Introduction

“The Way I See It”: Reframing Black Youth and Racial Injustice

A man never knows the real importance of fighting juvenile delinquency until he has to stare it in the face.
—Roy Campanella, “The Way I See It”

“I just got mixed up with some jerky kids,” David Campanella told the police when he was arrested for his role in a Queens brawl. According to police reports, the fifteen-year-old son of the former Brooklyn Dodger catcher Roy Campanella, was one of the six boys involved in a fistfight in the vacant parking lot of a bowling alley as roughly thirty boys from fourteen to twenty years old looked on. No weapons were involved, and no injuries were reported. Media coverage of the incident varied as the young Campanella was subjected to legal proceedings for the fracas. Still, even with his well-known surname, the black youth faced tremendous hardship in both the court of justice and the court of public opinion.¹

The first public accounts of the parking-lot scuffle were printed by New York newspapers, the New York Times and the New York Herald Tribune, with Campanella’s photograph displayed and his name stamped in the headlines. There was not much discrepancy with regard to what happened on February 23, 1959; however, the New York dailies’ characterization of those who were involved differed. As reported by the Herald Tribune, David Campanella entered the Mapleways Bowling Alley and issued a challenge to a group of white boys to come out and fight. In accordance with the police report, Campanella was one of the leaders of the Chaplains, “a Queens gang of Negro and Puerto Rican youths.” The reason for the clash, according to the Herald Tribune story, was that “the Chaplains had been piqued over their ‘territorial rights’ in Flushing being taken over by the unidentified rival gang.”²
The unidentified rival gang was the Champions, a group of white youths who resided in the same neighborhood as the Chaplains. The New York Times’ coverage of the incident proclaimed that the Champions were said to have called the fight one week earlier “to protest the presence of some of the Negro and Puerto Rican youngsters in a Flushing bowling alley.” The Champions considered the bowling alley their “territory” and engaged Campanella and his guys when they entered Mapleways. One of the white boys who fought against the Chaplains, Mike O’Neill, said, “We were lounging around the bowling alley when Campanella and his two friends walked in. Campanella did all the talking. He said he wanted to build up a rep—you know, a reputation in the neighborhood—and he wanted three of us to fight him and his guys. Three of us said we would and we did.” Fourteen youths, between the ages of fifteen and twenty, were booked at the Flushing Precinct on charges of disorderly conduct, arraigned in Night Court before Magistrate Edward Chapman, and paroled to their parents’ custody—except Campanella.3

The police escorted Campanella to the Bronx Youth House but did not release him to the custody of his mother, Ruthe, when she arrived to pick him up. Mrs. Campanella refused to talk to reporters, and the authorities at the Youth House did not immediately disclose why young Campanella was not discharged. Later it was learned that after David was detained for his role in the skirmish, he made damaging admissions concerning a burglary of a drugstore one week prior. Domestic Relations Judge Wilfred A. Waltemade explained to David, “You must understand you have been found a juvenile delinquent and if you get in further trouble and are returned to children’s court, you have my word, boy, you will be dealt with very severely.” Following a two-and-a-half-hour hearing, David was let go with a warning. His mother told reporters, “This is going to break his father’s heart.”4

Roy Campanella, one of the first black, modern-era major-league baseball players, worked for many years with youngsters, mostly in New York City, to curb juvenile delinquency. In an article published by Jet magazine, an African American weekly founded in 1951, Roy Campanella revealed why it was important for him to work with kids around the country when he traveled with the Dodgers. “For years I’ve been lecturing in YMCAs, boys clubs and to kid groups about walking the straight and narrow,” Campanella explained. “Too, I felt I was making
a contribution towards solving a really serious problem in American life.” But like any father, Roy was forced to reexamine the whole picture of juvenile delinquency when he faced the problem firsthand. After his son, David, was released, Roy told New York Times reporters dejectedly, “Everything else compared to this is nothing.”

