

# Pacific youth and violent offending in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Pacific youth offenders in Aotearoa New Zealand are over-represented in the rates of violent offences. The purpose of this study was to explore the risk factors that exist amongst this group. Using file data from the New Zealand Police, the offending behaviour and social demographic characteristics of 200 Pacific violent youth offenders aged 10–24 years were investigated. Results revealed that these youth were more likely to be born in Aotearoa, raised in low socio-economic deprivation areas, and that their exposure and involvement in family violence was high. Furthermore, their first known offence to Police was generally of a violent nature. Recommendations for clinical practice and implications for future research are discussed.

**Keywords:** Pacific youth offenders, youth offenders, youth violent offending

Pacific people are a rapidly growing, diverse and vibrant population. They include those born in the islands and overseas. Within this wider population, the main groups are predominantly Samoan (49%), Cook Islands Maori (21%), Tongan (20%) and Niuean (8%) (Statistics New Zealand, 2014). Recent statistics show that almost two-thirds of Pacific people are born in Aotearoa New Zealand<sup>1</sup>, urbanised, and make up 7.4% of the total population in Aotearoa. The Pacific population are also a youthful population, with more than half of its population (54.9%) under 25 years old (Statistics New Zealand). Population projections estimate that the number of Pacific people living in Aotearoa will increase by 2.4% per year, an estimate which is higher than for both Māori and Europeans in Aotearoa (Statistics New Zealand, 2010).

The Pacific population typically reside in the most deprived areas of Aotearoa characterised by poverty, inadequate housing and typically, high rates of crime (Ministry of Health & Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, 2004). Statistics continue to report a low number (22.8%) of Pacific secondary school students achieving the requirements to attend university when compared to both Pakehā (48.3%) and Asian secondary school students (65.3%) (Statistics New Zealand and Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, (2010).

<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, New Zealand will be referred to as Aotearoa, its indigenous translation.

Given the fact that the Pacific community in Aotearoa have such a youthful population; and that a number of risk factors exist including poor education (Maguin & Loeber, 1996), antisocial peers (Zimmerman & Messner, 2010), family violence (Reid & Crisafulli, 1990) and poverty (Farrington, 1989), all of which contribute to offending behaviour; any influence this population will have on Aotearoa is likely to increase as the current youthful population develops into adulthood. Therefore, researching Pacific youth and their offending behaviour is necessary to provide information for targeted prevention and intervention of this vulnerable population group (Ioane, Lambie & Percival, 2013).

## *Pacific Youth and their offending behaviour*

The classification age range for youth who offend in Aotearoa is between 14 and 16 years old. Pacific youth offenders are the third largest group of youth offenders in Aotearoa, representing 6–9% of all youth apprehensions over the period 1996–2005 (Soboleva, Kazakova & Chong, 2006). The latest figures show that Pacific youth who engage in offending behaviour commit a larger percentage of violent apprehensions<sup>2</sup> than do European and Māori youth

<sup>2</sup> Apprehensions count the number of times a person is apprehended or multiple offenders are apprehended for one offence. For example, one offender apprehended for three burglary offences is counted as three apprehensions, while two offenders appre-

offenders (who constitute the other larger ethnic youth groups in Aotearoa). The definition of a 'Violence' offence reflects that of the New Zealand Police. These include Homicide, Kidnapping/Abduction, Robbery, Grievous Assaults, Serious Assaults, Intimidation/Threats, Group Assemblies (see Appendix A).

Both in Aotearoa and overseas, the dearth of research regarding Pacific youth is acknowledged (Fiaui & Hishinuma, 2009; Singh & White, 2000). In order to provide a brief review of the existing literature, the authors examined Pacific studies in Aotearoa and overseas, including local and international studies investigating other ethnic minorities. A 14 year longitudinal study in Aotearoa found that children of Pacific ethnicity had a higher risk of offending than children of Pakehā ethnicity (Fergusson, Horwood & Lynskey, 1993). Few studies looking at Asian/Pacific Island youth violence found that Samoan youth reported higher rates of violence than other ethnic groups such as Filipino and Hawaiian youth (Mayeda, Hishinuma, Nishimura, Garcia-Santiago & Mark, 2006). In addition, a more recent study that analysed data from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (1999–2009) in the U.S. found that indigenous and ethnic minority youth that included Native Hawaiians/Pacific Islanders reported higher rates of youth violence than Asians and European (Sugimoto-Matsuda, Hishinuma, Chang, 2013). This is not surprising given the large existing literature base demonstrating that youth in ethnic minorities generally are more likely to be involved in violence. An American study, examining the differences in youth violence among different ethnic groups, found that American Indian, African-American, and Latino youth were more likely to be involved in physical fights than their Caucasian counterparts, and were also more likely than youth hended for a burglary offence is counted as two apprehensions.

