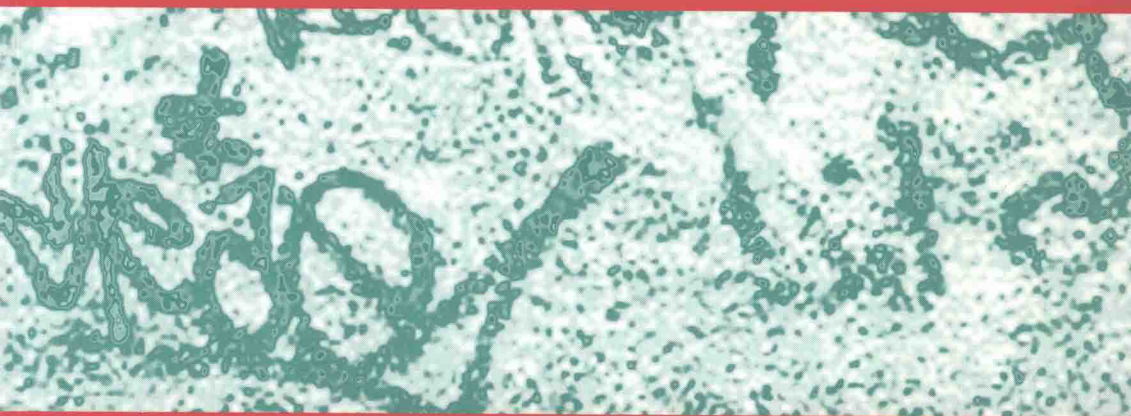


# Youth and Crime

A Critical Introduction



John Muncie

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# YOUTH AND CRIME

**For Lynn and Ella**

# PREFACE

The aim of *Youth and Crime: A Critical Introduction* is to provide an accessible textbook to facilitate the study and teaching of one of the major social issues of our time. In the main, it selects and condenses the major debates about youth and crime that can be found in contemporary criminology. But criminology as a discipline is notoriously hard to define. Not only has it in itself inspired a diverse range of knowledges, but its boundaries have become increasingly expanded and blurred. As a result this book moves beyond the traditional concerns of criminology and the search for the causes of youth crime and draws upon other knowledges derived from sociology, media analysis, cultural studies, women's studies, social history, youth studies, criminal justice studies and social policy. As with all textbooks a number of hard choices have had to be made. Every year hundreds of books, articles and commentaries are written on this subject. It is one on which it seems we all have a ready opinion. The material included here has been guided by the organization of the book into seven seemingly distinct (but in reality overlapping) areas:

Chapter 1 examines the nature of current assessments of the 'youth crime problem' as proffered by media representations, political discourses and statistical data. It offers a critical review of these sources, noting their partiality and the significant absences in their common terms of reference.

Chapter 2 draws upon a wide range of 'revisionist' social history research that has burgeoned since the 1970s to explore not only the origins of the 'youth' and 'crime' discourses, but also their most resilient and recurring features.

Chapters 3 and 4 are a systematic guide to traditional and modern criminological theory, noting in particular how much of this endeavour has been driven by an academic mirroring of the populist obsession with the 'youth problem'. Chapter 3 looks at a diverse range of theory, emanating from anthropology, biology, psychology and sociology which has tried to isolate key causes of youth crime. Chapter 4, in contrast, explores theories emanating from radical and realist perspectives which are either more attuned to the processes whereby youth have become criminalized, or which have abandoned the search for causes in favour of approaches which emphasize how youth can or should be controlled.

Chapter 5 draws largely on cultural studies to assess how youthful non-conformity, in the form of gangs, subcultures, countercultures, leisure and cultural consumption, can best be conceptualized and made

sense of. It alerts the reader to the fact that notions of the 'youth problem' are generated not simply through concerns about crime, but through the 'threat' of alternative lifestyles and consumer choices.

Chapter 6 moves on to explore how 'youth' is also a key site of social regulation. In particular it notes how many aspects of social policy in the UK – from employment, youth training and housing to crime prevention – have increasingly come to define the parameters of what it means to be young.

Chapter 7 is a thematic analysis of the diverse and contested strategies that make up the complex of contemporary forms of youth justice.

Throughout the book the importance of comparative and historical analysis is stressed. It is subtitled 'A Critical Introduction' for various reasons. Firstly, it is designed to offer a critical social science perspective on popular and commonsense understandings of 'youth crime'. Secondly, it acknowledges that there are no uncontested positions to be found in this area. Rather the book has been written to encourage the reader to develop a fuller and more measured response to the debates and issues involved. Thirdly, the book reviews a wide range of relevant research, but unlike many other textbooks, it does not claim that its contents can be objective or fully comprehensive. Its key intent is to encourage a critical reflection on the twin concepts of 'youth' and 'crime'. For this reason it deliberately and, through necessity, continually moves beyond the traditional confines of criminology.

