Cops and Kids

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The Rise of Police Crime Prevention, 1919–40

In 1919, August Vollmer, chief of the Berkeley (CA) Police Department, spoke before the annual meeting of the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) in New Orleans and articulated a new vision of policing. The policeman, he suggested to the assembled leaders, should function “as a social worker.” Traditionally, according to Vollmer, policemen had been mainly concerned with catching offenders and putting them behind bars. These officers were honest and well intentioned, but they did little to address the sources of crime and delinquency. A modern policeman, however, had much greater obligations and much greater potential. “If he would serve his community by reducing crime,” Vollmer argued, “he must go up the stream a little further and dam it up at its source, and not wait until it is a rushing torrent, uncontrollable and relentless.” No public official, in his view, had more flexibility to work with other helping agencies or more opportunities to act for good in their community than the “intelligent, sympathetic, and trained policeman.” And central to Vollmer’s vision were systematic efforts to intervene with children and to prevent delinquency. “By close cooperation with schools and public welfare agencies,” Vollmer suggested, “[the policeman] will soon learn who the potential delinquents and dependents are, and can do much to assist in preventing them from becoming social failures. Boy gangs may be transformed into juvenile police and taught to be friendly helpers, or they may be helped to join boy scouts or similar boys’ organizations, and through these agencies become helpful members of the community.”

Vollmer’s vision was profoundly influential. By the late 1910s, Vollmer had become the most prominent advocate of police reform in the United States. As in other areas of police administration, he did not necessarily gen-
erate new ideas for preventing crime himself, but he did consolidate, articulate, and attempt to implement an array of innovations that had been, until that time, somewhat formless and disparate. In this case, Vollmer’s vision of the policeman as a social worker organized a set of newly emerging concepts about what the function of the police in the community should be. In particular, he began to establish a new role for police in dealing with children and youth. One goal of the “child-saving” movement had been to minimize the influence of law enforcement officials over young offenders, marginalizing the police. Although courts depended on cops, court advocates had suggested that the police had little legitimate role in juvenile justice and sought to push them out of the system. In his 1919 speech, Vollmer articulated how the police could be brought back in.

Between the 1890s and the 1910s, juvenile courts had unquestionably been the key public innovations in dealing with troubled teenagers. As the primary institutions for addressing delinquent and dependent children, juvenile courts redefined how the state sought to discipline and help youth. In the 1920s and 1930s, however, the sources of innovation shifted from courts to the communities. Schools, child guidance clinics, neighborhood-organizing groups, and character-building agencies all assumed new importance in fighting delinquency.

And in particular, many U.S. police departments sought to create new methods to deal with youth. As advocates of this new approach presented it, police strove not only to catch and punish criminals but to prevent crime as well. They would intervene early with potential delinquents by organizing recreation programs, befriending and monitoring young people, and resolving minor cases without referrals to court. They intended these activities to redirect boys away from antisocial activities and to minimize crime they might commit in the future. Vollmer and his ideal of making social workers of policemen helped inspire this movement, but other factors shaped it as well. Growing disenchantment with juvenile courts in the 1920s and 1930s also invited new approaches to handling delinquency. In particular, new psychiatric understandings of delinquency suggested that early intervention and individualized treatment had greater impacts on youths than did juvenile court. And new popular understandings of delinquents as potential criminals further encouraged communities to develop crime prevention programs. Together, these influences led many police departments to address delinquency more systematically than they had in the past. Beginning in the late 1920s and accelerating in the 1930s, police departments across the country inaugurated new efforts to prevent juvenile crime.
A Model for “Crime Prevention”: Vollmer’s Berkeley

The Berkeley Police Department under August Vollmer established a key precedent for subsequent police “crime prevention.” Preventing juvenile crime by making social workers of policemen, however, was not Vollmer’s highest priority. Instead, it was one component of a larger campaign to professionalize policing more generally.

Vollmer became the most prominent police official of his time by developing new methods to maintain public order and fight crime effectively. Elected Berkeley’s town marshal in 1905 at the age of twenty-nine, Vollmer immediately set out to modernize his tiny department. He hired additional deputies, placed officers on bicycles to make them more mobile, and established a signal system that allowed patrolmen and dispatchers to communicate. He also adopted innovations such as fingerprinting and forensic science to identify criminals, and maintained systematic records to keep track of them. Vollmer’s administration coincided with tremendous growth for his town. In 1906, the San Francisco earthquake brought thousands of refugees across the bay into Berkeley, fostering a permanent jump in both population and commerce. The expansion of the main campus of the University of California also fueled the town’s growth. In 1909, Berkeley incorporated as a city and appointed Vollmer as police chief, a position he retained until he retired in 1932. In an era when big-city police chiefs were lucky to retain their positions for even a few years, Vollmer’s long term in office, his comfortable base in a small city, and the support of a relatively progressive municipal administration all allowed him to build the police department he envisioned. Plus, he publicized his innovations widely through vigorous writing and through his positions as president of California Police Chiefs Association and, later, the IACP.4

Vollmer sought to set a higher standard for police work. Observers first noticed the technological innovations. By the late 1910s, Berkeley police officers responded to radio calls from a central headquarters and drove automobiles to reach crime scenes quickly. When they apprehended offenders, they collected fingerprints, handwriting samples, and physical measurements, identified them by cross-referencing detailed records, and interrogated them using a newly invented lie-detector machine. Such technical innovations quickly became standard operating procedures for police in other cities by the 1920s.5

