



# DO YOUTH IN SPORT **STAY OUT OF COURT?**

Insights and recommendations for families, coaches,  
community groups, sports organisations, and policymakers



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**How to cite this document (APA 7th ed.):**

Clarke, G. H. (2025). Do youth in sport stay out of court? Insights and recommendations for families, coaches, community groups, sports organisations, and policymakers. Division of Health, University of Waikato. <https://doi.org/10.15663/shei43661>

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express special thanks to the young men who volunteered to speak with me about their lived experiences; for their courage and generosity in discussing events they have put behind them, for the benefit of future generations. I also thank the University of Waikato for funding the original research project, Ngā Pae o Te Maramatanga for their initiatives supporting Māori postgraduate students, and the Health Research Council of New Zealand for funding the production of this report. Many thanks also to my colleagues for their feedback and peer reviews.

# INTRODUCTION

Sport is widely regarded as a positive developmental activity. Adult-led and rule-governed, sport not only promotes physical health but also instils normative values (e.g. cooperation, persistence, self-discipline) (Ball-Rokeach, 2002; Danish et al., 2003; Theokas et al., 2008) and contributes to identity formation, self-esteem, social status, and social capital (Collins, 2011; Cosh & Tully, 2021; Edwards, 2007; Miracle & Rees, 1994; Polley, 2011; Skinner et al., 2008). Consequently, sport has long been endorsed as a powerful tool for socialisation and behaviour modification, including crime prevention (Carmichael, 2008; Cashmore, 2010; Dandurand, 2023; Field, 2000; Hartmann & Massoglia, 2007; Hastad et al., 1984; Nichols, 2007). This endorsement is reflected in sayings such as, 'Sport is a wonderful metaphor for life', 'Sport teaches you character', and 'A kid in sport stays out of court'. Thus, concerns arise when there is a decline in sport participation amongst children and youth (Back et al., 2022; Howie et al., 2020; Sport New Zealand, 2017; Valenzuela-Moss et al., 2024).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, rugby and rugby league are popular sporting codes, historically and particularly among males. In their 2023 annual reports, New Zealand Rugby reported 147,434 registered participants, while New Zealand Rugby League reported 28,180. Both institutions have also developed equity, diversity and inclusion strategies aimed at nurturing the participation and involvement of women and girls, as well as Māori and Pacific communities. However, while both codes have recorded an increase in female participation, there has been a gradual decline in male participation (Cully, 2023; Radio New Zealand, 2023; Wilson, 2022). This decline in sport participation has also been noted by (former) Principal Youth Court Judge Andrew Becroft, who found that young male offenders are often not involved in sport (Bruce, 2013; Sport NZ, 2018).

This report summarises the findings of a study that examines sports attrition in relation to youth offending. In that study, the author (Clarke, 2012) examined the childhood and youth sporting experiences and illegal activities of five young men aged between 18 and 25 years old.

The aim of this report is to provide insights into how these young men became involved in sport and why they dropped out, how they became involved in crime, and possible links between their sport participation and offending. Their experiences highlight several issues that can be addressed by

parents/caregivers, clubs, sport administrators, coaches, community groups, sports organisations, and policymakers.

In course of the study, six key observations were made. For these young men:

1. rugby and or rugby league were their primary and final sporting codes;
2. these sports were or had become 'just a game';
3. aggressive coaches diminished their enjoyment and commitment to sport;
4. their parents/caregivers were absent from their sporting lives;
5. their participation in sport and crime was simultaneous; and
6. the collision aspect of rugby and rugby league may have helped to facilitate their offending.

In this document, the names of these young men have been replaced with aliases. To provide the reader with a richer and deeper understanding of the issues, the report features a number of their stories and reflections (edited for readability only). The research methods are briefly outlined in Appendix 1. Sources included in this report are listed in the References section. For a fuller review of the literature and the research analysis refer to the original research document (Clarke, 2012).

# DOES 'A KID IN SPORT STAY OUT OF COURT?'

The short answer is – not necessarily.

Four of the five young men involved in this project reported participating in sport and illegal activity simultaneously. Moreover, involvement in sports was directly linked to the offending of three of these young men.

**Adam** played rugby league from the age of 5 to 18. Playing rugby league was his way to connect with his estranged father and circle of friends. With these friends, Adam's offending began at eight years old with shoplifting and progressed to burglary and receiving stolen goods. In their early teens, they also began abusing alcohol and using and selling Class A, B, and C drugs. After games, their coach rewarded his teenage "playmakers" with alcohol and marijuana. Between the ages of 17 and 22, Adam was in and out of court regularly and spent time in the Mount Eden youth unit.

**Bruce** was involved in club athletics for two years (6-7 years old) and then 'bounced' between rugby and rugby league from ages 8 to 17. When he started high school, he discovered a passion for tagging and graffiti. This new passion was fueled by long bus rides to and from school with his crew, who used these trips to plan and celebrate their 'hits.' Bored with the drinking culture of his rugby league team, 16 year old Bruce 'tagged the town' while the older players drank. At 18 years old, Bruce was twice charged with wilful damage.

**David** played rugby league from ages 7 to 14, and then basketball for two years. When he started high school, his family moved to a new city, where he joined the local league club and made new friends. With these friends, David began smoking cigarettes and marijuana, drinking alcohol, and shoplifting. He then progressed to burglary, car theft, assault, aggravated robbery, and unlawful damage. By age 16, David had been picked up by the police at least a dozen times and excluded from two high schools for aggressive behaviour.

**Evan** was involved in a number of sporting codes: Judo (ages 5-15), wrestling (ages 11-14), rugby (ages 10-16), and also sampled soccer, basketball, and hockey. At 11, he began hanging out with youth in his neighbourhood who were connected to or involved with gangs, and in high school, he joined a youth gang. His first serious offence occurred at 14 when he was arrested after a P-fuelled aggravated robbery. Evan's gang identity and activities eventually led to his exclusion from high school. He then joined the workforce and became a patched gang member. Evan was involved in burglary, destruction of property, assault, and served a six-month prison sentence. By age 19, Evan estimates he had been picked up by the police at least 40 times.

The fifth research participant, **Calvin**, is the only example in this study of 'youth stepping out of sport *and then* into court.' Calvin was raised by extended family members who kept him isolated at home. Under the close supervision of another family member, he began playing rugby at age seven. When he was 13 years old, he ran away from home. Living with his estranged father, he stopped playing rugby and became involved in youth gangs and drugs. At 14, he was charged with manslaughter after a drug-related altercation resulted in the death of another teenager.

