

Tracking wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand: Family types

Findings report

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Awhi Rito

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FOR THE STUDY OF FAMILIES
AND CHILDREN

Acknowledgement and Disclaimer

Acknowledgement: Stats NZ is the source for the data in the figures presented in this report.

Disclaimer: The results in this report are not official statistics. They have been created for research purposes from the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI), which is carefully managed by Stats NZ. For more information about the IDI, please visit <https://www.stats.govt.nz/integrated-data/>.

Access to the anonymised survey data used in this study was provided by Stats NZ under conditions designed to give effect to the security and confidentiality provisions of the Data and Statistics Act 2022.

The findings and conclusions expressed in this report are those of the authors, and not those of Stats NZ nor the Ministry of Social Development. The authors take full accountability for any errors or inaccuracies.

Tracking wellbeing: Project Context

The Families Package was introduced in 2018 and increased rates for several income support payments, as well as introducing new initiatives such as Best Start and the Winter Energy Payment. Since the introduction of this package, further changes have been made to the income support system as part of the government's focus on wellbeing, reducing child poverty, and in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, this included further increases to main benefits rates in 2020, 2021, and 2022.

The purpose of this project is to provide insight into how wellbeing is tracking for key groups in Aotearoa New Zealand that were likely to be more or less affected by these policy changes: people receiving main benefits and different family types. It does so by combining nationally-representative survey and administrative data from 2008 through 2020/21 to examine wellbeing indicators across multiple domains, including economic and socioemotional wellbeing and access to healthy housing.

This work was commissioned by the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) as part of the Families Package evaluation work programme. This work programme aims to measure the impact the suite of Families Package initiatives, primarily delivered through MSD and Inland Revenue, have had—and are having—on the economic and social wellbeing of New Zealanders.

Several government ministries have undertaken initiatives to track wellbeing in ways that align with the policy advice they provide government. Examples of these initiatives include:

- [The Treasury's Living Standards Dashboard](#)
- [Statistics NZ's Indicators Aotearoa](#)
- [Ministry of Health's Annual Data Explorer](#)

Importantly, these existing resources also support sub-group analysis by ethnic group. These approaches, however, do not support sub-group analysis that are most important for MSD's income support policy advice. In particular:

- Family type groups that match the family types used to assess entitlement for income support; and,
- Those who are supported by main benefits.

Thus, the purpose of this project is to fill these gaps, providing insight into how wellbeing is tracking for key groups targeted by recent income support policy changes, and how trends for these groups compare with those for others less affected by these reforms. In turn, these insights can be used by MSD and other service providers to support policy and operational design in ways that can address low levels of, and inequities in, specific wellbeing domains.

This report: Family types

This report is part of a five-part series which focuses on tracking wellbeing among families and those who receive main benefits from MSD in Aotearoa New Zealand. This report presents trends in wellbeing from 2008 through 2020/21 across different family types.

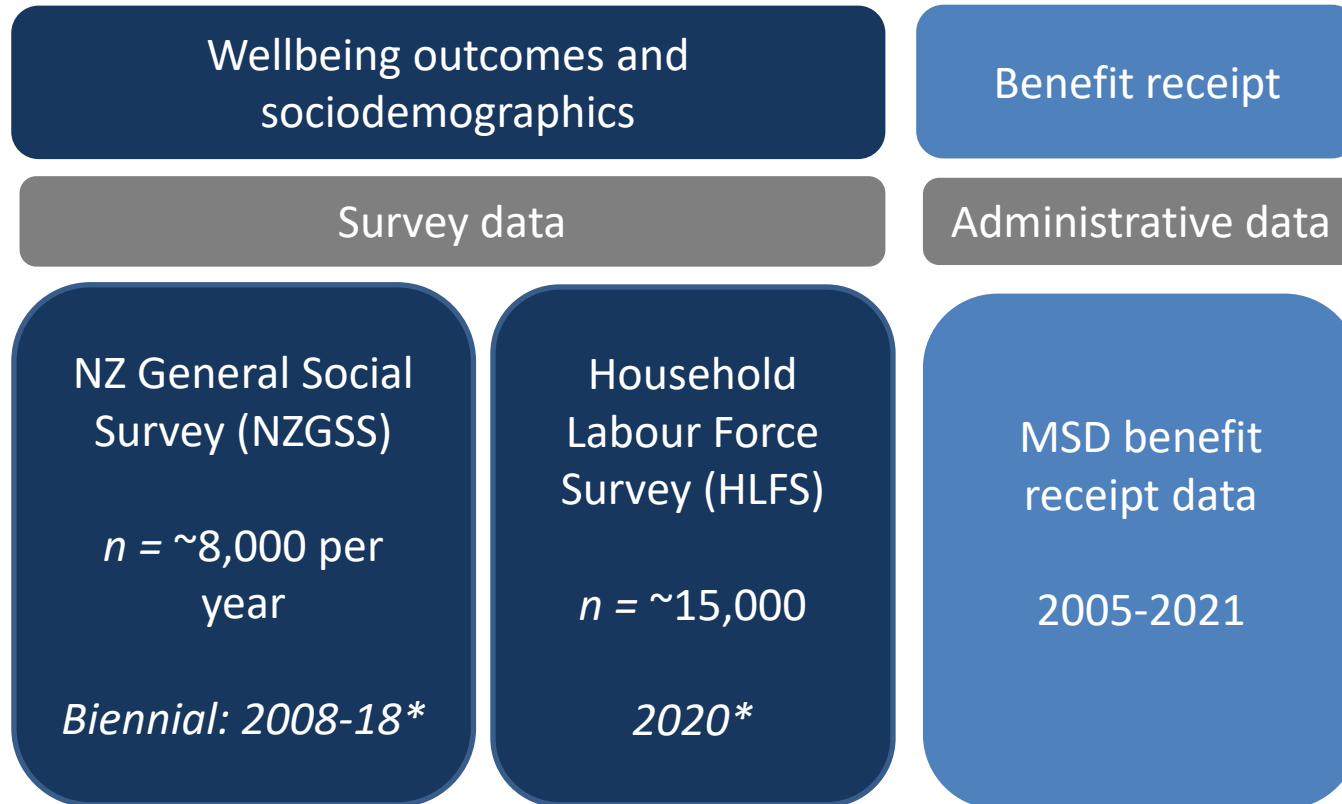
An executive summary highlighting the key findings and implications across all reports can be found here: [Tracking wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand: Project overview and key findings](#)

The three other reports as part of the series are:

- [Tracking wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand: Those who receive main benefits](#): This findings report focuses on trends in wellbeing among those who received a main benefit in the past 12 months compared with those who had not received a main benefit.
- [Tracking wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand: Main benefits and family types](#): This findings report focuses on the intersection between benefit receipt and family types, examining trends in wellbeing by family type among those who receive a main benefit and those who do not.
- [Tracking wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand: Methodological report](#): This report contains detailed information on the methodological approach taken to construct the datasets and measures that produce the wellbeing estimates in the findings reports.

Methods

IDI data sources



Data come from Stats NZ's Integrated Data Infrastructure, with the analytical dataset consisting of linked administrative data and survey data.

Information on benefit receipt comes from MSD'S benefit data. These data capture information on people's main benefit and supplementary payment receipt, including start and end dates of benefit receipt spells.

Data on wellbeing and other sociodemographic information, such as those needed to construct family type, come from the 2008-2018 New Zealand General Social Survey (NZGSS) and from the 2020/21 Household Labour Force Survey (HLFS).

These data sources are linked in the IDI at the person level.

The final analytical sample included all survey respondents aged 18-64 years old.

* Data collected in the years 2008-2018 cover the periods of April in the current year through March the subsequent year. In 2020, the data collection period is May 7th, 2020, through March 2021.

Wellbeing domains and family type

Overall, 20 wellbeing indicators were selected across six wellbeing domains. These domains include:



Data on wellbeing indicators come from the NZGSS and the HLFS. More information on the selection criteria and indicator harmonisation across waves can be found in the [Methodological report](#).

Family type

- Family type was determined from the perspective of the survey respondent and was constructed from the Stats NZ household matrix—a standard format on Stats NZ social surveys for collecting information about the people living in the household and the relationships among the household members.
- Respondents were categorised into one of four groups that broadly align with family types that are used to assess entitlement or income support at MSD:



Couples without dependent children



Couples with dependent children



Single people without dependent children



Sole parents with dependent children

Analytical approach and limitations

Analytical approach

The estimates produced are bivariate statistics, with wellbeing estimates presented as means and proportions depending on how the outcome was measured. The data were pooled and estimated for each year separately, by main benefit receipt. The figures are presented with 95% Confidence Intervals (CIs) to provide information on statistical differences between groups and over time.

The supplementary tables contain these estimates and CIs, along with t-test and chi² tests for key comparisons.

Weighting

The final survey weight from the respective surveys, along with 100 jackknife replicate weights, were used to account for the multistage sampling design and to generate population-level estimates.

Analysis interpretation and data limitations

- Findings should be interpreted as a snapshot of a group of people's experiences, on average, at a given point in time.
- Findings are correlational, *not causal*. Other factors might explain differences by family type that are associated with differences in wellbeing and are overrepresented in different in certain family types. For example, sole parents are more likely to be women compared to the overall population, meaning that reports of lower levels of feeling safe in their neighbourhood after dark, compared to those in other family types, may be driven more so by gender differences across these groups, versus being a sole parent or not.
- Smaller sample sizes among some groups—such as among sole parents—has resulted in some suppressed values (per Stats NZ confidentiality rules), and likely accounts for some instability in estimates across years. Small sample sizes also means we may be limited in determining statistical differences across groups, even when these differences may appear large. Findings should be interpreted with this understanding.
- Comparisons are made across many years—years in which the proportion of the population receiving main benefits has changed, as too the sociodemographic composition of those receiving main benefits. It is important to contextualise the interpretation of these findings with these changes in mind. More information on these compositional shifts can be found in the Methodological report.

Findings summary: Family types

Socioemotional wellbeing



Socioemotional wellbeing either increased or remained similar from 2008 to 2020 for all family types. Increases in socioemotional wellbeing were primarily reported among sole parents with dependent children.

Economic wellbeing



There was an improvement in income adequacy across all family types, but especially among sole parents with dependent children. Sole parents also greatly increased their employment from 2008 to 2020.

Housing



There were improvements in house coldness and dampness over time across all family types, however conditions improved most for sole parents, narrowing the housing condition gap across family types.

Health



Gaps across family types in self-rated health in 2008 closed by 2020, driven by improvements in self-reported health among sole parents.

Social connectedness



Indicators of social connectedness remained mostly stable, with increases in trust in parliament among sole parents, but also increases in experiencing discrimination.

