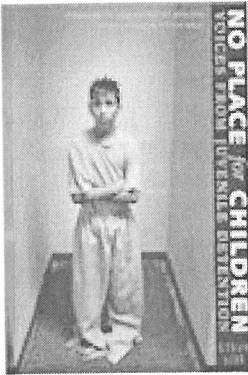


Liss, Steve. **No place for children: voices from juvenile detention.** Foreword by Marian Wright Edelman; Introduction by Cecelia Balli. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press. ISBN: 0-292-70196-9. paper \$19.77



This collection of photographs and narratives of children in juvenile detention is a rare, honest, and often disturbing look at a world to which we rarely have access. While confidentiality laws normally prevent incarcerated children from being photographed or interviewed for public purposes, Steve Liss, an award-winning *Time* magazine photographer, was able to gain access to the residents of a

Laredo, Texas detention center—a prison-like cinderblock structure sparsely furnished with cots and bedrolls. The children, some as young as ten, have been sent to “juvy” for such offenses as drug possession, violence against family members, truancy, and, in some cases, cold-blooded murder. Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children’s Defense Fund, notes in her introduction, however, that only a quarter of the crimes that bring children into detention are violent in nature, a fact that makes one wonder if juvenile incarceration is always truly necessary, or if it simply functions as a method of warehousing troubled children.

In Liss’s stark black-and-white photographs, the young subjects gaze into the lens, their expressions alternating between confused, fearful, twisted with rage, and

awash in a drug haze. Fourteen-year-old Rene, in the throes of detoxification, stares into space and writhes on his cement floor, looking more alien than human, while self-loathing Zulema displays the scars on her wrist and laments that her suicide attempt was unsuccessful.

The world around these children is photographed as well. Crying mothers, imposing guards, exasperated judges, and stressed-out parole officers are all players in the children’s lives. It is noted that these adults are not necessarily

contributing to the problem of overcrowded, ineffective detention facilities. In many cases, they are simply struggling to work effectively within the confines of an impossible system. One well-meaning detention worker mourns the reality of “watch[ing] some beautiful lives just get wasted,” and discloses that he could count the success stories he has witnessed on the fingers of one hand.

The text, drawn mainly from personal interviews with the children, tells a story of parental absence and drug abuse, violent families, sexual abuse, and a legacy of failure. Most disturbing is the acknowledgement that, in many cases, juvenile detention is an avoidable fate. In the absence of publicly-funded child care, after-school programs, and other support systems so desperately needed, we end up spending

somewhere in the neighborhood of \$42,000 per year to incarcerate a child in juvenile detention, which itself is often just a rest stop on the road to adult prison.

Liss has succeeded in turning this ugly reality into a beautiful and thought-provoking work of photojournalism. His photographs are raw, honest, and often quite disturbing, such as that of two young brothers playing on a skateboard while wrestling over a butcher knife, and another of a baby-faced ten-year-old boy puffing thoughtfully on a joint the size of a clove of garlic. But these grisly images are juxtaposed against those of kindly probation officers sharing their rare personal time with their young charges and detention officers making true attempts at emotional connection, and Liss never stoops to the level of shock value. His text wraps up by providing examples of juvenile detention centers embracing reform and focusing on treatment over incarceration. Yes, things are bad in the world of juvenile detention, but we do have choices. If we as a society decide that these children are worth saving, a better way may be forthcoming.

This book is highly recommended, and would be appropriate for public libraries and academic libraries, especially those serving social work, psychology, sociology, and criminal justice departments. —Jennifer Downey

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