**WHY WAS THE  
CHARACTER-  
BUILDING ETHOS  
OF SPORT NOT  
INTERNALISED?**

# JUST A GAME

While sport has the potential to transform lives, it does not possess any inherent magical qualities (Coakley et al., 2009). The reality is that not everyone participates in or enjoys sport, and that dropout is highest and is also increasing amongst youth (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008).

In listening to and comparing the life stories and reflections of the young men involved in this study, participating in and dropping out of sports can be linked to motivation, early specialisation, and friendship.

According to motivation theorists (e.g. Deci et al., 1985; Vallerand, 2001), individuals who persist in sports are more likely to be intrinsically motivated and to possess an internal locus of control. In other words, these athletes have a genuine interest in the qualities of the sport and feel self-determined and competent. In contrast, when athletes are motivated by external forces and factors, they may feel less autonomus and connected to the sport, resulting in diminished feelings of joy, freedom, and fun.

Regarding self-determination, these young men began their sporting journeys in activities that were chosen for them, with convenience being a determining factor.

Although Adam's father was a lifelong rugby league fan, he enrolled his five-year-old son in rugby because it was closer to home and the coach provided transportation.

When Bruce was five, his mother felt that athletics was a good fit for him, but had to bribe him with gaming time. After dropping out of athletics, Bruce was then pulled back and forth between rugby and rugby league by friends and by coaches who were family members or friends of the family.

Evan, at age five, began participating in soccer and judo because the children of his mother's friends played those sports. He was also drawn to sports that his friends and family members enjoyed.

David started playing rugby league at seven-years-old because his mother's friend was coaching a team and needed more players. He also offered to provide transportation so she could stay at home with the younger children. Whilst, seven-year-old Calvin played rugby because it was the only activity available to him, and was an escape from home.



He was the one who got me out of there, cause he knew what was happening to me. ...he could help me, he used to take me away, take me to sports just to get out of the house.  
—Calvin

They just put me in soccer, cause everyone was in soccer back then... I don't know, it's like mums gathered together - their kid was playing that sport, so their kid had to play that sport. Never really liked soccer.  
—Evan

I was one of the fastest on the field at the time, ah had a few people after me, that's why I was always going back and forth from rugby and rugby league, cause the coaches were always after me, always going back and forth, having turns with them.  
—Bruce

I wasn't a serious sports person. I'm not into team sports. More concerned with just hanging out... but I knew all the Kiwi players, knew all the Warriors [by name], always wanted to watch it. Think it was cause the old man would always be watching it. Trying to be like the old man, so kept up with the rugby league.  
—Adam

Four of these young men also specialised in rugby or rugby league, which in this case simply means that they played one sport rather than receiving specialised training.

According to developmental researchers (e.g. Coakley, 2011; Strachan et al., 2009; Wall & Côté, 2007), skipping the sampling phase (ages 6 to 12) interferes with normal maturation and development, and leads to early dropout (before adulthood). Common reasons for early dropout include burn out and stress; a lack of enjoyment and fun; irrelevant or repetitive content; and competing interests.

### **Competing interests were particularly relevant in this study, and provided a greater sense of self-determination and enjoyment.**

While Adam continued to play rugby league to gain his father's attention and to be with his friends, he preferred surfing. However, he lacked the resources needed to surf regularly and did not have the support of his friends.

I wasn't too into team sports. ...just like school and that too, kinda kept to myself, I didn't like relying too much on other people to get something done, hence the skating hence the surfing, I'm in control of what I was doing. [If you had the money, what would you have chosen: surfing, skateboarding, rugby or rugby league?] Surfing, but none of my friends surfed and it was hard to get out to the beach.  
–Adam

Bruce enjoyed rugby and rugby league, but his passion for tagging and graffiti was stronger.

[What's more challenging? Tagging, bombing or rugby league?] Tagging... when you play rugby league you play once a week, train two times a week... then the week's over, whereas with tagging, any little opportunity you get, you're sitting in class... assembly... anywhere you are... if I see a pen and I'm bored, I'll start tagging, bombing. You know when I go out to the streets and I tag and then the Council paint over it, that pushes me to do it again, I find that more challenging Rugby game, you lose the game - you lost the game. You go out and tag something - you've never lost, they can

paint over it, you go tag it again, they paint over, you do it again, it's a constant battle. Whereas with rugby league, you lost that game, you lost it. You can go and play them the following week, but you can't take back the week you lost, but with tagging you can. You do a bombing, and they don't paint over it and you're happy with it, you can go back and fix it up. [So what's more fun, tagging or sport?] Oh tagging... I just get more of a thrill out of it, more of a kick.

–Bruce

When Calvin ran away from his caregivers, he reconnected with his father and no longer needed rugby as an outlet for his anger. Unfortunately, his newfound freedom included roaming the streets and selling drugs.

I was hanging out with the wrong people, drinking, smoking. Ended up doing my crime. [You were 14 and at a party?] Oh my father didn't really mind, as long as we came back. .... I knew the crime that I had committed was a serious one. And yeah, I thought you know, because I was still young that they wouldn't go that hard on me.

–Calvin

Although David's family was financially comfortable, he burgled houses to raise extra 'pocket money' for junk food, cigarettes, drugs – and for a thrill that was more intense than playing rugby league.

[What was more challenging, rugby league or burgs?] [pause] Doing a house is more challenging, you have to know certain things, and watching out if you get caught. Rugby league is pretty easy, you're out in the open and everyone can see you. [What was more fun?]. ... 50/50, they were both fun, but I think at the time I got more of a thrill out of robbing houses and stuff... Get goosebumps when you're robbing houses, just an adrenaline rush... fast paced, your heart races... do everything fast as... just the feeling that someone is watching you, gonna get caught, you have to be sharp, watch out for yourself.

–David



Evan, on the other hand, sampled a number of sports as a child and was intrinsically motivated. He spoke at length about his dedication to each sport, competing at regional and national levels, and the coaches and national heroes who inspired him. He also expressed bitterness about being excluded from school for gang activity on school grounds, describing it as an “over-reaction that ended a promising rugby career.”

However, his sporting aspirations were at odds with the life he was born into, which included drug use and a glorified view of gangs.

