



"WHERE DOES HE LIVE?"

Measuring Father Absence in New Zealand

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- Child Abuse & Family Structure: What is the evidence telling us? (2016)
- Imprisonment & Family Structure: What is the evidence telling us? (2018)
- Families: Ever Fewer or No Children, How Worried Should We Be? (2019)
- The Challenges Facing Children In Step-Families: What we know, don't know, and how to fill in the gaps. (2020)
- New Zealand's Teenage Birth Rate: Is it time to stop worrying about it? (2021)
- Child and Youth Mental Health: Why New Zealand's young lead the developed world in poor mental health. (2022)

When she isn't writing and researching, Lindsay paints and exhibits, specialising in Māori portraiture.

About Family First NZ

Family First NZ is a charitable organisation formed in 2006. Its purposes and aims are:

- to promote and advance research and policy regarding family and marriage
- to participate in social analysis and debate surrounding issues relating to and affecting the family
- to educate the public in their understanding of the institutional, legal and moral framework that makes a just and democratic society possible
- to produce and publish relevant and stimulating material in newspapers, magazines, and other media relating to issues affecting families
- to speak up about issues relating to families that are in the public domain



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Summary

For the past fifty years married and unmarried births have broadly trended in opposite directions and are steadily converging. In the year to June 2022, 49.8 percent of all births were unmarried. In the June quarter births to unmarried parents surpassed the halfway mark for the first time reaching 50.7 percent. For Māori 79.9 percent of births are to unmarried parents – up from 28% in 1969.

At the 2018 census there were 131,829 sole parent families – or 24.5% of all families with dependent children under 18. 108,612 were female-headed.

Of 59,785 birth registrations in 2021 the parental status of 19 percent was either 'no legal relationship' or 'not recorded'. No father was included for 5 percent and 17 percent did not have a father living at the same address as mother.

Divorces affecting children have trended down for the last twenty years and fathers are divorcing at older ages. More children are being born into cohabitations however which are less stable than marriages.

Early evidence from Growing Up in New Zealand showed 17 percent of children experienced maternal relationship transitions before the age of five. At eight, living in a single parent family had increased from 3 to 10 percent though the proportion did not include those children living with single parents in extended households. Additionally, 23 percent of original participants had been lost. This group typically comprised very young, poorly educated, non-European mothers from the most deprived areas - those more likely to be separated from fathers.

Sole parenthood has progressed from being rare to relatively common. In 1961, 95.5 percent of dependent children relied on married couples. At the 2018 census there were 131,829 sole parent families – or 24.5% of all families with dependent children under 18. 108,612 were female-headed.

In 1961, 95.5 percent of dependent children relied on married couples.

During 2021 101,026 males paid child support. Of these, 89 percent had zero % care of their child(ren).

In July 2022 129,426 children – 10.7 percent of all children – had a non-custodial father with zero percent of their care. 12 percent of these fathers (9,389) were paying child support to more than one recipient, with the highest being six. The child support-paying population is slowly declining and ageing.

Births with no registered father have declined from 9% in the mid-nineties to five percent in 2021. The New Zealand Law Commission maintains children can encounter real difficulties in obtaining information about their genetic parent if they have no record of him on their birth certificate. They cite the reasons for this omission as “...one or both parties do not want him to be identified for personal reasons; the man is not aware that he is the child's father; the father is absent or unknown; the mother registers the name of another man on the birth certificate; the mother decides to place the child for adoption; or the father's name is not registered to avoid him being liable for child support under the Child Support Act 1991.” The Ministry of Social Development explored reasons for not naming fathers and included among their findings, “...mothers did not want the father to have any rights over the child because of his perceived unsuitability for fatherhood.”

In 2021 101,026 males paid child support. Of these, 89 percent had zero % care of their child(ren).

Due to “international instruments affirming the rights of children to know their genetic origins” the Commission counselled governmental efforts to encourage registration. Yet in April 2020 the requirement for a single mother receiving a benefit to name the child’s father was abolished.

There are suggestions that between 1,000-5,000 children per year may have a man other than their genetic father recorded on their birth certificate. This represents 1-4 percent of all births; other country estimates range from 0.7-2 and 1-5 percent – numbers which pose a greater threat to accurate genetic knowledge than that from assisted reproductive practices.

Mandatory registration of donor-conceived children was established in 2004. If this emphasis on children’s rights to information about genetic origins was applied consistently, greater attention would focus on the registration of biological fathers on birth certificates *in general*.

For children, father absence is associated with poverty, material hardship, abuse and neglect, lower cognitive capacity, substance use, poorer physical and mental health and criminal offending.

Estranged fathers may also suffer materially and emotionally. The mortality rate for fathers paying child support is high. In the 46–50-year age-band the mortality rate is more than double that of the general relevant population (0.43 versus 0.20). Inland Revenue possesses suicide data specific to child support payers for years 2009-11 but refuses to release it.

It is estimated 16,000 children are affected by Family Court decisions every year. The Facebook page ‘NZ Families Fed up with the Family Court’ has 23,514 followers. (An advocacy group for women with devastating experience of the family court was also established in 2017.)

Benefits in father absence are also suggested. Childhood stability may outweigh the desirability of a disruptive father’s presence. When measuring child outcomes, one school of thought ranks a stable one-parent family ahead of a two-parent family in turmoil, or one moving through multiple parental transitions.

MSD-commissioned research finds, “*Biological father absence does not necessarily mean that children lack a father figure.*” That observation is particularly relevant in the New Zealand setting which features a high rate of single parents who live within an extended family. Grandfathers and uncles can play a vital role in modelling good male behaviours. It continues, “*Additionally, cohabiting male partners or boyfriends of single mothers may play a parental role.*”

Māori perspective research also states, “*Māori single parents and those living in multi-whānau households tend to be more involved with Māori institutions than other whānau. Both children and adults living in single-parent whānau have greater access to te reo Māori in the home. The cultural resources that exist within single-parent whānau and multi-whānau households are an important feature that, until now, have been largely overlooked... Many young tamariki in single-parent whānau have meaningful opportunities to develop and sustain te reo Māori in varied contexts. In the 2013 Census nearly one-third of these children lived in a family where at least one person could hold a daily conversation in te reo.*”

Father absence is associated with poverty, material hardship, abuse and neglect, lower cognitive capacity, substance use, poorer physical and mental health and criminal offending.

Internationally New Zealand continues to have one of the highest rates of sole parenthood among developed countries.

Children of teen mothers tend to have young, uninvolved fathers.

Internationally New Zealand continues to have one of the highest rates of sole parenthood among developed countries. It is difficult to be precise about where NZ ranks. Even the OECD has been unable to access the same type of family data for NZ that it publishes for other members.

There are several positives for the prospect of father absence reducing. First-time fathers are getting older. As men are more stable in their 30s and 40s this trend may translate into more stability in parental relationships.

Additionally, fewer men are becoming fathers with the birth rate for every 1,000 males declining over the past generation. Those opting out of fatherhood may be unsuited and deselecting themselves. Conversely men who want to be fathers may be involuntarily missing the opportunity. The first circumstance could though lead to less father absence.

The sharply declining teenage birth rate from 33.11 in 2008 to 10.31 in 2021 is also a positive. Children of teen mothers tend to have young, uninvolved fathers. In 2009, 48 percent of births to teen mothers had a father under 20 years. Fewer teen fathers will almost certainly lead to less father absence.

Divorces are rarer and, as the age of fathers divorcing is increasing, probably occur when children are older (though this cannot be verified on available data).

The number of men paying child support is declining (though future statistics will be distorted by female sole parents on benefit having no legal requirement to name fathers).

Another positive can be found in female-led one parent families trending down.

But Statistics NZ is predicting little change through to the year 2043 with one parent families maintaining their existing share of all families. And professor Paul Spoonley cites OECD calculations that “...New Zealand will see an increase in single-parent households of 29 percent between 2006 and 2031 – the highest rise in the OECD – and that New Zealand will also have the highest proportion of single-parent households with children in the OECD by the 2030s.”

“...New Zealand will see an increase in single-parent households of 29 percent between 2006 and 2031 – the highest rise in the OECD... New Zealand will also have the highest proportion of single-parent households with children in the OECD by the 2030s.”

Professor Paul Spoonley

Perhaps those children who grew up without parental stability are successfully seeking it in their own relationships?

So, there is good and bad news. Actual trends hold some promise - predictions, less so.

Perhaps those children who grew up without parental stability are successfully seeking it in their own relationships? Let's hope so.

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Introduction

A child visiting her schoolfriend's house for the first time peered at a wedding photo on the wall and asked, "Is that your dad?"

"Yes," her friend replied.

"Where does he live?" the child responded.

Every child has a father. But not every child has a father in their day-to-day life.

"The father's relationship with the child is as important as the mothers' between early to middle childhood."

Ministry of Social Development
(MSD) 2018

Shortly before his death in 1998 Children's Commissioner Laurie O'Reilly stated:

*"In my opinion, the issue of Fatherless Families, is the greatest social challenge facing New Zealanders today."*¹

Just months later the late renowned professor David Fergusson, Director of the Christchurch Health and Development Study wrote:

*"...children in fatherless families are at greater risk of problems of educational under-achievement and social adjustment, however, this increased risk does not reflect father absence but rather the social, economic and related context associated with fatherless families."*²

Fergusson seems to be saying fathers do not intrinsically matter. Yet two decades later a literature review conducted by the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) concluded, *"The father's relationship with the child is as important as the mothers' between early to middle childhood."*³

The two phenomena – father absence and child disadvantage – are strongly intertwined and arguments about 'why' will doubtless continue.

What can usefully be asked is, has the situation changed since the late 1990s? Has father absence reduced or has the relatively recent rise of female sole parenting to non-exceptional status become the new normal?

The first part of this paper collects data indicating the degree to which fathers are absent, and reasons why.

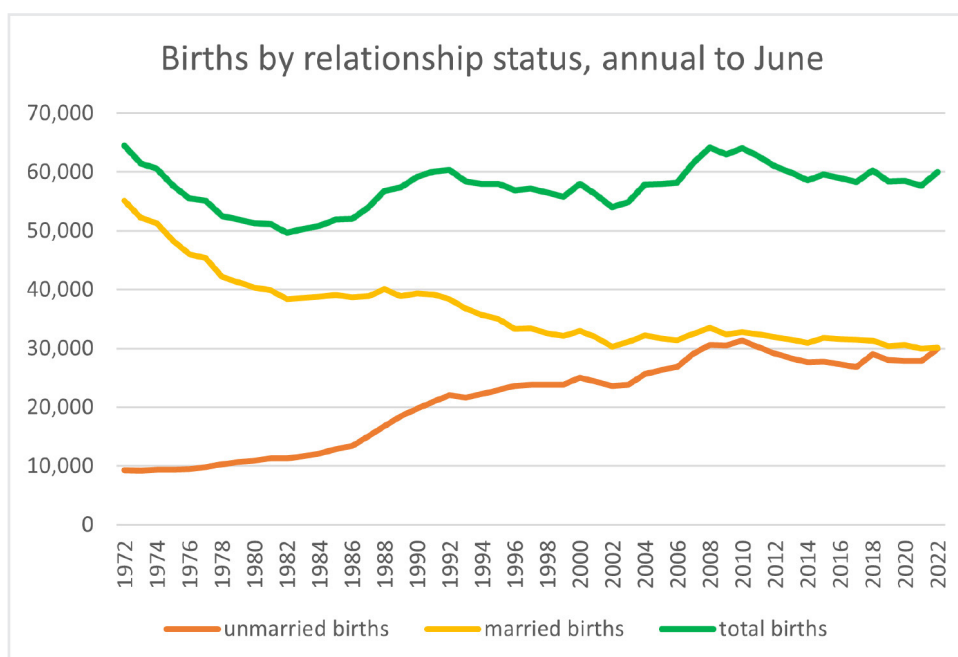
There is no single conclusive source, and it is impossible to know what is happening at the individual level. However, a variety of information from marriage and divorce data, birth registration, the census, longitudinal studies, benefit data, surveys and child support liabilities are drawn together to establish a collective contemporary overview and trends.

