

**Investigative Paper: Trafficking**

Dayana Pereira

Barry University

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Dr. Athena Kolbe

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## **Introduction**

Imagine waking up in the middle of the night to a stranger standing on top of you and realizing you are being taken forcefully by them to someplace you do not know. The worst thing about that? Your parents have given consent for all of it to happen and they are in the room watching as everything unfolds. According to Mater (2022), the Trouble Teen Industry (TTI) is a term that encompasses a wide range of programs and facilities, including therapeutic boarding schools, wilderness therapy programs, boot camps, and residential treatment centers.<sup>1</sup> These facilities often market themselves as providing interventions and support for troubled teens, promising to address issues such as behavioral problems and academic difficulties.

## **Problem**

Trafficking: When children are awoken in the middle of the night and taken away by private “escorts” for interstate transport to TTI programs, what is the average experience? Is this a common practice? What impact does the “transporting” experience have on children being escorted? What is “benefits trafficking” and how might it apply to transporting children across state lines, especially when public funds are being spent?

Youth escort service is the official term used when these programs transport a child from their home to a facility however, others like to call it “legal kidnapping”. There is little to no government regulation when it comes to these escort services and they can be highly traumatic to young people as individuals are forced out of their beds in the middle of the night, handcuffed or restrained, and then told they can do this the easy or the hard way.

This predatory industry shows no respect for the autonomy of its victims. They have no voice and no free will. Its victims are scared, missing their families, and kept in the dark from the

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<sup>1</sup> Mater, C. Jamie, "The Troubled Teen Industry and Its Effects: An Oral History" (2022). *Inquiry Journal*. 8. [https://scholars.unh.edu/inquiry\\_spring\\_2022/8](https://scholars.unh.edu/inquiry_spring_2022/8)

outside world. Many of them are denied basic medical attention and spend years dealing with chronic illnesses.

## **Impact**

The Trouble Teen Industry is a multi-billion-dollar industry that affects many children.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, due to its lack of required reporting the exact number of youths in these programs is unknown. While there are some studies and reports that highlight the potential benefits of the TTI programs, there are limited firsthand accounts from individuals who have personally experienced the program and can attest to its effectiveness. According to Very Well Mind, Kayla shuttled between facilities in North Carolina, Utah, and Texas and survived years of abuse. By the time the program was over she was left with PTSD, shame, and distorted social skills.<sup>3</sup>

According to Trapped in Treatment, one survivor describes how her parents flew her to Ohio to meet her first pair of transporters.<sup>4</sup> She had been crying for weeks because she was told it was either wilderness therapy, jail, or death. She recalls how she was driven for hours into the mountains in a dirty truck and once she arrived at the camp she was ordered to strip naked. Another survivor tells the story of how she was dropped off in the middle of nowhere to a place she never heard before with people that did not care she was in distress. The survivor recalls how since the very first moment she was taken away, her parents were warned by the staff at the facility how she would be trying to manipulate and lie to them. A young survivor of only 15 years old remembers how he was kidnapped and sent to a facility in another country because he came out as gay to his parents. Since the very first day he arrived at the camp, he was put under observation placement, beaten, and living in filthy conditions until he reconsidered his sexual

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<sup>2</sup> <https://lisakanebrown.com/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-troubled-teen-industry/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.verywellmind.com/problems-in-the-troubled-teen-industry-6754975>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.trappedintreatment.co/stories/survivor-eva-carlston-academy-amp-second-nature-wilderness-therapy-2014-2015>

orientation. Sadly, for many of the survivors, these conditions go on for years and even after or if they get out they are left permanently scarred.

### **Research and Funding**

The average cost of the so-called Therapeutic Boarding Schools can range from \$5000 to \$9000 per month.<sup>5</sup> The burden of paying for TTI programs is frequently put on taxpayers who unknowingly fund these institutions through Medicare, Medicaid, the juvenile justice system, or through their local school districts under IEP services.<sup>6</sup> Many of these programs also accept private pay or private insurance for a portion of their tuition. Though, more frequently than not parents end up mortgaging their home or spending their kid's college tuition in order to pay for these camps that are often not all-inclusive.

### **Counterargument**

The trouble teen industry represents a lucrative business deal for program owners and staff members. The industry itself benefits from the problem as they are pocketing funds and not truly investing them into the proper care of the youth. The individuals who run these types of camps argue that this is absolutely the only way to “correct” a troubled teen. Parents are being told that sending their kids away to a therapeutic camp will save their lives and help them build independence, leadership and life skills, and most important respect. Supporters of the TTI also argue that alternative options such as traditional therapy or outpatient services may not be sufficient to address severe behavioral issues or provide the necessary level of structure.

### **Proposed Solution**

There is a lot of fixing to do in this industry especially because some of these places do not even have a state or national accreditation.<sup>7</sup> Even though a lot has changed in the past years

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<sup>5</sup> <https://helpyourteens.com/how-do-parents-afford-therapeutic-boarding-schools/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://bcnetwork.org/the-troubled-teen-industry/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.allkindsoftherapy.com/9-outdated-halftruths-about-the-troubled-teen-industry>

and many of the individuals that used to run these facilities are no longer in charge, the programs need a complete revamping. No one should wake up fearing the unknown, believing they are being kidnapped or betrayed by their parents. TTI programs should not be forceful and should not take away someone's autonomy and right to get medical treatment when needed. These programs must ensure complete transparency to both parents and teenagers regarding past and future practices, enabling them to make informed decisions. The Trafficking Bill 2023 has been a victory and marks an important step towards the solution of this complex issue.<sup>8</sup>

### **Gaps/Missing Information and Future Research**

More research needs to be done about this topic but sadly, there are a lot of websites that require payment in order to obtain the information needed. Also, a lot of information is listed from unreliable sources, and they cannot be used or confirmed. Many survivors are not yet coming forward with the beginning of their stories and how they were taken away from their homes, so we are offered limited information on the survivor's part. It could also be that a lot of information is erased from the online community in order to protect the higher-ups who run the programs. It is highly encouraged that more investigation and research be done and published.

### **Conclusion**

There is a significant amount of work that needs to be done in order to bring changes to the current system. Changes include but are not limited to providing extensive education, implementing reforms in various institutions, and ensuring that the personnel responsible for dealing with troubled teenagers are adequately and capable of addressing their needs. However, the way teenagers are taken at night by private escorts and then transported to another state or country needs to be completely eradicated because this is point-blank human trafficking. While some TTI programs may provide effective treatment and support for struggling adolescents, there

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.flsenate.gov/Committees/BillSummaries/2023/html/3167>

have been numerous reports of abuse, neglect, and human rights violations within the industry. Therefore, it is crucial to establish regulations that protect the well-being of minors and ensure their rights are protected.