Critical Criminology (2019) 27:611–626
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10612-019-09466-4

Troubled Affluent Youth's Experiences in a Therapeutic Boarding School: The Elite Arm of the Youth Control Complex and Its Implications for Youth Justice

Heather Mooney[1] · **Paul Leighton**[2]

Published online: 12 October 2019

Abstract
Criminology focuses on street crime and crimes of the poor. Surveys, however, indicate that deviance among middle- and upper-class youth is widespread, and that their experience of social control is not researched, despite its importance for a more complete understanding of youth justice. This study provides insight into a mostly unregulated private troubled teen industry, relying on interviews and a survey of affluent youth sent to a therapeutic boarding school. The main sections of this article explore the wide variety of behaviors that caused youth to be sent to the program, the key aspects of their experiences, and the very mixed outcomes. (All participants graduated high school and most completed college, but many others committed suicide or overdosed.) While a degree and the lack of a criminal record ultimately benefited these privileged youth, the strong-arm rehabilitation tactics of this kind of total institution are a problematic model to use to advance youth justice.

Introduction

While affluent families have lower levels of exposure to, and victimization by, interpersonal violence than their poorer peers, non-poor preteens and teens experience comparable or higher rates of anxiety disorders, delinquency, depression, substance abuse, suicide and somatic symptoms. Poor teens become entangled in the school-to-prison pipeline, but criminology rarely examines the prevalence and consequences of similar behavior for middle- and upper-class youth—what Currie (2005) calls "A White Kind of Messing Up." Youth in every economic class have substance abuse and mental health problems, and engage in crime and deviance, but the criminal legal system "weeds out the wealthy" and concentrates the disadvantaged in prison (Mohamed and Fritsvold 2010; Reiman and Leighton 2017). Even though youth with economic privilege are less likely to be criminalized for

✉ Heather Mooney
heather.mooney@wayne.edu

[1] Department of Sociology, Wayne State University, Detroit, USA

[2] Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Criminology, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, USA

their delinquency, their troubles and experiences of social control are necessary for a more elaborate accounting of youth justice.

Chambliss' "Saints and the Roughnecks" is an early report on bad behavior among upper-class youth and the biases of police. Chambliss (1973: 24) noted that the upper-class group that he studied, "the Saints[,] were constantly occupied with truancy, drinking, wild driving, petty theft and vandalism. Yet not one was officially arrested for any misdeed during the 2 years I observed them." People knew such acts were happening but viewed the behavior as less serious than analogous acts committed by the lower-class Roughnecks, who were considered to be inherently incorrigible and thus appropriate targets for official control. While Chambliss' study is a classic—and rightfully so—one limitation is that he did not examine non-criminal justice sources of social control because "the authoritarian for-profit treatment centers" (Currie 2005: 278–279) and "troubled teen" (youth control) industry did not proliferate until the 1990s.

The absence of non-poor in the criminal justice system can lead to ideological conclusions that impoverished individuals are the only criminals and/or that higher social class is a protective factor against troubled behavior and deviance (rather than protective against official labeling) (Kuhl et al. 2016). For example, Luthar's examination of substance abuse among inner-city (minority) youth led her to conduct research among affluent (white) suburban youth for comparison: delinquency rates were "comparable" (Luthar et al. 2013) and "substance use levels among affluent, suburban teenagers were significantly higher than among their inner-city counterparts," as was peer support for it (Luthar and D'Avanzo 1999: 857). In addition, elevated levels of substance abuse were "linked with depression and anxiety, suggesting efforts to self-medicate" (Luthar and Latendresse 2005).

The psychological distress leading to self-medication is often related to pressures inherent in affluent families and communities. "Scheduled hyperactivity" leads to a work hard–party hard environment; emphasis on accomplishment and perfection displaces development of moral character (Luthar and Sexton 2004). Excessive emphasis on competition and highly critical childrearing practices can combine with a larger emotional and physical parental absence (Luthar and Becker 2002). With money and privacy, youth have easy access to alcohol, fake forms of identification, pharmaceuticals, and other illegal drugs.

Similarly, Currie's (2005) observation of troubled middle-class high schoolers reveals significant delinquent behaviors, both acting "in" (e.g., cutting, eating disorders) and acting "out" (e.g., fighting, insubordination). He reports significant mental health concerns, often trauma-related, and a culture of "social Darwinism" (2005: 255) reflecting America's harsh individualism. When the "high demand, low support environment" produces troubled youth, Currie sees the middle-class as being "quick to punish and slow to help" (2005: 47, 254).

Currie notes some use of "specialty schools" to "replace that sense of adolescent entitlement with unquestioning compliance" (2005: 155), and adds that as family economic resources increase, youth are more likely to enter this troubled teen industry—one that likes to paint itself as therapeutic and that is investigated more frequently by journalists than academics. Indeed, Sankofa and colleagues (2018:1767) indicate that academic work thus "provides a critical contribution to those seeking to 'reform, reinvent, and… replace' the juvenile facilities of old." The options provided by the troubled teen industry should also come under their warning that "just because we call the new residential settings 'therapeutic' does not necessarily make them so" and "our work suggests that this does not always make them more humane or less institutional" (Sankofa et al. 2018:1782).

Troubled teen industry programs include boot camps, Christian "emotional growth" schools (conversion therapy for LGBTQ+ youth), therapeutic boarding schools (TBS),

therapeutic ("last chance") ranches, wilderness therapy, and a variety of behavior modification institutes—all of which have euphemistic names to avoid a "residential treatment" label (Kutz and O'Connell 2007). Spillover occurs on the industry's periphery into drug treatment and/or mental health facilities, as well as military academies. Informed speculation suggests this private industry holds 50,000–100,000 adolescents (McKay 2017), in comparison with the 46,000 youth held by the US juvenile justice system in 2016 (OJJDP 2018).

