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University
of Auckland

 **Growing Up**
in New Zealand

Now We Are 15 Policy Brief

Discrimination is undermining young people's mental health and educational outcomes

What data from the Growing Up in New Zealand study tells us

Date: September 2026

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The issue

Discrimination experienced by young people is independently and consistently associated with lower school satisfaction, lower ability to navigate academic challenges, poorer mental wellbeing, higher anxiety, and higher depression symptoms.

This is not a peripheral finding – it runs across all three Growing Up in New Zealand (GUINZ) Now We Are 15 snapshots as a cross-cutting driver of poor outcomes for young people.

GUINZ data shows that schools, where young people spend much of their time, are the most common setting in which discrimination occurs, making them a crucial and accessible point of intervention. Yet schools currently lack the resourcing, workforce capability, and accountability mechanisms to address discrimination. GUINZ data provide robust, population-level evidence that this gap is impacting young people in measurable ways.

The data also demonstrate how experiences of discrimination, in conjunction with broader sociodemographic and structural inequities, work to undermine young people's wellbeing. Policy responses should therefore take a both-and approach: ensuring appropriate anti-discrimination measures while also addressing the wider social, economic, and institutional factors that influence young people's experiences and wellbeing.

Key data at a glance

Where discrimination happens

- **34%** of young people reported experiencing discrimination in the past 12 months
- **School** is the most common setting for discrimination for all ethnicities: Asian (91%), European (91%), MELAA (83%), rangatahi Māori (78%), and Pacific young people (55%)
- **Young people with a disability** who reported discrimination were most likely to experience it at school (88.5%)
- **Skin colour and race or ethnicity** were among the most common reasons young people gave for experiencing discrimination

Impacts of discrimination

- Young people who experienced discrimination were **less likely** to report high satisfaction with school (34% vs 44%)
- Young people who experienced discrimination report a **reduced ability** to manage academic setbacks and pressure
- Discrimination is **independently associated** with lower wellbeing, higher anxiety, higher depression, and less positive peer relationships, even after adjusting for sociodemographic, structural, and social factors

The policy context

Several New Zealand legal and policy documents address discrimination directly.

GUINZ data shows that young people continue to experience discrimination including at school settings. This is consistent with the 2023 cross-agency Long-Term Insights Briefing on youth employment, which cites various reports that highlight rangatahi Māori and Pacific young people reports of racism and discrimination across education, welfare, and employment systems.

The New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990

Protects individuals from discrimination

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Ratified by New Zealand in 1989, sets out the right of children to be protected from discrimination

The Education and Training Act 2020

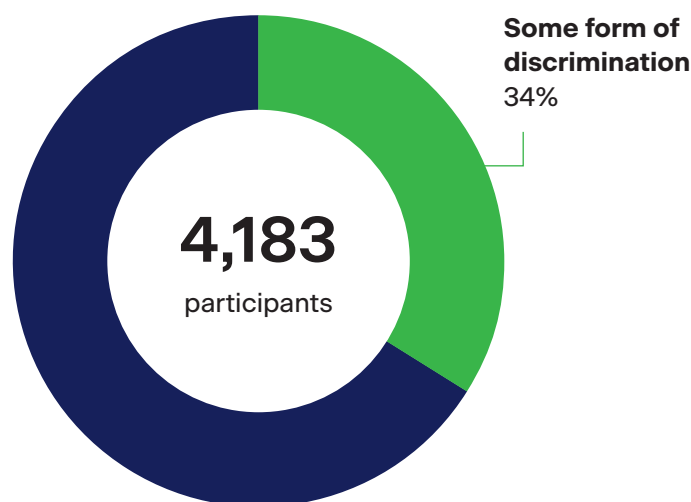
Requires school boards to take all reasonable steps to eliminate “racism, stigma, bullying, and any other forms of discrimination within the school”

The Ministry of Education’s Strategic Intentions 2025–2029

Identifies that the Ministry’s purpose is to shape an education system that delivers equitable and excellent outcomes

What the GUINZ data shows

A total of 4,183 young people participated in the GUINZ 15-year data collection (February to July 2025). Of them, 34% reported experiencing some form of discrimination in the past 12 months.



