

# What the media told New Zealand about child wellbeing

October 2026

Beyond the UNICEF ranking: mental health, early support, safety and digital life

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Lilly Herds  
SOCIALHERDS

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# 1 Executive summary

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Children's wellbeing depends on more than household income. Safe relationships, parental wellbeing, stable housing, learning support, friendships and timely care all matter. This report brings those connections into view through official evidence, research and selected headlines in the Social Herds record.

The wider headline record contains meaningful reporting on distress, barriers to support and practical responses. Relevant stories span health, education, housing, technology, and other categories. A narrow children and welfare selection therefore understates the range of wellbeing issues receiving attention.

## **The central finding**

The emerging concern is whether help reaches children and caregivers early enough and whether policies are assessed against changes in their lives. The evidence also records strengths, including caring relationships and positive friendships. Neither those strengths nor the difficulties should be lost in a single national ranking.

## **I. Main findings**

- Mental health coverage includes explanations of distress and scrutiny of service access. It cannot be characterised simply as announcements or a lack of attention to outcomes.
- Learning support, parental mental health and digital life need explicit treatment alongside care and protection.
- Housing reporting includes questions about what happens to children after emergency accommodation ends. Lower service numbers do not by themselves establish better circumstances.
- International rankings identify poor outcomes but do not establish why New Zealand performs worse than other countries. That requires separate comparative analysis.

## **II. Purpose and status**

This is a qualitative review based on selected, checked headline examples. It does not claim a complete newly coded child wellbeing corpus, strand totals or coverage percentages. It complements the companion report on children, poverty and welfare. Material hardship is context here; detailed income and benefit analysis remains in that report.

### 3 The national and international picture

Different measures reveal different aspects of children's lives. Most children may be rated as generally healthy while some cannot obtain timely care. Many teenagers report good wellbeing while a substantial group experiences distress. Those findings can coexist.

| Official figures: how New Zealand's children are doing |            |                                                                      |
|--------------------------------------------------------|------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Indicator                                              | Finding    | Population and period                                                |
| Overall child wellbeing rank                           | 32nd of 37 | UNICEF Report Card 20, May 2026                                      |
| Mental wellbeing rank                                  | 37th of 37 | UNICEF Report Card 20                                                |
| Good or excellent wellbeing                            | 65.6%      | School-based youth survey, ages 13–19, 2025                          |
| High psychological distress                            | 21.2%      | Youth survey respondents completing sufficient screening items, 2025 |
| Someone at home cares for and loves them               | 90.0%      | School-based youth survey, 2025                                      |
| Appointment delays as a barrier to a GP visit          | 19.5%      | Caregiver reports for children aged 0–14, Health Survey 2024/25      |

Sources [1–3]. Distress is a screening result, not a clinical diagnosis. UNICEF publication dates are not the dates of all underlying observations. Its New Zealand mental wellbeing measures include life satisfaction at age 15 in 2022 and adolescent suicide data averaged over 2019–2021.

#### I. Why the ranking is not an explanation

UNICEF combines physical health, mental wellbeing and skills. These are outcomes, not a list of their causes. Its 2026 report finds international associations between economic inequality and poorer child outcomes, but this does not identify the contribution of each influence within New Zealand. [1]

The Netherlands ranks first and Ireland sixth despite documented housing shortages and affordability pressures in OECD reviews. That makes them useful comparison cases. It does not mean the scale, distribution or effects of their housing problems match New Zealand's, or that other policies have been proven to explain the difference. [1, 9–10]

#### II. What a useful comparison would examine

A further study should compare the housing burden specifically on families with children, income support, access to early help, school belonging, exposure to harm and mental health care. National averages alone cannot identify which children are protected from pressures and which experience several at once.

## 4 Mental health and access to support

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The wider record contains both warnings about distress and scrutiny of how services respond. This is a substantive addition to the companion report: some headlines explicitly examine explanations, access and interventions, even when they are classified outside children and welfare.