from the Caucasian community to come from impoverished environments where violence was more common (McNulty & Bellair, 2003). In Canada, a ten-year follow-up of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal adolescent sex offenders found that the Aboriginal population were more likely to have backgrounds associated with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder, substance abuse, childhood victimisation, academic difficulties and instabilities in their home environment, and were more likely to reoffend sexually, violently, and non-violently than were their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Rojas & Gretton, 2007).

While there is some available research regarding Pacific youth offending in Aotearoa, much more is needed given the continued disparity of outcomes for Pacific youth in areas of social, economic, and educational risk factors that suggests that this population will continue to have greater representation in youth offending (Ministerial Taskforce, 2002; Ioane, Lambie & Percival, 2013; ). The over-representation of Pacific youth offenders in violent apprehension statistics necessitates an exploration of this population in our society. The aim of this study was to explore Pacific violent youth offenders through analysing their social and demographic characteristics alongside their offending behaviour in order to gain further insight into this vulnerable population group.

## Method

Funding was received from the Auckland City Pasifika District Advisory Board of New Zealand Police and the Health Research Council. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Auckland Human Subjects Ethics Committee (UAHSEC) and the Research and Evaluation Steering Committee (RESC) of the New Zealand Police. Information from the New Zealand Police was sourced from two national databases: the INCOFF Offender Provisional Detail Business Object universe database and the National Intelligence Application (NIA)<sup>3</sup>. Files were accessed for the purposes of this study for offenders who had committed a Violence offence,

3 This is a database that involves sharing information and integrating interfaces between the New Zealand Police, Ministry of Justice, Department of Corrections and Land Transport Safety Authority.

regardless of whether they had been charged or not.

### Inclusion criteria

The youth offenders identified for this study were sourced from the New Zealand Police according to the following criteria:

1. They committed a violence offence (charged or non-charged) on or between 1 January 2007 and 31 December 2007<sup>4</sup>.
2. They were identified as having a Pacific ethnicity. This is either reported by the offender or previously known by Police.
3. They were aged between 10 and 24 years of age at the time of their Violence offence. This age range was selected by the authors in recognition of the fact that Pacific cultures use concepts other than age to define the maturity of youth in the community, which tends often to be older than their chronological age (Suaalii & Muavoa, 2001).

### Procedures

Using the inclusion criteria, this information was extracted from the INCOFF Offender Provisional Detail Business Object universe database, which provided a list of all Violence offences committed in 2007. The information documented that related to the offender included their age at the time of the Violence offence; suburb where they reportedly lived; gang notification<sup>5</sup> (if present); and family violence notification<sup>6</sup> (if present), all of which was recorded. Random sampling was used to select 200 case numbers within the database that involved youths of Pacific ethnicity. Inter-rater reliability was also carried out to check all coding of variables that included offence types and demographic information.

### Final selection criteria

If there was more than one offender involved in a Violence offence, all offenders in that group were selected for the study. If the offender committed

4 This date was the actual date of the offence or, in some cases, when it was made known to New Zealand Police.

5 The offender may be an associate, member or affiliated with local gangs. This was either known by Police or reported by the offender.

6 The offender may be an offender, victim or witness of family violence.

more than one Violence offence at the same time, the most serious Violence offence was recorded. For example, if an offender committed a serious assault and also intimidated the victim, the serious assault offence was recorded. Furthermore, if an offender committed other Violence offences during 2007, the first Violence offence in 2007 was recorded. Once the Violence offence was identified and recorded; all previous offences (violence and non-violence offending) prior to the Violence offence were also recorded. The authors also documented any further offending until 2009 to explore the likelihood of recidivist offending. As the research progressed, the authors redefined the Violence offences into three separate categories for further analysis.

Table 1.

#### Type of Violence offences

Severe <sup>a</sup>	Kidnapping and Abduction, Robbery, Greivous Assault, Serious Assault
Moderate	Minor Assault
Minor	Intimidation/Threat, Group Assembly

<sup>a</sup> There were no homicide offences in this study.

