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IN RETROSPECT: ANTHONY M. PLATT’S THE CHILD SAVERS: THE INVENTION OF DELINQUENCY

Miroslava Chávez-García

Nearly forty years have lapsed since the publication of Anthony M. Platt’s *The Child Savers: The Invention of Delinquency* (1969; 1977), a groundbreaking study critical of social reformers and the juvenile court of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In that time, the study of juvenile justice has evolved into a rich and diverse as well as fragmented and specialized area of research. Academics, activists, and popular writers as well as politicians, public policy advocates, and former inmates have all attempted to capture the historical and contemporary ideologies and practices of a system that many critiqued and continue to critique as ineffective. Works focusing on the court’s early history reveal that the motivations, interests, and players involved in its establishment varied in complex and subtle ways across time and place. Yet much of the literature reflects the belief that the juvenile court in particular played a central role in sustaining a network of child saving institutions that we know of today as the juvenile justice system. How effectively the court championed the interests of children and adolescents, as it purported to do, has been debated quite vigorously. Arguably, no work has done more to provoke sustained discussion over the nature of the juvenile court and those who worked so diligently for its formation as has Platt’s *The Child Savers*. Platt’s biting critique elicited—and continues to elicit—vocal opposition, on one end, and strong support, on the other, of his interpretation. As this essay will demonstrate, Platt’s study shaped and continues to shape how we think and write about the juvenile court, social reformers, and delinquent youths.

This essay examines the significance of Anthony Platt’s classic study, *The Child Savers*, on the development of the field of juvenile justice in history and analyzes how that work has impacted many of the central arguments historians as well as social scientists grapple with today. It begins by briefly noting the book’s successes and then examines the historical contexts—the author’s personal and professional as well as the social, cultural, political, and intellectual influences—that shaped the study so deeply. Next, it explores how scholars responded to *The Child Savers* and shows how, in the process of critiquing the text’s arguments, theoretical approach, and methodology, they produced a rich body of literature. Finally, the essay ends by highlighting the...
latest research and by calling attention to areas that are still sorely lacking. As the discussion will demonstrate, despite great strides in the study of juvenile justice, histories interrogating the role of race and ethnicity in the criminalization of youth are still wanting.

**Situating *The Child Savers***

To most scholars, Anthony Platt’s *The Child Savers* has an enviable record. Published in 1969 and expanded and reissued in 1977, the book has sold well over 10,000 copies and has been translated and sold in Italy, Japan, Mexico, and greater Latin America. For many years, the paperback edition was used in college courses across the United States. Today, it is still in print and continues to sell respectably well, according to the University of Chicago Press. In 2005, Steven L. Schlossman called it a “seminal study of the nation’s first juvenile court in Chicago” and current scholarship indicates that its influence persists in juvenile and criminal justice as well as social welfare. A search conducted on the scholarly electronic search engine Web of Knowledge supports that statement, demonstrating that the study has been cited in hundreds of publications spanning the fields of history, criminology, sociology, law, and ethnic studies. Nearly forty years later, all of the notoriety has surprised even Platt, who remarked in a recent interview that the attention not only enabled him to land a prestigious post at UC Berkeley but also brought him personal satisfaction. “I liked the celebrity aspects of it, going around and talking and debating people, it was an interesting part of my career,” he said.

Achieving such notoriety was furthest from Platt’s thoughts when he decided to leave his native England to pursue his graduate studies in the United States in the 1960s. Raised in a leftist, middle-class Jewish family and educated at Oxford University, Platt decided to study abroad because, as he put it, “I was dissatisfied with what I was studying there [in England], I didn’t know what I wanted to do, and I wanted to get away from my family and their influence.” Platt chose UC Berkeley, he says, not because he knew much about the school but because it was a “long, long way from England” and because of the reputation of the criminology and sociology departments. When he arrived in 1963, the year before the free speech movement, he encountered “tremendous political ferment and vitality” and found that the activism of the black civil rights, women’s, and third-world liberation movements blurred on and off campus-community boundaries. The university itself, he said, “was a site of political activism, political struggle, and political debate.” And, in many ways, he noted ironically, “it felt like home.”

