Moana Rarere

Māori Population Futures are Aotearoa New Zealand's Population Future

Abstract

Māori population futures are increasingly intertwined with the future prosperity of Aotearoa New Zealand. As the population ages, Māori are projected to comprise a growing share of the nation's children, young adults and working-age population. Drawing on the concept of the 'collateral demographic dividend', this article explores the demographic trends shaping Māori population futures and considers their broader significance for an ageing society. It argues that investments in Māori educational achievement, health and wellbeing, and economic participation generate benefits well beyond Māori communities. Understanding and supporting Māori population futures is therefore central to Aotearoa's long-term social, economic and demographic wellbeing.

Keywords Māori population futures, collateral demographic dividend, population ageing

Moana Rarere (Rongomaiwahine, Ngāti Kahungunu, Tūhoe, Whakatōhea) is a Senior Research Fellow in Demography and Population Studies at Te Ngira Institute for Population Research. Her research focuses on Māori/iwi demography, fertility, family formation, and Māori data sovereignty.

Aotearoa New Zealand's present socio-economic and demographic situation is often discussed through the lens of addressing population ageing and its accompanying fiscal challenges. Understandably so. For decades, population ageing has been looming as an impending crisis, primarily driven by the increasing longevity of the New Zealand European/Pākehā baby boom generation (born approximately between the mid-1940s and mid-1960s) and their entry into retirement, and declining fertility (New Zealand Institute of Economic Research, 2025; Preston, 2008). With a relatively shrinking working-age population, Aotearoa is faced with the steep challenge of driving economic growth while also financing expanding pensions, health services and aged care facilities (Bell, 2021). Anticipated by demographers, economists and policymakers, this demographic challenge has prompted a range of policy resets and initiatives. In terms of directly addressing the retirement system, policy changes have included the establishment

of the independent advisory body Te Ara Ahunga Ora Retirement Commission under the Retirement Income Act 1993 (now the New Zealand Superannuation and Retirement Income Act 2001), which is tasked with reviewing retirement income policies, promoting financial capability and monitoring the retirement villages sector (Retirement Commission, n.d.; 2025). On top of institutional arrangements, the government introduced a series of reforms designed to strengthen both public and private retirement provision. The most significant of these were the establishment of the New Zealand Superannuation Fund in 2001 and the introduction of the KiwiSaver scheme in 2007. Since then, successive governments have occasionally adjusted retirement income settings to manage fiscal pressures.

Immigration policy has also played a key role in shaping Aotearoa's demographic and economic future. Although immigration settings have generally been motivated by economic considerations, such as the need to address labour and skill shortages (Spoonley, 2015; Spoonley & Bedford, 2008), immigration has had the additional effect of strengthening the working-age population and mitigating some of the immediate workforce pressures associated with population ageing and/or retirement (Rensburg et al., 2021).

There is little doubt that population ageing will continue to be a defining feature of Aotearoa's demographic landscape and dominate political agendas and public discourse (see Annear et al., 2026; Pelletier, 2025; Stuff, 2026). However, the overwhelming focus on addressing population ageing and retirement risks overshadowing another demographic reality which may prove equally consequential, and beneficial, for Aotearoa's future. While Aotearoa is ageing overall, this trend primarily reflects the age structure of the dominant New Zealand European/Pākehā population. In contrast, the Māori population remains comparatively youthful and is projected to comprise an increasing share of the nation's future population, particularly among younger adult age groups and those entering the workforce.

Thus, Māori population futures are not simply a matter of interest for Māori communities, iwi or hapū, but are also increasingly central to Aotearoa's social, economic and cultural future. Recent calls for a national population strategy similarly argue that Aotearoa's demographic future cannot be understood solely through the lens of ageing but must also engage meaningfully with the distinct demographic circumstances of Māori (Kukutai et al., 2026). Understanding what this means for Aotearoa, and whether current policy settings are equipped to realise the opportunities it presents, is the focus of this article. Central to this discussion is notable demographer Natalie Jackson's concept of the 'collateral demographic dividend', which suggests that Aotearoa's youthful and growing populations may provide broader social and economic benefits as the overall population ages (Jackson, 2011).

Māori occupy a distinctive place within Aotearoa, not only as tangata whenua or indigenous peoples, but also as a growing share of the nation's population, communities and workforce.

