



LeVa

# Pasifika Peoples perceptions of Health and Wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Our purpose is to support Pasifika families and communities to unleash their full potential and have the best possible health and wellbeing outcomes.





# Executive Summary

Mālō e lelei, Talofa lava, Taloha ni, Kia orana, Fakaalofa lahi atu, Namaste, Ni sa bula and warm Pasifika greetings.

Le Va supports Pasifika families and communities to unleash their full potential, working with those delivering health and wellbeing services to develop flourishing Pasifika communities that enable the best possible health and wellbeing outcomes.

The current health reform being implemented in Aotearoa New Zealand presents significant opportunities to improve health outcomes for Pasifika people. However, with all major changes there are challenges which if not navigated with care, could have a negative impact on Pasifika communities. As a strong advocate for the health, wellbeing and aspirations of Pasifika families and communities, Le Va conducted a discovery project to better understand the current and future health and wellbeing needs of Pasifika people.

This document is the formal record of the discovery project, which connected with close to 900 Pasifika people across Aotearoa New Zealand. It will be shared with health, political, social and community leaders to increase understanding about the health and wellbeing needs, challenges, opportunities and aspirations of Pasifika people.

There were a range of compelling issues revealed in the discovery project. We found young people to have significant health literacy around mental health and wellbeing issues. This high level of comfort talking about mental health and wellbeing issues appears to be a shift over time and perhaps also attributable to the multiple mental health promotion efforts to reduce stigma and increase conversation about mental health issues. However, this positive health literacy did not appear to be present with older age groups.

While we know that positive connections to family act as a protective factor for wellbeing, we heard that family can also be a source of stress and trauma. Disappointingly, we also heard many stories of Pasifika people experiencing a health system that did not understand them or their cultural identity, highlighting the need for significant improvement in cultural competency for all of our health workforce.

**The many issues, challenges and opportunities Pasifika people shared with us, have been analysed and are presented in this document in [six key insights](#):**



**1. Mental health is the biggest area of concern for Pasifika people**



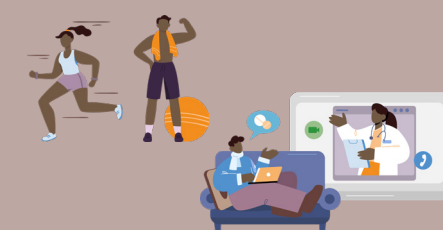
**2. Family is key to wellbeing but also complex**



**3. Income, housing and privilege have a major impact on Pasifika wellbeing**



**4. Many Pasifika people feel like the health system can be doing more to meet their needs**



**5. Pasifika people want diverse options and choice**



**6. Stigma and discrimination affect Pasifika wellbeing**

At the end of this document we share possible future focus areas based on Pasifika people's thoughts on what could make a positive difference to the health and wellbeing of Pasifika communities and families.

The project team has engaged with a wide range of Pasifika community members across Aotearoa New Zealand during this project, and extends deep gratitude to all for their courageous and honest contributions, and the time it took to participate.



# Methodology

A simple methodology was used to complete this discovery project based on the following questions:

- What health and wellbeing issues are important to Pasifika people?
- What expectations do Pasifika people have related to the current/ recent changes, and future shape of the health system?

## 895

people completed an online survey or participated in an in-person or online workshop

## 9

workshops with various Pasifika community members across Aotearoa New Zealand were held

## 83%

of the total survey participants were female

## 65%

of the total survey participants were aged between 25-44

## 60%

the majority of survey participants were Samoan

## 1908

qualitative responses were reviewed for high level theming

The insights that follow summarise findings from 895 Pasifika people who completed an online survey or participated in an in-person or online workshop.

Nine workshops with various Pasifika community members across Aotearoa New Zealand were held. Seven workshops were delivered in-person and two were delivered online. A total of 197 Pasifika people participated across all workshops, with approximately 116 of those participants being young people under 26 years old. The workshops had a range of focuses including specific workshops with young people in school and community settings, and workshops with health professionals, community leaders and the disabled community.

An online survey was created providing a safe, confidential process for Pasifika people to share their views on current and future health and wellbeing needs. 698 people completed the survey which was disseminated through Le Va's extensive community networks, including social media outreach.

