

# Juvenile Delinquency and Crime Theory in *Blackboard Jungle*

By

Kevin E. McCarthy

John Jay College of Criminal Justice

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The 1955 film *Blackboard Jungle* jarred audiences with its tale of unruly youths in a New York City high school, told over a rock and roll sound track. This article addresses whether the film's portrayal of 1950s juvenile delinquency was based on reality, whether the film supported recognized theories of criminal behavior, and how the film itself became an alleged cause of crime. The examination suggests that the 1950s concern about juvenile delinquency was legitimate, that rational choice theory appeared to be the film's preferred explanation for crime, and that the film was unfairly blamed as a cause of crime.

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## INTRODUCTION

In contrast to nostalgic images of Eisenhower-era placidity, the 1950s saw an unprecedented public concern about crime by American youth. Hollywood filmmakers, spurred by the competition of television, rushed to chronicle and exploit this interest. Three films stood out: *The Wild One*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, and *Blackboard Jungle*. *The Wild One* presented the sexually charged Marlon Brando as a motorcycle gang leader whose followers caused havoc in a small town. *Rebel Without a Cause* turned to the intense James Dean to display maladjustment and occasional law breaking by high school students in upper middle class suburbia. *Blackboard Jungle*, on the other hand, starred the virtuous Glenn Ford from the other side of the generation gap, and depicted the delinquency of multi-ethnic youths of the urban working class, some of whom sought to beat, rob, and rape adults. America's crime problem in subsequent decades would be closer to *Blackboard Jungle*'s depiction.

In 1954, Evan Hunter's novel *The Blackboard Jungle* caused a mild sensation with its depiction of crime and educational dysfunction in a vocational high school in New York City. The film adaptation soon followed as the article-less *Blackboard Jungle*. While the film stayed close to the novel and even toned down scenes to conform to Hollywood conventions, the impact of the film far exceeded that of Hunter's work. Societal issues of the 1950s -- from failing schools to race relations, from urban transitions to responses to crime, and from rock and roll to the Cold War -- were mixed in the film like the varied students were mixed in the classroom. The film's purpose, as claimed in a scrolling prologue, was to express concern over the causes and effects of juvenile delinquency, especially "when this delinquency boils over into our schools."<sup>1</sup> Regardless of whether that was, indeed, its purpose, the film did present bold images

of delinquency, along with dialogue and circumstances that reflected a variety of theories of the causes of juvenile delinquency. Ultimately, according to some public officials and commentators, the film itself became one of the causes of delinquency.

### FROM BOOK TO SCREEN

Born Salvatore Lombino and later more famous for detective stories under his Ed McBain pseudonym, Evan Hunter briefly taught after World War II at a vocational high school in the Bronx. The novel *The Blackboard Jungle* was set in the post-war 1950s, but few aspects seemed distinctive to that period. The misbehaving students could have been the pre-war Dead End kids with a bit more ethnic diversity. Although the students all wore “tee shirt and dungarees” (Hunter, 1954, p. 66), the novel did not grasp the emerging, separatist youth culture of the 1950s. Hunter seemed more focused on peppering his work with soft-core descriptions of the seductive teacher, Miss Hammond. The novel was an expansion of Hunter’s short story *To Break the Wall*, which introduced some of the characters, but was limited to describing a single fight between teacher and students (Hunter, 1998).

All major characters made the transition intact from Hunter’s novel to the film, including novice teacher Richard Dadier (Glenn Ford), delinquent student Artie West (Vic Morrow), and African-American student leader Gregory Miller (Sydney Poitier). Writer-director Richard Brooks was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Screenplay, ultimately losing to Paddy Chayefsky for another New York story, *Marty*. *Blackboard Jungle* lifted most of its major scenes directly from the novel, often with identical dialogue. Consistent with standards of the time, some scenes were modified. The remark “think of the pussy” (p. 57), in a discussion in the novel by male teachers about the possibilities of teaching in an all-girls’ school, was eliminated in the film. The important scene of student Morales (Rafael Campos) telling a story to a tape recorder changed his repeated uses of “fuckin’” in the novel (pp. 144-145) to “stinkin’” in the film. The novel’s description of West unzipping his pants and approaching Dadier after being denied a bathroom pass was dropped entirely.

