



Sir Collin Tukuitonga,
Roannie Ng Shiu,
Patrick Thomsen

UNDERSTANDING PACIFIC
PEOPLES HEALTH AND
WELLBEING CHALLENGES
IN AOTEAROA NEW
ZEALAND

Pacific Islander Studies

Collection Editors

MOEATA KEIL

PATRICK THOMSEN

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Sir Collin Tukuitonga,
Li'amanaia Roannie Ng Shiu and
Malaeulu Seuta'afili Patrick Thomsen (Eds)

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In loving memory of Tunumafono Fa'amoetaulua Avaula Colenso Fa'amoe MNZM (1972–2025). A giant in the disability community: Pacific leader and advocate who will always be remembered for a lifetime of courage, compassion and change making.

la manuia lava lau malaga.

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Foreword

Pacific peoples have some of the worst health statistics in Aotearoa-New Zealand and despite several dedicated government policies and strategies over the years, they continue to show poor health outcomes. Ethnic inequities are pervasive and persistent with no sign of improvement largely as a result of the broader determinants of health. Risk factors such as obesity, unhealthy diets, and smoking disproportionately affect Pacific people. Adverse socioeconomic circumstances such as low income and cold, damp, and over-crowded houses are responsible for much of the health inequities seen in the country (Ministry of Health, 2020). High and rising prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes and heart disease reflect the impact of the commercial determinants of health on Pacific people. Undue consumption of highly processed foods and sugar-sweetened beverages is a major factor driving NCDs in Pacific people (Parnell et al., 2011). Prevention and control of NCDs including reducing the prevalence of childhood obesity is a key priority for Pacific people (Ministry of Health, 2020). It is not simply a matter of individuals making better choices but governments, civil society organisations, and the private sector making a collective effort to address the socioeconomic and commercial determinants of health in Aotearoa-New Zealand.

We have highlighted a number of critical issues affecting Pacific people in Aotearoa-New Zealand in this the first reference publication addressing the health of Pacific peoples in the country. These

include a focus on children and young people, mental health and wellbeing, disabled people, and particular health concerns of Pacific Rainbow+ communities. The hope is that researchers and students of Pacific health will contribute to the generation of knowledge about various communities that make up the broader Pacific population group in Aotearoa-New Zealand.

A significant proportion of Pacific children and young people grow up in challenging social and economic environments. There is some evidence that longer term poverty has a more severe negative effect on children's outcomes than shorter term experiences of poverty. Childhood poverty negatively influences adult employment, education, income, health, and cognitive outcomes (Ministry of Social Development, 2018). The Pacific Islands Families (PIF) study has provided detailed health and development information on Pacific children in Aotearoa-New Zealand. It is an important source of information about Pacific children and young people. The study is embarking on information collection from the birth cohort as they approach 22 years. Additional information about Pacific children and young people can be obtained from the Growing Up in New Zealand (GUiNZ) Study (Growing Up in New Zealand, 2023). Further reducing the number of Pacific children living in poverty is an urgent priority for Aotearoa-New Zealand.

Increasing awareness of the importance of mental health and wellbeing is an important part of health improvement in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Additional updated information on the specific mental health needs of Pacific peoples is needed especially in relation to access and use of mental health services. Furthermore, there is an urgent need for better services for

people with disabilities, addictions, and those of the Rainbow+ communities.

Improving the health and wellbeing of Pacific peoples is an urgent public policy for Aotearoa-New Zealand. A continuation of the same strategies and health plans will not deliver better health outcomes. Opportunities exist in the health reforms and the Pae Ora Legislation but plans need to be adequately resourced. Information in this reference text will help Pacific researchers and communities to monitor and report on the progress being made.

