverty Reduction Act was passed in 2018 have seen a steady and significant **reduction in child poverty and hardship**. This is a result of sustained government action in many areas that cause poverty—low incomes, high energy costs, unaffordable rents, and lack of access to healthcare.

But the job is only half done—hardship and poverty in households with children are still well above what is acceptable for a wealthy country like ours. Targets to more than halve the 2018 poverty levels by 2028 are already in place, but **need politicians to prioritise clear actions that will reach this goal**. We know what works to reduce poverty and we need to keep doing this.

Our political parties need to show they have clear plans to achieve the things that reduce child poverty:

- Increase incomes for households with children, both for those in employment and those without income from employment, eg, through paying the In-Work Tax Credit to all households with children.

- Reduce food hardship for households with children, such as expanding the lunches in schools programme. Five days of lunch per week is the equivalent of \$60 per week saved for a two-child family.
- Reduce housing costs and make homes healthier through further increases in the number of community and public housing units and further strengthening rules around insulation, ventilation and heating of rental housing.

YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH—A PLAN FOR PEACE OF MIND IN CHALLENGING TIMES

Children and young people experience the uncertainty and inequality of our times more directly, as it shapes the formative years of their lives. What they experience in the school system, in their homes and communities, and online can have deep and lasting impacts.

A defining experience of recent years has been the dramatic and unequal increase in levels of mental distress among young people aged 15–24. In 2022, **one in four 15- to 19-year-olds** reported moderate to high levels of mental distress, more than twice the level of a decade ago.

Young females are more likely to report poorer mental health, while rainbow and queer youth, rangatahi Māori and young Pasifika people also experience much worse mental health. Rates are worsening faster for those living in more deprived communities, meaning **increasing inequality in mental health** compared to young people in less deprived areas.

Many factors are likely contributing to this rise, but the stresses created by social and economic factors such as poverty, social exclusion, economic inequality and homelessness play a large role. More recent trends such as the impact of a rapid increase in the use of new technologies and social media, and **concerns about the future with climate anxiety** are all considered to be playing a part.

There are also positive signs for some of the accepted drivers of poor mental health. Most school students report strong family and school connections, bullying does not appear to be on the increase, and substance use and risk behaviours have also been trending down.

One reason for the unequal increases in poor mental health among some population groups can be linked to the lack of early intervention programmes and health services where those young people live. Despite evidence of higher rates of mental distress, data on service use shows that young Māori are less likely to be able to have their problems identified in earlier stages of distress, before becoming more severe (eg, self-harm). Our current mental health services simply **do not reach rangatahi Māori** and other marginalised groups of young people to the extent needed.

Our political parties need to show they have clear plans to achieve the things that will help reduce mental distress:

- Increasing access to support and mental health services for those groups of young people most affected. Such access needs to focus on delivering youth-focused, low- or no-cost community-based healthcare.
- Culturally appropriate support is needed that recognises the different contexts for Pasifika and Asian youth and rangatahi Māori.
- Primary and intermediate schools need more help, as evidence shows mental health issues emerging earlier among young children.
- Addressing the social and economic causes—such as education achievement, connections to employment and training, and youth homelessness.

YOUTH EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT— A PATHWAY FOR EVERY YOUNG PERSON

For our nation to thrive, we need our young people learning and growing their skills and keeping their connections to employment and training. Despite record low unemployment, around one in every seven young people leave school each year without finding work, going on to study at university or learning new skills like a trade, agriculture, tourism or technology.

There are around 650,000 young people in the 15–24 year age group and some 70,000 of them are **not in education, training or employment (NEET)**. This number has decreased since peaking during the Covid-19 pandemic but while the overall adult unemployment rate is well below the pre-Covid level, the NEET rate has not fallen as much, which means young people have not benefitted as much from record high levels of employment.

Employers desperate for workers and claiming not be able to find them have at the same time not managed to hire, train and retain more of these young people. Employers appear to be struggling to design their recruitment, training and employment conditions in a way that works for young people in the 2020s.

It has been estimated that **around one in five young people between the ages of 16–24** years will experience sustained periods (ie, more than half of those crucial early adult years) where they are working in limited, irregular employment and with little training and skills development.