Some changes assisted in delivering the story to the 1950s. The film showed a number of students wearing leather jackets (*The Wild One* was released before shooting started on *Blackboard Jungle*) and sporting piled-high pompadours (not part of the less youth-oriented *The Wild One*) to create scenes distinctive to the mid-1950s. Neither the advisory prologue nor the scene of Dadier visiting a suburban school appeared in the novel. Although likely intended to appease the Motion Picture Production Code and other censoring influences, the prologue and the school visit also served to position the film at the center of the debate over social issues of the time. A subcommittee of the United States Senate had already begun a highly publicized investigation into the relationship between motion pictures and juvenile delinquency (U.S. Senate, 1956).

The most striking change from the novel to the film was the soundtrack’s use of *Rock Around the Clock* (DeKnight & Freedman, 1954). As filmed, the production was in danger of being stuck in a bygone musical time: when disruptive students in the novel smashed a teacher’s collection of jazz records, they called out for their musical preferences of Perry Como and Tony Bennett, while the film only slightly updated their tastes when they asked for Frank Sinatra. The

bold use of *Rock Around the Clock* managed to muffle the other parts of the soundtrack and dialogue that were becoming dated in the swiftly changing youth culture.

Different stories have been told of how writer-director Brooks came upon *Rock Around the Clock*. Brooks contended in a 1965 article that he had heard *Rock Around the Clock* on the radio some years before making the film, but the song was actually recorded less than one year before the film's release (Brooks, 1965; Dawson, 2005). A more likely version gives credit to the musical tastes of Glenn Ford's young son who bought a 78 rpm copy of *Rock Around the Clock* in 1954. Brooks later visited the Ford home and may have borrowed some of the youngster's records (Ford, 2004). *Rock Around the Clock* blared over the film's opening and closing, and an instrumental version of the song was used in the brutal scene of the alleyway beating of Dadier and another teacher. The song, a mesh of western swing with rhythm and blues by the underrated Bill Haley and His Comets, was re-released with *Blackboard Jungle* in 1955 and became a huge hit.

### GENUINE DANGER OR MORAL PANIC

Jock Young applied the term "moral panic" to describe an overblown public concern about deviant conduct (1971). Later theorists set forth elements of a moral panic that included (1) a heightened level of concern due to certain behavior of a certain group, (2) hostility toward an identified group that engaged in the undesirable behavior, (3) agreement within society as a whole that a real threat was presented by the group and its behavior, (4) behavior seen by many as generating a greater threat than indicated by the objective reality, and (5) a fairly sudden eruption of the moral panic (Goode & Ben-Yahuda, 1994). The clamor over juvenile delinquency in the 1950s met some of these elements. There was clearly a heightened level of concern over teenage behavior, and the concern seemed to escalate quickly. In 1952, a prominent series of lectures about issues facing American education did not even mention juvenile delinquency (Conant, 1952). The topic would have seemed unavoidable just a few years later.

Young particularly emphasized the role of the media in provoking moral panics (1971). Whether or not concern over juvenile delinquency heated up to the level of a moral panic, the media certainly fanned the flames. Presidential aspirant Estes Kefauver conducted televised Senate hearings about films and juvenile delinquency, and *The Ladies Home Journal* serialized Evan Hunter's novel. The film *Blackboard Jungle* may have marked a high point of the media frenzy over juvenile delinquency, which was quite an accomplishment in the context of the decline of Hollywood's influence as it lost ground to television.

Assessments of juvenile delinquency encounter obstacles in the basic terminology. The term "juvenile delinquency" came into common usage in the 1950s. Disaffected youths were referred to as "JDs," and doo-wop singer Frankie Lymon crooned awkwardly to assure listeners, "I'm not a juvenile delinquent" (Goldner & Levy, 1956).<sup>2</sup> Still, the definition of a "juvenile" was imprecise. For a number of legal purposes in the 1950s, such as voting or drinking alcohol, the age for adulthood was usually twenty-one. For adult liability for criminal conduct, most states provided that eighteen-year olds qualified, but some states drew the line at different ages. The average citizen whose car was stolen by an eighteen-year-old high school student might

have considered the thief to be a juvenile delinquent; however, the offender would have been treated as an adult in most states.

