

Te Atatū – Insights

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Supporting better outcomes for young people in Alternative Education

At a glance

This paper summarises recent analysis by the Social Wellbeing Agency focused on Alternative Education, a programme for young people disengaging from the education system. The insights from this project have implications for how the social system could better support the wellbeing of these young people and their families.

Summary of findings

- Young people who attended Alternative Education have statistically significantly worse outcomes in adulthood than similar young people.
- Many Alternative Education participants have had traumatic histories and have much higher rates of mental distress than other young people.
- Exclusionary discipline in schools is the biggest predictor of future Alternative Education participation.
- There are clear opportunities for the social system to provide earlier and enduring support for children, young people and their families, including through the implementation of the Oranga Tamariki Action Plan.



The Education Review Office recently evaluated Alternative Education

The evaluation sought to understand how well the education system supports young people in Alternative Education (AE). It found that the quality of provision is inadequate, and the education system needs to do more to support young people and AE providers¹.

To support the evaluation, the Social Wellbeing Agency used the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) to explore participants' past experiences and future outcomes. This allowed us to understand and describe the characteristics, experiences and interactions with government systems that are observable in the data and compare these to the rest of the population.

We then compared the outcomes of AE participants with those of a similar group of people, rather than the rest of the population who would have different experiences and likely different outcomes. We used statistical models to match AE participants one-to-one with young people who had near identical characteristics and experiences up to the same point in their lives, but who never enrolled in AE.

Our analysis revealed stark differences later in life

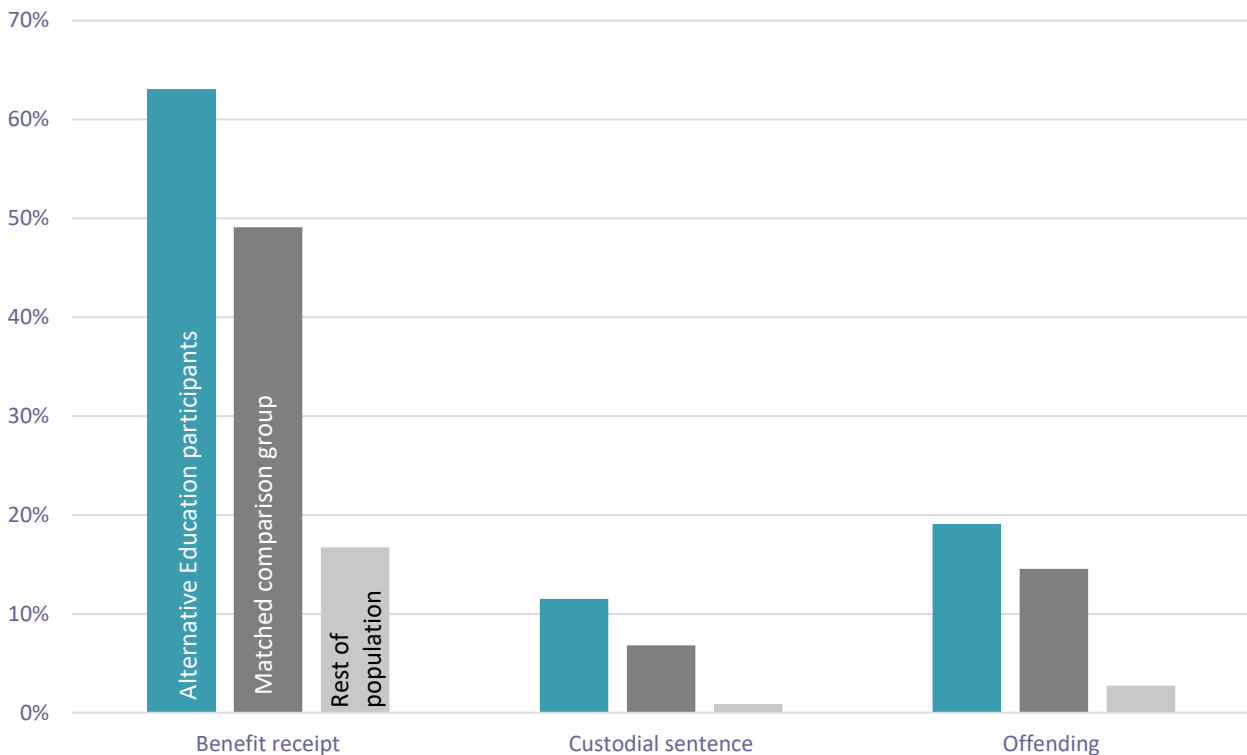
We found that young people who attended AE have statistically significantly² worse outcomes in adulthood than the comparison group across multiple domains. This includes substantially lower earnings, more benefit receipt, higher offending and victimisation, higher rates of imprisonment, more emergency departments admissions, and lower qualification attainment.

Young people who attended AE have significantly worse outcomes in adulthood than the comparison group.

¹ [An Alternative Education? Support for our most disengaged young people | Education Review Office \(ero.govt.nz\)](https://ero.govt.nz)

² Significance at the 5% level. See Table A1 in the appendix of the [Technical Report](#) for definitions of outcomes.

Welfare and justice outcomes at age 30



Understanding the backgrounds and experiences these young people have earlier in life can contextualise the events that lead to enrolment in Alternative Education: that these young people and their families need responsive, effective and quality wraparound supports from the wider social system to prevent the compounding effects of multiple unmet needs.

Many AE participants have had traumatic histories and much higher rates of mental distress

Almost three-quarters of AE participants have had a report of concern made about them to Oranga Tamariki, almost two-thirds have had an investigation into their safety by Oranga Tamariki, and 17% have been placed into the care of Oranga Tamariki (compared to 2% of the rest of the population).