The second part of the paper briefly details New Zealand evidence – scientific and anecdotal – regarding the effects of father absence/ parental separation, how New Zealand compares internationally and what the future holds.

Indicative data

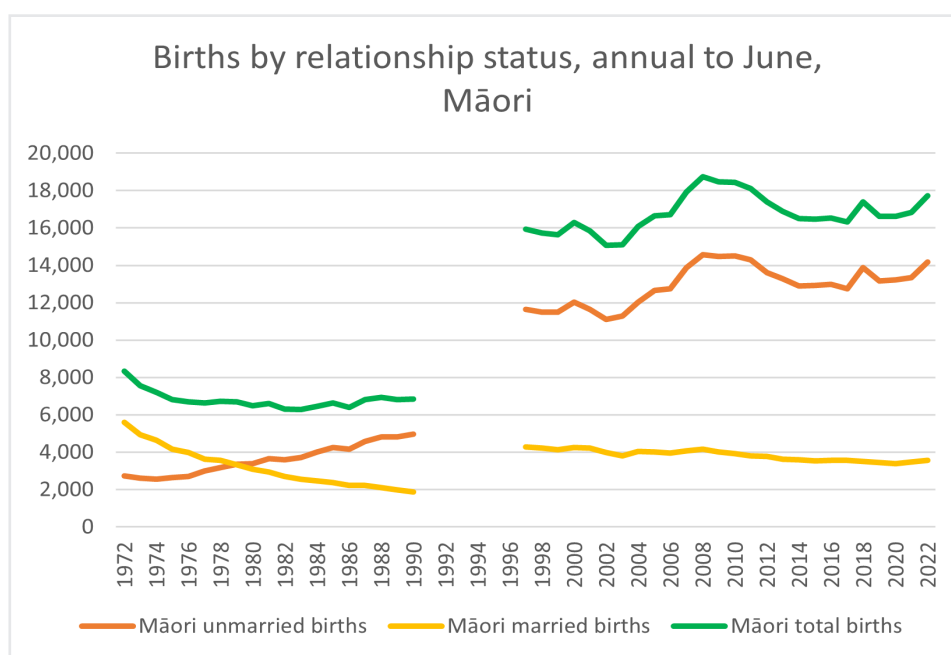
Married and unmarried births

For the past fifty years married and unmarried births have broadly trended in opposite directions and are steadily converging. In the year to June 2022, 49.8 percent of all births were unmarried. In the June quarter alone births to unmarried parents surpassed the halfway mark for the first time reaching 50.7 percent.



Data source: Infoshare: Births – VSB, Table: Live births by nuptiality (Māori and total population) (Annual-Jun)

‘Total births’ are strongly influenced by Māori births of which 79.9 percent are to unmarried parents, up from 28 percent in 1969 (first year available.)

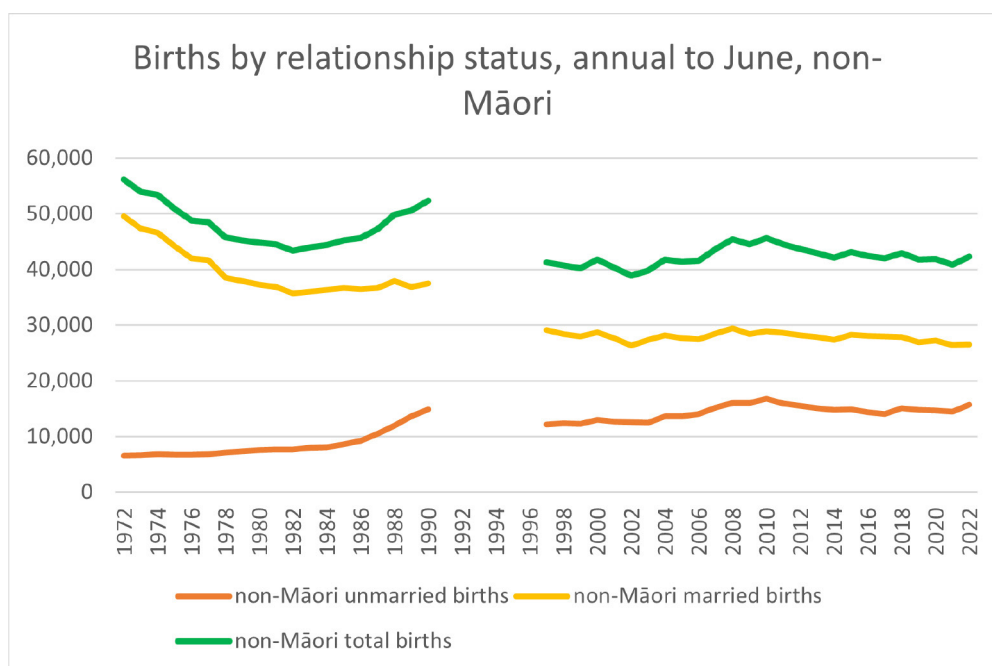


Data source: Infoshare: Births – VSB, Table: Live births by nuptiality (Māori and total population) (Annual-Jun)

Data through 1991-96 is unavailable. From September 1995, birth registrations determined ethnicity based on self-identification, rather than degree-of-blood. The data represents ‘Māori child’ – the ethnicity of the child as opposed to the mother. Clearly the change in definition resulted in many more births being recorded as Māori after 1995. This shift is also evident in the next chart.

79.9 percent of Māori births are to unmarried parents, up from 28% in 1969.

For non-Māori 37 percent of births were unmarried in the year to June 2022.



Data source: Infoshare: Births – VSB, Table: Live births by nuptiality (Māori and total population) (Annual-Jun)

An unmarried birth does not necessarily represent an absent father. Many parents will be cohabitating when their child is born.

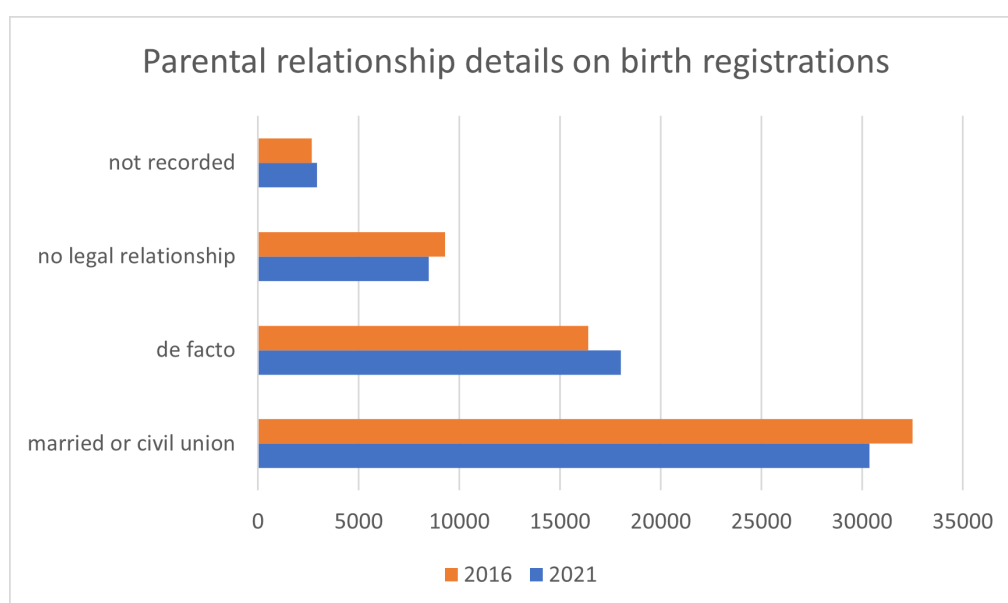
37 percent of non-Māori births are unmarried.

Birth registrations

The following data comes from Internal Affairs and relates to 59,785 birth registrations in 2021.⁴

Regarding details of parental relationship status, 'no legal relationship' or 'not recorded' accounted for 11,403 or 19.1 percent of registrations in 2021 – down slightly from 19.6 in 2016.

New-borns registered to de facto relationships increased from 16,416 in 2016 to 18,024 in 2021 or 9.8%; over the same period, births registered to married (or civil union) parents decreased from 32,507 to 30,358 or 6.6%.



Data source: OIA response from Internal Affairs to L Mitchell, 25 July, 2022

In the mid-1990s births without a father registered peaked at about 9 percent but the proportion has been generally decreasing since. In 2018 about 5 percent of birth registrations did not include the father's details.⁵

This remains unchanged in 2021 when 3,036 or 5.1 percent of birth registrations did not have a father included.⁶

It is likely this decline is substantially due to the rapidly falling teenage birth rate.

So today one in twenty children has no father registered on their birth certificate. More on this later.

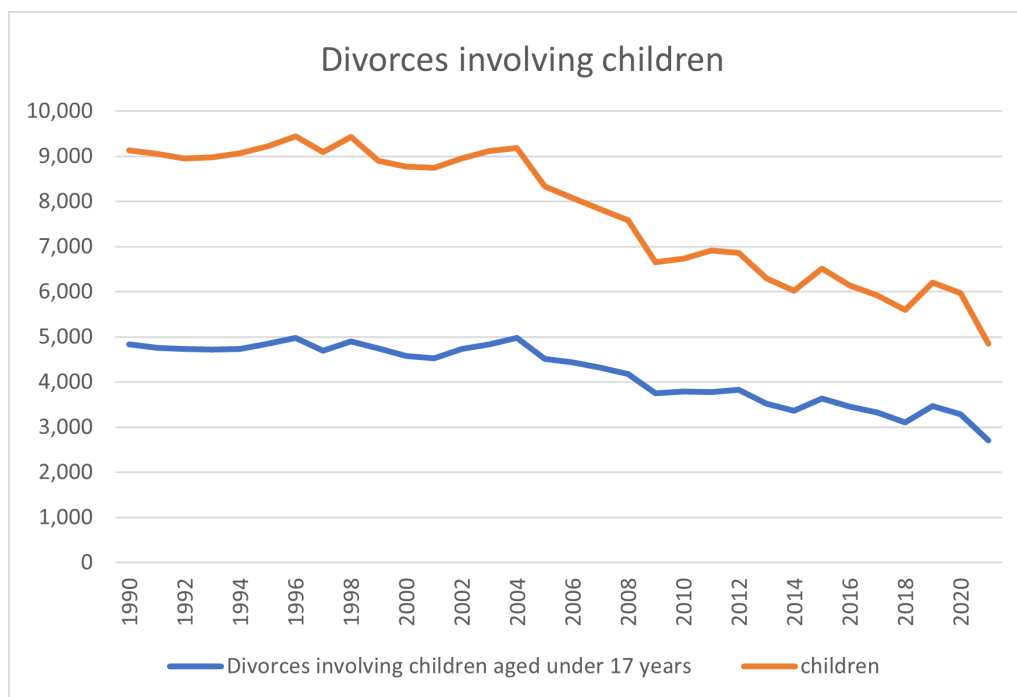
One in twenty children has no father registered on their birth certificate.

Children whose father wasn't living at the same address as mother dropped from 12,052 (19.8%) in 2016 to 10,277 (17.2%). Of course, not living at the same address doesn't mean the father isn't involved in the child's life.

Overall, based on birth registration data, the majority of children are born into homes that have a co-resident father. The next question is, for how long?

