

2025

Social Impact Report

Adventure Therapy at Waipuna Youth Services.

Measuring the Impact of Adventure Therapy



Prepared by St John of God Hauora Trust, based on research
conducted by Sarah Wylie, Social Research and Evaluation.

sjog.org.nz

For 25 years, Waipuna has harnessed the power of challenge and support to change lives.

About St John of God Waipuna.

St John of God Waipuna is an Ōtautahi-based service of St John of God Hauora Trust. For over 25 years, Waipuna has delivered adventure therapy programmes that support rangatahi to transform their lives. Rooted in the values of dignity, compassion, hospitality, and justice, Waipuna creates safe and challenging spaces where rangatahi can discover their strengths, overcome adversity, and reconnect with whānau and community.

Adventure therapy is not a stand-alone intervention; it is woven through Waipuna's broader suite of services. From residential and community reintegration for young offenders, to tailored school-based programmes, Waipuna integrates outdoor challenge with therapeutic practice to meet young people where they are, physically, emotionally, and culturally.

About the Social Impact Assessment

This assessment draws on research led by social researcher Sarah Wylie (MA Hons - Psychology), funded by Rātā Foundation, and ethically approved by the Aotearoa Research Ethics Committee (AREC25_10). The study engaged 75 participants through surveys, analysed 30 exit surveys, and conducted in-depth interviews with eight former participants of Ara Poutama-funded programmes.

The study used a mixed-methods approach to capture both measurable outcomes and lived experience:

Surveys: 75 past participants completed an electronic survey.

Exit Surveys: 30 randomly selected client exit surveys were analysed.

In-depth Interviews: Eight former participants from Ara Poutama-funded programmes were interviewed to provide deeper insight into their journeys.

Adventure based therapy,
where resilience
is discovered.

Young People at the Centre.

At every stage of this journey, the young person stands at the heart. Around them, whānau, Waipuna staff, community providers, and partners form a circle of support, each contributing care, challenge, and guidance. Together, these connections create the foundation for growth and change.

6 months

Ara Poutama Youth Reintegration (emotional regulation and skills, whānau and community connections)

First year

Waipuna wraparound services (young parents, drug and alcohol support, mental health counseling)

1-2 years

MSD Waipuna Tumanako Group (prosocial mentoring, education and employment support)

2-5 years

Waipuna, Tumanako Tuakana-Teina (community connection and modelling trusting healthy relationships)

Foreward.

Surrounding the important gathering of evidence, featured in this Social Impact Assessment, has been three important contributions that has weaved a constant thread of consistency that is unique to this practice:

Tuatahi: A committed community of people who have sat inside organisations, in communities, inside government departments and, regardless of their roles, have held fast to the kaupapa of putting young people's needs at the centre of what they do, regardless of the internal/external environments that surround them. Without their many big and small contributions to this mahi, adventure therapy would not have survived beyond its first year. These people have always been collective in their actions and have humbly used their skills and resources for a complex array of needs that has always been for a bigger picture than their individual contribution. This has been truly collaborative featuring a number of committed partnerships which have stood the test of time.

Tuarua: The challenge of experimental learning is transferring the learning from the experience or activity back to the places where the Rangatahi live. The staff actively live in the transfer space of the young people, thus holding the young to account to the potential of the evidence shown on the adventure days. This has been critical to the progress gained by the young people and is unique to the Waipuna model.

Tuatoru: An Alternative to Prison. The evidence in the report demonstrates the genuine alternative to prison that Waipuna has developed. The threshold that 12 years of knowledge, development and achievements has attained, means that the wider community can have confidence that energy, effort and investment will bring a consistency of results.

This model of support gives context to understand the critical sustainable practice contributed by the collective that delivers a continuity of relationship to the young people.



Paddy Pawson

Founder of the Waipuna Adventure Therapy Programme.

Waipuna Approach: Philosophy & Practice.

Adventure therapy weaves outdoor challenge with intentional therapeutic practice. In rivers, mountains, caves, and coastlines, rangatahi take on activities such as canoeing, tramping, caving, and mountain biking, experiences that test their limits while building confidence, trust, and resilience. These experiences stretch rangatahi beyond their comfort zones while being held in a safe, supportive, and reflective space.

