



FIRE
EMERGENCY

NEW ZEALAND

YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS OF THE FIREFIGHTER ROLE

LITMUS

January 2019

The fire and emergency services have changed dramatically in recent years and was unclear if young people understand the contemporary firefighting role.

Ten focus groups with 38 young people, aged 18 to 22 years and from diverse backgrounds, were conducted to understand young people's perceptions of the firefighter role, their understanding of the skills needed, and the sources of information contribute to these perceptions.

The research helps us understand how we can encourage diverse groups to consider firefighting/emergency response as a career and how we need to describe the role in our recruitment material.



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Young people's perception of the firefighter role

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Context and research purpose

This report presents an overview of how young people perceive the firefighter role. Fire and Emergency New Zealand (Fire and Emergency) will use the report findings to inform their recruitment strategy. The report will help Fire and Emergency target and encourage skilled and diverse applicants whose qualities align with the role of the modern firefighter.

In recent years fire and emergency services have changed dramatically

The rate of structural fires fell in past years due to improved building standards and fire protection measures. At the same time, there is a growing trend towards more vegetation fires and other emergency incidents arising from climate change. There is also an increasing demand to respond to a wide range of non-fire emergencies, often coordinating with and assisting other emergency services (2017-2021 Statement of Intent).

Fire and emergency services are increasingly involved in community engagement activities as part of their work on risk reduction and community resilience. Effective community engagement is facilitated by having a service that reflects the population it serves.

Firefighters as a group are not reflective of the communities they serve. Currently, 3.5 percent of career firefighters are women with 11.2 percent identifying as Māori and 4.4 percent as Pasifika (2017 Annual Report). Sixteen percent of volunteers are women, and ethnicity data for volunteers is not complete (2017 Annual Report).

This research explored young peoples' perceptions of the firefighter role

It is unclear if young people understand the contemporary firefighting role and the skills and capabilities needed to be successful. Fire and Emergency also wanted to understand the barriers to becoming a firefighter, particularly for women and non Pākehā men.

The objectives of the research were to understand:

- how young people perceive the role of a firefighter (both career and volunteer)
- what skills and competencies they feel are needed
- perceptions of entry barriers, particularly about diversity
- the sources of information that contribute to these perceptions.

To understand young people's perceptions of the firefighting role, and the barriers to becoming a firefighter we conducted ten mini-focus groups with 38 men and women aged 18 to 22 years from diverse backgrounds. Young people interviewed were open to careers with similar experiences and rewards as firefighting, such as Armed Services, Police, nursing, teaching, and the trades. We conducted fieldwork in Auckland and Wellington in May 2018.

How young people form beliefs and attitudes

Young people form beliefs and attitudes about the firefighting role from a young age, and throughout life

Some young people form associations of the firefighter role from personal connections with firefighters, such as friends and family members. However, most young people form beliefs and attitudes about firefighting through a range of influences and experiences.

Learning through play

Young people recall at an early age making sense of the firefighter role through playing with toys and games and watching Fireman Sam books and movies. These resources fostered stereotypes and expectations about who fights fires from an early age.

Attending emergency call outs

Young people form strong impressions of the firefighting role when firefighters are traveling to a call out. Some young people who have holidayed in beach communities or visited whānau in rural areas also have memories of volunteers turning up at the station to attend a call out. These impressions give young people the opinion that firefighters are alert, decisive, fit, brave, selfless and protective.

Some young people, particularly Māori and Pasifika have more direct interaction with firefighters. These young people, have been involved in or closely associated with a motor vehicle incident, house fire or fire emergency in their communities. These interactions give young people the impression that firefighters are helpful, comforting and caring.

Fire safety education

Young people also have strong memories of firefighters coming to their schools to teach them about fire safety and practice drills. Young people associate these visits with kindly yet serious and staunch male firefighters.

Young people form impressions about firefighters being community-minded through their presence at community festivals, e.g., Relay for Life, the Sky Tower Chair Challenge, Newtown Festival, and school fairs.

Young men, in particular, recall fire trucks at many of these events and being invited to climb on the trucks and play with the hoses.

Young women, in particular, remember there only being male firefighters at these events. At the time, they recall feeling intimidated and less comfortable talking with firefighters and engaging with displays.

Media

Young people also form impressions of firefighters in the media, which largely depicts male firefighters battling large and uncontrollable house, factory, and bushfires. Movies (mainly American) are also influential in shaping young people's perception of the role, as having superhero qualities.