Deeply influenced by Marxism, history, and sociology as well as the writings of Edwin M. Lemert, Howard Becker, Erving Goffman, David Matza, Phillip Arié, and, later, Michel Foucault, Platt and his peers working in criminal justice challenged long-held assumptions of deviancy, criminality, and criminology.
In the post-World War Two era, research questions that had most concerned traditional criminologists focused on the causes of criminality and the efficiency of the criminal justice system. Platt engaged those same subjects but did so in radically different ways. Rather than accept the basic premises of the field, he drew upon Lemert’s use of labeling theory to question “what aspects of the system criminalized people, what aspects were corrupt and unjust, and what aspects reproduced inequalities.” Becker’s finding that delinquency and deviancy were socially constructed labels used to identify individuals who had transcended socially prescribed lines of normative behavior also influenced Platt’s approach. Instead of focusing on crime, lawbreakers, and criminal behavior, he examined the social construction of crime, lawmakers, and institutions. Goffman, Matza, and Ariès’s studies on asylums, delinquency, and childhood, respectively, were equally powerful in informing Platt’s thinking as were the new revisionist histories of Gabriel Kolko, William Appleman Williams, and James Weinstein. At the same time, debates in criminology about “what one studied and what one worked on” ensued, Platt commented in an interview. Platt’s interest in reframing the basic premises of criminology, the mentorship of David Matza, and the lively discussions at the Center for Law and Society at Berkeley led him to take on the social reformers of the Progressive era and the juvenile court as the subjects of his doctoral dissertation, which he later revised and published as The Child Savers.

Challenging Progressive Reformers and Liberal Scholars
In crafting his interpretation, Platt sought to expose and revise contemporary views of the Progressives who worked to establish the first juvenile tribunal in Chicago in 1899. To liberal scholars of the 1940s and 1950s—or “march of progress” historians, as Alexander Pisciotta identified them in 1980—social reformers were humanitarians who used the court to bring moral order to a society undergoing dramatic change in the wake of rapid industrialization, immigration, and urbanization. As legal scholar David Tanenhaus has observed recently, early-twentieth-century social reformers clung faithfully to liberalism—the belief in the state’s ability to “provide for the positive rights of social citizenship to ensure that its citizens, especially children, would be able to achieve freedom through living in a society that provided the necessary ‘social conditions for full human development.’” Progressives, liberal historians argued, as members of the middle class, invested in liberal thought and practices, fought tirelessly and selflessly against capitalists, corporate interests, and unregulated capitalism.

Platt, however, disputed that portrayal. Rather than cast them as upstanding members of the community, or do-gooders, he characterized them as self-conscious, middle- and upper-class men and women interested in self-preservation. Progressives, he believed, worked hand in glove with capitalists
to control the masses. After all, he argued, most of the social reformers had interests in business or came from that rank. It was no surprise, then, that they targeted the growing numbers of youths of the lower, dangerous classes, many of whom stayed out late at night, roaming the city streets. The child savers, Platt wrote, devised new policies and practices aimed at monitoring their behavior and “helped to create special judicial and correctional institutions for the labeling, processing, and management of ‘troublesome’ youth.” And, “in doing so, invented . . . new categories of youthful misbehavior.”

Platt’s revisionist work and challenge to liberal ideas resonated with those increasingly disenchanted with the state’s juvenile, criminal, and social welfare systems as well as those fighting for children’s rights and the deinstitutionalization of prisons, mental hospitals, and juvenile reformatories. In the 1960s and 1970s, many contemporary writers and legal scholars criticized the juvenile court in particular as unconstitutional, for it denied young people the basic rights entitled to adults in the criminal court. For many, the United States Supreme Court case—In re Gault (1967)—granting youth the right to due process of law, specifically the right to counsel, was the first step in reforming the system. Supportive of the principle in the decision, Platt nonetheless conceded that, in practice, In re Gault had resulted in few significant changes, for many states had previously passed similar laws and the lawyers appointed to represent youngsters rarely had their clients’ interests at heart. In general, he argued, the “massive investment in the criminal justice apparatus [in the aftermath of Gault] has neither reduced the amount of crime nor improved the quality of justice.” Ultimately, he argued, the juvenile justice system required structural change—not simply reform—for it was ultimately punitive.

Political and Professional Fallout
Platt’s political and professional convictions cost him dearly as a recently appointed assistant professor in the school of criminology at UC Berkeley. Hired in 1968, Platt easily earned early tenure. The administration, however, refused to finalize his promotion after he and two of his junior colleagues—known in the press as “radical young faculty members”—became involved with local efforts to take control of the Berkeley police force. Following a community protest at the People’s Park in Berkeley in 1971, marking the second anniversary of the original demonstration in 1969, Platt was arrested. That as well as Platt’s role in the larger controversy over the closure of the school of criminology prompted Chancellor Roger W. Heyns to remove his name from the “suggested-for-tenure” list, according to the Chronicle of Higher Education. “Although charges against Platt were dropped,” the Chronicle reported in 1975, and the Academic Senate at UC Berkeley urged the new chancellor Albert H. Bowker “to forward his tenure nomination to the regents,” Platt fought a losing struggle “to have his name put back on the [tenure] list.” As Platt
tells it, he fought a “very long, very bitter” battle all of the way up to the California State Supreme Court. “It absorbed me for two years,” he said. In a conservative political climate, Platt ultimately lost and the university refused to reinstate him. At the same time, the administration closed the doors to the school of criminology, citing fiscal concerns as well as quality of instruction. To concerned faculty and students, the closure of the school as well as Platt’s removal reeked of politics.

