

# DifferentTakes

---

## The Scapegoating of America's Youth: Past and Present (Mis)Conceptions

by Ryn Gluckman

In December 1995 John DiIulio, former head of Bush's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, published a series of apocalyptic reports predicting a new breed of violent juvenile delinquents, the "teenage superpredators." Most famous among these reports was the widely read "The Coming of the Super-Predators."<sup>i</sup> Even as adult and youth crime indices began to drop from their 1994 peaks, DiIulio, with a handful of other criminologists and academics, warned of violence rooted in the inner cities – specifically in young black men raised by single mothers – that would spill over into unsuspecting white suburbs and infect white kids with the superpredator syndrome. Their

warnings were based upon the "youth bulge" theory which blames increasing crime and social disorder on rising numbers of young people. As DiIulio testified in front of Congress in 1995:

*The moral and civic arguments for acting to save America's at-risk black inner-city children should be enough for any decent American to want to act... While there is as yet no strong statistical evidence that inner-city crime has 'spilled over' into up-scale urban neighborhoods or adjacent suburbs, the demographics of the problem make the inner cities a ticking crime bomb.<sup>ii</sup>*

Fast forward to 2001. Contrary to the fears of DiIulio and his colleagues, statistics from the FBI's 1999 crime report show that violent juvenile crimes are at their lowest point in twenty years. The U.S. Departments of Education and Justice noted that there is a one in two million chance of being killed in a school. Out of all youth-committed crimes, embezzlement increased the most since 1995. Perhaps DiIulio should author a new report: "The Coming of the Super-Embezzlers."

---

### DifferentTakes

c/o Population & Development Program  
Hampshire College-CLPP  
Amherst, MA 01002-5001 USA  
413/559-6046 fax 413/559-6045  
<http://hamp.hampshire.edu/~clpp/popdev.html>

Opinions expressed in this publication  
are those of the individual authors unless  
otherwise specified.

Yet, despite every indication that American youth are not crazed, self-serving criminals with a hair-trigger mentality, the American adult public continues to respond to young people as if they are wildly out of control. The U.S. remains the only industrialized country to sentence minors to death, executing 17 youth since the reinstatement of the death penalty in 1976.<sup>iii</sup> Although school crime is at an all-time low, armed guards, metal detectors, and clear backpacks have made their way into the typical American school setting, indicating an increasingly narrow gap between the public school and

the prison. In the past twenty years, federal and state policy makers have advocated for more and more punitive measures for juvenile offenders. These measures often result in the incarceration of 14, 15, and 16 year olds in adult prisons where they are more likely to be beaten, raped, or commit suicide. All of these trends are manifestations of an unspoken but almost tangible sentiment: America needs to protect itself from its own children.

This sentiment is a far cry from the notions of rehabilitation that we have held to be fundamental to the juvenile justice system since its inception a century ago. Conservatives argue that the shift from rehabilitative to punitive policies for youth is indicative of an actual change in the nature of young people, while liberals contest that it is people's perceptions of youth that have changed.

In reality, neither one of these assessments is quite accurate. The incidence of juvenile crime has been, at different times, both higher and lower than it is today. Juvenile crime rates correspond less with growth of the youth population, and more with the number of youth living in poverty.<sup>iv</sup> Media cries of "What's wrong with our children?!" after every school shooting may make you think that there was a time in the nostalgic American past when grown-ups did not believe that youth were out of control. But in truth, American adults have always believed that youth in their time are more violent than kids in the past.<sup>v</sup>

So, if not due to an actual increase in crime or change in perception, what is to account for the recent warehousing of youth in prisons and heavily guarded public schools? As it turns out, the answer may be found in the rise of the juvenile justice system one hundred years ago.

The first juvenile court was established in 1899 in the midst of what seemed like national chaos. While U.S. imperialism was at its height overseas, the increasing entry of immigrants into the U.S. gave birth to new communities of color in growing urban areas. Social Darwinism and eugenics were also at their height, positioning the white adult male as the archetype of superior human evolution. At the same time women were demanding not only entrance to college but participation in the public sphere, challenging traditional Victorian gender roles. The Industrial Revolution became a symbol of man's intellect and domination over nature, but some worried that it was a harbinger of a dehumanized world, ruled by technology.

To the white upper classes that headed social reform movements and held public office, it may have seemed as if the social order that had ensured their status and privilege was disintegrating. In the chaos of the turn of the century, concerns about the direction that the nation was taking were articulated through concerns about young people. Growing populations of immigrant youth represented a threat to white supremacy. The exclusion of youth from the work force as a result of child labor laws represented the increasing dominance of mechanization and technology in the industrial world. Out of attempts to maintain racial, class, gender, and national superiority emerged institutions that focused on the control and regulation of youth.

