

Ethnic fertility trends: convergence of diverse patterns in New Zealand?¹

New Zealand's birth rates – among the highest in the OECD over the last 70 years – have driven national and local population growth. However, New Zealand's period total fertility rates have dropped significantly over the last 15 years, while international migration has increased its contribution to population growth.

Period fertility measures are always susceptible to temporal social and economic factors, but the cohort measures are unequivocal: New Zealand couples are having fewer children with each successive generation. A wider array of fertility measures – including completed fertility and childlessness rates – all indicate sustained fertility declines across New Zealand's ethnic subpopulations.

Despite these trends, fertility patterns continue to be a key driver of changes in the ethnic make-up of New Zealand. It is not just differences in fertility rates, but the combination with differences in age structure and intermarriage that are important.

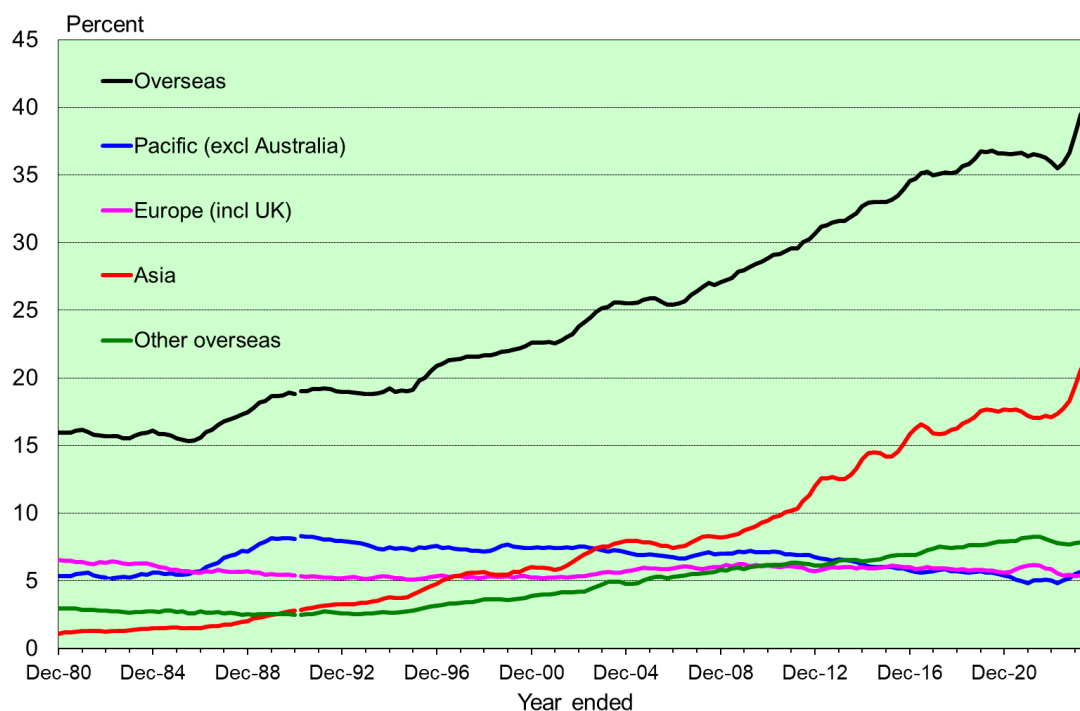
We look at whether ethnic fertility rates are converging, or whether fertility differentials are widening. This is of broad interest to observers of demographic transition theory. It is also a fundamental question for projection practitioners considering future fertility assumptions and how ethnic subpopulations will evolve over the coming decades.

Increasing diversity by birthplace

The number and proportion of births occurring to mothers born outside of New Zealand has increased from 1 in 6 in the early 1980s, to 2 in 5 in 2023. This has largely been driven by parents born in Asian countries, although the proportion has also increased for parents born in Middle Eastern, African and American countries.

¹ Analysis and findings will be based on, and extended using, 2024 births and 2023 Census data to be released between Sep 2024 and mid-2025.

