

# JUVENILE JUSTICE

## **AMERICA'S OFTEN HIDDEN NATIONAL TRAGEDY**

**Physical and Sexual Abuse  
of  
Detained Juvenile Offenders**

**Investigations Underway in Florida may Disclose  
the Cause in the Untimely Death of Dozens of  
Children and Teenage Victims of Abuse at  
Florida's State Reform School**

**By  
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**Housing Units at the Florida State Reform School in Marianna.**

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## **JUVENILE OFFENDERS WHO WERE ONCE CONFINED AT MARIANNA'S DOZIER SCHOOL FOR BOYS HAVE ACCUSED EMPLOYEES AND GUARDS OF SYSTEMATIC ABUSE.**

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**A**s has been the case at so many of the nation's once heavily populated juvenile "reform schools," the draconian practices that have been hidden for so long at Florida's Dozier School for Boys are now finding their way into the glare of public scrutiny.

First opened in 1900 as the "Florida State Reform School," the Dozier School for Boys, sits on over 1,400 acres in the town of Marianna, located just west of Tallahassee. Throughout its history, the reform school, known for its brutality, has been the subject of countless calls for investigation. Despite those pleas nothing ever seemed to change, that is, until recently.

To be sure, at this point investigators and researchers at the University of South Florida are still working to substantiate some pretty horrific allegations made by a considerable number of former inmates. However, considering the consistencies described in those allegations, coupled with the type and quality of physical evidence currently being uncovered on the grounds of the now closed Dozier School for Boys, there is every reason to now believe that the prevalence of abuse at Dozier may have been far worse than anyone has ever suspected.

### **THE ALLEGATIONS**

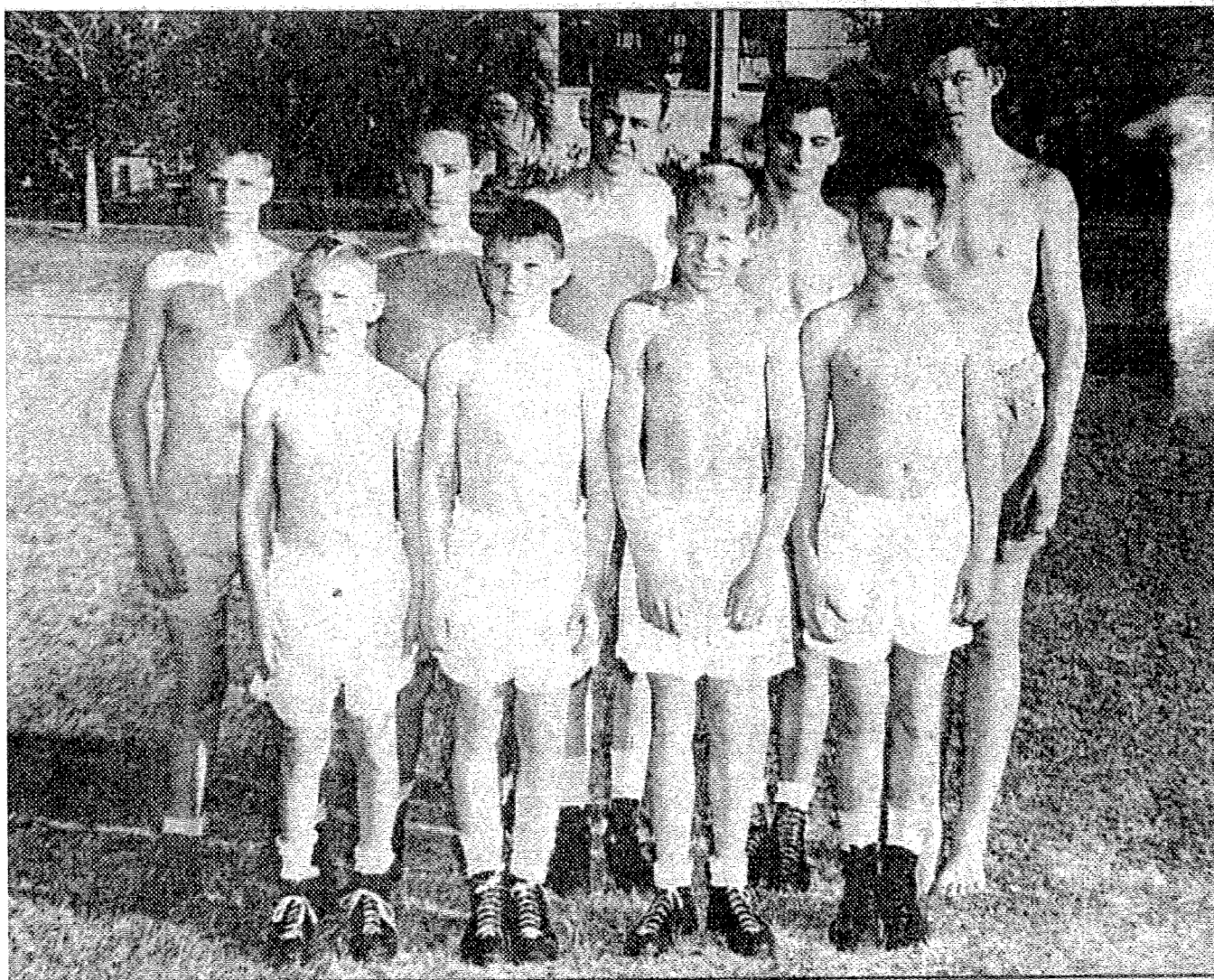
Beginning over a decade ago, a number of men, who as juveniles in the 1950's and 1960's, had been confined at Florida's Dozier School for

