

# Tracking wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand: Project overview and key findings

## Project overview and key findings

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## Awhi Rito

Roy McKenzie Centre  
FOR THE STUDY OF FAMILIES  
AND CHILDREN

# Acknowledgements and Disclaimer

Acknowledgements: Stats NZ is the source for the data in the figures presented in this report.

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Disclaimer: The results in this report 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/>.

Access to the anonymised survey data used in this study was provided by Stats NZ under conditions designed to give effect to the security and confidentiality provisions of the Data and Statistics Act 2022.

The findings and conclusions expressed in this report are those of the authors, and not those of Stats NZ nor the Ministry of Social Development. The authors take full accountability for any errors or inaccuracies.

# Tracking wellbeing: Project Context

The Families Package was introduced in 2018 and increased rates for several income support payments, as well as introducing new initiatives such as Best Start and the Winter Energy Payment. Since the introduction of this package, further changes have been made to the income support system as part of the government's focus on wellbeing, reducing child poverty, and in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, this included further increases to main benefits rates in 2020, 2021, and 2022.

**The purpose of this project is to provide insight into how wellbeing is tracking for key groups in Aotearoa New Zealand that were likely to be more or less affected by these policy changes: people receiving main benefits and different family types. It does so by combining nationally-representative survey and administrative data from 2008 through 2020/21 to examine wellbeing indicators across multiple domains, including economic and socioemotional wellbeing and access to healthy housing.**

This work was commissioned by the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) as part of the Families Package evaluation work programme. This work programme aims to measure the impact the suite of Families Package initiatives, primarily delivered through MSD and Inland Revenue, have had—and are having—on the economic and social wellbeing of New Zealanders.

Several government ministries have undertaken initiatives to track wellbeing in ways that align with the policy advice they provide government. Examples of these initiatives include:

- [The Treasury's Living Standards Dashboard](#)
- [Statistics NZ's Indicators Aotearoa](#)
- [Ministry of Health's Annual Data Explorer](#)

Importantly, these existing resources also support sub-group analysis by ethnic group. These approaches, however, do not support sub-group analysis that are important for the MSD's income support policy advice. In particular:

- Family type groups that match the family types used to assess entitlement for income support; and,
- Those who are supported by main benefits.

Thus, the purpose of this project is to fill these gaps, providing insight into how wellbeing is tracking for key groups targeted by recent income support policy changes, and how trends for these groups compare with those for others less affected by these reforms. In turn, these insights can be used by MSD and other service providers to support policy and operational design in ways that can address low levels of, and inequities in, specific wellbeing domains. This builds on [previous research](#).

# Project reports and supporting documents

In addition to this project overview report, there are numerous other supporting documents that offer more information on the project findings, supplemental analyses, and technical documents and statistical programme code that generated the analyses.

## *Findings reports*

There are three main findings reports associated with this project:

- [Tracking wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand: Those who receive main benefits](#)
- [Tracking wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand: Family types](#)
- [Tracking wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand: Main benefits and family types](#)

## *Methodological report*

The methodological report contains in-depth information on the data used, study samples, creation and harmonisation of wellbeing indicators across time, analytical approach, and data limitations.

- [Tracking wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand: Methodological report](#)

## *Supplementary tables*

Tables containing the wellbeing estimates presented in the findings reports, along with confidence intervals, standard errors, and estimates by different main benefit receipt periods (i.e., in the past month, past year, 30 or more of the past 36 months), are available. These same set of tables are available for those receiving any MSD benefit.

Tables containing wellbeing estimates by a two-category family type variable (those with vs. those without dependent children) are also available. These tables are available by total response ethnicity groups. Note that in some cases due to small cell sizes, there are a larger number of suppressed estimates.

## *Data documentation and programme code*

SQL code which constructs the analytical datasets and codes and harmonises variables across waves and datasets (within the Stats NZ IDI) is available. Stata code that produces the main and supplementary tables, as well as R code that generates the report figures, is also available. Accompanying data documentation files are available that provide instructions on how to use the programme code to produce the output tables.

# Methods: Data and sample

## IDI data sources

Wellbeing outcomes, family type, and sociodemographics

Benefit receipt

Survey data

Administrative data

NZ General Social Survey (NZGSS)

$n = \sim 8,000$  per year

*Biennial: 2008-18\**

Household Labour Force Survey (HLFS)

$n = \sim 15,000$

*2020\**

MSD benefit receipt data

2005-2021

Data come from Stats NZ's Integrated Data Infrastructure, with the analytical dataset consisting of linked administrative data and survey data.

Information on benefit receipt comes from the Ministry of Social Development's (MSD) benefit data. These data capture information on people's main benefit and supplementary payment receipt, including start and end dates of benefit receipt spells.

Data on wellbeing and other sociodemographic information, such as those needed to construct family type, come from the 2008-2018 New Zealand General Social Survey (NZGSS) and from the 2020/21 Household Labour Force Survey (HLFS).

These data sources are linked in the IDI at the person level.

**The final analytical sample included all survey respondents aged 18-64 years old.**

\* Data collected in the years 2008-2018 cover the periods of April in the current year through March the subsequent year. In 2020, the data collection period is May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020, through March 2021.

