

A STUDY OF STUDENT TRANSIENCE IN SOUTH AUCKLAND PRIMARY SCHOOLS ¹

Introduction:

Reports by primary schools teachers and principals talk of the frustration of attempting to educate children who are constantly changing schools². Anecdotal information from teaching professionals reports that this transience has become worse during the 1990s. Many believe it is linked to the shift to market-related rents in 1993, and the rapidly increased rents that followed this change. These policy changes have made the housing position of many families vulnerable and tenuous, leading to frequent shifts between houses as they attempt to manage high rents and household debts. Reports from budgeting agencies suggest that many families move between renting their own home and sharing one with their extended family, with the high financial cost of renting and the high personal cost of sharing being continuously traded off.

Child Poverty Action Group (Inc) is a not-for-profit group of practitioners, activists and academics who advocate for more informed social policy to support children in Aotearoa New Zealand. CPAG is particularly interested in the plight of the one third of New Zealand children who presently live in relative, and occasionally, absolute poverty. CPAG believes that this situation is not the result of economic necessity but due to policy neglect. Through efforts in research and advocacy, CPAG hopes to highlight the unfortunate position of tens of thousands of New Zealand children, and promote public policies that address the underlying causes of much of this poverty.

CPAG believes that every child is part of a family/whanau and that one of the best ways to support family/whanau to nurture their children is to ensure that everyone has access to decent, affordable and appropriate housing. To promote this concept, CPAG will publish a monograph on housing policy in New Zealand in April 2003, which the organisation hopes will expand the discussion around policy in this area. In particular, it hopes to encourage the movement of housing policy out of its present position as a residual social policy area, and onto centre stage, as a key social policy which supports and strengthens the state's efforts in nurturing our children.

During the preparation of this housing monograph, it became apparent that issues of security of housing tenure and the resulting increased mobility of households were likely to have two apparent negative impacts on the well-being of children: poor health status and reduced educational achievement. To study the later impact in more detail, a survey of 59 South Auckland primary schools was undertaken to better understand two key questions:

- What is the size of the problem of transience of primary school children from low-income communities?
- How seriously does this problem affect the delivery of good quality educational opportunities to children?

This paper reports the results of this survey.

¹ Study by the Child Poverty Action Group - P.O. Box 56-150 Mt Eden Auckland - <http://www.cpag.org.nz>
Report prepared by Alan Johnson – August 2002

² An excellent reference article on this topic is Anna Lee (2000) "*Transient Children – Perceptions of how often transient children come and go*". New Zealand Education Institute, Wellington.

Survey methodology:

A brief survey (attached as Appendix One) was circulated to 59 primary schools in the South Auckland suburbs of Otahuhu, Mangere, Otara, Papatoetoe, Manurewa, Clendon and Papakura. The survey was sent directly to principals at each school via fax, and included a brief introduction to Child Poverty Action Group, and to the research project. Principals were asked to provide information about their school roll for the 2001 school year, indicate the extent to which they thought transience of children was a problem for their school, and explain the types of problems that arise as a result of transience. Participants in the survey were offered anonymity in any reported results, a copy of the finalised report, and a \$50 book voucher for their library, as a token of CPAG's appreciation for their participation.

The actual survey asked participating schools to provide details of their enrolments during 2001 and to respond to a question regarding the importance of the problem of transience within their school. It was expected that enrolment information would be taken from roll returns sent to the Ministry of Education.

The study area of South Auckland was chosen for this study because it has the largest poor urban population in New Zealand. A brief description of the South Auckland area is attached as Appendix Two for those unfamiliar with the characteristics of the area. South Auckland is a comparatively large community of just over 200,000 people, most of whom are Maori or Pacific people. As with any community of this size, there is a wide range of income levels. In South Auckland, there are several higher income neighbourhoods within generally poorer and larger communities.

Of the 74 State registered full primary or contributing schools within the study, 59 were asked to participate. The selection of potential participant schools was based on an early decision to omit the following types of schools:

- **Middle decile schools** (4 in total) where transience did not appear to be a problem.
- **Small special character schools** (5 in total) where the special character of the school may have influenced levels of transience, and where the small numbers involved would not have altered the overall results significantly. Three of these schools were Maori language immersion schools, which had a combined roll of 130 students.
- **Special needs schools** (3 in total) where transience is most likely not a problem, partly because of the children's special needs, and partly because the limited places in these schools mean there is often a waiting list.

