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Book Author(s): Carl Suddler

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“Every Generation Has Had the Habit of Going to the Devil”

Constructions of a Postwar Delinquent

All over Harlem, Negro boys and girls are growing into stunted maturity, trying desperately to find a place to stand; and the wonder is not that so many are ruined but that so many survive.

—James Baldwin, “The Harlem Ghetto”

On a moderately warm Saturday in the city as the summer of 1945 came to an end, *New York Amsterdam News* readers were greeted with a front-page headline that read, “Kid Gang Shoots Lad Five Times.” The account that followed was of a seventeen-year-old Harlemit, Joseph Mitchell, who was shot by a group of youngsters before being rushed to Harlem Hospital. As reported, Mitchell was aggressively approached by five youths, who police declared were members of “a club called the Slicksters.” This club was reported to have a membership of “at least 100 Harlem teen-age youths,” and after questioning more than fifty boys in the New York City neighborhood, the police arrested three of the offenders within a day of the incident. Mitchell, who interestingly was the first cousin of the famous jazz pianist Eddie Heywood, survived the attack, as the doctors revealed he was shot three times in the back and once in each leg. Witnesses confirmed the report and described “five tough-looking boys, each armed with a revolver [who] took turns at shooting the victim,” before Mitchell scampered away to a bar and grill on Bradhurst Avenue. Mitchell’s mother, Mamie, disclosed to an *Amsterdam News* reporter that “the mothers of some of the boys under arrest had visited the hospital to see her son and had begged him not to press charges.” The motive for the shooting remained unsolved; one report suggested that the incident was sparked over a stolen bicycle,

and another report claimed that Mitchell was attacked for not paying a five-dollar debt to the Slicksters. Still, the melee happened, and for the African American weekly, it was front page worthy.¹

Joseph Mitchell's story was just one of the captivating front-page headlines on that Saturday. Under the headline was an image of an elementary-school-age black boy waving good-bye to his mother, who "affectionately watche[d] him trudge off for a great adventure, the first day of school." This image was juxtaposed with an image that captured the "Tragedy of a Broken Home in Harlem Told through the Eyes of a News Camera" and the accompanying article that described a broken home "as acute a Harlem problem as are jobs and housing." Succinctly, and not coincidentally, this front page of the *New York Amsterdam News* captured the "growing tragedy" of Harlem in the postwar period. Since July 1, the African American weekly carried at least five front-page stories of youth gang shootings and stabbings similar to the Mitchell headline, because "every mother and father, every school, every community agency, [was] revolted at the cold-blooded youths who shot Joseph Mitchell lying helpless on the side-walk, because the community needs [a] waking up." This was a deliberate tactic by those who ran the *Amsterdam News*, because they were convinced that the larger community either "slumber[ed] on in lethargy or is annoyed that [their] headlines disturb their complacency." Thus, they accepted the challenge to use their platform in a way that tackled the postwar crime and delinquency problem.²

Compared to the state and city authorities who enforced the laws and policies regarding crime and delinquency in New York City, the media held a distinct power that influenced public discourse and behaviors. Their power to control the narrative affected disparate societal forces that vied for authoritative position as well as the everyday perceptions of presumed culprits. For example, as predictions of a postwar crime wave saturated the headlines of newspapers across the country, law enforcement officers were advised to be "very much on the alert against an undoubted rise in offenses." Debates about who would be the main cause for concern shifted from returning veterans to war-industry employees, especially youths, who were forced back to prewar salaries and opportunities; however, once wartime crime statistics were accounted for, the consensus eventually settled on the young.³

As the crime-wave sensationalism plagued New York City after the war, debates surrounding the legitimacy of its rhetoric, its causes, its impact on the community, and prevention plans transpired. In this moment, black crime discourse reestablished itself in ways similar to the Progressive era, when many northern, white and black, reformers attributed social conditions to criminal behaviors. This included the efforts of criminologists such as Edwin J. Lukas and the Society for the Prevention of Crime as well as social psychiatrists such as Frederic Wertham and the Lafargue Mental Hygiene Clinic in Harlem. The stakes, however, were different for the black youths who were presumed delinquent in the urban North, especially when they encountered the police. Carceral authorities continued to feed on their quelling of the Harlem uprisings, and police extended their punitive tactics and strategies into the postwar period. Consequently, police arrested black youths in higher numbers, which reinforced the perception of the crime wave; the discourse of the crime wave, led by New York City's print media outlets, mutually reinforced the racialized perceptions of crime held by the larger public.⁴

"Go In Shooting": Police Responses to the Postwar Crime Wave

"We know it is one of war's aftermaths," the newly appointed police commissioner, Arthur W. Wallander, announced to his chief subordinates at the Police Headquarters. "We shall do all within our power to cope with it."⁵ Police Commissioner Wallander continued, "We'll use every damned thing we can get to down this crime movement. We fully realize the situation is bad." The new police commissioner was appointed by old mayor La Guardia, who believed Wallander to be a "worthy successor to Commissioner Valentine."⁶

Shortly after Commissioner Wallander's appointment, he brazenly outlined his plans to address New York City's crime problem. He sought to redistribute police responsibilities by surveying the police department to see how many men were assigned deskwork or other nonpatrol duties who could be put on the streets. The police commissioner turned to the military to alleviate the work-force shortage and informed respective branches that "not only the rank and file but lieutenants and sergeants engaged in lesser tasks [were] to be put out on beats or on motor patrol until the wide gap in the force can be filled." The former deputy chief

inspector was forward about his “warlike preparations” for the “war on crime” in New York City. Commissioner Wallander reassigned the department’s “top-flight pistol marksmen” to radio car and cruiser patrols; he replaced night-cruiser patrol cars with radio-equipped cars borrowed from other city departments, which carried machine guns and rifles. “We do not hesitate to recognize that crime has increased,” the police commissioner proclaimed, and he was determined to strengthen the police force, if only in presence, to control the crime rise in the city.⁷

“The crime growth may be traced to several causes,” according to Commissioner Wallander: “the police manpower shortage and lack of parental control over the city’s restless adolescents.” To the former, most reports indicated that the police shortage in New York City, and similar in US cities, was a direct result of the war. Returning veterans’ efforts to join or rejoin the police force were delayed for different, mainly bureaucratic, reasons. In November 1945, there were more than four thousand unfilled vacancies in the New York Police Department. Many accounts suggest that this void was because of the men who enrolled in the armed forces and were still on leave; however, there were also those who inferred that Mayor La Guardia’s push toward aggressive police tactics discouraged many to rejoin after returning from war. The shortage in the department was “not because of the war,” a special issue published by the *Chicago Defender* reported, “because only 780 of its personnel [were] still in the service.” Instead, the blame was placed on the New York City mayor for overworking police officers with more menial tasks. “Under La Guardia’s control,” the writer explained, “policemen in 1943 were detailed to 24 hour duty watching homes where persons had been found playing cards.” Reports exposed some police officers being camped at homes for seven weeks and in one case for a month, raiding poker and bridge games, and ransacking guarded stores where race bets were taken. Before the war, the police force was then “hundreds of men short of its authorized complement,” and the suggestion that similar policing tactics were employed to combat this postwar crime wave discouraged some officers from returning to their positions.⁸

