

Boot Camp: Te Whakapakari Youth Programme

A case study of State-funded violence and abuse of children and young people needing care and protection

# Context

Commissioners directed that some case studies be developed for a variety of reasons, including to highlight the experiences of particular communities of survivors, across the inquiry period.

# Trigger Warning

We honour and uphold the dignity of survivors who have so bravely shared their stories here. We acknowledge that some content contains explicit descriptions of tūkino – abuse, harm and trauma – and may evoke strong negative, emotional responses for readers. Although this response may be unpleasant and difficult to tolerate, it is also appropriate to feel upset. However, if you or someone in your close circle needs support, please contact your GP or healthcare provider. Respect others’ truths, breathe deeply, take care of your spirit and be gentle with your heart.

# Executive summary

Te Whakapakari Youth Programme (Whakapakari) was started by John da Silva in 1977 on Aotea, Great Barrier Island funded by the department of Māori Affairs. Although he was not Māori, it was promoted as a Maori [sic] Outdoor Pursuit Programme Adventure using the environment and outdoor activities to de-programme youth from drug abuse, develop self-esteem and learn skills, Maoritanga and gain confidence.

It was a geographically isolated ‘boot camp’, with harsh conditions[[1]](#footnote-1) that emphasised survival skills, military style discipline, subservience, self-sufficiency and hard physical labour. The young people on the programme endured what has been described as cruel and inhumane treatment.[[2]](#footnote-2) This environment which permitted abuse to occur was not kaupapa Māori and placed rangatahi Māori at risk.

In 1989 John da Silva established the Whakapakari Youth Trust which in 1990 was approved by the Department of Social Welfare and its successors, and the Community Funding Agency, as an approved Child and Family Support Service under section 396 of the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1989. It became a social welfare care and protection or youth justice sentencing option at a time when ‘boot camps’, including later discredited sentences such as Borstal and Corrective Training, were seen as the solution to criminal offending by young people.

Children and young people in the custody of the Director General of Social Welfare were sent there by social workers or sentenced by judges in the Youth Court. Many had significant emotional and psychological problems but were not assessed for their needs such as disability or neurodiversity. Staff estimated that 80 percent of them were Māori, 14 percent Pākehā, 5 percent Pacific Peoples and 1 percent ‘other’.’[[3]](#footnote-3) Most were male but some were female. They were mostly aged between 14 and 16 years old but some were as young as 12 years old.

They were sent to the programme for between one and six months. Although the young person or their guardian’s consent was required, this was not always obtained. Children and young people were housed in substandard tents, with long drop toilets and little or no hot water for bathing. The daily emphasis was on physically demanding work, such as chopping and moving firewood, hunting and gardening. [[4]](#footnote-4) Supervisors had guns, ostensibly for hunting, but these were also used to instil discipline and, at times, to facilitate sexual assault.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Survivors described extreme psychological, physical and sexual abuse at Whakapakari causing severe mental and physical pain. They were also physically, educationally and medically neglected.

There is evidence to suggest physical and sexual abuse were used as punishment as well as to intimidate. Instead of being rehabilitated, survivors suffered immense harm from their experiences there. Its geographical isolation made it was almost impossible for children and young people to escape and difficult to alert their whānau or social worker to what was happening.

The State funded the programme until its closure in 2004 but failed to monitor it or to safeguard the children and young people in its care at Whakapakari. It failed to respond to the repeated disclosures of abuse by children and young people sent there.[[6]](#footnote-6)

There were numerous but inadequate investigations into complaints. Reports and recommendations to close or improve the programme were not acted on.[[7]](#footnote-7) The State’s failure to respond to the allegations of abuse and its willingness to continue to support and fund the programme in the face of these reports meant that children and young people continued to be subjected to physical, psychological and sexual violence, including rape.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Research demonstrates that ‘boot camps’ and other harsh ‘short sharp shock’ interventions for youth are ineffective at reducing repeat offending. In 1983, before Whakapakari was approved as a provider of State care, Department of Justice research found that 71 percent of young people reoffended within 12 months of release.[[9]](#footnote-9) In 1988, reconviction rates of young offenders in these settings were 92 percent, the highest of any sentence in that year.[[10]](#footnote-10) This was finally recognised by the Department of Child, Youth and Family in 2004 when it ceased funding of Te Whakapakari Youth Trust, citing research that ‘boot camp’ type environments do not effect positive change, especially to reduce reoffending.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Survivors of Whakapakari suffer from long term conditions such as PTSD and terror of meeting their abusers. Many were dislocated from their families, whanau and communities. Almost all have experienced drug and alcohol addiction and every one of the survivors has been in prison since they attended the programme. Some survivors remain there to this day.

The former Minister of Child, Youth and Family, Hon Ruth Dyson, said in a televised article in 2017 exposing the failings of the boot camp at Whakapakari:[[12]](#footnote-12)

“A lot of government money was put into that programme and in the end it resulted in the State funding violence and abuse towards children and young people. That’s how horrific it was.”

Oranga Tamariki told the Inquiry that enabling children and young people to go into a:“residential care facility is sometimes referred to as a fully funded failure model”.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Boot camps such as Te Whakapakari Youth Programme are extreme versions of this failure.

Young people were sent to Whakapakari to be ‘straightened out’. Instead, their lives were ruined from the abuse they suffered there.

End of information | **Boot Camp: Te Whakapakari Youth Programme**

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1. The chairman of Te Whakapakari Youth Trust referred to the camp as has having “primitive” facilities, in Letter from the chairman of the Whakapakari Youth Trust to Director-General of Social Welfare (20 November 1989, page 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Letter from Commissioner for Children Roger McClay to General Manager, Children, Young Persons and Their Families Agency Jackie Brown (20 January 1999), as appended to the Witness statement of David Bagley (22 March 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sporle, P, Mangati Bay Great Barrier Island community: A micro community profile (2003, page 17). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Whakapakari Youth Programme 15 Report (6–30 June 1989, page 2), in which John da Silva wrote: “The group were an enthusiastic bunch who thrived on the hard survival tasks such as firewood chopping digging etc”. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Witness statements of Mr PM (23 March 2021, para 45) and Mr SL (28 July 2022, para 3.141). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Chapter 6 of this case study, Institutional response to abuse and neglect in care, and Structural, systemic and practical issues. See also Witness statements of Ngatokorima Mauauri (2 July 2021, para 101) and Mr SL (28 July 2022, para 3.159). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See for example the 1994 Topzand Report, 1995 Thom Report, 1996 Egglestone Review and 1997 Green Report, which are discussed in Chapter 5 of this case study. See also McClay, R, Final Report by the Commissioner for Children into a complaint against the Department of Child, Youth and Family (page 5), as appended to the Witness statement of David Bagley (22 March 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Chapter 6 of this case study, Institutional response to abuse and neglect. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Walker, W & Brown, R, “Corrective training – An evaluation,” Study Series No 10 (Department of Justice, 1983). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “‘Court in the Act’ A regular newsletter for the entire Youth Justice Community,” Youth Court of New Zealand, Issue 42 (April 2009, page 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Email from youth justice team manager to the Department of Child, Youth and Family (9 November 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Sunday TVNZ, Return to the island (6 August 2017), <https://www.facebook.com/SundayTVNZ/videos/return-to-the-island/1698357530174418/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Transcript of evidence of Chief Social Worker Peter Whitcombe for Oranga Tamariki at the Inquiry’s State Institutional Response Hearing (Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care, 24 August 2022, page 876). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)