Boys, began to come forward with long suppressed stories of abuse so horrifying that they seemed almost unbelievable. By 2012 that group of former inmates had become known as the "White House Boys" and their number had swelled to over 300. Not surprisingly, given the fact that by 2005 a great deal of information had been disclosed, some began to pay closer attention to what the "White House Boys" had to say.

The numbers may vary somewhat, but one thing is crystal clear. Between 1914 and 1973 no less than 98 boys between 6 and 18 years of age died under suspicious circumstances at the state run reform school. Recently it was disclosed that at least seven of the dead boys had died following escape attempts, and twenty more children died without explanation within three months of being sent to the Dozier School for Boys.

### **WE WEREN'T BAD KIDS**

According to former inmate Jerry Cooper now 67, who had served time at Dozier in 1961, when he was 16 years-old brutal beatings were administered to countless children. **"A lot of orphans were there that did not have places at times and they were sent to Marianna. They weren't there for any crime whatsoever** Cooper says. **"But we had many, many boys who were there for smoking in school, that were incorrigible. We weren't bad kids. We might have needed help in some respect. But that**



Children and young boys confined at Florida's Dozier Reform School

wasn't the place to find it. I'll tell you that right now."

Cooper knows first hand of the depth of the brutality practiced by the sadistic guards at Dozier. **"They got me out of bed at 2 a.m. one day and took me to the White House where they threw me on a bed, tied my feet and began beating me with a leather strap. The first blow lifted me a foot and a half off that bed and every time that strap would come down, you could hear the shuffle on the concrete because their shoes would slide. And you could hear the shoosh, shoosh, bam."** Cooper passed out from the beating, but another inmate close by claimed that

during the beating of Cooper, he had counted no less than 135 lashes.

As incredible as Cooper's story may sound, it is not at all an uncommon one. Roger Kiser, another of the so-called White House Boys, says that he personally saw another youth who had been beaten half to death by staff die in a bathtub. Kiser says: **"I thought he'd been mauled by the dogs because I thought he had ran away."** **"There was also the boy I saw who was dead who came out of the dryer. They had put him in one of those large dryers."**

## THE FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF LAW ENFORCEMENT INVESTIGATION

Concerned about the scope of the allegations of abuse being made about the Dozier School for Boys, former Florida Governor Charles Crist ordered an investigation into claims of abuse, torture and deaths at the school. The Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) was charged with conducting the investigation.