Young people also get their impressions of firefighters from The New Zealand Firefighters Calendars. These popular calendars which raise awareness and funds for worthy charities also portray men and women firefighters as having superhero qualities.

Fire safety advertising

Past fire safety advertisements communicating the benefits of smoke alarms and the consequences of leaving cooking unattended also influence young peoples' attitudes and beliefs about firefighting. These advertisements leave young people with the view that firefighters are responsible stewards of property and lives.

Young people feel uninformed about the benefits of a firefighting career

Young people are generally unaware of volunteer and career firefighter recruitment campaigns. They feel uninformed about what firefighters do and the benefits of a career in Fire and Emergency.

In contrast, young people feel they are more informed about careers that offer similar experiences and opportunities, such as Police, Armed Services, health, and trades. These organisations are considered to be very visible and informative at career expos, and open days. They use savvy and engaging digital campaigns to connect with young people. These organisations are also considered to be more open and transparent about promoting diversity, and a life beyond the organisation.

How young people describe the role

Young people assume that firefighters fight fires

As the name suggests, young people assume the main role of a firefighter is to respond to fire emergencies in houses, factories, and buildings. However, young people sense that large structural fires in their communities are rare, and therefore firefighters attend fewer and smaller fires. Young people also know the role includes putting out large and uncontrolled bush and scrub fires. Young men, therefore consider the role is about protecting people and resources, and rescuing people. Young Māori and Pasifika men, in particular, are driven to achieving their community outcomes.

Young people know that firefighters respond to motor vehicle crashes. However, they assume firefighters take a secondary and supportive role to police and ambulance services by directing traffic, cleaning up fuel spills and cutting people out of wrecks.

Young people are also aware that firefighters respond to natural disasters such as earthquakes (Canterbury), floods, and other natural emergencies and search and rescue activities.

Young people are generally not aware that firefighters help with medical emergencies and are often the first responders. However, once we presented this activity to them, they feel it makes sense for firefighters to provide this assistance.

Young people assume firefighters spend most of the day on repetitive and mundane tasks and false alarms

Young people assume that firefighters spend significant periods of time waiting between call outs. They think firefighters do mundane tasks during these times like cleaning the station and maintaining and checking equipment. They imagine firefighters repetitively practice their training in firefighting drills. They also assume firefighters have a lot of downtime between call outs, when they eat, shower, watch movies, play cards and sleep.

Young people also assume firefighters do a lot of less rewarding work such as routine building inspections, attending to false alarms and rescuing cats stuck in trees.

‘It would be one of those jobs that are boring and then really intense and then boring again. Waiting at the station for something to happen and then you get the call.’
(Pākehā man)

‘I just imagine them playing poker around the table until they get a call, and then they slide down the pole and jump in the truck.’ (Rainbow young person¹)

‘There was a song when I was a kid and it was about a firemen’s day – had breakfast, went to the station, got the truck ready, went to a fire, went back to the station, had mac & cheese for dinner and then went to bed.’ (Māori woman)

Young people think educating children and the community is one of a firefighter’s main roles

Young people know from their own experience that firefighters support fire education in schools by conducting school visits and giving fire safety presentations. Young women, in particular, saw education in schools is a core role of a firefighter.

They also know firefighters attend and give fire safety presentations at community events.

Young people are unaware of the skills and competencies to become a firefighter. However, they hold some assumptions

Young people assume first and foremost they would need to be physically very strong and extremely fit to be a firefighter. They also believe firefighters would need to be emotionally well and have the emotional strength to deal with the trauma they face in the role, e.g., dealing with injured and dying people, and people who have lost property and irreplaceable items.

They believe they would need to have problem-solving skills and be good with their hands to maintain the fire trucks and equipment.

Young people also believe that they would need strong morals, ethics, life skills, and a broad range of experiences to communicate effectively as a firefighter. They, therefore, think they need to be at least in their middle or late twenties before considering this role. However, people feel being a volunteer firefighter might give them the experience they need.

‘I felt I needed a bit of life experience and needed to be in my 20s’s. I would be dealing with adults and it comes better talking to an adult than a 17-year-old.’ (Pākehā man)

¹ Rainbow community refers to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, takatāpui and intersex, and other sexual orientations and gender identities. The term seeks to be inclusive of diversity.