Impacts are unequal. Young mothers are those who struggle most to find and sustain employment and training. Rangatahi Māori and Pasifika young people make up about a third of the 16–24 age group and this proportion will continue to grow. It is these young people who experience the worst impacts of limited employment and training. One in five rangatahi Māori (20 percent) and one in six (16 percent) Pasifika young people are NEET, around double the rate for European young people.

It is a regional issue; Te Tai Tokerau/Northland and Tairāwhiti/Gisborne regions experience much higher NEET rates, where there is also a much higher proportion of Māori in the population and higher overall adult unemployment rates. These are also regions that have been deeply impacted by recent weather disasters. But most young people not in employment, education or training live in the main urban areas and **Auckland has the largest number**.

It is important to believe in our young people and not blame them for the problem. Young people today are no better or worse than those of previous generations, but they are experiencing rapid social and technological change. Employers, educators and trainers need to understand these changes and design work and training that gives them the best chance to succeed. The **alternative education sector** is one way school students facing exclusion from mainstream schools can find an education pathway, but this sector faces challenges with funding and recognition of what is being achieved.

Political parties need to explain how they will work with young people to help them shape their futures:

- Every young person leaving school needs a plan for their future. Resource our schools to work with every student to ensure no-one leaves without a plan and more school students can achieve NCEA Level 2 or higher.
- Employers and employer organisations, education and training organisations, government agencies, iwi and community organisations need to connect earlier and more consistently with young people at school to offer pathways to careers and skills development.
- Unequal impacts mean that different kinds of responses are needed. We need policies that are tailored to the needs of young parents, the needs of young people in the worst affected regions, and the cultural and social needs of rangatahi Māori and Pasifika young people as a priority.
- Parties need to recognise that young people living in neighbourhoods with high levels of deprivation are more likely to be NEET. Investing in better community infrastructure, community-level youth work, more affordable housing and lifting incomes for those communities will help provide the family and whānau resources needed to help youth succeed.

ABUSE AND VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN— A PLAN TO KEEP CHILDREN SAFE

Children and young people are more likely to be the victims of violence and abuse than they are perpetrators of crime. That is the reality for children and young people, despite media headlines about high profile youth crime such as ram raids.

Over the past five years, violent offences against children under 15 years old have risen, especially serious assault resulting in injury. Over **2000 such offences were recorded in 2022**, nearly 50 percent higher than in 2017 (1375).

Around 12,500 children were identified as victims of abuse and neglect in 2022, just under one percent of all children. On average **seven children die, and some 211 children are hospitalised** each year for injuries from assault, neglect or maltreatment. There has been no clear increase or decrease in these rates in the past decade.

This violence affects tamariki Māori and Pacific children more severely. The hospitalisation rate for Māori children is three times—and for Pasifika children more than twice—that of children of European and other ethnicities. These higher rates are partly explained by the fact that children in more disadvantaged communities have much higher rates of hospitalisation, and Māori and Pasifika children are more likely to be living in less well-off neighbourhoods.

Having been involved with both victims and perpetrators of violence, The Salvation Army has learnt that family poverty is a significant source of stress, and can be one of the major factors contributing to this problem. Success in reducing violence in families/whānau is most likely when the root causes are addressed—such as poverty, housing and systemic discrimination.

Reducing violence towards children involves recognising the quality of relationships they are part of and how to improve these relationships in a way that eliminates violence.

Preventative support that is responsive to community and cultural needs must be more widely offered, including in more isolated communities and those with higher levels of deprivation.

Political parties need to explain how they will:

- continue **Te Aorerekura National Strategy and Action Plan** for reducing family violence and sexual violence
- resource prevention approaches that will adequately fund increased work at community and family/whānau level to prevent violence towards children
- work in a targeted way in more deprived neighbourhoods to foster initiatives that reduce poverty and deprivation through employment
- ensure victims of abuse get good quality support from well-trained and skilled social work and counselling providers.

We welcome your comments on this *Pressing Issues* election series.

Please contact the authors at social.policy@salvationarmy.org.nz

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