Vollmer, however, placed greater importance on improving the quality of officers. In principle, he argued that police departments needed to attract
better-qualified recruits and provide more systematic training. In practice, Vollmer implemented these goals in three ways. First, he established rigorous standards for job applicants, eventually using intelligence testing to screen them. Second, he actively recruited undergraduate and graduate students from the University of California to serve as police officers. These “college cops” became one of Vollmer’s best-known innovations. Third, he established a permanent training program in 1908, one of the first in the United States. While the few police schools elsewhere trained recruits primarily in military drill and firearms, Berkeley’s school taught the principles of public service and scientific crime detection. Vollmer’s ultimate goal was to transform policing from a low-status occupation filled with ill-educated working-class men into a profession filled with college-educated public servants armed with the latest techniques to detect and prevent crime. He went a step beyond other police leaders who sought administrative reform and instead sought a more professional model of policing.6

Beginning in the late 1910s, Vollmer devoted increased attention to questions of what caused crime and how to prevent it, particularly among juveniles. In this, he was influenced heavily by psychiatric thinking and adopted ideas from the new field of child psychology. In the early years of the twentieth century, sociological models focusing on troubled social environments had dominated scholarly understandings of delinquency. But at the turn of the century, psychiatry was also emerging as its own discipline, focusing particularly on questions related to children’s development. The widely accepted environmental model of delinquency gradually evolved into a multicausal model influenced heavily by psychiatry. This new interpretation provided a more complete explanation of delinquency, but it did not provide an immediate prescription of what to do about it. Thus, reformers were increasingly willing to experiment.

In Chicago, the same reform coalition that originally had sponsored the juvenile court looked to psychiatry to supplement the court’s work. In 1909, at the initiative of philanthropist Ethel Sturges Dummer, the Juvenile Protective Association (JPA) established a Juvenile Psychopathic Institute to investigate boys and girls petitioned to the Chicago juvenile court. They hired Dr. William Healy to direct the institute, perform mental examinations on children referred by the court, treat them, and use them as a basis for research on psychological factors contributing to misbehavior. In his initial findings, first published in 1915, Healy challenged most accepted thinking about delinquency. Finding neither purely social nor purely biological explanations consistent with the children he had studied, Healy instead suggested that much delinquency resulted from the interaction of social circumstances,
psychological maladjustment, and minor mental disorders. Healy’s arguments provided an intellectual justification for establishing new institutional mechanisms across the country to address delinquency, particularly psychiatric clinics affiliated with juvenile courts and, later, “child guidance” clinics to screen younger children.7

Vollmer embraced Healy’s perspective, particularly his conclusion that public officials should facilitate expert intervention into the lives of “predelinquent” youngsters. Moreover, in 1919, Vollmer conducted his own study (in collaboration with psychiatrist Dr. Jau Don Ball) of the personality characteristics of 220 students at Berkeley’s Hawthorne Elementary School. They found that as many as 10 percent of students tested deviated substantially enough from the norms to be considered “problem children” requiring close supervision. From this study, Vollmer concluded that “predelinquent” traits could be detected in children, and potentially treated.8

Thus was born Vollmer’s argument that the policeman should act as a social worker. In the early twentieth century, “social work” had evolved from a general term for any activism or voluntary charity into a more concrete profession. Driven by a largely female group of academics and activists who pioneered social scientific research as well as the “case work” method of delving deeply into clients’ lives and experiences, social work developed substantial professional cachet by the late 1910s.9 For Vollmer, the new social work provided a model for both diagnosing and treating predelinquency. Somewhat oversimplifying the results of Healy’s work and of his own Hawthorne School study, Vollmer concluded that “it is possible to detect in children of predelinquent age the mental peculiarities” found by other researchers in teenage delinquents and adult criminals. Scientists, he suggested, had confirmed what policemen had long believed, that the “habitual offender’s criminalistic tendencies were displayed by non-conformity to regulations at a very tender age.” Building on this logic, Vollmer asked fellow police administrators, “does it not seem reasonable that our efforts to check crime should begin before the habits are so firmly fixed that it is too late to correct evil inclinations that forever blight a child’s chances of making good in this world? Is it not better to devote a few hours toward guiding him along the paths of rectitude that he may acquire essentials of character . . . than to spend days attempting to unravel a murder, robbery, or other vicious act which may follow our neglect of preventive police work?” As usual, Vollmer had suggestions how police could accomplish this. First, officers should build relationships with schools and teachers so that they could learn which children could become problems. Next, the police should record this information (Vollmer suggested maps with a system of color-coded pins so they could see which children with what
problems lived where). Finally, the police should turn to experts for analysis and instruction, and potentially to refer predelinquent children for treatment.10

Vollmer’s public pronouncements on crime prevention consolidated and systematized existing thinking about the role of police in dealing with young offenders. His most original insight was giving the old notion that police could intervene early with young offenders a new psychiatric twist. In so doing, he created both a practical justification for police crime prevention work that was consistent with what many police leaders and rank-and-file officers already believed, and an intellectual justification that could help ensure the cooperation he needed from the educational, psychiatric, and social welfare communities. Importantly, juvenile courts did not play a major role in his vision.