That experience nearly ended his career, as Platt stated. Finding himself unemployed and blacklisted, Platt struggled to land a position in California. Apparently, his professional and political battles at Berkeley had branded him a troublemaker. The author’s luck turned, however, when a professor and the chair at the School of Social Work at California State University at Sacramento offered him employment in 1977. Platt quickly accepted and came on board the faculty before the then-president of the university found out about Platt’s hire. For the next thirty years, Platt worked at the university, teaching and training—ironically—the child savers he so vilified in his early work. When asked if he thought about that irony and its significance, he answered, “yes, all of the time.” He made up for it, he said, by telling his students about the contradictions inherent in the work that they would be expected to do as social workers.

The Child Savers Provokes Criticism and Creativity
The upheaval in Platt’s professional life had seemingly minimal impact on his study, for it continued to attract attention in the scholarly and popular press. Much of that attention focused on the ways in which Platt’s political ideology and political struggles had filtered his view of the past. As a social scientist, historians in particular critiqued Platt for his apparent presentism. That, wrote William Muraskin, influenced the writing of The Child Savers, making it appealing to the “alienation and cynicism that characterized the 1970s.” Platt’s use of the social control theory allowed him to argue that the “whole machinery of criminal law [was] used to intimidate and control the poor and powerful anti-establishment movements,” Muraskin noted. Yet, Platt’s arguments rested on his investigation of the Progressives and the juvenile court alone. In other words, he had not explored other aspects of the criminal justice system. The result was an “overly simplistic, moralistic, and reductionist interpretation.”

Platt’s argument that Chicago’s most famous social reformers—Jane Addams, Louise Bowen, Julia Lathrop, and Lucy Flower, among others—used the juvenile court to control the lower classes and in doing so invented delinquency attracted even more attention. As Robert Mennel argued in 1971, “juvenile delinquency come of age” in the nineteenth century—not the twentieth century as Platt argued. Through the efforts to establish houses of refuge, asylums, and
reform schools designed specifically for children and adolescents, away from the contaminating affects of criminal adults, the idea of delinquency as juvenile crime was created. Platt’s study, Mennel wrote, “show[ed] no awareness of refuge philanthropy.” Moreover, Mennel pointed out, the purpose of the court was not to institutionalize misbehaving youths but to reunite them with their families under the watchful eye of probation officers. Probation, Mennel noted, came about “precisely because the opposite system, embodied in the reform school, had largely failed in the nineteenth century.” The reformers’ goals were to correct where the reform school went wrong, they were not out, as Platt had said, to imitate “correctional programs requiring longer terms of imprisonment, long hours of labor and militaristic discipline.”

Platt’s convictions did not blind him to the shortcomings of *The Child Savers*. In 1977, eight years after its publication, he expanded and reissued the book with a new preface and postscript. In that edition as well as in other forums, he acknowledged the criticisms of his peers and the influence of feminist writings, admitting that he had granted the child savers too much credit for inventing delinquency and had simplified his portrayal of women. Platt also confessed that the sociopolitical context of the 1960s had influenced his work. He refused, nonetheless, to discard his theoretical framework, arguing that contemporary urban unrest, increasing crime and incarceration rates, and black youths’ alienation in the 1970s exposed the social control so deeply entrenched in the criminal justice system. Adhering to his beliefs, he wrote in the second edition: “This book destroys the myth that the child-saving movement was successful in humanizing the criminal justice system, rescuing children from jails and prisons, and developing dignified judicial and penal institutions for juveniles. It argues that, if anything, the child savers helped to create a system that subjected more and more juveniles to arbitrary and degrading punishments.”

The lively debates and heated arguments both editions of *The Child Savers* inspired resulted in an outpouring of scholarship examining and analyzing delinquent youths, social control, and the state within the context of juvenile justice. Using Platt’s work as a point of departure, several writers in the late 1970s and early 1980s examined the ways in which Progressives used the juvenile court and related institutions to control the children and adolescents of the urban poor and the working class. In 1978, Ellen Ryerson, for instance, in *Best Laid Plans*, followed Platt’s lead, for she examined the origins of the juvenile court in Chicago and paid specific attention to the architects of that tribunal and less so on the youth and families that it impacted. Ryerson differed from Platt, however, in that she brought her institutional history up to the contemporary period, the 1970s. Yet, Ryerson’s argument rang familiar when she noted that the impetus for the court came from the “voices of social control and liberal reform,” namely capitalists and the middle class. “[B]y blurring
the distinctions between dependent, neglected, and delinquent children, by minimizing questions of guilt or innocence of specific acts, and by including in the definition of delinquency noncriminal conduct . . . .” she argued, the state expanded its power to “intervene in the lives of children.”

