

What the media told New Zealand about children

October 2026

Poverty, welfare, care and follow-through



Lilly Herds
SOCIALHERDS

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1 Executive summary

This report examines 2,357 headlines about children, poverty and welfare published between 1 June 2023 and 29 September 2026. They make up 2.8% of the 84,950-headline SocialHerds record and come from 90 outlets. The headlines fall into eight strands: welfare and benefits, Oranga Tamariki and child protection, abuse in care, youth justice, child poverty and hardship, school lunches, early years and family support, and child and youth health.

The central finding

Coverage of children and welfare followed government action rather than children's outcomes. It peaked in 2024, when the coalition reset welfare, introduced boot camps, moved to repeal section 7AA and received the abuse in care report. It then fell away, reaching its lowest point in the first quarter of 2026 (49 headlines, 1.1% of the record), even as official child material hardship rose to 14.3%, its highest level since the Child Poverty Reduction Act baseline. Only about one headline in ten used outcome or measurement language.

Key findings

Attention tracked announcements, not measures. The annual Stats NZ child poverty release drew 15 child-poverty headlines from 11 outlets in its February–March window in 2024, 5 in 2025 and 4 from 3 outlets in 2026, while material hardship moved from 12.6% to 13.5% to 14.3% of children (Figure 1).

Welfare was the largest and most alarmed strand. Its 481 headlines centred on sanctions, the traffic-light system, emergency housing and Jobseeker rules for 18- and 19-year-olds. One in five (20.2%) was framed as Alarm, more than three times the 5.9% rate across all headlines.

Follow-through collapsed where structural change was greatest. Abuse in care fell from 208 headlines in 2024 to 14 in 2026; youth justice from 169 to 9. The redress legislation passing its final reading in June 2026 and the boot camps becoming a sentencing option in September 2026 attracted a small fraction of the attention their announcements received.

Outcome language was scarce. Across the corpus, 10.1% of headlines used measurement or outcome language. The rate was lowest for school lunches (4.9%), abuse in care (5.0%), early years (5.3%) and Oranga Tamariki (6.5%).

Some official measures did not reach the headline record. UNICEF's favourable December 2023 report card was covered; its later report cards ranking New Zealand near the bottom of wealthy countries for child wellbeing were not. A rise in child food insecurity in the 2023/24 Health Survey was reported; the fall in 2024/25 was not.

Ministers were visible, then absent. Karen Chhour was named in 39 headlines in 2024 and 2 in 2026. David Seymour was named in 33 in 2024, 26 of them about school lunches, and 5 in 2026.

The 2026 election revived the topic, through error and pledge. July–September 2026 produced 201 headlines, led by MSD payment errors, the Auditor-General's school lunch findings, the Marokopa inquiry and competing parental leave pledges.

2 Scope and method

The source data is the SocialHerds master dataset: headlines from the Democracy Project’s daily news briefings, classified under the SocialHerd schema. The workbook used covers 1 June 2023 to 29 September 2026.

The schema’s own category labels for this area are fragmented (for example “ChildPoverty”, “ChildPov” and “ChildPvrty” all occur, and a “Welfare” parent also contains animal-welfare stories). Headlines were therefore identified with a keyword dictionary applied to headline text, organised into eight strands. Each strand was sampled and checked for false positives, and exclusions were added where they occurred (for example, a minister’s tourism stories, councillor Andy Foster, corporate “uplift”, and pig-welfare regulation). Appendix A lists the definitions.

Item	Detail
Unit of analysis	Headline, not full article
Period	1 June 2023 to 29 September 2026
Corpus	2,357 headlines (2.8% of 84,950); 90 outlets
Overlap	114 headlines fall in more than one strand; strand counts should not be added
Overlap with other reports	School lunches overlaps the education report; emergency housing overlaps the housing report
Tone measures	Frame (Reporting, Analysis, Opinion, Alarm) for the full period; negative Direction only to 30 June 2026 (see below)
Interpretation	Counts measure visibility and repetition, not readership, persuasion or policy importance

Data note: Direction coding from July 2026

The share of headlines coded Negative rises across the whole record from about 16–20% in January–June 2026 to 42–51% in July–September 2026. That is a change in classification, not in the news. This report therefore measures negative direction only to 30 June 2026 and uses the Alarm frame as the main tone measure for the full period. Alarm also drifts upward across the whole record in 2026 (from about 5% to about 9%), so 2026 Alarm figures are compared with the same-period rate for all headlines.

Official statistics in this report come from Stats NZ, the Ministry of Social Development, Health New Zealand, the Ministry of Health, Aroturuki Tamariki, Oranga Tamariki, the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care, the Office of the Auditor-General, UNICEF and the OECD. They are used only for context and are listed with sources in Appendix B. All findings about coverage come from the headline dataset.

3 Background: the official picture

The coverage analysed in this report sits against a set of official measures that, for the most part, did not improve over the period.

3.1 Child poverty

The Child Poverty Reduction Act 2018 requires governments to set three-year and ten-year targets and Stats NZ to report annually. For the year ended June 2025, Stats NZ reported that 14.3% of children lived in households experiencing material hardship, with no statistically significant change from the previous year. The low-income rates were 12.6% before housing costs and 17.8% after housing costs (fixed line). The Children’s Commissioner estimated 169,300 children in material hardship in 2025, against 121,800 in 2022.

The second intermediate target of 9% material hardship for 2023/24 was not met; the measured rate was 13.4%. In July 2024 the Government set a new intermediate target of 11% for 2026/27. The ten-year target remains 6% by 2027/28.



Source: Stats NZ, years ended June 2018–2025; targets from MSD. The 2024 figure is revised; 2025 is from the new Household Income and Living Survey.

Measure	Latest official figure	Source
Children in material hardship	14.3% (year ended June 2025)	Stats NZ
Low income, before housing costs	12.6% (year ended June 2025)	Stats NZ
Low income, after housing costs (fixed line)	17.8% (year ended June 2025)	Stats NZ
Material hardship target, 2026/27	11%	MSD
Children in households where food runs out often or sometimes	21.4% (2024/25); 27.0% (2023/24)	NZ Health Survey
Pacific / Māori children, food runs out	44.3% / 32.3% (2024/25)	NZ Health Survey
Jobseeker Support recipients	196,434 (June 2024); about 218,500 (June 2026)	MSD
Children and young people in state care	4,217 (30 June 2025)	Aroturuki Tamariki
Share of children in care who are Māori	68%	Oranga Tamariki annual report 2024/25

Measure	Latest official figure	Source
Children fully immunised at 24 months	83.5% (quarter to 31 March 2026); target 95%	Health NZ
Students in Ka Ora, Ka Ako	about 242,000	Ministry/Beehive

3.2 International comparison

UNICEF's Report Card 18 (December 2023) ranked New Zealand 19th of 39 wealthy countries on child poverty, combining 17th for progress and 29th for its absolute rate. UNICEF's Report Card 20 (2026) ranked New Zealand 32nd of 37 high-income countries for overall child wellbeing, 37th for mental wellbeing and 33rd for physical health. On the OECD's relative income poverty measure, 12.2% of children across the OECD live below 50% of median income; a directly comparable recent New Zealand figure on that basis was not verified for this report and is not used.