### Inter-rater reliability

To assess the reliability of the data collected, a post graduate psychology student with research experience, access to the New Zealand Police database and no previous involvement in the current study checked inter-rater reliability for 10% of the overall sample. The results of the inter-rater agreement for the variables examined (suburb recorded at the time of offending; ethnicity; gang notification; family violence notification and offence codes) showed a 'moderate' agreement between raters, with an average kappa of 0.74.

### Data analysis

All information was recorded in Microsoft Excel© and subsequently transferred to Predictive Analytics Software (PASW)<sup>7</sup> Version 18.0 for statistical analysis and results.

7 Formerly known as Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

## Results

Table 2 provides a summary of the social and demographic variables associated with violent offending behaviour amongst Pacific offenders. Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) tests were used to identify statistically significant differences among the variables. In addition, t-tests were used to test whether differences were significant for the interval variables.

Table 2.  
Background characteristics of Pacific violent youth offenders ( $n = 200$ )

Characteristics	n (%)
Family violence <sup>a</sup>	122 (61.0)
Born in New Zealand	103 (51.5)
Male	168 (84.0)
Female	32 (16.0)
Socio-economic deprivation index (8 or higher) <sup>b</sup>	142 (71.0)
Age: Range 12–24yo; $M=19.43$	

<sup>a</sup> Either an offender, witness or victim of family violence.

<sup>b</sup> 10 is the most deprived areas in New Zealand.

According to the sample in this study, just over half of the Pacific youth offenders (51.5%) were born in Aotearoa. Most Pacific youth offenders were male (84.0%) and living in areas of very high socio-economic deprivation. Seventy-nine, or over a third of the total sample (39.5%), lived in areas with a socio-economic deprivation index of ten, described as one of the most deprived areas in Aotearoa.

Finally, more than half of the Pacific youth offenders (61.0%) in this study had either been exposed to, or experienced, family violence in their homes. Other variables measured, such as drugs, suicide risk, and gang association were excluded from the analysis due to very low numbers. Any findings from these variables would distort and provide an inaccurate perception of the reality as numbers are not significant.

Table 3 provides a summary of the offending variables associated with violent offending behaviour among Pacific youth offenders. The average age at first offence of Pacific youth offenders

( $M = 17.22$ ,  $SD = 3.66$ ) was 17 years. Almost half of the sample committed a Violence offence ( $n = 94$ ) as a type of first offence. After recoding Violence offences in the subcategories of severe, moderate, and minor; Pacific youth offenders in this study committed more severe Violence offences than any other type of Violence offence in this study ( $\chi^2 (1, N = 200) = 9.38, p = .002$ ). More than half of the Pacific youth ( $n = 146$ ) in the study reoffended after their Violence offence ( $\chi^2 (1, N = 200) = 42.320, p < .001$ ).

Table 3.  
Offending characteristics of Pacific violent youth offenders ( $n = 200$ )

Offending variables	n (%)	M	SD	Sig
Average age at first offence		17.22	3.66	
Violence as first time offence	94 (47.0)			
Severe violent offence as first time offence	129 (64.5)			**
Offends after violence offence	146 (73.0)			

\*\* $p < .01$

Table 4 provides a summary of the type of Violence offences committed by Pacific youth in this study. Of the sample of 200 Pacific youth offenders who committed a Violence offence in 2007, Serious Assaults were the most common Violence offence committed. Serious Assaults accounted for over a third of all Violence offences, including Male Assaults Female and Aggravated Assaults.

Table 4.  
Types of violent offences committed by Pacific youth offenders ( $n=200$ )

Types of violent offences	n (%)
Homicide	0 (0.0)
Kidnapping and Abduction	2 (1.0)
Robbery	22 (11.0)
Grievous Assaults	31 (15.5)
Serious Assaults	75 (37.5)
Minor Assaults	34 (17.0)
Intimidation and Threats	34 (17.0)
Group Assemblies	2 (1.0)

Table 5 provides a summary of the social and demographic characteristics of Pacific recidivist offenders. The average age for Pacific recidivist offenders was 16 years old. With regard to gender, 76% of Pacific males in this study reoffended; consistent with 60% of Pacific females in this study. Therefore, no significant difference in gender was found with respect to recidivist youth offenders ( $\chi^2 (1, N = 200) = 3.59, p = .058$ ). Of the sample that went on to reoffend, it was found that those born in Aotearoa were significantly more likely to reoffend than those who were born in the Pacific Islands ( $\chi^2 (3, N = 200) = 16.64, p = .001$ ). More than two-thirds (66.4%) of Pacific recidivist offenders were likely to have experienced or been exposed to family violence in the home; significantly higher than for Pacific youth offenders who did not reoffend ( $\chi^2 (1, N = 200) = 6.72, p = .010$ ).

