

Making Aotearoa a better place to call home



Reflecting on how far
Growing Up in New Zealand
has come – and how
important it is to keep going



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Growing Up
in New Zealand

Contents

1. Executive summary	5
2. Introduction	9
2.1 What makes <i>Growing Up</i> special	13
3. Study overview	19
3.1 Ethnic diversity	20
3.2 Socio-economic diversity	21
3.3 How the data is collected	22
3.4 The interwoven forces in children’s lives	24
3.5 A rich track record of publications	27
4. Key impacts	31
4.1 A study designed with impact in mind	32
4.2 How <i>Growing Up</i> ’s data gets shared	33
4.3 What <i>Growing Up</i> ’s data tells us over time	34
4.4 Policy impacts	36
4.5 Community impacts	38
5. Growing Up’s future	45





1. Executive summary

At the heart of the *Growing Up in New Zealand* study is a simple concept: narratives that you can rely on. *Growing Up* is a longitudinal study, meaning that it has been interviewing the same group of children and their families for over 15 years. This has allowed the *Growing Up* team to follow the participants as they age, creating a continuous narrative of their early years that goes well beyond the one-off slices of life that most surveys provide. And because those narratives are generated from a scientifically rigorous survey, they have a weight and reliability lacking in the ‘human interest’ stories presented in media reports and elsewhere.

Why is *Growing Up* important?

“ Because we get to learn how others live and what they go through, so that the government can tend to their needs or make some changes based off the data given.

(Cohort child, 15 years old)

Since 2009, *Growing Up* has followed the lives of more than 6,000 young New Zealanders and their families. As the participating caregivers were recruited while their children were in utero, the study’s connections with these young people’s lives date back to before their birth. Since then, *Growing Up* researchers have returned regularly to these families, asking them to share an exceptionally detailed account of their lives that covers not just their health and wellbeing but also their children’s cognitive development, the functioning of their whānau, and the wider context of their neighbourhood. This research has already generated over one million data points.

In addition to this wealth of detail, *Growing Up*’s children are the most representative group of young New Zealanders ever selected for a longitudinal study: their socio-economic and ethnic make-up are the Aotearoa population in miniature. These features make *Growing Up* an unrivalled treasure trove of data about how our young people live, whether or not they are thriving – and what can be done to improve their

prospects. *Growing Up* has already yielded striking insights about the challenges facing our children: the fact that, for instance, half of them experienced house moves – many of them forced – between the ages of 8 and 12, with clear consequences for their health. *Growing Up*’s findings have also directly influenced policies: on the introduction of folic acid into bread-making flour, for instance, and the extension of paid parental leave. The huge challenges its cohort has faced – from the global financial crisis to the Auckland Anniversary floods – and its growing wealth of data give it the potential to inform policy-making even more deeply in future.

Growing Up’s participants are deeply committed to the study. They signed up because they wanted to be part of something that would make a difference to families just like theirs. Participating caregivers talk about how invested they are in the study’s future – not just because of the many hours they have spent being interviewed, but also because they have shared intimate details about their living situations, their parenting, and even their child’s DNA. They have given hugely of themselves, and hold high hopes for the study’s impact on government policy and the country’s future.

Both the survey and its participants are reaching a key stage of progression. Our young New Zealanders are choosing their level of involvement in the project as they step into adolescence. The further a longitudinal study extends, the richer and more powerful its data. With continued support, *Growing Up* can provide a full narrative of the first quarter-century of New Zealanders’ lives, and make its ever-deeper insights available to decision-makers seeking to make Aotearoa a better place to call home.





2. Introduction

Growing Up's mission is to help improve the wellbeing of children and their families in Aotearoa New Zealand. It does this by providing a high-quality evidence base from which policy-makers can develop pro-wellbeing policies and public services. The survey is also strongly focussed on achieving equity: it aims to identify the greatest challenges to Aotearoa's young people and inform policies that can address hardship and disadvantage.

Long-term, this work contributes to a more hospitable world for young people, allowing them to flourish and achieve their potential, while benefiting Aotearoa as a whole through better educational outcomes, improved child wellbeing, and reduced demands on health and other taxpayer-funded public services.

Growing Up has also generated a rich and complex resource for researchers and other data users to explore, helping them understand which policies and situations will support a good life for young people in contemporary Aotearoa.

The history of *Growing Up* dates back more than two decades, to a 2004 decision by the then Labour government to commission a contemporary study of children and their families. New Zealand – then as now – featured near the bottom of OECD league tables for children’s outcomes: it performed poorly on measures such as infant mortality rates, immunisation coverage, accidents and injuries in under 5-year-olds, rates of child maltreatment, and hospital admissions for diseases such as rheumatic fever. New Zealand also had high levels of children in poverty and material hardship, as well as significant inequities in health and developmental outcomes, especially for Māori and Pacific children.

Previous longitudinal surveys – notably, the famed Dunedin study – had laid bare the long-term damage

that early poverty did to children’s later health outcomes. But policy-makers recognised that the new generation of New Zealanders was more diverse than ever in its ethnic identities, family structures and local environments. To trace the developmental pathways for these diverse children, and to address ethnic inequities, a new longitudinal study was deemed necessary. And so one was commissioned by a group of government agencies led by the Ministry of Social Development. In 2008, the contract to run a longitudinal study called *Growing Up in New Zealand* was awarded to researchers at the University of Auckland. A year later, some 6,800 pregnant women and their partners – drawn from the Auckland, Counties Manukau, and Waikato district health board areas – were recruited to take part.

“ We felt proud and privileged to be part of this ground-breaking study, which we felt was following in the footsteps of the renowned Dunedin study and offering New Zealand, and the world, leading science, research and information related to children and families. We firmly believe in the power that science, research, evidence and the information of ordinary New Zealanders has to improve the lives of children and the systems that support families in Aotearoa New Zealand.

(Participating caregiver)



As a participant in the study, what do you feel you're contributing?

“

Providing insight into real lived experience; giving back to the community and helping research increase awareness and knowledge.

