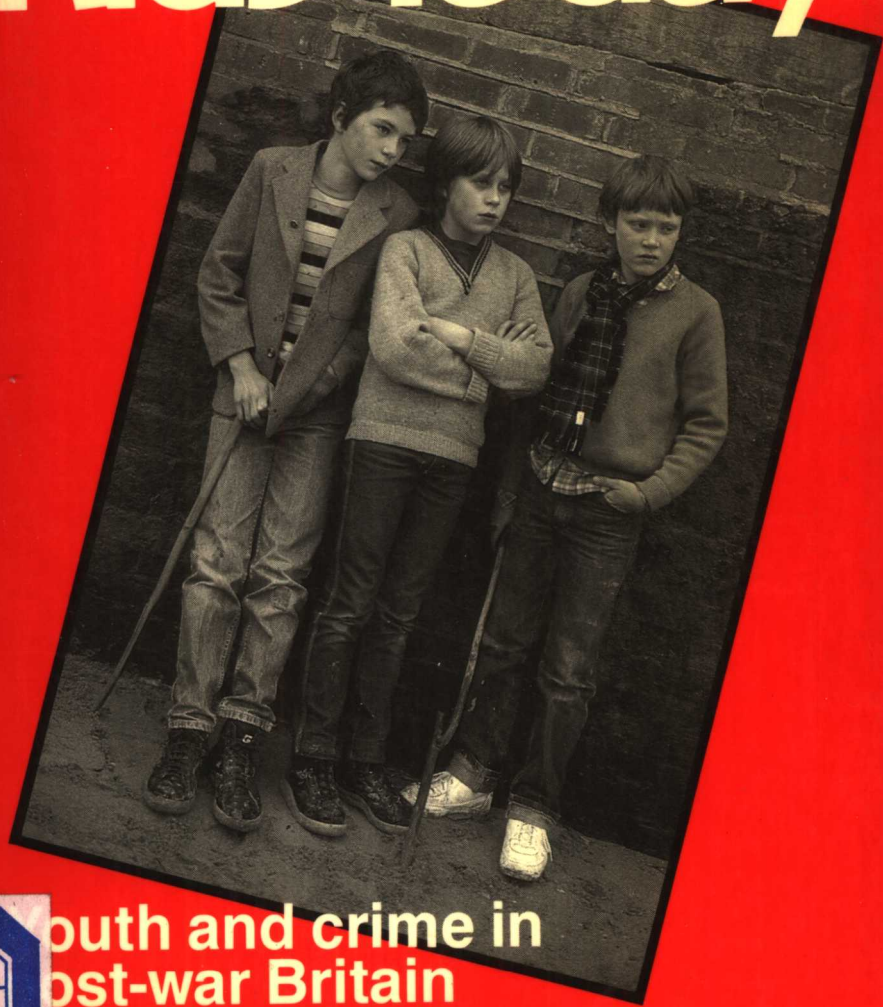# 'The Trouble with Kids Today'

Youth and crime in post-war Britain

John Muncie

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Introduction

Young people have probably attracted more public criticism in Britain since the Second World War than almost any other social group. Both academic and popular analyses of their behaviour, life-styles and leisure pursuits have resulted in their definition as a major social problem. The very category of 'youth' seems to attract adult censure and moral outrage. In the 1950s these fears centred around the image of a teenager who had no respect for authority and lived in a world unpenetrated by adult interests. Teddy boys were Britain's first post-war teenage 'folk devils' popularized as ruthless, violent, depraved and sex-crazed. In the 1960s student unrest, the increased use of drugs, from pep-pills to LSD, mods and rockers, sexual permissiveness, football hooliganism, vandalism, truanting, skinheads and rock festivals all combined to amplify public concern over 'troublesome kids'. In the 1970s black youth, mugging, the blank generation, punks, violence in schools and groups of 'vicious young criminals' were the most potent symbols of the 'youth condition', while in the 1980s, the sight of thousands of young people rioting on the streets completely mystified adult sensibilities. The youth of contemporary Britain continue to be a source of anxiety and despair for adults. 'Hooligan', 'teenager', 'criminal' and 'delinquent' have become almost synonymous terms in describing young people's deviant patterns of behaviour. The major response of the state, despite the 'liberal' intentions of the Children and Young Persons Act of 1969, has been characteristically punitive. In the 1980s more young people are being arrested and placed in custody than ever before.

