A POCKET GUIDE FOR DISMANTLING THE TROUBLED TEEN INDUSTRY

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.
THE TROUBLED TEEN INDUSTRY (TTI)

is a multibillion dollar industry designed to modify the socially undesirable behavior of adolescents. This opaque network of for-profit facilities holds an estimated 100,000 to 200,000 children at any given time.

Youth may enter the TTI through the school system, foster care system, legal system, or through direct placement by family.

Death, injury, neglect, and abuse have been reported in the TTI for decades. TTI programs have also faced numerous lawsuits due to substandard schooling, inexperienced and/or unlicensed staff, unsafe living conditions, the use of bizarre pseudo-therapy techniques, and other human rights violations.

The TTI currently operates without federal regulation, oversight, or accountability. State laws (where they exist) vary greatly. When a TTI program is shut down, it is common practice for owners to rebrand or open a new program under a different name.
A SHORT AND SCARY HISTORY OF THE TTI*

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.

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.

*Adapted from YouTube shorturl.at/afnOX
WHAT GOES ON INSIDE

The TTI 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 TTI 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
- Inappropriate and/or abusive behavior from staff, poor boundaries by program staff/therapists

- Forced public disclosure of past traumas in detail
- Unsafe and/or unsanitary living conditions

- Strip searches and cavity searches
- Physical, mechanical, and chemical restraint

- Forced medication, withholding medication and/or overmedicating
- Use of physical punishment (e.g. running laps) and forced stress positions

- Excessive and humiliating punishments (e.g. being forced to wear a blindfold for weeks on end)
- Manual labor (may be used as punishment [e.g. moving rocks] and/or to maintain the property in lieu of hiring maintenance staff)

- “Tough love” tactics (e.g. screaming, shaming, or name-calling)
- Use of seclusion and solitary confinement

- Restricting or forbidding communication (both verbal and nonverbal)
- Medical neglect and/or withholding medical care
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
- Engaging in substance abuse and/or other destructive behaviors to numb emotions
- Complex PTSD symptoms including nightmares, panic attacks, disassociation, and hypervigilance to threat
- Inability to trust one’s instincts leaving one vulnerable to further victimization in adulthood
- Somatic symptoms such as migraines & chronic nausea
- Self-harm, suicidality, and/or acts of suicide
- Feelings of identity erasure, lacking a clear sense of self
- Fractured or severed relationships with family
- Difficulty forming relationships with others
- Difficulty controlling and/or expressing anger
- Feelings of extreme isolation, non-belonging, and community dislocation
- High mistrust and fear of the mental health care system, avoidance of therapy and/or other forms of therapeutic care
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.
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 TTI 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 TTI. Survivors are using the hashtag #BreakingCodeSilence to share their experiences on social media, organizing protests, and advocating for legislation that regulates TTI programs and curtails abuse.
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
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.
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.
LEARN MORE ABOUT THE TTI

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 Obliged
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/4s4wjlzvb

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 TTI

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 Emmis
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://lathroplybrook.com

New Haven RTC Voices
https://www.newhavenrtcvoices.org

Survivors of Institutional Abuse Network
https://sia-now.org/index.html

Unsilenced
https://www.unsilenced.org

WWASP Survivors
http://wwaspsurvivors.com

We Warned Them
https://wewarnedthem.org
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)
A common punishment in which youth are forbidden from speaking and/or engaging in other forms of communication

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)

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
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.

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 complicity. Wilderness programs are considered experimental and are not covered by health insurance providers.
The kids you abuse today will be the ones that will take you down tomorrow.

DIY ZINE by Sam Fein