Of the total survey participants 83% were female, 16% were male, and 1% were gender non-binary. 65% were aged between 25-44, 22% were young people aged 16-24, and 13% were over 45 years. The majority of survey participants were Samoan (60%), followed by Tongan (17%), Cook Island Māori (13%), Niuean (8%), Fijian (5%), Tokelauan (4%), and Tuvaluan (1%). Participants could choose more than one ethnicity so percentages will not add up to 100.

27% of participants worked for an organisation that provides support to Pasifika people and 26% were health or social services professionals, while 22% were community or church leaders in a Pasifika community.

The workshop and survey data was analysed using an in-depth thematic analysis method, which included thematic analysis summaries being completed following each of the nine workshops.

The survey asked participants to answer quantitative and qualitative questions. Quantitative data was analysed using a cross tabulation method. The three qualitative questions were:

- What helps you take care of your mental health?
- What is the most challenging thing for you in terms of yours or your family's/ whānau/ āiga health and wellbeing?
- What do you think should be the top three priorities for the health system?

A total of 1908 qualitative responses were reviewed for high level themes and then each qualitative response was coded to the corresponding theme. The survey question about the priorities for the health system were scored based on the ranking participants gave them. Not all survey participants answered the qualitative questions.

Following specific workshop and survey sub-analyses, a full, robust thematic analysis of all the data was conducted by the project team and three additional researchers with experience working in Pasifika communities, but not directly involved in this project. This ensured a fresh perspective and peer review of the project team's work. This analysis led to the six insights presented in this document.

All quotations in this document have come directly from participants who completed the online survey or participated in a workshop.



## Insight One

# Mental health is the biggest area of concern for Pasifika people





Mental health, including suicide and addictions are recognised as a big concern for Pasifika people in Aotearoa New Zealand. Across the workshops and survey participants, issues related to mental wellbeing were raised as the health issues people are most concerned about. Out of the total survey participants, 73% thought suicide was an extremely concerning issue for Pasifika families and communities, and 84% thought mental health was either extremely or moderately concerning.

Additionally, self harm, depression and alcohol and drug use are issues Pasifika people worry about. A telling 61% of survey participants were 'extremely concerned' of the self harming behaviour amongst Pasifika families and communities. For alcohol and drugs, 54% of survey participants were 'extremely concerned'.

There are multiple factors that can negatively impact mental health and wellbeing. Participants thought the main issues contributing to poor mental health included experience of violence, achievement pressure from family and the stigma and judgement around mental health in Pasifika communities, causing people to not seek out support.

Pasifika people are particularly aware of the impact of violence on wellbeing. People talked about how experiencing physical and/or sexual violence can cause trauma and have a long lasting impact on mental health. Survey data showed that 59% of participants were 'extremely concerned' about physical violence as an issue for Pasifika communities and families. As well as violence within family, 61% of survey participants indicated they were 'extremely concerned' about bullying within school and peer group environments.

Mental health discrimination has long been an issue across society in Aotearoa New Zealand. While there has been significant gains made in destigmatising

It is so easy to talk about our physical unwellness but it's challenging to talk about emotional unwellness like mental health. It's not easy to express to whanau when you're experiencing mental health [problems].

mental health, participants were still reporting high levels of judgement and misunderstanding around mental health in their communities. Pasifika young people demonstrated a high appreciation for the importance of mental health, wellbeing and self care. However, they reported older generations did not have the same appreciation or understanding. They reported finding it difficult to open up about their challenges and stressors with family. Many discussions highlighted the fact that there was still stigma around mental health that led to people feeling reluctant to access support. Some of this can be attributed to traditional Pasifika cultures having often viewed the cause of mental distress in the spiritual realm, as a punishment or curse, leading to some believing that mental illness or 'spiritual possession' is a result of a current or past breach of a sacred covenant or tapu relationships with other people (living or dead), Gods, ancestors or the environment.

Positively, 75% of the survey participants shared effective ways of managing and supporting their mental health and wellbeing. Common self care strategies included:

- Having a strong support network (family, friends, church)
- Physical activity (exercise)
- Self reflection and meditation
- Faith and spirituality
- Having people to talk to that are trusted

While many people identified effective self care strategies, they also talked about the difficulties they and their families have related to health and wellbeing. A high proportion of participants stated having the time and resources to prioritise wellbeing, including physical activity, was challenging. Pasifika people acknowledge that some families don't have the ability nor luxury of effective self care strategies, due to other stress and busyness in their lives.