# Methods: Wellbeing indicators

Overall, 20 wellbeing indicators were selected across six wellbeing domains based on the following criteria:

- Consistent measurement across time
- Alignment with other well-established wellbeing frameworks
- Importance for social policy
- Potential for variability over time for individuals
- Measures that may vary by family type and benefit receipt
- Keeping it simple and efficient for future data management

Data on wellbeing indicators come from the NZGSS and the HLFS. More information on the selection criteria and indicator harmonisation across waves can be found in the [Methodological report](#).

## Socioemotional wellbeing



- Life satisfaction
- Self-actualization
- Family wellbeing

## Economic wellbeing



- Income inadequacy
- Material wellbeing
- Labour force participation

## Housing



- Warmth
- Dampness
- Crowding

## Health



- General health

## Social connectedness



- Loneliness
- Trust in institutions
- Discrimination
- Contact with friends and whānau

## Safety



- Feeling safe in the community after dark
- Victim of crime

# Methods: Benefit receipt and family type

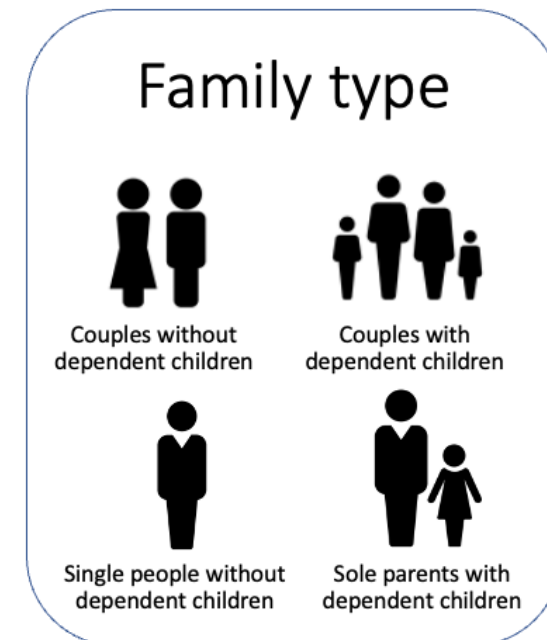
## Main benefit receipt

- Data on benefit receipt comes from the Ministry of Development's benefit data, which captures information on people's main benefit and supplementary payment receipt, including start and end dates of benefit receipt spells.
- The benefit receipt date is linked with the date respondents took the survey—the same survey from which we draw wellbeing data—to determine eligibility receipt during certain time frames.
- In the findings reports, we focus on **main benefit receipt in the past 12 months** prior to the day of wellbeing survey completion. Main benefit refers to income assistance such as Jobseeker Support, Sole Parent Support, and the Supported Living Payment.
- Benefit receipt status reflects the benefit receipt of the survey respondent, *not* of the household (i.e., benefit receipt by any household member).
- Wellbeing estimates for those receiving any MSD benefit, including supplementary payments such as the Accommodation Supplement and Winter Energy Payment, and receiving a benefit during other time periods (i.e., past 30 days, in 30 or more of the past 36 months) can be found in the supplementary tables.

## Family type

Family type was determined from the perspective of the survey respondent and was constructed from the Stats NZ household matrix—a standard format on Stats NZ social surveys for collecting information about the people living in the household and the relationships among the household members.

Respondents were categorised into one of four groups that broadly align with family types that are used to assess entitlement or income support at MSD:



# Methods: Analytical approach and limitations

## *Analytical approach*

The estimates produced are bivariate statistics, with wellbeing estimates presented as means and proportions depending on how the outcome was measured. The data were pooled and estimated for each year separately, by main benefit receipt, by family type, and by a combination of main benefit receipt and family type. The figures are presented with 95% Confidence Intervals (CIs) to provide information on statistical differences between groups and over time. The supplementary tables contain these estimates and CIs, along with t-test and chi<sup>2</sup> tests for key comparisons.

## *Weighting*

The final survey weight from the respective surveys, along with 100 jackknife replicate weights, were used to account for the multistage sampling design and to generate population-level estimates.