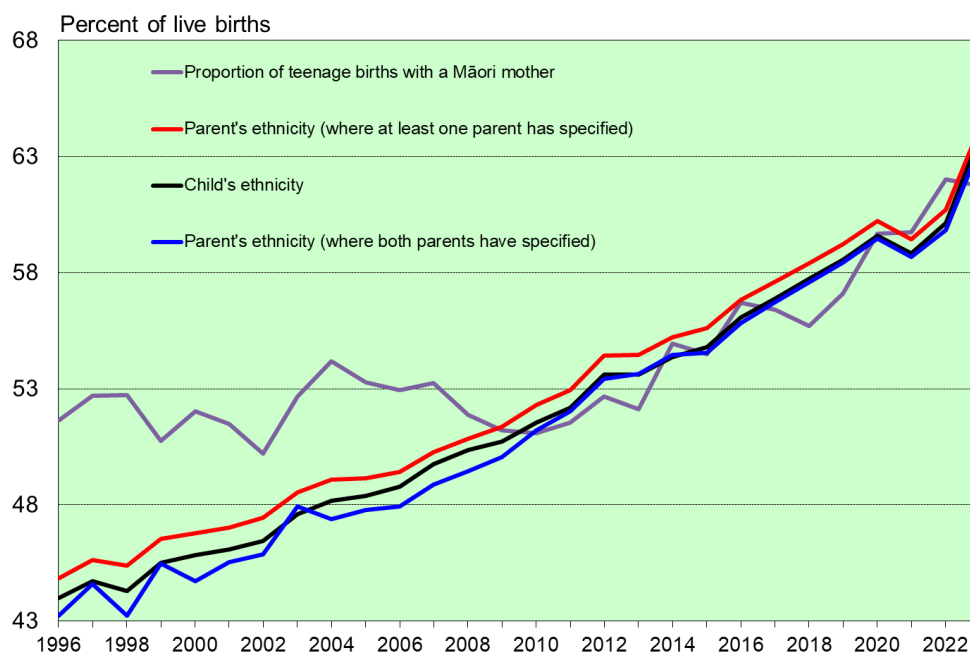
Proportion of Births with Mother Born Overseas



Increasing diversity by ethnicity

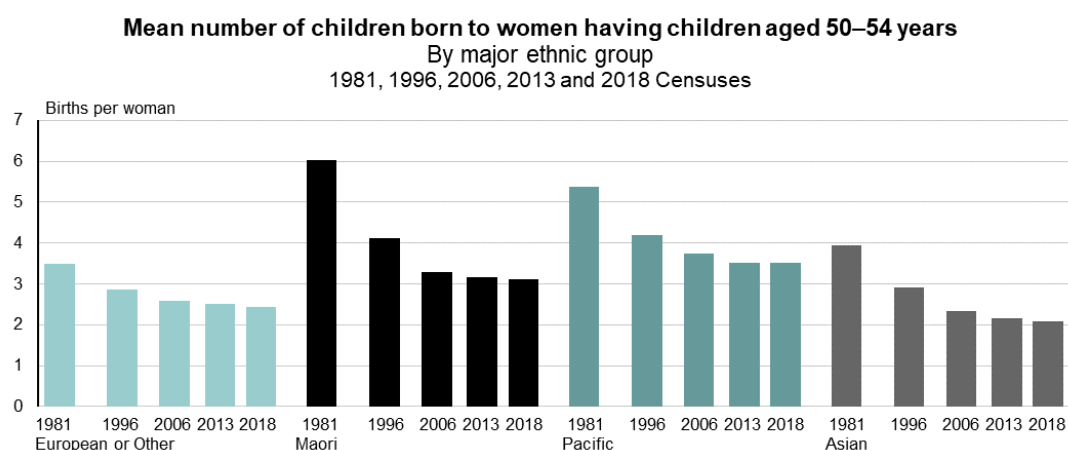
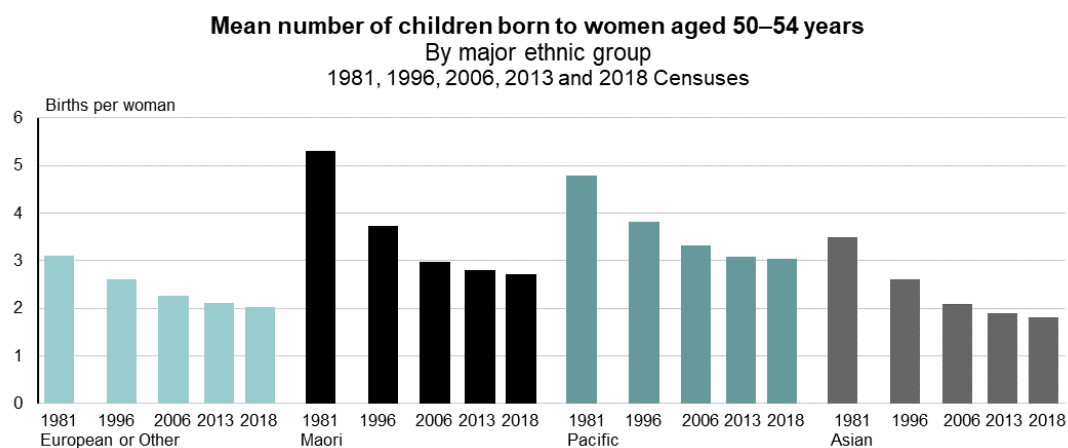
Consistent with the trends in birthplace, two in three births in New Zealand had a Māori, Pacific and/or Asian ethnicity in 2023.