Three schools were omitted from the survey in error – one in Papakura, and two in Otara. Further, at least two composite schools with a primary school age population (ie. under Year 7) were omitted because of difficulties in gaining accurate information about their primary school age population.

The total school population of the schools asked to participate was 26,500 children, or around 85% of the primary school age population in South Auckland.

Response tax:

Table 1 below provides a breakdown by suburb of the response rate from the 59 schools surveyed.

TABLE 1: Responses to Primary School Transience Survey

| Suburb | Total schools in suburb | Total children in suburb's schools | Number of schools surveyed | Total children in surveyed schools | Schools responding | Total children in responding schools | Children in responding schools as % of all children |
|--------------|-------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| Otahuhu | 4 | 1,954 | 4 | 1,954 | 4 | 1,954 | 100% |
| Mangere | 16 | 6,655 | 12 | 5,663 | 6 | 2,506 | 38% |
| Otara | 12 | 5,192 | 9 | 3,403 | 3 | 1,327 | 26% |
| Papatoetoe | 8 | 3,976 | 7 | 3,932 | 2 | 1,383 | 35% |
| Manurewa | 21 | 8,416 | 17 | 7,875 | 13 | 6,077 | 72% |
| Papakura | 13 | 4,536 | 10 | 3,668 | 3 | 1,196 | 26% |
| TOTAL | 74 | 30,729 | 59 | 26,495 | 31 | 14,443 | 47% |

Results and findings:

The survey required schools to provide information from their school roll for 2001. The following information was sought:

- Estimates of the ethnic breakdown (in percentage terms) of the student population according to the four categories of Maori, Pakeha-Eurporean, Pacific and Other.
- The number of students enrolled at the start and at the end of the school year.
- The number of students enrolled at the school during the course of the school year. This number included enrolments by "New Entrants" (ie, five-year olds or children starting school) as well as enrolments from other schools.

Estimates of transience have been made using these roll figures and by applying the following formula:

$$\text{Transience (as \% of average school roll)} = \frac{\text{Enrolments during the year} - \text{increase in school roll}}{\text{Average school roll for the year}}$$

The increase in the school roll is simply the difference between the numbers enrolled at the beginning and at the end of the year. The average school roll is simply the average of the opening and closing rolls.

Assumptions:

It is accepted that this estimate is useful only as an indicative measure of transience. While a more accurate estimate may have been more helpful, this would have required significantly more information from respondents. Any request for more detailed information would have reduced the response rate considerably, given the pressure on schools to provide information for Government requirements on a continuous basis.

A number of obvious flaws exist in assumptions behind this measure³. Further, this measure estimates the annual turnover of a school's roll, not the transience figure often cited by principals, which is the proportion of Year Six children who did not start at the school as new entrants.

Results:

The responses from the survey have been analysed by suburb and the decile rating of the respondent schools. Tables 2 and 3 below provide details of student transience by these measures. (Note that ethnicity percentages may be more or less than 100%. This is because some students identify with more than one ethnicity, and sometimes because inadequate information was supplied by schools).

TABLE 2: Results of Primary School Transience Survey - by Suburb

| Suburb | % Maori children | % Pakeha children | % Pacific children | % Other children | Total children in responding schools | Children shifting during 2001 | Transience % of school roll shifting during 2001 |
|--------------|------------------|-------------------|--------------------|------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| Otahuhu | 16% | 5% | 63% | 16% | 1,954 | 593 | 30% |
| Mangere | 24% | 2% | 62% | 3% | 2,506 | 602 | 24% |
| Otara | 23% | 1% | 66% | 10% | 1,327 | 420 | 32% |
| Papatoetoe | 22% | 22% | 25% | 35% | 1,383 | 213 | 15% |
| Manurewa | 41% | 27% | 24% | 8% | 6,077 | 1,992 | 33% |
| Papakura | 41% | 40% | 14% | 5% | 1,196 | 318 | 27% |
| TOTAL | 31% | 17% | 41% | 11% | 14,443 | 4,138 | 29% |

³ This includes the implicit assumption that all the increase in the school roll is the result of enrolments from New Entrants. A school's roll may increase through population growth in the local area, for example, through the completion of a nearby housing development. The numbers of students in the Year 1 to 6 classes may increase through such a change, but would not be included as part of the transience measure using this approach. The only way of overcoming such a problem is to ask schools for a finer breakdown (by years) of their school roll at the beginning and end of the school year. Such a request was seen as onerous and likely to reduce the response rate considerably.

