

# WHAT MAKES A GOOD LIFE?

## *Follow-up report*

Views of children and young people in care on wellbeing



November 2019



**ORANGA  
TAMARIKI**  
Ministry for Children



MANAAKITIA Ā TĀTOU TAMARIKI  
**Children's  
Commissioner**

## About us

This report was a collaboration between the [Office of the Children's Commissioner](#) and [Oranga Tamariki—Ministry for Children \(Oranga Tamariki\)](#), supported by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC). The DPMC asked the Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC) and Oranga Tamariki to gather information from children and young people to make sure their voices were heard in the development of the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy.

The Office of the Children's Commissioner and Oranga Tamariki share a mutual aim of ensuring children and young people have their views heard on matters that affect them. The project team was made up of staff from the Office of the Children's Commissioner's Strategy, Rights and Advice - Mai World team and the Oranga Tamariki Voices of Children and Young People team.

## Acknowledgements

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Most of all we are grateful to the children and young people who participated in the project for their time, wisdom and insights.

Ngā mihi nui and thank you to everyone who was involved.



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# Executive Summary

## We asked children and young people in care about wellbeing

In 2018, the Office of the Children's Commissioner and Oranga Tamariki asked more than 6,000 children and young people across Aotearoa New Zealand what wellbeing means to them. The project was designed to inform the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, which will drive government action on child wellbeing. In February 2019, the report *'What makes a good life? Children and young people's views on wellbeing'*, was released summarising what we heard.

This follow-up report shares the views of the small subset of 113 children and young people in care who took part in the project. It describes what this group of children and young people in care said it means to have a good life, as well as describing their current experiences of wellbeing. It also compares that to what we heard from children and young people who were not in care.

The views of children and young people in care were collected using a mixed methods approach. We engaged with 34 children and young people in focus groups and interviews, which were organised in partnership with seven Oranga Tamariki sites. An online survey was completed by a further 79 children and young people in care who were living in non-family care arrangements. In total, 113 children and young people in care shared their views.

## We heard four key themes from children and young people in care through focus groups and interviews

### *1. I want support for my family and whānau*

The children and young people we spoke with in focus groups and interviews talked about the important roles of parents, siblings and wider family members in helping them to have a good life. They wanted support for their family and whānau so that their family would be able to care for them well. They didn't want to be separated from their family and whānau.

### *2. Oranga Tamariki has the potential to make things better but sometimes makes things worse*

Children and young people's interactions with Oranga Tamariki have a major impact on their lives. Those we spoke with in focus groups and interviews said having relatable youth workers and having social workers who would push to get things done for them could make a big difference. However, children and young people often felt let down

by Oranga Tamariki. They talked about the disruption of frequent placement moves and not feeling listened to by their social workers.

### *3. I want to feel loved and respected*

The children and young people in care we spoke with told us that they wanted to be treated equally to children and young people who are not in care. They wanted to be treated fairly, shown respect by adults and to feel loved and cared for. They spoke about the stigma that comes with being in care, and said that people make assumptions about them because of their care status.

### *4. I want the basics*

Children and young people said that having the basics was a crucial part of having a good life. Those we spoke with said they shouldn't have to struggle with having enough food or a place to stay. They talked about having electricity, a warm house, the right clothes and being able to pay for school supplies. They said that children and young people shouldn't have to worry about being able to pay for the things they need to survive.

## **There was also a fifth finding based on the survey results**

### *5. Across a range of wellbeing indicators, children and young people in non-whānau care generally fare worse than their peers*

Children and young people who completed the survey were asked about how much they agreed or disagreed with a series of 17 statements about elements of wellbeing, to see how they are currently experiencing wellbeing. Children and young people in care fared worse in every area of wellbeing the survey asked about, and the difference was statistically significant for 14 of the 17 statements.

## **There were strengths and limitations to our survey approach**

The group of children and young people who took part in focus groups and interviews, as well as those who completed the survey, was not intended to be representative of all children and young people in care.

In particular, survey responses are limited to children and young people in care who were living in non-family care arrangements, which excludes the approximately six in ten children and young people who are in care but living with family or whānau. Identifying that group would have required the survey to include a question about the child or young person's legal custody status, rather than just their living arrangements, which was deemed too complex for a survey designed to be completed independently by children and young people. In addition, the small number of responses (79) means

only relatively large differences between the results for children and young people in care and the results for those who are not in care can be considered statistically significant.

However, there are also strengths to our approach. In particular, the ability to compare the subset of responses of children and young people in care with the overall responses provides a point of reference for how children and young people in care are faring compared to their peers.

### **Overall, we learned what needs to happen if the wellbeing of children and young people in care is to be improved**

This work sought to better understand what children and young people in care think about wellbeing, and how they are currently experiencing wellbeing. The key themes suggest there are some areas of wellbeing where children and young people in care experience major challenges. For 14 of the 17 elements of wellbeing the survey asked about, children and young people in care fared worse than those who are not in care.

The biggest area of alignment between the views of those in care and the views of those who are not in care was the emphasis both groups placed on the importance of family and whānau. Both groups also agreed on the importance of having the basics. Both groups mentioned things like feeling loved and respected, but this meant something slightly different for the children and young people in care we spoke with. For example, children and young people who were not in care focused on the importance of acceptance, while those we spoke with who were in care mentioned the importance of being treated like equals.