(Participating caregiver)



2.1 What makes Growing Up special

The size of the participating cohort, and the commitment to follow these families through their child's life course, makes *Growing Up* the largest longitudinal study ever conducted in New Zealand. This allows it to examine, in exceptional detail, the factors that influence a child's development. Whereas a conventional, point-in-time survey gives a snapshot of a child's life at one moment, with little ability to explain what has influenced their strengths and limitations, a longitudinal survey can pinpoint the forces that have shaped their life course. Nutrition in the first years of a child's life, for instance, can be linked to health status in adolescence.

Growing Up also has a unique feature: its first face-to-face interviews were conducted with parents-to-be, while the mothers were still pregnant. These interviews, known as the antenatal data collection, have contributed immensely to *Growing Up*'s data foundation, allowing researchers to examine the long-term impacts of a child's pre-birth conditions. Interviews with the fathers, or the mother's partner, have added to the richness of the survey's data throughout its existence.

The *Growing Up* cohort, meanwhile, faithfully reflects the ethnic diversity and social-economic make-up of children born in New Zealand (see next section for more details). It is also a purposefully accessible and culturally responsive study: its questionnaires are, for instance, translated into te reo Māori and other languages spoken by participating families.

Growing Up gets rich and varied data from its participating whānau. This data is collected across six interrelated domains: health and wellbeing, psychosocial and cognitive development, education, family/whānau, culture and identity, and social context and neighbourhood environment. This data collection builds up a detailed picture of children’s lives, and allows connections to be made across domains. Researchers can ask, for instance, how much children’s housing affects their health, or how strongly their social context determines their educational results.

When *Growing Up*’s information is linked to official data

– hospitalisation records from the Ministry of Health, for instance, or achievement records from the Ministry of Education – the scope of questions it can answer extends still further. The DNA samples collected from the survey’s children also help show how their biological profile and local environment interact over time, shaping their outcomes in complex ways.

The desire to inform policy change, finally, is woven into the study’s design. *Growing Up* has been carried out in a long-term partnership with policy-makers: at every step of the way, the study team has consulted with politicians and public servants to understand what they need from the data and how it can be useful for policy development. (See below for instances of the study’s real-world impact.)

Growing Up is, in short, the largest longitudinal study of child development in Aotearoa, the most diverse such study ever conducted, and the one most closely focussed on influencing policy.

How would you describe *Growing Up*?

“ A journey that is meaningful and needed for our next generation. Politicians should keep the study for our betterment as a nation and for the next generation. It creates awareness as to what could possibly be needed to benefit New Zealand. (Participating caregiver)





How some of the *Growing Up* children feel about being part of the study.
(Cohort children, 8 years old)

“
Having my DNA samples taken, that was cool.

“
I feel special and important, like I am being helpful.

“
I receive birthday cards every year. They get to study me until I'm 21 years old. I'm very special to be part of it.



3. Study Overview

Growing Up's children are a unique microcosm of our wider society. The details they have shared of their lives hold rich insights, and are brought to multiple audiences through reports covering a broad swathe of policy areas.

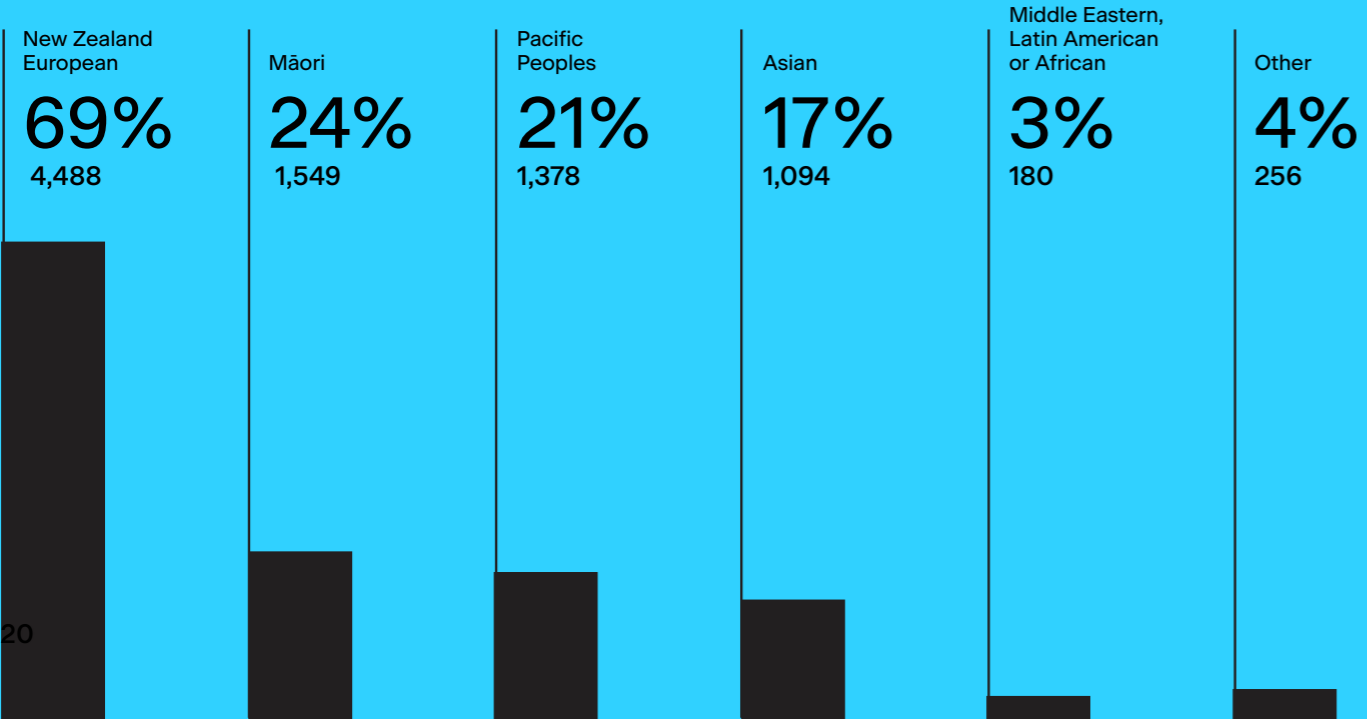
Our cohort

Designed to reflect the ethnic and socio-economic make up of twenty-first century New Zealand, *Growing Up* had an initial cohort of:

6,846 babies

3.1 Ethnic diversity

This diversity really matters: *Growing Up* is the only longitudinal study with enough Māori, Pacific and Asian children to allow rigorous analysis of the specific challenges for those populations, the factors that build strength and resilience into those communities, and the opportunities for early and targeted interventions.



