

# CHILD POVERTY

“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

Micah 6:8

**New Zealand used to be known as a** great place to raise children. Most parents could earn enough to support their families, homes were affordable and people had a chance to get ahead and improve their standard of living. Now, however, an increasing number of children lack the opportunities that others consider their birthright because their families have insufficient income or resources to provide them. In other words, they are experiencing poverty.

*What is happening in New Zealand?*

**With no agreed definition of poverty,** it's hard to pinpoint the exact number of Kiwi children living in poverty, but the number could be as high as 305,000, depending on the factors taken into account. There is also disagreement about what has been happening over time, but regardless of the measure used, child poverty is much worse now than in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup>

Whatever the exact numbers, it's clear that children are experiencing poverty in New Zealand. For them, it means going without or making do, perhaps forgoing basics such as warm clothes and sturdy shoes. They might go to school barefoot and hungry; extras like school camps or sports activities are out of the question. These kids commonly live in overcrowded houses or cold, damp homes, but when they get sick, their parents can't afford to take them to the doctor or buy medicine. Other families struggle to pay the mortgage, even on two incomes.

Children rely on the adults in their life for physical resources – food, shelter, and clothing – as well as emotional wellbeing. Going without can have a devastating effect on all aspects of children's growth and development, and contributes to a range of negative health, education, employment and social outcomes. That's why this section is about child poverty – because what affects parents also affects their families. Children are our present as well as our future and the conditions in which they grow up impact the health of our country as a whole.

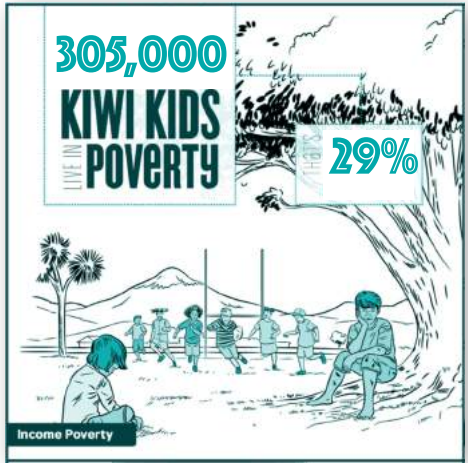
# What is child poverty?

**New Zealand has no consistent definition** or measurement for child poverty, although in recent years, two types of measures have been used – income and material hardship.

Income poverty views a person's economic status in the context of everyone else's. Income poverty generally describes those living on less than 60 percent of the median household income, after adjusting for housing costs. By this measure, as many as 305,000 Kiwi kids, or nearly one third (29 percent) of the nation's children are living in poverty, almost twice as many as in the early 1980s.<sup>7</sup>

Material hardship looks at a list of things that people should be able to enjoy as an acceptable standard of living, such as:

- adequate nutritious food
- hot running water and heating
- suitable clothes and shoes
- a warm, dry house
- dental and medical care as required
- social engagement that involves financial cost (e.g. belonging to a sports team)
- financial resources to cope with unexpected essential expenses.



By this definition, 14 percent or 148,000 children are going without at least some of the things they need to thrive. An estimated 9 percent of New Zealand children are living at the hardest end of poverty, experiencing both material hardship and low family incomes. These children are not only going without the things they need; their families also lack the resources to change their living situation. More than half of the children living in poverty are likely to live this way for many years.<sup>8</sup>

“Child poverty can be simply defined as those children who have insufficient income or material resources to enable them to thrive. Consequently, they are unable to enjoy their rights, achieve their full potential and participate as equal members of New Zealand society, now and into the future.”