[Drugs] I only did it cause of family, when your family's got like, my dad, his lifestyle's all about drugs, and when your father's got 16 ounces on the table and he's like “Oh son you're smoking with me” you kinda got no choice, it's respect for your father, or your cousin's doing it “Oh you're not cool cuz.” Same thing I started smoking cigarettes at one time in my life. I hate cigarettes, but it was peer pressure.

[Gangs – What was the attraction?] Just had this whole idea of being a gangster when you grow up; go to jail, and that was the sweet life. Who's the hardest and that's about it... I had a lot of family in gangs and a lot of mates in gangs... I didn't grow up in a rich neighbourhood. Most kids where I was, were gang members, that's all we knew... Also didn't help that everyone's favourite rapper was shot you know... with all these women dancing around them... they see it “Oh he looks like he's living the life” ... or the best sports people happened to be violent, or you see violent families. Especially when that *Once Were Warriors* [film] came out, everyone wanted to be like that.

[You couldn't play sports when you were in the gang after you left school?] Na it wasn't cool. Everyone one was drinking, everyone was stealing, everyone was fighting. So you had to look cool in those aspects.

–Evan

## When asked what they liked most about participating in sport, one of two the major themes was spending time with friends.



If a friend says 'oh I'm going to play for that team, you're like 'oh yeah, I'll play too'.

—Evan

Just kept me doing something... seeing my mates, going to school – see my mates, go to training – see my mates.

—Bruce

Cruising with the boys, just being part of something. It was really cool... I liked being with the team. A lot of my crook stuff I got up to with my team [laughs]. .... There were nerves, but I was playing cause my mates were there. If they weren't on the team I'd probably not be there.

—Adam

And in Calvin's case, feeling accepted.

That's one area where the family knew to get me, cause yeah I was pretty good at sports. [So everything was good when they wanted you on the team?] On the field, yeah, yip. [So at school, you didn't have mates - but they warmed up to you when you were playing for the club] They only warmed up to me when I played for the club.

—Calvin

The influence of friends features strongly across all the research themes.



# SUMMARY

Other than Evan, it was relatively easy for these young men to become involved in illegal activities because rugby and rugby league were just games – activities they participated in primarily to be with their mates, and to please adults. In contrast, engaging in crime (and surfing, in Adam's case) provided them with a greater sense of self-determination, excitement, and challenge.

Supporting this argument, in the Participant Advice section of this report, these young men are adamant that youth will not be distracted by or attracted to crime if they have a genuine interest in and are truly dedicated to their chosen activities.

# AGGRESSIVE COACHES

**In addition to motivation and competing interests, the participants' stories highlight an increasing lack of enjoyment that was associated with aggressive coaching behaviour.**

Developmental researchers (e.g. Côté, 1999; Côté & Hay, 2002; Strachan et al., 2009) have identified notable differences between youth who persist in sports and those who drop out. In these international studies, persisters have two or more trained coaches who are supportive and understand the importance of athlete autonomy and reciprocal and progressive training. Additionally, their parents/caregivers do not coach from the sideline or pressure them to perform. Persisters also have friends who support their participation in activities that they don't have in common.

In contrast, those who drop out tend to have one untrained coach who is controlling and focuses on the talented players rather than the average or developing players. Their parents/caregivers, who are either past athletes or lacked the resources to participate in sports as children, pressure them to perform and offer incentives. If their friends do not share an interest in their activities, they are not supportive.

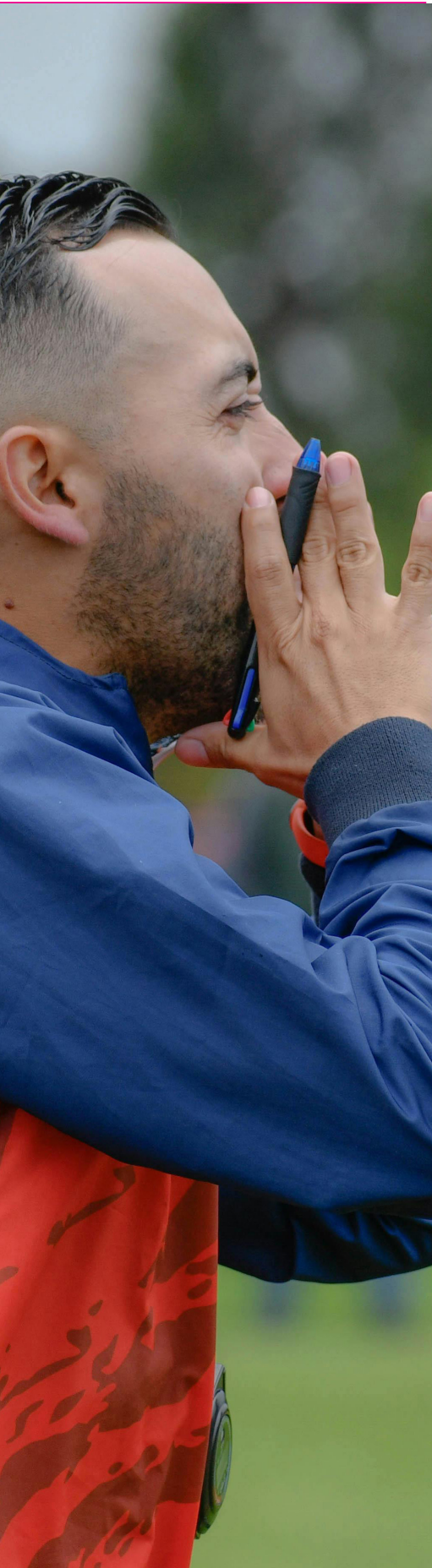
A significant pattern in the current study is that all these young men experienced aggressive and controlling coaching behaviour in rugby and rugby league. This behaviour primarily occurred in club settings and when they transitioned from junior to secondary and senior grades. Except in Evan's case, this behaviour seems to have played a significant role in their emotional and subsequent physical withdrawal from the sport.

In short, the character-building ethos that is supposedly embedded in sports, was neither modelled nor transmitted by these coaches.

”

As a young fulla I had a lot of good coaches, and I really wanted to impress them and do well. But [‘John’] just didn't measure up. He was a bit of an egg, bit of a clown, bit aggressive. Quick to threaten us if we didn't listen to him. Na, never really liked [John].

—Adam (rugby league, dropped out 18yrs old)



...he expects too much... like, he pushes us, but he pushes us way over the boundaries, cause he'll yell and swear at you "rah-de rah-de ra!" and all this. And then everyone will get frustrated at him, then no one will turn up to training and he'll be sitting there ringing everyone asking why we didn't come to training, and he'll always think that we're in the wrong and not him.... he did help us win but in a shit way. .... so I just hacked it and did my parts and that was it. Did what I needed to do and nothing else.