The themes we heard from children and young people in care suggest that a number of things need to happen if their wellbeing is to be improved. These include:

- Ensuring that the rights of all children and young people in care are upheld.
- Recognising the challenges that children and young people in care face relative to other children and young people.
- Improving children and young people's experiences with Oranga Tamariki.
- Ensuring that family and whānau are supported and are involved in the lives of children and young people in care.
- Ensuring that the people caring for children and young people have the support they need to meet children and young people's needs.
- Providing opportunities for children and young people in care to share their views, in order to understand their aspirations and the challenges they face, including discrimination because of their care status.

## Section One: Introduction

In 2018, the Office of the Children’s Commissioner and Oranga Tamariki asked 6,054 children and young people what wellbeing means to them. The project informed the development of the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, which will drive action on child wellbeing. In February 2019, the report *‘What makes a good life? Children and young people’s views on wellbeing’*, was released summarising what we heard.<sup>1</sup>

This follow-up report shares the views of a subset of 113 children and young people in care who took part in the project. These children and young people had all been placed in the custody of the Chief Executive of Oranga Tamariki.

This follow-up report is an opportunity to understand what wellbeing means to this group of children and young people in care. Although the experiences of this group do not purport to be representative of all children and young people in care, their views and experiences can provide insight into the wellbeing of children and young people engaged with Oranga Tamariki and highlight opportunities for improvement, particularly for children and young people who do not live with their family or whānau.

The purposes of the report are to:

- Help to uphold the right of all children and young people to share their views and have those views taken in to account.
- Share the views of a group of children and young people in care on what it means to have a good life, what helps and what gets in the way.
- Share the experiences of wellbeing for that group of children and young people.
- Compare the views and experiences of wellbeing for this group of children and young people in care with those who are not in care.
- Contribute to the development of initiatives focused on the wellbeing of children and young people in care, including the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy and the oranga tamariki action plan.

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<sup>1</sup> The first report is available at [www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/research/latest-research/what-makes-a-good-life/](http://www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/research/latest-research/what-makes-a-good-life/) and <https://www.occ.org.nz/publications/reports/what-makes-a-good-life/>

## Section Two: Our approach

This section provides a brief overview of how we engaged with children and young people in care and then analysed what they said. We used a mixed methods approach, including an online survey, focus groups and interviews. More information about the characteristics of the children and young people in care we engaged with is contained in Appendix 1. The strengths and limitations of our approach are discussed in Section Four of this report. A methodology for the entire project is contained in the [first report](#).

### *Who we engaged with*

The online survey was completed by 79 children and young people in non-family care arrangements aged between seven and 19 years. Of the children and young people in care who completed the survey, 53% were male, 35% female and 12% selected 'gender diverse', 'a gender not listed here' or 'I'd rather not say'. In terms of ethnicity, 44% of care-experienced survey respondents were Māori, 29% were Pacific and 41% were New Zealand European (children and young people could indicate more than one ethnicity which is why these figures total more than 100%).

The focus groups and interviews involved 34 children and young people aged between five and 19 years in a range of care placement types (including family and non-family care). We spoke with similar numbers of males (47%) and females (53%). Of these participants, 62% were Māori, 12% were Pacific and 38% New Zealand European.

### *How we engaged*

The survey included a mix of closed and open-ended questions. This report focuses on two parts of the survey. The first part asked children and young people how they are currently experiencing 17 selected elements of wellbeing. The second part asked, "what is the one thing you want to tell the Prime Minister that children and young people need to live good lives, now and in the future?" Answers to this question were used to illustrate the themes from focus groups and interviews (Section Three of this report).

The survey was available through two channels. The majority of the responses came from students of schools directly invited to participate from the Office of the Children's Commissioner's Mai World network. The link was also available on the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet website.

Focus groups and interviews included discussion, drawing, performing arts and activity-based techniques. We worked with seven Oranga Tamariki sites to engage with children



and young people in care. We worked particularly closely with Oranga Tamariki youth workers, who were able to ensure the children and young people we spoke with felt supported and able to share their views. Some of the youth workers helped facilitate or co-facilitate engagements with children and young people.

### ***How we analysed what we heard from children and young people in care***

Survey responses were included in the analysis for this report where the child or young person indicated a living situation consistent with being in care, that is: with a caregiver, in a foster family, in a care and protection residence, in a group home or in a youth justice residence. This excludes the approximately six in ten children and young people who are in the custody of Oranga Tamariki but living with family or whānau.<sup>2</sup>

The reason the survey excludes children and young people in family or whānau care placements is because identifying that group would have required the survey to include a question about the child or young person's legal custody status, rather than just their living arrangements. This was deemed too complex for a survey designed to be completed independently by children and young people.

Survey respondents were asked to use a 5-point scale to indicate their level of agreement with 17 statements that assessed different elements of wellbeing. We then calculated the proportion of respondents in each group (care and non-care) who agreed (strongly agree and agree combined), neither agreed nor disagreed, or disagreed (disagree and strongly disagree combined) with each statement.

Logistic regression was used to test for group differences in the proportion who agreed with each statement. Results were considered statistically significant if  $p < 0.05$  (see footnote 4).

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<sup>2</sup> This figure is from the recent Oranga Tamariki Safety of Children in Care report (released July 2019), which found that between January and March 2019, 57% of children and young people in care were living with family or whānau (45% were in a family placement while a further 12% were in a return/remain home placement, which means the child or young person is in the legal custody of the Chief Executive but returns to or remains in the care of their immediate family). A further 41% were in a non-family/whānau placement and 2% were in a residential placement.