JONATHAN BOSTON AND SIMON CHAPPLE,  
CHILD POVERTY IN NEW ZEALAND



## *How did it get like this?*

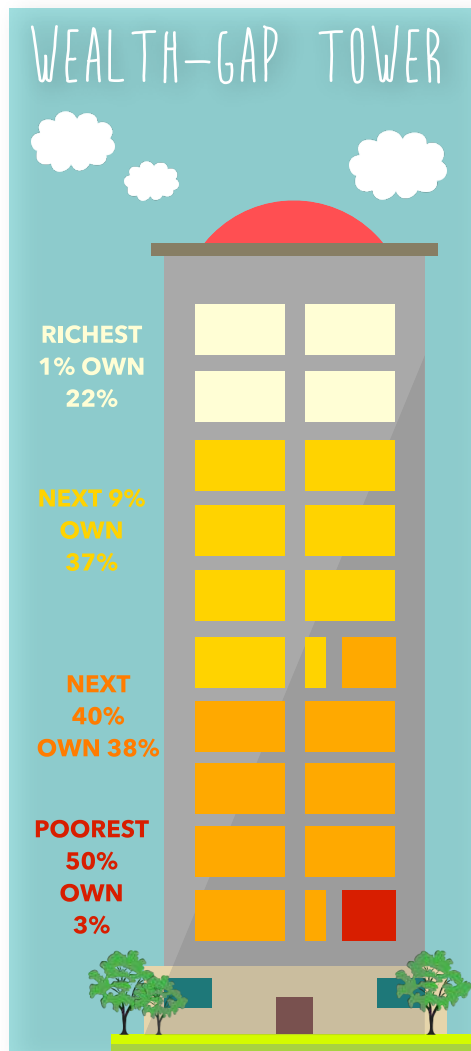
**The gap between the rich and the poor has** been growing wider ever since the mid-1980s, when political reforms cut taxes to higher income earners, reduced the value of welfare benefits and made it harder for the lowest-paid workers to win pay increases.<sup>9</sup> Further changes to the tax-benefit system and housing policies in the early 1990s contributed to a sharp rise in child poverty rates (by some measures).<sup>10</sup>

The OECD's 2015 Economic Survey showed that New Zealand's economy has grown faster than in most other developed countries in recent years but income poverty and inequality remain at the very high level they reached following the reforms of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>11</sup> The outcomes for children are particularly poor.<sup>12</sup>

The top incomes have doubled since the mid-1980s. In that time incomes for the poorest New Zealanders have increased only very slightly (about 15%). Someone in the top 10 percent used to earn five times as much as someone in the bottom 10 percent; now they earn eight times as much.<sup>13</sup>

Wealth – meaning accumulated assets, rather than annual income – is even more unevenly distributed. The top 1 percent of adults now holds seven times as much of the country's wealth as the poorest 50 percent.<sup>14</sup>

What does this mean for those at the bottom with low income and few or no assets?



*“The test of the morality of a society is what it does for its children.”*

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER



“There is hunger for ordinary bread, and there is hunger for love, for kindness, for thoughtfulness, and this is the great poverty that makes people suffer so much.”

MOTHER TERESA

*Making ends meet*

**A weekly budget for a single mother  
with two children**

**Income**

Pay (after tax)	510
Tax credit & housing supplement	339
	<b>\$849</b>

**Expenses**

Food & groceries	180
Rent	400
School, sports costs	30
Clothes/shoes/uniforms	18
Power, phone, water	85
Medical	8
Car	77
Insurances	34
Savings (birthdays, Christmas)	15
	<b>\$847</b>

**For extras or emergencies                      \$2**

Budget prepared for a typical family by Maureen Little,  
Service Manager Budgeting Service, Presbyterian Support Northern.

## *A complex picture*

**Poverty is much more complicated** than looking at how much income a family has, or the material things they are doing without. Families fall into poverty for different reasons, and may stay impoverished for a short time or for many years. A sudden crisis, such as the death of the income provider, loss of a job, or even the birth of another baby can tip a family below the poverty line.

Some factors add to the risk of living in poverty, such as unemployment, welfare dependency, health, educational levels and ethnicity. Pacific and Māori children are more likely to live in poverty than European children, while 61 percent of children whose family's income is a benefit experience material hardship.<sup>15</sup> Children with one parent are also more likely to be living in poverty than those with two parents at home.<sup>16</sup>

The presence of any one risk factor does not necessarily mean a life-sentence of poverty. More usually, a combination of factors, accumulating over time, contributes to where a child will be on the spectrum of poverty.

