This chapter looks critically at current and past developments in child protection in New Zealand, in the light of their implications for children’s rights and well-being. I look critically at whether children are being protected appropriately by current policy directions, and how other directions for reforms could improve their protection. Child protection is a policy area where there are massive problems in many countries, and I make no claim to having answers to the many questions that perplex the field. This is not a particularly positive story, as described by Professor Dorothy Scott:

Most child protection services in countries such as Australia and New Zealand have become demoralised, investigation-driven bureaucracies which trawl through escalating numbers of low-income families to find a small minority of cases in which statutory intervention is necessary and justifiable, leaving enormous damage in their wake. The point has been reached in many places where we are exceeding the use of the State’s coercive power to protect children without causing them further harm. (Scott, 2006, p. 1)

Many children in New Zealand do not receive adequate nurturance and care within their families, and are subject to abuse, violence or neglect. Isolation, deprivation and poverty (often intergenerational) are clearly associated with these risks to children’s well-being and rights. The Public Health Advisory Committee (PHAC) report of 2010 paints a grim picture of children’s health in New Zealand. The country has moved from being in the top third for most child well-being indicators in the 1970s, to the bottom third in the early 21st century (PHAC Report, 2010). There are many concerning statistics showing that New Zealand is doing very poorly in terms of injuries to children, rates of pneumonia, whooping cough, rheumatic fever and child maltreatment. This alarming picture occurs within the context of increasing financial pressure (unemployment and low wages), widening socioeconomic disparities, increasing single parenthood, and high rates of abuse and neglect (PHAC Report, 2010).
A 2003 UNICEF report highlighted that New Zealand had the third highest rate of child maltreatment among OECD countries. There were 1,286 hospital admissions in 2008/2009 for children under five due to assault, neglect or maltreatment. Rates of abuse and neglect in New Zealand have been increasing since 2005, with the number of investigations requiring further action increasing from 44,808 in 2005/2006 to 55,482 in 2009/2010. The majority of children (46% in 2010) are placed in family/whānau care, while 36% are placed with Child Youth and Family (CYF) caregivers and 15% receive care in CYF bednights or caregiver homes. Māori children are over-represented in the child abuse and state care statistics and are more likely to experience poverty. Just over half (51.6%) of children in state care are Māori. The number of children in care is relatively low in New Zealand, largely due to the high threshold for intervention and the policy of moving children into permanency (Atwool, 2010). New Zealand was ranked 24th out of 35 nations for child health and safety; 21st for children’s material well-being (a measure of poverty) (UNICEF, 2013) – more than three times as bad as Finland, and below the UK (16th) and Australia (19th); 27th for child homicide; and 24th for immunisation rates.

Good outcomes for children depend on whether their families’ basic needs are met, and the strength of their families’ connections to services and support. Poverty and fragile social networks are frequently associated with child abuse (Tapp & Taylor, 2002). Children from low-income and indigenous families are more vulnerable to economic downturns, have worse employment prospects, suffer poorer health outcomes and face a greater risk of physical abuse and neglect:

Poverty is correlated with higher risks of physical abuse and neglect of children. US estimates suggest children in poverty are 44 times more likely to suffer neglect and 14 times more likely to be harmed by some form of abuse.

(Every Child Counts, 2010, p. 8)

One in four children in New Zealand is living in poverty, and the rate of child poverty among two-parent and one-parent families is above the OECD average. The cost of housing is a major contributor to these poverty figures. New Zealand has very high rates of housing unaffordability, with the median multiple of the family income being 5.5 (regions with median multiples of 3 are deemed unaffordable) (Stuff, 2014). The country has the seventh highest rate of child poverty – higher than the UK (which is below the OECD average) (Expert Advisory Group on Solutions to Child Poverty, 2012). Child poverty in the mid-1980s was at half of its current level. New Zealand’s child poverty rate is about two-and-a-half times as high as the Nordic average of countries such as Sweden, Norway, Finland and Iceland (Boston & Chapple, 2014).