To add to the murkiness, the term “delinquency” covered a variety of behavior. In a legal sense, the primary purpose of the word was to express the distinction between the offenses committed by adults and those committed by juveniles. In addition, some conduct that was perfectly legal for an adult, such as leaving home or not attending school, could result in a delinquency charge against a juvenile. Once in the legal system, juveniles were treated differently than adults. Some police departments had officers who specialized in handling juvenile matters, as portrayed by Edward Platt in *Rebel Without a Cause*. The juvenile justice process usually occurred in secret proceedings that protected the identity of the accused in juvenile (or family) court rather than the public proceedings of an adult court. The result in juvenile court proceedings might be called an adjudication of delinquency, rather than a conviction of a crime. The punishment might send the offender to a reform school, not a prison. In the climactic fight scene in *Blackboard Jungle*, student Belazi (Dan Terranova) grabbed a switchblade knife and announced, “I’m not going to that reform school!”

The question of whether the perceived threat of 1950s juvenile delinquency was much greater than the actual threat may be unanswerable. There was certainly an exaggeration of the threat on the part of some. For instance, Wertham (1953) drew wild inferences of causation between comic books and juvenile delinquency in *Seduction of the Innocent* and in his congressional testimony. Nevertheless, many reasonable observers concluded that juvenile crime was, indeed, increasing in the early 1950s (e.g., Silberman, 1978; Warshow, 1970). Teeters and Matza (1962) conducted a convincing analysis of juvenile crime statistics, while acknowledging limitations of the data, and found that juvenile delinquency did rise significantly in the early 1950s.

### **DEPRAVED, DEPRIVED, OR RATIONAL**

Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, working in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and influenced by Darwin’s theories, described some criminals as biological throwbacks who failed to develop on the evolutionary tree (Lombroso, 1968/1899). *Blackboard Jungle* appeared to draw from this theory in the opening scene that featured Bill Haley and His Comets on the soundtrack and showed the all-male students acting rowdy in the schoolyard, including some walking on their hands. A tall metal fence enclosed the schoolyard, suggesting a need to separate the students from the law-abiding world outside. The scene became more explicitly zoo-like as a half-dozen students reached through the bars of the fence toward a passing female while making crude sounds, gestures, and facial expressions. The animalistic image was consistent with later dialogue. Cynical teacher Murdock (Louis Calhern) called the students “those wild animals,” and even Dadier referred to his “class of screaming wild animals.”

With its setting in a boys’ high school, *Blackboard Jungle* was consistent with the image that the criminal world was essentially male. The only substantial female characters of the film, teacher Lois Hammond (Margaret Hayes) and the pregnant Anne Dadier (Anne Francis), were both victimized by delinquent students. The student behavior was so uncontrolled that Hammond was warned that she would need the National Guard to protect her from students if

she dressed in a slightly provocative manner. While *Blackboard Jungle* contained no dialogue suggestive of specific biological causations of crime, the rowdy aggressiveness by the male students that segued into criminality would appear to support studies that associate crime with higher levels of testosterone (Fishbein, 1990), and also studies that find such associations to be stronger in lower socio-economic classes (Booth & Osgood, 1993).

An alleged link between low intelligence and a tendency toward criminal behavior has been strongly attacked by critics but retains traction among those who see inherent biological causes of crime (Herrnstein, 1983). In addition, low academic performance is recognized as being highly correlated with delinquency (Felson & Staff, 2006). Although the novel's North Manual Trades High School dropped the word "Trades" for the film to avoid stigmatizing vocational schools, the movie's school was clearly vocational. Dadier's English class suffered disruption from deafening noise from the school's machine shop, and Miller attended automotive classes. Especially through the contrast drawn by Dadier's visit to the suburban school, it was obvious to filmgoers that North Manual High School was not filled with top students. The novel told of Dadier discovering that the I.Q. scores for his students, with the exception of Miller, were extremely low, but the film removed most of the novel's direct references to a lack of intelligence among the students and did not suggest it as a causation of delinquency. On the contrary, the smiling Santini (Jameel Farah, better known as Jamie Farr) of the film was called an "idiot boy," but he seemed among the most law abiding of the students. In the final fight scene, he speared the knife-wielding Belazi with an American flag to rescue Dadier.