What the role would do for young people

Young people generally do not know the benefits firefighters receive, including salary (career firefighters), development and training opportunities, or work policies.

Most young men believe there are many benefits to being a firefighter

Most young men have considered being a firefighter at some time in their lives. Young men consider being a firefighter a worthy career because they would be saving peoples' lives and protecting property. While they believe most of the tasks are mundane, they consider the role very rewarding and gratifying.

Leadership skills gained as a firefighter working in a dangerous and stressful occupation is a benefit of the role for young men. For example, learning to stay in control under pressure, how to 'direct people', and being at the scene to 'calm people down.' Other benefits of the role are improving their knowledge, gaining confidence and learning life skills by interacting with a wide range of people and situations.

Keeping fit while working is a benefit of the role for young men. They think being a firefighter would involve an extreme workout every day. Exercising on the job means they wouldn't need to spend time going to the gym or paying gym fees.

Young men believe being a firefighter involves forming authentic and lifelong friendships. They perceive this comradeship or brotherhood forms from the mutual trust and friendship of firefighters working closely together and sharing the same experiences.

Young men think being a firefighter makes them attractive to women, due to the 'sexy' suit and the selflessness of the role. Getting to drive trucks and operate heavy machinery is a further bonus.

'It's not about the money or making your way up the career ladder. It's about making a difference.' (Pākehā man)

'The idea of team-ship and mates is cool. You will be like brothers, and you want to know they've got your back.' (Māori man)

'Chicks would love it. It would feel good saving people's lives. The skills you learn could carry through to everyday life. You make lifelong friends, and you get to drive a fire truck.' (Māori man)

However, young men feel it would be hard to rationalise being a firefighter when they have a family knowing that there is a real risk of being harmed. Young men also think shift work would mean spending less time with their partners and children. Pasifika men also feel the salary of a career firefighter might not be enough to support a family.

‘I would be open to it, but they basically live at the station. I don’t know how it works with the shifts, but you want to be with your family and kids so I don’t think I would want to live that lifestyle.’ (Asian man)

Most young women do not see themselves as firefighters

Young women believe the benefit of being a firefighter is having a job with a strong purpose that serves the community. A few women also identify keeping fit and healthy as an advantage of the role.

However, young women have never considered a firefighting role, do not know how to start applying, and could not see themselves in a role. Most assume women in the fire service work on the front desk, answering telephones and not on the front line.

Most say if they wanted the role enough, and trained hard enough they could probably achieve being a firefighter. However, they feel that passing the physical fitness test to join Fire and Emergency would be hard and the rate of failure high.

Young women feel the fire service has a ‘boys club’ culture. They think it would be difficult for women to fit in and be respected. In contrast to young men, women consider it would be harder to form trusting friendships with their colleagues.

Young women often use the word ‘fireman’ when referring to firefighters. This old terminology which is still evident in our communities has a hand in discouraging women and girls to become firefighters.

Juggling the demands of shift work and call outs with parenting is identified as a difficulty by young women. They also believe it would be difficult for pregnant women and women with young children to maintain the required fitness level.

Young women say if female firefighters were more visible when they were growing up it would have opened their eyes more to a career in Fire and Emergency. They compared the lack of female firefighters with the Police and Navy. These organisations appear to have more women in front line and senior roles and more targeted recruitment campaigns for women.

‘The idea of a “boys club” would put me off.’ (Pākehā woman)

‘I think it would take a woman a while to settle in, and if there’s a bunch of guys that have been in a crew together for a while – even if they were open to a young woman joining, it would be a shift for them.’ (Rainbow young person)

‘With Police, we know there are lots of other roles, there's been a lot of advertising with the Police – the new ads have women, and people of colour – there's a lot more inclusion in the Police which makes it more appealing. There doesn't seem to be much inclusion for firefighters – quite a male dominated area and I don't know if it's very inclusive. I don't get the feeling it's “anyone come join us!” (Asian woman)

Disabled young people would like to give volunteering a go

All young disabled people who participated in the research are active volunteers and would be interested in getting involved in volunteering. They see the benefits of volunteering as a firefighter would be to gain skills, confidence, and independence for a worthy cause. Disabled young people do not see being a career firefighter is an option for them.