To Platt, Ryerson’s analysis, “though superficially radical, [was] traditional and cautious,” for she championed the constitutionalist view of the court, a move “fashionable in liberal circles.” Constitutionalists, Platt explained, were those who sought to reform the juvenile court along the lines of the criminal court, with respect to constitutional rights, such as those granted in In re Gault. But such thinking, he argued, did little to change the fundamentally flawed nature of the juvenile court.

Platt’s critique of Ryerson’s work, while harsh, exposed some of the differences among left-leaning scholars who argued that the Progressives had used the juvenile court as a tool for social control. Those same writers debated to what extent and for what conservative purposes social reformers used the tribunal to manage youngsters and their families. The work of Randall G. Shelden, Sanford Fox, and Barbara Brenzel, among others, exemplified the uneven treatment authors accorded the state and the control it exercised over the lives of young people. Sanford Fox, writing in 1970 about the juvenile court law in Illinois, for instance, said little explicitly about the state and social control. Rather, he emphasized that the statute was conservative: It “changed nothing of substance,” Fox noted, “in reality . . . [it] could hardly be described as a milestone of progress.” In contrast, for Shelden, who documented the experiences of female offenders in Tennessee, legislation dealing with dependent and delinquent youth, “extended state control over the ‘surplus labor force,’ especially the poor and the children of the poor.” In slight contrast to Shelden, Brenzel, writing about the first reformatory for girls in the United States, the Lancaster School for Girls in Massachusetts, identified some negotiation between parents and representatives of the state in determining the future of delinquent and dependent girls. Ultimately, though, she argued, the state had final say over the girls’ lives, for parents generally shared the ideologies of sexual propriety upheld by the state and reinforced by the reformatory. What had started out as an innovative site of social reform in the 1850s had deteriorated into an institution of social control by the early 1900s, Brenzel concluded. Like Platt, Brenzel and Shelden argued that state institutions and the law, respectively, operated symbiotically to regulate the impoverished and expendable members of society, whereas Fox viewed reformatories and legislation as mechanisms reinforcing the status quo.

Questioning the degree to which the juvenile court exercised control over the lives of children and adolescents, Steven L. Schlossman, in Love and the American Delinquent, published in 1977 and reissued in 2005 as Transforming Juvenile Justice, went a step further in exploring not only the tribunal’s official
policies but also the daily practices of the emerging juvenile justice system. To do so, Schlossman engaged the tools of the new social history with the emphasis on “doing history from the bottom up” and searched for sources that would allow him to probe the inner workings of the juvenile court and of its nineteenth-century predecessor, the reform school. Unlike Platt, who used official published reports and the writings of Jane Addams, Louise Bowen, and Julia Lathrop, among other Progressive reformers, Schlossman employed local newspapers and juvenile court records from Wisconsin, specifically the Milwaukee region, to understand the experiences of youth and institutional operations.25

As the first to employ juvenile court records extensively, Schlossman not only broke ground in the field of juvenile justice but also captured the complexity and drama of the tribunal. When completed, his study argued that negotiation and contestation as well as manipulation and miscommunication took place among court officials, youth, and their families.26 It was not simply top-down control, as Platt had suggested and others had reiterated. Nor were Progressive social controllers of one mind or of one class. Rather, Schlossman found that in Wisconsin they were primarily men, not women, who came from diverse ethnic, cultural, and class backgrounds. Yet, when it came to dealing with wayward youth, social reformers “behaved in similar ways,” Schlossman admitted.27 Schlossman’s findings affirmed what Robert Mennel had argued earlier in his 1973 book, Thorns and Thistles: The juvenile court preferred to reunite children—under the watchful eye of probation officers—with their families rather than incarcerating them in detention homes and reform schools. Sending them home meant losing, not gaining, significant control over troublesome youth.

In an equally thoughtful and careful analysis, Paul Boyer in Urban Masses and Moral Order, published a year later, in 1978, examined Progressive policies and practices on a wider scale. Rather than focus on the rise and function of the juvenile court, Boyer examined the multiple ways in which Progressives responded to their changing urban environment in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Drawing on Edward A. Ross’s Social Control, Boyer argued that Progressives responded to the increasing social disorder they perceived through urban or positive environmentalism. Rather than attempting to transform moral values and behaviors at the individual level, social reformers instituted a series of reforms aimed at changing the larger environment. They did so by establishing parks, playgrounds, and kindergartens, among other sites, intended to divert the young and vulnerable from spaces of moral decay and delinquency. This process did not occur overnight, as Platt’s study had suggested. But, rather, Boyer saw the genesis of these reforms over the course of a hundred year history.28
Boyer’s work, while upholding many of Platt’s main premises, did not end the debates over social control and Progressive reform. A couple of years later, in 1980, an influential study focusing on the criminal justice, juvenile justice, and mental health systems in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was published. David Rothman’s *Conscience and Convenience* picked up where his first book, *Discovery of the Asylum*, written ten years earlier, had left off in the nineteenth century. Curiously, in his latest edition Rothman devoted little space to exploring social reform within the context of social control, despite the discussions inspired by Platt’s *The Child Savers* and Rothman’s own use of that theory in his first work. In his discussion of the juvenile court in *Conscience and Convenience*, Rothman implicitly challenged Platt, for he argued that the Progressives’ intentions in establishing that tribunal and related institutions were not motivated by class interests. On the contrary, their intentions were transparent and bound up in the common good: “Openly and optimistically,” Rothman wrote, “they presented a program that seemed so very right and necessary precisely because it did not require trade-offs.” “[T]he juvenile court,” he concluded, “was all light—no darkness intruded. . . . Here was an effort to promote the best interest of the child and the state.”