One area of crime theory that seemed to receive little attention in *Blackboard Jungle* would have involved psychological explanations of human behavior. Reiss (1951) postulated that recidivist juvenile delinquents suffered from weak superego controls that impaired their ability to follow social norms. One might imagine that the incorrigible Artie West could have been diagnosed with some strain of mental disorder, but the film never specifically suggested psychological problems as underlying student behavior. Psychological influences on delinquent behavior would achieve higher prominence a few months later with the release of the pseudo-Freudian *Rebel Without a Cause*.

Contrary to suggesting any biological or psychological influences on his behavior, the insolent West offered Dadier a rather thorough and logical explanation of his delinquency:

A year from now the Army comes by and they say, "OK, Artie West, you get into uniform, and you be a soldier and save the world, and you get your lousy head blowed right off." Or maybe, maybe I get a year in jail and maybe when I come out, the Army they don't want Artie West to be a soldier no more. Maybe what I get is, is out. (Berman & Brooks, 1955)

As West lectured Dadier in the *noir* street scene ("You're in my classroom now"), a Marine Corps recruiting poster was displayed on a newsstand. Later, when other students responded to a cartoon movie shown to the class, West concluded that the lesson of the story was that "crime always pays." West's remarks strongly supported the rational choice theory of

crime, sometimes called the classical school. According to the long established theory, criminals commit crimes because they freely choose to do so, and they make the choice after weighing the perceived advantages and disadvantages (Beccaria, 1986; Bentham, 1948;). In making the transition from novel to film, writer/director Brooks seemed to emphasize rational choice theory. The major crimes that occurred in school, the attempted rape of Lois Hammond and the destruction of a math teacher's jazz record collection, were of an opportunistic or impulsive nature, and both appeared in the novel and the film; however, Brooks added the scenes of West's speech to Dadier and the financially motivated truck hijacking, both of which supported the notion of juvenile delinquents making rational, if unwise, choices.

The only other time in the film that a student specifically explained the thought process behind whether or not to engage in delinquency came after the climactic classroom showdown. As the incident developed, Stoker (Paul Mazursky) assisted West by pulling the window shade and blocking the door. Even during the fight, Stoker appeared to consider joining the fray on West's side until Miller threatened him ("Come on, boy. Just make a move."). Stoker offered his own explanation for not helping West as Dadier led the two vanquished delinquents to the principal's office. In an exchange that did not occur in the novel, Miller asked, "What made you change your mind?" Stoker responded, "They did," referring to West and Belazi. Again, Brooks wrote dialogue that supported a rational choice theory of the students deciding on their own how they would behave.

It might be noted that beyond the crime theory supported in West's street speech to Dadier, there was some significance to West speaking at all about what motivated him. In *The Wild One*, gang leader Johnny (Marlon Brando) famously declined to answer directly the question of what he was rebelling against, instead responding with the question of "Whatd' ya got?" West, on the other hand, was never asked the question of why he rebelled, but he volunteered the lengthy answer.

*Blackboard Jungle* leaned toward using some sociological explanations of behavior as reasons for student delinquency. The so-called Chicago School of environmental theorists found that particular urban neighborhoods had high rates of juvenile delinquency over several decades, even after substantial ethnic turnover among residents (Shaw & McKay, 1946). This "zone" theory contended, in essence, that juvenile delinquents were produced by bad neighborhoods. *Blackboard Jungle* certainly depicted the troublesome high school students as members of the urban working class. Although Miller took Dadier to what he called the "colored neighborhood" where he lived and worked in an auto repair shop, there was no mention of where other students lived. Some students arrived at school by bus and Morales described taking the subway, so one might conclude that the vocational high school drew the multi-ethnic students from various neighborhoods, thereby limiting the application of zone theory.