A collaborative analysis process was used to analyse focus group and interview data. The outputs from the focus groups and interviews were analysed by six people as part of a one-day analysis hui, including three members of the project team and three who had not been involved in the project until that point and were there to provide a critical and more objective perspective on the information and discussions.

Throughout this report quotes are presented to illustrate key themes. Children aged 13 and under are referred to as 'children', while those aged 14 or over are referred to as 'young people'. The child or young person's location is also recorded.

## Section Three: What did we hear?

This section describes what we heard from children and young people in care through the interviews, focus groups and survey. There were four key themes from the children and young people we spoke with in person through interviews and focus groups, and a fifth finding based on the survey results:

1. I want support for my family and whānau.
2. Oranga Tamariki has the potential to make things better but can sometimes make things worse.
3. I want to feel loved and respected.
4. I want the basics.
5. Across a range of wellbeing indicators, children and young people in non-whānau care fare worse than their peers.

### **1. I want support for my family and whānau**

For the children and young people in care we spoke with in focus groups and interviews, whānau were essential to having a good life. They talked about the roles that parents, siblings and wider family played in their lives. They wanted support for their family so that their family would be able to care for them. They didn't want to be separated from their family and whānau.

#### **My family need support – they are the ones who will be there for me**

*“Mum. When people pick on me she would come to school. Supports me, cheers me up. When I cry she will stick up for me. She talks to me so much and says she loves me.”* Child from Whangārei

Children and young people spoke a lot about being with their whānau. They said it was important that family and whānau are supported to take care of them and they wanted it to be easier for their families to be involved in what was happening to them. They wanted to be able to spend time with their family. Children and young people spoke about specific family experiences, such as going fishing with their koro.

*“Children and young people have to have good lives by having people like families, friends, and teachers to cheer and encourage them to keep on going if they fall down.”* Child from Auckland

Some children and young people spoke about providing specific support to family members; for example, one young person said having a good life meant that his mum

would receive counselling. Children and young people said their parents' upbringing could sometimes lead to problems, but their parents were not supported to deal with those problems. They spoke about financial support for family and whānau.

*"Please do everything you can if their parents are poor and on a benefit so that them and their children can live."* Child from Dunedin

### **Being separated from my family and whānau really hurts**

*"They promise they won't separate us, that they'll keep kids together, but if they can't promise it don't say it. We already know that everything's sh\*t, they can't hide that. They shouldn't."* Young person from Dunedin

The children and young people we spoke with said being separated from family was one of the things that could get in the way of a good life. They spoke about the pain of being separated from siblings and parents. Children and young people wanted to be able to see their family and spend time with them.

## **2. Oranga Tamariki has the potential to make things better but can sometimes makes things worse**

Children and young people told us about the impact that Oranga Tamariki can have on their lives. Those we spoke with said having relatable youth workers and social workers who push to get things done can make a big difference to their wellbeing. However, children and young people in care often felt let down by Oranga Tamariki. They talked about the disruption of frequent placement moves and said they didn't feel listened to.

### **When social workers get it right it makes a big difference**

*"A social worker that is welcoming. She listened instead of asking questions – she did all she could for me."* Young person from Christchurch

Some children and young people talked about the difference it made when Oranga Tamariki helped them out. These children and young people said it made a difference having relatable youth workers and social workers who would work hard to get things done. Children and young people said having a good social worker could lead to a better life.

*"Telling your social worker something and knowing they will actually do it instead of just slapping it on the desk."* Young person from Dunedin

### I experience constant change

*"Stability not moving around, having the same social worker, being listened to having voices heard. Good supports and trusting them with decisions."*

Young person from Christchurch

Children and young people in care talked a lot about instability. Many of those we spoke with described how hard it was to have multiple social workers who were always leaving. They said moving placements could be traumatising and meant they never got the chance to form lasting relationships. Changing schools meant they would have to start all over again each time; one young person told us that moving schools so often meant she didn't really have any friends anymore. These changes could be a major barrier to having a good life.

*"What helps? People that will stay in your life."* Young person from Hamilton

Children and young people said that having just one social worker would be better than their social worker changing all the time. They wanted stable relationships and they also wanted to be able to spend a longer period of time in care placements.

### I don't feel listened to

*"The big message is give kids a choice."* Young person from Dunedin

Many children and young people told us they feel like they don't have any choices. They felt like their freedoms were impacted because of their care status. Younger children talked about not being able to play with other children. Young people mentioned not having a say in decisions, such as where they are staying.

*"The family makes the rules and you go with it."* Young person from Upper Hutt

Often children and young people connected their sense of not being listened to with their experiences with Oranga Tamariki. Those we spoke with said their social workers didn't usually listen to them, and when they did listen they didn't always act on what children and young people had told them.

Part of not feeling listened to was not having enough information about what was happening to them. Children and young people felt there was a lack of communication from social workers and said sometimes they felt as though social workers "sugarcoat" what was happening to them. Not knowing what was going on was one thing that could get in the way of a good life for the children and young people we spoke with.

### Oranga Tamariki lets me down

*“People don’t listen, sometimes social workers, they say they’ll do something and it never happens.”* Young person from Dunedin

Children and young people spoke about experiences of being let down by their social workers. They said the workloads of social workers meant they never got the chance to get to know them. This meant they could not talk to them, because they weren’t able to spend time with them and get to know them, and therefore could not trust them. Children and young people spoke about social workers not being there when they needed them. They said social workers need to stay in touch regularly, be honest with them and give them the information they need. Sometimes they felt as though their social worker and caregiver didn’t really know each other.