## *Analysis interpretation and data limitations*

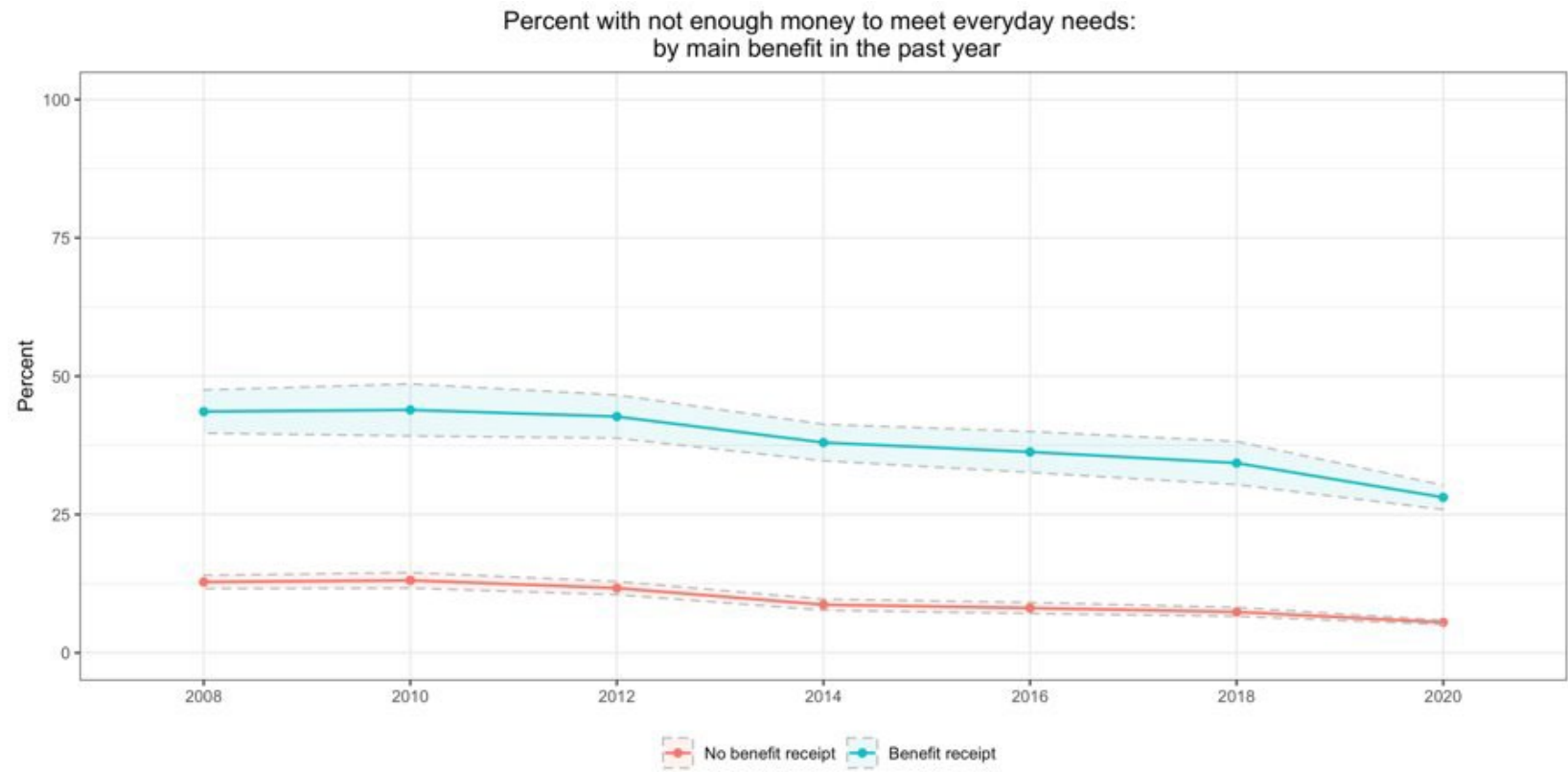
- Despite being nationally representative, Stats NZ national social surveys undercount those receiving benefits. Although we address some of this undercount by linking administrative benefit data to the surveys (i.e., helping address the issue of under-reporting by respondents), those receiving benefits are less likely to be respondents on social surveys. This means that the sample receiving a benefit may not be representative of the most vulnerable in the population.
- Findings should be interpreted as a snapshot of a group of people's experiences, on average, at a given point in time.
- Findings are correlational, *not causal*. Other factors might explain differences between those who received benefits versus those who did not that are associated with wellbeing and overrepresentation in the population receiving benefits, such as disability status, gender, and age. For example, single persons have higher rates of loneliness *and* are a greater proportion of those receiving a benefit than in the general population, meaning higher rates of loneliness among those receiving benefits can be partially explained by being overrepresented by single persons.
- Smaller sample sizes among some groups—such as among sole parents receiving a main benefit—has resulted in some suppressed values (per Stats NZ confidentiality rules), and likely accounts for some instability in estimates across years. This also means that drilling down further to examine some of these trends by ethnicity, for example, was not possible. Small sample sizes also means we may be limited in determining statistical differences across groups, even when these differences may appear large. Findings should be interpreted with this understanding.
- Some variables are not available at all waves, masking longer-term trends or missing potential changes between specific years.
- Several factors should be considered when interpreting changes in wellbeing across time, including changes in measurement of some variables, the impact of the Great Recession and COVID-19 pandemic, change in survey used between 2020/21 and earlier years, and changes in the sociodemographic composition of those receiving a main benefit. More details about these considerations can be found in the Methodological report.
- Data were not available for some wellbeing indicators that may be particularly important for those who receive benefits or in different family types, such as mental health.