The troubled teen industry flourished following the United States's "Tough Love" movement in the 1970s. Subsequent increases in juvenile delinquency rates and "tough on crime" policies created more exclusion from institutions for both affluent and poor youth (Mohr 2009; Reiman and Leighton 2017). Occasional reports and journalistic attention spotlighted abuse and deaths in the industry, sparking some awareness, research and policy suggestions that have gone largely unheeded (GAO 2008a, b; Kutz and O'Connell 2007). This for-profit industry is thus influenced heavily by state regulations (or lack thereof) and any accreditation standards the private institution embraces voluntarily.

The National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs (NATSUP) was established in 1999 to validate the industry. It represents a subset of approximately 163 private facilities, housing roughly 7000 youth in residential programs for young adults exhibiting behavioral and emotional difficulties (NATSUP Directory 2016–2017). The current average cost of one of these programs is $6316 per month (McKay 2017). NATSUP publishes nearly all research and data points about this industry in the *Journal of Therapeutic Schools and Programs*, whose articles demonstrate their own programs' efficacy in reducing behavioral problems and/or substance abuse for up to 2 years afterward (Behrens et al. 2010; Behrens and Satterfield 2017).

In contrast, many view these for-profit institutions for troubled teens as problematic due to abuses and the forced removal of children from their home communities (Bettmann and Jasperson 2009; Bush et al. 2011; Friedman et al. 2006). Critics point to the lack of reliable, longitudinal, unbiased data on effectiveness (Currie 2003; GAO 2008a, b; Miller and Toivonen 2010; Reamer and Siegel 2013; Szalavitz 2006; Zahn 2009). In parallel with the criticism of the "rehabilitative focus" in the juvenile justice system, troubled teen programs are seen as too harsh (using counterproductive disciplinary approaches), and focus on conformity and compliance as measures of success. Critics contend the industry pushes "pills and programs," mirroring the inpatient psychiatric moral panic of the 1980s/1990s (Clemson 2015; Goshe 2015, this issue; Mohr 2009; Whitehead et al. 2007).

In order to explore further these issues, this article reports on a survey and in-depth interviews with a sample of affluent teens who attended an elite TBS. This rare study of a hidden population is significant because it provides longitudinal insight into upper-class delinquency, the nature of a therapeutic intervention, and adult reflection on the experience. In the next section of this article, we discuss the research methods employed in this study, including the research site and data collection. From here, our article reviews three main findings: the behavior of both troubled teens and "troubled teens" that caused them to wind up in a TBS; the main features of their experience there; and how the research participants, currently adults, reflect on the impact of having attended a TBS. The discussion explores how the nicer material conditions of an elite TBS obscure how the "strong arm rehab" that such institutions practice recreates a variety of harmful and ineffective practices. We conclude with some observations about how researching all social classes is important for dismantling class-based stereotypes and conclusions about youth justice based only on the treatment of the poor.

Methodology and Data Collection

This research examines students who attended a specific TBS in order to improve our knowledge about upper-middle-class troubled teens. The first author of this article (Mooney) attended Youth Academy Services (YAS),[1] an East Coast private therapeutic boarding school, for 16 months and graduated both the program and high school in 2000, sparking her interest in this seldom-discussed enterprise. Indeed, youth subjected to the troubled teen industry remain a hidden population because they have no stigma of a criminal record. Graduates of YAS, however, created a private social media group that the first author joined years ago, proving access to a convenience sample of other graduates. This "insider" status assisted her in understanding institutional nuances, programmatic language, and therapeutic concepts; more importantly, it allowed for interviews with people who would not speak willingly with an outsider. One attendee and interviewee, Hannah, commented that "I get to talk to somebody else who has been through it," which starts to capture how the first author's status increased response rates and provided a safe space for contributors to engage in open communication.

The surveys and interviews were undertaken with former students of YAS, which was owned by a leading privately held corporation in the industry that ran a chain of approximately 12 other similar programs nationwide. YAS operated between the late 1990s and early 2010s out of a former cross-country ski lodge in a picturesque setting without razor wire or chain link fences. The juvenile justice system, however, lurked in the background, as Tiffany noted: "ultimately if you didn't want to be there you could walk off campus, [but] if you walked off campus you were probably going to end up in a lock down somewhere."

While an in-depth analysis of class is beyond the scope of this article (for a discussion, see, e.g., Barak et al. 2018), the families of participants can be described as upper-middle class based on the $5000 per month tuition charged by YAS in the 1990s. That puts them in a similar position to those described in research on children in affluent families, whose household income ranged between $80,000 and $160,000 (Levine 2006; Luthar 2003). YAS students interviewed and surveyed usually had two-income households, predominately with mothers in education occupations and fathers with white collar positions—often business owners or employment in upper-level corporate management—easily putting their family incomes above these definitions of wealth.

The first author's Institutional Review Board (IRB) required multiple consent forms; recruitment via social media was limited, and other requirements and restrictions were imposed. Nonetheless, both the interviews and survey remained open for data collection for 10 months until October 2017. The in-depth interviews provide most of the data for this research. In general, they were cathartic and enjoyable for participants; none of the respondents reported traumatic flashbacks or negative consequences from revisiting this part of their lives. The average interview took place over a roughly 3-hour timeframe. Each interview was recorded after receiving informed consent; it was then transcribed and the audio recording deleted.

The data collection resulted in 14 completed interviews—seven males and seven females—85% of whom were white. The average participant's age was almost 30, ranging from 22 to 35. Those completing the interview had been students in the program on average for 14 months (ranging from 11 to 17 months). All but one (who got his GED later) graduated

[1] This is a pseudonym as are all the names used to link quotations to respondents.

from high school. Out of the sample, five had their bachelor degrees, three were in higher education at the time of the interview, and three more had attended college but dropped out before completing their degree. The average income of the narrators, $102,230, was affected by outliers: a pre-med student reported the lowest income at zero; the highest was $500,000 for a banker.

