

Len Cook

Lessons from Child Welfare

why accountability to ministers cannot meet the needs of public legitimacy.

Abstract

It is an historical fact that tamariki Māori are over-represented in Aotearoa New Zealand's child welfare system, with a recent disproportionate increase in that over-representation. The recent spotlight on the removal of babies and, in particular, several highly visible examples in the media of attempted removals of babies, however, has once again raised the issue of the legitimacy of state involvement in ensuring the care and protection of children among Māori. Increased accountability and transparency is one vital step towards restoring the public legitimacy of the child welfare system.

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This article examines the factors that led to and exacerbated the most recent crisis in Māori views of the legitimacy of the child welfare system, and details contextual factors both common among state actors and unique to New Zealand's child welfare system that influence systems of accountability. I conclude by providing a set of key factors that are imperative when moving towards increased systemic accountability of the child welfare system – factors that acknowledge and incorporate the historical legacy, current socio-economic position, and the significance of whānau and family.

Keywords child welfare, Māori, families, public sector, legitimacy

I say: take no thought of the harvest, but only of proper sowing. — T.S. Eliot

Māori reaction to the recent disproportionate increase in the share of Māori children in state care has again put a spotlight on the legitimacy to Māori of how the state is involved in the care and protection of children. Specifically, this recent spotlight has been firmly fixed on the number of – and ways in which – babies are removed from their parents and whānau. There were attempts by whānau and healthcare professionals to prevent some of the nearly 300 forced baby removals in 2018, and a small share of these attempts have been become highly visible to the public through first-hand videos and accounts (Kaiwai et al., 2020; Oranga Tamariki, 2019).

In part, then, because of these two trends – the historical legacy of over-representation and recent publicly visible trauma when babies are taken from new mothers – the legitimacy of the child welfare system and fundamental elements of these services have come into question among Māori. Thus, understanding the role and restoration of public legitimacy for public services has taken on greater importance, particularly in the context of New Zealand’s child welfare system. In this article, the term legitimacy is used in the sense of public acceptance, rather than statutory compliance. Where there is tension between these two aspects, or of meeting te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations, enforcing statutory obligations requires either strong forms of accountability, or further authority.

This article will explore the current system complexities and historical legacies that complicate restoring the public legitimacy of the child welfare system, provide a statistical portrait of tamariki Māori in care and their providers, and point to aspects and conditions of the child welfare system that can move towards a restoration of accountability and public legitimacy.

Systemic and institutional legacy complicates current public legitimacy

The issues in disentangling the factors that are behind the most recent questioning of the legitimacy of the child welfare system in protecting and caring for tamariki Māori are multifaceted and complex. Compounding this complexity is the difficulty the state encounters in understanding and engaging with whānau,

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and the implications of its obligations to the Treaty of Waitangi with respect to tamariki Māori. Systemic, policy and institutional change is voiced by Māori as the way of bringing legitimacy and transparency to the way Māori view the state’s role in ensuring the care and protection of children.

Systemic context

The historical legacy of a child protection system which has now seen multiple generations within families come in contact with it has conditioned actors within the system to see these families as more ‘at risk’. For example, it is not clear how far practice today is informed by the long reach of historical experience and its disparate influence on communities, particularly Māori. As the focus of child welfare has shifted from the perceived delinquency of children to the perceived inadequacy of parents, practices need to be challenged to ensure that come-at-ability¹ and redress fit new obligations of legitimacy. Political legitimacy needs to include openness of the contemporary context within which the child welfare system as a whole operates to care for children and connect with family and whānau. When this openness is not provided institutionally by the state, then the state by default demands that its front-line staff provide resolution of the doubts of those who question the absence of political legitimacy in some of the communities in which they work. This is the role of the system, and this cannot be substituted for by individuals.