Discrimination is widespread and concentrated at school

- Among those who reported discrimination, school was the most common setting: **78%** of rangatahi Māori; **91%** of Asian young people; **91%** of European young people; **83%** of MELAA young people; and **55%** of Pacific young people who reported discrimination experienced it at school.
- Young people with a disability who reported discrimination were **more likely** to experience it at school (88.5%), with **over a quarter** (26.9%) reporting their disability or health condition as the reason.
- Across ethnic groups, skin colour and race or ethnicity were consistently among the **most common** reasons young people gave for experiencing discrimination. European young people also frequently cited appearance and gender.

Discrimination is independently associated with worse educational and mental health outcomes

- Young people who reported experiencing any form of discrimination were **significantly less likely** to report higher school satisfaction (34%) compared to peers who reported no discrimination (44%; $p < .001$).
- After taking into account differences in a wide range of sociodemographic, structural, educational, and social factors, experiencing any form of discrimination remained independently associated with **lower mental wellbeing, higher anxiety symptoms, and higher depression symptoms**.
- Young people who experienced discrimination reported **decreased capacity** to manage everyday academic setbacks and pressure, with a mean difference of 0.6 points compared to those without discrimination experience ($p < .001$).

School environment is a lever for mental health, not just educational outcomes

- Young people with higher school satisfaction and higher academic buoyancy – a young person's everyday ability to bounce back from the normal ups and downs of school life – consistently reported **better mental wellbeing** and **fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression** – associations that hold after adjusting for sociodemographic, structural, and social factors.
- This data establishes school experience as a **meaningful** and **modifiable** factor in mental health outcomes.

What this means for policy

Discrimination is not an isolated event; it is one layer of accumulated inequity that interacts with the other barriers young people face.

Policy responses should ensure appropriate anti-discrimination measures, while also addressing the wider social, economic, and institutional factors that influence young people's experiences and wellbeing. The following three areas represent actionable levers available to government.

1

Establish clearer mechanisms for monitoring, accountability and reporting

The Education and Training Act 2020 requires all school boards to take reasonable steps to eliminate discrimination. Clearer mechanisms are needed for how schools report on discrimination incidents, respond to them, and demonstrate improvement over time. Reporting processes must be safe and accessible for young people, recognising that discrimination in schools is not only peer-to-peer and that trusted and independent reporting pathways are essential for any accountability system to be effective.

2

Invest in anti-racism and inclusive practice training

Dedicated resourcing can help schools understand their specific needs and design programmes, interventions, and policies to eliminate discrimination. Particularly for school leaders, counsellors, and pastoral staff, training that builds a capable, culturally-safe workforce is needed. Consider opportunities to ensure that a range of ethnicities and cultural backgrounds are reflected in school workforces.

3

Support a whole-school systems approach

Tackling discrimination effectively means setting clear processes for reporting and responding, committing to inclusive environments, and engaging meaningfully with whānau and communities.



About Growing Up in New Zealand

Growing Up in New Zealand is Aotearoa New Zealand's largest contemporary longitudinal study of child and youth development. The study enrolled more than 6,000 young people before birth and has now followed them and their whānau for nearly 18 years.

The cohort reflects the diversity of Aotearoa New Zealand, providing rich insight into the different experiences, strengths and challenges shaping young people's lives across childhood and adolescence.

A core commitment of Growing Up in New Zealand is to ensure the voices and experiences shared by young people and their families are heard by those making decisions that affect them. By following the same young people over time, the study can connect their current health, wellbeing, education and social outcomes with experiences and circumstances across childhood in ways that point-in-time surveys or administrative data alone cannot.

This long-term investment has created a unique national evidence resource that can inform policy, services and decisions for children, young people and whānau now and into the future.

Growing Up in New Zealand is funded by the Ministry of Social Development and hosted by Waipapa Taumata Rau | University of Auckland.

Source

[Growing Up in New Zealand Now We Are 15 Snapshot reports and supplementary materials](#)



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