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superu



# Multiple disadvantage among sole parents in New Zealand

JUNE 2018

## Our purpose

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The purpose of the Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit (Superu) was to increase the use of evidence by people across the social sector so that they can make better decisions – about funding, policies or services – to improve the lives of New Zealanders and New Zealand’s communities, families and whānau.

Due to Superu’s disestablishment on 1 July 2018, the Families and Whānau work programme is now managed by the Ministry of Social Development (MSD). This report was prepared by MSD under delegation from Superu.



# Acknowledgements

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The results in this report are not official statistics. They have been created for research purposes from the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) managed by Statistics NZ. The opinions, findings, recommendations and conclusions expressed in this report are those of the authors, not Statistics NZ.

Access to the anonymised data used in this study was provided by Statistics NZ in accordance with security and confidentiality provisions of the Statistics Act 1975. Only people authorised by the Statistics Act 1975 are allowed to see data about a particular person, household, business or organisation, and the results in this report have been confidentialised to protect these groups from identification.

Careful consideration has been given to the privacy, security and confidentiality issues associated with using administrative and survey data in the IDI. Further detail can be found in the privacy impact assessment for the Integrated Data Infrastructure, available from [www.stats.gov.nz](http://www.stats.gov.nz)

# Executive summary

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This study explores whether some groups of sole parents are more likely to experience multiple disadvantage than others and if the types of disadvantage vary across different sole parent groups. Eight life domains are used to categorise disadvantage: Income, Material Wellbeing, Employment, Education, Health, Housing, Safety, and Connectedness. If someone is found to be disadvantaged in three or more of these life domains, they are said to be experiencing multiple disadvantage.

## Background

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In 2016, Superu began a programme of research to better understand multiple disadvantage and how it affects New Zealand families. The 2017 Families and Whānau Status Report presented the first results from this programme including a new measure of multiple disadvantage using data from the General Social Survey. This measure was used to examine the prevalence of multiple disadvantage across different family types and the kinds of disadvantage faced.

We found that while 18% of all adults faced multiple disadvantage, this proportion varied greatly by family type. Sole parents with young children were disproportionately affected with 50% being disadvantaged in three or more of the life domains examined, our definition for multiple disadvantage.

The release of the 2016 General Social Survey data provided the opportunity to combine 2014 and 2016 survey iterations to create a sample large enough to investigate which characteristics of sole parents were more or less associated with experiencing multiple disadvantage.

## Our approach

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The analysis uses data sourced from the 2014 and 2016 iterations of the General Social Survey (GSS). Approximately 8,000 individuals are surveyed for each iteration of the GSS, creating a sample representative of the New Zealand population. The information obtained from the GSS was complemented with data from the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI), a collection of linked administrative data, primarily from governmental agencies.



To answer whether certain groups of sole parents were more likely to be disadvantaged than others, we compared the rates of multiple disadvantage for sole parents with varying characteristics. The characteristics we assessed included:

- Current age of sole parent
- Gender of sole parent
- Family ethnicity
- Number of children in the family
- Age of the youngest child in the family.

## Results

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- Sole parents who are younger, have young children, belong to a Māori or Pacific family, are female, or have more than three children, are more likely to experience multiple disadvantage
- Age of the sole parent and age of the youngest child were the characteristics associated with the greatest likelihood of facing multiple disadvantage
- Having children at a younger age is associated with higher likelihood of experiencing multiple disadvantage
  - In particular, sole parents who had their first child below the age of 20 were nearly two and a half times as likely to experience multiple disadvantage than sole parents who had their first child aged 25 to 35. The size of this effect is notable, with one in five sole parents having their children under the age of 20, and 84% of those parents experiencing multiple disadvantage at the time of the GSS
- Low income and Housing were the most common disadvantages for sole parents with multiple disadvantage irrespective of their age, gender, ethnicity.
  - Nearly four out of five sole parents facing multiple disadvantage had a low income, and nearly two thirds were facing problems with their housing condition and/or overcrowding
- Sole parents in Māori and Pacific families are more likely to experience disadvantage in Housing than those in Asian or European families
- For sole parents with a Housing disadvantage, those in Pacific families were more likely to experience overcrowding while those in Māori, European, and Asian families were more likely to face poor housing conditions
- Younger sole parents are more likely to experience disadvantage in Material Wellbeing and Connectedness than older sole parents.

## Further research

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The study recommends further exploration of the relationship between family structure and disadvantage. It is not currently clear which (if any) factors related to family structure are causally related to multiple disadvantage. Developing a clear understanding of the relationship between sole parenthood and multiple disadvantage would also provide a clearer picture of how to provide support to prevent adverse outcomes for children and later in life.

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# 01

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## Introduction







In 2016, Superu began a programme of research to develop a measure of multiple disadvantage for New Zealand. This work aims to fill a gap in our understanding of how the challenges people face in different areas of their life combine and interact with each other. For example, we can estimate with some confidence the number of people experiencing health troubles, who are unemployed, or who report living in poor quality housing. We struggle, however, to describe those with any particular combination of these challenges at the same time, such as those who not only have poor health but are also in a household where no-one is employed and live in a poor quality house.

Measuring multiple disadvantage is not an easy undertaking as there is no one correct or consensus way of creating such a measure. The design of any particular attempt is influenced by the exact concept being measured, its intended use, and the data available. Superu's measure uses data from Statistics New Zealand's General Social Survey to assess whether someone is disadvantaged in eight life domains: Income, Material Wellbeing, Employment, Education, Health, Housing, Safety, and Connectedness. If someone is found to be disadvantaged in three or more of these life domains, we say they are experiencing multiple disadvantage. Choices about the indicators, domains, and thresholds used in Superu's measure were made with the benefit of an extensive literature review, input from a cross-sector reference group from over seven governmental agencies, and testing of the indicators available in the General Social Survey.<sup>1</sup>

Our research found considerable variability in the prevalence of multiple disadvantage across different family types, with sole parents being disproportionately affected. The proportion of families facing no disadvantage compared with the proportion of those facing multiple disadvantage are presented by family type in Table 1. As shown, sole parents were the family type least likely to face no disadvantages and most likely to experience multiple disadvantage. Only 11.5% of sole parents had no disadvantage compared with just over a third (35.6%) of New Zealand adults overall. Furthermore, just under half of sole parents (49.5%) were disadvantaged in three or more domains compared with a little over one in six (17.6%) of New Zealand adults overall. This result is particularly concerning because while sole parents represent only 5% of working-aged adults in New Zealand, they account for nearly a quarter of New Zealand families with dependent children.<sup>2</sup>

While disadvantage is more prevalent among sole parent families, we know that not all of these families face disadvantage. Many children raised by sole parents are not adversely affected in terms of their outcomes and wellbeing (Chapple, 2009). We therefore need a greater understanding of which sole parents face multiple disadvantage more often and whether certain types of disadvantage are more commonly associated with multiple disadvantage than others.

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<sup>1</sup> See Superu (2017) for a more detailed description of how our measure of multiple disadvantage was created.

<sup>2</sup> As at September 2017. Data sourced from custom output from the Household Labour Force Survey.

**TABLE  
01**

**Proportion of adults with zero life domains in disadvantage and those with three or more in disadvantage, by family type (from Superu 2017)**

Family type	No domains in disadvantage (%)	Three or more domains in disadvantage (%)
Couple, both under 50	50.6	8.0
Couple, with at least one child <18	41.5	12.5
Sole parent, with at least one child <18	11.5	49.5
Couple, one or both is 50 years or older	34.8	14.2
<b>Total adults</b>	<b>35.6</b>	<b>17.6</b>

Source: General Social Survey 2014

This paper extends Superu’s previous multiple disadvantage research to look more closely at sole parents and address the following research questions:

1. Are some groups of sole parents more likely to experience multiple disadvantage than others?
2. Do the types of disadvantage faced vary across different groups of sole parents?

We begin with a short review of what we already know about sole parents from the literature, and what sole parent families look like in the New Zealand context. We then describe the data sources and methodology used to answer the questions posed above, before presenting the results addressing each of these questions.