The New York City mayor denied these allegations and declared his commitment to provide a suitable police department. Mayor La Guardia proclaimed he was responding to citizens’ demands for an adequate police force, and he was “ready to appoint to the police department any

man coming out of the army who passed an examination but was called into the army before taking a final physical examination.” These citizens included Joseph Goldstein, for example, the president of the Taxpayers Union of New York City, who affirmed in a letter to the mayor that if the demand was not met within a reasonable time, he would be forced to call on Governor Dewey to remove the mayor and the police commissioner on charges that they were neglectful of their duties. “Criminals are marching thru the streets of our city unmolested by the police,” Goldstein wrote, “and it is your duty to make safe the streets of our city and properly protect the lives and property of our citizens.” Within days, Mayor La Guardia announced that his plan of action was in place to suppress the “growing wave of violence in the city.”⁹

But Mayor La Guardia held no qualms administering aggressive police tactics. In fact, after the war, he encouraged patrol officers to be more assertive in their war on crime in New York City. In his address to police rookies being sworn in for duty on December 1, 1945, the mayor advised the provisional police officers to be forceful when they faced situations in which a firearm may be being used in the commission of a crime. “Be quick on the trigger,” Mayor La Guardia insisted. “You’ve got a nightstick. You’ve got a gun. They’re not meant to be ornamental.” He continued, “When you know there’s a crime being committed and there’s a criminal in the place, go in with your gun in your hand. Go in shooting.” Mayor La Guardia closed his address reminding the newly minted officers that their life on the force would be “no bed of roses,” because the department was short-handed. He encouraged the war veterans, some who were holders of combat citations and battle ribbons, to boast that identity for “every bum in town to know that.” While the address faced some criticism, Mayor La Guardia’s message was clear.¹⁰

Commissioner Wallander was hardly a critic. In fact, he was in full support of Mayor La Guardia’s message to the newly minted police officers, and the two met to discuss a plan of attack. “We have more plans for meeting this situation which we’ll put into operation,” Mayor La Guardia informed reporters, without revealing too much of said plans. He did disclose, however, that the plan of attack involved an increase in the police force. “I am making my second appeal for the release of 750 policemen still in the armed forces,” Mayor La Guardia explained. “I made the first after V-J Day. Apparently, it was ignored.” He continued,

"I'd like to have these men released as quickly as possible to bolster up the force." This demonstrated a shift in priority for the mayor. At first, Mayor La Guardia showed signs of prioritizing the war's efforts over his city's issues; such was the case in the WAVES decision. With the war being over, the mayor was determined to refocus his priorities, and the number-one priority was to quell the crime wave that alarmed city officials. Mayor La Guardia urged Washington to release all former New York City police officers who still served in the armed forces. The secretary of war, Robert P. Patterson, said of the mayor's plea, "I don't know the details of the New York City situation, but if the need of separation from the service of people needed by the City of New York is shown to us, it will receive our most careful attention."¹¹

Thus, it became critical for the city to prove that the crime wave existed. For those who were close to Mayor La Guardia, it was hardly a question. Revised figures, "obtained from an authoritative police source," showed the number of violent deaths rising exponentially, including seventy-eight in eighty-six days in the last months of 1945—not including vehicular homicides. The Correction Department's statistical director, Paul D. McCann, reported in New York City, "the number of fingerprints received by the department in connection with arrests for serious crimes increased from 3,350 in June to 3,750 in October, or approximately 12 percent." McCann continued, "the November figures [were] showing a continued rise." And these numbers confirmed what Commissioner Wallander speculated about the city's "restless adolescents," as the officials cited an increase in criminal activity in the twenty-year-old and teenage groups as the "cause of the crime wave."¹²

"The Mounting Tide of Lawlessness": Combating an Armed Crime Wave

The rise in criminal activity among youth in New York City was not exceptional. In the years after the war, the highest crime rates nationwide were in large cities, and young people made up roughly 50 percent of the documented arrests in both 1945 and 1946. As the nation furthered itself from the immediate aftermath of the war, arrest rates continued to rise, while the ages of those who were arrested continued to drop. According to the 1946 Uniform Crime Report, "more persons were arrested during

1946 than during any year of the past decade.” Of the more than 645,000 arrests recorded by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, most fell around the twenty-one-year-old age group. Because of this, the numbers alone did not bolster Mayor La Guardia’s demand for the release of New York City police officers enlisted in the service, because the city’s crime rates hovered around the national average.¹³

Consequently, the secretary of war turned down the mayor’s request. “While the need of the City of New York for uniformed police is recognized,” Secretary Patterson wrote in a letter to La Guardia, “the War Department is unable to comply with your request for the immediate mass release of these individuals.” On the one hand, this may have indicated that the urgency expressed by the mayor and other city authorities was exaggerated, at least in the opinion of the secretary of war. On the other, as Patterson attempted to convey in the letter, to release these service members from duty was a bureaucratic nightmare and made for an intricate personnel problem. “Some ninety other professional and occupational groups,” Secretary Patterson wrote, were “distributed all over the United States, [that] have also requested priority in release from the Army.” The truth probably lay somewhere in between, as many expected that crime-wave arrests would steadily decrease gradually “with the ever-increasing number of veterans returning to civilian life” and that “the nation’s need for manpower in all categories [would] be shortly met.” But Mayor La Guardia and other city officials were less optimistic, and the crime wave evoked a public debate with broader social implications beyond the wood-paneled walls of City Hall.¹⁴