The first author converted the themes discovered from the interviews into an online survey that she distributed to the YAS Alumni social media group (about 400 members) to discover whether these themes fit the larger population. Thirty-four surveys were completed, so the results are less robust than we would have preferred. But given the scant amount of scholarly attention directed to upper-middle-class TBS, this study nevertheless sheds an academic, non-polemical light on what Matt, one of the interviewees, described as "almost a legend or a myth" and an institution that people who have not been there "have no concept of what it is."

The problematic limitation is survival bias: former students who overdosed or died from suicide are obviously not able to share their experiences. Information, while prevalent on the social media page about these events, could not be used because of IRB limitations, leaving only a limited amount of information from the interviews about the deceased.

Of the 34 survey respondents, 41% were male and 59% were female; all were white. The average age was 30, with birth years between 1982 and 1996. Almost three-quarters graduated from a four-year college or had various trade school credentials (e.g., cosmetology, nursing, photography). Seventy-five percent were working full time, and another 20% were full- or part-time students, with 5% temporarily unemployed. Close to a third (29%) had an annual household income below $39,999 per year; 18% made between $40,000 and $59,000; nearly a quarter (24%) made between $60,000 and $79,999; and 17% made between $160,000 and $299,999. The income, education, and employment demographics skew on the high side for a formerly delinquent population, reflecting their upper-middle-class upbringing and the role of the expensive YAS program in recreating that status.

The majority of respondents framed their upbringing as happy. Mike, for example, commented: "Childhood. I really can't complain, you know? Everything was great. I just remember going outside having a good time and hanging out in the neighborhood and riding bikes around." Nearly all interviewees spoke of parents encouraging (some required) sports and/or other extracurricular activities alongside academic achievement preparing them for college, thereby demonstrating Lareau's (2011) concept of "concerted cultivation." Ashley, for example, commented: "I was always happy. I went to ski camps, … I was on all these sport teams, like swimming, soccer, to volleyball to basketball." At the same time, respondents nearly always reported absentee fathers (but attentive mothers). More disturbingly, nearly two-thirds of interviewees spoke of childhood abuse and trauma either in passing or, for a few individuals, experiences of abandonment, adoption, bullying, physical/emotional abuse and/or family disruption because of divorce, or prolonged periods of molestation. The survey indicated 44% had a mental health diagnosis of ADD/ADHD, anxiety, bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorders, depression, and Oppositional Defiance Disorder, among others.

Social Construction of "Troubled Teens"

Prior to YAS, roughly a third of students attended public high schools and nearly half attended either private schools or regular boarding schools. Four major themes emerged from the interviews and survey that largely encompass how the students understood their delinquency. These include concerns of authority (and defiance thereof) and parents, along

with overlapping issues regarding hanging out with the "wrong crowd," mental health, sexuality and sexual health, and substance use.

Every respondent reported engaging in status offenses—actions considered offenses because of their status as minors—running away from home, truancy, underage drinking, violating curfew, and general ungovernability. More than 70% reported engaging in vandalism at least one or more times (but 82% never had legal troubles). Many youth stated that their parents and school authority figures "didn't know what to do" with them. Fifty percent of the students surveyed were skipping school most of the time to always, while only a quarter of the students reported being suspended or expelled from school all or most of the time. A common refrain on the survey was: "Parents felt [I was] 'out of control,'" usually due to a combination of concerns like "broke rules, eating disorder, cutting, depressed."

Gender and sexuality issues involved both consensual activities and abuse and rape, as well as stigmatized reputations that were not related to their actual sexual activity. Participants ranged anywhere from 12 to 21 years of age when losing their virginity, and none of the contributors expressed any gender identity or LGBTQ+ concerns. Emerging sexuality, however, remained a challenge in both genders, even if treated differently.

Unfortunately, sending young women away to total institutions in order to control their sexual behaviors (real or perceived) is well documented historically (Flavin 2008; McCorkel 2013; Zahn 2009). Similarly, Mandy reasoned that she was sent away even though "the only thing I did [was] have sexual encounters but that kind of goes hand and hand with the whole YAS experience." Indeed, a mere perception of active sexuality seemed to be grounds for the girls and young women to be sent away to institutions, while none of the boys/young men cited sexuality as a primary source of deviance. Dave, however, did describe himself as being "very interested in girls at a young age and that never stopped." His reputation as "a player" had no adverse consequences, in contrast to Amber, who said: "I confided in someone about the rape that happened and they proceeded to just tell everyone that I had lost my virginity and so people started spreading rumors… calling me the nickel whore or whatever… [then I] started having this reputation that I was promiscuous which was not the case [but] I started trying to live up to that reputation."

Hanging out with the "wrong crowd" and status offenses, especially running away and truancy, pervaded the construction of incorrigibility for both genders. Many participants made reference to shifting peer groups, or, as Dave explained, "[I] kind of started running with the wrong crowd." For some, this meant that they started hanging out with people who partied more; for women, this often meant hanging out with older men. For other interviewees, the "wrong crowd" was perceived as such only by their parents. As Hannah explains: "I wouldn't, but my mom would go and say they were a bad crowd, you know, the punk kids, skaters." In other cases, it was less about a stigmatized cultural identity than simply parents trying to control the economic and social class of their child's peer group (Lareau 2011; Levine 2006).

Alcohol, drug, and other addictions, as well as mental health concerns, manifested typically around the age of 12–14—in between middle-to-high school transitions. Some of the individuals that Mooney interviewed "acted in" or hurt themselves through eating disorders and/or self-cutting—an attempt to process whatever was going on within themselves and their environments—perhaps a means of perceived control over *something* when everything in their lives seemed chaotic or unkind (Reamer and Siegel 2013). Affluent youth had money for substance abuse and binges that could last from 4 months to years, sometimes resulting in hospitalizations, private counseling, and rehab/detox.