3.2 Socio-economic diversity

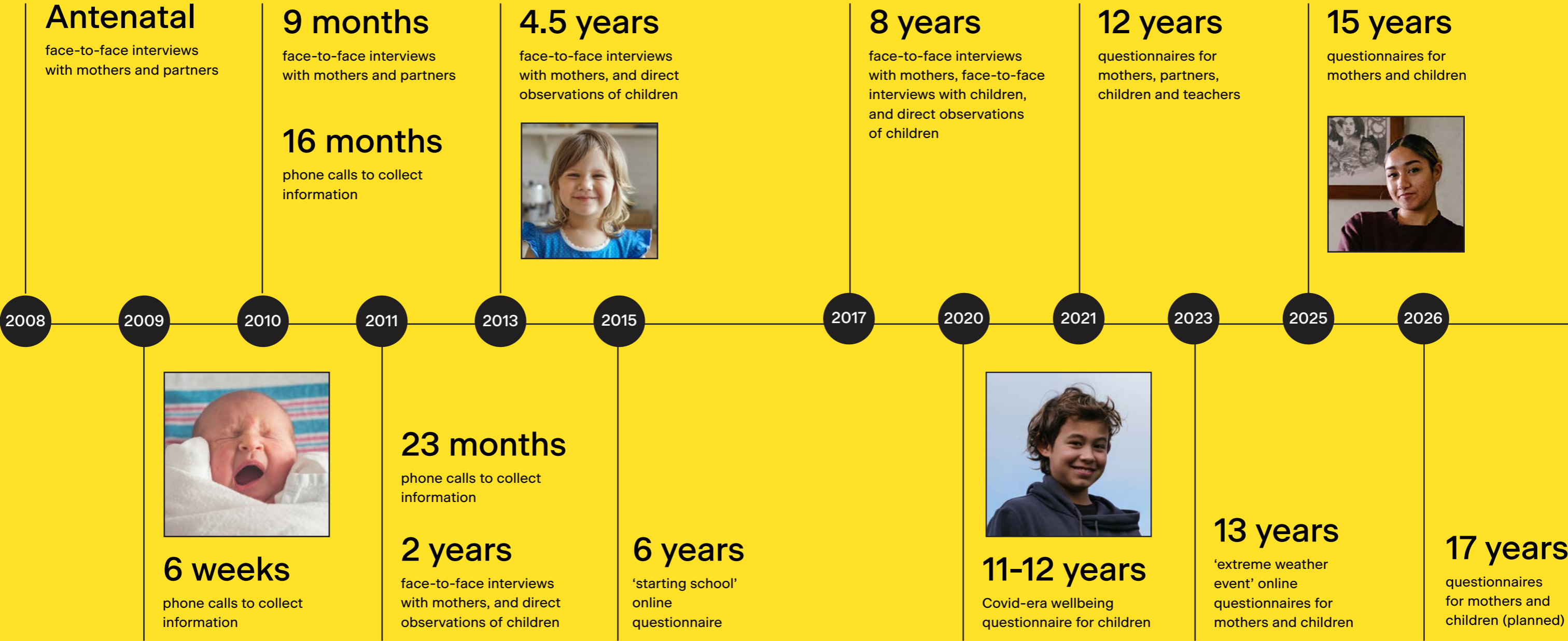
Growing Up is also representative of the wider country when it comes to the social and economic background of its families. The following table shows the proportion of the *Growing Up* children born into each quintile (one-fifth of the adult population), according to its level of deprivation, compared with the proportion of children in the whole population born into each of those quintiles.

	Quintile 1 (least deprived)	Quintile 2	Quintile 3	Quintile 4	Quintile 5 (most deprived)
<i>Growing Up</i> Children (%)	16.4	17.4	17.5	21.2	27.5
Whole Population (%)	14.3	14.8	17.8	23.4	29.5
Social-economic proportions					



3.3 How the data is collected

Beginning pre-birth, the researchers have frequently returned to the participating whānau, finding out their progress at the following life stages for their children:



The study has so far retained a high proportion of its participants. In 2021, twelve years in, 6,450 young people – that is, around 94% of the initial cohort – were still in contact with the survey and were invited to take part in that year’s data collection. Some 4,600 – roughly 71% – participated in at least one component of the questionnaire. That year the survey also received responses from 4,659 mothers and 2,507 partners.

Growing Up has collected a staggering 100 million-plus data points during its first 15 years. The average family – mother, partner and child – has:

- participated in three hours of phone interviews;
- completed eight hours’ worth of online questionnaires; and
- spent over 12 hours in face-to-face interviews with researchers.

3.4 The interwoven forces in children’s lives

Fundamental to the *Growing Up* approach is a life-course view that recognises the dynamic interactions between children and their surroundings – both their immediate family environments and the wider society in which they live. One of the study’s particular strengths is its ability to track these interactions as they unfold and deepen over time. The study recognises that