Thus, the effort to arouse public support through fear became the next tactic employed by city officials. In La Guardia’s last month as mayor, before William O’Dwyer was to take office, he moved on “the mounting tide of lawlessness” that ravaged New York City. Property crimes are one thing, but the real fear was inspired by a lawlessness involving violent crime. Though the popular narrative shifted from a postwar crime wave with war veterans as the culprits, it was believed that they still did add to the cause. According to Commissioner Wallander, discharged war veterans did not add “materially to criminal ranks,” but their weapons may have. That was confirmed by numerous reports that indicated that weapons once belonging to war veterans, including guns, were confiscated in street crimes. When pressed on how this happens, City Council

district attorney Frank S. Hogan pointed partial blame toward the War Department. "In order to improve the morale of soldiers overseas," an official bulletin circulated by the War Department expressed, "troops may be permitted to bring home as souvenirs rifles, small arms, swords, bayonets, slingshots, billies, bludgeons, metal knuckles and the like." These weapons were sometimes brought back in GIs' personal luggage; other times they were mailed home. Regardless of how they got into the country, the concern was how they got into the streets. District Attorney Hogan reported that between September and November, "sixty-seven foreign-made guns have shown up in criminal cases in Manhattan," and he was convinced that an underground market had developed a "sinister new strategy" to arm the crime wave. It would be up to the police commissioner, whether he was convinced or not, to establish a practical policy to rid the city of these excess weapons.¹⁵

"I am not proposing a drive of any kind," Commissioner Wallander told the three hundred or so law enforcement officials who attended the annual FBI conference at Fordham University, "but the establishment of a sensible policy and the sustained application of that policy" was needed to combat the rising wave of crime and delinquency in New York City. The police commissioner encouraged the conference attendees to return to their communities and to be more active in their efforts to remove firearms from their residents. "They should be picked up regardless of who owns them," Wallander said, referring to veterans and "any other respected member of society." He closed his address with a call for integrated and coordinated efforts by city authorities and the community to reduce the numbers of firearms in the streets.¹⁶

To be sure, the street crimes involving the confiscated war weapons were committed by a range of offenders; however, Commissioner Wallander worried a great deal about the "many souvenir war weapons coming into the possession of misguided youth." Because the increase in crime, according to the police commissioner, stemmed from the police-force shortage and the lack of parental control over juveniles, the combination of youth culprits and access to weapons was distressing. Be that as it may, such was a concern for the nation at large. Even FBI director J. Edgar Hoover warned of the "mounting crime" problem, and he declared that the country was "facing a potential army of 6,000,000 criminals and an ever-increasing wave of lawlessness which is feeding the

criminal ranks with a never-ending supply of recruits.” Like New York City officials, the FBI director cited arrest statistics to defend his stance and further argued that youths composed the “vast army” of criminals, as their numbers trended toward a figure “ten times greater than the number of students in our colleges and universities.” Beyond this, Hoover reinforced Wallander’s reasoning on lack of parental control. For the FBI director, there was little doubt that the postwar crime wave was a direct consequence of “a recession of moral fortitude, laxity in parental control, lowered moral standards, social and economic conditions, and abuses and maladministration of the penal system.” Hoover further underscored the point of parental neglect, suggesting that the postwar generation of youths were not receiving adequate rearing from their parents. “If all parents fulfill their obligations to their children we would soon experience a sharp decline in crime,” Hoover posited. Such a claim was laden with racial implications connected to a longer history of the state’s function as a “surrogate parent.”¹⁷

Accordingly, in New York City, authorities moved forward with their efforts to avoid the national trend as much as possible—at times with extreme measures. For example, Commissioner Wallander invoked the powers of a rarely used statute in which he ordered police officers to “haul parents into court when there is a definite indication that parental neglect is a contributing cause to the delinquency of a juvenile.” Admitting that this was not “a complete cure-all,” the police commissioner unveiled this order to an audience of Queens Rotary Club members in Long Island. “We do feel that making parents realize their responsibility will materially help in cutting down juvenile delinquency,” Wallander pledged. The order reaffirmed what many juvenile judges advanced for years: juvenile delinquency was traced to home life. Consequently, the police commissioner combined the new directive with older tactics designed to prevent crime. These included calls for the police to break up “corner gangs and groups of youngsters before they can be tempted by their solidarity to engage in disorderly acts,” to keep a sharp eye on pool parlors where “potential young offenders might resort or be encouraged and developed,” and to prevent “the loitering of thieves, criminals and other suspicious persons in cabarets, dance halls and night clubs.” The same level of diligence was given to bars and grills that were known to be “hangouts of degenerates, prostitutes and disorderly persons.”¹⁸

As city officials continued to devise and revise tactics to address the postwar crime wave, they recognized their responsibility to mitigate the crime-wave discourse from a policy standpoint. In other words, while the calls for increased surveillance to cope with the shortage of officers and the directives to extend police power over youths to include their family, it gave the impression that crime was rampant in New York City, and this could mean something drastically different for different New Yorkers. For example, the perception of a crime wave was used as a defense technique for attorneys defending "reputable" criminal offenders, such as the sixty-two-year-old Catherine Jefferson, who was visiting New York City from Ohio and arrested for the possession of a pistol. "When I told my friends I was going to New York, they told me that I ought to take the gun along to protect myself," Jefferson explained to judicial authorities. "They pointed out to me what a wild place New York was and told me about crime waves in the city." The prosecution did not buy the account and attempted to convict Jefferson after she jokingly admitted that she was "going to use the gun for some sort of revenge" on a man who was her suitor in the past. In any event, Jefferson and her attorney used the perception of a crime wave and the need for protection as a reason, to which the courts gave credence.¹⁹

The use of New York's crime wave as a defense strategy to protect specific offenders suggests a troublesome element that reveals a different truth of who exactly was being implicated in the discourse. It is one thing for an elderly woman to rely on the fear sparked by the crime wave as defense, but the defense also covered those who were considered reputable. Such was the case for Charles Hopkins Vejvoda and Hugh R. Thomas, two youths arrested for a melee on Thanksgiving night 1945. Vejvoda and Thomas, "two seventeen-year-old honor students," were charged with a violation of the Sullivan law, a misdemeanor weapons charge, for carrying homemade brass knuckles during their "noisy argument with four naval officers." Vejvoda, the son of a surgeon, and Thomas, the son of an attorney, were arrested around 1:00 a.m. by Patrolman Robert Baron. Patrolman Baron informed the adjudicating authority, Chief Magistrate Edgar Bromberger, that Vejvoda kept his hand in his pocket, and when demanded to show his hands, he brandished the concealed "knuckles." The teenager told the arresting officer that he received the brass knuckles from a sailor a year before

the incident and that he “carried them for protection.” Vejvoda’s father, Charles Vejvoda, defended his son and his son’s friend, and he attributed the arrest to the “overzealousness” of the arresting officer, who was “making a mountain out of a mole hill.” Chief Magistrate Bromberger immediately dismissed the charges against Thomas, who was determined to be “merely accompanying the other boy,” though he held his decision on Vejvoda for a later date. The judge decided that he needed to review additional briefs to determine if Vejvoda’s intent to use the brass knuckles had been enough to entail a violation of the Sullivan law—it is presumed that the charges were dropped, and Vejvoda eventually joined the Navy.²⁰

