Māori Population Growth

1. The history of Māori population change has been extensively documented, particularly through the seminal works of the late New Zealand demographer Ian Pool (1977; 1991) and his more recent scholarship on Māori population dynamics between 1769 and 1900 (Pool, 2015). Rather than reiterate that history here in this commentary (see Pool, 1991; Pool & Kukutai, 2014), I make only brief observations (based on the works already referenced above) to provide the demographic context necessary for understanding the contemporary size, growth, and youthful age structure of the Māori population, and the factors shaping Māori population futures.
2. The history of Māori demographic change is, overall, a story of recovery and resilience. Following a period of severe population decline during the latter half of the nineteenth century[1], driven by introduced disease, land alienation, warfare, and the wider impacts of colonisation, the Māori population rebounded throughout the twentieth century. This recovery was underpinned by sustained high levels of fertility, declining mortality, and more recently, processes of ethnic mobility[2] and Māori identity renewal[3]. Together, these forces transformed Māori from a population once predicted to disappear (see Hiroa, 1924) into one of the youngest and fastest-growing populations in Aotearoa New Zealand. Contemporary Māori population growth and age structure is therefore best understood not as a recent phenomenon, but as the outcome of a long history of demographic adaptation, renewal, and resilience across successive generations.
3. Before discussing contemporary patterns of Māori population growth, it is important to recognise that there is no single definition of the Māori population. The size of the Māori population (i.e., who counts as 'Māori) as recorded in official statistics depends on the definitions used, with different measures producing different estimates. As Kukutai (2011) notes, different statistical measures of 'Māori' serve different purposes and reflect the social, political, and policy contexts in which Māori population statistics are collected and applied.
4. The New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings is one of the primary sources of official Māori population statistics. Through its collection of information on Māori descent, ethnicity, and iwi affiliation, the Census provides various measures for understanding the size and characteristics of the Māori population (see Kukutai, 2011).
5. The Māori descent indicator is of constitutional and political significance because it determines who can enrol on the Māori electoral roll and the number of Māori electorates. Māori ethnicity is the measure most used in social policy, health, education, and population reporting. Iwi affiliation provides important information for iwi planning and development and assists in monitoring Crown commitments and responsibilities arising from Te Tiriti o Waitangi/The Treaty of Waitangi.

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[1] The peak period of post-1840 settlement and colonisation.
[2] This includes the impact of changes in definitions of 'Māori' in official statistics. For further information or history about quantifying Māori in the NZ Census, see Kukutai (2011).
[3] For example, the 'Māori renaissance' and 'te reo revitalisation' have played an important role in this process (see Taonui, 2017).

6. As at the 2023 Census[4], the Māori descent population numbered 978,246 persons (up from 668,721 in the 2013 Census[5]), representing approximately 20 per cent of the national population (n = 4,993,923). Of those identifying as being of Māori descent, 807,468 reported an affiliation to at least one iwi. The Māori ethnic population numbered 887,493 persons (an increase from 598,602 in 2013 Census), representing approximately 18 per cent of Aotearoa NZ's population.
7. The Māori population is also characterised by a relatively youthful age structure [6] compared with the total Aotearoa NZ and NZ European/Pākehā populations[7] (see Fig 1). Māori are over-represented in the younger age groups and under-represented in the older age groups, reflecting historically higher fertility rates and therefore a younger age profile. The opposite is true for the NZ European/Pākehā population – where we see higher (and growing proportions) at the older ages, thus reflecting historically lower fertility rates[8]. This has important demographic implications. A larger proportion of Māori are currently in, or approaching, their reproductive years, creating demographic momentum that contributes to continued population growth even when fertility rates decline – as is the current case with Māori fertility[9] (see Stats NZ, 2026b). The youthful age structure of the Māori population is therefore both a legacy of past demographic patterns and a key factor in shaping Aotearoa NZ's future population[10].

[4] Data can be found on Stats NZ Aotearoa Data Explorer

[5] Due to the unacceptably low response rates from the 2018 Census i.e., significant undercount in the Māori and iwi populations, I have used 2013 Census as the closest comparative year (see Stats NZ, 2019).

