

# Lindsay Lohan heads to jail: Harsh treatment or help at last?

Lindsay Lohan, set to begin a 90 day jail sentence Tuesday, has sparked debate over justice, entitlement, and a society obsessed with celebrity.



Lindsay Lohan watch: Members of the media gather outside the Century Regional Detention Facility where the actress is expected to begin a 90-day sentence for violating her probation on Tuesday, in Lynwood, Calif.

(Damian Dovarganes/AP)

By Daniel B. Wood, Staff writer

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Los Angeles —

The jail door clanks shut Tuesday on 23-year-old actress Lindsay Lohan – due to start her 90-day sentence for violating probation in a 2007 drug case by failing to attend court-ordered alcohol education classes. As she does, the tabloid paparazzi fall over themselves for the last, best flash shots, the evening fan broadcast shows lurch into overdrive with “Lindsay’s-last-minutes-of-freedom” stories, and even the “film at eleven” local news folks can’t ignore the story.

Channel 4 Los Angeles spent its first 10 minutes of news on Lohan, announcing the ‘Mean Girls’ actress had joked nervously in a late-Monday message on Twitter that “The only ‘bookings’ that I’m familiar with are Disney Films, never thought that I’d be ‘booking’ into jail ... eeks.”

With US troops committed to two wars, an oil spill wreaking economic and environmental devastation on an entire region, and North Korea instantly bankrupting thousands of its own citizens with currency reform, is the attention on Lohan worth anything more than a dismissing glance? Is this just one of many overindulged celebrities who have “dissed” the law one too many times and need to stop being coddled, or is this a “teachable moment” with tangible, real-life lessons for those who dig deep enough?

A bit of both, say sociologists, theologians, behavior specialists, and therapists.

“Of what is Lindsay really guilty?” asks Dr. Ben Agger, director of the Center for Theory at the University of Texas, Arlington’s Sociology department.

“We, her titillated public, are the guilty ones – we who track her Twitters and consume the latest headlines about her private

life lived publicly," he says. Our celebrity and media culture, which values presence and profile over substantive contributions, is at fault, he says.

"We who devour her should be doing the time," he says. "Shame on us! Is there a lesson in all this? In our postmodern moment, the boundary between fame and infamy has nearly vanished."

Wherever one stands on all the above, the experts seem split on whether courts should be making an example of Lohan or not.

"For Lindsay Lohan to finally go to jail after having beat it so many times is to reinforce our American values: 'You reap what you sow,' " says author and radio personality Debbie Mandel.

"Helicopter parents" too often smooth things over for their children, even up to dealings with professors and employers, says Ms. Mandell, imprinting undeserved self-esteem. In these cases, "failure can be a potent teaching moment," she says.

"Lindsay manipulated the legal system and took advantage of the judge's leniency – she made a mockery of court instructions. She acted out because she wants everyone to see her in the spotlight – her life has become her movie," says Mandell.

Jail time isn't the right answer to celebrities who act out, says Paul Levinson, a professor of communication and media studies at Fordham University in New York. He says he doesn't think Lohan should necessarily be going to jail.

"When you have these stars with personal behavioral problems and prosecute them to the full extent of the law, you are turning jails into some kind of social corrector. What she needs is counseling and psychological help, but there is a tendency in our legal system to make examples out of people."

Jail time had a positive effect on socialite and reality TV star Paris Hilton, helping her stay mostly out of trouble, and it can be the best thing that ever happened to Lohan, argues Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, a prominent author who has advised celebrities including Michael Jackson.

"Sadly, we live in an age when parents are failing their children and the culture is failing its constituents, and the only people who are left to be mature adults are judges and police," says Rabbi Boteach, who was named by Newsweek as one of the ten most influential rabbis in America.

"When it comes to people like Lindsay Lohan, Britney Spears and Paris Hilton – these are not wicked, evil people," says Boteach. "Rather their sins are self-annihilation, and we as a society have to step in and help save them. This judge has been an angel of mercy by sending Lohan to jail. This is a life saving mission. She is saving a life."

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