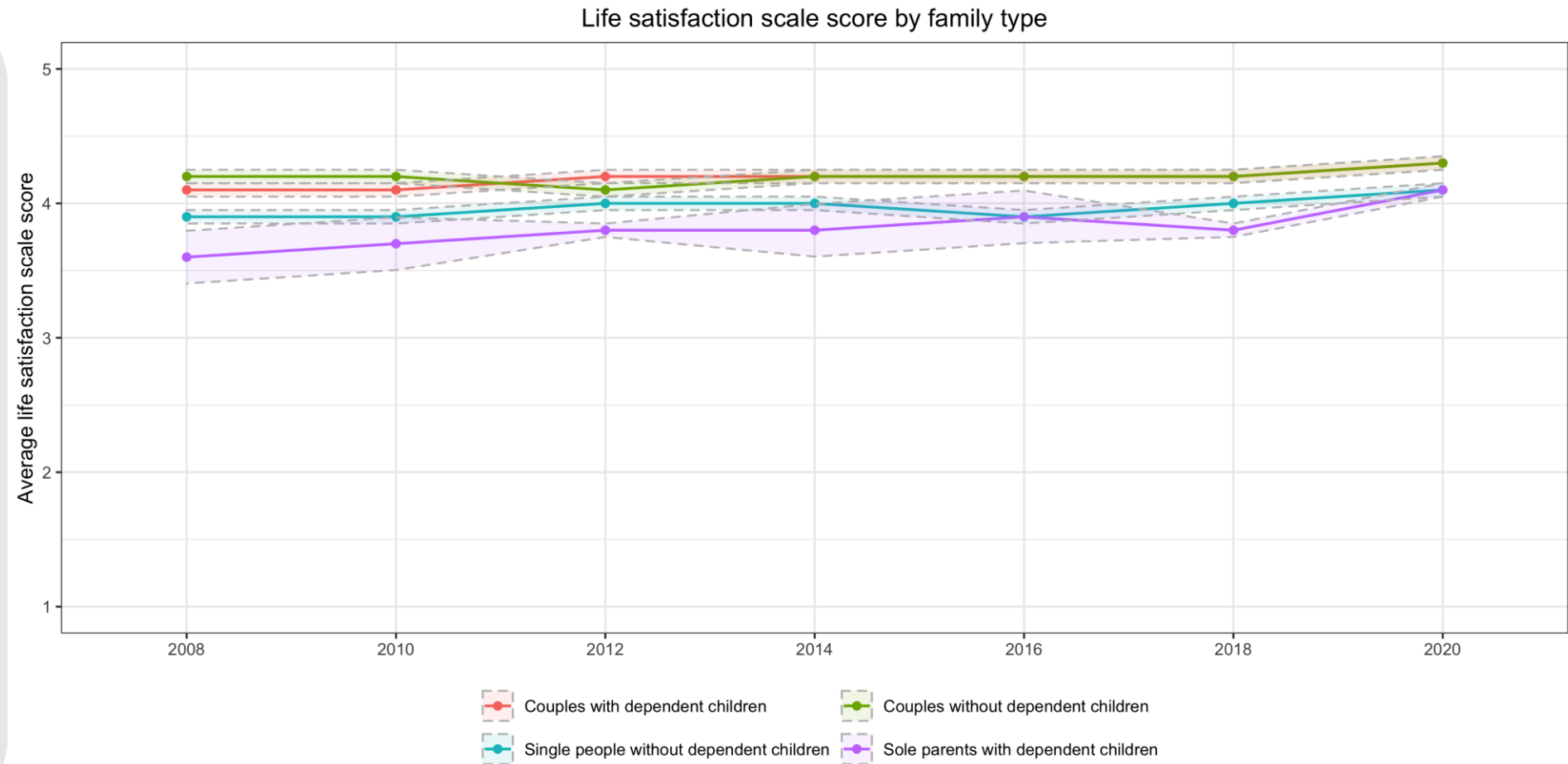
Safety



There were increases in feeling safe in the community and declines in being a victim of crime across all family types. Larger changes among sole parents narrowed or closed the gap by family type.

Socioemotional wellbeing: Life satisfaction

Life satisfaction increased from 2008 to 2020. Moreover, differences in life satisfaction across family types converged from 2008 through 2020, whereby life satisfaction increased more so among sole parents with dependent children—the family type with lowest levels of life satisfaction in 2008—bringing average life satisfaction to the same levels as single people without dependent children.



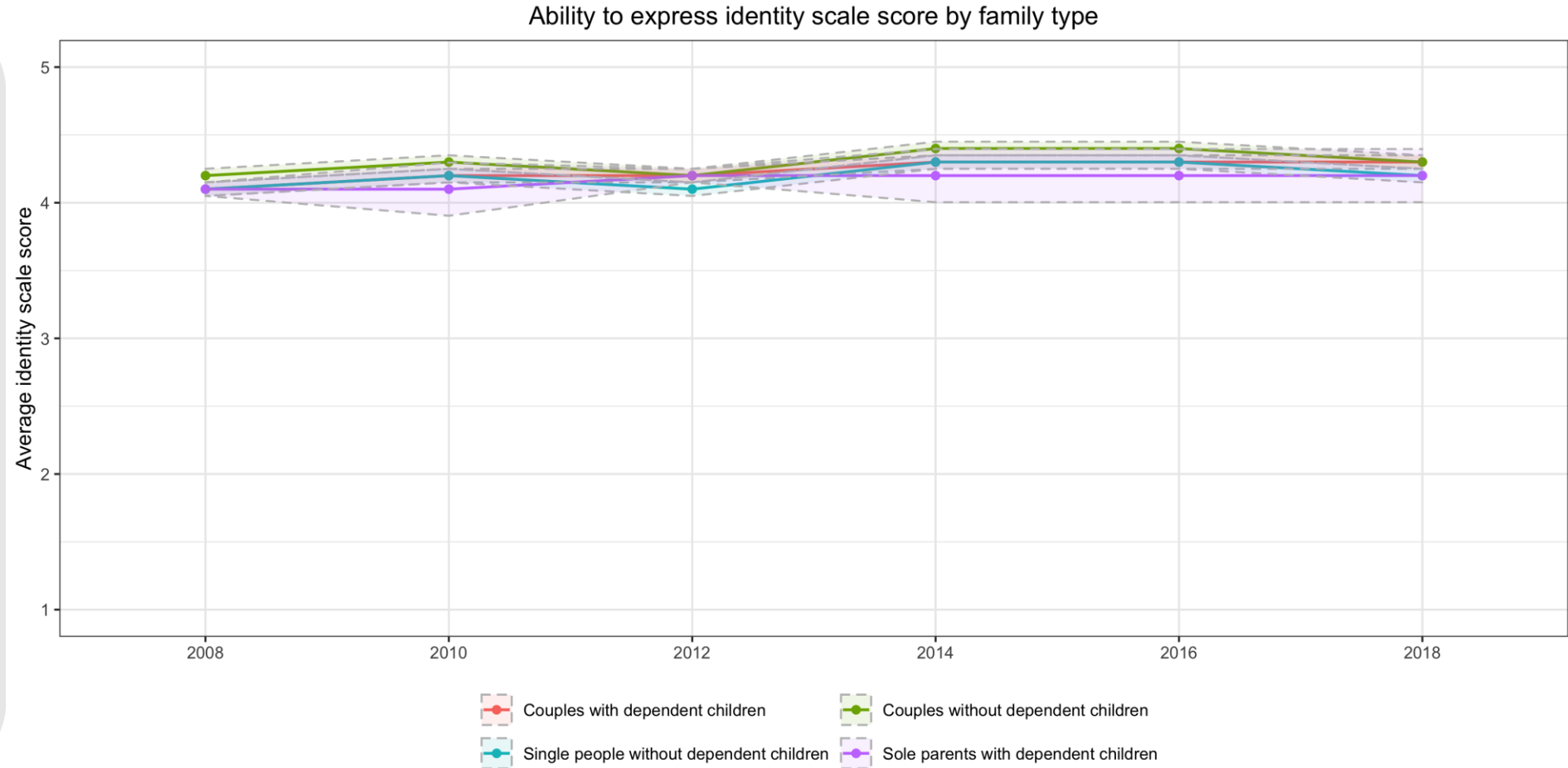
Data source: StatsNZ IDI

Note: “How do you feel about your life as a whole?” 1 = very/completely dissatisfied; 5 = very/completely satisfied. Measurement change between 2008-2012 (1-5 scale) and 2014-2020 (0-10 scale). 0-10 scale collapsed to 1-5 scale.

Socioemotional wellbeing: Self-actualisation

There was little statistical difference in the ease of expressing one's identity across family types.

Levels of self-actualization increased from 2008 through 2018, however this increase should be treated with caution given changes in survey question wording between 2008-2012 and 2014-2018.



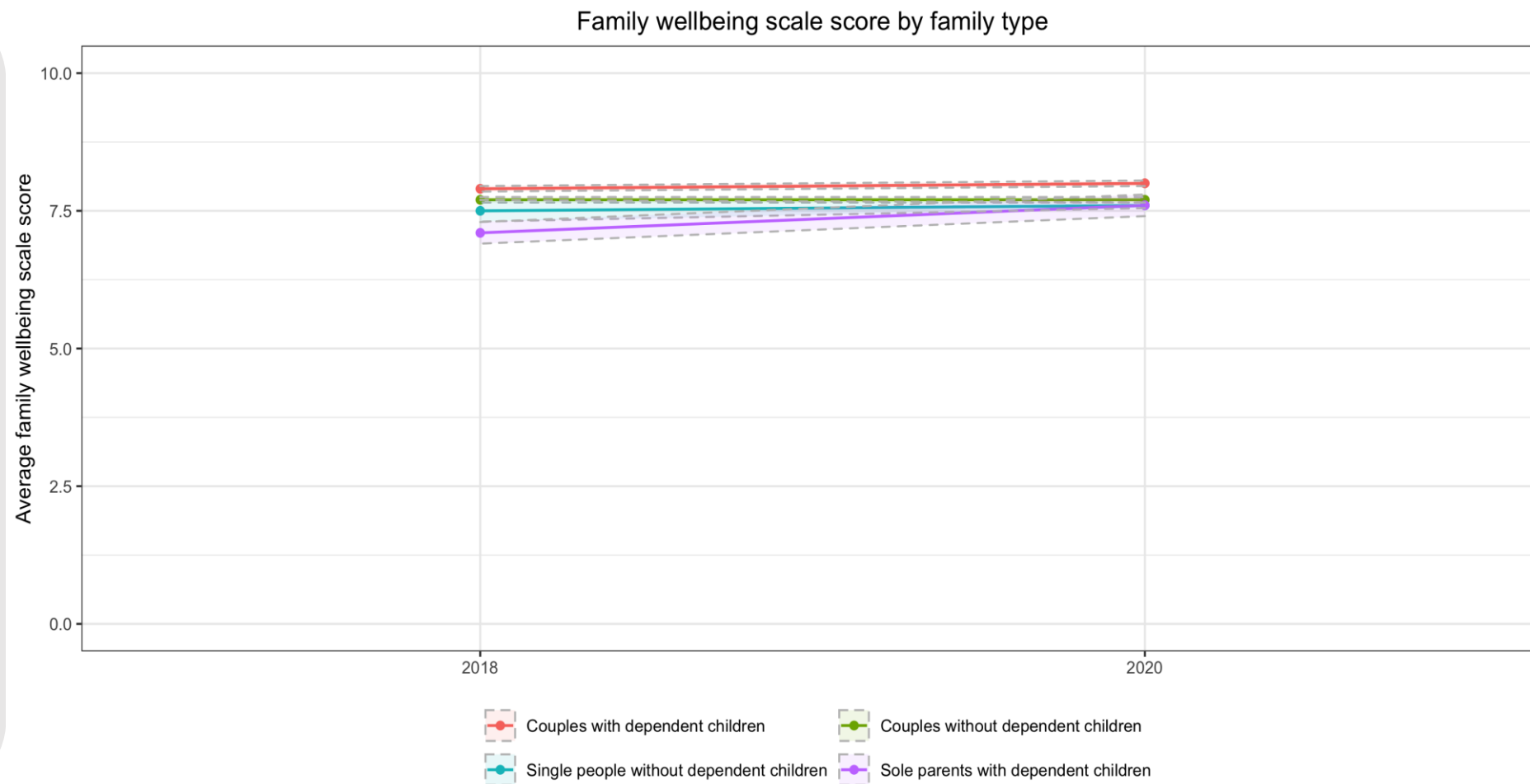
Data source: StatsNZ IDI

Note: "How easy or hard is it for you to be yourself in New Zealand?" 1 = very hard/difficult; 5 = very easy. Construct not available in the 2020/21 HLFS. In 2008-2012 the question asked: "Here in New Zealand, how easy or difficult is it for you to express your own identity?" In 2014-2018, this changed to: "People in New Zealand have different lifestyles, cultures, and beliefs that express who they are. How easy or hard is it for you to be yourself in New Zealand?" This question was not asked on the 2020/21 HLFS.

Socioemotional wellbeing: Family wellbeing

Family wellbeing was similar between 2018 to 2020 among couples with and without dependent children and single people without dependent children.

Sole parents with dependent children reported an increase in family wellbeing between 2018 and 2020, which led to there being no statistical difference between sole parents and people in other family types by 2020.