Focusing less on the intentions of the social reformers and more on the outcomes of their work, Eric Schneider, author of *In the Web of Class*, published in 1992, examined the role of secular and religious, public and private, organizations of social welfare that predominated in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Boston, Massachusetts. Increasingly concerned about the poor and dangerous classes of the city, in the late 1800s social reformers pushed for the establishment of the juvenile court, a tribunal that promised efficiency and scientific expertise in dealing with delinquency. Schneider demonstrated that, while the realization of the tribunal streamlined and integrated agencies into a network—or web—of providers with common ideologies and practices, it failed to do more. In contrast to Rothman’s findings and along the lines of Platt’s position, Schneider concluded that the juvenile court brought little, if any, meaningful change to the lives of delinquents and their families.

**Women’s and Gender Studies in Juvenile Justice Studies**
The debates over Progressives, social control, and the juvenile court as well as the role of class and gender in social reform did not end in the 1970s and early 1980s. On the contrary, those discussions continued unabated well into the late 1980s and 1990s, particularly by the growing number of female scholars who entered academia in the 1970s. Until Platt’s book appeared in 1969, few scholars working in juvenile justice had paid attention to females, delinquents or reformers, and much less to gender. Those who had done so included Paul Tappan, Meda Chesney-Lind, Christopher Lasch, and Joseph Gusfield. A new cohort of academics soon joined Tappan and his peers. These
researchers explored the experiences of girls and young women in the criminal justice system in general as well as how gender operated and informed reform schools and juvenile courts in particular. Steven L. Schlossman and Stephanie Wallach, Barbara Brenzel, and Randall G. Shelden, among others, found that females identified as delinquent bore the brunt of a sexual double standard that excused young male sexual indiscretions yet punished females for the same kind of behavior. These scholars found that underage as well as adult females were more likely than males of all ages to get picked up for sexually based crimes and more likely to suffer harsh consequences for it.

The literature exploring sex as well as gender within the frame of juvenile justice in the United States, Canada, and England exploded in the 1990s, leading to new understandings about the role of the state—and of European American women social reformers, in particular, as representatives of the state—in carrying out social control. Mary Odem’s careful analysis of tribunal records from Los Angeles and Alameda Counties in Delinquent Daughters, published in 1995, demonstrated that, despite rising public anxiety over young women’s sexuality and state policies aimed at monitoring and controlling it, females identified as delinquent and their families played a significant role in the outcome of juvenile justice. Rather than having moral reformers or Progressives dictating the lives of the largely working-class females apprehended for sexually based crimes, as Platt argued implicitly, Odem found a “triangulated network of struggles and negotiations among working class parents, daughters, and court officials.” Moreover, she noted, parents were more likely than court officials to bring public attention to their daughters’ misdeeds. The court cases revealed that mothers and fathers used the tribunal for their own purposes, namely to discipline their daughters. In the end, though, parental needs took a back seat to state interests, Odem conceded. The “court’s concern about sexual promiscuity and venereal disease often took precedence over the needs of working class families,” suggesting that the state had greater power than the young women’s families in dictating the immediate and, sometimes, long term course of events shaping their lives.

Odem’s work not only complicated power relations between the state and clients—females identified as delinquent and their families—but also notions of women social reformers. In his first edition, Platt had suggested that such privileged females joined the Progressive movement out of class interests. Informed by feminist scholarship, Platt later revised his thinking in the second edition, noting that these women also faced patriarchal constraints and were not free to do as they pleased. Moreover, Odem’s work demonstrated that they came from diverse backgrounds and had varied interests. Odem found that the moral crusaders of the late 1800s, who sought to protect young females and their sexuality from the evils of urban expansion, belonged to the upper class, were married and had ties to religious and philanthropic organizations.
Progressive women of the early 1900s, on the other hand, were often educated, unmarried middle-class women who worked for secular agencies and eventually had careers in social work, public health, and education. They did not align themselves with capitalist interests, Odem argued. Instead, they operated in a third space, independent of socialists who called for a radical reconstruction of the economic system and “conservative business leaders and politicians who opposed government intervention.” As advocates of maternal justice, they sought to inculcate middle-class standards of gender and sexuality at the expense of the working-class girl’s—and her family’s—own understanding of those roles and relations. At the same time, Odem acknowledged, reformers formed part of the state apparatus. “As officials within that system, women became implicated in its repressive and discriminatory policies.”