However, caution is warranted to ensure that Māori population futures are not framed solely in terms of their contribution to national prosperity, thereby risking the instrumentalisation of Māori aspirations, wellbeing and development. A te Tiriti/Treaty of Waitangi-led approach requires that Māori futures be grounded first and foremost in the rights, aspirations and development goals of Māori communities themselves. While the demographic, social, economic and cultural contributions of a youthful Māori population may have broader significance for Aotearoa New Zealand, any such benefits should be understood as complementary to, rather than primary justification for, investment in Māori wellbeing. Moreover, if wider society is expected to benefit from Māori population futures, principles of reciprocity suggest corresponding obligations to support equitable outcomes, including investment in health, housing, asset development, and meaningful Māori participation in decisions about how the benefits of future growth are realised and shared.

While Pacific populations exhibit similar patterns of population growth and youthful age structures, and Asian populations will account for an increasing share of Aotearoa's workforce, the focus of this article is on the Māori population. This focus reflects not only the demographic significance of Māori as the largest youthful population group, but also their status as tangata whenua ('people of the land'). However, while the discussion is therefore centred on Māori, many of the broader implications are just as relevant to Pacific and Asian and other immigrant populations.

Furthermore, while immigration can help alleviate immediate workforce pressures, it does not diminish the importance of investing in the capabilities of populations already living in Aotearoa. The demographic opportunities presented by Māori population growth suggest that investing in the Māori population, such as in education, training and workforce development, should be equally viewed as an important long-term response to Aotearoa's demographic change.

Māori: a population of strategic importance to Aotearoa's future

Māori occupy a distinctive place within Aotearoa, not only as tangata whenua or indigenous peoples, but also as a growing share of the nation's population, communities and workforce. To appreciate the significance of Māori population futures, it is first necessary to consider how Māori are defined and measured as a population for statistical and public policy purposes.

There is no single statistical definition of the Māori population. Rather, different measures of 'Māori' serve different purposes, reflecting the social, political and policy contexts in which population data is collected and applied (see Kukutai, 2011). The Māori descent population, for example, comprised around one fifth (978,246) of Aotearoa's usually resident population (of 4,993,923) in the 2023 census (Statistics New Zealand, n.d.-c). This measure is of constitutional and political significance because Māori descent determines eligibility to enrol on the Māori electoral roll and influences the number of Māori electorates. In contrast, Māori ethnicity, which is more commonly used in social policy, health, education and population reporting, accounts for around 17% (887,493) of the population (Statistics New Zealand, n.d.-a).

A third measure relates to iwi (tribal) affiliation – kinship groupings based on whakapapa (genealogy). As at the 2023 census, 83% (807,468) of the Māori descent population identified with at least one iwi (Statistics New Zealand, n.d.-b). Iwi affiliation data provides critical insights for iwi in planning and development, enabling them to better understand the characteristics, wellbeing and aspirations of their members and informing decisions regarding economic development, social investment, housing, education and cultural revitalisation (Statistics New Zealand, 2023, 2025a). Iwi data is also important for monitoring the Crown's commitments and responsibilities towards Māori, including those arising from te Tiriti o Waitangi, and provides an evidence base through which outcomes for iwi members can be assessed and tracked over time (Statistics New Zealand, 2023).

Although these three measures capture somewhat different populations (Kukutai, 2011), they point towards the same demographic reality: that Māori constitute a significant and growing component of Aotearoa's population.

Historically, Māori population growth has not always been straightforward. The overall trend has been one of remarkable recovery and expansion (see Pool, 1991; Pool & Kukutai, 2014). Following severe population decline experienced during the latter part of the 19th century, Māori numbers began to recover in the early 20th century, with sustained growth occurring throughout much of the post-World War II period. In recent decades this growth has accelerated. The Māori population increased from approximately 357,000 in 1976 (census night count) to 978,000 in 2023 (census usually resident count) – about a 174% increase in less than 50 years. This growth has increased both the numerical significance and demographic influence of Māori within Aotearoa's wider population.