Divorces affecting children

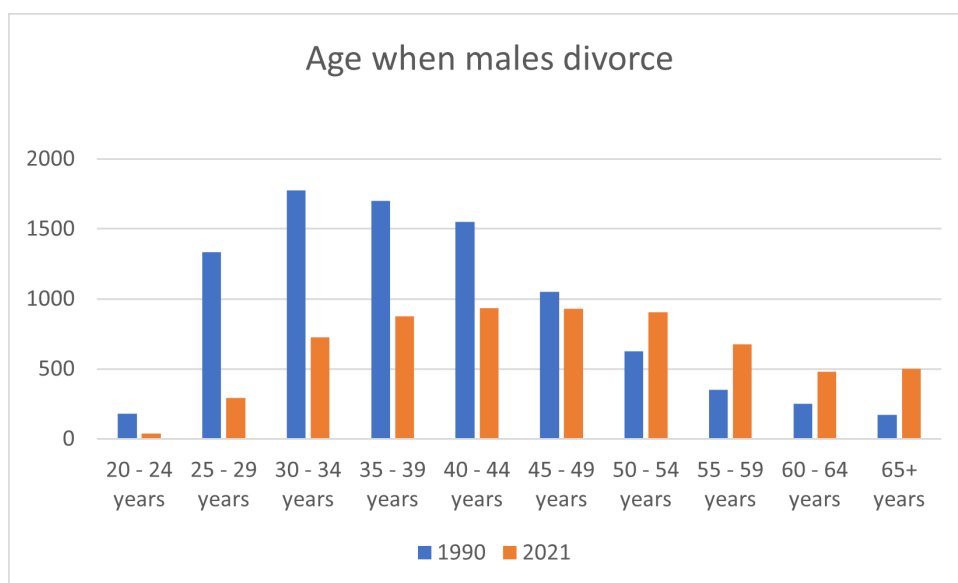
In 2021 there were far fewer children affected by divorce (4,842) than was the case three decades ago.



Data source: Infoshare: Divorces involving children aged under 17 years

The 0–16-year-old population grew fairly steadily between 1991 to 2021 (19%) whereas children of divorces have trended down.

The married population is ageing. The males depicted in the next chart are not specifically fathers but there is a clear pattern of divorce happening at older ages. Men who divorce between middle-age and retirement are less likely to have dependent children though they are also marrying and fathering at a later age than previously.



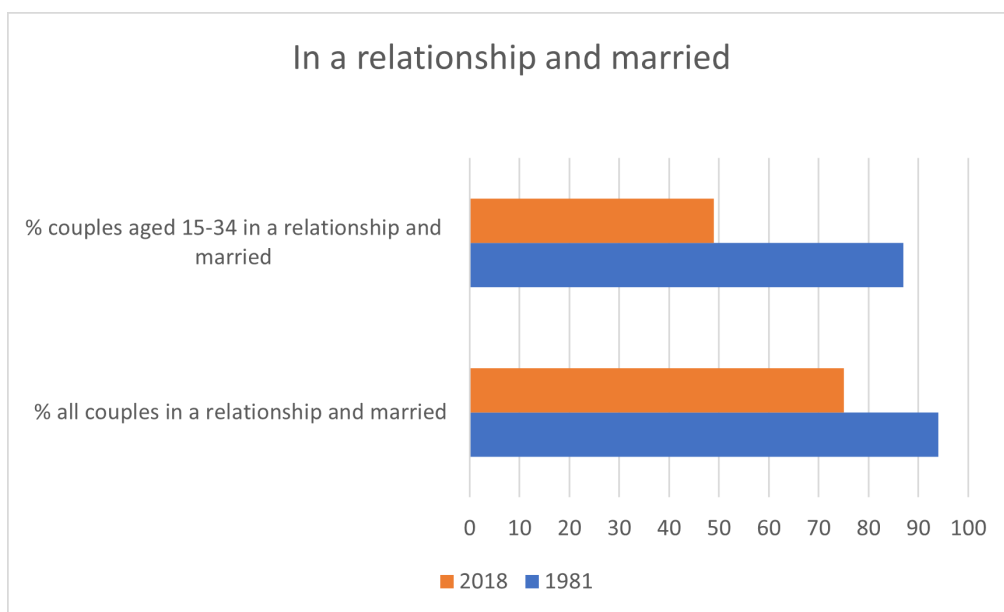
Data source: Infoshare: Age at divorce by sex

De facto separations

The proportion of children growing up in two parent families whose parents cohabitate increased from 9 to 14 percent between the 1991 and 1996 censuses. The 2013 census indicated a level around 21 percent.⁷ According to registrations, births to de facto couples in 2021 represented 30 percent of the total.

The next chart reflects the growing propensity for couples to live together without marrying.

By 2018 just under half of couples with partners aged 15-34 were married compared to 87% in 1981.



Data source: Divorces drop to lowest number since 1979, Statistics New Zealand

Unfortunately, not a lot is known about de facto separations - with or without children. Unlike divorces, these partnerships are not registered with the state.

In the absence of New Zealand specific research, international evidence gathered across 17 countries (European and the United States) showed: "Children born to cohabiting couples were over

twice as likely to experience at least one maternal union transition by age 12 than children born to married couples.”⁸

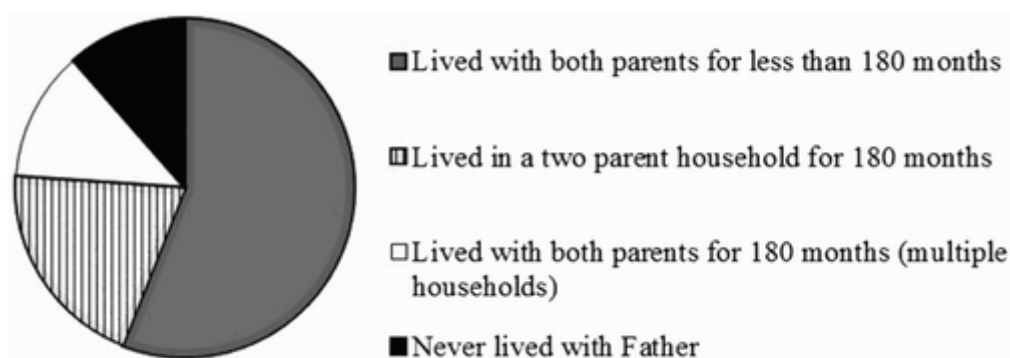
Although fewer children are being affected by divorce, more children are being born into cohabitations which are less stable relationships than marriages.

Longitudinal evidence

New Zealand longitudinal studies do not typically record parental relationship status. They do however take an interest in children’s living arrangements and parental transitions. For instance, the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study analysed subset data from the original 1973 cohort. As parents of the next generation - children born between 1991 and 1995 - cohort members were surveyed about their living arrangements during their offspring’s first 15 years. Of the 209 children, only 20 percent lived with both parents in the same house for the duration, 12 percent never lived with their biological father, and 12 percent remained in shared parental care after parents separated. The remainder lived with both parents for less than 15 years.

Children born to cohabiting couples were over twice as likely to experience at least one maternal union transition by age 12 than children born to married couples.

Social Trends Institute



Source: *The dynamic, complex and diverse living and care arrangements of young New Zealanders: implications for policy*, 2016

The authors caution: “This is not a random sample of New Zealand teenagers. All participants had at least one parent born in Dunedin and some were from the same families. The participants had relatively young parents at birth (median mothers’ age was 22) and young parenthood may be associated with educational and socioeconomic disadvantage. However, the parents of these participants were not extremely young: there were very few teenage parents.”⁹

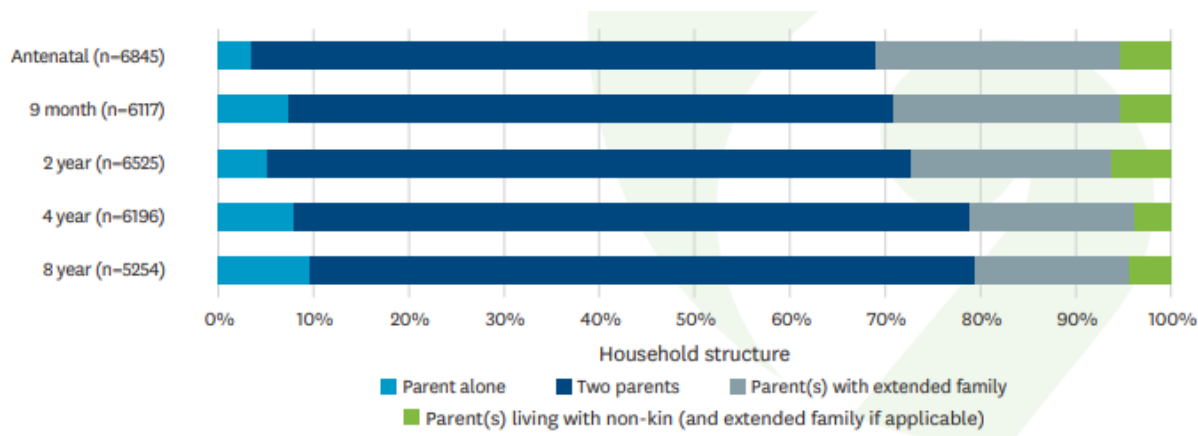
More recently, Growing Up in New Zealand (GUINZ) is tracking children born in the Auckland, Counties Manukau and Waikato DHB regions during 2009/10. Data revealed high levels of change in family structure, even pre-birth. A key finding was, “1095 (17.3%) of mothers were categorised as having experienced 1-4 relationship transitions from pregnancy to the 4.5-year interview.” Relationship transitions were characterised as, “...the count of the entrances and exits by biological parents, romantic partners, or spouses.” Participants assessed, “...ranged from 6,853 at the antenatal interview to 6,156 at the 4.5-year interview,” producing an attrition rate of ten percent. Later analysis of those lost to attrition showed the mothers were more likely to be single.¹⁰

Therefore, a *minimum* of 1 in 6 children experienced maternal relationship transitions before they were five years old.¹¹

A minimum of 1 in 6 children experienced maternal relationship transitions before they were five years old.

Household structure for the children was surveyed again at eight years of age and showed, “The percentage of children living in a single-parent family has increased from 3% to 10% between the antenatal and eight-year interview.”¹² Sole parents might also live with extended family or non-kin but are not identified as such.

Household structure at each face-to-face interview in the first eight years



Source: Now we are eight, Growing Up in New Zealand, MSD, 2020

Note that participants have decreased 23 percent from 6,845 at antenatal interview to 5,254 at eight years. Typically, those ‘missing’ were young, poorly educated, lived in the most deprived area and were non-European. For instance, 43% of the mothers who were aged under twenty during their pregnancy did not participate at the eight year collection. Nor did 41% of the Pacific cohort as shown below.

Sociodemographic characteristics of participants (in any component of the 8 year DCW) compared to non-participants in the eight year DCW.

	Participated in DCW (n=5556)		Did not participate (n=1297)		Baseline cohort (n=6853)	P-value
	n	%	n	%	n	
MOTHER ETHNICITY						
European	3046	93%	229	7%	3275	Ref
Māori	921	73%	345	27%	1266	<0.001
Pacific	598	59%	415	41%	1013	<0.001
Asian	789	76%	251	24%	1040	<0.001
MELAA	108	71%	44	29%	152	<0.001
Other	89	91%	<10	9%	98	<0.001
Missing information	<10	56%	<10	44%	<10	

Source: Now we are eight, Growing Up in New Zealand, MSD, 2020

Because of the increasing attrition rate, as an accurate source for measuring father absence the utility of GUINZ data is decreasing over time. The Auckland University of Technology has also pointed to aspects of the sole parent data that are ambiguous (detailed in the following section.)

Sole parenthood

Sole parenthood has progressed from being rare to relatively common. In 1961, 95.5 percent of dependent children relied on married couples.¹³ In 1971 fewer than 10% of families with children were one parent.

The rapid growth period between 1981 and 1991 is described by the 1994 New Zealand Yearbook as follows:

“One-parent families

One in four families with children now contain only one parent, compared with one in five in 1986 and one in six in 1981. Families headed by a sole mother continue to outnumber sole-father families by more than four to one.

