



Child Poverty & Family Structure

What is the evidence telling us?

Executive Summary

Endorsements

"Lindsay Mitchell has a proud record of researching social issues and confronting skewed conclusions reached by others. This work carries on from other studies she has undertaken and the conclusions seem balanced and worthy of publication. I'd go so far as to say that her main finding – that marriage is the best guarantor that children will be given an adequate start in life – has to be given considerable publicity if, as a society, New Zealanders are serious about tackling the evidence of child poverty in our midst."

DR MICHAEL BASSETT - former Minister of Health and Local Government for the Labour government between 1984 and 1987, and Minister of Internal Affairs, Local Government, Civil Defence and Arts and Culture between 1987 and 1990; renowned political historian, award-winning columnist and former Waitangi Tribunal member.

"Both poverty and family structure are politically charged issues. For practical and political reasons, available data imperfectly represent the underlying situation. Many groups prefer to promote their own policy agendas while suppressing others. This report attempts to challenge the dominant discourse by highlighting the relationship between increased child poverty and the decline of stable traditional two-parent families. It indicates that changing attitudes combined with government policies may be having significant detrimental effects for many children. It will be most useful if it can stimulate greater awareness and debate on these issues."

DR STUART BIRKS - Fellow of the Law and Economics Association of New Zealand (LEANZ). Dr Birks has over 40 years' experience in economic policy and theoretical and quantitative economics methodology. He is a Life Member of the New Zealand Association of Economists and is active in the World Economics Association.

"Once again, Lindsay Mitchell has produced a stunning indictment of society's increasing indifference to marriage. There can't any longer be any serious doubt that the breakdown of the institution of marriage has been a major contributor to economic and social poverty in New Zealand over recent decades. And easy access to no-questions-asked state welfare has in turn been an important contributor to that outcome."

DR DON BRASH - Dr Brash was an MP between 2002 and 2007, and was elected Leader of the National Party in 2003. He also led the ACT Party in the 2011 election. Before entering Parliament, Dr Brash was Governor of the Reserve Bank for almost 14 years. In 2009, he was appointed to chair the New Zealand Government's 2025 Taskforce and remained chairman until the Taskforce was wound up in May 2011.

Executive Summary

Despite families being much smaller, parents being older, mothers being better educated and having much higher employment rates, child poverty has risen significantly since the 1960s.

In 1961, 95 percent of children were born to married couples; by 2015 the proportion had fallen to 53 percent.

For Maori, 72 percent of births were to married parents in 1968; by 2015 the proportion had fallen to just 21 percent.

In 2015, 27 percent of registered births were to cohabiting parents. The risk of parental separation by the time the child is aged five is, however, 4-6 times greater than for married parents.

Cohabiting relationships are becoming less stable over time.

Cohabiting parents are financially poorer than married parents. They form an interim group between married and single parent families.

Single parent families make up 28 percent of all families with dependent children. These families are the poorest in New Zealand.

51% of children in poverty live in single parent families.

Single parents have the lowest home ownership rates and the highest debt ratios.

Children in sole parent families are often exposed to persistent poverty and constrained upward mobility.

Of registered births in 2015, 5% had no recorded father details and a further 15% had fathers living at a different home address to the mother.

Of all babies born in 2015, 17.5% (10,697) were reliant on a main benefit by the end of their birth year, over two thirds on a single parent benefit. Over half had Maori parents/caregivers.

The higher poverty rates for Maori and Pasifika children are reflected in the greater number of sole parent and cohabiting families.

Rapidly changing family structure has contributed significantly to increasing income inequality.

Child poverty is consistently blamed on unemployment, low wages, high housing costs and inadequate social security benefits. Little attention has been given to family structure.

Despite marriage being the best protector against child poverty it has become politically unfashionable – some argue insensitive – to express such a view.

But if there is to be any political will to solve child poverty the issue has to be confronted.

Child poverty has risen significantly since the 1960s.

For Maori, 72 percent of births were to married parents in 1968; by 2015, just 21 percent.

Cohabiting parents are financially poorer than married parents.

Rapidly changing family structure has contributed significantly to increasing income inequality.

Despite marriage being the best protector against child poverty it has become politically unfashionable to express such a view.

About the Author



LINDSAY MITCHELL has been researching and commenting on welfare since 2001. Many of her articles have been published in mainstream media and she has appeared on radio, television and before select committees discussing issues relating to welfare. In 2009 her paper, *Maori and Welfare* was published by the New Zealand Business Roundtable. She mentored beneficiary families during the 2000s and is currently teaching literacy as a prison visitor. She has also kept a blog since 2005 and counts herself as a rarity in blog survival rates. When she isn't writing and researching, Lindsay paints and exhibits, specialising in Maori portraiture.



For additional copies, please contact Family First NZ:



tel: 09 261 2426

fax: 09 261 2520

email: admin@familyfirst.org.nz

web: www.familyfirst.nz

post: PO Box 276-133, Manukau City 2241, New Zealand

Copyright – This report and all information contained herein is © Family First NZ 2016.

About Family First NZ

Family First NZ is a charitable organisation formed in 2006, and registered as a charity with the Charities Commission. 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 produce and publish relevant and stimulating material in newspapers, magazines, and other media relating to issues affecting families
- to be a voice for the family in the media speaking up about issues relating to families that are in the public domain