Troubled Teen Industry Regulations (Information current as of October 2026)

Executive Summary

The troubled teen industry (or the industry) is a nationwide network comprising for-profit residential treatment facilities (RTF), boarding schools, and wilderness therapy programs intended to help children and teenagers with matters ranging from addiction, eating disorders, behavioral issues, and even sexual orientation.[1,2] As of 2020, there were between 50,000 to 100,000 adolescents currently enrolled in these facilities, with enrollments lasting weeks to several years, depending on the program.[3] Several high-profile cases of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse have brought the industry into the spotlight in recent years.[4,5] Some of the alleged incidents include "excessive force, extended use of restraint and isolation, humiliation, denial of sleep and nutrition, overuse and misuse of psychiatric medication, and chemical restraint, which is the practice of administering sedatives and other drug products to subdue a patient".[6] Currently, there is no federal law mandating a minimum standard of care for youth treatment facilities, and several regulatory areas fall under the domain of state law, including areas surrounding family law, health and safety regulations, and education, leaving the regulation of the industry primarily to the states.[7,8] Despite years of well-documented allegations and abuse, these facilities and programs remain largely unregulated, with residents often unable to communicate outside the facility with parents or caretakers.[9]

Residents are often enrolled in these programs by parents or through foster care and the court systems, but are often sent to programs across state lines, complicating efforts to regulate and monitor these facilities[10]. One such complication is the industry practice known as 'gooning', in which parents find relocating their children out of state too challenging and instead hire professionals to transport them, often against their will.[11] Furthermore, there is no national accreditation or licensing law governing for-profit RTFs.[12] While there is some federal involvement in state juvenile justice systems, RTFs remain largely unregulated due to several loopholes in state licensing and regulatory standards, including private ownership and religious exemptions. In 2006, 28 states reported deaths in RTFs, and 49 states reported investigating allegations of abuse.[13] A 2007 report from the GAO

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found thousands of allegations of abuse and several deaths dating back to 1990.[14] A 2023 news investigation found that at least 375 deaths occurred between the 1980s and 2020s.[15]

Figure 1. Deaths in the Troubled Teen Industry by Decade



Source: [16]

Despite these reports, annual attempts to pass federal legislation regulating the industry have failed for more than a decade.[17] Though Congress did pass the Stop Institutional Child Abuse Act in December 2024, critics claim the legislation is neither robust nor comprehensive enough to prevent further abuse, with most oversight still falling to a patchwork of entities.[18] As of 2026, states have passed 316 prosecution-related policies and 303 protection-related policies, but only 153 prevention measures, creating what advocates refer to as 'The National Prevention Gap'.[19] As the industry continues to grow geographically and in population, states often lack the resources or legal authority to enforce the federal law and hold RTFs accountable.[20]

State policymakers have begun taking action to address gaps in industry regulation. The following report provides an overview of pertinent laws and regulations in Missouri, model legislation from leading states, and a survey of the 15 Southern Legislative Conference states, spread across human-trafficking, child-welfare, residential-facility licensing, restraint/seclusion, youth rights, forced-labor, transportation, inspection, and mandatory-reporting statutes.

Research Methods

Review of news and government reports, state legislative handbooks, rules, and procedures, as well as review of state statutes using Quorum.

Findings and Analysis

The regulatory landscape for the troubled teen industry varies from state to state across the country and within the SLC region. The following section analyzes gaps in Missouri's regulatory framework, model legislation from states considered leaders in the field, and a survey of the 15 SLC states.

