

How to treat violent young offenders

[Sociology](#), [Violence](#)



How to Treat Violent Young Offenders A common assumption about young people who commit violent crimes is that they are simply born evil and that nothing good can come of their lives. From this perspective, the only solution is to punish these young offenders by locking them up, either in prison or in a place for teenagers designed to make their lives as miserable as possible. Such an approach suggests that young people who hurt or kill others are untreatable. It also suggests that more prisons must be built to make our communities safe. This assumption, however, is a false one.

Research shows that violent young offenders can be treated and reformed. In addition, it shows that when young people fail to receive treatment, it does more damage than good. For example, John Hubner's (2005) book, *Last Chance in Texas: The Redemption of Criminal Youth*, describes how experimental treatments at the Giddings State School in Texas can change the lives of violent young offenders for the better. Giddings State School is a facility run by the Texas Youth Commission for those who have not only broken the law in Texas, but who are also considered to be "the worst of the worst" (p. viii). This means that Giddings houses offenders who have committed crimes that involve weapons, serious injury, abuse, torture, and, in some cases, death (p. xx). For this reason, readers of Hubner's book might think that such young people cannot be redeemed. However, as Hubner (2005) shows throughout the book, the therapists, corrections officers, administration, teachers, and coaches who work at Giddings are committed to changing the overall outlook of the young people who are sent to the facility.

Hubner describes how the students, as they are called, are “resocialized,” which means that students process their feelings and learn empathy in some unusual ways (p. xxi). Students who conform to the rules of Giddings earn the right to participate in the Capitol Offenders Group, which asks students to tell their life stories, their crime stories, and to act out scenes of their lives and crimes in role playing. Hubner shows how these techniques help save the lives of young people who came from violence and, as a result, led a life of violence.

For example, in Chapter 12, “I Earned Myself Some Distance from Myself,” Hubner provides the reader with the case history of Candace, one of the female students at Giddings. According to Hubner, Candace lived for fourteen years in a family that struggled with drug addiction, violence, and sexual abuse. Candace turned to a life of crime to escape. Hubner writes about how she robbed stores with another youth named Derrick and took the money to feed her own addictions.

While Candace never shot or physically hurt anyone during her robberies, the drugs and the stories she told herself about why she was committing her crimes have left her mentally unstable. Hubner (2005) observes that she often commits “thinking errors” in which she blames others for her own actions (p. 240). With this kind of history, most readers might assume that there is no hope for an offender like Candace. However, as the chapter reaches its end, the reader discovers that, while in Giddings, Candace has become a decent student, an independent thinker, a track star, and has a life plan that seems, for the most part, like it could work.

Hubner(2005) concludes by relating that Candace is freed from the Giddings School and, while she encountered some problems after released, she is doing fine with two of her children, living with her foster parents in West Texas. While Hubner's(2005) book describes how violent young offenders in Texas can be rehabilitated, another source explains what can happen when youth are not offered treatment for their problems. Natalie Valios (2006), for example, wrote " No Wonder He's Distressed," a short article that appeared in the trade journal called Community Care.

In her article, Valios reports on teenagers who break the law in England and who stay in " Young Offender Institutions" (p. 30). While England is certainly not Texas, and is not even in the United States, her article still overlaps with some of ideas found in Hubner (2005). Valios(2006) begins her article by providing her readers with information about the large number of violent young offenders who are locked up in England, even though they have been diagnosed with a serious mental illness. She turns to the case of a young man named Robert Stewart, a violent racist who was serving time in a facility with an Asian teenager named Zahid Mubarek. Valios(2006) summarizes a report that explains how Stewart killed Mubarek. She argues that there was plenty of evidence that Stewart was severely mentally ill, but that no psychiatric programs were available to treat his condition. As a result, Mubarek needlessly died. Valios (2006) poses a good question: " How should we handle young people who are severely unwell but who have committed serious offenses? " (p. 31). She answers this question by advocating for better psychiatric evaluation and treatment of violent youth.

Valios(2006) concludes her article by quoting from prison reformers and other experts who also want there to be separate facilities in England for violent offenders who are mentally ill and those who are serving time. While Hubner(2005) argues for the benefits of resocialization and Valios(2006) argues for the benefits of medication, both demonstrate that more can be done to treat youth who have broken the law. And even though the authors look at cases from two different countries, both write about how treatment is often a matter of life or death.

Taken together, the two authors present evidence that, with more attention given to the details of a young offender's life, institutions and facilities can do more than simply lock bodies in cages and throw away the key.

References Hubner, John. (2005). Last Chance in Texas: The Redemption of Criminal Youth. New York: Random House. Print. Valios, Natalie. (2006, July). " No Wonder He's Distressed. " Community Care,(1631), 30-31. Retrieved October 20, 2010, from ABI/INFORM Trade ; Industry. (Document ID: 1083442291).