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This substantial growth has been driven primarily by natural increase, whereby births exceed deaths, with Māori maintaining higher fertility rates than the New Zealand European/Pākehā population for much of the 20th century and into the new millennium (see Pool, 1991). However, Māori population growth reflects more than demographic factors alone. It has also been shaped by changing patterns of ethnic identification and corresponding changes in statistical definitions and measurement, from descent-based and blood-quantum classifications to self-identified ethnicity (see Kukutai, 2011). Increased willingness to identify as Māori has contributed to Māori population growth over time, highlighting the socially constructed and dynamic nature of ethnic affiliation (Carter et al., 2009; Kukutai, 2007; Statistics New Zealand, 2025b; Yao et al., 2025). Accordingly, Statistics New Zealand accounts for inter-ethnic mobility (i.e., shifts in ethnic identification patterns) in its Māori population projections (Statistics New Zealand, 2025d, 2025e). However, while these factors may complicate the interpretation of Māori population trends, they do not alter the broader demographic reality that Māori are an increasingly significant component of Aotearoa's present and future population.

Although Māori fertility has slowly declined over the last decade or so, it remains a key driver of Māori population growth and future demographic change (Statistics New Zealand, 2025c, 2026). This is particularly important in a national and international context characterised by declining birth rates and, in many cases now, sub-replacement fertility (fewer than 2.1 births per child-bearing-age woman) (United Nations, 2025). Aotearoa has experienced sub-replacement fertility since 2014, and now records a historical low of 1.5 births per woman (Statistics New Zealand, 2026). Yet Māori fertility remains higher, at around 1.9 births per woman (Statistics New Zealand, 2026), and is coupled with a youthful age structure, the reasons for which are not yet fully understood. Together these characteristics generate demographic momentum that will continue to shape Māori population futures.

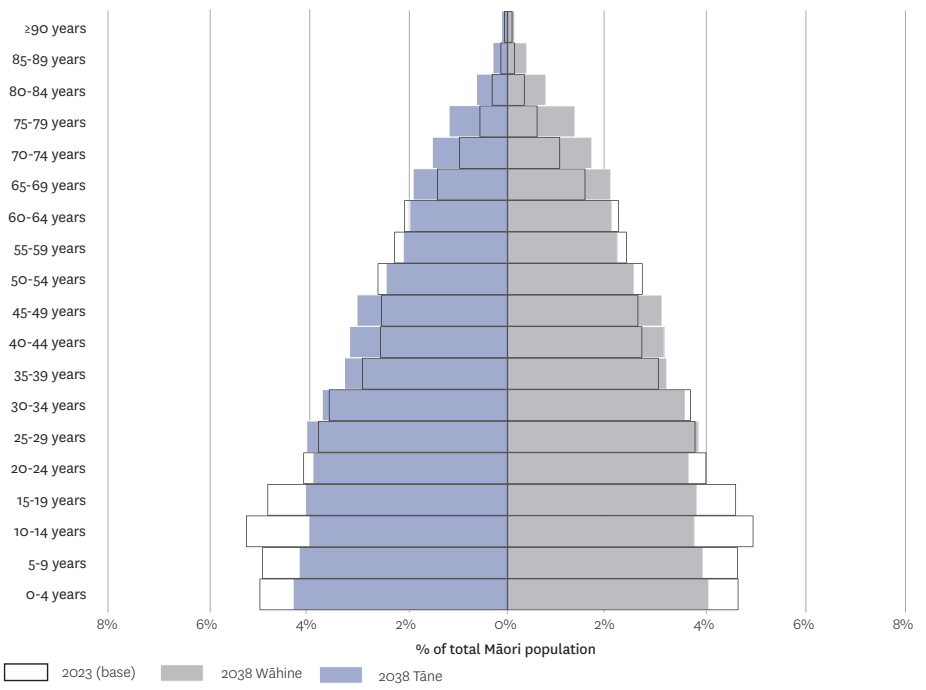
Looking ahead, the Māori share of the population is expected to grow further over coming decades (Statistics New Zealand, n.d.-d). This growth reflects both the comparatively youthful age structure of the Māori population and the demographic momentum generated by larger cohorts of tamariki (children) and rangatahi (teens and young adults) moving through the life course (Figure 1). As a result, Māori will comprise an increasingly important share of children, young adults, workers, parents and future leaders.