The Vejvoda case was telling. The fact that two youths were arrested for the possession of a deadly weapon—two predominant descriptors of the postwar crime wave—and escaped culpability because of the same crime wave demonstrates the protection that privilege can buy and suggests that the new policies had different subjects in mind. Also, the favorable media portrayal of Charles Vejvoda and Hugh Thomas suppressed public scrutiny of the two youths and played down any potential guilt. They were two of four persons arrested that Thanksgiving night in New York City who were charged with violating the Sullivan law, but they were the only ones to receive media coverage. Also, the two “honor students” benefited from their parents’ status and were described as fearful youngsters who were protecting themselves from “New York’s crime.” The possessive nature of the coverage conveyed to the public that Vejvoda and Thomas were not representative of whom “New York” personified. Hence, New York City’s media outlets joined the attack to fight crime by utilizing their platform to define who was the city’s crime problem.²¹

Whose New York? Black Crime and the New York Press

Print media coverage of New York’s crime wave became the driving force behind how it was experienced and who sustained the long-term effects. Unfortunately for black New Yorkers, coverage of the postwar crime wave was usually spearheaded by crimes committed in predominantly black neighborhoods and was usually the cause for the application of repressive responses by the police. Regardless of what the

crime and delinquency statistics revealed, the press routinely emphasized crimes committed by blacks in preference to white crimes. By accentuating the words “Negro” and “Harlem,” they contributed to the public perception of the postwar crime wave by stimulating a phobic apprehension with which uninformed persons viewed the crime wave in New York City. “New York’s crime” became synonymous with “black crime,” and it was the most influential media outlet in the world that led the charge.

In the *New York Times*, for example, crime reports were laden with racial markers, some more glaring than others, that did more than cover the incidents under investigation. For example, in November 1943, a front-page article on a second-offense robbery, adjacent to “War News Summarized,” bore the headline, “Ex-Convict Gets 40 to 60 Years as a Lesson for Brooklyn Thugs.” The coverage included “the tongue lashing” imposed by King County Judge Louis Goldstein to Jack Morgan, “a Negro,” for his offense. “Let the punishment I mete out to you,” Judge Goldstein told Morgan, “be a warning to those of your criminal element who have infested the Bedford-Stuyvesant section that when they commit vicious crimes no consideration whatsoever will be given to them.” Of course, Bedford-Stuyvesant is a neighborhood in the Brooklyn borough; however, coverage of the crime and sentencing in the *Times* regularly referred to the neighborhood as “Brooklyn’s ‘Little Harlem’ because of its large Negro population.” The same article also included superfluous updates on the state of the Juvenile Aid Bureau, the successes of police increases “to curb lawlessness in that area,” the “much too lenient” Adolescent Court and its “youthful hoodlum offenders”—two-thirds of whom were white—and admissions of crime increases in the city from notable black residents.²²

But the commentary provided by black residents to reporters was rarely an admission to having an inherent crime problem as much as it, generally, reflected an effort to address neighborhood social conditions that may lead to crime. For instance, the Reverend Thomas Harten of Holy Trinity Baptist in Brooklyn told the *Times* reporter on the Morgan case, “I do not deny that crime has increased here, but the increase is national.” For the African American pastor in “Brooklyn’s Little Harlem,” crime was “due largely to bad economic conditions, bad housing, exorbitant rents and the fact that, until Pearl Harbor very many of our people were out of



Benjamin Davis Jr. at the Hotel Theresa discussing policing in Harlem, 1949.
(AP Photo / John Lent)

work and on relief.” Rev. Harten believed that reports were “exaggerated and the result of pressure by persons who have long been making ‘vicious attacks’ on Brooklyn’s Negro population.” And Brooklyn was not alone.²³

At a convention of the Young Communist League, the prominent Harlemit Benjamin Davis Jr. told an audience of roughly a hundred young men and women that the postwar emphasis on “muggings by Negroes” in the news was “exaggerated crime wave slander.” The executive secretary of the Harlem division of the Communist Party denied the accusations of a postwar crime wave and expounded on how “mugging [was] a new handle of slander and libel to be used against the Negro people to exaggerate and to create the impression that the Negro people are a criminal element and that the white population should regard them as such.” Davis, like Harten, did not dismiss the fact that crimes were being committed in Harlem; similarly, he associated the crimes with neighborhood social problems that “existed there for a long time,” while emphasizing that the postwar crime-wave sensationalism was fabricated by the print media.²⁴

Many black leaders discerned the media’s tendency to conflate New York’s crime problem with its black residents. In 1945, a staff of

researchers and writers led by Duane Robinson published their study on “mugging” and the New York press in *Phylon*, a quarterly journal founded by W. E. B. DuBois. The study sought to respond directly to the media’s attempt to “create a Negro crime wave.” The researchers interviewed an editor or staff representative from their respective newspapers, who interpreted their paper’s policies on handling crime news. In doing so, they sought to answer the following: (1) Do the readers of *PM* and the *Post* and the readers of the more conservative newspapers differ in the degree of acceptance of the “mugging” stereotype and differ in their views of the policy of the press? and (2) Do important differences of opinion exist between black and white groups, between economic groups with different levels of education, and between different religious groups in regard to the problem? The results proved, according to Robinson, that “the New York press has a long-established practise of giving crimes among the city’s half-million Negroes excessive prominence,” and after World War II, “the press proceeded to create a fictional and exciting picture of this new brand of Negro crime, ‘mugging.’” The data indicated that the newspapers examined could be divided into two groups. One group followed the “conservative” and traditional policy of sensationalizing reports of black crimes without regard for the misinformation and prejudice that these reports created. The other group of papers exercised varying degrees of caution in their reporting of black crimes. Both defended their stances with varying reasons.²⁵

One representative from a “conservative,” traditional newspaper declared, “It [Negro crime] all goes back to religion and sex.” The representative insisted that black people in the North have too much freedom, and because of this, “they get away with murder in New York City.” The unnamed representative concluded the interview declaring, quite frankly, “I hate them.” A representative from the second group, whose newspapers were described as cautious in their crime reporting, told the interviewer that though his or her newspaper used the race tag “Negro,” it also used the term “Harlem” synonymously, and it was doing “everything possible to improve the position of the Negro in the public’s mind.” This mattered, because the prejudices and personal feelings of the editors carried into the reporting and the news coverage, which influenced strongly the opinions of their audience.²⁶