# Key findings: Benefit receipt

*There are large differences in wellbeing between those supported by main benefits versus not across most wellbeing measures*

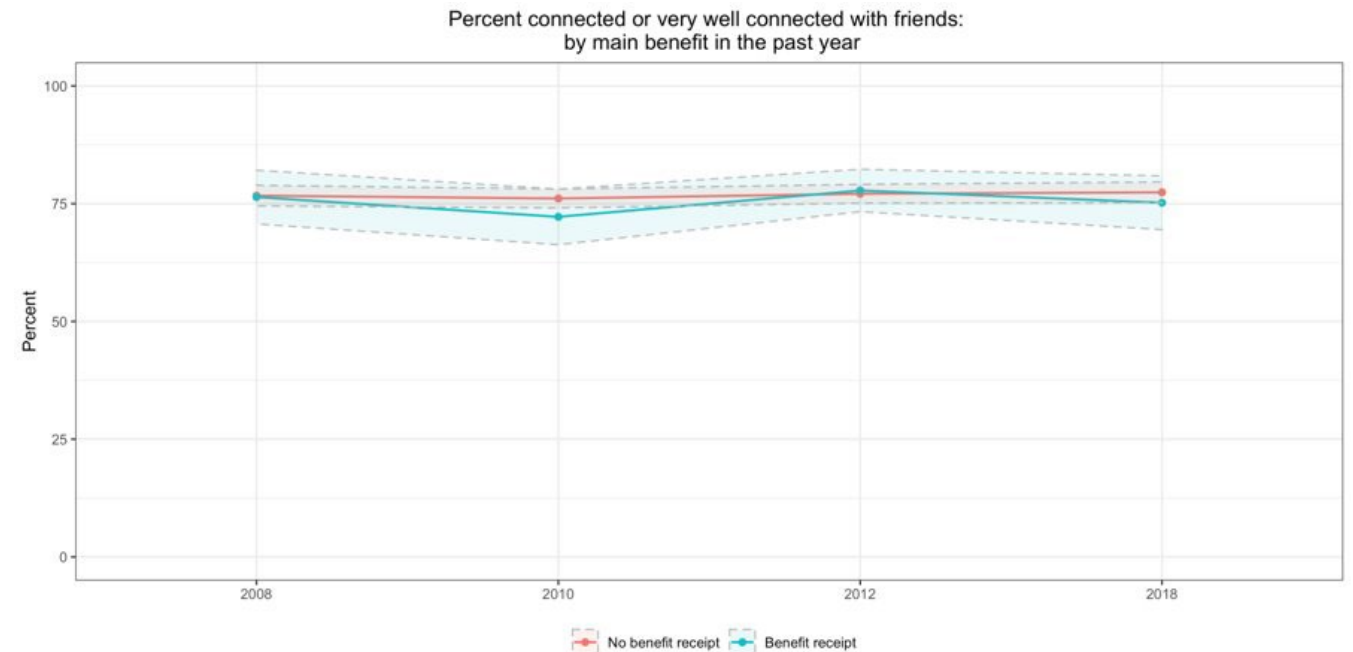
- Across many of the wellbeing indicators, there were persistent gaps between those who received a main benefit in the past year and those who had not. There were, however, some exceptions.
- People receiving a main benefit during the past year reported an improvement in income adequacy and consistent employment patterns since 2008. The economic gaps between those receiving a benefit and those not receiving a benefit, however, remained. The narrowing of the gap in income adequacy between 2018 and 2020 coincided with major legislative changes aimed at supporting low- and middle-income families, such as the Families Package.



# Key findings: Benefit receipt

## *Despite persistent economic, housing, and health gaps, there were few differences in socioemotional wellbeing and connectedness*

- There were few differences between those who received a main benefit in the past year and those who did not across socioemotional wellbeing indicators that tapped into ability to express oneself and family wellbeing. There was a persistent gap in life satisfaction between those receiving a main benefit and those who did not, however.
- Those who received a main benefit reported similar levels of connectedness to friends, family and whānau as those who did not receive a benefit.
- These findings were despite large disparities in economic wellbeing across benefit receipt status—economic factors that are often associated with poorer social wellbeing.
- Although there were improvements in housing conditions over time for those receiving a main benefit, the gap in housing conditions between those who did and did not receive benefits persisted.
- These socioemotional wellbeing and connectedness trends continued into 2020, despite the potential short-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Other research has pointed to the resiliency of communities that might have served to promote socioemotional wellbeing during the initial phases of the pandemic.



