

Nurses v Health NZ: Our data interactive reveals the truth about hospital staffing

Chris Knox & Danica MacLean

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It took journalist Danica MacLean months to get Health New Zealand Te Whatu Ora to hand over this never-seen-before data: a record of almost every nursing shift in public clinics and hospitals in New Zealand for 2025. She was trying to understand the disconnect between what nurses have said about our hospitals – that they can be dangerously understaffed – and what Health NZ has said.

The data contained some shocks: our national child cancer ward fell to 41% of its target staffing across September – and there were nine days that month when no shifts met their nursing staff targets. MacLean and Chris Knox report.

The *Herald* has obtained official data revealing staffing levels for 739,503 hospital shifts across 615 wards in 67 health facilities across New Zealand in 2025.

It encompasses nearly every nursing shift in the public health system for the full year.

It reveals that almost a quarter of all nursing shifts across the country last year were at some point understaffed – that is, below the target laid out by Health New Zealand Te Whatu Ora.

Even our sickest children are affected. Only two-thirds of shifts at Starship's children's cancer ward were fully staffed last year and across September, only 41% shifts had enough nurses according to targets.

There were nine days that month when no child cancer ward shifts met their nursing targets.

Meanwhile, at Auckland's high-risk maternity ward, Whitinga Ora Pēpi – designed for babies who need high levels of support – half of all shifts in 2025 didn't have the targeted number of nurses.

Looking at the big picture across the country and the year, 185,711 shifts – or 24.5% – didn't have enough staff, according to targets, while 44.1% of shifts were overstaffed. About a third, 31.4% of shifts, were staffed to target.

Health NZ and the New Zealand Nurses Organisation fundamentally disagree on how to interpret the data.

Health NZ says it's relatively meaningless and not useful – yet it has invested in it as its main staff monitoring system for 20 years.

The New Zealand Nurses Organisation says it proves patients often aren't getting the care they need.

Nursing shortages aren't evenly spread over the country. At the Porirua Mental Health Services Facility, 49.4% of shifts met their staffing target – while over on the West Coast, Grey Base Hospital met its target for 93.8% of its shifts.

Search this interactive to see the staffing levels in all the public hospital wards in New Zealand, including in your region:

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There appeared to be a [disconnect](#) between what frontline health workers were saying about staffing levels, and what politicians and Health NZ were [saying](#) about them.

That's why NZME first submitted an Official Information Act request in January for this data from Health NZ.

Then in May this year, nurses at Waitākere Hospital's Muriwai Ward told the *Herald* that patients recovering from strokes [were languishing in wet beds](#) and being put at risk of falls because of "chronic understaffing".

Forty staff on the ward also signed a letter warning Health New Zealand of "urgent" safety concerns.

Kate Gilmour, Health NZ chief nurse for [Waitematā](#), responded in writing, acknowledging challenging circumstances, but saying current staffing levels at the ward were "appropriate".

Two months later, [a patient fell and fractured his spine](#) amid short staffing on the same ward.

[New Zealand Nurses Organisation \(NZNO\)](#) delegate Gemma Bethell, who was on shift at the time, claimed they were short of three healthcare assistants when he fell. She said her team had warned management of severe or "red" capacity issues during the course of the day.

However, Health NZ's Waitematā group director of operations, Brad Healy, told the *Herald* that when the man fell, the ward was "fully staffed" and there was additional support in place for patient watches.

In June, the *Herald* revealed that [a patient died in Waikato Hospital's emergency department](#) toilet. A hospital worker told the *Herald* at the time that before the death, the patient had spent "nine hours waiting" to be seen in the overcrowded and understaffed waiting room.

Health Minister Simeon Brown called it a "[terrible situation](#)" and ordered an urgent review.

'It's just a snapshot' – Chief Nurse

Health NZ's national chief nurse Nadine Gray told NZME the shift data are just a snapshot measure that helps guide where nursing resources are needed.

She said the data are collected after shifts have ended and sometimes represent "five minutes or less of under-resourcing within a ward over an eight-hour shift".

Gray said that taken in isolation, the data is not a measure of patient safety, workforce adequacy or care quality, and using it in isolation to claim wards are under-staffed or unsafe would be misleading.

Gray said Health NZ is committed to ensuring it has the right staff and skill mix to deliver quality, safe patient care in every hospital.

'Chronically short' – nurses

New Zealand Nurses Organisation CEO Paul Goulter told the *Herald* if shifts are under their staffing target, it means they are "chronically short" of meeting the needs of patients.