Data source: StatsNZ IDI

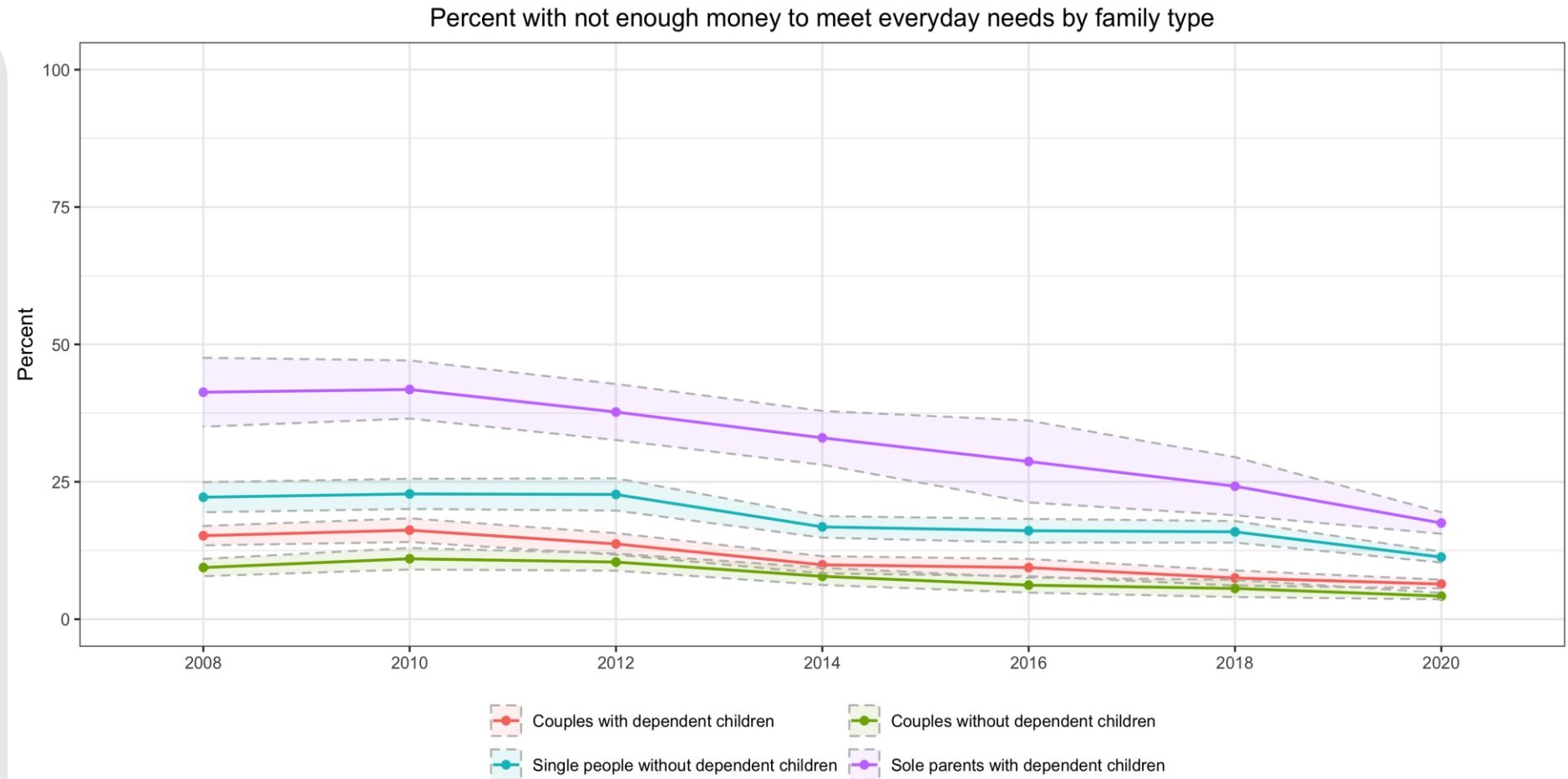
Note: "How would you rate how your family is doing these days?" 0 = extremely badly; 10 = extremely well. Construct not available from 2008-2016.

Economic wellbeing: Income inadequacy

There were declines in the proportion who reported not having enough money to meet everyday needs across all family types.

Larger declines were among family types with higher rates of inadequacy to begin with, narrowing the income adequacy gap across all family types by 2020.

The largest declines were among sole parents with dependent children, declining from 41% of sole parents reporting not enough money to meet everyday needs in 2008 to 18% in 2020.



Data source: StatsNZ IDI

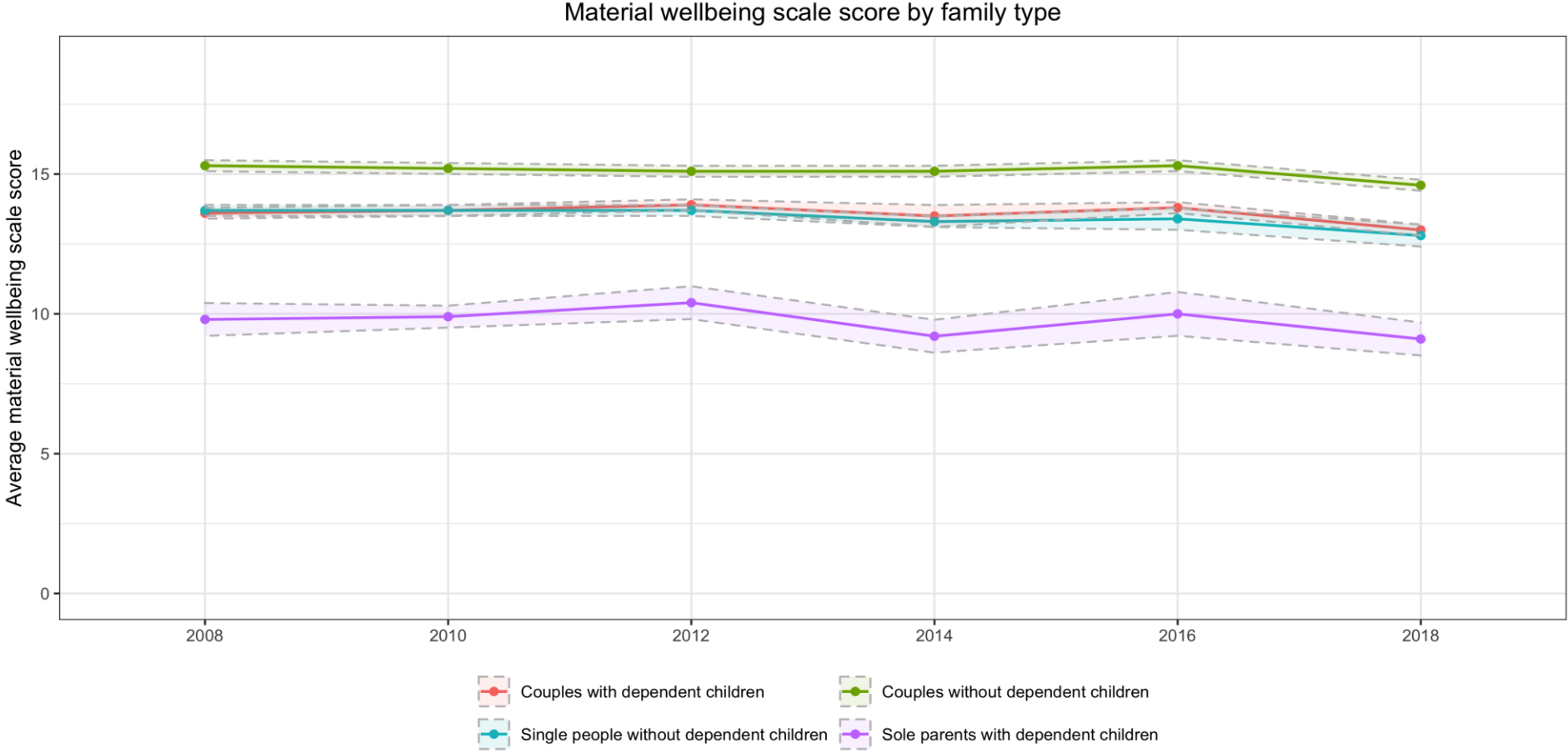
Note: "How well does [your household] income meet your everyday needs, for such things as accommodation, food, clothing and other necessities?" 1 = not enough money; 2 = only just enough money; 3 = enough money; 4 = more than enough money. Figure displays percent who reported not enough money vs. those with just enough, enough, and more than enough money.

Economic wellbeing: Material wellbeing

Material wellbeing—an index scale indicating access to certain resources, or absence of need—has remained consistent across all family types except for a slight decline between 2012-2014 and 2016-2018.

Sole parents reported the lowest levels of material wellbeing at each year—a gap in material wellbeing that remained consistent from 2008 to 2018.

The material wellbeing scale was not available in 2020.



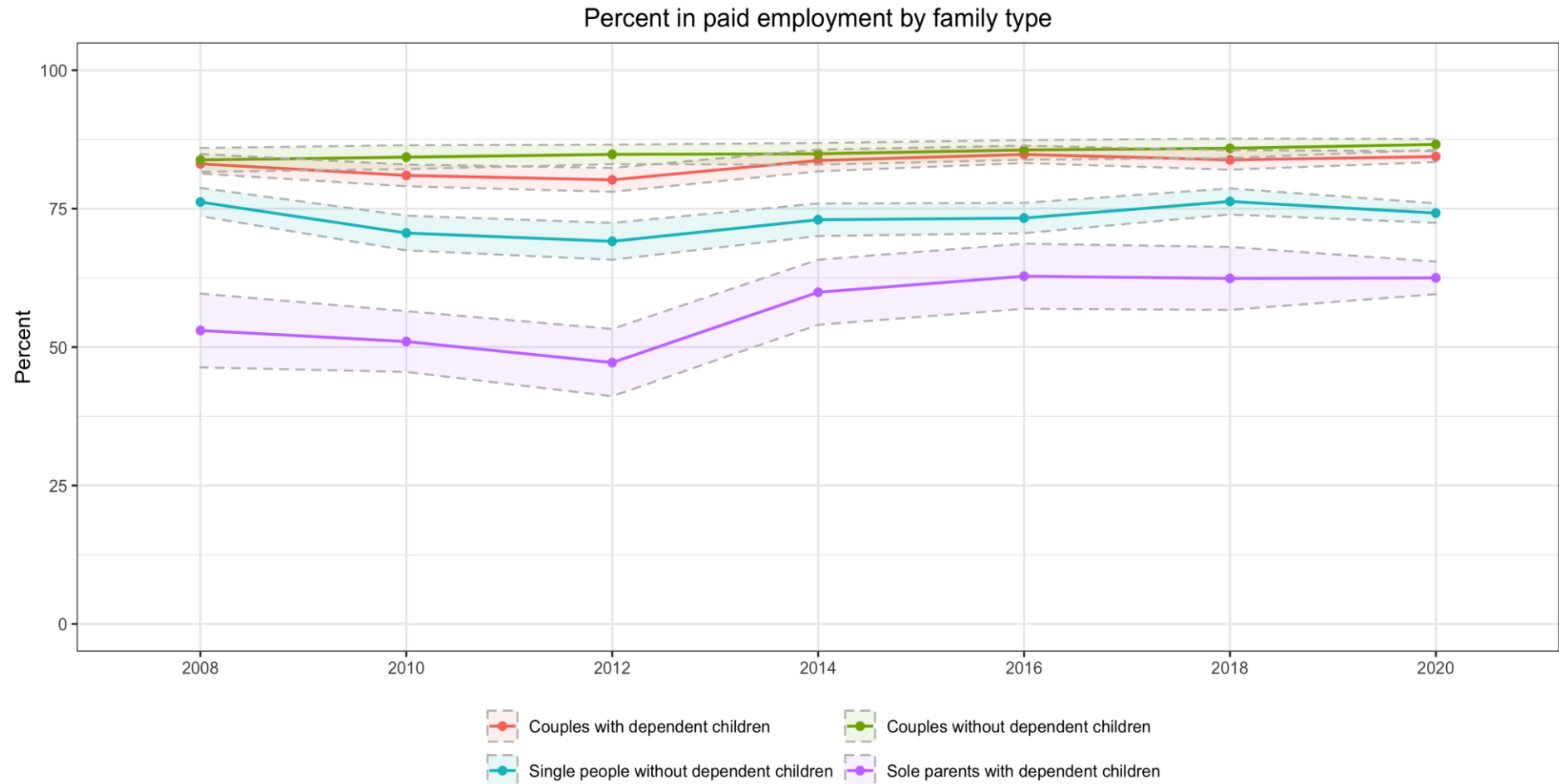
Data source: StatsNZ IDI

Note: Material wellbeing measure in 2008-2012 NZGSS (the Economic Living Standards Index) was deflated to approximate the Material Wellbeing Index (MWI) in 2014-2018 for comparability over time. This deflation resulted in a distribution of 0-19 in 2008-2012 and a distribution of 0-20 in 2014-2018. The index is not available in the 2020/21 HLFS.

Economic wellbeing: Employment

The proportion of respondents in paid employment was similar and consistent from 2008 to 2020 among couples with and without dependent children. Single people without dependent children reported similar rates of employment when comparing 2008 to 2020, but at lower levels than coupled respondents.