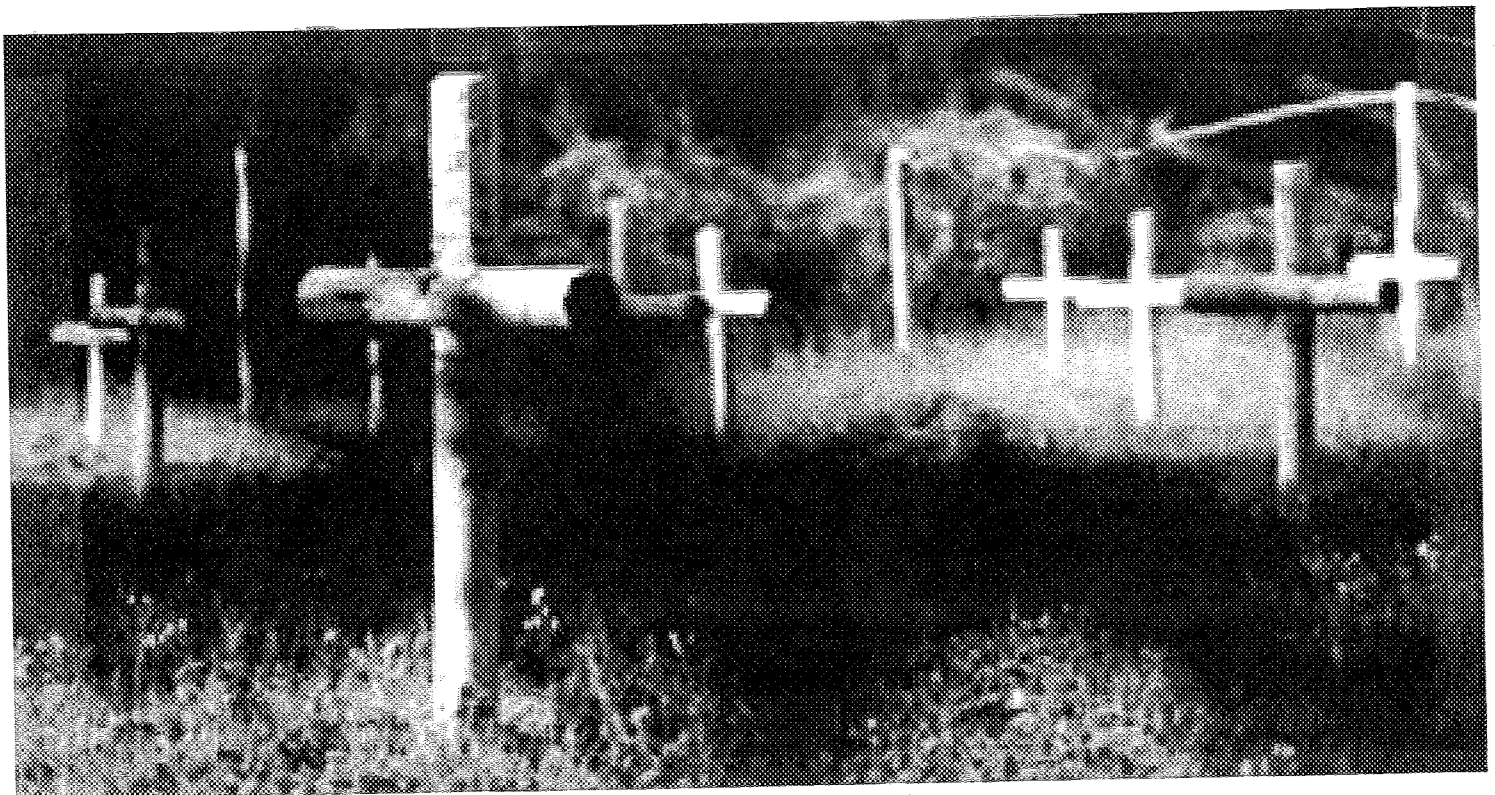
Amazingly, after conducting dozens of interviews with the so-called White House Boys, former Dozier staff members and others, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement said that it could not find enough evidence to support the countless allegations of abuse that had been made. The state report also found no evidence indicating that a staff member was responsible for any inmate deaths.