*“It takes social workers forever to do anything, that’s what screws up opportunities.”* Young person from Dunedin

Many children and young people we spoke with felt that they were not properly supported by Oranga Tamariki. Some spoke about not knowing what they were entitled to from Oranga Tamariki, and not finding out until they met other children and young people in care who had had different experiences. Some children and young people in care had a sense of feeling “stuck in the system”.

The impact of feeling let down by Oranga Tamariki was illustrated by one young person who told us about being taken away from her family. The police and Oranga Tamariki had shown up to her house and taken her and her siblings away without giving them or their whānau any notice. The whānau who were at home at the time fought against the police officer and social workers and some were arrested. The struggle at the house meant the young person remained in care longer than she should have. It wasn’t the first time this had happened; the Police and Oranga Tamariki had also uplifted her and her siblings in this way from school. The way this young person and her whānau were treated made her feel let down by Oranga Tamariki, which made her angry. She told us:

*“If they wanna go to war, we will go to war.”*  
Young person from Auckland

### I need to be with caregivers that really care about me

Children and young people wanted to feel cared for by their caregivers. They wanted to be with caregivers who would support and respect them and treat them as equals. They emphasised the importance of good relationships with their caregivers.

*"The relationship between child and caregiver in a lot of homes is that they have the power. That's the problem. Kids aren't being treated equally."*

Young person from Dunedin

Some children and young people we spoke with felt let down by their caregivers. They described feeling powerless in caregiver homes. They said caregivers should treat children and young people in care as equal to their own children, but this didn't always happen. They criticised the lack of choice they had over their caregiver and placement.

*"I think the main focus should be on employing new caregivers so that placements aren't limited."* Young person from Dunedin

### **3. I want to feel loved and respected**

Children and young people in care told us that they wanted to be treated equally to children and young people who are not in care. They wanted to be treated fairly, shown respect by adults and to feel loved and cared for. They spoke about the stigma and discrimination that comes with being in care, and said that people make assumptions about them. They said it was important for adults to be understanding towards them.

#### **Treat me as an equal**

*"A good life to me is having the same opportunities as everyone else. My voice being heard and the voices of those who can't speak for themselves."*

Young person from Christchurch

The children and young people we spoke with told us that they wanted to be treated equally to children and young people who are not in care. They wanted to be treated fairly, shown respect by adults and they didn't want to feel judged for being in care.

*"You're not just some kid from Oranga Tamariki."* Young person from Hamilton

Being treated as an equal included having the same opportunities as children and young people who are not in care. Young people spoke about specific examples, such as having a bank account, being able to go out and having more responsibilities.

#### **Be understanding towards me**

*"If we make a mistake, allow us to learn from it."* Young person from Hamilton

Children and young people said it was important for adults to be understanding towards them, because some of them have been through a lot. Some of them spoke about challenging the stereotypes of children in care and showing examples of young

people who have “*come out of the system on top.*” Some children and young people spoke about the importance of adults showing empathy.

### **I want to feel loved**

*“Support, stability and to be loved unconditionally. When a child is supported and feels the love they are capable of anything.”* Young person from Christchurch

Many children and young people spoke about love and happiness. They said having a good life was about having fun, enjoying themselves and making good memories. They valued having fun and activities such as road trips, birthdays and listening to music. Some children and young people spoke about wanting to be praised and rewarded.

*“A good life means being able to be me, able to get along with my family and friends and to be happy.”* Young person from Christchurch

### **I am stigmatised and discriminated against because I am in care**

*“Something I always have to deal with at school is the stigma. When people find out you’re a foster kid and they’re like, ‘oh you’re an orphan’, or ‘whose house did you burn down?’”* Young person from Dunedin

The children and young people we spoke with had strong views about stigma and discrimination. They spoke about “the stigma that comes with being in the system” and the negative assumptions that get made about them because they are in care. Some felt there was a general lack of understanding about what it means to be in care.

*“Making people that are in care feel more wanted like feel like they belong with the crowd. For them feel like they’re not being judged wherever they go because they are in care.”* Young person from Hamilton

Some children and young people in care said they often felt judged by adults and negatively compared to others. They said people in the community make assumptions about them because they are in care. Some young people also felt they were not trusted by Oranga Tamariki.

*“OT thinks we are the same, like back in the day. They’ve got to keep a tab on you.”* Young person from Hamilton



## 4. I want the basics

The children and young people we talked with spoke about needing to have 'the basics'. They wanted to feel comfortable and they didn't want to have to struggle. They emphasised the importance of having enough money and being able to access the supports they need.

### Provide me with the basics and help me to feel comfortable

*Not having to struggle – struggling and worrying about schooling and clothing and stationary and when you are going to eat next and bills.”*

Young person from Christchurch

Children and young people spoke about the basics as important for a good life. They mentioned having enough food, a warm house, electricity, clothes and school supplies.

*“Comfort. You would want to be comfy in your own home, wouldn't you?”*

Young person from Christchurch

Children and young people in care spoke about being able to afford the essentials and having a stable income. Young people said that having the basics covered gave them a sense of security and independence.

*“Knowing there is money coming keeps you well mentally.”*

Young person from Dunedin

The basics included taking part in sports and activities. Children and young people wanted to be able to play games and participate in activities such as kapa haka, dancing, soccer and netball. Young people spoke about the importance of youth spaces and activities for young people outside of school, and being able to take part in creative arts groups. All of these things needed to be accessible and affordable.