There was an increase in the proportion of sole parents with dependent children who reported being employed, increasing from 53% in 2008 to 60% by 2020. This was driven by an uptick in employment between 2012 and 2014—a period of change in work requirements for those on main benefits, of which sole parents are overrepresented.



Data source: StatsNZ IDI

Note: Primary respondent was in paid employment at the time of the survey versus primary respondent unemployed or not participating in the labour force.

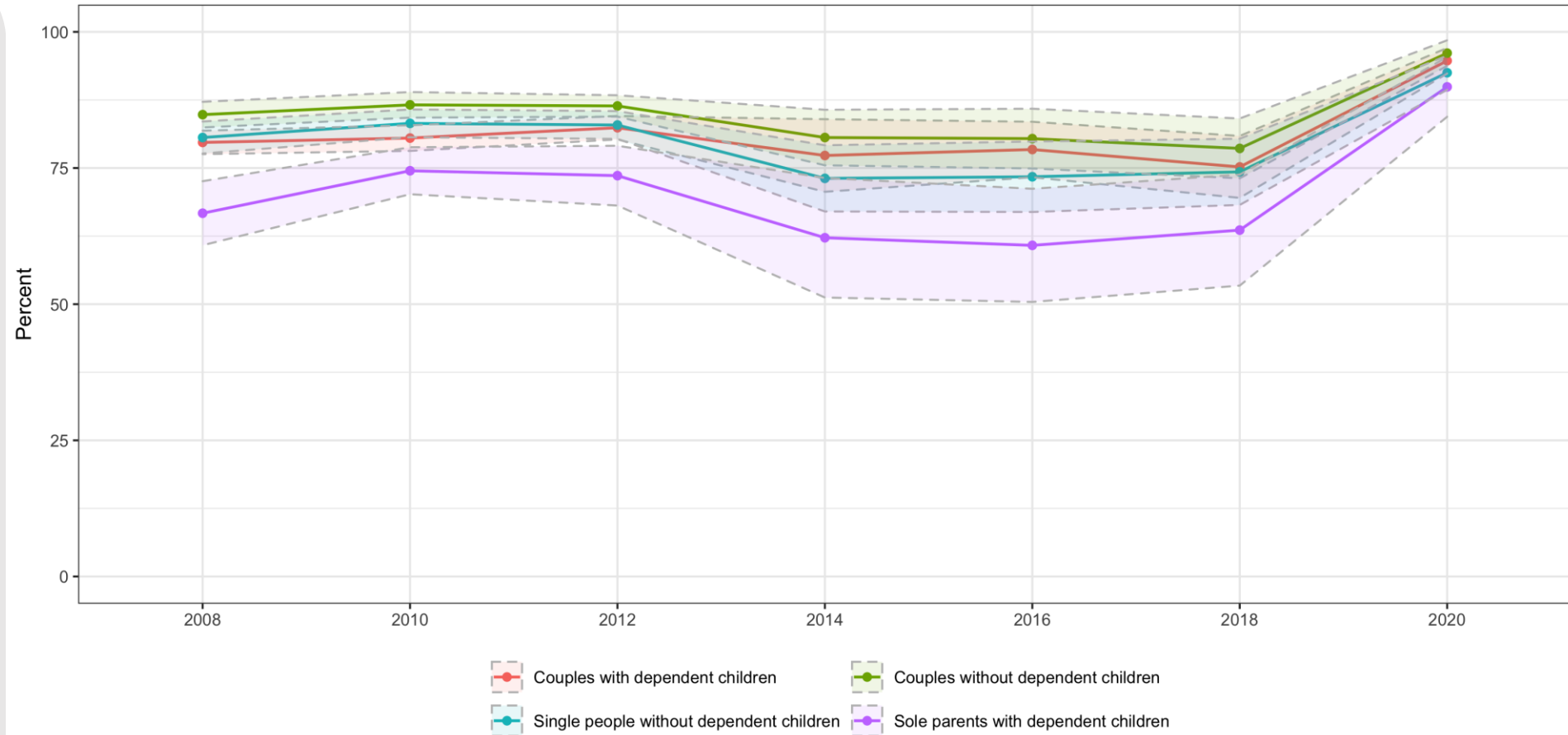
Housing: Coldness not a major problem

Sole parents were more likely to report coldness being a major problem compared with those in other family types.

This family type gap widened between 2012 and 2014 before large improvements in housing warmth between 2018 and 2020. In 2018, 67% of sole parents reported coldness not being a major problem. This increased to 90% in 2020. This increase narrowed the gap across family types, indicating no statistical differences in home coldness by 2020.

It is important to note that changes in the measurement may account for some of the changes at key points (i.e., 2012-2014 and 2018-2020), but also that changes in the Residential Tenancies Act in 2016 may have increased insulation compliance by 2019

Percent reporting coldness not being a major problem in their home by family type



Data source: StatsNZ IDI

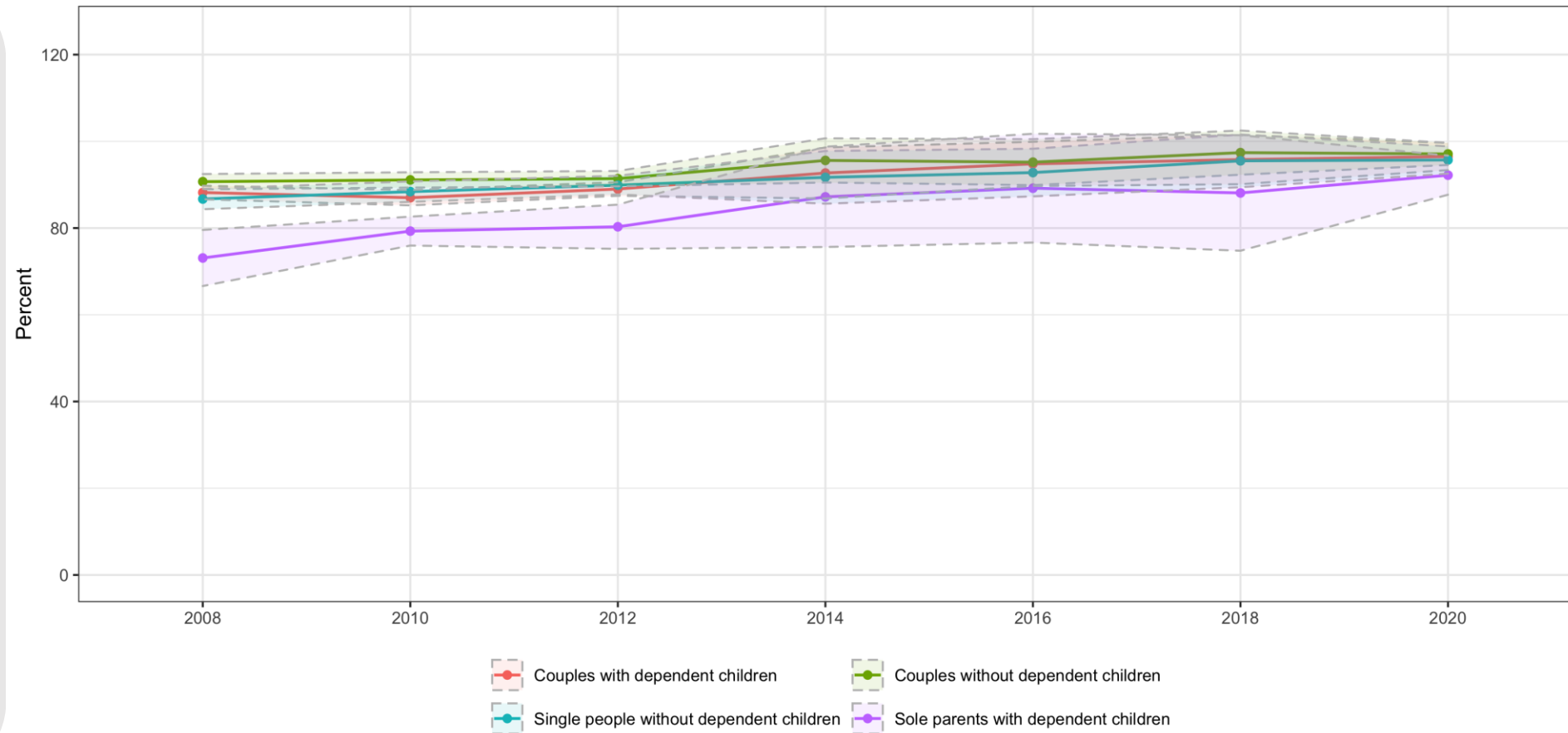
Note: Significant changes in measurement across time. All measures were transformed into a binary measure: 2008-2012: *no* = no major problem; 2014-2018: *no* = no problem or sometimes a problem; 2020: *no* = no problem or a minor problem. Measures across time: 2008-2012: binary measure (yes/no) of cold being a major problem; 2014-2018: 4-point scale measuring the frequency of problem (always/often/sometimes/no problem); 2020: 3-point scale measuring the magnitude of the problem (major/minor/no problem).

Housing: Dampness not a major problem

Reports of dampness not being a major problem steadily increased from 2008 through 2020.

This increase was larger for sole parents (from 73% to 92%—a 21 percentage-point increase) than other family types, narrowing the gap in reports of dampness.

Percent reporting dampness not being a major problem in their home by family type



Data source: StatsNZ IDI

Note: Significant changes in measurement across time. All measures were transformed into a binary measure: 2008-2012: *no* = no problem; 2014-2020: *no* = no problem or minor problem.

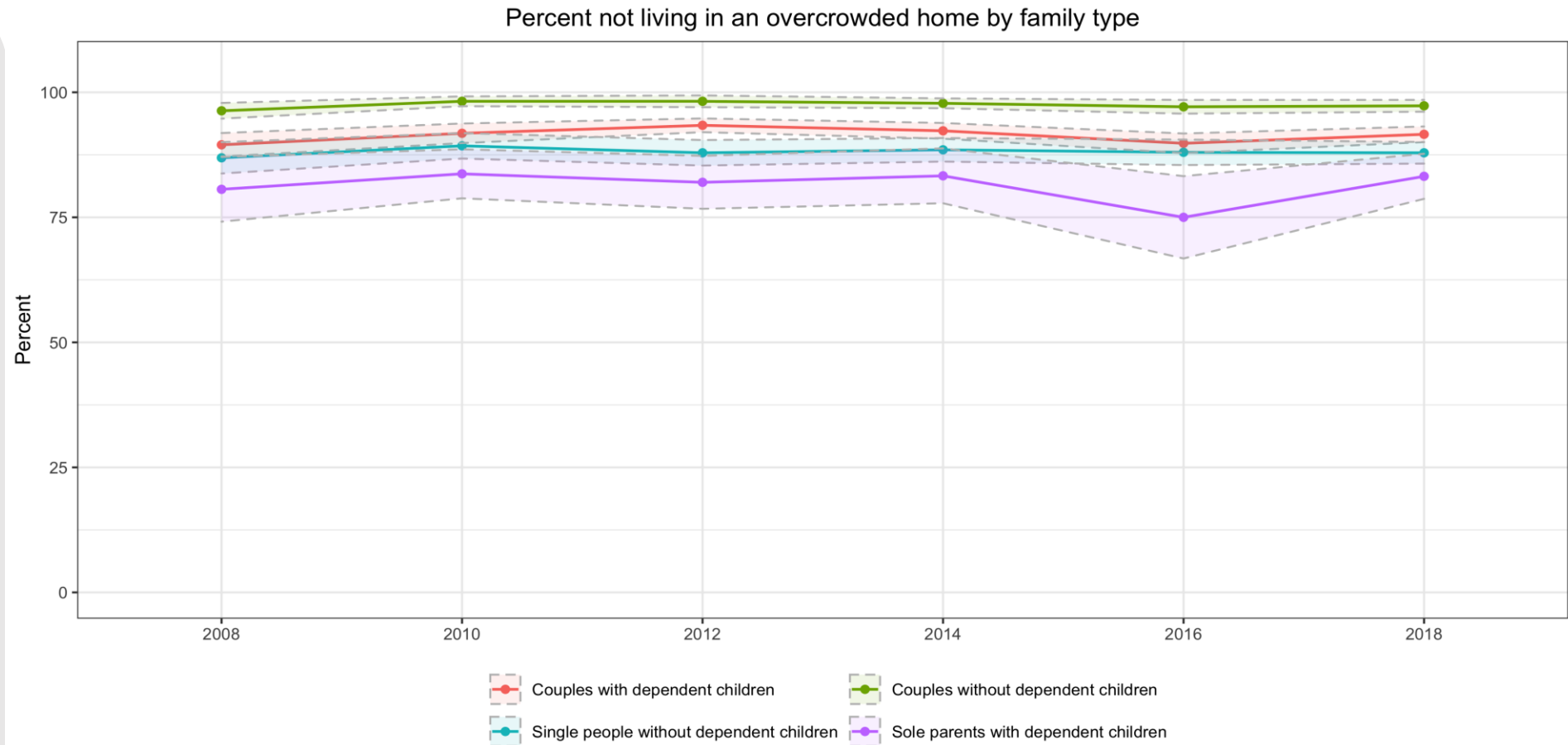
Measures across time: 2008-2012: binary measure (yes/no) of dampness being a major problem; 2014-2020: 3-point scale measuring the magnitude of the problem of dampness or mould (major/minor/no problem).