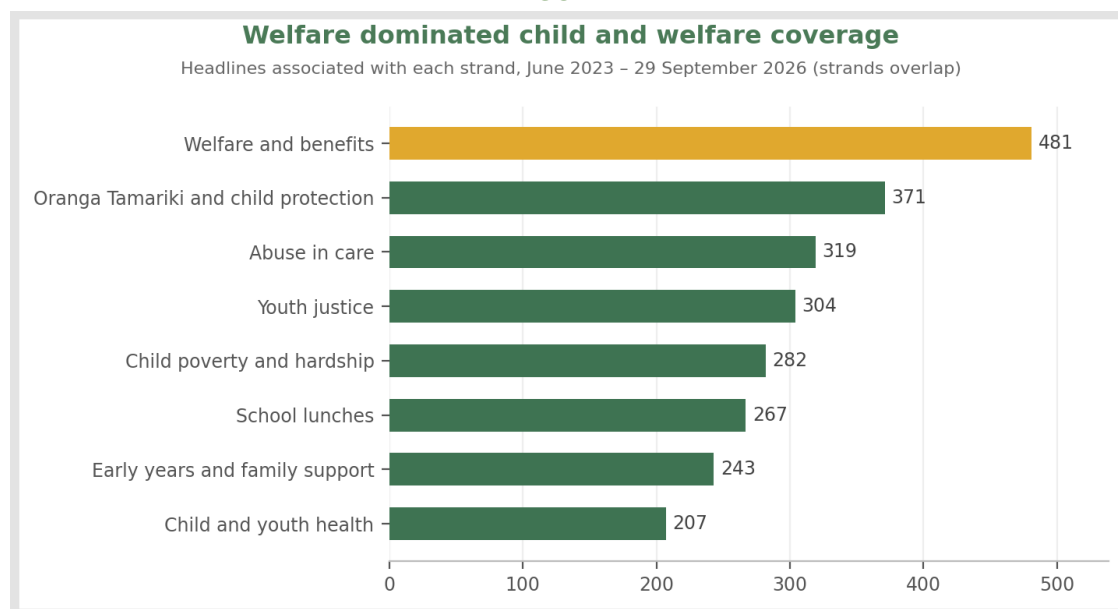
3.3 Care, abuse in care and youth justice

The Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care reported on 24 July 2024. Of an estimated 655,000 children, young people and adults in care between 1950 and 2019, it estimated that 200,000 were abused, and it made 138 recommendations. The Prime Minister delivered a public apology on 12 November 2024. The Government's military-style academy pilot ran from July 2024 to July 2025; Oranga Tamariki reported that seven of the ten young men reoffended, and the final evaluation found the cohort too small to provide meaningful data.

4 The coverage at a glance

The 2,357 headlines are spread unevenly across the period. They peaked in 2024 (1,146 headlines, 3.6% of that year's record), fell in 2025 (562, 2.7%) and fell further in 2026 (328 to 29 September, 1.7%). The first quarter of 2026 was the low point of the whole period: 49 headlines, or 1.1% of the record. Coverage recovered to 201 headlines in July–September 2026 as the election campaign began.

FIGURE 2

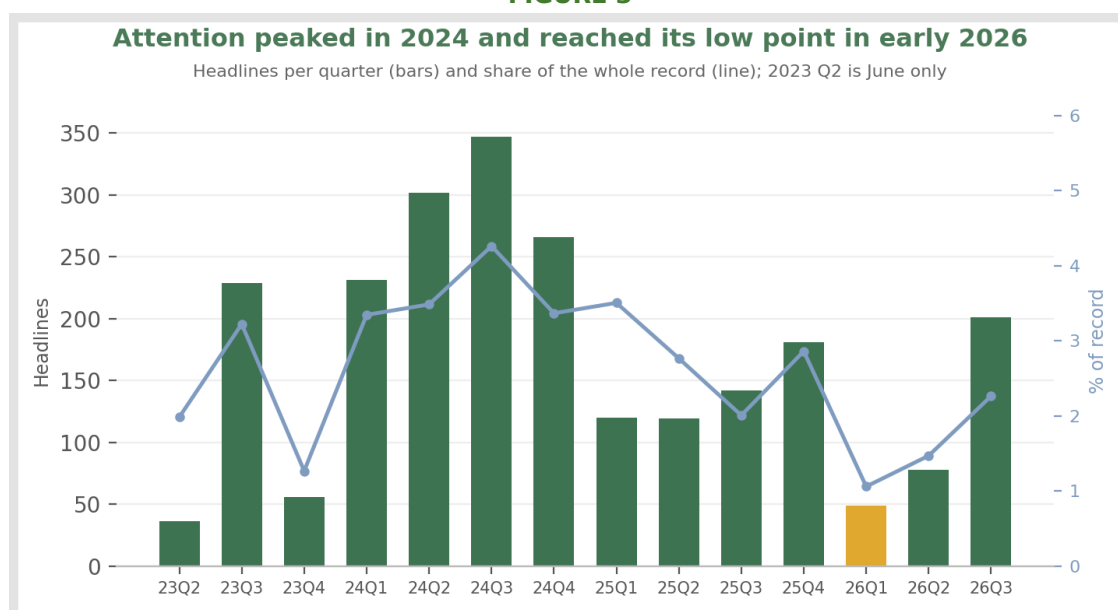


Strands overlap: 114 headlines fall in more than one strand.

Strand	Headlines	2023	2024	2025	2026
Welfare and benefits	481	49	229	102	101
Oranga Tamariki and child protection	371	45	223	55	48
Abuse in care	319	24	208	73	14
Youth justice	304	66	169	60	9
Child poverty and hardship	282	49	123	53	57
School lunches	267	15	113	112	27
Early years and family support	243	51	84	57	51
Child and youth health	207	36	69	68	34
All child and welfare headlines	2,357	321	1,146	562	328

2023 runs from June; 2026 runs to 29 September. Strands overlap, so strand counts do not sum to the total.