Following these interviews with newspaper representatives, the researchers shifted their attention to public opinion. They used a questionnaire seeking information about the respondents' attitudes toward crime in general, toward "Negro crime," and toward the press's handling of "Negro crime." The questions ranged from "Do you think that there has been a greater increase in crimes in Harlem than in other parts of the city?" to "Do you think that Negro crimes are reported by the newspapers with too little emphasis, or by and large fairly and correctly, or with too much emphasis?" There were considerable differences in opinion between black and white respondents on the questions. On the first question, roughly two-thirds of the white respondents believed yes, there was a greater increase in crimes in Harlem; 80 percent of blacks said no. On the second question, roughly half of the white respondents believed that "Negro crimes" were reported fairly; 79 percent of black respondents believed there was too much emphasis. By and large, the evidence from the study indicated that the press played a vital role, either as a liberal influence or a conservative influence, in the development of public opinion on crime.²⁷

For many black newspaper writers and readers, this information did not come as a surprise. Earl Conrad, who served as the Harlem bureau chief for the *Chicago Defender*, printed a report that affirmed that two New York City newspapers, the *World-Telegram* and the *Times*, made no apologies for how their coverage of the crime wave led to a "smear attack on the New York Negro communities." Lee B. Wood, executive editor of the *World-Telegram*, confirmed his newspaper's use of the word "Negro" to describe crimes connected to black people; Richard Joseph, city editor of the *Times*, "bombastically refused" to discuss the situation. It was the *World-Telegram's* policy, according to Wood, to designate the race of the culprit when a black person was arrested or charged with a crime, but it did not specify national or ethnic origins of others. "I haven't heard of anything yet which would convince me of a need for changing that policy," Wood explained. "I've talked with Negro groups before about that, and they know our position." He continued, "Our policy is to use the word 'Negro' when we think a story is sufficiently important to indicate its need." When asked why other ethnic groups were not identified, Wood countered, "Their names would identify them: that is, if Italian, Jewish, Polish, or other, their names would indicate what they were." The

Defender representative challenged Wood and informed him that it was a matter of group relations, of understanding between black and white, and that the *World-Telegram's* policy injured the black community each time the word was used. Wood acknowledged, "It might have this kind of effect," but the specification was needed.²⁸

But most black New Yorkers knew there was no "might" about it. Black journalists, in particular, believed that since the war ended, news media outlets were running low on newsworthy events, and "the papers now return[ed] to their original scapegoat, the Negro, to spotlight him as a criminal to the nation." In New York City, the crime wave was built by lumping routine crimes together to make it appear as though a great increase in violence had occurred. "When repeating these sensational stories of lawbreaking," according to the *Chicago Defender*, "the word Negro was used profusely creating the opinion that the upward trend of crime was directly traceable to Harlem." To be sure, black journalists did not completely reject the idea that there was a natural upswing in crimes committed after the war; however, they did not believe the rates put forth by mainstream media outlets and did not presume it was a solely a black problem. The racial identification of black persons as offenders in every possible case created the impression that they were the main culprits, and presentation as much as content contributed to this belief. For example, when eighteen black waiters were accused of defrauding the railroads and the passengers of large sums of money in a meal-check scheme, the story was covered by most newspapers with large front-page stories, and the waiters were "belabored as leeches preying upon poor servicemen and their families." But after the trial, when the waiters were exonerated, those same papers printed the outcomes in much smaller articles, buried in the depths of the newspaper. This practice, according to many black journalists, was a custom that print media outlets had followed since the Emancipation; that is, "Negroes are not news unless connected with crime."²⁹

At times, black journalists made use of their platforms to counter the crime-wave sensationalism. For example, Carl Lawrence of the *New York Amsterdam News* wrote a piece that denied the crime wave's existence and divulged an ulterior motive. According to Lawrence, "serious" crimes were decreasing in Harlem, and rumors of a crime wave were being applied to get more police in the city. "The downtown papers

have decided that we need some more help,” an unnamed detective from the 135th Street Station told Lawrence, “so I guess they figured that’s the best way to get it.” Another police officer from the Thirty-Second Street Station disclosed to the black weekly reporter that “even teen-age gang brawls, the community’s most serious crime problem in the opinion of some police officials,” were cut to a minimum. Still, countless headlines continued to be printed across New York City newspapers that reported otherwise.³⁰

“Can Crime Preventive Efforts by Police Be Helpful?”: Prevention beyond Policing

Black journalists were not alone in their efforts to combat the sensationalized, racialized crime wave being spread by the New York City press after the war. Crime-wave opponents included a new surge of reformers who worked through various organizations to expose their truths. This included the Society for the Prevention of Crime, which was founded in 1877 and continued to promote “temperance for judicial and legislative reform and for public and legal education” into the postwar years. The executive director, Edwin J. Lukas, was adamant that there was “no genuine crime wave—yet.” Lukas admitted that some crimes, mainly property crimes, increased; however, Lukas expounded, “What we are now experiencing appears on analysis to be nothing more than the expected upsurge of those types of criminal behaviors which during the war diminished for a variety of reasons.” Further, the unpaid director of the Society for the Prevention of Crime did concede that the potential for a crime wave existed. Lukas’s reasoning echoed many of the early predictions of a crime wave happening, and he acknowledged one would come about “if and when the incidence of crime surges above average rates; if and when idle teenagers remain idle for a protracted time, and in greater numbers; if and when displaced war workers remain unabsorbed into industry; and if and when returning GI’s with unresolved personal problems and emotional disturbances do not receive appropriate guidance and jobs.”³¹

Lukas also advocated for revised and refurbished prewar programs such as the Juvenile Aid Bureau, athletic leagues, and summer camps that had been reduced or cut. These kinds of programs, according to

Lukas, needed to be readjusted for the times if they were to be successful. The Society for the Prevention of Crime director acknowledged that the programs used before the war were “gravely emasculated” and needed to be revived to be effective. For example, the Juvenile Aid Bureau in New York City lost many caseworkers who were either released from their duties or transferred to other city departments. “The activities of the unit,” Lukas wrote, “gradually deteriorated into fairly routine and mundane matters varied only by the thus far unspectacularly effective Coordinating Councils established in precincts scattered throughout the city.” Thus, Lukas used his platform to address the needs to prevent a crime wave from happening, because it seemed to be on the horizon, and his concern was that many prevention programs were being suppressed and replaced by more punitive police-selected directives.³²

Another opponent of the “fabricated” crime wave was Frederick A. Moran, chairman of the New York State Board of Parole. At the forty-seventh annual New York State Conference on Social Work at the Pennsylvania Hotel, Moran announced that the predictions of a postwar crime increase were based on “incomplete statistics” concerning juvenile delinquency. In fact, the Board of Parole chairman affirmed, “every generation, in the opinion of the older one, has had the habit of going to the devil.” In other words, there was a generational tension. The postwar crime wave received undue attention because the older generation misinterpreted the shifts in youth behaviors as they took over positions of power.³³