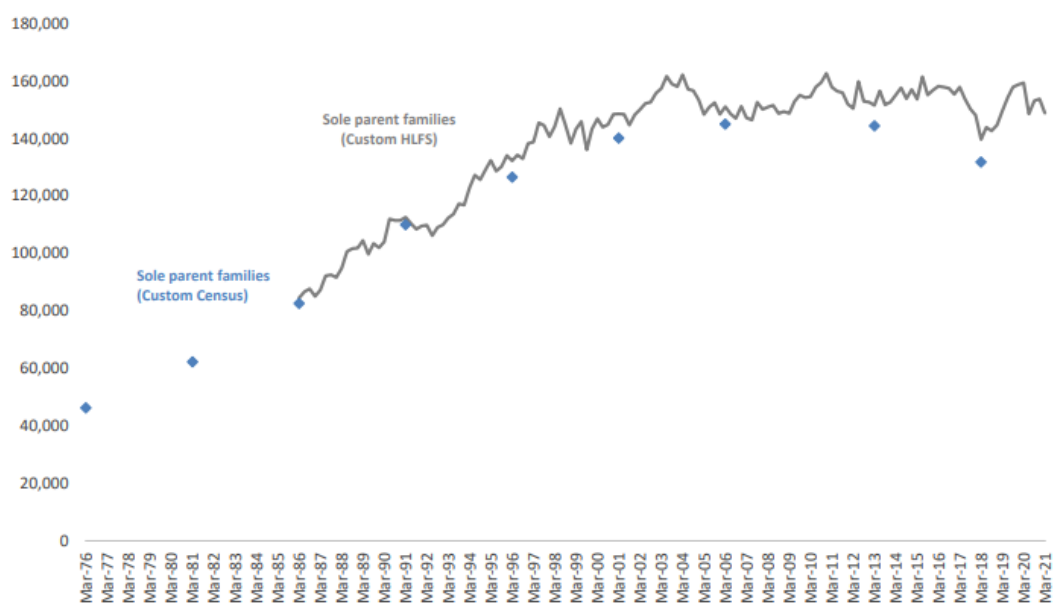
During the last 10 years, the number of children born to unmarried mothers has almost doubled, and the proportion has risen from 23 percent of all births in 1982 to 37 percent in 1992. Note, however, that many of these ex-nuptial births occur to women living in de facto relationships.

Increasing levels of separation and divorce between 1971 and 1986 saw these events replace death as the most likely cause in the formation of a one-parent family. More than half (53 percent) of sole parents in 1991 were separated or divorced. Legislative change in 1981 saw the number of divorces rise dramatically in 1982. A growing number of marriages are dissolving after shorter periods. In 1992, 41 percent of all divorces involved marriages of less than 10 years duration.

The fastest growing group of sole parents is those who have never married (this includes people previously living in de facto relationships). Sole-parent families raised by a never married parent increased in number by 80 percent between 1986 and 1991, and accounted for over half of the total rise in sole-parent families during this time. In 1991, more than one in four sole parents had never married, compared with one in five in 1986.”¹⁴

Post 1992 the growth continued with numbers stabilising at the turn of the century and remaining reasonably steady since. At the 2018 census there were 131,829 sole parent families – or 24.5% of all families with dependent children under 18.¹⁵ 108,612 were female.

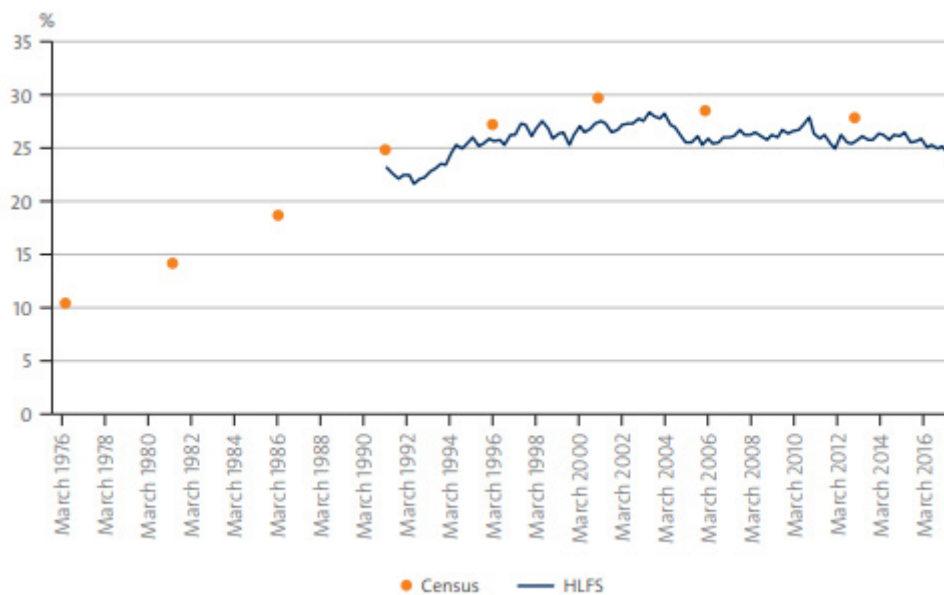
Number of sole parent families with dependent children under 18



Source: WHAT'S HAPPENING TO THE NUMBER OF SOLE PARENTS ON BENEFIT? MSD

An earlier version of this chart (with data to March 2016) is also included to provide proportion of families led by a sole parent:

Proportion of families with dependent children headed by a sole parent



Source: Multiple disadvantage among sole parents in New Zealand, Superu

As a measure of father absence some problems present:

1. Some sole parent families are headed by males. Of all sole parents with dependent children at the 2018 census, 17.6% were male.
2. Many fathers remain involved in the lives of children being raised in female-headed sole parent families.
3. Some female sole parents live with either their children's father or subsequent partner but report sole parent status for the purposes of collecting a benefit. When utilising GUINZ data the Auckland University of Technology found, "70% of those who say they receive the domestic-purposes benefit also answer yes to the question of whether they have a partner – confirming that the sole-parent status derived from GUINZ is essentially different to those studies which rely on benefit status to infer partnership status."¹⁶
4. Though it is possible to count sole parents at a point in time, their movement in and out of sole parenthood can be fluid over short time frames.

Māori children are more likely to live with a sole parent than any other ethnicity. At June 2022 Māori made up half of those on a sole parent benefit (with recorded ethnicity).¹⁷ Selected data from the New Zealand Longitudinal Census (NZLC) showed nearly 64 percent of Māori children born between 1997-2001 had experienced time in a 'single parent only' family by the time they were aged 12-16.¹⁸ For non-Māori the percentage was just under half.

Māori children are more likely to live with a sole parent than any other ethnicity.

Family structure from 2001 to 2013 in the New Zealand Longitudinal Census: Linked sample

	2001 (0-4 years)		2006 (5-9 years)		2013 (12-16 years)		Ever experienced	
	number	%	number	%	number	%	number	%
Māori								
Family structure								
Two parents	10698	49.9	10641	49.6	9921	46.3	14466	67.5
Single parent	8781	41	8337	38.9	8784	41	13623	63.6
All else	1956	9.1	2457	11.5	2733	12.7	4854	22.6
non- Māori								
Family structure								
Two parents	51042	69	48345	66	45669	62	61785	83.9
Single parent	19746	27	20703	28	23025	31	36369	49.4
All else	2811	4	4551	6	4902	7	8961	12.2

Data source: Poipoiā te kākano kia puawai, Family structure, family change and the wellbeing of tamariki Māori, MSD

The limitations of the NZLC include the non-identification of biological relationships between 'parents' and children. For instance, children in the two-parent family at one census may not have the same two-parents at the next.

What data is available nevertheless indicates a greater degree of father absence in the families of Māori children. (It is highly unlikely that Māori single parents are predominantly or even majorly male. Only 17.6 percent of all sole parents were men at the 2018 Census. Ethnic information is not published.)

Household Labour Force Survey

The number of sole parents is sometimes derived from the Household Labour Force Survey. March 2022 quarter data ¹⁹ is as follows:

Household Labour Force Survey March 2022	
Households with one parent with dependent children under 18	
All employed	74,100
Mixed work	14,600
None employed	42,300
Total	131,000

Data source: HLFS table supplied to L Mitchell, June 2022

'Mixed work' and 'none employed' total 56,900 yet at April 2022 there were 97,122 sole parents collecting benefits.²⁰ This implies that the balance comprises either sole parents living in extended family/friend households or sole parents claiming benefits while also working fulltime (or a mix of both.)

An unpublished paper written for the Department of Labour (now MBIE) in 2011 found, "About 40% of people on work-tested benefits may not be meeting their labour market obligations, as they appear to be either working too much or searching too little."²¹

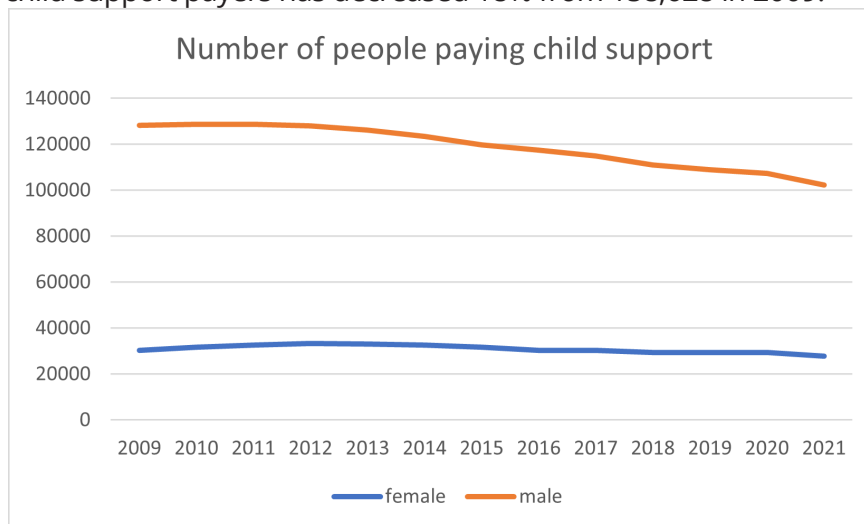
The workforce/benefit status of sole parents is not the subject at hand, but this anomaly (as per the GUINZ discrepancy identified by AUT on p16) is highlighted to demonstrate that the HLFS data also has limitations based on the accuracy of information provided by respondents.

Child support data

Inland Revenue data is perhaps more robust by its very nature.

During the financial year ending March 2021 130,007 individuals paid child support and 102,186 were male.

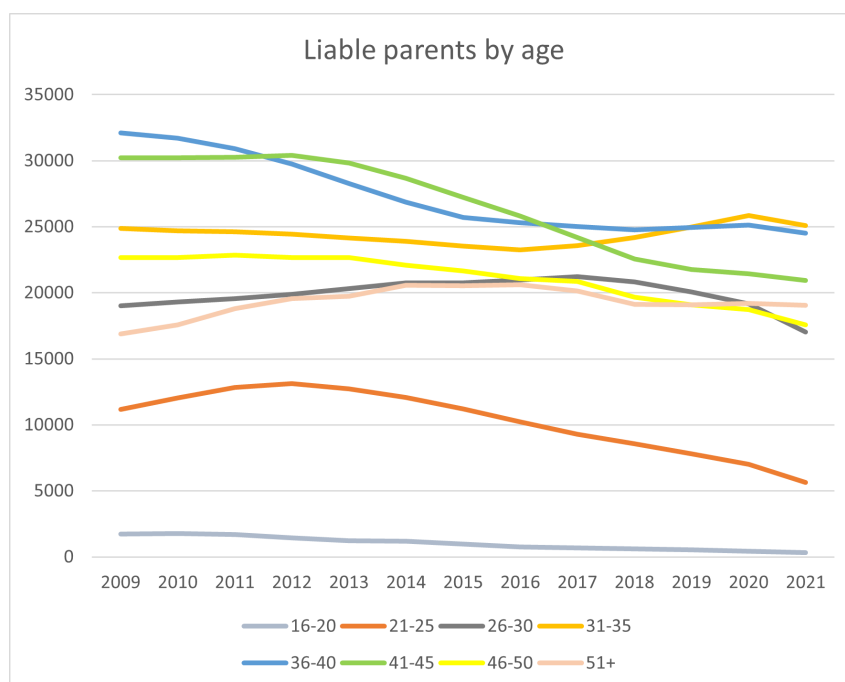
Broadly, child support is payable until a dependent child not living with (or for the portion of time they are not living with) the liable parent is 18 years-old (or becomes financially independent <18). The number of child support payers has decreased 18% from 158,628 in 2009.