Through this process, participants learn to manage risk, trust others, regulate emotions, and discover resilience. The adventure becomes a metaphor for life, teaching skills and confidence that transfer into relationships, education, work, and community life. Waipuna's Adventure Therapy model is a relational, culturally anchored, youth-centred, and holistic approach that has evolved over 25 years. It is designed not only to provide immediate therapeutic experiences but to support rangatahi across their life journey, responding to their unique needs, context, and potential.

Holistic Approach	Relational and Mana-Enhancing
Rangatahi thrive when emotional, social, cultural, and physical wellbeing are supported.	Relationships are central: every interaction fosters trust, respect, and connection.
Integrates Te Ao Māori models and youth frameworks to address mind, body, whānau, and spirit.	Young people's voices drive the mahi; aspirations, challenges, and choices are respected and prioritised.
Supports long-term growth, focusing on life skills, resilience, emotional regulation, and cultural identity.	Staff actively walk alongside rangatahi as they apply learnings from adventure days to real-life contexts.
Connected and Need-Focused	Experiential Growth
Adventure therapy integrated with wraparound supports (counselling, housing, parenting etc.).	Nature-based challenge experiences that build confidence, resilience, agency, and problem-solving.
Needs assessed and met holistically, ensuring the right combination of challenge, support, and guidance.	Experiences are designed to be progressive (dependence → independence → interdependence),
Facilitates reconnection with whānau, peers, and community, strengthening social networks.	Reflection, discussion, journaling, and mentoring ensure that learning is transferred into daily life.
Culturally Anchored	Long-Term Life Journey Focus
Te ao Māori principles underpin all aspects of our mahi: whakapapa, whānaungatanga, manaakitanga, and hauora.	Support is wraparound and persistent by design, following young people into the community, employment, study, and family life.
Rangatahi learn to connect with their identity, culture, and environment, deepening self-awareness, pride, and belonging.	Graduates remain connected, creating continuity and resilience that reduces offending, and enhances life skills.
Rangatahi strengthen cultural identity and connection to tikanga and Te Ao Māori enriching understanding and respect.	This approach recognises that change takes time, and ongoing guidance is critical for sustained transformation.

The Waipuna Theory of Change.

Waipuna's approach is grounded in a clear belief: when rangatahi are provided with safe challenge, authentic relationships, and opportunities to reflect, they can change the course of their lives.

Our theory of change is simple yet powerful:

- **Challenge** stretches participants beyond what they thought possible.
- **Support** from skilled and compassionate facilitators provides safety and encouragement.
- **Reflection** helps participants connect their experiences to their everyday lives.

This cycle builds resilience, strengthens identity, and empowers rangatahi to make positive choices for their future.

Impact findings.

The assessment revealed that adventure therapy creates significant and lasting change across multiple areas of participants' lives. Rangatahi reported stronger self-belief, healthier relationships, and increased ability to make positive choices. Many described the programme as a turning point, helping them to break cycles of offending, substance use, and disconnection.

Importantly, the findings show that these impacts extend beyond the individual. For those who are parents, the benefits flow to their tamariki and whānau. For those reintegrating from prison, the impact reduces the likelihood of reoffending, easing the burden on justice and social systems. And for rangatahi in schools, the outcomes include improved confidence, trust, and engagement in learning.

“ If it wasn't for the support of Waipuna I'll be in prison no doubt about it but thanks to them I'm able to be in the community and even made a little family on my own. I had... a high chance of coming back to prison... I was last in prison in 2022 and still going strong - crime doesn't even come into my mind and that's thanks to Waipuna.”

Participant feedback: Te Whare Hāpai Tangata - Community reintegration programme.





Te Whare Hāpai Tangata - youth reintegration.

Since 2021, more than 120 rangatahi have taken part in Te Whare Hāpai Tangata, Waipuna's reintegration programme delivered in partnership with Ara Poutama. For many, it represents a critical turning point: moving from repeated cycles of offending toward stability, employment, and family life.

Eight males aged 21+, from a variety of cultural backgrounds who had taken part in Ara Poutama-funded adventure therapy courses with Waipuna were interviewed. Seven of the eight participants were now either working full time or studying towards employment since participating in this programme.

Participants consistently spoke of Waipuna as the factor that helped them break free from crime:

"If it wasn't for this programme I would be dead or in jail for a very long time."

"I wouldn't be who I am today without the help of Waipuna they have changed my entire life around."

"“Before I done the programme I rarely had respect for other people let alone myself - the way I spoke, how I reacted to things, my anger, frustration was all over the show but on the programme I learnt so much about myself and about other people that I feel like I became a better version of myself. Being surrounded by Waipuna staff has had a massive impact on the person I am today and I couldn't thank them enough.”"

