

**THE  
NEW ZEALAND  
INITIATIVE**

# New Zealand by Numbers

2026 Edition

*What the long-run data reveals about our changing country*



Edited by Oliver Hartwich and Bryce Wilkinson

New Zealand by Numbers, 2026 Edition

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Every chart and figure in this publication is documented in the bibliography. Drafted with research and production assistance from Claude (Anthropic). All data were compiled from the official and international sources cited.

# Contents

	<b>Foreword</b> .....	<b>6</b>
	<b>A note on the data</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Population</b> .....	<b>8</b>
1.01	New Zealand's population .....	9
1.02	Rural and urban population .....	10
1.03	Natural increase and net migration.....	11
1.04	Median age .....	12
1.05	Age distribution .....	13
1.06	Ethnicity .....	14
1.07	Population born overseas .....	15
1.08	Migrant arrivals and departures.....	16
1.09	Departures by destination .....	17
1.10	Religious affiliation.....	18
1.11	Average household occupancy.....	19
1.12	Children and the elderly .....	20
<b>2</b>	<b>Children and Families</b> .....	<b>21</b>
2.01	Marriage rate .....	22
2.02	Civil unions and same-sex marriages .....	23
2.03	Marital status of the adult population .....	24
2.04	Median age at first marriage.....	25
2.05	Divorce rate .....	26
2.06	Divorces involving children .....	27
2.07	Total fertility rate.....	28
2.08	Ex-nuptial births.....	29
2.09	Families by type.....	30
2.10	Teenage mothers .....	31
2.11	Household composition.....	32
2.12	Adoptions .....	33
2.13	Working for Families .....	34
<b>3</b>	<b>Health and Mortality</b> .....	<b>35</b>
3.01	Hospital beds .....	36
3.02	Private health insurance .....	37
3.03	Medical practitioners.....	38
3.04	Immunisation rates .....	39
3.05	Tobacco use .....	40
3.06	Alcohol consumption.....	41
3.07	Obesity.....	42
3.08	Mental health.....	43
3.09	Life expectancy at birth .....	44
3.10	Suicide .....	45
3.11	Motor vehicle deaths, ages 15-24.....	46
3.12	Adolescent death rates (15-19 years) .....	47
3.13	Death rates by age group .....	48
3.14	Motor vehicle accident fatalities.....	49
3.15	Maternal mortality.....	50
3.16	Neonatal and infant mortality .....	51

<b>4</b>	<b>Education.....</b>	<b>52</b>
4.01	State, state-integrated and private school enrolments.....	53
4.02	Student-teacher ratio.....	54
4.03	PISA scores: reading, mathematics and science.....	55
4.04	Tertiary enrolment .....	56
4.05	Educational attainment of adults .....	57
4.06	International students and export education .....	58
4.07	Total school enrolments and ECE participation.....	59
4.08	School attendance.....	60
<b>5</b>	<b>Crime and Justice.....</b>	<b>61</b>
5.01	Property crime .....	62
5.02	Homicide .....	63
5.03	Sexual assault offences .....	64
5.04	Assault and violent crime .....	65
5.05	Illicit drug offences.....	66
5.06	White-collar and fraud crime .....	67
5.07	Prison population .....	68
5.08	Youth and juvenile crime.....	69
5.09	Police force size.....	70
5.10	Benefit fraud.....	71
5.11	Victims of crime.....	72
5.12	The Crime and Victims Survey .....	73
<b>6</b>	<b>Communication, Technology and Digital Life .....</b>	<b>74</b>
6.01	Researchers engaged in R&D .....	75
6.02	Expenditure on R&D .....	76
6.03	Circulation of daily newspapers .....	77
6.04	Household access to computers .....	78
6.05	Household and individual internet access.....	79
6.06	Online shopping and e-commerce.....	80
6.07	Fibre broadband and the UFB rollout .....	81
6.08	Mobile phones and smartphones .....	82
6.09	Use of AI tools.....	83
6.10	Working from home .....	84
<b>7</b>	<b>Labour Market and Productivity .....</b>	<b>85</b>
7.01	Labour force participation.....	86
7.02	Working hours.....	87
7.03	Trade union membership .....	88
7.04	Average weekly and hourly earnings .....	89
7.05	Unemployment rate.....	90
7.06	Income distribution .....	91
7.07	Youth unemployment and NEET .....	92
7.08	Welfare benefit numbers .....	93
7.09	Labour productivity .....	94
<b>8</b>	<b>Domestic Economy.....</b>	<b>95</b>
8.01	Real GDP per capita.....	96
8.02	Merchandise terms of trade.....	97
8.03	Britain's share of New Zealand exports .....	98
8.04	Exchange rates.....	99
8.05	Employment by industry .....	100
8.06	Consumer price inflation .....	101
8.07	Government debt.....	102
8.08	Top marginal income tax rate.....	103
8.09	Household debt .....	104
8.10	Government spending .....	105

<b>9</b>	<b>Housing</b>	<b>106</b>
9.01	Residential house prices	107
9.02	Housing affordability	108
9.03	Mortgage lending and interest rates	109
9.04	Rents	110
9.05	Building consents	111
9.06	Home ownership rate	112
9.07	Social housing register and homelessness	113
<b>10</b>	<b>Energy and Environment</b>	<b>114</b>
10.01	Renewable electricity share	115
10.02	Greenhouse gas emissions	116
10.03	Electric vehicles	117
10.04	Electricity generation per capita	118
10.05	Air quality	119
<b>11</b>	<b>Wellbeing and Society</b>	<b>120</b>
11.01	Life satisfaction	121
11.02	Loneliness	122
11.03	Volunteering	123
11.04	Te reo Māori speakers	124
11.05	Trust in people and institutions	125
11.06	Voter turnout in general elections	126
	<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>127</b>

# Foreword

Watch the evening news on any given day and you could be forgiven for thinking New Zealand is a country in permanent crisis. There is always a queue somewhere, a shortage of something, a scandal brewing. Bad news sells. Good news, especially the kind that unfolds over decades, rarely makes the bulletin.

That is not the journalists' fault. A patient improvement spread over forty years offers no pictures and no drama. Nobody holds a press conference because fewer babies died this year than last, or because another small town got fibre broadband, or because the road toll fell again.

Yet these quiet changes are the real story of our country. In 1973, the worst year on record, 843 people died on New Zealand roads. In 2025, with far more people driving far more cars, the provisional toll was 272. Life expectancy has risen by more than a decade since 1970. Far fewer people smoke. These are remarkable achievements, and they happened so slowly that we barely noticed.

This book gathers the numbers that describe how New Zealand has changed. Across eleven chapters and more than a hundred indicators, it traces our population, our families, our health, our schools, our safety, our technology, our work, our economy, our homes, our environment and our wellbeing. Wherever the records allow, the data reach back to 1970 and beyond, because only the long view reveals the trend.

Not every line in this book points the right way. Houses still cost far too much, though the numbers now hint at what happens when we finally let people build. Our school results have been sliding for a quarter of a century. And the productivity gap between New Zealand and Australia, the gap that sets the limit on our wages, has widened as reform zeal faltered. We do not hide these failures. A country that wants to fix its problems must first measure them honestly.

The New Zealand Initiative believes that good policy starts with evidence, and evidence starts with numbers. The figures in this book come from official statistics and respected international databases, and every source is listed at the back. Readers are welcome to check them, question them and argue with our reading of them. That is what the numbers are for.

New Zealand is a better country than its headlines suggest. It could be better still. We hope this book shows both truths at once.

**Dr Oliver Hartwich**

Executive Director

The New Zealand Initiative

Wellington, July 2026

# A note on the data

Every figure in this book comes from a named source: Stats NZ and its predecessors, government ministries and agencies, the Reserve Bank, the Treasury and international databases such as the World Bank, the OECD, the World Health Organization and Our World in Data. The bibliography at the end lists the source for every indicator.

Where possible, each time series reaches back to 1970 or earlier. Statistics are not always so obliging. Some surveys began only in the 1980s or later, and some agencies publish only census-year or selected-year figures. Where a chart shows selected years rather than a continuous annual series, the bars or markers make that plain, and the accompanying text says so.

Definitions change over time, and honest statistics admit it. The police counted crime one way until 2014 and a different way afterwards. Migration was measured by arrival cards until 2017 and by actual travel histories since. Where a series breaks, we note the break rather than splice the numbers together.

Figures are rounded for readability. A number quoted as ‘about 5.3 million’ is what it says, an approximation; the precise values sit in the sources. Data are current to June 2026, reflecting the latest releases available at that time; figures published after that date are not included. Provisional figures, including the 2025 road toll and recent population estimates, are marked as such by their agencies and may be revised.

# Population

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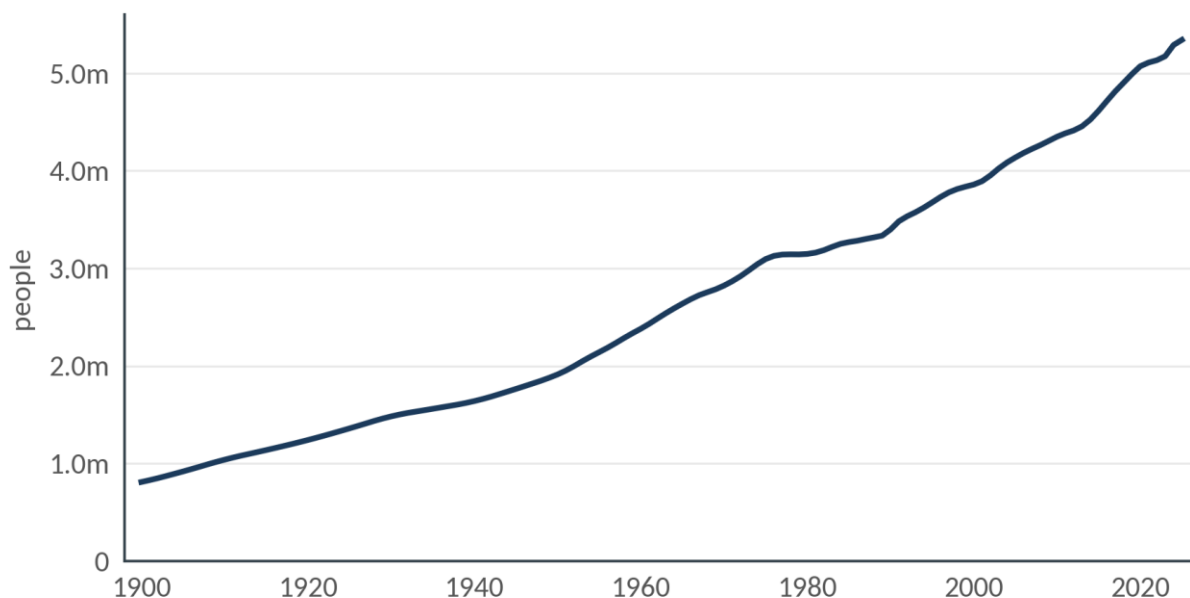
Every debate about New Zealand is at heart about its people. Schools, hospitals, houses and pensions all raise the same questions: how many of us there are, how old we are and where we choose to live. So this book starts with the population, and the population has grown. A country of about 800,000 people in 1900 entered 2026 with more than 5.3 million.

That growth has never been steady. It has come in surges of births and waves of migrants, interrupted by the slumps that sent New Zealanders abroad. Few developed countries have a population so shaped by people moving in and out, with Australia and Ireland among the few comparable cases. In recent years, a record migration boom has given way to a quieter net inflow, while tens of thousands of New Zealand citizens have left, mainly across the Tasman.

The second great change is age. The median New Zealander was about 25 years old in 1970, at the height of the baby boom. By the 2023 Census the median age was 38.1 years, and on current projections it will keep rising for decades. The country is running short of children and gaining grandparents, with all that implies for public finances.

The third change is who we are. Nearly three in ten residents were born overseas. The Asian share of the population has almost caught up with the Māori share, and for the first time more than half of census respondents report no religion. New Zealand remains a small country at the edge of the world, but it has become a remarkably open and diverse one. The numbers in this chapter show how.

## 1.01 New Zealand's population



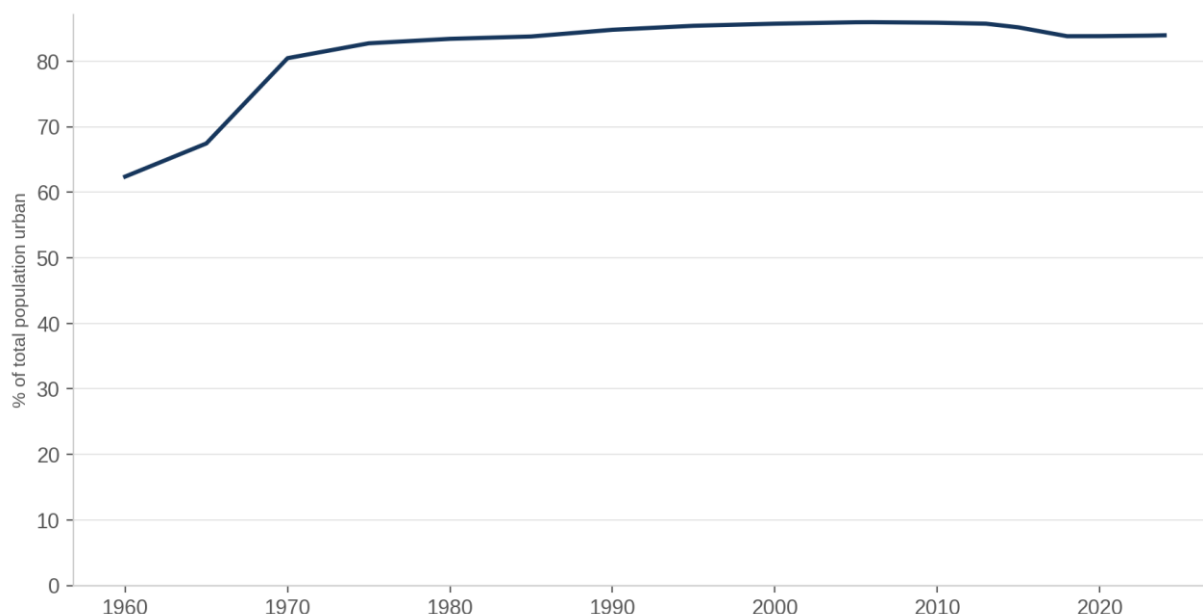
Source: *Our World in Data* (HYDE/UN); *Stats NZ*

New Zealand began the twentieth century with about 800,000 people. The population reached one million in 1908 and two million in 1952. Doubling again took longer, reaching four million only in 2003. The chart also records the pauses, most clearly the stagnation of the late 1970s, when the population barely moved from about 3.14 million between 1977 and 1980 as New Zealanders left for better prospects abroad.

The past decade brought the opposite. The population passed five million around 2020 and 5.3 million in 2025. Stats NZ puts the estimated resident population at 31 March 2026 at 5,361,300, on a provisional count. In the year to March 2026 the country grew by 43,500 people, or 0.8%. The long international series shown here is measured at mid-year and differs slightly from Stats NZ's resident population estimates.

Growth is set to continue. Stats NZ's latest projections suggest the population will probably pass six million before 2040, and they give a 90% probability that it will sit between 6.12 and 7.21 million in 2051. A country that took a century to gain its first four million may add its next million in little more than a decade.

## 1.02 Rural and urban population



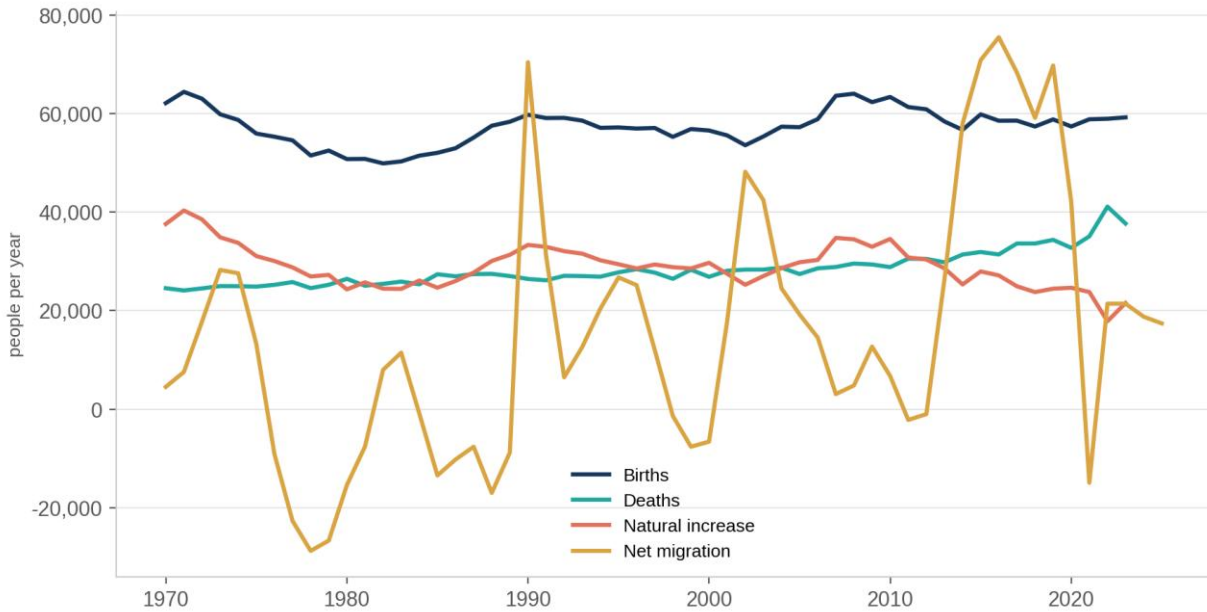
Source: World Bank/UN World Urbanization Prospects; Stats NZ

New Zealand likes to think of itself as a farming nation, but its people deserted the countryside long ago. In 1881, almost 60% of non-Māori New Zealanders lived in rural communities. By 1911, the rural share had dropped below 50%, to the alarm of contemporaries who feared the loss of the pioneering spirit. For Māori the great move from land to cities began after 1945, driven by a lack of rural jobs.

By 1981, about 83.5% of the population was urban, and the share edged up over the next quarter century to a peak of about 85.9% in 2006. Urbanisation was essentially complete two generations ago, and the story since then is one of stability rather than further drift.

The apparent dip in the chart around 2018 is a definitional change, not a return to the land: Stats NZ redrew its urban boundaries in 2018, which lowered the measured urban share from about 86% to about 84%. On the current international definition, 83.9% of New Zealanders lived in urban areas in 2024.

### 1.03 Natural increase and net migration



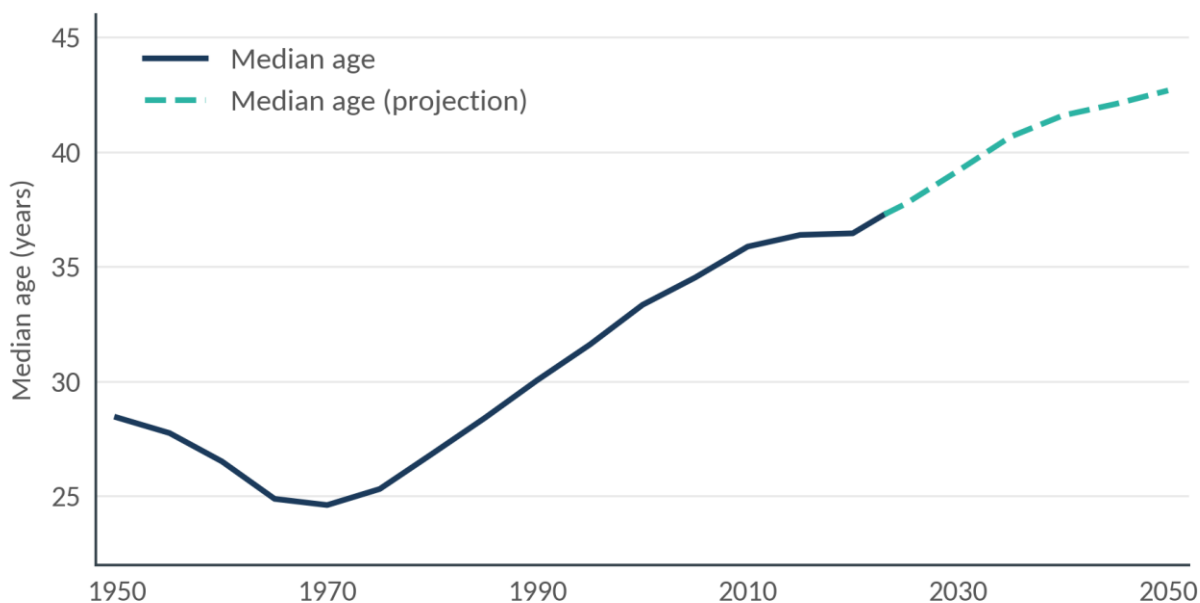
Source: UN World Population Prospects via Our World in Data; World Bank; Stats NZ

Two forces drive population change: births over deaths, and arrivals over departures. The first has weakened slowly. Natural increase has roughly halved since the early 1970s, from about 40,300 in 1971 to about 19,000 in 2023. Births have barely moved, at about 62,000 in 1970 and 57,000 in 2023, but deaths have climbed with an ageing population, from about 24,600 to 38,000 over the same span. Deaths spiked at 38,574 in 2022, the highest on record and the biggest annual rise in a century, as COVID-19 arrived in an older New Zealand.

Migration is the volatile partner. The chart shows deep outflows after the oil shocks, with net migration negative every year from 1976 to 1981 and a loss of about 29,000 in 1978 alone, and again through the mid and late 1980s. Then came the booms, including a sustained surge from 2014 to 2019 that peaked at about 75,500 in 2016 on the UN measure. These UN estimates differ from Stats NZ’s own migration series, especially around the COVID years, because the UN figures are modelled at mid-year while Stats NZ now classifies migrants by their actual time in the country, a rule it adopted in 2017.

On Stats NZ’s official figures, the year to June 2025 marked a quiet turning point. Of total growth of 34,700, natural increase contributed 21,000 (61%) and net migration 13,700 (39%). Setting aside the closed-border years of 2021 and 2022, that was the first time since 2013 that births over deaths outweighed migration as the engine of growth.

## 1.04 Median age

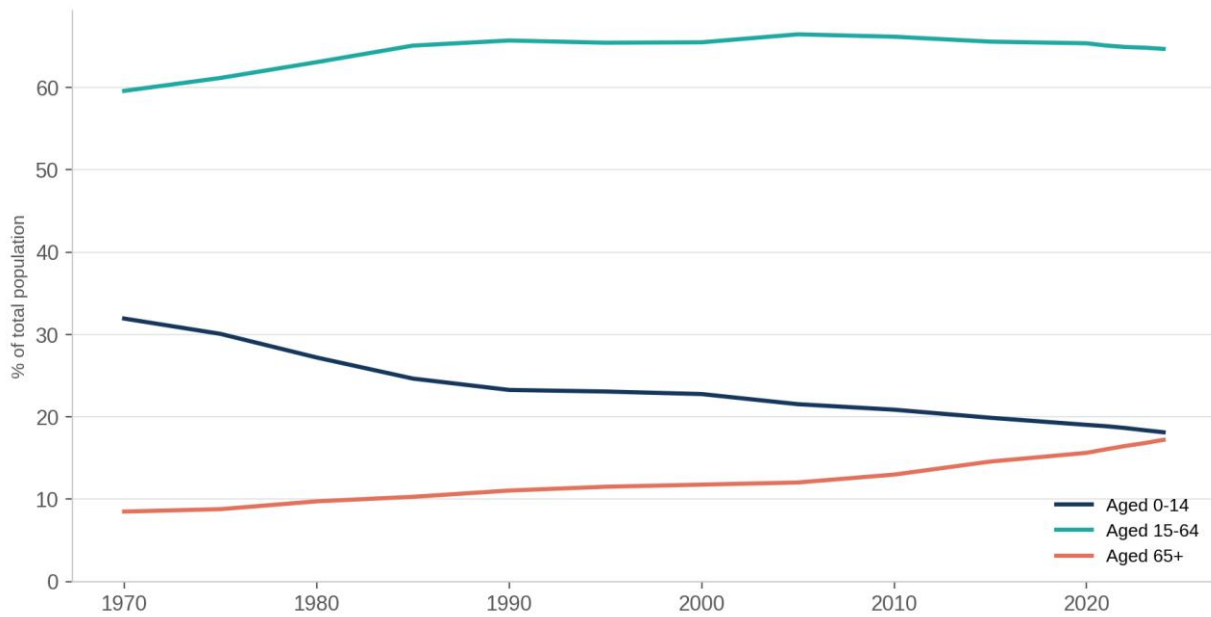


Source: UN World Population Prospects via Our World in Data; Stats NZ

In 1950, the median New Zealander was 28.4 years old. Then the baby boom filled the country with children, and by 1970 the median had fallen to about 24.6 years. Half the population was younger than a 25th birthday. Since that trough the median age has risen almost without interruption, passing 30 years around 1990 and reaching 37.3 years in 2023 on the UN measure. The 2023 Census put it slightly higher at 38.1 years, up from 37.4 years in 2018.

The climb has further to go. On UN medium projections the median age reaches about 39.2 years in 2030 and 42.7 years in 2050. A society in which half the people were under 25 has become one in which half are pushing 40, and within a generation half will be past it. Lower fertility and longer lives have remade the shape of the country, and no plausible level of migration will reverse it.

## 1.05 Age distribution

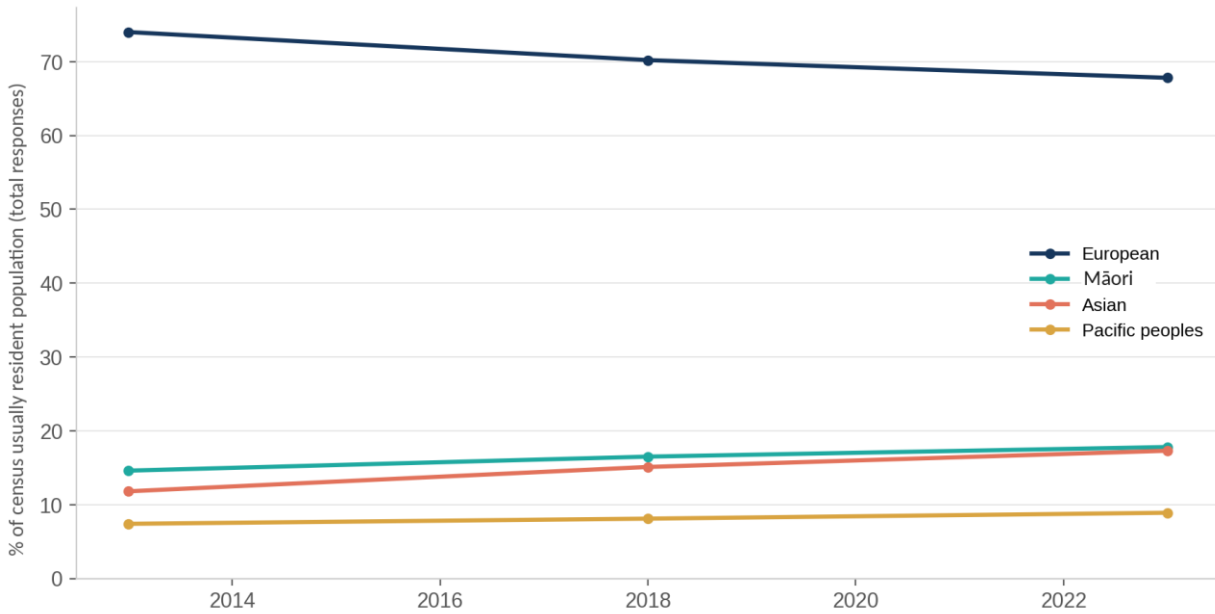


Source: World Bank (Stats NZ-sourced)

In 1926, children under 15 made up 31.2% of the population and those 65 and over just 5.1%. The children's share peaked at 33.1% in 1961, at the height of the baby boom, when a third of all New Zealanders were under 15. The decline since has been relentless: from 31.9% in 1970 to 18.1% in 2024. Over the same half century the share aged 65 and over doubled, from 8.5% to 17.2%.

Between the two sits the working-age population, the people who pay for both ends of life. Their share rose as the baby boomers moved through their careers, peaking at about 66.5% around 2006 to 2008. It has since slipped to 64.7% in 2024, and it will keep slipping as the boomers retire. Each year the country asks slightly fewer workers to support slightly more retirees. That quiet shift in the chart is the single most important fact in this book.

## 1.06 Ethnicity



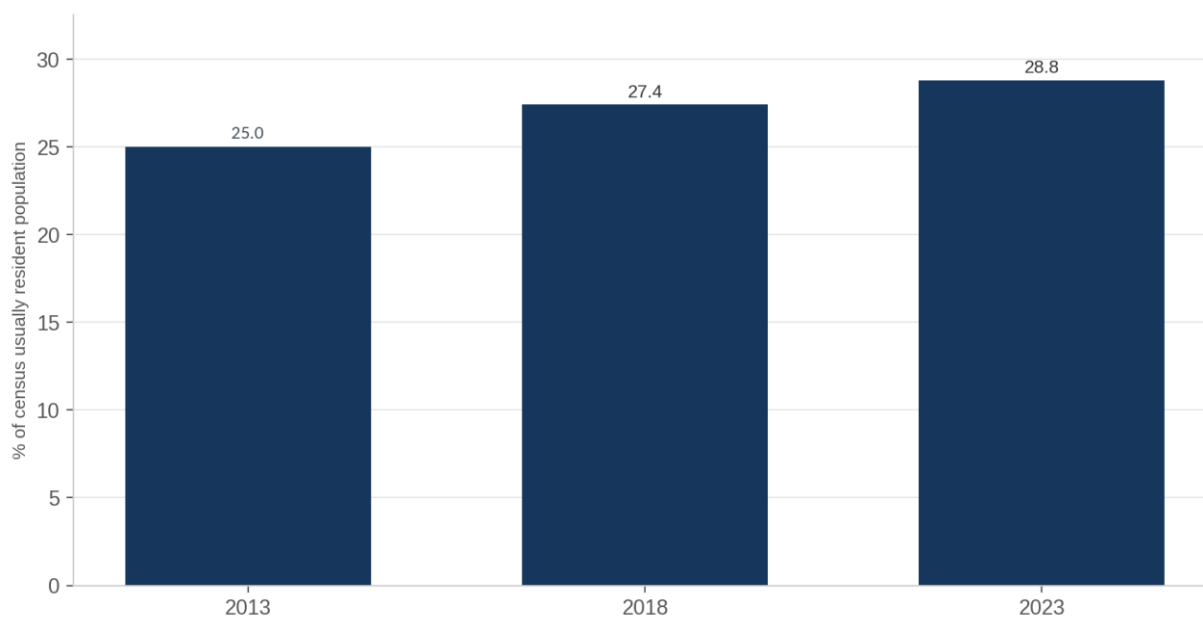
Source: Stats NZ, 2023 Census

People can report more than one ethnicity in the census, so the shares here sum to more than 100%. At the 2023 Census, 67.8% of the population identified as European, 17.8% as Māori, 17.3% as Asian, 8.9% as Pacific peoples and 1.9% as Middle Eastern, Latin American or African. Ethnicity here is how people identify, and differs from Māori descent or ancestry, which Stats NZ records separately.

The change over a single decade is striking. In 2013, the European share was 74.0% and the Asian share 11.8%. By 2023, the Asian share had grown to 17.3%, nearly matching the Māori share, which itself rose from 14.9% to 17.8%. Between 2018 and 2023, the Asian ethnic group recorded the largest numeric increase of any group, up 153,978 people, while the recorded Māori population grew by 111,657, partly through higher birth rates and partly because more people now identify as Māori.

A country that was once almost exclusively bicultural has become one of the developed world's most diverse, and Stats NZ projects the Asian population to keep growing fastest. The change has come largely through the front door, by migration, and largely without rancour. That is something to note with pride.

## 1.07 Population born overseas



Source: Stats NZ, 2023 Census

New Zealand is among the most open of rich countries to newcomers, with only a handful, such as Luxembourg, Switzerland and Australia, recording a higher share born overseas. At the 2023 Census, 28.8% of the usually resident population was born overseas, up from 27.4% in 2018 and 25% in 2013. Nearly three in ten New Zealanders started life somewhere else.

The mix of birthplaces tells its own story. England remained the most common overseas birthplace in 2023, with 208,428 people or 4.2% of the population, but the People's Republic of China (145,371 people, 2.9%) and India (142,920, 2.9%) were close behind. The turning point came earlier: between 2006 and 2013, Asian-born residents came to outnumber those born in the United Kingdom and Ireland for the first time in New Zealand's history. The settler nation still attracts settlers; they simply come from different shores.

**Further reading:** Jason Krupp and Rachel Hodder, *The New New Zealanders (The New Zealand Initiative, 2017)*; and *Prescription for Prosperity 2026, Chapter 15, Immigration*.

## 1.08 Migrant arrivals and departures

### Net migration on the 12/16-month measure

Period	Measure	People
Year ended October 2023	Migrant arrivals (record)	234,800
Year ended October 2023	Net migration gain (record)	135,500
2024 calendar year	Net migration gain	23,800
2025 calendar year	Net migration gain	14,200
2025 calendar year	Net loss of New Zealand citizens (provisional)	40,000

Source: Stats NZ international migration releases

New Zealand is a country of churn. People arrive and leave on a scale matched by few comparable countries; in 2012 permanent inward and outward flows were each equivalent to roughly 2% of the population. Measurement changed in 2017, when Stats NZ replaced the old arrival and departure cards, which recorded travellers' stated intentions, with an outcomes-based rule that counts a traveller as a migrant if they are in or out of the country for 12 of the following 16 months.

On that measure, the years after the pandemic produced the wildest swings on record. Annual net migration peaked at a record gain of 135,500 in the year to October 2023, with migrant arrivals peaking at 234,800. The boom then faded fast, to a net gain of 23,800 in calendar 2024 and just 14,200 in 2025.

Beneath the headline gain, New Zealand's own citizens were leaving. In 2025, the country recorded a provisional net loss of 40,000 citizens, with 26,300 arriving against 66,300 departing. That outflow is large. Citizen departures reached record levels in the post-COVID years of 2023 and 2024, approaching the previous high of 72,400 set in the February 2012 year, before easing in 2025. Migrants from the rest of the world keep the total growing; New Zealanders themselves vote with their feet.

## 1.09 Departures by destination

### New Zealand citizen departures, 2025

Measure	Value
Migrant departures of New Zealand citizens	66,300
Estimated share departing to Australia	61%
Share of movers to Australia born outside New Zealand	35%
Departures aged 18 to 30	25,500 (38%)
Net migration loss to Australia, year to early 2025	about 30,000
Historical peak in citizen departures (February 2012 year)	72,400

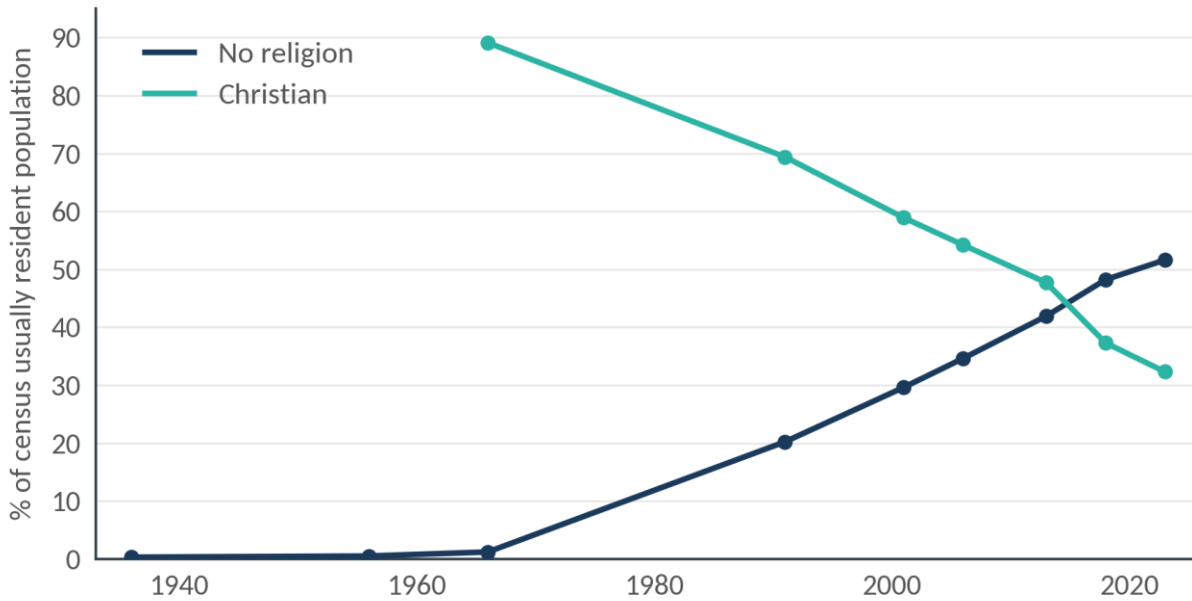
Source: Stats NZ international migration releases

When New Zealanders leave, they mostly go to one place. An estimated 61% of the 66,300 New Zealand citizens who departed as migrants in 2025 went to Australia, and in the year to early 2025 the net loss across the Tasman was about 30,000 people. Australia has long been the preferred refuge during domestic recessions, but the pull is no longer merely cyclical; departures have trended upward since the mid-1990s regardless of the state of the economy.

The leavers are disproportionately young. Migrants aged 18 to 30 made up 25,500, or 38%, of citizen departures in 2025. Notably, 35% of those moving to Australia were themselves born outside New Zealand, migrants who came, took citizenship and moved on. An earlier peak in citizen departures, 72,400 in the February 2012 year, came when the trans-Tasman income gap was near record levels. The lesson has not changed since: while incomes across the Tasman outpace incomes at home, the airport remains the most honest referendum on New Zealand's economic performance.

**Further reading:** Bryce Wilkinson, *Are Flying Kiwis Fleeing?* (The New Zealand Initiative, 2024); and *Prescription for Prosperity 2026*, Chapter 15, Immigration.

## 1.10 Religious affiliation



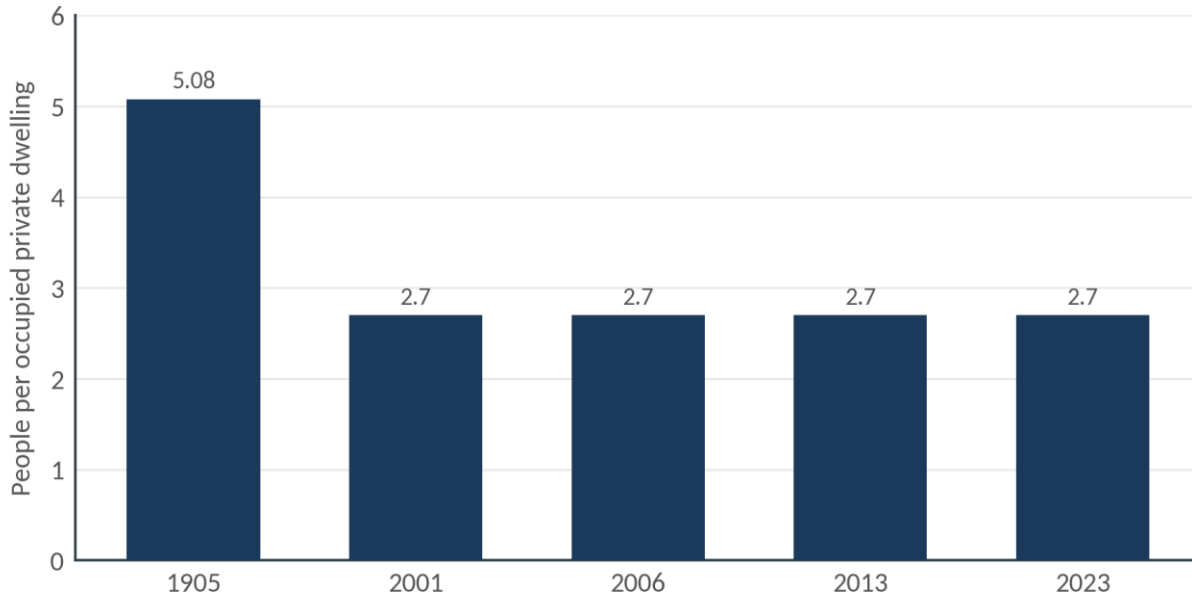
Source: Stats NZ census releases

In 1936, 40% of New Zealanders were Anglicans and only 0.3% were willing to declare they had no religion. By 2006, the Anglicans were down to 15% and 35% reported no religion. The transformation of New Zealand from a churchgoing British outpost into one of the world's most secular societies took barely two generations.

The 2023 Census crossed a threshold. For the first time since the question has been asked, more than half the population, 51.6%, reported no religion, up from 48.2% in 2018 and 41.9% in 2013. Christians fell to 1,614,636 people, or 32.3%, down 102,543 from 2018, when they were 36.5%.

Secularisation has not meant uniformity. Hindu affiliation rose to 2.9% in 2023 and Islam to 1.5%, both up on 2018, a reflection of migration rather than conversion. New Zealand's religious landscape now mirrors its population: mostly unchurched, and more varied at the margins than ever before.

## 1.11 Average household occupancy

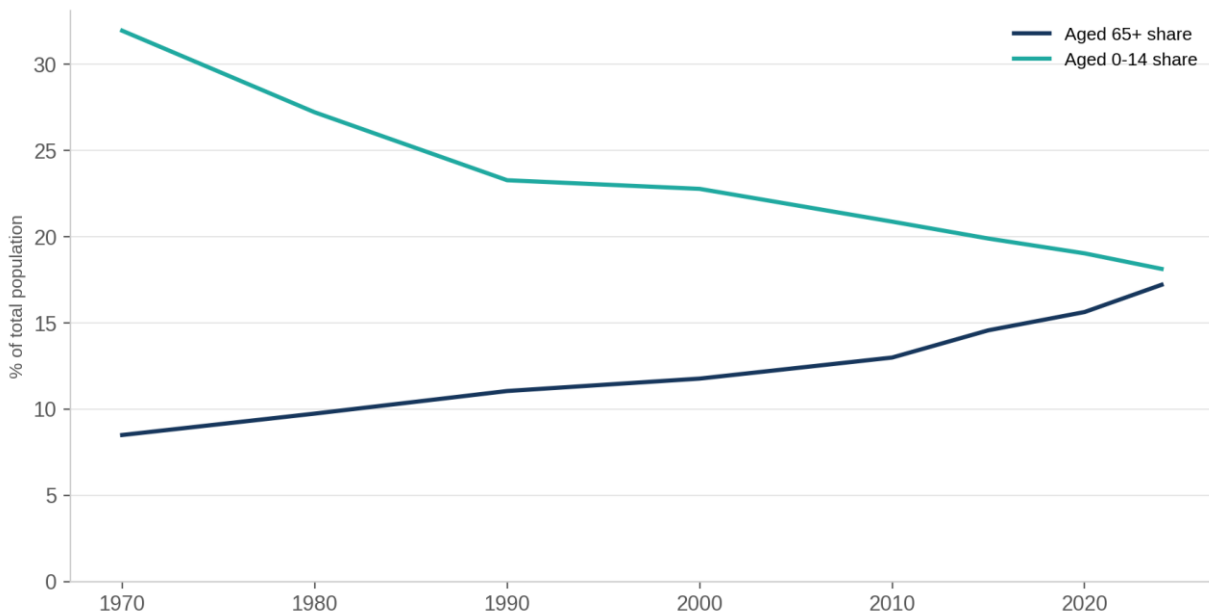


Source: Stats NZ census releases

In 1905, the average New Zealand household held 5.08 people. By 2001, it held 2.7, and the figure was unchanged at the 2006 and 2013 censuses. The long decline reflects falling fertility and a reduced tendency for elderly parents to live under the same roof as their grown children. As households shrank they also multiplied, since every couple living apart from their parents needs a dwelling of their own. The 2023 Census confirmed the average household size remained 2.7.