Vollmer put his ideas into practice almost from the beginning of his tenure as Berkeley’s police chief. As early as 1909, policemen placed potential delinquents on “voluntary police probation,” requiring them to report to officers on the beat. In 1925, Berkeley established an official Crime Prevention Division headed by psychiatric social worker Elizabeth Lossing. Like similar police bureaus elsewhere, the Crime Prevention Division investigated girls and young boys suspected of delinquency and attempted to resolve their problems before they reached the police station. Unlike other juvenile bureaus, however, officers educated in psychiatry and social work were trained to diagnose a child’s potential for delinquency, evaluate his or her home and community life, and coordinate with other social agencies.11 Vollmer also encouraged all of his patrolmen to conceptualize their work as “preventing trouble.” This meant not only admonishing boys they viewed as being at risk for delinquency, but also directing them to Berkeley’s wide array of social or psychiatric services. Patrolman George Brereton explained, “I try to know the youngsters on my beat, make friends with them, and if I see tendencies that may lead to trouble, steer them toward the right help. A policeman ought to know the welfare agencies and how to use them.”12

Cooperation between all social agencies dealing with children was essential to make this system work. Beginning in 1919, informal lunchtime meetings between Vollmer and Dr. Virgil Dickson, director of the Berkeley Public Schools’ Bureau of Research and Guidance, gradually began to include the heads of other social agencies and to function as a “Coordinating Council.” This voluntary organization, formally incorporated in 1924, linked the efforts of Berkeley’s police, schools, recreational bureaus, and public and private welfare agencies to detect and treat signs of delinquency. The group had no official powers, but they discussed individual cases and collectively agreed
which agency could best intervene with each youth. By working together, they avoided duplicating their efforts and treated children more systematically than was possible for any one agency.13

Vollmer provided other leaders with a model for establishing a more professional and efficient method of policing. In particular, Vollmer’s concept of the policeman as a social worker, rooting out predelinquency, became the key idea in a wave of police crime prevention programs established in subsequent decades. By adapting cutting-edge psychiatric insights about delinquency to make them useful for police work, Vollmer established an intellectual justification for police to engage in crime prevention. Whether or not they fully embraced his model, Vollmer’s Berkeley became the precedent that police reformers elsewhere looked to throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

**BEYOND THE JUVENILE COURT**

Vollmer developed his ideas at a time when popular concerns about crime and delinquency were rising and when professional enthusiasm for juvenile courts was fading. In the early 1900s, juvenile court advocates had presented them as panaceas for delinquency, and even for more general problems related to children and youth. But by the early 1920s, these problems remained and seemed to be worsening. Many scholars, child welfare workers, and members of the public became disenchanted with the juvenile court and began to look for new ways to deal with young offenders.

Delinquency became a particularly pressing public concern in the 1920s as America seemed to experience a national crime wave. The conclusion of the First World War late in 1918 brought a rapid military demobilization, labor unrest, and an apparent breakdown in morals. In addition, beginning in 1920, the prohibition of alcohol spawned widespread violations by otherwise law-abiding citizens. Gangsters such as Al Capone became popular icons by performing the public service of supplying liquor. Moreover, the existing institutions of criminal justice—police, courts, and jails—were widely viewed as ineffective. As local, state, and ultimately national crime commissions reported, the justice system failed to prosecute and punish more than a small minority of criminals.14

The apparent crisis of adult crime was widely believed to contribute to juvenile delinquency as well. Both in social work journals such as *The Survey* and in general interest magazines such as *Collier’s*, writers fretted that gangsters were becoming role models for youth and guiding them into delinquency. And in Chicago, juvenile court officials associated increased
delinquency with the larger social changes of the 1920s. A short-term increase in delinquency complaints resulted, Chief Probation Officer Joseph Moss argued, from “the restlessness and the new freedom to which youth has not yet adjusted itself, and also the breaking down of respect for law on the part of the youth and adult.”

Almost simultaneously, the high hopes that had been associated with the juvenile court began to fade among a growing number of social workers, law enforcement officials, and academics. Investigations conducted under the auspices of the U.S. Children's Bureau found the results of the juvenile court movement to be disappointing. A national survey showed that, as of 1920, while juvenile courts had been established in all cities with populations over 100,000, they were less common in smaller towns and virtually unknown in rural areas. More disturbingly, courts hearing children's cases often lacked many key mechanisms, with fewer than half offering probation services and only 7 percent conducting mental examinations. In short, big-city courts were likely to offer diagnosis and treatment, while rural courts hearing children's cases were not. A 1925 examination of ten urban courts found much to criticize as well. Many courts only sporadically maintained separate detention facilities for children, few offered well-developed probation services, and psychiatric treatment was even scarcer. In short, investigators found that the “resources at the disposal of the court seemed to have been developed in a haphazard manner and did not fit together to form a complete community program for the care of delinquent and dependent children.”

