



# FEAR OF THE AMERICAN TEENAGER

## OVERVIEW

### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What made the teenager a source of anxiety during the 1950s?

### OVERVIEW

After World War II, America experienced unparalleled growth and prosperity. The children born during the early years of the postwar “baby boom” were becoming teenagers by the late 1950s. Because of the burgeoning economy, many middle-class teens had more leisure time and more spending power than previous generations of young people. As examined in the Birth of American Teenager lesson, teenagers of the 1950s began exerting a growing influence on American life and commerce. But the rapid rise of this growing demographic also unleashed a wave of anxiety among adults. It was a fear both real and imagined. The number of crimes committed by teenagers was, in fact, rising throughout the nation. But there was also a level of intense anxiety that seemed unwarranted concerning the new power of the emerging teen demographic. Teenagers seemed to be challenging the social fabric of America. Many questioned, and even blamed, movies, comic books, and Rock and Roll for its influence on the rising misbehavior of youth.



According to a lengthy report on juvenile delinquency in the 1955 Saturday Evening Post, crime committed by teenagers increased by a drastic 45% between 1950 and 1955. There were more extreme cases of teenage violence as well, like that of Charlie Starkweather, a white teenager from a working class family in Lincoln, Nebraska. When Starkweather went on a two-month murder spree in 1958, killing eleven people in the Midwest, his gruesome actions challenged the notion that teenage crime was relegated to poor, urban areas. Starkweather, and the sensibility that he embodied, seemed to ignite fear among Americans everywhere. In a public opinion poll referenced by the United States Children’s Bureau in 1960, juvenile delinquency ranked third behind national defense and world peace as the American public’s greatest concern. As the journalist Bill Davis wrote in a 1957 issue of Colliers magazine, “Never in our 180-year history has the United States been so aware of – or so confused about – our teenagers.”

The release of the 1955 film Blackboard Jungle tapped into this general fear and anxiety. The movie included the first instance of Rock and Roll being used in a Hollywood feature film with “Rock Around The Clock” by Bill Haley and His Comets. The opening credits rolled to Bill

## OVERVIEW (CONTINUED)

Haley's voice calling out "1, 2, 3 o'clock, 4 o'clock rock," all punctuated by heavy drums. Although the track features a familiar foundation of Country swing, it is steeped in Rhythm and Blues. Midway through the song, kicking and careening out of the chorus, is a frenetic and now famous electric guitar solo that seems to shake the very bars of the song, igniting and exciting the listener. This was Rock and Roll. And blasting through the speakers of the movie theaters, it was Rock and Roll the way it was intended to be heard: loudly. Teenagers took to the aisles of the movie theaters dancing. The film was banned in some Southern cities like Atlanta and Memphis. It is rumored that a few theaters even the opening credits without sound.

It was clear that some believed music and movies marketed towards teenagers were a direct threat to the moral fiber of society, challenging the strength of the family unit. As one staff writer for the Vancouver Sun wrote in 1957 when Elvis was slated to perform in his town, "If any daughter of mine broke out of the woodshed tonight to see Elvis Presley ... I'd kick her teeth in." This was the tense backdrop that colored the reception of early Rock and Roll.

Who was responsible for this rise in lawlessness and how could the "wild" teenagers be tamed? There was a consensus that something had to be done. In 1954, the Senate created a special subcommittee on juvenile delinquency. The subcommittee held hearings to investigate the effects of "crime and horror" comic books on the psychology and misbehavior of youth. In addition to comic books, it was the subcommittee's intention to study the influence of music, movies, and other media upon teenagers as well.

This lesson will investigate the role of the media, its influence on young people, and the growing anxiety about teenagers' newfound independence in the 1950s. Students will explore primary source materials related to movies, music, and comic books that impacted teenage culture. Learning about the 1954 Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, students will read and form opinions on actual congressional testimony. Additional resources will include the trailer for *Blackboard Jungle* and a 1956 performance of Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers' "I'm Not A Juvenile Delinquent."