# 02

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## Background





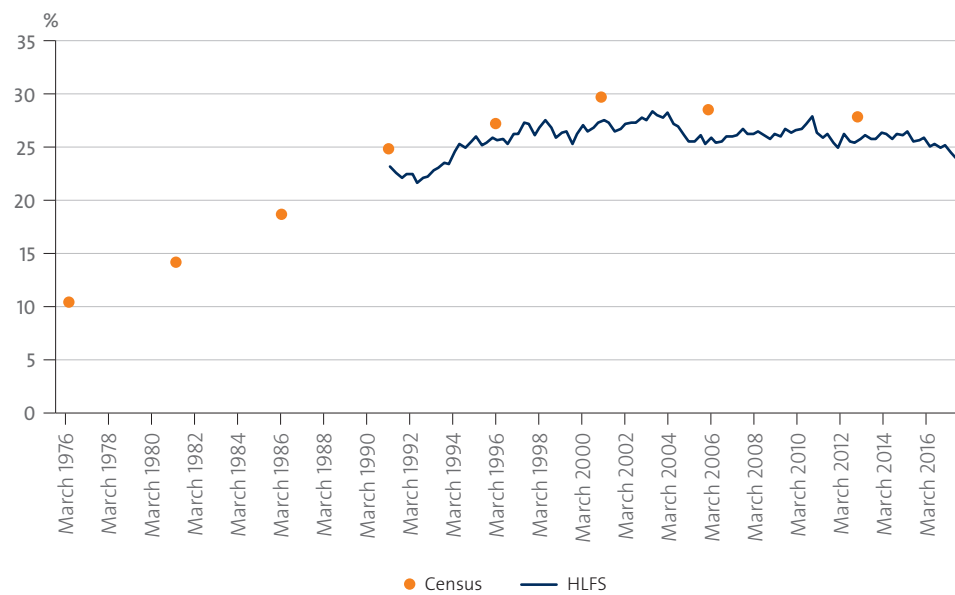
## 2.1 What we know about sole parents in New Zealand

### Sole parent families represent a significant proportion of families with children

New Zealand has one of the highest rates of sole parenthood among developed countries (Stewart-Withers, Scheyvens, & Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2010). In 2006, New Zealand (26%) ranked second only to the United States (28%) for the proportion of children under 18 living in sole parent families (Ministry of Social Development, 2008). As such, sole parent families represent a significant proportion of families with children in New Zealand.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of New Zealand families with dependent children headed by a sole parent from 1976 to 2016, with data sourced from the Census and the Household Labour Force Survey (HLFS). As shown, the proportion of families headed by a sole parent grew sharply from just over 10% in 1976 to its highest point of close to 30% in the 2001 Census.

**Figure 1** \_ Proportion of families with dependent children headed by a sole parent



Source: 2013 Census of Population and Dwellings, Household Labour Force Survey (HLFS)



Since 2001, the proportion of families with dependent children headed by a sole parent has dropped, to just under a quarter of families as at September 2017. Importantly, the number of sole parent families has mostly been increasing over this period. However, the number of coupled parent families has been increasing at a faster rate (and therefore the overall proportion of sole parent families has been decreasing). A pattern of levelling off in the proportion of families headed by a sole parent in the 2000s was shared by a number of other countries with similar social and economic forces to New Zealand. These include Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States (Centre for Social Research and Evaluation/Te Pokapū Rangahau Arotake Hapori, 2010a).

### Sole parents are a particularly vulnerable population

In line with the Superu (2017) findings, previous New Zealand and international literature has found that sole parent families face disproportionate levels of disadvantage across a number of life domains. These are:

- **Employment:** Sole parents tend to have lower rates of employment (Families Commission, 2010). Additionally, incomes for those sole parents who are employed are on average lower than two-parent families who have one parent working (Whiteford & Adema, 2007). Recent data from the Household Labour Force Survey suggests that lower rates of employment for sole parents may be partially due to greater difficulty in accessing childcare (Statistics New Zealand, 2018).
- **Health:** Sole parents and their children have been found to face higher rates of poor physical and mental health (Collings, Jenkin, Carter, & Signal, 2014; Tobias, Gerritsen, Kokaua, & Templeton, 2009; Tobias, Kokaua, Gerritsen, & Templeton, 2010).
- **Education:** Sole parents, particularly sole mothers, are more likely to have no qualifications than partnered parents (Centre for Social Research and Evaluation/ Te Pokapū Rangahau Arotake Hapori, 2010a).
- **Income:** Sole parents (particularly those living without other family members or adults who can contribute to the household income) are more likely than coupled parents to have incomes below 60% of the median household income, after accounting for housing costs (Perry, 2017). This is an indicator commonly used to assess poverty.
- **Home ownership:** Sole parents are less likely to own their own home than coupled parents, and are more likely to experience poor housing conditions or overcrowding (Families Commission, 2010). Among renters, sole parents are more likely to pay more than a quarter of their weekly household income on rent than coupled parents (Crothers, von Randow, & Cotterell, 2013).

Furthermore, these higher rates of disadvantage have been associated with poorer outcomes for children of sole parent families, with indications that these effects last into adulthood (Mackay, 2005).



## Sole parenthood has been associated with poor child outcomes, but a causal relationship is not clear

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Parental separation or sole parenthood has been commonly associated in the literature with poor outcomes for children, with detrimental effects apparent both during childhood and into adulthood. Previous research has found that children living in families facing multiple disadvantage are more likely to report experiencing a variety of risk markers or poor outcomes, such as being bullied or having mental health issues (Oroyemi, Damioli, Barnes, & Crosier, 2010). This research also identified that the poor outcomes experienced by these children are often related to the types of disadvantage faced by the parents or family. For example, children of parents with poor health are more likely to also experience physical or mental health issues, and children from families with low incomes are more likely to not have access to the internet at home. Children from families experiencing a large number of disadvantages (i.e., families facing multiple disadvantage) experienced almost all poor outcomes or risk factors at a higher rate than children in general.

The finding that children in sole parent families are often more vulnerable to disadvantage and poor outcomes has been replicated in recent research completed by Superu (2018). This looked at the prevalence of a range of health outcomes for New Zealand adults and children from different family types, using data sourced from the New Zealand Health Survey. They found that sole parents experienced higher rates of poor health outcomes, including poor mental health, psychological distress, asthma, and obesity, compared with adults from other family types. Importantly, the children of sole parent families also experienced higher rates of health-related disadvantage compared with children of coupled parents, including higher rates of asthma and obesity. Lack of financial resources was found to have a strong association to many of the relatively poorer outcomes found for sole parent families compared with coupled parent families. This included children having unmet primary healthcare needs because of cost or a lack of transport, and 40% of sole parent families not being able to afford to eat properly. Additionally, over one in four sole parents reported using special food grants or food banks to obtain food for their family (compared with just over one in 20 coupled parents).

Although previous findings on outcomes for children of sole parent families are concerning, it is important to note that this list of issues conceals a more complicated picture about the impact of sole parenthood on the outcomes of children. First, although negative outcomes have been identified for these children, the size of the effects are often small, with the size of the effect decreasing as the quality of the study increases (Chapple, 2009). This means that these effects may have little appreciable impact on the overall lives and wellbeing of children when compared with children from families with two parents.

Second, there is currently no consensus on the causal role that sole parenthood plays in the negative outcomes that have been identified in previous literature. It is possible that the disadvantages faced by sole parents and their children are due to factors or conditions present prior to the biological parents splitting (and potentially contributed to the split, e.g., genetics, financial stress, mental or physical health issues; Chapple, 2009). In that vein, previous literature has found that the wellbeing of children in separating families is worse prior to the separation or divorce when





compared with children from intact families. Furthermore, many of the presumed effects of separation or divorce on children can be identified in the years leading up to the separation (Chapple, 2009; Mackay, 2005). This indicates that the poor outcomes may be related to factors that occurred prior to the separation and move into sole parenthood.

Third, the average effects identified in the literature hide a large amount of variation in outcomes for children in sole parent families. Some factors that have been found to moderate outcomes for children of sole parents include parental involvement from the non-custodial parent (Simons, Lin, Gordon, Conger, & Lorenz, 1999), parenting style (Mackay, 2005), level of parental conflict pre-separation (Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995), and whether the absent parent created an unsafe environment prior the separation (Amato, 2000). Most children of sole parent families will not experience the adverse outcomes listed above, which means that any policies that aim to provide assistance to this vulnerable group need to be targeted to ensure that they are reaching the right people (Mackay, 2005). A blanket policy affecting all sole parents is likely to be an inefficient use of government money, given that it would capture a lot of families that do not need assistance. Identifying families facing multiple disadvantage may therefore be one way to identify the most vulnerable children in sole parent families.

Therefore, although children in sole parent families are generally considered to be a vulnerable group due to a number of adverse outcomes being identified in prior research, it is vital that these children are recognised as a heterogeneous population displaying wide variation in outcomes. Because of this, it is important that we develop a deep and nuanced view of the specific challenges faced by this population that reflects the complexity of the relationships between family structure, multiple disadvantage, and child wellbeing.

### **Pathways into sole parenthood, and therefore living circumstances, vary**

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Sole parents in New Zealand have a diverse demographic make-up, in part because of the variety of pathways into sole parenthood. These range from beginning parenthood as a sole parent, through to transitioning to sole parenthood following separation or divorce, bereavement, imprisonment of a partner, or moving to a long-distance relationship. Furthermore, sole parenthood is not a fixed state, but is often instead a situation that parents move in and out of dependent on life circumstances such as separation, partnering, marriage or divorce, and other social life cycles (Hutt, 2012). Previous research has found that approximately half of mothers will have experienced sole parenthood at some point before the age of 50 (Centre for Social Research and Evaluation/Te Pokapū Rangahau Arotake Hapori, 2010a).

The degree to which sole parents are parenting 'on their own' also varies. For example, in cases of separation, the amount and nature of the involvement by the children's other parent differs. Children raised in sole parent families often have a second parent living in another household who provides support, through financial child support payments or shared physical custody. Many sole parents across all groups have support with parenting from extended family or whānau. However, others may not

have access to this support, including families that have immigrated from their home country. The likelihood of being able to draw on this type of support, and the likelihood of living with extended family, may be greater in groups with strong traditions of wider kin-based responsibility for the care of children (Warburton & Morrison, 2008).