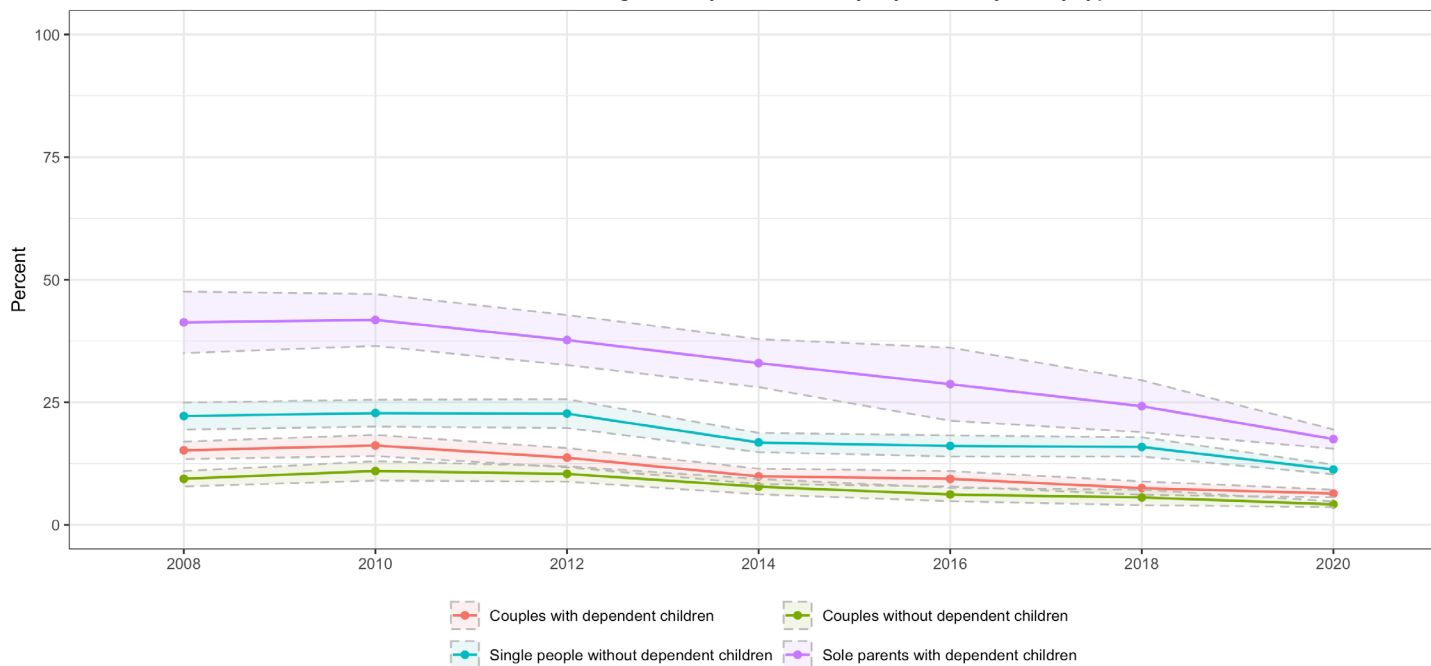
Data source: StatsNZ IDI

# Key findings: Family types

*Although economic and housing conditions improved from 2008 to 2020—and sometimes more so for sole parents—sole parents often still lagged behind on wellbeing indicators*

- From 2008 to 2020, there were improvements among all family types across many of the economic and housing wellbeing indicators, and often greater improvements for sole parents who consistently had the poorest economic and housing outcomes in 2008. For example, the proportion of respondents reporting that their household did not meet everyday needs declined by nine-percentage points for couples with dependent children, five-percentage points for couples without dependent children, and 11-percentage points for single people without children. Among sole parents, by comparison, the decline was 24-percentage points.