TABLE 3: Results of Primary School Transience Survey - by Decile Rating of School

| Decile ranking | % Maori children | % Pakeha children | % Pacific children | % Other children | Total children in responding schools | Children shifting during 2001 | Transience % of school roll shifting during 2001 |
|----------------|------------------|-------------------|--------------------|------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| Decile 1 | 31% | 5% | 54% | 7% | 9,299 | 2,985 | 32% |
| Decile 2 | 35% | 23% | 27% | 16% | 2,378 | 693 | 29% |
| Other Deciles | 25% | 47% | 16% | 15% | 2,765 | 460 | 17% |
| TOTAL | 31% | 17% | 41% | 11% | 14,443 | 4,138 | 29% |

A number of interesting trends can be identified from these charts or from the underlying data:

- The wide variation in transience levels across suburbs, although some of this variance may be a result of the small sample sizes from some areas.
- The low level of transience in Mangere, although based on a small sample size of 38%, is important. This suburb has a high concentration of state houses and the study period followed the re-introduction of income related rents in state houses. The lower level of transience for Mangere may be due to improved housing stability, due to that major policy change.
- The difference between suburbs with high and lower levels of transience appears to be due to differences in socio-economic status. Papatoetoe schools have slightly higher decile ratings than the majority of other schools. Papakura's results appear to have been influenced by the participation of one high decile school within the three responding schools.
- There is a clear relationship between the decile level of the school and the level of transience likely to be experienced. Nearly one in three children at a decile one school changed school during 2001, while only one in six children did so in schools with a decile rating of three or more.

By applying the transience measures from Table 3 above, it is possible to make an estimate of overall transience across South Auckland and the differences in this transience between Maori, Pakeha, Pacific, and children from other ethnic groups. These estimates are based on the assumption that the ratios applying to the respondent schools would apply equally to all other primary schools in South Auckland. Based on this, Table 4 below provides estimates of the level of transience within South Auckland schools overall.

TABLE 4: Estimates of overall primary school transience in South Auckland - 2001

| Decile Ranking | Official Roll July 2001 | Total children in responding schools | Transience % of school roll shifting during 2001 | Estimates of overall transience Numbers of children shifting during 2001 |
|----------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| Decile 1 | 16,650 | 9,299 | 32% | 5,300 |
| Decile 2 | 5,050 | 2,378 | 29% | 1,500 |
| Other Deciles | 8,140 | 2,765 | 17% | 1,400 |
| TOTAL | 29,840 | 14,443 | 29% | 8,500 |

Estimates of the likely ethnic breakdown have not been included in this discussion because of the unreliability of the data. Notwithstanding this, it is apparent from the tables above that the overall distribution of transience is biased against Maori and Pacific children, and to a similar extent against children from ethnic minorities, such as Asian and Middle Eastern groups. This bias arises because of the predominance of Maori and Pacific children in the Decile 1 schools, and because of the relatively higher roll turnover in these schools. Overall, it appears that Pakeha children are nearly half as likely as non-Pakeha children to shift in any given year. However, more detailed information would be required to confirm this apparent result.

Estimates in Table 4 show that almost one third of decile one students in South Auckland (5,300 children) were likely to shift at least one during the school year, with similar rates in decile two schools. There was a marked drop in transience levels in decile 3 and higher schools, highlighting the concentration of the issue in low-income areas.

The survey also asked respondents about the seriousness of student transience as an educational problem. Of the 30 responses to this question, 15 (50%) indicated that they thought that it was a serious problem, 11 (37%) indicated that it was quite a serious problem to them, 3 (10%) that it was a slightly serious problem and 1 indicated that it was not a problem at all.

Conclusions:

The results of the survey suggest that in South Auckland, the equivalent to a middle sized New Zealand primary school, shifts every week of the school year. This impacts on almost a third of all low decile school children. These results broadly mirror data from the 2001 Census, which reported that 20-22% of primary school aged children shifted in the 12 months prior to Census night.

