Domestic Violence In New Zealand

To the outside eye, New Zealand seems to be the closest one can get to paradise on our planet. Dreamy landscapes filled to the brink with animals exclusive only to New Zealand, historical landmarks and a fascinating Maori culture which is still present despite the modernization. New Zealand is famously known for its symbolic biculturalism, being a self-consciously egalitarian society and the first country to give women the right to vote in 1893. Although the country may seem like the ideal society, is it really immune to social inequality? The truth is, that even though New Zealand is a prosperous nation that has seen substantial economic growth, and is at the top of many international rankings in different categories, it has its flaws as well. Statistics from OECD (2015) show that New Zealand has the highest rate of reported family violence in the developed world. Many are now left wondering how a problem as grave as this could arise in a country like New Zealand? Why does New Zealand have the worst rate of reported family and intimate-partner violence in the developed world, how is it affecting society, and how can the problem potentially be solved? These particular questions are what this text aims to explore.

Geographically New Zealand is located in the east of Oceania, right next to its neighbor and longtime collaborator Australia. The country is slightly larger than Britain, yet it only has a population of 4.4 million. The original settlers of New Zealand are the Maori, and they came to the islands at around 1250 AD. They now represent about 15% of the population and are currently growing in numbers. Immigration has recently become more common for New Zealand as many are moving there from densely populated countries such as India, Japan, and China. In 2013 as much as 11.8% of the population identified as Asian, and 7.4% as non-Maori Pacific Islanders (Wikipedia.com, 2019). This is evidence that New Zealand is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world. This has led to conflict several times over the course of the last few centuries, like the New Zealand wars and the northern war.

In recent history, New Zealand has become a country of peace and growth, seeking to constantly better itself. Now that the country suffers less from disputes between different demographic groups, one would imagine that the country could rest assured that kids would grow up without as much conflict in their lives. According to the New Zealand Police, however, that is not the reality children are facing today. The greatest conflicts of their generation take place in their own homes.

Today, domestic violence is the most notable problem in New Zealand. Domestic abuse is when violence is committed by someone in the domestic circle of the victim, be it a family member, partner, ex-partner, or other relatives. Domestic violence can take the form of sexual, physical or psychological abuse. Women are the most likely to be victims of domestic violence but men, children and elderly are also common victims. There are some areas in New Zealand that have higher rates of domestic violence than others. In these areas the Maori are typically more heavily represented. The domestic violence rates among Maori are higher than those of other ethnicities.

Police are called out to investigate a case revolving around domestic violence once every five minutes (areyouok.org, 2016). This amounted to as much as 118,910 cases of family violence in

2016 (areyouok.org, 2016). If New Zealand's small population is taken into account, then this is the highest reported rate of domestic violence in the developed world (OECD, 2016). However, it is important to question these statistics as there are many possible sources of error. Having the highest reported rate does not necessarily translate to the most incidents, seeing as people in other countries may have far worse opportunities when it comes to actually reporting these occurrences. What is even more alarming though, is that New Zealand also has a low rate of reports compared to the number of incidents, as it is estimated that only about one out of every five cases are reported. This amounts to a staggering 525,000 possible cases of domestic violence a year(nzherald.co.nz, 2017).

Domestic violence has no doubt taken its toll on society and will continue to do so until the problem is resolved. According to NZherald (2003), domestic violence costs New Zealand up to as much as 7 billion dollars a year. This is 1500 dollars per person in New Zealand. This money is used to pay compensation for victims, pay legal fees, and the funding of organizations that help people who have suffered. A considerable amount of money is also spent on enlightening people on the issue. Domestic violence has also cost New Zealand some image and has been the source of a great deal of criticism from other countries and the UN.

Seeing as how this is a problem that constantly arises in so many different individual homes, it is imperative to find out what all these troubled homes have in common to find the source of the problem.

