



Highlights of [GAO-08-146T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Residential treatment programs provide a range of services, including drug and alcohol treatment, confidence building, military-style discipline, and psychological counseling for troubled boys and girls with a variety of addiction, behavioral, and emotional problems. This testimony concerns programs across the country referring to themselves as wilderness therapy programs, boot camps, and academies, among other names.

Many cite positive outcomes associated with specific types of residential treatment. There are also allegations regarding the abuse and death of youth enrolled in residential treatment programs. Given concerns about these allegations, particularly in reference to private programs, the Committee asked GAO to (1) verify whether allegations of abuse and death at residential treatment programs are widespread and (2) examine the facts and circumstances surrounding selected closed cases where a teenager died while enrolled in a private program.

To achieve these objectives, GAO conducted numerous interviews and examined documents from closed cases dating as far back as 1990, including police reports, autopsy reports, and state agency oversight reviews and investigations. GAO did not attempt to evaluate the benefits of residential treatment programs or verify the facts regarding the thousands of allegations it reviewed.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-146T](#). For more information, contact Gregory D. Kutz at (202) 512-6722 or kutzg@gao.gov.

RESIDENTIAL TREATMENT PROGRAMS

Concerns Regarding Abuse and Death in Certain Programs for Troubled Youth

What GAO Found

GAO found thousands of allegations of abuse, some of which involved death, at residential treatment programs across the country and in American-owned and American-operated facilities abroad between the years 1990 and 2007. Allegations included reports of abuse and death recorded by state agencies and the Department of Health and Human Services, allegations detailed in pending civil and criminal trials with hundreds of plaintiffs, and claims of abuse and death that were posted on the Internet. For example, during 2005 alone, 33 states reported 1,619 staff members involved in incidents of abuse in residential programs. GAO could not identify a more concrete number of allegations because it could not locate a single Web site, federal agency, or other entity that collects comprehensive nationwide data.

GAO also examined, in greater detail, 10 closed civil or criminal cases from 1990 through 2004 where a teenager died while enrolled in a private program. GAO found significant evidence of ineffective management in most of the 10 cases, with program leaders neglecting the needs of program participants and staff. This ineffective management compounded the negative consequences of (and sometimes directly resulted in) the hiring of untrained staff; a lack of adequate nourishment; and reckless or negligent operating practices, including a lack of adequate equipment. These factors played a significant role in the deaths GAO examined. See the table below for detailed information related to three of the case studies.

Examples of Case Studies GAO Examined

Sex/age	Date of death	Cause of death	Case details
Female, 15	May 1990	Dehydration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Showed signs of illness for 2 days, such as blurred vision, vomiting water, and frequent stumbling ▪ Program staff thought she was faking her illness to get out of the program ▪ Collapsed and died while hiking ▪ Lay dead in the road for 18 hours ▪ Program brochure advertised staff as “highly trained survival experts”
Male, 15	Sept. 2000	Internal bleeding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Head-injury victim with behavioral challenges who refused to return to campsite ▪ Restrained by staff and held face down in the dirt for 45 minutes ▪ Died of a severed artery in the neck ▪ Death ruled a homicide
Male, 14	July 2002	Hyperthermia (high body temperature)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Experienced difficulty while hiking and sat down, breathing heavily and moaning ▪ Fainted and lay motionless ▪ One staff member hid behind a tree for 10 minutes to see whether the victim was “faking it” ▪ Staff member returned and found no pulse ▪ Died soon afterwards

Source: Records including police reports, legal documents, and state investigative documents.