The Campanellas scolded their son for his misbehaviors but at the same time understood the role that his reputable status played in the situation. As Mrs. Campanella defended her son in court, she affirmed that the charges were “blown up all out of proportion because of his name.” The family’s attorney, William O’Hara, agreed. Objecting to the high bail the Campanellas were forced to pay, the lawyer told reporters that he wondered “what would have happened to this boy if his name were Johnny Jones.” Though it is difficult to know for certain to what extant David’s family name affected
the court’s response to his wrongdoings, the press openly admitted that its coverage of the Campanella case was indeed influenced by his last name. Objecting to the tacit rule not to publish the names of juvenile offenders, the managing editor of the New York Times, Turner Catledge, disclosed, “It is not the purpose of newspapers to prevent crime or to sell any philosophy to the public.” Unrelenting in his sentiment that the press was obligated to give the public facts, in reference to the Campanella case, Catledge stated, “We in New York have much less to apologize for than if we had not printed the name. Names do make news.”

Ultimately, Magistrate James E. LoPicolo dismissed the charges against the fourteen youths, including David Campanella, for the parking-lot altercation, with a stern warning to the defendants not to participate in any further “gang fights.” Young Campanella was, however, judged a juvenile delinquent in Queens Children’s Court for his involvement in the drugstore robbery. Justice Sylvia J. Liese of the Domestic Relations Court paroled Campanella in the custody of his mother and a priest. She explained that it was immaterial whether anything had been taken from the store, since breaking into the store itself constituted an act of juvenile delinquency. Campanella’s parole conditions prohibited overnight visits to his friends, ordered mandatory school attendance, and enforced a nightly curfew. Deviation from these conditions, Justice Liese implied, would send Campanella to reform school. “I don’t expect him to get any special treatment or sympathy as the son of his father,” Justice Liese professed. “But I feel he should get the same chance as any other boy.”

Justice Liese was right. David Campanella did deserve the same chance as any other boy. And though the coverage of the case exacerbated the particulars, to a certain extent young Campanella’s encounter with carceral authorities was, in fact, common—at least compared to other black youth encounters with the carceral state in the mid-twentieth century. Campanella had all the normal interests that boys of his age had, including athletic interests and group interests such as singing. Prior to the Mapleways incident, he had never been in trouble, and Justice Liese confirmed, “The things that got him into trouble [were] not typical of his behavior.” Nevertheless, Campanella’s attitude toward authority reflected a familiar distrust that many youths of color retained; but as much of the public inquired, why? A Washington Post editor wrote, “Even the scars of his race must have been slighter for him since his father was
so conspicuous an example of how even deep-rooted prejudice can be overcome by merit and personality.” Still, it was difficult for the public to understand how a youth such as Campanella, who did not fit the usually ascribed factors such as parental neglect, an unfavorable environment, and so on, became delinquent.8

*Presumed Criminal: Black Youth and the Justice System in Postwar New York* examines how the juvenile justice system and its associated authorities contributed to racialized constructions of youth criminality in New York City from the 1930s to the 1960s. “Criminalization” is broadly defined as the means in which one is criminalized, or prevented from being law-abiding, and its practices and processes extend further than the US criminal and juvenile justice systems. Bridging the historiographical gap between the Great Depression and the War on Crime, I argue that black youths faced a more punitive justice system by the post-war era that restricted their social mobility and categorically branded them as criminal—a stigma they continue to endure.9

Cautiously, I use the labels “black,” “youth,” and “juvenile delinquency” throughout the book. These labels are often defined and understood in particular social settings at any moment on the basis of their relationship with larger structural conditions, social policies, and ideologies, on the one hand, and local practices of everyday life within the contexts of families, peers, and state institutions, on the other. When referring to people, I use “black” much like the proper noun “African American”; however, I employ the term throughout the study in reference to people connected to the African diaspora as well. When referring to age, I use “youth” to refer to young men and women up through their early twenties; however, especially in legal proceedings, there is often variation across race and gender. I use “juvenile delinquency” generally in reference to antisocial behaviors and criminal acts committed by youths that have been categorized by the state. While I have attempted to analyze the complexities of race, class, and gender, young men do constitute the main subjects of the text.10 By examining the experiences of black youths confined in New York City’s expansive carceral systems, *Presumed Criminal* offers timely historical context for contemporary debates surrounding youth, race, and crime in the United States.