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The term “juvenile delinquency” and its prominence in 1950s American culture
- U.S. government efforts to curb juvenile delinquency in the 1950s and the resulting Senate subcommittee hearings
- Growing concerns among adults in the 1950s that Rock and Roll was challenging the existing social order
- The influence of the popular 1955 film *Blackboard Jungle*

### 2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Analyze and interpret primary source documents, including congressional testimony, newspaper articles, and 1950s comic book covers and movie trailers
- Make connections between society’s attitude toward teenagers in the 1950s and today

## ACTIVITIES

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

**1. Distribute Handout 1: “Juvenile Delinquent” Lyrics, Facts, and Figures. Play the song, “I’m Not A Juvenile Delinquent” by Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers (1956) and discuss the following:**

- How are the performers dressed? What kind of image are they trying to present?
- What is the message of the song? What does this song tell you about American attitudes towards teenagers in 1957?

**2. As a class, work define the term juvenile delinquent. Brainstorm some examples of what might constitute juvenile delinquency. Have the students write down the class definition. As a reference, the Meriam-Webster definition is: a violation of the law committed by a juvenile or conduct by a juvenile characterized by antisocial behavior that is beyond parental control.**

**3. Review the facts and figures concerning juvenile delinquency in the 1950s. Ask the students, if teenage crime is increasing, who is responsible for curbing its rise? Some examples might be parents, community leaders, teachers, mass media, or law enforcement.**

**PROCEDURE:**

1. Explain to the students that in the 1950s, early Rock and Roll was achieving dominance on the airwaves, with artists such as Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry releasing their first singles. Parents and community leaders were very suspicious of this powerful new form of music that seemed to excite teenagers. Using student volunteers, alternate reading the first six paragraphs of the 1957 Vancouver Sun article “Daughter Wants to See Elvis? Kick Her In The Teeth!”

- What does the writer find most offensive about Elvis Presley?
- Why would fathers be concerned about their daughters if they “screamed, and quivered, and shut their eyes” when they heard Rock and Roll?

2. Remind students that as late as 1955, miscegenation laws existed in more than half of the 48 states and outlawed marriage between Blacks and Whites. Rock and Roll seemed to directly challenge the system of segregation at the time. It encouraged white middle-class teenagers to dance and mix with other races and socio-economic levels. Alan Freed, (who introduces Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers in the “I’m Not A Juvenile Delinquent” video clip), had a prime-time music show in 1957 called The Big Beat. It was canceled after four episodes because the show had broadcast footage of Frankie Lymon dancing with a white girl from the studio audience. Reportedly, this incident had offended network affiliates in Southern states.

Play the clip of the D.J. smashing Rock and Roll records. As a class discuss:

- Why does the D.J. smash the records? What about Rock and Roll do you think he finds objectionable?

- Would Elvis Presley be played on this station?
- Do you think music can influence behavior?

3. As a class, watch the first minute of the trailer for the 1955 film Blackboard Jungle. Ask students to write down any key words or actions describing teenagers in the trailer (e.g. “teenage terror,” “savagery,” dancing, smoking, fighting). Tell the students, the opening credits include the first instance of a Rock and Roll song being used in a Hollywood feature film. When teenagers across the nation heard “Rock Around The Clock” by Bill Haley & His Comets, many of them took to the aisles of the movie theaters to dance. The movie was a smash hit; the song spent eight weeks as number one on the Billboard charts and became an anthem for Rock and Roll.

4. Explain to the students that in the 1950s the nation was concerned with the rising crime rate among youth. In 1954, the government launched a Senate Judiciary Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency to examine the influence of movies, music, and comic books on teenagers.

Distribute Handout 2: Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency. Ask student volunteers to read aloud “1. Introduction: What Is A Subcommittee?” by alternating paragraphs.