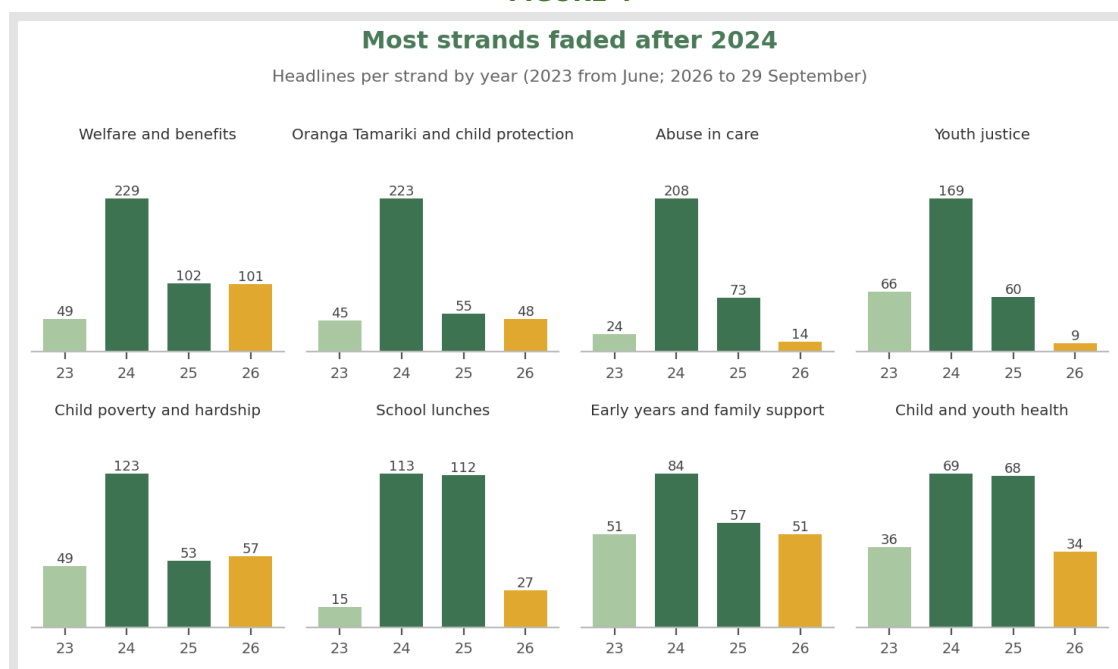
FIGURE 3



Bars show headline counts; the line shows child and welfare headlines as a share of all headlines.

Two features stand out. First, 2024 was dominated by policy change: the welfare reset in February, school lunches in March-May, section 7AA and boot camps through the middle of the year, and the abuse in care report in July. Second, the 2026 decline is broad. Abuse in care, youth justice and child and youth health reached their lowest annual totals of the period in 2026, and Oranga Tamariki and school lunches fell back close to their part-year 2023 levels. Child poverty was the exception (57 headlines in 2026 against 53 in 2025), largely because of the Children's Commissioner's July report. In the election run-up, welfare and early years recovered most.

FIGURE 4



2023 is a seven-month year; 2026 runs to 29 September.

5 Poverty, hardship and income support

Three strands cover the material circumstances of children and families: child poverty and hardship, the benefit system that supports low-income households, and the school lunch programme. They include welfare, the most alarmed strand in the corpus.

5.1 Child poverty and hardship

282 headlines (2023: 49; 2024: 123; 2025: 53; 2026: 57). Alarm framing 12.1%; outcome language 14.2%.

Child poverty coverage was driven by a small number of recurring moments: the Stats NZ release each February, the Salvation Army’s State of the Nation report, the Government’s target decisions and, in 2026, the Children’s Commissioner’s report. Between those moments, the story was carried by food banks and charities rather than by the measures themselves.

Recurring issue	Headline matches*
Food banks and food insecurity	76
Charities and city missions	58
Child poverty statistics and targets	25
Housing and energy hardship	20

**Keyword-assisted and overlapping; indicators of recurring issues, not exclusive categories.*

February 2024 was the strand’s busiest month. Stats NZ reported that child poverty had worsened, and the release coincided with official warnings that benefit changes could push thousands more children into poverty. The rest of 2024 brought two decisions with long-term consequences: Stats NZ scrapping the longitudinal Living in Aotearoa survey in April, and the Government lowering the intermediate material hardship target in July. In September, headlines reported that the minister had rejected official advice that about \$3 billion a year was needed to get back on track.

In February 2025 the Government missed all three statutory targets and the coverage briefly turned to Alarm. By February 2026, when material hardship reached 14.3%, the annual release generated only four child-poverty headlines in its window, two of them in BusinessDesk. The Children’s Commissioner’s report in late July 2026 produced more coverage than the official statistics had: nine child-poverty headlines from five outlets between 20 July and 31 August, including a Herald editorial.

❖ **What was done:**

Headlines reported the Government lowering the 2026/27 material hardship target to 11%, rejecting advice on the cost of meeting the original trajectory, and pointing to tax relief and FamilyBoost as its main levers.
Stats NZ replaced its income survey and discontinued the Living in Aotearoa longitudinal survey.

❖ **What received scrutiny:**

Missed targets in February 2025 drew the strongest scrutiny, with headlines describing a “clear fail”.
Charity funding cuts and food-bank closures were reported as visible, local consequences of hardship.

❖ **What remained under the radar:**

The annual official measure lost visibility as hardship rose: 15 headlines in 2024, 5 in 2025, 4 in 2026.
The 2024/25 Health Survey fall in child food insecurity, from 27.0% to 21.4%, did not appear in the headline record.

Only 68 headlines in the whole corpus (2.9%) named Māori or Pacific people at all, though Māori and Pacific children have the highest hardship and food-insecurity rates.

5.1.1 Representative headlines: Child poverty and hardship

23 Feb 2024 — Child poverty has worsened, Stats NZ figures show [Post]

18 Mar 2024 — Foodbank forced to cut 70 pct of recipients as Government funding for charity sector dries up [Newshub]

5 Apr 2024 — Stats NZ scraps survey gathering key child poverty data [Newsroom]

26 Jul 2024 — Government quietly shrinks child poverty reduction targets [Stuff]

24 Sep 2024 — Louise Upston rejects official advice \$3b a year needed to fix child poverty [RNZ]

20 Nov 2024 — More children going hungry, Health Survey shows [RNZ]

21 Feb 2025 — 'Clear fail': Government slammed for missing all child poverty targets [Stuff]

27 Feb 2026 — 'Unacceptable': Children's Commissioner says child poverty progress has stalled [BusinessDesk]

24 Jul 2026 — Report on child poverty reveals 'national shame', Children's Commissioner says [RNZ]

5.2 Welfare and benefits

481 headlines (2023: 49; 2024: 229; 2025: 102; 2026: 101). Alarm framing 20.2%; negative direction to June 2026 36.5%.

