

Places for Struggling Teens™

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"It is more important to get it right, than to get it first."

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Why Parents Flee Public Juvenile Facilities

By Lon Woodbury



One of the most common fears I hear from parents looking for help for their struggling teen is the fear that their child will wind up in the juvenile justice system. Many will do anything they can to avoid that fate for their child.

Why do so many parents have this fear?

Parents read and hear a constant drumbeat of horror stories about what sometimes happens to children placed in these public programs. The following are just a few of the stories I have run across lately while surfing the net as a sample of what parents are hearing:

- In July, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported a suicide at a public "psychoeducational" school for emotionally disturbed children by a boy who had such a horrible time at the special public school, that he hung himself. According to the article, students there were frequently placed in an "Isolation Room," were spanked, restrained and criticized. The title of the story was *Death Highlights Lack Of Regulation At 'Psychoeducational' Schools*.
- In August, a 20-year Canadian study following 779 low-income youth in Montreal found that children who entered the juvenile-justice system even briefly "were twice as likely to be arrested as adults, compared with kids with the same behavior problems who remained outside the system." *Why Juvenile Detention Makes Teens Worse*.
- And then there is the study released last March tracking Los Angeles juvenile offenders over seven years. *Most Adolescents Placed into Group Homes Still Involved with Drugs or Crime Seven Years Later*.
- Finally, there's the story of the death at a Florida Boot Camp run by the State which we have followed for three years where a young man was "disciplined" for alleged "malingering" his first day and died the next day at the hospital. It was reported that there had been 182 complaints of abuse at this facility with little or no action taken. However, in this 183rd incident, the "discipline" was on video tape. To me and to most casual observers, the discipline could better be called a beating. Even then, it is likely not much would have happened until two legislators forced the state to release the video. Once the video became public, this became a national story and action was finally taken, resulting in the facility being closed.

On the other hand, the news is not all bad. Some juvenile justice systems seem to be doing what they are supposed to do, rehabilitating the young people and preparing them for responsible adulthood. See, for example, Julia Steiny's article *Vermont's Juvenile Justice System Bucks Nationwide Trend*. The difference, according to Steiny, is that the Vermont system rejects the nationwide trend toward punitive methods and instead focuses on "treating" rather than "punishing" bad behavior, calling it "restorative justice."

With all these horror stories of what happens in public juvenile facilities, it is no wonder so many parents fear for their children when they are involved in behavior that might bring them into "The System." These parents are

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> The classification of (mis)behavior as illness provides an ideological justification for state-sponsored social control.
> – Thomas Szasz

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