

Te Atatū – Insights

November 2022

Wellbeing in the first year of COVID-19: Summary

Summary findings

The emergence of COVID-19 almost immediately resulted in fundamental changes to the way New Zealanders lived their lives. This report focuses on how wellbeing in New Zealand changed in the immediate, short-term, and medium-term, using survey data over the first year of COVID-19, up until March 2021.

We tracked outcomes for all New Zealanders, as well as key groups who might have been particularly impacted by COVID-19. These groups include parents, especially sole parents; disabled people; younger (18-39) and older (65+) people; Māori; Pacific people; and people living in Auckland.

This paper is a summary of the full research report, *Wellbeing during the first year of COVID-19* (October 2022) which is available on the Social Wellbeing Agency website www.swa.govt.nz.



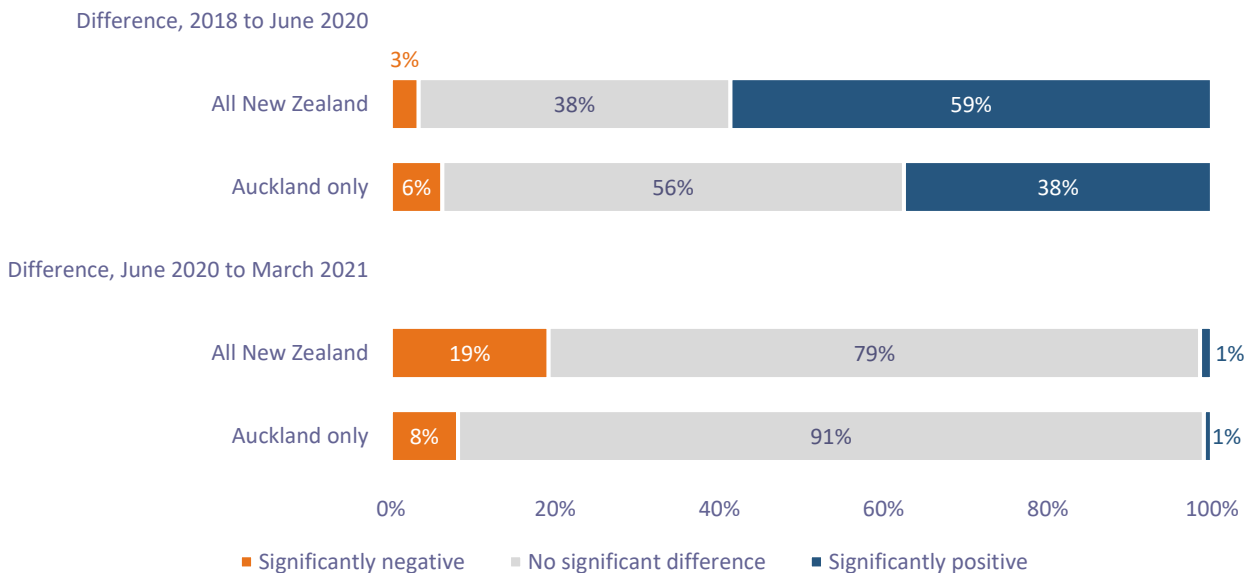
Trends before and during the first year of COVID-19

We tracked 13 different wellbeing outcomes for 16 separate groups using the New Zealand General Social Survey and the Household Labour Force Survey (both representative of the New Zealand population, containing the same questions) before and during COVID-19. For each group and outcome, we conducted two statistical tests: one looking at the change between 2018 and June 2020 (collected during and immediately after the first national lockdown); and the second between June 2020 and March 2021 (the latest time point for which we have data). We repeated this analysis for only the subset of people in our 16 groups who were living in the Auckland region.

We found that, in general, reported wellbeing outcomes tended to be more positive or about the same level in June 2020 as they were for the same group in 2018. The outcomes with statistically significant increases across most of the groups we looked at nationally were life satisfaction, having enough income, mental wellbeing, feelings of safety, trust in other people, trust in Parliament, trust in the police, trust in media, and trust in the health system.