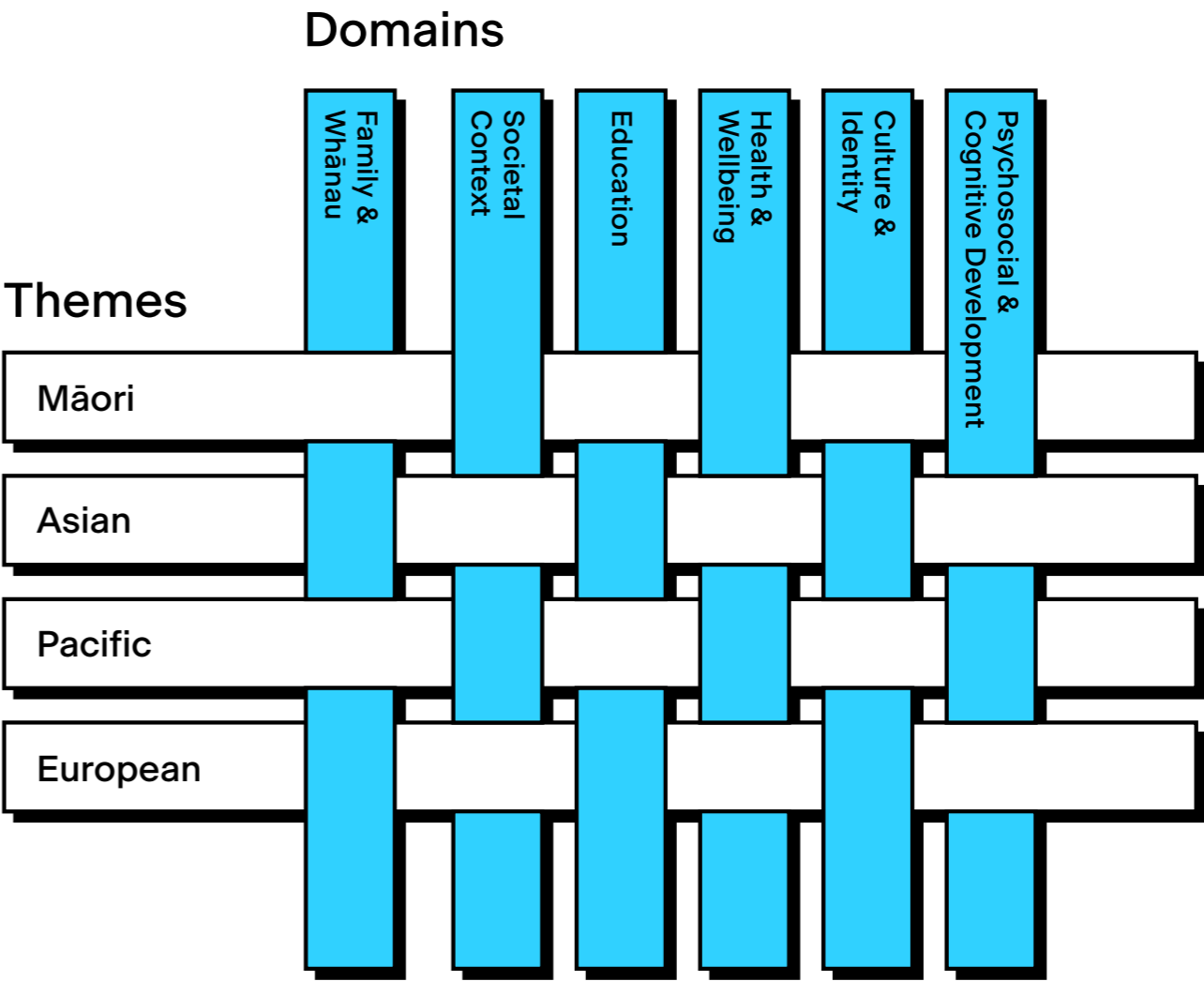
children’s development, beginning well before they are born, is strongly influenced by intergenerational factors. The outcome of each child’s life is also the result of a complex interplay between their surroundings (environmental factors), their biological inheritance (genetic), and their environment’s influence on their genetic make-up (epigenetic)

The study is anchored in four key research questions:

- 1. How do a range of factors – political, social, cultural, intergenerational, familial and individual – combine to determine children’s development?
- 2. How are New Zealand children faring, across multiple domains and at different points in their life course?
- 3. How are these trajectories and outcomes associated with ethnicity?
- 4. What factors confer resilience on, and optimise development for, New Zealand children?

There are, as below, six domains in the *Growing Up* survey: health and wellbeing, psychosocial and cognitive development, education, family/whānau, culture and identity, and social context and neighbourhood environment. These domains have been chosen because they represent the key sets of influences on children’s development. In every round of the survey, the participants are asked for detailed information in each domain.

In the illustration below, the six domains are woven into a lattice with lines representing Aotearoa’s four largest ethnic groups. This image is modelled on the weaving of a kete, a traditional basket seen in te ao Māori as containing all the elements necessary for life. The interweaving of the lines reflects the different ways in which elements of the six domains are experienced by the different ethnicities.



3.5 A rich track record of publications

The results of *Growing Up*'s data collection can be seen in its extensive publication record. Below are just a sample of the reports and policy briefs the survey team have produced, highlighting the breadth and depth of their insights.

2010

Before We are Born
The hopes, dreams and realities faced by expectant parents, the increasing diversity of our families, and how they different from those involved in previous longitudinal studies

2012

Now We are Born
The beginnings of children's journeys, in the context of their families and wider environments, as developmental pathways are being established

2014

Now We are Two: Describing our First 1000 Days
Insights into the physical health, emotional and behavioural wellbeing, and cognitive development of the study's two-year-olds

Vulnerability Report 1: Exploring the Definition of Vulnerability for Children in their First 1000 Days
How often children experience the family and environmental risk factors shown to increase the chances of poor developmental outcomes

Residential Mobility Report: Moving House in the First 1000 Days
How often and how far New Zealand children are moving in the early years of their lives

2015

Keeping Our Children Injury-free: Household Safety Evidence from *Growing Up in New Zealand*
Exposing the lack of basic safety measures in and around many houses, including smoke alarms and fenced-off outdoor areas for children to play safely

Measuring the Economic Environment: What Resources are Available to Children in their first 1000 Days?
Examining hardship for very young children and their families, including antenatal poverty and post-birth falls in income

Employment and Parental Leave Around the Time of Birth: Evidence from *Growing Up in New Zealand*
Most parents take at least some leave when their child is born, but leave is less common for those from the lowest socio-economic groups



2016

Who are Today’s Dads?