As another example, a much larger share of Māori adults have been through state custody compared with any other ethnic group. Because whānau Māori involve a much larger ‘family circle’, historical contact by whānau members with the state’s childcare and justice systems increases the possibility that young Māori who wish to be mothers will be more likely

Table 1: State removal of babies from mothers, Māori and total, 2012–18

Year ended	Removals			Removals per 1,000 births		
	Total	Māori	Non-Māori	Total	Māori	Non-Māori
2012	225			3.7		
2013	216			3.6		
2014	227			3.9		
2015	211	110	101	3.5	6.7	2.3
2016	247	147	100	4.2	8.9	2.4
2017	275	178	97	4.7	10.9	2.3
2018	281	179	102	4.7	10.3	2.4

Source: Oranga Tamariki Official Information Act response 24/10/2017 and 19/10/2018: population rates calculated by the writer

Table 2: Number of children taken into care (0–17 years) and deaths by intentional injury among children (0–9 years)

Year	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Children (0–17 years) in care	5,044	6,136	5,689	5,446	5,020	4,979
Deaths of children (0–9 years)	3	4	11	4	6	4

Source: Children in care of CYF: Oranga Tamariki; deaths of children: Health Quality and Safety Commission child mortality reports of children, including death resulting from intentional injury

to appear as a risk, even if the tests themselves that focus on previous contact with the justice or child protection services were designed to be administered without bias. The culmination of historical factors, demographic and social structures and prearranged monitoring strengthen the shadow cast by past bias and predetermine the outcome of selection criteria. Additions to the selection criteria by the statutory child protection and care system widen the gap between the opportunities of motherhood faced by Māori and by other women even when they have the same likelihood of being a good mother.

Systemically, then, these dual factors have potentially established a structure that both undervalues Māori views of a just system and reinforces existing inequalities in system contact that self-perpetuate in practice.

Institutional context

Child welfare services are extensive in reach, are diverse in organisational forms and beliefs, and involve fundamental contributions by citizens (rather than the state). The characteristics that are needed to make any such complex system work are a common focus, mutual trust and respect, strong collaboration, shared knowledge and continuous improvement. A good number of case studies report that too few of these characteristics are seen across child welfare services at present (Kaiwai et

al., 2020; Keddell, 2019). It raises issues of accountability and legitimacy when the accountabilities placed on public service agencies become focused on the efficiency of the agency rather than their impact on the wider communities they were set up to serve.

The Family Court provides independent oversight through the need for its approval of the most critical decisions involving individual cases, particularly regarding custody. The Office of the Children’s Commissioner has an oversight role that is systemic. We know little about how and when the parts of the state’s childcare and protection system interact where it includes social workers, police, midwives, hospitals, obstetricians, lawyers and non-governmental organisations. Measuring agency efficiency is not an effective means of assurance of system accountability. This means that critical components of the statutory childcare and protection system can escape effective scrutiny because of the weak accountability for some other part.

Moreover, the state child protection system comprises different professional and institutional structures and cultures. Each of these have embedded in them attitudes to risk and these differ across medical, legal and welfare cultures, police, different civil service groups, community sector organisations and iwi Māori, as well as judges and politicians. Thresholds of risk can become volatile after sentinel events,

resource shifts or shifts in policy direction. Conflicting views on practice or philosophical matters that are not properly confronted can affect trust within the wider family and whānau welfare system. As an example, and pertinent to the current crisis in legitimacy, resolution appears necessary on whether or not there are very different views held by midwives and social workers on the way a mother should connect with her baby immediately after birth in the event that a forcible removal of a baby has been planned.

With this systemic and institutional context in mind, I next provide a statistical portrait of tamariki Māori in child protection, and identify key features of public services that should be in focus for a child welfare system concerned about Māori public legitimacy.

A brief statistical overview of Māori and child protection

The 2015 report *Investing in New Zealand’s Children and their Families* estimated that during their childhood, one in five children overall would have had some experience of the care and protection system by the time they reached 17 years (Expert Advisory Panel on Modernising Child, Youth and Family, 2015, p.41). Since 2015 the number of babies removed from mothers by the state has increased by one third, with all except one of those 70 more babies being Māori (see Table 1).