"I haven't reoffended since I've been off the programme and I'm not going to again. They taught me that I am good enough and that I can achieve anything I put my mind to. I'm now working fulltime, I have my own house, I'm in a beautiful relationship with my partner, I see my son more than I did before I done the programme. I'm so grateful for taking part in the programme and I would do it again in a heartbeat just to experience it once more."

Quantitative results reinforce these stories:

- **100%** of surveyed participants reported a big-huge increase in hope.
- **94%** reported significant improvements in self-belief and decision-making.
- **89%** reported increased connection to people and services supporting their wellbeing.

These outcomes point to a powerful preventative impact: reducing reoffending, easing pressure on justice systems, and enabling rangatahi to rebuild positive lives.

School-based adventure therapy.

For more than a decade, Waipuna has delivered 10-week adventure therapy programmes in secondary schools, offering rangatahi the chance to step outside the classroom and into the outdoors. Each week, a group of 8-10 students take on new challenges - tramping, abseiling, caving, mountain biking, coasteering, and more. These activities are carefully designed to stretch comfort zones while ensuring safety, reflection, and growth. Skilled facilitators help participants draw connections between the day's challenges and the choices they face in their everyday lives.

“Waipuna’s adventure therapy made me a lot more confident as a person and I got to experience things I was too scared to do and didn’t have the money or people to experience it with.”

The impact on students is striking. Many arrive disengaged, struggling with trust, confidence, or social connection. Over the course of a term, they report significant changes in self-belief, relationships, and wellbeing. Survey data confirms these powerful stories:

- **80%** reported greater awareness of emotional state.
- **78%** reported stronger feelings of hope.
- **79%** reported a stronger sense of connection.

By giving rangatahi a safe space to reset their trajectory, the programme strengthens resilience at a critical stage of development and helps schools support students who may otherwise fall through the cracks. Teachers and whānau consistently note the difference: improved confidence, better engagement in learning, and a stronger sense of belonging.

“ Before Waipuna, before I met the staff, I didn’t trust people. I was neglected as a child, I wasn’t healthy, I was broken, no people skills, no confidence, didn’t trust a soul, drug/drinking problem, Waipuna saved my life. I’m now living ... a life that seemed impossible before, and I hope I can make an impact on others like Waipuna did that saved my life. ”

Participant feedback: School-based adventure therapy programme.



At the heart of change: trusted relationships.

The relationship with Waipuna staff was repeatedly identified as one of the most important elements of the programme.

- **98%** of participants rated their connection with staff as good or great.
- **97%** said they were treated with high levels of respect.

These relationships create a family-like environment where rangatahi feel accepted, respected, and empowered to grow.

A culture of safety and belonging...

Participants consistently described Waipuna as a place where they felt respected, accepted, and safe. Even when group dynamics were complex, staff worked hard to build a strong and supportive culture, often likened by participants to a “family feel.” Every participant interviewed reported feeling safe, physically, culturally, and spiritually, during their time in adventure therapy.

The impact of this environment endures well beyond the programme. Former participants remain connected to Waipuna, drawing on networks of support that include counselling, alcohol and drug services, housing advocacy, and parenting support.

Several spoke of the pride their whānau felt in their progress, while others reflected on the difficult but positive choices they made in balancing family ties with living a crime-free life. For some, adventure therapy also strengthened cultural identity, particularly for tane Māori, who described deeper connections to whakapapa through their journey with Waipuna. One participant shared how, with the encouragement of staff, he was able to reconnect with his dying mother, a step that gave him both closure and pride.

The impact at a glance.

100%

of participants reported a big-huge increase in **hope**.

95%

felt stronger **self-belief**, backing themselves to take risks.

95%

reported making better **choices** around drugs, alcohol, and offending.

94%

said their **relationships** with whānau, peers, and professionals improved.

80%

of school-based participants reported greater **emotional awareness**.

37%

of participants are **parents**, highlighting intergenerational impact.

Data from Waipuna's Social Impact Assessment. Surveys, exit surveys, and interviews were completed by 75 participants between 2021–2024.

Ethics approval: Aotearoa Research Ethics Committee (AREC25_10).

\$15.44 social value return for every \$1 invested.

Independent evaluation shows that Waipuna's programmes reduce reoffending, strengthen whānau, and open pathways to education and work.