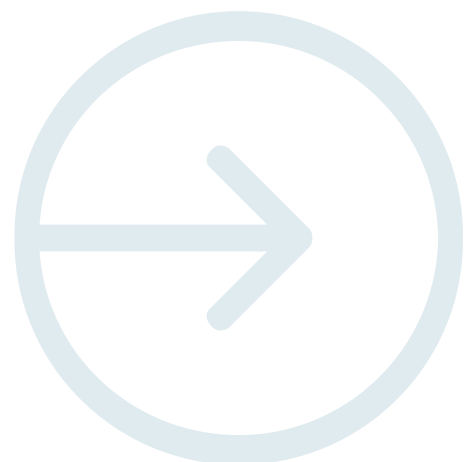
The diversity of pathways into sole parenthood means that sole-parent families differ in the levels of personal, financial, and social resources they can draw on to overcome disadvantage. For example, sole parenthood may be less challenging for individuals who make the transition later in life, once they have had the chance to build a strong foundation of education and work experience to allow for greater economic independence and employment opportunities.

### **Sole parents represent a wide cross-section of the New Zealand population**

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Sole parents are also a heterogeneous population in terms of their demographics, representing a broad cross-section of the New Zealand population. Table 2 shows the demographic breakdown of sole parents from the current research sample. The columns represent the proportion of the total sole parent population with a given characteristic.

There was notable variation across the sample in most of the characteristics we assessed including a broad spread of parental and child ages, ethnicity of family members, and number of children in the family. This diversity in the population makes it difficult (and perhaps unhelpful) to design supports and policies around an 'average' sole parent, because the characteristics of the 'average' sole parent are likely to exclude a large proportion of sole parents who do not fit into those boundaries. Instead, it is important that we understand the unique challenges and circumstances faced by different kinds of sole parents to understand the types of support they may need, and how these supports are best delivered.







## TABLE 02

### Demographic characteristics of sole parents in New Zealand

Source: Combined 2014 and 2016 General Social Survey iterations

		Proportion of total sole parents (%)	Rate of multiple disadvantage (%)
<b>Total sole parents</b>		<b>100</b>	<b>46.7</b>
<b>Age of sole parent</b>	<i>Under 30</i>	17.9	69.6
	<i>30 - 39</i>	26.5	51.2
	<i>40 - 49</i>	34.3	36.6
	<i>50 and over</i>	21.3	38
<b>Age of youngest child</b>	<i>0 to 4 years</i>	26.1	62.8
	<i>5 to 12 years</i>	42.4	49.0
	<i>13 to 17 years</i>	31.4	31.4
<b>Family ethnicity*</b>	<i>Māori</i>	43.3	54.9
	<i>Pacific</i>	16.6	60.2
	<i>Asian</i>	8.2	43.3
	<i>European</i>	72.2	42.2
<b>Gender of sole parent</b>	<i>Male</i>	14.0	35.6
	<i>Female</i>	86.0	48.5
<b>Number of children</b>	<i>One child</i>	38.1	42.3
	<i>Two children</i>	34.4	46.8
	<i>Three or more children</i>	27.5	52.6

\*Note: Proportions for ethnicity do not add up to 100 because family members can identify as having multiple ethnicities. A description of how family ethnicity was measured is provided in Section 3.3. Unit of analysis.



# 03

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## Our approach





## 3.1 Data sources

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### General Social Survey

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The analyses presented below use data sourced from the 2014 and 2016 iterations of the General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS is a cross-sectional survey that has been conducted biennially by Statistics New Zealand since 2008 to collect information on the wellbeing of New Zealanders aged 15 and older. Approximately 8,000 individuals in households are surveyed for each iteration of the GSS, creating a sample representative of the New Zealand population.

The GSS is well suited to the current research for a number of reasons. First, the GSS collects demographic information on respondents and their families that allows for the identification of sole parent families. Second, the GSS is currently the only official data source that captures people's social connections outside of the household.<sup>3</sup> It is also useful for the breadth of life domains captured. Third, the breadth of information captured allows for the identification of multiple disadvantage at the individual respondent level.

Although the GSS is the most appropriate source of data for this report, it does have a number of associated limitations. Perhaps the most important of these is that the GSS is a cross-sectional survey. This therefore limits our ability to identify the causes of multiple disadvantage; an association with multiple disadvantage is not an indication of causality. Relatedly, the cross-sectional nature of the GSS also limits our ability to assess the impact of the duration of the disadvantage faced by sole parent families. We know that neither multiple disadvantage nor sole parenthood is a permanent life situation, and it is important to understand how the length of time (or number of times) a family experiences multiple disadvantage impacts on their overall wellbeing. Accessing longitudinal information on the wellbeing of sole parent families may be possible once more iterations of the GSS have been incorporated into the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI), (allowing for a larger sample size), or through the development of a panel survey that taps into similar types of information to the GSS.

### Integrated Data Infrastructure

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The information obtained from the GSS was complemented with data sourced from the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI). The IDI is a large research database that contains information sourced from a range of different government agencies. This information is linked at the individual and/or household level and then anonymised, allowing researchers to access rich data that can be used to answer complex questions about the relationships between different life domains and factors.

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<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, this does not extend to capturing childcare and/or custody arrangements across households. This is a major limitation of using the GSS (and all other existing Statistics New Zealand surveys) in research focused on sole parents.



For the current research, we used the IDI to obtain parental age at first birth for the sole parents in our sample. This data was only available for respondents to the 2014 iteration of the GSS (because the 2016 iteration has yet to be added to the IDI). Age at first birth was not able to be obtained for approximately 34% of sole parents from our 2014 GSS sample. This is mainly because of issues with the source data for this variable. Most of birth certificates issued before 1990 are missing the mother's date of birth, meaning that their age at first birth cannot be calculated. We are also missing age at first birth details for those whose children were not born in New Zealand, or whose births were not registered.

This missing information only affects the size of the sample used for analysing the association between age at first birth and multiple disadvantage. All other analyses use the full combined GSS sample.

## 3.2 Measuring multiple disadvantage

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This paper builds on previous work done by Superu (2017), which defined multiple disadvantage as 'experiencing multiple difficulties or challenges that negatively impact family functioning'. In this previous Superu research, multiple disadvantage was measured using 17 indicators that corresponded to eight life domains: Income, Material Wellbeing, Employment, Education, Health, Housing, Safety, and Connectedness. Multiple disadvantage was defined as being disadvantaged in three or more life domains.<sup>4</sup>

The current research uses this measure of multiple disadvantage. However changes in survey content between the GSS 2014 and 2016 iterations meant that modifications had to be made to the indicators in the Connectedness domain. Further information on modifications made to the measure is provided in the Appendix: Description of changes to the multiple disadvantage measure.

## 3.3 Unit of analysis

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The 2015 Families and Whānau Status Report (Superu, 2015) introduced a six-class family type framework that could be used for defining different kinds of family structure. This family type framework includes two sole parent family types: sole parents with children under the age of 18, and sole parents with all children over the age of 18. In the present study, we have focused on sole parents with children under the age of 18.

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<sup>4</sup> For further information on the development of this measure, see Superu (2017), pages 10-15.



The GSS does not provide information on multi-household and within-household parenting and caregiving arrangements, such as shared custody. The sole parents in our sample are therefore likely to be a mix of parents who care for their children on their own full-time, and parents who share custody with other parents or caregivers living in other households, and parents who share caregiving with other members of their own household.

## Measuring family ethnicity

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Family ethnicity was determined using the self-identified ethnic grouping of all family members rather than just the ethnic grouping of the respondent. For example, if one family member identified as Asian and another as Pacific, then the respondent would be included in the results for both Asian and Pacific families. This approach has been used in previous Superu research assessing wellbeing by family ethnicity (Superu, 2016).

There is currently no standardised way to measure family ethnicity, in part because ethnicity is often considered a primarily personal attribute that cannot easily be assigned to a group of people (Callister, Didham, Newell, & Potter, 2007). We could therefore have approached the measurement of family ethnicity in many different ways, including using the ethnicity of the parent or of the children as the unit of analysis. We decided to retain the method of determining family ethnicity used in previous Superu research to promote consistency and ease of comparison with this previous work.

However, it is important to note that this choice of definition may introduce specific biases into our results. For example, the ethnicity of the parent may be more strongly associated with experiencing economic and social discrimination than the ethnicity of the children in a family. Therefore, by incorporating the ethnicity of the children into overall family ethnicity we may be diluting the true differences in rates of disadvantage faced by ethnicity.<sup>5</sup> This level of complexity means that results relating to family ethnicity should be interpreted with caution.

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<sup>5</sup> Preliminary analyses were conducted that compared rates of multiple disadvantage using the ethnicity of the parent rather than the ethnicity of the family as a whole. Results showed similar rates of multiple disadvantage faced by Māori and Pacific parents compared with Māori and Pacific families. However, rates of multiple disadvantage were slightly lower for European parents than for European families. This indicates that families with a non-European sole parent and European children are more likely to be disadvantaged than families with a European sole parent. This lends support to the idea that the ethnicity of the parent may have a stronger association with multiple disadvantage than the ethnicity of children.