These studies were meant to provide constructive criticism, but they also reflected a growing disenchantment with juvenile courts. As the twenty-fifth anniversary of the first juvenile court approached, many of its original advocates became increasingly dissatisfied with the results of their movement. Papers presented in January 1925 at a conference organized in Chicago to commemorate this anniversary evidence their uneasiness. Henry S. Hulbert, the long-time judge of the Wayne County (Detroit) Juvenile Court and current president of the National Probation Association, expressed concern about the use of probation. He suggested that, although the public had accepted probation as a remedial tool, many who worked in juvenile justice felt “a queer current of dissatisfaction with the quality of our work.” Too often, judges granted probation in cases when it was not appropriate, when children were not amenable or circumstances prevented close supervision. Likewise, Louise de Koven Bowen, the former president of the Chicago Juvenile Protective Association, lamented the state of the Chicago Detention Home. By the mid-1920s, Bowen claimed, the Detention Home had “every appearance of being a jail, with its barred windows and locked doors,” the
attendants knew little about the psychology of childhood, and children were harmed rather than helped by their experiences.\textsuperscript{18}

The implied solution seemed to lie in integrating mental examinations and psychiatric treatment into investigations and probation work. Discussions of the personality of the child and the operation of psychiatric clinics dominated the 1925 conference. In particular, William Healy argued that the key to treating delinquency was analyzing the psychology of individual youths, understanding how multiple social and personal traits contributed to misbehavior, and considering how contact with the juvenile justice system impacted the child.\textsuperscript{19} Psychiatric clinics, however, never had as much impact as their advocates hoped. Clinics associated with courts required extensive resources and expensive personnel and did not spread widely; they remained concentrated in only a handful of the largest cities. Instead, by the late 1920s, “child guidance” clinics became common. These aimed at offering psychiatric services to younger children with milder behavioral problems long before they ran into trouble with the law. At most, psychiatric clinics remained a supplement to already-existing court mechanisms.\textsuperscript{20}

Harvard criminologists Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck further crystallized these debates with their 1934 publication of One Thousand Juvenile Delinquents, one of the first efforts to evaluate systematically the effectiveness of juvenile courts and psychiatric clinics. The Gluecks conducted a longitudinal study of one thousand boys handled by the Boston Juvenile Court and its psychiatric clinic, the Judge Baker Foundation, between 1917 and 1922 (during which time Healy served as the clinic’s director). They found that a stunning 88 percent of boys continued to commit delinquencies in the five years following their treatment. Apparently, neither the court nor the highly touted clinics reformed offenders. Consequently, the Gluecks urged greater cooperation between court and clinic, and proposed that social agencies more actively try to prevent delinquency before it became serious enough to reach the courts.\textsuperscript{21} Other commentators, such as Richard C. Cabot, a professor of social ethics at Harvard, interpreted the Gluecks’ research differently. In a review of their work in The Survey, he rejected entirely the juvenile court and its preventive mission. Cabot argued instead that the court was “an appallingly complete and costly failure, a stupendous waste of time, money and effort in an attempt to check delinquency.”\textsuperscript{22}

Cabot’s interpretation (as much as the actual study) provoked furious responses from social work professionals and juvenile court administrators. In particular, Judge Harry L. Eastman of the Cuyahoga County (Cleveland) Juvenile Court questioned both Cabot’s and the Gluecks’ understanding of the court. Eastman dismissed Cabot by arguing that he “has gone far afield
and out of his way to register his own preconceived prejudices . . . without foundation in fact.” While Eastman took the Gluecks more seriously, he defended juvenile courts by defining their functions very narrowly. The Gluecks, he argued, “fail to discriminate between the proper function of the court and those of other community agencies.” In his view, “The juvenile court was never designed to prevent delinquency. It was planned as a better method of combating delinquency after its occurrence.” To uphold the legitimacy of juvenile courts as judicial institutions, Eastman rejected the idea that they had ever been meant to prevent crime.23

These debates suggest that the intended purpose of juvenile courts underwent a subtle yet important shift in the 1920s and 1930s. Early advocates had envisioned juvenile courts as institutions to diagnose the sources of delinquency, treat its manifestations, and prevent its recurrences. By the 1920s and 1930s, however, decades of experience and evaluations of courts’ results had undermined even professional child welfare workers’ faith in their efficacy. Less and less often did observers and court officials believe that juvenile courts, probation, and institutionalization could treat delinquency and stop recidivism. Instead, they began to look more and more toward preventive approaches. For example, Grace Abbott, former head of the U.S. Children’s Bureau, argued that as “treatment agencies,” juvenile courts faced “fundamental difficulties” and proposed that new community agencies should be created as an alternative.24

This disenchantment with juvenile courts in the scholarly and social welfare communities paralleled a growing concern about juvenile crime among the public. By 1930, it was not uncommon to see the supposed failures of a kind-hearted juvenile court presented as the source of delinquency. In one Collier’s article, an unnamed (and possibly fictional) female probation officer in Philadelphia exemplified the problem. She reportedly handled delinquent boys under her supervision by inviting them into her home on Friday nights and asking if they had been good during the previous week. While she interviewed one boy, others would rob the houses on either side of hers. According to Philadelphia District Attorney Charles Edwin Fox, this type of “stupid and sentimental” probation told first-time offenders that their actions had no repercussions and encouraged them to commit further crimes.25

More generally, during the apparent surge in crime that accompanied the Great Depression, the national press repeatedly articulated a popular view that boys who committed minor offenses as juveniles would grow up to commit more serious crimes as adults. Article after article suggested that, without proper adult guidance, boys could be lured easily into gangs and crime. For example, journalist Howard McLellan used an account of one boy, Red, to
encapsulate what he believed to be a much more common problem. After losing a father figure at age twelve, Red found friendship and structure in a local street-corner gang. He then committed petty offenses as a teenager, was arrested and released repeatedly, committed murder at age eighteen, and was executed finally at twenty-one. Geneva (NY) Police Chief R. W. Morris summarized a common public perception in the 1930s when he wrote “the juvenile delinquent of today is tomorrow’s criminal.”