Robert Merton (1938) postulated that the structure of American society produced a shortage of legitimate opportunities for the lower classes to achieve wealth and other accepted cultural goals. The resulting frustration or strain would give rise to a number of possible responses, some of which involved criminal behavior (Merton, 1938). Similarly, Cloward and Ohlin (1960) saw differential opportunities in youths gravitating toward crime because they lacked access to legitimate means to achieve success but did have access to the illegitimate

means offered by criminal elements in their neighborhoods. In *Growing Up Absurd*, Paul Goodman contemporaneously described 1950s youths as facing a new economic pyramid in which those at the bottom were in danger of falling completely out of society. Automation and discrimination were contributing factors, and the “economy of abundance” of the 1950s accelerated the problem by frustrating the underprivileged with unattainable standards. The result was an attitude of fatalism among those drifting toward delinquency (Goodman, 1956).

Dadier’s classroom in *Blackboard Jungle* certainly carried suggestions of strain, lack of access to legitimate means, and fatalism. Veteran teacher Murdoch called the school “the garbage can of the educational system.” The intelligent Miller stated that he stopped trying to achieve in school because other students and his parents did not “give a hoot.” Dadier expressed his frustration that the “kids don’t care about an education,” and Dadier’s college professor acknowledged that teachers were unprepared for “certain children of this generation.” Nevertheless, Dadier’s dogged efforts to control his classroom and convince Miller to stay in school were well placed. Not long before the film’s production, Reiss (1951) emphasized school behavior problems and truancy as indicators of whether juvenile offenders failed under probationary supervision.

The apparent alienation of Dadier’s students from mainstream America suggested the “delinquent subculture” described by Albert Cohen. Cohen’s major work was published in the same year as the release of *Blackboard Jungle* and examined the same demographic group depicted in the film – young, urban, working class males (Cohen, 1955). Being stuck at the bottom of a “status hierarchy” as measured by conventional criteria, some youths adjusted by establishing their own group norms. Cohen emphasized the role of gangs in this delinquent subculture, in another similarity between his subjects and some of Dadier’s students.

Cohen also observed that members of the delinquent subculture might direct criminal conduct toward activities that were not necessarily utilitarian, that is, not money-producing (Cohen, 1955). The only seriously delinquent incident of the film that involved most of the members of Dadier’s class was the destruction of the teacher’s record collection, led by West. According to Cohen, juvenile delinquents were not seeking their own route to financial success but were seeking status among peers. In a scene that did not occur in the novel, Dadier had his first confrontation with West and asked his name. Before West could answer, another student acknowledged West’s status by interjecting, “You mean you never heard of Artie West?” Clearly, West’s delinquency had achieved status for him. His speech to Dadier and his overall demeanor showed that he did not buy into middle class notions of status.

In addition to showing non-utilitarian delinquency, the record destruction incident focused on the exultant reaction by the students to their own criminality. They laughed and danced as the teacher was taunted and his beloved collection destroyed. The scene was an extreme example of what Katz (1991) saw as he dismissed explanations of crime that relied on materialism as a motivation. Instead, Katz emphasized the role of the sensuous thrill that the criminal sought in the commission of the crime.

In *Blackboard Jungle*’s overall representation of crime, perhaps the most significant change that Brooks made to the novel was to present West as a gang leader. The novel had no

suggestions of a formal gang. The alleyway assault on the two teachers was treated similarly in the novel and the film, except that several of the assailants in the film wore the “X” marked jackets of West’s gang. The jackets became more prominent in the hijacking scene. Dadier noticed the jackets and said to West, “They’re all wearing the same kind of jacket you’re wearing. You’re members of the same gang, aren’t you?” West responded, “No. It’s a club, Teach.” By incorporating the gang factor, Brooks may have borrowed from *The Wild One*, and he also added another element important to crime theory. Walter Miller (1958) developed a cultural theory contending that lower class communities held different “focal concerns” than middle class communities. Among juveniles operating in the subculture of a gang, the concerns of belonging, toughness, and status were central, according to Miller.