Examining data on the study’s fathers, including the high levels of work they carry out but also the issues some experience with long hours and multiple jobs

2017

Now We are Four

A picture of pre-school life for young New Zealanders, including high levels of ECE attendance and growing numbers of single-parent families

2018

Transition to School

The nature and impact of the transition to formal schooling, and how to make this a positive experience for all children

2019

Intentions and Decisions About Early Childhood Education (published in collaboration with the Ministry of Education)

Parents are planning leave, care and ECE choices well before their child’s birth – but their ultimate choices do not always reflect those intentions

2020

Now We Are Eight: Life in Middle Childhood

An insight into children’s emerging sense of culture and identity, directly featuring the voices of the survey’s children

2021

Life in Lockdown: Health and Wellbeing and Life in Lockdown: Education

Two reports detailing the experiences of New Zealand children during Covid restrictions

2023

Now We Are Twelve snapshots

Ten reports looking at children’s experiences of ethnic and gender identity, material hardship, food insecurity, housing and homelessness, school engagement, and the Covid pandemic

2024

Extreme Weather Survey reports

How the storms and cyclone that hit Aotearoa New Zealand in early 2023 affected the wellbeing of young people and their families

2026

Now We Are Fifteen snapshots

Two reports exploring young people’s experiences of health and education at age 15



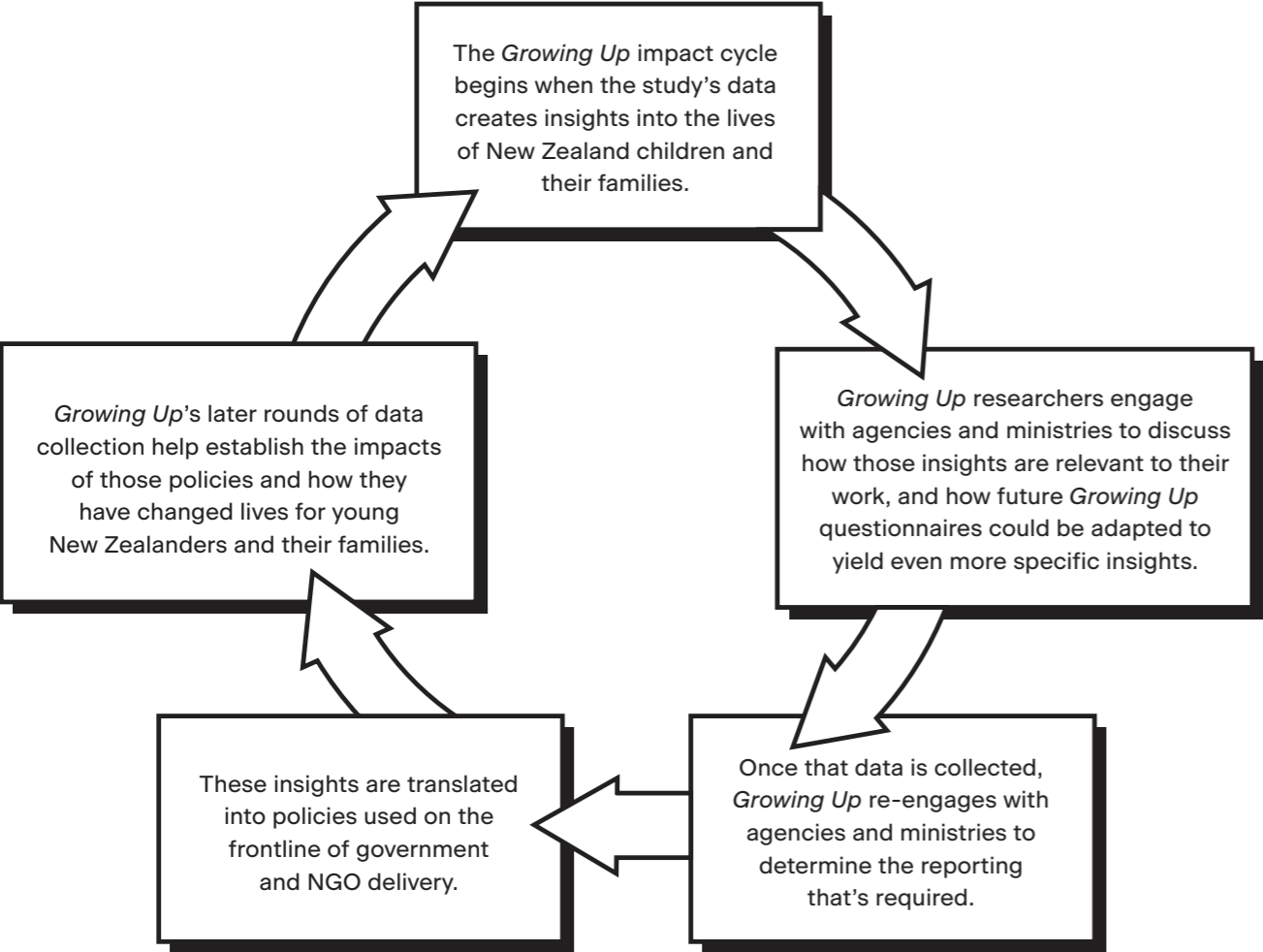
4. Key Impacts

Growing Up's data has already yielded precious insights about some of the greatest challenges our young people face, and influenced significant public policy interventions.

4.1 A study designed with impact in mind

From its inception, *Growing Up* has been constructed to be as useful as possible to decision-makers. It has played a central role supplying data for policy-makers, funders, councils, organisations and researchers. Its datasets have been widely used and valued by people working in policy development and service delivery, whether in government departments, NGOs or philanthropic foundations. Some of this influence is exerted through the *Growing Up* Policy Forum,

which is attended by representatives from multiple government agencies, including the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, the Treasury, Te Puni Kōkiri, Oranga Tamariki, Statistics New Zealand, and the ministries of housing, social development, health, culture and heritage, justice, disabled people, and education.



4.2 How Growing Up's data gets shared

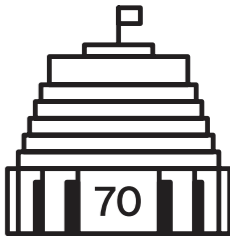
Publications

Over 270 reports, briefs and articles have been published using *Growing Up* data.



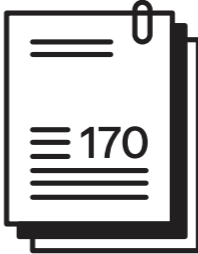
Policy briefs and reports

Over 70 such publications have set out key insights from the *Growing Up* surveys.



Journal articles

More than 170 academic publications have drawn on the data, spreading its findings across New Zealand and the world and influencing the wider research agenda.



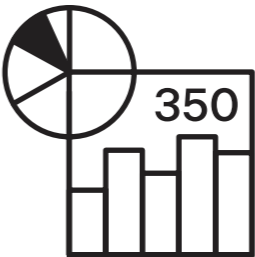
Collaborations

126 collaborations have been established with internal and external partners – that is, researchers outside the immediate *Growing Up* team. This creates additional opportunities to utilise the datasets, extending their influence. This includes collaborations with international research partners across five continents.



