

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1950s, the United States faced an apparent epidemic of juvenile delinquency. According to Federal Bureau of Investigation statistics for 1951, 1,350,000 juveniles, based on juvenile court age of ten to seventeen years old, were either brought to the attention of the courts or dealt with by the police for various acts of delinquency. Auto thefts by juveniles in 1951 had increased by more than half over 1948 reports, robbery by 25 percent, burglary by 15 percent, and assault by 10 percent. These numbers represented a 17 percent increase overall for those recorded in 1948.¹ The juvenile population increased only 5 percent in the same period. This three-to-one rate of increase of delinquency over population caused concern particularly because of the 42 percent increase in juvenile population projected for 1960.²

The increase in juvenile delinquency after World War II coincided with the onset of the Cold War in the late 1940s, and received added impetus with the advent of the conflict in Korea.

¹In 1951, juveniles committed 24 percent of all auto thefts reported, 19 percent of all burglaries, 7 percent of all rapes, 3 percent of all homicides, and 2 percent of all assaults. U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Social Security Administration, Children's Bureau, Special Juvenile Delinquency Project, Some Facts about Juvenile Delinquency, Children's Bureau Publication No. 340 (1953), pp. 1, 4.

²Ibid., pp. 1-3.

Based upon these statistics, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare warned in 1953 that juvenile delinquency was "fast becoming America's No. 1 social problem."³ The Special Juvenile Delinquency Project in the Children's Bureau of the Social Security Administration attributed the increase to the disruption in the home life of the family, which accompanied the unstable and accelerated "atmosphere of sudden change and a doubtful future."⁴ Normal social development suffered as parents were unable to provide the steady care and supervision children required. Others sought a different reason.

In an often desperate attempt to allocate responsibility, some critics singled out entertainment favored by juveniles. Comic books, comic strips, motion pictures, radio programs, and television at one time or another, and other simultaneously, were blamed for the increase in juvenile crime and deviance. Pursued with a fervor which recalled the religious, such excursions contained the elements of the ludicrous, but their solemnity betrayed the subject matter. In varying stages of determination, the battle against one foe, the comic book, was waged from 1940 to 1955 by crusaders no less fixed

³U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Social Security Administration, Children's Bureau, Special Juvenile Delinquency Project, Helping Delinquency Children, Children's Bureau Publication No. 341 (1953), pp. 5-6.

⁴Ibid., p. 6.

in the righteous indignation than their cartoon counterparts were intent on their zealous, if ambiguous, war against evil.

The moral crusade against the comic book assumed numerous guises in the hands of its various protagonists. This study will examine the origins of the debate which began almost with the advent of the chosen scourge. Unorganized and extemporized, the earliest reactions depended on the efforts of a few lonely prophets who regarded the comic book as a menace more terrifying than European fascism. The study will then focus on the pivotal year of 1948, when a champion imbued the quest with an aura of purpose and a sanctity which it lacked in earlier incarnations. The investigations by a committee of the New York legislature, the longest sustained official reaction and potentially the most effective, will then be analyzed. Finally, the role of federal investigations, which provided a sense of importance which the comic book as a social issue lacked and may not have deserved, will be discussed.

The significance of the crusade stemmed not from its results. In its basest form, it remained limited to one isolated and, in many ways, unique industry, although the spectre of censorship plagued the moral entrepreneurs who attempted to justify restrictions and controls. The importance of the crusade rested in the willingness of so many individuals and groups, official and impromptu, to expend vast amounts of time and energy on what was, under the warnings and

justifications, a ten-cent, garishly colored, newsprint booklet, designed to be barely read and discarded, or consigned to hasty destruction through overuse. But its power to persuade and to incite not only children but adults lay far beyond its flimsy covers and forgettable contents. For a time the world of children's fantasies intruded on a nation's realities and a country read the comic books.