—David (rugby league, dropped out 14yrs old)

...most coaches swear at you most of the time, you kinda get used to it. When they're swearing at you, you're thinking 'I need to improve' or 'I'm doing good'... most people who play have a rugged background so generally they come from an environment where they swear a lot.

—Evan (rugby, dropped out 16yrs old)

[He] was my favourite uncle... he never hit me [laughs]. He would be like "Aw! You can do it aw" and he just picked me up, so I go hard, hmm. The others were like "Oi! Grab that ball! Grab it!! Fucken grab it! Throw it! I'll kick your arse!" .... I don't even think they know how to play properly. But they just happened to be there, "Nah nah, don't do it that way – see that cone, run in and out." So you start running in and out:

"Aye! What you doing?! Go do your laps!" [laughs] and cause he was whānau and your uncle, you had to listen.... I remember this one time, our uncle was taking us, next minute, next training, different uncle; next training, two different uncles [laugh] – but at least we had a coach you know, at least we knew we wouldn't run out of one.

—Calvin (rugby, dropped out 14yrs old)

...old white fulla, he was good, not good at coaching, but a nice fulla but lazy, he'd sit there all day and tell us what to do, just sit there and yell at us.

—Bruce (rugby and rugby league, dropped out 17yrs old)

# ABSENT PARENTS/CAREGIVERS

A related observation is the absence of parents/caregivers. While these young men mentioned that their mother or father attended one or two games, they tended to be at home caring for younger siblings or working. This highlights the significance of coaches providing transportation when the boys were younger, and the association between socio-economic status and access to leisure activities (Mizdrak, 2019; Recreation Aotearoa, 2019). As they grew older, in addition to dealing with aggressive coaches, they then became responsible for getting themselves to training and games.

“

As soon as I got a job at 10 [years old], it was like boom! You got a job, you pay your own way.... I paid for everything if it wasn't done through the school... but I got there catching buses, friends, walking... cause they [parents] were busy working or didn't have time for me.

—Evan

[As a child] Mum had to stay home with my sister, look after her. Played early mornings and it was always freezing, so coach would come pick me up. It was always a transport thing.

—Adam

As soon as I put a shirt on and had a game, that was it, I was happy to have a game... yip, yeah, never missed training, never missed training... cause it got me out of the house. Oh, apart from when uncle wasn't there, when he couldn't get me.

—Calvin

I played for them four-five games before I dropped out of there, cause pretty much after every game we were going to, on our way back, we would stop at every pub on the way back, and cause I was under age I couldn't really drink at the time, and it was pretty boring sitting around, waiting for them, watching them get drunk all night, I wasn't very happy with it, so yeah stopped going.

—Bruce

They [parents] liked me playing sport... doing things that I enjoyed, that's what they wanted to see... but I had to find my own way there, cause trainings were after school and mum was at work, so I caught the bus... mum came only when [games] were at our fields... but she also didn't want to see me get hurt so she would stay home. [Dad] was always away, they always used to send him away for [work] and that... so we didn't really see him.

—David



**One possible consequence of parental/caregiver absence is that it signalled to these boys that bullying and intimidation are normal coaching behaviours.**

The assumption being that if this behaviour was unacceptable, their parents/caregivers would not have allowed them to play for this coach or team, or would have at least voiced concern. However, being absent from games or practices meant parents/caregivers did not witness first-hand the bullying and intimidation their sons were experiencing.

Moreover, if bullying and intimidation was also present at home and or within their wider circles of influence (e.g. friends, neighbourhood), the boys may not have thought to complain or report it to their parents/caregivers. And even less so if the coach was a family member or a family friend.

A theory of relevance here is Akers’ Differential Association (Akers, 2009), which consists of four key arguments.

1. We are all exposed to a “ratio” of good and bad messages.
2. These conflicting messages are transmitted by both law-abiding and deviant sources and include beliefs, attitudes, justifications (reasoning), and orientations (propensities).
3. In terms of exposure, factors such as ratio (degree), frequency, duration, intensity, and prioritisation are significant.
4. And the family lays the foundation, as “interaction and socialization in the family precedes and affects choices of both conforming and deviant peer associations” (p.55).

In other words, as first teachers, the beliefs, attitudes, justifications, and orientations of the family influence how children interpret what is and is not acceptable behaviour. As a continuing influence in their children’s lives, the family also plays an important role in balancing the ratio of conforming and deviant messages they are exposed to when they leave the house to meet friends, attend school, and play sports etc.

# SUMMARY

Other than Calvin, who experienced aggressive coaching behaviour from childhood, the research participants reported that coaches became more aggressive as they moved up from junior to senior grades. It was also noted that at the peak of their experiences, they were playing for clubs not schools.

This behaviour may not have been challenged because their parents were absent and thus unaware of what was happening. Additionally, such behaviour is considered 'the norm' in rugby and rugby league – and possibly in their homes, friendships, and wider community.

Despite this normalisation of bullying and intimidation, these young men did not appreciate this treatment. Their life stories and reflections indicate that this lack of a quality sporting experience gradually eroded their love for the game and increased their interest in other leisure activities, most of which were illegal, and where they experienced greater self-determination and excitement.

Employing the lens of Differential Association, one could argue that their prolonged exposure to the beliefs, attitudes, and justifications of aggressive coaches may have contributed to a level of deviant messaging that outweighed any positive messaging they received from previous coaches, at home, and in other settings. According to this theory, the higher the ratio of deviant messaging that children and youth are exposed to, the more receptive they are likely to be to deviant beliefs, attitudes, justifications, orientations, and associations.



# SPILLOVER

When asked about possible similarities or connections between sport and crime, the theory of spillover emerged.

**The general assertion of spillover theory is that experiences in one setting can be carried over to other settings.**

This theory is particularly relevant in the argument that sport is important for the development of children and youth because it teaches and promotes positive attitudes and behaviours that will benefit them in various aspects of life (Pierce et al., 2024), including health, education, employability, and citizenship.

For these young men, the similarity between offending and sports is that success requires preparation and the ability to block out thoughts of injury or the risk of being caught and punished.

When asked what they liked most about sports – in addition to being with their friends – the second theme that emerged was tackling, i.e. the ‘legitimate’ contact and collisions that are central to rugby and rugby league.