We are always looking after one another as it's pretty busy. This sometimes means sacrificing self care to take care of others. We need to get better at this, so we are pouring from a full cup, not half empty or empty cup.



## Insight Two

# Family is key to wellbeing but also complex





**Family at the heart**

There was an overwhelming sense across the workshops and survey participants that āiga, kāinga, magafaoa, kōpū tangata, vuvale, fāмили, and family are central to most Pasifika people's sense of wellbeing. Whilst family connection, support and the health and wellbeing of the family as a whole is a core cultural value, family being at the heart of Pasifika people's health and wellbeing comes with its complexity.

Across the workshops and survey participants, having a strong support network from family is the top priority that helps Pasifika people take care of their mental health. It is crucial that valuable support, connection, understanding and acceptance from parents and family is given and reciprocated. Participants shared that a lack of this can result in family being the source of distress and negatively impact their health and wellbeing.

**Talking about mental wellbeing is challenging**

Pasifika young people reported parents and other older family members not understanding mental wellbeing, and in turn feeling unsupported when it came to distress and challenges they faced. One of the biggest challenges for young people is openly discussing mental wellbeing issues with parents and family due to lack of understanding. People talked about being scared to be vulnerable because of the shame it could bring on family. With family at the forefront of Pasifika wellbeing, lack of understanding and emotional support from loved ones left young people to feel misunderstood and hopeless.

Success to me is when I can have conversations around taboo topics with my family. They don't understand what mental health is. Mental health just isn't a thing for them.

**Unrealistic expectations can cause distress for young people**

Many Pasifika young people experience high levels of pressure from family to succeed academically and in sports, cultural and employment pursuits. While having expectations of young people can be positive and encouraging, young people referred to a relentless sense of expectation without support that was often overwhelming. Young people do not want to shame or disappoint family and the pressure to achieve can be disabling and overwhelming, leading to a negative impact on mental wellbeing. Survey data showed that 70% of participants were concerned about the unrealistically high expectations placed on young people.

Along with pressure, a large number of young people stated that they face multiple responsibilities at home which negatively affects their wellbeing. Being a source of income and achieving in school whilst caring for grandparents, parents or younger siblings are responsibilities that young people referred to as challenging. These responsibilities are seen as a way of being of service and giving back to family, however they can also come at the cost of placing wellbeing as a second priority. Young people spoke about these responsibilities being extremely difficult to manage.

**Family violence is a big concern**

Survey data showed that 92% of participants are concerned about the impact of family violence on wellbeing for Pasifika families. This includes both physical and sexual violence occurring within families and the intergenerational trauma and harm it creates. Young people spoke about the impact this had on multiple family member's mental health and the need to break the cycles of violence.

Staying connected. I do love my family but it can be stressful at times due to the high expectations they have of me and the example I set for my younger nephews and nieces.



## Insight Three

# Income, housing and privilege have a major impact on Pasifika wellbeing







Physical wellbeing and use of health care services, while important, is only responsible for a small part of a person's overall health and wellbeing. It is well reported that environmental and socio economic factors have a major impact on our health and wellbeing. Across the workshops and survey participants, the social determinants of health such as a lack of financial security, inadequate housing and costs associated with accessing health care were reported as factors that are significantly impacting Pasifika wellbeing.

Lack of financial security and facing financial hardships is a wellbeing issue that significant numbers of Pasifika young people and adults experience. Having a stable income that meets the rising costs of living is essential for Pasifika people to thrive.

Keeping healthy and well is challenging for some Pasifika families. This includes affording healthy food, being able to access healthcare when you need it and living in adequate and quality housing. Participants talked about the cost of healthy food to feed a large family being unattainable. This results in families buying meals that are cheaper, and often less nutritious and highly processed. From the survey data, 64% of participants said cost was a barrier towards accessing health and social care services, including the cost of getting to services and the financial impact of taking time off work. Having access to affordable health care, such where cost is not a barrier, is extremely important for wellbeing, and affordability is not only about low or no co-payments at services.




I want to see more of my people under a roof rather than behind four doors.