That is why household size matters for housing. A population can need many more homes even when it grows slowly, simply because people spread themselves across more households. At the 2023 Census, couples with children were still the most common household type, and nearly 1.3 million families lived in New Zealand. The era of the large household ended a century ago; the housing market is still catching up.

## 1.12 Children and the elderly



Source: World Bank (Stats NZ-sourced); Stats NZ 2024-base projections

This final chart compresses the chapter into two lines. In 1970, there were nearly four children under 15 for every New Zealander aged 65 and over, 31.9% of the population against 8.5%. By 2024, the two groups were almost level, at 18.1% and 17.2%. On Stats NZ's projections the lines will cross within a few years, and for the first time the country will have more elderly than children.

The projections run further. Stats NZ expects the 65 and over population to reach one million by 2029, 1.5 million in the early 2050s and two million around 2070. By the mid-2030s, one in five New Zealanders are likely to be 65 or older; by 2060, about one in four. Meanwhile, the total population is likely to pass six million before 2040.

None of this is a surprise, and none of it is a catastrophe. Longer lives are a triumph. But a pension designed for a much younger nation cannot simply roll on unchanged when one in four New Zealanders is past 65, and the same is true of the health budget. The numbers give fair warning, decades in advance. Whether governments act depends on electoral support.

## CHAPTER TWO

# Children and Families

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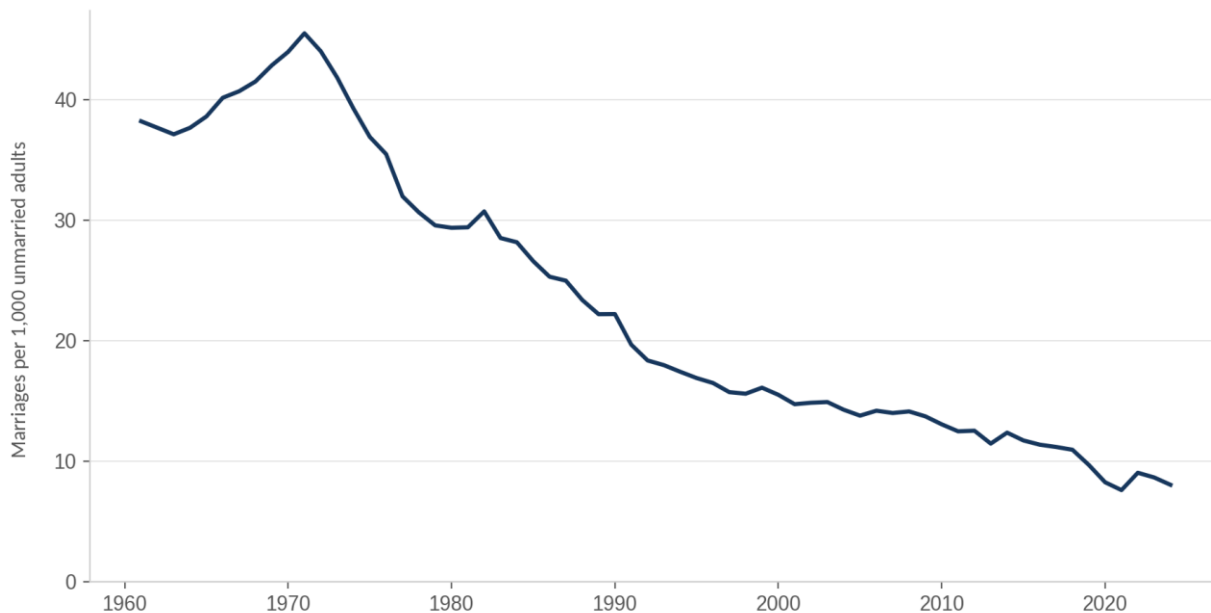
No part of New Zealand life has changed more quietly, or more completely, than the family. In 1971, a typical first-time bride was 21 and her groom 23, and nearly everyone married. Half a century later marriage comes later, happens less often and is entirely optional, and most of the change arrived without anyone voting for it.

The numbers in this chapter trace that revolution. As the charts that follow show, the marriage rate has fallen to about a fifth of its 1971 peak. The total fertility rate, 4.31 births per woman in 1961, fell to 1.55 in 2025, the lowest on record. In 2022, for the first time, more than half of all babies were born to parents who were not married.

Not all of it is loss. The teenage birth rate has fallen by almost 87% from its 1972 peak, one of the steepest improvements anywhere in this book. The divorce rate is among the lowest since 1980, and fewer children each year watch their parents' marriage end in the Family Court.

The census shows what the new domestic landscape looks like: nearly a quarter of households contain just one person, and couples without children are almost as numerous as couples with them.

## 2.01 Marriage rate



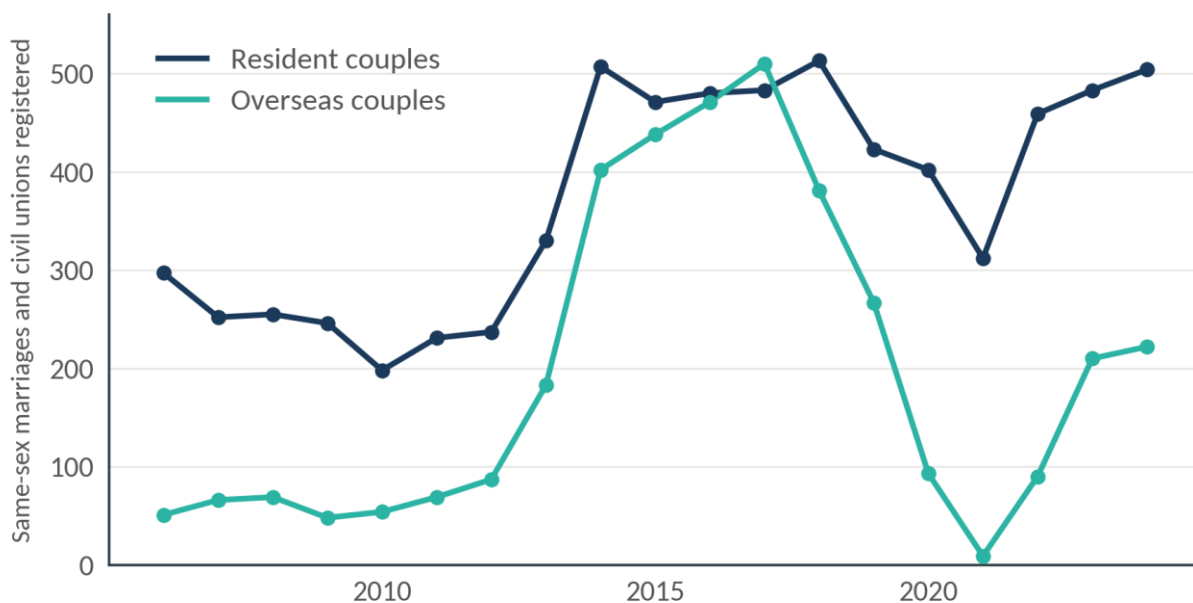
Source: Stats NZ

In 1971, New Zealanders married at a rate of 45.5 per 1,000 unmarried adults, and 27,201 couples wed. That was the peak. The rate has fallen in almost every year since, reaching 8.0 per 1,000 in 2024, about a sixth of its 1971 level.

The 18,033 marriages and civil unions registered to residents in 2024 made the lowest annual total since 1957, leaving aside the COVID-affected years of 2020 and 2021, when restrictions cut the count to 16,779 and then 15,657 before a partial rebound to 18,858 in 2022. Of the 2024 total, 13,467 were first marriages, 4,560 were remarriages and the small remainder were civil unions. Another 2,418 ceremonies were held in New Zealand for couples living overseas.

The series has its quirks: the rate uses the resident population from 1991 rather than the earlier de facto population measure, and it includes same-sex marriage from August 2013. None of that explains the trend. Fewer people marry, and those who do marry later. The institution has become a choice rather than an expectation.

## 2.02 Civil unions and same-sex marriages



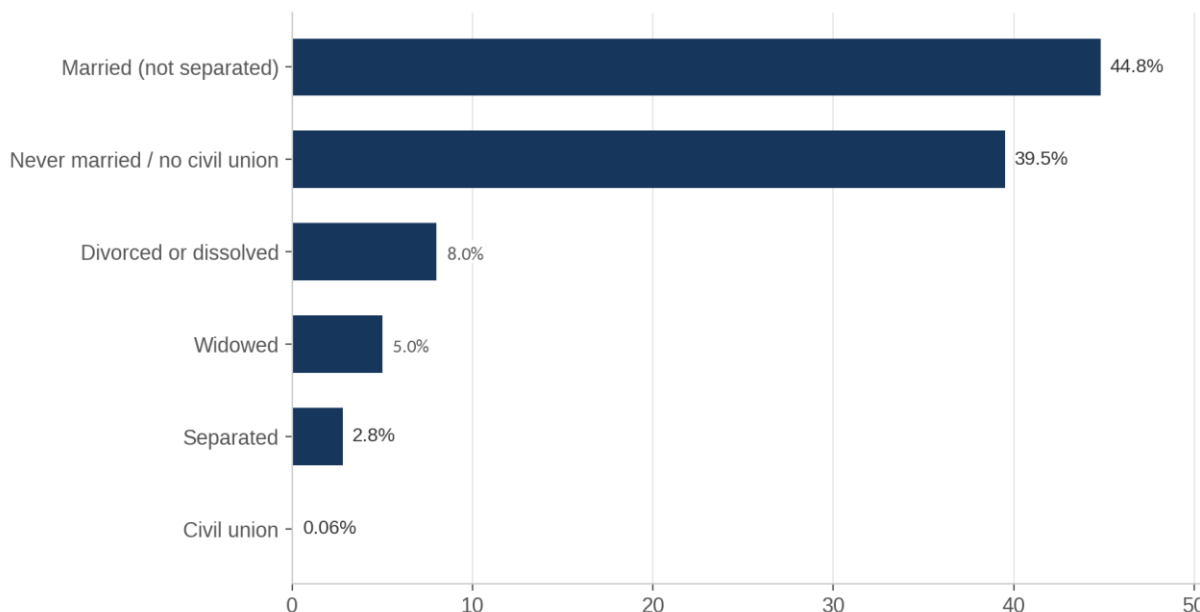
Source: Stats NZ

The first civil unions were celebrated in April 2005, and the first same-sex marriages followed on 19 August 2013. Both laws passed as conscience votes after fierce public debate. The numbers involved have always been modest: in 2024, 504 same-sex marriages or civil unions were registered to New Zealand resident couples, about 2.8% of all marriages.

Legalisation had an immediate effect. Resident same-sex unions jumped from 330 in 2013 to 507 in 2014, the first full year of marriage equality, and Stats NZ counted more than 4,000 same-sex marriages in the decade after the law changed. Civil unions, by contrast, collapsed once marriage became available to all couples.

New Zealand also became a wedding destination. Same-sex unions where one partner lived overseas climbed from 87 in 2012 to a peak of 510 in 2017, as couples from countries without marriage equality, Australia above all before 2017, flew here to wed. COVID border closures cut that trade to just 9 ceremonies in 2021; by 2024 it had recovered to 222.

## 2.03 Marital status of the adult population



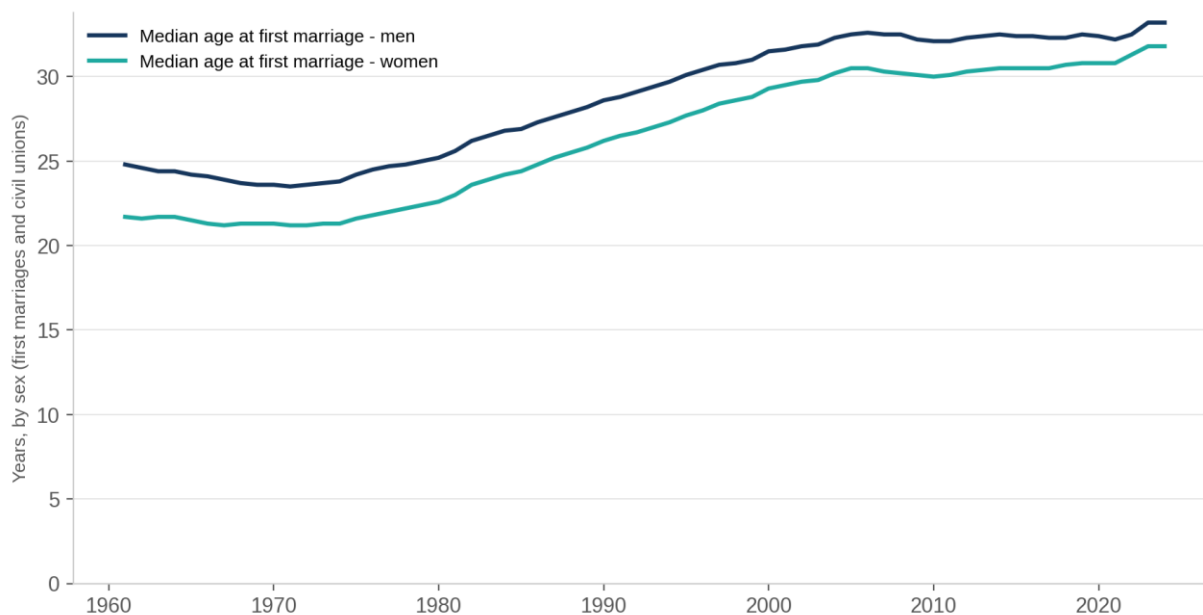
Source: Stats NZ, 2023 Census

The 2023 Census asked New Zealanders aged 15 and over about their legally registered relationships. Some 44.8% were married and not separated, while 39.5% had never married nor entered a civil union. Another 8.0% were divorced, 5.0% widowed and 2.8% separated.

The most telling figure is the smallest. Just 0.06% of adults were in a civil union, the institution legislated in 2004 partly as a substitute for the marriage same-sex couples could not then have. Once marriage opened to all couples in 2013, the substitute lost its purpose. The 2023 Census was the first able to report civil union status separately, and it recorded a category already close to vanishing.

Married people still form the largest single group despite half a century of falling marriage rates. The census counts a stock, not a flow. It includes every marriage still standing from the high-marrying decades, which is why the decline in new marriages shows up here only slowly.

## 2.04 Median age at first marriage



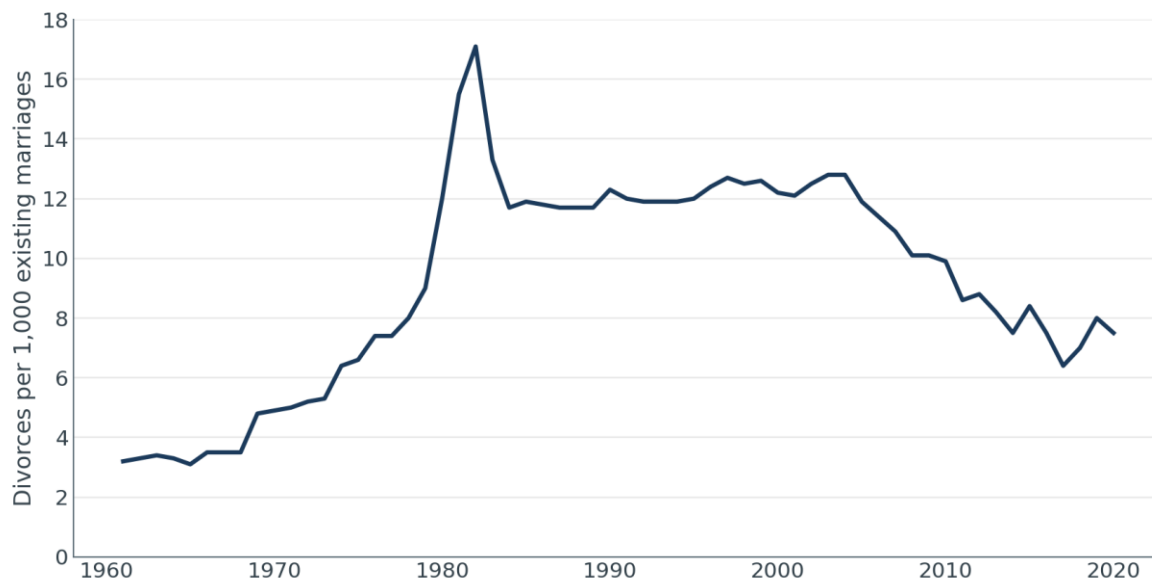
Source: Stats NZ

Marriage came early in the early 1970s. In 1971, the median first-time bride was 21.2 years old and her groom 23.5. Cohabitation before marriage was unconventional, a wedding was the usual way to leave the family home, and custom pushed couples to the altar young. The shift away from that pattern gathered pace through the 1970s and 1980s.

Everything since has run the other way. By 1990, the median first-time bride was 26.2 and the groom 28.6; by 2024 they were 30.5 and 31.6, roughly ten years older than their early-1970s counterparts. The ages have largely plateaued since the 2010s, at around 30 to 31 for women and 31 to 32 for men.

One gap has narrowed. Grooms were 3.1 years older than their brides in 1961; by 2024 the difference was 1.1 years. Men and women now arrive at marriage from much more similar lives, with similar years of study and work behind them.

## 2.05 Divorce rate



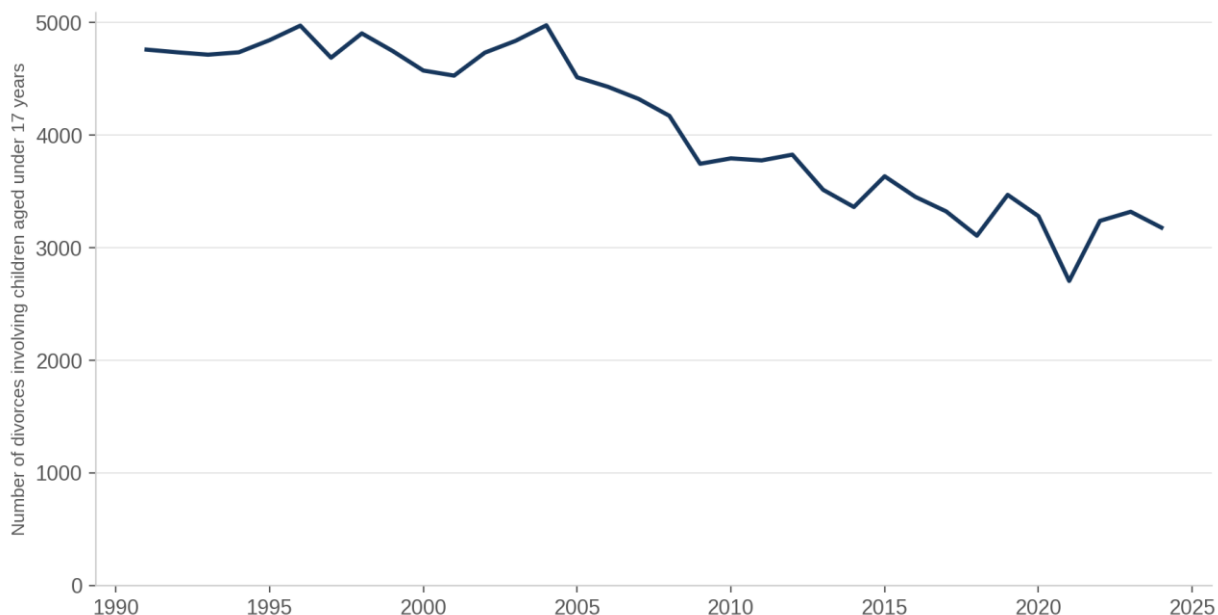
Source: Stats NZ

The divorce chart carries the clearest legislative fingerprint in this book. The Family Proceedings Act 1980 swept away fault-based divorce and replaced it with a single ground, irreconcilable breakdown shown by two years of separation. When the Act came into force, a backlog of long-separated couples surged through the courts: the rate jumped from 9.0 per 1,000 existing marriages in 1980 to 17.1 in 1982, a one-off peak of 12,396 divorces.

After the backlog cleared, divorce settled at around 12 per 1,000 through the 1980s and 1990s, and the annual count peaked again at 10,608 in 2004. Then it began to fall. In 2024, the Family Court granted 7,497 divorces, a rate of 7.5 per 1,000 existing marriages and civil unions and among the lowest since 1980. The disrupted courts of 2021 produced the lowest modern figures of all, 6,372 divorces at 6.4 per 1,000.

Selection explains part of the decline. With marriage rarer, later and freely chosen, the couples who do marry are likelier to stay together than when weddings were a near-universal expectation. Falling divorce and falling marriage are two sides of the same change.

## 2.06 Divorces involving children



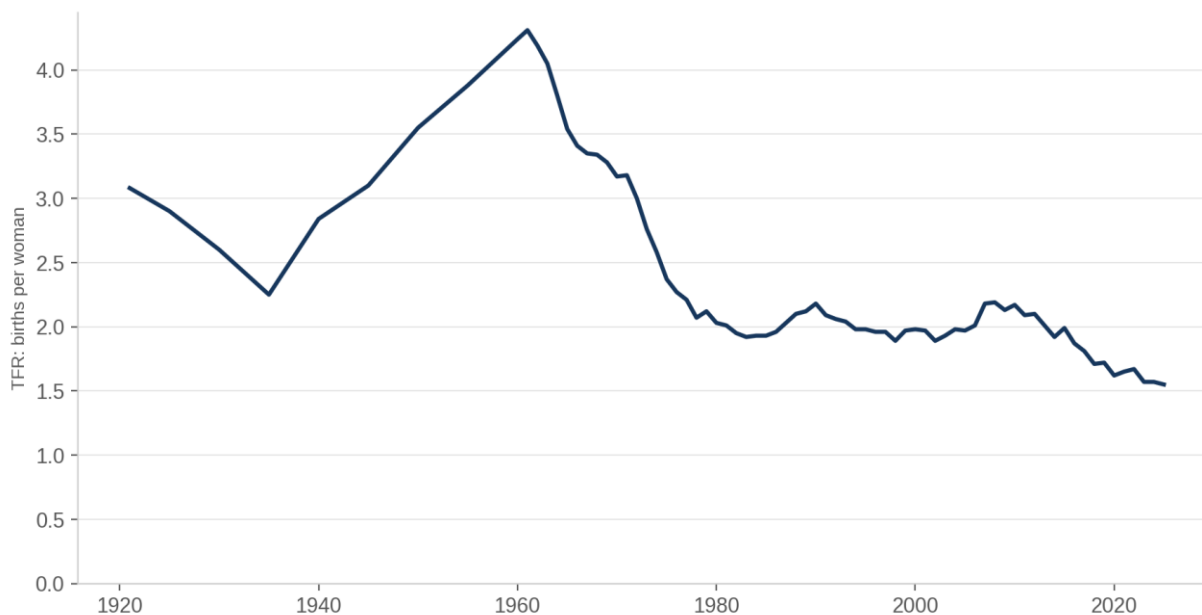
Source: Stats NZ

In 1991, 4,758 divorces involved children under 17, just over half of the 9,150 divorces granted that year. By 2024, the number had fallen to 3,177, about 42% of all divorces. Both the count and the share have been declining for three decades.

Behind each case are children. In 2024, some 5,685 children under 17 had parents granted a divorce, down from 6,024 a decade earlier and 9,186 in 2004. Divorces involving children peaked at around 4,900 to 5,000 a year in the mid-1990s and mid-2000s and have since fallen by roughly a third.

The figures flatter the picture in one respect. They count only dissolutions of marriages and civil unions, so the separations of never-married de facto parents, who now raise a large share of New Zealand's children, appear nowhere in this series.

## 2.07 Total fertility rate



Source: Stats NZ; World Bank

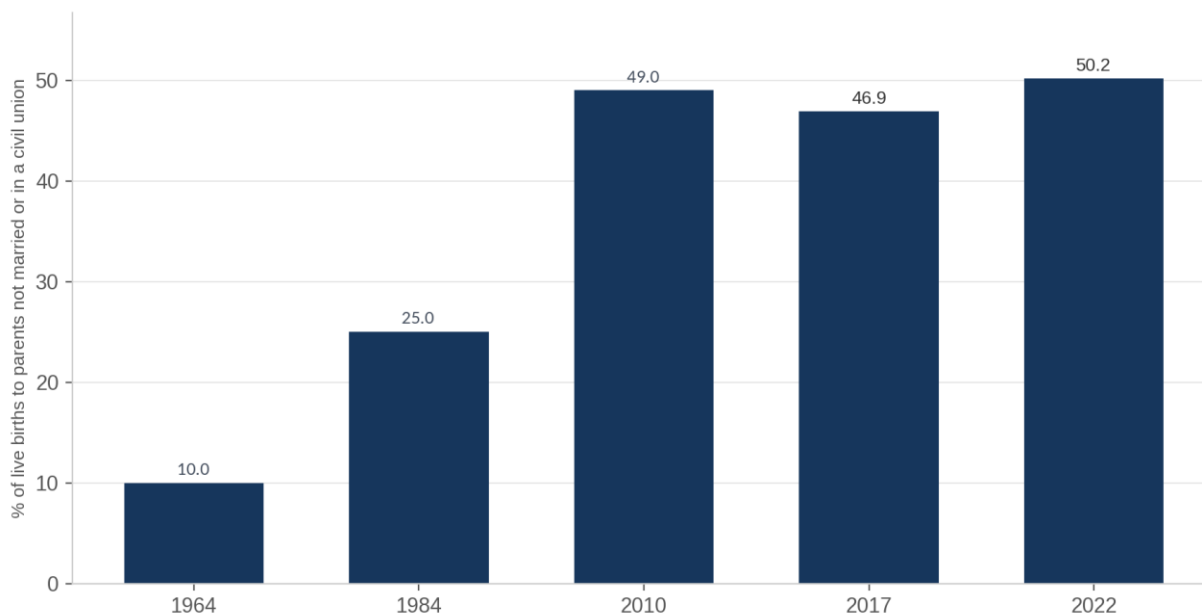
The total fertility rate is the average number of live births that women would have during their life if they experienced the age-specific fertility rates of a given period (usually a year). It excludes the effect of mortality and is expressed in the chart as the number of births per woman. At the height of the baby boom in 1961, the average New Zealand woman could expect 4.31 children. The total fertility rate then fell fast, dropping below the replacement level of about 2.1 in the late 1970s. What followed was unusual: for three decades, from 1980 to about 2012, the rate held remarkably steady, averaging 2.02 births per woman.

That stability has gone. The rate has fallen steadily since 2013, has sat below 1.8 since 2018 and reached 1.55 in 2025, the lowest December-year figure on record.

The crude birth rate (CBR) is the number of live births during a year per 1,000 people in the total population. It tells the same story in different units, halving from 22.0 births per 1,000 people in 1970 to 11.0 in 2024.

New Zealand registered 57,705 live births in 2025. Annual births have stayed below 60,000 since 2016 even though the population is far larger than in the 1960s, when births exceeded 60,000. Mothers are older too: their median age rose from 24.8 years in 1972 to 31.7 in 2025, and since 2002 women aged 30 to 34 have had the highest fertility of any age group. Natural increase, the excess of births over deaths, was 20,214 in 2025, less than half its level in the early 1970s.

## 2.08 Ex-nuptial births



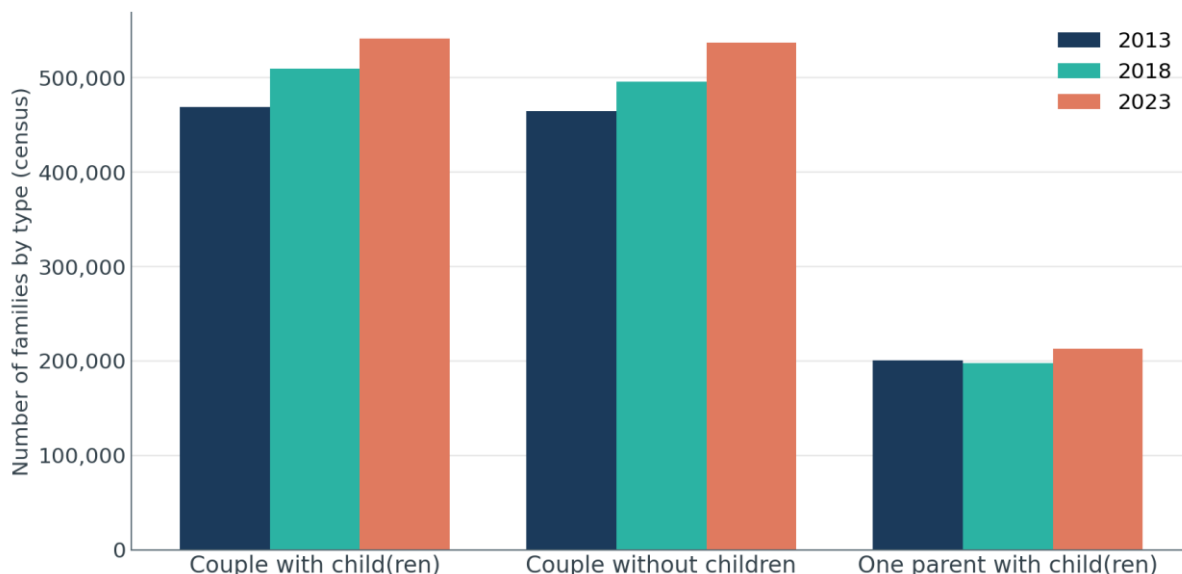
Source: Stats NZ; Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand

In 1964, just under 10% of babies were born outside marriage, and an unmarried mother faced heavy pressure to give her child up for adoption. By 1984, the share was nearly a quarter, and by 2010 it was nearly half, easing back to 46.9% in 2017.

The threshold was crossed in 2022. In the year to September, 50.2% of the 58,749 babies registered, 29,508 of them, were born to parents who were neither married nor in a civil union. For the first time, marriage was the minority setting for a New Zealand birth.

The label misleads, though. Almost two-thirds of babies born to unmarried parents had parents living together in a de facto relationship. A category that once signalled sole motherhood now mostly describes settled couples who saw no need for a ceremony first.

## 2.09 Families by type



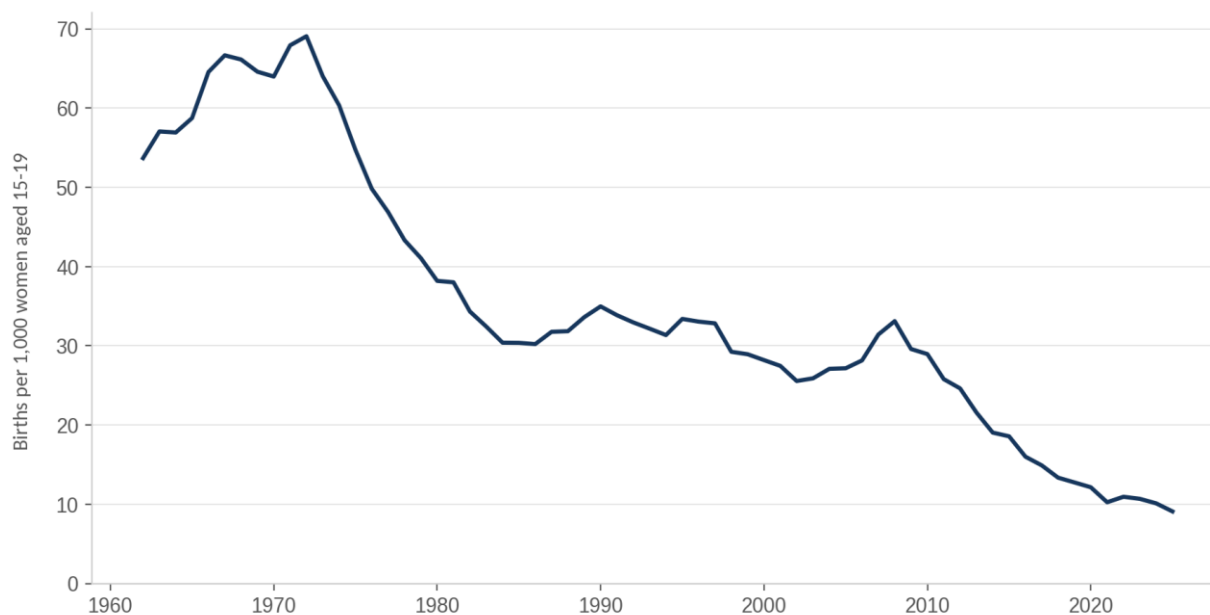
Source: Stats NZ, Census

The 2023 Census counted 213,534 one-parent families, 28.2% of all families with children. That share has barely moved in a decade; it was 30.1% in 2013. The raw number even fell between 2013, when there were 201,804 such families, and 2018, when there were 197,946, before rising again by 2023. Most one-parent families are headed by women.

The more striking shift in the census lies elsewhere. Couples without children, 537,486 of them, are now almost as numerous as couples with children, 543,483, a near tie produced by an ageing population and delayed childbearing.

A narrower and more comparable measure counts only families raising dependent children. On that basis the two-parent share fell from about 90% in 1976 to about 72% in 2006, then edged up to about 76% by 2023, though better enumeration in the 2023 Census explains part of the recent rise. The great restructuring of the family happened last century. The past decade looks more like consolidation.

## 2.10 Teenage mothers



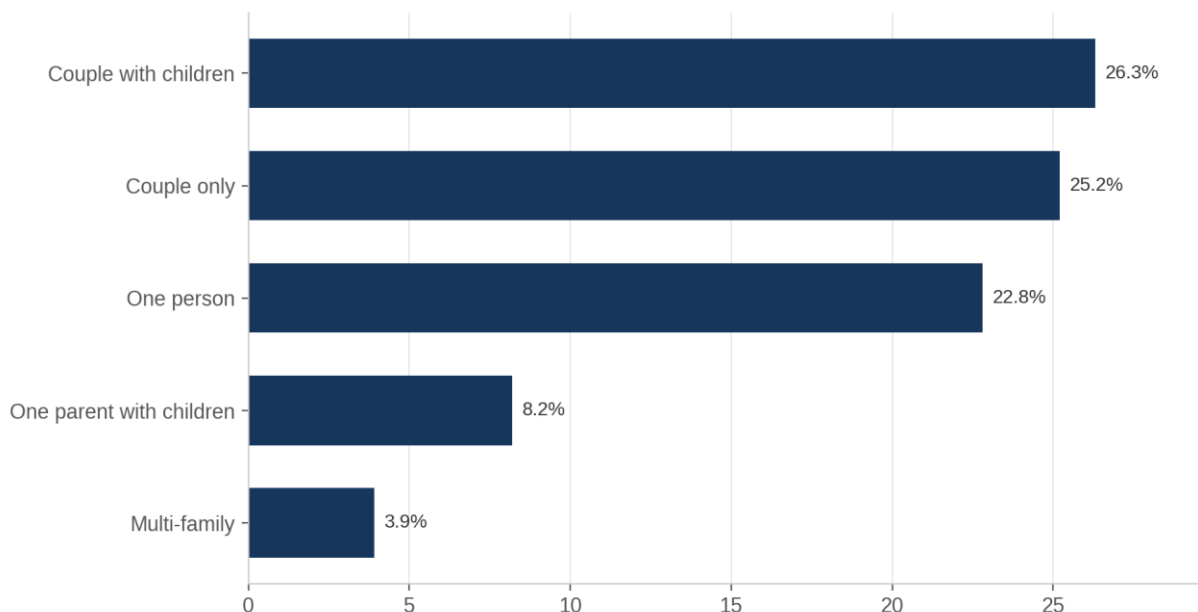
Source: Stats NZ; World Bank

In 1972, New Zealand recorded 69 births for every 1,000 women aged 15 to 19. In 2025, it recorded 9.1, a fall of almost 87% and one of the steepest declines of any indicator in this book.

The fall was neither smooth nor inevitable. The rate dropped sharply through the late 1970s, drifted between the high 20s and mid 30s through the 1980s and 1990s, and rose again to 33.1 per 1,000 in 2008. Then it collapsed. The rate fell by more than two-thirds in the decade after 2008 and halved again between 2015 and 2025, from 18.6 per 1,000 to 9.1.

New Zealand once ranked among the highest teen-birth countries in the developed world. The teenage birth rate for Māori was particularly high. On the World Bank measure, its adolescent fertility rate of 10.3 per 1,000 in 2024 now sits far closer to OECD norms. Whatever mix of contraception, education and aspiration drove the change, it ranks among the great unheralded social successes of the past generation.

## 2.11 Household composition



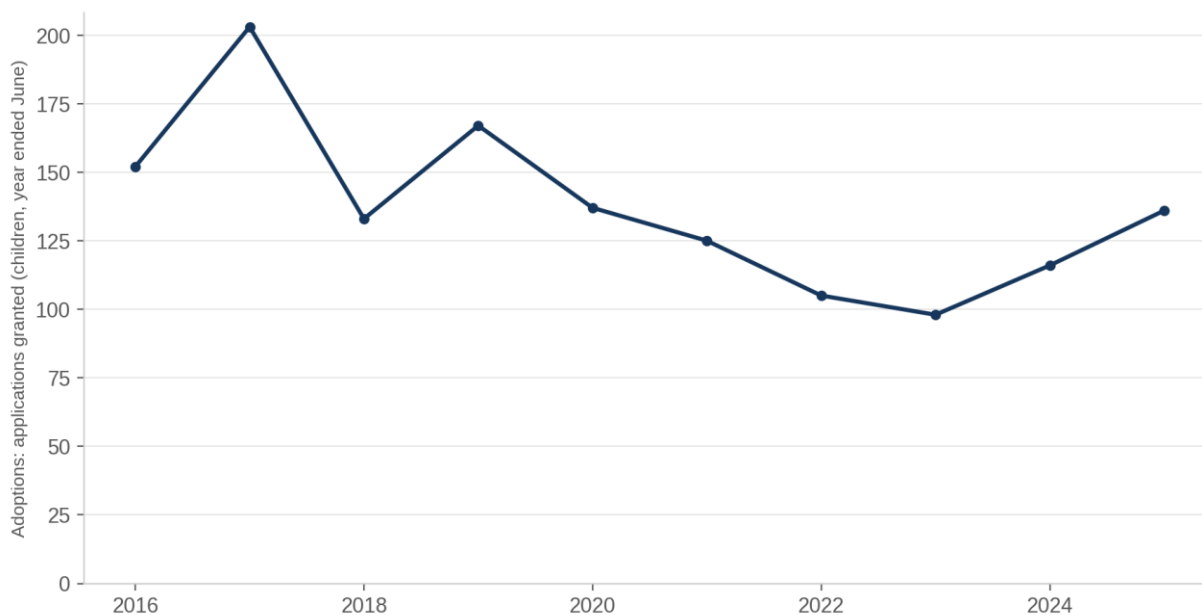
Source: Stats NZ, 2023 Census

The 2023 Census found couples with children still the most common household type, at 26.3% of households, but only just. Couple-only households came close behind at 25.2%, and 22.8% of households, 389,352 of them, contained a single person.

One-parent households with children made up 8.2%, or 10.3% once those sharing with other people are counted. Multi-family households, at 3.9% combined, remain a small category but a growing one, often a response to housing costs as two or three families share a roof and a mortgage. The shares exclude households whose composition Stats NZ did not classify, so they need not sum to 100.

Living alone is most common among women and among people aged 65 and over, a product of longer lives and widowhood. Nearly one household in four now contains just one person, and the fertility and longevity trends elsewhere in this book point that share in only one direction.

## 2.12 Adoptions



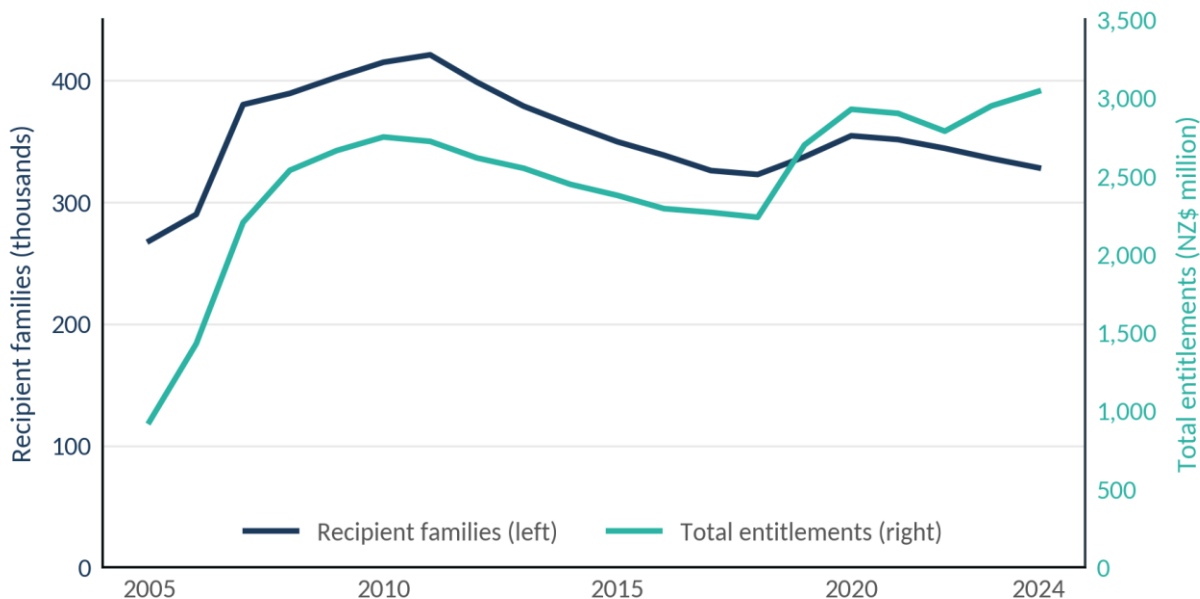
Source: Ministry of Justice; Ministry of Health; Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand

Adoption has almost disappeared. At its peak around 1969 to 1971, New Zealand saw roughly 3,500 to 4,000 domestic adoptions a year, and about 80,000 children were adopted between 1955 and 1985, the era of closed stranger adoption in which unmarried mothers surrendered babies they would often never see again. In the June year 2025 the courts granted just 136 adoption applications, and the annual total over the past decade has ranged between 98 and 203, with some of those arising from surrogacy arrangements. The forces that emptied the adoption registers run through this whole chapter: reliable contraception, welfare support for sole parents, the rise of de facto partnership and the end of the stigma around birth outside marriage.