Frequently, abuse started with prescription drugs. As Emma explains: "I started doing drugs when I was about 14…I got pretty into benzodiazepines for a while. They were

actually, initially prescribed when I was 15 they uh, they gave me Klonopin and Adderall as well and then I started buying more of the Klonopin and Xanax and taking them against prescription." At times, doctors prescribed drugs in response to abuse/trauma symptoms, instead of directing the youth to counseling and other forms of mental health aid. This, in turn, created longer-term problems for the youth, who struggled to disentangle the effects of trauma, co-occurring disorders, misdiagnoses, and drug side effects.

Finally, these youth were typically constructed as "defiant" because of an attitude of antiauthoritarianism and independence, fighting frequently with their parents and questioning other figures in positions of power, such as teachers. Like Emma, most participants spoke of significant experiences in seventh or eighth grade as turning points, when they, the young people, become more focused on peers and became more independent from family, while developing increasing cognizance of their own agency. Over 70% of those surveyed stated that "most of the time to always" they were getting in trouble at home, while only 37% were getting in trouble at school "most of the time to always."

James stated succinctly that he got in trouble "because I do what I want." Similarly, Mike said, "I just stopped listening to everyone and just did whatever I wanted." Tiffany added that "I just wanted to get away and do whatever I wanted and I felt like I should be able to make those choices for myself even though at the time I really was not making good choices um… and I shouldn't have to deal with parents at all is the way I thought." This combination of developing agency and questioning authority for some youth contributed to the construction of "troubled." As Ashley illustrates: "I was the troubled kid because I was outspoken, I had anger issues, I didn't care—like nobody could tell me no, you know?" Young people's anger and independence aided in their deviant labeling and was predominately pathologized instead of explored or investigated for alternative or traumatic sources (Giroux 2009).

"Escorted" to "Therapy"/Legally Kidnapped to a Total Institution

After the behavior described in the previous section triggered parental concern, most of the "troubled teens" ended up in a wilderness therapy program first. Typically, these lasted several weeks to a few months, often a holding place while parents made plans for a longer-term placement, including addiction treatment facilities, military academies, and TBSs, such as YAS (Marcus 2005; Szalavitz 2006). The first part of this section examines the transfer of youth from home to a troubled teen institution—what the industry calls "escorting" and others call "legal kidnapping" (Robbins 2014). The second part reveals four main themes (group therapy, pejorative assumption, culture of punishment, and high school academics) that emerged from the experience of attending a therapeutic total institution.

Deception was the primary mode of arrival for youth sent to YAS. Some were under the impression they were going to a normal boarding school. More than half (62%) of the participants were "escorted" using teen transport services to at least one troubled teen program, often their first one. Sam commented that while one experience was "not bad," another was "terrifying and violent." Typically, ex-military or ex-police, in teams of two, arrived at the teenager's home between 3 and 5 am, woke them and transported them to the program (Robbins 2014). Youth were rarely told where they were going, for how long, or any other details. Moreover, escorting can involve threats and physical restraint and, as Mike describes, "I got escorted to the wilderness [program] and, it was like 3 in the morning and these gigantic guys in my room, uh, I have no idea what's going on here." Simon's

comment that there was "no agency" on his part is based on his experience of "being blindfolded" and then "realiz[ing], what the hell—nobody explained to me what this place was or what I was there for and that was—that was very traumatic."

Most students were deceived or not informed about subsequent programs when parents transported them from one facility to another. Matt and Amber both reported, "I wasn't told anything," and that their parents just took them to YAS after a wilderness program. Ashley noted how her "mom says you can have phones, oh it's coed, it will be fun and then you walk in and it's nothing like that, like nothing like it."

YAS had the hallmarks of a total institution—a facility where individuals were excluded from larger society for a year to two, with work and residence regimented and supervised at all times (Goffman 1961). YAS had educational courses year-round to facilitate college preparation—a unique element within the troubled teen industry that reflects its elite nature (Khan 2012). The primary feature, though, was behavioral modification, accomplished through interrogation, policing and therapeutic surveillance. When asked about their experience at YAS, participants in interviews and the survey raised issues that we capture as four main focal concerns: group therapy; the pejorative assumption; the culture of punishment; and the high school degree.

First, teens at YAS averaged at least 8 hours of group therapy per week. Each student received individual counseling on a fairly consistent basis, although the school put more emphasis on this as its curriculum developed over the decade. A slight majority of respondents felt that the therapy was beneficial. This finding, however, is tainted with a degree of "survivor bias," as it counts neither those who were removed from the program because of ongoing behavioral issues nor those who subsequently died and thus could not provide insights and critiques of the therapy. Dave captured the dynamic in his comment that "I saw a lot of positive stuff take place personally, I also saw a lot of like completely waste of time, unconstructive stuff going on in those [group] therapy sessions, especially when it came to the deep [trauma]." Matt likewise felt conflicted: "sometimes I felt like [group therapy] was really good um…other times I felt like it wasn't…honest."

A consistent theme in the critiques of therapy included a lack of trust, using truth as a weapon, and therapy's "cutthroat" nature, which felt abusive psychologically. Students stated some groups felt like bullying, highlighting the legacy of Synanon's "attack therapy"—a confrontational method used by staff to tear someone down often through verbal abuse or humiliation (Bratter 2011; Szalavitz 2006). Hannah expressed the overall challenges of navigating the therapeutic community: "your trust was always betrayed and you'd try to do the right thing and they would, like, psychologically be the opposite of what you were expecting." Suzy found the group to be "extremely intimidating and I remember sitting in absolute terror that the group would turn on me and take me on that week to dissect and interrogate." Others, like Steve, learned "if you cry within the first 10 min, they say ok cool, and like once you cry for another 10 min, uh, hell, ok, you're healing."