Black youth criminality, for all its singularities, continues to resonate as a national concern; however, few people are willing to accept
the reality of their plight. Psychologists have determined that “black boys are seen as older and less innocent” than their white counterparts. Economists have found that “race trumps class, at least when it comes to [the] incarceration” of youths in the United States. Even as black youths in the twenty-first century articulate their own experiences with carceral authorities, many people remain surprised by the disparities between black and white youth experiences in the justice system. But these contemporary studies illustrate a much-longer history of policies and strategies that targeted specific communities since the late nineteenth century.11

The criminalization of black youth is inseparable from its racialized origins. Because of this connection, much of the historical narrative about crime and delinquency before the 1960s tends to focus on the southern criminal and juvenile justice systems whose racist practices prevailed during the long Jim Crow era. They have been framed as “pre-modern,” as noted by historian Khalil Gibran Muhammad, while this history in the North has been more of a “modernizing narrative,” which focused largely on the experiences of native-born whites and European immigrants. This approach overlooks the urban North as a critical site of production of modern ideas about race, crime, and punishment, and it gives a false impression that the history of racial criminalization both started and ended in the Jim Crow South—an assertion that scholars continue to debunk.12

Presumed Criminal joins these efforts and makes central the experiences of black youths who faced the expansive justice system in New York City.

For youth crime, or juvenile delinquency, more specifically, these historical narratives have either been framed around the Progressive era and the establishment of the juvenile court system or the post–World War II period, especially the 1950s, when developments of youth culture were tied to the rise of a mass-media society. Like the histories of early criminal justice in the North, histories of youth crime in the Progressive era tend to revolve around the experiences of white youths, generally ethnic immigrants. Progressive reformers believed that “immigrants had to be ‘Americanized,’ culturally and morally transformed from aliens into citizens.” The reformers involved in the establishment of the juvenile court, the “child-savers,” believed that a separate justice system for youths could play a role in the Americanization process of its wards.
After all, “the progressive answer to make the state into a parent” quelled national concerns posed by the influx of European immigrants, as the state’s power of parens patriae accelerated the process of Americanizing their offspring. Thus, the newly established juvenile court system became a protective buffer for white youths that diverted their misbehaviors away from the adult criminal justice system.¹³

Black youths, during the same period, were forced to navigate shifty terrain, where the dominant view characterized any of them whose behaviors deviated from social norms as “an incorrigible, undeserving, and expendable breed of human clay.” This was a problem as they became overrepresented in the juvenile court. Black youths encountered a “Jim Crow juvenile justice system” that refused to extend rehabilitative ideals and resources; regularly committed them to adult prisons; and sentenced them to the convict-lease system, prolonged periods of detention, and higher rates of corporal punishment and execution. Therefore, as delinquent white youths benefited from juvenile court interventions under the guise of rehabilitative ideals, black youths were denied such privileges and presumed criminal beyond a doubt—a trend that outlived the Progressive era.¹⁴

These presumptions of criminality extended beyond the juvenile court, especially by the postwar period. Heightened surveillance of city spaces led to an increase in youth encounters with law enforcement officials that, naturally, inflated crime rates. Further, many of these run-ins with police triggered racial antagonisms in their respective communities and, consequently, caused black youths to view the police as a repressive, untrustworthy authority. To be sure, police brutality and misconduct was not exclusive to black communities, nor was it entirely a postwar phenomenon. And though each city presents its own unique history with police violence, many of the underlying causes and, often, community responses were the same.¹⁵

Even then, the juvenile justice system and the police are just a part of the criminalization of black youths in the twentieth century. Print media outlets and social scientists, especially with the rise of social psychiatry and social psychology, were also authorities who contributed to the criminalization of the city’s black youths. Whether reporting on criminal investigations or stories of uprisings, political organizing, or grassroots activism, media bias reinforced racialized constructions of
criminality that intensified public anxieties about black youths. Social scientists continued to rely on crime statistics to substantiate the need for intervention in black communities. Thus, it is imperative to continue to advance our understanding of how criminalization impacted race relations in urban America and vice versa.16

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Presumed Criminal not only broadens the burgeoning historiography of carceral studies but also expands the postwar urban narrative that emphasizes the limits of racial liberalism in the North, and it builds on the long-standing efforts to recognize youths as important historical actors. New York City from the Great Depression to the Great Society presents a case study that lends itself well to comparisons with other large US cities. Its demographic makeup from the onset of the twentieth century transformed drastically from decade to decade. The earliest decades of the century witnessed vast European immigration that fueled America’s urban growth—a trend that remained from the nineteenth century. By the 1920s, the flow of European immigrants to American cities slowed and was supplanted by migrations of black folks, mainly from the American South and the Caribbean. These demographic changes in America’s largest city, combined with technological advances and urban industrialization, sparked many confrontations inspired by societal changes.17