Abortion has moved the other way in recent years. The Abortion Legislation Act 2020 took abortion out of the Crimes Act and into health law in March 2020, and shifted responsibility for the statistics from Stats NZ to the Ministry of Health, so figures before and after 2020 come from different collections. The general abortion rate, about 13.0 per 1,000 women aged 15 to 44 in 2020 and roughly at that level for the preceding decade, rose to 16.6 by 2024.

There were 17,785 abortions in 2024, up 9.3% on the 16,277 recorded in 2023 and about 34% higher than at decriminalisation in 2020. The abortion ratio reached 232 per 1,000 known pregnancies in 2024, almost one in four, and 67% of abortions were early medical abortions using the abortion pill, up from about 38% before 2020 and helped by telehealth provision. Whatever one's view of the law change, its statistical effect is unmistakable.

## 2.13 Working for Families



Source: Inland Revenue

Working for Families is a package of tax credits for low and middle income families with children. Before 2004, it was plain ‘family assistance’; the reforms of 2004 to 2007 widened eligibility into the middle class and added an in-work tax credit to make employment pay better than a benefit. The effect on the rolls was swift, with recipient families jumping from 268,400 in the 2005 tax year to a peak of 421,200 in 2011.

Family numbers have drifted down since, to 328,400 in the 2024 tax year, but spending has not followed. Total entitlements tripled from \$932 million in 2005 to \$2,751 million in 2010, dipped to \$2,238 million by 2018 and then climbed to a record \$3,043 million in 2024. Average support per family rose from \$8,777 in 2023 to \$9,269 in 2024, after the Family Tax Credit for a first child increased from \$6,642 to \$7,524 a year in April 2023.

In the 2024 tax year, 252,500 families received the family tax credit and 150,500 the in-work tax credit, while 137,200 received Best Start, which replaced the parental tax credit in July 2018, and 2,600 the minimum family tax credit, with many families receiving more than one of these. The pattern is fewer families receiving more money. Two decades on, Working for Families is a permanent fixture in the budgets of a third of a million households. Budget 2026 forecast it would cost taxpayers \$3.1 billion in the year to June 2026.

**Further reading:** Bryce Wilkinson, *Welfare, Work and Wellbeing (The New Zealand Initiative, 2017)*; and *Prescription for Prosperity 2026, Chapter 16, Social Development*.

# Health and Mortality

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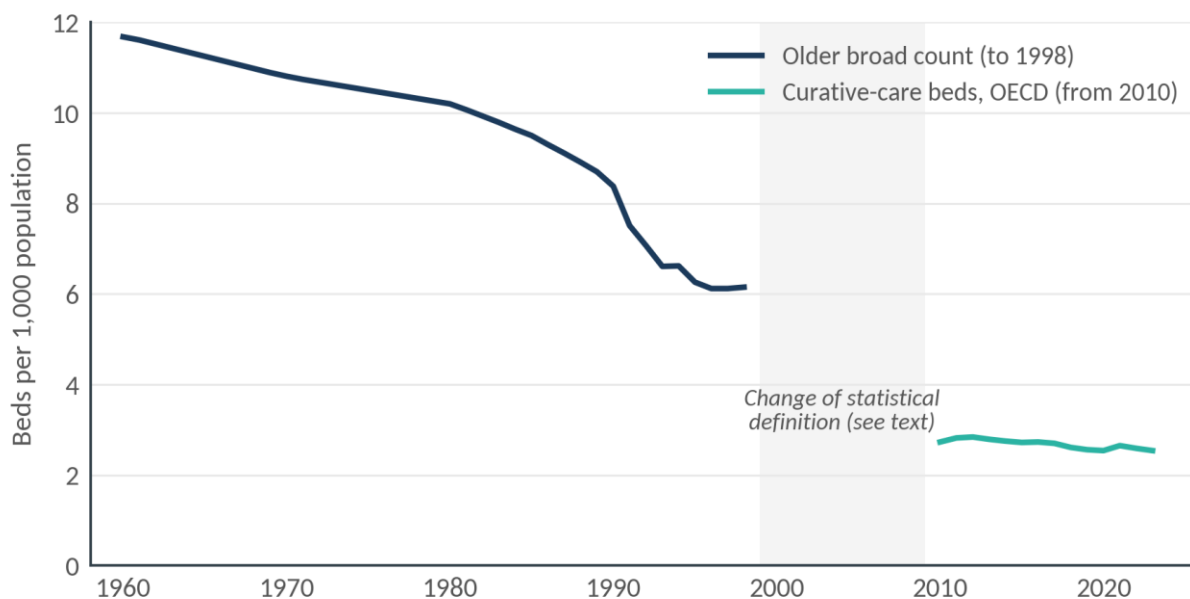
Most of what this chapter records would once have seemed beyond reach. A boy born in New Zealand in 1970 could expect 68 years of life; a boy born in 2024 can expect more than 80. Infant deaths have fallen by three quarters since 1970. A woman giving birth in 1948 faced a risk of dying in childbirth that her granddaughter, by 2010, faced at less than one fortieth of the rate.

These gains arrived slowly, year by year, and so they rarely made headlines. The road toll tells the same story. In 1973, New Zealand buried 843 people killed on its roads. In 2024, with far more people and far more cars, the toll was 292, the lowest per person in more than a century. Smoking has collapsed, from about 36% of adults at the 1976 census to under 7% smoking daily today. Alcohol consumption per adult is the lowest on record.

The detriments must be acknowledged. One in three adults is now obese, up from one in eight in 1989. One in seven adults reports high psychological distress, nearly double the rate of five years ago. Childhood immunisation has slipped well below the level needed to keep measles out, and in 2019 the country paid for that lapse with a major measles outbreak.

The pattern across these indicators is plain. Where the dangers were external, infection, accident and childbirth, prosperity, new technologies, medicine and policy responses have driven death rates down decade after decade. Where the risks are bound up with how we live, food, distress and the choices of young drivers, progress has been slower and sometimes absent. Both halves of the record belong in the same chapter.

### 3.01 Hospital beds



Source: World Bank; OECD; Our World in Data

In 1960, New Zealand had 11.7 hospital beds for every 1,000 people. Hospitals then were places where patients stayed for weeks, recovering slowly from surgery or confined for long illnesses. As drugs improved and day procedures replaced long stays, the country needed fewer beds. On the older, broader count the ratio nearly halved between 1970 and 1998, from 10.8 to 6.2 per 1,000.

The figures up to 1998 count all beds, public, private and long-stay, while from 2009 a narrower OECD definition applies and no data exist for 1999 to 2008, so the two segments of the chart are not strictly comparable. The 1990s also reshaped who provided the beds. Private hospital beds nearly tripled from 7,149 in 1993 to 20,536 in 2002, while public beds fell from 15,897 to 12,484.

On the modern definition the ratio has held within a narrow band of about 2.4 to 2.8 per 1,000 between 2009 and 2023, standing at 2.51 in the latest year, even as the population grew strongly. That puts New Zealand alongside the United Kingdom (2.42) and Denmark (2.43), slightly below the United States (2.68) and far below Japan (12.59) and South Korea (12.81). Fewer beds need not mean worse care, but they leave less slack when a bad winter or a pandemic arrives.

## 3.02 Private health insurance

### Private health insurance coverage

Year	Share of population covered (%)	Lives covered (millions)
Late 1980s	about 50	n/a
2000	34	n/a
2013	30	n/a
2023	about 27	1.45
2025 (year to September)	about 26	1.35

Source: OECD; Financial Services Council of New Zealand

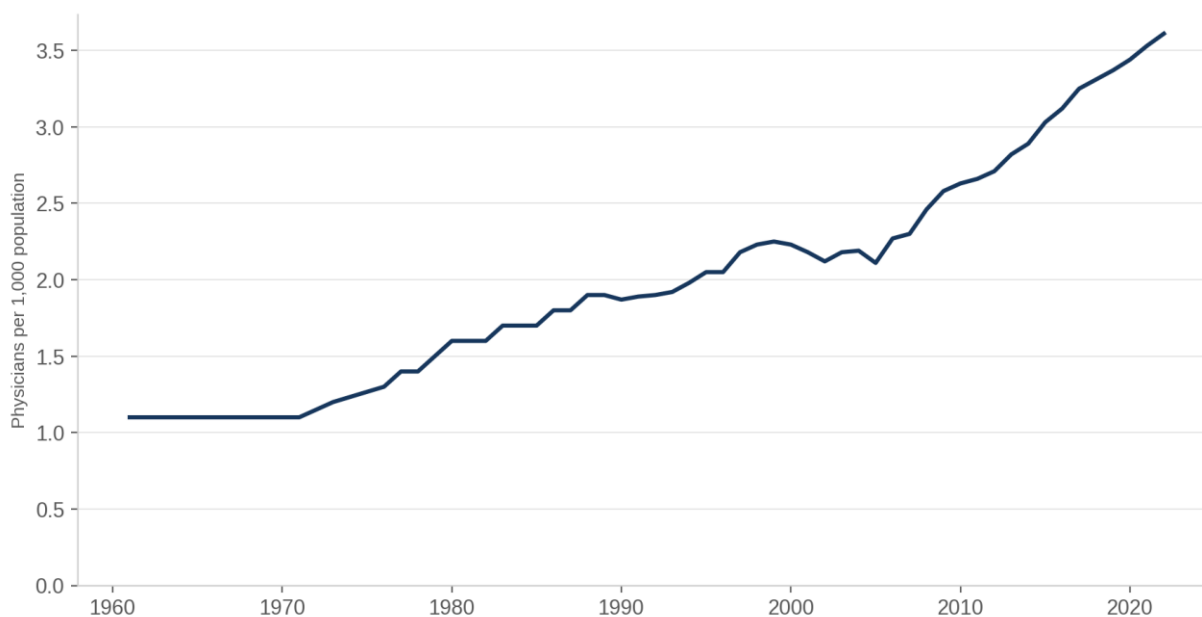
In the late 1980s, about half of all New Zealanders held private health insurance. The share then fell steadily, to 34% in 2000 and 30% in 2013. Premiums rose with the cost of private care, and many households decided the heavily subsidised public system was backstop enough.

The decline has continued. The Financial Services Council counted about 1.45 million insured lives in 2023, after roughly 250,000 people gained cover in the preceding year, many of them through workplace schemes. In the year to September 2025 there were about 1.35 million covers, and insurers paid out NZ\$2.545 billion in claims. With a population of about 5.3 million, that is roughly 26% to 28% of New Zealanders, around half the coverage of the late 1980s.

Insurance mostly buys faster access to elective surgery and specialist care. When fewer people hold it, more of that demand lands on public waiting lists. The long slide in coverage therefore shifts load onto a public system that already carries plenty.

**Further reading:** Prabani Wood, *The Heart of Healthcare: Renewing New Zealand's Primary Care System* (The New Zealand Initiative, 2025); and *Prescription for Prosperity 2026*, Chapter 13, *Health*.

### 3.03 Medical practitioners



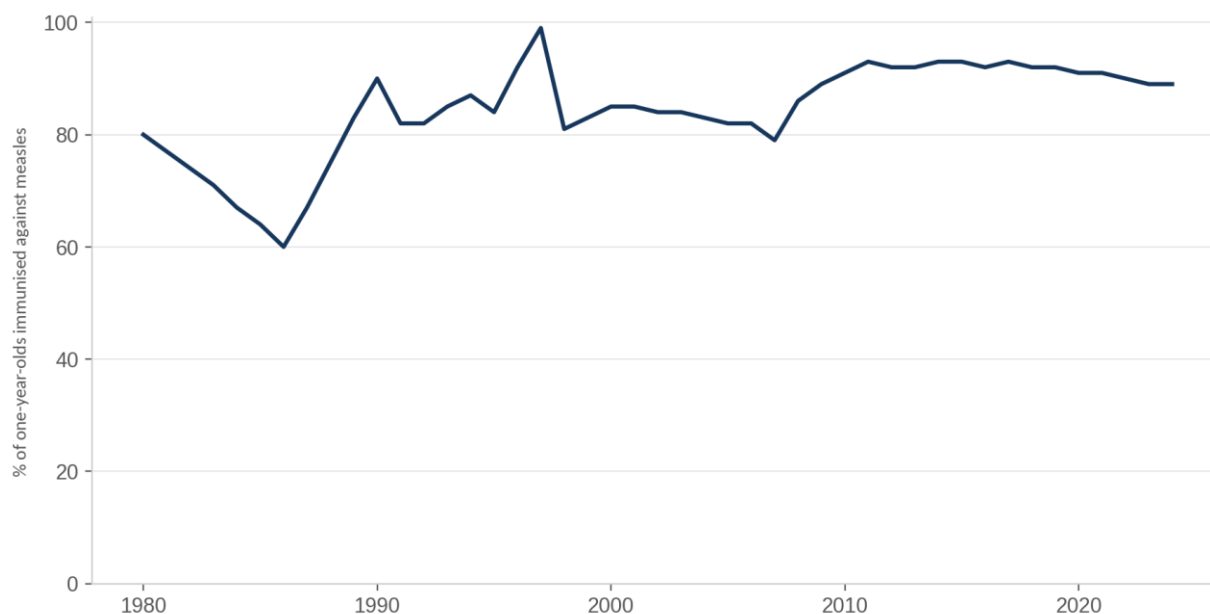
Source: World Bank; WHO; Our World in Data

For a decade after 1961 the number of doctors barely moved, stuck at 1.1 per 1,000 people. Then medical schools expanded and migration brought doctors in. By 2022, New Zealand had 3.61 physicians per 1,000 people, more than triple the 1971 ratio. The climb was fastest after 2005, when the figure rose from about 2.1 to 3.6 in seventeen years.

That places New Zealand respectably among its peers, just below the United States (3.68), above the United Kingdom (3.30) and behind Australia (4.09). The familiar complaint that doctors are scarce is really a complaint about distribution and demand, not raw numbers; there have never been more doctors per head than now.

Nursing tells a bumpier story. Nurse and midwife numbers per 1,000 people hovered around 9 to 10 through the 2000s, then climbed to 10.6 by 2012 and 12.3 by 2023. That is close to Australia (13.45) and well above the United Kingdom (9.55).

### 3.04 Immunisation rates



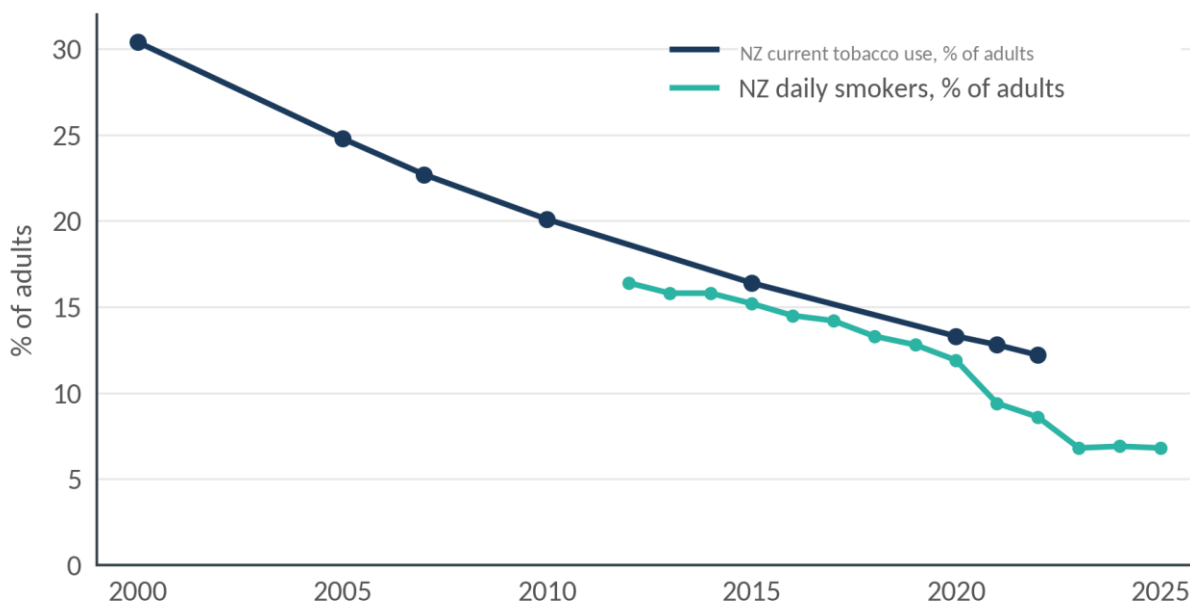
Source: World Bank; Health New Zealand | Te Whatu Ora

Measles immunisation among one-year-olds tells an uneasy story. Coverage stood at 80% in 1980, slid to 60% by 1986, then recovered through the 1990s, touching 99% in 1997. Through the 2010s it held at 92% to 93%, close to the level that keeps measles from spreading. Since then, it has slipped, to 89% by 2023 and 2024.

The broader measure looks worse. In the three months to 30 June 2025 only 82.0% of children were fully immunised at 24 months, against a Government target of 95% by 2030 and an interim target of 84% for 2024/25. At the end of 2023 a new national register, the Aotearoa Immunisation Register, replaced the old one and captures more eligible children, so part of the measured drop was expected. The shortfall that remains is real.

The cost of low coverage is not hypothetical. The 2019 measles outbreak was the largest in more than two decades, with more than 2,000 confirmed cases and more than a third of patients hospitalised. In November 2024, a whooping cough epidemic was declared after 263 cases in four weeks; cases climbed to about 2,190 by April 2025, the most since early 2019, and an infant died. With only about 77% of under-18s vaccinated against measles, well short of the roughly 95% needed for herd immunity, the next outbreak is a matter of time.

### 3.05 Tobacco use



Source: WHO via World Bank; Ministry of Health (NZ Health Survey)

At the 1976 census about 36% of New Zealand adults smoked cigarettes regularly. The retreat began soon after: between 1976 and 1981 smoking fell from 40% to 35% among men and from 32% to 29% among women. Higher taxes, advertising bans, smokefree workplaces and plain social disapproval did the rest of the work over the following decades.

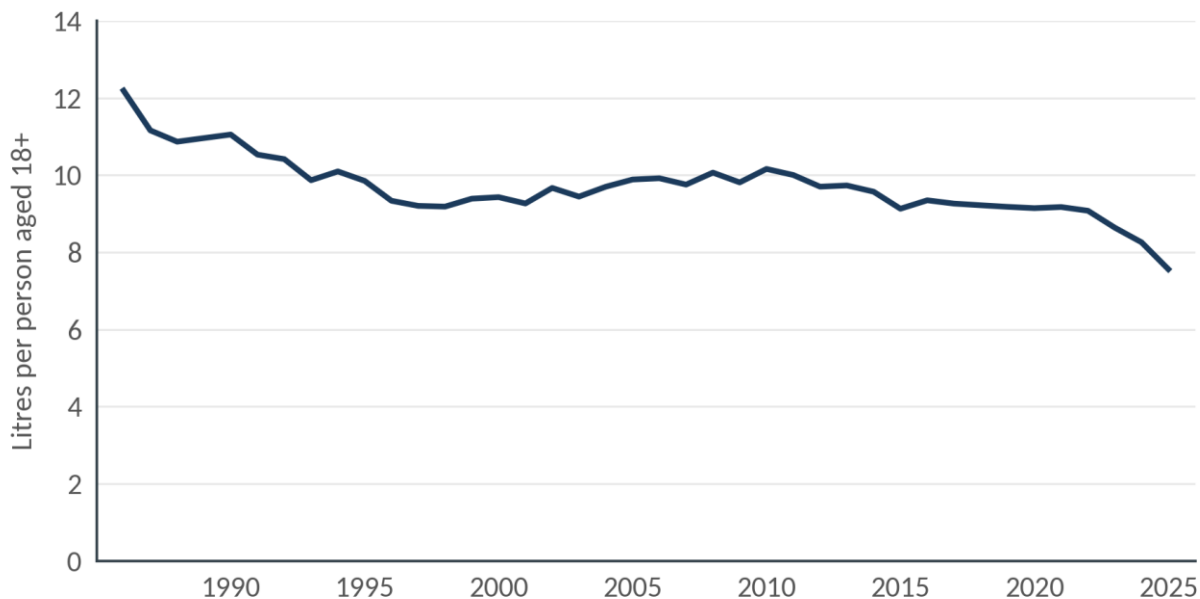
The fall has been relentless. WHO estimates put New Zealand current tobacco use among adults at 30.4% in 2000 and 12.2% in 2022, a drop of about 60% in 22 years. Not all of that use is daily. For New Zealand, 11.9% of adults smoked daily in 2019/20 and just 6.8% in 2024/25, barely down from 6.9% the year before. The remaining smokers are increasingly male: 8.3% of men smoke daily against 5.3% of women, and the gap has widened over the past two years.

The next generation has nearly given up the habit before starting it. Daily smoking among 14 and 15-year-olds fell from 15.6% in 1999 to 3.2% in 2013. Few public health campaigns anywhere have succeeded so completely. Vaping has risen sharply in this and other age groups. The rise in its prevalence is an offsetting consideration that is still being debated.

Tobacco excise revenue has recently dropped more quickly than survey-reported smoking rates; Treasury recently provided a sharp downward revision in tobacco excise forecasts. If the next update of the New Zealand Health Survey does not show a proportionate decline in smoking rates, a rising illicit market is the most likely source of the discrepancy.

**Further reading:** *Jenesa Jeram, Smoke and Vapour: The Changing World of Tobacco Harm Reduction (The New Zealand Initiative, 2018); and Prescription for Prosperity 2026, Chapter 26, Lifestyle Regulation.*

### 3.06 Alcohol consumption



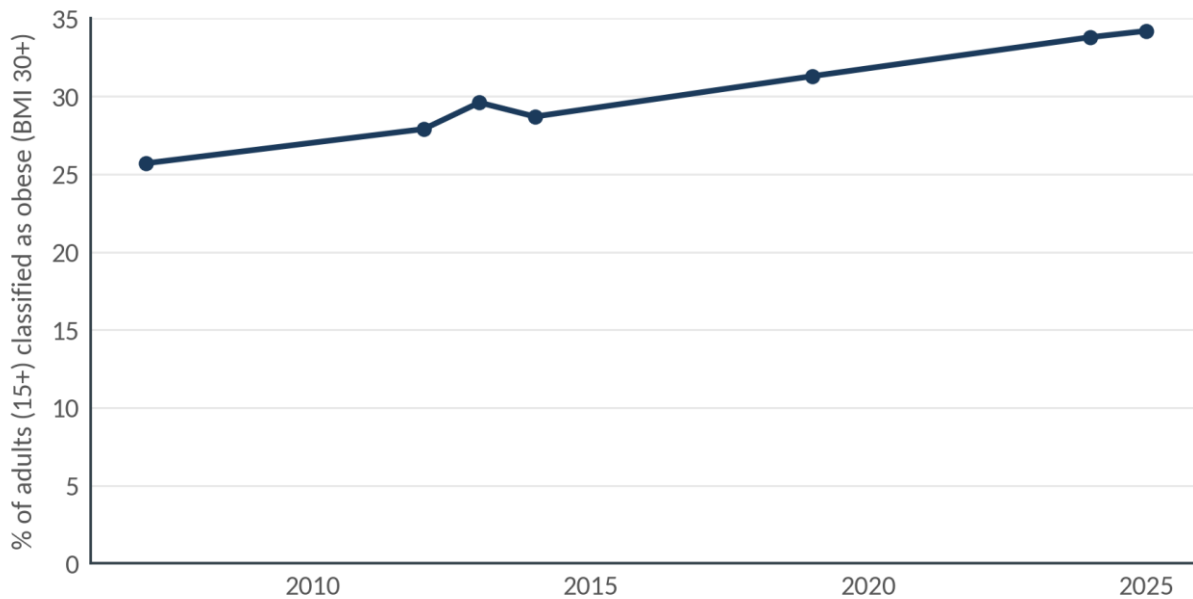
Source: Stats NZ

New Zealanders are drinking less than at any time since records began. Alcohol available for consumption fell from 12.2 litres of pure alcohol per person aged 18 and over in 1986 to 7.56 litres in the year ended December 2025, the lowest on record. The latest year alone brought an 8.4% drop, and over the past 20 years consumption has fallen by about 23%.

WHO estimates show the plateau before the fall: consumption hovered around 10 litres per person through the 2000s, peaking at 10.29 litres in 2009, before easing below 10 litres in the mid-2010s. No single law explains the decline. Younger New Zealanders simply drink less than their parents did.

The country that once limited drinking in public bars to 6 pm now drinks more moderately than the official statistics of the 1980s would have thought possible. It is one of the quieter behavioural shifts of the past generation.

### 3.07 Obesity



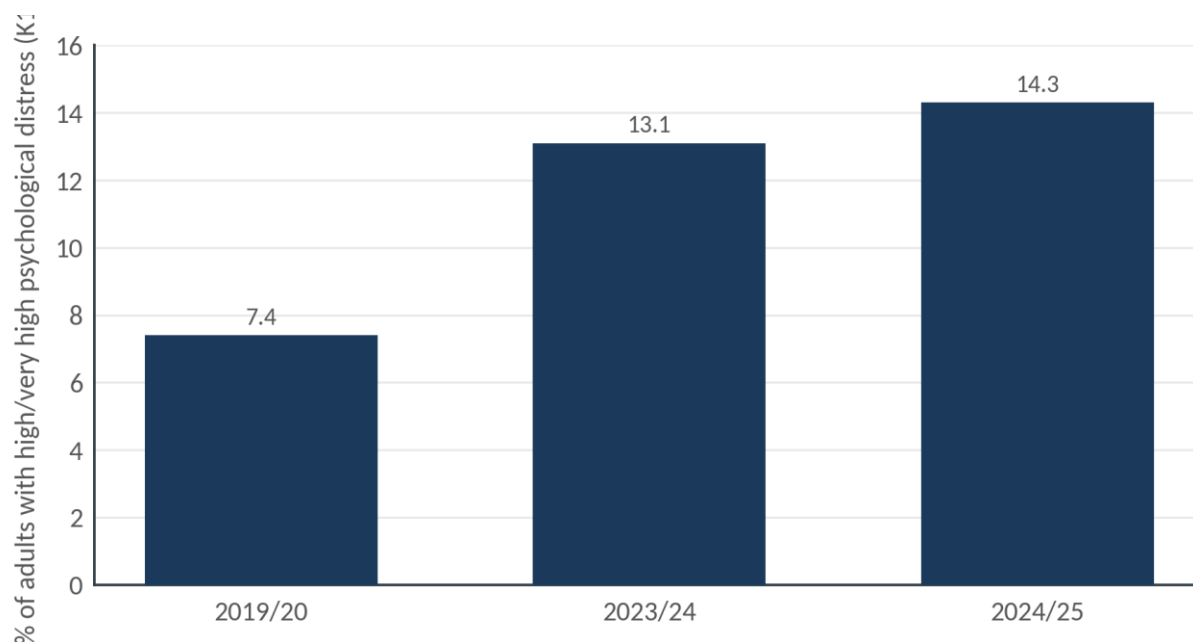
Source: Ministry of Health (NZ Health Survey); OECD

Here the trend runs the wrong way. On OECD figures, adult obesity more than doubled from 12.7% in 1989 to 28.4% in 2012. The New Zealand Health Survey, which measures height and weight rather than asking, found 25.7% of adults obese in 2006/07 and 33.8% in 2023/24. In 2024/25, it edged up to a new high of 34.2%, about one in three adults.

The most recent readings suggest a plateau rather than a peak. Obesity stood at 31.3% in 2018/19 and has sat around 33% to 34% in the mid-2020s, which means the rate has roughly held for five years, but at a historically high level. A generation ago, one adult in eight was obese; now it is one in three.

Smoking shows that behaviour can change on a national scale. Obesity shows that it has not yet done so here. From the chart, the rise has slowed but not reversed; obesity has edged to a new high. The likely drivers are familiar, from less physical work to changing diets and the decline of smoking, which once suppressed appetite, though their relative weight is hard to disentangle.

### 3.08 Mental health



Source: Ministry of Health (NZ Health Survey)

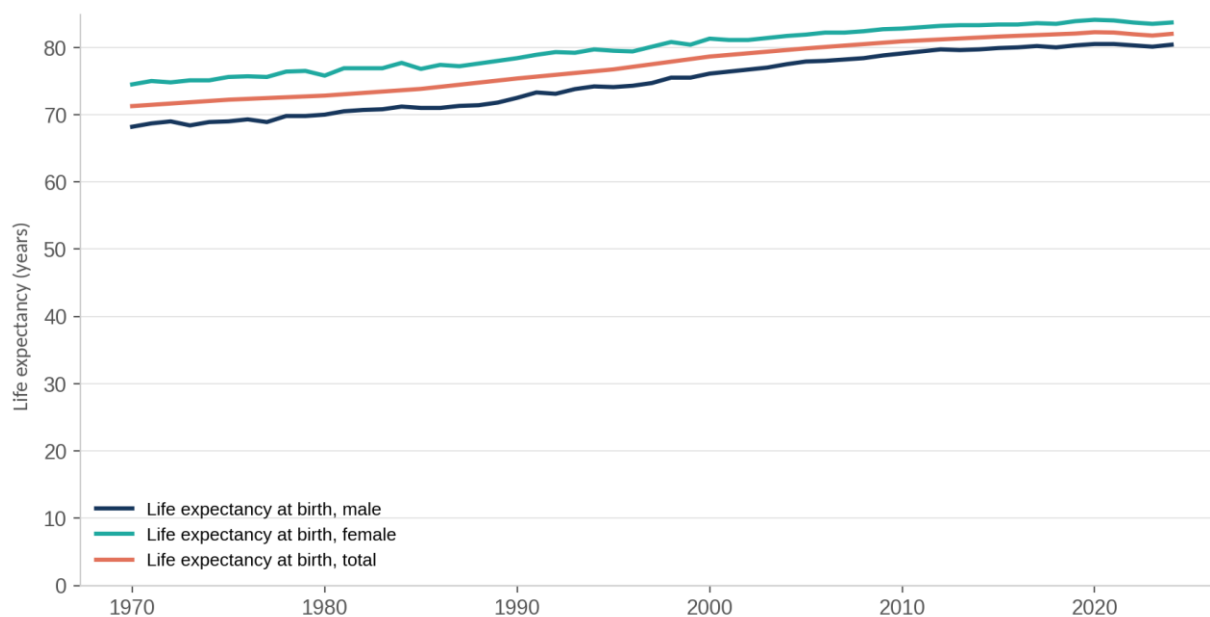
Mental health is the hardest indicator in this chapter to measure. Definitions shift, services change and long consistent series barely exist. The best recent population measure is the health survey question on psychological distress, and it has moved sharply. In 2019/20, 7.4% of adults reported high or very high distress; by 2024/25 the figure was 14.3%, one adult in seven, or more than 600,000 people.

Treatment has expanded alongside. Antidepressant dispensing rose by close to 50% between 2007 and 2016, and the share of the population using specialist mental health services rose from about 2.2% to 2.7% between 2001 and 2010. More medication and more services have not, on the survey evidence, produced less distress.

How much of the rise is worsening mental health and how much is greater willingness to report it, nobody can say with confidence. Either way, a doubling of measured distress in five years is the most troubling line in this chapter.

The New Zealand Initiative's *Prescription for Prosperity 2026* expressed concern about the rising problem and pointed to the need for more research into its causes and the efficacy of existing programmes. It pointed to the need for better-funded and structured primary care that could identify and address problems at an earlier stage. It also advocates greater empowerment for those with mild to moderate afflictions through personal mental health budgets.

### 3.09 Life expectancy at birth



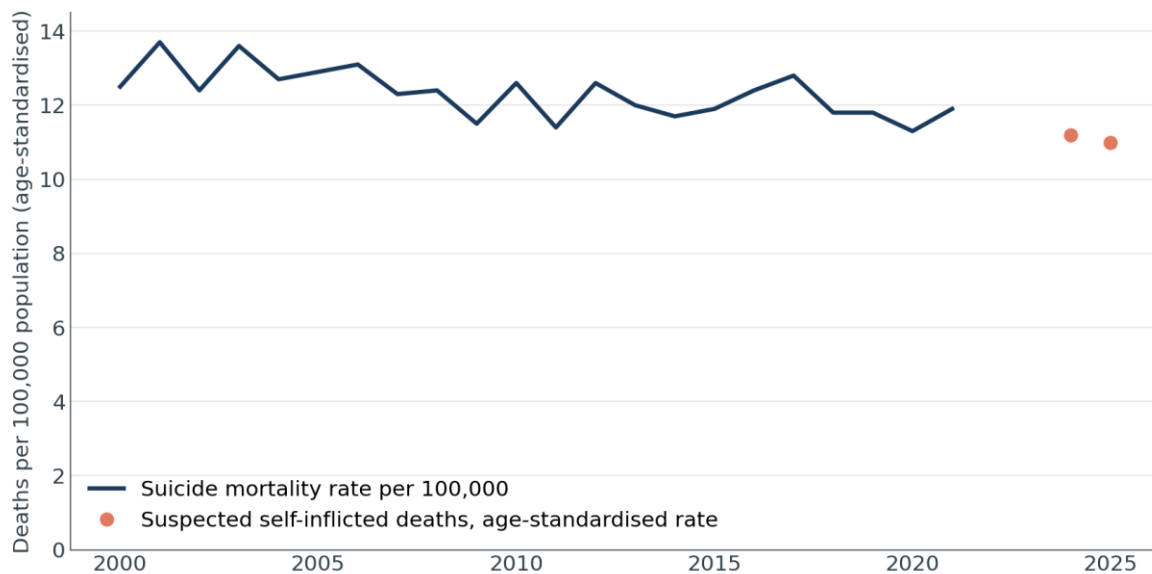
Source: World Bank; Stats NZ

Life expectancy at birth rose from 71.3 years in 1970 to 82.0 years in 2024, a gain of almost 11 years in little more than two generations. Men gained the most. On the latest Stats NZ period life tables, for 2022 to 2024, male life expectancy rose from 68.2 years to 80.1 and female from 74.5 to 83.5, narrowing the gap between them from 6.3 years to 3.4.

Behind the headline sits a halving of death rates. Age-standardised mortality fell from 633 to 324 per 100,000 for women between 1980 and 2010, and from 1,013 to 412 for men. The crude death rate fell from 8.8 per 1,000 people in 1970 to a low of 6.4 in 2020.

Since then, the crude rate has ticked up, to 7.6 in 2022 and 7.1 in 2024. That is not health going backwards. An ageing population pushes the crude rate up even when each age group is dying less often, and 2022 carried the mortality of the COVID years. The chart of life expectancy, which strips out age structure, still points the right way.

### 3.10 Suicide



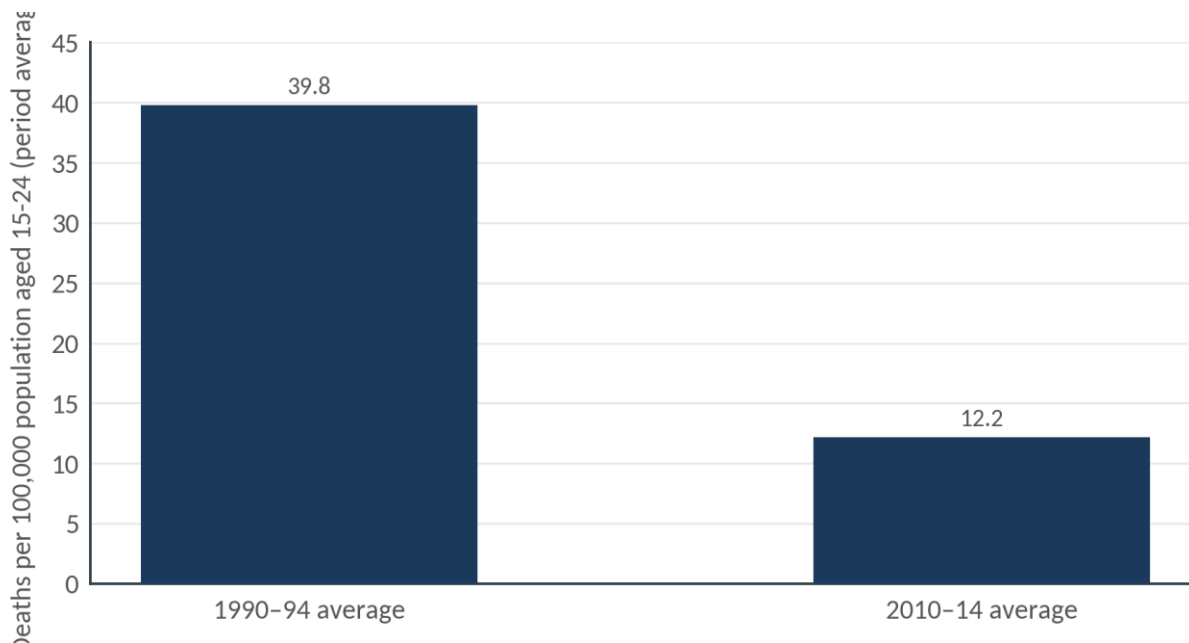
Source: WHO via World Bank; Office of the Chief Coroner

While almost every other death rate in this chapter has fallen, suicide has not. WHO-standardised rates have moved in a band of roughly 11 to 14 per 100,000 since 2000, from 13.85 in 2001 to 11.92 in 2021, with no clear trend. Male rates peaked in the 1990s and have fallen since, but the overall rate has proved stubborn.

The most recent coronial figures sit at the bottom of that band. In 2024/25, there were 630 suspected self-inflicted deaths, an age-standardised rate of 11.0 per 100,000, which is 3.1% below the average of the past 16 financial years. These coronial counts are provisional and are not directly comparable with confirmed statistics.

Youth suicide remains the darkest corner of the data. In 2009 to 2013, New Zealand's rate among 15 to 19-year-olds, 15.6 per 100,000, was the highest among 41 EU and OECD countries. The suspected rate for that age group has since edged down, from 12.3 per 100,000 in 2021/22 to 11.8 in 2023/24. The direction is right; the level is still a national reproach.

### 3.11 Motor vehicle deaths, ages 15-24



Source: Ministry of Social Development; Ministry of Transport; AA New Zealand

In the early 1990s, the roads were the great killer of the young. Between 1990 and 1994, an average of 39.8 of every 100,000 New Zealanders aged 15 to 24 died on the roads each year. By 2010 to 2014, the average had fallen to 12.2 per 100,000, a drop of nearly 70%. Graduated licensing, tougher drink-driving enforcement and safer cars all played their part.

Behaviour changed too. Young drivers were involved in 36.1% of all fatal crashes in 1990 but only 18.9% in 2012. Youth driving offence rates fell 41% over the decade to 2025, with drink and drug-driving offences down 58% and seatbelt offences down 52%. The reckless young driver is becoming rarer.

The job is not finished. Young people still suffer more road deaths per 100,000 than any other age group, and New Zealand's young-driver death rates remain the highest in the OECD. Crashes in which a young driver is at fault still cause about 90 deaths and 600 serious injuries a year.

### 3.12 Adolescent death rates (15-19 years)

#### What still claims young lives

Measure	Period	Value
Suspected suicide rate, ages 15-19	2021/22	12.3 per 100,000
Suspected suicide rate, ages 15-19	2023/24	11.8 per 100,000
Suicide as share of deaths, ages 15-19	Recent years	17.6%
Youth deaths from unintentional injury (over two thirds car accidents)	2003-08	44%
NZ 15-19 suicide rate of 15.6 per 100,000	2009-13	Highest of 41 EU/OECD countries

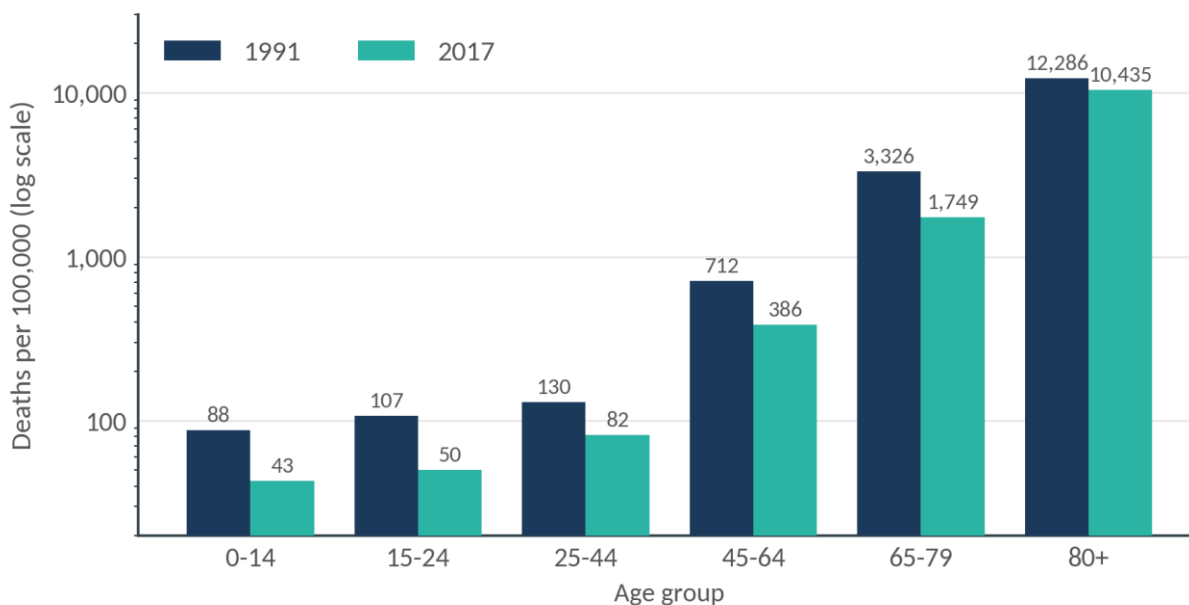
Source: Health New Zealand | Te Whatu Ora; Te Ara

Adolescence has become far safer. Mortality among young people fell markedly from the 1950s onwards, and among under-15s the all-cause death rate dropped from 62.0 to 21.3 per 100,000 between 1990-91 and 2016-17. The diseases and accidents that once carried off teenagers now rarely do.

What remains is concentrated in two causes. Unintentional injury accounted for 44% of youth deaths between 2003 and 2008, more than two thirds of those from car accidents. Suicide is now the leading single cause of death for 15 to 19-year-olds, accounting for 17.6% of deaths in that age group.