Through the lens of Differential Association, this legitimised aspect of the game is a justification that conflicts with conforming messages about not causing harm to self or others.

”

It's a physical game, you're out there to get hurt, you don't go out there half-pie... you don't want to just tackle them, you want to smash them, you want to win the game, you want to get him off the field... that's how a lot of people who play think, they don't go out there to put them on the ground, they go out there to injure them... you want to walk off with grass stains, mud stains, blood...

–Bruce



[I] play defence cause I love tackling. Just hearing that sound when you go in for a tackle, a rib shot, that "Huh!" It's a nice sound, it's a nice sound... You can tell, if you're watching a game of rugby and if you can hear that, you can tell it was a good tackle.... being able to hurt people without being hurt back or getting into trouble for it.

—Calvin

I loved my sports, but definitely rugby and boxing because they just appealed to my lifestyle... But anything that involved contact, that you could get some anger off your chest you know. So yeah, where you can just grab a ball and run into someone or something, just loved it.

—Evan

I miss it heaps aye... the thrashing around, hurting people, I like tackling people. .... For me it's like a rush when I injure someone, cause then they can't play... if they're injured then I don't have to tackle them anymore, I don't have to do much more to prevent them from getting a try or something... so they're out of my way then I can focus on something else...

—David

I was excited to get on the field. There were nerves, but I was playing cause my mates were there. If they weren't on the team I'd probably not be there. There was a rush too I suppose... hearts going for it, loud, I could hear it, dof-dof-dof-dof! When I was on, I'd get all excited, lots of fist-clenching, I'd visualise a lot... I'm going to hit that guy, get around that guy... nerves in the changing room, like going out for jobs, you've done all the nervous stuff, you're ready, cool calm and collected.

—Adam



Trained and rewarded from a young age to pursue others, and to be pursued, with the intent of causing pain or injury

## the participants emphasised the importance of preparation and not dwelling on potential risks – in both sports and crime.

...yeah [rugby league] can be dangerous. You can do head-highs, too hard, too fast, I've seen people getting paralysed... this fulla I used to play with... he got hit head-high from three people... he just dropped to the ground and couldn't move a muscle... his whole back just bent, he just dropped, they had to call the game off.... It happens aye, you stop to think about it and that's about it. I've heard of people tagging and falling of buildings, falling off story high bridges and stuff and getting up and out there tagging again the next weekend... you gotta always know the consequences... or else it will just shock you if you don't. That's what trainings are for; you build up all those techniques, how to get tackled, how to tackle, warming up and warming down, stretches, so when you do get hit it's not as sore on your body, that just comes with all the sports really.... Got to train to win a game – same with tagging, can't just pick up a can and expect to be the best graffiti artist overnight, got to practice, get heaps of cans, spend money, hand control...

–Bruce

Rugby league is risky... every time you get on the field there is such a high risk it could be your last game. You stress your body out, like doing weights, not giving your body time to rest, then you're on the game, the rugby injuries are big, they're not injuries I can recover from in a couple of days, they're injuries for a couple of years, and when you finish your rugby career, that injury will still be there... that collar bone will be an injury for the rest of your life. But you're training too. If your friends hit you really hard, a stranger isn't going to hurt you. That's why you go hard out in training... try and hurt each other at training, you'd rather get hurt by a mate, than a stranger, cause you'll get more offended, like if your friend hurts you really hard its "Oh that was cool, I'm going to get you back."

–Evan

”

I feel untouchable in rugby league, it rubs off when I do my crime thing and stuff... I think I can do anything. .... I get a thrill out of hitting people like, ticketing people, and seeing them on the ground cause it makes me feel like I'm the bigger person, so like when I go out there and hit people [assault] that's how it still feels, but in my head I know it's wrong, cause I done it in the wrong way, outside of what I actually used it for.

–David

...the enemy will come around before your bout [wrestling] and they'll be "can't wait to see you on the ring" - or you're walking up and they got the right look on them you're like, "Oh don't want to mess with this fulla"...but if you can push those butterflies aside and become a fighting machine you'll be good, successful.

–Evan

There's a big waterfall we'd jump off and it was big, we found that if you stay out there too long you're not going to jump, so if things came up, time to do a hit or time to do something, don't think about it too long, just get into it, get busy. [It gets easier?] Yeah comes easier. Get over the initial fear, get more business-like, more streamlined, you're looking for things, getting things, whereas before you're worried, waiting for someone to knock on the door, waiting for someone to come home, ah not anymore, you just get your stuff, boom boom boom, get all your stuff and you're out of there, so you're not mucking around so much. The first couple of ones you're looking at photos thinking "Oh man I'm ripping you off" but blank it out, bam bam, do your thing.

–Adam

Their reflections also reveal that

## the thrill of 'feeling the fear, doing it anyway, and being victorious' leads to increased risk-taking behaviour.

Their reflections illustrate that these thrills and challenges can be addictive.



Hanging off bridges at night, fall into that water... broken legs. Hang off with one arm.... homemade harnesses... wire snips to cut through wire fences... [Why?] It's just the whole thrill... I've seen walls and opportunities of getting to walls, and passed them up, and just regretted it for days, weeks even, sometimes months, I've regretted walls till now.... You just can't hesitate, if you see it, you go do it, don't think about it twice. With a lot of walls that I've done that with, I've found it a lot easier just getting out there and doing it, don't think about it, one thing I tell a lot of my mates, it's a lot harder if you stop and think about it... if you start thinking about it, you think about all things that can go wrong.  
—Bruce

If it's good, man its good. Weed's like 20 minutes... mushrooms are five hours... it's risky man [laughs] cause if it's a bad one, its five hours of bad and there's been people who have had bad trips and never been the same again... just weren't the same... they just lost confidence in themselves or something, like this guy who was playing rugby league, best rugby league player... he became a shell of himself, skinny, withdrawn, stuttering, he got wasted. [Why do it if the risks are so high?] I felt I could manage it, you know when too much is too much, but even then, you still try to go it all. It was a really good challenge.  
—Adam

It didn't phase me cause I had never been caught, it was a cocky sort of thing, that I could just keep doing it and doing it [shoplifting], and I could keep getting away with it and no-one will know.... But then I got bored. It just wasn't the same feel as the first time, you keep doing it and doing it and then it just got boring, it's the same old thing... then that's when we started robbing houses and stuff... we thought that houses have heaps of things in them and sometimes people aren't home. So we done that for a little bit.