The past has a long reach, affecting trust and attitudes to state custody today among older generations of Māori men and women. The grandparents and even great-grandparents of some of today’s tamariki Māori will have been subject to the closed adoptions enabled by the 1955 Adoption Act, as teenage mothers, fathers or babies. It is estimated that during the peak period between 1944 and 1980 some 87,000 babies of mainly teenage unmarried mothers and fathers were placed in adoption, with many of those mothers placed under duress. The father was often not recorded on the birth certificate (Haenga-Collins, 2017).

Table 2 shows the most recent glaring example of escalation in removal into state care occurring during 2008, following the highly publicised deaths of the Kahui twins (2006) and Nia Glassy (August 2007). Deaths by intentional injury over the same

period are presented as well. During 2008 the number of children aged under 17 years taken into the care and protection of Child, Youth and Family increased by 1,092, a 21.6% jump from 2007. In the following three years the number in care fell back to below its previous level, and it did not exceed the 2007 level again until 2014.

Ethnic inequality in rates of care entries and in care

Although these numbers provide an illustrative picture of the historical role of the child welfare system, they do not speak directly to how these patterns either exacerbate or narrow ethnic inequalities in the system. Complicating this picture is a lack of regular and consistent statistical reporting over the long term.² Furthermore, knowing what is being counted and what the relationship of each statistic is to the others is critical in understanding trends in disproportionate treatment of tamariki Māori by the state. Counts of the number in care, of the number who enter care and of the number who exit care all provide different insights into the system.

Since July 2017, information provided by Oranga Tamariki on child care and protection has been dominated by entry to care counts (Figure 1), whereas almost all counts published up to June 2017 by the Ministry of Social Development are of those in the custody of the state (Figure 2). The different counts are neither proxies nor substitutes for each other in deriving measures of disparity. Unless trends in entry to care are seen in the context of both exits from care and the counts of those who remain in the care of the state, it is not possible to adequately examine trends in the disproportionate number of tamariki Māori being taken into care. For short-term trend comparisons, having the three counts is essential, especially because they can easily move in different ways, as is happening at present.

Between 2001 and 2011, tamariki Māori were 3.4 times more likely than non-Māori to enter state care. Since 2012, the disproportionate entry of tamariki Māori into care has averaged 4.6 times that of non-Māori. The disproportionate increase in the number held in care has been similar to that of entries, with the comparable average level of disproportionality between Māori and

Figure 1: Entry into care of MSD/Oranga Tamariki: number and incidence rate by ethnicity

