

**CONTENT WARNING:** This primer provides a frank discussion of the Troubled Teen Industry. While not graphic, there are references to child abuse and other subject matter that may be upsetting to some readers

# A POCKET GUIDE FOR DISMANTLING THE TROUBLED TEEN INDUSTRY

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2023

THE KIDS YOU ABUSE TODAY WILL BE THE ONES THAT WILL TAKE YOU DOWN TOMORROW

KIDS OVER PROFIT



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#BreakingCodeSilence  
#SeeYouSurvivor

## LIVES LOST IN THE TII

In April of 2020 a 16-year-old died by asphyxiation while being physically restrained at Michigan's Lakeside Academy. His death was ruled a homicide, and 3 staff members were charged with involuntary manslaughter. Lakeside Academy closed months later. Lakeside's parent company, Sequel Youth and Family Services, was banned from operating in Michigan. Michigan courts still send youth to Sequel facilities that operate in other states.

A 17-year-old died at Florida's Lakeland Girls Academy in May of 2020. A report by DCF concluded that her death was caused by medical neglect; the teenager had been experiencing intense pain and her requests to see a doctor were denied. The family filed a wrongful death lawsuit, and Lakeland Academy closed in 2022. Teen Challenge USA, Lakeland's parent company, continues to operate over 200 residential programs.

In December of 2022 a 17-year-old died at Diamond Ranch Academy in Utah. She had been severely ill in the weeks prior but was told by staff to "suck it up." The family has filed a civil lawsuit for wrongful death. Since 2014 Diamond Ranch Academy has faced multiple lawsuits for wrongful death, sexual abuse, and improper restraint resulting in partial paralysis. The facility remains open.

**WHAT ARE WE DOING ABOUT IT?**  
The TII currently operates without federal regulation, oversight, or accountability. State laws (where they exist) vary greatly. In recent years, survivor-led activism has led to greater public awareness of the dangers of TII. Survivors are using the hashtag #BreakingCodeSilence to share their experiences on social media, organizing protests, and advocating for legislation that regulates TII programs and curtails abuse.

## LEARN MORE ABOUT THE TII

### FILM AND TV

Cruel Instruction (2022)

This is Paris (2020)

The Last Stop (2017)

Children that Play aired 4/20/21 on NBC News with Kate Snow

Broken Circle aired 2/11/21 on Dateline

### PODCASTS

On the Emms

Sent Away

Trapped in Treatment

Troubled

The Lost Kids

### WEBSITES

Breaking Code Silence <https://www.breakingcodesilence.org>

Enthusiastic Sobriety Abuse Alliance <https://www.esaalliance.org>

More about CEDU and Synanon <https://athropibrook.com>

New Haven RTC Voices <https://www.newhaventrtoices.org>

Unsilenced <https://www.unsilenced.org>

WWASP Survivors <http://wwaspsurvivors.com>

We Warned Them <https://wewarnedthem.org>

### BOOKS

**Help at Any Cost: How the Troubled Teen Industry Cons Parents and Hurts Kids**  
by Maia Szalavitz

**Troubled: The Failed Promise of America's Behavioral Treatment Programs**  
by Kenneth Rosen

**This Will Be Funny Later**  
by Jenny Pentland

**Jesus Land**  
by Julia Scheeres

## LEARN MORE ABOUT THE TII

### ARTICLES

**Wilderness therapy was supposed to help these 'troubled teens.' It traumatized them instead**  
by Sara M. Moniuszko, USA Today, 12/8/22 <https://tinyurl.com/5n7exb5d>

**Can you punish a child's mental health problems away?**  
by Alexander Stockton, New York Times, 10/11/22 <https://tinyurl.com/y4r5rra8>

**When I Was Labeled A 'Troubled Teen', I Obligated**  
by Kenneth R. Rosen, New York Times 1/12/2021 <https://tinyurl.com/2xm78852>

**Inside Utah's troubled teen industry: How it started, why kids are sent here and what happens to them**  
by Jessica Miller, Salt Lake Tribune, 8/30/20 <https://tinyurl.com/4s4wjzvb>

## WHAT GOES ON INSIDE

The TII relies on isolation, surveillance, captivity and punishment. Youth are removed from society and held indefinitely at the program's discretion, often for years. Communication with the outside world is monitored, grossly restricted, or forbidden altogether. Much of what occurs within the TII happens behind closed doors and away from public scrutiny.