Former Dozier inmate Roger Keiser doesn't buy it. "It all boils down to civil liability." "They do not want anybody to be able to have factual evidence that would make them pay for these —

what I consider to be crimes. There's just too many stories," Kiser notes. State investigators did say that by using old Dozier records, they were able to identify 31 former inmates interred within the reform school's cemetery. Those records also show that an additional 50 boys had also died at Dozier, but there was no indication of how they had died or where on the grounds of the reform school they are buried.

## DISCOVERING DOZENS OF UNMARKED GRAVES

Forensic anthropologist Dr. Erin Kimmerle who once served as chief anthropologist for the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, is currently leading a team of investigators searching for remains at the old reform school. Dr. Kimmerle, who is currently an associate professor at the University of South Florida, has repeatedly asked a very critical question: "Why are there no records of where any of the boys who died at the school are buried? When you look at the state hospitals,







Dr. Kimmerle's team of investigators dig at a gravesite at the Dozier School for Boys

the state prisons, the other state institutions at the time, there are very meticulous plot maps you can reference. Or if you are a family member today, you can say, "Where is my great-aunt buried? and they can show you exactly where. So, why that didn't happen here, I don't know. But that does stand out."

So far Dr. Kimmerle and her team, using ground penetrating radar equipment, have identified some 49 additional grave sites at one particular location on the school's grounds. Some of which she says "may contain more than one person." The ongoing problem that the investigators face is that

by all accounts, there are at least several distinct burial sites located on the expansive Dozier school grounds.

Central Florida businessman Glen Vamadoe says that his uncle Thomas was sent to Dozier when he was just 13 years-old. Less than a month later, he was dead. Now Vamadoe wants his uncle's remains exhumed and properly buried at his family's graveyard. In the 1990's when the Dozier school was still open, Vamadoe visited the reform school looking for his uncle's gravesite. School staffers sent him to a different location, other than the school's recognized graveyard, to search for

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the remains of his uncle. Today Vamadoe says **“There is absolutely no question and no doubt that people that worked at that facility during the late 1980’s and early 1990’s knew then and know now that there are other places on the grounds of that school where children are buried.”**

**CURRENT EVENTS  
AT FLORIDA’S  
DOZIER SCHOOL FOR BOYS  
ARE NOT AN ABERRATION**

Unfortunately, the events currently unfolding at Florida’s Dozier School for Boys are not an aberration. One need only to look at the torrid history of large scale “reform” or “industrial” schools for boys and girls that sprang up across America during the middle and late 1800’s to get a much clearer picture of the depth of systematic physical and sexual abuse of incarcerated juvenile offenders. Shamefully, at some of the nation’s Juvenile Detention Centers, that abuse continues unabated to this day.