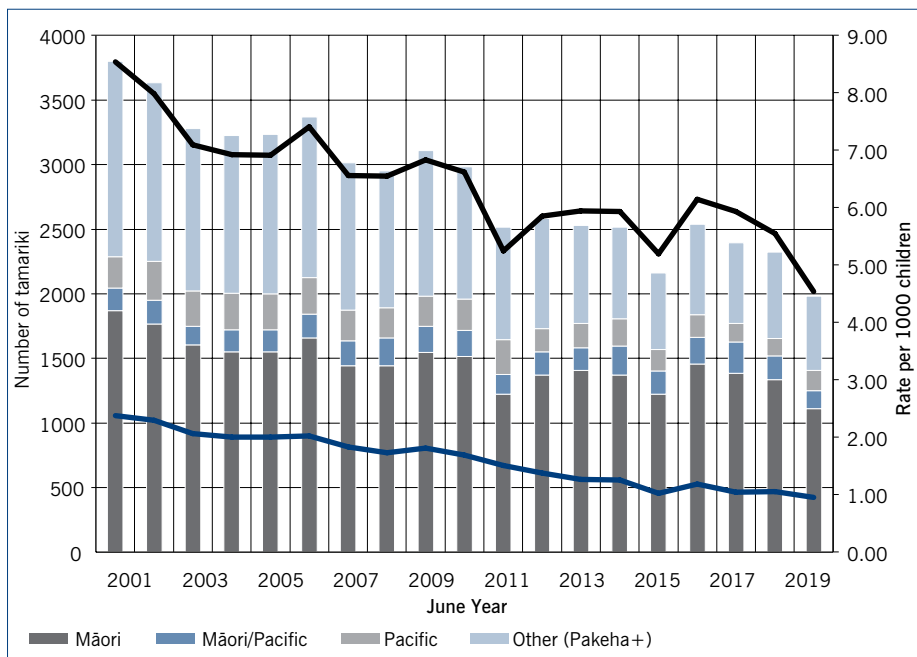
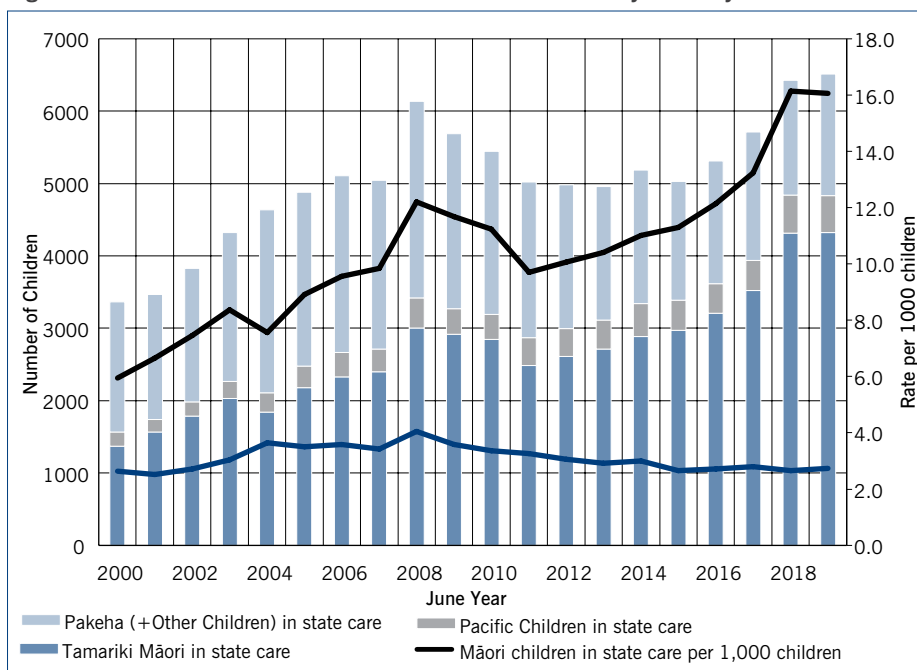