These demographic trends have implications that extend well beyond population statistics. They raise fundamental questions about whose futures are being considered in long-term policy planning and investment decisions. If Māori are projected to make up an increasing share of future generations, the policies concerning education, housing, employment, health, infrastructure and environmental stewardship are, quite significantly, policies about Māori futures. Beyond the Crown's obligations under te Tiriti o Waitangi, Māori wellbeing has broader implications for Aotearoa's future social, economic and cultural development.

While Māori are projected to comprise an increasing share of the population, Aotearoa's demographic future is also being reshaped by international migration. Continued reliance on immigration to support population growth, labour force participation, productivity and economic development is contributing to a more diverse population than at any previous point in the country's colonial history. For policymakers, this means planning for a future that is simultaneously more multicultural and more Māori. Acknowledging Māori as tangata whenua alongside an increasingly diverse population presents both opportunities and responsibilities, requiring policy frameworks that are attentive to indigenous rights, demographic change and social cohesion.

On the other hand, any consideration of Māori population futures must also account for the ongoing trans-Tasman migration and Māori diaspora, which redistributes people, skills, resources and whānau networks. Of course, these movements affect both the size and composition of Māori populations and highlight the transnational nature of contemporary Māori demographic change, with implications for identity and whānau wellbeing on both sides of the Tasman (see Brown et al., 2025).

Figure 1: Age & sex structure of Māori estimated resident population, 2023(base) projected to 2038



Source: Stats NZ, National ethnic population projections, by age and sex, 2023(base)-2048 (50th percentile / median scenario)

Māori youthfulness and Aotearoa's ageing society: a collateral demographic dividend

As argued above, Māori population futures warrant attention because they are increasingly intertwined with the future wellbeing and prosperity of an ageing Aotearoa, the majority of whom are of European descent. It is within this context that Natalie Jackson (2011) proposed the notion of a 'collateral demographic dividend', arising not from demographic change within a single population (under the classical 'demographic dividend' model) but from the coexistence of populations at different stages of the demographic transition. In an international context characterised by sub-replacement fertility and population ageing, Aotearoa's comparatively youthful Māori population represents a demographic asset that relatively few countries can draw upon.

The concept of a collateral demographic dividend invites a reframing of how Māori population change is understood within contemporary Aotearoa. Rather than viewing Māori demographic growth solely as an indigenous demographic phenomenon, Jackson's framework highlights its wider societal significance. While Māori remain comparatively youthful, the predominantly European population is substantially older and advancing more rapidly through the process of population ageing. Jackson argues that these contrasting age structures collectively form an 'economic dividend system' (p. 66), creating opportunities that extend beyond Māori communities to the wider national economy.

It is important to note here that while Jackson clearly locates the first demographic dividend within the context of the Māori demographic transition (1960s–70s), she was less definitive about the timing of the collateral demographic dividend. Rather than providing a discrete period, she presents it as an emerging opportunity associated with the coexistence of a relatively youthful Māori population alongside a structurally older and increasingly ageing European-origin population. The collateral dividend is therefore best understood not as a bounded demographic phase, but as a set of opportunities arising from the growing demographic interdependence between younger Māori populations and an ageing national population – which is happening right now.

More than a decade after Jackson first articulated the concept, the relevance of the collateral demographic dividend arguably extends beyond workforce replacement alone. As Aotearoa confronts the fiscal, social and economic implications of population ageing, the significance of Māori demographic vitality becomes increasingly apparent. A youthful and growing Māori population contributes not only to future workforce renewal, but also to the tax base, productivity growth, innovation, community resilience, and the

provision of services and care upon which older populations depend. In this sense, Māori population growth and Māori wellbeing are central to the long-term sustainability of an ageing Aotearoa.

Against the background of an ageing Aotearoa, which primarily reflects the age structure of the New Zealand European/Pākehā population, the demand for healthcare, aged residential care, income support and other age-related services and infrastructure is expected to significantly increase; indeed, this is unfolding right before us. Meeting these demands will require a sufficiently large, skilled, healthy and productive workforce capable of supporting the needs of older generations. Demographically, the future workforce that will sustain Aotearoa's economy, services and ageing population will be increasingly Māori and increasingly diverse. Ensuring that these populations can thrive is therefore not simply a matter of equity or Treaty obligations, important though these are; it is also central to Aotearoa's long-term social and economic resilience.