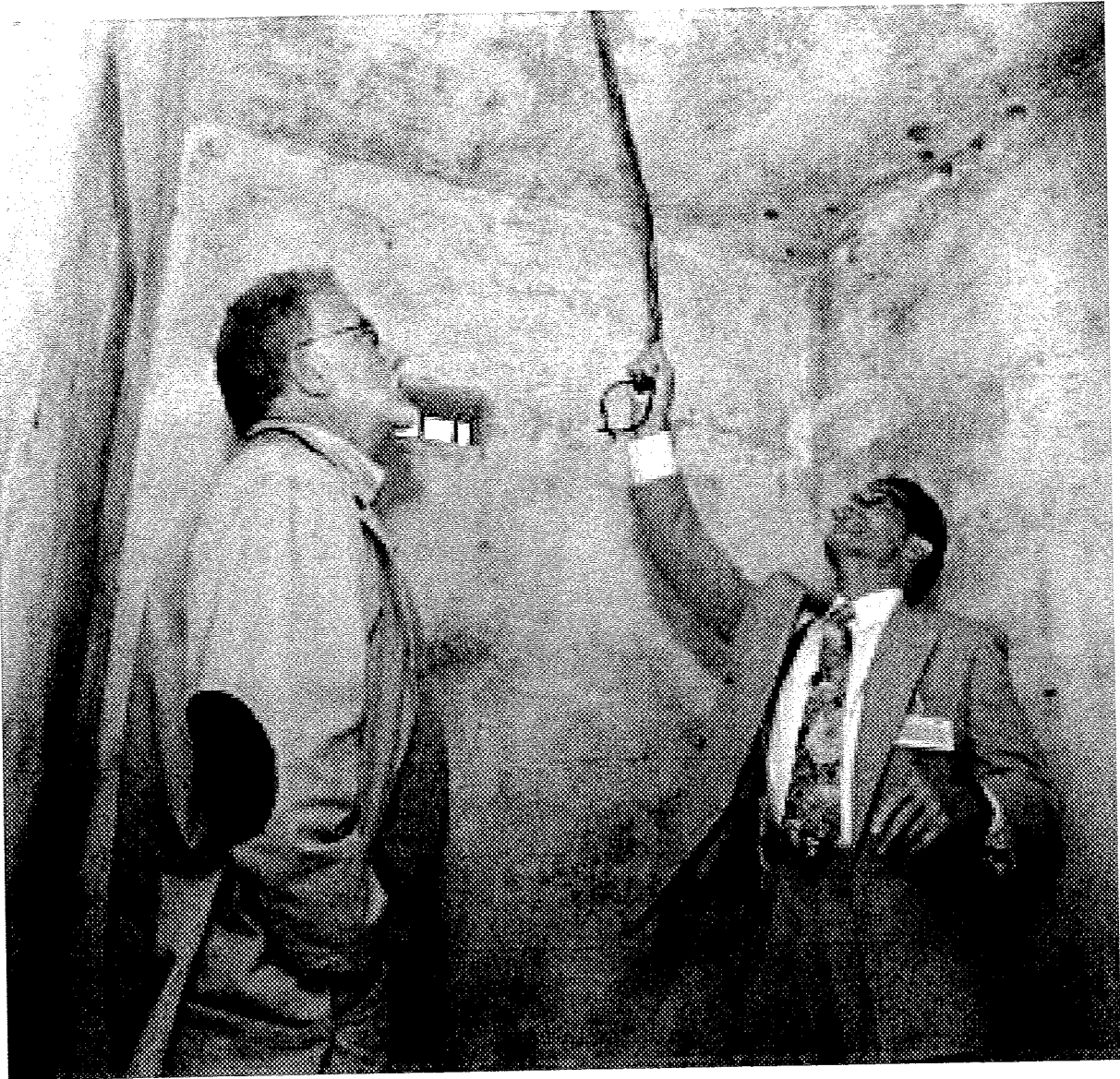
Physical and sexual abuse of juvenile offenders has been a hidden and unmentionable element of the American juvenile justice system since its inception. This type of abuse can be traced far back in history to a period decades prior to the creation of the nation’s first large scale reform school, the infamous Lyman School for Boys in Westboro, Massachusetts in 1846. Between the day of its opening in 1846 and the day of its

closing during March of 1972, thousands of boys aged 6 to 17 were subjected to just about every form of physical and sexual abuse imaginable at the Massachusetts State Reform School in Westboro.

Young male juvenile offenders were not the only victims of the outrageous systematic abuse that occurred in state run reform schools. Literally thousands of pre-teenage and teenage girls incarcerated in Massachusetts were subjected to a type of physical abuse that today would be deemed criminal.

There is little doubt that young girls at both Boston’s Huntington Avenue Detention Center and at the Lancaster Industrial Reform School for Girls were abused at an alarming rate. The Lancaster facility was established in 1850, first as a foster home for wayward girls, but then it quickly expanded and turned into a brutal reform school, just like its counterpart Westboro’s Lyman Industrial School for Boys. Most girls held at the Lancaster institution were status offenders, guilty of nothing but minor non-criminal type offenses such as truancy, incorrigibility, and runaways.