Figure 2: Children in state care: number and incidence rate by ethnicity

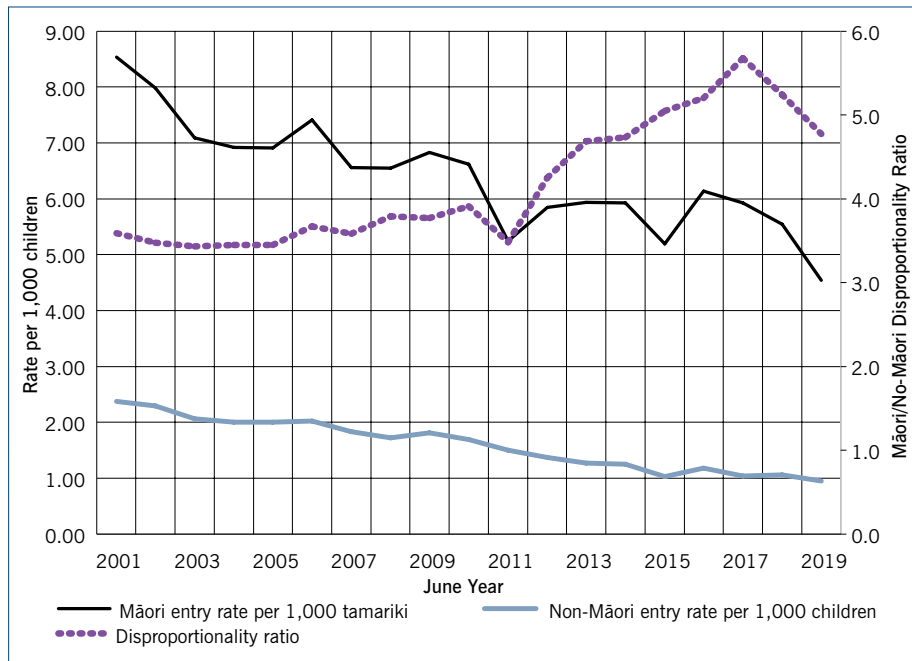


non-Māori over the same periods changing from 2.8 to 4.0 times. After several years of relative stability near those around year 2000, from 2005 there has been a continuing expansion in the disproportionate rate with which tamariki Māori compared to non-Māori are in state care. Although the actual counts of care entries have declined over the past decade, this provides no indication of current trends in disproportionality in either entry to care or the number now in the custody of the state for care and protection. A shift upward³ in the disproportionate removal of tamariki Māori

(Figure 3) occurred from 2012 and this has been sustained since. The trend increase in disproportionality as estimated by comparing the rate ratios has occurred despite the fall in incidence of removals for both tamariki Māori and non-Māori children over the period from 2000 to 2018, because the incidence of state care for non-Māori declined faster than that for Māori.

State care accounts for one in 65⁴ of all Māori children aged 17 and under in New Zealand, compared with one in 400 of all other children. State custody of children has disproportionately affected Māori for

Figure 3: Entry to care of children/tamariki: incidence rate by ethnicity and ethnic disproportionality ratio



some 70 years, most particularly in the decade after 1972/73 but also since that period. Between the late 1980s and 2000 the disproportionality was lower than before and after this period. During the period which lasted through to 1986, Māori girls experienced a similar rise in being placed in custody at about one third the rate of Māori boys.

The state and whānau

The wider family or whānau is the dominant means by which children are cared for when the state removes them from the care of their parents. Whānau and families care for more than twice as many (nearly 30,000) children in the child welfare system as do statutory services (Angus, 2014). These carers often give up jobs to do this through personal choice and obligation. In such situations there can be support from the child welfare system, including families and whānau. Iwi and Māori health and social service providers also work alongside whānau to support the directions they set (for example, the Whānau Ora model).

Seeking a whānau voice in the child welfare services of the state has been obligatory in law since the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act (now Oranga Tamariki Act) 1989. Up until now, however, this voice has been weakly heard or avoided, so that whānau have had few

means or resources by which to hold the childcare and protection system of the state to account for how whānau members enter this statutory system or are treated in it. Child welfare services have operated in the past in a wider environment where whānau characteristics are not recognised in regular statistics; nor has much of the history of research and scholarship played a part in policy or practice. When whānau are recognised they are most often seen through an extended nuclear family lens. There has been little place for their resourcefulness or distinctiveness to be recognised or valued, bringing a poorly recognised bias in service delivery. VOYCE – Whakarongo Mai is a start to reversing this. The Pua-te-Ata-Tu report of 1988 (Ministerial Advisory Committee on a Maori Perspective for the Department of Social Welfare, 1988) remains a major point of reference for assessing how significant challenges by Māori to the legitimacy of state action need to be addressed. The expert review of 2015 (Expert Advisory Panel on Modernising Child, Youth and Family, 2015) was the most recent of many to report on progress.