Māori population futures are also intrinsically linked to the future growth of the Māori economy (te ōhanga) and iwi development. The Māori economy has become an increasingly significant contributor to Aotearoa's economic prosperity, driven by a diverse asset base spanning primary industries, property, tourism, fisheries and various other sectors. In 2023, the Māori economy contributed $32 billion (8.9% of GDP) to Aotearoa, up from $17 billion (6.5% of GDP) in 2018 (Schulze et al., 2024). These estimates should be interpreted with some caution, as they depend on how the 'Māori economy' is defined and measured, and may not fully reflect the broader social, cultural and environmental value created by Māori communities. Rangatahi Māori will play an increasingly important role in sustaining economic growth, innovation and productivity. Investments in Māori education (including te reo Māori), skills development and wellbeing are therefore critical not only for supporting individual and whānau aspirations, but also for strengthening the Māori economy and advancing the long-term development aspirations of iwi and Māori communities.

From the perspective of Māori population futures, Pūhoro is just one compelling example of how demographic potential can be transformed into demographic advantage.

Pūhoro STEMM Academy: a model of investment in rangatahi Māori and a future-focused Aotearoa

One contemporary example of strategic investment in Māori population futures, and Aotearoa's population future, is the Pūhoro STEMM Academy. Established in 2016, Pūhoro (now a charitable trust) was created to address the historically low participation rates and under-representation of Māori within the science, technology, engineering, mathematics and mātauranga Māori (STEMM) fields by supporting rangatahi through secondary school and tertiary education, and into employment. Its kaupapa (purpose) is founded on strengthening engagement and achievement in STEMM while simultaneously affirming Māori identity and mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge systems). Through partnerships with schools, tertiary institutions, iwi, industry and government agencies, Pūhoro seeks to improve educational outcomes, increase participation in high-value STEMM careers, and create pathways through which Māori can contribute to both Māori and national development aspirations (Pūhoro, n.d.-b, n.d.-c).

Importantly, Pūhoro's approach extends beyond conventional educational interventions. By integrating mātauranga Māori with the modern science disciplines (i.e., STEM), and providing mentoring, hands-on learning experiences, internships, scholarships and ongoing pastoral support, the programme aims to ensure that rangatahi are not only prepared for tertiary study and employment, but are equipped to become future leaders, innovators and knowledge holders. In doing so, Pūhoro directly addresses the type of human-capital investment that the 'demographic dividend' theory identifies as necessary if youthful populations are to realise their full economic, social and cultural potential:

> By empowering rangatahi to take up STEMM pathways and bridging the underrepresentation gap in the STEM workforce, Māori can feel inspired and supported to demonstrate the interconnections between mātauranga Māori and modern science. (Pūhoro, n.d.-a)

The success and impact of Pūhoro over the last ten years demonstrates the substantial returns that can arise from investing in Māori capability. From an initial cohort of just under 100 students, the programme has expanded to support thousands of rangatahi across numerous regions, schools and iwi throughout Aotearoa (Pūhoro, n.d.-c;). An independent impact report (Whitehead & Hingston, 2021) found that Pūhoro participants achieve significantly improved educational outcomes and are five times more likely to transition into tertiary education and STEMM-related pathways than other Māori school leavers (Pūhoro STEMM Academy, 2022).

Economic assessments of the programme have further indicated that these educational gains generate benefits extending well beyond individual participants. A 2024 cost–benefit analysis estimated that every dollar invested in Pūhoro generates positive economic returns, with total net benefits exceeding $123 million across its secondary and tertiary programmes. The analysis further concluded that Pūhoro contributes to regional economic development, employment creation and wider social benefits, including enhanced wellbeing,

increased civic participation, and improved long-term life opportunities for participants and their whānau (Environmental Science Research et al., 2024). Programmes such as Pūhoro align closely with the current government's science and research aspirations as articulated in the *Science Investment Plan 2026–2036* (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2026). This plan outlines the current government's national strategic priorities and long-term investment profile for the science and innovation system around four pillars: technology for prosperity; primary industries and bioeconomy; environment sustainability and resilience; and healthy people and a thriving society.