In addition, the gangster films of the era—notably *Little Caesar* (1931), *The Public Enemy* (1931), and *Scarface* (1932)—reinforced this narrative trope that young offenders would mature into serious criminals. They showed boys committing petty thefts and vandalism in their early teens, advancing into more serious crimes as they grew up, and becoming leaders in organized crime as adults. These movies were particularly disturbing not only because they captured a common public understanding of how criminals developed, but also because they romanticized gangsters. Although James Cagney’s character in *The Public Enemy*, Tom Powers, died in the end, while he lived he enjoyed power, authority, and the finest luxuries that money could buy. Some child psychologists feared that movies (and gangster films in particular) encouraged youths to commit crimes. Studies sponsored by the Payne Fund and published between 1929 and 1933 argued that movies portrayed criminals sympathetically and as potential role models, demonstrated criminal techniques for children to emulate, and stimulated unattainable material desires among the over 20 million juveniles who attended them at least once a week.

Both declining faith in the juvenile court and the increased popular concern about young offenders fostered a range of new programs to prevent delinquency. “About fifty public-spirited citizens” organized the Boys’ Club of Detroit in 1926, for example. Housed in its own four-story building that had once been used as a cigar factory, the club offered games and “wholesome sports,” classes in trades such as carpentry and auto mechanics, and medical and dental clinics. Rather than investigate potential delinquents on a case-by-case basis, as a psychiatric approach would have suggested, interested citizens sought to prevent delinquency via a collective approach that was intended to build character in urban boys and give them something to do other than commit crimes.

Organized recreation became a particularly popular tool. Throughout the 1920s, child welfare workers had implicitly assumed a connection between a lack of recreational opportunities and delinquency, and had thus haphazardly organized programs such as boy scouting for urban youth. In the 1930s, as the Great Depression closed job opportunities for working-class youth and
forced them to delay careers and marriage, recreation became a more serious issue. Social workers and social scientists looked to recreation to redirect young peoples’ energies and build character. Their studies also provided greater scientific validity for the use of recreation to prevent delinquency. For example, M. L. Pettit, a South Bend (IN) probation officer, believed that the large majority of cases of “maladjustment among boys” resulted from inadequate recreation or “antisocial companionship.” He conducted an informal experiment, attempting to determine the recreation needs of boys, and to fulfill them by providing athletics through cooperation with the YMCA and outdoor activities through the Boy Scouts. Organized recreation, he claimed, helped rehabilitate about 60 percent of boys in the study. Likewise, sociologist Frederic Thrasher argued on the basis on his work with Chicago gang youth, “It is the unwise use of leisure by boys and young men . . . which . . . is responsible for the development of delinquency and crime.” Lacking worthwhile activities in their homes or communities, urban lower-class boys gravitated to an often-delinquent peer group in the streets. Thrasher proposed that communities financially support existing programs for boys and establish additional opportunities for “wholesome recreation.” “Here is the fruitful field for crime prevention,” he argued, “the virile and intelligent control of the leisure time of boys and young men.”

Perhaps no organization carried these ideas further than the Chicago Area Project (CAP), founded by sociologist Clifford Shaw in 1931 and incorporated in 1934. Drawing on his experience as a Chicago probation officer and graduate student at the University of Chicago, Shaw came to understand delinquency as a product of deteriorating neighborhoods in modern industrial cities, and sought to create a new sort of community organization in response. Like other agencies, neighborhood organizing committees affiliated with CAP sponsored recreation programs, operating boys’ clubs and athletic leagues, but they also sought to elicit as much grassroots engagement in the process as possible. Shaw envisioned delinquency prevention as being fundamentally about rebuilding communities. To do so, CAP sought vigorously to incorporate neighborhood leaders, to cooperate with existing institutions such as churches and schools, and to let local people determine what form community renewal should take. Furthermore, CAP used young “street workers” to shadow each community’s principal juvenile gangs, trying to gain gang members’ trust and to provide “curbstone counseling” that would help them see that the values of conventional society were more desirable than lives of low-level delinquency.

By the early 1930s a certain public consensus emerged in favor of working with boys to prevent delinquency, and these programs slowly became
more systematic. In 1936 Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck followed through on their call for greater preventive efforts by organizing a symposium on various agencies’ programs for youth. They paralleled their efforts to those of a modern fire department to prevent fires but argued that, “in relation to the control of delinquency and crime, . . . society has not progressed much beyond the stage of putting out the flames. It has waited for violations of law and then bent its efforts to pursuing, arresting, prosecuting, and punishing offenders without giving much thought to the elimination of the forces that produced them.” That, they argued, had to change. Based on the best current practices of neighborhood groups, schools, boys’ clubs, recreation agencies, child guidance clinics, and the police, the Gluecks and their collaborators promoted a range of experimental crime prevention programs built around existing community agencies. And while they sought to segregate children from official contacts with police stations, criminal courts, and jails, they nonetheless agreed that crime prevention programs organized by police had “certain unique values.”

The Gluecks’ symposium represented a turning point. No longer did leading thinkers and activists consider juvenile courts the primary institutions for fighting delinquency. Rather than bring children into the juvenile justice system, social workers, teachers, law enforcement officials, and others working with children all sought to address the sources of delinquency before kids reached court. To be sure, not all of their ideas were terribly original; the notion of using recreation to prevent delinquency had been around for decades. But these ideas did signal a fundamental shift in how the problem of delinquency was to be approached. The focus of attention had moved beyond the juvenile courts and toward community-based crime prevention programs. And urban police departments found themselves involved deeply once again.