### I. Selected headlines

**16 Feb 2024** — Access to mental health support for young people worsening – report [Post]

**11 Sep 2024** — Emotional distress increases among students but counselling helps, report finds [Post]

**31 Oct 2025** — Youth mental health crisis: New reports shed light on what's driving it and why social media is an 'amplifier' [Herald]

**25 Feb 2026** — Youth facing more psychological distress, finding it harder to get specialist help - report [RNZ]

**6 Mar 2026** — Spike in children under 12 needing mental health support [RNZ]

### II. What this changes

These examples qualify any broad claim that coverage ignores outcomes or underlying pressures. The counselling headline identifies a response reported as helpful; the specialist-access headline connects distress with difficulty obtaining care. The October 2025 headline also signals a more complex account of social media than a single-cause explanation.

The full reports behind these headlines should be consulted before their particular results are treated as established findings. A headline saying that something works is evidence of that claim receiving attention, rather than independent confirmation of effectiveness.

### III. What the research adds

Growing Up in New Zealand's age-15 findings associate positive peer relationships and school satisfaction with better mental wellbeing. Disability and experiences of discrimination are associated with poorer outcomes on several measures. These findings support examining children's environments and relationships alongside access to clinical treatment. They do not isolate the cause of New Zealand's international position. [4]

### IV. Questions for policy and follow up

Assessment should follow the whole route to help: recognising difficulties, obtaining an initial response, receiving assessment and accessing suitable continuing support. Waiting times alone can

miss children declined entry or redirected elsewhere. Evaluation should include their experiences, functioning and wellbeing after support, not just the number of appointments provided.

## 5 Early support and learning

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Parents' wellbeing and children's opportunities to learn connect the early years with later development. The wider record contains concerns about postnatal services and parent support alongside reports of investment in learning support. Both pressures and responses belong in the account.

### I. Parents and the early years

**16 May 2024** — Many new mums struggle, but NZ's postnatal services often fail to address maternal mental health: new study [Herald]

**18 Jun 2024** — Counselling, support for new parents among services cut [Post]

**8 Sep 2026** — ['We are in a health care crisis' - Plunket nurses face chronic understaffing](#) [RNZ]

These headlines identify service availability and caregiver support as issues for scrutiny. They do not establish that all families lack help. In the 2024/25 Health Survey, 91.6% of children had a caregiver who reported someone to turn to for day-to-day emotional support with raising children, while 76.5% had a caregiver reporting that they coped well or very well with parenting demands. [2]

### II. Learning support and participation

**29 Aug 2024** — 'New and deeper level of crisis': Some children waiting 6 months to see learning support specialists [RNZ]

**22 May 2025** — \$646 million boost for student learning support [1News]

**2 Oct 2025** — More than 5000 children waiting for specialist learning support [Press/Post]

The record includes funding announcements and evidence of unmet demand. These should be followed together. A later waiting-list headline does not by itself prove a funding increase failed: its timing, implementation, eligibility and changing demand all need examination.

### III. What needs to be assessed

For early support, ask whether families can reach help without excessive paperwork, travel or repeated referrals. For learning support, examine the time between recognising a need and receiving useful assistance, including the experience of disabled and neurodivergent children. School

participation, friendships and reduced distress are relevant outcomes alongside educational achievement. [4]

The policy question is whether services can respond before difficulties accumulate. Workforce capacity and continuity of support need as much attention as headline funding totals.

## 6 Safe relationships, care and housing

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Children's safety and care require attention in their own right. Income measures cannot show whether a child feels loved, is supervised appropriately, is protected from abuse or is listened to when reporting harm.

### I. Safety at home and in care

The 2025 youth survey records caring relationships as a widespread strength: 90% of surveyed young people reported someone at home who cared for and loved them. This does not establish that those homes were free from all forms of harm. [3]

Historical research following the 1998 NZ birth cohort through age 17 found substantiated abuse or neglect recorded for 9.7% of children. This includes several forms of maltreatment, rather than physical violence alone. It describes identified cases during 1998–2015, not today's prevalence. International differences in reporting and investigation prevent a simple current league table. [7]

The companion media report already examines Oranga Tamariki, abuse in care and youth justice. This separate wellbeing account retains their relevance while asking how children's safety, relationships and access to help are followed over time. Independent monitoring provides an important source beyond individual cases. [8]

### II. Housing outcomes after a service ends

**19 Aug 2024** — The government celebrates more than '1000 children no longer growing up in motels' - but can't say where they have gone [Stuff]

**21 Aug 2024** — Minister not seeking answers over where kids went after emergency motels [Stuff]

**27 Jun 2025** — Stable public housing in the first year of life boosts children's wellbeing years down the track – new research [The Conversation]

The first two examples show direct scrutiny of whether lower emergency housing numbers correspond to improved circumstances. This follow-up should be acknowledged rather than described as absent. The third brings research into the record.