Welfare is the largest strand and the most alarmed. Most of its coverage concerns adults, but the policies it covers—sanctions, emergency housing and Jobseeker eligibility—bear directly on the incomes of households with children.

Recurring issue	Headline matches*
Emergency housing	102
Sanctions, obligations and the traffic-light system	85
Benefit numbers and Jobseeker	76
18- and 19-year-olds and parental income test	26
Indexation and payment levels	26
MSD errors and capability	20

*Keyword-assisted and overlapping; indicators of recurring issues, not exclusive categories.

The coalition's welfare reset began in February 2024 and produced the strand's first peak. The second came in August 2024, when tougher sanctions were announced and headlines reported large falls in emergency housing numbers. Emergency housing then became a contest over what the falling numbers meant: the Government celebrated the reductions, while later headlines linked tighter rules to rising homelessness and rejected applications.

October 2025 brought the parental income test for 18- and 19-year-olds, with the Prime Minister quoted saying 4,300 teenagers would lose the Jobseeker benefit. In 2026 the strand turned to administration. From mid-August to late September, 26 headlines covered MSD payment errors: Winter Energy Payments wrongly stopped for 15,000 pensioners, benefits wrongly suspended, and food declared "not an essential need" in hardship decisions. A review found tens of thousands of payments had been affected.

❖ What was done:

Headlines reported a traffic-light sanctions system, new non-financial sanctions

including money management and community work, tighter emergency housing rules with staff performance targets, the parental income test for 18- and 19-year-olds, and automation of welfare decisions under urgency.

❖ **What received scrutiny:**

Sanctions were contested from the start, by advocates, economists and the Opposition.

Emergency housing numbers were challenged as hiding rising homelessness.

The 2026 MSD errors became the strand's main accountability story, with calls for the minister's resignation.

❖ **What remained under the radar:**

Few welfare headlines connected policy to children: 52 of 481 (10.8%) mention children, young people, parents or families, and most of those concern 18- and 19-year-olds rather than dependent children.

Benefit numbers—the Government's own Jobseeker target—appear in about 20 headlines across the period; one in September 2026 reported Jobseeker numbers almost 80,000 over target.

The most visible victims of the 2026 errors were pensioners, so the year's largest welfare story was largely not about children.

Debt to MSD, reported at \$1.5 billion in July 2026, received isolated attention.

5.2.1 Representative headlines: Welfare and benefits

20 Feb 2024 — Government starts reset of welfare system [Post]

13 Aug 2024 — Tougher sanctions for beneficiaries to be introduced next year [Post]

23 Sep 2024 — Government celebrates as number of whānau in emergency housing drops by more than half [RNZ]

6 Oct 2025 — Jobseeker: Parents earning more than \$65k must support 18-19yo children [RNZ]

19 Aug 2026 — Growing homelessness linked to tighter emergency housing rules, community leader says [RNZ]

8 Sep 2026 — MSD told thousands food was 'not an essential need' [1News]

9 Sep 2026 — PM Christopher Luxon's targets: Jobseeker numbers climbing, almost 80,000 over target [RNZ]

11 Sep 2026 — MSD review: Tens of thousands of payments wrongly cut in policy bungle [Herald]

5.3 School lunches

267 headlines (2023: 15; 2024: 113; 2025: 112; 2026: 27). Outcome language 4.9%, the lowest of any strand.

School lunches was the most sustained single-programme story in the corpus. It is also covered in the education report.

Recurring issue	Headline matches*
Cost and funding	56
Seymour named	38
Food quality and complaints	37
Compass and suppliers	35

*Keyword-assisted and overlapping; indicators of recurring issues, not exclusive categories.

In early 2024, David Seymour described the programme as wasteful while its future was reviewed, and principals, researchers and health campaigners argued for it. In May 2024 the Government committed to continuing it in a cheaper form. October 2024 brought a \$3-per-meal external model and the loss of contracts for 75 suppliers.

The new model began in 2025, and February 2025 was the strand's busiest month: late, burnt or rejected meals, a principal calling it a disaster, and comparisons to dog food. Through 2025 coverage tracked complaints, falling orders and a new tender. In July 2026 the Auditor-General reported that the revamp saved money but missed its own targets, and that only half of 2025 meals met health and nutrition standards.

❖ **What was done:**

Headlines reported the programme's continuation with lower per-meal costs, a bulk-supply contract with the School Lunch Collective, an extension to some early childhood centres, and a new tender for primary schools in 2025.

❖ **What received scrutiny:**

Meal quality, delivery failures and supplier performance received intense day-to-day scrutiny in 2025.

The Auditor-General's July 2026 findings were widely reported.

❖ **What remained under the radar:**

Almost no headlines asked whether lunches were reaching hungry children or affecting attendance and learning—the programme's original purpose. Only 13 lunch headlines (4.9%) used outcome language, most of them in 2024, when research on the original programme was used in the debate over its future.

5.3.1 Representative headlines: School lunches

5 Mar 2024 — David Seymour slams free school lunches scheme as 'wasteful' as fate to be considered by Coalition Government [Newshub]

24 Oct 2024 — 'Massive blow': 75 suppliers lose school lunch contracts [BusinessDesk]

14 Feb 2025 — School lunches revamp a disaster, principal says [Stuff]

21 May 2025 — 170 formal complaints from schools to Ministry of Education about lunches programme in first month [Herald]

1 Jul 2026 — School lunch revamp saves money but misses its own targets, AG finds [BusinessDesk]

1 Jul 2026 — School lunch inquiry reveals only half of meals in 2025 met health and nutrition standards [Post]

6 Care, protection and youth justice

Three strands cover the State’s direct responsibility for children: Oranga Tamariki and child protection, the legacy of abuse in care, and youth justice. All three peaked in 2024 and fell sharply afterwards.

6.1 Oranga Tamariki and child protection

371 headlines (2023: 45; 2024: 223; 2025: 55; 2026: 48). Negative direction to June 2026 35.6%; outcome language 6.5%.

In 2024, Oranga Tamariki coverage was a story about institutions in conflict: the minister and the Waitangi Tribunal, the Crown and the courts, the agency and its contracted providers. In 2025–26 it became a story about individual failures.

