**1930s and 40s Cinematic Depictions of Juvenile Delinquency**

**Jack Nelson, 2022**

This project explores the depictions of juvenile delinquents, the juvenile justice system, and the reform school system in American studio-era cinema in the 1930s and 1940s. The juvenile delinquency films exist on the periphery of the gangster genre; understanding them requires understanding the conventions of the 1930s gangster and prison films. In addition, the adoption of the Hays Code, a self-censorship mechanism run by the Hollywood studios, influences these films in striking ways. Finally, these films reflect contemporary culture, including Prohibition, increased urbanization, the Depression, the print media news cycle, and the history of the studio system in Hollywood.

Over this summer, I examined 44 films from 1930-1945. In addition, I looked at film trade journals and reviews from newspapers for each film (primarily *The New York Times*, *Variety*, *Motion Picture Daily*, *Film Daily*, and *Motion Picture Herald)*. I read one of the studies influential in establishing the Hays Code: *Movies, Delinquency, and Crime (1933)* focused on the influence of crime in movies on children. Other titles helped me learn about Prohibition gangsters, prison films, and juvenile policing: *Prohibition Gangsters: The Rise and Fall of a Bad Generation*; *Film Censorship – Regulating America's Screen*; *Cops and Kids: Policing Juvenile Delinquency in Urban America*, *1890-1940;* and *Prison Films of Pre-Code Hollywood: Big Houses, Death Houses and Chain Gangs* were noteworthy. I also looked briefly at the silent film depictions of juvenile delinquency. These films are hard to find, but the *American Film Institute Catalog* summarizes every film from 1915 to 1930 dealing with juvenile delinquency and battered children.

The rise in the number of films treating juvenile delinquency in this period reflects both social worries and industry practices. For instance, people worried that the harsh punishments in reform schools only created bigger criminals. Thus, film gangsters often mentioned their time in reform school as part of the backstory that led them to crime, topics taken up in films like *Hell’s House* (1932) and *The* *Mayor of Hell* (1933). In fact, many Hollywood tropes depicting juvenile delinquents were adapted from gangster and prison movies. These films actively influenced each other: the same directors, screenwriters, and actors worked on these movies and frequently reused elements from earlier films. Generally, reform schools were versions of prisons, and juvenile delinquents imitated the behavior of gangsters. The brutality in reform schools was extremely noteworthy. The heads of the school were often corrupt or inept and actively hurt the boys in their care. A sympathetic outside figure—often from a similarly impoverished neighborhood as the boys—would step in and use his political influence to improve the conditions in the school. (This figure also frequently had a romantic relationship with the sister of one of the boys.) Yet the gang structure was hard to miss and hard to defeat: when not in reform school, juvenile delinquents on screen behave like 1930s gangsters: they bond tightly around a leader, establish hideouts, play poker, frequent pool rooms, steal, extort, and generally misbehave. They act tough, refusing to cooperate with cops and using colorful nicknames. Unlike the gangsters they emulate, however, these films insist that kids can be reformed and become positive members of society.

Warner Bros gained a reputation for making socially conscious films that took their plots from current headlines. In addition to juvenile delinquency, these films went after issues such as brutality in the prison system, the dangers of nativism, and the rise in crime. While there had always been experimentation in the gangster genre, the restrictions established by the Hays Code in 1934 led to creative new approaches: the movie gangster was actually one of the main reasons there was a call for censorship. Code regulations led the genre in two different directions. Part of the genre spun into satire and comedy, and the other approached dark, serious, and socially aware melodramas, including adaptations of Broadway plays like *Dead End* (1937). While a handful of films about juvenile delinquents had appeared earlier, *Dead End* started and set the conventions of the cycle that followed in the late 1930s. A challenge with making films about juvenile delinquents is the necessary reliance on child actors. *Dead End*’s competent and charismatic young actors moved from Broadway into Hollywood; the Dead End Kids went on to make around 20 films for multiple studios based loosely on characterizations from *Dead End*. The individual actors would also appear in minor roles in other gangster films. For these young actors, gang life was anything but a dead end.

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