The y-axis goes from 0-120% to accommodate 95% confidence intervals that exceed 100%.

Housing: Not in an overcrowded home

The proportion of respondents living in a home that had enough bedrooms for household members remained consistent from 2008 through 2018 for couples with and without dependent children, and single people without dependent children.

Rates remained consistent across time for sole parents, apart from a decrease between 2014 and 2016, but then a return to pre-2014 levels by 2018.



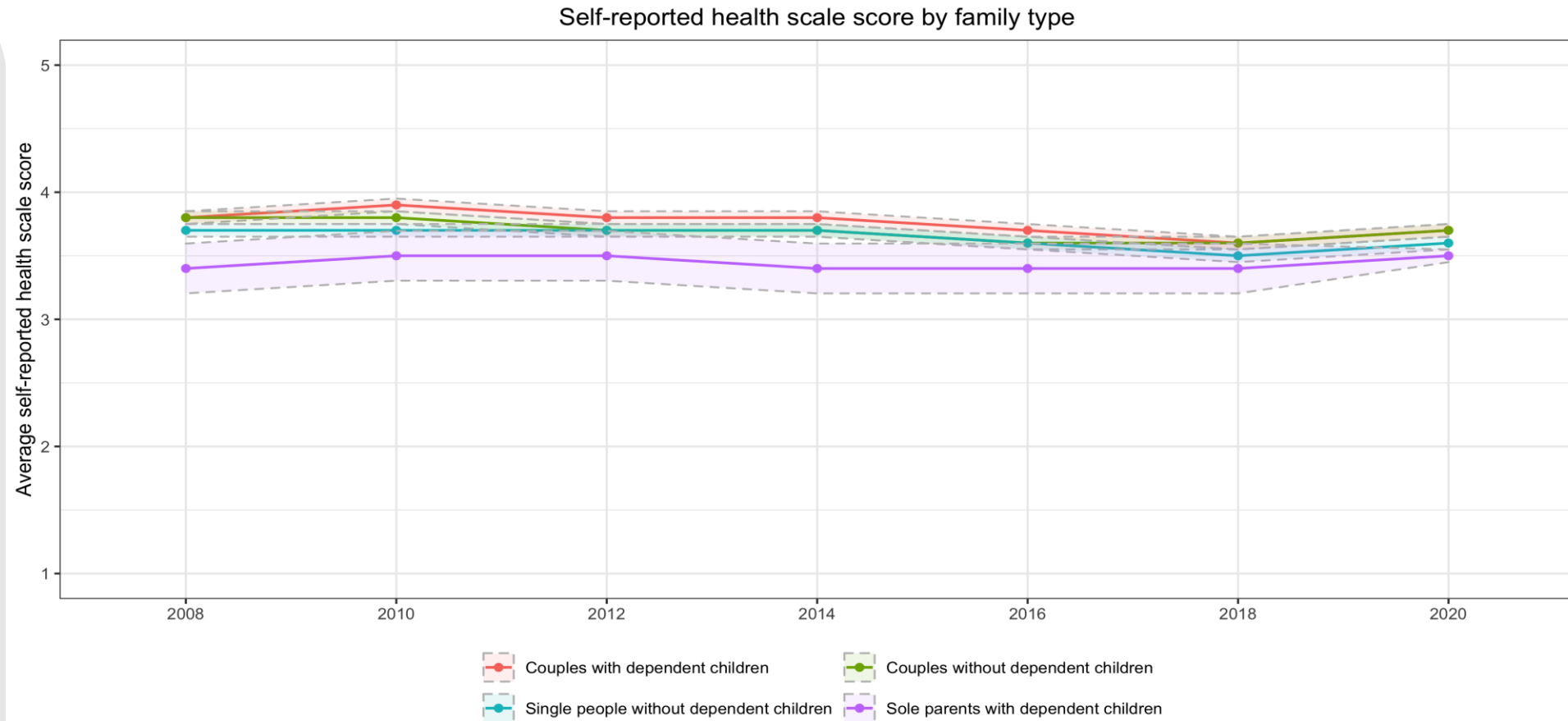
Data source: StatsNZ IDI

Note: Percent of respondents who do not live in an overcrowded household. (*Not overcrowded* = no more bedrooms needed; *Overcrowded* = one or more bedrooms needed)

Health: General self-report health

There was a slight decline in the levels of self-rated health from 2008 to 2020 among couples with and without dependent children, and single people without dependent children.

This trend, combined with an increase in self-rated health among sole parents, narrowed the health gap across family types by 2020.



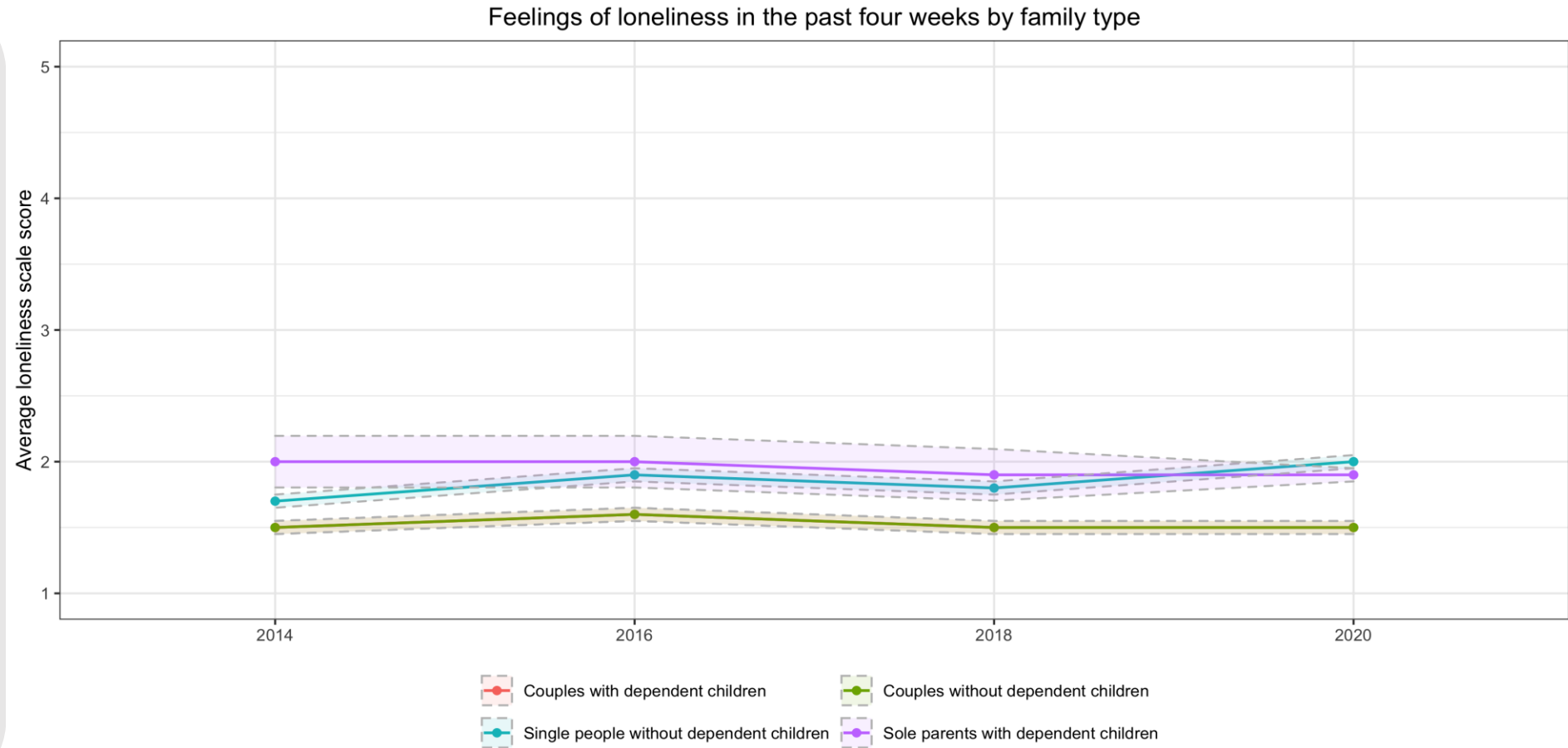
Data source: StatsNZ IDI

Note: "In general, would you say your health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?" 1 = poor; 5 = excellent.

Social connectedness: Loneliness

Feelings of loneliness remained consistent and similar between 2014 and 2020 among couples with and without dependent children.

Declines in feelings of loneliness among sole parents and increases among single people without dependent children closed the gap in feelings of loneliness among these two family types.



Data source: StatsNZ IDI

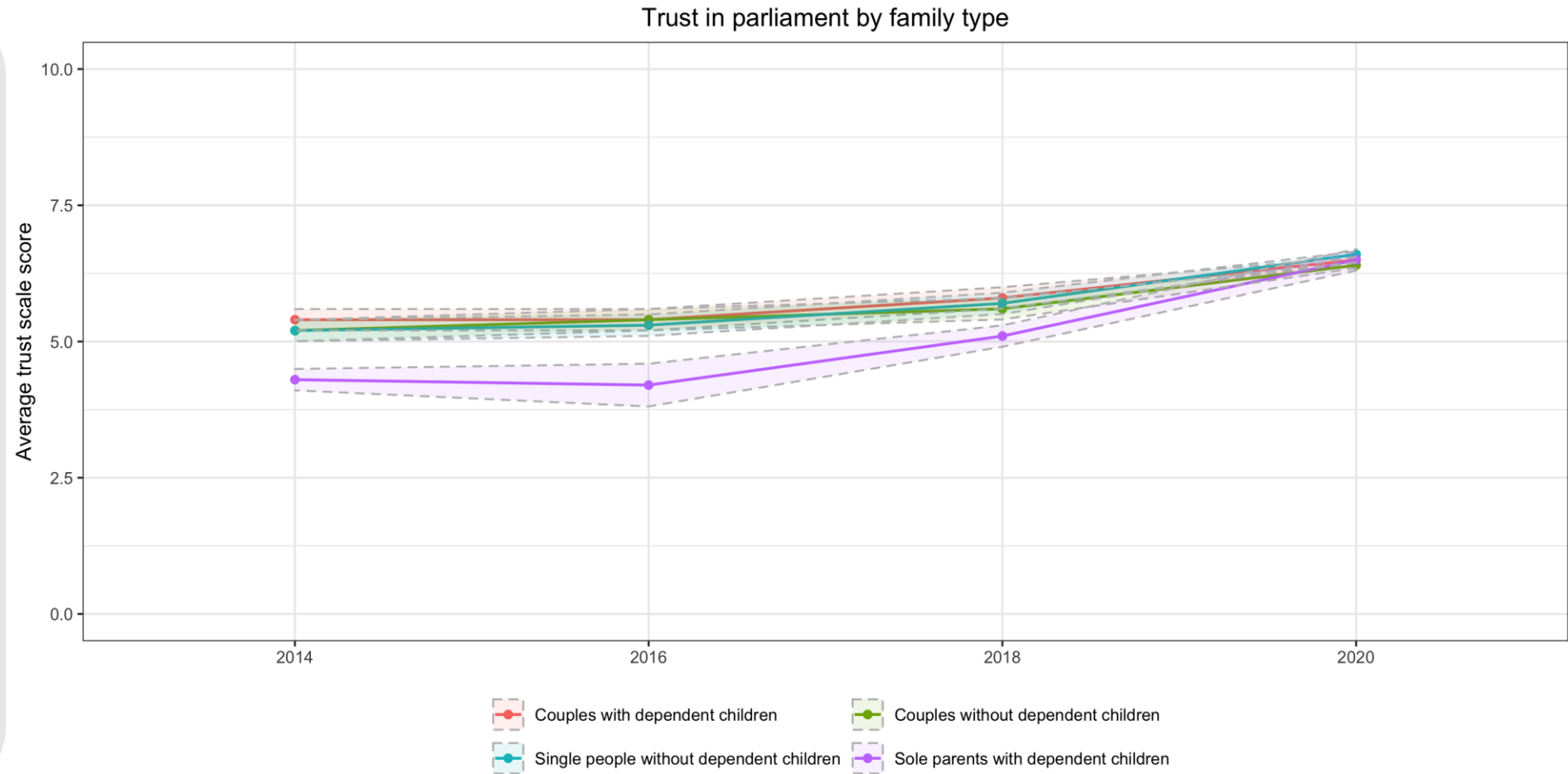
Note: "In the last four weeks, how much of the time have you felt lonely?" 1 = none of the time; 2 = a little of the time; 3 = some of the time; 4 = most of the time; 5 = all of the time.