*“Have the ability to get what they want – like if they wanted to do a sport they could do a sport. A lot of kids have a dream but people say they can't do that.”*

Young person from Christchurch

### I don't have enough money and I can't access the supports I need

*“There shouldn't be situations where a young person needs to drop out of school or turn to illegal options just to provide food for their families.”*

Young person from Auckland

Children and young people in care spoke about the barriers preventing them from accessing the basics. Often this was about money; money problems could mean

families struggled and parents could find it hard to get jobs. One child talked about ensuring benefit levels were high enough to live on.

*“School uniforms are so expensive. Sometimes my little brother goes to school with no jacket.”* Young person from Christchurch

As well as financial barriers, children and young people also spoke about the difficulty of accessing services. Some young people said there were not enough counsellors and mental health services. One young person said even when support services existed it was difficult to know who to ask for help.

## ***5. Across a range of wellbeing indicators, children and young people in non-whānau care fare worse than their peers***

In addition to the four key themes from focus groups and interviews, there was a fifth finding based on the survey results.

Children and young people who completed the survey<sup>3</sup> were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with a series of 17 statements about elements of wellbeing. The majority of the children and young people in care who completed the survey responded positively to most statements (see Figure 1). However, there were some statements that only around one-half of children and young people in care agreed with:

- 51% indicated that they can cope when life gets hard.
- 51% indicated that they get enough time to spend with their family/whānau.
- 49% indicated that they feel safe online.
- 46% indicated that they feel they belong at school.

When responses from children and young people in care were compared to the results from those who are not in care, we found that they fared worse in all 17 elements of wellbeing the survey asked about (see Figure 1 and 2). The difference was statistically significant for 14 out of the 17 elements of wellbeing.

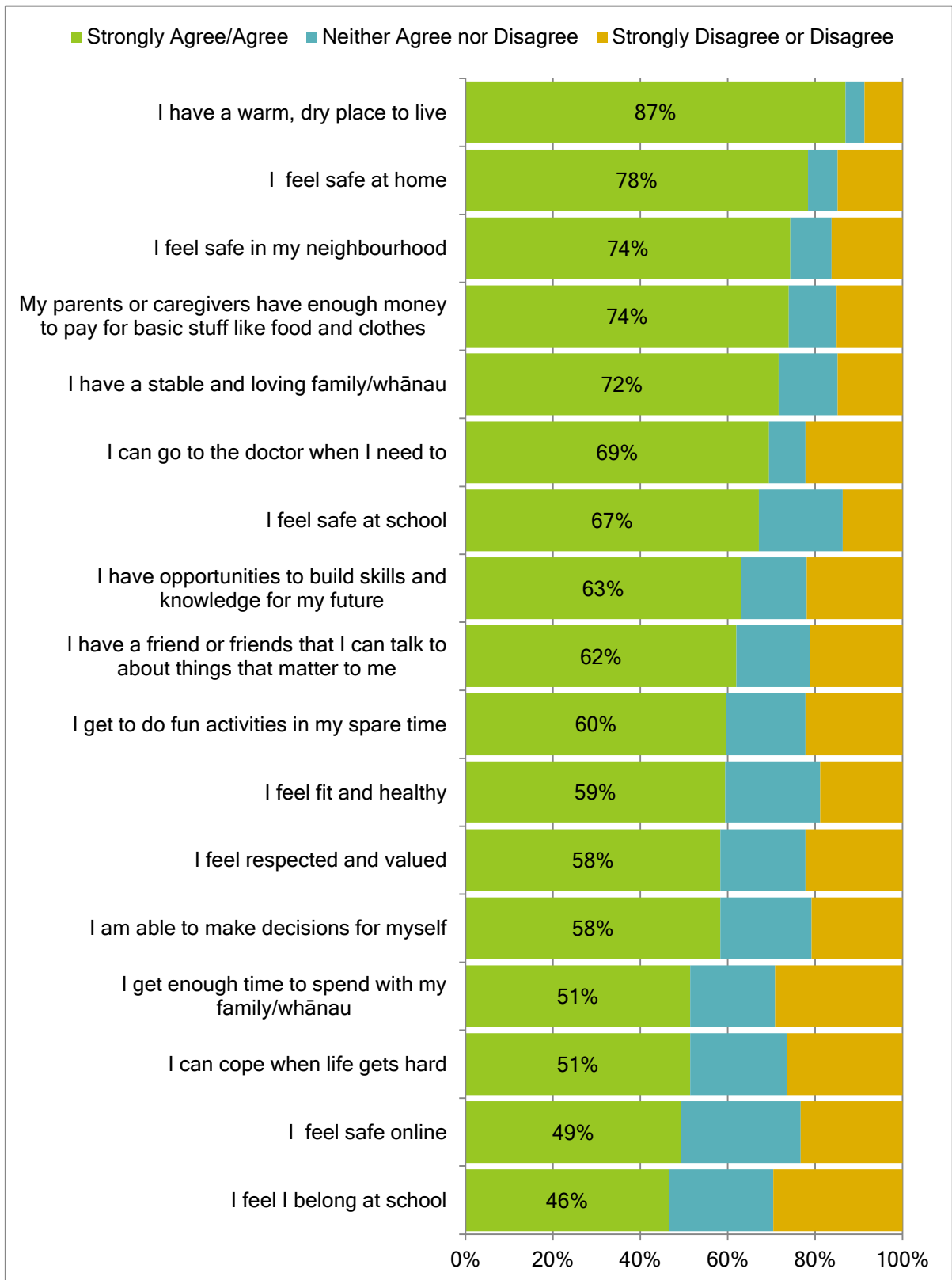
Table 1 shows the differences between the results for children and young people in care and those who were not in care. The biggest differences were for the statements relating to:

- Spending time with family and whānau.
- Being able to make decisions.
- Feeling safe online.
- Having opportunities to build skills and knowledge for the future.
- Getting to do fun activities in spare time.
- Feeling a sense of belonging at school.