Monk and Grimes identify housing stability, quality and affordability as pathways relevant to wellbeing. Their longitudinal analysis finds that initial behavioural-difficulty gaps associated with public housing at birth narrow over childhood. Selection into housing and other family circumstances matter, so this is not proof that housing alone caused improvement. [5]

### III. Questions for policy and follow up

Follow children's safety and stability after placements, housing exits or programme completion. Evaluate prevention, support for safe caregiving, independent complaints and children's own accounts. Care, housing and youth justice counts should not be used as interchangeable measures of wellbeing.

## 7 Digital life and public debate

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Digital wellbeing is a substantial addition to the report's scope. Much of the relevant debate is classified under media, technology, society or politics, which makes a category-based children and welfare search incomplete.

### I. Selected headlines

**13 Sep 2024** — Banning kids from social media won't solve anything - Netsafe [RNZ]

**18 Mar 2026** — Young people's mental health is deteriorating and we're still arguing about social media [Post]

**29 Jul 2026** — [The jury's out on social media bans. Here's a better idea NZ can borrow from Australia](#) [The Conversation]

**29 Aug 2026** — [Nothing about us without us: What our young people are saying about a social media ban](#) [Post]

**13 Sep 2026** — [What social media replaces matters as much as what young people see online](#) [Sunday Star Times]

### II. What the selection shows

The record contains competing responses, expert disagreement and young people's perspectives. It is therefore too narrow to describe this area only as political announcement coverage. It also raises a question for evaluation: does attention to a proposed restriction help explain the wider pressures on children, or substitute for that explanation? The selected examples alone cannot establish the balance.

The 2025 youth survey includes self-reported screen use and social media alongside wellbeing and home life. A relationship between time online and distress would not alone establish causation. Type

of use, content, relationships, existing difficulties and the activities displaced all need consideration. [3]

### III. What a policy assessment needs

A useful assessment identifies the harm a proposal is intended to reduce, its expected mechanism, who is covered and how implementation would work. It should also examine privacy, evasion, access to supportive communities and unintended exclusions. Young people's views can reveal practical effects adults may overlook. [6]

Digital interventions should be considered alongside family support, safe schools and mental health services. This is a recommendation about assessing policies together, rather than a finding that any particular intervention has already succeeded or failed.

## 8 Implications for the election and media coverage

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The wider review changes the emphasis of the account. There is explanatory and accountability reporting across several policy areas. The next task is to connect it to evidence about children's circumstances and test whether improvements reach those who need them.

| Question                     | Evidence needed                                                                                  |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Who receives help            | Eligibility, take-up, exclusions and the experiences of children with multiple needs             |
| How soon help arrives        | Referral decisions, declined requests, waiting periods and service continuity                    |
| Whether delivery is credible | Funding, workforce, implementation dates and coordination across services                        |
| Whether lives improve        | Safety, stable housing, participation, relationships, functioning and children's own assessments |
| Who is accountable           | Independent monitoring, public reporting and follow-up when results fall short                   |

### I. Government coordination

The Auditor-General's April 2025 review of arrangements for reducing child poverty found weaknesses in implementation planning, coordination and reporting. Although that audit concerns poverty arrangements, it provides a relevant question for wellbeing policy: who ensures support works across organisational boundaries? It should not be presented as a direct audit of every service discussed here. [11]

## II. What media follow up should retain

Coverage can revisit the children and families affected after an announcement, funding increase, service cut or change in eligibility. Follow-up should check improvements as well as failures. It should distinguish the number leaving a service from the number obtaining an adequate alternative, and programme spending from children receiving useful support.

## III. Conclusion

The evidence points to overlapping needs, with access to timely help a recurring issue across mental health, parental support, learning and housing. The headline record includes substantive scrutiny of these connections. A child wellbeing report should bring those stories together while keeping the limits of headline analysis visible.

New Zealand's international results justify examining how other countries protect children from similar pressures. This report does not establish a single national cause. Its contribution is to identify the experiences and delivery questions that should guide that investigation and the assessment of election policies.