[6] The median age is the age that divides the population into two halves i.e., 50% of the population is younger (or on the flipside – older) than the median age. It is a key indicator of a population's age structure and tells us whether it is relatively young or old. Based on the 2023 Census, the median age for Māori population was 26.8 compared to the national population 38.1 and NZ European/Pākehā population 41.7.

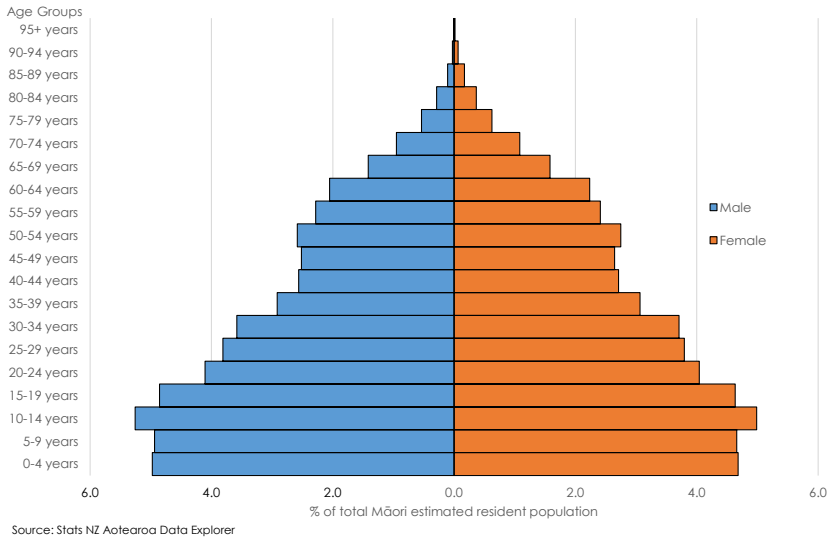
[7] With reference to Figure 1, the Māori population age/sex structure resembles more of a classic pyramid shape which has a broader base at the younger ages and narrows towards the point at the older ages. On the other hand, the NZ European/Pākehā age/sex structure is shaped more like a column reflecting even proportions at the younger and older ages.

[8] This trend is compounded by the ageing of the 'baby boomer' generation, a substantial cohort that has either entered or is nearing entry into the 65+ age group. The 'baby boom' period was a NZ European/Pākeha phenomena as Māori birth rates were already high at the time (see Pool, 2007; Pool & Jackson, 2011).

[9] There are several indicators of fertility. The most common is the Total Fertility Rate (TFR, often quoted in media releases), which estimates the average number of children who would be born to each woman if she were to pass through her childbearing years (typically 15 to 49 years old) at the current age-specific birth rates (Weeks, 2016).

[10] My forthcoming paper about 'Māori Population Futures' is currently under peer review for a policy journal. Otherwise, see Kukutai, Bryant, and Atatoa-Carr (2026) that points out an increasing and significant Māori demographic as the future of Aotearoa NZ.

Figure 1: Māori Population Age/Sex Pyramid (2023 Jun Estimated Resident Population)



Source: Stats NZ Aotearoa Data Explorer

8. Although all three measures of the Māori population (descent, ethnicity, iwi) in official statistics capture different populations and produce different counts, they all point to the same demographic reality: that Māori constitute a substantial and growing component of Aotearoa NZ's population.
9. On another note, although Māori population growth is shaped by several demographic processes[11], fertility (or more specifically natural increase[12]) has remained a central driver of population increase since the late twentieth century. The continued contribution of births to Māori population growth reflects both the youthful age structure of the Māori population and patterns of Māori childbearing. Understanding why Māori fertility has remained comparatively high (to especially the dominant NZ European/Pākehā), and how it has changed over time, is therefore critical to understanding contemporary Māori population dynamics – and especially how the population has maintained a youthful age structure. It is for this reason that my doctoral research examined the socio-demographic and cultural factors associated with Māori fertility patterns.