‘Everything they do – climb ladders, save animals, save people, I want to do something like that – want to save people. Serving people is one of my biggest goals, it's really important, to keep our community safe.’ (Disabled man)

Young people consider the firefighting role career limiting

Young people want a career with a future. They, therefore, want to know what is the career path and progression when they are deciding on a job. Due to the physical and emotional demands that young people associate with firefighting, they do not think of remaining as a firefighter is a long-term career option.

Young people do not know opportunities for advancement from firefighter to Station Officer, or to head office. They are also not aware of the ability of firefighters to move into interesting areas of work outside the brigade, such as policy, research, education, and communications within national, regional and area headquarters. This comment was raised by rangatahi Māori who want a career that benefits whānau, hapū, and iwi.

Additionally, young people do not know how the career firefighter role equips them for positions outside of Fire and Emergency, either in another emergency services field or if they changed careers. Young people assume that compared with other occupations, e.g., building and construction and nursing, there would be fewer work opportunities overseas.

Young people consider the firefighting role narrow and not forward-looking

Young people feel the firefighter role is very narrow, as they are not aware of the full scope of the position, i.e., responding to medical emergencies. They also see the firefighter role as very general without opportunities for specialisation.

Many young people want to continue with further education in their chosen career. Due to the practical nature of the role, they assume that Fire and Emergency would value in-house

training over tertiary education. Due to shift work and irregular hours, they consider applying to be a firefighter would close the door on tertiary education.

Furthermore, young people view the firefighter's tools and communications devices as very manual, e.g., hoses and sirens. Given the importance to young people of learning and embracing technology and innovation in a career, this too is considered career limiting.

Other career choices are tailoring to young people's needs

Young people are familiar with other careers such as the Police, Navy and Air Force that recognise that young people do not intend to stay in the role for life. These organisations are known to promote career progression, tertiary education, overseas opportunities and the need to train and develop for life beyond these services.

Young people are also aware that the Police offers a range of opportunities outside of being a general constable, e.g., family violence, youth aid, dog handling and forensics.

‘At our age, we want to be starting our careers for the future. You assume with Police that when you get older, you will get an office job or something, or if you are in the Police for 30 years, then you could become influential and influence policy. But what happens with firefighters? Working in an office seems less like an option. You would need to do physical labour for quite a while. You would be doing day to day chores and wouldn't have much influence.’ (Māori man)

How the role makes young people look and feel

Young men and young women think very differently about how firefighting makes them look and feel

Young men

Young men think being a firefighter would make them appear brave, cool and hyper-masculine. They also believe the selflessness of the role would make them attractive to women. These young people think the position would make them feel worthy and meaningful, as well as being powerful and strong. They believe the role would connect them to other like-minded people and a worthy vocation.

‘People would think I am cool; girls would be impressed if I was a firefighter. It would feel challenging, fulfilling, rewarding and gratifying saving peoples’ lives. It would be self-satisfying helping the community to make a difference.’ (Asian man)

Young men believe that they wouldn’t have to prove themselves as deserving to be a firefighter as young women.

‘If you were smaller or older or a woman then there would be perceptions from others...you would face difficulties because people would not think you are strong.’ (Pākehā man)

Young women

Young women feel they would receive more attention from being a firefighter than their male peers. They believe they would need to prove themselves more to be seen by the community, their seniors, and peers as a professional and competent firefighter. They think they would have to be tough and not let their seniors and peers walk over them.

Young Pasifika and Asian women, in particular, say their parents would worry about their safety if they were a firefighter. Young Asian women (and men) also say their parents would be concerned about the perceived lack of career prospects in this line of work.

As with young men, young women feel being a firefighter would make them feel worthy and fulfilled. However, some young women think that they would let down their male peers because they are not as fast or strong. Some young women may also feel lonely and unsupported as a female firefighter, due to the perceptions of the fire service as a ‘boys club’.

‘People would look down on me because I am female and I am tiny.’ (Pasifika woman)

'They [parents] would not think it was sustainable, as I wouldn't be able to keep doing it in my 50's. They would be worried about my safety, and they would probably harass me for not being strong enough.' (Asian woman)

All young people would feel vulnerable to being a firefighter

Young people know that firefighters work in dangerous environments and they are at higher risk of serious injury or death. Young people would feel scared and vulnerable entering burning buildings. While they are unaware of details of serious injuries or fatalities of firefighters in New Zealand, they are acutely aware of the New York City firefighters and other emergency workers who died responding to the World Trade Centre attack.