To be sure, New York City was one of the many American cities north of the Mason-Dixon line where its citizens confronted, resisted, and challenged the racial status quo, especially after World War II. Historians attest that much of the struggle for civil rights emerged in major northern cities, but because southern movements received more media and national political attention, they tend to dominate the historical narrative and popular memory. Gradually, however, the narrative of the urban North as a utopian melting pot has been exposed. So too has the history of New York City as a “supposed bastion of liberalism.” In fact, it has been noted, because of its sizeable black population, “progressive” leadership, and far-reaching print media outlets, New York City became a pivotal battleground in the postwar push for racial equality. This included contests over fair housing, public schools, and the criminal justice system—all spaces that affect the lived experiences of the city’s youths.18
Even so, youth experiences remain largely omitted from the historical narrative of New York City’s postwar struggle toward equality. This, indeed, speaks more to the shortcomings of public records than to their historical significance. *Presumed Criminal* attempts to deal with this dilemma. Teens and young adults often stood “at the vanguard of grassroots mobilizations” in city spaces, and New York City was no exception. Many historians and youth studies scholars continue to develop the analytical frameworks needed to examine not only how ideas about youth have been framed but also how the youths can be studied as agents of change. For example, research on youth gangs in postwar New York reveals that gangs were a product of the confluence of perceptions of masculinity and class in a postindustrial context. However, because the historical sources are generally about the youths and not from them, the premise relies entirely on the theory that crime is culturally adaptive to economic and social oppression. But what about the many youths who did not join gangs in postwar New York City? Such an approach ignores the majority of the youngsters who were criminalized by association and forced to cope with the unjustified consequences that followed. These are the youths whose experiences make up a bulk of the text that follows.19

*Presumed Criminal* begins in the second half of the 1930s. New York City, like most cities, continued to work its way back to normalcy after the stock market crashed. Harlem, whose renaissance was disrupted by the Great Depression, continued to subsist as the “Negro capital of the world” within the “greatest city in the world.” Conversely, the city’s youths found themselves at a crossroads. Institutional resources to provide sufficient education, economic, health, and recreational opportunities for youths were drained as the city recovered from the Depression, and this impacted youth behaviors, decisions, and perceptions of authorities. Consequently, many youths, especially black youths, found themselves entering the criminal justice system for the first time—a system that, like the black youths who entered it, found itself at a crossroads.

Chapter 1 focuses on the juvenile justice system and its related efforts to address youth crime in New York City before World War II. Tensions developed among state authorities who vied for position on the way to combat the city’s crime problem. On one side, there were those who anticipated a rise in criminal acts and believed it was imperative to increase
carceral sovereignty to prevent potential problems. Preventive policing of youth behaviors increased surveillance, which naturally compounded arrests rates and gave reason to become tough on youth crime. On the other side, there were those who made efforts to extend Progressive-era ideas, which emphasized the correction of social ills, to attend to crime and delinquency in the city. This approach offered both promise and perils for black youths in the justice system. For example, Jane Bolin’s appointment to New York City’s Domestic Relations Court marked promise. The first black woman judge in US history represented a cultural and intellectual tradition that advanced a neo-Progressive ethos that prioritized social influences over race when handling cases of youth crime. Bolin often administered a brand of justice that recognized the racism and structural inequalities that black youths faced, and she joined a handful of black reformers who demanded that whites treat them more fairly. But the Progressive-era logic gave little regard to the demographic changes in the city and, consequently, contributed to its perils. The informality of juvenile justice, combined with absolute judicial authority reaffirmed by the Federal Juvenile Delinquency Act of 1938, made the system a precarious space for countless black youths, who were subjected to a state authority that chose to ignore the character, condition, needs, and welfare of individual cases. Thus, despite the best efforts of Bolin and others, the racialization of youth crime proved too compelling to oppose.