Pasifika people are particularly aware of the lack of adequate housing and poor housing conditions that are affecting their families and communities. When asked about the most important health and wellbeing issues for Pasifika people, lack of housing and poor housing conditions came out as a top priority. Many Pasifika people tend to live in larger, multigenerational households and, for most Pasifika families, housing and health are inseparable. This can be attributed to the cultural traditions of hospitality towards extended family members with the expectation to provide long term accommodation. Pasifika families have the highest rates of housing related hospitalisations in Aotearoa New Zealand including rheumatic fever, cellulitis and pneumonia.

Having the time and resources to prioritise wellbeing is seen as a privilege for Pasifika people. This includes having the time to prioritise self care, physical activity and exercise, being able to afford healthy food, resourcing childcare and being financially able to take time off work for health and social care appointments. Significantly, many participants reported that they did not experience this privilege.



Trying to eat healthier or buy healthier options for the kids is becoming impossible as fruits and veggies are more expensive to buy compared to a packet of noodles and bread. It's too expensive to feed a big island household with healthy food.





## Insight Four

Many Pasifika people feel our health system can be doing more to meet their needs






Pasifika people in Aotearoa New Zealand are experiencing some of the worst health inequities in the country. It is well reported that Pasifika people have the highest rates of multi-morbidity and have a six year lower life expectancy compared to non-Pasifika people. Whilst these health inequalities can be partly attributed to socioeconomic determinants, poor access to appropriate health care also contributes towards Pasifika health inequity.


Health services that do not understand Pasifika people have been a long standing issue when navigating health and social care services in Aotearoa New Zealand. In order to deliver safe, appropriate and effective health and wellbeing services to Pasifika people, services and the professionals who provide them must be culturally competent and safe. This includes understanding Pasifika people's diverse worldviews, values, beliefs and culture. Having access to health and social services that understand cultural values and identity was seen as extremely important by 73% of survey participants.

The majority of Pasifika people want all health and social care services across Aotearoa New Zealand to be culturally responsive, including services provided by Pasifika led organisations and mainstream (non-Pasifika led) organisations. This means health and social care professionals, regardless of their own ethnicity, should be able to provide appropriate care that creates positive health and wellbeing outcomes for all. Survey data showed that 99% of participants believed having a workforce who can work appropriately with Pasifika people is an important priority that the healthcare system should focus on.

Health literacy is the term used to encapsulate having access to the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate the health system and receive the right support and relevant information needed to thrive and be well.




The language barrier. I remember growing up, I would attend appointments and be asked to pay attention to what the nurse or the doctor is saying so that I can translate or make sure that my parents understand their needs.




Navigating the health system, health literacy and knowing where to find help are all big challenges affecting Pasifika people's health and wellbeing. Additionally, 54% of survey participants thought it was extremely important for Pasifika people to be equipped with the skills, tools and resources to navigate and understand the health system.

Pasifika people want to make informed health-related decisions for themselves and their family. 97% of survey participants thought it was important to know where and how to access different types of health and social care services. Service and health information was referred to as complicated and difficult to understand due to language barriers, use of medical jargon and complicated referral arrangements between services. For some Pasifika people, English is their second language. Participants thought health information needed to be available in all Pasifika languages with consideration towards language style, tone and using accessible platforms.

Pasifika people want greater prioritisation on health promotion and prevention. Pasifika young people play an important role in a Pasifika families which is often a hybrid of navigating and experiencing a largely Western society while also being grounded in Pasifika heritage and values. Often there is a generational knowledge gap between older family members and young people on physical activity and nutrition, sexual health, alcohol and drug and mental health issues. Targeted health promotion for parents and older family members to increase awareness and comfort around these issues was a priority identified by Pasifika young people. Being educated on health and wellbeing issues in a way that Pasifika people can truly understand and connect to is crucial towards empowering families to create better health outcomes and close the intergenerational knowledge gap.



