

# Child Abuse & Family Structure

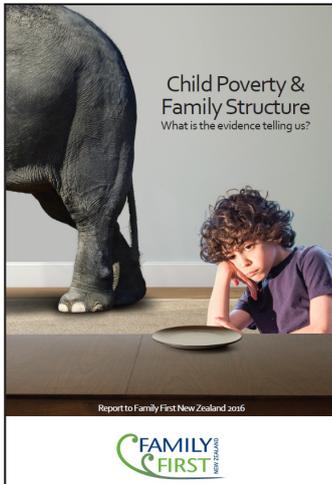
What is the evidence telling us?



Report to Family First New Zealand 2016



# Executive Summary



This report follows on from *Child Poverty & Family Structure: What is the evidence telling us?* It covers the same period – 1961 to the present.

Compared to low income, child abuse is a less precise concept subject to changing societal norms and values, legislation, reporting and recording practices, and data dissemination procedures.

Low income affects *hundreds* of thousands of children whereas substantiated child abuse affects only *tens* of thousands. In 2014, 29% of all children lived in relative poverty but only 1.5% were found to be abused.

The vast majority of children, whatever shape their family takes, do not suffer from maltreatment.

In the year ended 31 March 1961, child welfare officers handled 6,607 cases. In 2014, 146,657 notifications were made to Child, Youth and Family yet the population aged 17 and under had grown by just 30%.

The rate of substantiated *physical* abuse grew more than ten-fold from 2.5 per 10,000 children in 1967 to 29 per 10,000 in 2014.

For the last fifty years, families that feature ex-nuptial births, have one or both parents absent, large numbers of siblings (especially from clustered or multiple births) and/or very young mothers have been consistently over-represented in the incidence of child abuse.

Maori and Pacific families exhibit more of these features and have appeared disproportionately in child maltreatment statistics since earliest data analysis in 1967.

While the incidence of child abuse has climbed, the death rate from child maltreatment has fluctuated between 0.7 and 1.4 per 100,000 children since the early 1960s. Of the seven deaths recorded in 1967, two children were European, two were Pacific, two were Maori and one was part-Maori.

The growth of child abuse has accompanied a reduction in marriage and an increase in cohabiting or single-parent families.

Over three quarters of children born in 2010 *who had a substantiated finding of abuse by age two* were born into single-parent families. The likelihood of abuse in this family type is almost nine times greater than in a non-single parent family.

The risk of abuse for children whose parent / caregiver had spent more than 80% of the last five years on a benefit was 38 times greater than for those with no benefit history. Most children included in a benefit appear with a single parent or caregiver.

International care and protection data shows a similar over-representation of single-parent and step / blended families in child abuse substantiations.

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*The growth of child abuse has accompanied a reduction in marriage and an increase in cohabiting or single-parent families.*

*Over three quarters of children born in 2010 who had a substantiated finding of abuse by age two were born into single-parent families.*

Both sexes are responsible for *physically* abusing children. In New Zealand, males are responsible for around 60% of physical abuse findings and are more likely to *sexually* abuse children; females are more likely to *neglect* them. Females are also more likely to inflict multiple types of abuse against children.

Stepfathers – a label which today covers a variety of male care-giving relationships with children – are significantly over-represented as perpetrators of child death from inflicted injury in New Zealand and other countries.

The high rates of single, step or blended families among Maori present a much more compelling reason for disproportionate child abuse incidence than either colonisation or unemployment.

Maori children with a single parent are four times more likely to be abused than those in a non-single parent family; Maori children whose caregiver had spent 80% or more of the last five years on a benefit were 19 times more likely to suffer maltreatment than those with no benefit history.

Like non-Maori, Maori children with two-parent working families have very low abuse rates.

The likelihood of a child being in poverty and abused is smaller than the likelihood of being on a benefit and abused.

While both Maori and Pacific families are over-represented in maltreatment findings, some data shows Pacific families near to rates commensurate with their share of the population.

Asian children have disproportionately low rates of child abuse. The Asian population has the lowest proportion of single-parent families.

The presence of biological fathers matters. Generally, it protects children from child abuse. Marriage presents the greatest likelihood that the father will remain part of an intact family. When fathers are excluded from their children's lives, so too are potentially protective paternal grandparents and other family members.

Compared to married parents, cohabiting parents are 4-5 times more likely to separate by the time their child is aged five. Overseas data show a greater likelihood of child abuse in cohabiting families.

Intimate partner violence also contributes significantly to child abuse as children witness or get physically caught in the cross fire. This type of violence has its lowest incidence in marital partnerships, and highest incidence among sole parents.

New Zealand has been slow to analyse its own care and protection data relying heavily instead on reviews of international research. A reluctance remains (compared to other jurisdictions) to identify which families are disproportionately associated with child abuse and deaths.

There are certain family structures in which children will be far more vulnerable. Suspension of fact is an abrogation of our collective responsibility to children. In the same way discussions about child poverty ignore the elephant in the room – family structure – so do analyses of the incidence of child abuse.

The family model in which children are raised by their two biological parents did not evolve without reason, and it is still fit for purpose.

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*The presence of biological fathers matters... Marriage presents the greatest likelihood that the father will remain part of an intact family.*

*A reluctance remains to identify which families are disproportionately associated with child abuse and deaths.*

## 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 2000's 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.

Her previous report *Child Poverty & Family Structure: What is the evidence telling us?* was published in June 2016.



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### *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