New Zealand's Children

For most children the family provides the context within which they are nurtured and socialised. It can also have a major bearing on life chances in education, health and their future socio-economic status.

In New Zealand, the make-up of families is changing and there is a growing number of sole-parent and de facto-couple families. This article looks at recent changes in family types and examines the economic circumstances in which New Zealand children are being raised. Information for this article is based on Statistics New Zealand's publication New Zealand Now: Children.

Sole-parent families

Although just over three-quarters of New Zealand children live in two-parent families, changing patterns of family formation, dissolution and reformation have promoted a growing diversity of family types. In particular, the number of sole-parent families has grown rapidly over recent years. This has important implications for the welfare of children, given that sole parents tend to be disadvantaged in terms of employment, income, education and housing when compared to partnered parents.

In 1996, 189,900 children (defined as those under 15 years of age) were living in sole-parent families, an increase of 57 percent since 1986. The proportion of children living in sole-parent families has also grown over the past decade, from 16 percent to 24 percent. However, the growth slowed between 1991 and 1996, when the proportion of children living in sole-parent families increased by only 2 percentage points.

The fastest growing group of children in sole-parent families are those whose parents have never been married (see Figure 1). In 1996 these children accounted for 44 percent of all children in sole-parent families, an increase of almost 10 percentage points since 1991. This increase includes those children with sole-parents who were previously in a partnership. Department of Social Welfare statistics indicate that 1 in 5 sole parents receiving the domestic purposes benefit in 1996 were living apart from their de facto partner, and 68 percent of all sole parents previously had partners, either married or de facto.

Māori children and to a lesser extent Pacific Islands children are more likely than children from other ethnic groups to live with only one parent. Some 41 percent of Māori children lived in sole-parent families in 1996. This compares with 29 percent of Pacific Islands children, 17 percent of European children and 12 percent of Asian children.

Most children who live in sole-parent families live with their mother. In 1996, only 1 child in 8 in a sole-parent family lived with their father. Compared with children in two-parent families, those in sole-parent families were twice as likely to have a mother aged under 30 years of age.

De facto-couple families

Another family type that has become more common in New Zealand in recent years is the de facto-couple family. Although most children who live in two-parent families are the children of married parents (87 percent) there has been an increase in the number of children whose

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parents are in de facto unions. These are relationships where two partners cohabit without having legally married.

The proportion of children from two-parent families whose parents are de facto couples increased from 9 percent to 14 percent between 1991 and 1996. The fastest growth was among European children, where the proportion increased from 7 percent to 10 percent. However, Māori children are more than three times as likely as European children to belong to a de facto-couple family. Thirty percent of Māori children in two-parent families were in de facto couple families in 1996. By comparison, 13 percent of Pacific Islands children and 3 percent of Asian children lived in de facto families (see Figure 2).

De facto couples tend to be younger than married couples and have younger children. Whereas, 18 percent of children up to the age of 4 living in two-parent families are the children of de facto couples, the figure falls to 12 percent among 5-9 year olds and 10 percent for 10-14 year olds.

Census statistics do not show what proportion of children living with de facto couples are the offspring of that union. However, just over a quarter (28 percent) of people in de facto marriages are divorced or separated, so it is likely that significant numbers of children who live with de facto couples are the children of previous marriages.

**Economic circumstances of children**

Changes in patterns of family formation can have a major influence on the economic circumstances of children’s lives. In particular, parents not living with a partner often face financial hardship and there continues to be an increasing proportion of children in this situation.

Access to paid work is an important factor in determining the resources available to parents to meet both their own needs and those of their dependent children. In 1996, 23 percent of all children did not have a parent in paid work. Children in sole-parent families were significantly more likely than those in two-parent families not to have a parent in the workforce. Two-thirds of children in one-parent families (66 percent) had a parent who was either unemployed or not in the labour force compared with 10 percent of children in two-parent families. Overall, the proportion of children (regardless of family composition) without a parent in paid work has increased significantly in the last 10 years, from 14 percent in 1986 to 23 percent in 1996.

The differing labour force patterns of single and partnered parents are reflected in the disadvantaged income position of sole-parent families compared with two-parent families (see Figure 3). In 1996, 56 percent of children in sole-parent families had family incomes in the lowest 20 percent of family incomes for all

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**Figure 2**

*Children in De facto-couple Families as a Proportion of all Children in Two-parent Families by Ethnic Group, 1991 and 1996*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic group</th>
<th>1991</th>
<th>1996</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>European</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Māori</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islands</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Source: Statistics New Zealand, Censuses of Populations and Dwellings, 1991 and 1996*
families with children. This represents a deterioration from 1991 when 50 percent of children living with one parent had family incomes in the lowest quintile. Only 5 percent of children in sole-parent families were in the top 20 percent of all family incomes of children in 1996. By contrast, 25 percent of children in two-parent families had a family income in the top quintile and only 9 percent had a family income in the lowest quintile. The difference in the family income of children in sole-parent families and those in two-parent families continued to widen between 1986 and 1996.

European children are less likely to be in low income families than children belonging to other ethnic groups (see Figure 4). In 1996, 13 percent of all European children had family incomes in the lowest 20 percent of all family incomes compared with 34 percent of Māori and Pacific Islands children and 28 percent of Asian children. These ethnic differences reflect to some extent the smaller proportion of European families which are sole-parent families and the older age structure of the European population.

There is a strong relationship between the income of a child’s family and the tenure of the dwelling where the child lives. Of children whose family income was in the top two quintiles of all children in 1996, 71 percent were living in mortgaged homes. This was more than twice the proportion of children in the bottom income group (34 percent). Children in sole-parent families were generally more likely to be living in rented or leased accommodation than children in two-parent families. Over half of all children in sole-parent families were living in rental accommodation (53 percent) compared to 21 percent of children in two-parent families.
The different income situations faced by sole and two-parent families has a major influence on the proportion of the weekly budget that can be allocated to various goods and services. Lower income households with children spend a higher proportion of their average weekly expenditure on housing expenses than do higher income households. Households with children and a household income below the median of all households (with or without children) spent nearly a third (31 percent) of their weekly budget on rent or mortgage payments and home maintenance in the three years to March 1998. This compares with 14 percent for households with children and a household income above the median. Compared with lower income households, high income households with children spent a greater proportion of income on "other goods" (such as cigarettes, alcohol, books and other personal services and leisure items), transport and "other services".

Family income level is also positively correlated with access to a motor vehicle. The availability of a motor car for family use is an important influence on family life. The proportion of children in families with access to a car increases progressively with income. Among children with family incomes in the lowest family income quintile, nearly one-quarter (23 percent) did not have access to a motor vehicle compared with less than 1 percent of children in the highest family income quintile. European children were most likely to live with a parent who has access to a car and Pacific Islands children the least likely. A total of 19 percent of Māori children and 21 percent of Pacific Islands children in 1996 lived in households which did not have access to a motor vehicle, compared with 4 percent of European children.