

Hundreds of thousands abused in state and religious facilities in New Zealand

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In July, a long-running Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in State and Faith-based Care released its shocking finding that between 1950 and 2019 up to 256,000 people in facilities including boarding schools, youth justice centres, foster care and psychiatric hospitals, were the victims of abuse and neglect. This is more than one in three of the estimated 655,000 people who were institutionalised during this period.

The inquiry was launched by the previous Labour Party-led government in late 2018 following many years of demands and petitions for justice from survivors of abuse. Its final report, based on testimony from nearly 3,000 survivors, and more than a million documents, reveals criminal actions carried out on a vast scale by state agencies and churches, with devastating consequences. The number of victims equates to more than 5 percent of New Zealand's current population of 5 million people.

The royal commissioners—Judge Carol Shaw, Dr Andrew Erueti and Paul Gibson—describe their findings as “a national disgrace.” They note: “These gross violations occurred at the same time as Aotearoa New Zealand was promoting itself, internationally and domestically, as a bastion of human rights and as a safe, fair country in which to grow up as a child in a loving family.”

In fact, the widespread, routine and prolonged abuse, in many cases amounting to torture, is an unanswerable indictment of capitalism. The brutal conditions documented by the royal commission are inseparable from the decades-long assault on workers' wages and living standards and the gutting of social services, in order to transfer more wealth to big business and the rich. This has been accompanied by racist scapegoating of Māori and other minorities, and the promotion of militarism and “tough on crime” policies by successive Labour and National Party governments.

Hundreds of thousands of children from impoverished families, and people suffering mental and physical disabilities, were deemed unproductive and a burden on society, and effectively thrown on the scrap-heap.

The 3,000-page report details the appalling suffering endured by generations of young people, including:

? The willful neglect of babies “left in cots with no hugs, physical interaction or other expressions of care.”

? Racist abuse towards Māori and Pacific Island people, who “experienced harsher treatment across many settings.”

? The use of “seclusion rooms” where vulnerable and young people could be held for weeks or even months, and “where they were at risk of being sexually and physically abused by staff.”

? “Physical abuse was prevalent across all settings. In some cases, staff went to extremes to inflict as much pain as possible using

weapons and electric shocks.” In addition, “Staff often pitched children and young people against each other, encouraging peer-on-peer abuse. This involved vicious attacks and humiliating rituals, which staff ignored.”

? Sexual abuse, including rape, is described as “commonplace” in both state and religious facilities. It was used to “punish and intimidate,” and in some cases “abusers organised the sexual abuse of survivors by trafficking them to members of the public.”

? Severe neglect of deaf and blind people, who were denied the ability to learn sign language and braille.

? “Over-medicalisation, lobotomies, sterilisation, invasive genital examinations and experimental psychiatric treatments without informed consent.”

? Hundreds of psychiatric patients and young people who died in care are believed to be buried in unmarked graves across the country.

Lifelong trauma was inflicted upon survivors, many of whom turned to drug abuse and some committed suicide. More than 30 percent of children and young people held in “social welfare institutions” went on to serve prison sentences later in life.

Many survivors faced ongoing difficulty establishing and maintaining relationships, inability to find a job, periods of homelessness, and increased likelihood of joining a criminal gang. In 1999, researcher Moana Jackson estimated that 85 percent of Mongrel Mob members and 88 percent of Black Power members (the country's two biggest gangs) had been wards of the state.

Māori, who are one of the poorest sections of the working class, are over-represented among the victims. During the 1970s, several of the facilities looked at by the royal commission were 70 or 80 percent Māori, even though Māori were only about 12 percent of the population. As in Australia and Canada, the New Zealand state has disproportionately separated indigenous children from their families and housed them in punitive institutions.

Scores of institutions were named by the royal commission. The highest levels of physical abuse were reported at Wesleydale Boys' Home and Wairaka Boys' Home, two orphanages in Auckland, which no longer operate. The highest levels of sexual abuse were reported at Dilworth School in Auckland (Anglican), Marylands School in Christchurch (Catholic) “and at Catholic institutions in general.”

Lake Alice psychiatric facility, which closed in 1999, features prominently in the commission's report. Its child and adolescent unit was notorious for abuse that occurred during the 1970s, including sexual abuse and electro-shock therapy as a form of punishment. The state has so far reached settlements with 202 Lake Alice survivors, averaging \$70,000 each.

No staff at Lake Alice were ever held accountable, however. Dr Selwyn Leeks, who was in charge of the child and adolescent unit, moved to Australia and continued working there until 2006; he died at the age of 92 in 2022. One former nurse, John Corkran, was charged but the High Court last year ordered a permanent stay on the prosecution due to the 91-year-old's poor health.