They, therefore, consider being a firefighter would mean putting their lives on the line every day and is a personal choice.

Firefighter symbols and facts

Young people associate many powerful symbols with the firefighting role. However, they don't know many important facts about the role and Fire and Emergency.

Young people identify strong symbols with the firefighting role

Fire trucks

Young men in particular associate firefighting with big, powerful and red fire trucks. Young men recall climbing on fire trucks at school and playing with fire trucks when they were children. Fire trucks are a symbol of excitement, urgency, and importance.

'When I think of firefighters I think of red fire trucks zooming through the streets.'
(Pākehā man)

'The fire truck is a universal symbol – everyone knows you have to get out of the way.'
(Pasifika man)

Personal protective equipment

A further symbol of the firefighting role is firefighter's distinctive personal protective equipment (PPE), which young people refer to as 'uniforms' or 'suits.' Young people see firefighters wearing PPE when traveling to or attending emergency call outs. They associate uniforms with danger, bravery, and protection.

However, young women in particular view the suits as big, bulky, heavy, restrictive, obscuring and manly. Small women fear the weight of the PPE and associated gear could weigh them down and impact on their effectiveness as a firefighter.

There is low awareness of the navy blue uniforms firefighters wear every day amongst young people, and no knowledge of the dress uniform firefighters wear for ceremonial occasions. Young women perceive careers like the Navy and the Police cater to them by designing uniforms that have a better fit and cut for women.

'What they wear is a protection thing and like a veil. They wear heavy looking clothes and have big hats. You can't see their faces.'
(Māori woman)

'The uniforms firefighters wear are really manly – really heavy. I can't see a woman in that role because of what they wear. At the career expo, there was a woman in a Navy outfit. It was short sleeved and fitted.'
(Asian woman)

Fire stations

Young people associate firefighting with large brick utilitarian fire stations. Many young people live near a station or walk or drive past one most days. Some young people visited a station when they were at school. Many young people don't know the activities that occur in fire stations. They assume it is a place to house trucks and machinery and for firefighters to wait between call-outs.

Young people who have visited rural areas also associate the siren for calling volunteer firefighters with firefighting.

Fire and water

Young people associate firefighters with the elements of fire and water. They associate firefighters with putting out big, blazing, dangerous and unpredictable infernos. Water symbolises the gallant and courageous act of extinguishing a fire. Young people also associate soot with firefighters as the media and movies often portray firefighters emerging from burning buildings with soot on their faces.

Young people are unaware of many relevant facts about firefighters

Many young people are unaware that most firefighters in New Zealand are volunteers. While a few young people are aware of volunteer firefighters because they had lived, visited or had whānau living in provincial or rural areas, many young people assume all firefighters are full-time career firefighters.

Young people are also not aware of the new unified organisation Fire and Emergency, or any of its predecessors.

The personality of a firefighter

Young people describe a firefighter as big, white, strong and male

Young people associate a firefighter with being a family man in his 30's and 40's. At the younger age of this spectrum, he is handsome, fit, athletic and muscular. At the older end of this spectrum, he is balding with a bit of a pot belly. He epitomises traditional masculine traits relating to protectiveness, courage, competitiveness, and confidence.

Other human qualities and characteristics that form his character are being outdoorsy, a good problem solver and not afraid to get his hands dirty. He is also on alert for possible danger and remains calm under pressure.

Young people also define him with softer characteristics including being friendly, patient, warm, caring, and comforting. He is also ethical, trustworthy, loyal, and community-minded.

Above all, young people describe a firefighter with admiration and respect.

'He is athletic, masculine and fit, ethical and only ever wanting to do good. He's also physically and emotionally strong.' (Pākehā woman)

'He's calm, comforting, fit, healthy, alert and always on guard.' (Pasifika woman)

'Brave and strong and isn't scared to run into a fire. He has the mental motivation to do it and carry people out.' (Asian woman)

'Fit, brave, calm and able to make decisions under pressure. He's also trustworthy and responsible.' (Pākehā man)

'He is white, strong, sacrificial, thankless, courageous, takes risks, patient, masculine, big (to carry people), protective of women and children, admirable, and a hero.'
(Asian man)

'He's staunch, brave looking, white. He's manly, rugged and not afraid to get his hands dirty. That's exactly the person I imagine to be a firefighter.' (Māori man)

The essence of a firefighter

The heart and soul of the firefighter role are ‘Father Knows Best.’