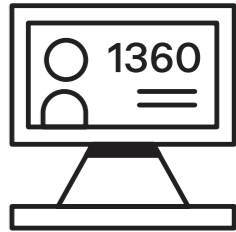
Data access applications

There have been nearly 350 applications to use and access *Growing Up* data.



Webinars

Over 1,360 registrations were received for *Growing Up* webinars run in June and July 2023 alone.



4.3 What Growing Up’s data tells us over time

The great advantage of a longitudinal study is its ability to explain what is happening to children throughout their life course. Following them through time, *Growing Up* is able to look at the connections between events in their first few years – or even in utero – and outcomes later in childhood and adolescence. This cohort has already lived through huge change and turbulence, occasioned by events including the global financial crisis, Covid-19, rapid technological advancements, and severe weather incidents such as Cyclone Gabrielle and the Auckland Anniversary floods. *Growing Up*’s insights, accordingly, are vast. Below are just two key areas in which the study has significantly advanced our knowledge of the situation facing young people in New Zealand.



Residential mobility



Some of *Growing Up*’s most striking insights have come through examining the impact of residential mobility – how often families moved, and whether this was voluntary or involuntary – on the outcomes for young people.

In the study, nearly half of all young people had moved home at least once between the ages of 8 and 12. Residential mobility was worse for children with specific housing tenures, ethnicities and socioeconomic positions. One fifth of moves were involuntary.

Young people who lived in the most deprived neighbourhoods and experienced material hardship were more likely to experience high residential mobility. Around 10% of the young people moving most often were also experiencing severe material hardship, compared to less than 1% of those moving least often.

The young people who moved house most often had higher unmet needs for healthcare, indicating that the health system needs to find better ways to stay connected with families as they move around the country.

It is also likely that high residential mobility changes young people’s engagement with and attendance at school, and diminishes the rich social relationships that come from a stable living environment. Frequent moves makes it harder to establish and maintain connections to whānau, friends and peers, all of which are crucial for children’s wellbeing.

These findings offer several important implications for policy. They indicate, for instance, that stable housing has benefits for children’s access to healthcare and, to a lesser extent, child health. Policies should ensure that all children have access to stable housing, whether that be through enhanced home ownership, greater provision of social housing or improved security of residential tenure.

Material hardship



Growing Up has provided the first contemporary longitudinal assessment of the timing, duration, and patterns of material hardship for New Zealand’s young people. Families are in material hardship when they have to go without at least six basic necessities, such as being able to heat their home, buy decent clothes and shoes for their children, and afford doctor’s bills.

One in 10 of the *Growing Up* cohort were, at age 12, living in households that reported experiencing material hardship.

Those living in material hardship at age 12 were more likely to be from sole-parent homes, lower-income households, and Māori and/or Pacific families.

Three-quarters of children who experienced material hardship during childhood were living in households facing hardship in their early childhood years.

This last point, in particular, underscores the need for policies that prioritise the support of families with very young children and ensure they live in secure and stable environments that meet their basic needs. In other words, material hardship in early childhood is a critical area for policy intervention.

4.4 Policy impacts

One of the greatest sources of pride for the *Growing Up* team is the direct impact their research has had on changing policy and improving the lives of our youngest citizens. The team can count over 170 distinct contributions to policy-making. On multiple occasions, it has provided fast-tracked information to policy-makers, responding within 10 days to aid urgent decision-making, on issues including maternal alcohol consumption during pregnancy (Ministry of Health, March 2014), parental leave, breastfeeding and immunisation (Ministry of Health, July 2017), housing issues (Ministry of Housing and Urban Development,

2021), and participation in arts, culture and recreation by young people (Ministry of Culture and Heritage, 2023). *Growing Up*'s data has also helped shape policies such as the Healthy Eating Guidelines for New Zealand Infants and Toddlers (published September 2021) and the development of home safety guidelines (2022).

Among this wealth of policy-making interventions, a handful of initiatives directly attributable to the survey's findings are highlighted below.



Paid parental leave



Central findings from *Growing Up*'s research into this topic can be found in the report *The Drivers of Mothers' Parental Leave Decisions* and the policy brief *Employment and Parental Leave Around the Time of Birth: Evidence from Growing Up in New Zealand*.

- One of the key questions asked of parents, during the mother's pregnancy, was how much leave they would originally have liked to take, and how much they now intended to. This was then compared to how much leave they actually took.
- The results showed a clear desire among parents to take more leave than they were in fact able to.
- This research contributed towards an increase in leave allocations. Prior to the research, paid parental leave was available for just 14 weeks, but was then increased to 26 weeks.

Folic acid



Growing Up's research revealed very large numbers of pregnant women – especially those from lower socio-economic groups – were taking insufficient amounts of folic acid before and during pregnancy.

- These findings provided key evidence in the debates about folic acid supplementation and the influence of inequities.
- The findings also contributed to the Ministry of Health's new policy, announced in 2023, that bread-making flour would be fortified with folic acid, with the aim of reducing rates of neural tube defects in babies.

Smoke alarms



- Research by the *Growing Up* team revealed that more than one in four rentals lacked working smoke alarms.
- This finding directly influenced the New Zealand government's 2016 decision to mandate alarm installation.

4.5 Community impacts

As well as influencing local and central government policy-making, it has been important to the *Growing Up* team that their research be useful to community groups and initiatives doing vital work with young people and their families.



The *Growing Up in New Zealand* data has been critical in shining a light on the disproportionate burden of stress on south Auckland families – and the urgent need to do more to ensure all children in this country get a good start in life.

(Aimee Hadrup, Manager - Tamariki Wellbeing at The Southern Initiative)



Supporting the Southern Initiative’s work

Growing Up data has provided crucial insights to support work by the Southern Initiative (TSI), an Auckland Council innovation team focussed on disrupting social and economic inequity for South Auckland families.

Growing Up offers insights into the prevalence of issues like housing instability, financial hardship and health disparities, all of which are critical for TSI’s focus on improving early childhood outcomes.