Percent with not enough money to meet everyday needs by family type

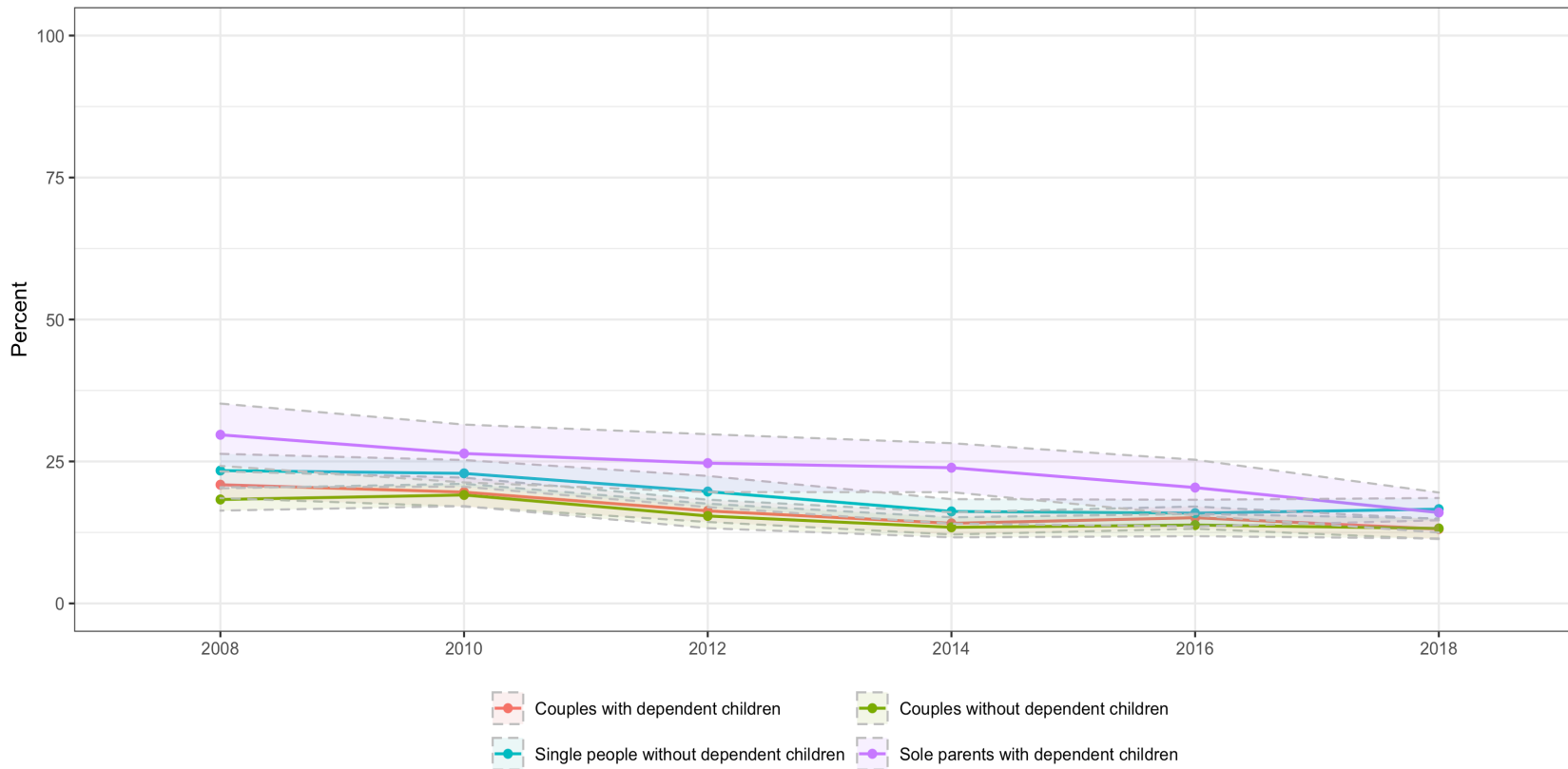


- Despite these differences in rates of improvement, there were persistent gaps between sole parents and couples with and without dependent children, and single people without dependent children. Using income inadequacy, again, as an example, in 2020, 18% of sole parents reported not having enough money to meet everyday needs—three-to-four times higher than couples with (6%) and without (4%) dependent children, and 1.5 times greater than single people without children (12%).

# Key findings: Family types

*Despite persistent economic and housing gaps between sole parents and other family types, earlier disparities in socioemotional wellbeing, health, and social connectedness narrowed or closed by 2020, driven by increases in wellbeing among sole parents*

