

Study suggests NZ children's family lives often complex and fluid

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Credit: University of Otago

Conventional notions of family life that underpin New Zealand's social policies do not match the reality of many young New Zealanders' lives, new University of Otago research suggests.

Otago researchers took life histories of 209 15-year-olds who are children of members of the internationally-renowned Dunedin Study and found that many had complex and dynamic whānau/family arrangements.

The findings by the Next Generation Study researchers are published in *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences*.

Dr Judith Sligo says that they found that few of the teenagers had a consistent pattern of parental care arrangements and most had experienced multiple changes in household composition.

"For example, only 54 (26 per cent) of the participants were living with both of their biological parents at age 15, and just 14 had lived their whole lives in households made up of only their mother, father and siblings," Dr Sligo says.

Overall the participants experienced up to eight changes in care arrangements over their 15 years, she says. They also had lived at an average of eight different addresses.

The researchers found that while 63 per cent of the children were being cared for by two parents at birth, by age 15, 59 per cent were either in sole parent or some form of multiple-resident care, such as shared arrangements between parents in different households.

Only 55 (26 per cent) of participants had the same parental care arrangement for all their lives: 42 of these were from two-parent households and 12 lived with a sole parent.

Dr Sligo says that the extent of complexity and change in [family life](#) revealed by this research is at odds with the simpler and more static view of household and care arrangements that underpins policy-making relating to [young people](#). Currently, researchers and policy makers use measures which have not been able to capture this diversity and fluidity.

"This means that the policies and support intended for children, young people and their families/whānau may not match the realities of their lives."

One example is "Working for Families", which requires applicants to be

the principal child carer and to notify Work and Income New Zealand whenever they have a change in circumstances, she says.

"Our findings suggest that this is unrealistic and likely to cause many children to be excluded from this policy."

The research indicates that New Zealand [social policies](#) should be developed and delivered with the child at the centre, acknowledging cultural context and the dynamic nature of [children](#) and young people's living and care arrangements.

Provided by University of Otago

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