The recent movement is modestly encouraging. The suspected suicide rate among 15 to 19-year-olds fell from 12.3 per 100,000 in 2021/22 to 11.8 in 2023/24. When so few teenagers die of anything else, every gain against these last two causes counts double.

### 3.13 Death rates by age group



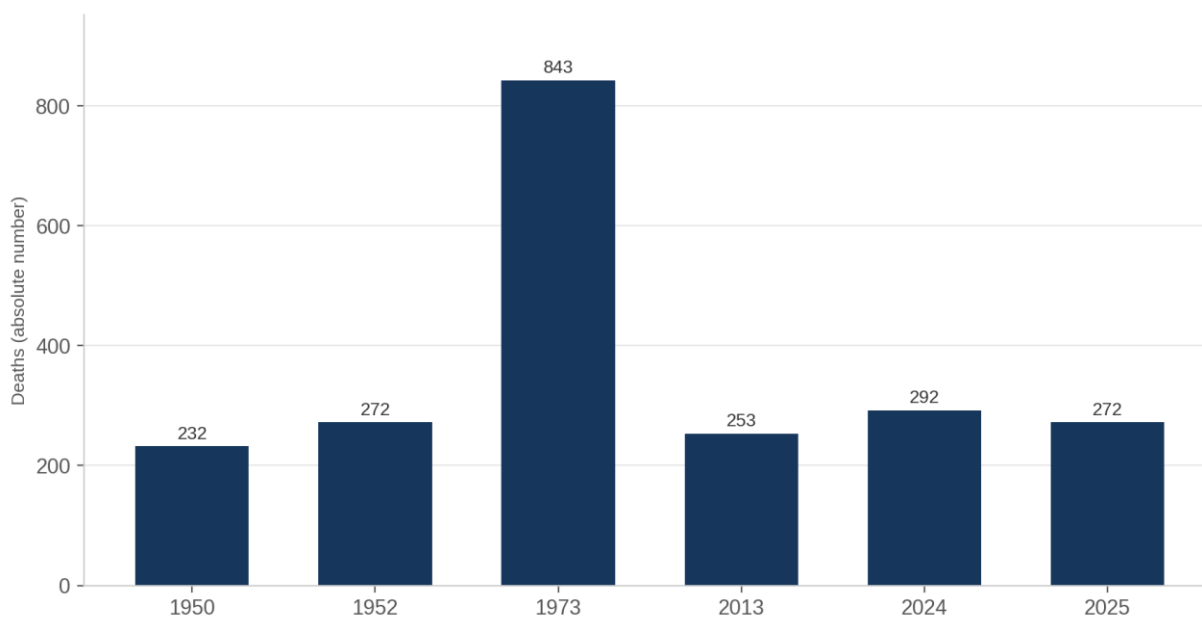
Source: Stats NZ (period life tables and population estimates)

Death rates have fallen at every age, and the chart shows by how much. Among children under 15 the rate roughly halved between 1991 and 2017, from 88 per 100,000 to 43, and among 15 to 24-year-olds it more than halved, from 107 to 50. The decline reached well into middle age, with the rate for 45 to 64-year-olds falling from 712 to 386.

As the young stopped dying, death migrated to old age. At 80 and over, where death is most common, the rate eased only modestly, from about 12,300 per 100,000 to 10,400, far less than the falls at younger ages. The 80-plus age group accounted for about 27% of all deaths in 1963 and about 51% by 2013. In the year ended December 2025, New Zealand registered 37,491 deaths against 57,705 live births, so death has become, overwhelmingly, something that happens to the old.

This is what the 11-year gain in life expectancy since 1970 looks like from underneath. The rates are drawn on a logarithmic scale because they span more than two orders of magnitude, from tens per 100,000 among the young to thousands among the old. The largest proportional declines came among children and young adults. A funeral for a child, once a common grief, is now mercifully rare.

### 3.14 Motor vehicle accident fatalities



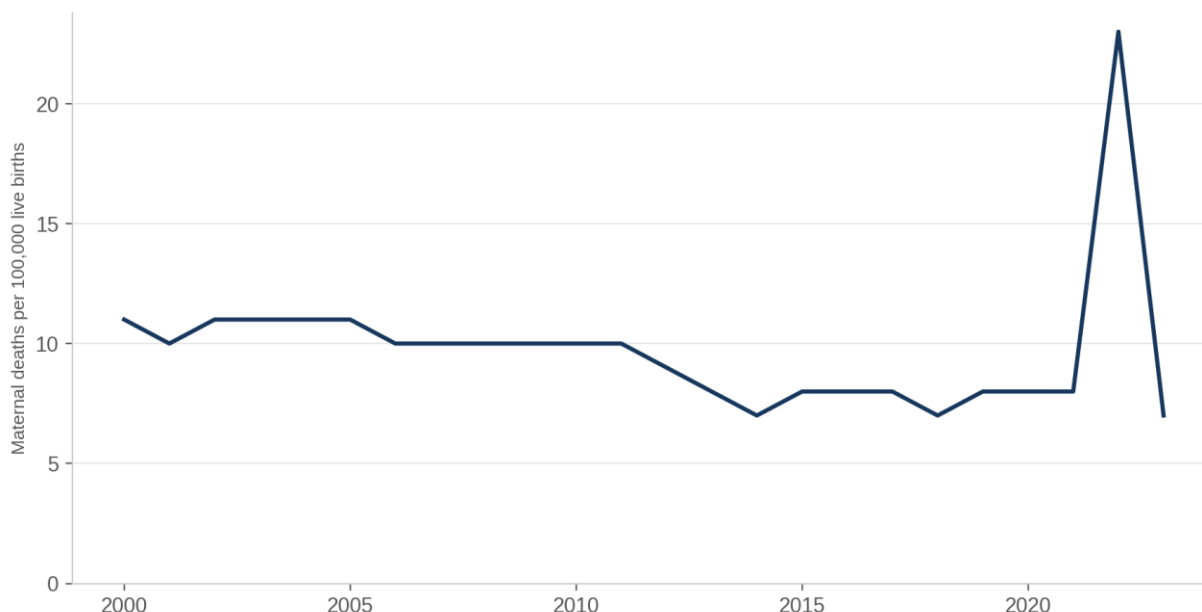
Source: Ministry of Transport; NZ Police

In 1950, New Zealand recorded 232 road deaths, and 272 in 1952. Then came mass car ownership, powerful imported vehicles, six o'clock closing and its rush of drinkers onto the roads, and no seatbelts. The toll climbed for two decades and peaked at 843 deaths in 1973, in a country with far fewer people than now. No other peacetime statistic in this book records so much avoidable death in a single year.

Then the long descent began. Seatbelt laws, drink-driving enforcement, better roads, safer cars and changed attitudes each shaved away at the toll. By 2013, it had fallen to 253. After drifting up for a decade, it dropped again: 292 deaths in 2024, the first year below 300 since 2014 and, at about 5.5 deaths per 100,000 people, the lowest per-capita toll in more than 100 years. The provisional 2025 toll of 272, about 5.0 per 100,000, matches 1952 exactly and would be the second-lowest annual total since 1951.

The improvement is recent as well as historic. The per-capita rate stood at 7.1 per 100,000 as recently as 2019, and alcohol-related road deaths fell from 92 in 2023 to 57 in 2024. The road toll is the chapter's best evidence that sustained, unglamorous policy work saves lives by the hundred.

### 3.15 Maternal mortality



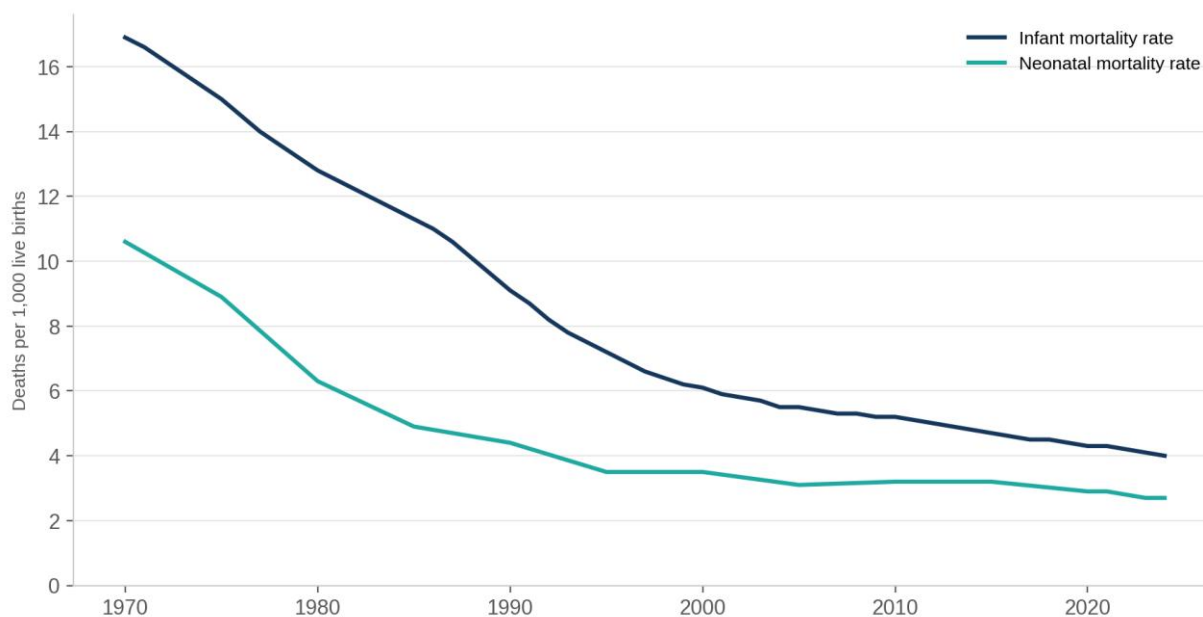
Source: World Bank (UN MMEIG); Ministry of Health

No statistic in this chapter has fallen further. In 1948, about 132 of every 100,000 women giving birth died directly as a result of childbirth. By 2010, the figure was about 3 per 100,000, a decline of 97.5%. Antibiotics, blood transfusion, trained midwifery and hospital delivery turned what was once a common cause of death for young women into a rarity.

The chart shows the modern, modelled series, and it needs careful reading. With only about 55,000 to 60,000 births a year, New Zealand records a handful of maternal deaths annually, so the ratio jumps around: the modelled estimate sat at 11 per 100,000 in 2000, eased to 7 or 8 through the 2010s, spiked to 23 in 2022 and returned to 7 in 2023. The spike reflects small numbers, not a collapse in care.

Indirect maternal deaths, those from pre-existing conditions rather than childbirth itself, stayed roughly stable at 4 to 4.6 per 100,000 between 1983 and 2010. The battle that remains is against the deaths that medicine cannot yet prevent, because the ones it can prevent have largely been prevented.

### 3.16 Neonatal and infant mortality



Source: World Bank (UN IGME)

In 1970, 16.9 of every 1,000 babies born in New Zealand died before their first birthday. By 2024, the rate was 4.0, a decline of 76%. Deaths in the first 28 days of life fell almost as far, from 10.6 per 1,000 live births in 1970 to 2.7 in 2024.

Most of the gain came early. Infant mortality fell from 16.9 to 6.1 per 1,000 between 1970 and 2000, then more slowly to 4.0 by 2024. The easier victories were won first, and the remaining deaths are the ones that medicine finds hardest to prevent, so each further gain comes more slowly.

The averages also conceal unequal risk. Babies from multiple births died at 53 per 1,000 multiple births in 2011, many times the overall rate, and perinatal mortality is higher for Māori, Pacific and Indian mothers. A rate of 4.0 per 1,000 is a large improvement.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# Education

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New Zealand taught its children early. Schooling became compulsory for 7- to 13-year-olds in the 1860s and 1870s, and enrolment has been close to universal ever since. At 1 July 2025 the school roll stood at 856,113, and almost every child now arrives at school having already attended early childhood education.

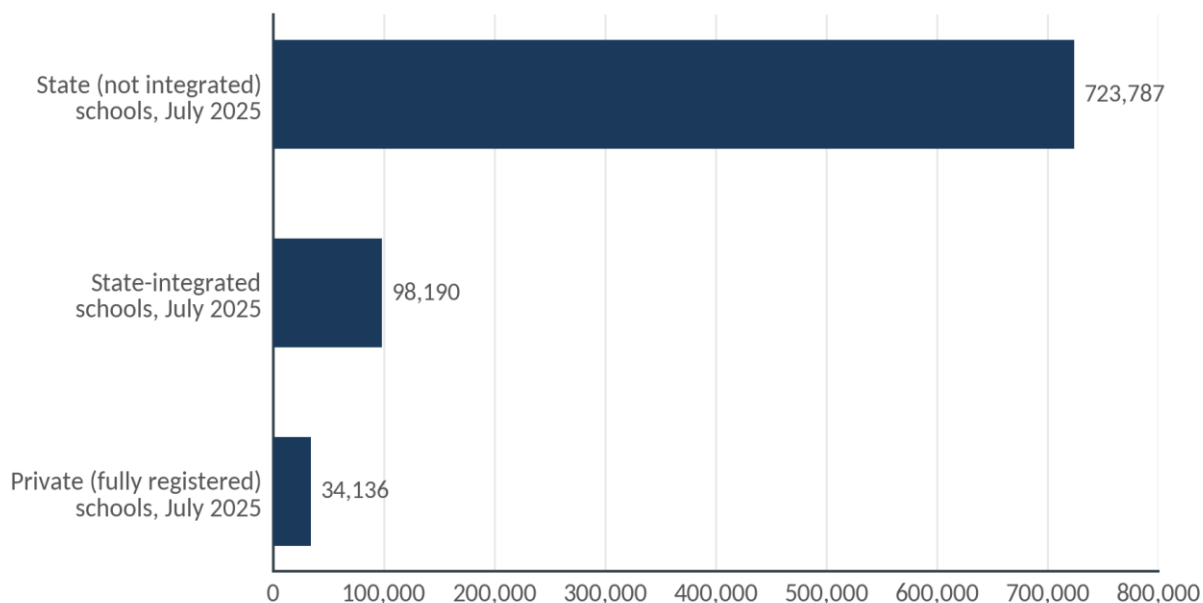
On paper, New Zealanders have never been better educated. In 2001, 13% of adults aged 25 to 64 held a bachelor's degree or higher; by 2025 the figure was 39%. The share with no school qualification at all fell from 24% to about 15% over the same period.

Yet the machinery behind the certificates is faltering. Since 2000, New Zealand's scores in the OECD's PISA tests of 15-year-olds have fallen in reading, mathematics and science. In mathematics the loss amounts to roughly three years of learning. A country that ranked 4th in the world in 2000 now sits in the middle of the pack, and the slide has not stopped.

Recent years added two shocks. School attendance, already declining before COVID, collapsed in 2022 and has only partly recovered. Export education, a NZ\$3.9 billion industry in 2019, was nearly wiped out by the border closure and is still climbing back. This chapter records the successes, which are real, and the failures, which are larger.

There is, at last, reason for cautious hope. After a quarter-century of slippage, the deepest education reforms in a generation are now under way, from a knowledge-rich curriculum to structured literacy in the early years to a simpler but more demanding NCEA. None of it shows in these numbers yet, and none of it is guaranteed to work, but the direction is right. The New Zealand Initiative's report *Prescription for Prosperity 2026* sets out what more is needed. If the reforms hold, a future edition of *New Zealand by Numbers* may record the country's school results turning back up.

## 4.01 State, state-integrated and private school enrolments



Source: Ministry of Education, via Figure.NZ

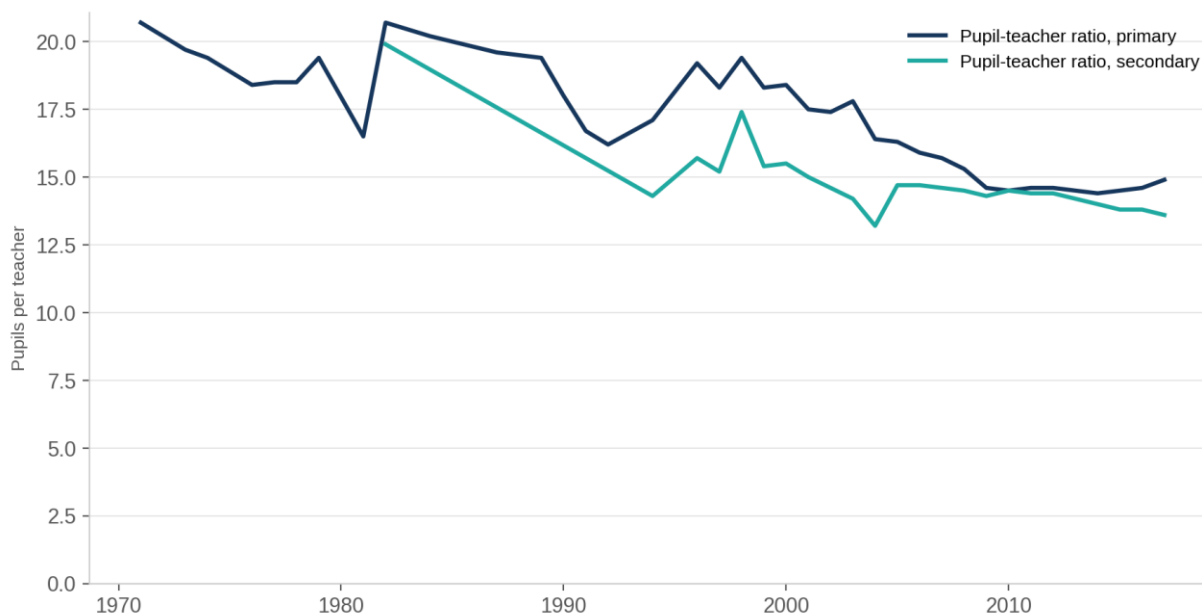
At 1 July 2025, 723,787 students attended state schools, 98,190 attended state-integrated schools and 34,136 attended fully registered private schools. State and state-integrated schools together educate about 96% of New Zealand's school students. Private schools take around 4%, a share that has stayed broadly stable since the Ministry of Education's time series began in 1996.

State-integrated schools deserve a word of explanation. They are former private schools, mostly religious, brought into the state system between 1977 and 1984 when financial pressure threatened their collapse. Today, they enrol roughly one in nine students, with 11.5% of the 2025 roll against 84.5% in ordinary state schools.

The picture is remarkably stable. In 2013, the public sector share was 96%; in 2025 it is still 96%. Whatever else has changed in New Zealand education, the balance between public and private schooling has not moved.

**Further reading:** Joel Hernandez, *In Fairness to Our Schools (The New Zealand Initiative, 2019)*; and *Prescription for Prosperity 2026, Chapter 11, School Education*.

## 4.02 Student-teacher ratio



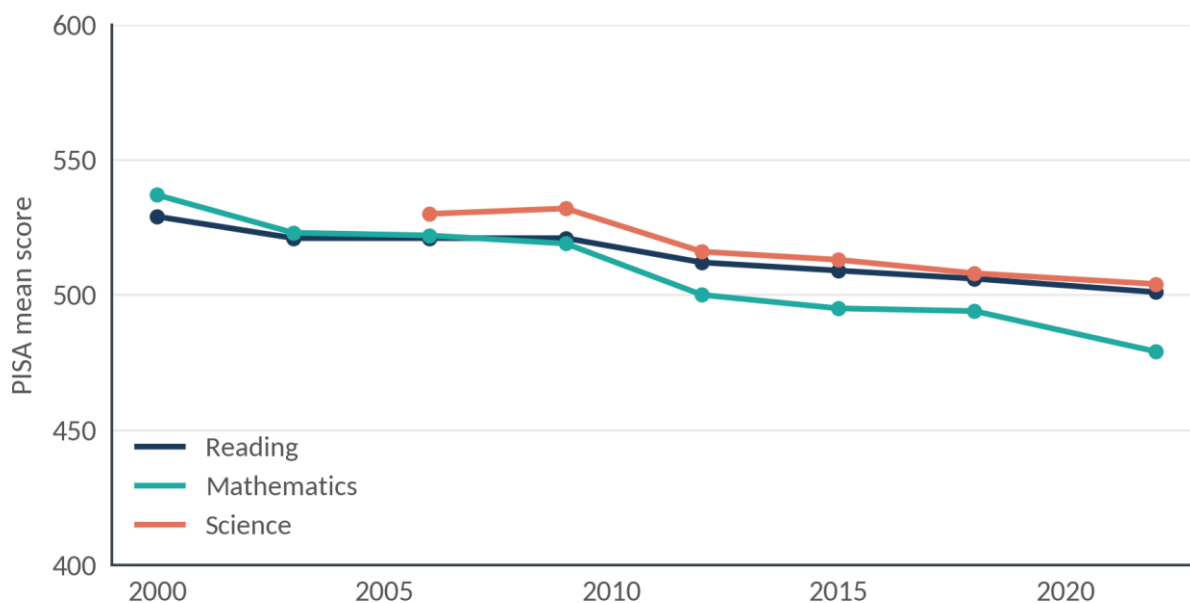
Source: World Bank (UNESCO Institute for Statistics)

Classes have been getting smaller for half a century. The primary pupil-teacher ratio fell from about 20.7 in 1971 to 14.9 in 2017, and the secondary ratio from about 19.9 in 1982 to 13.6 in 2017. Most of the recent reduction came in a single decade: between 2000 and 2009 the primary ratio dropped from 18.4 to 14.6, and it has been roughly flat since. Smaller classes have had little measurable effect on achievement. Teacher quality and curriculum matter more.

The international series is patchy and stops in 2017, so two cautions apply. The Ministry of Education measures the ratio differently, dividing the whole school roll by full-time teachers, which gave 25.5 in 2004 and 23.6 in 2012; on the OECD-comparable measure, the 2012 ratios were 16.3 in primary and 13.9 in secondary.

Smaller classes are among the most popular and most expensive things a school system can buy, and New Zealand bought them. Over the same decades, as the next indicator shows, student achievement fell. More teachers per pupil have not translated into more learning.

### 4.03 PISA scores: reading, mathematics and science



Source: Ministry of Education; OECD PISA

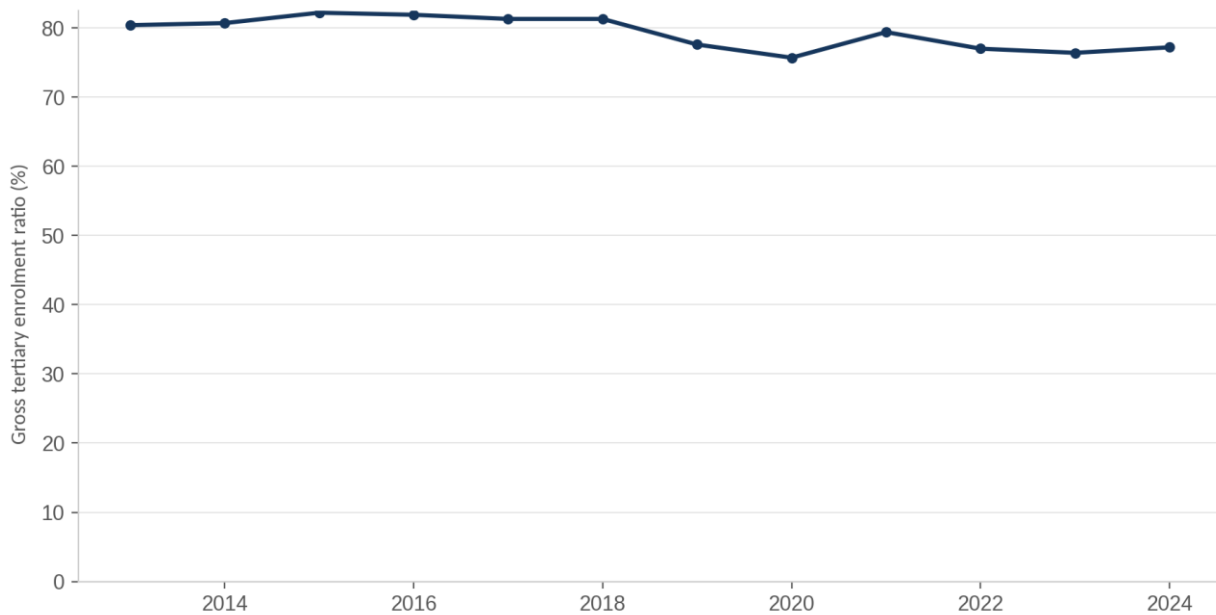
The OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment tests what 15-year-olds can do with reading, mathematics and science. When the first results came out in 2000, New Zealand could be proud. Its mean mathematics score of 537 ranked 4th among the 41 participating countries, and reading, at 529, was almost as strong.

Every survey since has been worse. By 2022, mathematics had fallen to 479, a loss of 58 points, or roughly three years of learning at the OECD's benchmark of about 20 points per year; 15 of those points vanished between 2018 and 2022 alone. Reading fell from 529 to 501, and science from 530 in 2006, the first year it was fully measured, to 504. Every 2022 result was New Zealand's worst on record, and because a weak response rate skewed the 2022 sample upward by an estimated 10 points, the true position is probably worse still.

The spread of results tells the harder story. The share of low performers in mathematics nearly doubled from 15% in 2003 to 29% in 2022, while high performers halved from 21% to 10%. New Zealand still sits above the OECD averages of 476 in reading, 472 in mathematics and 485 in science, and in 2022 it ranked 7th among OECD countries in reading and in science, but only 19th in mathematics, having slipped from 4th of 41 countries in 2000 to 27th of 78 by 2018. Other studies confirm the slide: PIRLS Year 5 reading fell from 529 in 2001 to 523 in 2016, and TIMSS Year 9 mathematics from 501 in 1995 to 482 in 2019. Results from the 2025 round are due in late 2026. Nothing in this book worries us more.

**Further reading:** Briar Lipson, *New Zealand's Education Delusion (The New Zealand Initiative, 2020)*; and *Prescription for Prosperity 2026, Chapter 11, School Education*.

## 4.04 Tertiary enrolment



Source: *Education Counts; World Bank (UNESCO UIS)*

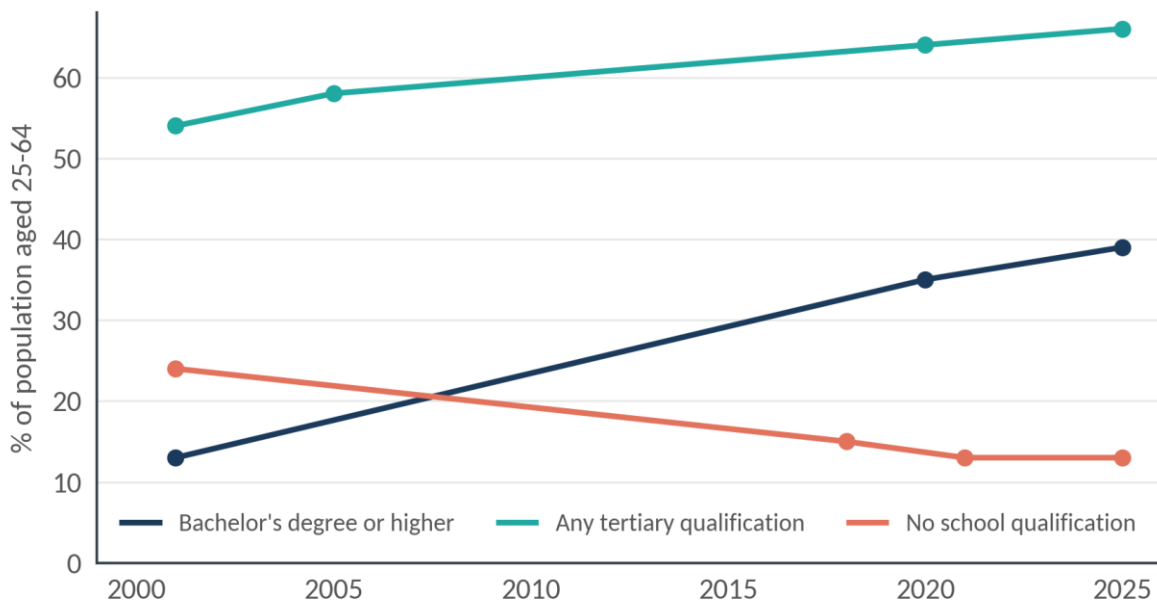
In 2025, 395,095 students were enrolled in formal tertiary study, 1.1% fewer than the 399,685 of 2024. Domestic enrolments fell 3.5% to 335,205, while international enrolments rose 15% to 59,890, still just short of the 61,040 recorded in 2019 before the pandemic.

The mix is shifting in two directions at once. University enrolments grew 3.7% in 2025 to 188,710, while polytechnic enrolments at Te Pūkenga fell 4.3% and private training establishments lost 8.5%. Students are also moving up the qualification ladder: bachelor's enrolments rose 2.9% and masters enrolments 17%, while Level 4 certificate enrolments fell by a fifth.

The long view puts these wobbles in proportion. In 1880, New Zealand had 211 tertiary students; today it has roughly 400,000. Numbers peaked around 2005 after the great expansion of the 1990s and 2000s and have drifted down since, largely on falling polytechnic enrolments. The chart shows the gross tertiary enrolment ratio, which slipped from 82.2% in 2015 to 77.2% in 2024.

**Further reading:** *Prescription for Prosperity 2026, Chapter 12, Tertiary Education and Skills.*

## 4.05 Educational attainment of adults



Source: *Education Counts (Household Labour Force Survey)*; NZQA

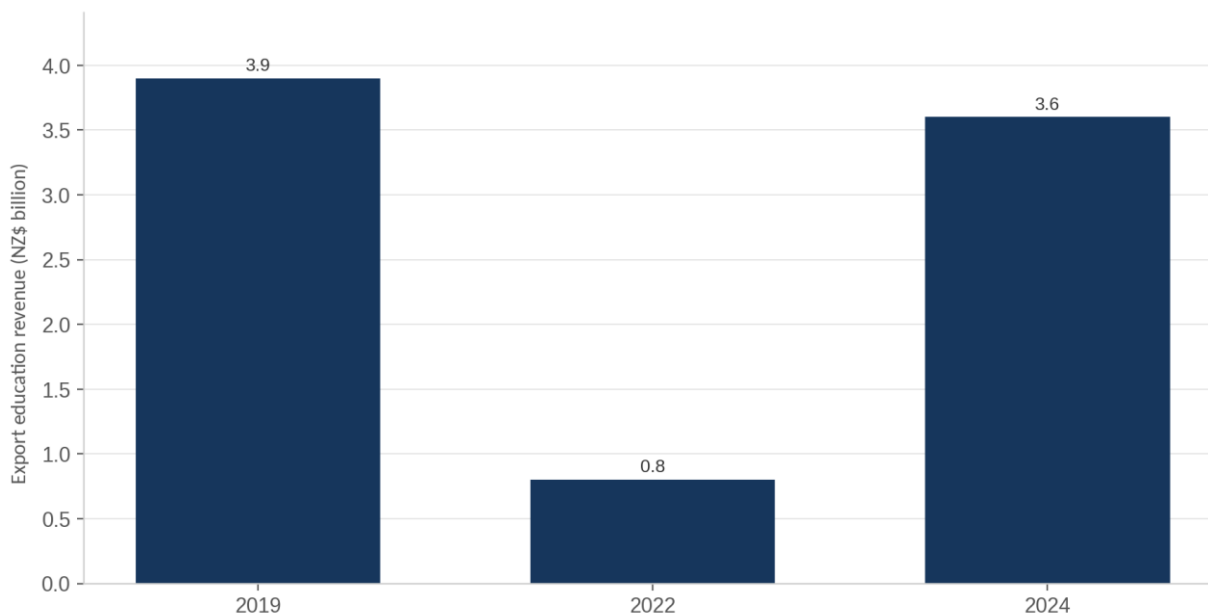
In 2001, 24% of New Zealanders aged 25 to 64 had no school qualification; by 2020 the share was about 15%, though progress stalled and it has hovered there since 2018. At the other end, adults holding a bachelor's degree or higher tripled from 13% in 2001 to 39% in 2025, and two thirds of working-age adults now hold a tertiary qualification of some kind, up from 54% in 2001. A change to the survey question in 2013 means earlier figures are not fully comparable with later ones.

The gains have not been shared evenly. In 2020, only 18% of Māori adults and 15% of Pacific adults held a bachelor's degree or higher, against 35% of the population as a whole. Internationally New Zealand is unremarkable: 81% of adults had attained at least upper-secondary education in 2019, around the OECD average.

Qualifications are only as good as what stands behind them. NCEA's new literacy and numeracy co-requisite has exposed weak basics: in the May and June 2024 assessments only 58.7% of students passed reading, 55.7% passed writing and 45.6% passed numeracy. Counting resits, the 2024 pass rates rose to 69.6%, 66.1% and 55.0%, and improved again in 2025 to 71.8%, 68.0% and 63.0%. Meanwhile, the first cohort under the new, tougher NCEA Level 1 saw the pass rate fall from 81.9% in 2023 to 70.0% in 2024, as the literacy and numeracy co-requisite exposed the weak basics that easier credits had masked.

**Further reading:** Briar Lipson, *Spoiled by Choice: How NCEA Hampers Education (The New Zealand Initiative, 2018)*; and *Prescription for Prosperity 2026, Chapter 11, School Education*.

## 4.06 International students and export education



Source: Education New Zealand; Education Counts

In 2019, New Zealand hosted 115,705 international students across schools, tertiary providers and language schools, and export education earned the country NZ\$3.9 billion. Then the border closed, and it stayed closed longer than in most competitor countries, until mid-2022. By 2022, the industry's economic contribution had shrunk to about NZ\$0.8 billion.

Recovery came late but fast. By 2024, enrolments had climbed back to 83,425, or 72% of the pre-COVID level, and the sector's value recovered to NZ\$3.6 billion. Universities hosted 33,485 international enrolments that year, schools 18,350, Te Pūkenga 10,270 and government-funded private training establishments 10,185. In 2025, tertiary international enrolments rose another 15% to 59,890, almost back to the 61,040 of 2019.

Ambition has returned too. A decade ago, the government aimed to double a NZ\$2.6 billion industry by 2025, a goal the pandemic buried. The 2025 'Going for Growth' plan starts again, targeting 119,000 international students and NZ\$7.2 billion in sector value by 2034.

## 4.07 Total school enrolments and ECE participation

### School roll and early learning participation

Measure	Value
Total school roll, 1 July 2025	856,113
State (not integrated) school students, 2025	723,787
State-integrated school students, 2025	98,190
Private school students, 2025	34,136
Children starting school who had attended ECE, 2009	95.0%
Children starting school who had attended ECE, 2024	96.8%

Source: Ministry of Education; Education Counts

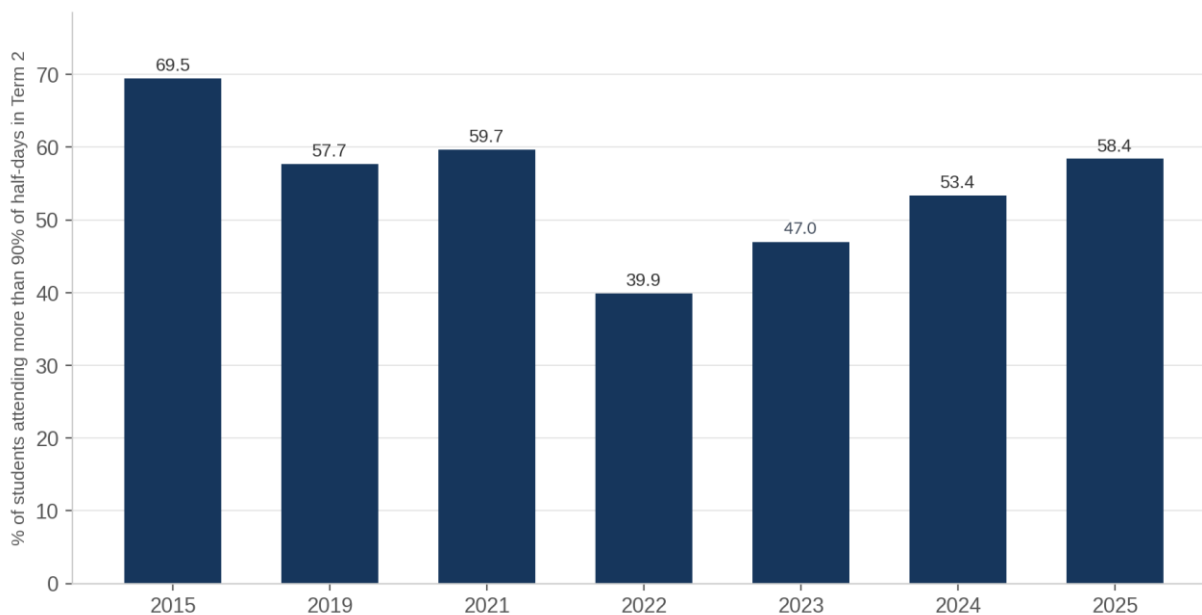
New Zealand's total school roll stood at 856,113 at 1 July 2025. Primary schooling has been effectively universal since the nineteenth century: education was made compulsory for 7- to 13-year-olds in the 1860s and 1870s, and enrolment has tracked the size of the child population ever since.

Almost every child now starts school with early learning behind them. In 2024, 96.8% of children starting school had regularly attended early childhood education in the six months before entry, up from 95% in 2009. The two measures are defined slightly differently, so the comparison is indicative rather than exact.

The roll itself is heading down. The smaller birth cohorts born after the early 2010s are now moving through the system, and the Ministry of Education projects school rolls to decline as they do.

**Further reading:** *Prescription for Prosperity 2026, Chapter 11, School Education.*

## 4.08 School attendance



Source: *Education Counts; Education Review Office*

Regular attendance means being at school for more than 90% of available half-days in a term, which still allows about a week away. In Term 2 2015, 69.5% of students cleared that bar. By Term 2 2019 only 57.7% did, a fall of 12 percentage points before COVID had even arrived. Term 2 2021 was little changed, at 59.7%.

Then came the collapse. In the Omicron and influenza winter of 2022, regular attendance fell to 39.9%; fewer than two in five students were at school more than nine days in ten. Recovery since has been steady but partial: 47.0% in Term 2 2023, 53.4% in 2024 and 58.4% in 2025, the first term to beat its pre-COVID comparator, though still far below the 69.5% of 2015. Term 2 2020, when lockdown changed how attendance was collected, is not comparable and is omitted.

Absence is not harmless slack. Ministry of Education research finds no safe level of non-attendance: each additional half-day missed predicts fewer NCEA credits, even among students still counted as regular attenders. A school system cannot teach children who are not there.

# Crime and Justice

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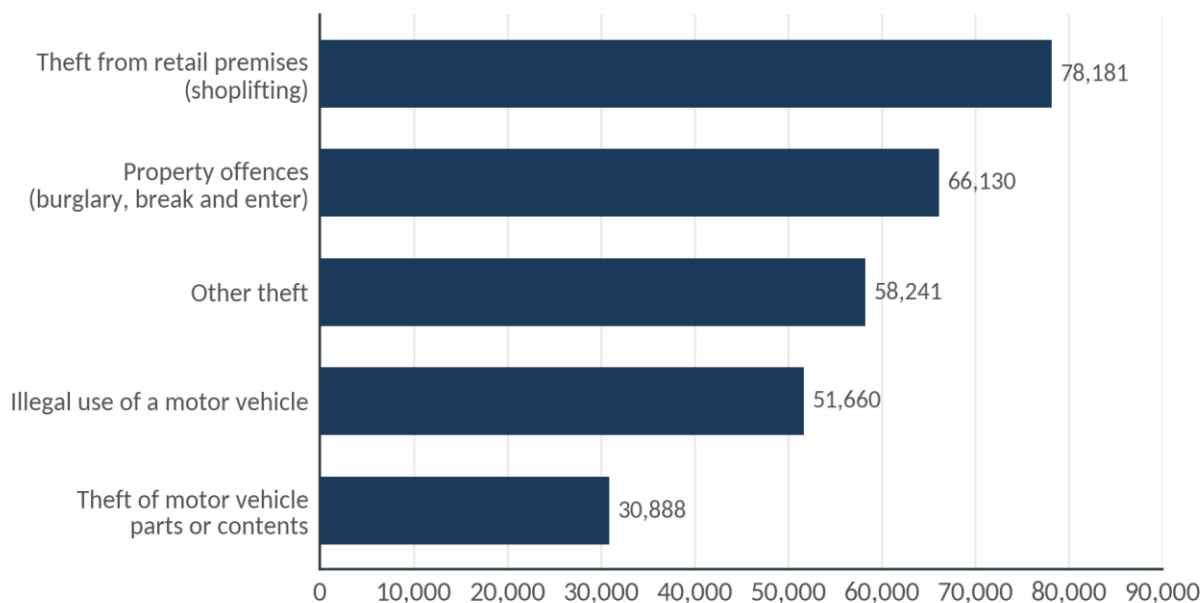
Crime statistics carry a double warning. They measure what gets reported and recorded, not what happens, and both reporting and recording change over time. A rise in recorded sexual assault can mean more victims coming forward rather than more offending, and a fall in fraud prosecutions can mean a change in policy rather than an outbreak of honesty.

One change matters above all others. In 2014, New Zealand Police replaced its decades-old recorded offence statistics with new collections that count victimisations and offenders instead, so figures from before and after that year measure different things and cannot be compared directly. Throughout this chapter the old and new series sit side by side, never joined.

Read with that care, the numbers hold genuine good news. The recorded crime rate fell steeply from its 1992 peak, the homicide rate roughly halved between the early 1990s and the 2010s, and youth offending declined on every available measure, one of the most encouraging social changes of the past generation.

There is bad news too. Survey-measured fraud and cybercrime is the fastest-growing crime type, recorded violence rose sharply after 2018, and in March 2026 the prison population reached a record 11,255, with two in five inmates on remand rather than serving a sentence. Crime has not disappeared. It has changed shape, and so have the tools we use to see it.