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Setting the scene: Pacific health research in Aotearoa- New Zealand

Sir Collin Tukuitonga; Roannie Ng Shiu

Chapter summary

This chapter presents a historical and contemporary analysis of the dynamics of Pacific peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand in relation to its significance to health research. Tracing Pacific peoples' journey from early migrations to Aotearoa New Zealand, and the systemic inequalities which has created health disparities for Pacific peoples, this chapter draws attention to the significant socioeconomic challenges that have created adverse effects on health and wellbeing for our communities. The chapter emphasises the importance of addressing these issues through a public health lens, focusing on social determinants of health. It highlights the resilience of Pacific communities, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, and underscores the necessity of

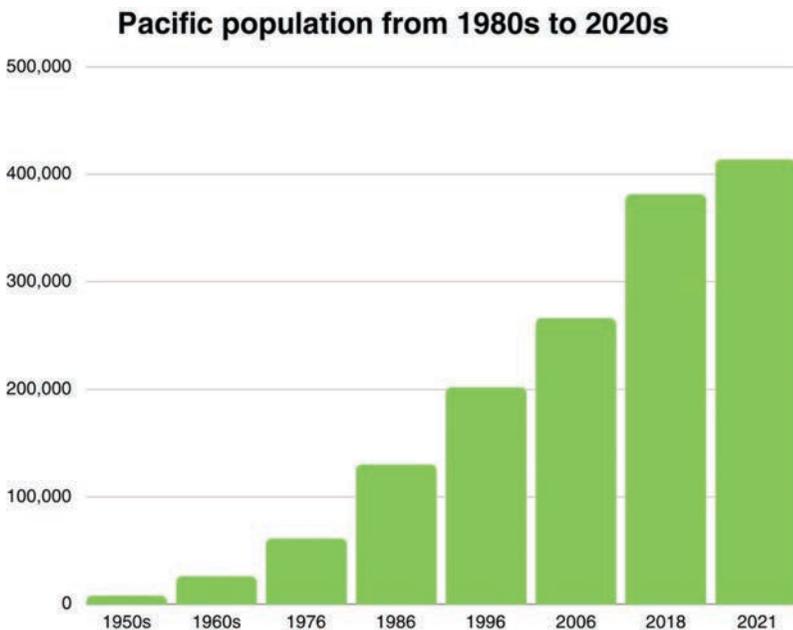
culturally competent healthcare solutions. By exploring population and health trends among Pacific peoples, the chapter aims to provide an understanding of the multifaceted issues affecting our communities and calls for targeted action to remedy historical injustices while promoting health equity in New Zealand, which is why this book matters for Pacific peoples and Aotearoa New Zealand today.

Introduction

Aotearoa New Zealand has had strong historic links with the Pacific region since at least 1901 when the Cook Islands and Niue became colonial territories of New Zealand. Tokelau later joined the New Zealand realm in 1925 which enabled Tokelauans citizenship and rights of residence like Cook Islanders and Niueans. After the Second World War, there was rapid growth in the Pacific population in Aotearoa. This growth and movement of Pacific migrants to New Zealand was welcomed and encouraged by the New Zealand government given the post-war labour shortages. Initial labour programmes were focussed on bringing young Pacific men to work as agricultural and forest workers while young Pacific women were employed as domestic workers. New Zealand experienced a manufacturing boom in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This boom coupled with a labour shortage led to another wave of migration from the Pacific.

However, New Zealand soon faced an economic downturn with increasing unemployment and Pacific people were no longer welcomed. A new, tumultuous relationship between Pacific people and New Zealand began, highlighted by the Dawn Raids of 1974–1976. The New Zealand police were given powers and

rights to enter people's homes and to stop and ask anyone on the street for documents to prove they were in New Zealand legally in order to identify those who had overstayed their visa permit. The irony of this directive is that Pacific people were exclusively targeted despite the majority of overstayers coming from Europe or North America. As part of this new government directive, New Zealand police raided homes with known Pacific families at dawn for searches giving rise to the term Dawn Raids. Since the Dawn Raids and what has been described by Dr Melani Anae (2020) as 'the most blatantly racist attack on Pacific peoples by the New Zealand government in New Zealand's history,' this history of racial discrimination has had permeating effects on the health and wellbeing of Pacific people in Aotearoa.