Growing Up’s research has identified the common risk factors faced by young families, such as overcrowded housing, financial stress and maternal depression. This information helps TSI target their interventions more effectively by focussing on reducing these risk factors.

The study has provided data specific to South Auckland, which in turn helps TSI demonstrate that South Auckland families are disproportionately affected by the effects of compounding daily stress. The situation in South Auckland had previously been masked by data available only at a city-wide level.

Drawing on a strength-based perspective, *Growing Up*’s data has helped identify things that make a positive difference in the lives of young children, such as reading to kids and support networks for parents.

The insights gleaned from *Growing Up* data help TSI, working alongside whānau and communities, understand what needs to change. It also helps TSI and partners catalyse the policy, practice, investment and mindset shifts that this change requires to make that change happen. *Growing Up* data allows TSI to zoom into populations and places, providing insights that help the government work differently with communities to make change.



2023 Extreme Weather Survey

Some 680 young people and 817 mothers/primary caregivers participated in the Extreme Weather Survey run by *Growing Up* researchers in the aftermath of Cyclone Gabrielle.

This research highlights both *Growing Up's* deep connections with its families, which allowed it to rapidly collect data following this major weather event, and its ability to produce policy-relevant findings.

Growing Up produced tailored reports on the community impacts of Cyclone Gabrielle for Auckland, Northland and the East Coast and Hawkes Bay. While each region faced impacts from the extreme weather events, the specific challenges and recovery processes varied, highlighting the need for tailored emergency preparedness and response strategies.

Growing Up appears to be the only study to date that captured the views of young people themselves about these extreme weather events. Its unique insights include young people's view that schools are a crucial source of support during such events, and should have their role in disaster response strengthened. Young people also stressed the need for greater mental health and wellbeing support after such events.

“

Our son has literally grown up with *Growing Up in New Zealand*, and we have shared so many parts of his life, and our family life, with the study – right down to his DNA. We did this because we felt the study was offering such value to improve the lives of generations to come... This was part of our contribution to a better future for Aotearoa New Zealand. Our son felt important belonging to the study as well. We were always encountering other kids who were ‘*Growing Up in New Zealand*’ kids and we all felt like we were part of something that was important for this country.

(Participating caregiver)

Message from the Chief Children’s Commissioner

Working as the independent advocate for children and young people in Aotearoa New Zealand, I’m deeply committed to grounding my advocacy in sound evidence, data, research and the lived experiences and voices of mokopuna, as well as an understanding of their whānau.

Growing Up in New Zealand is one of my most trusted sources of Aotearoa New Zealand-based information about the realities of childhood, given its longitudinal and holistic nature.

The fact that the study has been following this group of mokopuna since birth for over 15 years provides an incredibly rich picture. The body of research that draws and builds on *Growing Up* is a taonga that continues to develop and enrich the value of the study.

Both Mana Mokopuna – Children and Young People’s Commission, and our predecessor, the Office of the Children’s Commissioner, have relied on *Growing Up* to inform our advocacy, and it’s been a privilege to partner with the Growing Up team over the years. As we look towards the next exciting stages of the study focusing on adolescence and early adulthood, I’m excited to see even more of the direct voices and views of

the mokopuna shining through, and for these young people to be increasingly co-designing the study with the *Growing Up* team.

When the *Growing Up* whānau made the huge decision over 15 years ago to agree to be part of this unique study, they stood on the precipice of change in their lives, as they looked to welcome a new pēpē. With that pēpē now reaching the age of 15, and with such an array of life experiences having accumulated amongst the *Growing Up* rōpū, I hope that all the mokopuna, together with their whānau, know what a huge contribution they have made, and are continuing to make to our understanding of childhood in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The insights from their lives shared through *Growing Up* – which are often intensely personal – are helping to shape policies, practices and laws in our country, as well as independent advocacy for mokopuna wellbeing and rights.

I’m grateful to all the mokopuna and their whānau who are part of *Growing Up*, for your courage, generosity and commitment. Ngā mihi! Your impact is going to be lifelong and intergenerational, for the benefit of Aotearoa New Zealand’s mokopuna of today and tomorrow.

I’ll continue paying close attention to *Growing Up* over the coming years, so I can inform the advocacy I undertake for and with mokopuna with the aspirations, challenges and contemporary and fresh insights shared through this essential study.

Dr Claire Achmad - Chief Children’s Commissioner





5. Growing Up's future

Each additional year of the *Growing Up* study doesn't just add another 12 months' worth of information: it multiplies the value of all the pre-existing data.



As the study's children move through their fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth years, their lives become ever-more complex: adolescence, increased questions about sexual and gender identity, the growing preparations for adult life. All of these changes – and the snapshots of them that can be explored through the *Growing Up* data – are important in themselves. But they can also be connected back to the children's earliest years, or even to their experiences in utero.

Teenagers are the subject of an immense amount of society's attention; their challenges, including growing mental health needs and high numbers of NEETs (young people not in education, employment or training), are the source of much concern. As *Growing Up* begins to survey young people on the cusp of adulthood, its data promises to help us uncover some of the deepest drivers of these problems. Thanks to its unrivalled depth of information about the life courses of these young people, *Growing Up* will increasingly allow policy-makers to look for the early-life factors that may have contributed to adolescents' social problems – or to their emotional and personal resilience.

Growing Up's cohort has already been shaped by the turbulence of events such as the global financial crisis and Covid-19. Entering adulthood, they'll also be navigating a cost-of-living crisis, growing environmental and economic damage from climate change, and increased social division. Trends like automation and AI will further shape their lives; as the population ages, their importance as a future workforce will only grow. They are also perhaps the most diverse cohort this country has ever seen, increasingly at ease with a range of identities and able to repurpose new technologies with creativity and skill. The information gleaned from *Growing Up* will help decision-makers understand these trends in greater depth and respond to them more effectively.