# 04

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## Results





## 4.1 Some groups of sole parents are more likely to experience multiple disadvantage than others

In order to answer whether certain groups of sole parents were more likely to be disadvantaged than others, we began by examining the characteristics of sole parents who faced disadvantages in multiple life domains. The characteristics we assessed included:

- current age of sole parent
- gender of sole parent
- family ethnicity
- number of children in the family
- age of the youngest child in the family.

The characteristics we examined were limited to demographic characteristics of sole parent families. Other variables that have previously been associated with sole parent wellbeing (eg education level, income, and employment) are included in our measure of multiple disadvantage. We are therefore not able to assess their independent relationship with multiple disadvantage.

Table 3 displays the characteristics of sole parents that were associated with disproportionately lower and higher rates of multiple disadvantage, compared with their prevalence in the general sole parent population.

**TABLE**  
**03**  
Characteristics of sole parents more and less likely to face multiple disadvantage

Less likely to be disadvantaged	More likely to be disadvantaged
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent over the age of 40</li> <li>• Male parent</li> <li>• European family</li> <li>• Families with one child</li> <li>• Families with youngest child aged 13 or over</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent under the age of 40</li> <li>• Female parent</li> <li>• Māori or Pacific family</li> <li>• Families with three or more children</li> <li>• Families with youngest child under the age of 13</li> </ul>

We used a range of different measures to answer the question about whether different groups of sole parents are more likely to experience multiple disadvantage than others. These measures provide a nuanced view of the subgroups of sole parents who experience multiple disadvantage, and of those who are over-represented among those facing multiple disadvantage. The measures we used include:

- the proportion of each subgroup within the general sole parent population
- the proportion of each subgroup that experience multiple disadvantage
- the ratio of disadvantage rates.



The ratio of disadvantage rates (RR) tells us about the likelihood of a particular subgroup of sole parents facing multiple disadvantage. This allows us to identify subgroups that are disproportionately likely to face multiple disadvantage. The RR value compares the proportion of sole parents facing multiple disadvantage in a particular subgroup, with the proportion facing multiple disadvantage in a reference group. This tells us whether experiencing multiple disadvantage is more or less likely in the first subgroup compared with the reference group. The RR can be interpreted as follows.

- An RR of 1 means that there is no difference in the prevalence of multiple disadvantage in a given subgroup of sole parents compared with the reference group.
- An RR lower than 1 indicates that multiple disadvantage is less prevalent in a given sole parent subgroup than in the reference group (ie, that the subgroup has a lower likelihood of facing disadvantage).
- An RR greater than 1 indicates that multiple disadvantage is more prevalent in a given sole parent subgroup than in the reference group (ie, that the subgroup has a greater likelihood of facing disadvantage).

Table 4 shows the proportion of each subgroup in the total sole parent population, the proportion of each subgroup facing experiencing multiple disadvantage, and the RR values for each subgroup. The reference group for the RR values is the subgroup with the lowest prevalence of multiple disadvantage within each characteristic assessed.

The figures in Table 4 tell us that certain groups of sole parents are more likely to face multiple disadvantage. Sole parents who are younger, have young children, belong to a Māori or Pacific family, are female, or have more than three children are more likely to experience multiple disadvantage.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, the RR values tell us how large these differences in likelihood are. We can see that RR values are largest for subgroups based on sole parent age and child age. For example, sole parents under the age of 30 have a RR of 1.83, which can be interpreted as meaning that sole parents under the age of 30 are 90% more likely to experience multiple disadvantage than sole parents aged between 40 and 49. This indicates that age is the characteristic associated with the greatest changes in likelihood of facing multiple disadvantage, more so than family ethnicity, parent gender, and number of children.

<sup>6</sup> Note that the differences in proportions experiencing multiple disadvantage based on family ethnicity or number of children are mostly not statistically significant, although this could be because of small sample size. The difference in rates of disadvantage for male and female sole parents is also not significant, although it is approaching significance.





## TABLE 04

### Proportion and likelihood of sole parents facing multiple disadvantage

Source: Combined 2014 and 2016 General Social Survey iterations

Characteristics		Total	Facing multiple disadvantage		
		Percent	Percent	95% CI <sup>7</sup>	RR <sup>8</sup>
Total sole parents		100	46.7	42.8-50.6	
Age of sole parent	<i>Under 30</i>	17.9	69.6	60.9-78.3	1.90
	<i>30 – 39</i>	26.5	51.2	45.3-57.1	1.40
	<i>40 – 49 (reference group)</i>	34.3	36.6	30.4-42.8	<b>1.00</b>
	<i>50 and over</i>	21.3	38.0	29.8-46.0	1.04
Age of youngest child	<i>0 to 4 years</i>	26.1	62.8	56.3-69.3	2.00
	<i>5 to 12 years</i>	42.4	49.0	42.6-55.4	1.56
	<i>13 to 17 years (reference group)</i>	31.4	31.4	25.5-37.3	<b>1.00</b>
Ethnicity*	<i>Māori</i>	43.3	54.9	49.7-60.1	1.30
	<i>Pacific</i>	16.6	60.2	51.0-69.4	1.43
	<i>Asian</i>	8.2	43.3	32.0-54.6	1.03
	<i>European (reference group)</i>	72.2	42.2	37.5-46.9	<b>1.00</b>
Gender of sole parent	<i>Male (reference group)</i>	14.0	35.5	25.9-45.1	<b>1.00</b>
	<i>Female</i>	86.0	48.5	44.2-52.8	1.36
Number of children	<i>One child (reference group)</i>	38.1	42.3	35.6-49.0	<b>1.00</b>
	<i>Two children</i>	34.4	46.8	40.9-52.7	1.11
	<i>Three or more children</i>	27.5	52.6	44.5-60.7	1.24

\*Note: Proportions may add to more than 100 because families can identify with multiple ethnicities

### Age of the parent is a key factor associated with experiencing multiple disadvantage

Our results clearly indicate that the age of the sole parent is a key factor in the likelihood of sole parent families experiencing multiple disadvantage. We therefore wanted to take a closer look at how rates of multiple disadvantage change for sole parents of different genders and ethnicities, when looking at sole parents of the same age groups (ie, when controlling for the effect of age).

Table 5 examines the rate and likelihood of sole parents experiencing multiple disadvantage, comparing family ethnicity and males and females within age groups.

<sup>7</sup> The 95% confidence interval (CI) means that we can be 95% certain that the true proportion of sole parents experiencing multiple disadvantage falls between the two values shown. This is used to account for the fact that our sample might not be representative of all sole parents in New Zealand, and so the exact proportions from our sample might not match the rest of the population. Where the intervals overlap for two different groups, this means that the differences in proportions experiencing disadvantage are not statistically significant at the  $p < .05$  level.

<sup>8</sup> RR for the reference group is in bold.

## TABLE 05

Proportion and likelihood of sole parents experiencing multiple disadvantage, by age, ethnicity and gender

Source: Combined 2014 and 2016 General Social Survey iterations

Age of sole parent	Total sole parents			Aged under 30			Aged 30 to 39			Aged 40 to 49			Aged 50 or above			
	%	95% CI	RR <sup>9</sup>	%	95% CI	RR	%	95% CI	RR	%	95% CI	RR	%	95% CI	RR	
<b>Family ethnicity</b>																
<i>Māori</i>	54.9	49.7-60.1	1.30	67.5	56.6-78.4	0.89	61.1	52.9-69.3	1.36	41.1	31.5-50.7	1.30	50.4	37.3-63.5	1.59	
<i>Pacific</i>	60.2	51.0-69.4	1.43	69.1	52.1-86.1	0.91	65.2	49.0-81.4	1.45	52.1	32.9-71.3	1.64	52.0	25.8-78.2	1.65	
<i>Asian</i>	43.3	32.0-54.6	1.03	S	S	S	40.2	20.1-60.3	0.90	44.4	25.6-63.2	1.40	39.4	8.7-70.1	1.25	
<i>European (reference group)<sup>9</sup></i>	42.2	37.5-46.9	<b>1.00</b>	75.6	65.6-85.6	<b>1.00</b>	44.9	37.8-52.0	<b>1.00</b>	31.7	24.6-38.8	<b>1.00</b>	31.6	23.1-40.1	<b>1.00</b>	
<b>Gender of sole parent</b>																
<i>Male</i>	35.6	25.9-45.1	0.73	63.0	27.2-98.8	0.90	41.7	18.0-65.4	0.79	33.6	17.1-50.1	0.91	28.8	14.1-43.5	0.71	
<i>Female (reference group)</i>	48.5	44.2-52.8	<b>1.00</b>	69.9	61.0-78.8	<b>1.00</b>	52.7	46.2-59.2	<b>1.00</b>	37.0	30.1-43.9	<b>1.00</b>	40.8	30.4-51.2	<b>1.00</b>	

Note: Figures have been suppressed for Asian sole parent families where the parent is under the age of 30, due to insufficient sample size (denoted by an S)

9 Reference groups are European families for family ethnicity, and female sole parents for parental gender. These figures are in bold.