For decades, the rampant abuse in such facilities was covered up. The commissioners' summary says: "The State and leaders of faith-based institutions knew, or should have known, about the abuse and neglect that was happening. They failed not only in their duty to keep people in their care safe from harm, but they also failed to hold abusers to account."

Within church-based organisations, "Religious beliefs were often used to justify the abuse and neglect, and to silence survivors. Hierarchical and opaque decision-making processes impeded scrutiny and making complaints." When abusers were identified they were often shielded and "relocated and went on to continue abusing people in care elsewhere."

The National Party-led government, the opposition Labour Party and the rest of the political establishment are now engaged in a cynical damage control exercise. In response to the royal commission's report, Prime Minister Christopher Luxon declared: "I say to the survivors, the burden is no longer yours to carry alone. The state is now standing here beside you, accountable and ready to take action."

The government has issued apologies and is promising "redress" for survivors, in line with the commissioners' recommendations, although what form this will take remains unclear. The aim is to make a show of "learning the lessons" and deflect public attention from the appalling conditions that still exist for many oppressed youth.

While the royal commission's report calls for police investigations and prosecutions for past crimes, it is clear that the political and religious leaders responsible for the systematic cruelty inflicted on generations of young people will not be held to account.

The abuse uncovered by the inquiry is not confined to the distant past. Approximately 56,000 cases of abuse and neglect occurred in the period from 1999-2019. The commissioners note that "most of the factors that led or contributed to abuse and neglect during the Inquiry period continue to persist."

Last year, more than 20 staff members of Oranga Tamariki, the state's child welfare agency, were stood down after videos emerged of brutal "fight clubs" among teenage inmates at the Korowai Manaaki youth justice facility. Staff had encouraged boys to fight each other. Police also launched an investigation into "sexual misconduct" by some of the staff members.

Significantly, the royal commission's report devotes more than 100 pages to a "boot camp" called Te Whakapakari, which operated on Great Barrier Island with state funding from 1988 until 2004, under successive Labour and National Party governments. The program emphasised "military style discipline, subservience, self-sufficiency and hard physical labour."

Allegations of abuse were first made about the program in 1989, and more were made during the 1990s, prompting internal investigations. Despite this, state agencies continued to refer young people to the program, most of them aged 14 to 17 and from families affected by violence, drug and alcohol problems.

Victims told the royal commission horrifying details of repeated beatings and rape committed by Whakapakari staff, who sometimes carried out these crimes at gunpoint. The Ministry of Social Development received 176 allegations of abuse from 40 different

claimants regarding the boot camp. According to the commission's report, police failed to properly investigate allegations of rape made against the program's founder John da Silva, who died in 2021 aged 86.

The current National Party-led government is reintroducing military-style boot camps for teenage offenders: a pilot program began last month, around the same time that the royal commission released its report. During the 2023 election campaign, Prime Minister Luxon glorified military personnel as "our best leaders and mentors" and asserted that the new boot camps would turn young people's lives around.

In fact, as the royal commission report warns, people with military backgrounds who worked with children "brought with them a culture of command and control, punishment, physical violence and verbal abuse."

Luxon and his ministers have dismissed such concerns. As the country's economic and social crisis deepens—with one in five children already living in poverty and one in 10 households relying on charity to survive—the government intends to deal with the fallout by significantly expanding the prison system and introducing harsher punishments for "violent youth offenders."

The Labour Party has denounced the boot camps policy as "cruel," despite having supported such programs in the past. Labour sought to compete with National on "law and order" in the 2023 election, promising to build two new juvenile prisons.

The promotion of boot camps also dovetails with the bipartisan policy to funnel working class youth into the armed forces as they prepare for war. The government is supporting the US imperialist-led militarisation of the Indo-Pacific region against China, and has deployed troops to Britain to train Ukrainian conscripts to fight against Russia. Wellington also backs the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza and has provided troops to assist with the US-led bombing of Yemen.

The militarisation of society, which is taking place in every country, is inevitably leading to the brutalisation of a new generation of young people.

The abuse uncovered by the royal commission cannot be explained as simply the fault of bad individuals or inadequate oversight and regulation. Its findings reveal a system that is corrupt and rotten to its core, presided over by a ruling class and a political and religious establishment that are utterly indifferent to the conditions facing the most impoverished and vulnerable people in society. The only way to end abuse, poverty and degradation is by abolishing the capitalist system that is responsible for these conditions and replacing it with socialism, in which society's wealth and resources are used to meet human needs, instead of accumulating profits for the super-rich.



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