Recurring issue	Headline matches*
Staff cuts and provider funding	79
Commissioner and oversight	47
Child deaths and abuse cases	45
Section 7AA repeal	23

**Keyword-assisted and overlapping; indicators of recurring issues, not exclusive categories.*

April–August 2024 was the strand’s peak. The Waitangi Tribunal’s summons of the Children’s Minister went to the High Court and Court of Appeal; the bill to repeal section 7AA drew a Ngāpuhi hīkoi; job cuts and provider funding cuts were contested by the Children’s Commissioner and unions. The Children’s Commissioner role was replaced by a commission in 2023 and became a recurring critical voice.

Coverage fell to 55 headlines in 2025 and 48 in 2026. The Marokopa case, ending in September 2025, and the inquiry report in September 2026 produced the strand’s main recent story, with headlines describing a litany of failures by Oranga Tamariki and police.

❖ **What was done:**

Headlines reported the repeal of section 7AA, staff and provider funding cuts, a strip-search ban for children in care and an IT overhaul. Under the previous government, the Children’s Commissioner had been replaced by a commission in July 2023.

❖ **What received scrutiny:**

The 7AA repeal, the Tribunal summons and the funding cuts received intense scrutiny in 2024.
Individual failures—a baby’s death, motel placements, and the Marokopa inquiry—dominated 2025–26.

❖ **What remained under the radar:**

The monitor’s system-level findings rarely reached headlines: Aroturuki Tamariki or the Independent Children’s Monitor is named in three headlines in the whole record. The long-run fall in the number of children in care, and the recent rise in entries noted by the monitor, received little attention; a single July 2024 headline reported more children entering care.
After 2024, the effect of the 7AA repeal on Māori children was not followed up in the headline record.

6.1.1 Representative headlines: Oranga Tamariki and child protection

- 1 May 2024 — Waitangi Tribunal warns Government’s Oranga Tamariki policy will cause harm [Stuff]
- 22 May 2024 — Bill repealing section 7AA of the Oranga Tamariki Act passes first reading in Parliament [RNZ]
- 27 Jun 2024 — Hundreds of jobs to go at Oranga Tamariki, ACC, MSD [Post]
- 12 Aug 2024 — ‘Disappointed’: Children’s Commissioner slams Oranga Tamariki provider cuts [Stuff]
- 12 Jun 2025 — Oranga Tamariki report finds stark outcomes for Māori in state care system [RNZ]
- 16 Sep 2026 — Tom Phillips inquiry exposes multiple mistakes by police and Oranga Tamariki [RNZ]

6.2 Abuse in care

319 headlines (2023: 24; 2024: 208; 2025: 73; 2026: 14). Alarm framing 5%, the lowest of any strand; outcome language 5%.

Abuse in care received the most concentrated burst of coverage in the corpus. July 2024, the month the Royal Commission reported, produced 89 headlines.

Recurring issue	Headline matches*
Royal Commission report and apology	134
Redress and compensation	60
Lake Alice	55
Faith-based care	26

*Keyword-assisted and overlapping; indicators of recurring issues, not exclusive categories.

Coverage was largely sober and survivor-centred: harrowing testimony, the scale of abuse, and the recommendations. The November 2024 apology produced a second peak, with headlines reporting survivors’ disappointment at the setting and the absence of a redress scheme.

After 2024, the story fragmented into Lake Alice compensation, missed deadlines, the first anniversary of the apology and data breaches. In 2026, the year redress legislation passed its final reading in Parliament (June), the strand produced 14 headlines.

- ❖ **What was done:**
Headlines reported a national apology, a rapid payment for terminally ill Lake Alice survivors, a three-part Lake Alice redress package, a National Day of Reflection, and redress legislation in 2026.
- ❖ **What received scrutiny:**
The scale of abuse, the apology’s setting and the delay in redress received sustained scrutiny in 2024.
Lake Alice redress and Crown conduct were followed through 2025.
- ❖ **What remained under the radar:**
Most of the 138 recommendations did not appear in the headline record after the report’s release; the proposed Care Safe Agency is not named in any headline.
The link between historic abuse and today’s care system was made mainly by survivors and advocates, rarely by news reporting.
The redress legislation’s passage drew little attention compared with the report.

6.2.1 Representative headlines: Abuse in care

- 25 Jul 2024 — Pervasive, systemic, ‘nothing short of horrific’: state care abuse scale finally revealed [Post]
- 12 Nov 2024 — Abuse in state care: Government cops flak as redress scheme absent ahead of apology [Herald]
- 29 Nov 2024 — Abuse in care survivors deflated as coalition government misses deadline [RNZ]
- 13 Nov 2025 — A year since the apology, state abuse survivors say real change is still to come [Whakaata Māori]
- 25 Jun 2026 — Abuse in care redress legislation passes final reading in Parliament [RNZ]
- 25 Jul 2026 — Abuse in care survivor: Two years on from the inquiry, I’m despondent [Spinoff]

6.3 Youth justice

304 headlines (2023: 66; 2024: 169; 2025: 60; 2026: 9). Opinion and analysis made up 20.4%, among the highest of any strand.

Youth justice moved from ram raids in 2023 to boot camps in 2024–25. Boot camps alone account for 144 of the strand’s headlines.

Recurring issue	Headline matches*
Boot camps and military-style academies	144
Reoffending and evidence	39
Ram raids	38
Youth justice facilities and incidents	32

*Keyword-assisted and overlapping; indicators of recurring issues, not exclusive categories.

In July 2023 a video of an MMA-style fight in a youth justice facility and the Labour Government’s ram-raid offence made youth crime an election issue. In 2024 the coalition announced and launched the military-style academy pilot, and coverage tracked its cost, its use of force, and the withdrawals and reoffending of participants.

The question of whether the pilot worked was eventually answered: headlines in August 2025 reported that most participants reoffended, and the final evaluation was reported in November 2025. In 2026 the strand fell to nine headlines, even as the Government passed legislation making boot camps a sentencing option and Labour promised to scrap them.

❖ **What was done:**

Headlines reported the military-style academy pilot, a Young Serious Offender category, legislation making boot camps a sentencing option, and a reduction target for child and youth offending.

❖ **What received scrutiny:**

Reoffending was pursued persistently, including Oranga Tamariki’s reluctance to release figures.

Use of force at boot camps drew a sustained exchange involving the Prime Minister.

❖ **What remained under the radar:**

Wider trends in youth offending appeared rarely, for example a June 2024 headline reporting ram raids down 80% and a November 2025 headline reporting serious youth crime falling nationally while rising in some regions.