The key difference from these results is that this shifting behaviour is not evenly distributed across all ethnic and income groups. Rather, low-income families and hence almost by definition, Maori and Pacific households, are more likely to move frequently than Pakeha-European households. **This research suggests that children from families with the lowest 10% of incomes are likely to shift twice as often as children from higher income households.**

The causes of these high levels of mobility are beyond the scope of this study. Intuitively, and from anecdotal reports, it would appear that the lack of affordable and stable housing is a strong contributing factor to this mobility. There is some initial evidence from the comparatively low level of mobility in Mangere, that areas with concentrations of state houses have lower mobility, perhaps because of lower rents and better security of tenure. Results from Otago, which has a similar concentration of state houses, is more equivocal. This suggests further work is required to establish the link, or otherwise, between social housing policies, lower residential mobility and reduced transience through local schools.

The survey has not identified the educational costs of a child's transience through a series of schools. Comments received as part of the survey highlighted problems teachers have with assisting children to catch up with their new peers, particularly when there is a continuous stream of new faces into a classroom. The slow transfer of records from previous schools can exacerbate these problems, and the waiting time that often exists before a child can access remedial teaching once a learning problem has been identified.

From the comments received, transience also appears to be concentrated within a core group of people who appear to be almost perpetually mobile. This group represents only a small proportion of the total population (3-5%), and may account for half the shifts between schools. Reports of children shifting two or three times in a school year, or having attended five or six primary schools are common. This suggests that the averages reported here, and in the Census, do not truly reflect the extent and nature of the transience problem.

Overall, it appears that transience through schools is concentrated in poorer communities, which typically have lower levels of homeownership and higher levels of rental housing. It is these same groups whose children generally achieve less in educational terms, who are most often at risk of youth unemployment, and most at risk of slipping into criminal activity as teenagers. While transience at primary school, brought about by unstable housing situations, cannot be blamed directly for these outcomes, transience is a contributing factor, and one which can be addressed through better directed and better funded housing policies.

Appendix One

C H I L D P O V E R T Y A C T I O N G R O U P

STUDENT MOBILITY SURVEY

Name of School

Decile rating

Ethnicity of Students

(please estimate the ethnic breakdown of your school roll)

| | | | |
|-------|--------------------|---------|-------|
| | | | |
| Maori | Pakeha/NZ European | Pacific | Other |

Number of students on school roll at the start of 2001

Number of students on school roll at the end of 2001

Number of new students enrolled during 2001

As a barrier to children's learning, student mobility at our school is

(please tick the box which most closely represents the situation at your school)

Very serious

Quite serious

A little serious

Not serious

Do you have any comments or anecdotes which you can add to this survey? These comments/anecdotes may be published in the final report either anonymously or with your name/school attached. Your comments will illustrate the sort of problems that student mobility is causing schools, teachers and children.

.....

.....

.....

.....

Please don't publish these comments

I am happy to have these comments published anonymously

I am happy to have these comments published against my name/school.

WHEN COMPLETED PLEASE RETURN TO ALAN JOHNSON BY FAX TO 267-6422. YOU CAN GET AN ELECTRONIC COPY OF THIS SURVEY BY EMAILING ALAN AT ajsemail@xtra.co.nz

Appendix Two

An overview of South Auckland

There are several definitions for South Auckland but the one used in the Student Mobility Survey is that of the urban suburbs of Otahuhu, Mangere, Papatoetoe, Otara, Manurewa and Papakura.

These South Auckland suburbs have a total population of around 250,000 people, 39% of whom are European-Pakeha, 30% Pacific, 20% Maori and 10% Asian. The high concentration of Pacific people is a unique feature, which means that one in three Pacific people in New Zealand live in South Auckland. Similarly one in ten Maori and one in ten Asian New Zealanders also live in South Auckland but only one in every 29 European-Pakeha does.

On average, South Aucklanders are poorer than other Aucklanders and other New Zealanders. However, beneath these averages there is a wide range of incomes from wealthy upper middle class neighbourhoods to wide concentrations of benefit dependant communities in Otara, Mangere and Clendon in west Manurewa.

South Auckland is a relatively young community with a higher percentage of children in the local population than elsewhere in Auckland and New Zealand, and also a higher percentage of households with children. Conversely there are fewer elderly people living in South Auckland. One in sixteen New Zealanders live in South Auckland, while one in twelve New Zealand children live there, but only one in thirty people aged over 65 years old. Much of this difference is due to the lower life expectancy of Maori and Pacific people who are so much more numerous in the South Auckland population than elsewhere in New Zealand. Much of the resident European-Pakeha population are in the older age groups living in Papatoetoe and Papakura, which suggests that over time age structure of these communities will become younger.

People living in South Auckland are more likely to rent their homes, although they shift house only as often as other New Zealanders. South Aucklanders are more likely to live in crowded houses and are three times more likely than other New Zealanders to live in multi-family households.

