

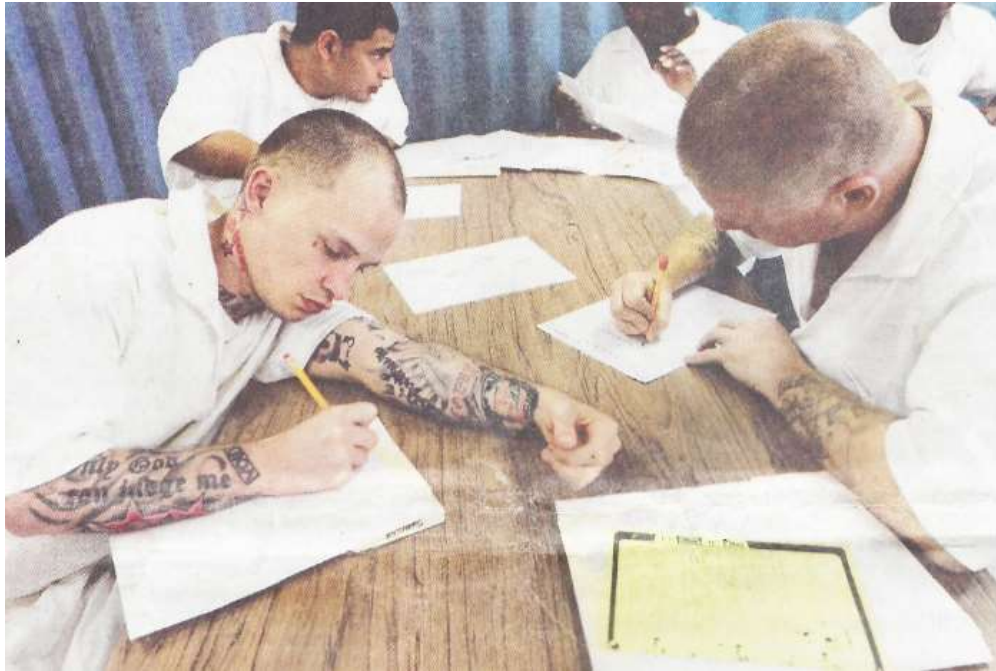
# The Dallas Morning News

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## Outside chances

KIDS OR CRIMINALS? | GROWING UP AND GETTING OUT

'They've got no skills. They've got nowhere to go because they've been locked up since they were children.'



Inmates Colby Swanzy (left) and Rickey Farmer work on an assignment in a skills class geared for inmates getting ready to be released from prison at the Holliday Unit in Huntsville.

A life of uncertainty awaits those who grew up in the prison system once they're free

One in an occasional series

By DIANE JENNINGS  
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Staff Writers

Charles Morehouse is either a man with a plan — or a boy with a dream.

The former Dallas resident is scheduled to walk out of prison Monday after serving 15 years for sexually assaulting a child when he was 14.

Day after day, year after year, Morehouse — who denies committing the crime — has been told what to do from pre-dawn to dark.

Now he's eager to make his own way in the free world.

His plan?

"I'll stay at a homeless shelter," he said during an interview at the Daniel Unit in Snyder. "I'll do day labor. And I know that I'm qualified for food stamps when I first come out. ... At least I'll have some-



Charles Morehouse has been in trouble with the law since age 13. He has spent more than half his life behind bars, but is set to be released today.

**INTERACTIVE:** Read more in the series. [interactives.dallasnews.com/2015/kids-or-criminals/](http://interactives.dallasnews.com/2015/kids-or-criminals/)

**INSIDE:** One ex-con's path to a good life on the outside. 10A

**EDITORIAL:** "Kids or Criminals?" 14A

thing to eat."

Chronologically, Morehouse and other inmates who grow up behind bars are adults when released. But spending their adolescence in prison leaves them ill-prepared to take care of themselves or cope in a dramatically changed world.

Morehouse "was a kid when he went in there," said his father, Gary. "And he's kind of going to be a kid when he comes out."

Sending juveniles who commit horrific offenses to prison for a long time makes a statement about how seriously society takes crime, said Edward Mulvey, a psychiatry professor at the University of Pittsburgh who studies juvenile offenders.