...

The adrenaline buzz is way more intense [than sport] when you're robbing someone, you fear more that you're going to caught... even though you're feeling regret for the people that lived there, it was cool to do it, cause you think you can get away with everything.  
—David

Big rush in surfing, big waves come in and break in front of you. Lot of excitement. Lot of fear. Lot of fear. Taking off on big waves... you might go from the top and boof, go right to the bottom. Fear of getting hurt, fear of coming off, get into a big barrel, might not come out, haven't come out a couple of times just gotten wasted, just that type of fear, but then you come up, wasn't that bad, "Oh man that was awesome!"  
—Adam

# SUMMARY

In several interviews, the research participants referred to “butterflies” – the fluttering feeling of anxiety and fear that signals impending risk or danger. However, over time and with practice they learned to “push aside” this feeling. Their ability to suppress and overcome these butterflies enabled them to run onto the field of play repeatedly, knowing and prepared for the reality that, “it could be your last game.”

For these young men, this practiced ability to ‘crush butterflies’ and the increasing bravado that comes from victory spilled over into illegal activities and supports the hypothesis that collision and combative sports may facilitate criminal behaviour.

Employing the theory of Differential Association, the justification for inflicting harm in collision sports is legitimised by law-abiding institutions and skews the athlete’s ratio of conforming and deviant beliefs, attitudes, and justifications. Young athletes, particularly impressionable children and youth, may be especially vulnerable if they are not exposed to an equal or greater degree of positive beliefs, attitudes, justifications, orientations, and associations.

# CONCLUSION

Sport is often credited with building good citizens and fostering good citizenship. Yet, four of the five young men in this study participated in sport and illegal activity simultaneously. This report outlines some reasons and theories that may explain why this occurred, and supports the argument that sport is not “essentially pure and good” (Coakley, 2016).

The first observation is that these young men weren't entirely committed to or invested in their sports because they were chosen for them, and playing these sports with their friends was more important than the sports themselves. This made it relatively easy for them to be distracted by illegal activities where they experienced a greater level of self-determination, excitement, and challenge alongside their friends.

The second observation is that aggressive coaches exacerbated this situation. While four of these young men reported positive coaching experiences during childhood, the coaches of their senior teams shouted, yelled, swore, and threatened them. The reported absence of parents/caregivers in their sporting lives suggests that they were unaware that their sons were being bullied and intimidated. However, it is possible that their parents/caregivers would not have challenged these coaches, as aggression from both coaches and players has been normalised in rugby and rugby league. Similar behaviour also occurred in some of their homes, their friends' homes, and their neighbourhoods.

The third observation is that years of participating in collision sports gave these young men the confidence needed to engage in illegal activities. In rugby and rugby league, they were trained to and developed a 'taste' for injuring others, and were therefore aware that the risk to their own health was real. Their strategy for 'survival' and success was twofold: Practice how to 'hit' and how to receive a 'hit', and to ignore or 'crush' the butterflies that typically prevent people from taking risks. They adopted this strategy in their offending as well: Be prepared, and don't think about the consequences.

These observations are supported by theory. Motivation studies have found that youth are more likely to play and enjoy sports if they are intrinsically motivated, meaning they have a genuine interest in the sport itself and feel self-determined and competent. In contrast, youth who are externally motivated (e.g. following friends, pleasing adults) feel less autonomous and connected to the sport, which leads to diminished feelings of joy, freedom, and fun.

Developmental studies indicate that youth who specialise early – rather than sampling a variety of activities as children – are more likely to drop out early. Two common reasons for dropout identified in those studies and echoed in the current study include a lack of enjoyment and competing interests.

Developmental researchers have also found that persisters are more likely to have two or more trained and supportive coaches who understand the importance of athlete autonomy; supportive parents; and friends who encourage them to pursue their own interests. Conversely, those who drop out early tend to have one untrained and controlling coach; parents who pressure them to perform; and friends who do not support them if they engage in activities that they're not interested in.

The theory of Differential Association offers another perspective, and a potential 'solution.' The basic argument is that we live in a world where we are exposed to 'good and bad' messages, transmitted by both law-abiding and deviant sources. If the ratio of negative messages outweighs the positive, we are more likely to adopt and to associate with people who have deviant beliefs, attitudes, justifications, and orientations.

In the case of the five young men at the centre of this study, their ratio of conflicting messages leaned in the negative direction during their formative years. As mentioned in their life stories and reflections Evan, Adam, and Calvin were raised in households and communities where they were exposed to drugs, violence, and gang ideology and activity. All five participants also associated with friends and peers living in similar environments. From as young as five years old, they also began playing sports in which a primary task is to 'hit' one another. As teenagers, they were then 'mentored' by aggressive coaches.

In short, as children and youth it appears that these young men were exposed to a degree of deviant beliefs, attitudes, justifications, and orientations that overshadowed the positive messaging associated with the character-building ethos of sport.

So why don't all youth who play rugby and rugby league become involved in crime?

Following the theory of Differential Association, the hypothesis is that while all children and youth are exposed to deviant beliefs, attitudes, justifications, and orientations (e.g. aggressive coaches), some also receive a greater degree of positive and conforming messages (e.g. supportive parents) that offset the negative messaging.

This report concludes with advice provided by the research participants, and recommendations.





# PARTICIPANT ADVICE

When asked directly, does 'a kid in sport stay out of court?' the research participants offered the following advice and insights.

The key points are that children and youth are less likely to be distracted by other activities, including crime, if they:

- are involved in an activity that they want to do
- are supported in that activity
- have a sense of who they are, and
- have some goals to focus on.

## DAVID

That's pretty true, like if sport is your life then yeah you'll definitely stay out of court, cause you'd just be focused on making it up there, making it up in the world and doing something with your life, that you want to do, that you want to be your life.

## EVAN

That's a good statement, if you want to be a good sports player that's what you would do... it's true... you know the Fairplay Award was always the person who didn't play dirty or was a bad influence in sport. You strive to try and get that. But it also depends on that person's character... like I was talking about my mates, they're not attracted to crime... [sport] pushed them to go towards something better, and not towards crime. It all depends on the person, like rugby league players sometimes they think they're too good and then they get one criminal record in their life and then they're stuffed and regret it the rest of their life.

## CALVIN

If you nurture that kid properly, they can keep out of court. For instance, give them a treat or like something you know if he scores or something like that, and even if he doesn't still give him that treat, because he'll be happier about it, knowing that even though he scored or didn't score, he'll get something good out of it. You know, if you say, "You're useless, you're useless" then course they're going to get all negative.