The Missing Link: Race and Ethnicity in History

By the late 1990s and early 2000, Platt’s foundational study had informed a body of literature exploring the intersections of gender, class, social reform, institutions, and delinquency. Much of that work, however, focused on European Americans of different classes residing in the Northeast and Midwest with little attention to race and ethnicity as well as class and gender as categories of analysis in the South and Southwest. In The Child Savers, Platt paid some attention to African American youth in particular, but that came in the appendix and postscript of the first and second editions, respectively, and focused on contemporary issues. Nevertheless the neglect to examine issues of race, ethnicity, and culture within a historical framework seemed (and seems) puzzling, given that a significant number of females and males caught up in the juvenile courts were racialized youth and racialized immigrants or the sons and daughters of such immigrants. Historians and criminologists who initially paid some attention to the ways in which race, ethnicity, and culture mediated the experiences of youth and their families in and outside juvenile institutions in the early twentieth century included Randall G. Shelden, who studied African American and European American youth in early-twentieth-century Memphis, Tennessee; Cecil Frey, who explored the House of Refuge for Colored Children in nineteenth-century Philadelphia; and Vernetta D. Young, who examined juvenile institutions of social control in the South in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In general, however, most scholars had (or have) what Vernetta D. Young in 1994 suggested was “racial myopia,” a term she borrowed from Nicole Hahn Rafter to explain why so few historical or contemporary studies on youth of color had been produced in the recent past. Indeed, reviewing the literature reveals that historians have been the most notorious of this neglect. Young argued that the tendency to overlook issues of race was because most juvenile justice studies authors were European Americans, or “white” as she stated,
and because they shunned the history of the South, where the vast majority of African Americans resided in the nineteenth century and where institutions of social control—slavery, segregation, and discrimination—were used to regulate adults as well as minors. Had they paid serious attention to the South or writings by African Americans, such as W.E.B Du Bois and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, they would have noted that up until the Civil War, indiscretions on the part of black slave youth were handled through plantation justice and the institution of slavery. In the post-emancipation South, social reformers and philanthropists deemed newly emancipated African American youth unworthy of reformation and thus excluded those identified as delinquent from juvenile institutions meant to instill a productive civic life and citizenship. Instead, state officials kept black youngsters locked up in the adult prison system and parcelled them out regularly through the convict lease system, where boys and girls toiled for long hours alongside adult offenders. In contrast to white boys and girls and to African American boys, African American girls waited the longest period to have access to institutions made especially for them. That came in 1882 and was established in Baltimore, Maryland, as the Industrial Home for Colored Girls.

The call for attention to the racial myopia that plagued the study of juvenile justice in history in particular has drawn limited attention, despite the obvious need for research into the historical and contemporary issues influencing the widespread criminalization and institutionalization of young males of color, specifically Black and Latino, in the last forty years in the United States. Today, the racial and ethnic makeup of juvenile detention facilities in some of the most populous states, such as California and New York, demonstrate a crisis in the disproportionate numbers of Latino and Black youngsters who are detained and incarcerated. Even so, most historians as well as other scholars who incorporate historical methods to study the juvenile court and social reformers infrequently examine or make race and ethnicity central to their work.

For example, the marking of the centennial of the foundation of the Chicago juvenile court in 1999 resulted in little scholarly attention to issues of race and ethnicity and how they structured and informed the court and related institutions. At least two prominent journals published special issues dedicated to the court, yet they almost entirely overlooked race and ethnicity. In 1996, the journal, The Future of the Children, dedicated an issue with fourteen essays contemplating the tribunal. Of those pieces, none of them used race or ethnicity, or class and gender for that matter, as tools of analysis to study juvenile justice. Three years later, in 1999, the Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science gathered “some of the country’s leading juvenile justice policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and child advocates” to study an alternative agenda: the editors asked, “Will the Juvenile Court System Survive?” Nine authors responded and only two dealt with race and one with
gender. Several books and collections of essays marking the court’s centenary have also appeared, but, again, only a few explore race, racism, or racial ideologies, rendering invisible the vast majority of young persons entering the juvenile justice system in the last quarter century.\textsuperscript{43}