Today, Pacific people in Aotearoa New Zealand, represent a diverse and vibrant population group of about 17 well-established Pacific

ethnicities that contribute to the country's social and multicultural fabric. The impact that Pacific people have had on Auckland culturally, economically, and socially has meant that Auckland is often described as the world's largest Polynesian city. While Pacific people have made positive contributions to Aotearoa New Zealand, persistent inequalities and the lack of investment in the health and wellbeing of Pacific families have had a range of impacts. Addressing health inequalities in Pacific communities and understanding the issues that impact on the health and wellbeing of Pacific families is important for the future of the country.

Taking a public health view and social determinants of health (SDH) approach to addressing Pacific health issues allow us to better understand, and nuance, the determinants that impact on the health and wellbeing of Pacific peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand. SDH are the non-medical factors that influence health outcomes which describe the conditions in 'which people are born, grow, work, live and age and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life' (Solar & Irwin, 2010). Addressing health inequities in Pacific communities contributes to a more just and equitable society.

Focusing on SDH and framing health as a social phenomenon enables us to think critically about what is needed to create a more equitable social environment for Pacific communities. Realising health equity, that is, the absence of unfair and avoidable or remediable differences in health among social groups requires significant resourcing to address historic health disparities and inequities for Pacific communities in New Zealand who have experienced higher rates of long-term illnesses and infectious diseases and lower life expectancies. Addressing these

inequities is crucial to achieving health outcomes that are fair and just for all populations in Aotearoa-New Zealand.

In August 2021 when this anthology of Pacific health in Aotearoa New Zealand was initially proposed, Aotearoa New Zealand and Auckland specifically went through significant COVID-19 lockdowns. Many of the authors and contributors to this edition were at the forefront of New Zealand's pandemic response. Pacific communities were disproportionately affected by the pandemic as several COVID-19 outbreaks occurred in Pacific communities. The silver lining of the COVID-19 outbreaks and the subsequent vaccination drives demonstrated the resilience of Pacific communities and the effectiveness of Pacific leadership in addressing Pacific health problems. The challenge now remains on how the learnings from the pandemic and Pacific leadership in Pacific health issues continues to help address current health challenges.

Population trends and patterns

The Pacific population represents 9% of the total population (an estimated 459,200) (Stats NZ, 2023). The seven largest Pacific groups in Aotearoa are Samoan, Tongan, Cook Island, Niuean, Fijian, Tokelauan, and Tuvaluan (Stats NZ, 2023). As a well-established ethnic group more than 60% of the population was born in Aotearoa New Zealand and of those born overseas, more than 60% have lived in Aotearoa for more than 10 years (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2021). Pacific populations continue to have relatively high birth rates which contributes to strong population growth and relatively high net migration which tends to be associated with younger age groups leading to a projected

population growth of 1.9% over the next 10 years. These trends contrast with Europeans who are ageing faster and growing slower compared to other ethnic groups (Brundson, 2023).



The majority of Pacific communities live in Auckland; the number of Pacific people living in rural areas is likely to increase from its current state of 7.2%.



Almost half of the Pacific population identify as Samoan (49%) with the number of Pacific people identifying with more than one ethnic group increasing as 50% of Pacific children aged 0–14 years identify with more than one ethnic group. A key contemporary demographic feature of Aotearoa New Zealand is the number of people who identify as both Māori and Pacific, currently at 58,000, 50% of whom are younger than 15 years old (Ministry of Health, 2023).

The Pacific population has a much younger age structure than the country's total population. Approximately 33% of Pacific peoples in Aotearoa are younger than 15 years old and 50% are younger than 25 years old. In an ageing population, the Pacific working-age population is projected to increase from almost 300,000 in 2023 to 420,000 by 2043, which is an important demographic feature for Aotearoa-New Zealand as a whole (Stats NZ, 2023).