These positions included the judges and lawyers who worked the juvenile courts. Moran recommended changes in the court procedures to adjust to the times. “It is the contention of many that the failure of so large a percentage of the courts to function effectively is due to a misconception, willful or otherwise, of the purposes of these courts not only on the part of laymen,” Moran opined at the National Conference of Social Work, “but of lawyers and judges as well, and that the greatest part of the responsibility for the present condition of affairs rests with the legalists.” That is, judges and lawyers needed to use their discretion better to determine the fate of youth offenders by individualizing their cases—a founding component of the juvenile court that postwar reformers believed the courts no longer understood or accepted.³⁴

In New York City, most juvenile judges were pressured to consider revising their court standards. In a letter to Justice Justine W. Polier, Bolin's colleague at the Domestic Relations Court, Lukas expressed his discontent with why the courts were still combined. "In my opinion," Lukas wrote, "it is no longer arguable that a juvenile court should also be a domestic relations court; the integration of these two functions has been inordinately delayed in most places." Further, he argued that this separation did not make much difference in practice; however, the change in terminology would promote a shift of the fundamental principles. "Many of us have reached the point in our discussions concerning the adjustments of youngsters' problems at which mere words begin to take on disproportionate significance." Perhaps this was a lesson learned from the press's role in perpetuating the crime: words mattered and held consequences.³⁵

The trouble remained, though. Everyone had something to say about crime in Harlem, and its youths continued to bear the burden. Amid the postwar crime-wave sensationalism, these debates reignited conversations on the role of state authorities in controlling youth behaviors. Questions emerged such as whether police should be agents of repression, of correction, of prevention, or where possible, of all three. New York City youths admitted that they were unclear about police roles in their neighborhoods, but they objected to having their teachers "act as policemen." Others raised questions concerning the influence of the police in meeting the problems of delinquency but noted "the good influence of the Police Athletic League" and urged that it be advertised more widely. They made efforts to navigate the carceral terrain laid out by different authorities in the city. And before they knew it, another one intervened by way of science.³⁶

Psychiatry Comes to Harlem: Social Scientific Constructions of Youth Criminality

By the last years of the 1940s, crime and delinquency had "been studied 'to death.'" The time had come "for some forthright work to be done not only to get the facts, but to do something about them." In the midst of the New York City media touting the postwar crime wave and state authorities becoming increasingly tough on crime, many

social scientists, particularly psychologists, psychiatrists, and sociologists, came forth as authoritative participants in public debates dealing with crime and delinquency. Their affirmation reinforced preconceived notions of criminality that were politicized and racialized. In a domineering sweep, many of these scientists sought to “cure” delinquency, and they believed science was the missing piece in efforts to prevent crime and, potentially, purge it altogether.³⁷

For resident New Yorkers, there was some skepticism as medical science entered crime and delinquency discourse. Mistrust in medical practices, especially for black New Yorkers, was long established in the community because of the racist history of being misdiagnosed, dismissed, denied treatment altogether, or worse. Thus, suspicions emerged as scientists—from within and from outside the community—concurrently joined crime-prevention efforts when the idea of “black crime” saturated public opinion.

Of the numerous scientists in New York City to enter the assault on crime in Harlem was Frederic Wertham, a German-Jewish émigré who opened the Lafargue Mental Hygiene Clinic in the basement of St. Philip's Episcopal Church on 133rd Street near Seventh Avenue. Wertham was trained in psychiatry in Vienna, Paris, London, and Munich before he joined the prominent psychiatrist Adolf Meyer at the Phipps Psychiatric Clinic at Johns Hopkins University in 1922. From there, Wertham moved to New York City in the 1930s and worked in various capacities before he started the Lafargue Clinic. Insistent that the clinic was not “a racial or interracial project,” Wertham avowed that he set up in Harlem “merely because the need here [was] greater.” And with hardly any money and no sponsorships from any significant reformers, he organized a staff that shared his belief in bringing psychiatry to the people.³⁸

“There must be some way to bring psychiatry to the penniless urban masses,” Wertham proclaimed after years of unsuccessful pleading for the extension of a psychiatry clinic in Harlem. For more than a decade, jurists, social reformers, doctors, and the clergy requested a state or city mental-hygiene clinic in Harlem. Many proposals were considered; however, it was not until a Children's Court magistrate stressed that the community's juvenile-delinquency statistics demonstrate the severity of the call that progress was made. Noting that 53 percent of Manhattan's juvenile delinquency occurred in Harlem, the Children's Court justice

believed “a competent, easy-to-reach mental-health clinic could reduce that figure tremendously.” But the lack of finances or sponsorships proved too significant of a barrier, and the advancements were shelved.³⁹

Refusing to accept that only the wealthy coveted mental health, Wertham and a staff of fifteen opened the Lafargue Clinic and started to work in the community. The staff included four black social workers; a black psychiatrist, André Tweed, who joined immediately after getting out of the Army; three white psychiatrists; and several pediatricians. The African American writer and poet Richard Wright, an ardent supporter of Wertham and the clinic, declared that the clinic’s staff was “composed of the best technical talent in the city, medical people and social workers of so high a standing in their respective fields that no one would dare question their qualifications.” Together, under Wertham’s lead, they attempted to address what they understood to be the interior and intangible effects of racial discrimination; a problem that the renowned African American novelist Ralph Ellison described as “the sickness of the social order.”⁴⁰

The upsurge in the fields psychiatry and psychology in the postwar years led to an increase in public and private institutions dedicated to mental health that promoted a growing interest in the psychological roots of prejudice and discrimination. Even so, many of the medical practitioners, social scientists, policy makers, and institutions responsible for those developments often ignored African Americans who experienced the grim realities of the late 1940s. Harlemites, specifically, continued to face limited employment opportunities, overcrowded housing conditions, and limited access to equal education and health care. It was determined that these conditions were detrimental to the development of the psychological character of a person—“a character that arises from the impact between urban slum conditions and folk sensibilities.” Thus, it was diagnosed that inadequate social conditions held the ability to alter biological behaviors. Behavioral and medical scientists alike agreed that elevated frustrations caused by social circumstances led to neuroses, a mild mental illness that was often induced by stress; and neuroses too often engendered crimes. As a result, practicing psychiatrists and psychologists developed “social psychiatry” and “social psychology”—which held that all neuroses and psychoses, the latter being the more severe mental disorder, do not necessarily result from in-

herent problems but that many can be attributed to society—to focus on cultural contexts of well-being. Still, African Americans were denied access to services and “treatments” in the capital of the Jim Crow North.⁴¹