Recent publications that do pay attention to race and ethnicity have come mostly from criminologists, sociologists, and legal scholars, though some historians have worked within this field. The edited anthologies by legal scholars Jeffrey Fagan and Franklin E. Zimring, \textit{The Changing Borders of Juvenile Justice} (2000), as well as the most recent studies by criminologists Darnell F. Hawkins and Kimberly Kemp-Leonard, \textit{Our Children, Their Children: Confronting Racial and Ethnic Differences in American Juvenile Justice} (2005), and Everette B. Penn, Helen Taylor Greene, and Shaun L. Gabbidon, editors of \textit{Race and Juvenile Justice} (2006), for instance, point to the significant work being accomplished in examining contemporary ethnic and racial disparities in the justice system.\textsuperscript{44} Legal scholar Barry Feld, a provocative and prolific writer who has published extensively on race and juvenile justice administration in the twentieth century, has also done much to bring youth of color into the framework of juvenile justice.

Feld’s scholarship explores the ways in which changing racial demographics and urban dynamics in the second half of the twentieth century have transformed the juvenile court from a rehabilitative ideal to a punitive institution of social control, a characterization akin to Platt’s rendition. For Feld, the crux of the problem was with the juvenile court’s dual mission of being an agent of criminal social control and social welfare. Those competing goals have made the court ineffective for both dependent and delinquent youth, Feld believes. Uncouple those aims, he has said, and the state can pursue both goals independently and, ultimately, more successfully than it has done up until now. Feld’s proposal: abolish the juvenile court.

Despite Feld’s widespread zeal for the deinstitutionalization of the juvenile court, his point of view has not been endorsed widely, particularly by scholars who study the early history of the court. This is due, in part, because Feld’s research focuses primarily on the impact of race and the juvenile court in the post-\textit{In re Gault} period rather than on the early part of the twentieth century. Nevertheless his scholarship provides an important link in tracing how the maturation of the juvenile court and related institutions have impacted the lives of young people of color in the United States.\textsuperscript{45} Like Feld, the advocacy group \textit{Building Blocks for Youth} has also done much to promote research, awareness, and public policy to the disproportionate confinement of African American, Latino, and Native American youth and the trend to prosecute youth—most of them non-whites—as adults.\textsuperscript{46}

In trying to understand the origins of the racialization and criminalization of youth of color in the juvenile justice system in ways that Platt and few of his
colleagues attempted to do so, a small yet growing number of historians and historically minded criminologists have gone to great lengths to examine and analyze how race and ethnicity structured and informed juvenile institutions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries across the United States. Among the most innovative include Jennifer Trost, who wrote *Gateway to Justice* in 2005, the first published book of “juvenile justice and child welfare in the South,” according to William Bush.\(^47\) Equally important, Trost was among the few scholars who employed, or had access to, juvenile court cases to explore the inner dynamics and personal lives of those that came before that tribunal.\(^48\) Through her research, Trost found that the juvenile court reflected the larger racial discrimination and segregation that characterized the Jim Crow era of the South. Not surprisingly, black children, she demonstrated, were more likely than their white counterparts to be institutionalized and less likely to have access to child welfare services, resulting in gross disparities in resource allocation, staffing, and treatment services.

Building on the work of Anthony Platt, Vernetta D. Young, and other scholars, Geoff Ward, criminologist and author of the forthcoming *Strange Clay: Juvenile Justice in the African-American Experience*, also explores how race, as well as class and gender, functioned in the juvenile justice institutions of the South. Nineteenth-century African American clubwomen, or black child savers, Ward demonstrates, worked tirelessly to bring the rehabilitative ideal to black children and adolescents when white, mainstream social reformers refused to do so. They carried out such work, Ward notes, through “institution-building and other reform initiatives.”\(^49\)

Recent explorations of race and ethnicity have also extended to the west, specifically to Texas and California. Scholars explore how institutions of social control, namely reform schools for boys, became laboratories for the study of delinquency as well as intelligence, heredity, and race. In California, efforts to transform decaying reform schools into premiere institutions had serious repercussions for youth of color. As I have argued, in the 1910s school administrators at one of California’s leading reform schools for boys, Whittier State School, turned to science and scientific research to determine the causes of delinquency. Reflective of the larger Progressive educational movement and the growing national and international interest in science, race, and eugenics, the school’s administrators employed the use of intelligence tests to determine the causes of delinquency. The result was the removal of low-scoring male youth of color—particularly Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and African Americans—who, officials believed, would be unlikely to reform and become productive citizens. Those deemed un reformable were sent to other institutions, including state hospitals, which routinely sterilized their wards, as allowed by a 1909 statute.\(^50\)
In Texas, state officials also turned to experts to bring about dramatic transformations to their correctional system. As William Bush finds, the juvenile correctional system in the post-World War Two period showed how in the process of transforming the massive Gatesville School for Boys from an impersonal, disciplinarian, and punishment-based institution to one of individualized attention and rehabilitative ideal, the school turned for the worse. The Texas Youth Council, the agency responsible for reforming the reform school, failed to carry out its mandate and instead exacerbated racial tensions among the increasing numbers of African Americans and Mexican Americans. In the end, Bush argues, “Both groups experienced discriminatory and disproportionate forms of punishment. In Texas, juvenile corrections became a site of heightened de facto Jim Crow inequality.”

