

# Editors' Introduction

## Youth under Control: Punishment and “Reform” in the Neoliberal State

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**G**IVEN THE ENTRENCHED SOCIAL INEQUALITIES AND PUNITIVE JUSTICE POLICIES facing young people in the United States, a more theoretically informed and principled scholarship on youth criminalization and punishment is sorely needed. A goal of this special issue of *Social Justice* is to provide examples of such work from scholars working at the intersections of criminology, justice studies, and the sociology of punishment. Using various theoretical lenses connected by a critique of neoliberal logics, the articles explore the lived realities of punitive social and penal policies aimed at young people in the United States. Individual articles focus on particular aspects of the punitive turn: schools, juvenile justice, and community-based programs. But they also historicize their inquiries to make sense of these local lived realities in and beyond the contexts of neoliberal constraints on funding and constructions of responsabilization, the rise of the carceral state and racialized criminalization and punishment, and the increasing securitization of youth spaces.

Neoliberalism remains a critically important phenomenon through which to consider youth punishment (Ossei-Owusu 2012; see generally Harcourt 2010). In taking a moment to define neoliberalism, we identify at least three ways in which authors within this volume observe the relevance of neoliberalism to contemporary projects of youth punishment. All three also index the importance of considering neoliberalism—a term often (mis)used to identify the shrinking role of the state—as working in and through a reconstituted state. First, as a political-economic project of privatization, deregulation, and accumulation, neoliberalism has produced dramatic shifts in production during the latter decades of the twentieth century that have underdeveloped urban and rural areas, reduced the amount of semi-skilled work available, and maintained low wages for what labor remains (Harvey 2005; Smith 1984). Yet sectors of the economy that remain solvent and even expanding are decidedly part of the problem under study in this volume. The growing scope of police and carceral power, part of the emergent security state (Hallsworth and

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Lea 2011), is visible inside secondary schools through the rise of the “punishment industry” (Simmons, this volume), but is also palpable in the halls of university criminology departments, where job fairs and classes prepare the next generation of police, probation, and correctional officers (Schept, Wall, and Brisman, this volume). Second, neoliberalism has not only structured job markets in favor of police and carceral power, but has also diffused into the micro-operations and discourses of criminal justice agencies and actors. This has resulted in technocratic and managerial approaches to an expanding juvenile justice apparatus (Wacquant 2009; Schept, this volume) that affirms youth “disposability” (Giroux 2008) and reinscribes earlier forms of racialized punishment (Cox, this volume). Finally, the retreat of the welfare state under neoliberalism and the “penalization of welfare” have meant fewer community programs and opportunities for young people and a restrictive tethering of remaining programs to neoliberal standards, vocabularies, and assessments (Gray 2013; Myers and Goddard, this volume; Wacquant 2009).

As the articles in this issue theorize through various lenses, these global shifts in political economy—and the ideologies that justify and drive them—have transformed sites of youth socialization. From the school to the workplace to the detention center, mantras of personal responsibility, contingency, and competition animate the workings of social institutions in which youth find themselves. For youth justice and juvenile justice, this can be seen in programs that urge young people to see myriad *social* problems as *personal* problems. This approach, inscribed now into the discursive and material fabric of programs and institutions, can depoliticize youth and further sediment narratives of personal responsibility that obfuscate structural relationships that impose marginality (Cox 2011; Phoenix and Kelly 2013). Beyond the content of programs, their administration now falls more heavily on local communities, with much of the service delivery being done by private nonprofit and for-profit entities through partnerships with the state, a change mirroring the state’s inextricability from the private sector (DeFilippis, Fisher, and Shrage 2010; Goddard 2012).

As the title of this issue suggests, we value using the lens of neoliberalism to understand the lived realities of youth justice, school discipline, and attempts at criminal justice reforms. But there is also a danger in connecting all manner of social life to “neoliberal” shifts. In the rush to explain (and combat) what some might term the “punitive turn,” we must be careful to recognize recurring patterns of racialized punishment and to remember that neoliberal logics are, in fact, just the next iteration of capitalist logics. Neoliberalism as a distinctive ideological, material, and temporal phenomenon cannot be used to explain everything; for if it explains everything, it explains nothing. This brings us to a core theme that runs through this issue: paying attention to how social and historical trends structure and transcend the neoliberal period. We acknowledge that historically rooted social relations may be playing out in a slightly different form, one that is veiled in neoliberal verbiage, but not born of this period. Various phenomena examined

within this special issue—the criminalization of youth of color, constructions of responsabilized youth subjects, the ascent of the School Resource Officer, the expansion of the juvenile carceral net under the guise of child saving—all bare qualities characteristic of neoliberalism and yet also index a more deeply structured past (Hartman 1997; Muhammad 2010; Platt 2009; Ward 2012). Nevertheless, we maintain that neoliberalism—with its logics that justify and animate the exploitation of poor communities, maintain gendered hierarchies, and punish poor children, disproportionately from communities of color—deserves continued scrutiny.