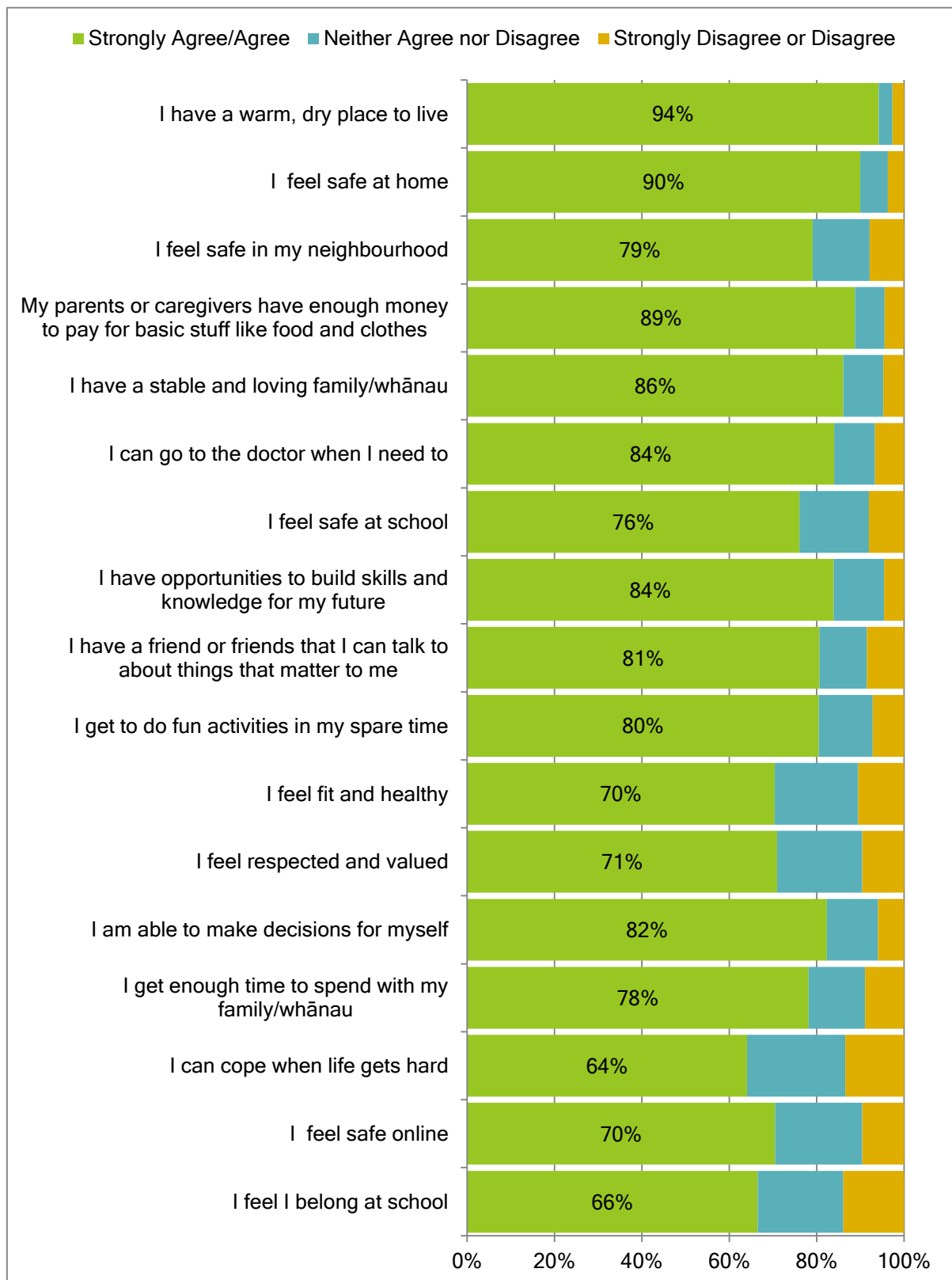
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<sup>3</sup> N.b. the children and young people who completed the survey were all living in non-family care arrangements (see footnote 2 above).

Figure 1: Elements of wellbeing for children and young people in non-whānau care (n=79)



**Figure 2: Elements of wellbeing for children and young people not in care (n=5353)**



**Table 1: Elements of wellbeing for children and young people in care (n=79) compared to elements of wellbeing for children and young people not in care (n=5353)**

Statement	Strongly agree or agree (children and young people not in care)	Strongly agree or agree (children and young people in non-family care)	Difference between strongly agree or agree responses <sup>4</sup>
I get enough time to spend with my family/whānau	78%	51%	-27%*
I am able to make decisions for myself	82%	58%	-24%*
I feel safe online	70%	49%	-21%*
I have opportunities to build skills and knowledge for my future	84%	63%	-21%*
I get to do fun activities in my spare time	80%	60%	-21%*
I feel I belong at school	66%	46%	-20%*
I have a friend or friends that I can talk to about things that matter to me	81%	62%	-19%*
I can go to the doctor when I need to	84%	69%	-15%*
My parents or caregivers have enough money to pay for basic stuff like food and clothes	89%	74%	-15%*
I have a stable and loving family/whānau	86%	72%	-14%*
I can cope when life gets hard	64%	51%	-13%*
I feel respected and valued	71%	58%	-13%*
I feel safe at home	90%	78%	-12%*
I feel fit and healthy	70%	59%	-11%
I feel safe at school	76%	67%	-9%
I have a warm, dry place to live	94%	87%	-7%*
I feel safe in my neighbourhood	79%	74%	-5%

<sup>4</sup> Asterisks denote that the difference is statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). This means we are 95% confident there was a real difference between the groups and that it was not due to chance.