... but it's more than treats, a kid in sport stays out of court, well you've already got them sidetracked by sports, already got their days filled up, without sports you know, well anything to be honest, they just gonna get lazy or get itchy fingers, start being tatus, wanting to do different things because they got nothing to do. But sports, it's a good outlet, positive outlet, especially for those who are angry.... I got to take my aggression out in a positive way and um yeah, just kept me busy. Kept me away from some of the mates that I used to hang around with really, kept me out of trouble.

**ADAM**

Generally, if they're involved in sport and if it's structured, and they've got good support for them to participate in the sport, then I think their love for their sport would override the need to get into any criminal activity.

You know, you get pretty disciplined if you're a part of a sport that you really love or enjoy. You look after yourself, you want to be a champion, you want to be a winner. That's if you're a real real sports person. But if you're just there to be with the mates or something to do on the weekends, then yeah.

Develop new relationships with people who have different outlooks on life, different aspirations, you know if you asked some of us "What do you want to do?" "Oh I don't know, where are we going to get the next session [drugs], where we going to drink next?" But you ask these other people in sports teams – "Oh man I want to win a championship, I want to do 'this' when I'm 21." You know, get those sorts of goals, that sort of kōrero going on in their life. It awakens something in them...

But then that depends on the type of sport that they're playing, like rugby league for instance is really violent, pretty aggressive. And a lot of rugby league players I know, are violent and aggressive, and they're with the gangs, rugby league just gives them a legal outlet for them to bang someone over. A lot of recruiting is also done through the rugby league.

You get some guys playing golf, I don't think they're going to get too much into crime but because of the makeup of the rugby league teams and where the young fullas are from. Then again its resources and support, if they don't have those things then it just becomes an outlet... and that attitude can roll over.

If they're looking for who they are... they will be easily influenced by a whole team of aggressive guys and they're more likely to become aggressive themselves, but if they know who they are and they know where they're heading, they got their compass set, and they love the game, then I don't see too many things that will take them off that path...

**BRUCE**

It depends if they're dedicated in their sport, then yeah that's what they will strive to do... there's even famous people who play sport and still get in trouble for fighting, drinking, can't handle their alcohol. So it can and it can't. Overall, it should if that's what you want to do, sports should keep you out of trouble, keep you occupied.

...like how you're asking if people might encourage them to do something, um personally I don't reckon it is because already they are entertained at playing sports, going to training, and after that shall we go tagging, shall we rob a house? "No I'm too tired, I'm going home to have a rest."

And then that keeps them entertained, when they go and rob or whatever... it tends to be because they're bored, that's what I've found with most people because they have nothing else to do, because they're bored, a lot of people do it because they're broke and might need money, but it all turns out because they're bored. If you really wanted money you'd go get yourself a job, so I don't reckon it's not sports people getting them into doing it.

# RECOMMENDATIONS & SUGGESTIONS

The following recommendations and suggestions are offered as a place to start. It is important to note that the research and these recommendations do not reflect the experiences of all youth, athletes, and coaches.

## PARENTS/CAREGIVERS AND WHĀNAU

1. Help your child/ren to discover their passions and skills by encouraging and supporting them to sample a range of sports and other leisure activities. Appendix 2 provides a useful framework.
2. Attend their activities (e.g. games, training) and pay attention to how their instructor/s behave.
3. Talk with your child/ren about their sporting experience – their coaches, teammates, and the beliefs and attitudes that they are being exposed to. Swing the ratio of beliefs, attitudes, justifications, orientations, and associations in the positive direction.
4. Support your child/ren in setting some goals and dreams to work towards. Talk to them about your goals and dreams and how you achieved them or are currently working towards them.
5. Children and young people want to do what their friends are doing; include their friends in all the above.
6. Support your child/ren's participation in sports/activities right up into adulthood.

## CHILDREN AND YOUTH

1. Be a leader and an example, inspire your friends and family to try different sport and leisure activities.
2. Set some goals to work towards. Talk to the adults in your life and to your friends about what you want to do and to achieve.
3. If you are not enjoying your sport, communicate this to your parents/caregivers or another adult.
4. Start to think about who you are and what you stand for. Ask yourself questions like:
  - What kind of person do I want to be? (e.g. reliable, strong, optimistic, fun)
  - What are my core values? (e.g. honesty, respect, kindness)
  - What are my skills? (e.g. fast runner, can play guitar)
  - What are my passions? (e.g. rugby, kapa haka)
  - What are my aspirations? (e.g. to be a good dad, to travel)

Your answers will help you make decisions about the types of activities that do and do not align with what is important to you. Appendix 2 provides a guide for decision making. It's important to understand that your answers are not set in stone. You're still young; your interests will grow and change over time.

## COACHES

1. Think about the impact of your words and attitude. Do you want your players to stay and play or will you be responsible for putting them off the game they love?
2. Check in with your players. Are they still enjoying the game? Do they feel autonomous or controlled?
3. Ask your players what you're doing well and what you could do better or differently. Find a way to do this so they can share without fear of being wrong, punished, or excluded (e.g. QR code to anonymous online survey).
4. Attend coaching workshops and or do some reading. SportNZ has a range of resources.



## SCHOOLS AND SPORTS ADMINISTRATORS

1. Vet, monitor, and support your coaches. Do you have a code of conduct? Do you hold your coaches to this code of conduct?
2. Check in with your athletes, regularly. Are they happy? Are they still enjoying the game?
3. Encourage players to challenge the stereotypes and norms associated with collision sports like rugby and rugby league. One place to start is to ask them what these stereotypes and norms include.
4. Find ways to help parents/caregivers to be involved in their child/ren's activities.
5. Help your students/athletes to discover new passions and skills by creating opportunities for them to try different sports and activities. Appendix 2 provides a guiding framework.
6. Also look at the range of resources offered by SportNZ (e.g. Balance is Better).

## SPORTS ORGANISATIONS

1. Create policies that require schools and clubs to vet, monitor, and support their coaches and to check in with their players. Offer workshops and materials to support these policies. SportNZ offers a range of resources.
2. Design programmes and campaigns that challenge the stereotypes and norms associated with various sports, particularly collision and combative sports.
3. Conduct and or fund research to ascertain how prevalent coach-athlete bullying and intimidation is in children's and youth sports, and act on the findings.
4. Design family and community-friendly campaigns that promote the benefits of being involved in their children's sporting lives, and encouraging their children to discover their passions and skills by sampling a variety of sports (see Appendix 2).