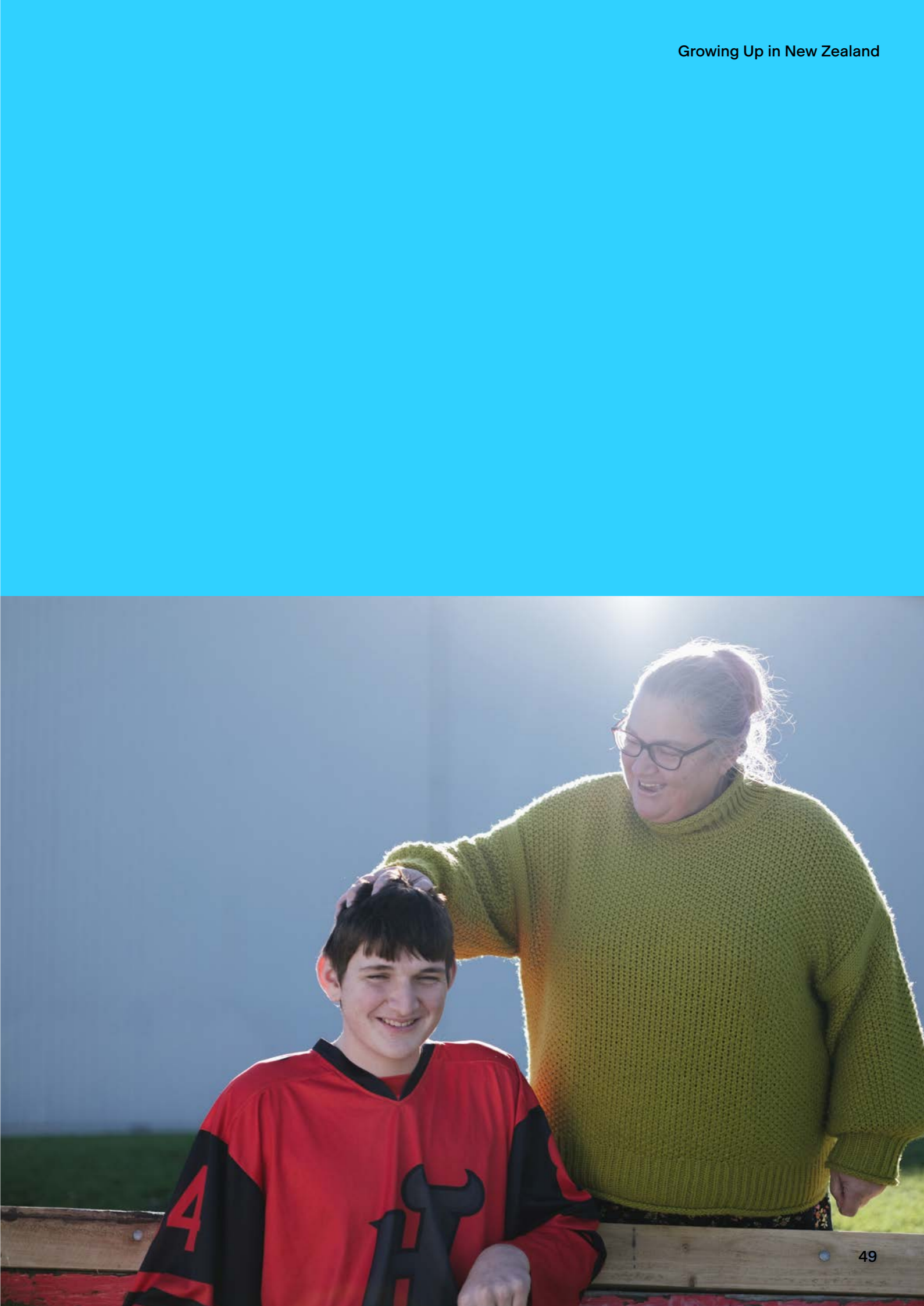
As *Growing Up* continues, it will provide an exceptionally rich source of data about young people's lives, a window into their world that will be of immense use to policy-makers, researchers, NGOs and others hoping to make this country a more hospitable place. And it will, crucially, draw ever more deeply on the views of those young people themselves.

As the young people involved in the study move beyond their teenage years, responsibility starts to shift. It's no longer up to their parents to provide consent for data collection - it becomes their own decision to be involved.

This represents an opportunity for those young people to engage more deeply with the study, on their own terms, and to shape how it develops. The study has already evolved in ways that could hardly have been imagined back in 2009; most notably, its researchers have found ways to keep collecting data during a global pandemic and after extreme weather events. They sought to do so because they knew there would be critical risks to wellbeing at such heightened moments. And they were able to do so because the participants are so well-engaged with the study and believe so deeply that their contributions can make a lasting difference.

Looking ahead, the *Growing Up* team are already working on new apps and other mechanisms to allow participants to engage in ways that feel authentic to them. This is all part of the study's adaptation to an online and digital world – and a chance to reimagine how the team engage with participants, when and how often those contacts occur, and which key wellbeing issues are in focus. *Growing Up* is looking to develop systems that are agile, responsive and able to change as the cohort themselves change.

The transition from adolescence to early adulthood is a crucial moment, during which the study team will be seeking to maintain their links with these young people, and buttress their belief that participating in the study is an important part of their lives. The study's long-held intention has been to follow its participants to at least the age of 21. It is, accordingly, looking to connect intensively with its young people – and their families – in the next year or so. As a study it has already proved it worth. Now, it just needs to secure its future and, with it, a door into an ever-richer world of information about how our young people are faring and how our policies can ensure every one of them truly finds themselves at home in Aotearoa New Zealand.



What some of the *Growing Up* children hope will be the legacy of their participation:

(Cohort children, 8 years old)

“

My mum thinks this is a fantastic opportunity to maybe help future generations.

“

I know that people will use the info to make NZ a better place to live in.

“

I get to make sure that the next generation can live a happy and healthy life.

“

Mum likes that we can help learn heaps about the importance of life’s beginnings.



Acknowledgements

Most importantly, we want to acknowledge the young people and families participating in the *Growing Up in New Zealand* study. We are incredibly grateful to our families for their generosity and honesty, and we are indebted to them for sharing their life stories with us. Thank you to the cohort whānau who have generously allowed us to include their portraits in this report.

We also wish to acknowledge the many wonderful individuals who have contributed to the study’s success over the past 15 years. Our heartfelt thanks go to the wider *Growing Up in New Zealand* team, both past and present, for their unwavering support and dedication.

Finally, we sincerely thank the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) for their funding and support of the *Growing Up in New Zealand* study over the years.

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 **Growing Up**
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