75% of participants did not reoffend within two years

94% of participants reported increased self-belief and better decision-making

90% of parents reported stronger hopes and priorities for their tamariki

\$2.8M+ in measurable social value generated in one year

SROI analysis conducted by Sarah Wylie with funding from Rātā Foundation.

Ethics approval: Aotearoa Research Ethics Committee (AREC25_10).

Building Resilience, Changing Futures.

Social Return on Investment

Adventure therapy pays it forward.

Independent evaluation has confirmed what Waipuna has long seen in practice - adventure therapy doesn't just transform lives, it generates lasting value for families, communities, and the public sector. A Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis shows that every dollar invested in Waipuna's Corrections-pathway programmes returns \$15.44 in measurable social value.

Evidence of impact.

The social ROI evaluation drew on 75 participant surveys, 30 exit interviews, and in-depth conversations with eight former participants, alongside staff assessments and Corrections data. The findings paint a consistent picture: rangatahi experience a surge in hope, confidence, emotional awareness, and positive decision-making. Over time these gains translate into stronger relationships, healthier lifestyles, and a willingness to engage with supports.

Evaluation of past participants indicates that more than three-quarters of participants did not reoffend over two years. For those who did, nearly a third reduced the severity of their offending. Staff ratings showed the greatest growth in **confidence, self-reflection, physical activity, and readiness to engage with services.**

What drives the value.

The SROI calculation conservatively monetised outcomes most directly linked to public benefit, including:

- Employment and retention, reducing benefit dependence and increasing tax contributions.
- Reduced drug and alcohol use.
- Increased physical activity for both participants and their children.
- Reduced offending - violent, drug-related, traffic, and property.
- Less time spent on custodial and community-based sentences.
- Reduced family harm.

Other powerful impacts, improved wellbeing, stronger cultural identity, intergenerational benefits for tamariki, were evidenced but not counted, ensuring the \$15.44 figure is a conservative estimate.



Case Study: Cassidy

From homeless to hopeful: Waipuna helped me find my voice.

Cassidy, in his mid-20s, describes his early life as “pretty rough.” When he first joined Waipuna’s adventure therapy programme in 2024, he was homeless and serving time in Christchurch Prison. With the support of his probation officer and the judge, he was able to participate as part of his release conditions.

During the programme, Cassidy embraced challenges like mountain biking, hiking, and coasteering. When staff learned he was living on the streets, they moved him into Waipuna’s transitional housing and later helped him secure a permanent Kāinga Ora home.

“If it wasn't for them, I don't think I would have had the confidence to tell my housing manager what position I was in. They just stepped in, he's homeless, he needs a place.”

Cassidy, naturally reserved and struggling with mental health, found Waipuna to be a place of safety, belonging, and respect. Even with peers he had clashed with in the past, the programme’s tikanga created a neutral environment where he could grow. He discovered a sense of connection, describing Waipuna as having a “family feel.”

Since then, Cassidy has built new confidence and direction. He is training to run the length of Aotearoa, has returned to study at Ara, and recently reconnected with his dying mother - a step he says took enormous courage. He has been drug-free and out of trouble for more than two years, with secure housing, better health, and a hopeful outlook for the future.

“I've learned how much and how strong my voice can be.”

Case Study: Kahu

Kahu's Journey: Choosing a Different Path

At the age of 17, Kahu stole two bikes from a garage. The homeowners, a police officer and a social worker, took a restorative approach, attending his Family Group Conference (FGC) and attempting to support his rehabilitation.

However, his youth justice social worker failed to provide consistent follow-up, leaving him without structured guidance. Recognising his vulnerability, they connected him with Te Rangatahi Tūmanako Trust, where Reon, a youth mentor, began working with him.

Despite engaging in activities such as Adventure Therapy, half-marathons, mountain biking, and indoor netball, Kahu struggled to separate himself from old influences. He relapsed into alcohol, parties, and gang activity, leading to multiple violent offences, including aggravated robbery and grievous bodily harm. By age 22, he had been incarcerated three times and formally joined a gang, following the path of many of his family members.

Upon his release at age 24, Kahu made a request to his probation officer to join the reintegration programme at Waipuna. Kahu's prior engagement with the team at Waipuna had laid the foundation of relationships and trust to support a successful programme referral. Re-engaging with Tūmanako staff, he began to see an alternative future, one focused on fatherhood, stability, and personal growth.