This essence is the core characteristic that defines the firefighter role in the hearts and minds of young people. It is how they connect with the position emotionally.

The firefighting role is about strong, brave and caring men serving their communities by going to work to fight fires, protect houses and resources, and save lives. Young people widely recognise firefighting as a non-traditional occupation for women.

The firefighter role has positive qualities and values such as being protective, selfless, problem-solving and comforting. The firefighting role, therefore, commands respect and admiration from the community.

The firefighting role is not considered modern or forward thinking. It is believed to be narrow and career limiting. The firefighting role is also not deemed relevant to many young women because of its archetypal masculine character.

‘Father Knows Best’ is a suitable metaphor to apply to the firefighter role. Father Knows Best was a beloved American sitcom about a wise family man and his wife and children. In the middle-class family sitcom, fathers went to work and solved problems, mums stayed at home with the children and were caring and kind, and kids were good and respected their fathers.

Research method

We conducted ten mini-focus groups with 38 young people aged 18 to 22 years who were in the 'explorer phase' of their career. People in this age group tend to test various career options through activities like attending open days and enrolling in tertiary study. Young people in this age group are often influenced by parents, career advisors, career expos, and peers. They are therefore at a stage where Fire and Emergency can positively impact their career choice.

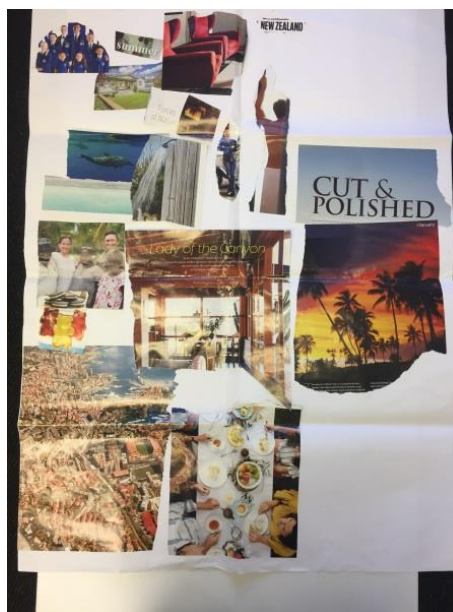
We explored the firefighting role at both rational and emotional levels

We investigated what young people think consciously and unconsciously about the firefighting role through collage creation.

Participants used a range of magazines to create an A2-sized collage of the firefighting role. They were asked to tear out pictures and words that they associated with the firefighter role and glue on to the A2-sized sheet. Once they have completed the collage they provided a short explanation of their chosen pictures to help understand meaning.

Through this technique, we explored young peoples' breadth of knowledge of the firefighting role; where they get their information from, and the depth of emotion young people have for the role.

The following is an example of a completed collage from the Pasifika focus group.



We also used past recruitment advertising to explore young people's perceptions of the skills and attributes needed to become a firefighter and perceptions of inclusiveness and diversity.

We used a purposeful sample

We included young people who were considering a career change in future. We included young people who were open to careers with similar experiences and rewards as firefighting, i.e., Armed Services, Police, ambulance officer, humanitarian, disaster response, civil defense, building, plumbing, nursing, and teaching.

We interviewed women and men separately. This separation allowed us to explore in depth women’s and men’s perceptions of firefighters’ roles and identify women’s perceived barriers to pursuing firefighting as a career.

We conducted mini-groups with different ethnic groups to enable a deeper understanding of cultural perspectives on the role. We also conducted mini-groups with young disabled people and young people from the rainbow community. Our sample achieved is below.

Mini-group	Women	Men
Pākehā	4	4
Māori	4	4
Pasifika	4	3
Asian	4	4
Rainbow community	2	2
Disabled people	1	2
Number of young people	19	19

We selected young people from qualitative recruitment panels. They received a \$60 koha to acknowledge their time and contribution to the research. We conducted fieldwork in May 2018.

We held focus groups in Auckland and Wellington. These locations were selected because they have several fire stations and large populations of diverse young people. We recognise that by not conducting fieldwork in provincial and rural centres we may have missed some critical perspectives.

We undertook a thematic analysis of the findings

We audio recorded and transcribed all focus groups with participants' permission. We took a thematic analysis of the data and presented the themes in a workshop with the Project Reference Group. The report was then drafted and circulated to the Project Reference Group before being finalised.

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