The increasing attention drawn to youthful 'delinquency' has been largely responsible for the resurgence of British sociology's interest in criminology over the past three decades. Coupled with a growing body of interest in cultural studies, social policy research and socio-legal studies, sociological criminology has now

overturned psychology's traditional dominance in studies of delinquency.

This book offers a critical overview of this research. It also provides an analysis of how the *media* looks at youth today, how youth has been treated historically and it finishes with an examination of the contemporary *practice* of youth control. Chapter 1 examines how the daily press informs the general public about youth in contemporary society. It focuses on the processes by which the press has presented youth as a major social problem. Using various forms of analysis derived from media studies, the chapter provides a critical analysis of popular images of youth, crime and deviance. Youth has not always been seen as a distinct social problem. Chapter 2 traces the origins of moral panics about youth dating from the early nineteenth century and examines the implications of the use of such categories as 'childhood', 'juvenile delinquency' and 'adolescence'. It identifies key shifts in the analysis of youth and situates various theories which have attempted to explain the causes of youth's delinquency in their specific historical settings. The chapter thus provides both a 'history of the theory', and also, in its organization, a 'theory of the history' of 'youth as a social problem'. Chapter 3 brings this history and theory up to date. It illustrates how theory has been, or can be, applied to contemporary cases of youthful criminality. It concentrates on five specific forms of crime – theft, criminal damage, robbery with violence, riotous assembly and public order offences. Chapter 4 shifts the focus away from those youth legally defined as criminal to those youth socially defined as deviant. It provides a critical analysis of British subcultural studies of youth. The relationships between deviance, leisure pursuits and subcultural style are examined, as well as the processes whereby particular aspects of subcultural action have been subject to criminalization. Chapters 5 and 6 shift attention away from subcultural and ethnographic studies of youth, to questions of social reaction and institutional control. Chapter 5 looks at how the general parameters of youth control are contained within the processes of schooling, work, unemployment and policing. Chapter 6 examines in detail the more 'exceptional' interventions applied through the juvenile justice system which have to date found their most practical expression in the use of detention and youth custody centres. The book concludes by discussing how the 'problem of youth' has been addressed, and responded to, in the 1980s.

It is, however, important to emphasize at the outset that these sociologies of youth, crime and deviancy also have serious weaknesses. First, the most studied youth were also those most publicly identified as deviant or criminal. There is, as a result, an almost complete hiatus of research into youthful conformity. Second, sociological research has almost exclusively focused on white, male and working-class forms of deviancy. Feminist researchers have pointed to the significant absence of any consideration of girl delinquency. Youth culture theory has only in the past few years acknowledged this serious omission. Another startling absence, until the late 1970s, was any discussion of ethnic divisions and the existence of black youth subcultures. Thus while the sociologies of youth, crime and deviancy have generally operated under the global banner of *youth* studies, it is important to recognize that it is only *particular* elements of youth behaviour and *particular* sections of youth which have received anything like a sustained analysis.

This book should not be seen as an attempt to overcome these weaknesses. Rather its purpose is to amalgamate and draw together the many and diverse areas of research that have already been established. This is important because analyses of youth have, and continue to be, tied to particular disciplines and sub-disciplines. For example, studies of youth subcultures have been generally restricted to sociology, analyses of leisure pursuits to cultural studies, juvenile courts to socio-legal studies, youth offender rates to criminology, youth unemployment to social policy and so on. This book is an attempt to draw these disparate areas together for the first time.