## COMMON EXPERIENCES INCLUDE

- Limiting or withholding food, water, shelter, use of the restroom and/or hygiene products
- Use of physical punishment (ie running laps) and forced stress positions
- Forced medication, withholding medication and/or overmedicating
- Strip searches and cavity searches
- Unsafe and/or unsanitary living conditions
- Excessive and humiliating punishments (ie being forced to wear a blindfold for weeks on end)
- Physical, mechanical, and chemical restraint
- "Tough love" tactics (ie screaming, shaming, or name-calling)
- Manual labor (may be used as punishment [ie moving rocks] and/or to maintain the property in lieu of maintenance staff)
- Restricting or forbidding communication (verbal and nonverbal)
- Use of seclusion and solitary confinement
- Limiting or withholding medical care
- Inappropriate and/or abusive behavior from staff, poor boundaries by program staff/therapists



## RAPS

(Also called confrontations, tough love, etc.) A selected individual is berated, shamed and/or publicly humiliated. Often youth participate in raps to achieve a higher level or program status

## RESIDENTIAL TREATMENT CENTERS (RTCs)

Live-in congregate care facilities with extensive therapeutic programming and controlled access to the outside world

## SURVIVOR

A person with lived experience in the TTI. Often individuals do not disclose their survivor status to others due to social stigma, shame and/or fear of not being believed

## THERAPEUTIC BOARDING SCHOOLS

(Also called emotional growth schools) Residential schools with therapeutic programming and limited access to the outside world

## TROUBLED TEEN INDUSTRY (TTI)

A highly lucrative industry that claims to reform “troubled” youth by forcibly removing them from society and using intensive behavior modification techniques. Examples of TTI programs include boot camps, RTCs, wilderness programs, therapeutic boarding schools, religious reform schools, etc. The industry operates without federal oversight. Cases of abuse and death inside TTI programs have been reported for decades

## GLOSSARY OF COMMON TTI TERMS

### BOOTY JUICE

A form of chemical restraint in which the child forcibly receives a sedating drug through an injection in the buttocks

### #BREAKINGCODESILENCE

The survivor-led grassroots movement to end institutionalized child abuse in the TTI

### CODE SILENCE

(Also called communication block or comm block) A common punishment in which youth are forbidden from speaking and/or engaging in other forms of communication with peers and staff

### EDUCATIONAL CONSULTANT

(Also called ed consultants or referring agents) Many youth enter the TTI pipeline through referrals from ed consultants. These referring agents are self-created; there exists no formal educational or licensing requirements. TTI programs go to great lengths to court referrals and may offer agents financial incentives and/or other kickbacks. These kickbacks are not always disclosed to families.

### ESCORT SERVICES

TTI programs often encourage the use of hired transporters to forcibly transfer youth to the facility (see also: gooning)

## UTAH

Considered the epicenter of the TTI due to the overwhelming number of programs. It is estimated that one third of all children who cross state lines are transported to a TTI facility in Utah. The TTI provides thousands of jobs and generates hundreds of millions of dollars for the State annually. TTI facilities are often located in small towns where it is easy to forge partnerships with law enforcement and other local officials

## WILDERNESS PROGRAMS

TTI programs that require youth to backpack for miles and camp outdoors. Youth often spend months without a shower or change of clothing. Frequently youth are transferred to a long term residential facility once completing the wilderness program. Additionally, indoor TTI facilities use the threat of wilderness to force behavioral compliance. Wilderness programs are considered experimental and are not covered by health insurance providers

## GOONING

The practice in which hired escorts (AKA “goons”) wake a sleeping child and transport them to a TTI program without prior warning. Physical restraint, handcuffs, and blindfolds may be used. Survivors equate the experience to kidnapping, and many report nightmares for decades afterwards

## HOLDS

A euphemism for physical restraint. Use of restraint and/or threats of restraint are widely used to force behavioral compliance—despite extensive research that restraint is ineffective and harmful

## LEVEL SYSTEM

(Also called phase system or point system) TTI program often employ highly structured level systems. Youth must reach a certain level to receive privileges and/or complete the program

## LOCK DOWNS

A program that uses locked doors and/or other barriers to ensure captivity. A less restrictive program may threaten to transfer youth to a lock down in order to force behavioral compliance

## NATSAP (The National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs)

An organization founded by TTI program owners. NATSAP is neither an accrediting agency or licensing body. NATSAP members have lobbied to oppose legislation regulating TTI programs

The industry exploded in the 1990s due to the “War on Drugs,” tough-on-crime policies, and the myth of the juvenile superpredator. Staff members of TTI programs continue to branch out and open new facilities.