Chapter 2 moves the discussion of youth criminality from the courts to the streets. The chapter examines Harlem’s home front during World War II, centered on the 1943 uprising and its lasting impact on police-community relations. The 1943 uprising joined a series of rebellions across the country in response to long-standing racial resentments and animosities. The Harlem uprising, specifically, was a direct response to the system of discrimination, segregation, and police brutality that plagued the community through the 1940s. Incited by the untimely, fatal police shooting of a black soldier, the public protests called attention to the plight of black New Yorkers, especially young Harlemites, as they contested the urban landscape and sought equal access to wartime benefits. The excessive policing employed to quell the uprising agitated any cordial relations the police attempted to cultivate in the 1930s, and it negatively influenced youth perspectives of state authorities, while simultaneously affecting the city’s perceptions of its youths.
Chapters 3 and 4 explore postwar constructions, and deconstructions, of youth, race, and crime in New York City. A range of societal forces, such as politicians, print media figures, and social scientists, as well as celebrities and athletes, joined carceral authorities in directing the public discourse on youth crime. This not only influenced theoretical constructions of criminality—that is, reaffirming who was presumed criminal—but also shaped public policies connected to the restored postwar problem. Chapter 3 investigates New York City’s postwar crime wave. Crime-wave sensationalism, led mostly by print media outlets, plagued the city after the war, and it launched debates relating to the legitimacy of its rhetoric, its causes, its impact on the community, and prevention plans that were proposed to fight it. It also reconstructed popular crime discourse in ways similar to the Progressive era, when many reformers, both white and black, attributed criminal behaviors to social conditions. In postwar New York City, these reformers included social psychiatrists, criminologists, and politicians committed to stopping crime. These efforts, combined with a fortified police presence in the city, made it difficult for black youths to escape presumptions of criminality. The crime wave was packaged with racial undertones, which were reinforced by disproportionate arrest statistics and crime data, that synonymized New York’s crime problem and its black residents, mainly youths.

By the 1950s, the decade of delinquency, there was little doubt that youth crime was a nationwide concern that warranted the attention and resources of all who were willing and able to address the problem. In the 1950s, the United States committed fully to curbing youth crime in a way comparable to the Progressive-era child-saving efforts, leading to the establishment of the juvenile court system. Chapter 4 dissects the effectiveness of antidelinquency efforts that trickled down from the national to the state to the local levels. Of all the dramatic social changes throughout the first half of the twentieth century, shifts in youth behaviors dominated popular discourse at midcentury, and youth crime emerged at the forefront. Considering that youth criminality intersected race, class, gender, and region, as confirmed by the United States Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency in 1953, many people took interest in prevention efforts. In New York City, various agencies and organizations, both formal and informal, put forth efforts to combat youth crime as they saw fit—some more successful than others. These ranged
from large institutional endeavors to on-the-ground organizing by the youths themselves. For example, the Harlem Young Citizens Council, an enthusiastic group of young Harlemites, called on the adults in the community to accept more responsibility for the unfair branding of black youths as delinquent. In the end, even with all the crime- and delinquency-prevention efforts that emerged, the number of youths arrested, especially black youths, continued to rise, and although this rise was a function of policy and practice as opposed to changes in behavior, it reestablished race as the basis of youth criminality.

The progress made in the decade of delinquency was met by systemic and institutionalized racism in the 1960s. Efforts to create a fair and impartial juvenile justice system became a thing of the past, and black youths in New York City bore the brunt of inordinate police practices and, consequently, endured the stigma of criminality henceforth. Chapter 5 recovers the case of the Harlem Six to attest to the firmness of race as a crucial determinant in American notions of crime and delinquency. With anticrime laws such as “stop-and-frisk” and “no-knock,” which contributed to disparate arrest rates and increased police encounters in predominantly black communities, New York City officials established a police state that created a climate for dissension. This tragic tale of criminal injustice—with all its familiarities and uniqueness—reveals the extent to which the community was compelled to go to protect its youths from the overwhelming power of the state.

Before the War on Crime, thousands of black youths in New York City confronted an opponent in the justice system that appeared to be constantly changing, a justice system whose powers derived from its ability to be shaped and reshaped by extension, never revision, and one that prioritized punishment, never prevention. A growing police state that was supported by countless policies to increase surveillance criminalized the behaviors of those who most needed protection, not condemnation. Still, thousands of black youths negotiated their place in the “greatest American city” as different adult social actors proposed their potential solutions to the problems the youngsters faced. But the problems lay in the presumptions: the presumption that black youths elicit a less essential conception of childhood and the presumption of criminality that tethers the lives of black youths to the justice system indefinitely.