### Parental gender

We can see that in the total sole parent population, male sole parents are 27% less likely to face multiple disadvantage than female sole parents. However, looking across the table, we can see that the difference in likelihood of experiencing multiple disadvantage reduces when we limit analyses solely to parents under the age of 30. For this group, males are only 10% less likely to experience disadvantage compared with female sole parents. It is important to note that these differences are not statistically significant, possibly because of the relatively small sample of male sole parents. However, they indicate patterns that are important to validate with a larger sample.

What this tells us is that the association between gender and disadvantage varies by age; that is, sole fathers and sole mothers of similar ages face more similar rates of multiple disadvantage. Rates of multiple disadvantage are highest, and the gender difference in likelihood of experiencing multiple disadvantage lowest, in the under 30 age group. This means that overall, some of the association between being a female sole parent and elevated risk of multiple disadvantage can be explained by the fact that female sole parents are more likely to be younger than male sole parents. This places them at greater risk of experiencing multiple disadvantage.

### Family ethnicity

We can see similar patterns occurring for the ethnicity of the sole parent. Sole parents in families where at least one family member is Māori (a 'Māori family') are 30% more likely to face multiple disadvantage than sole parents where at least one family member is European (a 'European family'). Additionally, sole parents in families where at least one family member is Pacific (a 'Pacific family') are 43% more likely to experience multiple disadvantage than sole parents in European families.

However, when we limit the analysis to only sole parents under the age of 30, sole parents belonging to Māori and Pacific families become 11% and 9% less likely to face multiple disadvantage than sole parents belonging to European families, respectively. This indicates that again, some of the association between belonging to Māori and Pacific families and elevated risks of multiple disadvantage can be explained by the younger age profiles of sole parents from Māori and Pacific families. Please note that these differences are not statistically significant (potentially due to small sample sizes), so it is important to interpret these results with caution.

## Having children at a younger age is associated with higher likelihood of experiencing multiple disadvantage

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The results above tell us that younger sole parents tend to experience similar levels of multiple disadvantage irrespective of their family ethnicity or parental gender. However, differences in likelihood of experiencing multiple disadvantage remain between different ethnicities and genders for sole parents in older age groups.

Previous literature has found that women who have their first child when they are young have significantly poorer socioeconomic outcomes than women who have their children at a later life stage (Boden, Fergusson, & John Horwood, 2008; Bradbury, 2006; Budig & Hodges, 2010; Gibb, Fergusson, John Horwood, & Boden, 2015). This is thought to relate to a number of different factors, including educational and other disadvantages that precede and are often associated with early parenthood, and the

impact that early parenthood has on employment prospects and earning potential. It is therefore possible that parental age at the birth of their first child is more highly associated with experiencing multiple disadvantage than the current age of the parent.

To identify whether the age at first birth is an important factor in rates of multiple disadvantage, we looked at whether rates of disadvantage were higher for sole parents who had their first child younger. Results from this analysis are shown in Table 6.

**TABLE 06**  
**Proportion of sole parents facing multiple disadvantage, by age at the birth of first child**

Source: General Social Survey 2014 linked to the Integrated Data Infrastructure

		All sole parents Percent	Facing multiple disadvantage		
			Percent	95% CI	RR
All sole parents		100	46.7	42.8-50.6	
Age at birth of first child	Under 20	20.7	84.0	74.1-93.9	2.30
	20-24	32.1	68.8	59.1-78.5	1.88
	25-35 (reference group)	37.3	36.6	25.4-47.8	<b>1.00</b>
	35 and over	9.9	44.2	20.9-67.6	1.21

Our results show that the likelihood of experiencing multiple disadvantage increases significantly for sole parents who were below the age of 25 when they had their first child. In particular, sole parents who had their first child below the age of 20 were nearly two and a half times more likely to experience disadvantage than sole parents who had their first child aged 25 to 35. Sole parents who had their first child between the ages of 20 and 25 were just under twice as likely to experience disadvantage as sole parents who had their first child aged 25 to 25.

This finding supports our hypothesis that having children younger is likely to increase rates of disadvantage. The size of this effect is notable, with one in five sole parents having their children under the age of 20, and 84% of those parents experiencing multiple disadvantage. Higher rates of disadvantage were also found for sole parents who had their first child aged 35 and above. However, these results are difficult to interpret given the small sample size.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to note that our analysis is missing sole parents who had their first child outside of New Zealand, or whose birth was not registered. Because of issues with the source data, we are also missing a significant number of sole parents who had their first child before 1990. It is difficult to determine the impact this missing information has on our results, although inspection of the final sample for this analysis showed that the demographics of our final sample were largely similar to the demographics of our total sample used in the previous analyses. This lessens the likelihood that the missing data has systematically biased our results.

<sup>10</sup> Preliminary analyses were conducted to assess the rates of multiple disadvantage by age at first birth and current age of the sole parent. We found that within each sole parent age group assessed (including sole parents over the age of 40), the proportion of families experiencing multiple disadvantage increased as the age at first birth decreased. This indicates that the age at first birth may have a stronger association with experiencing multiple disadvantage than the current age of the sole parent across all age groups. However, the size of the sample meant that results were not sufficiently reliable for presentation.



### **Age at first birth and experiencing disadvantage**

This finding – that having children at younger ages is associated with higher rates of disadvantage – is also found in the Growing Up in New Zealand (GUINZ) cohort, the Christchurch Health and Development cohort, and other New Zealand-based research (Boden et al., 2008; Centre for Social Research and Evaluation/Te Pokapū Rangahau Arotake Hapori, 2010b; Morton et al., 2014, 2015). It could help to explain why disparity in rates of disadvantage by gender and ethnicity remain for sole parents in older age groups in our sample.

Sole parents in older age groups differ in terms of their age at first birth, and therefore in the effect that this has on their long-term wellbeing. Māori and Pacific women have lower average ages at first birth than non-Māori and non-Pacific women, and women tend to be younger when entering parenthood than men (Statistics New Zealand, 2013; Welch, 2009). This means that the higher rates of disadvantage for female sole parents, and sole parents from Māori and Pacific families, could partially be explained by the tendency for these groups to have their first child younger. This exposes them to the factors associated with higher rates of disadvantage for those introduced to parenthood earlier.

There are several reasons why parents having their first child at a younger age may increase the risk of facing disadvantages later in life. Having a child at a younger age impacts on the ability of parents to gain higher education and qualifications. Previous research has indicated that this conflict between childbirth and education is not purely financial, but also a result of other factors such as access to childcare (OECD, 2011). This lack of education and qualifications is likely to negatively affect the parent's chance of gaining adequate employment to financially support the family. This therefore impacts on other areas of wellbeing such as material wellbeing and housing quality. Employment is an area that is already challenging for parents; we know that parenthood itself is associated with lower rates of employment. However, the mother's age has a greater impact on employment rates than other factors, including the age of children in the family (Flynn & Harris, 2015).

Furthermore, results from the GUINZ study have shown that risk factors and disadvantages often do not occur in isolation for teenage mothers, with disadvantages instead tending to cluster together (Morton et al., 2015). This again supports our finding that sole parents who had their first child younger are more likely to experience multiple disadvantage. If this is indeed the case, it would suggest that extra support and resources need to be provided for young parents so that they can build resilience against the difficulties they may face during parenthood. In particular, the GUINZ researchers note that this support needs to address multiple disadvantages at once (i.e., a 'wrap-around' support), rather than just targeting individual risk factors or disadvantages (Morton et al., 2015). This addresses the complexity and number of disadvantages often faced by younger parents.

Overall, our results suggest that the age of the sole parent, but particularly the age of the parent at the birth of their first child, is associated with rates of multiple disadvantage. Indeed, age appears to have a stronger association with rates of disadvantage than do gender, family ethnicity, or the number of children in the family. This means that different groups of sole parents – particularly sole parents who had their first child under the age of 25 – are more likely to face multiple disadvantage.

However, the size of our sample was not large enough to draw strong conclusions about the size of the impact that age at first birth has on outcomes for sole parent families. We were also not able to draw strong inferences about what might be driving the higher prevalence of disadvantage among sole parents who had their first child at a young age. More information (ideally longitudinal) is needed on this vulnerable group of families in order to further our understanding of how their wellbeing might best be supported, and how disadvantage might best be prevented.

## 4.2 — How the types of disadvantage faced vary across different groups of sole parents

To answer the question whether the types of disadvantage faced by sole parents vary across subgroups, we first looked at the proportion of sole parents facing disadvantage in each of the eight life domains covered in the multiple disadvantage measure. Table 7 shows the proportion of sole parents facing disadvantage in each life domain, for all sole parents and those facing multiple disadvantage.