The formalised processes by which families and whānau can hold to account the statutory childcare and protection services have been shown to be weak. Weakness in accountability is a consequence of and contributes to a cultural bias against

Māori which has long had a disproportionate effect on Māori children. It is the personal experiences with the agencies of the state which deal with children of today’s mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers, or their relatives and friends, that have the most relevance at a local level in how the legitimacy of the state is judged. Current practices cannot ignore the way that past racism and colonialism will determine the response of many to the child welfare services of the state. That history is also embedded in the evidence base that determines the nature and operation of the selection criteria now and into the future.

Accountability

In New Zealand, giving an agency of the state the power to break up families and to remove children in order to protect a child from continuing or anticipated harm is a dimension of family policy that is embedded in statute. Where it has reason, the state can choose to enforce its legal authority, systems and resources on any individual family or whānau, usually subject to the approval of the Family Court. Overseeing the nature of this authority, its reach and the potential for disempowerment of families by the way the authority is applied cannot be met by any general means of accountability intended by Parliament for the oversight of the executive. The place of retrospective as well as prospective testing of the trustworthiness of the means used to act on this exceptional and potentially severe use of a statutory authority has yet to be established by the Ministry of Social Development. Despite the absence of such testing, it is a necessary basis for community acceptance of the legitimacy of how such authority is applied.

There are few means by which the state is held to account once the Family Court gives approval. Transparency is not enough, as the self-reporting of the practices of operational activity limits scrutiny of decision-making processes, as well as of how underlying models of care and protection are evaluated and applied in practice. In New Zealand, the Independent Police Complaints Authority originated from how police responded to the Bastion Point and Springbok tour protests of 1978

and 1981. The Independent Taxation Review Authority and the Health and Disability Commissioner both originated from a similar need to reinforce trust not in policy, but in how public servants put it into practice. British philosopher Onora O’Neill has noted:

To be accountable is not merely to carry a range of tasks or obligations, for example to provide medical treatment to those in need, to make benefit payments to those entitled to them, or to keep proper accounts. It is also to carry a further range of second-order tasks and obligations to provide an account of or evidence of the standard to which those primary tasks and obligations are discharged, typically to third parties, and often to prescribed third parties. (O’Neill, 2009)

Because of the different institutional cultures and incentives of those who may play a part in determining the outcomes for any individual child, oversight needs to be able to open a unique window on bodies that have varying degrees of independence in how they meet their statutory obligations. This includes those to whānau. The oversight of the state’s childcare and protection system has to extend beyond agency performance measures and strategic plans by bringing a genuine understanding of the workings of the whole child welfare system. It must recognise the importance of parents, family and whānau in the usual independent resolution of short-term or longer breakdown in the care of children.

The science that influences thinking about child protection has seen major changes and significant reversals over the past 70 years since the professionalisation of social work began to evolve. The transparency and validation of the application of science should be a matter of periodic scrutiny. In particular, this concerns theories of child removal and adoption, trauma, social work training and methods of quality assurance. Early research by the Department of Social Welfare into the experiences of birth mothers following adoption pointed to a high need for understanding and ensuring ways of managing the impact on the

In practice, in whatever way the tensions between responsiveness and the sufficiency of evidence are balanced when forming judgements, there are personal costs. On one hand, death can result from failure to respond when circumstances justify extreme actions. On the other, the process of removal itself has harmful consequences for the mothers, family and whānau that are left behind, in addition to the trauma children experience from separation.

mother’s physical and mental health of any such loss of a child (Dominick, 1988).

Multiplicity of agents

The mix of bodies that have an increased statutory responsibility for the welfare of children is now quite extensive. Child protection and care involves a mix of entities with a high degree of operational independence, varied oversight and weak connections. The focus on the child cannot escape consideration of its family

and whānau, mothers and the science of child development. The disproportionate intensity of state action on Māori collectively would be expected to challenge the fundamentals of the system and needs ongoing vindication.