## 5.01 Property crime



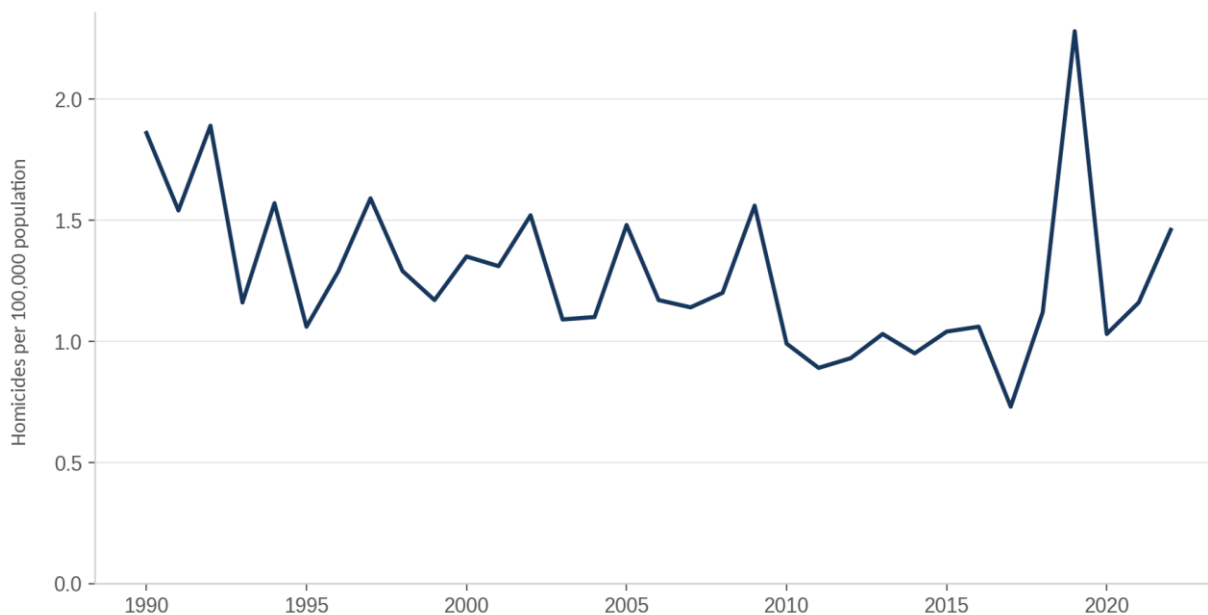
Source: Recorded Victimisations; Stats NZ; NZ Police; Ministry of Justice (NZCVS)

Property crime makes up the bulk of all crime. Under the old recorded offence series, property offences fell 26% from 298,877 in 1994 to 221,037 in 2013, and only about a fifth were ever resolved. The new victim-based statistics count something different, so the two sets of figures tell separate stories rather than one.

In 2023, Police recorded 78,181 victimisations for theft from retail premises, the largest single category, ahead of burglary at 66,130 and other theft at 58,241. Vehicles remain a favourite target, with 51,660 victimisations for illegal use of a motor vehicle and a further 30,888 for theft of vehicle parts or contents.

The Crime and Victims Survey, which catches crime whether or not anyone reports it, offers some comfort. Household offences fell from 33 incidents per 100 households in 2018, the survey's first year, to 26 per 100 households in 2024, and the Ministry of Justice says falling burglary drove that decline.

## 5.02 Homicide



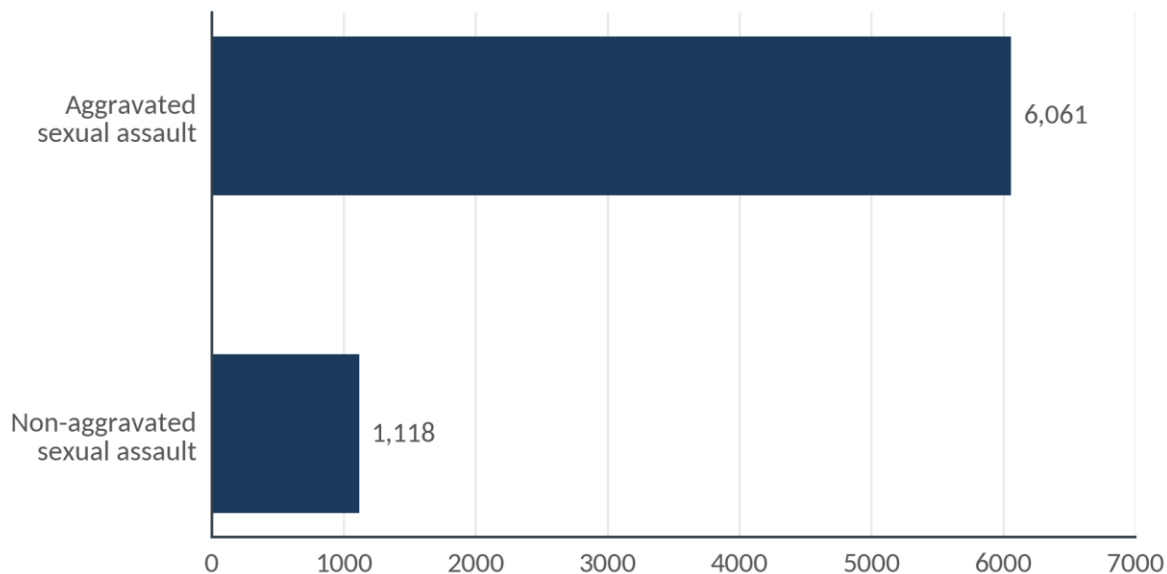
Source: UNODC via Our World in Data; Stats NZ

Homicide is the crime that statistics measure best, because a death can hardly go unrecorded and almost every case is solved. Under the old offence series, recorded homicides fell 32% from 123 in 1994 to 83 in 2013, with resolution rates of 84% to 88%, among the highest of any offence.

The longer trend is one of this chapter's quiet successes. The homicide rate roughly halved from 1.86 per 100,000 people in 1990 to 0.89 in 2011, and touched 0.73 in 2017, the lowest point in the series.

The spike in 2019, at 2.28 per 100,000 the highest in the series, records the terrorist attack on two Christchurch mosques on 15 March 2019, in which 51 people were murdered. By 2022, the rate stood at 1.46 per 100,000, higher than Australia's 0.84 and the United Kingdom's 1.12 but under a quarter of the United States' 6.51.

### 5.03 Sexual assault offences



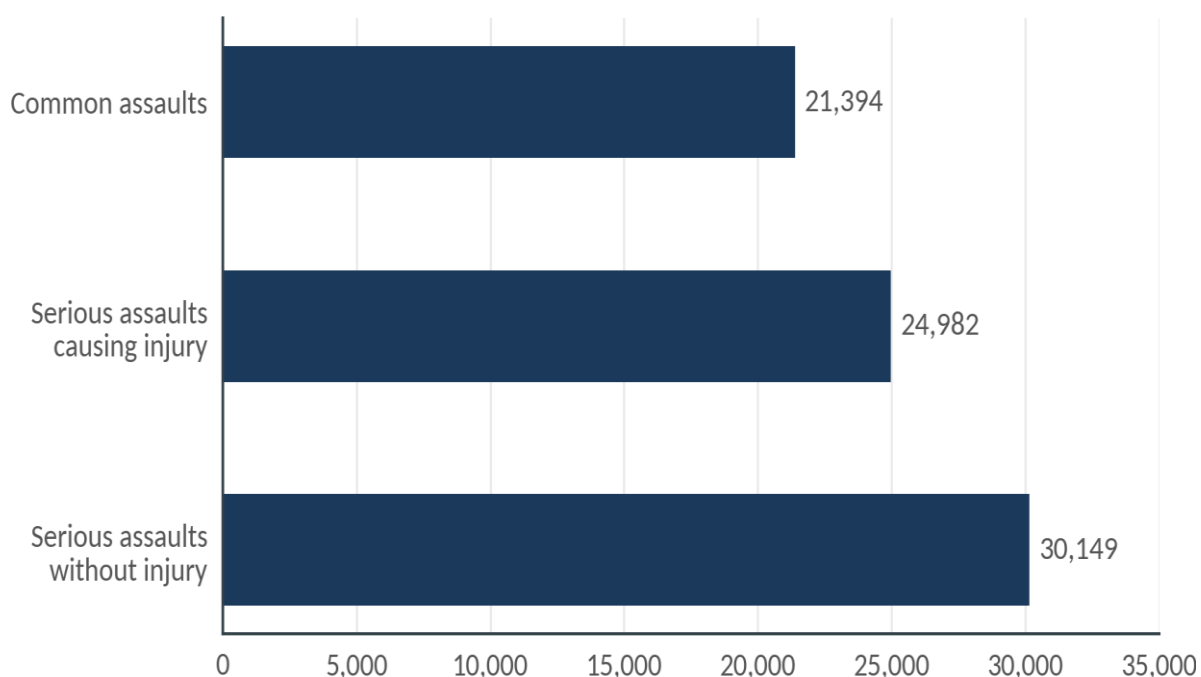
Source: Recorded Victimisations; Stats NZ; NZ Police; Ministry of Justice (NZCVS)

No crime statistic is harder to read. Recorded sexual assault and related offences rose 49% from 2,633 in 1994 to 3,919 in 2013, yet arguably most of that rise reflected greater willingness to report and wider legal definitions rather than more offending.

The same caution applies today. In 2023, Police recorded 6,061 victimisations for aggravated sexual assault and a further 1,118 for non-aggravated sexual assault. Police themselves warn against reading trends into offences known to be heavily under-reported, and sexual offences top that list.

The Crime and Victims Survey suggests the underlying picture has not worsened. The prevalence of sexual assault stayed steady between 2018 and 2024 while the share of sexual assaults reported to Police rose to about a third, which the Ministry of Justice counts as progress because more victims are coming forward.

## 5.04 Assault and violent crime



Source: Recorded Victimisations; Stats NZ; NZ Police; Ministry of Justice (NZCVS)

Violence draws more public attention than any other crime. Under the old series, recorded assaults rose 31% from 30,127 in 1994 to 39,418 in 2013, a rise driven largely by greater reporting of domestic violence and falling public tolerance of it.

The new victim-based figures are sobering. In 2023, Police recorded 76,525 assault victimisations: 21,394 common assaults, 24,982 serious assaults causing injury and 30,149 serious assaults without injury. On the police-data definition ministers use, violent crime rose 51% between 2018 and 2023, mostly through serious assaults, before easing 2% in 2024, the first fall since 2018.

The survey evidence is steadier. The Crime and Victims Survey found 4% of adults experienced violent offences in both 2023 and 2024, about 185,000 victims rising to 191,000. The Government has set a target of 20,000 fewer victims of assault, robbery and sexual assault by 2029, measured by the survey rather than by police statistics.

## 5.05 Illicit drug offences

### Drug offences before and after the 2014 statistics change

Measure	Year	Number
Recorded drug offences (old series)	1994	24,418
Recorded drug offences (old series)	2013	about 16,070
Police proceedings for drug offences (new series)	2025	6,045
Convictions for drug possession or use	2025	3,158
Convictions for supply, trafficking or distribution	2025	1,657

Source: Stats NZ; NZ Police; NZ Drug Foundation

Drug offences have no individual victim, so they vanish from the victim-based statistics and must now be read from the offender side, in the proceedings Police initiate. That makes the 2014 break starker here than anywhere else in the chapter.

The old series showed recorded drug offences falling about 34% from 24,418 in 1994 to about 16,070 in 2013, with more than 90% resolved. In 2025, Police initiated 6,045 proceedings for drug offences, including 4,735 against men and 1,309 against women, though proceedings count legal actions rather than offences and cannot be set against the old totals.

Enforcement at the lower end is climbing again. In 2025, some 3,158 people were convicted of unlawful drug possession or use, the highest number since 2016 and nearly twice the 1,657 convicted for supply, trafficking or distribution. Possession and use charges reached 8,474, the highest in a decade, prompting the Drug Foundation to warn that low-level prosecution was undermining the health-based approach.

## 5.06 White-collar and fraud crime

### Fraud: shrinking on the old measure, growing on the new

Measure	Year	Value
Recorded deceptive business and government offences (old series)	1994	207
Recorded deceptive business and government offences (old series)	2013	42
Police proceedings for fraud and related offences (new series)	2025	2,195
Adults victims of personal offences including fraud and cybercrime (NZCVS)	2018	15%
Adults victims of personal offences including fraud and cybercrime (NZCVS)	2024	17%

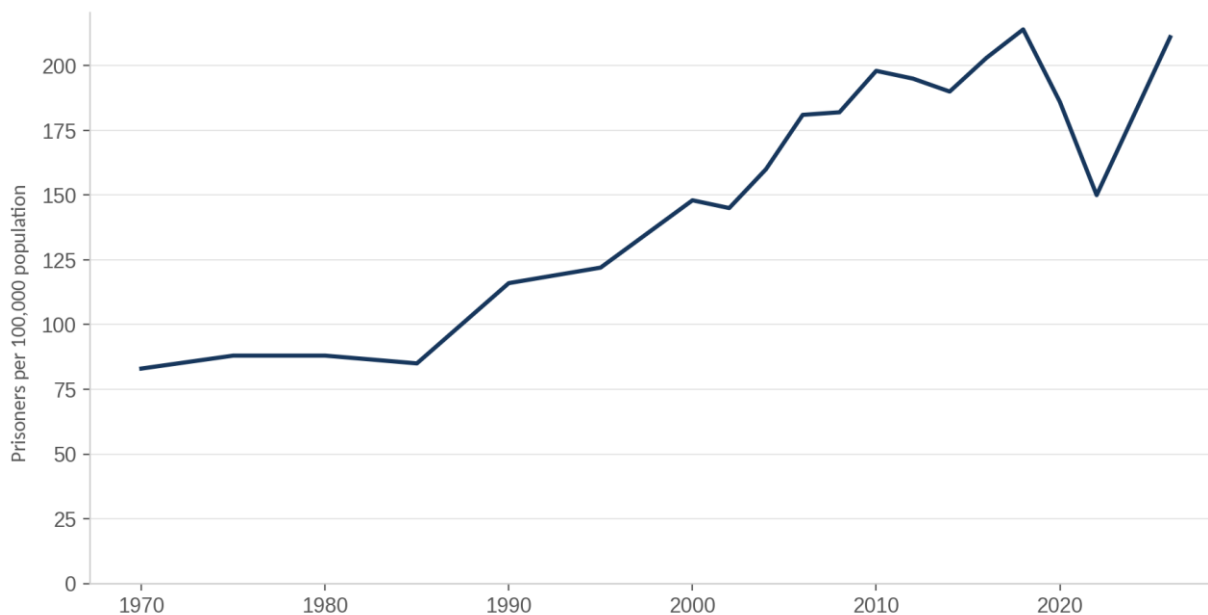
Source: Stats NZ; NZ Police; Ministry of Justice (NZCVS)

On paper, white-collar crime collapsed. Recorded deceptive business and government offences fell 80% from 207 in 1994 to just 42 in 2013. That category was always narrow, a small subset of fraud, and its fall said more about what Police recorded than about what New Zealanders suffered.

The modern measures tell the opposite story. In 2025, Police initiated 2,195 proceedings for fraud and related offences, while the Crime and Victims Survey found 17% of adults were victims of personal offences in 2024, up from 15% in 2018, a rise the Ministry of Justice attributes mostly to fraud and cybercrime. Fraud and vehicle theft were the offence types that increased in the 2024 survey.

Most fraud never reaches police statistics at all. The Serious Fraud Office, established in 1990, and the Organised and Financial Crime Agency, set up in 2008, were responses to increasingly sophisticated financial crime. Judging by the survey, the sophistication has only grown.

## 5.07 Prison population



Source: *World Prison Brief (ICPR); Department of Corrections*

In 1970, New Zealand held 2,365 prisoners, 83 for every 100,000 people. By the 2018 peak the count had nearly quintupled to 10,435, or 214 per 100,000. Numbers then fell sharply, to 7,728 prisoners (150 per 100,000) by 2022, a 26% drop, before climbing again.

On 31 March 2026 the prison population reached 11,255, the highest in New Zealand's history and a rate of 211 per 100,000, among the highest in the developed world. Of those prisoners, 6,606 were serving sentences and 4,537 were on remand, with a further 112 held offsite, either awaiting trial or awaiting sentence. The remand share has tripled since 2000, from 13.3% to 40.3%.

Women remain a small but growing share, 849 prisoners or 7.5% of the total in 2026, up from 266 and 4.7% in 2000. A system in which two in five inmates have not been sentenced measures pressure in the courts as much as crime on the streets.

## 5.08 Youth and juvenile crime

### Youth offending has fallen on every measure

Measure	Earlier	Later
Juvenile offences, ages 0-16 (old series)	42,156 (1994)	25,739 (2011)
Children and young people (16 and under) with charges finalised in court	2,268 (year to June 2014)	1,104 (2023)
Alleged child offenders aged 10-13, rate per 10,000	208 (2010)	93 (2018)
Children who offended each year	4,292 (a decade earlier)	1,791 (2023)

Source: Stats NZ; Ministry of Justice

Here is the chapter's best news, and it rarely makes a headline. Juvenile offences fell 39% from 42,156 in 1994 to 25,739 in 2011 under the old series, and every later measure shows the decline continuing.

The number of children and young people aged 16 or under with charges finalised in court halved from 2,268 in the year to June 2014 to 1,104 in 2023. The rate of offending by the youngest children, aged 10 to 13, has more than halved over the past decade, and fewer children overall are coming to police attention than a generation ago.

The definitions even changed against the trend. Since 1 July 2019, 17-year-olds have been counted in the youth justice statistics, adding a whole age cohort, yet the numbers kept falling. Fewer young New Zealanders are entering the justice system than at any point in the recorded series, which is the single most hopeful trend in this chapter, and fewer young offenders today should mean fewer adult prisoners tomorrow.

## 5.09 Police force size

### The police workforce

Measure	Date	Value
Police per 100,000 population	1886	78
Police per 100,000 population	2010	197
Constabulary (sworn officers)	November 2023	10,200
Constabulary (sworn officers)	June 2024	10,103
Constabulary target, Budget 2024 ('500 more police')	Budget 2024	10,711

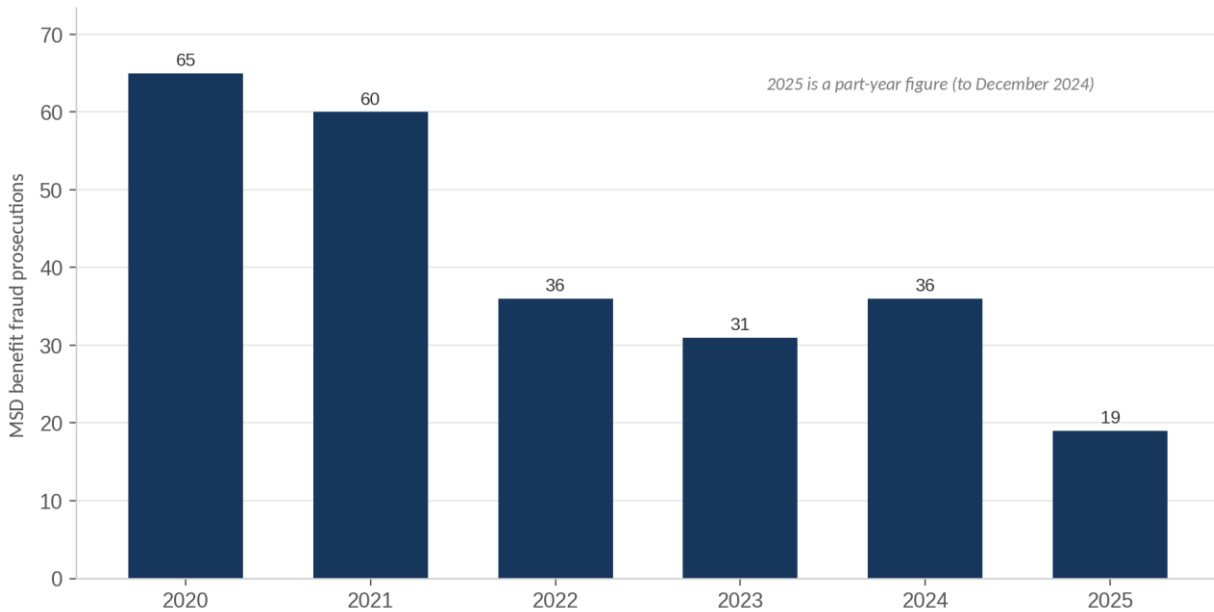
Source: NZ Police; NZ Police Association

Policing density rose for more than a century. In 1886, New Zealand had about 78 police per 100,000 people; by 2010 the figure was 197, well over double the rate. Today, Police employs around 15,000 staff in total, responds to more than 1.2 million events a year and answers over 992,000 emergency 111 calls.

The sworn constabulary has lately struggled to grow. Officer numbers slipped from 10,200 in November 2023 to 10,066 by late June 2024, before a Police College graduation lifted them to 10,103. Budget 2024 funded 500 more officers, a target of 10,711, but attrition, including about 69 officers recruited by Queensland alone, made the two-year timeframe doubtful.

Police also lengthened initial training to a 20-week curriculum in 2024, which slowed the pipeline of new constables for a time. With about 10,100 to 10,200 sworn officers serving about 5.3 million people, New Zealand has roughly one officer for every 510 to 530 residents.

## 5.10 Benefit fraud



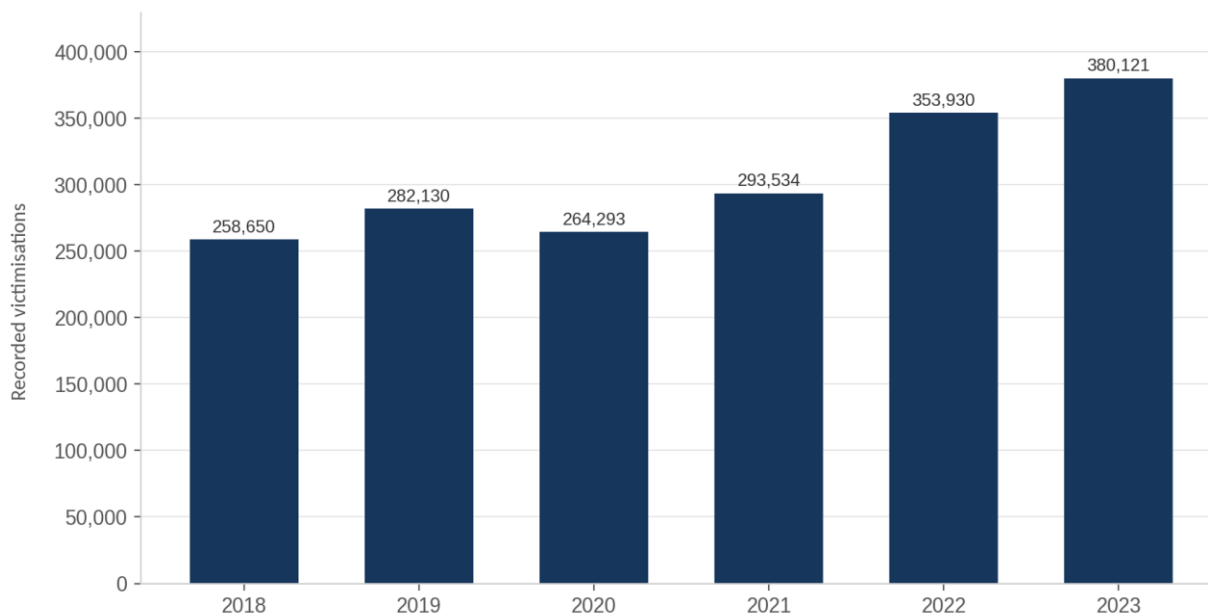
Source: Stats NZ; Ministry of Social Development

No series in this chapter changed character more completely. Under the old statistics, recorded benefit fraud cases fell about 73% from 25,775 in 1994 to 6,885 in 2013, with around 53% resolved. The Ministry of Social Development now reserves criminal prosecution for the most serious cases, under the Solicitor-General's guidelines, and handles most fraud-related overpayments as debt recovery, so the modern numbers count dozens rather than thousands.

MSD completed 65 benefit fraud prosecutions in the 2020 financial year, of which 64 succeeded, but just 36 in 2024 and 19 in the part of the 2025 year to December 2024. The decline partly reflects investigators diverted since 2020 to the integrity of COVID-19 economic supports.

The pandemic also created a new stream of offending. Wage subsidy fraud prosecutions ran at 9 in the 2023 year, 16 in 2024 and 12 in the first eight months of 2025. The old and new series measure entirely different things, and neither shows how much fraud actually occurs.

## 5.11 Victims of crime



Source: Te Ara, the Encyclopedia of New Zealand; NZ Police

The long arc of recorded crime rose for two generations and then turned. The recorded offence rate climbed about seven-fold from 1950 to its 1992 peak of 1,322 per 10,000 people, with recorded crime roughly doubling between 1970 and 2000 alone. By 2005, the rate had fallen back to 994 per 10,000, about where it stood in 1982.

The new victim-based series starts afresh. Total recorded victimisations, calculated here by summing Police's published monthly figures, rose 47% from 258,650 in 2018 to 380,121 in 2023, driven heavily by retail theft and the reporting of family violence. The April 2020 lockdown shows up as a trough, with 12,335 victimisations that month against 20,000 to 28,000 in a normal month.

The apparent jump between the old and new series is a statistical artefact, not a crime wave. The new collection counts victimisations rather than offences and excludes victimless crimes, so the two lines must never be joined. Public anxiety has long outrun the figures; a 2008 international study ranked New Zealand third in the world for the number of newspaper stories on crime and violent deaths.

## 5.12 The Crime and Victims Survey

### NZ Crime and Victims Survey headline results

Measure	Year	Share of adults
Victim of personal or household crime	2024	30%
Victims of personal offences	2018	15%
Victims of personal offences	2024	17%

Source: Ministry of Justice (NZCVS)

Since 2018, the New Zealand Crime and Victims Survey has asked about 7,000 people each year whether they were victims of crime, reported or not. It is the closest thing the country has to a true measure of crime, and it is now the official benchmark for the Government's target of 20,000 fewer victims of assault, robbery and sexual assault by 2029.

The headline has barely moved. In 2024, some 30% of adults, about 1.3 million New Zealanders, were victims of a personal or household crime, a finding consistent with every year since the survey began. Within that total, 17% experienced personal offences, up from 15% in 2018, with fraud and cybercrime doing most of the pushing.

The survey's steadiness is its value. Recorded crime swings with reporting habits, police priorities and statistical definitions, while the survey shows the underlying experience of crime changing slowly, if at all. Most incidents are still never reported to Police.

This is why a victimisation survey matters. A country can appear to grow more or less dangerous simply because reporting habits or police recording practices change, and only a consistent survey of the public can separate a real shift in offending from a shift in the statistics. The steadiness of the survey is a standing caution against reading too much into any single year of recorded crime.

# Communication, Technology and Digital Life

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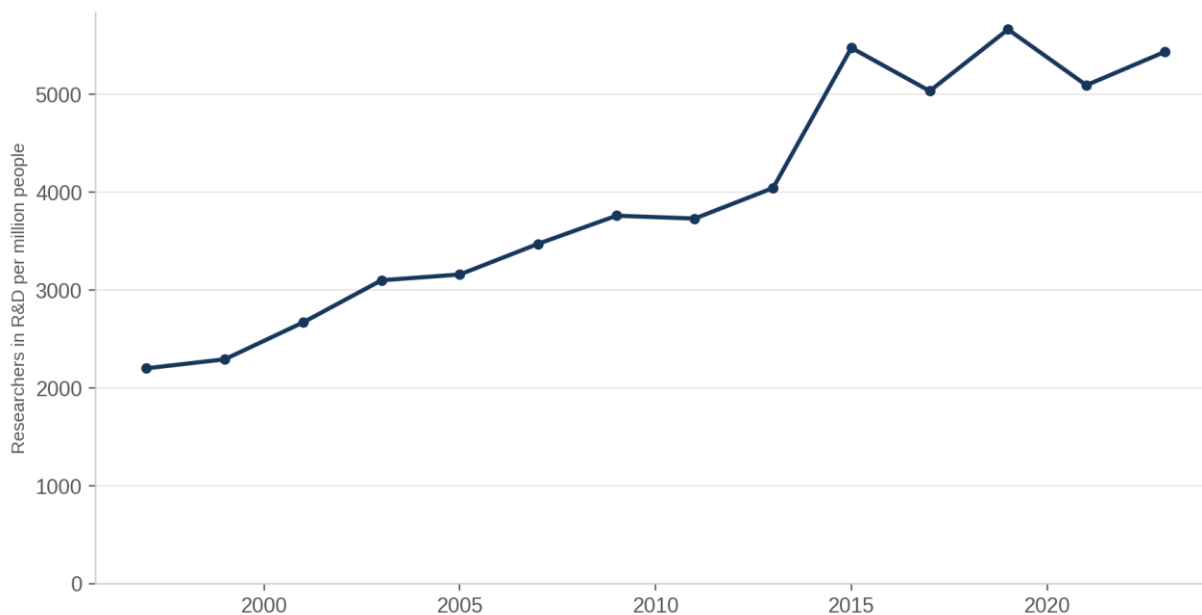
When this book last appeared in 2014, its technology chapter asked how many households had access to a computer. In 1987, the answer was one in ten. By 2009, it was four in five, and soon afterwards Stats NZ stopped asking, because smartphones and tablets had made the question meaningless.

The numbers in this chapter trace one of the fastest transformations New Zealand has ever recorded. In 1996, just 8% of New Zealanders used the internet; by 2024 it was 93.5%. The fibre network that now carries most of that traffic, begun in 2011, was finished in December 2022 and reaches about 87% of the population.

The question has moved on again. Four out of five New Zealanders used artificial intelligence tools in the year to 2025, and 87% of surveyed businesses were using AI in some form. Official statistics are running to catch up: Stats NZ launched its first national survey of business AI use in April 2026.

Not every line in the charts in this chapter rises. New Zealand still spends barely half the OECD average share of its income on research and development, and that gap has widened rather than narrowed. The audited record of daily newspaper circulation simply stops around 2019, because the industry gave up counting. The digital age has its casualties, and this chapter records them too.

## 6.01 Researchers engaged in R&D



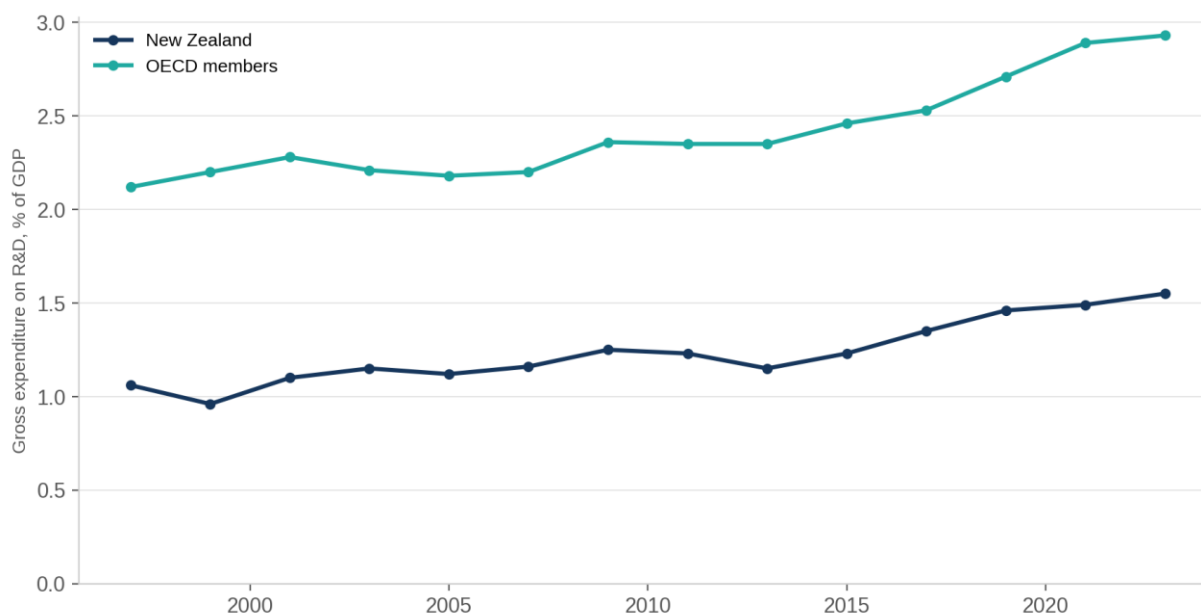
Source: World Bank (UNESCO Institute for Statistics)

Researchers are the people who can turn money into knowledge, and New Zealand has far more of them than it used to. In 1997, the country had about 2,200 researchers for every million people. By 2023, the figure was about 5,435 per million, well over double the density of a generation earlier.

The climb was steady rather than spectacular. Researcher numbers passed 3,000 per million around 2003 and 5,000 per million by the mid-2010s, peaking at 5,665 in 2019 before settling at 5,435 in 2023.

One caution applies. The survey behind these figures runs only every second year and its methods have changed over time, so the dips after 2015 and 2019 say as much about measurement as about research. The series is best read as a broken line, not a smooth one.

## 6.02 Expenditure on R&D



Source: World Bank (UNESCO Institute for Statistics)

More researchers have not closed the spending gap. New Zealand spent 1.06% of GDP on research and development in 1997 and 1.54% in 2024, a slow rise over a quarter of a century. R&D intensity approached 1.25% of GDP around 2009 and reached about 1.5% only by 2024.

These ratios are modest from an OECD-wide perspective. In 1997, New Zealand's 1.06% was exactly half the OECD members' average of 2.12%. By 2023, the OECD average had climbed to about 2.7%, so the gap had widened: the rest of the developed world lifted its R&D spending by about 0.6 percentage points while New Zealand managed less than 0.5.

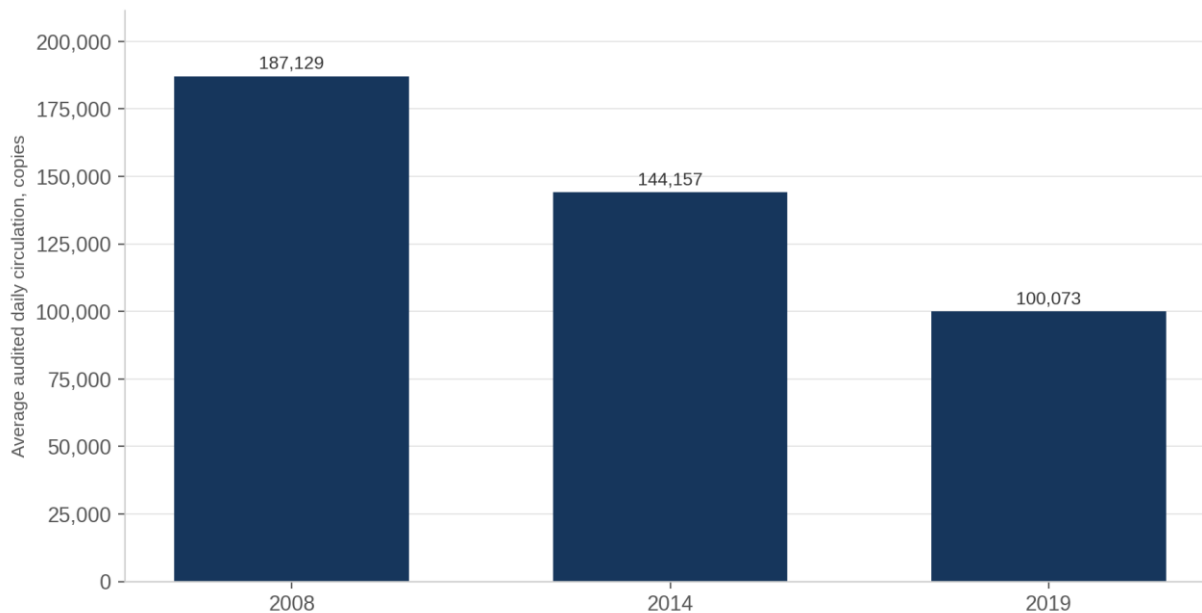
The ratio tells only part of the story, though. New Zealand's R&D spending will always be small against global totals, and most of the new ideas its firms use are developed elsewhere. For small firms, the competitive edge comes less from their own research than from their ability to find ideas developed anywhere and adapt them to local conditions.

On this view, how quickly firms take up and diffuse new ideas, techniques and technologies may matter more for their competitiveness than how much they spend on R&D at home.

Adapting is not only about research. Heavier regulation tends to slow how quickly firms can take up and apply new methods, and extra R&D spending achieves little if the rules make new ideas hard to put to use.

The theme that runs through this book – of pervasive problems that challenge income constraints – reflects the large productivity gap between New Zealand and Australia and other prosperous OECD member countries. On this reading, private R&D spending is better understood as a result of that wider picture than as a primary cause of low productivity.

### 6.03 Circulation of daily newspapers



Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations; AUT JMAD media ownership reports

The New Zealand Herald, the country’s largest daily, sold an average of more than 200,000 copies a day at its peak in 2006. By June 2008 audited circulation was down to 187,129. By December 2014 it was 144,157, and by September 2019 it was 100,073, half the peak in thirteen years.

The chart stops there because the data does. The News Publishers’ Association ceased releasing comprehensive audited circulation figures after about 2019, citing incomplete industry participation, so the long statistical record of New Zealand’s daily press effectively ends at that point. A measure once watched as closely as any in the media business no longer exists.

The readers did not vanish; they moved. By 2024, the Herald’s website was being viewed 2.2 million times a week. The decline of print began before the internet arrived, but the internet finished the job.

## 6.04 Household access to computers

### From the computer to the connection

Year	Measure	% of households
1987	Households with access to a computer	10
2009	Households with access to a computer	80
2018	Households with internet access (Census)	86.1
2023	Households with internet access (Census)	90.5

Source: Stats NZ

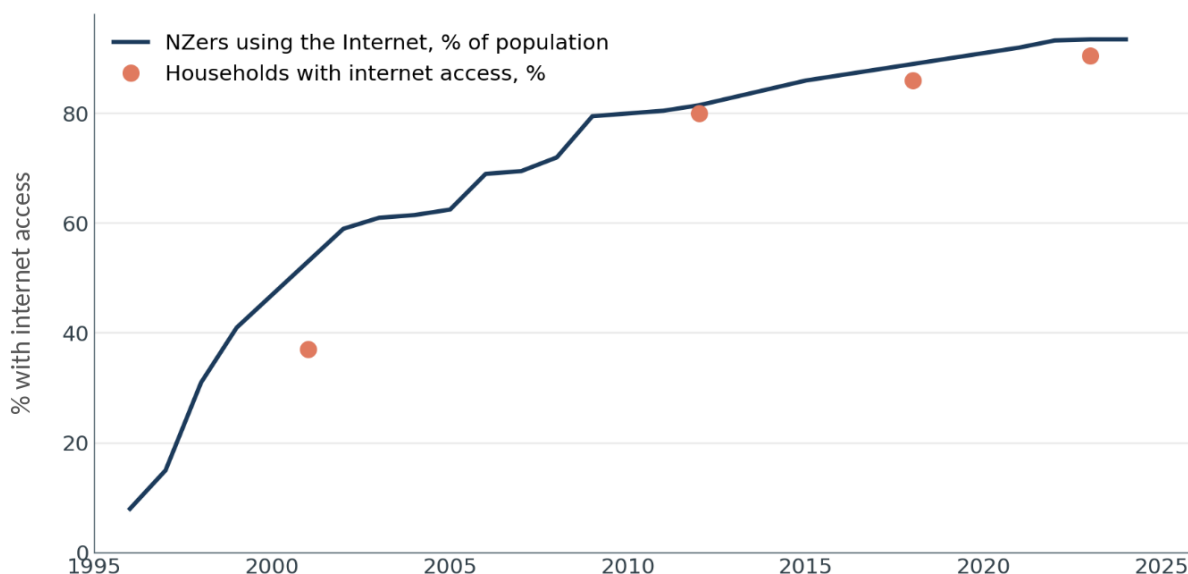
In 1987, one in ten New Zealand households had access to a computer. By 2009, the share had multiplied roughly eight-fold to about 80%. Then the counting stopped: Stats NZ discontinued its household ICT surveys after 2012, and the census has never asked about computer ownership.

The question did not die because computers failed but because they won. Once smartphones and tablets put a computer in nearly every pocket, asking whether a household owned one told statisticians nothing useful. The census now measures internet access instead, and on that measure 86.1% of households were connected in 2018 and 90.5% in 2023.

This indicator is therefore presented as a closed historical series. It records the era when the computer was a box in the corner of the lounge, and it ends where that era did.

The modern question is no longer whether a household owns a device but whether it has a fast, affordable connection and the skills to use it. On that measure the gap has narrowed without quite closing: rural connectivity, the cost of data and digital confidence among older New Zealanders remain the live divides, even as the box in the corner of the lounge has vanished into everyone's pocket.

## 6.05 Household and individual internet access



Source: World Bank (ITU); Stats NZ

In 1996, just 8% of New Zealanders used the internet. Use crossed half the population in 2001, 80% in 2010 and 90% around 2020, reaching 93.5% in 2024. The curve has flattened because there is almost nobody left to connect.

Household access tells the same story. In 2001, 37% of households had a connection; by 2012 about 80% did, and the 2023 Census recorded 90.5% of households online, nearly 1.5 million in all, up from 86.1% in 2018. The early household figures come from surveys and the later ones from the census, so the household points marked on the chart do not form one continuous series.

The dial-up era ended quickly, falling from 37% of households in 2001 to 4% in 2012 as broadband took over. What remains is a gap of cost rather than coverage. Roughly one New Zealander in ten still lacks a broadband connection, with price the main barrier, and the problem is most serious in rural areas.

## 6.06 Online shopping and e-commerce

### Online retail spending

Year	Online spend (NZ\$ billion)	Share of total retail (%)
2023	5.8	just over 10
2024	6.09	nearly 11

Source: NZ Post eCommerce Spotlight

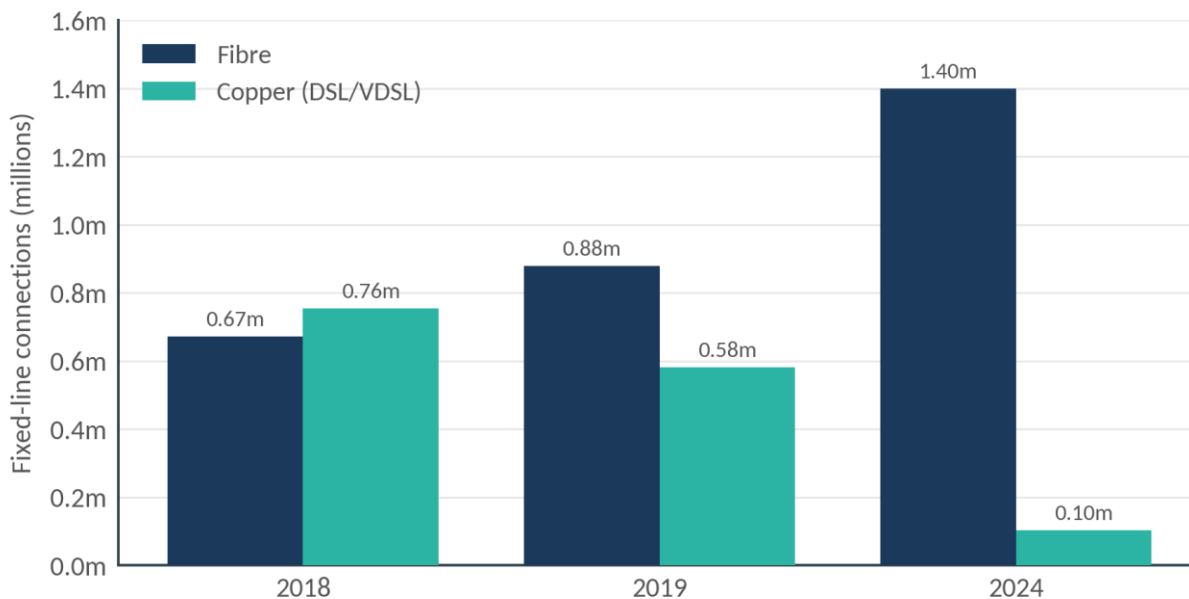
In 2014, online shopping was still measured by occasional Stats NZ surveys, run in 2006, 2009 and 2012, and it was a minority pursuit, strongest among 25 to 44 year olds and the tertiary qualified. That survey series is gone, and the best modern measure comes from NZ Post's card transaction data.