Second, therapy and other interactions were tainted by what Currie (2005: 147) calls the "pejorative assumption," which he defines as "the reflexive belief that if there was a problem between a child and [adult/s], the problem was inside the child, a problem of her character or personality, not of the relationship." As Hannah points out, "parents had, like, problems that were just as severe" as the child's. But parents were the ones paying the hefty tuition, so as Emma noted, "the therapists were so hesitant to say anything that the parents, might, you know, take them out of comfort zone at all, that there was no real work done whatsoever." Thus, many "deep" problems were never addressed or youth would be blamed for problems that originated elsewhere. For some youth, this was a consistent thread before, during and after the program. Matt

explained that "every time [my parents] would get an answer from the therapist that they didn't like, that was like something they were doing wrong, they'd immediately switch to a different therapist."

Third, a "culture of punishment" pervaded the therapeutic program at YAS, which was focused around conformity to rules (Clemson 2015; Goshe 2017). The main program rules were: no violence towards self or others, no sex or intimate relations, and no caffeine, cigarettes, or drugs. Swearing resulted in calisthenics as punishment. Other main rule violations resulted in punishments called a "Reflection, Challenge or Self Study" (in order of intensity from low to high). These involved therapeutic writing and art assignments that students were mandated to complete during free times, at their assigned table, facing a wall. Students were typically on "bans"—usually restrictions on talking—with most of the school, meaning that at every school-wide meeting, morning, noon and night, they had to announce to everyone to whom they could and could not speak. More severe punishments meant the student could talk to fewer people. Violating bans resulted in escalating punishments. In addition, any student "on punishments" was required to wash dishes after all meals, work projects on the weekends, and lost privileges. Mike explained that "kids were smoking in the bathroom, so now you have to be radioed into the bathroom, like this is a very slippery slope where as soon as something happens you just make a rule, and then a rule and a rule, and the next thing you know, there's so many rules that you can't even do anything."

Like other forms of "strong arm rehabilitation," YAS cultivated a culture of mutual surveillance (Gowan and Whetstone 2012: 76) that created anxiety and mistrust, as students were encouraged to turn on their peers in "truth lists." Individuals had to confess wrongdoings that they and others had perpetrated, even trivial violations, such as taking two desserts. Students were forced to sit alone, at a table, facing the wall, writing out these "truths" until the counselors were satisfied. Emma explained a common conundrum: "they were convinced I'd done something and I—I just hadn't." Consequently, students spoke of frequent false confessions produced through the therapeutic interrogation tactics. Simon revealed: "I would always sometimes make things up about bad things I did." Steve felt that "YAS tried to beat me out of things" and it "just freaked me out, does not work, you know?" As with the female prisoners observed by McCorkel (2013), many students learned how to "bullshit" the system, while some others adapted to it by buying in or for a few "flying under the radar."

Fourth, high school education was provided to students year-round on the YAS campus, although "academics were obviously second to therapeutic growth," as one survey participant explained. Others pointed out: "It was a joke in regard to its level of challenge but it resulted in my graduation from HS so it served its purpose at the time." Amber commented, "It sorta felt like they just kind of handed me a degree, being like 'oh look you did it, you're better!'" Study halls were provided every evening except for Saturday, when those who were not "on punishment" could watch the weekly movie. School also fostered pro-social peer and teacher–student mentorships that most participants referred to as the most helpful program outcomes as these self-selected relationships were genuine and humane. In short, the education component seemed to be money well spent in order to keep students preoccupied and prepared for college. While some students offered constructive criticism of the academics, in the end, all of students, even if they received creative assistance, completed high school or received their GED.

The Paradox of Rehabilitative Focus

The literature on the troubled teen industry and TBSs is highly polarized between those who believe it saves youth and those who view it as detrimental. The outcomes reported by former YAS students could be used to support either position, although the key point is that people in this study pointed to both positive and deeply problematic outcomes: everyone completed high school and everyone knew a handful of YAS peers who died. Those who had spent time at YAS could be divided into thirds based on their opinion about the program: one-third felt that it helped them; another third stated it did not really change much; and the last third felt they got worse. In considering these differing sentiments of the program, it is important to bear in mind that participants attended YAS anywhere from 4 to 18 years ago, and are now 22–35 years old. These results reported here, while an accurate reflection of the data, should be read in the context of a high attrition rate. Often students in the sample explained that their group started with on average 12–14 students, with maybe half of those graduating a year and half later. Frequently, students in the school were removed by their parents, turned 18 and left, or were sent to other programs for noncompliance.

Finding split perspectives that YAS was helpful to not helpful at all probably reflect the diverse set of experiences and purported wrongdoing that brought youth to YAS. As Suzy put it: "there were people there for issues ranging from social anxiety, video game addiction, severe drug addiction, depression…". Students thus came to the program with a wide variety of needs—often very complex and requiring more person-centered programming than the one-size-fits-all approach that YAS (and other private institutions) provide. Many students acknowledged that they needed help, either at the time or retrospectively, and some benefited from the YAS program. It is not always clear, though, whether benefits flowed from the program, the change in environment and peers, or were the result of maturation. Some youth received no benefits, perhaps because they had no real problems to begin with. Some did, indeed, have real problems and—analogous to penal harm—were worse off because of abduction, therapy sessions that could raise only a limited set of issues, and behavioral modification programs that had some counterproductive elements to them.

One area in which YAS seemed to help was with education, specifically getting a high school degree without the collateral consequences of a criminal record to hinder entry into the workforce or higher education. All of the students who attended finished high school or received their GED—many of whom were at risk of failing or dropping out prior to YAS. Of our interviewees, 36% completed bachelor degrees with another 29% currently attending community college or four-year colleges. Another 23% attended but dropped out of college, and graduates often started, stopped, and finished years later.

Fourteen percent of survey respondents had graduate degrees, 38% graduated from a four-year college, 24% had completed some college, and another 19% had various trade school credentials. Once released, all of the students were able to obtain with ease entry-level employment, mainly in the service industry (e.g., custodial services, food industry, retail industry). No one indicated that he or she had experienced long periods of long unemployment, and many of the survey participants indicated that they had secured positions with gainful income (e.g., business owner, cook, director of special events, helpdesk technician, museum employee, pharmacist, police officer, real estate broker, therapist).