Data source: OIA response from Inland Revenue, May 26, 2022

The child support-paying population is ageing.

Only two age groups - 31–35 and 51+ years - increased between 2009 and 2021. The first may be partially explained by males aged 30–34 years having the highest paternity rate (the same age group as females for highest fertility rate)²² and that relationships can become vulnerable after the birth of a first child. The drop off in 16–25-year-old liable parents is undoubtedly affected by the steep reduction in teen births since 2008.



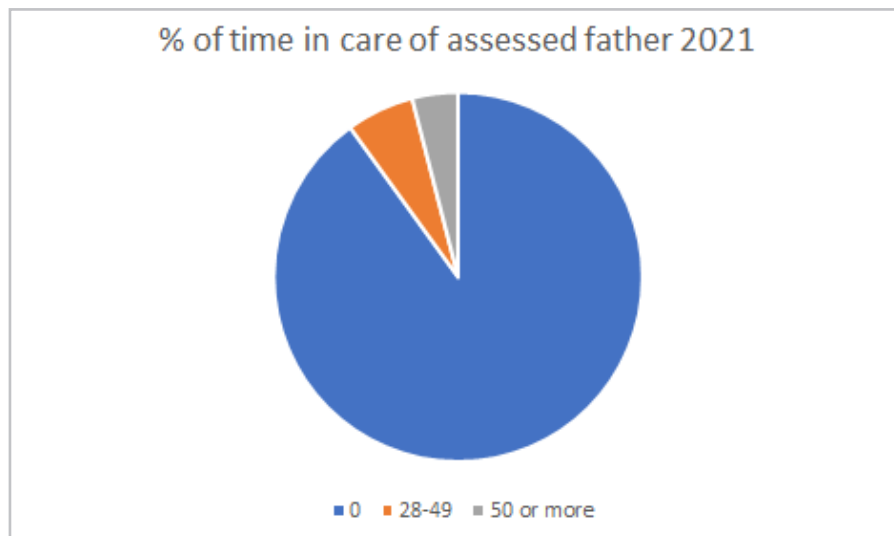
Data source: OIA response from Inland Revenue, May 26, 2022

A reduction in overall child support liability might reflect women's increased employment rate, financial independence and ability to raise her family without a father's financial input.

However, for the tax year 2020/21, 56 percent of people receiving child support were receiving benefit income.²³ Indicating little shift in the proportion, 54 percent of custodial parents received benefit income during the month of April 2009.²⁴

Liabe parent numbers are more likely to be reducing due to fewer separations, more shared parenting and decreasing total fertility (proportionately fewer children are being born).

In the calendar year 2021 101,026 males paid child support. Of these 89 percent (89,644) had 0% care of their children. The number of fathers assessed who had 50 percent (or more) care of at least one of their children was 3,817 while 6,682 had between 28 and 49% care of at least one of their children.²⁵



Data source: OIA response from Inland Revenue to L Mitchell, 25 July, 2022

At July 5 2022, liable fathers with zero percent care of their children were paying for 129,426 children.

9,389 of these fathers were paying to more than one receiving carer, the highest being six. This doesn't necessarily indicate the father has children with more than one mother. It may indicate his children are in the custody of more than one caregiver, e.g., with extended family.

The following chart reflects parents at a point in time, which is lower than assessed across an entire year:

Total number of male liable parents with 0% care of their child(ren)

Children	total parents	total children
1	43919	43919
2	21677	43354
3	8206	24618
4	2707	10828
5	908	4540
6	248	1488
7	66	462
8	18	144
9	7	63
10	1	10
Grand total	77757	129426

Data source: OIA response from Inland Revenue to L Mitchell, 25 July, 2022

Based on the above, approximately 10.7 percent of all 0–18-year-olds have a father paying child support with zero percent share of their care. It cannot be assumed however that these fathers have no contact with their child(ren). In the United Kingdom, *“one in ten non-resident parents do not have contact with their children post-separation, and one in four fathers lose touch with their child within 2 years.”*²⁶

In summary, in the 2021 calendar year:

- 5 percent of new-borns had no father recorded on their birth certificate
- 17 percent did not have a father recorded as living at the same residential address as the mother
- 19 percent had no legal parental relationship recorded
- 101,026 males paid child support and 89 percent had zero percent care of the child(ren)

In March 2018

- 108,612 female sole parents lived with dependent child(ren) under 18 representing 20 percent of all families with children under 18

Conservatively then, one child in five has a father absent *from their daily life*. If it is assumed that a non-recorded father at birth represents the *complete absence* of a father-child relationship with contact, one in twenty children is affected. This may be a minimum as there are other circumstances yet to be considered.

Reasons behind father absence

Unidentified fathers

Regarding the one in twenty children who has no birth father registered, the New Zealand Law Commission maintains he or she may encounter real difficulties in obtaining information about their genetic parent with no record of him on their birth certificate.²⁷ While some may have information, have met him or even have an ongoing relationship,

*“... a significant number will have no knowledge of their father and will have no means of obtaining this information from a public record.”*²⁸

According to the Commission there can be various reasons why a father’s name and details aren’t registered on a child’s birth certificate.

“Unlike a married father, an unmarried father cannot usually be registered unless the child’s mother consents to his name being included in the birth particulars. The unmarried father will need to sign either the birth notification form with the mother or provide her with a signed statement accepting paternity. There may be a number of barriers to this occurring if:

- *one or both parties do not want him to be identified for personal reasons;*
- *the man is not aware that he is the child’s father;*
- *the father is absent or unknown;*
- *the mother registers the name of another man on the birth certificate;*
- *the mother decides to place the child for adoption; or*
- *the father’s name is not registered to avoid him being liable for child support under the Child Support Act 1991.*

*Parties may also prefer not to name the father if, for example, the pregnancy was the result of rape or incest, or there are cultural reasons why naming the father may be embarrassing or distressing for the mother, the father or the child.”*²⁹

The Law Commission goes on to suggest:

*"In light of the international instruments affirming the rights of children to know their genetic origins, the Government might embark on an education campaign that encourages registration."*³⁰

Ironically in April 2020 the current government suspended the requirement for a mother receiving a benefit to name her child's father. The financial penalty for failure to do so was removed. This conflicts with the child's right to *"know their genetic origins"*.

The Law Commission advises both a government responsibility to ensure children's access to information about their genetic parents and an interest in *"ensuring that men who procreate children bear some of the cost of rearing them."*

Again, the current government has less interest in the latter consideration than prior governments. The Clark/Cullen administration (1999-2008) increased financial penalties for parents on a benefit who refused to name the liable parent whereas the Ardern/Robertson administration (2017-) removed them.

The commission also argues a public interest in *"giving men the opportunity to make a positive contribution to the life of their child, whether by way of emotional or practical support for the mother, or by way of a shared care arrangement or contact with the child."*³¹

New Zealand's seeming disinterest in children's identity rights stands in stark contrast to other jurisdictions, for instance, Sweden where establishing paternity and parenthood is given paramountcy under the law:

*"(Att fastställa faderskap och föräldraskap) Children are entitled to the love and support of both parents. That's why the parenthood of every child who is born must be established. Not only do children have the right to know where they came from, but they are entitled to maintenance and inheritance. If the mother is unmarried or divorced, paternity or parenthood must be established. Municipal social services have that responsibility."*³²

Inquiries into the parentage of babies born to unmarried mothers ceased in New Zealand in the 1960s. The Swedish enthusiasm for establishing paternity may be regarded as draconian in New Zealand but the Swede's focus is firmly on children's rights.

Fathers themselves may play a role in thwarting paternity acknowledgement. According to MSD the most common reason for fathers not being named by beneficiary mothers was:

*"...the father denied paternity and the mother did not pursue the matter for reasons such as cost, fear or simply not knowing what to do. Other reasons included the father being unknown, a wish not to have him involved if he did not want to involve himself, or that private financial arrangements existed on condition that he was not named. Some mothers did not want the father to have any rights over the child because of his perceived unsuitability for fatherhood."*³³

Misidentified fathers

The complete absence of the biological father from his child's life can occur through misidentification. The New Zealand Law Commission states:

*"There are also suggestions that between 1000–5000 children per year may have a man other than their genetic father recorded on their birth certificate."*³⁴

In the New Zealand context this represents 1-4% of annual births. 'Other country' estimates range from 0.7-2%³⁴ and 1-5%.³⁵

A senior lecturer at the London School of Economics comments that *"a mother's interests in keeping the father's identity secret are allowed to trump children's interests in knowing the truth"* and maintains *"infidelity may be a statistically greater threat to accurate knowledge of genetic origins than the relatively small number of children born using donated gametes or embryos."*³⁶

Which leads to a further area relating to father absence.

Donor and surrogacy births

With respect to surrogacy (a female agrees to carry a child for another party) the Law Commission has recently recommended to parliament:

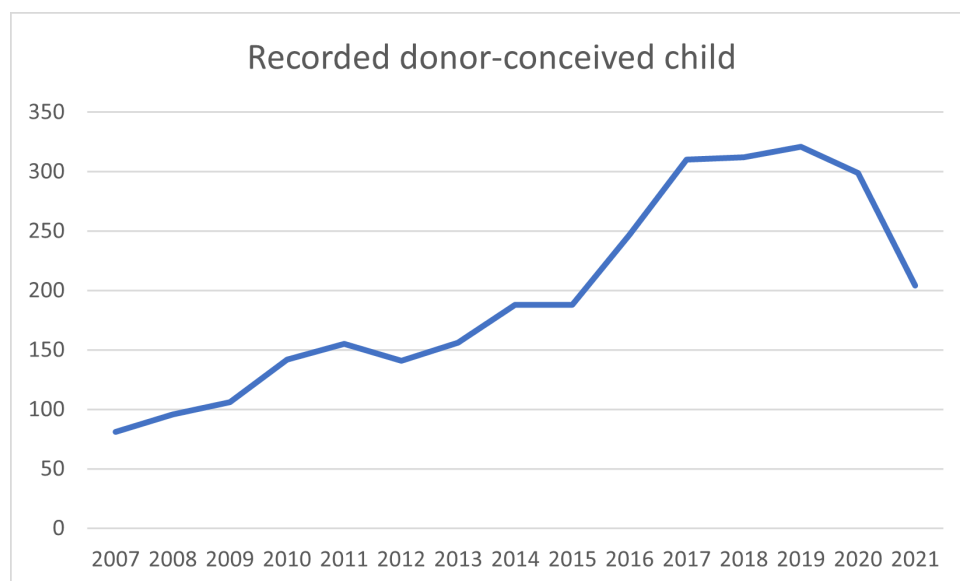
*"Giving effect to children's rights to identity by establishing a national surrogacy birth register to preserve access to information by surrogate-born people about their genetic and gestational origins and whakapapa."*³⁷

It estimates up to 50 children a year may be born from surrogacy arrangements. The circumstances of these arrangements may not be relevant to the issue of father absence but the legal advocacy to ensure access to genetic origin information is.

The Human Assisted Reproductive Technology Act 2004 has already established a register of donor births in New Zealand. Registration is mandatory. But sperm donations also occur outside of fertility clinic settings creating concerns about consanguinity. An unregulated environment may result in one highly active donor producing many offspring related by blood who may unknowingly form relationships as adults - another compelling reason why knowledge of biological paternity is important.

Donors appear to have varying degrees of ongoing contact with their biological children but would certainly feature on the father absence continuum. From a moral viewpoint donors appear to be motivated by altruism.