Table 5.  
Background characteristics of Pacific recidivist offenders ( $n=146$ ) and non-recidivist offenders ( $n=54$ )

Characteristics	Recidivist n (%)	Non recidivist n (%)	Sig
Male	127 (76%)	41 (23%)	
Female	19 (60%)	13 (24)	
Birthplace			
New Zealand	81 (53.5%)	22 (40.7%)	**
Pacific Islands	45 (30.8%)	11 (20.4) <sup>b</sup>	
Family violence			
Involved	97 (66.4%)	25 (46.3%)	**
Not involved	49 (33.6%)	29 (53.7%)	
Age: Range 12–24yo; $M=16.89$			

<sup>a</sup> Either an offender, witness or victim of family violence. \*\* $p < .01$ . <sup>b</sup> There were also a number of birthplaces not recorded.

## Discussion

Consistent with previous research on youth offenders, 84% of Pacific violent youth offenders in our sample were male (Moffitt & Caspi, 2001; Tibbetts & Piquero, 1999; Zimmerman & Messner, 2010). Using the Social Deprivation Index (SDI) to determine socio-economic deprivation, we found that this group of youth offenders were growing up in the lowest socio-economic deprivation

areas in the country; a finding which is consistent with other ethnic minorities internationally (Farrington, 1989; Hemphill et al., 2009; Jarjoura, Triplett & Brinker, 2002; Marie, Fergusson, & Boden, 2009; Maxwell, Kingi, Robertson, Morris, & Cunningham, 2004; McAra & McVie, 2010; Wright, Caspi, Moffitt, Miech & Silva, 1999; Zimmerman & Messner 2010). A survey of secondary school students in Aotearoa showed that Pacific students reported a higher degree of violence exposure in the family home between adults; and adults hitting children than NZ European students. (Helu, Robinson, Grant, Herd, & Denny, 2009). This finding validates the increased risk for Pacific youth towards offending behaviour given that more than half of the youth offenders in this study were either exposed to, or involved with, family violence in their homes. This is consistent with previous findings where family violence was reported amongst families with dysfunctional and criminal histories (Boden, Fergusson & Horwood, 2010; Juby & Farrington, 2001; Marie et al., 2009; Reid & Crisafulli, 1990; Rodriguez, Smith & Zatz, 2009).

The findings in the current study showed that Pacific youth were more likely to commit a violent offence as their first offence and were reported by NZ Police data to offend on average at the age of 17 years old. This was consistent with international research looking at Pacific youth offending in Australia where these youths did not commit their first offence before the age of 15 years old (Ravulo, 2016). This study is also consistent with international literature that has shown seemingly higher reports for violent behaviour with Pacific ethnicities than other minority ethnic groups (Fiaui & Hishinuma, 2009; Mayeda, Hishinuma, Nishimura, Garcia-Santiago & Mark, 2006). This study showed the average age of offending for Pacific youth was 17 years old, which is in line with the common age for violent apprehensions in Aotearoa (Smith 2008). However, this age means that our Pacific violent youth offenders generally begin to offend at an age that does not meet criteria for a legally defined 'youth'. Therefore, they are more likely to be sentenced in the District Court jurisdiction and face harsher penalties,

such as imprisonment without age appropriate intervention. In this study, most Pacific violent youth offenders committed violent crimes as a first time offence of a more 'severe' nature and continued to reoffend after their Violence offence. Therefore this study highlights a more serious group of offenders where intensive age appropriate interventions that includes cultural interventions need to be implemented after their first offence to ensure the likelihood of further offending is diminished.

Further findings in this study showed that Pacific youth offenders who reoffended, compared to those who did not reoffend, were more likely to have previous or current involvement with family violence, again highlighting the association by which family violence appears to impact on the development of young children and the risk of offending behaviour. Recidivist offenders were also more likely to be born in Aotearoa. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that it is possible some of the youth offenders born in the Pacific Islands were sent home to the islands by family as a consequence of their behaviour. In these cases any reoffending behaviours would not be captured in the New Zealand data (New Zealand Police, 2010).

#### *Limitations and future research*

One of the major limitations of this study was the inability to break down the Pacific ethnicities into the different Pacific nations, for example Samoan, Tongan, and Cook Islands Māori to name a few. This is due to the way in which Pacific ethnicities are recorded as one group in the Police database. Efforts to research and acknowledge each Pacific group separately remains a priority within the Pacific community because, without this research, issues that are relevant to one ethnic group but not to another are likely to be missed (Le & Arifuku 2005).