Missouri

In 2026, the Show Me State passed new legislation strengthening penalties for child trafficking and sex crimes and expanding protections for children from grooming and trafficking.[21] The state now requires intensive training for Juvenile officers, law enforcement, prosecuting attorneys, and emergency medical staff to identify and prevent sex and human trafficking of children and adults.[22] The bill also increases penalties for distributing sexual images without consent, clarifies that predatory conduct toward minors can be prosecuted even if no sexual contact occurs, and updates existing statutes to include new terms like 'sextortion' and 'grooming'.[23] Until the new legislation was signed, Missouri was one of 36 states that did not define grooming by law.[24]

While this legislation strengthens protections against sex trafficking broadly, gaps remain in Missouri's laws protecting minors from the troubled teen industry from sexual and other kinds of abuse. A primary reason for these gaps is the number of categories exempt from licensure requirements, including programs run by religious organizations and/or boarding schools. According to Missouri §210.516

> 210.516. Exceptions to license requirement — division may not require documentation. —
>
> 1. It shall be unlawful for any person to establish, maintain, or operate a foster home, residential care facility, or child placing agency, or to advertise or hold himself out as being able to perform any of the services as defined in sections 210.481 to 210.536, without having in full force and effect a license issued by the division; provided, however, that nothing in sections 210.481 to 210.536 shall apply to:
>
> (1) Any residential care facility operated by a person in which the care provided is in conjunction with an educational program for which a tuition is charged and completion of the program results in meeting requirements for a diploma recognized by the state department of elementary and secondary education;
>
> (2) Any camp, hospital, sanitarium, or home which is conducted in good faith primarily to provide recreation, medical treatment, or nursing or convalescent care for children;
>
> (3) Any person who receives free of charge, and not as a business, for periods of time not exceeding ninety consecutive days, the child of personal friends of such person as an occasional and personal guest, and who receives custody of no other unrelated child;
>
> (4) Any child placing agency operated by the department of mental health or any foster home or residential care facility operated or licensed by the department of mental health under sections 630.705 to 630.760 which provides care, treatment, and habilitation exclusively to children who have a primary diagnosis of mental disorder, mental illness, intellectual disability or developmental disability, as defined in section 630.005;
>
> (5) Any foster home arrangement established and operated by any well-known religious order or church and any residential care facility or child placement agency operated by such organization; or

(6) Any institution or agency maintained or operated by the state, city or county.

2. The division shall not require any foster home, residential care facility, or child placing agency which believes itself exempt from licensure as provided in subsection 1 of this section to submit any documentation in support of the claimed exemption; however said foster home, residential care facility, or child placing agency is not precluded from furnishing such documentation if it chooses to do so.

Although the 2021 Residential Care Facility Notification Act established new registration requirements for the industry, these requirements fall short of the protections provided by comprehensive licensure and regulation.[25] The following are several examples of model legislation from states with more comprehensive licensing and regulation frameworks.

Utah

Utah is known as the birthplace of the troubled teen industry, as it is home to some of the first wilderness therapy programs in the country.[26] The state faced extensive scrutiny in the wake of revelations from hundreds of former residents, including Paris Hilton, who described their experiences at one of these boarding schools.[27] As a result, Utah passed a series of reform laws, including a 'Youth Bill of Rights' that explicitly prohibited abusive practices in industry programs, created confidential ombudsman and incident-reporting hotlines, enacted restrictions on physical restraint, and provided means for communication with family.[28] Furthermore, Utah now requires full licensure for troubled teen residential facilities, albeit with a few religious exemptions.[29]

Montana

In 2019, Montana created new regulations for programs, including two unannounced inspections annually, unrestricted access to records, private interviews with 50 percent of facility residents, and, critically, state licensing authority.[30] Montana now regulates based on the services provided rather than by licensing category.[31] However, Montana still does not regulate religious programs.[32]

Oregon

Oregon laws also expand the definition of child-caring agencies to include programs such as wilderness/outdoor youth programs, specifically prohibiting the use of restraint or involuntary seclusion, and require documentation and reporting following any incidents of restraint.[33] Oregon also closely regulates 'gooning', or the practice of forcibly transporting children to RTFs, requiring all private organizations to use licensed, secure transportation, prohibiting surprise transfers, and banning all unnecessary restraints. Full licensure is required in Oregon, including private residential/religious boarding schools.[34]

Maryland

In 2024, Maryland passed HB 508/SB 550 that added child labor trafficking to the state's definition of child abuse, triggering child protection services in addition to criminal investigations.[35] Full licensure by service is required for RTFs and transporters in Maryland.[36]

SLC State Review

The following table provides an overview of the regulatory status of the troubled teen industry in each of the 15 SLC states.