Māori Fertility

10. As noted above, fertility (i.e., natural increase) has been the key driver of Māori population growth in recent decades (Stats NZ, 2015). Consequently, understanding the factors that influence Māori childbearing patterns is central to understanding contemporary Māori population change and future demographic trajectories. These issues formed the focus of my doctoral research.

[11] At its most fundamental level, population change is determined by fertility (births), mortality (deaths), and migration (relocation). In the context of Māori population change, shifts in ethnic identification and statistical classification (including concepts/definitions) may also contribute to changes in the number of people recorded as Māori in official datasets. Together, these processes influence both the size and age structure of the population.

[12] In demographic terms, natural increase refers to the excess of births over deaths within a population. For much of the contemporary Māori population, natural increase has been a significant source of population growth, reflecting both a youthful age structure and levels of childbearing that have generated more births than deaths.

11. My doctoral thesis, *Understanding Contemporary Māori Demographic Fertility Patterns and Trends in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Rarere, 2024)[13], examined contemporary[14] Māori fertility patterns and trends, with a particular focus on understanding the factors/determinants that shape Māori fertility behaviour and population change.
12. The research sought to address a significant gap in demographic scholarship by examining the extent to which cultural factors influence contemporary Māori fertility patterns, including fertility behaviours such as the timing and spacing of births, and fertility outcomes such as completed family size. The thesis was motivated by the observation that although Māori fertility rates have generally declined and converged towards those of the wider Aotearoa NZ population (mainly NZ European/Pākehā) over time, important differences remain. Māori women continue to enter parenthood at younger ages[15] and experience childbearing across a longer reproductive period than NZ European/Pākehā women. Existing demographic research has largely explained these differences through socio-economic and demographic factors while giving comparatively limited attention to Māori perspectives, values, and cultural influences.
13. The thesis aimed to answer the following research question: *To what extent does culture influence contemporary Māori fertility patterns?* In essence, the thesis examined the relationship between 'culture' and 'Māori fertility' behaviour. For the purposes of the thesis, 'culture' was understood as the collective values, beliefs, identities, practices and social institutions that shape behaviour and decision-making. In the Māori context, this includes whakapapa, whānau, tikanga Māori, te reo Māori, and connections to iwi and whenua.
14. To address this question, the research drew upon Kaupapa Māori and Mana Wahine frameworks alongside demographic theory and methods. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative analyses of the *2013 New Zealand Census* and the *1995 New Zealand Women: Family, Employment and Education Survey* with qualitative interviews undertaken with wāhine Māori.
15. Using various combinations of the 'descent' and 'ethnicity' measures in the census and survey as a proxy for 'culture', the findings indicated that cultural identity vis-à-vis culture, is an important factor in understanding Māori fertility behaviour, including the timing of childbearing and the number of children born (see Rarere, 2018; 2023). The interviews highlighted the enduring significance of whakapapa and whānau in fertility decision-making and demonstrated that cultural factors remain important alongside social,

[13] This doctoral thesis was completed 'with' publication and comprised three peer-reviewed articles examining different dimensions of the research. The full references are provided below.

[14] I deliberately used the word 'contemporary' in my thesis to refer to the period following the 'Māori fertility transition', which occurred between the early 1960s to mid-1970s. The fertility transition describes the long-term shift from relatively high levels of fertility to lower levels of childbearing, reflecting broader changes in mortality, family formation, contraception, education, urbanisation, and socio-economic conditions. The Māori fertility transition was regarded as one of the most rapid fertility transitions recorded internationally (Pool, 1991). The key mechanism for the long-term shift in Māori fertility rates was the uptake of effective contraception (see Pool, 1991).

[15] Since the fertility transition, Māori women entered parenthood at younger ages than NZ European/Pākehā women, with first births commonly occurring in their early twenties. However, the peak age-specific fertility rate for Māori women shifted to the late twenties (25-29 years) in 2013/14 and has remained in that age group ever since (see Stats NZ, 2026a).

economic, and demographic influences (see Rarere, 2022). More broadly, the thesis argued that Indigenous-centred frameworks are necessary to achieve a fuller understanding of Māori fertility behaviour, population change, and future demographic trajectories.