Based on the findings of the study, the authors suggest the need for qualitative research on Pacific youth in Aotearoa and their violent offending behaviour, alongside a control group of Pacific youth who do not offend. It is likely that common risk factors would be found between the two groups. However, of greater interest are the protective and resiliency factors among Pacific youth who do not offend. Determining what

these are requires research and analysis in order to identify prevention strategies for our Pacific youth. This is consistent with previous recommendations that an evaluation and review of current interventions with Pacific youth who are at risk of adverse outcomes, including those undergoing mentoring and therapeutic programmes, would be beneficial for both the Pacific community and for society as a whole (Siataga 2011).

Furthermore, given the growing diversity and diasporic Pacific community in Aotearoa, further research would benefit from consideration and acknowledgement of youths of mixed Pacific ethnicity, Pacific and non-Pacific ethnicity; youths born in New Zealand and those who migrate from the islands .

## **Conclusions**

Almost half of the sample committed a Violence offence as a first time offence consistent with a recent Australian study of Pacific youth offenders (Ravulo, 2016). The most common Violence offence committed by Pacific youth in this sample was Serious Assaults that also include Male Assaults Female. Family violence features highly in this sample of Pacific youth, a finding that supports a previous analysis of violent crime in Aotearoa that estimated that a third of violent crimes were associated with family violence (Smith 2008). In a national student survey, it was hypothesised that the violent behaviour among Pacific youth is a reflection of what is observed in the home (Helu et al., 2009). To gain further insight, the origins, attitudes, and effects of family violence in Pacific communities need to be researched directly with Pacific violent youth offenders and their families, given the high rates of family violence in this study.

It is also important to note the ongoing efforts of the government in Aotearoa, with campaigns against family violence and a change in Police attitudes, which are likely to have increased public reporting of family violence (Smith 2008). Working with families to eliminate violence in the homes should continue to be a priority amongst government agencies such as health, police and education. Equally important is the need for findings from research such as this, as well as future

research, to inform government policy and implementation. This will allow us to work with these vulnerable population groups using evidence based research and research informed practice (Lambie & Ioane, 2012).

Even though these findings should be viewed as exploratory, this study provides a platform for Pacific youth offending research to continue, as there is a significant amount of information yet to be discovered from studying this population. Future findings from this group are likely to inform government policies and practice, given the violent nature of offending for this population and the current youthful age of the population as a whole. As research continues in this area it is likely that Aotearoa will become better informed about developing culturally appropriate interventions for this group. This can then begin to reduce the adverse effects of offending on our Pacific youth and families; and the wider community in Aotearoa.

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## **Appendix A: New Zealand Police Violence Codes<sup>1</sup>**

Homicide	Murder; Attempted Murder; Manslaughter; Infanticide; Abortion; Aiding Suicide and Pact
Kidnapping/Abduction	Kidnapping; Abduction; Slave Dealing
Robbery	Aggravated Robbery; Non-Aggravated Robbery; Assaults with Intent to Rob; Compelling Execution of Documents; Aggravated Robbery
Grievous Assault	Wounding with Intent; Injuring with Intent; Aggravated Wounding/Injury; Disabling/Stupefying; Dangerous Acts with Intent; Injure—If Death Ensued, Manslaughter; Miscellaneous Grievous Assaults; Use Firearm against Law Enforcement Officer; Assault with Weapon
Serious Assault	Aggravated Assaults; Assault with Intent to Injure; Assault on Child (Under 14 years); Assault by Male on Female; Assaults Police; Assaults Person Assisting Police; Assaults Person Lawful Execution Process; Common Assault; Miscellaneous Common Assault
Minor Assault	Assault on Law Enforcement Officers; Assaults Person Assisting Police; Assaults Official (Other Statutes); Common Assault; Miscellaneous Common Assault
Intimidation/Threat	Threatens to Kill/Do GBH; Threatening Act (Person/Property); Threatening Behaviour/Language; Demand Intent to Steal/Extortion; Offensive Weapon Possession etc; Fail to Provide Necessities of Life; Miscellaneous Intimidation/Threats; Threatening to Act (Person or Property)
Group Assemblies	Riot; Unlawful Assembly; Crimes against Personal Privacy; Criminal Harassment; Participation & Association Offences

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to New Zealand Police for further information and clarity