### **Even ordinary life events can tip a family into poverty:**

- Accident or illness
- School fees and uniform costs
- Car breaks down
- Landlord raises rent
- Funeral for a relative
- Needing clothes for work

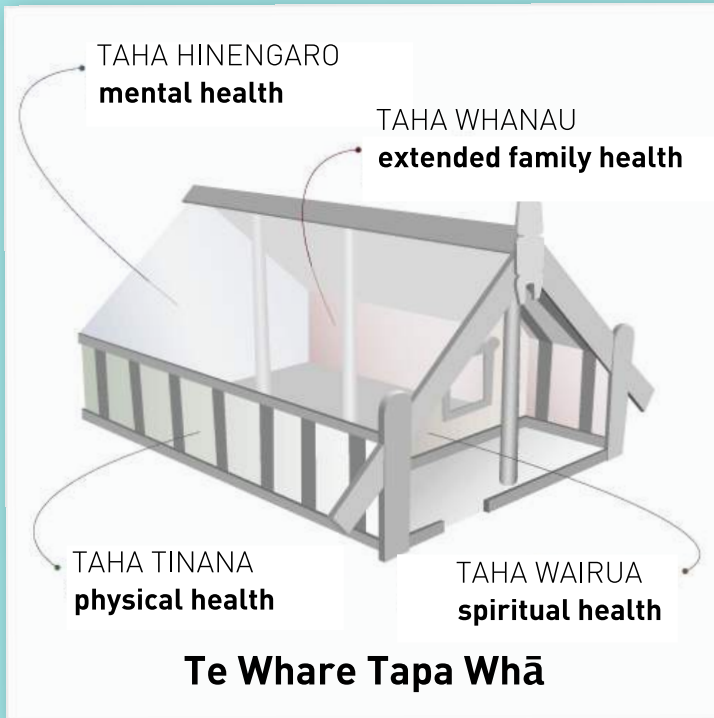
Child poverty is often attributed to poor parenting or selfish choices by adults to spend money on gambling, alcohol, or cigarettes instead of bread and shoes for the children. While it's true that some parents make unwise decisions, many poor families are striving against the odds to provide the best they possibly can for their children. Some of the common assumptions about poverty are based on stereotypes which merely serve to marginalise people further.<sup>18</sup>

"I didn't have anything there to feed the children and I felt so ashamed that I couldn't do that. I'm their mother and I've always taken that responsibility very highly and I love them and care for them very much. Having to choose whether to pay to keep the power on or feed the children – those sorts of decisions are just inhumane."

WOMAN AT A FOODBANK, ON BEING OFFERED A FOOD PARCEL FOR THE FIRST TIME.

# Wellbeing

**Another way of looking at poverty is to turn it around and consider it from the angle of wellbeing. What does a person need in order to be considered prosperous rather than impoverished?**



The Maori concept of Te Whare Tapa Whā compares a person's health and wellbeing to the four walls of a house (whare). All four aspects need to be attended to for the health of the whole person.

- Taha tinana – physical health
- Taha hinengaro – mental health
- Taha whanāu – extended family health
- Taha wairua – spiritual health

This model implies that poverty is not just about lack of income or material assets. Education, supportive family relationships, and a sense of hope and purpose are all important if people, and especially children, are to truly flourish.

As one of the participants in a Poverty Action Waikato study said, “The gap in material wealth is getting bigger and with this, the gap between Māori and Pākehā. However, Māori have whakawhanaungatanga (relationships). We are more connected with the people around us... We are rich in culture. It comes back to values, and what you value. Who is measuring the inequality?”<sup>20</sup>

## *The impact of child poverty*

### **Children do not choose to live in**

poverty. The reality for these young Kiwis is that they go without those things that most of us take for granted, such as their own bed, warm clothes and enough food.