**TABLE 07**  
**Proportion of sole parents facing disadvantage in each life domain, for all sole parents and sole parents facing multiple disadvantage**

Source: Combined 2014 and 2016 General Social Survey iterations

Domain	All sole parents	Rank	Sole parents with 3+ domains in disadvantage	Rank
Income	49.3	1	77.4	1
Housing	43.4	2	64.7	2
Health	36.2	3	57.3	4
Education	34.6	4	51.8	5
Material wellbeing	31.2	5	57.7	3
Employment	24.3	6	46.6	6
Connectedness	22.0	7	37.2	7
Safety	15.3	8	27.2	8

Income and Housing were the two most prevalent disadvantages faced, both for sole parents overall and those with multiple disadvantage. Nearly four out of five sole parents facing multiple disadvantage had a low income, and nearly two out of three were facing problems with their housing condition and/or overcrowding. Higher rates of income disadvantage were also identified in Superu’s (2018) research using the New Zealand Health Survey. This found that sole parents were more likely to report food insecurity and unmet health needs because of a lack of money compared with coupled parents. In addition, this research also found higher rates of asthma for children of sole parent families compared with children from coupled parent families. It is possible that this is linked to the poorer quality housing identified in this research.



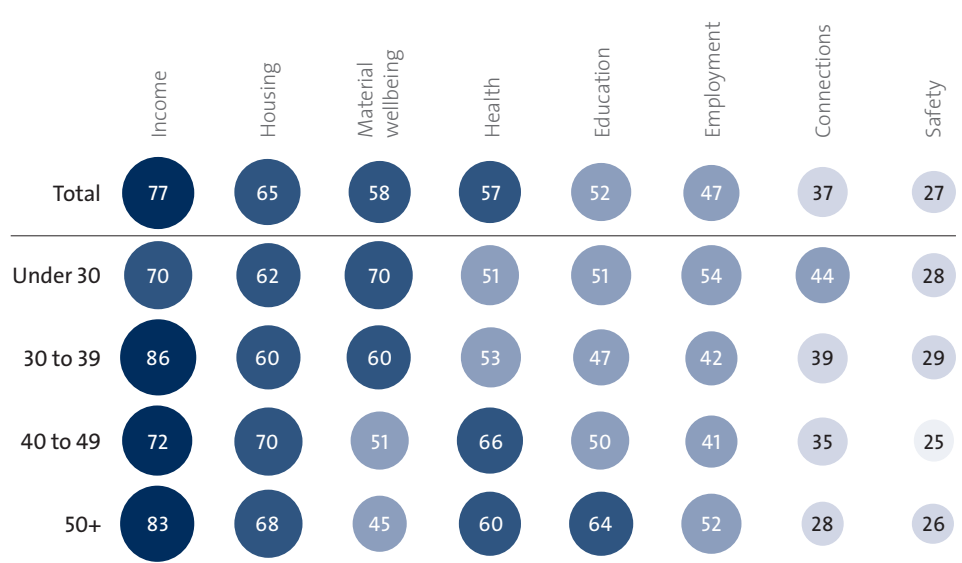
Disadvantage in Material Wellbeing was relatively more common among sole parents facing multiple disadvantage (ranked third) than for sole parents in general (ranked fifth). This perhaps explains the disproportionate impact that facing multiple disadvantages at once can have on one’s general standard of living. Other disadvantages were similar in terms of their ranking in each group, with disadvantages in Connectedness and Safety being the least commonly experienced.

So we know that the types of disadvantage faced by sole parents are relatively similar despite the overall level of disadvantage faced. But do different groups of sole parents experience different types of disadvantage? To answer this question, we assessed the prevalence of particular disadvantages by three of the key characteristics outlined in the previous section: age, gender and ethnicity. To control for the fact that rates of disadvantage are different for sole parents with different characteristics, we limited these analyses to sole parents who are facing multiple disadvantage. This gives us an idea of the most common disadvantages for the most vulnerable groups of sole parents.

### Types of disadvantage by age of sole parent

Figure 2 shows the proportion of sole parents facing multiple disadvantage that are disadvantaged in particular domains, by age. Each row of bubbles represents a different age group (with total sole parents represented in the top row). Each column of bubbles refers to a particular life domain, from Income on the left to Safety on the right. The size and colour of the bubbles reflect the proportion of sole parents in that particular age group that are disadvantaged in that particular domain. For example, the bubble at the bottom left represents the proportion of sole parents aged 50 and over who are disadvantaged in Income. The larger and darker the bubble, the greater the proportion of sole parents that are facing disadvantage in that age group and domain.

**Figure 2\_ Proportion of sole parents facing multiple disadvantage that are disadvantaged in particular domains, by age**



Source: Combined 2014 and 2016 General Social Survey iterations

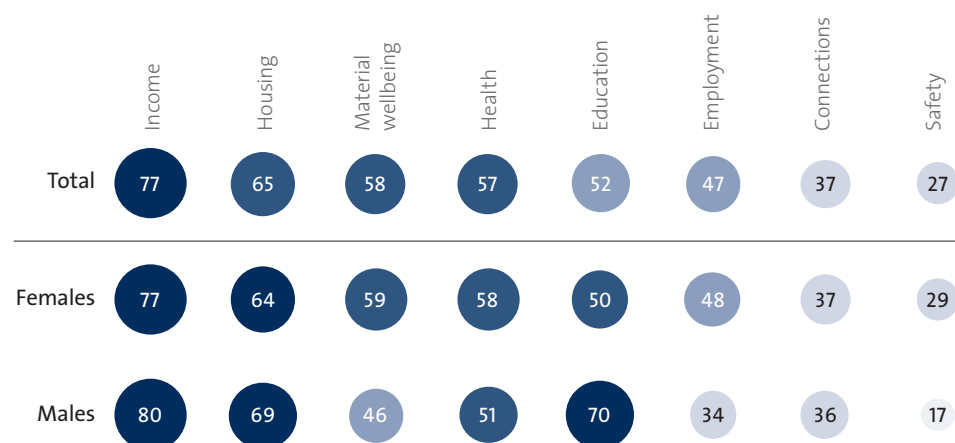
Looking across the rows of bubbles, we can see that a low income is the most common disadvantage for sole parents, followed by disadvantage in Housing. Disadvantages in Connectedness and Safety are the least common for sole parents. However, looking down the columns of bubbles we can see that there are some differences in the prevalence of different types of disadvantage for different groups of sole parents.

- Sole parents **aged under 40** have higher rates of disadvantage in **Material Wellbeing** than sole parents over the age of 40. This is despite parents under the age of 30 having comparatively lower rates of disadvantage in Income. This indicates that older sole parents may have additional resources to draw on to lessen the effect of low income on their standard of living.
- Sole parents **over the age of 40** have higher rates of disadvantage in **Health** than sole parents under the age of 40.
- Sole parents **aged 50 and over** have higher rates of disadvantage in **Education**. This is a pattern commonly found across the general population as rates of achieving high school qualifications have increased in recent years.
- Sole parents **under the age of 30** have higher rates of disadvantage in **Connectedness** than other sole parents. This means that young sole parents are more likely to lack supportive social networks that can help them when they are facing challenges. This is perhaps reflective of a stigma towards young sole mothers that has been identified in previous New Zealand research (Collins, 2010).

### Types of disadvantage by gender of sole parent

Figure 3 shows the proportion of sole parents facing multiple disadvantage that are disadvantaged in particular domains, by gender.

**Figure 3** \_ Proportion of sole parents facing multiple disadvantage that are disadvantaged in particular domains, by gender



Source: Combined 2014 and 2016 General Social Survey iterations





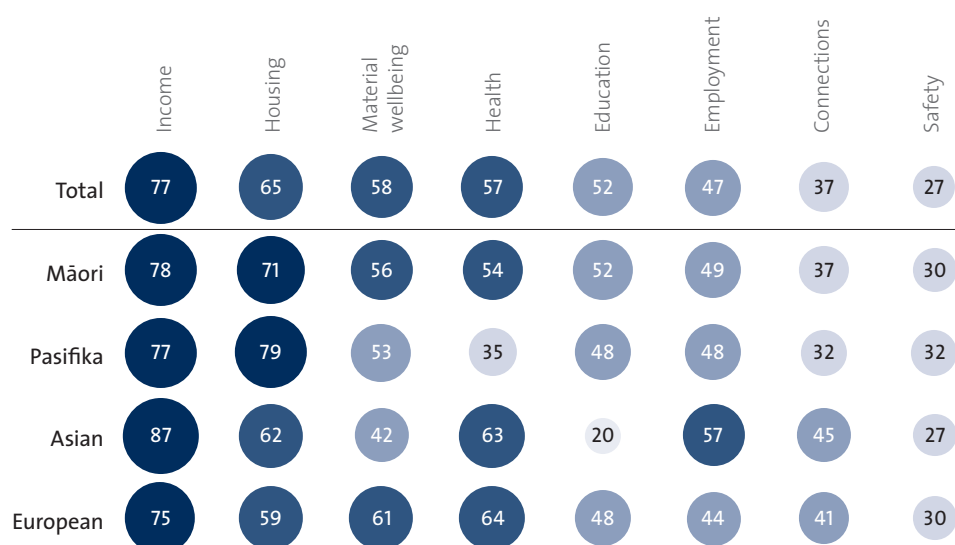
As with parental age, Income and Housing remain the two disadvantages most commonly experienced by sole parents regardless of their gender. That said, there are some differences that can be seen for other life domains:

- **Female** sole parents are substantially more likely to face disadvantage in **Material Wellbeing** than male sole parents. This is despite having similar levels of disadvantage in Income and Employment. This could indicate that male sole parents have greater levels of financial resource (eg savings) to draw upon to support them through periods of low income. Female sole parents are also more likely to be disadvantaged in Safety.
- **Male** sole parents are substantially more likely to be disadvantaged in **Education** than female sole parents, a pattern found in the NZ population more broadly (Statistics New Zealand, 2015). This, however, does not appear to be causing higher rates of low income and unemployment among male sole parents, which are often associated with low educational attainment.