Most AE participants have a parent who has been involved in the criminal justice system during their lifetime. AE participants and their parents have experienced mental distress at much higher proportions than the rest of the population.

A wide body of evidence shows that exposure to multiple adverse childhood experiences (such as those described above) negatively affects short and long-term outcomes, as well as manifesting behavioural issues.³ These experiences also lead to a disrupted education – AE participants are about five times more likely than other young people to have moved schools at least three times.

Exclusionary discipline in schools is the biggest predictor of future AE participation

Stand-downs, suspensions and exclusions, by their nature, disengage young people from education. They are mostly used by schools in response to behavioural issues, though this practice varies from school to school.

Almost 60% of AE participants have been stood down from school before they enrolled in AE (compared to 6% of the rest of the population), and more than a quarter have been suspended or excluded (compared to 1% of the rest of the population). Many have been stood down or suspended multiple times. These experiences are the single most important factor that statistically predicts a learner enrolling in AE.

While stand-downs and suspensions may be necessary at times, such as for acute management of behaviour that compromises the safety of others, they also exclude the young person from education and learning. Research shows that exclusionary discipline risks worsening disengagement from learning and the school community, which compound the impacts on long-term outcomes⁴.

Practices that maintain school connectedness and provide support can prevent AE enrolment and reduce disengagement

Some schools do not use exclusionary discipline at all, opting for other approaches, such as restorative practices and providing

Many young people in Alternative Education have backgrounds which have been disrupted, unstable, unsafe and traumatic.

³ See, for example, [Adverse childhood experiences \(health.govt.nz\)](https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/childhood-experiences)

⁴ Pyne, J. (2019), Suspended attitudes: Exclusion and emotional disengagement from school, *Sociology of Education*, 92(1), pp.59-82

intensive support to respond to underlying causes. Restorative practices encourage self-reflection and pro-social behaviours among young people, and improve student-teacher relationships⁵.

The backgrounds and home lives of AE participants are important contextualising factors to understand when managing challenging behaviour. Our data indicates that for many participants, these backgrounds have been disrupted, unstable, unsafe and traumatic. Increased and wider use of restorative practices, that emphasise accountability, relationships and communication, would reduce the use of exclusionary discipline and prevent escalation in the form of referral to, and enrolment in, Alternative Education.

Alternative Education is a missed opportunity to improve the outcomes of young people most in need of support

It is clear from the characteristics and experiences of AE participants that these are young people in need of intensive, wraparound support in a safe environment.

According to the ERO evaluation, despite the efforts of providers, Alternative Education does not set young people up for success: teaching quality and teaching resources are inadequate, providers are underfunded, facilities are run down, providers are not well connected with the broader education system and face challenges accessing support for young people through the social system⁶.

While traditional schooling may not be the right fit for many of these young people, it is important that alternative pathways, like AE, provide quality, intensive and long-term wraparound support to address the needs of young people and their families.

It is important that pathways like AE provide quality, intensive and long-term wraparound support to address the needs of young people and their families.

⁵ Towl, P. & Hemphill, S. (2016), *Locked Out: Understanding and tackling school exclusion in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand*, NZCER Press

⁶ [An Alternative Education? Support for our most disengaged young people | Education Review Office \(ero.govt.nz\)](#)

There are clear opportunities for the social system to provide earlier support for children, young people and families

Separate analysis we undertook in 2022 to support the Government's response to youth crime showed that young people with the highest unmet needs come to the attention of government agencies early and often⁷. This was measured by an indicator we constructed of factors highly correlated with youth offending.

Consistent with this finding, the young people who participate in Alternative Education often arrive with extensive histories of interactions with government agencies, including for serious issues. Despite these interactions and the multiple opportunities for ensuring needs are met, effective support with enduring impact has not been provided.

Leveraging implementation of the Oranga Tamariki Action Plan

Young people who participate in or are 'at risk' of enrolling in Alternative Education overlap significantly with the children and young people the [Oranga Tamariki Action Plan](#) is targeted towards. The Action Plan is the joint plan for children's agencies⁸ to better support the wellbeing and outcomes of children and young people in or 'at-risk' of entering the care and protection system. There is considerable work underway across children's agencies to implement the Oranga Tamariki Action Plan.

The pathway to Alternative Education involves many interactions for those young people and their families with multiple government agencies, where effective wraparound support could prevent or mitigate the escalation of issues. There is an opportunity in implementing the Action Plan for agencies to take a coordinated and cohesive approach to prevent

⁷ [Wellbeing of children and young people who offend | Social Wellbeing Agency \(swa.govt.nz\)](#)

⁸ Oranga Tamariki, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Health, NZ Police, Ministry of Justice

referrals to Alternative Education and provide quality support for young people (and their families) in or at risk of entering Alternative Education.

Better supporting these young people and their families earlier would reduce referrals to Alternative Education, improve short- and long-term outcomes across multiple domains, and reduce costs to the child protection, welfare, health and justice sectors.

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Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) disclaimer

Access to the data used in this study was provided by Stats NZ under conditions designed to give effect to the security and confidentiality provisions of the Statistics Act 2022. The results presented in this study are the work of the author, not Stats NZ or individual data suppliers. These results are not official statistics. They have been created for research purposes from the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI), which is carefully managed by Stats NZ. For more information about the IDI please visit <https://www.stats.govt.nz/integrated-data>.

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Ka pō, ka ao, ka awatea is a well-known tauparapara (traditional incantation) within te ao Māori, which refers to the separation of Ranginui (the sky-father) and Papatūānuku (the earth mother) which brought light into this world. It talks about 'coming from darkness to light' or 'transiting from a place of not knowing to knowledge'. Te Atatū indicates the morning light and acknowledges this series of events, and the importance of light representing knowledge in te ao Māori.