New Zealanders spent \$6.09 billion online in 2024, 5% more than the \$5.8 billion of 2023, even as total retail spending fell 1.7%. About 2.2 million people, roughly half the population aged 15 and over, shopped online during the year. In the October to December quarter alone they spent \$1.73 billion.

Online's share of total retail spending rose from just over 10% in 2023 to nearly 11% in 2024. For a country as far from the world's big markets as New Zealand, every parcel ordered from a screen shrinks the old cost of distance a little more.

The shift is structural rather than cyclical. In a year when total retail spending fell, online spending still rose, which means the channel is taking share from physical stores rather than simply riding the economic cycle. For a trading nation at the end of long supply lines, cheaper and wider online access to the world's goods is a quiet gain in living standards that the headline retail figures understate.

## 6.07 Fibre broadband and the UFB rollout



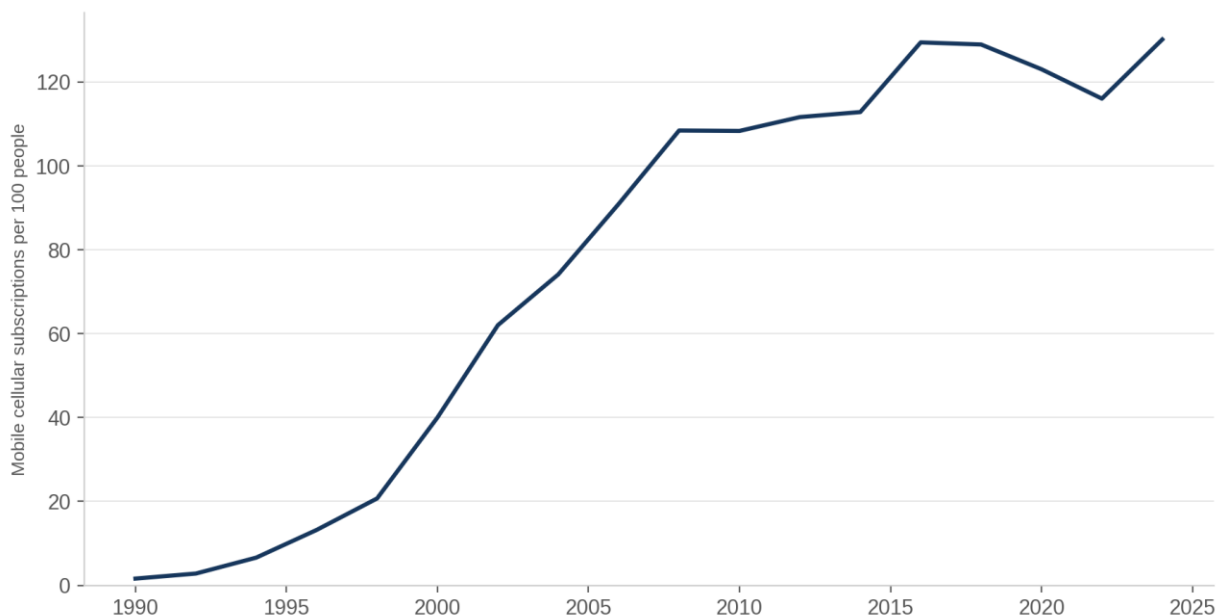
Source: Crown Infrastructure Partners; Commerce Commission

Large public projects in New Zealand have a habit of arriving late and costing more than promised. The Ultra-Fast Broadband programme did neither. Begun in 2011, the fibre build was completed in December 2022, on time and under budget, reaching 412 towns and cities and about 87% of the population.

New Zealanders took up the offer. Fibre overtook copper as the way households connect around 2019, when 880,000 fibre connections, up 31% on the 672,000 of 2018, faced 581,000 copper connections and falling. By the Commerce Commission's 2024 monitoring report there were more than 1.4 million fibre connections, and 76% of premises passed by the network had signed up by the end of 2024.

Beyond the fibre footprint, competition has arrived from orbit. Starlink became the fastest growing rural broadband provider, with speeds about three times faster than other rural options, yet 37% of rural consumers were still paying for a copper connection in 2024. The last mile of the digital divide is now a rural one.

## 6.08 Mobile phones and smartphones

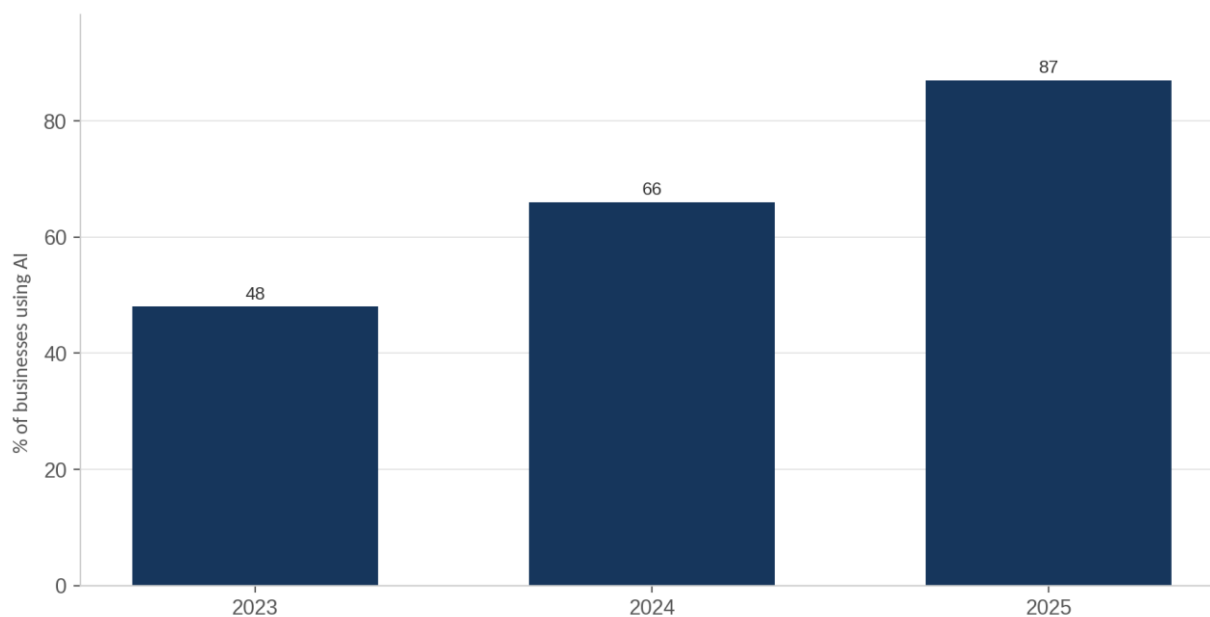


Source: World Bank (ITU); Horizon Research

In 1990, there were 1.6 mobile subscriptions for every 100 New Zealanders. By 2000, there were 40, by about 2007 more than 100, and in 2024 there were 130 per 100 people. New Zealand has had more mobile connections than residents for the better part of two decades. A dip in the figures between 2020 and 2022 owes as much to changes in provider reporting and the closed border as to any real decline.

The smartphone made those connections matter. Adult smartphone ownership jumped from 69% in October 2014 to 79.5% a year later, and Horizon Research was already projecting 92% within a further twelve months. The technology has since turned over again: the nationwide shutdown of the 3G network was completed in 2025-26 as traffic moved wholly to 4G and 5G.

## 6.09 Use of AI tools



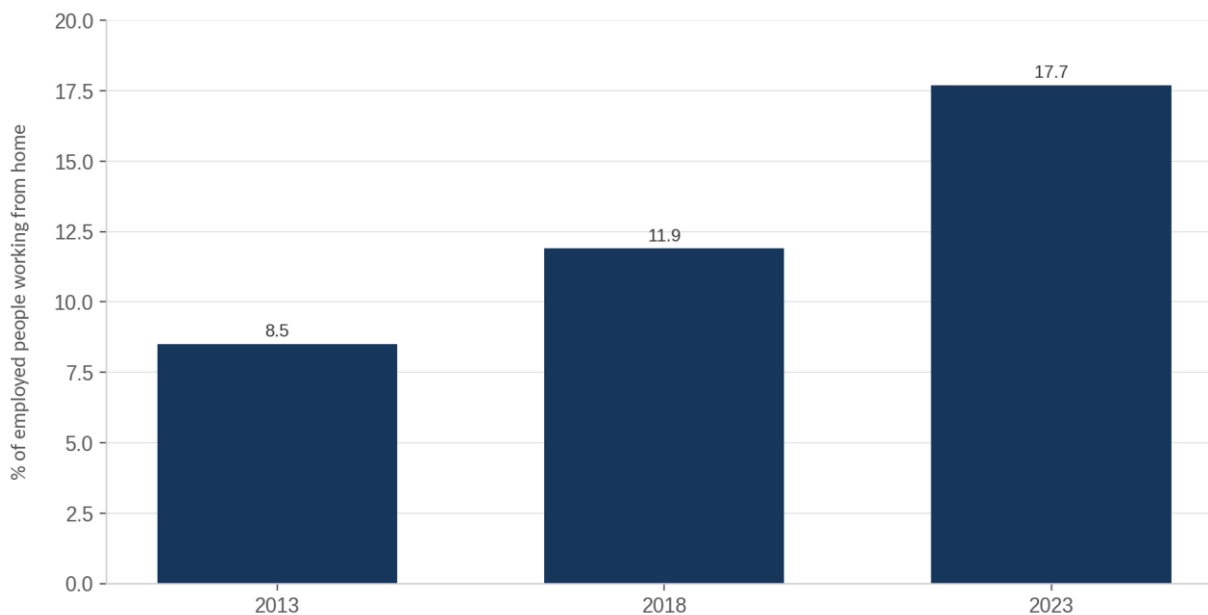
Source: Datacom State of AI Index; InternetNZ Aotearoa Internet Insights

Nothing else in this chapter spread so fast. The share of New Zealand businesses using some form of AI rose from 48% in 2023 to 66% in 2024 and 87% in 2025, and among organisations with more than 200 employees it reached 92%. Breadth still outruns depth: only 12% of organisations have scaled AI across the whole business, while 46% remain at the pilot stage.

Individuals moved just as quickly. Four out of five New Zealanders used AI in the twelve months to 2025, more than half of them at least weekly and one in five daily. Among organisations using it, 88% report a positive impact and 89% of users cite productivity gains, though 52% of leaders worry about unapproved 'shadow AI' use by their staff.

These figures come from private surveys and should be read with care: Datacom's index polls 200 senior business leaders and leans towards larger firms, while InternetNZ's survey of 1,003 people carries a margin of error of about three percentage points. Official measurement began only in April 2026, when Stats NZ launched its first Survey of Business Operations covering AI use, taking in about 20,000 businesses with six or more employees. Future editions of this book will have a proper series; this one records the take-off.

## 6.10 Working from home



Source: Stats NZ, *Census of Population and Dwellings*

In 2013, 8.5% of employed New Zealanders mostly worked from home. The 2018 Census put the share at 11.9% and the 2023 Census at 17.7%, roughly one worker in six. COVID-19 produced one of the biggest shifts in travel-to-work patterns since records began, and the 2023 figure was collected after the return to the office had already started.

The geography is not what city dwellers might expect. Tasman (20.8%), Northland (20.7%) and the West Coast (19.3%) had the highest rates in 2023, regions of farmers and the self-employed rather than white-collar commuters. Wellington tells the white-collar story instead: its share tripled in a decade, from 6.4% in 2013 to 9% in 2018 and 19% in 2023.

The census counts only people who mostly work at home in their main job, so it understates hybrid arrangements. Stats NZ began publishing dedicated quarterly work-from-home statistics from the Household Labour Force Survey in 2024. An obscure line in the travel-to-work table has become a question of national policy.

# Labour Market and Productivity

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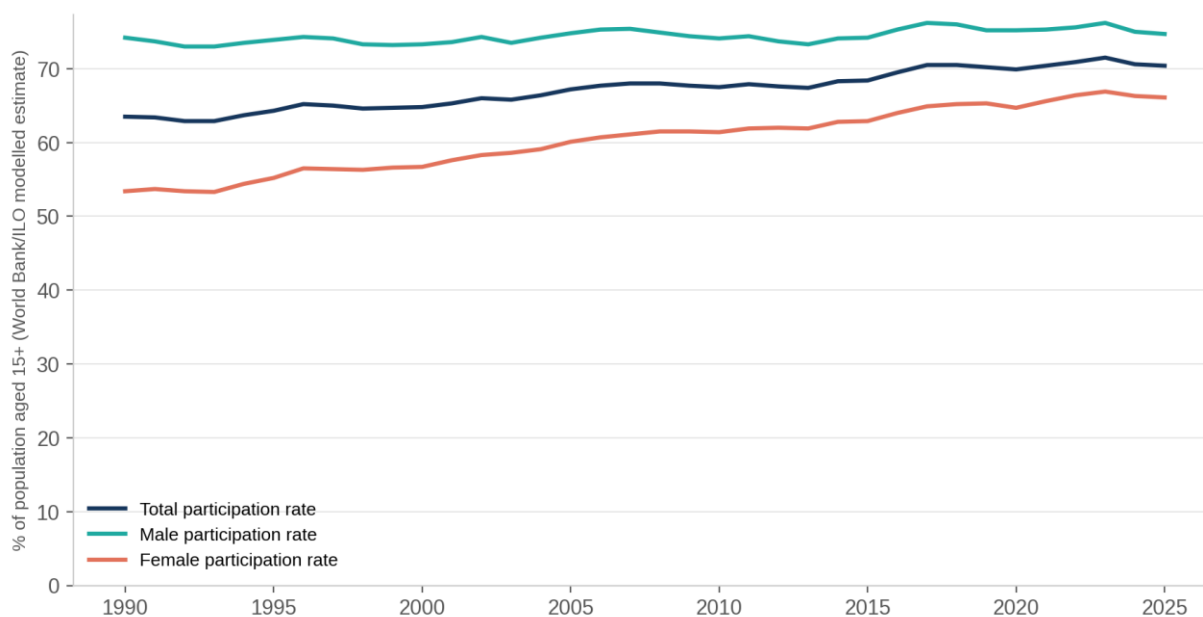
Work is where the economy meets ordinary life. A job pays the mortgage, but it also gives shape to the week and pride to the worker. Over the past four decades the way New Zealanders work has changed almost beyond recognition, and much of that change has been for the better.

More of us are in paid work than at any time in modern records. Women entered the labour force in numbers that transformed households and workplaces alike. The rigid old industrial system of national awards and compulsory unionism gave way after 1991 to one of the most flexible labour markets in the developed world. Unemployment, which haunted the early 1990s at over 10%, fell as low as 3.7% in 2007 and 3.3% in 2022.

Not everything in this chapter is comfortable reading. Income inequality jumped sharply in the late 1980s and early 1990s and has stayed at its higher level since. Youth unemployment remains stubbornly high, and the number of people on welfare benefits has been climbing again.

The chapter ends with its most important indicator, and the least flattering one. New Zealanders participate in work at high rates and put in long hours. What we fail to do is produce enough in each of those hours. In 1970, New Zealand matched the United Kingdom in output per hour worked. By 2023, the gap to Australia had grown to more than half of New Zealand's own level. Everything else in this book, from health spending to housing, ultimately depends on closing that gap.

## 7.01 Labour force participation



Source: World Bank (ILO modelled estimates); Stats NZ

The quiet revolution of the New Zealand labour market has been the arrival of women. In 1986, only 54.7% of working-age women were in the labour force, against 79.4% of men, a gap of about 25 percentage points. On the World Bank's measure of everyone aged 15 and over, female participation climbed from 53.4% in 1990 to 66.9% in 2023, easing to 66.1% in 2025. Male participation barely moved over the same 35 years, from 74.2% to 74.7%. The gap between men and women has narrowed to 8.6 percentage points.

The change has long roots. Te Ara records the number of women in the labour market rising from about 169,000 in 1945 to 382,000 by 1971, as more married women stayed in or returned to paid work. What began as a trickle became, by the 2000s, simply the way the economy works.

Total participation tells the same story from another angle, rising from 63.5% in 1990 to a peak of 71.5% in 2023 before easing to 70.4% in 2025. Stats NZ's Household Labour Force Survey, which uses a working-age definition, put participation at 70.4% in the March 2026 quarter, with 2.89 million people employed and an employment rate of 66.7%. By the standards of the developed world, New Zealanders show up for work.

## 7.02 Working hours

### Average hours worked

Measure	Year	Hours
Male average weekly paid hours	1989	37.9
Male average weekly paid hours	2013	36.6
Female average weekly paid hours	1989	29.7
Female average weekly paid hours	2000	27.8
Female average weekly paid hours	2013	29.3
Average annual hours per worker (OECD)	2022	1,748
Average annual hours per worker (OECD)	2023	1,751

Source: Stats NZ Quarterly Employment Survey; OECD

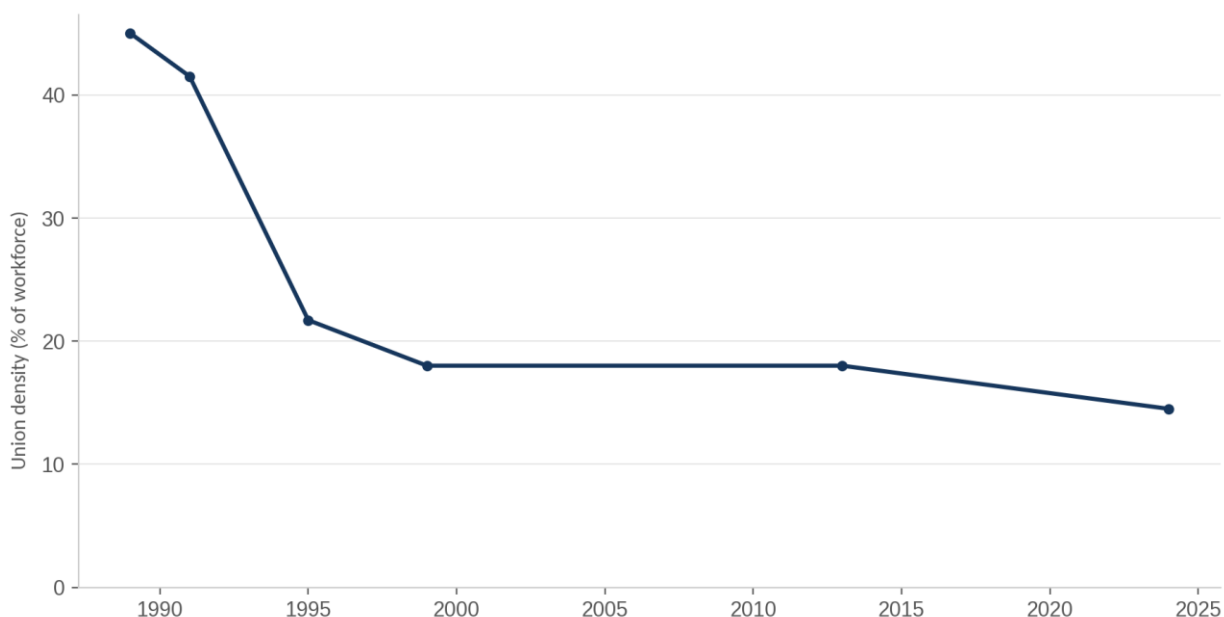
At the start of the 1900s the average worker spent about 48 hours each week at work, roughly a third more than today. The decline since then has been slow and uneven. Average weekly paid hours for men slid from 37.9 in 1989 to 36.6 in 2013. For women they dipped from 29.7 in 1989 to 27.8 in 2000 before recovering to 29.3 in 2013, as part-time work gave way to fuller hours.

The gap between the sexes barely closed over that quarter century. Men worked on average 8 hours, or 28%, more per week than women over the period, and still 7.3 hours, or 25%, more in 2013. The gap in hours remains a large part of the gender earnings story.

By international standards New Zealanders work long. The average worker put in about 1,748 hours in 2022 and 1,751 in 2023, against an OECD average of about 1,740 hours. We are not a nation of idlers. As the final indicator in this chapter shows, our problem is not how long we work but how much each hour produces.

**Further reading:** *Prescription for Prosperity 2026, Chapter 22, Workplace Relations and Safety.*

### 7.03 Trade union membership



Source: Stats NZ; Companies Office (MBIE)

In 1989, unions covered 45% of the New Zealand workforce, sustained by a system of compulsory membership and national awards that dated back generations. The Labour Relations Act 1987 ended compulsory arbitration. Then the Employment Contracts Act 1991 swept away compulsory unionism and the awards altogether. The effect was immediate and dramatic. Union density fell from 41.5% in 1991 to 21.7% in 1995, and membership dropped from over 500,000 in 1991 to just over 400,000 a year later.

By 1999, coverage had halved to 18% of the workforce, and it stayed near 18% through to 2013 even as member numbers recovered modestly. The Employment Relations Act 2000 restored legal recognition for unions in collective bargaining, but it did not restore the old membership. As at 1 March 2024 there were 126 registered unions with a combined 425,761 members, about 14.5% of the workforce. Of the unions reporting gender details, 62% of members were women, reflecting union strength in the public sector, health and education.

Density figures vary slightly depending on whether they are measured against all employees or the whole workforce, but the trend is the same on any definition. Unionism in New Zealand went from a legal obligation to a minority choice within a single decade, and it has stayed that way.

## 7.04 Average weekly and hourly earnings

### Average earnings, December 2025 quarter (QES)

Measure	NZ\$	Annual change
Ordinary time hourly earnings, all sectors	43.99	+3.3%
Ordinary time hourly earnings, private sector	41.80	
Ordinary time hourly earnings, public sector	52.12	
Weekly earnings incl. overtime, per FTE	1,712	+3.7%

Source: Stats NZ Quarterly Employment Survey

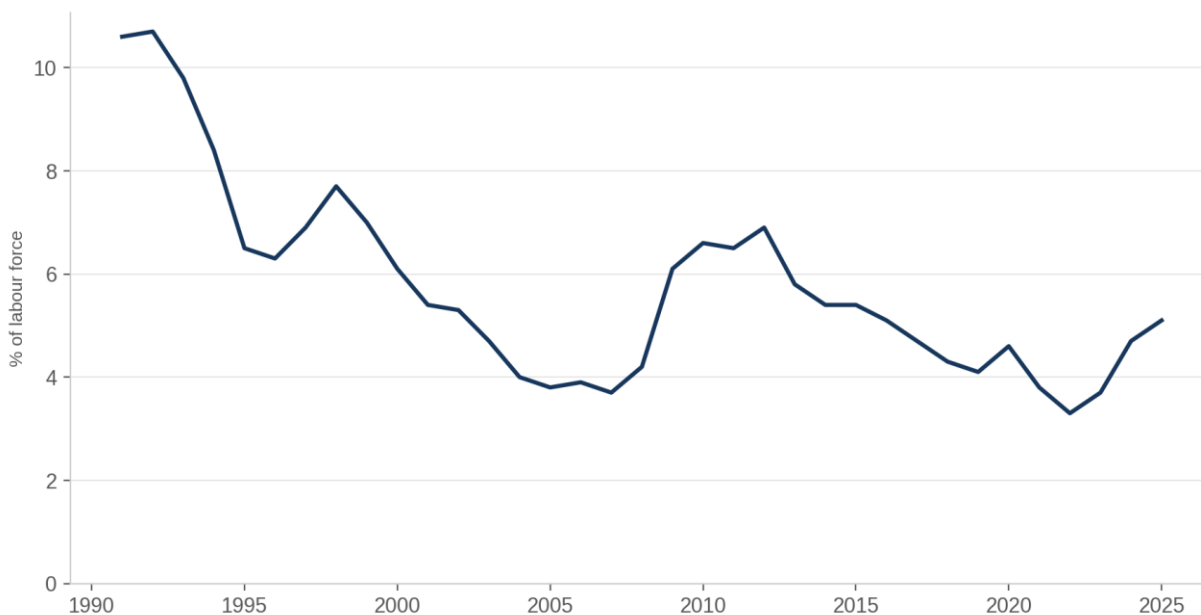
In the December 2025 quarter the average employee earned \$43.99 an hour in ordinary time, up 3.3% on a year earlier. Average weekly earnings including overtime, per full-time equivalent, rose 3.7% to \$1,712. The public sector premium remains large: public sector hourly earnings of \$52.12 stood about 25% above the private sector's \$41.80.

The longer view is more sobering. Between December 1989 and 2025, real average hourly ordinary time earnings, deflated by consumer prices, grew only 0.9% a year.

Why did real wages grow so slowly? In the long run pay tracks productivity, and economy-wide labour productivity has been similarly slow. Slow wage growth is the productivity problem arriving in the pay packet. No bargaining system, however ingenious, can pay workers for output that was never produced.

**Further reading:** Roger Partridge and Bryce Wilkinson, *Work in Progress (The New Zealand Initiative, 2019)*; and *Prescription for Prosperity 2026, Chapter 22, Workplace Relations and Safety*.

## 7.05 Unemployment rate



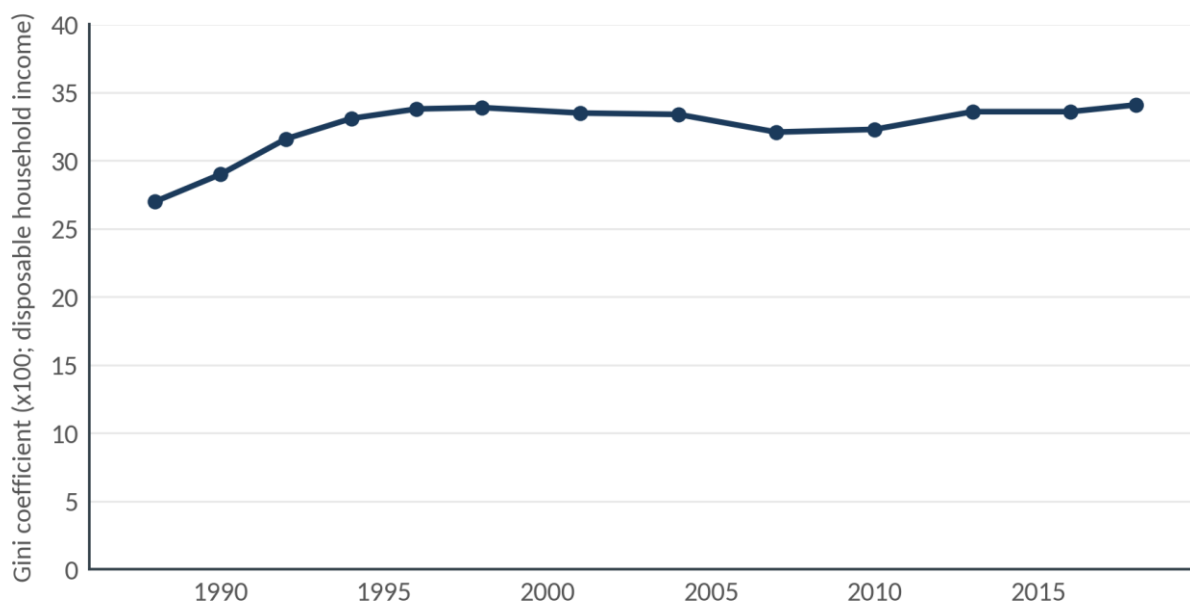
Source: World Bank (ILO modelled estimates); Stats NZ

For a generation after the Second World War, unemployment in New Zealand was a statistical curiosity. The official rate averaged just 0.6% of the labour force in the 1960s and 1.1% in the 1970s. Then the sheltered economy broke down. The rate averaged 4.1% in the 1980s and 7.9% in the 1990s, peaking at 11.2% in September 1991 as the economy absorbed the sharemarket crash of 1987 and the restructuring that followed.

From that peak the labour market staged a long recovery. Unemployment fell through the 1990s and 2000s to a low of 3.7% in 2007, before the global financial crisis pushed it back to 6.9% in 2012. The pattern repeated after the pandemic: a remarkably tight market drove the rate down to 3.3% in 2022, the lowest in the modern series.

Since then, the cycle has turned again. Unemployment averaged 4.7% in 2024 and 5.1% in 2025, and the Household Labour Force Survey recorded 5.3% in the March 2026 quarter, with 163,000 people unemployed, easing slightly from 5.4% in December 2025. The survey began in 1986, so earlier figures rest on registered counts and are not strictly comparable. Even so, the lesson of the chart is plain: painful as 5.3% feels, it is a world away from the early 1990s.

## 7.06 Income distribution



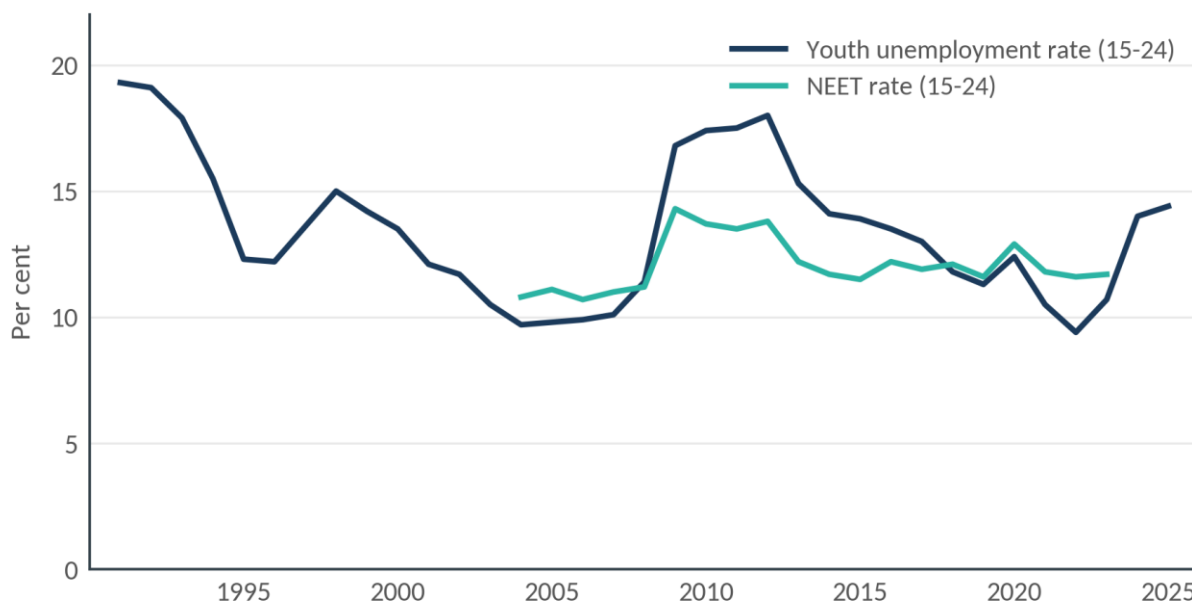
Source: Ministry of Social Development; The Treasury

New Zealand's Gini coefficient, the standard summary measure of income inequality, jumped from 27.0 in 1988 to 33.8 by 1996, one of the sharpest recorded rises in the OECD. The climb came in a single burst, through 29.0 in 1990, 31.6 in 1992 and 33.1 in 1994, the years of benefit cuts and labour market deregulation, and of the cut in the top tax rate from 66% to 33% over 1988 and 1989. Since the mid-1990s the line has been broadly flat, at 33.9 in 1998 and 33.5 in 2001, and Treasury analysis finds inequality little changed between 2007 and 2023. Part of the measured rise may also reflect changed reporting, as lower top tax rates reduced the incentive to shelter income.

The burst left a lasting mark on who gained from growth. Between 1982 and 2012, real equivalised household incomes rose 40% at the 90th percentile but only 20% at the median and 14% at the 10th percentile. A household at the 90th percentile earned 1.8 times the median in 1982; by 2012 it earned 2.1 times.

By international standards the result is unspectacular rather than extreme. The OECD's 2012 comparison gave New Zealand a Gini of 33 against an OECD median of 31, moderately more unequal than the typical developed country. The popular story of relentlessly rising inequality is wrong; the truthful story is of one sharp rise thirty years ago, never reversed.

## 7.07 Youth unemployment and NEET



Source: World Bank (ILO modelled estimates); Stats NZ

Young people queue at the back of the labour market. For decades, youth unemployment has run at roughly three times the overall rate: 19.3% of 15 to 24-year-olds in 1991, a low of 9.4% in the tight market of 2022, and back up to 14.4% in 2025. When the economy catches a cold, the young catch pneumonia.

The current downturn shows the pattern at its starkest. In the September 2025 quarter the unemployment rate for 15 to 19-year-olds was 22.3%, or 36,600 people, close to the record peak of 23% reached in 1992. For 20 to 24-year-olds the rate rose from 8.5% to 10.7% in a year. The NEET rate, the share of 15 to 24-year-olds not in employment, education or training, climbed 1.4 percentage points to 13.8%.

Policy has not always helped. The deterioration in employment among 15 to 19-year-olds from the mid-2000s coincided with the abolition of separate youth minimum wage rates, which had given employers a reason to take a chance on an unproven school leaver. A first job teaches habits no classroom can. Pricing teenagers out of that first job is a costly way to express good intentions.

## 7.08 Welfare benefit numbers

### Main benefit recipients, end of March 2026 (MSD)

Benefit	Recipients	% of working-age population
All main benefits	409,575	12.7
Jobseeker Support	215,214	6.7
Supported Living Payment	108,498	3.4
Sole Parent Support	81,531	2.5

Source: Ministry of Social Development

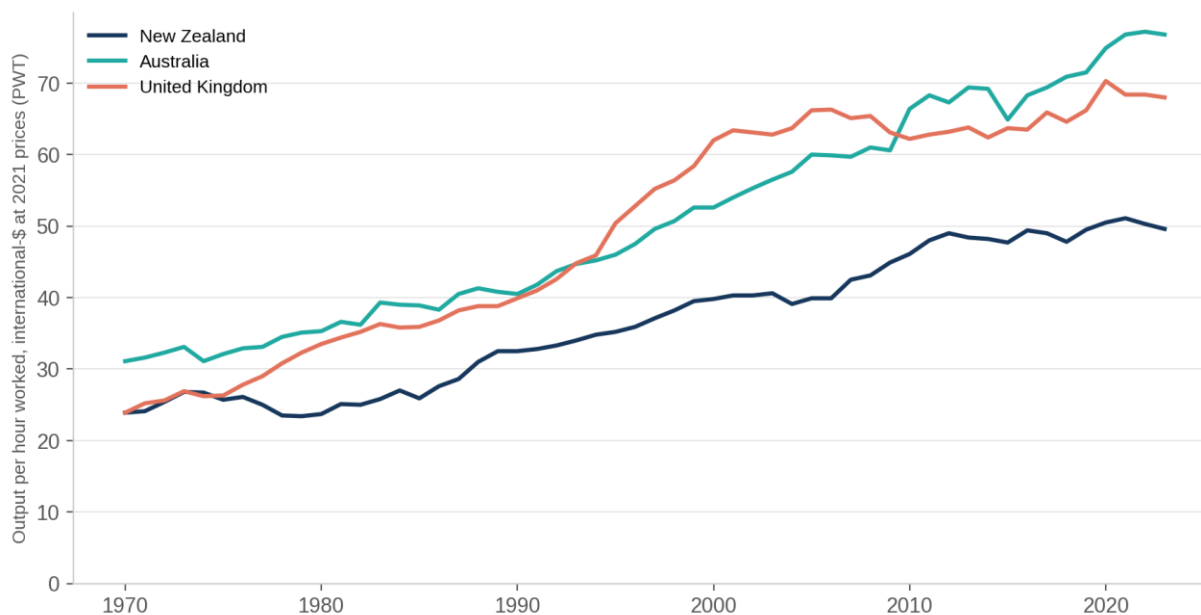
At the end of March 2026, 409,575 people were receiving a main benefit, 12.7% of the working-age population and up 2.9% on the 398,163 of a year earlier. Jobseeker Support accounted for 215,214 of them, or 6.7% of the working-age population. Within that group, 118,359 were classed as work ready while 96,852 had a health condition or disability. The benefit categories were renamed in 2013, when Jobseeker Support absorbed the old unemployment and sickness benefits, so long-run comparisons across that reform need care.

The longer history is uncomfortable. The share of the population on sickness and invalid's benefits rose six-fold from 0.5% in 1960 to 3.3% in 2011, in an era when incomes rose and health improved. The Domestic Purposes Benefit, introduced in 1973, covered 3% of the population by 1998 before easing to 2.6% in 2011. Benefit numbers track the unemployment cycle, but these long upward drifts in health-related and sole parent support owe more to policy settings than to the state of the labour market.

There are flickers of movement. Benefit cancellations through exits into work reached 24,615 in the March 2026 quarter, up 5.8% on a year earlier. The regional spread remains wide, with Northland's Jobseeker rate the highest at 11.5% of the working-age population. A welfare system should work like a trampoline, and for too many people it has become a hammock.

**Further reading:** *Prescription for Prosperity 2026, Chapter 16, Social Development.*

## 7.09 Labour productivity



Source: Penn World Table via Our World in Data; Stats NZ; OECD

This is the chart that explains most of the others. In 1970, New Zealand produced 23.9 international dollars of output for every hour worked, almost exactly the same as the United Kingdom and within sight of Australia's 31.1. We were a normal rich country. By 2023, New Zealand had reached 49.6 while the United Kingdom stood at 68.0 and Australia at 76.8. The gap to Australia, 27.2 dollars an hour, is now more than half of New Zealand's entire output per hour. The United States, at 83.5, is further away still.

Nothing dramatic caused this. It was the slow arithmetic of compounding. Australia's output per hour grew 1.6% a year on average against New Zealand's 1.2% over recent decades, and since 1996 the gap has been 1.8% against 1.1%. Employment growth in the two countries has been remarkably similar since the mid-1950s; the difference is that Australian firms turn each hour of work into far more output. The OECD reckons New Zealand's productivity gap to the top half of its members has widened from 34% in 1996 to around 40%.

The recent record offers no comfort. Measured-sector labour productivity fell 0.7% in the year to March 2024, after a 0.9% fall the year before, and growth has averaged only about 0.5% a year over the past decade. The longer record divides into phases, with a partial catch-up through the 1990s as the previous decade's reforms took hold, then a marked slowdown since the late 2000s. New Zealanders already participate in work at high rates and put in long hours; there is no reserve of extra effort left to draw on. Higher wages, better hospitals and affordable homes can come only from producing more in each hour worked. Until productivity growth recovers, every other ambition in this book runs on borrowed time.

# Domestic Economy

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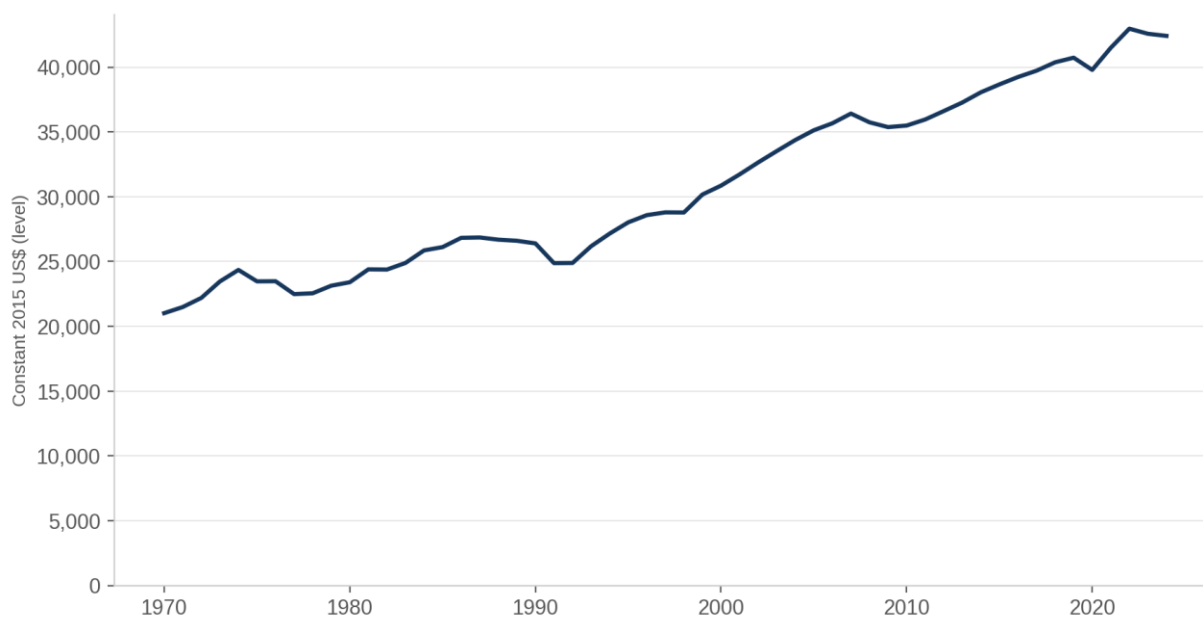
Few countries have rebuilt their economies as thoroughly as New Zealand has since 1970. In that year Britain still bought 36% of our exports, the exchange rate was set by the government, the top income tax rate was 60% and inflation was about to slip its leash. Within a generation, every one of those settings was gone.

Much of the change was forced on us. Britain joined the European Economic Community in 1973, and the oil shock a year later knocked the terms of trade from 25% above their long-run average to 20% below in two years. A decade of accommodating borrowing, inflation and devaluation followed, ending in the reforms of the 1980s: a floated dollar, a flattened tax scale and, through the Reserve Bank Act 1989, the world's first formal inflation target.

The rebuilt economy has much to show for itself. The merchandise terms of trade have recently reached record highs, and China and the United States have replaced Britain as the biggest export customers. Consumer prices, which rose 11.6% a year in the 20 years to 1989, have since increased at an average compounded rate of 2.6% a year to March 2026. Real income per person has roughly doubled since 1970.

The ledger has a debit side too. Income per head remains more than 20% below the OECD average, in a country whose policy settings should, on the OECD's own reckoning, put it 20% above. Government debt is back at early 1990s levels as a share of GDP, government spending remains above its pre-COVID share and households carry far more debt than their parents did.