Proportion of Births with Māori, Pacific or Asian Ethnicity

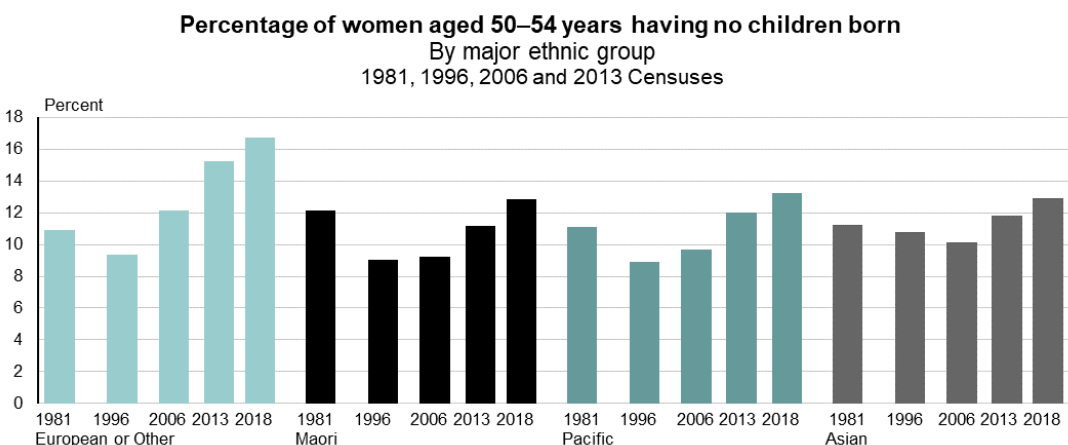


Generational declines in average family size

Comparing the completed fertility experience of women of different ethnicities indicate that, at least for recent generations, the mean number of children is progressively less with each successive generation. This true for those women giving birth, as well as for women overall.