He made the difficult decision to leave the gang, knowing this would place him at risk. Moving into Waipuna House, where tikanga and kawa were upheld, he took his first significant step, handing in his gang clothing and insignia.

Leaving the gang brought immediate consequences. He was violently assaulted and threatened with firearms, including a gun being placed in his mouth. Fearing for his safety and that of his four-year-old son, Kai, Kahu contacted the police for the first time, a significant moment that reflected his commitment to change. With staff support, he secured social housing, ensuring a stable environment for his family.

Since age 24, Kahu has consistently attended Alcoholics Anonymous, engaged in counselling at Waipuna, and participated in fortnightly art therapy sessions. He has rejoined the Tūmanako Touch Team, finding a new peer group that promotes health, stability, and positive social connection. He enrolled in a personal training course, and despite setbacks, he remains committed to education and self-improvement.

Kahu's journey is not without challenges, but his unwavering commitment, combined with the long-term, unconditional support of Waipuna and Tūmanako, has given him the tools to build a different future. He is now focused on being a present father, a leader in his community, and an example of transformation for others seeking a way out of the cycle of violence and incarceration.

25 years

Delivering adventure therapy in Ōtautahi, the only specialist youth reintegration service of its kind in Canterbury.

\$15.44

Social value generated for every \$1 invested in Waipuna's youth reintegration pathway programmes.

75%

Of youth reintegration participants had **not reoffended** two years after completing the programme.

94%

Reported a big or huge impact on **their self-belief and decision-making**.

37%

Of survey respondents are **now parents**, passing the benefits of adventure therapy to the next generation.

\$500,096

Average **lifetime social value** generated per participant.

Transformative outcomes.

The Social Impact Assessment confirmed that Waipuna participants consistently experience life-changing gains. Almost all reported stronger hope, emotional awareness, and healthier relationships. These impacts ripple out to whānau: nearly **90%** of parents reported that adventure therapy had a big or huge impact on how they relate to their tamariki, how much they prioritise whānau wellbeing, and their hopes for the future.

Rangatahi report greater hope, stronger self-belief, healthier relationships, and confidence to make positive choices. For many, these shifts ripple outward into whānau, schools, and communities, breaking cycles of harm and opening doors to opportunity.

Future focused: where to from here?

Adventure therapy works - but its reach depends on the commitment of partners to invest in its impact. Together, we can continue transforming lives and extend its impact to those who need it most.

Waipuna's adventure therapy programmes have a 25-year track record of changing lives. Independent research confirms what our communities already know: every dollar invested in this work generates more than fifteen dollars in measurable social value, reducing reoffending, strengthening whānau, and creating pathways into education and work.

With secure and stable funding, we can not only sustain this proven approach but also expand its reach to meet emerging needs. Our priorities for the future include:

Sustaining existing programmes with secure, long-term funding so rangatahi and whānau can continue to access life-changing support.

Expanding access to include parents alongside rangatahi, extending adventure therapy across services and the wider needs of the community.

Reaching more rangatahi through schools, giving young people across Ōtautahi the chance to build resilience, hope, and connection.

A call to continue the journey.

For 25 years, St John of God Waipuna has stood alongside rangatahi and their whānau, using the power of adventure therapy to spark hope, build resilience, and change lives. The evidence is clear: this approach works, and its value extends far beyond individual participants to benefit families, communities, and society as a whole.

With sustained partnership, we can safeguard these gains and ensure that even more rangatahi have the chance to step into new possibilities. The future of adventure therapy at Waipuna depends not just on our commitment, but on the shared vision of funders, partners, and communities who believe that every young person deserves the chance to succeed and belong.

We cannot do this alone. If in any way you connect to this story, have a sense of empathy for these rangatahi and want to help, or are thinking of making a contribution then we would love to hear from you!

Contact Dan Eastwood, Community Development Manager, at dan.eastwood@sjog.org.nz and **027 231 8344**.

About this report.

This Social Impact and Social Return on Investment (SROI) Report was prepared for St John of God Hauora Trust by Sarah Wylie, Social Research and Evaluation, July 2025. It draws on survey responses from 75 former participants, in-depth interviews with 8 Corrections-pathway participants, analysis of Waipuna programme records, and independent review of relevant research literature.

The report was commissioned to evidence the impact of Waipuna's adventure therapy programmes, inform funders and partners, and support the continuation and expansion of this proven approach.

Read the full Social Impact Assessment and Social ROI Analysis at www.sjog.org.nz.



St John of God Hauora Trust

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