Construct not available between 2008-2012.

Estimates for couples with and without dependent children are the same to one decimal place at each wave.

Social connectedness: Trust in parliament

Trust in parliament increased across all family types from 2016 to 2020, however the incline was steeper for sole parents, closing the trust gap between sole parents and other family types.

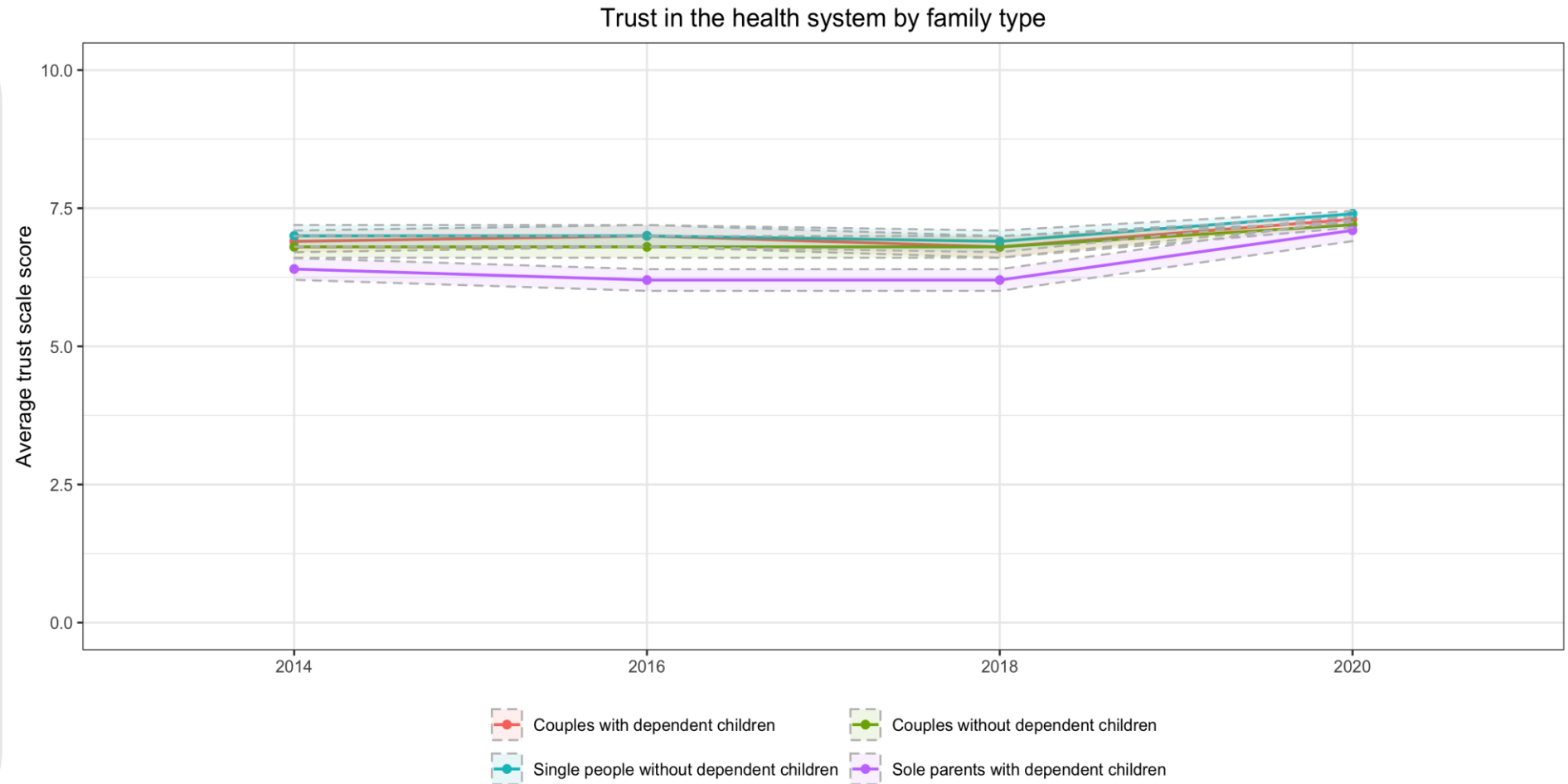


Data source: StatsNZ IDI

Note: "How much do you trust parliament?" 0 = not at all; 10 = completely.
Construct not available between 2008-2012.

Social connectedness: Trust in the health system

The gap in trust in the health system between sole parents and all other family types remained consistent from 2014 to 2018, before closing due to a larger increase in trust among sole parents between 2018 and 2020—the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.



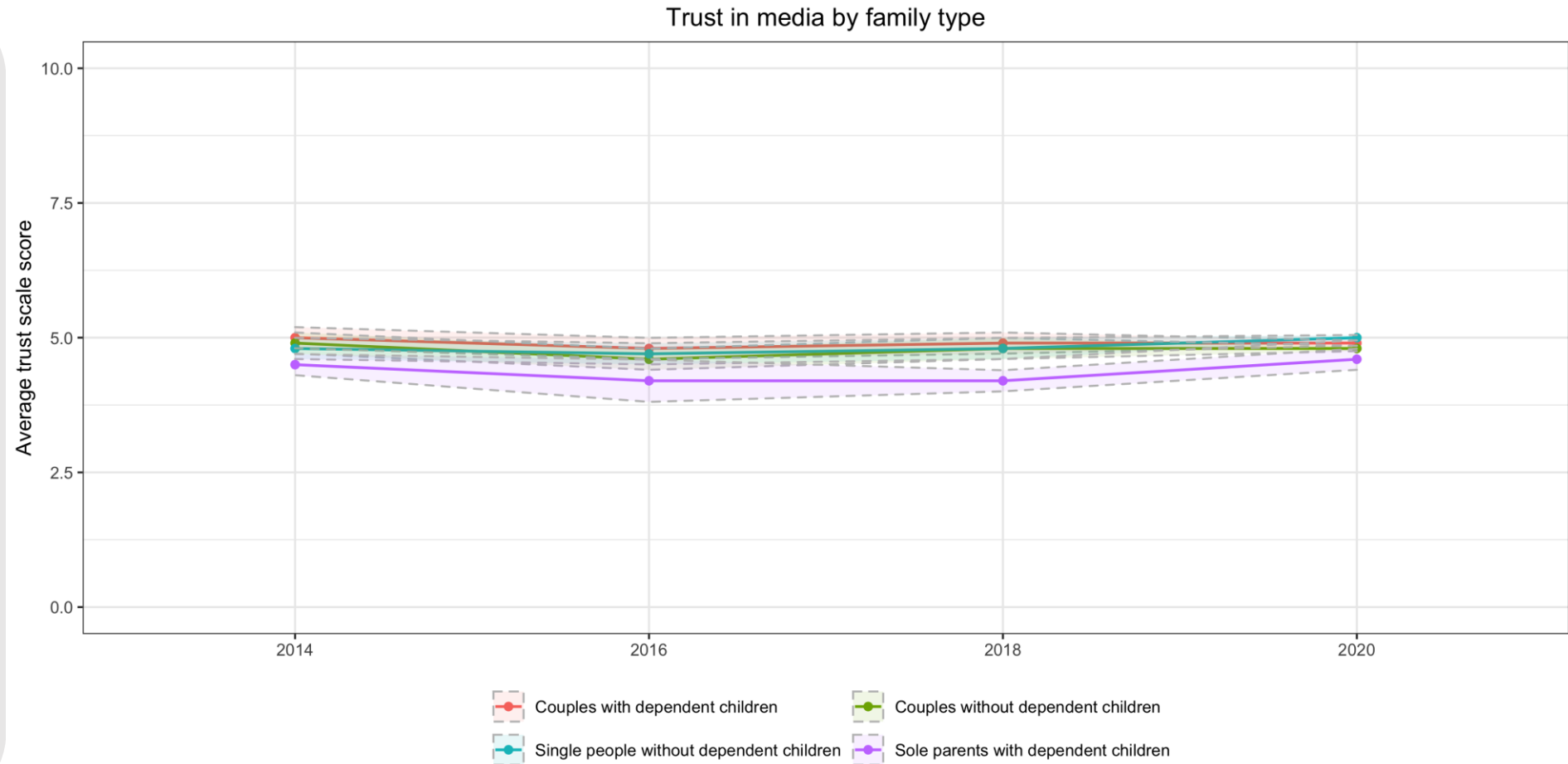
Data source: StatsNZ IDI

Note: “How much do you trust the health system?” 0 = not at all; 10 = completely. Construct not available between 2008-2012.

Social connectedness: Trust in media

Trust in the media remained consistent across the study period, except among sole parents who reported, after a decline in trust between 2014 and 2016, an increase in trust between 2018 and 2020.

This increase between 2018 and 2020—the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic—helped close the gap in trust in media by family type that was present between 2014 and 2018.



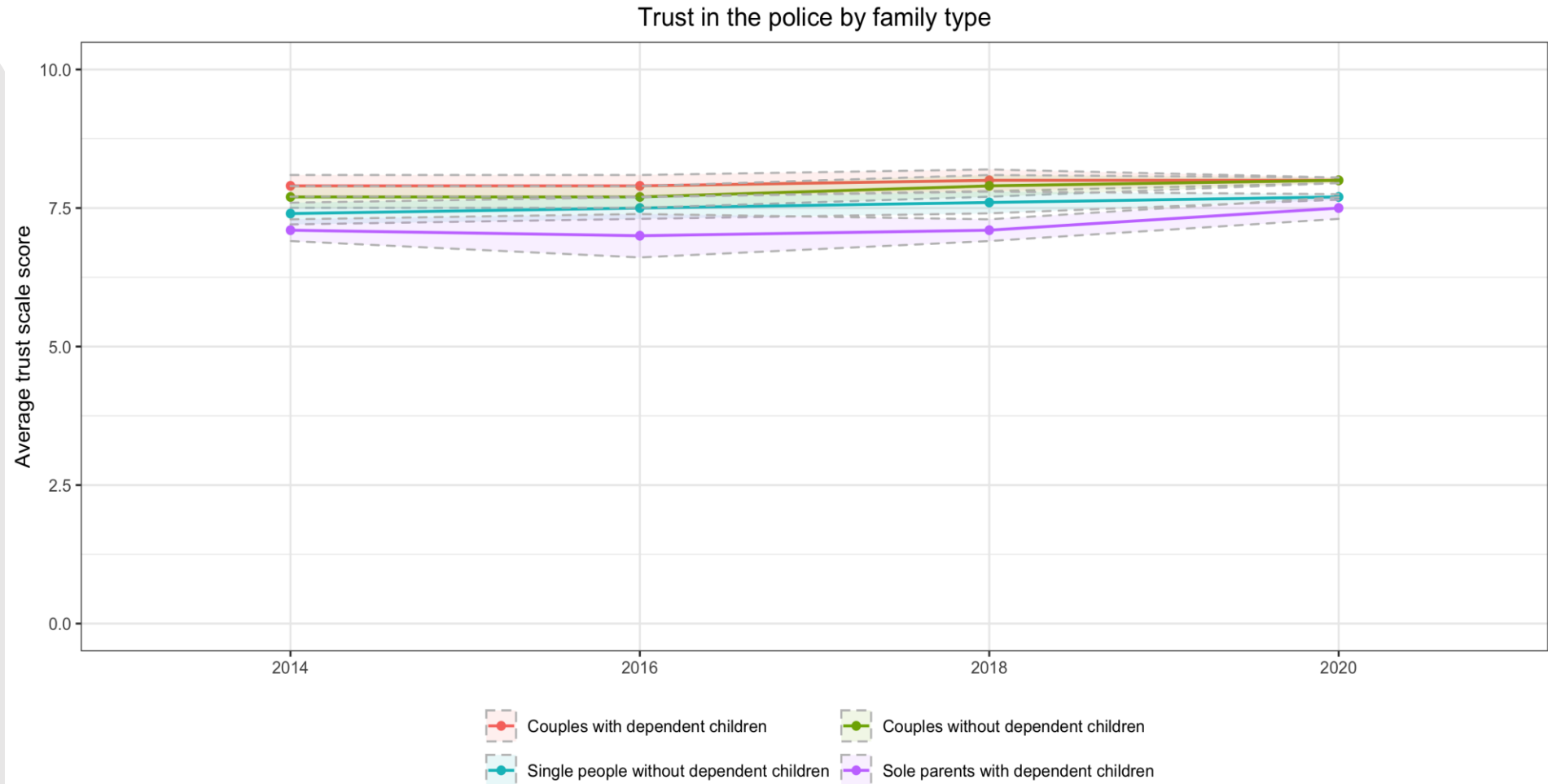
Data source: StatsNZ IDI

Note: "How much do you trust the media?" 0 = not at all; 10 = completely. Construct not available between 2008-2012.