The September 2026 legislation passed under urgency with little coverage compared with the 2024 pilot.

6.3.1 Representative headlines: Youth justice

5 Jul 2023 — Exclusive 'Disturbing' video shows MMA-style fight at Oranga Tamariki youth justice facility [Newshub]

20 Jul 2023 — Government announces new ram-raid offence, 12-year-olds could face it in Youth Court [Newshub]

17 Jun 2024 — Boot camps could cost \$100,000 per teen [RNZ]

17 Feb 2025 — Why Oranga Tamariki won't reveal bootcamp pilot re-offending [Herald]

12 Aug 2025 — Bootcamp re-offending rate revealed: 80% allegedly offended within the year [Stuff]

10 Nov 2025 — Final verdict on Govt's controversial bootcamp pilot released [Herald]

18 Sep 2026 — Bootcamps bill passes final reading under urgency, will become law [RNZ]

7 Early years and child health

The final two strands cover support for families with young children and children’s health. Both were steadier across the period than the care and justice strands, and child health was the most measurement-led strand in the corpus.

7.1 Early years and family support

243 headlines (2023: 51; 2024: 84; 2025: 57; 2026: 51). Paywalled share 31.7%, the highest of any strand; positive direction 4.5%.

Early years coverage is the most even across the period and the least alarmed of the large policy areas. It covers early childhood education, FamilyBoost, Working for Families, Best Start and paid parental leave.

Recurring issue	Headline matches*
Early childhood education and regulation	136
Working for Families, Best Start and parental leave	73
FamilyBoost	23

**Keyword-assisted and overlapping; indicators of recurring issues, not exclusive categories.*

FamilyBoost was announced in March 2024 as a flagship cost-of-living measure. Later headlines reported low uptake (fewer than half of eligible families receiving payments, and just 573 of 21,000 getting the full amount), then a redesign in July 2025. In May 2025 headlines reported that Best Start would be means-tested across all three years.

Early childhood education coverage focused on David Seymour’s regulation review and its implications for ratios, qualifications and safety. In 2026, headlines reported that nearly half of services failed to meet ERO’s quality bar and that officials admitted there was no evidence behind staffing ratios. In July 2026, National’s pledge to extend paid parental leave to 30 weeks became an election story.

❖ **What was done:**

Headlines reported FamilyBoost and its later expansion, means-testing of Best Start, increases to Working for Families, an ECE regulation review, and a paid parental leave pledge.

❖ **What received scrutiny:**

FamilyBoost uptake and ECE safety and quality received the most scrutiny.

❖ **What remained under the radar:**

Whether family payments reduced child poverty was almost never asked in headlines.
The 31.7% paywalled share means much of the analytical ECE coverage was not freely available.

7.1.1 Representative headlines: Early years and family support

- 26 Mar 2024 — Childcare subsidies to start from July, families eligible for up to \$75 a week [RNZ]
- 6 Jun 2024 — David Seymour confirms terms of early childhood regulation review [RNZ]
- 17 Dec 2024 — Fewer than half of families eligible for FamilyBoost get payments [1News]
- 22 May 2025 — Best Start payments to be means-tested across all three years [Herald]
- 10 Apr 2026 — Nearly half of early childhood services fail to meet ERO quality bar [Herald]
- 25 Jul 2026 — National pledges to extend paid parental leave to 30 weeks [Stuff]

31 Jul 2026 — 'Is my child safe here?' Officials admit there's no evidence behind childcare staffing ratios [Newsroom]

7.2 Child and youth health

207 headlines (2023: 36; 2024: 69; 2025: 68; 2026: 34). Outcome language 16.9%, the highest of any strand.

Child health coverage was more measurement-led than any other strand, largely because immunisation is a Government health target and measles risk was reported with numbers.

Recurring issue	Headline matches*
Measles, whooping cough and immunisation	79
Youth vaping	56
Starship and paediatric services	28
Youth mental health	26

*Keyword-assisted and overlapping; indicators of recurring issues, not exclusive categories.

Warnings of a measles epidemic ran through 2024; the October 2025 outbreak produced 19 measles headlines in a month. Youth vaping was a steady theme, especially vape shops near schools. Starship Hospital featured through bullying allegations and service pressure, and in 2026 through winter flu demand.

❖ What was done:

Headlines reported a childhood immunisation target of 95% at 24 months, funding for Māori providers, an early MMR dose under consideration, and vaping restrictions.

❖ What received scrutiny:

Immunisation rates and measles preparedness received measurement-based scrutiny.

❖ What remained under the radar:

Immunisation improvement—from 75.7% in late 2024 to 83.5% in early 2026—drew few headlines.

UNICEF's ranking of New Zealand last of 37 countries for child mental wellbeing did not appear in the headline record.

7.2.1 Representative headlines: Child and youth health

15 Dec 2023 — 'Alarming': Teenage vaping numbers almost double in past year [Te Ao Māori News]

28 Mar 2024 — Wait times to see health specialists rise, childhood immunisations fall [RNZ]

30 Apr 2024 — Public health experts warn New Zealand is close to large measles epidemic, 1000 more children susceptible every month [Herald]

9 Oct 2025 — Auckland's Starship Hospital providing 'lesser service' due to bullying - ex-staffer [RNZ]

31 Oct 2025 — Measles outbreak: Simeon Brown considers early MMR dose for infants [Herald]

25 Sep 2026 — Mistrust a factor as childhood vaccination rates fall, campaign aims 'to empower whānau' [RNZ]

8 The political contest

Headlines in this corpus are overwhelmingly about the Government: 260 name the Government or the coalition, against 57 naming Labour and 26 naming the Greens. Visibility was highly personal and short-lived.

Person	Headlines	2023	2024	2025	2026
Karen Chhour (Children)	51	1	39	9	2
David Seymour (ACT; school lunches, ECE)	53	2	33	13	5
Christopher Luxon	44	8	25	5	6
Children’s Commissioner (incl. Claire Achmad)	29	3	11	5	10
Chris Hipkins	18	8	5	2	3
Louise Upston (Social Development)	15	0	5	3	7
Nicola Willis	7	2	1	3	1
Erica Stanford	6	0	2	1	3

Name matches in headline text within the corpus. Louise Upston also holds tourism-related portfolios; those headlines are not in this corpus.