## MARAE, HAPŪ AND OTHER COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

1. Be intentional about offsetting negative beliefs, attitudes, justifications, orientations, and associations with positive messaging and examples.
2. Research and discuss the history of European sports including stereotypes, normalised negative behaviours and attitudes, and the impact these have on identity formation and relationships (etc.).
3. Create and promote events that include a range of activities/experiences, including ngā taonga tākaro (e.g. publications and events offered by Harko Brown). Appendix 2 also provides a useful framework.
4. Identify and discuss the values and principles embedded in traditional and contemporary sports and leisure activities.
5. Come up with ideas to increase access to sports for both tamariki and whānau, such as improving transport options.

# FUTURE STUDIES

This exploratory qualitative study was conducted in 2010 and comprises five case studies. To test the ongoing validity of the observations and findings in this report, the author recommends conducting further research with a larger number of young men, and with young women, who participate in different sporting codes, including rugby and rugby league. Additional research will provide an up-to-date picture of what is happening at the individual level and in clubs and schools.

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# APPENDIX 1

## Research Methods

This research project was undertaken as part of a Master of Sport and Leisure Studies degree at the University of Waikato (Clarke, 2012).

The aim of this study is to provide parents, caregivers, whānau, and other individuals, groups, and organisations involved with youth with insights that confirm, add to, or contest what is arguably 'known' about youth sports participation, attrition, and deviant behaviour.

The findings of this study challenge the mantra: A kid in sport stays out of court.

### Methodology & Methods

This exploratory study is located within the interpretive paradigm, which accepts that there is no universal truth because reality and therefore truth is subjective. The study therefore relies on the meaning-making narratives and reflections of the research participants.

Individually, five young men shared their lived experiences in three semi-structured life story interviews. The first interview focused on significant places and people. The second interview traced their history of sport participation and offending. The final interview was dedicated to clarification and filling gaps. Transcripts were returned to the interviewees for editing and their approval before the next interview was conducted.

With a focus on sport participation and offending, the interviews produced life story maps beginning at five years old. The cross case analysis involved the use of descriptive, analytical, and topical coding methods (Saldaña, 2009).

### Research Participants

At the time of their interviews, the research participants were aged between 18 and 25 years old. They lived in the Waikato region of Aotearoa New Zealand, had dropped out of sport, and had appeared before a court judge at least once.

These young men were recruited individually through different youth organisations. Four self-identified as Māori, and one as Māori and Pacific (Evan). Two grew up in a two-parent household (Bruce, David), two had been co-parented by separated parents (Adam, Evan), and one had been raised by extended family (Calvin). Three grew up in lower-income households, and where gang ideology and drug use were normalised (Adam, Evan, Calvin). Two participants had been raised in middle-income non-gang associated families (Bruce, David).

In this report (and the original thesis), I have not drawn attention to the research participants' ethnicities until the end. While ethnicity is a significant dimension of culture and identity, I sought to avoid triggering stereotypes, and deficit images and preconceived notions in the reader's mind.

# APPENDIX 2

## WE ARE the whare

### Background and Acknowledgements

In the 1980s, Dr. Mason Durie presented New Zealand health officials and clinicians with an integrated approach to positive Māori health (New Zealand Department of Health, 1984). This approach features four cornerstones – te taha wairua, te taha hinengaro, te taha whānau, and te taha tinana – that were later illustrated in the form of Te Whare Tapa Whā, a four-sided meeting house model. More recently, the significance of whenua (land) as the foundation of Māori health and wellbeing has been emphasised and added to the model. Ako Aotearoa has also published, Te Whare Tapa Rima (the five-sided meeting house; Fielden et al., 2020).

Here in Aotearoa New Zealand, Te Whare Tapa Whā/Rima has become the preeminent Māori model of health, and of holistic health generally, and has been adopted by a wide range of sectors including education, justice, tourism, health and safety, and employment.

In the context of leisure, the **WE ARE the whare** recommendation to involve our tamariki (children) in a variety and combination of structured and unstructured activities is a key finding of an earlier research project (Clarke, 2020) in which the author interviewed six successful young Māori men and found that their childhood leisure experiences aligned with the cornerstones of Te Whare Tapa Rima.

However, rather than focusing our attention on the image of ‘the whare’ as representing the concepts of health, wellbeing, and hauora, **WE ARE the whare** is a reminder that ‘the whare’ is us – as individuals and as a people. This perspective is discussed in more detail elsewhere (Clarke, 2025a).

**WE ARE the whare** was created in collaboration with Dr. Sharyn Heaton (Kai Tahu, Ngāti Apa ki te Rā Tō, Rangitāne ki Wairau, Muāūpoko, Te Arawa; 2011, 2022), and Natarl Lulia (Ngāti Whakaue, Ngāti Awa, Kuki Airani). I also acknowledge the influence of Tei Nohotima (Tūhoe, Rongowhakaata) and his karakia, Taku Whare Wānanga.

I also appreciate and thank our models and their whānau: Mana Tawhara-Crown (Ngāti Rereahu, Te Whakatōhea); Tarah Lulia (Ngāti Whakaue, Ngāti Awa, Kuki Airani, Tonga); and Ezra Ormsby (Ngāti Rangiwewehi, Ngāti Maniapoto, Ngāti Ranginui).

Kei te mihi nui ki a koutou kātoa.  
Mauriora!



# WE ARE THE WHARE



## TŌKU TINANA

Activities that move my body:

A variety of sports, games, and play in different settings, kapa haka...

## TŌKU HINENGARO

Activities that stimulate my mind and emotions:

Games of strategy, reading, kapa haka, musical instruments, (de)construction, exploration, storytelling...

## TŌKU WAIRUA

Activities that lift my spirit:

Music, dance, kapa haka, the outdoors, the arts, genealogy, church...

## TŌKU WHENUA

Activities that connect me to nature and cultural places and spaces:

Bush walks, swimming, kapa haka, gardening, marae, road trips, historical sites...

## TŌKU WHĀNAU

Activities that build and nurture relationships:

Game and movie nights, community events, kapa haka, volunteering, team sports, start/join a band...



## What leisure activities are best for our tamariki?

A variety and combination of structured and unstructured activities that nurture and stimulate the 5 interconnected dimensions of their whare.







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