There were 204 registered donor-conceived children born in 2021 bringing the cumulative total to 3,003.³⁸ In 2020, births numbered 299. Statistics for 2021 are not yet complete.



Data source: Human Assisted Reproductive Technology Act Statistics, Department of Internal Affairs

The register allows these individuals to learn about their genetic origin. Again, *“Experts stress that children who do not know the identity or background of their biological parents can struggle with feeling incomplete.”*³⁹

If this emphasis on children’s rights to information about genetic origins was applied consistently, more attention would focus on the registration of biological fathers on birth certificates *in general*.

Effects of father absence

Child hardship

In 1997, in his role as Children’s Commissioner, Laurie O’Reilly said,

*“Although there is strong debate as to the causal link between father absence and particular outcomes, there is evidence that strongly suggests that father absence whether through divorce or other circumstance is associated with a number of negative outcomes for the family and for children. One of the difficulties is that a number of deprivations or victimization may overlap or be concurrent. Negative outcomes include, poverty, youth violence, substance abuse, adolescent child birth, increased risk of suicide, an increase risk of abuse of children.”*⁴⁰

The passage of time has not reduced these negative outcomes.

For instance, in a cohort of children born in 2010 (N=63,176) a child born to a single parent was 9 times more likely to have a substantiated finding of maltreatment by age two than one born to a parent who wasn’t single or had unknown partnership status:

	% in population	incidence of finding
Single parent	22.1	8.2
Single parent and no father listed on birth registration	4.5	6.5
Not single parent or partnership status unknown	73.4	0.9

Data source: The feasibility of using predictive risk modelling to identify new-born children who are high priority for preventive services - companion technical report, MSD, February 2014

With regard to poverty, in 2019/20 twenty nine percent of single parent households with dependents experienced six or more items of deprivation. For two parent households with dependents the portion dropped to seven percent. Children in one parent homes are 4 times more likely to, for example, forgo meals with meat, dentist visits or put up with feeling cold.⁴¹

In 2021 an MSD update on sole parents stated, *“...of all the children in households in severe material hardship, 41 percent are from sole parent households.”*⁴²

Additionally, *“Children living in sole parent households are also more likely to experience poor outcomes and high levels of disadvantage, which can last into adulthood. In particular, these children experience significantly higher poverty rates than those in two parent households.”*⁴³

A child born to a single parent was 9 times more likely to have a substantiated finding of maltreatment by age two.

In 2021 Waikato University researchers summarised evidence from various New Zealand studies into effects on children of parental separation:

*"In Aotearoa NZ, parental separation after (but not before) school entry has been associated with lower cognitive capacity test scores (Fergusson, Lynskey, & Horwood, 1994) and later life substance use (Fergusson, Horwood, & Lynskey, 1994). Other health impacts found to be associated with parental separation include poor childhood physical health (Dawson, 1991), criminal offending (Hanson, 1999), tobacco use (Ermisch & Francesconi, 2001), alcohol use in adolescence (Pasqualini, Lanari, & Pieroni, 2018), early onset sexual behaviour (Ellis et al., 2003), and teenage pregnancy (Woodward, Horwood, & Fergusson, 2001)."*⁴⁴

A MSD literature review also recently stated that if, "...non-resident fathers remain active participants in their children's lives, then the fathers' involvement might potentially serve as a protective factor for their children."⁴⁵

Father hardship

Along with children, estranged fathers may suffer materially and emotionally. Much of the evidence for this is anecdotal and difficult to quantify statistically, though not impossible.

"Children living in sole parent households are also more likely to experience poor outcomes and high levels of disadvantage, which can last into adulthood."

MSD 2021

For instance, the mortality rate for fathers paying child support is shockingly high. In the five years to 2021, Inland Revenue (IR) administered 145,923 male liable parents spread over ages 17 to 92. They recorded 1,609 deaths with an average age of death being 44 years.⁴⁶ In the 46–50-year age-band the mortality rate is more than double that among the general relevant population (0.43 versus 0.20).

A number of suicides have been reportedly⁴⁷ linked to father's experience of enforced separation from their children. IR possesses suicide data specific to child support payers for the years 2009–11 but refuses to release it.⁴⁸ Other lifestyle factors for estranged fathers will play a part but no visible attempt to investigate this phenomenon – also identified in Australia⁴⁹ – has been made.

It is impossible to touch on aggrieved fathers (and mothers) without mentioning the family court. It is estimated 16,000 children are affected by Family Court decisions every year.⁵⁰ The Facebook page 'NZ Families Fed up with the Family Court' has 23,514 followers. (An advocacy group for women with devastating experience of the family court was also established in 2017.)⁵¹

It is not the intent here to apportion blame for parental separation/father absence to either gender. Each separation involves individuals and their unique circumstances.

But the following perspectives provide a contrasting sample of more generic views.

From a male perspective:

"...wives who feel aggrieved at the break-up of the marriage are sometimes all too ready to punish the husband by making access to the children as difficult as possible. In legal practice and on the Bench, I found this distressingly common; and very hard to deal with, because at times the mother would convince herself that the children did not want to see their father, or that he was a malign influence, and so they would justify their attitude with reasons which, if they were valid at all, were of their own, perhaps unconscious, making. Of course, at times the mother's attitude was quite justified, but often, looked at objectively, it was not."

Michael Hardie-Boys, Governor General, March 1998.⁵²

From a female perspective:

"All the women in the study who had substantially shared care arrangements were committed to the fathers having contact but believed shared care had an undesirable impact on children. The stereotype of the 'obstructive' mother was used to silence mothers who raised concerns."

Dr Vivienne Elizabeth, Sociology senior lecturer, Auckland University, September 2012.⁵³

Justice systems exist to provide fair and workable decisions between parties. The widespread dissatisfaction with New Zealand's Family Court suggests at least some degree of failure to do so. That may simply be the nature of the beast.

Benefits of father absence

(The following section features two pieces of United States research which have also been cited in New Zealand literature reviews for the very reason no equivalent domestic examples exist.)

Childhood stability may outweigh the desirability of a disruptive father's presence. When measuring child outcomes, one school of thought ranks a stable one-parent family ahead of a two-parent family in turmoil, or one moving through multiple parental transitions.

MSD-commissioned research finds, *"Biological father absence does not necessarily mean that children lack a father figure. Particularly in social contexts where rates of non-marital childbearing are high and adult men and women often play 'non-traditional' parenting roles, children may benefit from the presence of a 'social father'. Social fathers may be male family members, such as grandfathers or uncles, who may have regular interaction or a close relationship with children."*⁵⁴

Children may benefit from the presence of a 'social father'.

The observation is particularly relevant in the New Zealand setting which features a high rate of single parents who live within an extended family. Grandfathers and uncles can play a vital role in modelling good male behaviours and allow mothers more time for themselves.

The quoted research continues, *"Additionally, cohabiting male partners or boyfriends of single mothers may play a parental role."*⁵⁵

Stepfathers can do a better job than biological fathers. A mother's healthy romantic relationship can impact positively on her children's well-being.

However, an American study of 700 African American children provided a further perspective:

*"Where the father figure was the mother's romantic partner, children had significantly lower levels of emotional adjustment...On the one hand, mothers who have less well-adjusted children may be more likely to introduce a male role model in the hope of stabilising or improving the children's behaviour, thinking that perhaps this person would fill the absent father's role. On the other hand, when mothers have male partners who act like fathers or when mothers wishfully nominate their partners as father figures, this may cause tension in family dynamics and lead to behaviour problems or poor adjustment among the children. Male partners might also compete with children for the mother's time and attention."*⁵⁶

Specific to the New Zealand cultural environment other benefits for children raised primarily by their mothers have been identified.

The following research extract details an emerging theory that ascribes advantages to children growing up in Māori single parent families:

"The level of engagement with Māori institutions, including marae and kaupapa Māori education, varies significantly across whānau. Māori single parents and those living in multi-whānau households tend to be more involved with Māori institutions than other whānau. Both children and adults living in single-parent whānau have greater access to te reo Māori in the home. The cultural resources that exist within single-parent whānau and multi-whānau households are an important feature that, until now, have been largely overlooked... Māori single parents with dependent children have a strong sense of identity and belonging as Māori, which they are able to draw on as a personal and whānau resource. These whānau enjoy rich cultural connections to other Māori and are actively engaged in Māori communities and institutions... Many young tamariki in single-parent whānau have meaningful opportunities to develop and sustain te reo Māori in varied contexts. In the 2013 Census nearly one-third of these children lived in a family where at least one person could hold a daily conversation in te reo."⁵⁷

The inference that te reo trumps fathers may be mistaken but nonetheless easily made.

It is inarguable that some children are better off when their biological father doesn't feature in their everyday lives. Evidence of growing levels of family violence and substance abuse abound. (That is not to say mothers aren't also culpable. For example, *"The alleged perpetrator of abuse or neglect of gang member's children was more often recorded as the child's mother than the gang member father."*⁵⁸)

Analysis of a large United States sample of 5-year-olds discovered, *"... the less time fathers lived with their children, the more conduct problems their children had, but only if the fathers engaged in low levels of antisocial behaviour. In contrast, when fathers engaged in high levels of antisocial behaviour, the more time they lived with their children, the more conduct problems their children had. Behavioural genetic analyses showed that children who resided with antisocial fathers received an increased negative effect of genetic and environmental risk for conduct problems."*⁵⁹

While the absence of violent and unstable fathers is probably preferable, a key motivator for rehabilitation is ongoing contact with their children.

This tension is particularly relevant for Māori whose men (and women) are significantly over-represented amongst those serving community and custodial sentences for behaviours and lifestyles not conducive to attentive and nurturing parenting.

Which brings us to the final, but not forgotten, group of absent fathers – those in prison.

Fathers in prison

The last prison census was conducted in 2003. At that time, *"Thirty five percent of female and twelve percent of male sentenced inmates were recorded as having child custodial dependents at the time of their imprisonment."*⁶⁰ That represented 575 men and 1,071 children.

Corrections does not have up-to-date data for how many prisoners are fathers. According to a charity that supports children of prisoners, Pillars, in 2011 *"At any one time, more than 20,000 children in Aotearoa have a parent in prison."*⁶¹ At that time New Zealand prisons held around 8,000 male and 500 female inmates. In 2022 prisoner numbers have dropped to around 7,600 and 400 respectively. If the ratio maintains, children of prisoners would number in the region of 18,750.

In light of the 2003 census, the large majority of these children would be non-custodial prior to the parent's imprisonment. Unsurprisingly, the vast bulk of fathers in prison did not live with their children prior to incarceration.

Around 15 babies are also born to female prisoners each year and remain with their mothers in dedicated care units.⁶²

How does New Zealand compare internationally?