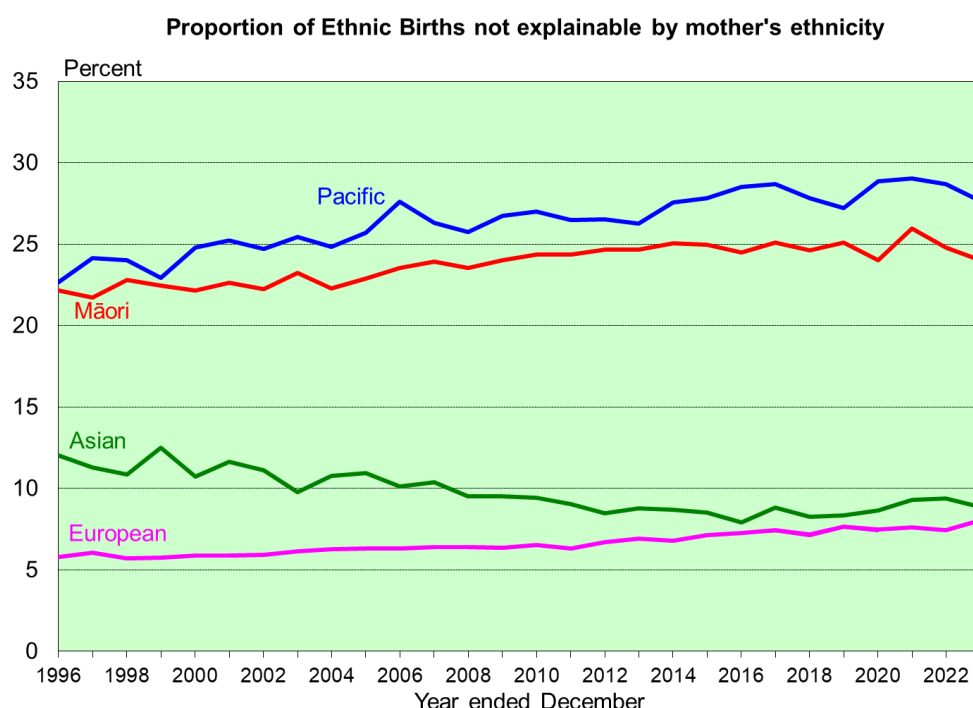


Among women having no children, we observe a progressive increase with each recent generation across all major ethnic groupings.



Ethnic intermarriage contributes to Māori and Pacific population growth

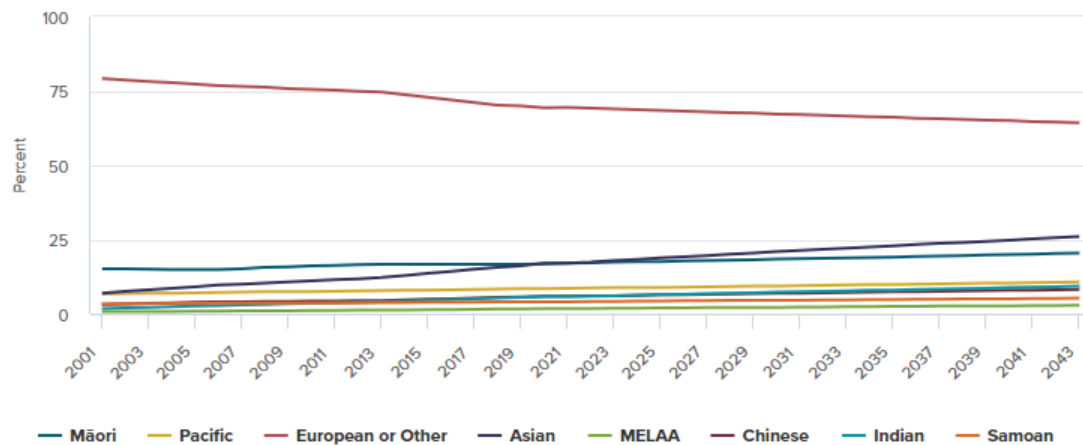
Ethnic intermarriage – in the broadest sentence – is a significant contributor to the growth of the Māori and Pacific populations in New Zealand. One in four Māori births are to a non-Māori mother where the father is Māori. A slightly higher proportion of Pacific births are to non-Pacific mothers where the father is Pacific. Both the Māori and Pacific proportions have increased since 1996 (when birth registration data first enables such analysis). In contrast, the proportion of Asian births that have a non-Asian mother has declined over time, indicating proportionately less intermarriage of people with Asian ethnicities.



Contrasting growth rates mean changing ethnic shares

The result of these sustained ethnic fertility differentials is a New Zealand population experiencing cultural changes, both currently and into the future. The changes in ethnic composition are especially pronounced at the youngest ages, driven by births to parents with multiple ethnicities.

Ethnic share of New Zealand population, median projection, at 30 June 2001–2043



MELAA – Middle Eastern/Latin American/African. See metadata tab for more information about this graph.

It is evident that fertility and migration are not independent dynamics, but intrinsically linked, especially in the context of ethnic population change.