

Subnational natural decrease across New Zealand territorial authorities and local boards, 1998-2043

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Demographic trends in developed (and developing) countries have increasingly tended towards higher life expectancy and lower fertility. A consequence of those long-run trends has been a rise in natural decrease (more deaths than births), which is increasingly a feature of national population change. However, trends at the national level can mask substantial subnational variation. In this paper, we investigate subnational trends in natural decrease for New Zealand, a country where national-level natural decrease has yet to commence. Specifically, we summarise past, present, and future natural decrease at the territorial authority and local board (TALB) level (n=87), covering the period from 1998 to 2023 and ahead to 2048. Over this fifty-year period, natural decrease becomes apparent in an increasing number and proportion of TALBs, initially concentrating in areas that are more remote and peripheral, but becoming a majority of all TALBs by the end of the period considered. Unsurprisingly, the prevalence of natural decrease is highly correlated with the degree of structural ageing of the population, with areas that have older populations systematically facing natural decrease. Despite these overall trends, some TALBs, particularly those that are urban and have large tertiary education institutions, maintain a structurally younger population and avoid natural decrease until at least 2048. These results demonstrate the importance of earlier work on subnational structural ageing, and reinforce that policymakers and other decision-makers should remain cognisant of the importance of subnational population ageing and subnational demographic trends more generally.

Keywords: Natural decrease, population ageing, structural ageing, New Zealand