But that message ignores the fact that most of those young criminals will be released eventually at relatively young ages. The practice of returning them to society, "as if they know what to do, seems incredibly naïve," he said.

"I'm a fairly well-adjusted individual,"

Mulvey said. "You lock me up at 15, and put me on the streets and tell me to make my own way, I am going to have some problems."

Research on the subject of young offenders held in adult prison is scarce, but one study concluded those offenders are 34 percent more likely to re-offend than those who stay in the juvenile system.

Bobby Gonzales said his life might have been different had he stayed in the more therapeutic juvenile system. He was tried at 16 as an adult in Dallas County for aggravated robbery.

After being paroled, he was sent back to prison for a drug conviction.

When released a second time, he committed murder. Now 49, he's serving a life sentence at the Tolford Unit in East Texas.

"Sending a child to adult prison only makes him a harden[ed] criminal," Gonzales wrote in a letter to *The Dallas Morning News*.

If an unemployed ex-con ends up on welfare or back in prison, the taxpayer picks up the tab.

The public has a "vested interest ... in all of our citizens being productive," said Alex R. Piquero, a nationally recognized juvenile justice expert at the University of Texas at Dallas. "Otherwise, the cost gets transferred back to the state and then the taxpayer. So we all pay — one way or the other."

### Clown clothes

Every business day, inmates step haltingly out the front door of the historic prison in downtown Huntsville known as "The Walls."

They wear so-called clown clothes, ill-fitting, mismatched secondhand garments given to them to replace their prison "smocks" and clutch orange mesh onion sacks holding their meager belongings. The sacks hold everything from a battered Bible to a roll of toilet paper.

Even though most of them worked at prison jobs, the state of Texas does not pay inmates, so they get \$100 from the state in "gate money" and a bus ticket to start their new lives. Older inmates amble toward the bus station; younger ones run.

Running is huge because it's forbidden in prison.

Perry Johnson ran when he was released in 1987, wearing green socks, a red shirt and khaki pants.

"The door opened about that much," Johnson said, holding his hands barely apart, during an interview at the

# 'We all pay — one way or the other'



Inmates in donated clothing and carrying their belongings are freed in Huntsville. The free world can be bewildering for those who grew up behind bars.

Stiles Unit in Beaumont. "I squeezed out of it, and I ran."

Johnson was 15 when he was arrested for killing Dallas police Officer Allen Camp. He broke into his middle school to steal from the vending machines in 1973. Camp responded to a silent alarm and was fatally shot with his own gun while struggling with Johnson.

Johnson was paroled after serving 13 years of a life sentence. Like many offenders who come from chaotic home lives, he had nothing to run to.

"It was a tough scene," he said. "If you don't really have nowhere to go, have nobody to look to guide you, you'll kind of get lost."

Now 68, he has moved in and out of prison ever since for drugs and parole violations. Though he completed the sentences, he remains incarcerated for the murder of Officer Camp.

### Institutionalization

Charles Monahan's release "plan" is disturbingly familiar to Charles Rotramel.

"That plan is probably the majority of these kids that come out of prison," said Rotramel, founder of reVizion, a Houston nonprofit that works with young offenders. "They don't have any family or they



lost touch with them. They've got no skills. They've got nowhere to go because they've been locked up since they were children. So it's not like they had an adult life already established. — Everything's changed."

The free world is bewildering for anyone isolated behind razor wire for any length of time. For those who entered prison as children and came out as adults, it's like landing on Pluto.

"If your last phone call was from a wall phone, using a cell-phone is a challenge. Ordering from a menu may be over-

whelming if you haven't made a decision in years.

Prison culture teaches a child to "become compliant on the outside and to give up their ... ability to control their lives," Rotramel said.

Institutionalization doesn't help them succeed in the free world, however, where self-starters are prized.

Morehouse admitted he has a "terrible" record for not showing up to his prison jobs.