They may miss out on schooling and find it hard to feel they belong in any community because their family moves around a lot in search of affordable housing. As these children grow to adulthood, their poor start in life may have lasting consequences. Lack of education may mean not getting a good job. Poor nutrition and sickness in their growing years might lead to chronic health conditions later on. Limited opportunities for meaningful work may lead to a life of crime.<sup>21</sup>

The cost of living in poverty for individual children is substantial and enduring, but there is also a cost to the country as a whole. Health expenses, lower productivity, and the burden on the welfare and justice systems can add up to billions of dollars, as much as \$470 to \$1890 per citizen, per year.<sup>22</sup>



# Why does poverty matter?

**As the gap widens between “the haves” and the “have-nots”, it’s all too easy to ignore not just the problem of poverty, but the people who are poor.<sup>23</sup>**

But inequality affects us all by creating more social problems and making us less healthy as a society.<sup>24</sup> This increases the pressure on social services, education, health and the criminal justice system as the cost of picking up the pieces rises.



Inequality contributes to a range of poor outcomes for children, families and communities:

- More children suffer preventable diseases such as rheumatic fever, skin complaints and respiratory infections
- Mental health problems increase, such as depression and anxiety, along with aggression and addictive or self-destructive behaviours
- There are higher rates of imprisonment, teen pregnancies and obesity
- People care less – empathy declines as trust between different social groups weakens.<sup>25</sup>



“Take care of our children.  
Take care of what they hear,  
take care of what they see, take  
care of what they feel. For how  
the children grow, so will be the  
shape of Aotearoa.”

DAME WHINA COOPER

## *What can we do?*

**It's easy to feel overwhelmed by the complexity of child poverty, but as** followers of Jesus and members of the Christian community, we do have resources that enable us to address it together.

It may be helpful to think of different levels of involvement – from what we can do as individuals through to how our churches, other community agencies or the Government can help relieve child poverty. We can also think about how our attitudes and values as a society need to change.

## *What can I do?*

**It's hard to feel empathy for children living in poverty if we don't 'see' them in** our daily lives. Loving others may require us to go out of our way to meet people where they are and to make an effort to understand the lives of those whose reality is unlike our own. Even small acts of kindness can make a difference.

### SOME SUGGESTIONS:

- **Lead by example** - raise awareness of child poverty issues within your congregation
- **Volunteer** at your local food bank, school or budgeting service
- Be a good **neighbour** – get to know others and share your resources with them
- **Pay** for a child's school uniform or camp fee
- Offer an interest-free **loan** to help a family cover bond and letting fees
- **Write** to your local council asking them to pay a living wage to their workers
- If your child attends a high-decile school, see if the school would like to **partner** with a low-decile school
- If you're a **landlord**, make sure your properties are insulated, heated and well-maintained
- **Buy** extra items with your groceries and drop them at your local foodbank
- Having a clean out? **Donate** useable household items or clothes to an organisation that can distribute them to underprivileged families
- See if your company produces anything that could be helpful for **families** in need and talk to your boss about donating.

## *What can our church do?*



**Your local church is a community that models the kingdom and family of God.**

Together, you have resources that can be used to bless others and help build a community that cares.

### SOME SUGGESTIONS:

- **Get to know** your local community of children and families and what their needs are
- Find out how you can **support a local low-decile school** with a breakfast club, garden project, or whatever else they need
- **Offer** free budgeting, job skills or parenting courses
- Contribute to a **community garden** or start your own, using the produce for a foodbank or cooking classes
- **Host** community meals
- People in business could **provide training or work** for the unemployed
- Start a **food co-operative**
- Offer to **match people** with gardening, handyman or building skills with families in need
- **Work together** with other churches and agencies in your area, sharing people and resources



## *What can the Government do?*

**Changes to government policies and legislation on tax, welfare, employment, housing and investment in the last 30 years are among the factors that have contributed to the widening gap between rich and poor.** Political solutions to child poverty depend, in part, on how poverty is defined and which factors are considered to be the major contributors to it. There are also philosophical differences over who is ultimately responsible for children's care and wellbeing – families, communities or the state.<sup>24</sup> Helpful government measures to relieve child poverty could include: lifting wages, raising welfare benefits, tax reform, housing initiatives, incentives or training programmes to get people into work. Other targeted measures have been suggested to “help poor families function better” through, for example, family budgeting or relationship services.<sup>25</sup>

But how can we, as individuals or groups, be more involved in the political process? What can we do to influence the Government's priorities?