From the perspective of Māori population futures, Pūhoro is just one compelling example of how demographic potential can be transformed into demographic advantage. As Jackson's notion of the collateral demographic dividend suggests, the benefits of investing in youthful Māori populations extend beyond Māori communities themselves. In a society characterised by population ageing and increasing demand for highly skilled workers, programmes such as Pūhoro strengthen the future workforce, expand the stock of human capital, and enhance the productive capacity upon which the wellbeing of an ageing population ultimately depends. Pūhoro therefore illustrates how strategic investment in rangatahi can simultaneously advance Māori aspirations while contributing to the broader social and economic resilience of Aotearoa.

Public policy implications

The example discussed above underscores an important lesson from the demographic dividend theory: population trends create opportunities, but policy enables whether those opportunities are realised. Nevertheless, the capacity of policy to shape demographic and economic outcomes is neither unlimited nor unconstrained, being contingent on prevailing economic conditions, fiscal capacity and competing political priorities. For this reason, demographic change should not only inform programme design but continue to prompt periodic reassessment of the policy and budget settings that govern public investment. Just as long-term fiscal and overlapping-generations modelling has been used to evaluate the implications of population ageing for future public expenditure, changing Māori population dynamics warrant similar strategic consideration. Revisiting current settings through a demographic lens may help identify investments that generate benefits not only for Māori communities but also for Aotearoa's longer-term economic and fiscal wellbeing.

> At a time when labour shortages, population ageing and skills constraints are becoming more pronounced, underinvestment in Māori human capital – both tamariki and rangatahi – risks weakening one of Aotearoa's most significant demographic advantages.

The Treasury's 2025 long-term fiscal statement (Treasury, 2025) rightly identifies population ageing as one of the most significant long-term fiscal challenges facing Aotearoa, with increasing expenditure on superannuation and healthcare expected to place growing pressure on public finances over coming decades. It also emphasises the importance of improving productivity and strengthening future economic performance as part of maintaining fiscal sustainability. However, while considerable attention is devoted to the fiscal costs associated with demographic ageing, comparatively little attention is given to the demographic opportunities arising from the changing composition of Aotearoa's population, particularly the growth and youthful age structure of the Māori population. This omission is notable given that, as discussed, Māori are among the youngest population groups in Aotearoa and will make an increasingly important contribution to future labour force growth, economic participation and tax revenue generation.

Yet the benefits associated with Māori demographic youthfulness are not automatic consequences of age structure alone. Rather, they depend on sustained investments in education, training, employment pathways, health, housing, and broader forms of social and economic infrastructure. In this regard, the Pūhoro STEMM Academy is an example of how demographic potential can be translated into tangible educational, economic and social outcomes. Importantly, Pūhoro demonstrates that the realisation of a collateral demographic dividend is dependent not solely on the scale of government expenditure, but also on the ability of institutions to work collectively towards shared long-term goals. Through a model of multi-agency investment and partnership, Pūhoro aligns resources and expertise from government agencies, iwi, industry, education and community stakeholders to support rangatahi aspirations and achievement. This collaborative approach illustrates how demographic opportunities can be converted into long-term gains in ways that are both effective and fiscally sustainable.

Against this backdrop, recent changes to funding and support for workforce development programmes raise important questions about Aotearoa's preparedness for its demographic future. While the National-led government has committed $69 million in Budget 2026 to expand trade academy placements, there appears to be little direct commitment to targeted initiatives such as Māori trade training programmes (Treasury, 2026). In contrast, the Labour Party has proposed investing $21 million annually in

Māori-led skills training (New Zealand Labour Party, n.d.). These policy choices matter because growing evidence suggests that Aotearoa's future economic resilience will increasingly depend on the success of younger people entering, remaining in and contributing to the domestic workforce. Equally important, however, is the availability of meaningful employment opportunities. Investments in education and skills development can only realise their full value if accompanied by labour market conditions capable of retaining talent and providing pathways into productive employment. Failure to align these elements risks undermining precisely the forms of capability development that demographic dividend frameworks, including Jackson's 'collateral demographic dividend', identify as critical for converting youthful population structures into sustained economic and sociocultural gains. At a time when labour shortages, population ageing and skills constraints are becoming more pronounced, underinvestment in Māori human capital – both tamariki and rangatahi – risks weakening one of Aotearoa's most significant demographic advantages.

