

# Oranga Tamariki baby removals "racialised, regionalised, antenatal and coercive"

August 28 2019

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Newly analyzed figures from Oranga Tamariki show the number of babies being taken from their parents are overwhelmingly Māori, hail mostly from four distinct North Island regions, and are more frequently

than ever removed by legal order before birth.

Dr. Emily Keddell, of the University of Otago Social and Community Work Programme, has analyzed data, dating from 2008 to 2018, released under the Official Information Act and voluntarily by the Ministry.

As a result of her analysis, Dr. Keddell recommends an urgent examination of the provision of non-state preventive services in these four regions.

The figures, of state-ordered removals of children, paint a grim picture.

From 2015 to 2018 there was a 33 percent increase in babies removed from families within three months of birth. This wasn't related to an increase in births, but purely an increase in the rate of Māori babies entering state care.

"The Māori rate increased from 67 to 103 babies per 10,000, but the non-Māori rate was stable at 23 to 24 babies per 10,000 for the same period.

"Disturbingly, dissecting by region shows that the entire increase from 2009 to 2018 is accounted for by four regions: Tai Tokerau (Northland), Wellington, East Coast and Waikato," Dr. Keddell says.

These four regions have increased from 111 to 175 babies removed, while the other eight regions in New Zealand have reduced from 315 to 265.

There has also been a 320 percent increase in orders made for unborn children, compared to babies aged 30 days to one year old—from 34 in 2008/9 to 112 in 2017/18.

The level of mandated removals also increased with legally enforced removals now the norm.

Removal by Section 78 order or "urgency" more than doubled, from 158 in 2008/9, to 380 in 2017/18, while babies entering care by arrangement or agreement declined from 168 to just 60.

"Overall, these patterns show that the increase in babies entering care is entirely accounted for by an increase in removals of Māori babies in four regions. A much greater proportion are removed by legal order as opposed to by agreement, and they are unborn rather than older babies.

"In short, the increase in baby removals is racialized, regionalized, antenatal and coercive."

Dr. Keddell believes there are multiple drivers behind these changes.

"The focus on early intervention in the 2015 reforms appears to be playing out in practice in a manner that emphasizes early removal rather than the imagined provision of supportive services outside the statutory system.

"Without the channeling of resources into supports and social protections needed for families, the '[early intervention](#)' idea was bound to result in more, not fewer baby removals," she says.

What is less clear is why there are regional differences.

"Are there more external stress factors such as poverty, poor housing and lack of access to services in those regions? Previous research has shown that children in the most deprived decile of neighborhoods have 9.4 times the chance of removal than those in the least deprived."

The ever-expanding definitions of child abuse (such as emotional abuse, harm to well-being and exposure to intimate partner violence—all included in the new Oranga Tamariki Act amendments) could also be shaping underpinning logics.

"While useful to understand harm to children more generally, these definitions can lead to a wider set of family circumstances caught in the headlights of the statutory child protection remit.

"Without also changing the nature of the response to those definitions—by funding services able to address the causes of those issues, for example—the effect can be removal simply because there is no other intervention option available.

"If you are a hammer, every problem is a nail."

Media and public scrutiny also results in risk of organizational critique getting conflated with actual risk to the child. This can lead to more use of removal and compulsion within families, rather than working with families in the collaborative and participatory ways that might lead to avoiding removal.

"It's not always possible. There really are situations where [babies](#) need to be removed. But when the practice of doing so has seen such a significant increase in rates, when that increase reinforces rather than reduces inequalities, when they are only in some regions and not others, when the removals are with less agreement and have such immense ramifications for the usual rights of families, then questions must be asked as to why.

"If I was a manager in Oranga Tamariki, I would be visiting those four regions quick smart, and examining both practice risk logics and the provision of preventive services outside of the statutory system."

Provided by University of Otago

Citation: Oranga Tamariki baby removals "racialised, regionalised, antenatal and coercive" (2019, August 28) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-08-oranga-tamariki-baby-racialised-regionalised.html>

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