In deciding when the immediate safety of children determines outcomes, it is Oranga Tamariki which chooses to seek approval from the Family Court for a child to be removed, but the court has little or no retrospective oversight of how the child was removed and placed for their future life course. It remains important that the resources of whānau and families have a place in informing decisions by all players, especially the Family Court.

Even when the legitimacy of actions based on state authority is generally accepted, retaining that trust can necessitate transparency in how compliance with the rule of law has been ensured, with such actions being properly overseen or reviewable by a judicial body independent of executive government. For iwi Māori, the state has long used its authority to take custody of Māori children at a high rate and this has periodically led to Māori challenging the legitimacy of this state action. When they have reason to challenge the legitimacy of state actions, individuals and groups in civil society will find ways to withdraw trust in any or subsequent actions by the state. Institutions and roles outside executive government such as parliamentary officers, appeal courts and parliamentary petitions are vehicles provided by the state for this, but individuals need to have common access to them. The children’s commissioner reported five years ago that what we have now does not provide citizens with an informed basis for granting or withdrawing trust (Office of the Children’s Commissioner, 2015).⁵ There are damaging and perverse effects on the welfare of parents and their children (including the unborn) when they individually withdraw their trust in institutions that exist primarily for their care, through avoiding the help they exist to give.

Accounting for the distinct characteristics of Māori

The common rules, obligations and tests of eligibility that are being applied to Māori

have been based on analysis and knowledge dominated by the characteristics generally measured and modelled for Pākehā, because of the limited scale of Māori-specific statistical sources. In the application of policies developed in this way, this ethnic bias inevitably leads to parts of the Māori population often being systematically identified and treated as outliers in most sectors, rather than as a community whose distinct characteristics need to be measured and reliably accounted for. A failure to account for, measure and treat as distinct the differences from cultural, social and demographic structures remains, as does ignorance of the effect of the pathways experienced by earlier generations of Māori. The rules that bring mothers to the attention of the state's childcare and protection system need to be regularly audited by relevant professionals, including those with deep knowledge of whānau, to identify whether they are potential sources of systemic bias against Māori. For each case, how whānau were involved in the process should be reported on by each of the key agencies and the whānau. These reports should be summarised in an annual report that is independently audited by Te Puni Kōkiri or another appropriate entity unaffiliated with the primary child welfare system actors.

Reacting to uncertainty, risk and rare events
The childcare and protection system of the state will make a difference between life and death for a small number of children, while for many others it may bring the only means of redress and response to situations of abuse. In the face of complexity in the system in its rules, practices and powers, for most people knowledge of what the state does comes from rare, highly visible cases. These cases can involve the death of a baby by the intentional violence of a caregiver, or the contested removal of a baby at birth from its mother. By how the public responds to such sentinel events, those who manage the operations of the state, in public administration as well as politicians, can predetermine their effect. There are a multiplicity of participants who could seek to minimise the potential for their association with a sentinel event. It is the children and their whānau who bear the consequences when state responses have

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shown a predisposition towards lowering the threshold for child removal.

In practice, in whatever way the tensions between responsiveness and the sufficiency of evidence are balanced when forming judgements, there are personal costs. On one hand, death can result from failure to respond when circumstances justify extreme actions. On the other, the process of removal itself has harmful consequences for the mothers, family and whānau that are left behind, in addition to the trauma children experience from separation. The future life of the child, its mother, family or whānau must be a demonstrable part of consideration for removal and consequent placement. In a fully functioning system, how the system as a whole can manage risk is critical if its legitimacy is to be properly defended in difficult situations.

The evidence that informs judgements in complex cases will not always be strong

or able to be independently substantiated. Knowing what makes up the family, whānau or other most relevant relationship group has become a statutory obligation that requires cultural understanding and sensitivity that is likely to challenge the norms that were embedded in public policy in the past. This is even more important at this time of change when the threshold for harm has become more loosely defined and case law around applying new law is limited or absent.

