

# Boot camps for young offenders are back, but psychological evidence shows they don't work

June 11 2024, by Simon Davies, Clare-Ann Fortune, Karen Salmon and Linda Fatialofa

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"Boot camps" for young people who commit serious offending are

coming back. The coalition government in New Zealand has [promised](#) to pilot "military-style academies" by the middle of the year—despite a wealth of [international](#) and [New Zealand](#) evidence that boot camps do not reduce reoffending.

It has been encouraging to see this evidence receive [extensive media coverage](#) and [expert analysis](#). Less encouraging, however, has been the minister for children's [reported rejection](#) of expert advice that the boot camp model is flawed and ineffective.

So, why do we keep returning to interventions that don't work? For boot camps, there are at least three possible explanations.

First, they appeal to politicians who [want to appear](#) tough on crime, while also saying they are encouraging rehabilitation options.

Second, boot camps seem to have a [strong appeal to common sense](#): People want to believe structure and military discipline can turn around [young people](#)'s lives, and this belief outweighs contradicting evidence.

Third, boot camps can take different forms, so evidence of their ineffectiveness can be avoided by claiming, as the minister has, that [improvements will be made](#) this time.

This seems unlikely, however, when the core features that characterize boot camps—strong discipline in particular—are a main reason they don't work. To understand why, we need to look at the psychology of [punishment](#) and behavior change.

## The limits of punishment

As children, either through direct experience or observing others, we learn that if we touch a hot stove we get burned. People tend to assume

that punishment works in the same way; that we change our behavior following punishment.

In practice, and in the criminal justice system in particular, punishment rarely works that way.

It has long been argued that punishment which is immediate, certain and severe will [deter crime](#). But most offending goes undetected initially, punishment is often delayed, and more severe sentences [have not been shown](#) to deter offending. Serious offending, in particular, [appears not to be deterred](#) by punishment.

Punishment also only tells someone what they should not do, not what they should be doing. In fact, punishment can have the [opposite effect](#), leading to more of the behavior you were trying to prevent. To learn new behaviors, [young people need praise and encouragement](#).

## **When punishment meets trauma**

Perhaps the main problem with the assumption that young people who offend seriously "just need some discipline" is that they have often already experienced more—and more severe—discipline than most. We might also call this "abuse."

Recent [New Zealand evidence](#) found that 95% of a sample of 63 young people involved in "ram raid" events had been exposed to family harm; 65% reported five or more such occasions.

Decades of [research](#) into the impacts of childhood maltreatment and trauma tell us these types of experiences have substantial effects on development. Children tend to develop a poor understanding of emotions, low self-value, problems forming healthy relationships, and hypervigilance to perceived threats.

When young people with these difficulties are subjected to harsh discipline in boot camps, they are likely to associate their treatment with the serious physical harm caused to them in the past, causing further anxiety and stress. Without healthy ways to manage those emotions, further disruptive behavior, including aggression, is likely.

Just as young people tend to engage in behavior (such as violence) shown to them by others, they also tend to adopt the attitudes of those around them. Often, these include negative views of society at large, particularly towards authority figures.

Because of the [strong link](#) between those attitudes and reoffending, interventions should focus on shifting those attitudes.

At best, however, [research](#) suggests boot camps have no impact on such attitudes. At worst, a focus on discipline may strengthen unhelpful attitudes and hinder the ability to form a therapeutic relationship.

A working therapeutic relationship is perhaps [the single most important feature](#) of effective interventions aimed at changing behavior.

## **Focus on what we know works**

Boot camps do not appear to be going away. They are seemingly [popular with the public](#) and will therefore likely remain popular with politicians.

But the evidence is clear: In the different forms tried to date, they do not reduce reoffending. Most likely, this is because of the limitations of punishment as a method of changing behavior, and the backgrounds of the young people entering these camps.

That doesn't mean these young people cannot be helped. There is [good evidence](#) that several different interventions—ones that have a

therapeutic focus, involve relevant support people, and work on building skills for living "pro-socially"—can reduce reoffending and other antisocial behavior.

Nor does it mean young people who seriously offend should be exempt from consequences. But we should be honest about the purpose and likely outcome of those consequences, and accept that punishment alone will not change behavior.

One of the most telling findings from [research into boot camps](#) is that those with a rehabilitative component are more effective at reducing reoffending than other models. Some may cite this as evidence boot camps can be effective.

We disagree. If the reason some boot camps are effective is because they include a rehabilitative component, why bother with the boot camp aspect? Why not focus on what does work?

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