Percent reporting being a victim of crime in the past year by family type

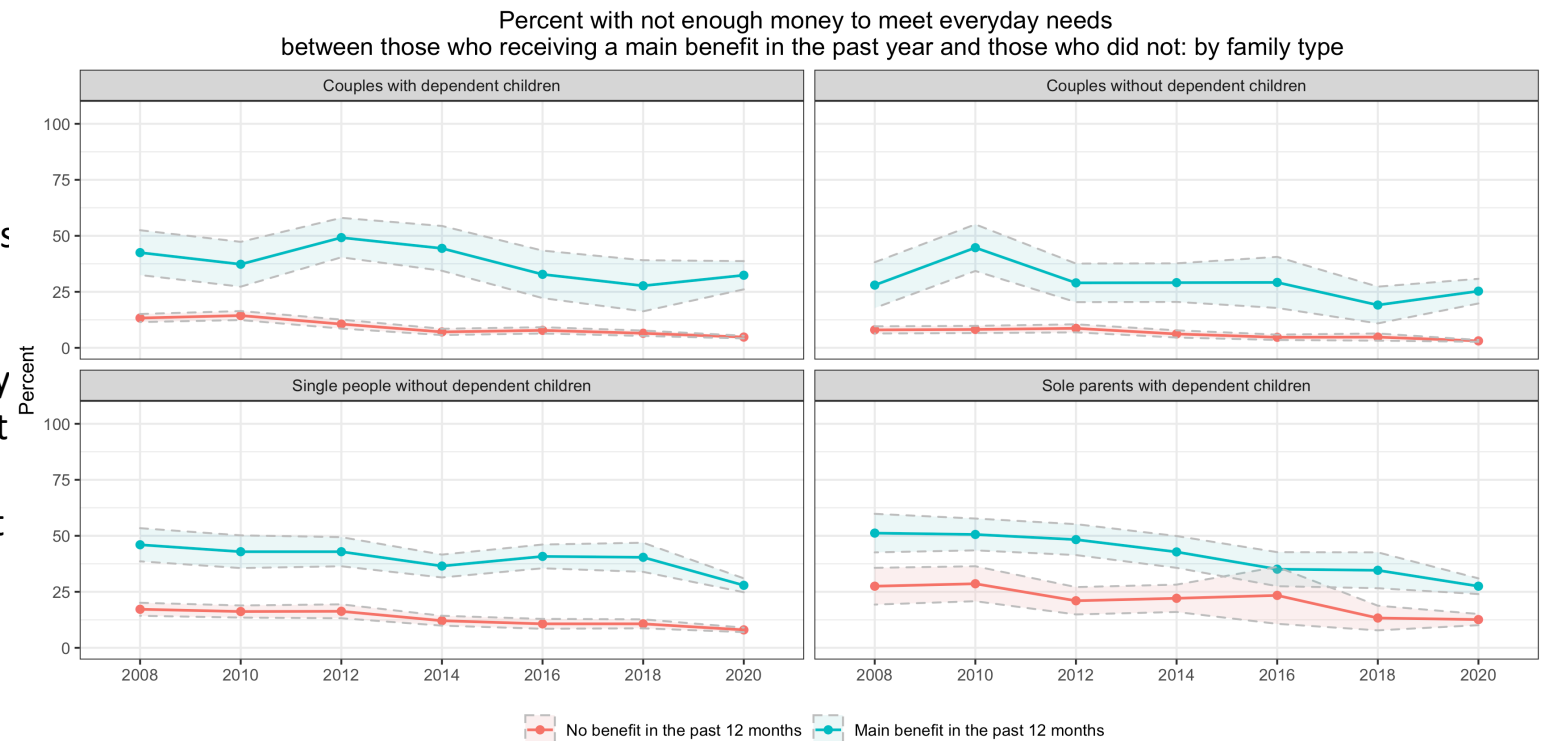


- There were few differences between sole parents and other family types across socioemotional, health, and social connectedness wellbeing indicators—either at any point across the study period (e.g., self-actualisation, connectedness to friends and whānau) or by 2020 (e.g., life satisfaction, family wellbeing, self-rated health, trust in institutions, victimisation).
- These findings were despite persistently worse economic wellbeing among sole parents—economic factors that are often associated with poorer social wellbeing.

# Key findings: Benefit receipt and family types

*Examining the intersection of benefit receipt and family type highlighted that, among those receiving a main benefit, families with children experienced the greatest economic and housing conditions improvement*

- When there were wellbeing gaps that narrowed from 2008 through 2020 between those who had received a main benefit and those who had not, this narrowing was more pronounced among those family types with less resources: sole parents, specifically, and parents, more generally.
- This narrowing occurred among economic (i.e., income adequacy, employment) and housing conditions (i.e., dampness, coldness)—key wellbeing indicators more likely (than other wellbeing indicators) to be influenced by changes to the welfare system (e.g., increased benefit rates, introduction of accommodation supplement and winter energy payment, Healthy Homes legislation that may have outsized impact on renters).
- Given that changes to the welfare system impact low-income families with children, more so than other working-age groups, it is intuitive that the narrowing of the wellbeing gap between those who received a benefit compared to those who had not would be more heavily concentrated among families with children.

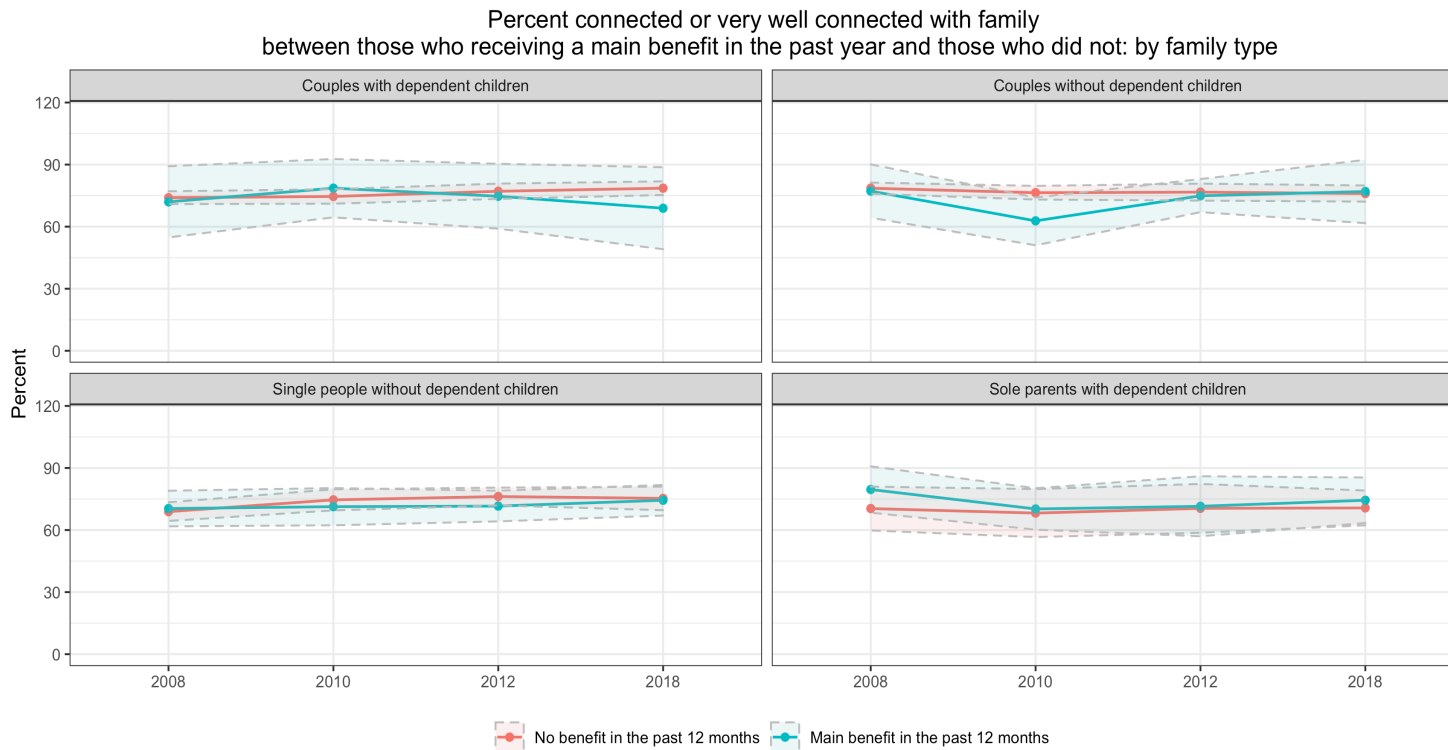


Data source: StatsNZ IDI

# Key findings: Benefit receipt and family types

## *There were few differences in socioemotional wellbeing and connectedness across the family types by main benefit receipt*

- There were few differences in socioemotional wellbeing and connectedness across the family types in terms of the disparities between those who received a main benefit and those who did not. That is, more often than not, there were no differences between those who received a main benefit and those who did not, and when there was, those patterns of disparities were similar across family types.