The needs of the undergraduate student have remained firmly in mind. Although some familiarity with sociological concepts is assumed, the book attempts to provide an exposition of criminological theory that is not only accessible, but that also suggests ways in which it can be responded to critically. As always, there is no real substitute for reading the original texts. I can only hope to have offered a flavour of these here. For this reason each chapter concludes with recommendations for further reading.

In many ways this book is the outcome of some of the work I have been engaged in during the past four years at the Open University. The teaching texts prepared for courses on social work, popular culture and crime have provided a firm basis for this book. In this respect I am indebted to Tony Bennett, John Clarke,

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1 Media images of youth

The majority of us rely on the mass media, particularly television and the popular press, for our information about the social world and the role and position of youth within it. Indeed a chief characteristic of living within large urban societies is that we depend on the media to learn not only of events occurring outside the nation, but also those happening closer to home. Without the social knowledge provided by the media we would in fact remain ignorant of current affairs and of the life-styles of social groups other than those in which we participate. The media thus play a major role in our perception and construction of the social world. Notwithstanding the problems of assessing public opinion and how it is informed, it can be safely argued that one of the major institutions that informs the public about 'youth as a social problem' is the national daily press.

'NEW PUNK CRAZE SHOCKS PARENTS'[1]*
'BANK PLOT KIDS ARE BUSTED'[2]
'230 YOUTHS ARRESTED IN SEASIDE GANG FIGHTS'[3]
'SCHOOLBOYS IN £42.000 SNATCH'[4]
'TEENAGE GANG ATTACKS LONE P.C.'[5]

Such headlines are as familiar as they are frequent. 'Teenagers', 'kids' and 'youths' are readily associated with a lack of discipline, violence and crime. Patricia Morgan, for example, has recently warned of a delinquent syndrome of 'new barbarism' in which youth seems to delight in crudity, cruelty and violence so that a 'frightening ugliness and hostility' pervades all human inter-action.[6] It is as if youth's very age automatically renders its behaviour newsworthy. The press seems continually concerned to report youthful behaviour in terms of its more bizarre and

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sensational aspects. This process is reinforced when seemingly unconnected events are clustered together to form an overall picture. On the August bank holiday weekend of 1982 *The Sunday Times* chose to place the following three stories together in a front page News Brief and report them in a similar vein:

The mods – 3,000 of them, with scooters – packed the ferries for a 'friendly invasion' of the Isle of Wight. Police called for reinforcements in case some were not so friendly.

The first soccer hooliganism was reported from Cleethorpes, where Leeds United fans smashed shop windows and damaged a hotel and a pub hours before the start of the second division game with Grimsby Town. Fourteen were arrested and kept in custody.

At Reading rock festival, police had made about 50 arrests, mainly for drug offences, by mid-afternoon. One fan was taken to hospital after being stabbed and more than 160 were being treated for minor injuries.[7]

Such selective reporting has serious social consequences. Between 1965 and 1979 national opinion polls discovered that juvenile crime was considered to be one of the most serious social problems faced by Britain. Respondents were asked whether they thought that crimes of violence, juvenile crime, drug-taking, organized crime, rape, drunkenness and prostitution were very serious social problems. The category of juvenile crime was consistently evoked more than organized crime, rape, drunkenness or prostitution. It never failed to produce less than a 50 per cent 'yes' response rate and was only considered slightly less serious than crimes of violence.[8]

Against this background there has been lamentably little research in Britain which details how youth is in fact reported in the press. To date our only available informatioin is supplied by Bradford University's Social Work Research Unit which scanned eight national daily newspapers and two local (Yorkshire) papers during June 1979.[9]

Any article which involved people between 11 and 19 years was analysed. The articles were categorized according to size, location and content, and each assigned an evaluation category (positive, negative, neutral) based on the researchers' assessment of the general feeling about adolescents which each article might arouse in the 'average' reader.