"If I hire a 29-year-old and he doesn't show up for work three times, I fire him," Mulvey said. "If I hire a 16-year-old who doesn't show up for work

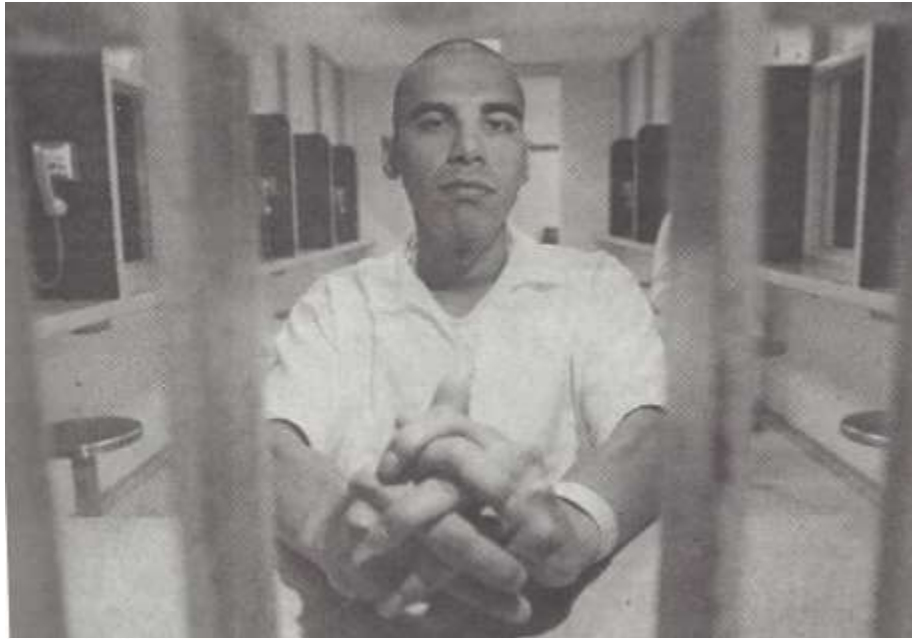
three times, I sit him down and say, 'What's going on?'"

Learning how to negotiate the world of work is "a lot harder to learn when you come out at age 26, 27 and you're supposed to figure out how do I relate to people? To work?" Mulvey said. "All of a sudden, you have to learn really fast."

Most teenagers learn through trial and error, Mulvey said, but opportunities to fail are few in prison. "How many times did we do stupid things?" he said. "You do that in prison, you can get hurt badly. Their



# 'Rewire their thinking'



**Nick Martinez, 34**, is scheduled for release next year. He went to prison at 15 for aggravated assault, after he and his brother beat a 3-year-old to death. "I'm ready to get out," he says. "But I'm not prepared."

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neural development is going to be sparse."

## Social skills

Christina Melton Crain, the former chair of the Texas Board of Criminal Justice, founded a nonprofit called Unlocking Doors to provide intensive, long-term support to ex-cons.

"When they get out, we have to basically rewire their thinking," she said.

That's particularly critical for young offenders who have spent most of their lives behind bars.

They have to learn how to relate to others. Survival behind bars means keeping to yourself and being constantly on guard — the opposite of the skills needed in the work world.

"When you go to prison, you don't trust anybody," said Bill Kleiber of Restorative Justice Ministries, a nonprofit organization that helps inmates and ex-offenders.

he was paroled, he said, he walked alone to an adult halfway house on Stemmons Freeway.

His father eventually offered him a construction job. But like many teenage boys and their fathers, "we kept bumping heads," the son said.

Morehouse, now 32, wasn't arrested for another crime. But like a rebellious teenager, he didn't follow parole rules. He said he left the state without permission, failed to meet with his parole officer and used drugs.

After about 10 weeks, he was sent to a secure adult facility for treatment.

But he said his pattern of squandered chances continued: eight months out in 2003, 14 days out in 2004, seven months out in 2005.

Morehouse finally went to prison in 2006 to finish his sentence.

"I've had one visitor," Morehouse said. "And that was my cellie's mom. It was kind of a mercy visit."

training and life skills.

Inmates under 18 spend the first few years in a program for youthful offenders, where education and counseling are stressed. But when they turn 18, those inmates are assigned to the general population, with access to certain programs for their age.

Young inmates with long sentences pose special challenges.