Party named	Headlines	2023	2024	2025	2026
Labour	57	26	19	5	7
National	60	26	16	6	12
ACT	29	13	9	4	3
Greens	26	9	10	5	2
Te Pāti Māori	8	3	5	0	0
NZ First	4	2	1	0	1

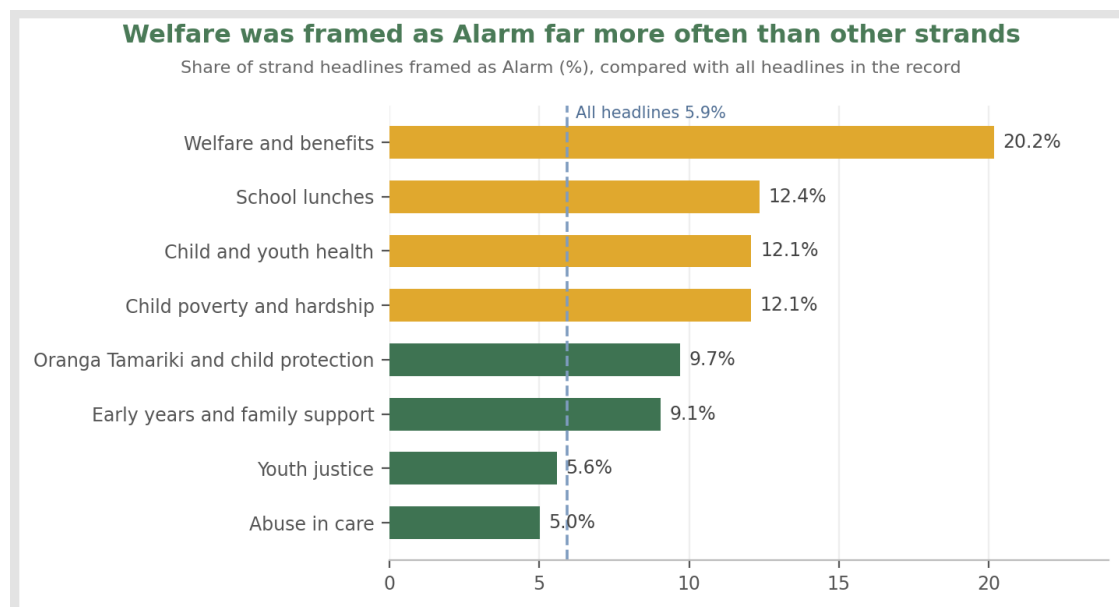
Party matches are by name in headline text and are indicative; “National” excludes phrases such as “national shame”.

Three patterns follow. First, the Opposition was rarely the subject of these headlines after the 2023 election: Labour appeared in 5 headlines in 2025 and 7 in 2026, and its 2026 promises (scrapping boot camps, ending the emergency housing target, scrapping MSD staff metrics) attracted limited coverage. Second, ministers’ visibility also collapsed after 2024: Karen Chhour fell from 39 headlines in 2024 to 2 in 2026, David Seymour from 33 to 5 and Christopher Luxon from 25 to 6. Third, the Children’s Commissioner was more visible in 2026 (10 headlines) than any minister, mostly through the July 2026 poverty report and Claire Achmad’s non-reappointment.

9 Frames, tone and access

Strand	Alarm %	Negative % (to Jun 2026)	Paywalled %	Outcome language %
Welfare and benefits	20.2	36.5	20.2	15
Oranga Tamariki and child protection	9.7	35.6	11.6	6.5
Abuse in care	5	12.1	15	5
Youth justice	5.6	19.5	14.1	11.2
Child poverty and hardship	12.1	23.1	21.6	14.2
School lunches	12.4	31	24.3	4.9
Early years and family support	9.1	18.4	31.7	5.3
Child and youth health	12.1	16.5	15.9	16.9
All child and welfare headlines	11.2	25.2	19.1	10.1
All headlines in the record	5.9	17.6	30.3	-

FIGURE 5



Alarm is a frame in the SocialHerd schema. The dashed line shows the rate across all 84,950 headlines.

Coverage of children and welfare was nearly twice as likely to be framed as Alarm as the record overall (11.2% against 5.9%). In July–September 2026, 45 of 201 headlines (22.4%) were Alarm, against about 9% for the whole record in that quarter. Only 32 headlines (1.4%) were coded Positive. Reporting made up 72.6% of the corpus, with opinion and analysis together 16.1%.

Access is better than average: 19.1% of these headlines were paywalled, against 30.3% across the record. This largely reflects RNZ, which carries 31.2% of the corpus against 20.8% of the record. The Herald (362), Stuff (256) and the Post (196) follow.

9.1 Who reported it

Journalist	Headlines	Main outlet	Main strands
Glenn McConnell	51	Stuff	Oranga Tamariki, youth justice, welfare
Susan Edmunds	41	RNZ	Welfare, early years and family support
Julia Gabel	40	Herald	Welfare, abuse in care
Phil Pennington	34	RNZ	Oranga Tamariki, youth justice
Lillian Hanly	28	RNZ	Youth justice, Oranga Tamariki
Lauren Crimp	27	RNZ	Welfare
Anna Whyte	26	Post	Oranga Tamariki
Adam Pearse	24	Herald	Youth justice, Oranga Tamariki
Cécile Meier	24	BusinessDesk	School lunches

Excludes bylines recorded only as an outlet name (for example "RNZ", 252 headlines).

10 Official measures and media attention

Comparing the release of official measures with headline coverage shows how unevenly the measures travelled.

Measure or release	What it showed	Headline coverage
Stats NZ child poverty, Feb 2024	Hardship rising (12.6%)	15 child-poverty headlines, 11 outlets (15 Feb–15 Mar)
Stats NZ child poverty, Feb 2025	All three targets missed (13.4%)	5 headlines, 5 outlets
Stats NZ child poverty, Feb 2026	Hardship 14.3%	4 headlines, 3 outlets
UNICEF Report Card 18, Dec 2023	NZ 19th of 39, progress praised	Reported (RNZ, Newshub, TVNZ, Stuff)
UNICEF Report Card 20, 2026	NZ 32nd of 37; last for mental wellbeing	Not found in headline record
NZ Health Survey 2023/24	Child food insecurity up to 27.0%	Reported (RNZ, Post)
NZ Health Survey 2024/25	Child food insecurity down to 21.4%	Not found; vaping findings only
Military-style academy evaluation, 2025	7 of 10 reoffended; cohort too small	Reported (Aug and Nov 2025)
Auditor-General, school lunches, Jul 2026	Half of meals met nutrition standards	Reported widely

What the comparison shows

Measures travelled best when they were new, attached to a single programme, or contradicted a minister. The routine annual measures that track children’s wellbeing over time—child poverty statistics, the Health Survey, the children’s monitor—travelled worst, and their coverage shrank just as they began to show deterioration. Good news fared no better: improvements in food insecurity and immunisation were barely visible.

