

ACEs and Cultural Considerations in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Introduction

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) checklist was first conceptualised as the result of an attempt to understand links between childhood experiences and long-term health outcomes.

It is important to understand that this initial research was undertaken with a US-based population sample consisting of mostly white, average to well-off, insured patients within a medical setting, and that the questions developed for the checklist were not the result of a rigorous review to select those variables most likely to predict health outcomes. Using such populations, with limited samples, as a 'norm' from which to judge global populations is a noted problem, and despite a growing body of research showing some global generalisability for the ACEs checklist, it often fails to consider wider societal pressures. Of particular concern in Aotearoa New Zealand is that the ACEs checklist fails to adequately account for the often entangled effects of poverty, racism, and colonisation.

Within the original ACEs checklist, for example, respondents are asked 'Did a household member go to prison?', and there are substantial associations between parental incarceration and childhood outcomes. However, a simple equation between parental incarceration and childhood outcomes is insufficient. Incarceration rates are differentially impacted by ethnicity. Concentrating only on the presence or absence of incarceration obscures the impact of racism in considering other factors, such as adverse childhood experiences; and, critically, it individualises a larger societal problem.

New Zealand

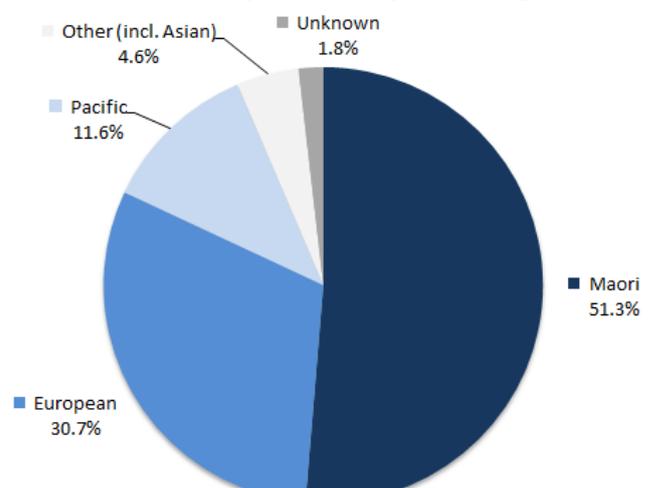
In Aotearoa New Zealand, much like many other colonised nations, the Indigenous population (Māori) experience differential incarceration rates. These differential rates are not limited to convictions: rather in comparison to Pākehā, Māori are four to five times more likely to be apprehended, prosecuted and convicted, seven and a half times more likely to receive a custodial sentence, and eleven times more likely to be remanded in custody.

Whilst the ACEs question, as it is framed in the checklist, asks about 'prison', the subheading states this is a measure of 'criminal behaviour in the household': a small but not insignificant distinction that demonstrates lack of rigour. Whilst it could be argued that prison is a measure of criminal behaviour, as a question this is limiting. This can be illustrated through examining the differential rates for less serious sentences: Māori are more likely than Pākehā to be given community service and/or periodic detention than a monetary fine, for instance.

Key Question:

Does the acultural application of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) checklists in the Aotearoa New Zealand context replicate and reinforce inequalities?

Prison Population by Ethnicity



NZ Department of Corrections, 2019

Thus poverty (and presumably poverty exacerbated by racism) impacts whether a person is able to avoid certain sentences despite the initial crime being similar. The inevitable result, in terms of the ACEs checklist, is that the criminal activities of Pākehā parents are significantly less likely to be captured than those of Māori parents. This produces 'false negatives' in addition to failing to capture the impact of institutional racism.

Therefore, the question itself, set up to measure the impact of parental criminal behaviour (purely through parental incarceration) on children, often reflects the impact of racism (in the case of Māori children) and relative privilege (in the case of Pākehā children). This is not a problem that is likely to be confined to those countries with Indigenous populations and a history of colonisation, nor those countries with minority populations with differential incarceration rates.

'Common Sense'

Child protection does not happen in a politically neutral vacuum. Politicians with responsibility for children's services face a challenging task as each child death tests the very idea that child protection can work. 'Common sense' is often invoked in child welfare and protection, especially by politicians wanting to appear strong in the face of public outcry over child deaths. The use of 'common sense' as a trope reinforces a divide between professionals and the public: it is neatly positioned as a discourse of the common citizens against expert (and bureaucratised) knowledge. Ironically, while the protection of children is seen as a 'common sense' issue, the policing of child protection professionals becomes more bureaucratised through the imposition of checklists and assessment tools: hence the ACEs checklist.



Conclusion

In conclusion then, through considering one part of the ACEs checklist, the notion that it is capable of being used across multiple populations with little regard for systemic issues needs to be challenged. The deployment of such a crude assessment tool invisibilises structural explanations for adult problems. This invisibilisation is invoked under the rubric of 'common sense', a rubric that highlights the individual at the expense of the societal through seemingly comprehensive risk assessments and checklists, and, reinforces Western and white-centric structures of family and ways of parenting.

Other authors have raised concerns with the ACEs checklist, including:

- not covering all measures of risk
- being acontextual
- conflating & collapsing measures
- differing measures being given equal weight ([McLennan et al., 2020](#))
- Misappropriating population-based risks to individuals ([Anda et al., 2020](#))
- Ignoring socioeconomic context ([Walsh et al., 2019](#)).

Key Policy Implications:

- Avoid using the ACEs checklist as a screening tool in any setting
- Imported assessment tools are generally not safe for use in Aotearoa New Zealand
- Develop a tool that considers colonisation, poverty, and racism in Aotearoa New Zealand among populations that have a long history of having bureaucratic tools used against them.
- Create an Aotearoa New Zealand model that honours Te Tiriti o Waitangi, that is a 'serious holistic approach to support that reduces the multiple intersecting harms that children suffer' [Featherstone et al. \(2018\)](#)

To find out more about this research, please visit: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746419000046>

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