Social connectedness: Trust in the police

Trust in the police remained consistent from 2014 to 2020, with a persistent gap between sole parents and couples with and without dependent children, and single people without dependent children.

A modest increase in sole parents' trust in the police from 2014 to 2020 narrowed the trust gap between sole parents and single people without children by 2020.

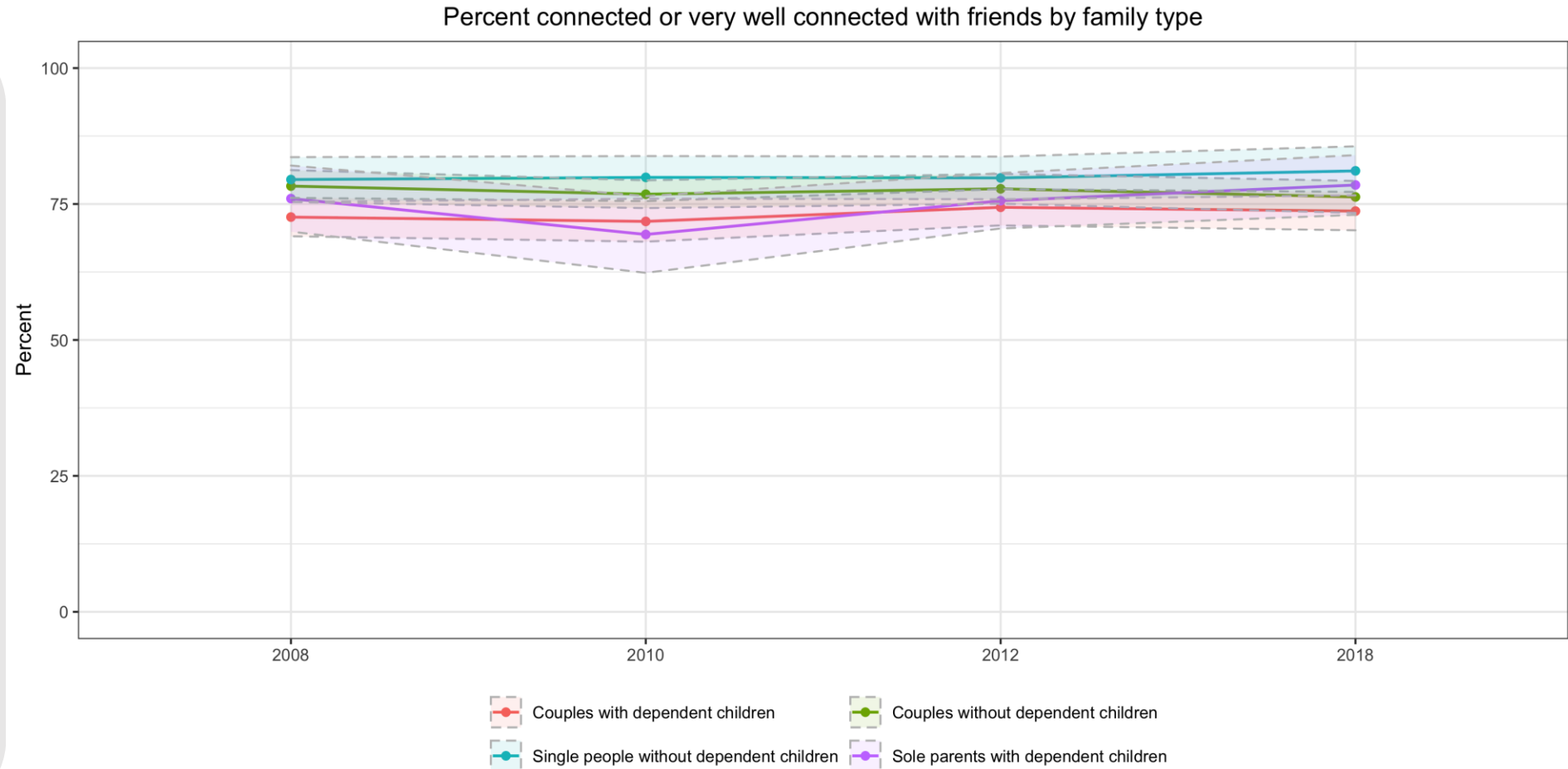


Data source: StatsNZ IDI

Note: "How much do you trust the police?" 0 = not at all; 10 = completely. Construct not available between 2008-2012.

Social connectedness: Friends

There was little statistical difference in the proportion of people who said they were connected or well connected to friends across family types, nor consistent patterns in the changes in connectedness from 2008 to 2018.

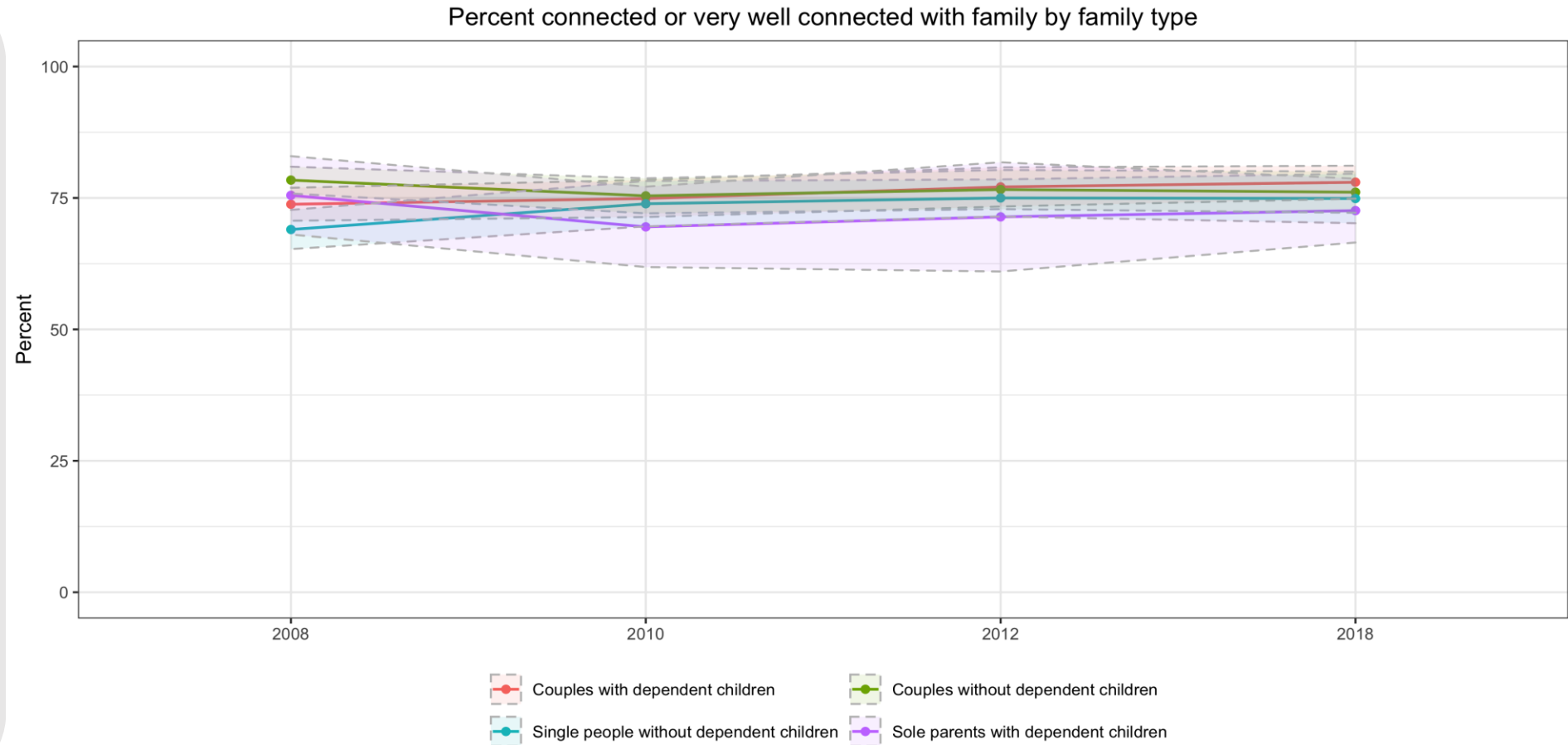


Data source: StatsNZ IDI

Note: "How would you describe the amount of contact you have with your friends [who don't live with you]?" 3-point measurement scale was transformed into a binary measure: Connected/very well connected vs. not well connected. Construct was not available in 2014, 2016, and 2020.

Social connectedness: Family and whānau

Similarly, there were no statistical differences between family types or across time in reports of connectedness to family and whānau not residing with.



Note: "How would you describe the amount of contact you have with your family or relatives [who don't live with you]?" 3-point measurement scale was transformed into a binary measure: Connected/very well connected vs. not well connected. Construct was not available in 2014-2016.

Social connectedness: Discrimination

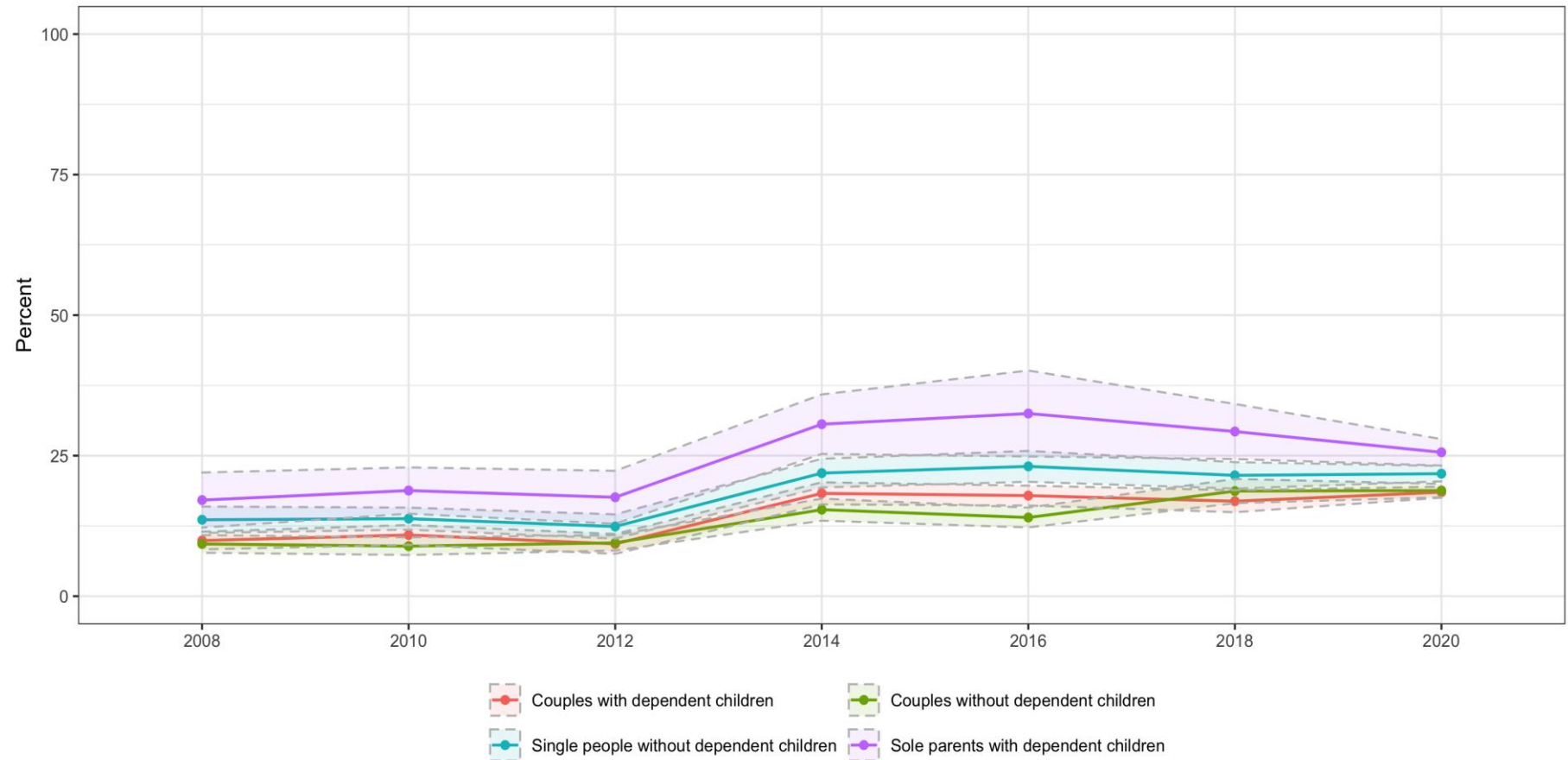
Respondents in all family types reported an increase in experiences of discrimination from 2008 to 2020.