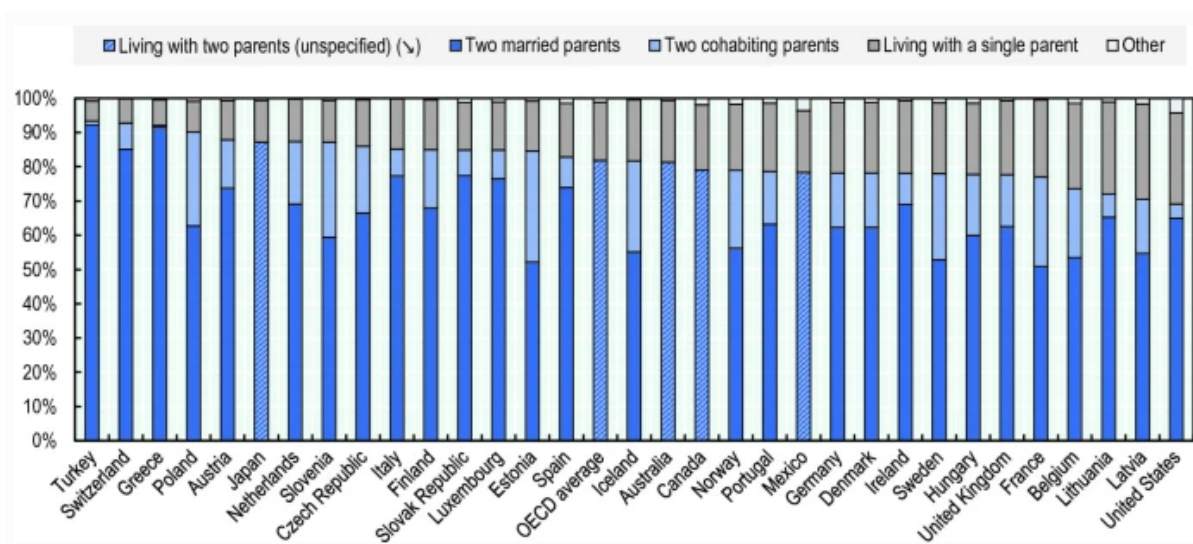
According to MSD in 2021, “While growth in the number of sole parents has flattened, New Zealand continues to have one of the highest rates of sole parenthood among developed countries...”⁶³

This claim references earlier data: “In 2006, New Zealand (26%) ranked second only to the United States (28%) for the proportion of children under 18 living in sole parent families (Ministry of Social Development, 2008).”⁶⁴ The source for this data was the Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit (Superu) which was disestablished in July 2018.

At the 2018 Census 24.5% of families with dependent children under 18 had a sole parent.⁶⁵

The difficulty in accessing domestic data related to children’s living arrangements is illustrated by the following OECD table in which New Zealand is omitted:

Distribution of children (aged 0–17) by presence and marital status of parents in the household, 2018 or latest



Source: Family Policies and Family Outcomes in OECD Countries

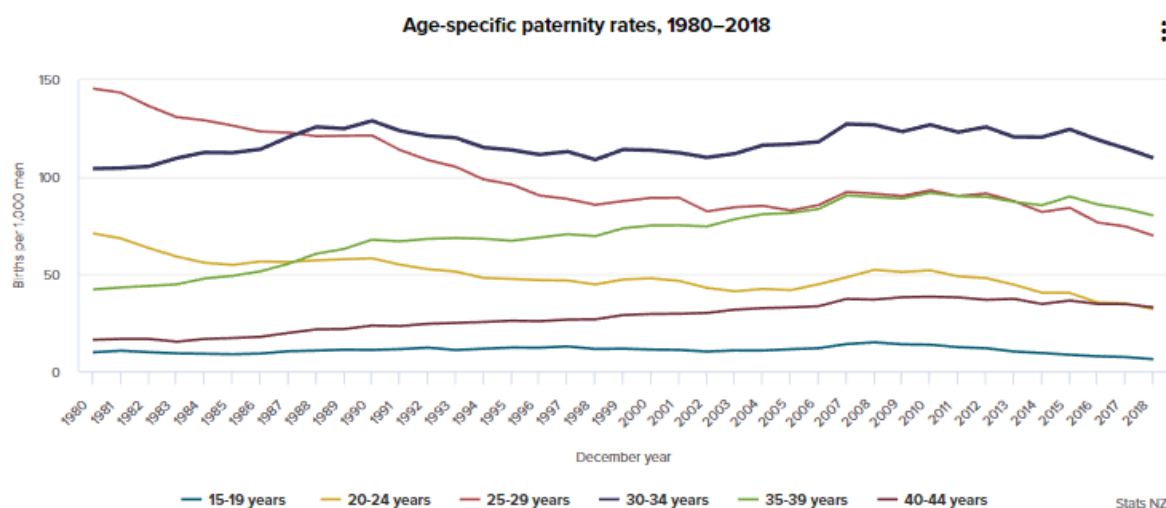
The ranking from left to right is based on proportion of children living with two parents. Based on known statistics and trends New Zealand would place on the far right somewhere between the United States and the United Kingdom.

What does the future hold for father absence?

There are several positives for the prospect of father absence reducing.

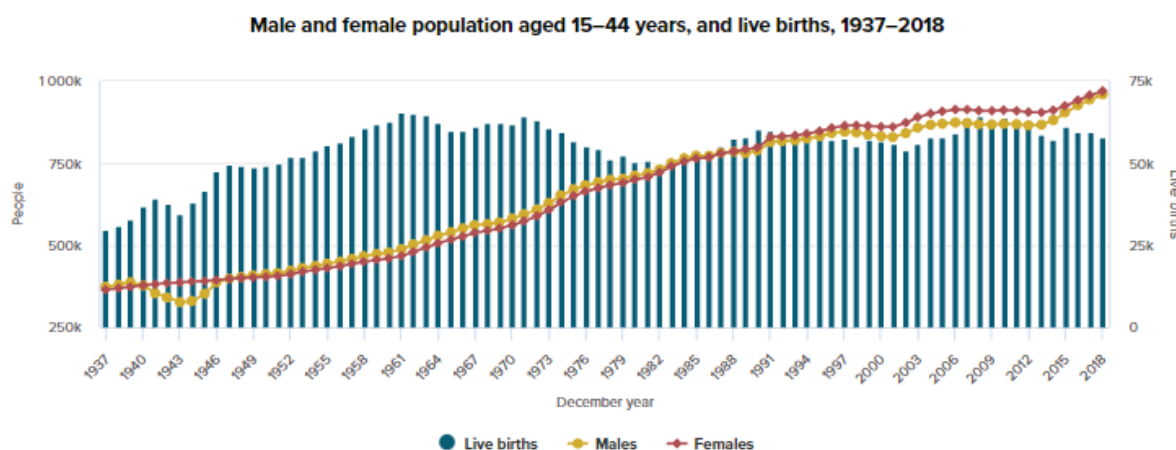
First-time fathers are getting older. As men are more stable in their 30s and 40s this trend may translate into more stability in parental relationships.

Statistics New Zealand says: “The underlying population shows an increase in men in their 20s, but fewer are fathering babies, resulting in a dropping paternity rate (number of live births per 1,000 men that age). The number of men in their late 30s and early 40s has also increased, but although more of these men are fathering babies, their paternity rates are stable.”⁶⁶



Source: Parenting and fertility trends in New Zealand: Statistics New Zealand, 2018

Additionally, fewer men are becoming fathers. *“The birth rate for every 1,000 males has declined over the past generation.”*⁶⁷ Those opting out of fatherhood may be unsuited and deselecting themselves. Conversely men who want to be fathers may be involuntarily missing the opportunity. The first circumstance could though lead to less father absence.



Source: Parenting and fertility trends in New Zealand: Statistics New Zealand, 2018

A large 2020 United Kingdom study (>2,000 children) explored fathers pre- and post- separation involvement in their children’s lives.

*“We show that fathers who were more involved parents prior to separation tend to have more frequent contact after separation, adjusting for other paternal and family characteristics. The size of this association between pre- and post-separation fathering is, however, modest, and even among more involved fathers, intensity of contact declines over time.”*⁶⁸

There is a small implied positive, nevertheless. As fathers today generally are more actively involved in the upbringing of their child, they are more likely to stay involved post separation.

The sharply declining teenage birth rate from 33.11 in 2008 to 10.31 in 2021 is also a cause for optimism.⁶⁹ Children of teen mothers tend to have young fathers. In 2009, 48 percent of births to teen mothers had a father under 20 years.⁷⁰

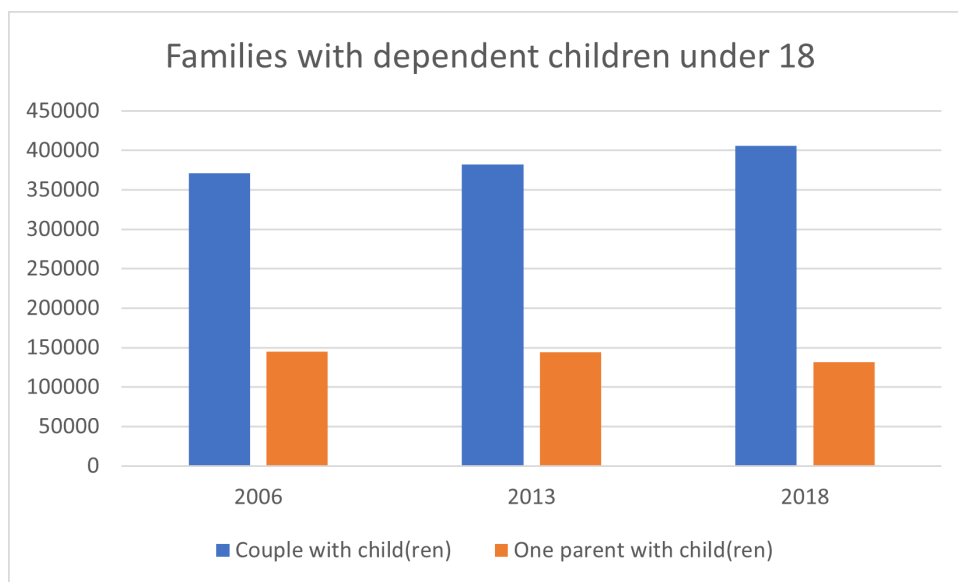
Delayed fatherhood is preferable because, *“teenagers who become fathers are more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds. They are more likely to have low socio-economic status and low participation in education and/or employment. New Zealand research indicates that young men who father a child as a teenager are more likely to have been born to a teenage mother, have lived with a single mother, have begun sexual activity early, have a history of conduct problems, and have planned to leave school early.”*⁷¹

Fewer teen fathers will almost certainly lead to less father absence.

Divorces are rarer and, as the age of fathers divorcing is increasing, probably occur when children are older (though this cannot be verified on available data.)

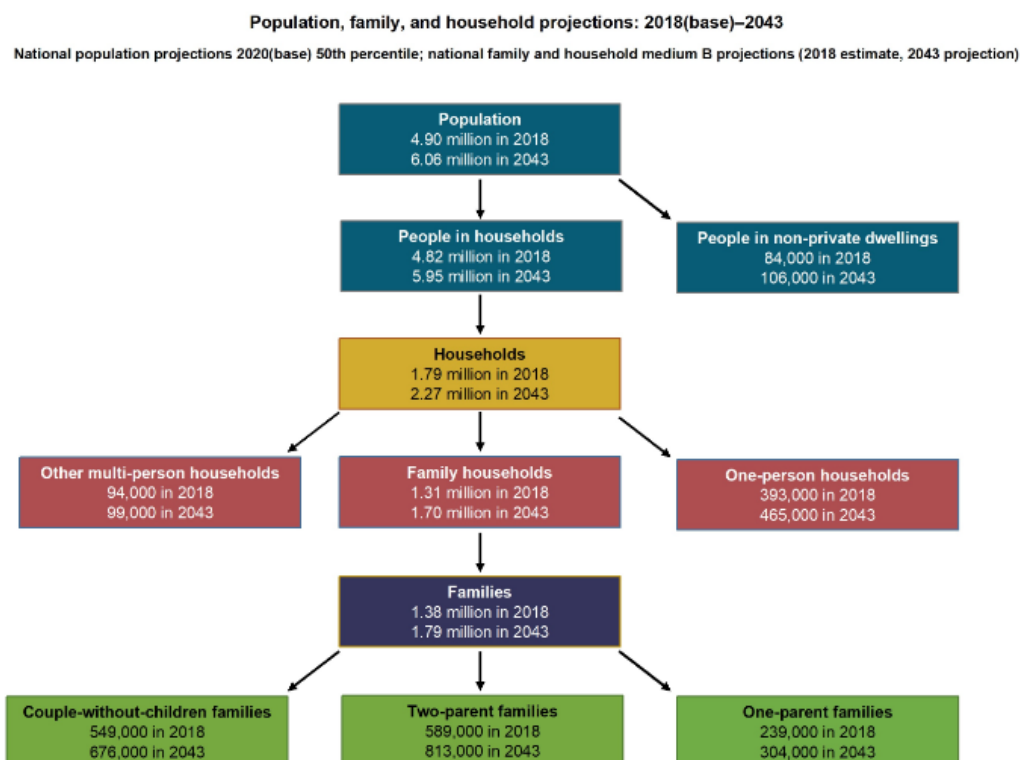
The number of men paying child support is declining (though future statistics will be distorted by sole parents on benefit having no legal requirement to name fathers.)