Respondents who found the program beneficial noted the intense therapy sessions and how YAS helped improve family communication skills and relations, often

fostering relationships instead of *severing* them. Peers and the friendships developed there were consistently referred to as being an integral component to success. Another benefit cited from YAS was increased emotional intelligence and personal insight, alongside better impulse control. (It is unclear, however, if this is from YAS or maturation.) Ultimately, everything seemed to "come together" for Elizabeth, who commented: "My time at YAS was a powerful experience that did ultimately lead me down the path I'm on today. I do not think I would have earned a Master's in Social Work to become a therapist for struggling youth if I hadn't been through my YAS experience." Aftercare programs also seemed to have positive influences and were generally attributed, along with a few humanizing teachers, to student's success. Amber, for example, spoke for several others when she said, "since I came back I've been a better person."

For others, YAS neither helped nor harmed them. James, for example, reflected, "did I have better insight into my actions, yes. Did I look at an action and understand that there was probably a consequence to said action, yep. But did I change my actions? Probably not much." Likewise, Emma, echoing the sentiments of others, explained, "So when I got home I felt like I'd just gotten out of jail. So you know, I just went back to hanging out and smoking weed and going to school and doing drugs."

Sam summarized some of the concerns of the group that reported negative effects: "Confinement is never a good method of discipline. Teach by example. Discourage bad behavior, but do not punish severely; it makes the problem worse and encourages further bad behavior." Other former YAS attendees made reference to the challenges of: reentering their community, school and peer group following release; managing or eliminating pharmaceutical medications; continuing substance abuse concerns; and negotiating interpersonal relationships, including strained family relations, as well as domestic violence or "bad relationships."

Many of these comments speak to inappropriate or even counterproductive therapy. One issue involved the failure of YAS to provide therapeutic coping skills for ongoing mental health problems, and a deeper problem of being blamed for traumas they experienced. The severity of problems post-YAS should not be minimized: this group reported problems with psychiatric institutionalization, continued drug and/or alcohol struggles and strained family/intimate relationships. When YAS had an influence on young people's sobriety, it seemed to dissipate after about 2 years and many reverted to past patterns. "I know at least those first 5 years, more and more I'd hear people just continuing to have a lot of the same struggles that they had at YAS," Tiffany reported.

Furthermore, all respondents could recount on average two deaths of fellow YAS students from overdose, suicide, or murder. While IRB prohibited the analysis of the social media (members only) page, participants made reference frequently to the regular posting of death notices. Ashley recounted that it was "just like crazy to me that so many people passed away. I just keep seeing the [web] page with like RIP, RIP, RIP." Matt, too, spoke to the reality of continual loss: "she's [my wife] like how can you and your friends talk so casually about people you know dying? And I'm like, I don't know, it's because it happens almost regularly now."

Ultimately, 71% of survey participants would not recommend YAS to a friend or colleague if it were still open today. Moreover, 48% of respondents indicated that there was a 0% chance that they would send their own kids (or relatives) to YAS if they were behaving exactly like they did when they were a teenager.

Discussion

Currie (2005: 5) notes that the "long tradition of research on juvenile delinquency had shown us again and again that the problems of drugs and violence among middle-class youth were both widespread and surprisingly severe, though mostly absent from our official statistics." He is also quite emphatic that such youth encounter harsh judgment, followed by "systematic exclusion and the withholding of assistance," which, ideologically, "are regarded as not only acceptable but laudable ways of dealing with those who fail or who break the rules" (2005: 97). This study of YAS and larger troubled teen industry, however, indicates that more affluent families do try to avail themselves of supports—ones defined as therapeutic but deeply problematic.

Although housed in a former ski lodge that attempted therapy, YAS recreated damaging practices that were and continue to be inflicted on poor youth and adults. As family affluence increases, the material condition of the facility improves and provides a distracting cover for "strong arm rehab," where blame is placed on the youth rather than factors beyond their control, where medications suppress symptoms rather than deal with deeper issues, and where emphasis is placed on conformity so that affluent youths can take their place in a broken neoliberal society. With YAS, this was the design of the institution, rather than symptomatic of a program gone wrong that descended into flagrant abuse (GAO 2008a, b; Wilson 2018). Next, we outline three main points that demonstrate the replication of counterproductive penal practices at YAS.

First, the idea of "strong-arm rehab" was developed in reference to court-mandated drug treatment, which "emphasiz[es] long residential stays, high structure, mutual surveillance, and an intense process of character reform" (Gowan and Whetstone 2012: 70). YAS featured stays of 1–2 years, high levels of structure and discipline, mutual surveillance to achieve "accountability," and an assumption that the problem rested with the youth who needed reform. The researchers who coined the term, "strong-arm rehab," note that it "tends to be a highly racialized form, consistently linked to poor African American drug offenders" (Gowan and Whetstone 2012: 70). This research on YAS, however, suggests that the radical 1950s utopian experiment of Synanon that created the therapeutic community (Gowan and Whetstone 2012: 79)—perhaps perverted by the harsh individualism of neoliberalism (Currie 2005), noted above—produced far ranging strong-arm rehab applications. The difference is that the poor have been and continue to be considered "bad" in a way that is inherent and in need of perpetual supervision (McCorkel 2013; Ramey 2018), whereas the affluent tend to be regarded as merely "troubled" and needing shorter-term control (Cox 2018: 39).

Second, affluent youth are subjected to the same "pejorative assumption" that they, as individuals, are the problem—a classic instance of "blaming the victim" (Currie 2005: 147). What Sankofa and colleagues (2018: 1774) found with juvenile facilities also applies to YAS: "The cognitive behavioral therapy programs used in the facilities are devoid of language about the role of social structure in shaping young people's lives." In addition, therapists "know better" than to investigate the parenting or problematic dynamics of families paying for the expensive "tuition" at a TBS. Although they were not subjected to the belief that poor families, in general, are dysfunctional, affluent youth still faced a disciplinary regime where "the child is always the problem…not the unreasonable expectations of conformity and compliance, not even their adolescent struggles to make sense of their identity and their relationships to themselves" (Cox 2018: 162).