More broadly, the demographic realities outlined in this article suggest a need to place population considerations at the centre of policymaking. Regardless of the political composition of future governments, there is a strong case for adopting a longer-term population strategy that recognises the importance of Māori population futures to Aotearoa's collective wellbeing (Kukutai et al., 2026). Such an approach would move beyond short electoral cycles and acknowledge that investments made today in the education, health, skills and wellbeing of rangatahi will shape the nation's social and economic capacity for decades to come. If Māori demographic vitality represents a strategic national asset, as Jackson's notion of the collateral demographic dividend suggests, then supporting Māori population futures should be viewed not simply as a matter of indigenous development or social justice, but as an essential component of Aotearoa's response to population ageing and long-term demographic change.

As Aotearoa continues to experience sustained sub-replacement fertility, understanding the demographic processes shaping future population growth and wellbeing becomes increasingly important. To date, policy responses to workforce and labour market pressures have relied heavily on immigration. While migration will undoubtedly remain an important component of population and economic policy, the demographic trends discussed in this article suggest that greater attention should be directed towards nurturing the capabilities and contributions of populations already present in Aotearoa. In this context, investment in Māori population futures should be understood not as a competing priority, but as a complementary and strategically important response to the demographic challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

For several decades, demographic evidence has pointed to an ageing population, changing labour force dynamics, increasing ethnic diversity, and the growing strategic importance of Māori as a comparatively youthful population.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Māori population futures are not peripheral to Aotearoa's demographic futures; they are central to it. While other contributions to this issue of *Policy Quarterly* examine population challenges through the lenses of health equity, migration, climate change, fiscal sustainability, retirement income and population data quality, this article has highlighted the importance of viewing the future through a Māori demographic lens. Together, these diverse perspectives reinforce a common message: demographic change will profoundly shape Aotearoa's future sociocultural, economic and fiscal wellbeing. Māori population futures are a critical part of that story, alongside the youthful trajectories of Pacific populations and the increasing diversity generated through international migration. Responding effectively to these changes requires more than broad-brush policy approaches. It requires a population-informed perspective that recognises the distinct demographic trajectories, opportunities and challenges unfolding across communities, regions and generations.

For several decades, demographic evidence has pointed to an ageing population, changing labour force dynamics, increasing ethnic diversity, and the growing strategic importance of Māori as a comparatively youthful population. The challenge for policymakers, public officials, and governments of all political persuasions is therefore not whether these trends should influence policy, but how best to respond to them. Policies informed by demographic realities rather than short-term political priorities are more likely to position Aotearoa to act proactively rather than reactively, enabling the country to anticipate future challenges while capitalising on emerging opportunities.

The case of Māori population futures illustrates both the opportunities and risks associated with demographic change. Although Māori remain one of the youngest populations in Aotearoa, future growth is expected to moderate as fertility rates continue to decline and the Māori population itself ages, based on current life expectancy assumptions. A more pressing issue, though, is achieving equity in healthy life expectancy. Meanwhile, the number of older New Zealanders, particularly among the New Zealand European/Pākehā population, will continue to increase. These trends suggest that the demographic advantages associated with Māori youthfulness cannot be assumed

to persist indefinitely. As Jackson (2011) observed, demographic dividends are best understood as windows of opportunity rather than permanent conditions. Whether the collateral demographic dividend is already unfolding, or whether some of its potential has been diminished through historical underinvestment in Māori capability and wellbeing, is ultimately less important than recognising the opportunities that remain. The critical question is whether policymakers will act upon them.

Ultimately, demographic futures are not predetermined. Population trends shape the opportunities and constraints that societies face, but their outcomes are influenced by the choices governments, institutions, communities and individuals make in response. If Aotearoa is serious about addressing population ageing, sustaining economic productivity, supporting regional development and strengthening social wellbeing, then Māori population futures must occupy a more central place within demographic and policy discussions. Investment in Māori education, health, housing, skills, science, innovation and employment pathways should not be viewed solely as an indigenous policy concern. Rather, it should be understood as a strategic investment in Aotearoa's long-term demographic, economic and social resilience.

As Aotearoa enters an era of sustained sub-replacement fertility and population ageing, understanding the demographic forces shaping the country's future becomes increasingly important. The demographic evidence presented in this article suggests that Māori population futures represent both a significant opportunity and a national responsibility. Whether Aotearoa realises the benefits associated with that future will depend not only on demographic trends themselves, but on the willingness to recognise Māori population potential as a cornerstone of the nation's collective prosperity and wellbeing.

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