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Abuse in Care apology hollow if boot camps continue - Sasha Borissenko



Opinion by

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National plans to send repeat youth offenders to boot camps. Photo / Getty

THREE KEY FACTS

- The [report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care](#) says of the roughly 655,000 children, young people, and adults in care from 1950 to 2019, about 200,000 were abused and even more were neglected.
- The inquiry found [evidence of abuse and failures of responsibility 'everywhere we looked'](#), including in welfare institutions, churches, and other religious organisations, some schools, the police, and in successive governments.
- Prime Minister Christopher Luxon has established a taskforce to manage the report's 138 recommendations.

Sasha Borissenko is a freelance journalist who has reported extensively on the legal industry.

OPINION

Last week the Government acknowledged the 2400 survivors who shared their experiences of abuse and neglect during the six-year [Royal Commission of Inquiry](#) into historical abuse in state and faith-based care.

"This is a dark and sorrowful day in New Zealand's history. As a society and as the state we should have done better. I am determined that we will do better," [Prime Minister Christopher Luxon said in a statement](#) following the release of the 3000-paged final report.

After analysing more than 1.1 million documents and holding more than 130 days of public hearings, the inquiry revealed that an estimated 200,000 people suffered at the hands of the state between 1950 and 2019.

The timing of the inquiry's 138 recommendations comes just days before the Te Au rere a te Tonga youth justice residence - a military-style academy or boot camp pilot for youth offenders - is set to open for business. It's part of the Government's pledge to 'crackdown' on youth crime.

Te Whakapakari Youth Programme

In one of its [case studies](#), Judge Coral Shaw (chairwoman), and commissioners Andrew Erueti and Paul Gibson Shaw painted a devastatingly horrific picture of the Te Whakapakari Youth Programme, a geographically isolated 'boot camp'.

It became a social welfare care and youth justice sentencing option when boot camps were "seen as the solution to criminal offending by young people", the case study read. Sound familiar?

Staff estimated that 80% of children and youths were Māori, 14% Pākehā, and 5% Pacific people. Children as young as 12 were housed in substandard tents, with long drop toilets and limited hot water.

They were internally strip-searched, suffered extensive periods of solitary confinement, forced to dig graves thought to be their own, and raped. Undetected physical, psychological, sexual, educational, and medical abuse occurred as late as 2004.

Complaints of the abuse were dismissed or ignored by the police, social workers, the Department of Social Welfare, and its successors. Instead, complaints were treated as 'incidental' and 'substandard', and children were described as 'unreliable' and 'unco-operative'.

Judge Shaw, Erueti, and Gibson said underinvestment was a factor driving the Whakapakari programme, where youth justice social workers were "desperate" to find residential placements for difficult-to-place young people in the 1990s.

Two years ago, an Oranga Tamariki executive admitted it was not in a position to "adequately assure" that state care providers were meeting the care standards, the case study read^[1].

The impact of unmonitored, under-resourced state care

Whakapakari survivors described suffering PTSD and terror of meeting their abusers. Almost all experienced drug and alcohol addiction and many were dislocated from their families, whānau and communities.

Every survivor of Whakapakari who spoke to the inquiry had been in prison at some point for crimes including very serious offending, murder and manslaughter, sexual offending, firearms, and drug offending, the case study read.

In fact, an [inquiry-led study](#) found a third of children and young people placed in state residential care between 1950 and 1999 went on to serve a prison sentence. For Māori youth and children, the rate was 42%.

Soberingly, the report highlighted that the circumstances making it more likely youths would enter the system, often became the factor for why they were more susceptible to abuse and neglect in care.

These factors could include being raised in poverty and experiencing deprivation, being racially targeted for being Māori and Pacific, having a deferential attitude to people in positions of authority, or experiencing adverse childhood events or mental

distress with unmet needs.

Is history geared to repeat itself?



National leader Christopher Luxon announcing his boot camp policy. Photo / NZME

Fast forward to the release of the inquiry's recommendations and the parliamentary speeches that followed. Luxon argued that the Government's plan to introduce boot camps was "very, very different".

"That was about unvetted staff, we have in this case senior psychologists and two social workers working with 10 young people consistently. That was about being isolated, we have a three-month programme, nine months at home, we involve the whānau, we involve the family, we involve other community organisations.

"We're doing a powerful targeted intervention in the life of serious young offenders because we do not want them going down a pathway into bigger crime and into gang life in particular."

How can the underlying issues driving youth offending possibly be tackled when we've already seen huge budget cuts to Oranga Tamariki, the Ministry of Justice, and the Ministry of Social Development?

From a monitoring and social deprivation perspective, there are also the cuts to the healthy school lunches programme, the Department of Corrections, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, the Waitangi Tribunal, and the Human Rights Commission.

Although Luxon said he'd read the report, perhaps he missed where it said "research demonstrates that 'boot camps' and other harsh 'short, sharp, shock' interventions for youth are ineffective at reducing repeat offending".

Not convinced? Former chief science adviser, Professor Sir Peter Gluckman, concluded in a [2018 study](#) that "boot camps do not work and 'scared straight' programmes have been shown to increase crime".

Ultimately, the report said an apology is hollow without change. Listening to the evidence and ceasing the Government's punitive approach to solving crime would be a start.