## Section Four: What did we learn?

This section discusses how the views of children and young people in care compared with the views of those who were not in care. It discusses possible implications as well as the strengths and limitations of our approach.

### *How children and young people in care experience wellbeing, and what wellbeing means to them*

In terms of what wellbeing means to children and young people in care, those we spoke with emphasised four themes: the role of family and whānau, the role of Oranga Tamariki, the importance of feeling loved and respected and the importance of having the basics. They told us that their families are crucial, and that their families need to be supported to take care of them. They said when Oranga Tamariki gets things right it can make a big difference, but that Oranga Tamariki can sometimes make things worse.

Children and young people said they wanted to feel loved, they wanted to be treated as equals and they needed people to be understanding. They said they sometimes felt stigmatised and discriminated against because of their care status. They also said that having the basics is important. They needed to have a comfortable place to live, enough food to eat and enough money to be able to afford things like school uniforms.

In the online survey, children and young people were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with 17 statements about elements of wellbeing. Most children and young people in care gave a positive response for the majority of statements. However, a large proportion of this group were experiencing challenges. Around one-half of the children and young people in care we surveyed felt safe online, felt they could cope when life gets hard or felt they spent enough time with their family and whānau.

### *How wellbeing differs for children and young people in care*

#### **Some things are crucial for all children and young people – family, whānau and having the basics**

The biggest area of alignment between the views of children and young people in care and the views of those who are not in care was the emphasis both groups placed on the importance of family and whānau. Both groups said that for children and young people to be well their families must also be well, and parents and families need to be

supported to take care of their children. For children and young people, regardless of whether or not they are in care, family and whānau are an integral part of their lives.

Children and young people in care agreed with those who are not in care on the importance of having the basics. Both groups emphasised having a home, an education and enough money to afford the things they need. Children and young people who were not in care placed more emphasis on the need for the services and systems which provide these 'basics' to be inclusive and accessible, but this is not to say that inclusivity and accessibility did not matter to children and young people in care. Overall there was a strong message that the basics are crucial for children and young people's wellbeing.

### **Universal elements of wellbeing can have a specific meaning for children and young people in care**

Both children and young people in care and those who were not in care mentioned elements of wellbeing like feeling loved and respected. However, these meant different things to different groups. For example, children and young people who were not in care emphasised acceptance, while the children and young people in care that we spoke with emphasised the importance of being treated like equals. Both groups wanted to be shown empathy and understanding, but for children and young people in care the desire for understanding often related specifically to the experiences that led to them being in care. Both groups faced stigma, but children and young people in care faced a specific form of stigma due to their care status. Understanding the unique needs and experiences of children and young people in care is important.

### **Children and young people's wellbeing is affected by their care experience**

This analysis suggests that children and young people in care fare worse than those who are not in care for most of the elements of wellbeing the survey asked about. The biggest differences between the results for children and young people in care and those who are not in care related to spending time with family and whānau and being able to make decisions. The finding relating to family and whānau is perhaps unsurprising given that survey respondents were all in non-family care arrangements.

In some areas there appeared to be alignment between the survey results and the qualitative themes. For example, children and young people in care told us about experiencing constant change, which could make it more difficult to form friendships. This aligned with the survey results, which found that children and young people in care were less likely to feel they belong at school and less likely to have a friend that they can talk to about the things that matter to them.



## ***What needs to happen to improve the wellbeing of children and young people in care?***

### **Recognise the significant challenges that children and young people in care face relative to other children and young people**

Across the board, children and young people in care faced challenges that those who are not in care did not. Initiatives aimed at supporting children and young people need to recognise the challenges faced by this cohort, because they need specific attention if their wellbeing is to be improved. This applies to cross-government initiatives such as the oranga tamariki action plan, initiatives within government departments, as well as schools and other agencies. It may also apply to community organisations and NGOs. If children and young people in care are not identified as a specific group in need of support then the effectiveness of efforts to improve their wellbeing may be reduced.

### **Improve children and young people's experiences with Oranga Tamariki**

Children and young people's experiences with Oranga Tamariki must be improved if the wellbeing of children and young people in care is to be improved. Children and young people in care said that Oranga Tamariki has a big impact on their lives. Many of those we spoke with felt let down by their social workers or their caregivers. However, when Oranga Tamariki gets it right it can have a positive impact. These key themes reinforce the importance of the ongoing improvements to the organisation.

### **Ensure that family and whānau are supported and can be involved in the lives of children and young people in care**

Family and whānau are crucial to children and young people in care. Those tasked with keeping children and young people safe should not lose sight of the importance of family and whānau. Family and whānau need to be supported so that the separation of children and young people from their families can be avoided.