## SOME SUGGESTIONS:

- Learn more about **what causes inequality** and how to reduce it through the resources listed at the end of this booklet
- **Write to politicians** about what actions you think should be Government priorities
- **Use your vote** – think about policies that address inequality when deciding how to vote
- **Support** your local community board and councillors
- Get behind local government **initiatives** that create healthier communities.

*How do we think about child poverty?*

**We all have assumptions and perspectives (often unconscious) that shape the way we view and treat others.** Our consumer culture encourages us to rank people according to how much money they make or possessions they own. As dependents with no purchasing or producing power of their own, children are sometimes overlooked or treated as a burden on society. Jesus Christ's followers are called to welcome children and speak up on their behalf.

Some questions to ponder:

- What does it mean to offer others the “abundant life” we are promised in Jesus? (John 10:10)
- Does our church welcome everybody, regardless of their financial or social status?
- What “riches” in terms of skills and talents do we have in our church and how can we use them wisely for the good of others?

“Overcoming poverty is not a task of charity, it is an act of justice. Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings.”

NELSON MANDELA






## A STORY OF TRANSFORMATION:

### *Feeding the hungry*


St Andrew's by the Sea, Whitianga, added a weekly meal to its community ministries in 2013. The Monday meal came about after a homeless man had the courage to speak up about his needs.



**The church  
listens to a need  
in the community**



Two years later, the ripple effects continue to spread. The homeless man is no longer homeless, some who receive the meal also help serve it, and others who come along have gained the confidence to apply for jobs.



**"Bite-sized"  
opportunities help  
people see how they  
can contribute**

People in the wider community also contribute to the meal and a communal garden has been started.




One of the lessons for this Whitianga church is that transformation is a gradual process. Some church members struggle to accept the need for community projects while others participate in spite of their reservations and then find new purpose.



The parish council meetings have changed too; no longer simply business meetings, they are an opportunity to discover what God is already doing in the community and how the church can continue to be part of it.