A total of 913 articles were analysed. The local *Bradford Telegraph and Argus* contained most stories (15 per cent of total) followed by the popular dailies, (between 10 per cent and 12 per cent of total), the serious dailies (between 7 per cent and 9 per cent of total) and the *Morning Star* (2 per cent of total). Their content analysis revealed that sporting stories accounted for 11.4 per cent of the total content, education 6.7 per cent, but most notably 34.9 per cent of all reports were related to crime in one form or another. Of these the most frequent category were crimes such as burglary, theft, vandalism and breach of the peace (9.2 per cent), murder (5.1 per cent), and sex crimes (2.3 per cent). Reporting was also found to be frequent where adolescents were the victims of such crimes as assault. The authors concluded that:

according to our daily press a typical adolescent is a sporting youngster, criminally inclined, likely to be murdered or injured in an accident.[10]

However, their evaluation variable was symmetrically distributed. 52 per cent of the articles were evaluated neutrally, 24 per cent positively and 24 per cent negatively, indicating that the press do not present a totally negative picture of youthful behaviour. However there are many aspects of young people's lives which the press never mention. The researchers found hardly any discussion of education or (un)employment issues. Only 2 per cent of the articles discussed youth employment, despite the fact that the numbers of unemployed youth were growing rapidly. In 1979 over 20 per cent of under-18s were without a job. Stories concerned with education only amounted to 6.7 per cent of the total (almost half of these appearing in the *Guardian*'s weekly feature 'Education Guardian').

Their report suggests, therefore, that a degree of imbalance exists in reporting. The most newsworthy aspects of young people would appear to be their involvement in crime – perhaps over-represented than its occurrence in real life would warrant.

Moreover, although some of the positive achievements of youth are given coverage, this is accounted for by a small number of media and sporting personalities.

Entertainers, sports stars and the children of the aristocracy and the famous 'tend to commandeer the limelight in a stereotyped presentation of the "good life"'.[11] Those youth occupying a different social position tend only to be presented as subversive or criminal.

This simple dichotomy of the young offender or troublemaker

(negative images of youth) set against the young media star (positive images of youth) tends to dominate how the media inform us about youth.

A good example of this process in action was supplied by the *Daily Mirror* in February 1982. Its front page was shared equally between a report of children rioting in St Saviour's junior school in Toxteth, Liverpool, and a full-length picture of Toyah Willcox voted Best Female Singer in the British Rock and Pop Awards. Their respective headlines – 'Girl 10, Led School Terror Gangs' and 'Toyah's the pop queen' – told their own stories.[12] Interestingly, both had claims to newsworthiness because they both presented images of deviancy within youth. The girl in the Toxteth school was depicted as uncontrollable and violent, while Toyah Willcox was seen as deserving of media attention because of her flamboyant and outrageous use of fashion and subcultural style (see Figure 1). Both of these images of youth contained elements considered to be extraordinary and were therefore newsworthy. The essential difference between them, of course, lies in one image being available for commercial popularization, whereas the other supports a general and popular mobilization of concern for lack of control in our schools. Such a juxtaposition of images increases the tendency of the press to inflate the criminal propensities of some youth. For example, the girl rioter described in the *Daily Mirror* as an extortionist gang leader, arsonist, tearaway and vandal, was four days later the subject of a *Sunday Times* in-depth analysis which gave a completely different view of the girl's character and performance in school. This article described her as 'bright, highly imaginative, good at games' and discovered that her last two school reports were generous with praise of her academic abilities.[13] Such investigative reporting however only occurred after the terms of reference – 'mini mafia leader', 'mini mobster' – had been firmly established by the popular press. Such images as those supplied by the *Daily Star*, which described her as 'big, black and really nasty', arguably had the most lasting impact, even when their accuracy was in question.[14]

But why are such images of youth constructed by the press? How are they maintained? What are their social consequences?

To answer these questions we need to broaden our range of inquiry to examine more generally the relationship between youth crime and the press, via the three interrelated concepts of 'news values', 'media definitions' and 'moral panics'.