### **Ensure that the people caring for children and young people have the support they need to meet children and young people's needs**

The importance of family and whānau for both children and young people in care and those not in care suggests that the systems designed to help children and young people need to complement the broader systems designed to help adults, such as the welfare system. The children and young people in care we spoke with often talked about not having enough money to afford the basics such as housing, food and school supplies. The changes required to address these challenges are not just about children, and they are beyond the control of a single government department.

## **Provide opportunities for children and young people in care to share their views, in order to understand their aspirations and the challenges they face**

An ongoing commitment to listening to the voices of children and young people in care is critical. These themes have shown that while some of the factors affecting the wellbeing of children and young people in care are universal, others are unique to that cohort. Some factors are universal but have unique implications for children and young people in care. An ongoing commitment to hearing the voices of children and young people in care will be critical to understanding their unique needs and aspirations.

## **Strengths and limitations**

### **Strengths**

#### *Partnerships with Oranga Tamariki sites*

The support of Oranga Tamariki sites enabled the project team to speak with children and young people in care and seek their views. Oranga Tamariki staff, who held the relationships with the children and young people we spoke with, co-facilitated some focus groups (along with the project team) and some of them also took part in the analysis process. Their support was an important part of enabling children and young people to feel comfortable sharing their opinions with the project team.

#### *Availability of a comparison group*

The large number of survey responses in the overall report has enabled comparison between the wellbeing of children and young people in care and the wellbeing of children and young people in general. This gives us an important point of reference in examining how children and young people are doing.

### **Limitations**

#### *Identification of children and young people in care*

The analysis included in this report is limited to insights from children and young people who we could be certain were in care at the time of the engagement. For the focus group analysis, this includes the engagements organised through Oranga Tamariki sites. There are likely to have been children and young people in care who took part in focus groups organised by the Office of the Children's Commissioner's community partners. However, we are unable to identify those children and young people as we did not record the care status of those focus group participants.

For the survey analysis this includes responses where the respondent indicated a living situation consistent with being in non-family care, that is: with a caregiver, in a foster

family, in a care and protection residence, in a group home or in a youth justice residence. It excludes the approximately six in ten children and young people who are in care but live with family (see footnote 2). The lack of responses from this group may mean the results are not representative of all children and young people in care. For example, this may have contributed to the low number of children and young people in care who said they get to spend enough time with family/whānau (see Table 1).

#### *Sample size for children and young people in care*

The relatively small number of children and young people in care who took part in both the focus groups and interviews (n=34) and the survey (n=79) means that the views of this group are not representative of all children and young people in care.

In addition, the small number of survey responses from children and young people in care means that only relatively large differences between the results for that group and the results for children and young people not in care were statistically significant. Some of the smaller numerical differences in this report may also be meaningful, and had a larger sample size been available, the results might have shown a greater number of wellbeing elements that were statistically significantly different by care experience.

It is also worth noting that the number of survey responses from children and young people in care was much lower than the number of responses from those who were not in care (n=5,631). This made it more difficult to detect statistically significant differences between the two groups, again raising the possibility that a larger sample size may have highlighted a greater number of differences in wellbeing between the two groups.

#### *Survey method and survey distribution*

Distributing the survey through schools means the results may be skewed towards children and young people engaged in education. Targeting the focus groups towards children and young people more likely to be facing challenges was one way to mitigate the lower representation of children and young people not engaged in education. The online survey also excludes children and young people without internet access, young children, or those who do not have the reading level needed to do the survey.

#### *Validation*

This analysis uses subjective views of children and young people regarding experiences of wellbeing. There is exclusive reliance on subjective reports and we have not attempted to triangulate the data with other sources to check for validity.

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## Section Five: Conclusion

In the first *'What Makes a Good Life?'* report we drew three conclusions: that government initiatives should reflect children's aspirations, that adults should listen to children's views and that children and young people deserve more. The urgency of those conclusions is reinforced by this report.

The themes of this report suggest that to improve the wellbeing of children and young people in care, we must first recognise the challenges they face relative to other children and young people. The critical importance of family and whānau in children and young people's lives must be respected.

Oranga Tamariki has an important role to support the wellbeing of children and young people in care; the organisation must continue to take steps to better support children, young people, their families and whānau. However, the themes of this report also suggest that the implications are wider than one agency; supporting children and young people requires supporting the adults who care for them, and improving broader support systems.

## Appendix 1: Demographic information for children and young people in care

### Survey participants – age

	Number	Percentage
0-6 yrs	0	0%
7-9 yrs	8	10%
10-12 yrs	23	29%
13-15 yrs	23	29%
16-19 yrs	25	32%
Total	79	

### Focus groups/interviews – age

	Number	Percentage
0-6 yrs	2	6%
7-9 yrs	6	18%
10-12 yrs	2	6%
13-15 yrs	10	29%
16-19 yrs	14	41%
Total	34	

### Survey participants – gender

	Number	Percentage
Male	42	53%
Female	28	35%
Gender diverse	2	3%
I'd rather not say	4	5%
A gender not listed above	3	4%
Total	79	

### Focus groups/interviews – gender

	Number	Percentage
Male	16	47%
Female	18	53%
Gender diverse	0	0%
I'd rather not say	0	0%
A gender not listed above	0	0%
Total	34	

### Survey participants – ethnicity

	Number	Percentage
New Zealand European	32	41%
Māori	34	44%
Pacific	23	29%
Indian	3	4%
Chinese	3	4%
Other	7	9%

### Focus groups/interviews – ethnicity

	Number	Percentage
New Zealand European	13	38%
Māori	21	62%
Pacific	4	12%
Indian	2	6%
Chinese	0	0%
Other	2	6%