**Operations of Police Crime Prevention**

Police officials certainly talked about preventing crime in the 1920s, but they did not initially agree about what this meant. From the origins of municipal police departments in the nineteenth century, the primary purpose of conducting patrols had been to discourage crime. This perspective continued into the early 1920s, when police often used the phrase “crime prevention” to describe tough law enforcement based on deterrence. For example, hard-line Detroit Police Commissioner James Inches attributed his department’s success in reducing crime to “intensive work on crime prevention,” which he characterized by “the increased number of men which the Police Department has...
been able to detail for street patrol.” In contrast, policewomen in the 1910s and 1920s also used the language of “crime prevention” to explain their goals. By performing social work with girls and young boys and by policing their behavior, pioneer policewomen expected to prevent crime and immorality in the future.

For the most part, police officials continued to see delinquency as boys’ normal response to the opportunities of an urban environment. But, by the late 1920s, they also began to share the public’s worry that today’s delinquent would become tomorrow’s criminal, and increasingly regarded salvaging potentially delinquent youth as a logical extension of normal policing. In so doing, they often ignored policewomen, demonstrating more interest in boys who might commit crimes against property and persons than in status offenders or in girls who might slip into “immoral” behavior. Police reformer Raymond B. Fosdick led the way in his seminal 1920 guide to police practice. Highlighting the seriousness of juvenile crime, Fosdick reported that in 1916, of seven persons awaiting execution in Sing Sing prison in New York, five were “boys” under age twenty-one. “Statistics such as these,” Fosdick argued, “furnish indisputable evidence that criminals are recruited from the ranks of childhood. The rollicking, mischievous boy of today, uncontrolled and out of hand, becomes the hardened offender of tomorrow. In their efforts to prevent crime, therefore, the police have no more fruitful field of work than is presented by the boys and girls of our cities.” He endorsed all existing crime prevention programs of his day—junior police, assigning uniformed police to talk to school children, creating special squads of juvenile officers—and urged greater efforts. Police departments were slow to follow this particular bit of Fosdick’s advice but did so eventually. In its 1929 annual report, the New York City Police Department used his precise language to justify its provisional creation of a Crime Prevention Bureau. The premise of stopping delinquents from growing up to become criminals emerged as the one concept that most police leaders could agree upon.

Just what form police crime prevention programs should take, however, remained a subject of debate. On one hand, leaders such as William Rutledge of the Detroit Police Department, speaking at the 1927 meeting of the IACP, presented crime prevention in medical terms, comparing police efforts to prevent crime among youth to physicians’ efforts to prevent disease. Police, according to Rutledge, should form “Protective Divisions” to investigate complaints against boys and girls and to work closely with “treatment agencies” in the community. Others suggested how this disease prevention model could be implemented. Dr. Bradford Murphey advocated close cooperation between police and child guidance clinics, while Gillmore Bush suggested that it would
suffice for police to act as big brothers to youth. On the other hand, other police leaders presented crime prevention as an old-fashioned effort to deter crime among youth. James Broughton, police chief in Portsmouth, Virginia, explained that he had carried out “an educational campaign against crime” by placing “a series of large hand-painted pictures (6’ by 40’) at a central location in the City, depicting the progress of the wrong-doers from the first transgression on through various stages until the inevitable consequences of prison or death.” His point, Broughton asserted, was to teach young people that “crime never pays.” A 1927 survey asking municipal police “what does your department do or recommend to prevent crime?” revealed the variety of work that police officials considered crime prevention. Most described new social programs aimed at reducing delinquency, but quite a few simply suggested that more efficient investigations and faster court hearings would make punishment more certain and thereby discourage crime.

In spite of this debate, a consensus in favor of some sort of police crime prevention work involving friendly interactions with boys emerged gradually in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Even police leaders who ridiculed scientific study of delinquency—for example, San Francisco’s Captain Duncan Matheson derided “so-called crime experts” as “bunkologists”—nonetheless urged close cooperation with boys’ clubs, parent-teacher associations, and Sunday schools as the best means of preventing juvenile crime. And in 1931, the federal government’s Wickersham Commission strongly endorsed crime prevention. Writing for the commission, Earle W. Garrett (a former research assistant for Vollmer), argued, “The youngster . . . is just starting out in life, has long to live, and is a greater potential threat to society if allowed to fall into criminal way. The young are plastic, impressionable, yielding, and can usually be influenced to go along in productive paths if taken in hand early enough.”

The resulting police crime prevention programs assumed a variety of forms. The Chicago Police Department, for example, opened an Unemployed Boys Bureau in 1927. While the Chicago police did not necessarily consider social work a legitimate element of policing, they nonetheless believed that that “if boys are regularly employed when they leave school there will be less chance of their getting into mischief and later, crime.” To this end, the Unemployed Boys Bureau aimed to match boys between ages fourteen and twenty with jobs. It collected applications from boys in each district, matched them with a parallel citywide file of available positions, and wrote introduction slips to help boys meet potential employers. The bureau was quite successful in its early years. As of the end of 1929, it reported that it had found jobs for 87 percent of the over 27,000 boys who had applied. Ironically, while
the Great Depression encouraged crime prevention programs elsewhere, it contributed to the demise of the Unemployed Boys Bureau. When adult male breadwinners were out of work, employment programs for teenagers seemed extravagant and inappropriate. Critics of the police also maintained that finding jobs for teens wasted scarce resources. In 1931, the Citizen’s Police Committee asserted, “the Police Department clearly should not support an official employment agency catering to all classes of boys without some evidence that it performs a service in preventing delinquency” and recommended that it be abolished. Subsequent investigations of the police and departmental annual reports never referred to the program again; apparently it had been abandoned.44