These trends point towards a growing, youthful, and ethnically diverse population. While the majority of Pacific people will continue to reside in urban cities, there will be an increase of Pacific people living in rural areas who also identify as Māori. This will have important implications for the future health and wellbeing of Aotearoa New Zealand, as a whole. Unaddressed health issues within the Pacific population can have economic consequences, including increased healthcare costs and lost productivity. Therefore, investing in the health of Pacific children and young people today is an investment in the future health and wellbeing of New Zealand.

Socioeconomic trends

A key feature of SDH is understanding the social and economic conditions in which people live in. These include income and

social protection, education and literacy, unemployment and job insecurity, working life conditions, and food security. The following table provides an overview of key socioeconomic indicators compared to Europeans.

	PACIFIC PEOPLES	EUROPEANS
Median personal annual income	\$24,300	\$34,500
Unemployment rate (June 2022)	5.4%	2.9%
School leaver with NCEA 2 or above	76.2%	81.1%
Individual home ownership	21%	58%
Severe housing deprivation (per 10,000)	245.5	41.2
Dwellings lack basic amenities (disabled)	17.3%	5.6%
Dwellings lack basic amenities (not disabled)	9.7%	3.1%
% children living in material hardship	25.6%	7.6%

These comparisons demonstrate the social and economic gaps between Pacific communities and their European counterparts. To put into context what some of these comparisons mean in real terms, we can look to current figures on gender and ethnic pay gaps where the biggest pay gap in Aotearoa New Zealand is between European men and Pacific women at 25%. At this

rate it will take about 110 years respectively to reach pay equity (Human Rights Commission, 2021).

The median personal annual income reflects the over-representation of Pacific people in low skilled occupations (53%) such as labour hire and packing type activities compared to 22% in highly-skilled occupations. Education achievement can provide some explanation. In 2021, Pacific achievement in school with NCEA 2 or above at 76% is comparable to 79% for all ethnicities. The gains made at school, however, have yet to be translated into tertiary education with 23% of Pacific people holding a Level 4 or higher qualification compared to 35% for the overall population (Brundson, 2023).

Pacific cultures often emphasise the importance of family and community and this is reflected in Pacific peoples preferred way of living. Pacific families are more likely to live in rented, large intergenerational homes. Intergenerational homes and large households can enable Pacific language retention and promote general family wellbeing. However, these homes are often insufficient in size, have poor insulation and are more likely to have issues with mould leading to overall poorer physical and mental health for Pacific families (Stats NZ, 2023). Affordable, safe, and warm housing is important for health and wellbeing. Recognising and integrating multigenerational and collective ways of living is also an important consideration for healthcare policy and practice that can positively impact the overall health and wellbeing of Pacific families and communities.

Home ownership is an important factor in securing intergenerational wealth, financial stability, and economic mobility. Pacific peoples experienced a net and percentage decrease in home

ownership since the 1980s, where in 1986 half of Pacific peoples lived in owner-occupied dwellings, which fell to just over one-third in 2018 (Stats NZ, 2023). The fact that Pacific peoples are less likely to own their homes today than their parents and grandparents' generations, speaks to further challenges in realising optimal health outcomes for Pacific communities that are tied to structural issues in wider society. In fact, Pacific peoples experience severe housing deprivation at greater rate than the total population. With homelessness prevalence at 578 per 10,000 people compared with 217 people per 10,000 people for the total population (Stats NZ, 2023).

Health trends

Pacific peoples together with Māori have the poorest health outcomes in Aotearoa New Zealand. Information on health outcome trends for Pacific peoples is limited and available projections may be unreliable due to quality of underlying data. Research has shown that there are substantial health disparities for Pacific peoples leading to a gap in life expectancy at birth between Pacific men (75.4 years) and women (79 years) compared to European men (81 years) and women (84.5 years). This gap is largely explained by premature deaths that could have been prevented with early health interventions, improved socioeconomic conditions, and better access to medicine and health care.

