

Military-style academies

"That funding could be used to increase the funding of existing youth justice and care and protection systems to allow earlier, broader and more intentional intervention that has a therapeutic approach, are trauma-informed, are based on facts and provides a wraparound approach."

Care experienced rangatahi¹

We do not support the implementation of military-style programmes as a youth justice solution. Evidence over time both in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally shows these do not result in long-term positive impacts.

Youth justice alternatives that do not include a military-style component exist in Aotearoa New Zealand, and they are shown to be working, particularly those that are Māori-led and which are place-based and focusing on mokopuna and their whānau, supported by community, iwi and government working together. Proven youth justice alternatives, together with a stronger focus on prevention, should be the focus of our youth justice system, so all people in our communities can be safe, and so mokopuna (children and young people) who offend are supported onto positive pathways through trauma-informed, evidence-based wraparound therapeutic support.

Military-style academies are one of several initiatives established by the Government to enforce 'stronger consequences for young people'² when they commit more serious offences.

Mana Mokopuna, and the peer-reviewed evidence base, does not support the Government's Oranga Tamariki (Responding to Serious Youth Offending) Amendment Bill which is currently before Parliament, and which seeks to write into law military-style academies as a youth justice sentencing option.³

If the Bill is passed, it will take Aotearoa New Zealand further away from a children's rights approach to youth justice, which the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has recommended Aotearoa New Zealand should be actively moving towards.⁴ It is also contrary to all of government's duties to mokopuna Māori protected under Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Data shows 93% of children involved in the youth justice system have previously been involved in State care.⁵ This highlights the significant crossover between care and protection and youth justice for the significant majority of mokopuna. This tells us all youth justice responses in our country should be trauma-informed, evidence-based, wraparound, and therapeutic in nature, not military-style.

Based on peer-reviewed evidence, we anticipate the Bill will do more harm than good, especially for mokopuna Māori and other overrepresented groups in the youth justice system. This includes Pacific and whaikaha (disabled) mokopuna, and those with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, whether diagnosed or undiagnosed, and those with other neurodiversity.⁶

Youth offending is symptomatic of deeper issues including poverty, housing insecurity, intergenerational trauma and unmet mental health and addiction needs. To reduce offending,

we must address these underlying issues, and invest in approaches that support rehabilitative accountability, not those that punish children.

Our concerns and calls to action are shared by care-experienced mokopuna, survivors of abuse in State care, organisations across the social service and health sectors, academics and others. Numerous evaluations of military-style treatment programmes (also known as 'boot camps') over the past 50 years in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally have discredited their use as corrective approaches for children and young people. Studies have consistently shown high rates of failure. Evidence shows military-style and similar approaches are the least likely intervention to reduce child re-offending. Evidence also finds increased likelihoods of harm and abuse experienced by children and young people during their time in military-style programmes.⁷

These programmes have been described as "worse than useless... [with] those emphasising strict discipline increasing crime rates and the likelihood of recidivism."⁸ In Aotearoa New Zealand, The Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in State Care has reported in detail the violence perpetrated against mokopuna in boot camps and the traumatic, long-term impacts on survivors.⁹

Embedding legislative provisions for military-style academies and related initiatives compounds existing inequities, discrimination, and other barriers to an equitable youth justice system, without addressing any of the underlying risk factors contributing to offending. Alternatives to military-style approaches not only exist, but are proven to be working, such as Kotahi te Whakaaro, a place-based early intervention collaboration between community, government, mokopuna and whānau.

There is no justification to introduce military-style academies into Aotearoa New Zealand's youth justice law. The evidence shows it would be profoundly irresponsible to do so.

Our calls to action

- **We urge Parliament not to pass the Oranga Tamariki (Responding to Serious Youth Offending) Amendment Bill.** It's not too late to stop this Bill.
- **We urge the Government to listen to experts and consult with mokopuna and people with lived 'boot camp' experience** to find the best possible solutions within the youth justice system that uphold the rights of children and young people.
- **We advocate for increased government investment in prevention and intensive intervention** focusing on restorative, individualised approaches that address underlying causes and risk factors, while building the protective factors needed to reduce the impetus to offend. Evidence shows *this* is what will substantially reduce recidivism.
- **We advocate for holistic wraparound interventions that meet the needs of mokopuna and whānau**, such as Kotahi te Whakaaro, which is proving effective in stopping offending and reoffending by mokopuna. This programme is an example of an effective solution currently operating in Aotearoa New Zealand that could be expanded and tailored to the unique needs of particular communities, instead of introducing military-style academies as a sentencing option.

What mokopuna say

Many care-experienced mokopuna have raised their concerns about the military-style academy approach, and have advocated against the military-style academy being written into law in Aotearoa New Zealand.

We acknowledge their advocacy, and amplify their concerns.

Endnotes

¹ VOYCE Whakarongo Mai, Oral Submission on the Oranga Tamariki (Responding to Serious Youth Offending) Amendment Bill, 14 February 2025, at [Social Services and Community Committee on Vimeo](#))

² [Govt cracking down on serious youth offending | Beehive.govt.nz](#)

³ See our full submission to Parliament on the Bill at: [Submission on the Oranga Tamariki \(Responding to Serious Youth Offending\) Amendment Bill | Mana Mokopuna](#). See the Chief Children's Commissioner's oral submission on the Bill at: [Speaking notes – Oral Submission at Select Committee on the Oranga Tamariki \(Responding to Serious Youth Offending\) Amendment Bill | Mana Mokopuna](#)

⁴ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. 2023. [Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of New Zealand](#).

⁵ Ministry of Justice [Youth Justice Indicators Summary Report December 2024](#), at page 8

⁶ Lambie, I. [What were they thinking? A discussion paper on brain and behaviour in relation to the justice system in New Zealand - January 2020 - Office of the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor](#)

⁷ [Oranga Tamariki 2023 Briefing: Advice on the Introduction of Military Academies.pdf](#) page 7-8

⁸ [Reducing Recidivism for Juvenile Criminal Offenders - Michigan Youth Violence Prevention Center](#) (2014). [The Primary Factors that Characterize Effective Interventions with Juvenile Offenders: A Meta-Analytic Overview](#) (2009). [Effectiveness of 12 Types of Interventions in Reducing Juvenile Offending and Antisocial Behaviour | Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice](#) (2022)

⁹ 24 November 2022. Māori psychologists pen an open letter to Luxon over boot camp policy - NZ Herald; Chances military camps 'fix' youth offending 'close to zero' - expert (1news.co.nz). August 9, 2023. The torture at Whakapakari | The Spinoff; 10 March 2024. Dr Elizabeth Stanley: Putting the boot in (newsroom.co.nz)