The incomplete and even evolving nature of the neoliberal project is a theme that runs through this issue. By examining the work of various reform efforts—ranging from liberal to radical—we show how the neoliberal project remains decidedly unfinished. Indeed, in its capacity to infuse its logics into the individual and community bodies that purport to oppose it, neoliberalism manipulates well-meaning initiatives and organizations, constraining social justice efforts and expanding carceral regimes under the guise of its own “common sense” (Harvey 2005, 39). Under the capable lenses deployed by authors in this special edition, neoliberalism reveals its reach into our community organizations, our reform efforts, and even into our articulations of resistance to it. Even as authors dwell in and expertly excavate the shifting social problems and regulatory contexts characteristic of neoliberalism, they also draw our attention to the continued importance of grassroots organizing efforts.

In the issue’s first article, Justin Turner reviews recent critical scholarship that connects changes in youth justice, education, and altered avenues to meaning making for young people to broader shifts in the political economy. In addition to reviewing important work on how neoliberal discourses and actuarial logics seep into schools and the juvenile justice system, Turner situates changes to youth social control within larger social, cultural, and economic changes tied to the ascendancy of neoliberal capitalism. He also provides readers with an insightful discussion about why youth specifically provoke the attention of the carceral state. While not discounting the challenges ahead, Turner highlights the efforts of various community-based social justice organizations working to upend—or provide a more humane alternative to—US-style youth justice. Although the neoliberal project has atomized, depoliticized, and individualized Western youth culture and increased economic precariousness for young people (Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum 2008), the work of socially conscious organizations highlighted by Turner shows that more democratic, collective, and sustainable models have not been foreclosed.

The issue’s conceptual beginnings through Turner’s article then pivots toward work that connects theories of neoliberal punishment with empirical study. “On the ground” examinations of the punitive turn remain relatively rare; fine-grained analysis of youth punishment informed by social theory is particularly lacking in US criminology. Drawing on intensive fieldwork within the New York juvenile justice system, Alexandra Cox complicates our understanding of how neoliberal rhetoric collides with historically rooted racialized oppression. Cox’s article demonstrates

how programs animated by discourses emphasizing “responsibility” and “self-sufficiency” judge “success” as submission to program staff and standards. In other words, rather than the cultivation of self-governing and autonomous neoliberal subjects, “responsibility” is more often a form of repression—and “success” is achieved when a particular subject shows obedience to the rules laid down by a facility or staff member. Though such a focus clearly aligns with neoliberalism, Cox’s work historicizes notions of Black responsibility and servility and offers an instructive argument. Rather than being borne out of a new neoliberal era, this focus on personal responsibility and deference threads slavery and Reconstruction-era constructions of Blackness to contemporary discourses and practices of racialized social control.

Two of the articles explore various aspects of local justice system “reform” efforts. Drawing on two years of ethnographic fieldwork in a small and progressive Midwestern community, Judah Schept demonstrates the continued importance of middle-class progressives in maintaining and expanding the juvenile justice system. Schept finds that in a community otherwise critical of the carceral state, there was substantial and passionate support for a local initiative that would have dramatically expanded the local capacity to detain youth. Schept uses the concept of *carceral habitus* to demonstrate how neoliberal punishment structures its own reproduction, including filtering its practices—such as a variety of actuarial techniques of knowledge production—through discourses of rehabilitation and therapeutic justice that massaged its appearance to fit the political-cultural context of the community. Thus, neoliberal punishment structured the circulating vocabularies with which to discuss the central issues and the policy options available to city and county officials. Given the growing national attention to the problem of mass incarceration, including reforms that download the administration of carceral duties onto local communities, Schept’s article is a cautionary example of how policy reforms justified under the guises of local control and benevolent governance may further perpetuate the carceral state.