Brooks changed the alleyway assault in another important way. In the novel, Dadier did not report the crime to the police; he simply went home. In the film, a police car appeared on the scene to end the attack. This variation allowed Brooks to follow up with Dadier’s conversation with a police detective (Horace McMahon) in the school. In a didactic manner, the detective offered the film’s most detailed observations on juvenile delinquency:

I’ve handled lots of problem kids in my time. Kids from both sides of the tracks. They were five or six years old in the last war, father in the Army, mother in a defense plant. No home life, no church life, no place to go. They formed street gangs. It’s way over my head, Mr. Dadier. Maybe the kids today are like the rest of the world -- mixed up, suspicious, scared. I don’t know. But I do know this. Gang leaders have taken the place of parents.

The detective’s views continued the film’s emphasis on gangs and even added a hint of the Cold War. In trying to spread the concern to “both sides of the tracks,” the detective’s theory reached beyond the students at North Manual High and the lower class culture described by criminologists. The detective’s words, however, were the film’s only specific suggestion of non-lower class delinquency. The topic of middle class delinquency would be addressed in *Rebel Without a Cause*, which spent more time in the homes of delinquents than in their schools. *Blackboard Jungle* never ventured inside the homes of students.

Dadier refused to cooperate with the police after the alleyway assault. Instead, he continued his attempts to try to break up classroom resistance to his teaching. His early overtures to Miller were rejected, but Miller turned out to be the lynchpin for the class’s change in attitude about West in the final fight. Crime theorists might have seen Dadier’s classroom as a microcosm of a lower-class culture or as an extension of the gang subculture. Either way, Dadier made the classroom community safe for non-delinquent values by the forced removal of West and Belazi. Dadier concluded, “There’s no place for these two in your classroom.”

While not presented in the film as full explanations for juvenile delinquency, a few other aspects of the film deserve mention. First, Dadier suggested the possibility of domestic physical abuse when he remarked about the students, “They get clobbered at home.” If so, that presented another layer to the troubled home life described by the detective. Second, substance abuse was raised as a factor when the gang members passed a bottle around before the truck hijacking and



later when Miller warned Dadier about West, “He’s crazy, he’s high, he’s floatin’ on Sneaky Pete wine.” Third, the film seemed to steer clear of suggesting support for any racial theories of crime. African-American Miller committed no crimes in the film, although Dadier initially suspected him, and West’s gang appeared to be all white. Finally, the film offered a momentary shot of a window closing and a light turning off in an apartment that overlooked the alleyway assault. Without any comment, the scene showed a dark side of urban America that was eerily prescient of the infamous 1964 homicide in New York City in which Catherine “Kitty” Genovese was repeatedly attacked within earshot of neighbors who failed to call police or come to her aid.

### THE NEXT MORAL PANIC

*Blackboard Jungle* did not simply depict matters of social concern; the film became a social concern itself. Some felt that the film painted an unfavorable portrait of America’s youth and schools. Brooks resisted suggestions that he insert dialogue to the effect that schools in the Soviet Union had worse crime problems (Brooks, 1965). The final product disturbed Clare Boothe Luce, then Ambassador to Italy, to such a degree that she managed to prevent its showing at the Venice Film Festival (Crowther, 1955). Luce was likely concerned more about America’s image abroad rather than rioting by festival attendees.

In other quarters, the concern was that *Blackboard Jungle* might actually cause juvenile delinquency. The Senate Judiciary Committee’s Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency considered that question, having already conducted hearings and issued reports concerning the influence of comic books and television on juvenile delinquency. *Blackboard Jungle* was released in March 1955, and the subcommittee held public hearings on the influence of films on juvenile delinquency three months later. The hearings were a *tour de force* by Senator Kefauver, who presided over the hearings in Hollywood. Major studio executives appeared, and various psychiatrists presented their views.