In 2018 the public of New Zealand believed that social inequality was the most concerning problem in their country (Yournz.com, 2018), and this is very relevant when thinking of domestic violence. “Low-income families are significantly more likely to have to contend with domestic violence, as poverty can act as a fuelling factor in this type of conflict” (Slabbert, 2016, s. 74). One possible explanation is that New Zealand has a problem with social inequality because the Maori population actually generally have less income and fewer resources than other demographics. This can lead to aggressive behaviour. This is often taken out on other people, and sadly this is typically the ones closest to them.

All children are particularly vulnerable though, as in 2017 research by the Child Poverty Monitor found that 290,000 children, which is around 27% of all the children in New Zealand, were living in income poverty (UNICEF, 2018). If a child is living below the poverty line, it means they are living in households where income is less than 60% of the median household income, after housing costs are taken into consideration. This puts them at a huge disadvantage, seeing as this to a large extent leads to poverty later in life. Domestic violence is also often a learned behavior, so exposure to it as a child can lead to generational inheritance of abusive behavior.

“Children who are raised in poverty are more likely to leave school with little or no academic attainment in comparison to their wealthier peers” (Michael & Dwyer, 2008). The difficulties of finding a job without any academic achievements have huge consequences later in life when they struggle to provide for themselves and their family. This can, in turn, lead to depression. The Department of Psychiatry at Oxford University conducted a study where they found out that people with depression are three times more likely to be the perpetrators of a violent or sexual crime (BBC, 2015).

Poverty is also a great hindrance in the race to overcome this problem in the way that not having the ability to support yourself means that people are more likely to stay with their partner.

This is particularly a problem for women who cannot leave their home because they are financially dependent on their partner. Consequently, they are not able to take their children with them either, and the fear of leaving them with a violent family member may irrationalize their way of thinking. This may deter the victims from taking action.

Poverty is also the root of many of the other causes of domestic violence such as the abuse of alcohol and other drugs. Alcohol is another serious problem in New Zealand. According to New Zealand's Ministry of Health, many people in their country consume alcohol at a rate that endangers both themselves and those around them. “In 2017/18, 25% of adults aged 15 years or more who drank alcohol in the past year had a potentially hazardous drinking pattern”(Ministry of health, 2017). The same problem exists with other drugs as 44% of adults will try an illicit drug at some point in their lives (drugfoundation.nz, 2018). Heavy usage of alcohol and other drugs leads to behavioral changes, mostly making the user more irrational and aggressive. It has even been stated by the Auckland city police that alcohol plays a role in every third case of reported domestic violence. Drug abuse therefore also plays a big part in domestic violence.

Solving a problem this deep-rooted will not be simple, but it is not impossible. The New Zealand government are already committed to making sure that the future will be different. New Zealand has passed legislation that grants victims of domestic violence 10 days paid leave to allow them to leave their partners, find new homes and protect them and their children. This law will enter into force on April 1st of 2019 and will especially help people in the first critical stages of attempting to exit an abusive relationship. This will allow them some time at a critical stage, to look for a place to stay and seek help.

According to stuff.co.nz, the police in New Zealand implemented new rules in 2018 relating to domestic violence aimed to handle cases more efficiently. Instead of only two hours training in how to handle a “domestic call”, new police officers will now go through sixty hours of training. That way, they will know how to treat these incidents with the best possible outcome in mind. The police will also be using a new phone application that gives them access to information on previous cases, so that the officers, for example, can see if the perpetrator has been involved in similar cases before. They can also create profiles for both the offender and victim which all the other policemen can see. It is also a new policy to do interviews with the victim at the scene, which has had a positive effect on results in the courtroom. All this makes it easier for the police to systematically deal with this problem.

Despite the fact that many steps have been taken there is still much that needs to be done, and there are ongoing debates on how to better fight the issue. Some are thinking of giving more resources to the police, others believe they need to focus on spreading knowledge. Continued efforts to combat poverty and to offset social inequality will be of great importance. Whatever the strategy, the most important point is that the entirety of New Zealand's population and the government pool their resources together to work against the problem. Domestic violence can only truly be stopped if everyone is willing to do the work. Family violence is a problem that affects people from all areas and social classes, which is why everyone shares the responsibility for making a change. If the whole of society contributes towards making a change, there might be light at the end of the tunnel.

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