**Partnering with  
others strengthens  
community bonds**

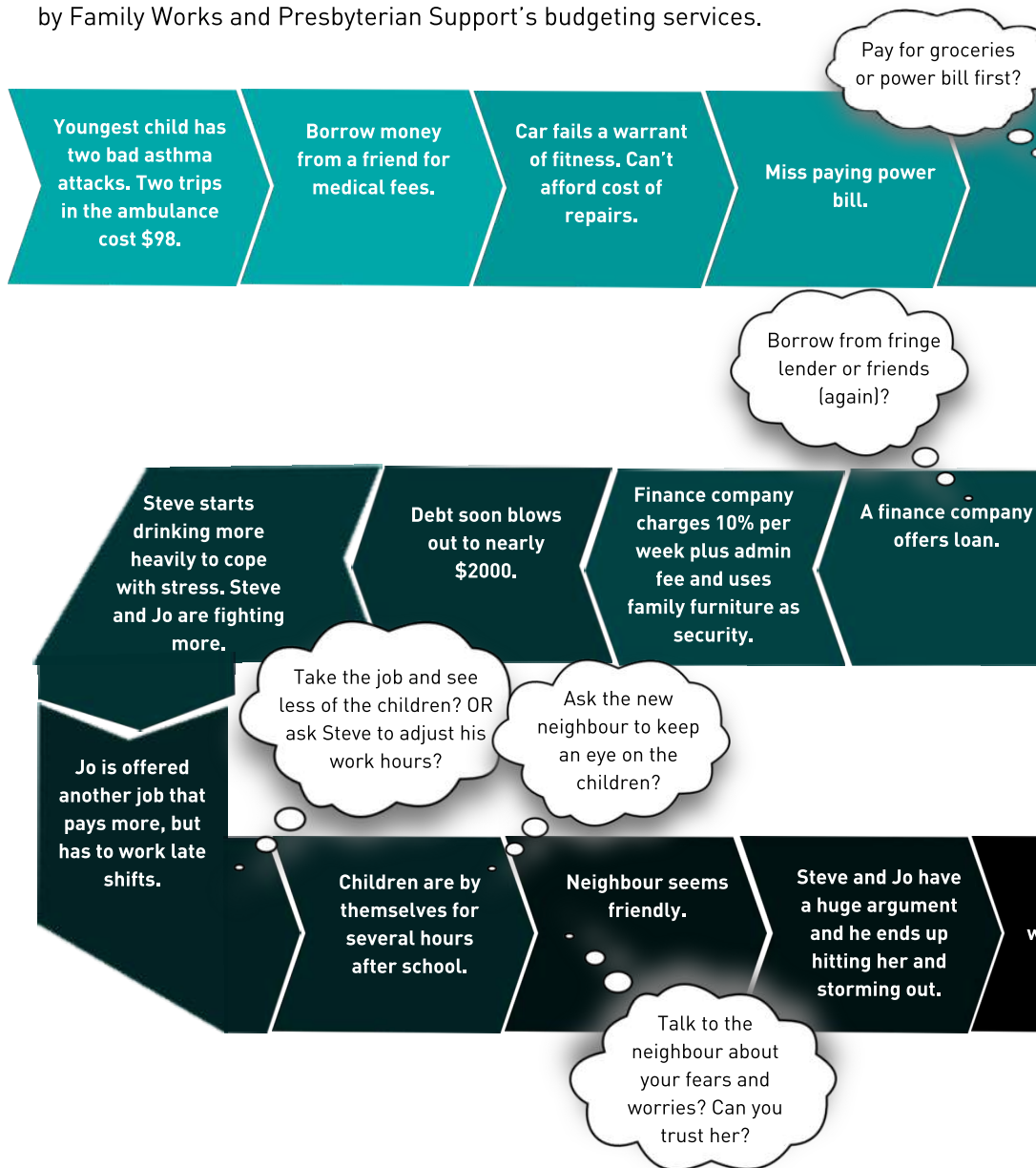


**The church is  
transformed in the  
process of looking  
outward and serving  
others**

## A CHALLENGING SITUATION:

*Snakes and Ladders*

All of us face ups and downs in everyday life; but for some families, there are more downs than ups – rather like losing a game of Snakes and Ladders. Steve and Jo are an imaginary couple, but their story is typical of many of the families supported by Family Works and Presbyterian Support's budgeting services.





Now what?

Jo feels she can't go back home and has to find somewhere affordable to live that's safe and healthy for her children. She has huge debts and her chances of finding stable employment are slim. The long struggle to survive is taking its toll on her mental

health. She has lost all confidence in herself and feels she has completely failed to keep her family together.

**What would you do in Steve and Jo's situation?**  
**What could you or your church do to support this family?**

# Reflection...

## Prayer

Creator God, draw us into your love for the broken in our communities.

**“Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation....”**

(Psalm 68:5)

God is present and active in the wider community, regardless of whether or not the church is actively involved there. In these places, amongst the young and old, rich and poor, faithful and faithless, God’s generous love extends to all. In particular, as we learn in scripture, God’s greatest concern is for those who are the most vulnerable or marginalised in society. As we learn more about these concerns, we also learn more about God’s heart, and what it means to love God more fully—for to love God is to love those whom God loves. Or as John puts it more pointedly, if we see those in need but do not respond with compassion, how can we say that God’s love is within us (1 John 3:17)?



**Read Matthew 25:31-46**

1. Who are “the least of these” in your community?
2. What practical ways can you think of to “feed the hungry” and “welcome the stranger”?

## *Discussion questions*

Isaiah 65:17-25 paints a wonderful picture of a healthy, harmonious society, where there is freedom from want and everyone’s labour is valued.

1. Who is responsible for relieving poverty and building a more equal society?
2. How can we as a church congregation contribute to the psychological, spiritual, mental and family wellbeing of the children in our communities?
3. Jesus said, “You will always have the poor with you” (Matthew 26:11). What do you think he meant? Can poverty be eliminated entirely? Why or why not?
4. To what degree is it appropriate for the Church to advocate for political change?