The greater the chance that rare events can determine policy, the more vital it is that responses to a rare event are seen in the context of a strong, well-established evidence base, practices that are demonstrably up to the task, and the existence of wide-ranging approaches that enable trust. In the justice sector or child protection, rare events can influence law changes. In the healthcare sector this occurs too, but with lower frequency. The power of a single event to influence public policy and practice can be stronger the more horrific the case and greater the attention associated with it. Since 1994, no noticeable trends exist in recorded incidents of infant death by intentional injury. These deaths involved an annual average of five–six deaths of a child under ten years old between 2003 and 2017, and ranging between two and 13 during those years. Annual care and protection notifications, however, have risen dramatically since 2004.

Conclusion

Child welfare services are wide-ranging, and they do not readily make up a coherent system. Yet without understanding their many parts and complexity we can undermine the protection of the rights of any child to the care and support of kin. Strengthening accountability is just one step in this. Moving towards strengthening this accountability and hopefully, in turn, increasing public legitimacy means acknowledging and incorporating the following key factors.

- The care of children who are in situations of concern is overwhelmingly provided by families and whānau. This reality needs to be reflected in policy and practice, and the application of the

- powers of the state must support rather than endanger this.
- Accountability needs to be comprehensive, have independent elements and be focused on the outcome for the child and their kin, as well as the quality of the processes with which they engage.
 - There needs to be good understanding of what each type of administrative count tells us, whether it be of entry to care, exit from care or the number in custody.
 - Disparity can increase if the rate ratios of Māori are unchanged but those of Pākehā improve, or simply improve faster than those of Māori.
 - Having wide-ranging accountability will not prevent harm, but lacking adequate means to hold the state to account leads to further harm.
 - What happens to all children once in the care of the state brings different risks of neglect and harm to their continuing welfare and life chances that need overseeing.
 - The disproportionate impact of state custody on Māori children, alongside that for Pacific children, requires much more transparency than exists at present, to facilitate ongoing scrutiny and inform the development and support of alternative approaches.
 - The nature of accountability should depend on the impact when citizens withdraw trust.
 - Māori who are great-grandparents, grandparents and parents today were part of cohorts that experienced forms of discrimination and disproportionate involvement in earlier versions of the current state institutions. Proper accountability makes it possible for the legitimacy of state action to be earned, rather than just asserted.
 - For Māori and Pākehā, their different histories and pathways not only require different processes, but also should shape the nature of accountability.
 - The independent oversight function in the Office of Children's Commissioner needs more teeth. Given that the

regulation and monitoring of child protection has been in place since the Child Welfare Act of 1925, putting in place this new oversight function ought to be accelerated before Oranga Tamariki ends its third year.

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- 1 Come-at-ability is a concept developed by British constitutional writer Anthony King to describe the ability of a citizen to challenge the state.
 - 2 Because Oranga Tamariki has yet to establish a regular statistical reporting process, this article was written using historical information drawn from the Ministry of Social Development website and answers to Official Information Act enquiries made of Oranga Tamariki. Ethnic definitions used by Oranga Tamariki are not those in common use and breaks in series have been pragmatically adjusted for by the author.
 - 3 The excess number of tamariki Māori removed into the care of the state has changed little from 2002 to 2019, although the excess has become a larger share of the number of tamariki Māori removed since 2013.
 - 4 Calculation made using Statistics New Zealand population estimates.
 - 5 Specifically, the children's commissioner report states: 'In our view, CYF and MSD's systems are not set up to measure and record the information that matters, and the integration of data between MSD and other government agencies is poor. Better collection and analysis of data is essential for CYF to improve its services and for the Government and the public to have confidence that CYF and other state agencies are improving outcomes for vulnerable children. We don't have enough information to say conclusively whether children are better off as a result of state intervention, but the limited data we do have about health, education, and justice outcomes is concerning.'

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