Limited taxpayer dollars mean that offenders close to release receive priority treatment in vocational programs. Training teenagers who face decades behind bars in a skill that may be obsolete by the time they leave doesn't make fiscal sense. Treatment programs, such as those for sex offenders, follow the same policy.

Morehouse earned a welding certificate in 2009. "I'm pretty rusty," he said.

Gary Morehouse intends to give his son a truck and a welding rig. A relative left his son some money. "With me coach-

who grew up behind bars.

"There's not a red flag that says, 'This guy came in at 13. This guy came in at 25,'" said Bryan Collier, deputy director of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. "We just try to deal with what risk level and issues we have right then."

The issues Morehouse faces — finding housing, transportation and work — are typical of most inmates, but he has no experience to fall back on. As an offender who started in the juvenile system, his record is sealed. But he'll have to deal with sex offender registration. He appears on a state website that shows his registration was projected to expire last year.

All those factors will make succeeding in the real world difficult.

Dominique Graham, a prison ministry volunteer, met Morehouse when he was imprisoned in Huntsville. She said he seems different and doesn't carry himself like other inmates.

They've been engaged for



William Skinner, 39, who is incarcerated for his role in a series of murders in Dallas starting at age 15, said he doesn't have real friends. He has "associates."

"I don't want to be anti-social," he said. "But mainly in here you stick to yourself and mind your business."

After spending 23 years of a 40-year sentence behind bars, he forces himself to break habits that mark him as an inmate: wolfing down his food; being a "neat freak" about his few possessions; constantly watching his surroundings to "make sure nobody's going to bother you."

He polishes his social skills through family visits and phone calls.

"Whenever I get a visit, I talk to my people. I ask them: 'What's going on? What's the price of gas? What's the price of eggs? How much does milk cost? What's the new movie out?' And DVDs. They got something out now called Red-box and Netflix. I'll be wanting to know those types of things."

Skinner was denied parole three years ago, and a new review date has not been set.

## Family ties

Skinner is lucky to have frequent visitors. But many inmates go years seeing only inmates, staff and volunteers.

When Morehouse started his sentence in a juvenile facility, his now-deceased mother called occasionally and his father visited twice in four years.

Gary Morehouse believes in his son's innocence, but years of dealing with the wild child who was first arrested at 13 drained the family emotionally and financially.

When an 18-year-old Morehouse stepped off the bus in downtown Dallas the first time

## Ready but not prepared

Nick Martinez, 34, is slated for release next year after two decades behind bars.

In prison, Martinez works as a janitor and does a little carpentry. But he has only a vague notion of what he'll do once he's free. Manual labor maybe. Or tattoo artistry.

"I'm ready to get out," said Martinez, who went to prison at 15 for aggravated assault, after he and his brother beat a 13-year-old to death. "But I'm not prepared."

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice tries to prepare inmates for release through the Windham School District, the statewide prison education system and rehabilitation and reentry divisions. General educational and literacy classes are available, along with vocational

ing him, he has a chance," Gary Morehouse said.

A truck might help, but Charles Morehouse has never had a driver's license, much less insurance.

When inmates who entered the system as teens near release, they can get the same job training and life skills instruction as other inmates. Some parolees are ordered to take classes. Those who serve their full sentences can request them.

Instruction includes everything from résumé writing to interview skills that include actions such as shaking hands, looking people in the eye, and speaking up — actions not encouraged in prison.

## Difficult prospects

When the inmates are released, the state of Texas offers no special programs for those

two years. But they haven't seen each other or spoken since he was moved to a West Texas facility more than 18 months ago. Still, she's tried to persuade him in letters to stay with her instead of going to a homeless shelter in Dallas when he's released.

"Some of his expectations ... they're not realistic," said Graham, 24, in a phone interview.

"Everything that we struggle through on a daily basis is going to be even harder for him because of where he has been."

Graham's not sure how Morehouse will overcome his past to have a future.

"It's not going to be easy," she said.

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**Bill Kleiber (left),** executive director of Restorative Justice Ministries Network of Texas, greeted John Taylor in Huntsville upon Taylor's release after 18 1/2 years in prison.