"Patients' needs won't be met in the way they need to be met. That creates a lot of stress on the nurses because they want to do the best thing for their patients, and they can't do that because the shift is understaffed."

Goulter said one of the biggest areas of concern is in mental health wards – with staff often put in "dangerous" situations.

Goulter has a simple message for health authorities: "resource and staff to patient need, not to some opaque budget number [or it's] dangerous for all New Zealanders".

What are the targets? How are they set?

The Government has been developing the same staff measurement system for more than 20 years.



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A shift is deemed below target for staffing if the hours of care required exceeds the hours of care available. A 2022 CCDM review classified shifts as below target if the deficit was greater than 40 minutes per nurse in an eight-hour shift.

More than 20 years of effort has gone into the CCDM programme, but Health NZ still says the current tools for safe-care are not fit for purpose.

The postcode lottery

In 2025, the Porirua Mental Health Services Facility had the highest percentage of shifts below target: 50.6% of its 21,900 shifts did not have the recommended staffing levels.

Meanwhile, the West Coast's Grey Base Hospital had some of the country's best staffing levels. Just 6.2% of its shifts were below target.

Just over half – 51.4% of 1095 shifts – at Auckland's High Risk Maternity Ward were below target for 2025.

But it wasn't evenly distributed across the year – the data show staffing improved in the final quarter.

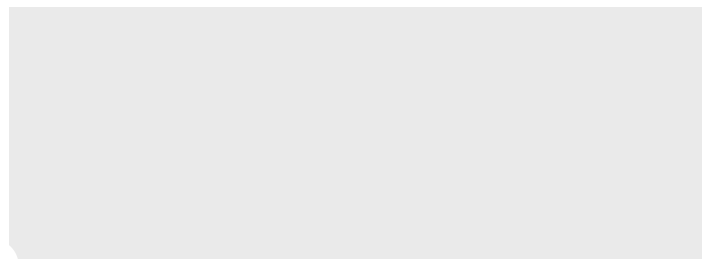
Search this interactive for staffing levels in almost all the public hospital wards in New Zealand during 2025.

Danica MacLean is an Auckland-based news director and senior reporter for Newstalk ZB, with a focus on health stories. She joined NZME in 2017, initially working for the *Northern Advocate* before switching to radio. She has previously worked for Stuff in Northland.

Chris Knox is a scientist turned data-journalist who investigates the stories behind the numbers, and creates interactives for *Herald* readers to explore them.

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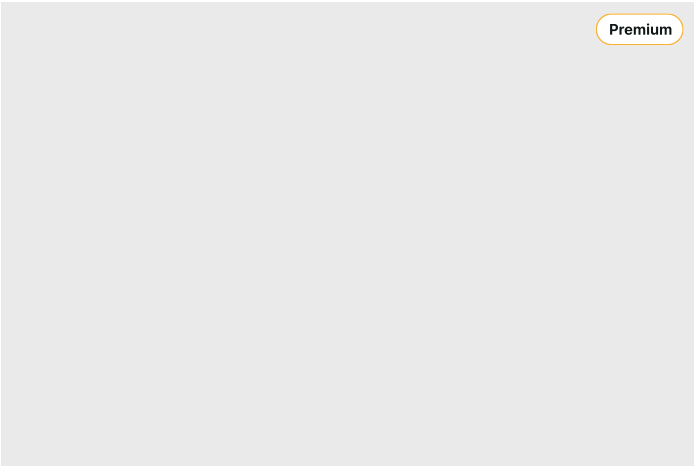
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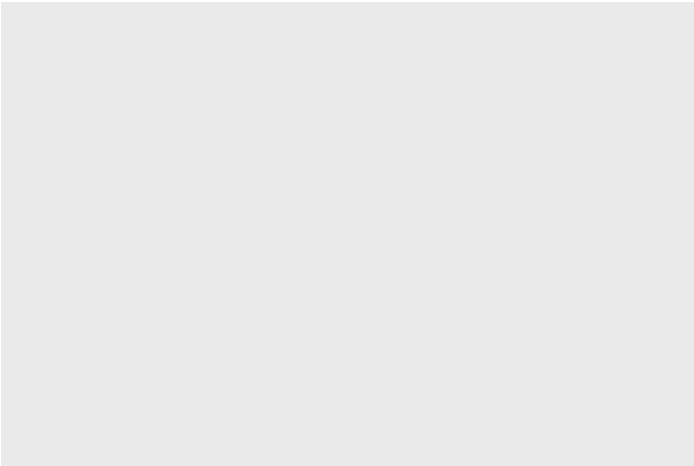


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