



# The troubled teen industry and its impact on Latin@ survivors

This resource is designed for anyone shouldering the vital responsibility of safeguarding our young people. Whether you are a parent, guardian, case manager, social worker, educator, advocate, or policymaker, we thank you for your commitment. As an organization dedicated to mobilizing Latin@ communities to end gender-based violence, we believe it is crucial to share vital information impacting survivors.



## What is the “troubled teen industry”?

The troubled teen industry includes various group homes, often called congregate care facilities, that claim to help youth with behavioral, emotional, or mental health challenges. This industry encompasses wilderness therapy programs, boot camps, therapeutic boarding schools, religious-based programs, drug rehabilitation centers, and residential treatment centers.

Each year, about [120,000-200,000](#) youth enter these facilities, which receive approximately [\\$23 billion](#) in taxpayer funds. Some programs can charge more than \$800 per day per child. Despite marketing themselves as solutions, many facilities face serious allegations of abuse and [lack consistent oversight](#) across agencies and states. Multiple investigations, including Senate hearings dating back to [1974](#), have uncovered widespread abuse in these programs.

## Survivor experiences

[#BreakingCodeSilence](#) is a survivor-led campaign encouraging people who have endured abuse in the troubled teen industry to share their stories. Survivors describe experiences such as strip searches, physical and sexual abuse, mechanical restraints, conversion therapy, denial of necessary health treatment, forbidding communication, and lack of basic needs like food and water. Activists like [Mariame Kaba](#), [Kayla Múzquíz](#), and [Paris Hilton](#) have brought awareness to this issue by bravely sharing their stories of abuse within these programs. By listening to [survivor voices](#) and centering their experiences, we can build a more compassionate and effective system of support.

## How do children end up in these facilities?

Children come to these facilities from diverse backgrounds. Some parents place their children privately, seeking professional intervention. Others come through court orders via the juvenile justice system, where facilities market themselves as solutions for behavioral issues. Many children enter through the child welfare system, where a shortage of foster parents forces placements in facilities that advertise



comprehensive services. For example, in 2021, [19,929](#) foster youth were placed in institutions across the United States. Mental health placements raise key concerns, with [Mental Health America](#) stating that short-term residential treatment with family involvement and community-based aftercare is more effective than long-term residential placements.

Other pathways for placement include disability services and the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), which cares for children who arrive in the U.S. without their grown-ups. [Most](#) of these unaccompanied children in ORR care come from Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Mexico, and [many](#) are girls who have survived sexual and gender-based violence.

## What unique risks do Latin@ children face?

Language barriers can make it difficult for Latin@ and immigrant children to report abuse, while cultural isolation may result in a lack of culturally competent care and community support. Additionally, fears about immigration status can complicate their situation, leading many families to worry about deportation and limited access to legal resources.

To better understand the implications of institutional placements, the [Away From Home](#) report centers the voices of 78 youth with recent lived experiences in these facilities. It highlights significant disparities in the system, indicating that Latin@ youth spend an average of 23 months in out-of-home placements, while white children spend 18 months. Similarly, Black youth, who represent 13% of the general U.S. youth population, account for 23% of the foster care population and 30% of the group care population. This systemic bias places children of color at greater risk of prolonged institutionalization and trauma.

## The need for oversight and reform

Recent cases, such as the [Southwest Key Programs lawsuit](#), emphasize the urgent need for consistent federal oversight. In July 2024, the U.S. Department of Justice filed a lawsuit against this leading housing provider for unaccompanied migrant children, alleging over 100 instances of severe sexual abuse between 2013 and 2023. Victims ranged from ages 5 to 17, with reported abuses including sexual violence and coercion for nude photos.



The bipartisan Stop Institutional Child Abuse Act (SICAA - [H.R. 2955](#) and [S. 1351](#)) offers a promising framework for reform in youth residential programs, with measures to enhance oversight, prevent dangerous practices like isolation and restraints, and establish a national abuse reporting hotline. However, its success will depend on strong implementation, cross-agency collaboration, and committing resources to ensure safer environments for vulnerable children. For an in-depth look at the troubled teen industry and the complexities of reform, the American Bar Association provides [a comprehensive, insightful multi-part series](#) that delves into the legal and social issues of these facilities.

## Alternative approaches

Sending teenagers to a long-term facility where they cannot contact their families is not the only solution for guardians and teenagers seeking additional support. Organizations like [Youth Advocate Programs \(YAP\)](#) provide community-based alternatives to institutionalization, focusing on individualized support that respects the unique needs of each child. Additionally, community-based solutions, such as [CAPAS](#) (Criando con Amor: Promoviendo Armonía y Superación), demonstrate effective alternatives to the troubled teen industry by emphasizing culturally responsive care, family engagement, trauma-informed practices, and community integration. With the right resources and support, every child can thrive.