11 Conclusion

Across more than three years, New Zealand media covered children and welfare mainly through what the Government did: resetting welfare, cutting and then rebuilding school lunches, repealing section 7AA, running boot camps, and responding to the abuse in care inquiry. The coverage was serious, often critical, and in welfare frequently alarmed. But it was organised around announcements and failures rather than around children's circumstances.

The result is a record that tells readers a great deal about ministers and agencies in 2024, and much less about whether children were better off by 2026. The measures that could have answered that question were available. Child material hardship rose to its highest level since the Act's baseline; immunisation improved; food insecurity rose and then fell; children in care declined. Few of those movements became news.

The 2026 election revived the topic, but largely through administrative error and competing pledges. That leaves an opening for any party, and any newsroom, willing to connect policy to measured outcomes for children.

12 What child and welfare policy coverage needs to cover

The gaps identified in this report suggest five questions that coverage of any child or welfare policy should be able to answer.

Which measure is it meant to move? Every major policy in this period had a measurable aim—material hardship, Jobseeker numbers, reoffending, immunisation, nutrition standards. Coverage should name it at announcement.

What happened to that measure? Return to the measure when official data is released, especially the annual child poverty statistics and Health Survey.

Who is affected, and who is missing from the story? Māori, Pacific and disabled children carry the highest rates of hardship, yet appear in few headlines.

Did the change last? Abuse in care, youth justice and section 7AA were followed intensively at announcement and barely afterwards.

Who is accountable? Distinguish ministerial decisions, agency performance and independent oversight, and keep monitors such as Aroturuki Tamariki and the Children's Commission in the story.

13 Appendix

13.1 Strand definitions and method notes

Strand	Main terms (headline text)
Child poverty and hardship	child poverty; poverty; food banks; food insecurity; hunger linked to children or families; Salvation Army; city missions; KidsCan; material or family hardship. Excludes KiwiSaver and loan hardship, hunger strikes.
Welfare and benefits	benefit (in a benefit-system context); beneficiaries; Jobseeker; MSD; social welfare and welfare reform terms; sole parent; Winter Energy Payment; accommodation supplement; emergency housing; traffic-light sanctions. Excludes animal welfare, “benefits of”, sanctions on other countries.
School lunches	school lunch; lunch programme, provider or supplier; free lunches; lunches linked to schools, Seymour, Compass or pupils.
Oranga Tamariki and child protection	Oranga Tamariki; uplifts; section 7AA; Children’s Commissioner and commission; child protection; care and protection; foster care; caregivers; social workers; children in care; Minister for Children; Marokopa.
Abuse in care	abuse in care; state care; the Royal Commission; survivors linked to abuse or care; Lake Alice; Marylands; Whanaketia; redress; faith-based care; apology linked to abuse.
Youth justice	youth justice; youth offending; young offenders; boot camps; military-style academies; ram raids; youth crime; youth residences; Youth Court; Karen Chhour.
Early years and family support	childcare; early childhood education; kindergarten; kōhanga reo; FamilyBoost; Best Start; Working for Families; parental leave; baby bonus; Plunket services; Well Child.
Child and youth health	childhood immunisation; measles; whooping cough; children’s and paediatric health; Starship; youth mental health; youth vaping; child dental; SUDI; neonatal care.

Outcome language. A headline was counted as using outcome or measurement language if it contained terms such as data, statistics, figures, rate, target, results, evaluation, evidence, reoffending, percent, numbers, measure, monitor, outcomes, “report finds/shows/reveals”, study or survey. The measure is deliberately simple and is an indicator of emphasis, not of accuracy.

Release windows. Coverage of the child poverty releases counts headlines mentioning child poverty, material hardship or poverty statistics between 15 February and 15 March of each year.

Quality checks. Each strand was sampled after the dictionary was built; false positives found during checking were excluded by rule. Some residual misclassification remains and counts should be read as indicators.

13.2 Official statistics and sources

Statistic	Source
Child material hardship 14.3%; low income 12.6% (BHC) and 17.8% (AHC fixed), year ended June 2025; series 2018–2025	Stats NZ, Child poverty statistics: Year ended June 2025 (Feb 2026). stats.govt.nz
169,300 children in material hardship in 2025 against 121,800 in 2022	Children’s Commissioner, reported by RNZ, Feb 2026

Statistic	Source
Targets: 9% (2023/24, not met at 13.4%); 11% (2026/27); 6% (2027/28)	MSD, Child poverty reduction measures and targets; Progress to date on the targets. msd.govt.nz
Discontinuation of Living in Aotearoa survey	Newsroom, 4 April 2024; Stats NZ technical appendix
Food runs out often or sometimes: 21.4% of children (2024/25), Pacific 44.3%, Māori 32.3%; 27.0% (2023/24)	Ministry of Health, NZ Health Survey Annual Update 2024/25 and 2023/24
Jobseeker Support 196,434 (June 2024)	MSD, Regulatory impact statement on welfare settings (2024)
Jobseeker Support about 218,500 (June 2026), sum of age groups 18–64	MSD Benefit Fact Sheets national tables June 2026, via Figure.NZ
4,217 children and young people in care at 30 June 2025	Aroturuki Tamariki, Experiences of care 2024/25
68% of children in care are Māori	Oranga Tamariki Annual Report 2024/25
655,000 in care 1950–2019; 200,000 abused; 138 recommendations; report 24 July 2024; apology 12 November 2024	Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care, Whanaketia; NCWNZ summary
Military-style academy: 7 of 10 reoffended; evaluation found cohort too small for meaningful data	Oranga Tamariki; RNZ and ODT reporting of the final evaluation (2025)
Immunisation at 24 months 83.5% (quarter to 31 March 2026); target 95% by 2030; 75.7% in Q1 2024/25	Health NZ immunisation coverage; Ministry of Health health targets; RNZ
Ka Ora, Ka Ako: about 242,000 students; \$3 per lunch under external contract	Save the Children / Beehive (2024); Office of the Auditor-General inquiry (2025)
UNICEF Report Card 18: NZ 19th of 39 (17th progress, 29th rate)	UNICEF Aotearoa, 6 December 2023
UNICEF Report Card 20: NZ 32nd of 37 overall; 37th mental wellbeing; 33rd physical health	UNICEF Aotearoa media release, 2026
OECD average child relative income poverty 12.2%	OECD Family Database, CO2.2 Child poverty

Official figures are context only. All coverage findings derive from the SocialHerds headline dataset.