## 8.01 Real GDP per capita



Source: World Bank; OECD

Measured in constant 2015 US dollars, income per person has roughly doubled in half a century, from about US\$21,000 in 1970 to about US\$42,400 in 2024. The climb was anything but smooth. The worst single years were 1991, when GDP per capita fell 5.8% in the post-reform recession, 1977 (down 4.2%) and 1975 (down 3.6%). Even the COVID year of 2020, at minus 2.3%, was milder than the slumps of the 1970s.

The trouble is that other countries doubled their incomes too, and then some. The OECD's 2024 survey of New Zealand put GDP per capita more than 20% below the OECD average, even though it judged that our policy settings should in theory deliver an income about 20% above it. The labour productivity gap against the top half of the OECD has widened from 34% in 1996 to around 40%. A country that ranked third in the world for income per head in the 1950s ranked 37th by 2024.

The recent record gives little comfort. After a sharp rebound from COVID, with growth of 4.3% in 2021 and 3.6% in 2022, GDP per capita fell in both 2023 and 2024 and now sits below its 2022 peak. Closing the gap with the rest of the developed world starts with halting the slide.

## 8.02 Merchandise terms of trade

Terms of trade: troughs, booms and records (index base June 2002 quarter = 1,000)

Period	Terms of trade
1933	28% below the long-run average (Great Depression)
1951	35% above the long-run average (Korean War wool boom)
1973-74 oil shock	From 25% above to 20% below the long-run average in two years
March 2017 quarter	Up 5.1%, highest since the 1973 commodity-price peak
June 2021 quarter	New record, up 3.3%
December 2024 quarter	1,490 index points, up 3.1%
September 2025 quarter	1,536 index points
December 2025 quarter	1,593 index points, among the highest on record

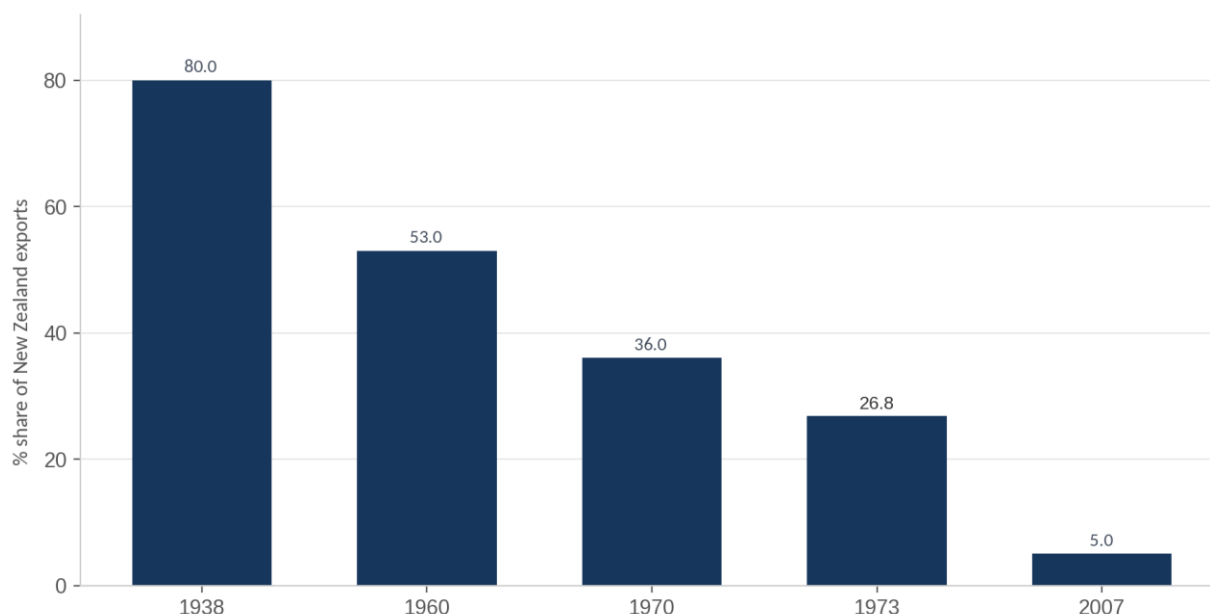
Source: Stats NZ, Overseas Trade Indexes

The terms of trade measure how many imports a given volume of exports will buy. For a country that sells food and buys machinery, fuel and electronics, few numbers matter more. For most of the twentieth century they were a source of instability: 28% below their long-run average in the Depression year of 1933, 35% above in the Korean War wool boom of 1951, and down from 25% above to 20% below in just two years after the 1973-74 oil shock.

The past two decades have rewritten that story. Rising Asian demand lifted the prices of our food exports while China's factories held import prices down. By the March 2017 quarter the terms of trade had climbed 5.1% to their highest level since June 1973, and the records kept coming, including a 3.3% rise in the June 2021 quarter.

They climbed to fresh highs. In the December 2024 quarter the index rose 3.1% as meat-led export prices outpaced import prices, and by the December 2025 quarter it stood at 1,593 points against a June 2002 base of 1,000, among the most favourable readings on record. The farmer of 1975 would scarcely believe it.

### 8.03 Britain's share of New Zealand exports



Source: *Te Ara*; *Stats NZ*; *MFAT*

No chart in this book falls more steeply, and few end more happily. In the late 1930s, Britain took more than 80% of New Zealand's exports; the share was 53% in 1960 and still 36% in 1970. Then, on 1 January 1973, Britain joined the European Economic Community, and the preferential access that had underpinned a century of trade ended. By the end of 1973 the British share was 26.8%; by 2007 it was 5%.

What followed was reinvention rather than decline. China has been the largest goods export destination for twelve consecutive years since 2013, taking about a quarter of goods exports in 2024, with two-way trade of NZ\$38.26 billion. In the same year the United States overtook Australia as the second-largest goods market, passing NZ\$9 billion, or 12% of the NZ\$71 billion total, for the first time. American demand for our meat (\$2.6 billion, up 17%) overtook China's (\$2.1 billion, down 32%).

The change runs both ways. China supplies about 21% of goods imports, including most of our clothing, toys and furniture, with imports from China peaking at \$18.2 billion in 2022. As recently as 2013, Australia was the largest bilateral trading partner, at NZ\$25.6 billion of two-way trade against NZ\$16.8 billion with China. The positions have since reversed.

## 8.04 Exchange rates

### The New Zealand dollar against the US dollar

Date	Value of NZ\$1	Event
December 1971	US\$1.1952	Pegged after the United States devalued against gold
July 1973 to March 1985	Trade-weighted basket peg	20% devaluation forced in the July 1984 crisis
4 March 1985	US\$0.4444	Dollar floated
22 November 2000	US\$0.3922	Post-float low
9 July 2014	US\$0.8821	Post-float high
2024 average	US\$0.6050	Also averaged A\$0.917 against the Australian dollar

Source: Reserve Bank of New Zealand

In December 1971, after the United States devalued against gold, New Zealand pegged its dollar at US\$1.1952. A New Zealand dollar was then worth more than an American one. From July 1973 the currency was set against a trade-weighted basket of currencies, an arrangement that buckled in the constitutional and currency crisis surrounding the July 1984 election, when a run on the dollar forced a 20% devaluation.

On 4 March 1985 the government floated the dollar at 44.44 US cents and stepped back. Markets have set the price ever since, between a low of US\$0.3922 in November 2000 and a high of US\$0.8821 in July 2014. In 2024, the dollar averaged US\$0.6050, roughly half its early 1970s official value, and A\$0.917 against an Australian dollar with which it once sat at parity.

The float shifted currency risk from taxpayers to market participants who chose to carry it. No currency crisis has occurred since 1985, not even during the global financial crisis of 2008. Forty years of calm have followed a decade of panic.

## 8.05 Employment by industry

### Employment by sector, 1986 and 2023

Sector	1986 census	2023 (ILO estimate)
Primary / agriculture	11%	5.6%
Manufacturing (1986); industry including construction (2023)	21%	20.5%
Services	68%	73.9%

Source: Stats NZ; Te Ara; World Bank (ILO estimates)

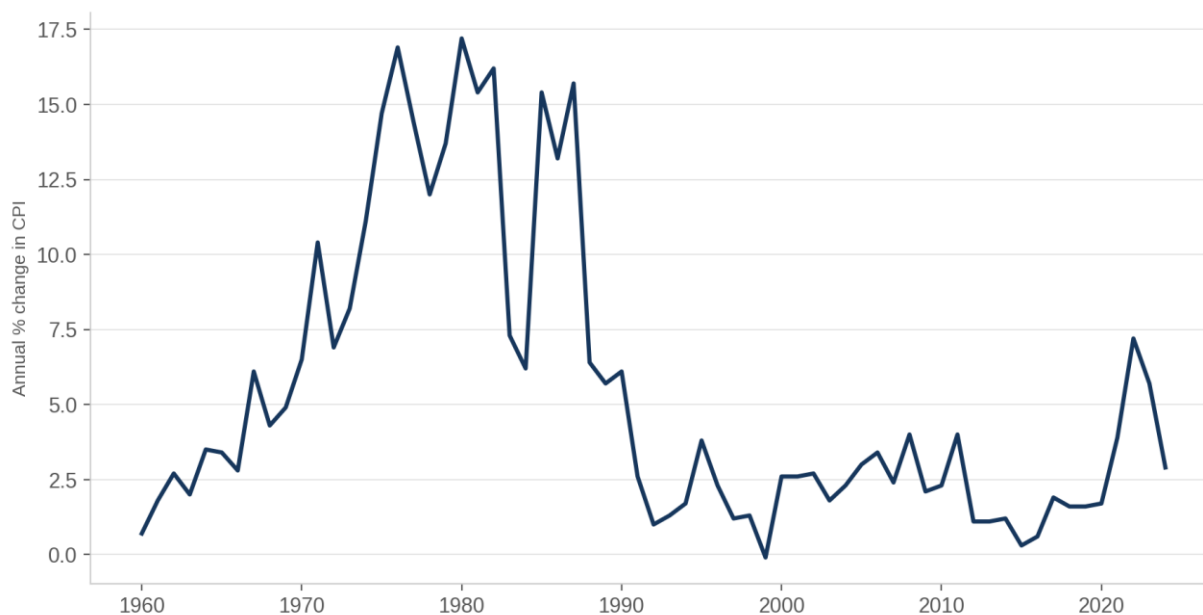
At the start of the twentieth century about two workers in five were on farms or in forestry and mining. By 1963, it was one in seven, and by 2013 one in fourteen, as machinery replaced muscle. On the modern statistics, agriculture's share of employment halved again from 11% in 1991 to 5.6% in 2023, even as farm exports boomed.

Manufacturing followed its own arc. It provided over one third of all jobs in 1963, but the share fell as government support was withdrawn from the 1970s and developing countries joined the global economy. At the 1986 census manufacturing still employed 21% of the workforce; by 2023, industry employed 20.5%, though that modern figure includes construction and so is not directly comparable with the census measure.

Services have absorbed the rest. They employed 68% of the workforce at the 1986 census and 73.9% on the 2023 estimate. Every developed economy has travelled the same road, from field to factory to office; the numbers below show how far along it New Zealand has come.

The shift from farms and factories to services is not a sign of decline but of development. Every rich country has made the same journey as rising productivity in the primary and manufacturing sectors freed labour for offices, hospitals, schools and shops. The open question for New Zealand is whether its expanding service industries are themselves high-productivity ones, because that, more than the sectoral mix, is what ultimately sets wages.

## 8.06 Consumer price inflation



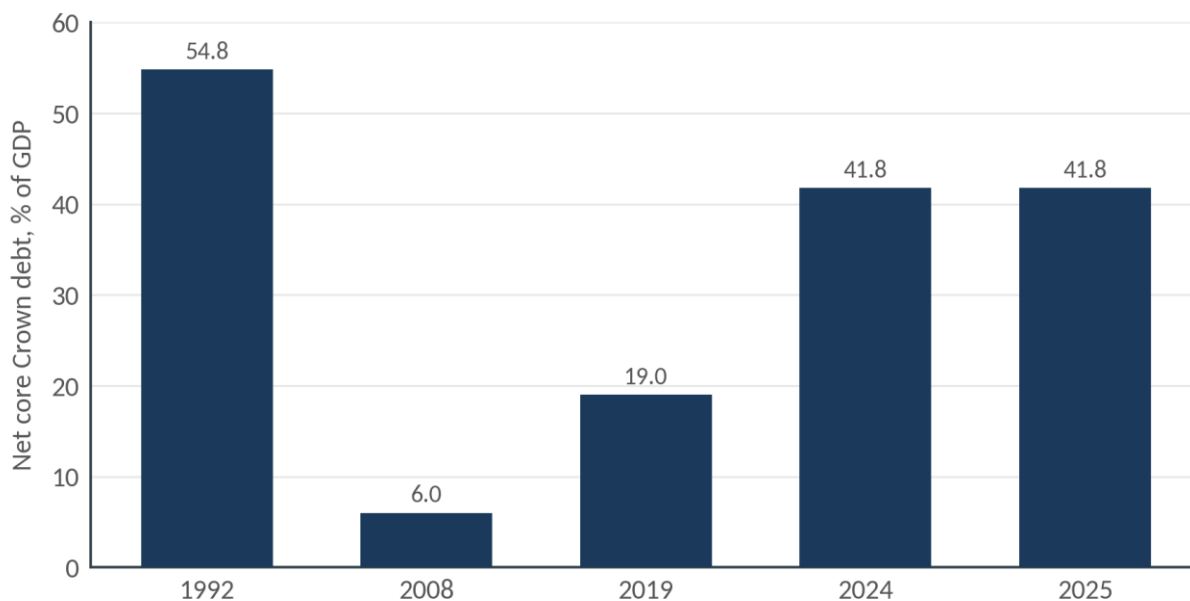
Source: World Bank; Stats NZ; Reserve Bank of New Zealand

In 1960, annual inflation was 0.7%. By 1971, it had reached 10.4%, and for the rest of the decade it barely paused, averaging 11.5% a year through the 1970s and peaking above 17% in 1980. The wage and price freeze of the early 1980s suppressed it only briefly. In the year to June 1987 the CPI rose 18.9%, a figure swollen by the introduction of GST at 10% in late 1986.

Then New Zealand did something no country had done before. The Reserve Bank of New Zealand Act 1989 gave the central bank one job, price stability, and made New Zealand the world's first formal inflation targeter. The March 1990 Policy Targets Agreement set a target of 0% to 2%, and the Bank reached it by December 1991, a year ahead of schedule. In the 20 years to 1989 the CPI had risen by an average of 11.6% a year; in the 20 years to 2013 it averaged 2.3%.

The post-COVID surge tested the framework. Annual inflation averaged 7.2% in 2022, peaking at 7.3% in the June quarter, the worst since the great inflation ended in the 1980s. By December 2024 it was back inside the Reserve Bank's 1% to 3% band at 2.2%, though it had drifted to 3.1% by December 2025, pushed up by electricity prices (up 12.2%) and council rates (up 8.8%). The institution invented here in 1989 has now been adopted across the developed world, and it has just experienced its sternest test.

## 8.07 Government debt



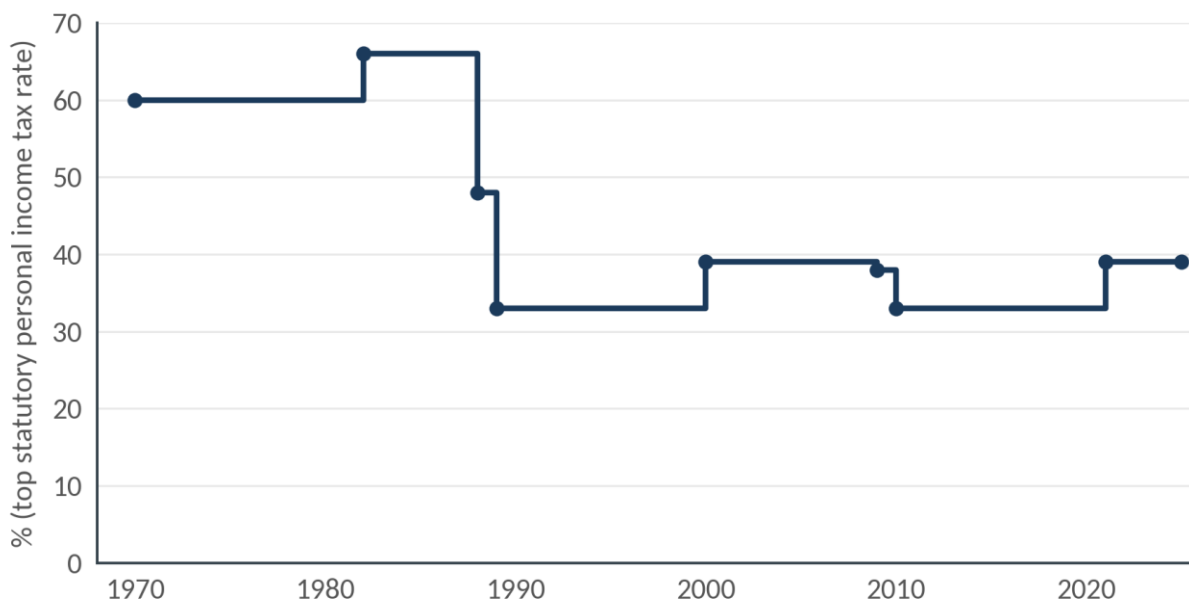
Source: *The Treasury*

The 1973-74 oil shock opened two decades of deficits, and the bill came due in 1992, when net government debt peaked at 54.8% of GDP. What followed was one of the great fiscal consolidations of the developed world. Asset sales and then sustained surpluses cut net core Crown debt to just 6% of GDP by 2008.

The climb back up has been faster than the climb down. The global financial crisis and the Christchurch earthquakes pushed debt higher, but the decisive shift came after 2019. From below 20% of GDP in 2018/19, net core Crown debt reached 42.5% of GDP, or \$175.5 billion, by June 2024. A year later, it stood at \$182.2 billion, or 41.8% of GDP; the 2024 ratio was later restated to the same figure after GDP revisions.

The current debt measure is restated back only to 1992, and the older net public debt measure used before then is not identical. On either measure the shape is the same: a peak, a long descent and a rapid new climb that has returned debt to early 1990s territory as a share of GDP. It took 16 years to pay the debt down and barely five to put it back.

## 8.08 Top marginal income tax rate



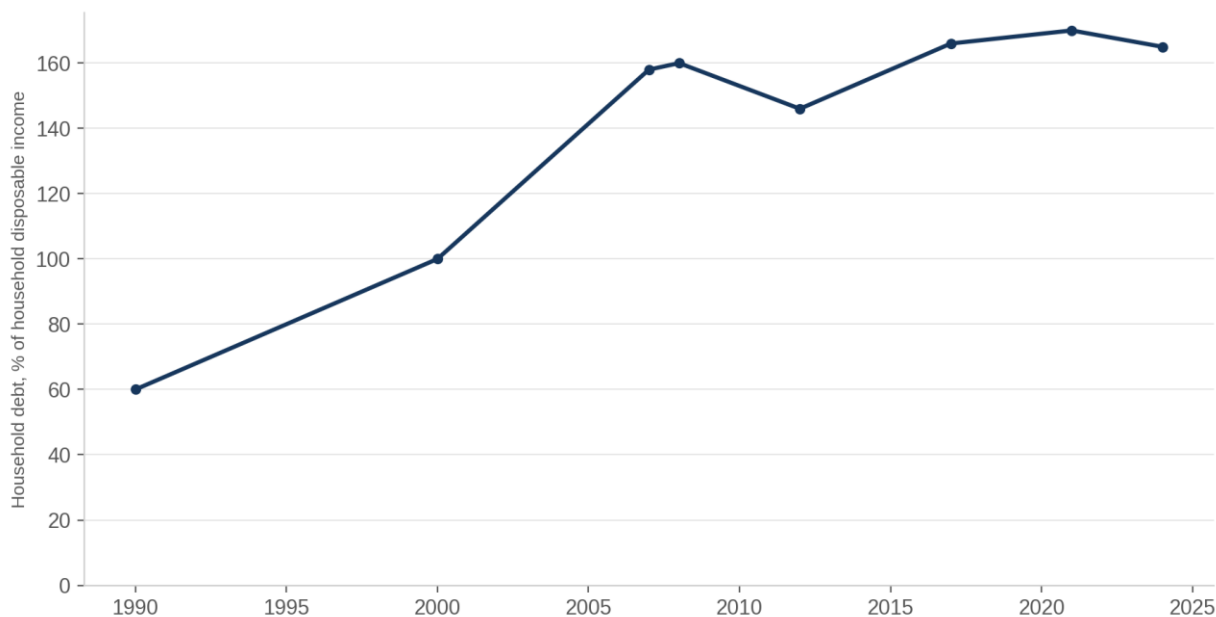
Source: Te Ara; Inland Revenue

Through most of the 1970s the top marginal income tax rate was 60%, and a temporary 10% surcharge raised the top statutory rate to 66% in 1982. High earners responded as high earners do, famously pouring income into tax-exempt kiwifruit orchards.

The tax reforms of the late 1980s swept that world away. The top rate fell to 48% in 1988 and 33% in 1989, its lowest since the early 1930s, paid for by a broader base and the new GST. Since then, the rate has moved with the political cycle: up to 39% from April 2000 under Labour, down to 38% from April 2009 and 33% from October 2010 under National (offset by GST rising from 12.5% to 15%), and back up to 39% on income over \$180,000 from April 2021.

Since its 1982 peak the top rate has dropped by about 40%, from 66% to 39% (and from 60% in 1970), and the kiwifruit shelters went with it. A lower rate on a broader base with greater reliance on taxing spending (that is GST) has proved the more durable way to raise revenue.

## 8.09 Household debt



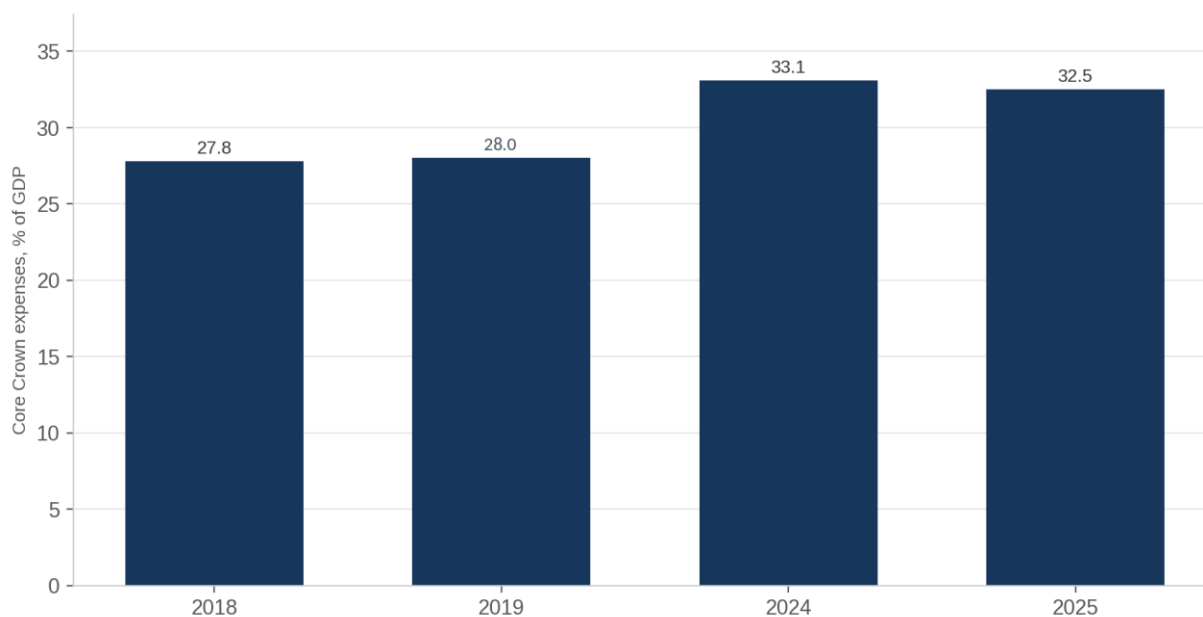
Source: Reserve Bank of New Zealand

As the government repaid its debts through the 1990s and 2000s, households did the opposite. Household debt rose from 60% of disposable income in 1990 to 100% in 2000 and 160% by 2008. Behind the borrowing stood the housing market, where each new buyer needed a bigger mortgage than the last.

The global financial crisis brought only a pause. The ratio eased to about 146% in March 2012, climbed to a new high of 166% by March 2017 as house prices surged, and peaked around 170% in the post-COVID boom of 2021. In 2024, it stood near 165%, almost triple the 1990 figure.

Servicing the debt has been more bearable than the headline numbers suggest. Interest payments peaked at about 14% of disposable income in 2008 and, even after the sharp rate rises from 2021, were back around 8.4% in 2024. The Reserve Bank is taking fewer chances with the stock of debt itself, introducing loan-to-value restrictions in 2013 and formal debt-to-income limits on new mortgage lending from July 2024.

## 8.10 Government spending



Source: *The Treasury; Budget 2026 Budget Policy Statement*

This indicator is new to the 2026 edition, and recent history explains why. Core Crown expenses were 27.8% of GDP in 2017/18 and 28.0% in 2018/19. Before the 2017 election, Treasury projected spending of 27.4% of GDP for 2023/24. The actual outturn was 33.1%, a structural lift of roughly five percentage points.

Spending has ratcheted before. Superannuation alone rose from about 3% of GDP in the early 1970s to almost 7% by 1980 after National Superannuation arrived in 1977. The long-run series also changes from a cash to an accrual accounting basis in 1994, so the earliest figures are not strictly comparable with recent ones.

Consolidation has begun, slowly. Core Crown expenses fell from 33.1% of GDP in 2023/24 to 32.6% in 2024/25, and Treasury's Budget 2026 forecasts, which cover the years 2025/26 to 2029/30, show core Crown expenses easing from 32.6% in 2025/26 to 30.3% by 2029/30. Even if those forecasts hold, the state will end the decade spending a larger share of the economy than it did before COVID.

# Housing

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New Zealanders talk about house prices the way the English talk about the weather, constantly and with feeling. For most of this century the talk was grim. Real house prices almost trebled between 2000 and 2018, the IMF in 2016 ranked New Zealand top of the OECD for housing unaffordability and a generation came to assume that owning a home was something their parents had done.

The cause was never mysterious. Houses sit on land, and for half a century planning rules rationed the land on which they could be built. Demand from a growing population pressed against a supply that was not allowed to respond, and prices did the rest.

This edition can tell a different story. Prices have fallen well below their late 2021 peak, rents have not moved in two years, building ran at record levels in 2022 and the 2023 Census recorded the first rise in home ownership since 1991. None of this happened by accident. Where councils allowed more homes, most visibly in Auckland after its 2016 Unitary Plan, affordability improved.

The job is not finished. Auckland remains severely unaffordable by international standards, and more than 112,000 people were severely housing deprived at the 2023 Census. But the direction has changed, and Parliament is replacing the planning laws that did the damage. When people are allowed to build, housing becomes cheaper.

## 9.01 Residential house prices

### House prices, peak and early 2026

Measure	Date	Price (NZ\$)
REINZ national median	November 2021 (peak)	925,000
REINZ national median	January 2026	753,106
REINZ Auckland median	Early 2026	1,015,000
QV national average dwelling value	Early 2026	912,190

Source: REINZ; QV

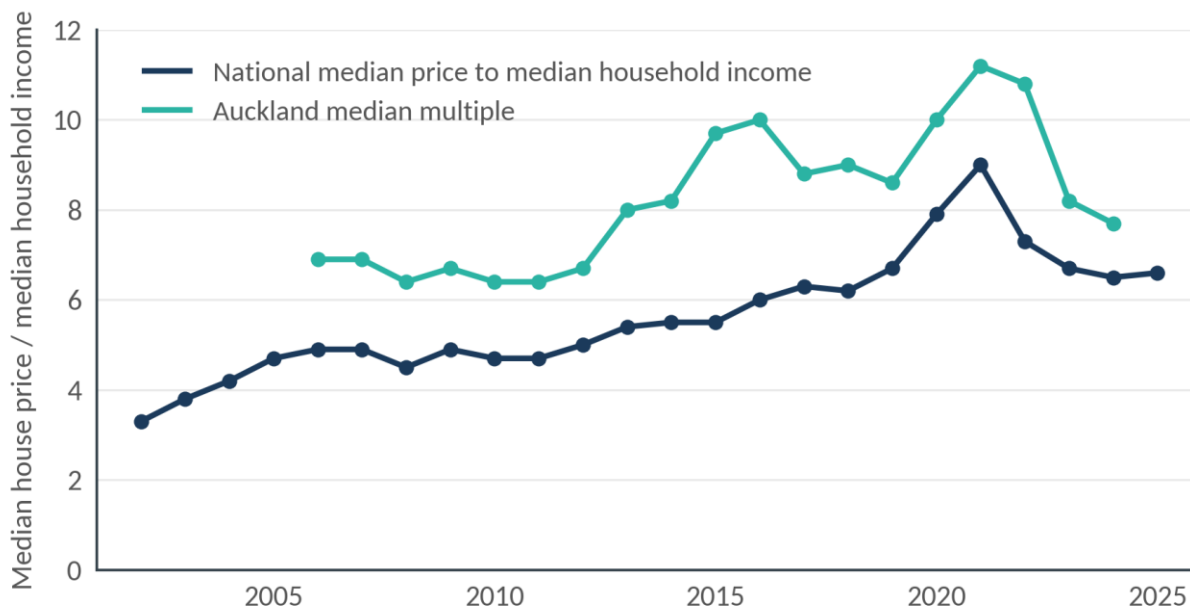
The REINZ national median house price reached a record \$925,000 in November 2021, having risen \$180,000, or 24%, in a single year. The boom did not last. By January 2026 the median had fallen to \$753,106, almost a fifth below the peak. Auckland's median stood near \$1,015,000 in early 2026. QV, which tracks average values rather than medians of sales, put the typical dwelling at \$912,190; averages sit above medians because expensive homes pull them up.

The correction needs to be seen against what came before. Real house prices almost trebled between 2000 and 2018, including an 80% real increase between 2002 and 2008 alone. The average price first passed \$700,000 in 2019 and crossed \$1,000,000 in 2021 before the fall set in.

Why did prices climb so far? The Infrastructure Commission found that between 1938 and 1977, house prices rose about 0.5% for every 1% increase in population. After the Town and Country Planning Act 1977 gave objectors far more power to block development, prices rose 2% for every 1% increase. The country and its geography had not changed. The rules had, and scarcity was manufactured in council offices.

**Further reading:** Michael Bassett and Luke Malpass, *Priced Out (The New Zealand Initiative, 2013)*; and *Prescription for Prosperity 2026, Chapter 14, Housing Affordability*.

## 9.02 Housing affordability



Source: Demographia

In January 2002, the median New Zealand house cost just over three times the median annual household income. By March 2017 it cost 6.27 times, and in Auckland 9.81 times, up from 4.0 over the same period. In fifteen years the typical house went from three years of household income to more than six, and Auckland's nearly ten.

Demographia's annual survey tells the Auckland story in four numbers. The city's median multiple was 6.4 in 2008, 10.0 in 2017 and 11.2 in 2021, well past the 9.0 threshold Demographia labels 'impossibly unaffordable'. By the 2025 edition, drawing on late 2024 data, it had fallen to 7.7. That is still 'severely unaffordable', which Demographia defines as anything above 5.1, but it moved Auckland out of the world's ten least affordable markets to 16th of the 95 surveyed. Hong Kong topped that survey at 14.4 and Sydney followed at 13.8, while Pittsburgh, the most affordable major market, sat at 3.2.

Demographia attributes nearly every severely unaffordable market to urban containment, the greenbelts, growth boundaries and restrictive zoning that choke land supply and inflate its price. Auckland's improvement fits that diagnosis in reverse. After the 2016 Unitary Plan allowed more homes across the city, prices flattened while incomes caught up.

**Further reading:** Michael Bassett and Luke Malpass, *Free to Build: Restoring New Zealand's Housing Affordability* (The New Zealand Initiative, 2013); and *Prescription for Prosperity 2026*, Chapter 14, *Housing Affordability*.

## 9.03 Mortgage lending and interest rates

### Mortgage rates and new lending

Indicator	Date	Value
Average floating mortgage rate	June 1998	11.20%
Average floating mortgage rate	October 2020	4.50%
Average floating rate (standard)	May 2026	6.15%
Average one-year fixed rate (standard)	May 2026	5.26%
Average one-year fixed rate (special)	May 2026	4.65%
Official Cash Rate	June 2026	2.25%
New mortgage lending	2021	\$99 billion
New mortgage lending	2023	\$62 billion
New mortgage lending	January to November 2025	\$85.8 billion

Source: Reserve Bank of New Zealand

Anyone who bought a first home in the late 1980s remembers floating mortgage rates of around 20%, the price of that era's inflation. The Reserve Bank's current records begin in June 1998 with a floating rate of 11.20%, the highest thus recorded. The low came in October 2020, at 4.50% floating, with two-year fixed rates bottoming at 3.50% and banks' one-year specials falling to about 2.2%. ASB held its one-year rate at 2.19% until July 2021.

Cheap money met scarce houses, and the result was the 2021 frenzy. New mortgage lending hit \$99 billion that year. The Reserve Bank then raised the Official Cash Rate by 525 basis points between October 2021 and May 2023, to 5.5%, the highest since 2008. Fixed mortgage rates climbed to around 7% in 2023 and new lending slumped to \$62 billion.

By June 2026 the cycle had turned again. The Official Cash Rate sat at 2.25%, and by May 2026 the average standard floating rate was 6.15% and the one-year fixed rate 5.26%, with one-year specials near 4.65%. Lending recovered to \$85.8 billion in the eleven months to November 2025, up 27.8% on a year earlier, with investors borrowing \$18.1 billion, up 36% and ahead of first home buyers for the first time since 2021.

## 9.04 Rents

### National median weekly rent, newly tenanted properties

March quarter	Median rent (NZ\$ per week)
2024	600
2025	600
2026	600

Source: MBIE Tenancy Services

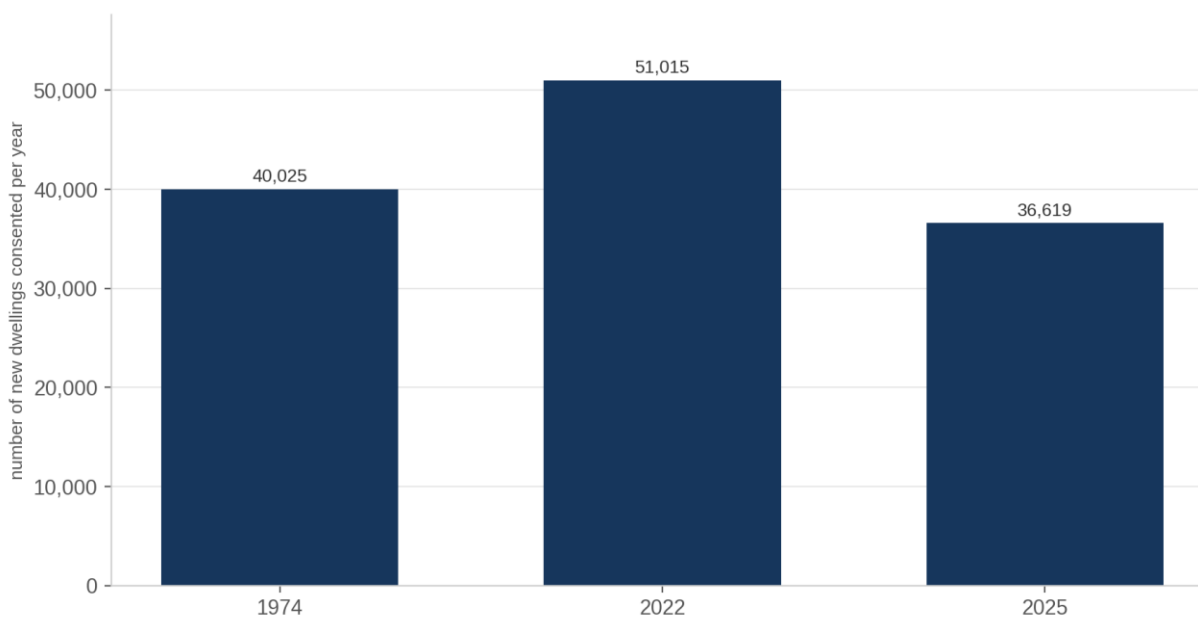
The national median rent for a newly tenanted property was \$600 a week in the March 2026 quarter. It was also \$600 in the March 2025 quarter and \$600 in the March 2024 quarter, with only a brief dip to \$590 in mid 2025. The monthly figure peaked at \$620 in January 2025 and has drifted down since. After decades in which rents only went up, two flat years stand out.

The flatness is not for want of activity. A record 48,645 bonds were lodged in the March 2026 quarter, up 10.2% on a year earlier and the highest quarterly figure since at least 2021, yet all that extra letting produced no rent increase. Auckland's median fell \$20 a week, or 3.1%, in the year to March 2026, Wellington-region rents fell by between 2.5% and 7.7%, and of 28 main urban districts eleven recorded falls and eight no change.

Analysts credit the construction boom, which delivered a strong supply of rental housing just as demand cooled. Over the 21 years to 2013, by contrast, mean weekly rents rose 240% in nominal terms. Rents stopped rising when houses kept getting built, which is what the supply-side case for housing reform predicted all along.

**Further reading:** *David Law, Rent Controls: The Next Mistake in Housing Policy (The New Zealand Initiative, 2021); and Prescription for Prosperity 2026, Chapter 14, Housing Affordability.*

## 9.05 Building consents



Source: Stats NZ

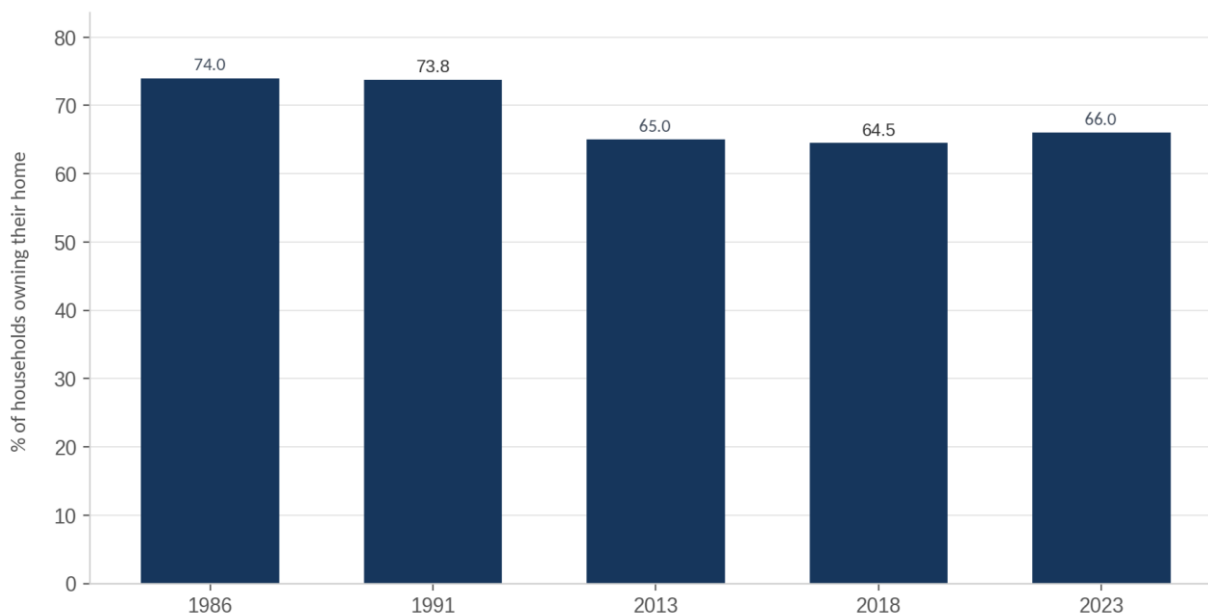
For nearly five decades the building record belonged to the year ended February 1974, when 40,025 new homes were consented. The record finally fell in the year ended May 2022, when consents reached 51,015. The headline flatters us, though. In 1974, New Zealand consented one new home for every 75 residents; as the new record approached, the figure was roughly one for every 100. Consents measure the intention to build rather than completions, and the record years cited here end in different months, so the comparison is indicative.

The half century in between explains much of this chapter. The building rate fell from around nine homes per 1,000 people a year in the 1950s to 1970s to around five per 1,000 through the 1990s and 2000s, a decline the Infrastructure Commission links to the Resource Management Act and to council funding constraints. New Zealand did not forget how to build houses. It made building harder and then wondered why houses cost more.

After the post-2022 slump, consents recovered to 36,619 in calendar 2025, up 9.0% on 2024, with Auckland leading the rise. The bigger news is legislative. The Planning Bill and the Natural Environment Bill, which will replace the Resource Management Act 1991, had their first reading on 16 December 2025 and are planned to pass by the end of 2026. Whether the new laws make land for housing abundant will decide whether the gains in this chapter last.

**Further reading:** *Khyaati Acharya, Up or Out: Examining the Trade-offs of Urban Form (The New Zealand Initiative, 2014); and Prescription for Prosperity 2026, Chapter 14, Housing Affordability.*

## 9.06 Home ownership rate



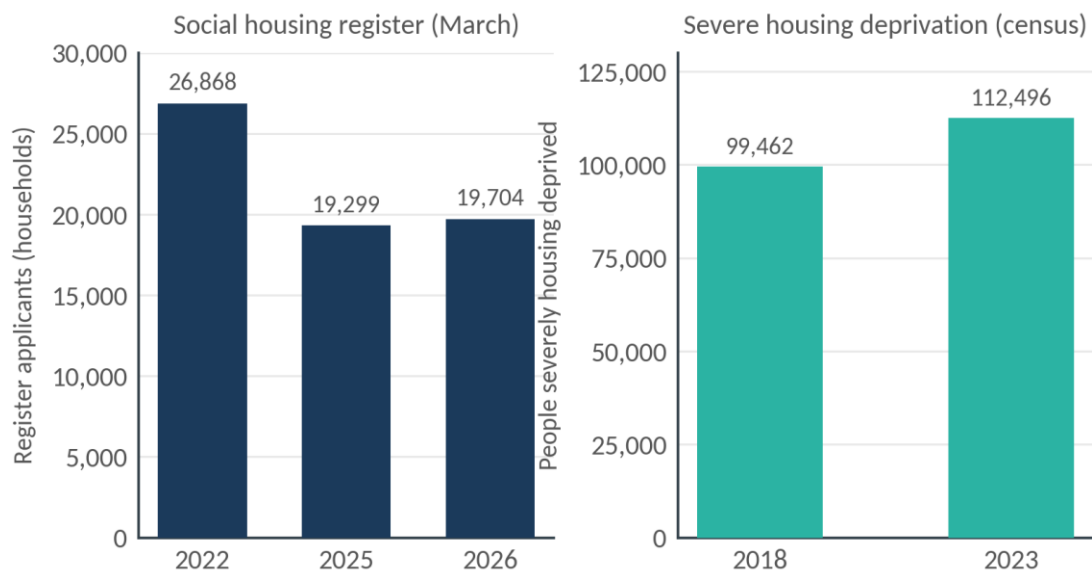
Source: Stats NZ, *Census of Population and Dwellings*

Owning a home was the normal condition of New Zealand households for most of the postwar era. About 74% of households owned their home in 1986, and the census peak came in 1991 at 73.8%. Then began three decades of decline, to about 65% by 2013 and 64.5% in 2018, as prices ran away from incomes and renting became the default for the young.