16. These findings have important implications for understanding Māori population change. Fertility is a fundamental demographic process because it influences both the size and age structure of a population. Historically, comparatively higher Māori fertility has contributed to the youthful age profile of the Māori population, characterised by a larger proportion of tamariki and rangatahi and a smaller proportion of older adults relative to the NZ European/Pākehā population. This age structure generates demographic momentum, whereby relatively large cohorts entering childbearing ages contribute to ongoing population growth even when fertility rates decline.
17. From both demographic and Māori perspectives, fertility is more than just about births alone. Fertility contributes to the renewal of whakapapa across generations and influences how whānau, hapū, iwi, and hapori Māori grow and sustain themselves, and plan. Understanding Māori fertility patterns is fundamental to understanding future population growth, whānau formation, intergenerational succession, labour-force participation, housing demand, education needs, and the long-term demographic resilience of Māori communities and iwi. In practical terms, fertility is one of the primary mechanisms through which iwi populations are replenished, age structures are renewed, and future generations maintain and strengthen connections to whānau, hapū, iwi, and their respective tribal rohe.

Limitations and Considerations

18. This brief provides a high-level overview of Māori population and fertility change and is therefore focused on broad demographic patterns rather than the circumstances of any specific iwi. The discussion primarily relates to the Māori population usually resident in Aotearoa New Zealand. While reference is made to wider drivers of Māori population change, the brief does not examine the Māori diaspora in detail, including Māori living in Australia and their descendants, despite their importance in understanding the global Māori population.
19. This brief does not provide a specific demographic analysis of Te Upokorehe. While broader Māori demographic and fertility trends can provide valuable insights for understanding iwi population change, caution should be exercised when drawing direct inferences for Te Upokorehe. As at the 2023 Census, the Te Upokorehe population numbered 1,383 persons. At this scale, demographic processes and outcomes may differ from those observed in the wider Māori population, and small population numbers can produce greater volatility in demographic measures and trends over time.
20. A more detailed assessment of Te Upokorehe population change would require iwi-specific demographic analysis using customised datasets and/or bespoke tabulations. Such analyses typically draw upon Census and administrative datasets (including iwi registers) and may involve substantial time and resource requirements. Furthermore, access to detailed iwi-level information may be constrained by statistical confidentiality requirements, data quality considerations, and the suppression of estimates where

population counts are too small to support reliable reporting. Consequently, the observations presented in this brief should be regarded as providing demographic context rather than a comprehensive assessment of Te Upokorehe population change.

21. As a final note, intercensal iwi population change is often complex, highly variable, and context-specific. As demonstrated in my master's research (Rarere, 2012), which looked at iwi population growth in the census, changes in iwi population counts between censuses may reflect a combination of demographic processes, migration patterns, changing expressions of identity and affiliation (i.e., 'ethnic mobility'), variations in census participation, and changes to statistical classifications and reporting practices. Accordingly, robust interpretation of iwi population change requires detailed and nuanced analysis rather than reliance on headline population counts alone. For this reason, caution should be exercised when interpreting changes in the reported population of Te Upokorehe in the absence of iwi-specific demographic analysis.

Concluding statement

22. This brief has been prepared to provide demographic context and expert opinion to assist the Tribunal in its consideration of the matters before it. The observations and opinions presented draw on my expertise in demography and population studies, relevant statistical evidence, and the scholarly literature. While Māori population trends provide an important context for understanding iwi population futures, a further detailed analysis would be required to fully assess the specific demographic experiences and circumstances of Te Upokorehe. Such analysis should be undertaken with due regard to the historical, cultural, and contemporary context of the iwi.

Formal Declaration

23. I confirm that the opinions expressed in this brief are my own and fall within my area of expertise as a demographer and population researcher. To the best of my knowledge, they are based on evidence and analysis that I believe to be accurate and reliable.

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