Third, because there were so many issues therapy could not and did not confront, the measure of success became conformity with the extensive institutional rules: "The production of a submissive 'attitude'—which many privately defined as 'sucking it up'—was the strongest evidence of the birth of the recovering self" (Gowan and Whetstone 2012: 83; see also Goshe 2015). To aid in this process, psychotropic drugs were "systematically overprescribed" (Currie 2005: 137); "Doctors just shit out the pills" (2005: 129) in a "reflection of a cultural predilection for the quick fix, an unwillingness to grapple with difficult issues" (2005: 131).

The mirroring in YAS of harmful therapeutic practices found elsewhere means the program's self-evaluated success rate is also similar. Indeed, Kaye (2013: 222) found that "whereas approximately half of the residents I interviewed said that they benefited from the program, sometimes in life-saving ways, others felt that 'nothing changes; people here just get sneakier about what they do'." To the extent that YAS deserves to be seen as an improvement over other programs, the key aspects of the intervention were education and the lack of a criminal record. Having a high school degree and little-to-no official contact with the criminal legal system put the affluent youth (who already possessed social capital) in a position to obtain employment or enter college, especially when being poor makes it more likely that the same behavior often results in entanglements with the criminal legal system that makes the completion of high school and securing a job more difficult. YAS should not get credit for the dynamics of class bias, when all it accomplished was facilitating a path to a degree.

Conclusion

Just as the stereotypic criminal is seen as a poor minority (Reiman and Leighton 2017), so, too, is the troubled youth. This image is created through biased practices of enforcement and prosecution, even though the non-poor are just as deviant. Criminology, however, usually does not try to "study up" and research the etiology and consequences of harmful behavior by middle-class and affluent youth. Yet, such studies are crucial for dismantling class-laden stereotypes and providing a more complete basis for exploring youth justice.

This research on the problems and treatment of affluent youth is not meant to minimize, detract from, or be seen as competing with the very real issues faced by poor and/or minority youth. Instead, it is meant to advance a class-based analysis of justice that all too often is ignored or rendered invisible in discussions of race and/or gender (Barak et al. 2018). Of particular importance is recognition that dynamics in middle- and upper-class communities have toxic effects on youth. Far from a few bad apples among youth generally protected by class, the cultures of the non-poor also can be systemically dysfunctional. As Luthar (2003: 1589) notes, "it is not the surfeit of riches in itself but rather an overemphasis on status and wealth that is likely to compromise well-being." Currie points to the "culture of negligent individualism" (2005: 123), that blames the poor for their problems and means that for middle-class youth, "punishment and self-righteous exclusion are routine. It is a world that places high expectations for performance on adolescents but does remarkably little to help them do well, a world in which teenagers' emotional problems are too often met with rejection—or medication—rather than attentive and respectful engagement" (2005: 12).

Elite youth have marginally more support than what Currie finds in the middle class, and certainly those in juvenile detention or subjected to solitary confinement would prefer a former ski lodge with education. As we discovered, however, YAS had its limitations as

a model of justice. While YAS should not receive credit for diversion based on class bias, its educational interventions had an important and positive effect on at least some students. That said, education in a youth justice program should teach true critical thinking, including about structural problems, rather than "belie[f] in the myths and superstitions of [their] society" and instructions in conformity (Postman 1970). Even with elite youth, "it was unquestioningly assumed that it was the child who needed to change or be changed" (Currie 2005: 145) rather than anything in their family, community or larger society. Such elite youth still faced the situation where "the punitive character of so much 'treatment' often drove [them] away in anger, leaving them [the kids] back out on the street without any help at all and sometimes making them mad enough to want to get in trouble again, out of spite if nothing else" (2005: 169).

The recognition of troubled non-poor youth is not a call to divert scarce resources to privileged youth. Instead, while class privilege exists, the notable string of dead youth mentioned by research participants reveals that such privilege does not always erase the structural disadvantages of being a youth. In short, our call is to recognize that the intersection of youth and privilege—especially youth, class, and social control—is more uneven and problematic than imagined by a criminology with a stunted awareness of class. Indeed, strategies for social change focus on cross-racial alliances, but with youth, the middle class and affluent should join with those more impacted by the criminal legal system to transform not just social control but the broader disregard of youth and the social forces that undermine them.

References

Barak, G., Leighton, P., & Cotton, A. (2018). *Class, race, gender & crime* (5th ed.). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Behrens, E., Santa, J., & Gass, M. (2010). The evidence base for private therapeutic schools, residential programs, and wilderness therapy programs. *Journal of Therapeutic Schools and Programs, 4*(1), 106–117.

Behrens, E., & Satterfield, K. (2017). Longitudinal family and academic outcomes in residential programs. *Journal of Therapeutic Schools and Programs, 2*(1), 81–94.

Bettmann, J., & Jasperson, R. (2009). Adolescents in residential and inpatient treatment. *Child & Youth Care Forum, 38*(4), 161–183.

Bratter, E. (2011). Compassionate confrontation psychotherapy. *Adolescent Psychiatry, 1*(3), 227–234.

Bush, N., Friedman, R., Huffine, C., Huff, B., & Elberg, P. (2011). *Treatment research lacks good science. Resource document*. Alliance for the Safe, Therapeutic and Appropriate use of Residential Treatment. Retrieved March 17, 2017, from http://astartforteens.org/assets/files/ASTART-Treatment-Research-Lacks-Good-Science-Sept%20-2011.pdf.

Chambliss, W. J. (1973). The saints and the roughnecks. *Society, 11*(1), 24–31.