The 2023 Census recorded 66.0% of households, some 1,175,220 of them, owning their home or holding it in a family trust. The figure surprised the statisticians, because it was the first rise since 1991. Officials attribute it partly to first home buyers who got in during the low-interest years of 2019 to 2021 and partly to the price correction that followed.

The census has counted family-trust ownership separately only since 2006, so the long series is indicative rather than exact. The turn itself is not in doubt. A measure that had fallen at every census since 1991 finally rose, and it rose because houses, for the first time in a generation, became easier to buy.

## 9.07 Social housing register and homelessness



Source: Ministry of Social Development; Stats NZ

The social housing register counts eligible households waiting for a state or community house. It peaked at 26,868 applicants in March 2022, at the top of the rent and price boom. By 31 March 2026 it stood at 19,704, up 2.1% on the 19,299 recorded a year earlier but well below the peak.

Homelessness, which the census measures as severe housing deprivation, worsened over the boom years. An estimated 112,496 people, or 2.3% of the population, were severely housing deprived in 2023, up from 99,462, or 2.1%, in 2018. Of these, 61.3% were living in housing classed as uninhabitable, and the rates were highest among Pacific peoples at 6.6% and in the Buller and Gisborne districts at 5.8% and 5.4%.

Both measures trace back to the same broken market. The state house stock peaked at about 70,000 in 1991, but no social housing programme can outbuild a private market that has been forbidden to supply. When rents flatten and prices ease, the queue shortens, and the register's fall since 2022 suggests that has begun.

# Energy and Environment

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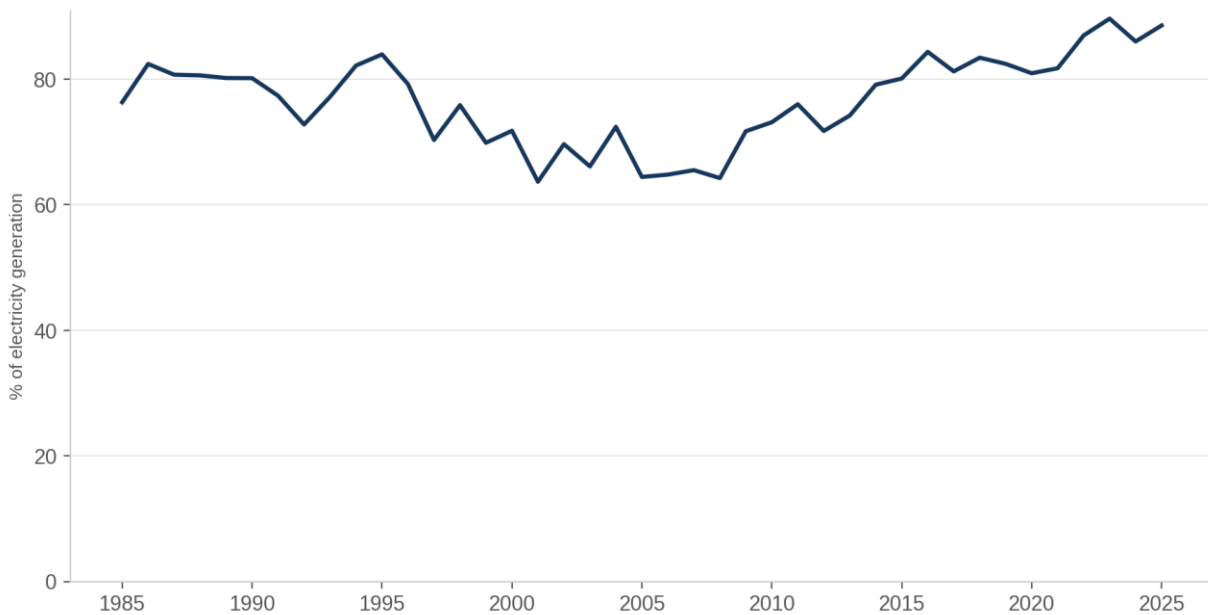
New Zealand's electricity is among the cleanest in the world, and it has been for a long time. In 1980, 91.3% of generation came from renewable sources, almost all of it hydro from stations built generations earlier. That figure is higher than anything achieved since. The renewable grid is an inheritance, not a recent accomplishment.

Emissions tell a better story than most people assume. Gross greenhouse gas emissions peaked in 2006 and have trended down since 2019. Per person, emissions fell 26.4% between 1991 and 2023 while the population grew 51%. Decarbonisation has happened without the economic ruin so often predicted.

One pair of definitions runs through this chapter. Gross emissions count everything New Zealand puts into the atmosphere. Net emissions subtract what forests absorb, and in 2024 forests and other land uses soaked up about 28% of gross emissions, taking the total from 75.8 to 54.8 million tonnes. The two measures answer different questions, and this chapter uses both.

The chapter also records what happens when policy pushes against price signals. Electric vehicle sales soared under a subsidy and fell by more than half when it ended. Good climate policy buys the cheapest abatement available rather than the most visible. The numbers here mostly show New Zealand getting that right by accident of geography and occasionally getting it wrong by design.

## 10.01 Renewable electricity share



Source: *Our World in Data* (Ember; Energy Institute); MBIE, *Energy in New Zealand*

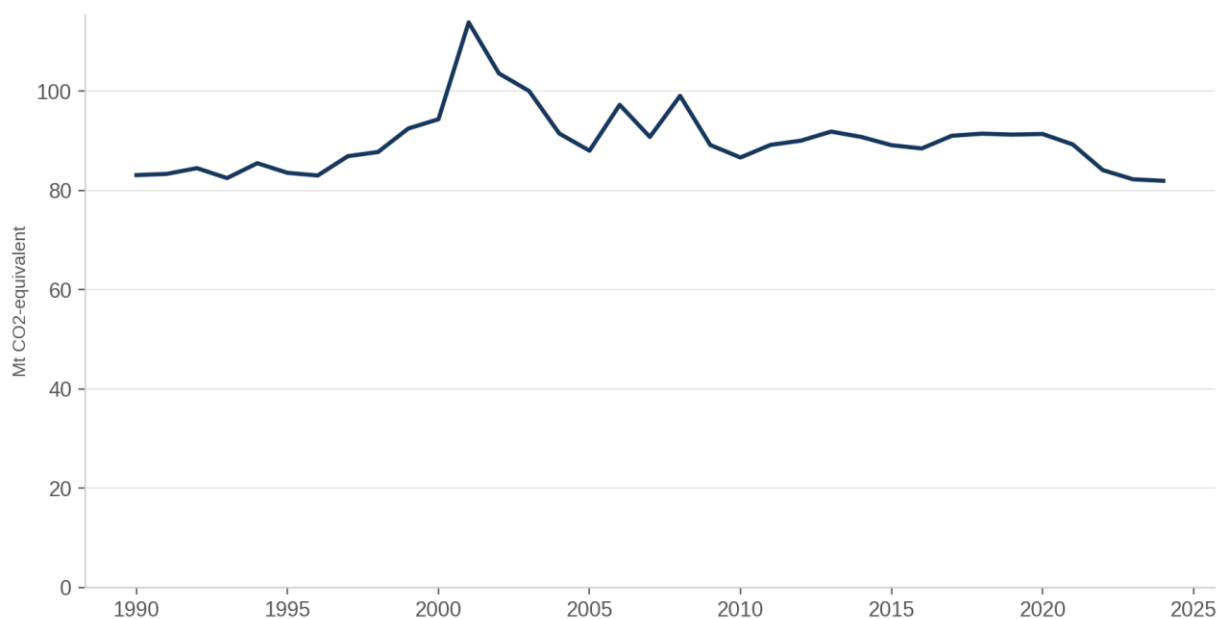
Few countries inherited a cleaner grid. When this series begins in 1985, renewables supplied 76.3% of New Zealand’s electricity, and on MBIE’s longer record the share had been 91.3% as recently as 1980. Then the share slid. Demand grew faster than new hydro could be built, gas and coal at Huntly filled the gap, and in dry years the lakes could not carry the load. The low came in 2001, when only 63.65% of generation was renewable, and the share stayed below 66% for much of the mid-2000s.

Geothermal and wind changed the arithmetic. The share climbed back above 80% in 2015, reached 86.9% in 2022 and hit 89.6% in 2023, the highest in this series. MBIE’s official figures run slightly lower, 88.1% for 2023, because the two sources define generation a little differently. In 2024, a dry year cut hydro output to 23,490 GWh, its lowest since 2013, and the renewable share slipped to 85.5% on MBIE’s measure. New machines took up the slack: the Tauhara and Te Huka 3 plants added 225 MW of geothermal capacity, lifting geothermal output to a record 8,741 GWh, while wind reached a record 3,919 GWh and solar jumped 62% to a record 601 GWh.

By 2025, the share was back up to 88.5%, among the highest in the OECD and exceeded only by Iceland, Costa Rica, Norway, Luxembourg and Denmark. The share was already 81% in 1990, though, and the average over the past decade is 83.4%. The green grid was not engineered by recent climate policy. It was inherited, and lately topped up with geothermal and wind.

**Further reading:** *Prescription for Prosperity 2026, Chapter 4, Energy.*

## 10.02 Greenhouse gas emissions



Source: *Our World in Data* (Jones et al.); Ministry for the Environment, *Greenhouse Gas Inventory*

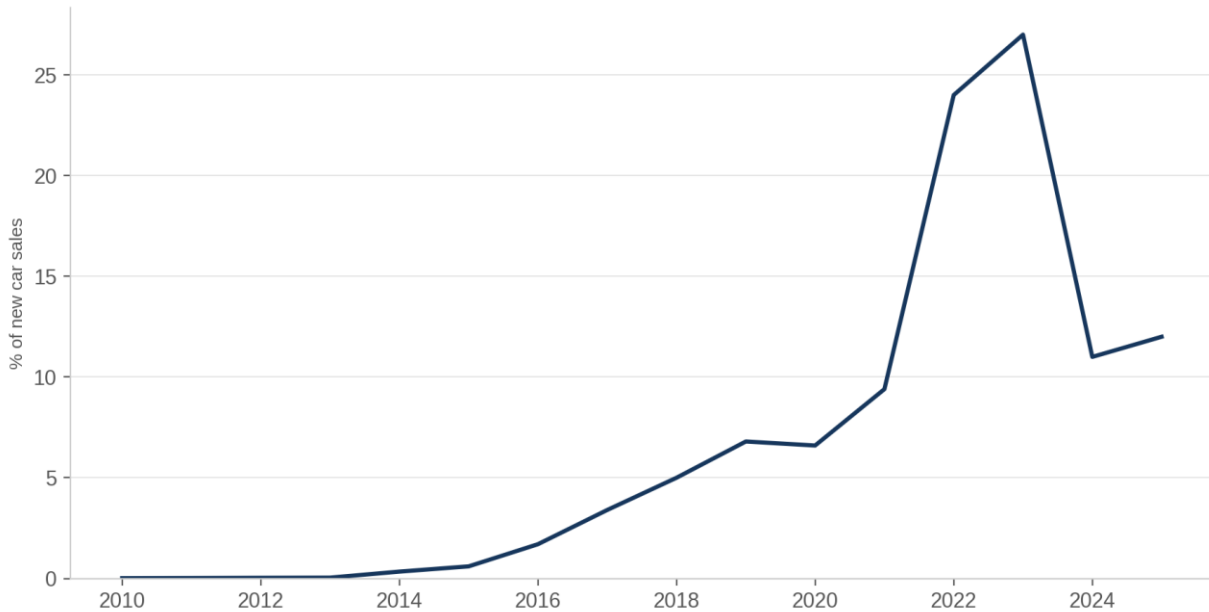
The chart shows total greenhouse gas emissions including land use, from the global dataset of Jones and colleagues. New Zealand emitted 83.1 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>-equivalent in 1990 and 81.9 million tonnes in 2024, slightly less than where it began. The spike to 113.8 million tonnes in 2001 is an artefact of the data, because the land-use component is estimated by models and arrives in lumps, so the series should be read for its trend rather than its bumps. Since 2020, it has fallen steadily.

The official inventory, the authoritative New Zealand source, counts differently. Gross emissions, which exclude forestry, were 75.8 million tonnes in 2024, little changed from 2023 but still above 1990; they peaked in 2006 and have trended down since 2019. Net emissions are what remains after forests do their work, 54.8 million tonnes in 2024 – about a quarter above 1990 – with forests and other land uses absorbing about 28% of the gross total. The two measures should be kept apart, because the Climate Change Response Act sets its 2050 target of net zero on the net measure, excluding biogenic methane, which must instead fall by 24 to 47% from 2017 levels. The shape of the problem is distinctive: agriculture produced 53% of gross emissions in 2024 and energy 38%, and methane alone, largely from livestock digestion, made up about half.

The per-person story is the better one. Emissions per capita fell 26.4% between 1991 and 2023 while the population grew 51%, and including land use they dropped from 24.5 tonnes in 1990 to 15.7 tonnes in 2024. That still leaves New Zealand a heavy emitter by rich-country standards, nearly three times the United Kingdom's 5.6 tonnes per person, though below Australia's 22.8 and the United States' 17.5. The livestock-intensive production for export markets of the pastoral economy explains much of the gap. Because emissions are counted where they are produced, the methane from livestock raised for export markets falls on New Zealand's account rather than on that of the countries that eat the food. The decline has come without ruin, in a country that kept growing.

**Further reading:** *Oliver Hartwich, Effective and Affordable: Why the ETS is Sufficient to Deal with the Climate Emergency (The New Zealand Initiative, 2020); and Prescription for Prosperity 2026, Chapter 18, Climate Change.*

### 10.03 Electric vehicles



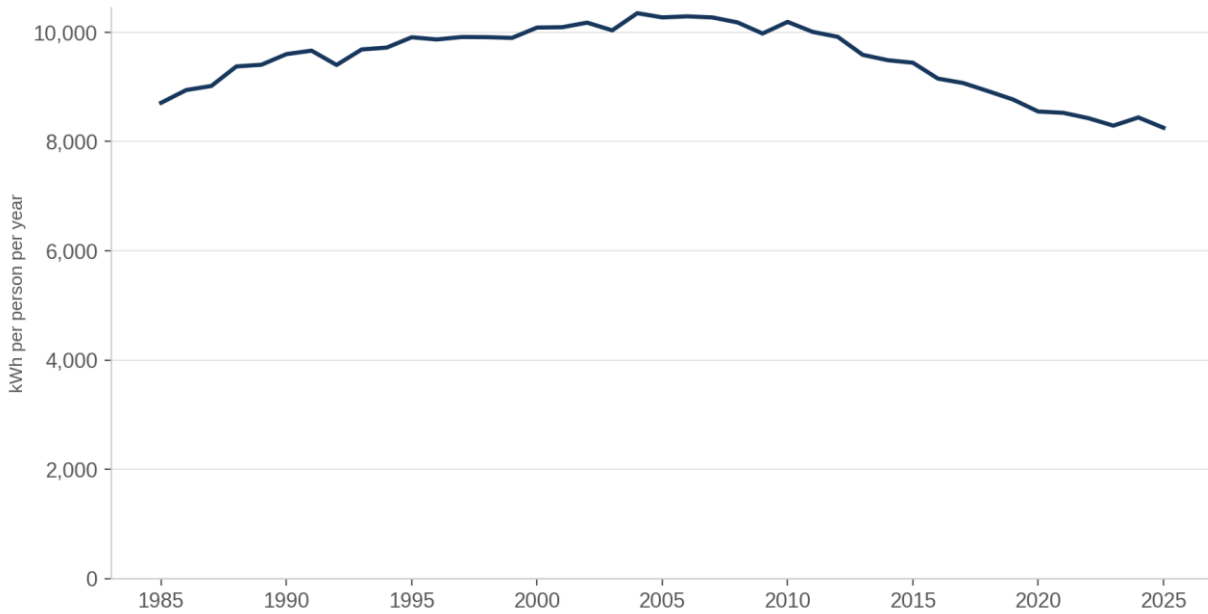
Source: Our World in Data (IEA); Ministry of Transport; NZ Transport Agency Waka Kotahi

In 2010, electric cars were a rounding error, just 0.015% of new car sales, and in 2013 still only 0.041%. By 2019, the share had climbed to 6.8%. Then the Clean Car Discount arrived in July 2021 and the climb became a sprint: 9.4% in 2021, 24% in 2022 and 27% in 2023, the scheme’s final year.

Then policy reversed. The discount ended on 31 December 2023, and from 1 April 2024 road user charges were extended to electric vehicles, at \$76 per 1,000 km for battery models. The plug-in share of new car sales fell from 27% to 11% in a single year, recovering only slightly to 12% in 2025. Few charts in this book show policy moving a market so visibly in both directions. The subsidy bought sales, and its removal returned the market to where willingness to pay, rather than the taxpayer, set the pace.

The fleet keeps growing all the same. New Zealand had 153 registered plug-in vehicles in 2013 and 135,348 at the end of 2025, roughly a 900-fold rise in 12 years, split between 92,540 battery-electric cars and 42,808 plug-in hybrids. That is still only about 2.8% of the national fleet. In May 2026, fully electric vehicles took 14.6% of new light registrations and plug-in hybrids a further 9.5%, while plug-ins of all kinds made up 3.14% of a light fleet of more than 4.4 million vehicles.

## 10.04 Electricity generation per capita



Source: Our World in Data (Ember; Energy Institute); MBIE, Energy in New Zealand

New Zealanders generate less electricity per head than their parents did. The figure stood at 8,710 kWh in 1985, climbed steadily to a peak of about 10,350 kWh in 2004 and has drifted down ever since, to about 8,250 kWh in 2025, below where the series began.

Total generation has not fallen; the population simply grew faster. The country generated 43,879 GWh in 2024, up 0.9% on the year, and total output rose 36.8% between 1990 and 2023. The gap between rising output and a falling per-person figure reflects energy efficiency gains and the slow fading of heavy industrial demand. The largest single consumer remains the Tiwai Point aluminium smelter, opened in 1971 and fed by the Manapouri power station, which draws around 572 MW, about 13% of the nation's electricity.

The 2024 dry year tested the system. Hydro output fell, yet record geothermal, wind and solar generation kept the grid 85.5% renewable. Generating less per person while keeping the lights on is efficiency at work, not decline.

## 10.05 Air quality

### Particulate air quality trends at monitoring sites

Measure	Period	Sites improving	Sites monitored
PM10 concentrations (Stats NZ)	2016 to 2023	30	41
PM2.5 concentrations (Stats NZ)	2016 to 2023	12	16
Air quality, 10-year trends (LAWA)	2015 to 2024	30	44

Source: Stats NZ; LAWA; Ministry for the Environment

Air quality is the indicator without a tidy national line. Monitoring happens site by site, sites come and go, and no single annual concentration series covers the whole country, so the table counts trends instead. New Zealand's particulate pollution comes mainly from home heating, wood burners working through winter, with traffic adding its share.

The counts point one way. PM10 concentrations fell at 30 of the 41 monitored sites between 2016 and 2023, and the finer PM2.5 fell at 12 of 16 sites over the same period. LAWA's 10-year analysis for 2015 to 2024 found air quality improving at 30 of the 44 sites with enough data, and *Our air 2024*, the official three-yearly report, reaches the same verdict: most monitored towns and cities breathe easier than a decade ago. It is the kind of slow success this book exists to record.

Measured against the industrialised world the picture is reassuring, though many monitored towns still breach the tightened World Health Organisation guideline for fine particulates. A small population, a windy maritime climate and a largely deindustrialised economy keep background pollution low, and the problems that remain are local and seasonal: winter wood smoke in a handful of inland southern towns, and vehicle emissions in the larger cities. The task for policy is less to reverse a national decline, which is not happening, than to manage these specific local sources without imposing national rules designed for problems New Zealand does not have.

**Further reading:** *Prescription for Prosperity 2026, Chapter 17, Resource Management.*

# Wellbeing and Society

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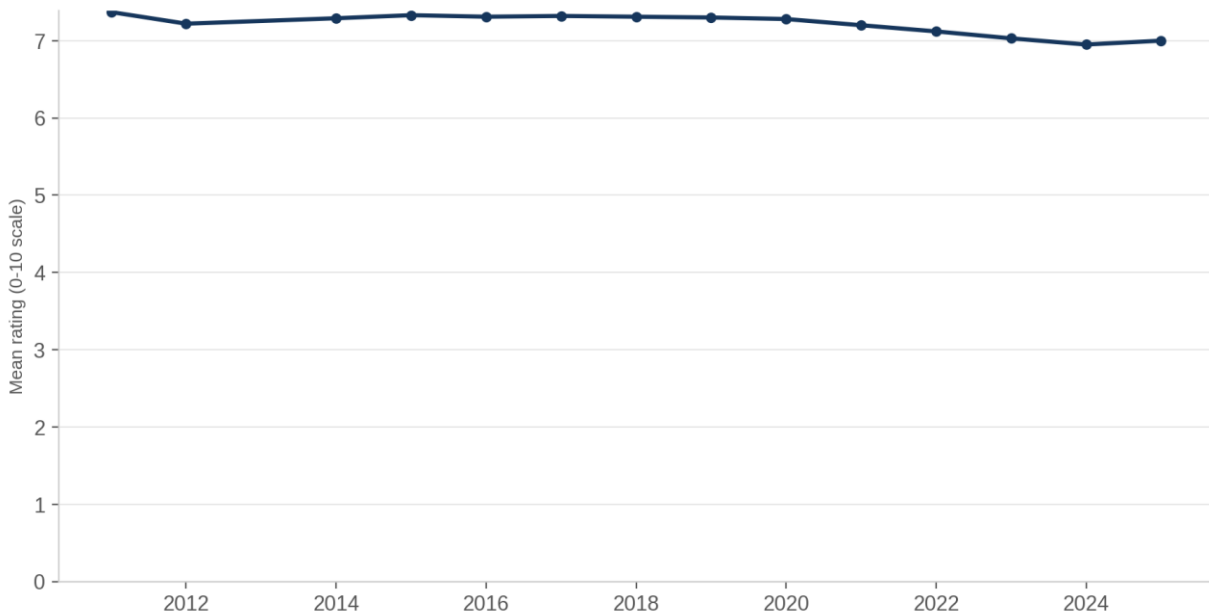
Statistics books usually count what is easy to count: people, dollars, houses, exports. This chapter, new to the 2026 edition, counts something harder. It asks how New Zealanders feel about their lives, their neighbours and their institutions, and what they do for one another when nobody is paying them.

Much of the news is good. New Zealand still sits among the dozen happiest countries on earth. More than half the adult population volunteers in a typical month. The number of people who can hold an everyday conversation in te reo Māori grew by 15% in five years, a remarkable turn for a language that spent a century in retreat.

But several lines on these charts are drifting the wrong way. The country's happiness score has eased for a decade, and the decline is sharpest among the young. Trust in parliament, the media and even in other people fell between 2021 and 2023. Voter turnout has never returned to its 1984 peak of 93.7% of enrolled electors.

Survey answers about feelings deserve more modesty than tonnes of milk powder or kilometres of road. People interpret questions differently, and two survey points do not make a trend. The numbers that follow are presented honestly, gaps and caveats included, so readers can draw their own conclusions.

## 11.01 Life satisfaction



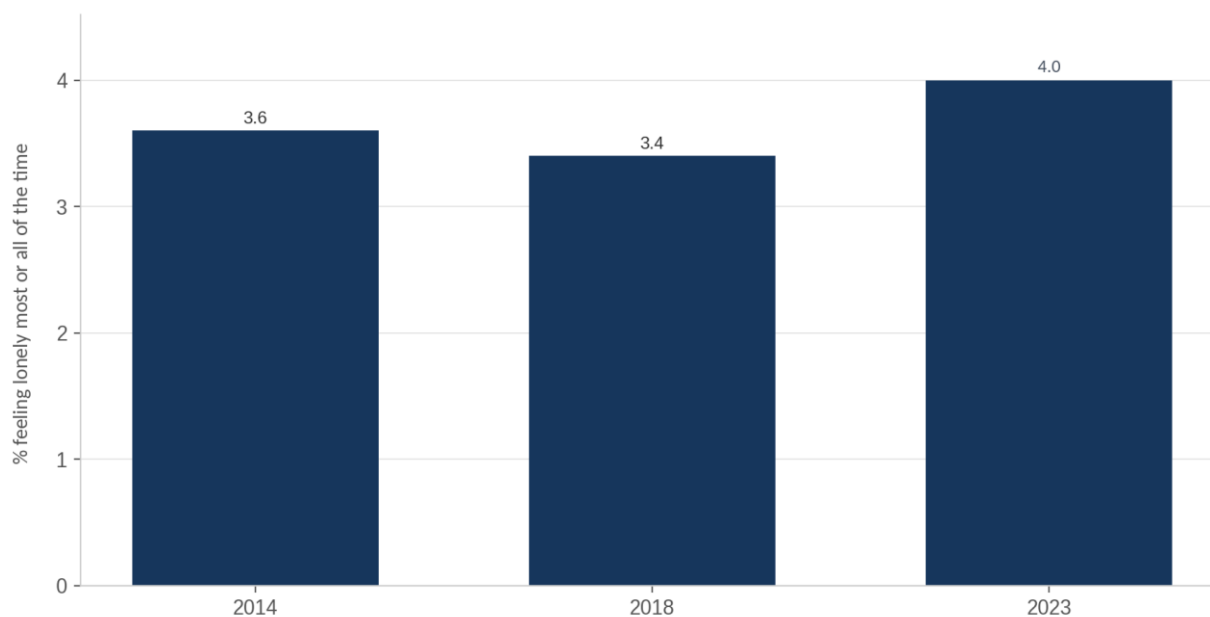
Source: World Happiness Report via Our World in Data; Stats NZ General Social Survey

Since 2011, the World Happiness Report has asked New Zealanders to place their lives on a ladder running from 0, the worst possible life, to 10, the best. They have always answered near the top. The score was 7.37 in 2011, hovered around 7.3 through the middle of the decade, before easing to 6.95 in 2024 and edging back to 7.00 in 2025. New Zealand ranked 11th in the world in 2024, 12th in 2025 and 11th of 147 countries in 2026.

Look closer, though, and the line tilts downward. The score has slipped by about a third of a point since 2011, with the fall concentrated after 2020: 7.12 in 2022, 7.03 in 2023 and 6.95 in 2024, before a small recovery to 7.00 in 2025. The slide is steepest among the young. The World Happiness Report finds that across the four countries it studies together – the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand – the happiness of people under 25 has fallen by an average of 0.86 points over the past twenty years, leaving the young the least happy age group.

Stats NZ's General Social Survey tells a similar story of high but gently sagging contentment. In 2014, 82.6% of people aged 15 and over rated their life satisfaction at 7 or higher out of 10; the share was around 83% in 2016 and 81% in both 2018 and 2021, steady even through a pandemic. The mean rating then slipped from 7.7 in 2021 to 7.6 in 2023. Surveys before 2014 used a five-point scale and cannot be compared directly.

## 11.02 Loneliness



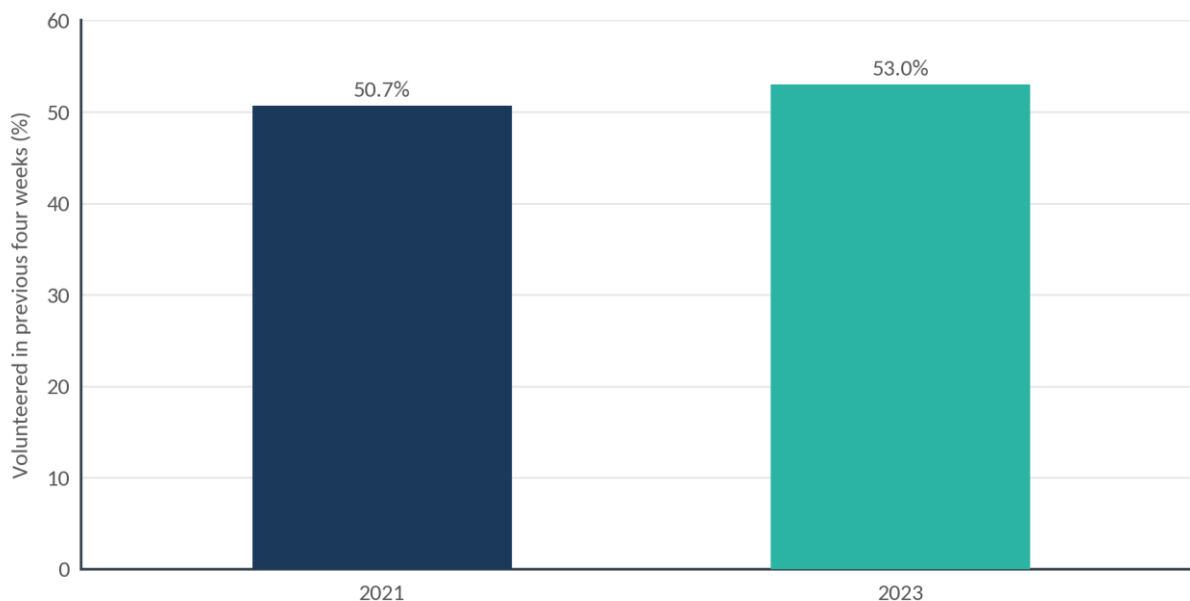
Source: Stats NZ General Social Survey; Ministry of Social Development; Helen Clark Foundation

The General Social Survey asks people how often they felt lonely in the previous four weeks. The chronic core is small but no longer shrinking. In 2014, 3.6% of people aged 15 and over felt lonely most or all of the time; the figure was 3.4% in 2018 and 4.0% in 2023, about 168,000 people. Far more feel it occasionally. In 2023, 44% had felt lonely at least some of the time in the previous four weeks.

Loneliness is often imagined as an affliction of old age, but the numbers point the other way. In 2014, 16.8% of people aged 15 to 24 felt lonely at least some of the time, against 9.6% of those aged 65 to 74. Among the young, the share rose from 24% in 2018 to 28% in 2021. The April 2020 lockdown showed how quickly isolation bites: the share of young people lonely most or all of the time jumped from 5.8% before the pandemic to 20.8%, then fell back near its old level within a year.

Loneliness also tracks hardship. In 2014, people on personal incomes of \$30,000 or less were twice as likely to feel lonely (17.6%) as those earning over \$70,000 (8.8%). These figures describe a problem rather than prescribe a cure, but they correct two common assumptions. Loneliness in New Zealand is not mainly a problem of the old, and it did not begin with the pandemic.

### 11.03 Volunteering



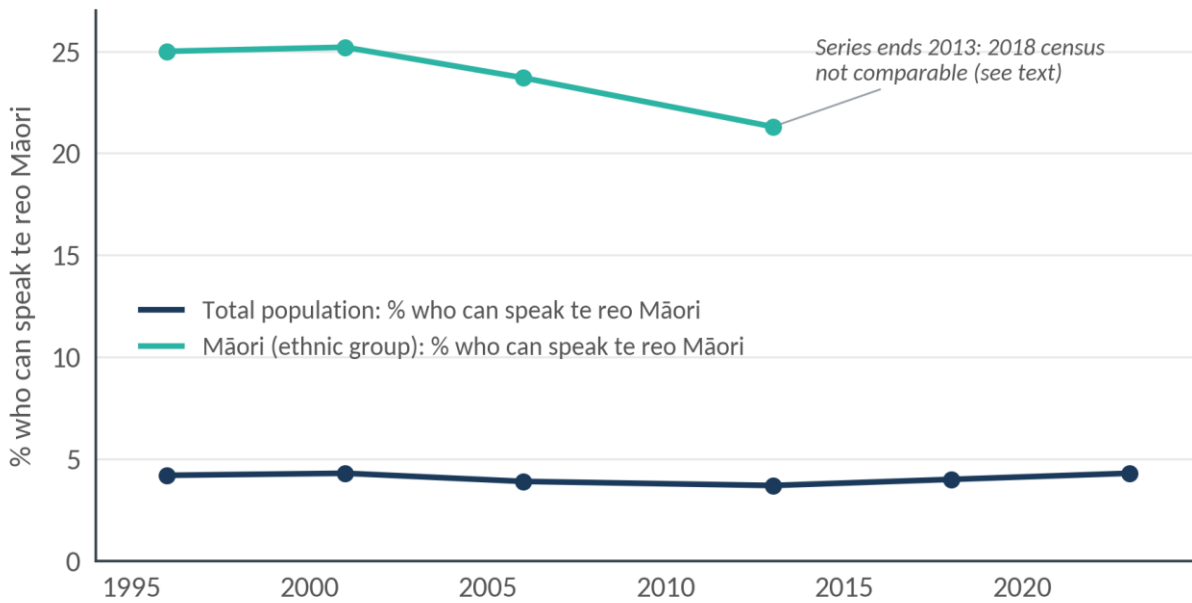
Source: Stats NZ General Social Survey via Volunteering New Zealand; JBWere/Philanthropy New Zealand

Many New Zealanders do voluntary work. In 2023, 53.0% of New Zealanders aged 15 and over had volunteered in the previous four weeks, up from 50.7% in 2021. On a narrower 2019 measure, formal volunteering alone amounted to about 159 million hours a year, worth about \$4 billion.

The way people help is changing. Between 2021 and 2023, volunteering through an organisation fell from 30.2% to 27.6%, while helping people in other households directly rose from 36% to 40.8%. The same shift shows in the non-profit sector: about 1,008,000 people volunteered for one of New Zealand's 115,770 non-profit institutions in 2018, down from about 1,229,000 in 2013. New Zealanders have not stopped helping; they are helping less through committees and clubs, and more across the back fence.

Money follows time. Total philanthropic giving was estimated at \$3.8 billion in 2018, more than half of it from personal donations. The givers seem to get something back too. People who volunteer rate their lives as more worthwhile, 8.1 out of 10 on average against 7.9 for those who do not, though whether helping makes life feel worthwhile or contented people help more is not a question a survey can settle.

## 11.04 Te reo Māori speakers



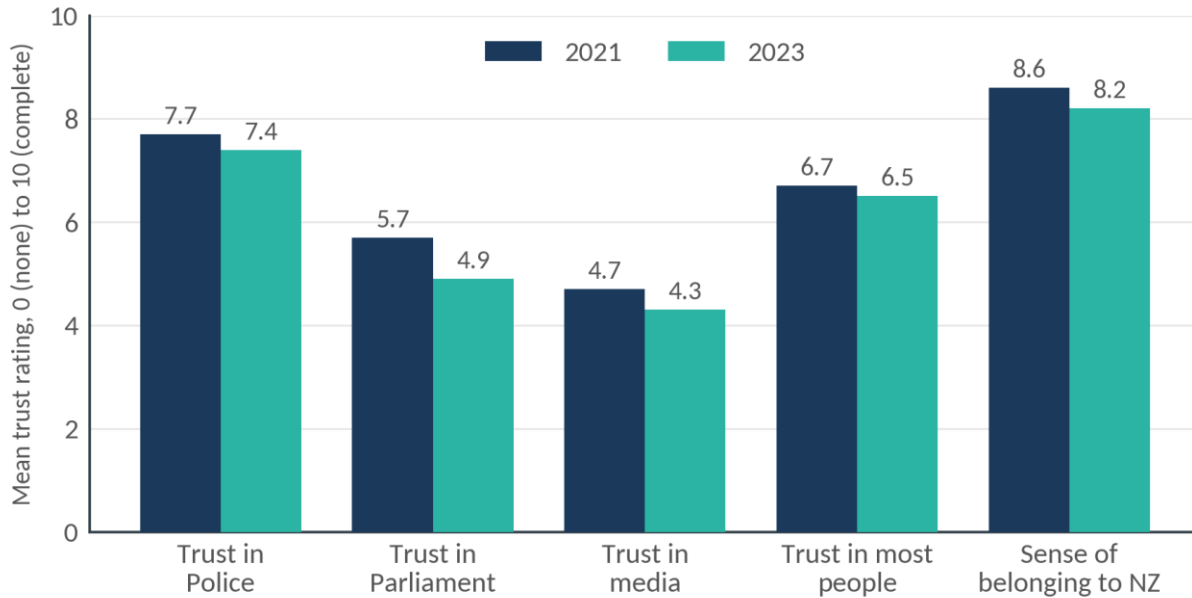
Source: Stats NZ censuses; Ministry of Social Development; Education Counts

Te reo Māori spent the twentieth century in retreat, a decline accelerated by post-war urbanisation as Māori moved into English-speaking towns and cities. The census traces the long tail of that loss. About a quarter of Māori could hold an everyday conversation in te reo in 1996, 25.2% in 2001, 23.7% in 2006 and 21.3% in 2013. In 2013, the language was strongest among the old: 44.2% of Māori aged 75 and over could converse in te reo, against 16.7% of Māori children under 15.

Across the whole population, the tide has turned. In 2013, 148,400 people, or 3.7% of New Zealanders, could converse in te reo. By 2018, the count was 185,955 (4.0%), and by 2023 it had reached 213,849, or 4.3%, a rise of 27,894 people, or 15.0%, in five years. Two cautions apply: the 2018 census suffered data-quality problems from a low Māori response, and a separate Māori-descent measure, which uses a changed counting method, shows the share of Māori speaking te reo essentially flat at 18.4% in 2013 and 18.6% in 2023.

The growth is coming from the classroom. At 1 July 2025, 31.1% of all school students were learning te reo Māori in English-medium settings, up from 30.6% a year earlier, and 362 schools offered Māori-medium education. The next census will show whether classroom learning becomes everyday conversation.

## 11.05 Trust in people and institutions



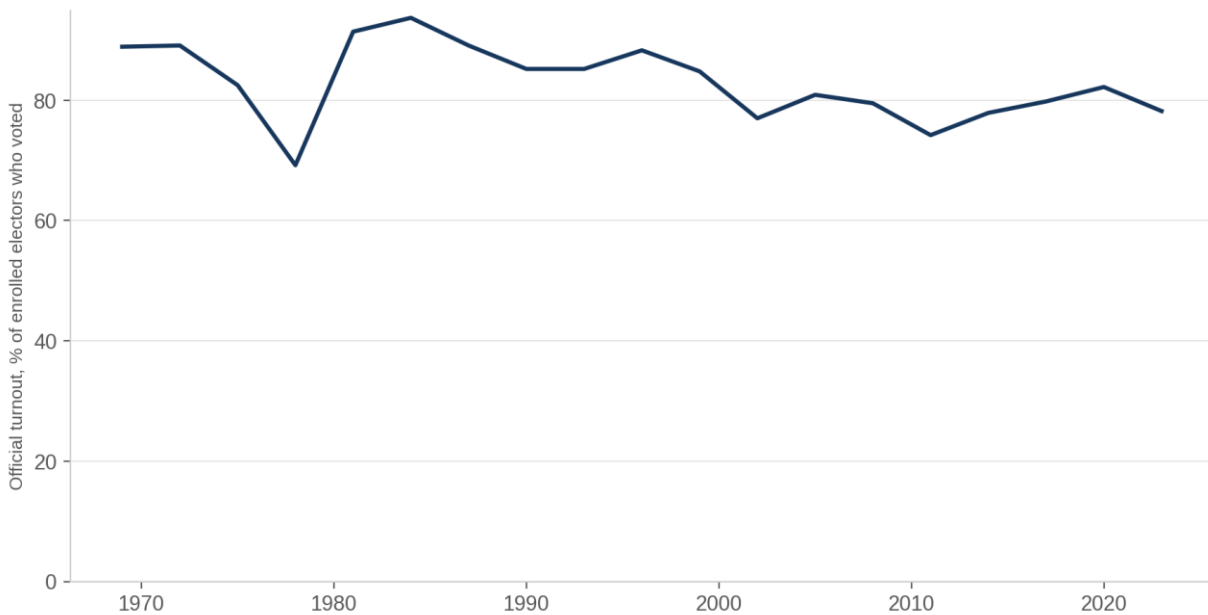
Source: Stats NZ General Social Survey (Wellbeing statistics: 2023)

The General Social Survey asks people to rate their trust in institutions from 0 (no trust) to 10 (complete trust). Between 2021 and 2023, every institution measured lost ground: the health system, education, parliament, the media, the police and the courts. The police remained the most trusted, at 7.4 in 2023, down from 7.7. The media were the least trusted, falling from 4.7 to 4.3. Parliament recorded the biggest drop, from 5.7 to 4.9. The chart shows a selection of these measures, alongside trust in other people and a sense of belonging to New Zealand.

The erosion ran deeper than institutions. Trust in most people in New Zealand slipped from 6.7 to 6.5, and the average sense of belonging to New Zealand fell from 8.6 to 8.2. People felt less safe too. In 2023, only 42% felt safe using or waiting for public transport at night, down from 49% in 2021, and 55% felt safe walking alone in their neighbourhood after dark, down from 59%.

Two survey points are a snapshot, not a slide. The 2023 survey was collected between May 2023 and April 2024, and Stats NZ does not plan to measure wellbeing again until 2026/27, so it will be years before we know whether 2023 was a dip or a turn. Even so, a country built on sound institutions cannot shrug when trust in all of them falls at once.

## 11.06 Voter turnout in general elections



Source: Ministry for Culture and Heritage (NZHistory); Electoral Commission

New Zealanders used to be formidable voters. Turnout of enrolled electors was about 89% in 1969 and 1972, and reached its peak of 93.7% in 1984. The apparent collapse to 69.2% in 1978 is a statistical illusion: the rolls were clogged with outdated and duplicate entries, and adjusted turnout was about 79.9%. The 1981 figure of 91.4% is affected by the same roll problems, and the calculation method changed slightly in 1957 and 1981.

Since 1984, the trend has been down. Turnout fell below 80% on clean rolls for the first time in 2002, at 77.0%, and hit its modern low of 74.2% in 2011. It recovered to 82.2% in 2020, the highest since 1999, before easing to 78.2% in 2023. Set the most recent three elections, between 77 and 82%, against the 89% of the early 1970s, and the decline comes to roughly ten percentage points over fifty years.

Enrolment is not the weak link. In 2023, 94.7% of estimated eligible voters were enrolled and 2,883,412 votes were cast. The gap opens at the ballot box, and it opens unevenly. Only 69.1% of enrolled 25 to 29 year olds voted in 2023, compared with 85.3% of those aged 65 to 69, and turnout in the Māori electorates was 68%. The habit of voting, like the trust it rests on, is strongest among those who formed it long ago.

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