Seed, Straight Inc, and CEDU.

Synanon disbanded after its leader and several members were charged with assault and conspiracy to commit murder. However, Synanon followers created their own program offshoots including The Seed, Straight Inc, and CEDU.

The TTI originated in the 1950s with Synanon, a drug rehabilitation group that became a violent cult. Synanon pioneered a form of attack therapy called “The Game.” Participants were tortured, beaten, and barred from leaving the community.

Synanon disbanded after its leader and several members were charged with assault and conspiracy to commit murder. However, Synanon followers created their own program offshoots including The Seed, Straight Inc, and CEDU.

## A SHORT AND SCARY HISTORY OF THE TTI\*



## LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF TTI PLACEMENT

TTI survivors report lasting effects including

- Symptoms of anxiety, depression and/or the worsening of preexisting mental health conditions
- Complex PTSD symptoms including nightmares, panic attacks, disassociation, and hypervigilance to threat
- Somatic symptoms such as migraines & chronic nausea
- Feelings of identity erasure, lacking a clear sense of self
- Difficulty forming relationships with others
- Feelings of extreme isolation, non-belonging, and community dislocation
- Engaging in substance abuse and/or other destructive behaviors to numb emotions
- Inability to trust one’s instincts leaving one vulnerable to further victimization in adulthood
- Self-harm, suicidality, and/or acts of suicide
- Fractured or severed relationships with family
- Difficulty controlling and/or expressing anger
- High mistrust and fear of the mental health care system, avoidance of therapy and/or other forms of therapeutic care

## WHAT COMES NEXT

Legislative changes are only the beginning

Despite the new legislation, lawmakers admit that the current regulations are not enough. There must be stricter enforcement and harsher penalties when a program commits violations.

Because the TTI operates without federal oversight, it is easy for program owners to relocate to another state with fewer restrictions. A national database is needed to keep track of abusive staff and program owners with a history of licensing violations.

Greater financial transparency is needed to understand how programs incentivize referrals and how referring agents profit from kickbacks.

Survivors must be supported and believed.

Most importantly, we need to move beyond carceral systems that marginalize the most vulnerable members of our society.

## RECENT LEGISLATION ENACTED

### CALIFORNIA

A.B. 153, 2021

Removes all California foster children from out-of-state residential programs by July 2023

### MISSOURI

H.B. 557, 2021

Requires all child residential homes to comply with safety inspections and conduct background checks on employees, removing a loophole that exempted faith-based programs

### MONTANA

H.B. 128, 2023 (Engrossed)

Requires programs to conduct criminal background checks on all staff and submit to unannounced quarterly inspections. Requires that youth have 24-hour unmonitored phone access.

### OREGON

S.B. 279, 2021

Forbids consultants from referring families to unlicensed programs, programs with recent license suspensions, and/or programs they have not personally toured in 24 months.

### UTAH

S.B. 127, 2021

Places restrictions on the use of strip searches, restraint, and seclusion. Forbids programs from using family contact as a behavioral incentive or withholding contact as punishment.

## DEATH AND ABUSE IN TTI PROGRAMS

### TRIGGER WARNING

Widespread cases of neglect and physical, sexual, and emotional abuse have been reported for decades. Hundreds of children have died in TTI programs.

Jason Scott Calder was a therapist at New Haven RTC in Utah. In 2018 he pled guilty to 15 felonies after repeatedly sexually abusing a teenager who was held under his care. New Haven RTC fired Calder for inappropriate behavior but did not report him to the police until months later, enabling Calder to obtain employment at another adolescent facility. He is now serving between 5 years to life in prison. New Haven RTC remains open.

Boyd and Stephanie Householder, the owners of Circle of Hope Girls’ Ranch in Missouri, were charged with over 100 counts of sexual abuse, neglect, and endangering the welfare of a child. Circle of Hope shut down in 2020. The Householders are set to go on trial in November of 2023.