More typically, police departments sought to prevent delinquency by establishing friendly contacts with boys before they accumulated a criminal record. The New York City Police Department, for example, devoted little attention to “boys’ work” in the 1920s, but it revived many programs in response to a 1928 investigation by the New York State Crime Commission’s Sub-Committee on Crime Causes. Drawing on the environmental thinking of Chicago sociologists, the commission argued that “improper parental supervision, bad housing, and a poverty-stricken environment” contributed to juvenile misbehavior and, ultimately, to adult crime. “The street,” the commission suggested, “is found to have supplanted the home . . . and to have fostered gangs, and gang ethics appalling to older people.”45 In response to the commission’s recommendation that police should actively supervise potential offenders, the NYPD established an experimental “Crime Prevention Bureau” in 1930. Police officials justified this new program not on theoretical grounds suggested by the Crime Commission, but on a very practical basis consistent with public thinking about delinquency. In 1931, Police Commissioner Edward P. Mulrooney reminded his listeners, “the child who is playing in the street today . . . is the gangster and gunman of tomorrow. And the work of this Crime Prevention Bureau . . . is the best method we have yet found for diverting these youngsters from evil paths.”46

The NYPD Crime Prevention Bureau sought initially to combine the social work approach characteristic of probation officers and policewomen with the law enforcement ethos of more traditional policing. Between its founding and 1934, it was led by social worker Henrietta Additon, whose status as deputy police commissioner made her the highest-ranking woman in the NYPD.47 In 1931, the Crime Prevention Bureau personnel also mixed a substantial number of women with backgrounds in social work (twenty-five female crime prevention investigators and forty-four policewomen) and a majority of men drawn from the police force (130 lieutenants, sergeants, and
patrolmen).\textsuperscript{48} The bureau’s main functions were controlling conditions that fostered delinquency and intervening with potential offenders. It sent officers to supervise poolrooms where boys encountered alcohol, gambling, or narcotics, to monitor movie theaters where young boys and girls engaged in “immorality” in darkened balconies, to visit dance halls or cabarets where children encountered a range of vices, and to keep an eye on candy stores and penny arcades where gangs congregated.\textsuperscript{49}

The NYPD Crime Prevention Bureau achieved its broadest impact not through these planned efforts, but by supporting individual initiatives sponsored by officers in daily contact with children. Organized recreation activities administered through the Police Athletic League (PAL, founded in 1932) quickly became the centerpiece of NYPD crime prevention. The creation of PAL is attributed to Lieutenant Edward W. Flynn, a patrolman in the Bronx. In 1931, Flynn confronted a gang of boys between ages fourteen and sixteen who had been robbing and vandalizing local shops. He thought the boys “weren’t basically mean, but they were hell-bent for total delinquency.” Flynn asked what they wanted and they responded that they wanted to be a baseball team. Rather than allow boys to gather in poolrooms or on street corners and cause trouble for lack of opportunities to play, Flynn volunteered to provide uniforms and equipment and to arrange games. He also approached local businesses and churches (including victims of theft and vandalism) to sponsor the teams, suggesting that the neighborhood would benefit in the long run. As Flynn gradually organized a baseball league, the boys reportedly “no longer had the time, energy or inclination for destructive activity.”\textsuperscript{50} By 1932, when the program was formally established, the police had organized almost 5,000 boys into PAL baseball teams that played 2,500 games.\textsuperscript{51}

PAL’s promoters portrayed it as a means of reducing juvenile crime. One 1932 account describes “Shorty,” a seventeen-year-old who turned to crime for want of places to play. Because the local playground was always crowded, he and his “gang” played at being cops and robbers, then committed real burglaries, and then ended up in prison. By contrast, other boys exposed to organized baseball reportedly stopped giving their teachers trouble and threw themselves into sports. The message here is clear: without recreation, boys would likely drift into delinquency and crime, but with games organized under the benevolent supervision of the police, they would find more productive uses for their time and energies.\textsuperscript{52}

Beginning in 1934, NYPD crime prevention programs focused more on recreation and less on investigation and supervision. Following the election of Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, the NYPD’s newly appointed leadership questioned if the Crime Prevention Bureau’s annual $600,000 budget might be spent in
ways that produced more immediate returns. Additon resigned in September, publicly declaring that LaGuardia had little knowledge of or sympathy for crime prevention work. The NYPD subsequently reorganized the Crime Prevention Bureau under the new name of the Juvenile Aid Bureau, appointed a male commissioner, Byrnes MacDonald, to succeed Additon, and focused on recreation as its primary method of intervention and treatment.53 PAL expanded accordingly, peaking at a membership of over 74,000 children in 1937, plus establishing a series of youth centers around the city that provided organized recreation and after-school activities.54

While the NYPD had initially sought to combine social work with policing, its approach to crime prevention quickly shifted to one that emphasized interactions on the ball field. The theoretical principles derived from psychiatry and sociology that justified crime prevention do not seem to have penetrated deeply or to have lasted long. Instead, the vague goal of discouraging young offenders from growing up to become criminals seems to have been at the root of the NYPD's efforts. This is not to say that PAL did not do good work; it provided large numbers of New York teenagers with all that sports entailed—discipline, character building, and male bonding. At the same time, it was not as successful at transforming police officers into community-organizing agents as early crime prevention advocates such as Vollmer might have desired.