### Types of disadvantage by family ethnicity

Figure 4 shows the proportion of sole parents facing multiple disadvantage that are disadvantaged in particular life domains, by family ethnicity. Again we see that despite ethnicity, the top two disadvantages faced are Income and Housing issues. Safety is the least common disadvantage faced for all ethnicities except Asian families, who are least likely to be disadvantaged in Education.

**Figure 4** \_ Proportion of sole parents facing multiple disadvantage that are disadvantaged in particular domains, by family ethnicity



Source: Combined 2014 and 2016 General Social Survey iterations

Other patterns seen in the results show that there are small differences in the types of disadvantage faced by sole parents of different ethnicities.

- Sole parents from **Māori and European** families are more likely to face disadvantage in **Material Wellbeing** than sole parents from Asian and Pacific families. Again, this could be indicative of lower levels of financial resources available to Māori and European families to help them through periods of unemployment or low income.
- Closer analysis of **Housing** disadvantage finds that sole parents from **Pacific** families are more likely to face issues with overcrowding than poor quality housing, whereas the opposite is true for all other ethnicities.
- Sole parents from **Pacific** families are less likely to be disadvantaged in **Health** than families of other ethnicities. For all ethnicities, poor **mental health** is the predominant health issue facing sole parents.
- Sole parents from **Pacific** families are also less likely to be disadvantaged in **Connectedness** than sole parents of other ethnicities. This indicates that Pacific families have greater access to social networks that can support them with difficulties they encounter.
- Sole parents from **Asian** families are more likely to face disadvantages in **Employment** than families of other ethnicities. However this does not appear to also increase their likelihood of facing disadvantage in Income or Material Wellbeing.



# 05

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## Future research directions



The results presented above further our understanding of what kinds of disadvantage are faced by sole parents and their children, and the characteristics of sole parent families that are indicative of higher rates of disadvantage. These findings provide valuable direction for further work on providing targeted support to one of the most vulnerable populations in New Zealand. However, a number of related areas also need to be investigated to better understand this complex relationship between family structure and disadvantage.

### **Further investigation into age at first birth**

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The current research suggests that the parent's age at first birth may be a key factor in determining levels of disadvantage in sole parent families. Further studies are needed to confirm this suggestion, and better understand the mechanisms sitting behind this relationship. Understanding these mechanisms is the first step towards effectively targeting those most at risk of multiple disadvantage, and effectively preventing vulnerable families from slipping into disadvantage.

### **Transience and/or fluctuations in disadvantage and their impact on outcomes**

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Previous research suggests that the measurement of disadvantage at one point in time may underestimate the true proportion of families facing disadvantage at any point over a given time period (Oroyemi et al., 2010). For example, this research found that although an average of 19% of families experienced low income in any particular year, 41% of families experienced low income at some point over a 6-year period and only 6% of families experienced low income for 5 or 6 years within that period. This indicates that some types of disadvantage are often transient, with families shifting in and out of disadvantage because of changes in personal circumstances (eg separation or losing a job) or as a result of environmental changes, such as shifts in government policies. This is particularly the case for quality of life measures. Conversely, other kinds of disadvantage are more stable over time, such as having no qualifications or being unemployed.

The current research relies on cross-sectional survey data, and it is therefore likely that our results underestimate the proportion of sole parent families that ever experience multiple disadvantage. We are also unable to shed light on how consistent disadvantage over an extended period of time (or fluctuations in and out of disadvantage) impacts on the development and wellbeing of children. It is important that future research investigates this temporal aspect of multiple disadvantage so that we are able to most effectively support chronically disadvantaged families. Longitudinal sources of information (eg panel surveys or cohort studies) are required for this research to be conducted.



## Assessing protective factors

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The current research has largely focussed on identifying the most vulnerable groups of sole parent families so that we better understand which families we need to support. However, it is equally important to understand how resilience can be developed among these populations; ie, better understand families that have good outcomes despite facing multiple disadvantages. As stated above, we know that most children in sole parent families are not adversely affected in terms of development or wellbeing, so understanding how they are able to flourish despite their vulnerability could provide useful insights into how all children in sole parent families are best supported.

## Identifying causal links between family structure and multiple disadvantage

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On a related note, it is not currently clear which (if any) factors related to family structure are causally related to multiple disadvantage. The current research provides a picture only of associations between various characteristics and factors to multiple disadvantage. However, as already discussed, it is possible that separate factors altogether are causing both the sole parenthood and the poor outcomes for families. (These are called confounding variables). Developing a clear understanding of the relationship between sole parenthood and multiple disadvantage would also provide a clearer picture of where we are best able to provide support to prevent adverse outcomes later in life. Again, longitudinal data is required to draw reliable inferences regarding the causes of multiple disadvantage.



# 06

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## Appendix: Description of changes to the multiple disadvantage measure





The multiple disadvantage measure created by Superu (2017) was developed using items from the 2014 iteration of the GSS. However, the current research used a combined sample from both the 2014 and 2016 iterations of the GSS. This meant that the indicators used in the measure needed to be present in both the 2014 and 2016 iterations so that the same measure could be applied to sole parents from both iterations.

Exact (or very similar items) were able to be identified in both GSS iterations for all domains except for Connectedness. The following indicators from the original Connectedness domain were not present in the 2016 iteration of the GSS:

- No family who could provide help or support
- No friends who could provide support.

This left three original indicators in the Connectedness domain:

- Could not or would not talk about feeling depressed or down
- Experiencing discrimination
- Does not belong to any community groups, clubs or organisations.

We felt that these three indicators alone were not sufficient to capture the complexity of Connectedness. We therefore revisited the questionnaires for the two GSS iterations to identify common items that could serve as robust indicators of Connectedness. Potential combinations of variables that could be used to measure Connectedness were identified based on the extensive literature review conducted prior to the development of the original measure. We also drew upon research investigating the nature and purpose of the social support networks of New Zealand families previously conducted by Superu (2017). In particular, we wanted to ensure that the variables included in the Connectedness domain captured the multi-faceted role that social support networks play in contributing to the overall wellbeing of families. These contributions include giving emotional and material support, providing enjoyment or entertainment, and improving access to opportunities such as employment.

Through this process, four additional variables were identified that could potentially be incorporated into the Connectedness measure:

- feeling lonely
- having no contact with any friends or family
- having no contact with friends and family who live nearby
- not having a place to stay in an emergency.

Different ways in which these new variables could be combined with the remaining three original variables were identified. They were then tested to ascertain their impact on the proportion of the sample identified as being disadvantaged in Connectedness and as experiencing multiple disadvantage overall. The results of this testing are provided in Table 8.

Ideally, we wanted both versions of the multiple disadvantage measure to identify the same group of people as experiencing disadvantage both in the Connectedness domain and at the multiple disadvantage level. Table 8 therefore shows the proportion of the sample identified as being disadvantaged in the original Connectedness measure that was also identified as being disadvantaged using the new combination of variables. The table also shows the differences in the overall proportions of the sample identified as being disadvantaged in Connectedness and experiencing multiple disadvantage, compared with the original measure.

# TABLE 08

Variable combinations tested for Connectedness domain, including impact on measurement of disadvantage

Possible Connectedness variable combinations	% disadvantaged in Connectedness	Difference between % disadvantaged with original vs new measure	% disadvantaged who were also disadvantaged using original measure	% experiencing multiple disadvantage
Original Connectedness measure	14.7			17.6
Adding 'loneliness' and 'having a place to stay in an emergency'	11.6	3.1	76.2	16.8
Adding 'no contact with any friends and family'	35.9	21.2	40.9	20.1
Adding 'no contact with friends and family living nearby'	23.2	8.5	63.3	19.3
Adding 'loneliness'	9.7	4.9	86.7	16.5
Adding 'loneliness'; removing 'not belonging to community groups'	22.5	7.8	44.0	18.8
Adding 'loneliness' and 'not having a place to stay in an emergency'; removing 'not belonging to community groups'	25.1	10.5	40.4	19.2
Adding 'no contact with friends and family'; removing 'not belonging to community groups'	22.6	7.9	35.1	18.0
Adding 'no contact with friends and family living nearby'; removing 'belonging to community groups'	11.0	3.6	57.8	17.2
Retaining three original variables with no replacements	8.0	6.7	100.0	16.1

 Shows option chosen





In addition to identifying the effect on the identified rates of disadvantaged across the entire sample, we also wanted to understand whether there were any differences in the types of people who were identified as experiencing disadvantage using the new variable combinations. To that end, we also assessed differences in the levels of Connectedness disadvantage and multiple disadvantage by age, ethnicity, gender, and family type between the original measure and the new combinations of variables.