Whereas Schept’s article shows evidence of the limits of liberal reform in neoliberal times—and the key role played by liberals in shaping the juvenile justice system in ways that maintain class interests—Randy Myers and Tim Goddard explore the work of grassroots activists working to transform and provide alternatives to juvenile justice. Bringing to light another aspect of the “localization” of justice administration, the authors explore the various contradictions that arise when social change organizations carry out social justice-oriented service work. Drawing on open-ended interviews with managing staff from 12 organizations in major cities across the United States, the article shows how indirect governance and market-based funding for crime prevention and juvenile justice programs allow activist organizations to provide socially conscious “services” to young people. Local activists often draw upon the language of earlier movements for social justice and racial equality, including Freedom Schools, radical community

liberation movements, and even Slave Schools, but doing social justice work within the neoliberal model is not without potential pitfalls. The article explores how staff members make sense of the contradictions and tradeoffs of doing social justice-oriented service work as nonprofit organizations, often in partnership with elite philanthropies and/or the state.

In the respective articles by Schept and Myers and Goddard, we see the importance of “reformers” in challenging, justifying, and maintaining systems of youth discipline. Although the discourses and regulatory contexts may be suffused with neoliberal vocabularies, how these reforms further, or challenge, dominant class interests brings to mind earlier movements. In Schept’s discovery of discourses of therapeutic justice stitched to expanded carceral practices, we see the continued importance of progressive advocates in constructing the benevolent logics that justify the use of juvenile punishment—along decidedly raced and classed lines (Platt 2009). In contrast, because they often share similar backgrounds with the youth they serve and advocate for, activists working in the organizations studied by Myers and Goddard perhaps serve as contemporary examples of the “other child savers” (Ward 2012). As with the racial repression discussed by Cox, the contexts and logics may be decidedly neoliberal, but the racialized processes and underlying class interests at work in both articles on “reform” are reminiscent of earlier skirmishes over the state’s role in defining and addressing “delinquency.”

Drawing on her forthcoming book, *Making Prisoners*, Lizbet Simmons’s article addresses the escalation of school securitization during the war on crime era. Simmons traces the genealogical processes that begot neoliberal punishment and examines their contemporary situation in everyday practices. At their root, she argues, schools are imbued with disciplinary power, but traditional distinctions between the welfare and warfare states provided important cover for schools and insulated them from critiques of punitive excess. In the context of the war on crime, however, schools have extended the parameters of the punitive state. In theorizing the US public school alongside the prison as sites of what Simmons calls an emboldened multidimensional punishment industry, this article furthers scholarly analyses of youth punishment in key ways. It illuminates a broader constellation of structural forces that are implicated in securitization. In related fashion, it engages with a key conversation in the study of the prison-industrial complex: the relationships between capital accumulation, statecraft, and the growth of the carceral state. Simmons deftly navigates this terrain and argues convincingly that youth punishment is the product of public and private profit-seeking and state-crafting forces.

The final article, by Judah Schept, Tyler Wall, and Avi Brisman, discusses the role of higher education in constructing the “school-to-prison pipeline” implicitly discussed by Simmons. Drawing on their experiences as professors of justice studies, the authors examine the role of departments of criminal justice and criminology in producing the institutional legitimacy and physical bodies necessary to construct, manage, and sustain such an infrastructural articulation of police and carceral

power. The authors situate the demand for criminal justice degrees in the larger social and economic contexts, especially shifts in employment opportunities that are characteristic of neoliberal political economy and the growth of the carceral state. Indeed, criminal justice stands as one of the few “growth” industries for young people, particularly in rural areas, which have been hardest hit by deindustrialization and the prison boom. From their unique vantage point, the authors provide a reflexive discussion of how criminology departments remain complicit in the pipeline and the larger practices of pacification and punishment, of which it is a part. The authors offer a preliminary discussion of how to intervene in and disrupt this component of the continuum, including a critical consideration of the reformist efforts often found within departments.

In keeping with the politics and promise of *Social Justice*, we hope that this special issue will appeal to multiple audiences who read it to further theorize contemporary youth punishment and better strategize against it. Readers will find theoretically rich material that offers refreshing perspectives on the ability of neoliberal logics to structure even the most committed reforms, as well as exciting insights into radical efforts to destabilize those logics. Because the articles are animated by critical theory, essays will hopefully provide new vantage points from which folks “on the ground” can perceive with increased acuity the structurally imposed constraints in which they operate and against which they fight. Moreover, since most of the articles rely on empirical work with youth and youth justice movements, this latter population of readers will hopefully find shared frustrations, trans-local solidarities, and inspiration.

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