The police in Detroit also considered the degree to which juvenile officers should act like social workers. The Detroit Police Department's Juvenile Division ultimately settled on a solution of engaging vigorously with potential delinquents but also setting limits on their involvement. The issue of boys' work first emerged with the appointment of James K. Watkins as police commissioner in 1931. An attorney, Watkins had no prior experience in law enforcement, but did have a background in social work; in 1910 he had served the Wayne County Juvenile Court as a probation officer for boys.55 As a probation officer, he had found the police “not very helpful,” but as commissioner, Watkins brought a new orientation to policing. He encouraged his juvenile division officers to adjust as many cases as possible without sending youths to court. Instead, they were to investigate children's offenses and encourage their parents to supervise them more closely. He sold these changes to the public on the basis of the efficiency they brought to police work and the “advantages” they offered. According to Watkins, delinquency prevention would rescue potential offenders themselves, relieve city residents from becoming victims of crime, and generate “financial savings to the public treasury” by reducing the expenses of courts and prisons.56

Watkins saw the police as part of a larger social service network, but not as social workers themselves. On the one hand, he dismissed a position that
“police should leave the problem almost entirely alone and should not attempt protective work with young people.” On the other hand, he did not embrace the notion that police should engage in “treatment work with the individual.” Instead, Watkins believed “that the proper function of the police lies between those two extremes.” Believing that police officers were unsuited to diagnose boys’ behavioral problems, Watkins urged his officers to refer juveniles to specialists who would decide whether informal disposition, social or psychological treatment, or juvenile court was necessary. “The police officer cannot be a case worker,” he stated, “but he can be a feeder to case workers and he likewise can be instrumental in bringing to the attention of proper agencies conditions and situations which need attention.” When juvenile officers and policewomen investigated minor complaints involving loitering, disorderly conduct, and petty theft by preadolescent boys, they often referred the problems to local social workers instead of making arrests. The most direct contact Detroit police had with local youth was as leaders of Boy Scout troops. Beginning with a single troop in 1934, the Detroit police organized sixteen troops by 1937.

Police crime prevention programs akin to those in New York and Detroit spread widely in the 1930s. Major cities such as Washington, D.C., and San Francisco established multifaceted programs, while in smaller towns like Bridgeport, Connecticut, and Freeport, Illinois, police organized Boy Scout troops or supervised afternoon play in the interest of crime prevention. At least thirty-six cities, large and small, began operating police crime prevention programs before 1940. The emergence of these programs marks a fundamental transition in the workings of juvenile justice. In the early twentieth century, social agencies had done all they could to keep children away from police, and in turn police had often been reluctant to cooperate with social agencies or juvenile courts. By the 1930s, however, both sides began to meet halfway. By establishing crime prevention programs, police also reestablished legitimate roles for themselves in handling young offenders. Social agencies in turn came to accept the police, in the words of probation officer Helen Pigeon, as the “first line of defense” against crime and delinquency. After juvenile courts had pushed police out of an official role in juvenile justice, crime prevention brought them back in.

**The Appeal of Police Crime Prevention**

In the 1920s and 1930s, many police departments assumed active roles in delinquency prevention. As the effectiveness of existing correctional agencies such as juvenile courts increasingly fell into question, new proposals that
Crime could be prevented, rather than punished or treated after the fact, extended the job of prevention to all community agencies. Following Vollmer’s ideal that policemen could act as social workers and the example of Vollmer’s experimental programs in Berkeley, police were among the most prominent agencies to engage in “crime prevention.” Not only did they cooperate with existing social agencies; police also supported programs such as scouting and Boys Clubs and often implemented their own programs to reach troublesome youths. More and more often, diversion to social agencies, to organized recreation, and to character-building programs became standard methods of handling young offenders.

In practice, however, police programs drew only indirectly on the new psychiatric and social scientific approaches to delinquency prevention. The reality of their efforts paralleled older efforts to deal with young offenders. Some police departments—such as New York’s—initially sought to balance policing and social work but quickly fell back into offering large-scale recreation in the general hope of giving boys something to do other than crime. Other departments—such as Detroit’s—were reluctant to extend the function of the police. They relied instead upon diverting some young offenders into social programs or organized recreation that might offer boys some guidance. Police crime prevention programs helped to reestablish legitimate roles for the police as intermediaries between young offenders and the juvenile justice system, and represent an important step forward in terms of organizational sophistication. They did not, however, entail the fundamental change in the function of the police that Vollmer had envisioned. Nor did these programs approach the community renewal model of delinquency prevention suggested by the Chicago Area Project. Nor did they represent a substantial change in police thinking about delinquency. Police leaders and rank-and-file officers adopted the new perspective in broad strokes because it seemed to support what many had already believed, that undirected youth would drift naturally toward misbehavior unless something was done to prevent it. And public fears that today’s delinquent would become tomorrow’s criminal gave this idea greater urgency. Most police officers had relatively modest goals other than discouraging boys from committing crimes. They saw informal dispositions, friendly personal contacts, and organized recreation as means of enabling boys to become law-abiding adults. And nowhere was this more the case than in Los Angeles, where innovative delinquency prevention programs coexisted with repressive campaigns to control crime.