5. Break students up into small groups. Explain that they will be serving on a mock Senate Judiciary Subcommittee. Please note, to encourage debate within the subcommittee groups, assign roles to each student. Half of the group should be “for” controlling and regulating media, and the other half of the group should be “against” the idea. At the end of class,

each subcommittee will be making their recommendations on the best method to curb juvenile delinquency in the United States.

6. Distribute Handout 3: 1950s Movie Posters to the subcommittee groups. Have them complete the handout together, with the voice of their assigned “roles” as needed. Poll the class for their answers and reactions to movie posters. Do the subcommittees believe that movies can influence the actions of teenagers? Why or why not?
7. Refer back to Handout 2: Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency. In their subcommittee groups, students will review “Part 2:

Comic Book Examples Submitted As Evidence” and “Part 3: Congressional Testimony.” Taking turns, students will read aloud the actual testimony from the subcommittee hearings. Students should discuss the following questions using their “for” or “against” roles to encourage debate:

- Of the testimony that you heard, which opinion resonated with you the most? Why? Which did you find least convincing? Why?
- What do you believe is the role of government, if any, in controlling media?
- Do you agree with some of the ways that industries and parents currently self-regulate (think of the Motion Picture Association of America rating system for movies and parental controls on television)?

### SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

1. In their subcommittee groups, students will address the following question: How should media such as Rock and Roll, movies, and “crime and horror” comic books be regulated, if at all? Label four areas of the room with the following phrases:
  - Parental Regulations
  - Government Oversight
  - Industry Self-Regulates
  - No Oversight / First Amendment Violation

Using the four options, students will come up with at least one recommendation that their subcommittee would like to make to the Senate (e.g., “As a subcommittee, we recommend that parents play a larger role in monitoring what their children read). Subcommittee groups will stand up and go to the area of the room that aligns with their recommendation. Each subcommittee will then share their recommendation with the class.

2. To end the class, the teacher or student volunteers will refer back to the Handout 2: Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency and read aloud “Part 4: Senate Recommendations and the Comics Code Authority.” This includes the actual recommendations given by the subcommittee in 1955.



## WRITING PROMPT:

Do you think it is fair to link movies, comic books, and Rock and Roll to juvenile delinquency? Are similar arguments made about the effects of popular music, movies, and media on teenagers today?

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:

1. The year is 1955 and your town is considering hosting a Rock and Roll concert. Students will explore different perspectives and potential reactions by writing an editorial to the local paper in the voice of a fictional character. Assign the students a character, or invite them to choose from the following:

- A parent of a teenager
- A local high school teacher
- A record executive
- Local law enforcement
- An interracial teenage couple
- A religious leader

In the editorial, students must voice his or her concerns or support for a Rock and Roll concert. Where is their town located in America and how might this affect their opinion? Where will the concert take place and who will be allowed to attend? Invite students to share their editorials in class.

2. Challenge students to find a present-day article in a newspaper (either online or in print) that reflects a similar anxiety or fear about the current effect of either music, movies, the internet, or video games on the behavior of today's youth. In a writing response, have them compare the present-day article to what they have learned about youth culture in the 1950s. How are reactions, fears, and anxieties about the influence of media similar? How are they different? How has entertainment changed since the 1950s?

## STANDARDS

### COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

#### *College and Career Readiness Reading Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 for Literature and Informational Text*

Reading 4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

Reading 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

#### *College and Career Readiness Writing Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects*

Writing 8: Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 6-12*

Speaking and Listening 3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

### SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

### NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

#### *Core Music Standard: Responding*

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis,

interpretation, and established criteria.

### *Core Music Standard: Connecting*

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.

## RESOURCES

### VIDEO RESOURCES

- DJ Smashing Rock and Roll Records (1958)
- Blackboard Jungle Trailer (1955)
- Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers – I’m Not a Juvenile Delinquent (1956)

### FEATURED PEOPLE

- Bill Haley and His Comets
- Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers
- Elvis Presley

### HANDOUTS

- Handout 1: “Juvenile Delinquent” Lyrics, Facts, and Figures
- Handout 2: Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency
- Handout 3: 1950s Movie Posters