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Figure 1: Summary of differences in wellbeing outcomes



The increase in life satisfaction across the population over this time is notable. Over the first year of COVID-19, the populations of Australia and UK were instead reporting a decline in life satisfaction. Using Treasury estimates of the value of social

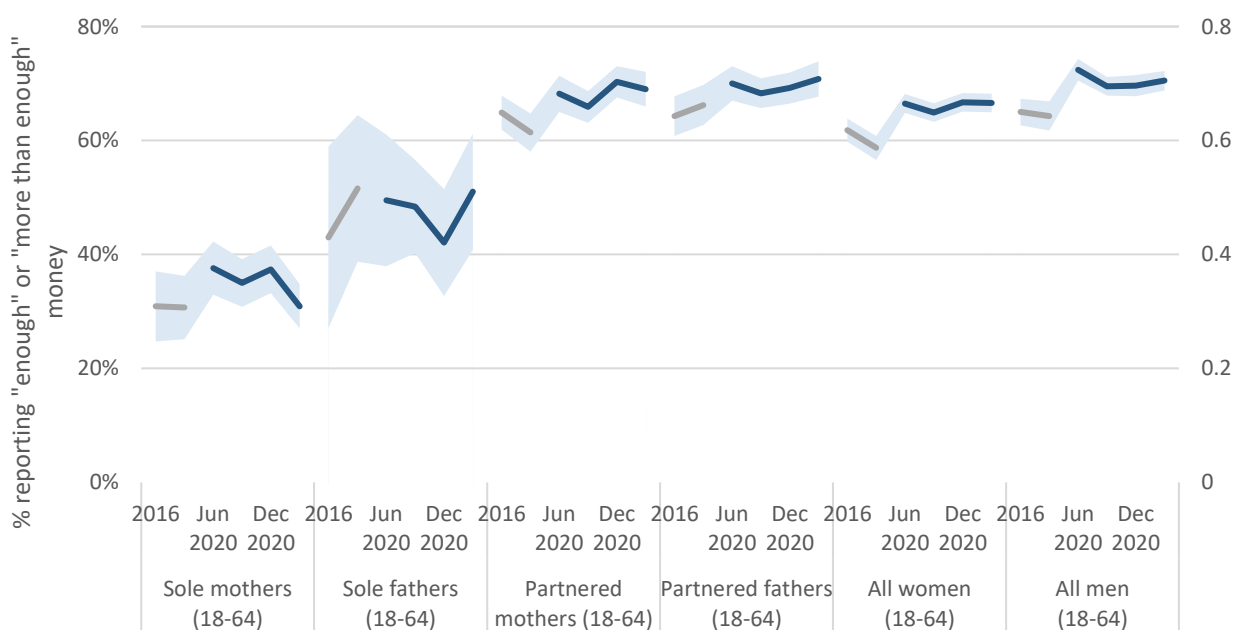
outcomes, the increase in life satisfaction in New Zealand implies a social benefit of \$4.5-19.8 billion – equivalent to 2-8% of New Zealand’s GDP in 2020.

The only statistically significant worsening outcome from 2018 to June 2020 was loneliness, particularly among Pacific people, men, people aged 65+, and people aged 18-39 in Auckland. However, for all of these groups other than 18–39-year-olds, rates of loneliness during COVID-19 were still better than other groups, despite worsening compared to 2018.

In the following 12 months, these initial benefits faded out for many outcomes. Self-reported health and most measures of trust fell for most groups between June 2020 and March 2021, so that by the end of our sample period, outcomes were at about the same level as in 2018. Some declines over the first year of COVID-19 were experienced only for some groups. For example, the life satisfaction of sole mothers in Auckland fell back to 2018 levels by March 2021, whereas for other parents (inside Auckland and nationally), life satisfaction remained higher. There was a similar pattern for Māori in Auckland relating to having enough income. For some groups and outcomes, there was little initial improvement in June 2020, and then a subsequent decline. This includes family wellbeing of people aged 65+, sole mothers reporting having enough income, and experiences of discrimination among Māori. For many of these outcomes, this had the effect of further increasing inequities that already existed.