Clemson, C. (2015). *The prison path*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Cox, A. L. (2018). *Trapped in a vice: The consequences of confinement for young people*. Camden, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Currie, E. (2003). "It's our lives they're dealing with here": Some adolescent views of residential treatment. *Journal of Drug Issues, 33*(4), 833–864.

Currie, E. (2005). *The road to whatever: Middle-class culture and the crisis of adolescence*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Flavin, J. (2008). *Our bodies, our crimes: The policing of women's reproduction in America*. New York: New York University Press.

Friedman, R., Pinto, A., Behar, L., Bush, N., Chirolla, A., Epstein, M., et al. (2006). Unlicensed residential programs. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 76*(3), 295–303.

Giroux, H. (2009). *Youth in a suspect society: Democracy or disposability?*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.

Goshe, S. (2015). Moving beyond the punitive legacy: Taking stock of persistent problems in juvenile justice. *Youth Justice, 15*(1), 42–56.
Goshe, S. (2017). The lurking punitive threat: The philosophy of necessity and challenges for reform. *Theoretical Criminology, 23*(1), 25–42.
Gowan, T., & Whetstone, S. (2012). Making the criminal addict: Subjectivity and social control in a strong-arm rehab. *Punishment and Society, 14*(1), 69–93.
Kaye, K. (2013). Rehabilitating the 'drugs lifestyle': Criminal justice, social control, and the cultivation of agency. *Ethnography, 14*(2), 207–232.
Khan, S. R. (2012). The sociology of elites. *Annual Review of Sociology, 38*(1), 361–377.
Kuhl, D., Chavez, J., Swisher, R., & Wilczak, A. (2016). Social class, family formation, and delinquency in early adulthood. *Sociological Perspectives, 59*(2), 345–367.
Kutz, G., & O'Connell, A. (2007). *Residential treatment programs: Concerns regarding abuse and death in certain programs for troubled youth (GAO-08-146T)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
Lareau, A. (2011). *Unequal childhoods*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
Levine, M. (2006). *The price of privilege*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
Luthar, S. S. (2003). The culture of affluence: Psychological costs of material wealth. *Child Development, 74*(6), 1581–1593.
Luthar, S. S., Barkin, S., & Crossman, E. (2013). "I can, therefore I must": Fragility in the upper-middle classes. *Development and Psychopathology, 25*(4pt2), 1529–1549.
Luthar, S. S., & Becker, B. E. (2002). Privileged but pressured? A study of affluent youth. *Child Development, 73*(5), 1593–1610.
Luthar, S. S., & D'Avanzo, K. (1999). Contextual factors in substance use: A study of suburban and inner-city adolescents. *Development and Psychopathology*, *11*(4), 845–867.
Luthar, S. S., & Latendresse, S. J. (2005). Children of the affluent: Challenges to well-being. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *14*(1), 49–53.
Luthar, S. S., & Sexton, C. C. (2004). The high price of affluence. *Advances in Child Development and Behavior, 32*(C), 125–162.
Marcus, D. (2005). *What it takes to pull me through*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
McCorkel, J. (2013). *Breaking women*. New York: New York University Press.
McKay, J. (2017). So you want to run an outcome study? The challenges to measuring adolescent residential treatment outcomes. *Journal of Therapeutic Schools and Programs, 2*(1), 63–80.
Miller, A., & Toivonen, T. (2010). To discipline or accommodate? On the rehabilitation of Japanese "problem youth". *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus, 7*(20), 22–26.
Mohamed, A., & Fritsvold, E. (2010). *Dorm room dealers*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
Mohr, W. (2009). Still shackled in the land of liberty: Denying children the right to be safe from abusive "treatment". *Advances in Nursing Science, 32*(2), 173–185.
NATSUP (National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs). (2017). *NATSUP program definitions*. Resource Document. NATSUP. Retrieved January 13, 2018, from https://natsap.org/PDF_Files/directory/2016-2017Directory.pdf.
OJJDP (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention). (2018). *Statistical briefing book*. Resource Document. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice. Retrieved May 3, 2018, from https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/corrections/qa08201.asp?qaDate=2016.
Postman, N. (1970). The politics of reading. *Harvard Educational Review, 40*(2), 244–252.
Ramey, D. (2018). The social construction of child social control via criminalization and medicalization. *Sociological Forum, 33*(1), 139–164.
Reamer, F., & Siegel, D. (2013). *Teens in crisis: How the industry serving struggling teens helps and hurts our kids*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Reiman, J., & Leighton, P. (2017). *The rich get richer and the poor get prison* (11th ed.). New York: Routledge.
Robbins, I. (2014). Kidnapping incorporated: The unregulated youth-transportation industry and the potential for abuse. *American Criminal Law Review, 51*(3), 563–600.
Sankofa, J., Cox, A., Fader, J. J., Inderbitzin, M., Abrams, L. S., & Nurse, A. M. (2018). Juvenile corrections in the era of reform: A meta-synthesis of qualitative studies. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 62*(7), 1763–1786.
Szalavitz, M. (2006). *Help at any cost: How the troubled-teen industry cons parents and hurts kids*. New York: Penguin.
US Government Accountability Office. (2008a). *Residential facilities: State and federal oversight gaps may increase risk to youth well-being (GAO-08-696T)*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.

US Government Accountability Office. (2008b). *Residential facilities: Improved data and enhanced oversight would help safeguard the well-being of youth with behavioral and emotional challenges (GAO-08-346)*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.

Whitehead, K., Keshet, M., Lombrowski, B., Domenico, A., & Green, D. (2007). Definition and accountability: A youth perspective. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 77*(3), 348–349.

Wilson, M. (2018).'It's like, who's next?' A troubled school's alarming death rate. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/02/nyregion/suicide-school-overdose-deaths-ny-family-foundation.html. Accessed 2 Sept 2018.

Zahn, M. (Ed.). (2009). *The delinquent girl*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.