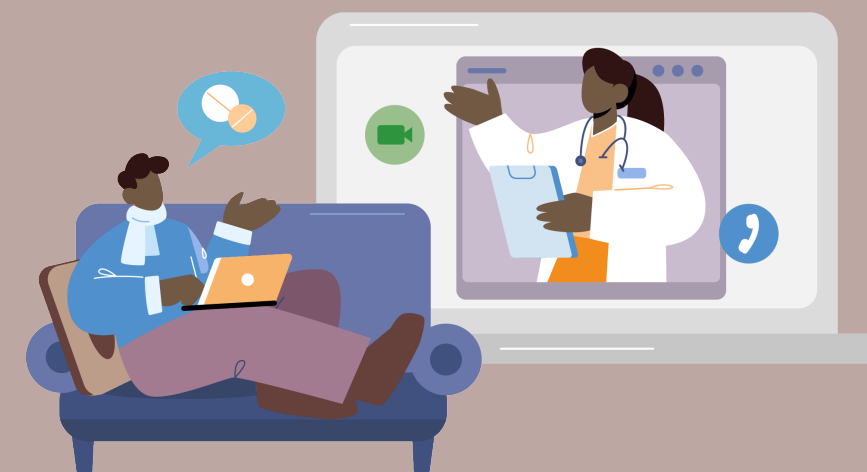
The most challenging thing for our family is knowing where to get access to help and services and what services are out there.





## Insight Five

# Pasifika people want diverse options and choice





Pasifika people are a heterogenous group with significant diversity. This includes multi-generational families, multicultural, multilingual, Aotearoa New Zealand-born, island-born and ethnic specific values and aspirations. Whilst connection to cultural identity and Pasifika values remains an essential part of Pasifika life, there is no one size fits all approach for Pasifika people. Having choice and diversity of culturally responsive services is important.

Choice of where and how to get support is a key factor for Pasifika people to maintain and feel in control of their health and wellbeing. Having diverse service options was referred to as a critical part of enabling choice for Pasifika people. This includes choice of mainstream or Pasifika led health and social care services, different models of service delivery (including online and in-person), and choosing whether to see a health or social care professional who is Pasifika or non-Pasifika.

Survey data showed that 98% of participants wanted health and social care services that understood their Pasifika worldviews, cultural values and identity. Many Pasifika people want to interact with Pasifika led organisations and Pasifika health and social care professionals, commonly referred to as services that are 'by Pasifika, for Pasifika' and delivered in a Pasifika way. Additionally, 64% of survey participants believe it is extremely important for Pasifika organisations to deliver health and social care services with 54% believing it is extremely important for these services to be delivered by Pasifika people. Pasifika services can contribute towards better understanding and relatability, enabling trustworthy relationships to be built and language barriers to be removed.

While many people prefer Pasifika led organisations and health and social care professionals, a significant number, particularly young people, do not. This dichotomy highlights the need for choice. Some people referred to feelings of

Having the ability to choose a service that is not Pasifika and knowing that is OK is important to me.

shame and concerns around the lack of confidentiality when interacting with Pasifika professionals, in particular for topics that are considered taboo or with Pasifika professionals who have chief titles. Many young people talked about 'Pasifika people liking to talk' which in their view threatens confidentiality and disallows a safe space for open conversations. Comparatively, some people did not have a service or professional preference however referred to respect, professionalism, open-mindedness and cultural competency being essential towards a positive experience with the health system. Survey data showed that 76% of participants think it is extremely important to access health and social support services without judgement where they can share issues openly and honestly with the healthcare professional.

Having a hybrid of digital and in-person delivery models for health and social care services was highlighted as important. Participants referred to online services being efficient and easily accessible, reducing barriers such as lack of transportation, commute costs and time commitments such as resourcing childcare or taking the day off work to attend appointments. When asked if transport was an issue or barrier for accessing services, 21% of the surveyed participants indicated it was. Additionally, many young people stated that they felt more comfortable accessing services online in a familiar environment such as home, particularly for those who experience anxiety.

In-person delivery models for health and social care services are still very much valued by the Pasifika community however. Participants referred to in-person services enabling greater human to human connection, patient advocacy and avoiding confusion around navigating a digital platform. Workshops and survey participants wanted health and social care services to be delivered in places that communities regularly gather. Schools were often referred to as key places for health and social care to be delivered.

Seeing cultural people provides cultural safety for me & my aiga. I don't feel judged & I feel accepted.



## Insight Six

# Stigma and discrimination affect Pasifika wellbeing





Racism and discrimination against Pasifika people contributes to negative health outcomes. Participants reported significant and painful experiences of racism, discrimination and judgment in society and when accessing health and social care services.

