

Youth input key to addressing pillars of the mental health crisis

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Credit: Amir Hosseini/Unsplash

Listening to what young people think about youth mental health is core to understanding why it's such a big health challenge and how we can address it, say researchers.

Koi Tū: The Center for Informed Futures, a think tank at Waipapa Taumata Rau, University of Auckland was commissioned by Te Hiringa Mahara—Mental Health and Well-being Commission to explore what [young people](#) in Aotearoa New Zealand have said impacts their well-being.

Research fellow Dr. Jessica Stubbing and researcher Naomi Simon-Kumar with support from Koi Tū director Sir Peter Gluckman, undertook a literature review focusing on what young New Zealanders have said about four specific areas—bleak futures, social media, racism and discrimination and intergenerational connectedness—and how they impact well-being.

The summarized literature, which included 105 publications and reports produced by government and support organizations, charities and researchers, contributed to the Te Hiringa Mahara publication, "[Young people speak out about Well-being: An insights report into the Well-being of Rangatahi Māori and other Young People in Aotearoa](#)," being released today (May 15).

Koi Tū is undertaking extensive consultation with young people and with experts to consider other factors beyond the four covered in the commissioned review.

In a Koi Tū commentary, "[Social Factors Affecting Youth Mental Health and Well-being](#)," produced to support the publication from Te Hiringa Mahara, the researchers explore what the literature review says and what it does not—particularly, concerning trends about how we are preparing (or failing to prepare) our young people to thrive in an increasingly complex world.

Dr. Stubbing says incorporating youth voice into [mental health policy](#) is an urgent priority.

"It's a field in which there are sizeable knowledge gaps. We need to know more about what young people think, particularly diverse groups of young New Zealanders," says Dr. Stubbing.

"Young people are the experts on their world and we know that youth culture moves very quickly, particularly on [social media](#), so we need to be talking to them and hearing their perspectives," she said.

"We need to consider what are we missing when we look at the work that's already been done in New Zealand and ensure we situate youth voice in a wider context. What it doesn't tell us is how we are preparing young people at the early life stage—and this is an area that we're exploring further."

Dr. Stubbing says internationally, organizations such as the World Health Organization and the International Association of Youth Mental Health are also recognizing young people's perspectives on youth mental health are vital for research and policy making.

"Historically, no one—whether that's health researchers, policy makers ministers, and governments—has been great at listening and incorporating youth voice into the bigger context. We need to get better at understanding how all of these things fit together."

A recent Treasury well-being report have said trends from within Aotearoa New Zealand show that our young people are faring poorly when compared to other countries and generations.

Dr. Stubbing says the literature review focused on what young people believe is affecting their well-being at a systemic level as opposed to the personal difficulties they might be facing.

"We have to look at what we call systemic determinants—the social

influences of what's going on in the broader lives of young people in Aotearoa New Zealand that contributes to their well-being."

Rates of mental-health challenges were rising even before COVID-19, which by all accounts made a bad situation even worse.

"Young people report higher levels of stress, anxiety and [social isolation](#) related to the pandemic, which also limited their access to [health services](#) and support in school," says Dr. Stubbing.

Dr. Stubbing says getting a handle on why young Kiwis are struggling calls for understanding the context of life in Aotearoa New Zealand.

"Not all Aotearoa New Zealand's young are affected equally, with rangatahi Māori, Pacific and ethnic-minority young people, and young people who identify as members of the LGBTQIA+ community particularly likely to experience poor mental [health](#), says Dr. Stubbing.

Peter says reversing the decline in young Kiwis' [mental health](#) will require systemic action, a [holistic approach](#) and nuanced understanding of well-being and its determinants, which must include what young people think.

"Any sustainable youth well-being strategy must also at its core prioritize funding high-quality research, including evaluation of interventions and strategies," he says.

He says investing in policy change must be accompanied by investment into measuring indicators of [youth](#) well-being over time, and continuing to prioritize tracking progress such as through the Treasury Well-being report.

"As the results of [policy change](#) or action taken at a central government

level are likely to be revealed over longer periods of time than a single parliamentary term, such sustained action will require significant cross-parliamentary action and collaboration across successive governments."

Doing nothing about the problem places society in jeopardy.

"If we want to see a New Zealand that thrives in the future, we need to be addressing this and prioritizing the voice of our rangatahi," Sir Peter says.

Provided by Koi Tū: the Centre for Informed Futures

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