By the time of the subcommittee hearings, *Blackboard Jungle* had already provoked strong reactions. Reports varied about whether some teenage audiences rioted in theaters or simply danced in the aisles. Either way, the audience reaction was not considered appropriate theater behavior, just as the dancing in the film was not appropriate school behavior. Some locales took drastic action. The film was banned in Memphis and Atlanta, perhaps with heightened sensitivity in the South to brief scenes of black students joining in the leering at white women (“Blackboard Jungle Banned,” 1955). A report of teenage girls committing an arson in Nashville after seeing the film was raised directly in a question by Senator Kefauver at the Hollywood hearings. MGM vice-president Dore Schary sounded like one of the organized crime figures from Kefauver’s earlier hearings by responding, “There’s no fire in the picture. They can’t pin that on us” (Pryor, 1955).

The subcommittee, however, did try to pin responsibility on *Blackboard Jungle*. In its 1956 report, the subcommittee found that an impressionable child who watched violence in films may “incorporate these ideas into his behavior pattern with the end result being a delinquent child” (U.S. Senate, 1956, p. 19). As a more short-term effect, a violent film could act as a “trigger mechanism” (p. 16) to provoke juvenile delinquency. More specifically, “In the case of

the *Blackboard Jungle* [the audience's] attitudes of brutality and violence may be given a further push in that direction [by seeing the film]" (p. 54). Although Schary and others attempted to defend the merits of the film, the subcommittee concluded that *Blackboard Jungle* "will have effects on youths other than the beneficial ones described by its producers" and that "many of the type of delinquents portrayed in this picture will derive satisfaction, support, and sanction from having society sit up and take notice of them" (p. 46). An example of moral panic or not, the subcommittee's line of thinking would become increasingly debated for many years in commentary on popular culture, particularly in the more modern contexts of rap music and video games.

## CONCLUSION

With a half-century of hindsight, *Blackboard Jungle*'s depictions of juvenile crime have retained vitality. Despite its share of Hollywood sensationalism, the film ultimately did not exaggerate the problem of juvenile crime. The delinquency depicted in the film was brutal, but there were no guns, drugs, or homicides. Regrettably, the youth driven urban crime waves of the next thirty years would make film's delinquents look quaint. The film's prototype of the delinquent as an urban character held true, and the troubled suburban youth of *Rebel Without a Cause* would pale in comparison.

The film showed students responding to conditions of urban poverty and ineffectual schooling and described circumstances that gave support to a number of explanations for delinquent behavior. While not to suggest that filmmaker Brooks consciously sought to promote any criminological theory, *Blackboard Jungle* showed an apparent preference for rational choice theory. Even in their problematic situations, the students essentially chose either to engage or not to engage in delinquency. Any sense of drama generated by the final fight scene of the film hinged on whether students would make the choice to support the criminals or support the teacher.

Also with the benefit of hindsight, it appears that those who feared the crime-causing "trigger" effect of *Blackboard Jungle* were wrong. Movie violence only increased as the Production Code broke down over the decade following *Blackboard Jungle*. Violent movies were then surpassed in cultural popularity by violence-laden cable television, Internet, and video games. Teenagers of today have been exposed to levels of video violence, in addition to sex and vulgarity, which would have been unimaginable when *Blackboard Jungle* was released. Yet, with the overall crime drop of the past decade, today's juveniles may be the most law abiding since the 1950s.

## ENDNOTE

Correspondence concerning this article may be sent to Kevin E. McCarthy, Department of Law, Police Science, and Criminal Justice Administration, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 899 Tenth Avenue, New York, NY 10019 (E-mail: [kmccarthy@jjay.cuny.edu](mailto:kmccarthy@jjay.cuny.edu)).

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### NOTES

1. The following was the entire prologue:

We, in the United States, are fortunate to have a school system that is a tribute to our communities and to our faith in American youth. Today we are concerned with juvenile delinquency -- its causes -- and its effects. We are especially concerned when this delinquency boils over into our schools.  
The scenes and incidents depicted here are fictional.  
However, we believe that public awareness is a first step toward a remedy for any problem.  
It is in this spirit and with this faith that BLACKBOARD JUNGLE was produced. (Berman & Brooks, 1955)

2. Although he was credited as the co-writer of the song, it is quite unlikely that the organized-crime-connected Morris Levy wrote any of *I'm Not a Juvenile Delinquent*.

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