The Lafargue Clinic targeted that population “to provide psychotherapy for those who need it and cannot get it”; however, it encountered numerous obstacles from its inception forward. The New York State Department of Social Welfare, for example, denied its early attempts to obtain a license. “We’ve decided that there’s just no need for a psychiatric clinic in Harlem,” a department representative explained to Wertham. “Well if there’s no need for our clinic,” Wertham refuted, “can you please give me the names and addresses of all the other places where I can send my Negro patients?” Wertham’s query, though sarcastic, was an explicit shot at the discriminatory practices of the field.⁴²

Before the Lafargue Clinic opened its doors in 1946, a team of social workers surveyed Harlem and its existing mental hospitals. They revealed that high rates of discrimination in practically all clinics was the rule and “that the few Negroes ever examined were treated with such contempt and sometimes brutality that they were afraid to go back.” This alone, for Wertham, justified the clinic’s existence. The year Lafargue opened for business, there were roughly twenty black psychiatrists in the entire country, and most practicing white psychiatrists rejected black patients who sought their services. In New York City, Bellevue Hospital did not discriminate against its patients; however, very few blacks voluntarily went because of the boilerplate diagnosis they received. Black patients seeking mental help were usually determined to be “just unhappy, or they need[ed] housing, or they [felt] downtrodden.” Even black veterans were denied services. Wertham and his staff aimed to correct this. They knew that African Americans were not “a happy-go-lucky race with natural immunity to stress and neuroses.” In fact, they believed because African Americans endured the most disadvantaged and ill-fitting circumstances, they needed it the most.⁴³

But the problem that everyone was aware of but no one wanted to discuss was whether black folks would trust Wertham and his staff enough to give their confidence. Even potential financial supporters questioned Wertham’s ability to sway this population. Wertham recalled the hesitations of “supposedly liberal rich man” about the clinic when Wertham was delivering his sales pitch: “My good Dr. Wertham, yours is a

magnificent plan, but everyone knows that Negroes don't need any psychiatry." The man continued, "There are 400,000 Negroes in Harlem. A tiny clinic like yours won't even make a dent. And, my dear Dr. Wertham, do you honestly expect the Negroes to come to you, to trust you? One other thing, by placing your clinic in Harlem, aren't you actually practicing segregation?" Wertham slammed the door and proceeded to leave.⁴⁴

Wertham was discouraged with the lack of financial support he received, but he continued to believe his clinic could successfully reach black patients. One night in 1945, the story goes, Wertham, Richard Wright, and Earl Brown, the latter a staff writer for *Life* magazine, were reviewing their failures to raise funds when the doctor looked at Wright and said, "If we can't get the money, let's do it without money. All we really need is talent, and I can get that." Wright and Brown introduced Wertham to the Reverend Shelton Hale Bishop, who offered them free use of his basement at St. Philip's Episcopal Church, and without any formal opening announcement, even with the space "dirty and empty, except for a small red table and some benches," two patients sat and waited to be examined.⁴⁵

Whether Harlemites trusted Wertham and his staff was tough to know for sure; however, between 1946 and 1958, the Lafargue Clinic, which was only open two nights a week from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m., did treat as many patients as it could handle. In its first eighteen months of operation, the clinic examined more than two thousand patients—children and adults. Those who visited the clinic ranged from those who needed someone to talk to about their problems to those who "suffered from mild forms of neuroses" to the extreme cases in which a patient was considered psychotic and referred to a hospital. This was a lot of work for a staff that worked largely on a volunteer basis. The Lafargue Clinic generated limited income from small financial contributions from individual, private donors. It also charged patients who could afford to pay twenty-five cents per visit and fifty cents to testify in court on their behalf; it was free for those who could not afford to pay anything. Still, for Wertham and his staff, they were doing the work for people in need.⁴⁶

These psychiatrists and social workers were regularly visited in their screened-off cubicles by "war veteran[s] who can't settle in a job; a young woman in love but afraid of marriage; a boy who disobeys his parents; a girl barred from her home because she is to bear an illegiti-

mate baby; a man who is scared of people; a woman who simply 'feels queer' and wants to be told why." But not all patients sought medical attention voluntarily. For example, the Veterans Administration, the State Department of Social Welfare, and a number of private agencies sent soldiers who returned from the war to the clinic to be treated for "war neuroses." Also, many youths treated at the Lafargue Clinic were either accompanied by their parents who wanted to suppress early signs of delinquent behaviors or by police officers who presumed that "the kids ought to have a chance before they get into serious trouble." This was highly encouraged by Wertham and the Lafargue Clinic staff.⁴⁷

"The big thing is to get the kids here," an unnamed social worker in charge of youth casework at the Lafargue Clinic told a reporter from the *New Republic*. In an article chronicling Wertham's "dream" institution, this social worker detailed why it was critical for concerned parents or arresting police officers to bring youths into the clinic instead of the precinct and explained how the clinic served as a constructive intermediary that could precede legal action. "Because once they're delinquent," the Lafargue staffer made clear, "they don't stand a chance." He continued, "The courts usually don't bother much with Negro kids; they send them directly to such places as the State Institution for Mental Defectives. They don't belong there at all: they come out of there bitter and mean and ready for crime." Thus, the clinic's intervention was deemed preventive and, to a certain extent, protective for youths brought to the clinic.⁴⁸

The range of youth treated at the clinic varied, and the *New Republic* writer, Ralph G. Martin, was certain to highlight the differences in the treatments they received while attesting that any treatment was preferable to any punishment issued by the court. To be sure, some youths who were examined did not warrant much treatment. For example, the social worker recalled a "skinny, ragged kid in knickers walking in bashfully, [screaming] I cut my finger. Can you fix it?" Even the ones who were treated, according to the Lafargue Clinic staffer, rarely showed any inclination toward criminal behaviors, especially not violent ones. The unnamed social worker remembered one occasion when a black boy was taken to Bellevue Hospital for a psychiatric examination, and the doctor explained to his parents that the boy "had sexual fantasies because he sang a song that started out, 'Don't you feel my leg because when you feel my leg, you're gonna feel my thigh.'" In jest, the social

worker told Martin, “God Almighty, everybody in Harlem knows that song. It’s a popular recording. That psychiatrist just didn’t know Harlem, that’s all.” For the Lafargue Clinic staffer, this validated their work and the work of social psychiatry at large, reiterating that the methods practiced at the Lafargue Clinic were not used by the Bellevue psychiatrist who “diagnosed that kid.” Had he known the cultural patterns of the community, the youth’s lived experience, and how they affected him—the basic principles of social psychiatry—such a judgment would not have been made.⁴⁹