Results from this search and testing identified the following two indicators as robust replacements in the revised Connectedness domain:

- Could not or would not ask for a place to stay in an emergency
- Feeling lonely.

These variables were selected to be included in the Connectedness domain because of their ability to capture the disparate roles that social networks fulfil for families, and because of the similarity in the proportion and profile of families identified as disadvantaged using this combination of variables compared with the original Connectedness measure.

The final indicators included in the revised measure of multiple disadvantage are outlined in Figure 5; we have also provided the indicators used in the original multiple disadvantage measure in Figure 6, for comparison purposes. Overall, the revised measure identified 16.8% of families as facing multiple disadvantage, compared with 17.6% identified using the original measure. Furthermore, the new measure indicated that 11.6% of families faced disadvantage in Connectedness, compared with 14.7% from the original measure. Overall, we believed that these proportions were similar enough to suggest that the new indicators were measuring similar constructs (and capturing the same types of families) as those that were replaced from the original measure.



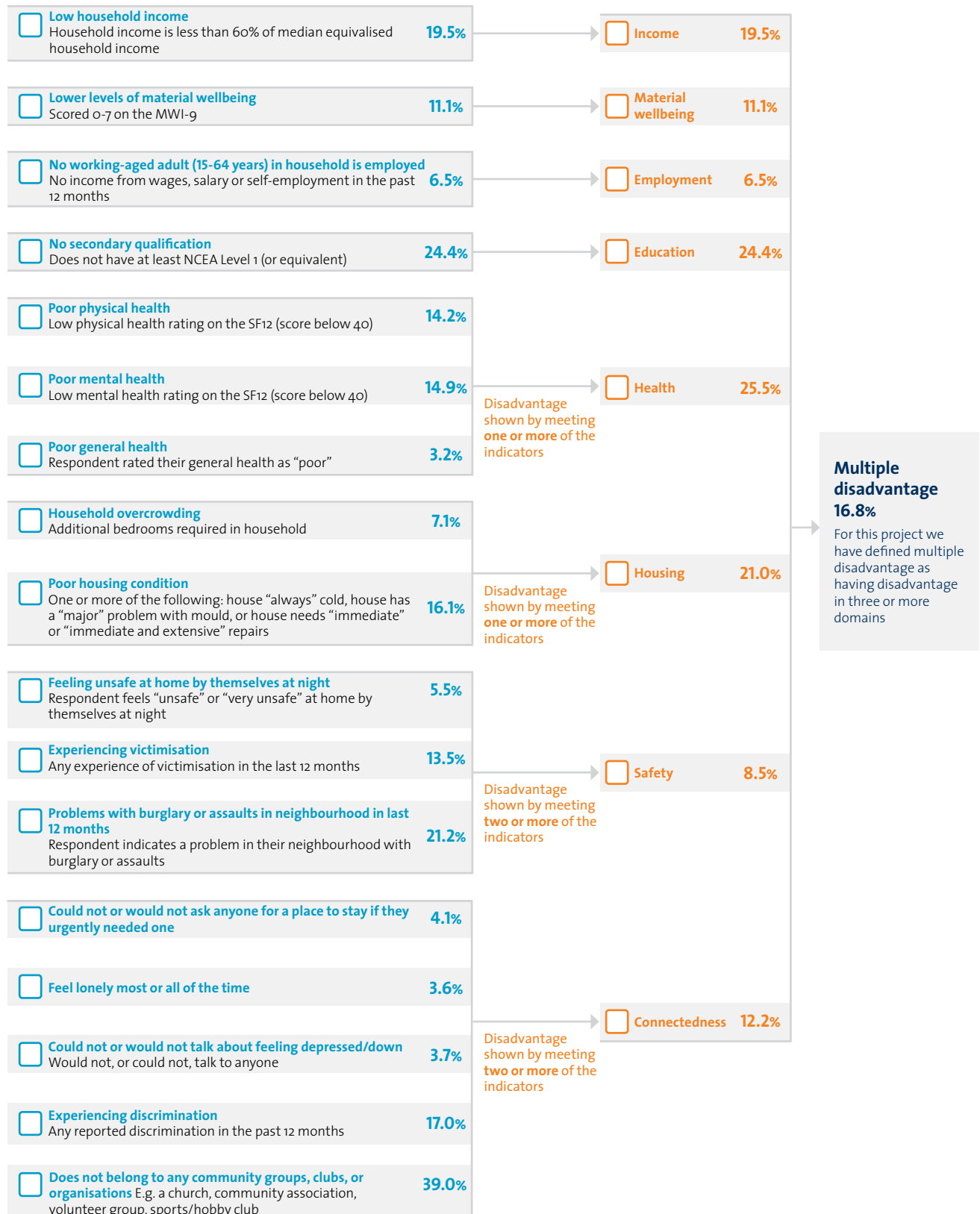
**Figure 5** \_ Indicators and life domains used to identify multiple disadvantage (Combined 2014 and 2016 General Social Survey data)

Percentages show the proportion of the total population aged 15 and above

**Indicators**

All indicators sourced from combined 2014 and 2016 General Social Survey data

**Domains**





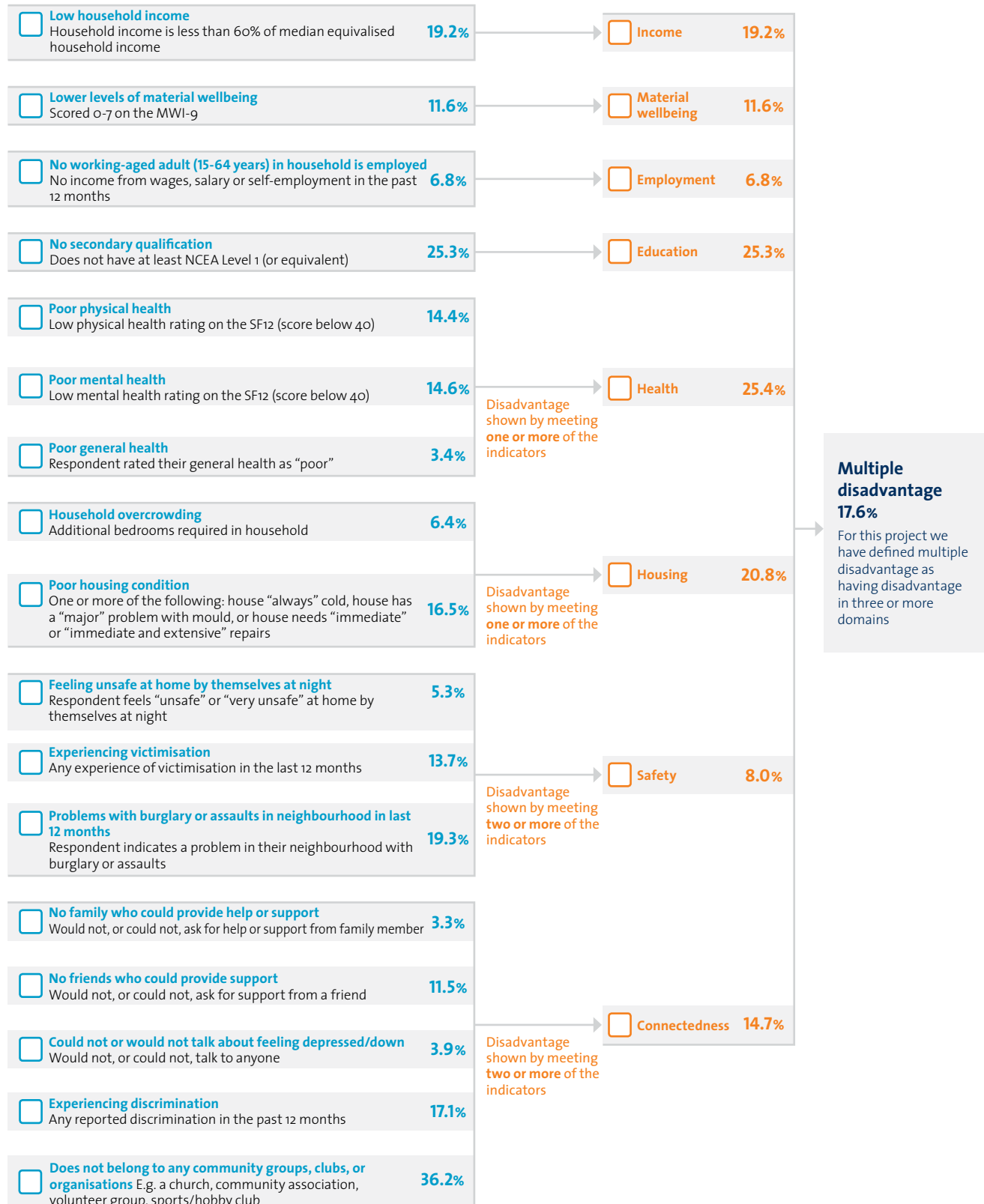
**Figure 6** \_ Indicators and life domains used to identify multiple disadvantage (General Social Survey 2014)

Percentages show the proportion of the total population aged 15 and above

**Indicators**

All indicators sourced from the New Zealand General Social Survey 2014

**Domains**



# 07

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