State	Licensure Requirements	Educational/Religious Exemptions	Specific Child Trafficking/Transport Laws
Alabama	Primarily uses registration	Exempts ordinary recreational camps and several government and school programs.	Section 38-15-4 Registration of Certain Youth Residential Institutions or Organizations; Staff Training Plans; Rights of Children; Licensing and Inspection of Food Preparation Areas; Access by Law Enforcement Agencies
Arkansas	Required for residential agencies caring for unrelated minors, unless exempt.	Exempts all programs that are not 'otherwise exempt'.	Arkansas Child Welfare Agency Licensing Act
Florida	Required for residential child-caring agencies	Educational/religious entities operate under several distinct regulatory statutes.	409.175 Licensure of family foster homes, residential child-caring agencies, and child-placing agencies; public records exemption.
Georgia	Required for child-caring institutions, subject to a boarding-school exemption	Allows bona fide boarding schools whose primary purpose is education to seek exemption from licensure.	O.C.G.A. title 49, Ch. 5 Programs and Protection for Children and Youth
Kentucky	Required for child-caring facilities	Church-related facilities are regulated but Kentucky law specifically preserves some religious-facility practices, e.g. permits reasonable corporal physical discipline.	922 KAR 1:495 Training requirements for foster parents, adoptive parents, and respite care propviders for children in the custody of the cabinet.
Louisiana	Required for residential homes, subject to separate treatment for some religious programs	Exempts church and religious programs.	RS 46: Chapter 14. Licensing Specialized Providers
Mississippi	Requires notification/registration	Distinguishes between 'child residential homes' and 'child-caring agencies', each of	Title 43, Chapter 16. Child Residential Home Notification Act

		which is governed by different state entities.	
Missouri	Required for nonexempt facilities; broad educational, camp, and religious exemptions apply	exempts qualifying educational programs, recreational camps, and facilities operated by religious orders/churches.	Title XII, Chapter 210. Child Protection and Reformation
North Carolina	Required for residential child-care operations, subject to educational and religious exemptions	exempts certain longstanding religious/fraternal facilities and "primarily educational institutions."	Chapter 131D-Inspection and Licensing of Facilities, Article 1A-Control over Child Placing and Child Care
Oklahoma	Generally required for child-care facilities, subject to statutory exemptions	Exempts some religious/boarding school facilities.	
South Carolina	Licensure applies to covered child-welfare agencies, but facilities supervised by an established religious denomination may be exempt.	Exempts child-welfare agencies under active supervision of an established religious denomination; religious foster-care facilities not receiving government funds need only register and meet fire/health/sanitation inspection requirements.	N/A
Tennessee	Required for covered facilities, but substantial educational and church-related exemptions apply	Exempts numerous educational, church-related and other programs.	N/A

Texas	Required for residential child-care operations; boarding schools are classified separately	Boarding-school classification remains distinct from residential child-care operation.	Tex. Fam. Code §261.001(1)(L) makes knowingly allowing a child to be trafficked under §20A.02(a)(5)-(8) "abuse."
Virginia	Generally required for children's residential facilities	Every child-welfare agency generally must obtain a license; Virginia has a single licensing framework for children's residential facilities, except educational programs licensed by Education and DJJ facilities.	Va. Code §63.2-100 governs "abused or neglected child"; Virginia separately criminalizes trafficking/forced labor offenses.
West Virginia	Required for regulated residential child-care facilities	Exempts any facility operated by a private, parochial, or church school that is recognized by the West Virginia Department of Education.	W. Va. Code §49-1-201 expressly makes a child subjected to human trafficking or attempted human trafficking under §61-14-2 an "abused child."

(*Source: Data visualization conducted by the author from state codes)*

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