Before the establishment of the Lafargue Clinic, very few agencies worked with black youths that linked the problem of juvenile delinquency to “the outward manifestation of dangerously unresolved conflicts within.” Popular opinion was that since courts and reform schools dealt with offenders of the law, there was no need for any other institution, least of all a psychiatric clinic. But for those who worked primarily with youths at the clinic, this could not be further from the truth. From its inception, the Lafargue Clinic was committed to taking on juvenile cases, and “it was naturally assumed that in Harlem the vast majority of patients would be Negro.” Jeanne Smith and Hilde Mosse, two psychiatrists who worked primarily with youths, understood that their role at the clinic was to “take care of frustrated children—and Harlem [was] full of them.” In the clinic’s brief yet impactful existence, more than a quarter of its patients were under twenty-one years old. Notwithstanding, the Lafargue Clinic’s role as a participant in the postwar criminalization of black youths in Harlem remains underexplored.⁵⁰

The Lafargue Clinic, however, was very much an active participant, whether it knew it or not, in the postwar discourse surrounding youth, race, and crime. The psychologist S. I. Hayakawa made it clear in his *Chicago Defender* column on the clinic’s efforts at combating juvenile delinquency that “the Lafargue Clinic will be to psychiatry what the front-line ambulance service is to medicine—treatment directly at the scene of action, where the casualties are heaviest and wounds are fresh.” Wertham acknowledged this when he actively sought “a group of far-sighted doctors” who would use “medical science in their fight to turn potential delinquents into useful citizens.” Smith and Mosse, the latter a pediatrician who worked with Wertham at Queens Hospital prior to the clinic’s opening, trusted in Wertham’s vision and developed ways to

employ social psychiatry as a means to combat crime and delinquency in Harlem. "The principal educational device used in this part of town is punishment," the Lafargue staffers indicated. "Children are hauled into court at the slightest provocation and sent to reform schools in droves." The clinic wanted to change this or at least to disrupt the approach. For Wertham and his staff, social psychiatry did this because it understood "the economic and social lives of patients." This applied to their young patients as well.⁵¹

For example, Wertham recalled the experience of a sixteen-year-old girl who served a sentence in a reform school for truancy and shoplifting and was referred to the Lafargue Clinic. Following her examination, it was determined that the girl's mother was psychotic and "vented her delusions on the long-suffering daughter and husband." After more than six months of sessions with the family, the clinic arranged for the mother's hospitalization, supported the family through the transition, and "not only persuaded the girl to return to school but also found her a part-time job." The narrative was framed as a success story of a girl whose "self-respect [was] restored" because the prospect of "a normal home environment." The account was concluded with praise of the clinic and a declaration that "when the mother completes her recovery, the clinic will have saved a family." This redemptive rhetoric emphasizes the chief aim of the Lafargue Clinic, and in this particular instance, Wertham and his staff were regarded as a success for instilling "the will to survive in a hostile world."⁵²

The Lafargue Clinic ceased its operations in December 1958 as the lack of financial support ultimately proved to be too serious a trouble to overcome. However, Wertham and his staff left an imprint on the broader intellectual debates materializing in Harlem on race and democracy. On the surface, the Lafargue Clinic played an important role in forcing the terms of race and the social implications of race out of sight. Similar to other "antirace" men and women of the time, they realized how such rhetoric was often reversed, so they emphasized "real" democracy by devaluing the distinction of visible racial hierarchies. Wertham and his staff acknowledged the difference between "black" and "white," and because the clinic was a site in which studies of black and white youths took place, the Lafargue Clinic held a particular relevance for civil rights leaders combating segregation throughout the country. For example,

in 1951, the NAACP called on Wertham to defend its push to desegregate public schools in Delaware. Wertham cited studies conducted at his clinic to argue that Jim Crow policies affected everyone. Before the Delaware Supreme Court, he declared that both black and white youths suffered an “unsolveable emotional conflict” and that they interpret segregation “in one way and only one way—and that is they interpret it as punishment.” Here, Wertham, like the psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark, whose Northside Center for Child Development simultaneously emerged in Harlem, understood segregation and racial discrimination as an issue that affected blacks and whites alike.⁵³

Speculation surrounding the authenticity of Wertham and his staff’s efforts to “treat” their patients, both young and old, emerged; however, evidence of any ulterior motives was difficult to find. The Lafargue Clinic’s staff, a conglomeration of peoples from within and from without the community, joined a growing field of social scientists committed to resolving the “crime problem in Harlem.” It is important to note, however, that it was spearheaded by white racial liberals who, like their Progressive-era predecessors, sought the rejection of biological determinism and the appeal of “remedial measures” to solve problems magnified by racial barriers. Despite its well-meaning intentions, even some of the clinic’s most avid supporters displayed skepticism. For example, Ralph Ellison pointed out that for blacks to experience progress, it must come from within. Ellison believed, “whites impose interpretations upon Negro experience that are not only false but, in effect, a denial of Negro humanity.” Thus, the idea of cultural universalism that may or may not have existed among the Lafargue staff, founders, and supporters would not prevail because, as Ellison put it, “Negroes live nevertheless as they have to live, and the concrete conditions of their lives are more real than white men’s arguments.”⁵⁴

Waiting for a city-bound bus, the well-known nonfiction writer Robert Keith Leavitt noticed a “CRIME WAVE” headline plastered across a New York City newspaper. Leavitt was not able to see the rest of the story because “the words were half hidden under untended money” left for the anonymous news dealer who always left the papers for taking. The irony of untended money left for the trusting news dealer whom, he recalled, “none of us ever saw” covering a story printed to defame a people who were essentially virtuous was “as though some Wise and Hu-

morous Hand had flung those shining discs across the black-faced type to give the lie to a slander upon mankind.” Leavitt was not ready to lose faith in people amid such lawless times. “There are crimes, of course,” he acknowledged, “and some ugly ones, [but] even all together they are no more than a ripple on the surface of a great, calm sea of human honesty and decency.” The Harvard-educated writer was right. “For every man who betrays his kind there are ten thousand doing the honorable thing all day long, as a matter of course, a custom, a way of life,” Leavitt reiterated to his readers, and he declared that people “by and large, are square shooters.” As the 1940s came to an end, however, such optimism was rare. These postwar societal forces combined to build a public fear around crime that was both raced and aged. It was going to take valiant efforts by those who thought about humanity as Leavitt did to overthrow this cycle of injustice and protect its future.⁵⁵