A number of teaching devices have also been built into every chapter. Each begins with a short *overview* of the main themes which follow. This is followed by a list of *key terms* associated with the subject under discussion. A *glossary* of all of these key terms is provided at the end of the book. At the end of each chapter a *summary* outlines the major points raised and this is followed by a list of *study questions* designed again to facilitate further reflection and analysis. As the book is a primary teaching and learning resource each chapter also concludes with a brief *reading guide* designed to encourage the in-depth and broader reading necessary for the full complexities of the subject matter to be grasped.

One lasting impression that I have gained from researching and writing this book is that many critical academic discourses about 'youth' and 'crime' have become less dogmatic and more attuned to notions of contingency, difference and diversity. At the turn of the century we may indeed be entering a period of greater uncertainty and self doubt. My hope is that the reader will leave this text, not with a feeling that youth crime has been (or can be) resolved, but with the knowledge that they are less unsure of the complexities involved.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, thanks are due to Sue Lacey who typed all of this text and will probably remain one of a very few to have to read every word, from cover to cover. She is not the only one who is waiting for voice recognition to be perfected. Most of the book was written during 1997–8, but it draws on much of my previous work for the Open University, in particular those contributions made to courses in social policy and popular culture, as well as criminology, penology and criminal justice studies. This work now straddles some twenty years and during this time I have been fortunate to work in various capacities with Hilary Canneaux, Pat Carlen, John Clarke, Stan Cohen, Geoff Esland, Nigel Draper, Ross Fergusson, Mike Fitzgerald, Stuart Hall, Fiona Harris, Gordon Hughes, Mary Langan, Gail Lewis, Eugene McLaughlin, Gregor McLennan, Geoffrey Pearson, David Pye, Roger Sapsford, Esther Saraga, Phil Scraton, Joe Sim, Richard Sparks and Ian Taylor as well as numerous Open University consultants and tutors and thousands of OU students. Their influence is undoubtedly reflected somewhere in this book's structure and content. It was also given a head start by my previous mapping of the field in *The Trouble with Kids Today: Youth and Crime in Post-War Britain*. Where appropriate, some of that text has been reproduced and reworked here. In addition I was lucky enough to persuade Gordon Hughes, Victor Jupp and Mike Presdee to comment on drafts of the whole book, while Clive Emsley provided valuable comments on Chapter 2 and Eugene McLaughlin reviewed Chapters 5 and 6. Finally, thanks to Gillian Stern at Sage who remained wholly committed to this project despite my own and Ella's best efforts to delay its completion.

John Muncie  
October 1998



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## CHAPTER I

# YOUTH CRIME: REPRESENTATIONS, DISCOURSES AND DATA

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## Overview

Chapter 1 examines:

- how young people have come to be regarded as a social problem;
- how the youth question is frequently collapsed into questions of crime and disorder;
- how young people are represented in media and political discourses;
- the nature and extent of young offending;



- young people as offenders and as victims of crime;
- the usefulness of the concepts of 'youth' and 'crime'.

## Key Terms

corporate crime  
crime  
criminalization  
delinquency  
deviance  
discourse  
folk devil  
hidden crime  
moral panic  
official statistics

persistent offending  
protracted adolescence  
recording of crime  
reporting of crime  
representation  
self reports  
social constructionism  
status offence  
victim surveys  
youth

This introductory chapter is designed to promote a critical understanding of the youth–crime nexus. The equation of these two categories is widely employed and for many is accepted as common sense. Stories about youth and crime appear regularly in the media and the official crime statistics seem to show that this preoccupation is entirely justified. But how far does the media reflect social reality and how much is it able to define it? How valid and reliable are the criminal statistics? By asking these questions the chapter draws attention to how the condition of youth and the problem of crime come to be defined in particular circumscribed ways. Its critical starting point is to view 'crime' and 'youth' as social constructions. That is, it explores how certain images and notions of youth crime have come to be institutionalized, sedimented or 'taken for granted' as facts and objective knowledges. It also pays attention to the ways in which these 'constructions' have been challenged, or can be contested, by empirical and theoretical research. In short, it provides an overview of the presences and absences routinely employed in discourses of the 'youth crime problem'.

### 1.1 The Threat of Youth

What is it about 'youthfulness' or 'being a teenager' that appears to be a constant source of fascination and concern for politicians, media commentators and academic analysts? Why has this age group, in particular, been afforded such critical attention? The problem years of