Some participants had experienced unfair treatment from health and social care professionals due to their ethnicity. This included lack of respect, negative assumptions made about them, and ignorance towards Pasifika worldviews and culture. Only 45% of survey participants did not feel judged when accessing health and social care services.

Participants referred to systemic racism causing unequal access to services. Survey data showed that 69% of participants thought it was extremely important for everyone throughout Aotearoa New Zealand to have access to the same type of health services (primary, secondary and specialist services). Feelings of distrust towards the government and mainstream health services are an issue for some Pasifika people, and many thought that was a direct result of experiencing racism and discrimination. When Pasifika people have negative experiences with health services they share them, which in turn reduces access to healthcare for other family and community members.

There is a pressing need to see greater representation of Pasifika people in health service delivery, governance and leadership roles. The online survey showed that 58% of participants thought it was extremely important for health and social care services to be delivered by Pasifika people. Building our Pasifika workforce in both mainstream and Pasifika led services will reduce barriers to accessing health care, including increasing language and cultural understanding.

Having more  
Pasifika  
people at the  
table making  
decisions  
and being in  
leadership  
positions is  
important for  
us, especially  
for our youth to  
look up to. These  
leaders need to  
be visible.

Visibility of Pasifika leaders across the health system was identified by many participants as being critical to increasing trust, relatability and connection in healthcare. This includes Pasifika young people being in leadership and decision making roles. Pasifika communities value the knowledge and lived experiences of young people and acknowledge they have a leadership role to play. Having youth representation at these levels will support intergenerational communication and approaches towards health whilst enabling youth perspectives and voices to be heard in the health system.

Youth participants across the workshops who were currently in secondary school, tertiary studies and/or employment referred to feelings of doubt towards their skills, talents and accomplishments, often attributed to Pasifika people being a minority group and underrepresented in leadership. Participants reported that Pasifika specific support groups and pastoral care support services enabled youth to be equipped with resources and tools to thrive in difficult, Western environments.

Pasifika people are particularly aware of the overbearing internal pride that many individuals and families have. Participants thought being 'too proud' was a common health and wellbeing issue because it led to reluctance to seek help and support. For Pasifika young people in this family dynamic, being honest around wellbeing issues and concerns is sometimes difficult due to feelings of embarrassment, stigma, shame and pride, often connected to their families.

The most  
challenging thing  
for my family  
and I is having  
access to health  
and care services  
and not wanting  
to attend the  
appointments  
arranged by  
GPs and doctors  
because a lot  
of us Pasifika  
Islanders have  
that pride and  
stubbornness  
within us.



# Focus Areas

There are many actions that could improve Pasifika health and wellbeing. Survey and workshop participants suggested a range of interventions that could make a positive difference to theirs, their family's and Pasifika communities' health and wellbeing. These eight were the most commonly mentioned.

## 1. **Acknowledging physical and sexual violence, addiction, suicide and self harm are all major concerns for Pasifika Communities and committing resources to reduce them.**

These issues are all significant contributing factors to mental distress and need sustained effort to enable health and wellbeing for Pasifika Communities.

## 2. **Education and mental health promotion with Pasifika families to normalise and encourage conversations about mental health and wellbeing.**

This includes issues related to having too much pride to seek help.

## 3. **Education and mental health promotion with Pasifika families to reduce the pressure of unrealistic expectations and achievement on Pasifika young people.**

While it is positive that families want the best for young people, Pasifika youth are reporting the pressure can be overwhelming, disabling and distressing.

## 4. **Consideration of the costs of transport, time off work and resourcing childcare as significant barriers to accessing healthcare for Pasifika people.**

## 5. **Building the cultural competency of all health professionals to be able to effectively, appropriately and safely work with all Pasifika people.**

Some perceive the mental health and addictions sector has grown in Pasifika cultural competency but there is significantly more work to do in other parts of the health system.

## 6. **Investing in initiatives to change the health system in ways that make it easier to navigate for Pasifika people.**

## 7. **Increasing the visibility of Pasifika people in the health system**

by significantly increasing the number of Pasifika people working in the health sector at all levels, including leadership and governance.

## 8. **Acknowledging the systemic racism in the health system and committing resources to reduce it.**





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