Fewer South Aucklanders of working age are in paid employment and fewer of them have an academic or vocational qualification.

Appendix Three

Key statistics for South Auckland 2001 - Source 2001 Census

| | Population 2001 (usually resident on Census night) | Population growth rate 1996-2001 | % of population under 5 years old | % of population under 15 years old | % of population over 65 |
|-------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Otahuhu | 12,231 | 0.6% | 10.8% | 28.0% | 8.0% |
| Papatoetoe | 35,391 | 5.3% | 9.1% | 25.5% | 10.8% |
| Mangere | 48,348 | 6.3% | 11.0% | 31.6% | 6.7% |
| Otara | 32,232 | 8.6% | 12.2% | 33.8% | 4.6% |
| Manurewa | 68,283 | 14.2% | 10.3% | 29.0% | 6.8% |
| Papakura | 40,581 | 2.5% | 8.3% | 25.4% | 9.7% |
| South Auckland | 237,066 | 7.6% | 10.2% | 29.0% | 7.6% |
| Rest of Auckland Region | 916,671 | 8.8% | 7.0% | 21.4% | 10.6% |
| Auckland Region | 1,153,737 | 8.6% | 7.6% | 22.9% | 10.0% |
| New Zealand | 3,737,277 | 3.3% | 7.2% | 22.7% | 12.1% |

| | % of population of European descent | % of population of Maori descent | % of population of Pacific descent | % of population of Asian descent | % of population born in NZ |
|-------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Otahuhu | 24% | 17% | 38% | 20% | 50% |
| Papatoetoe | 42% | 16% | 24% | 17% | 62% |
| Mangere | 23% | 18% | 50% | 8% | 58% |
| Otara | 16% | 19% | 57% | 8% | 56% |
| Manurewa | 45% | 24% | 20% | 9% | 70% |
| Papakura | 66% | 21% | 7% | 5% | 79% |
| South Auckland | 39% | 20% | 30% | 10% | 65% |
| Rest of Auckland Region | 69% | 8% | 8% | 13% | 65% |
| Auckland Region | 63% | 11% | 13% | 13% | 65% |
| New Zealand | 74% | 14% | 6% | 6% | 77% |

| | Median family income | % of households with children | % of families with one parent | % of households with multi-families |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|
| Otahuhu | \$29,178 | 76% | 31% | 10% |
| Papatoetoe | \$39,880 | 71% | 25% | 9% |
| Mangere | \$30,892 | 79% | 30% | 14% |
| Otara | \$33,392 | 82% | 32% | 15% |
| Manurewa | \$46,425 | 74% | 27% | 8% |
| Papakura | \$49,567 | 67% | 23% | 5% |
| South Auckland | \$38,995 | 74% | 28% | 9% |
| Rest of Auckland Region | \$56,517 | 63% | 18% | 4% |
| Auckland Region | \$53,129 | 65% | 19% | 5% |
| New Zealand | \$46,087 | 61% | 19% | 3% |

| | % of houses rented | Occupancy Rate (people per house) | % of households shifting in last 5 years |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| Otahuhu | 53% | 3.34 | 67% |
| Papatoetoe | 37% | 3.20 | 59% |
| Mangere | 43% | 4.20 | 55% |
| Otara | 48% | 4.44 | 57% |
| Manurewa | 35% | 3.44 | 63% |
| Papakura | 32% | 3.02 | 58% |
| South Auckland | 39% | 3.55 | 59% |
| Rest of Auckland Region | 32% | 2.85 | 60% |
| Auckland Region | 34% | 2.97 | 60% |
| New Zealand | 31% | 2.78 | 56% |

| | % of working age population in employment | % of over 15 year olds without a qualification | Median personal income for over 15 year olds |
|-------------------------|---|--|--|
| Otahuhu | 46% | 28% | \$13,774 |
| Papatoetoe | 54% | 28% | \$17,080 |
| Mangere | 50% | 30% | \$15,549 |
| Otara | 48% | 31% | \$15,384 |
| Manurewa | 57% | 29% | \$20,244 |
| Papakura | 60% | 28% | \$21,032 |
| South Auckland | 54% | 29% | \$18,026 |
| Rest of Auckland Region | 61% | 17% | \$21,838 |
| Auckland Region | 60% | 19% | \$21,117 |
| New Zealand | 60% | 24% | \$18,545 |