Sole parents were more likely at every time point to report being discriminated against compared to other family types.

While it appears that the gap widens between 2012 and 2014 due to steeper increases among sole parents, it is important to note that during this period there was also a change in how the survey question was asked.

Family type gaps in experiences of discrimination narrowed again by 2020.

Percent experiencing discrimination in the past year by family type



Data source: StatsNZ IDI

Note: "In the last 12 months, have you been discriminated against?" 1 = yes; 0 = no. Significant change in question wording: 2008-2012: "In the last 12 months, have you been treated unfairly or had something nasty done to you because of the group you belong to or seem to belong to?" In 2014-2020: "The next question is about discrimination in New Zealand. By discrimination I mean being treated unfairly or differently compared to other people. In the last 12 months have you been discriminated against?"

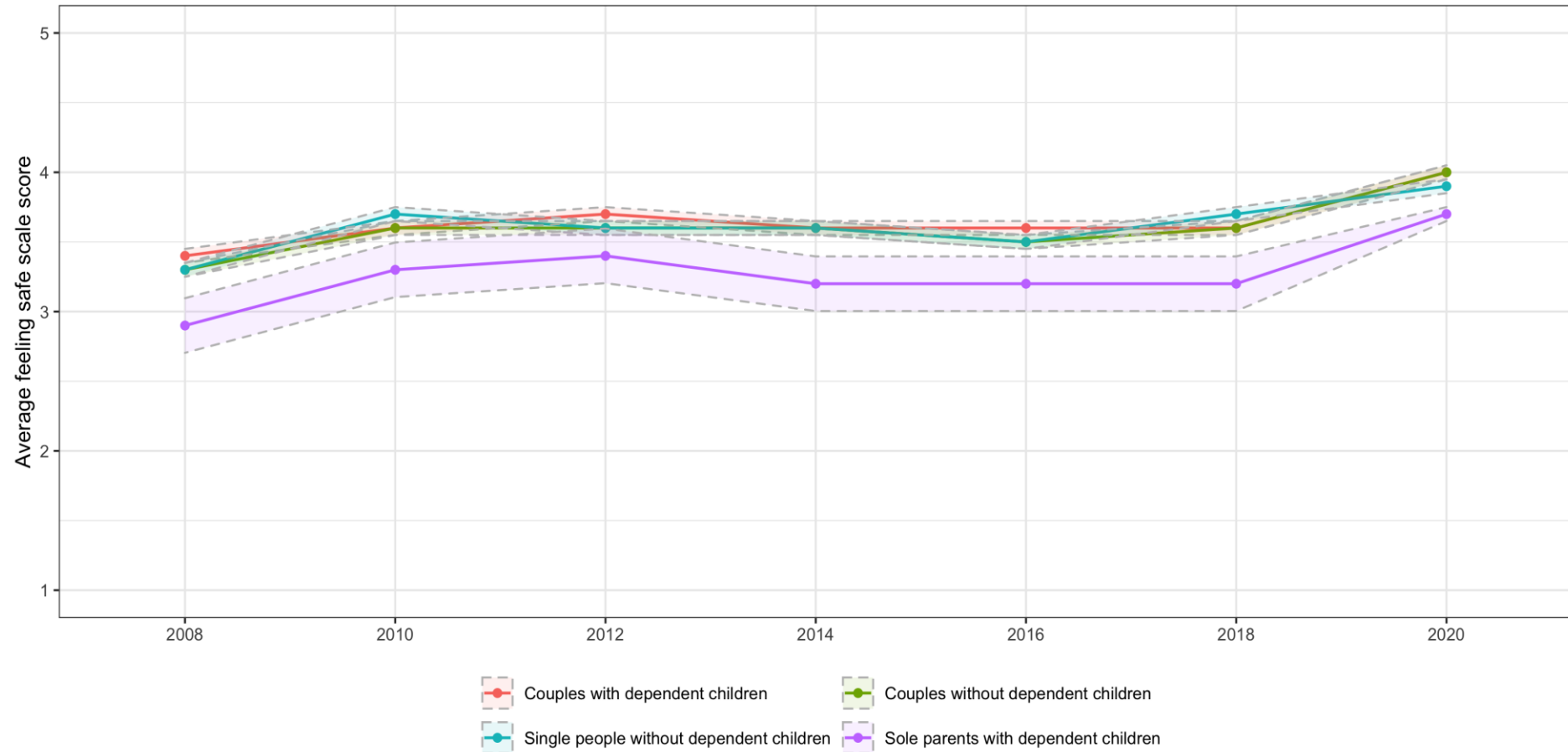
Safety: Neighbourhood safety

There was an increase between 2008 and 2020 in reports of feelings of safety walking alone in the neighbourhood after dark across all family types.

There were no statistical differences in feelings of safety among couples with and without dependent children, and single people without dependent children.

Sole parents were more likely to report, on average, lower levels of feeling safe at all time points, with the gap between sole parents and other family types persisting from 2008 to 2020.

Feelings of safety walking alone in the neighbourhood after dark by family type



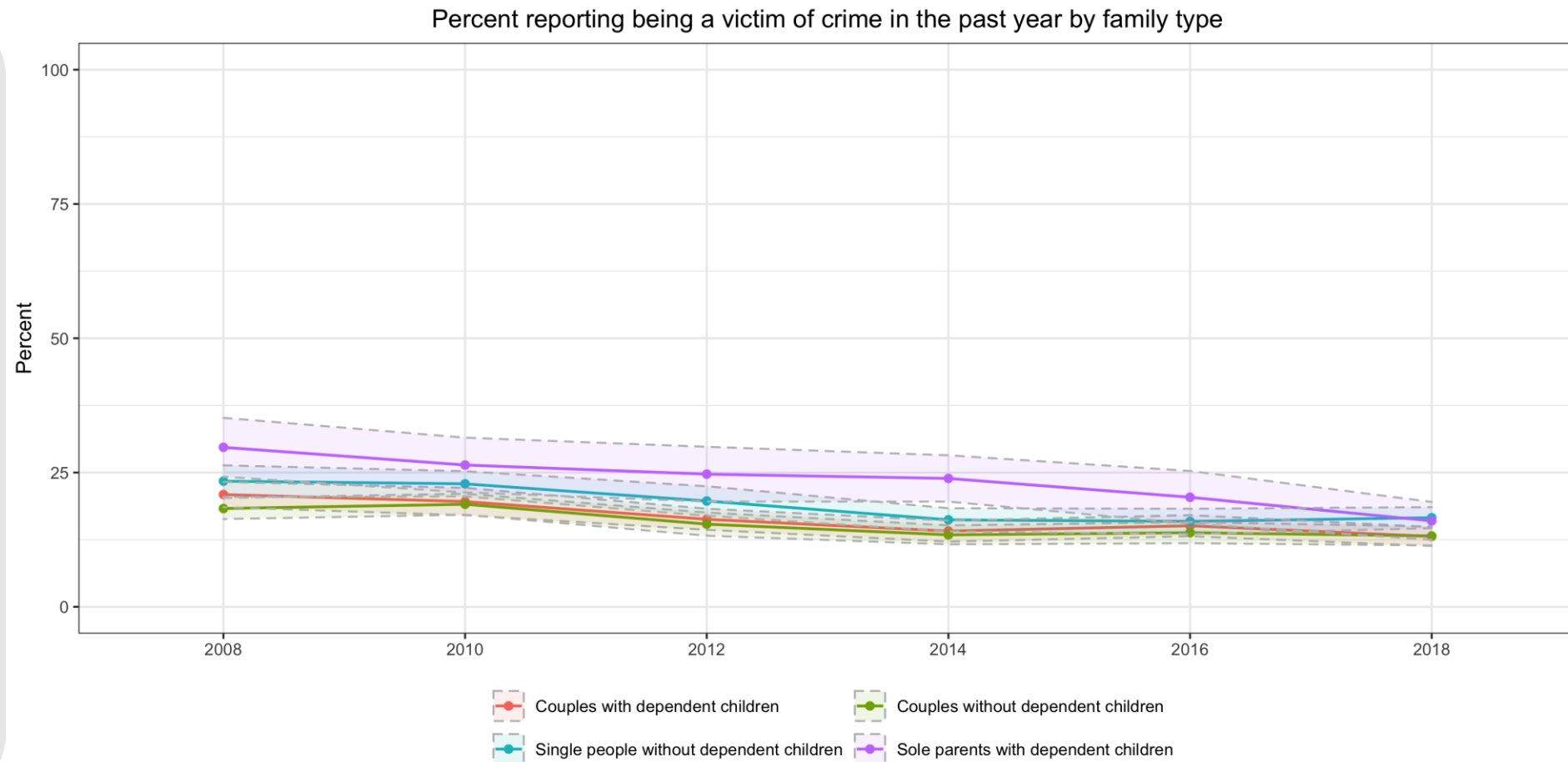
Data source: StatsNZ IDI

Note: "How safe or unsafe do you feel walking alone in your neighbourhood after dark?"
1 = very unsafe; 5 = very safe.

Safety: Victimization

The proportion of people reporting being a victim of crime declined from 2008 to 2018 across all family types.

Although sole parents were more likely to report they had been a victim of crime in the past year than those in other family types in 2008, steeper declines in reporting being a victim of crime among sole parents meant there were no statistical differences across family types by 2018.



Data source: StatsNZ IDI

Note: "In the last 12 months, were any crimes committed against you?" 1 = yes; 0 = no.

Findings discussion: Family types

Although economic and housing conditions improved from 2008 to 2020—and sometimes more so for sole parents—sole parents often still lagged behind on wellbeing indicators

- From 2008 to 2020, there were improvements among all family types across many of the economic and housing wellbeing indicators, and often greater improvements for sole parents who consistently had the poorest economic and housing outcomes in 2008. For example, the proportion of respondents reporting that their household did not meet everyday needs declined by nine-percentage points for couples with dependent children, five-percentage points for couples without dependent children, and 11-percentage points for single people without children. Among sole parents, by comparison, the decline was 24-percentage points.
- Despite these differences in rates of improvement, there were persistent gaps between sole parents and couples with and without dependent children, and single people without dependent children. Using income inadequacy, again, as an example, in 2020, 18% of sole parents reported not having enough money to meet everyday needs—three-to-four times higher than couples with (6%) and without (4%) dependent children, and 1.5 times greater than single people without children (12%).

Despite persistent economic and housing gaps between sole parents and other family types, earlier disparities in socioemotional wellbeing, health, and social connectedness narrowed or closed by 2020, driven by increases in wellbeing among sole parents

- There were few differences between sole parents and other family types across socioemotional, health, and social connectedness wellbeing indicators—either at any point across the study period (e.g., self-actualisation, connectedness to friends and whānau) or by 2020 (e.g., life satisfaction, family wellbeing, self-rated health, trust in institutions, victimisation).
- These findings were despite persistent worse economic wellbeing among sole parents—economic factors that are often associated with poorer social wellbeing.