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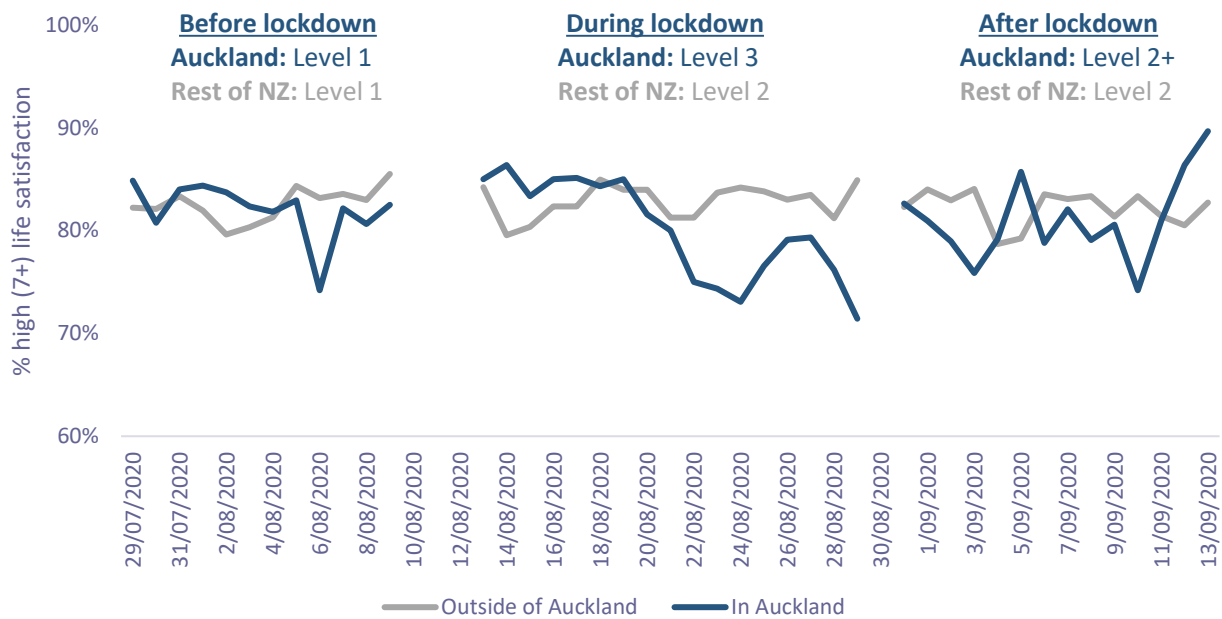
Figure 2: Having enough money, 2016 to March 2021, by parent status



Impacts of lockdown

We examined immediate impacts of lockdown by observing reported outcomes for people who were interviewed immediately before the end of the Alert Level 3 lockdowns that occurred in May and August 2020. We compared these to outcomes for people interviewed immediately before and after this lockdown. We found clear evidence that life satisfaction was lower while people were in lockdown, and some evidence that loneliness also increased (potentially with delayed effects).

Figure 3: Reports of high life satisfaction around August 2020 lockdown



We also found evidence that lockdowns have different impacts on different groups. The largest negative impacts on life satisfaction were among Pacific people and sole mothers. We found a strong gender difference in loneliness, with men’s reported levels of loneliness increasing much more during lockdowns than women. We found mixed effects of lockdown on trust in Parliament depending on group. For partnered mothers and working-aged women, trust was higher during periods of lockdown than immediately after lockdown, whereas for people aged 65+, lockdowns appeared to reduce trust in Parliament.

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Drivers of wellbeing during COVID-19

Because Stats NZ returned to the same households four times over the first year of COVID-19, this meant that many of the same people were surveyed multiple times. We created statistical models that explained changes in reported wellbeing outcomes between June 2020 and March 2021 using changes in other things happening in people's lives over the same time. These statistical models are less likely to be affected by unobservable differences between people, and so might allow us to get closer to causal effects.

These statistical models indicate that life satisfaction over the first year of COVID-19 was heavily affected by health and loneliness. Various economic aspects, including having enough income and not being unemployed, were also moderately important. When looking at family wellbeing, loneliness and material hardship were about as important for life satisfaction, but health, income and unemployment were less important.

These statistical models included indications of whether the respondent was in lockdown or receiving the Winter Energy Payment (an economic support that was doubled during 2020) at the time of the survey. We found that life satisfaction, family wellbeing, and trust in other people were lower when the respondent was in lockdown than at other times in the first year of COVID-19. We also found evidence that Winter Energy Payment improved people's income adequacy (which likely indirectly improved various aspects of wellbeing, including life satisfaction) and family wellbeing during 2020.

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Conclusion

These analyses indicated some concerning results relating to the wellbeing of some groups during the first year of COVID-19. We found evidence that loneliness increased for many groups from June 2020 to March 2021, relative to trends prior to COVID-19. Many groups (such as sole mothers in Auckland) did not experience the same benefits as the broader population, which increased inequity in many areas. While reported outcomes did improve for some outcomes and groups (for example, income adequacy among Pacific people), it is clear that substantial and inequitable barriers to wellbeing remained. Life satisfaction was

lower during the weeks of lockdown in the 12 months we examined, and this appeared to particularly affect Pacific people, sole mothers, and people in Auckland.

The bulk of our results, however, were positive, particularly given the circumstances during 2020 of the country responding to a new pandemic. Life satisfaction was higher for most groups over this period, as were many other aspects of wellbeing. While many of these positive effects appeared to fade out, they generally were not lower than baseline levels in 2018. We found evidence of the positive impact of government supports on wellbeing over this time via the doubled Winter Energy Payment. Wellbeing was also likely to have benefitted by actions we cannot directly measure here, including the coordinated and effective responses of communities such as non-government organisations, whānau, hapū and iwi, ethnic communities, churches, neighbours, and other support networks, looking out for one another in times of crisis.

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Authors

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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 1975. 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>.

Te Atatū – Insights

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.