Conclusion
Reflecting on Anthony Platt’s *The Child Savers* and its influence in the field of juvenile justice studies has provided an overdue opportunity to trace the creative responses as well as heated arguments that ensued over the nature of social reform, the juvenile court, and social control in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *The Child Savers* was perhaps most successful, revolutionary some might argue, in rattling basic assumptions about Progressive reform. Even with its flaws, *The Child Savers* forced a reconsideration of the evolution of the juvenile justice system in the United States. Contrary to much of the dominant literature in criminology, sociology, and history of the 1940s and 1950s, Platt’s approach involved deconstructing understandings about crime, criminality, and deviancy. Influenced by intellectual currents in Marxism, sociology, and history and by contemporary civil rights, women’s, and liberationist movements across the globe, Platt’s work embodied the growing cynicism of the optimism espoused by liberal thought and liberal thinking of the 1940s and 1950s. His work led his contemporaries and future scholars to grapple with not only the intents and outcomes of the Progressives’ agenda but also with their class, gender, and racial and ethnic biases.

This discussion has also allowed for a critical assessment of the research questions and findings that have evolved since and as a result of Platt’s *The Child Savers*. While Platt has moved on recently to non-fiction creative writing, his historical work—*The Politics of Riot Commissions* and *E. Franklin Frazier Reconsidered*—continued the revisionist perspective begun with *The Child Savers*. And in his latest book, *Bloodlines*, he returns to the Progressive Era, this time to explore the enduring legacies of eugenics. Nevertheless, the field of juvenile justice, continued to focus primarily on the northeast and Midwest and on frameworks privileging class and gender. Only very recently have scholars—historians and criminologists alike—given race and ethnicity serious consideration, despite the need for more attention to the
ways in which youth of color have been historically racialized and criminalized in the United States. Until we have adequate scholarship addressing the disproportionate confinement of minority youth and the construction of deviant youth as “other,” or non-white, will we move closer to a more accurate interpretation of the past.52

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3. Interview with Anthony Platt, July 2006, Berkeley, California, conducted by the author, digital voice recording in author’s possession.


17. Ibid., xvii–xviii.
20. Ibid., 1755.
25. For Platt’s sources, see Platt, The Child Savers, 221.
27. Ibid., xxii, 146.
32. See, for example, Nicole Hahn Rafter, Partial Justice: Women, Prisons, and Social Control, 2nd ed. (1990); Estelle B. Freedman, Their Sister’s Keepers (1981); and, see Rafter’s important call to correct the “gender myopia” of studies on the criminal justice system and prisons in general, see Rafter, “Gender, Prisons, and Prison History,” Social Science History 9 (Summer 1995): 233–47.
34. Odem, Delinquent Daughters, 158.
35. Ibid., 181.
36. Platt, The Child Savers, xxv–xxvi. Platt writes, women who “participated in the movement were able to free themselves from the domination of their husbands and fathers so as to participate more creatively in society.” This statement counters Mary Atwell’s statement that Platt’s work was “misogynist” and “outdated” for his portrayal of the social reformers. See, Mary W. Atwell, “Review of Mary E. Odem, Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885–1920,” H-PCAACA, H-NET Reviews,

38. Ibid., 143.
39. The notable exception in the Southwest is Odem’s Delinquent Daughters.
42. For Du Bois and Wells-Barnett’s writings, see Gabbidon, Greene, and Young, eds., African American Classics in Criminology.
43. Ira M. Schwartz, Preface to “Will the Juvenile Court System Survive?” Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 654 (July 1999). See also The Future of the Children “The Juvenile Court” (Special Issue) 6 (Winter 1996). For books on the court’s centennial, see, for example, Margaret K. Rosenheim, et al., A Century of Juvenile Justice (Chicago, 2002). That book has sixteen chapters, four of which focus on regions outside the United States, but none of which examine race.
45. Barry Feld’s numerous studies include Bad Kids: Race and the Transformation of the Juvenile Court (1999).
46. For a sample of report, see Francisco Villarruel and Nancy Walker, “¿Dónde Está la Justicia? A Call to Action on behalf of Latino and Latina Youth in the U.S. Justice System,” Building Blocks for Youth, 2000. For that and other reports, go to: http://BuildingBlocksforYouth.org.
48. Among the few scholars that use juvenile court cases include Schlossman, Transforming Juvenile Justice; Odem, Delinquent Daughters, and, more recently, Tanenhaus, Juvenile Justice in the Making.