- This finding points to the salience of benefit receipt as a key sub-group—perhaps more so than family type—as a contributing factor or key sub-group stratifier when examining socioemotional wellbeing.
- This finding also points to sources of resilience in the lives of families who are being supported by the social safety net, and forms of support for parents who may be taking on more caregiving responsibilities, such as sole parents.

# Future considerations

*Wellbeing tracking initiatives should consider including those who receive government benefits as a subgroup for analysis, and family type as a policy-relevant sub-group to examine*

- The findings highlighted another policy-relevant group—those receiving income support benefits—that are experiencing inequities across some key wellbeing indicators that have been identified by multiple government wellbeing frameworks as being important to measure. Wellbeing tracking initiatives, where able and alongside subgroup analyses by ethnicity, age, gender, and disability status, among others, should consider also allowing for the examination of wellbeing of those receiving income support from the government.
- Moreover, people receiving a main benefit are a nontrivial proportion (10-11%) of Aotearoa New Zealand’s working-age population, making it an important subgroup if the goal of policy is to increase wellbeing in the population, generally, along with reducing inequities in wellbeing, specifically.
- Persistent disparities across economic and housing indicators point to the salience of family type in shaping resource access (e.g., one income in single person/sole parent family types vs. potentially two incomes among couples), but also describing the economic circumstances within families. This is particularly important given that features of the social safety net in New Zealand often use family types, such as relationship status and responsibility for dependent children, as eligibility criteria. As such, it means that reporting on family typologies that more closely align with policy eligibility can yield additional insights that directly tap into understanding the wellbeing experiences of groups most likely affected by changes in the policy landscape.

# Future considerations

*An intersectional lens on the wellbeing experiences of those who are supported by government benefits and across family types is important for further understanding drivers of wellbeing inequities and which sub-groups may be more or less impacted by policy changes*

- The findings highlighted the importance of an intersectional lens, providing insights into which groups may be more or less affected by certain policy changes. In this particular project, this was the intersection of benefit receipt status and family type. There is reason to believe that other sub-groups, such as those with disabilities, renters, or living in specific regions, would also be important sub-groups for understanding how key changes in policy that directly affect those groups is shaped by their interaction with the welfare system.
- These findings also provided insights into sub-groups that may be impacted by broader economic forces but who *are not* receiving government support, pointing to potential inequities that could persist into the future. For example, the findings showed that the COVID-19 pandemic had an outsized impact on sole parents' employment, with the effect larger for sole parents who did not receive a main benefit in the past year, compared to sole parents who had received a main benefit.
- Timely reporting of these wellbeing dimensions, with a focus on sub-groups most impacted, is important for informing policy responses.
- Cell size issues prevented a closer examination of these wellbeing trends among those who received a main benefit and those who did not within ethnic groups, for example. Understanding whether these trends persist or are different across key subgroups can shed light on what may be driving persistent inequities and our understanding of the disparate impact of policy changes across our diverse population.
- A re-examination of the data using more rigorous statistical techniques that account for sociodemographic differences across sub-groups—and changes in sociodemographic composition of specific groups over time—should be conducted to examine whether wellbeing differences persist net of these factors.



# Future considerations

*A more holistic and multidimensional understanding of wellbeing is important for identifying aspects of people's lives that are more or less impacted, and also point to sources of resilience and support that may be particularly important for certain groups of people*

- The gaps—or not—in wellbeing across the range of dimensions examined differed across sub-groups and across time. Examining just one indicator in isolation of others, or even only one indicator within a wellbeing domain (e.g., just housing dampness, instead of dampness and coldness), could lead to different conclusions about the relative effectiveness of policies or the impact of broader contextual factors (e.g., pandemics, recessions, natural disasters). A range of indicators is important for understanding the collective wellbeing effect, and potential sources of resilience in people's lives that may be shaping the impact of larger events or certain contexts on their wellbeing.
- Indeed, examining a range of wellbeing indicators highlighted points of resilience for certain families, in spite of poor economic outcomes, and highlights the need for a multifaceted portrait of wellbeing.
- Knowing that different dimensions of wellbeing—and the difference in the inequities by key sub-groups across those wellbeing dimensions—points to the potential importance of other wellbeing indicators that were not measured or able to be measured consistently across time, such as a mental health. Future data collection and analyses should ensure, where possible, that a wide range of indicators that tap into multiple core wellbeing constructs are collected and analysed for a more complete picture of wellbeing across our diverse population.