An example of the type of abuse that faced young incarcerated female juvenile offenders in the state of Massachusetts can be found in the process all were forced to endure. Thousands of young girls who were unfortunate enough to have ended up in the old Massachusetts Reform Schools suffered outrageous sexual abuse. For decades, every girl



Investigators examine solitary confinement cell at the Dozier School for Boys

entering the state run female juvenile institutions were placed in solitary confinement for up to two weeks, or until such time as they could be subjected to what was termed as a "medical examination." As part of that so-called "examination" each girl was given a vaginal examination. As a result, a girl's hymen would frequently be broken during the process. A committee from the Harvard University School of Public Health would later categorize this practice as "barbaric." Adding to this ultimate insult to young innocent females was the fact that staff at the girls institutions would often publicly refer to the male Doctor who performed the examinations as "Goldfinger." Adding further insult to injury young female offenders were forced to call institutional matrons "Mommy" and male cottage masters "Daddy."

Massachusetts surely does not stand alone when it comes to the institutionalized abuse of minors. In the state of Illinois the history of the St. Charles School for Boys is rife with examples of the type of extreme brutality that occurred there. A report by the Illinois State Crime Commission during 1928 states: **"All whippings were administered by a disciplinary officer who went to each cottage each evening after supper and whipped any boys who had been reported earlier by the house father, or for whom the house father requested punishment at that time. Some boys were punished by being locked up in the 'hole' for up to thirty-two days with no shoes and no mattress. They slept on wooden boards nailed to the concrete floor. Some were handcuffed to iron pipes and kept manacled day and night."**

Perhaps one of the clearest depictions of the type of abuse that can, and often does, run rampant in state run juvenile detention facilities can be found in a Hollywood hit movie, "Sleepers."

Starring Kevin Bacon and Brad Pitt, "Sleepers" is the story of several young boys from New York's "Hells Kitchen" area, who end up in a not so fictitious New York State Reform School. The

physical and sexual abuse they suffer while incarcerated in the juvenile facility leads to extensive criminal activity as they mature. In one of the more dramatic scenes in the movie, two of the boys (now young men) run into one of their tormentors in a New York City restaurant, confront him, remind him of his prior abuse and then, seeking their revenge, murder him.

## AN ABJECT FAILURE

The placement of both male and female juvenile offenders in barbaric Detention Centers and/or Reform Schools can have but one possible outcome; increased criminal activity. The systematic abuse of children in our nation's juvenile lock-ups has hung like an albatross over the heads of public officials for decades. Ever mindful of the perils associated with public exposure of state sponsored systemic problems, many have cowered in denial rather than opting to take aggressive action to address this long standing national tragedy head on. The best intentions of those responsible for the creation of state operated Reform Schools proved to be misguided. That large scale experiment has caused much grief, pain and suffering, and has proven over time to be nothing short of an abject failure.

## TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

On August 6, 2013 Florida State Officials in Tallahassee voted to allow Dr. Kimmerle and her team of investigators to exhume the remains of countless boys buried at the old Dozier Reform School. No doubt the end result will unearth the truth. If the cause of in the death of the children at Florida's Dozier School for Boys is found to be anything other than natural, the consequences should be serious.

For decades, many of those responsible for insuring the safety and rehabilitation of juvenile offenders have escaped accountability. In far too



many cases, state and federal officials have turned a blind eye to the despicable conduct of individuals charged with protecting juveniles held in custody. It is long past the time when those who are found to have committed the type of transgressions alleged at the Florida Reform School for Boys, are brought to justice.

It has often been said that sometimes good can come from evil. As a progressive society we can only hope that the outcome of the search for answers at Florida's Dozier School for Boys in Marianna will serve as a catalyst for more definitive action to prevent abuse by those responsible for the wellbeing of our youth.



One can only imagine the type of abuse that took place in this building at the Dozier School for Boys.