Another positive can be found in one parent families trending down.



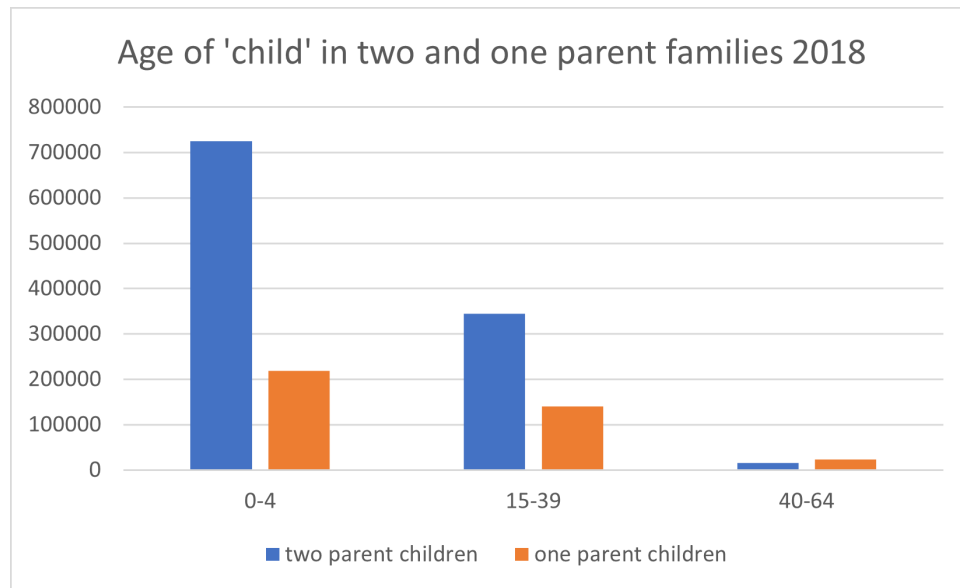
Data source: Age group of youngest dependent child in family by family type, for families with dependent children in occupied private dwellings, 2006, 2013, and 2018 Censuses (RC, TA, DHB, SA2)

However, official projections predict one parent families will continue to make up 17 percent of all family types through to 2043. Two parent families are expected to increase from 43 to 45 percent of all family types.



Source: Family and household projections: 2018(base)–2043, Statistics New Zealand

The sharp-eyed reader will notice that 239,000 one parent families is considerably higher than 131,829 sole parent families with dependent children under 18 (p15). The one parent families in the projection include 'children' of any age. By the time they are over 40, adult children are more likely to reside with a single parent than two parents. This tendency inflates one-parent family numbers.



Data source: National family and household projections, population by living arrangement type, age, and sex, 2018(base)-2043

The projection is nevertheless included to illustrate that the trend Statistics New Zealand is predicting is not a reduction.

Neither is the prediction Professor Paul Spoonley provides in his 2020 book 'The New New Zealand: Facing demographic disruption':

*"The OECD calculates that New Zealand will see an increase in single-parent households of 29 percent between 2006 and 2031 – the highest rise in the OECD – and that New Zealand will also have the highest proportion of single-parent households with children in the OECD by the 2030s."*⁷²

So, there is good and bad news. Actual trends hold some promise - predictions, less.

Perhaps those children who grew up without parental stability are successfully seeking it in their own relationships? Let's hope so.

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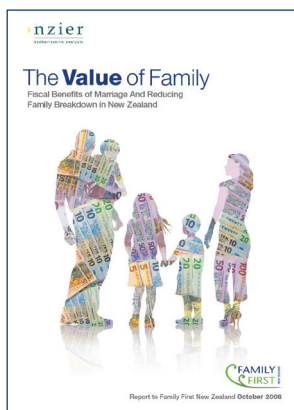
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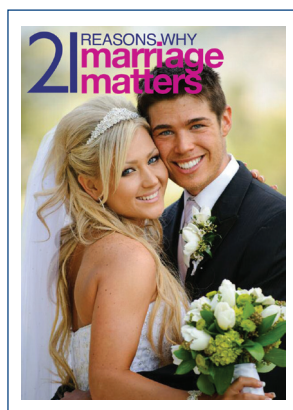
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Family Breakdown: 2008



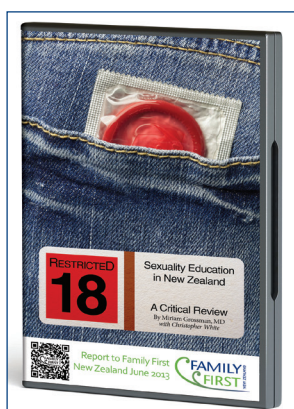
Marriage: 2009



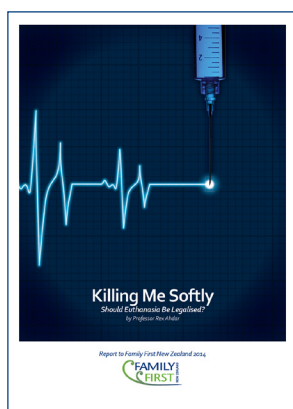
Drinking Age: 2011



Daycare: 2012



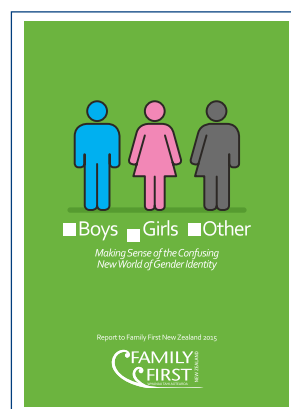
Sex Education: 2013



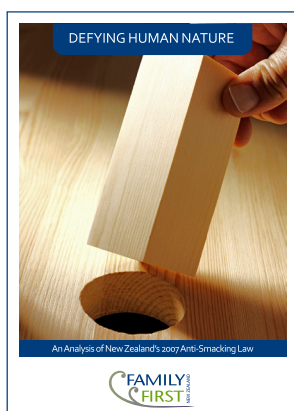
Euthanasia: 2014



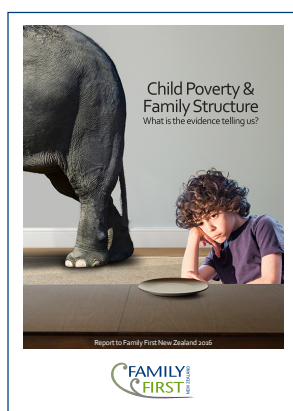
Screentime: 2015



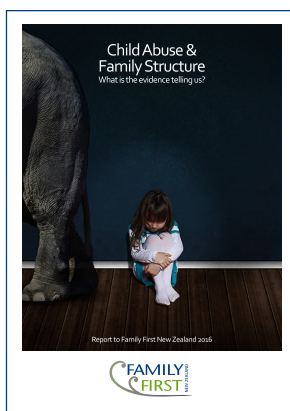
Gender Identity: 2015



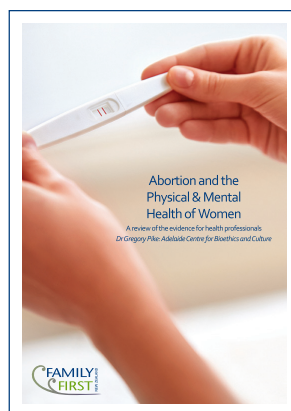
Anti-Smacking Law: 2016



Child Poverty: 2016



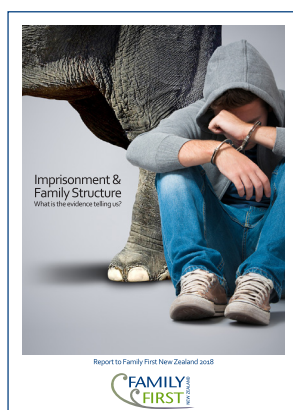
Child Abuse: 2016



Abortion & Health: 2018



Why Mothers Matter: 2018



Imprisonment: 2018



Dinner & Family Life: 2018

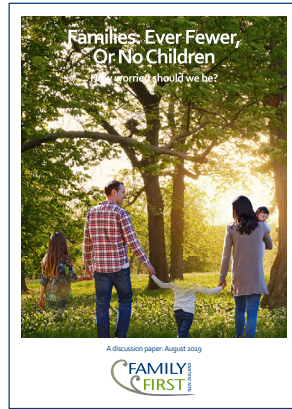


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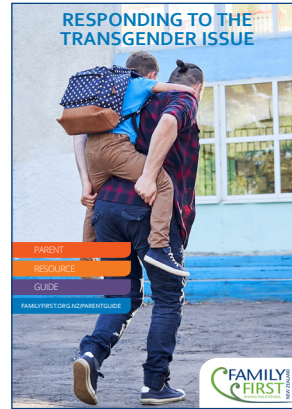
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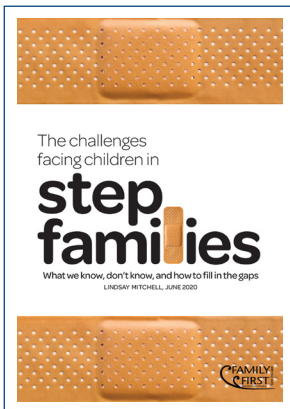
Fertility: 2019



Parent Guide – Gender: 2019



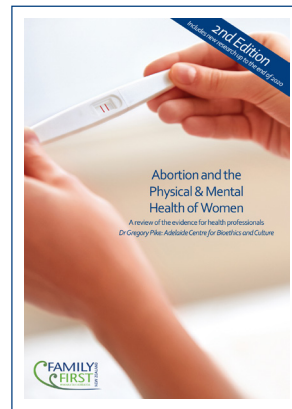
Anti-Smacking Law: 2020



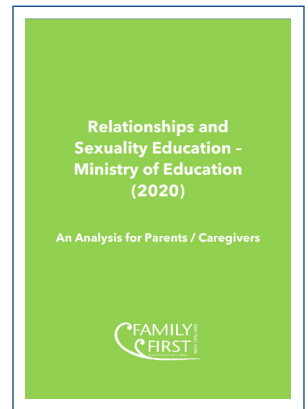
Stepfamilies: 2020



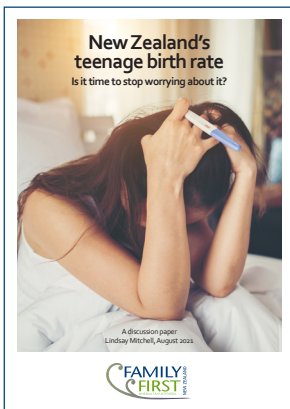
Cannabis Legalisation: 2020
(in conjunction with SAM-NZ)



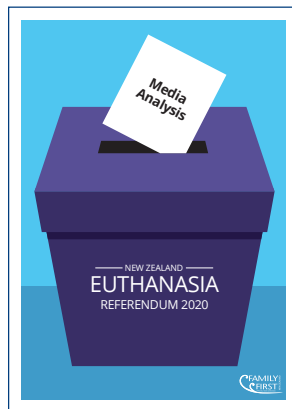
Abortion & Health: 2021



Sexuality Education: 2021



Teenage Birth Rate: 2021



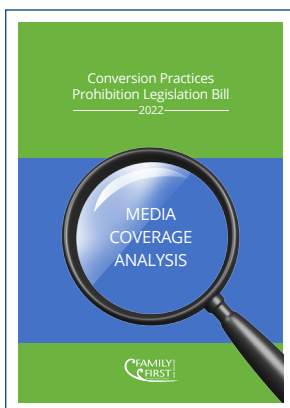
Euthanasia Referendum: 2021
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