# 9 Sources and evidence notes

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## I. Sources

- 1 **UNICEF 2026.** Unequal Chances Children and economic inequality, Innocenti Report Card 20. Published May 2026. Overall league table and NZ summary. [Source](#)
- 2 **Ministry of Health 2025.** Annual Update of Key Results 2024/25 New Zealand Health Survey. Published 19 November 2025. Child health, parenting and GP access. [Source](#)
- 3 **Ministry of Social Development 2026.** Youth Health and Wellbeing Survey 2025. Results released March 2026. School-based participants aged 13–19. [Source](#)
- 4 **Growing Up in New Zealand.** Now We Are Fifteen health and wellbeing snapshot. Mental wellbeing, anxiety, depression symptoms and peer relationships. [Source](#)
- 5 **Monk and Grimes 2025.** Housing and child development Trajectories of child wellbeing by tenure type in Aotearoa New Zealand. Motu Working Paper 25-05. [Source](#)
- 6 **Mana Mokopuna.** Children's voices reports. Use the date, population and method of each individual report when making specific claims. [Source](#)
- 7 **Rouland and Vaithianathan 2018.** Cumulative Prevalence of Maltreatment Among New Zealand Children 1998–2015. American Journal of Public Health. Administrative findings for the 1998 birth cohort. [Source](#)
- 8 **Aroturuki Tamariki.** Independent Children's Monitor. Reports on the oranga tamariki system; not population-wide prevalence measures. [Source](#)
- 9 **OECD Netherlands 2025.** Economic Survey executive summary. Housing shortage and affordability context. [Source](#)

- 10 OECD Ireland 2025.** Making housing more affordable and resilient for all. Housing availability and affordability context. [Source](#)
- 11 Auditor General 2025.** Effectiveness of arrangements for reducing child poverty. Published 3 April 2025. [Source](#)

## II. Notes

The source workbook contains 86,191 headline records from 1 June 2023 to 11 October 2026. This review uses the same period as the companion report, ending 29 September 2026, which contains 84,950 records. Restricting the period avoids treating later October additions as a change in the findings.

The unit of analysis is the headline. Searches extended across the whole workbook rather than relying on the Parent or Child classification. Relevant material was found under Education, Health, Housing, Public Sector, Media, Technology, Politics and other labels.

### How the examples were selected

Exploratory searches combined references to children, young people, teenagers, rangatahi, tamariki, pupils or schools with mental health, distress, counselling, bullying and related terms. Separate searches examined learning support, parental mental health, housing, child protection and digital life. Matching headlines were read for relevance; adult workplace disputes, political metaphors and unrelated uses of similar words were excluded from the examples.

The dated examples in this report were checked against individual workbook records. Where the workbook provides a URL, the headline is linked to that recorded address. A recorded link is a route to the article, rather than confirmation that its full content has been reviewed.

### What the review can establish

The examples demonstrate that certain issues and forms of scrutiny exist in the record. They support a broader interpretation of the coverage and identify questions for further investigation. They do not establish how common each approach is across all reporting, whether readers saw it, or whether it changed policy.

No percentages from the original eight-strand selection are applied to this wider review. A numerical wellbeing report would require a documented selection dictionary, review of inclusions and exclusions, and recalculation of overlaps, annual totals and denominators. That work has not been done for this report.

### Evidence and age groups

Official sources provide context, not validation of every newspaper claim. The Health Survey generally describes children aged 0–14; its mental health measures often cover ages 2–14. The 2025

youth survey covers school-based participants aged 13–19. UNICEF indicators use several age ranges and data years. These populations should not be combined as though they describe the same children.

The companion report is used for its account of care, protection and youth justice. Statements about changes across the whole media record remain provisional until a wider selection has been systematically coded.

*Headline source: SocialHerds master dataset (tbl\_data\_raw\_AllData\_2026.xlsx, sheet tbl\_data\_raw), filtered to 1 June 2023 – 29 September 2026. Dated examples are workbook records and retain the recorded wording. They are selected illustrations, not an exhaustive corpus.*

*Companion report: What the media told New Zealand about children (children, poverty and welfare). This report draws on its care and protection themes but does not reuse its strand totals as wellbeing counts.*