Today, we imagine the juvenile court at the turn of the century as a system that was rooted in an ideology of rehabilitation. In the name of rehabilitation, reformers advocated for a court system that had little legal formality. In theory, it was an attempt to create a civil rather than criminal process in which youth who entered the system were faced with "advocates" instead of "adversaries." In reality, informality of process gave the juvenile court coercive power to extend itself into the homes of those who were outside of middle class standards of "proper parents" or "normal adolescents." The lack of due process and documentation left the court with little accountability or responsibility for its treatment of parents or children. Families and youth were left vulnerable to the discrimination of the judges. Immigrant youth and poor youth, who made up the majority of juvenile arrests, were either shipped to reform homes in other parts of the country, used for labor, or put in adult prisons. The court also served as the enforcer of sex and gender norms, arresting disproportionate numbers of young women, particularly immigrant women, for arbitrary and vague sex offenses: staying away from home, masturbating, using

obscene language, "strutting about in a lascivious manner."<sup>vi</sup>

In this system, delinquency became an identification loaded with meaning about race, class, and sex norms and (mis)behaviors. All youth were considered as dependent upon adults to represent their best interest. In that status of dependence they were essentially voiceless – relying on adults to articulate their supposed best interests. Young people who were identified as "dependent," "neglected," or "delinquent," and thus subject to the court process, were used as tools to criminalize and regulate larger communities of color, poor people, and women. The standardized public school operated in much the same way – monitoring young people for signs of deviation and rewarding normality with privilege and abnormality with punishment. So much for rehabilitation.

At a time when many are pointing to a more punitive juvenile justice and public school system as evidence of some recent change in our attitudes toward young people, a historical examination of the rise of these institutions suggests that perhaps our attitudes are not so different after all.

There are some interesting parallels between the national environment in which the juvenile justice system arose a century ago and where we are as a nation today. We are facing a new century and a Republican Presidency that looks markedly different from that of the last eight years. We are also confronting an increasingly globalized economy in which the U.S. is a key player. The Census 2000 reported that California has no racial majority – and demographers predict that the rest of the country will soon follow suit. These characteristics seem a 21st century version of the social changes

that characterized the environment in which the juvenile court was born. Reformers of the late 19th century also faced an increasingly smaller world as a result of U.S. imperial projects and increased immigration. Much like the Internet signifies technology that we are unsure of our capacity to handle, commentators in the last century were expressing concerns over the growth of industrialization and the shifting nature of labor.

These similarities provide historical perspective on how youth are currently viewed in the U.S. and why they are being talked about in particular ways. Public debates today in which youth are either positioned alternatively as too young to know better or as primitive superpredators deny young people a personhood, voice, or agency in the here and now. These debates recall youth discourses of 1900 in which the social control of youth relied on their exclusion from public dialogue. Underlying these discourses one can read a century-old initiative to maintain race, class, and gender hierarchies through the bodies of youth in the face of a rapidly changing society.

*Ryn Gluckman is the Program Coordinator at the Population and Development Program at Hampshire College, and Program Assistant at the Civil Liberties and Public Policy Program. She is a writer and activist and is currently co-authoring a book on young people's oppression.*

## Endnotes

- <sup>i</sup> DiIulio, John. "The Coming of the Super-Predators." The Weekly Standard. 11/27/95. Vol. 1, No. 11, p. 23
- <sup>ii</sup> *DiIulio, John. "Crime in America: three Ways To Prevent It." Testimony: John J. DiIulio Professor of Politics and Public Affairs, Princeton University. House Judiciary Committee, Revised Crime Bill. 1/20/95*
- <sup>iii</sup> *Death Penalty Information Center.*  
<http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/juvchar.html#overview>
- <sup>iv</sup> *Kramer, Ronald. "Poverty, Inequality, and Youth Violence." The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science. 527. 1/2000 p. 123*  
*Males, Mike. The Scapegoat Generation. Common Courage Press: Maine. 1996 pp. 19, 20*
- <sup>v</sup> *Bernard, Thomas. The Cycle of Juvenile Justice. Oxford U. Press: New York 1991 pp. 32-33*
- <sup>vi</sup> *Schlossman, Steven, Wallach, Stephanie. "The Crime of Precocious Sexuality: Female Juvenile Delinquency in the Progressive Era." Harvard Educational Review. Vol. 18, No. 1, February 1987 pp. 68-9*

## For more information on the juvenile justice system and youth liberation:

Nancy Lesko.

Mike Males. The Scapegoat Generation.  
(Maine: Common Courage Press) 1996

The Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice/  
The Justice Policy Institute  
1234 Massachusetts Ave, NW, Suite C1009  
Washington, DC 20005  
(202) 737-7270  
(202) 737-7271 Fax  
[www.cjcj.org](http://www.cjcj.org)

WireTap  
"Youth in pursuit of the dirty truth."  
c/o Independent Media Institute  
77 Federal Street  
San Francisco, CA 94107  
415.284.1420  
<http://www.alternet.org/wiretapmag/>  
[info@wiretapmag.org](mailto:info@wiretapmag.org)