

Book Review of *Road to Whatever:  
Middle-Class Culture and the Crisis of Adolescence*

Mike Males

*Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice and www.YouthFacts.org*

***Road to Whatever: Middle-Class Culture  
and the Crisis of Adolescence***

By Elliott Currie

2005. New York, NY: Metropolitan Books,  
Henry Holt & Company.  
ISBN: 13:978-0-8050-6763-7.

University of California, Irvine, criminologist Elliott Currie is the latest author to proclaim suburban, middle-class adolescents in crisis. Currie, author of *Whitewashing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society* and *Crime and Punishment in America*, blames post-Reagan America's "new Darwinism," "culture of negligence and exclusion," and punishing attitudes for middle-class teens' "widespread alienation, desperation, and violence."

Currie's book fits into historical fears of the corruption of middle-class youth, from G. Stanley Hall's classic 1900-era anthro-psychologies to the 1950s intense scrutiny of white-teen delinquency (trumpeted in a cascade of books, films, and government investigations such as the Kefauver Committee's), the Sixties' fascination with inexplicably demented privileged white wastoids, and the 1980s' "River's Edge" panics over murderous suburban kids. Currie details his profiles of young people from classes and drug treatment centers, chosen because they were troubled by addictions, homelessness, crime, and self-destructive behaviors during their teen years. Their stories of suffering and danger after being cast out of their families, schools, and treatment institutions are poignant and often incisive.

But unlike similar books that treat grownups as victims of troubled teens or heroes rescuing them, Currie relentlessly lambastes modern adults—parents, school personnel, counselors, treatment staff—for perpetrating "the new middle class...harshness and heedlessness" that "is quick to punish and slow to help." Modern Americans refuse "to acknowledge how often and how badly middle-class adolescents are failed or endangered by their families," rule-crazed public schools function as "instruments for sorting and categorizing" rather than "building the competence and intellectual capacities of all their students," and blame-fixing therapeutic regimes

are mired in "a worldview so deeply ideological as to be disconnected from elementary reality."

Currie argues with good documentation that institutions charged with treatment and/or punishment of wayward youth more often "generate new, and frequently worse, problems." While youths' troubles stemmed from severe rejection, self-blaming, caring for themselves at young ages, and cruel deprivations of street life, professionals viewed them with "the conventional wisdom... that their charges had had it too easy and, accordingly, had never had to accept limits or take responsibility." Adults' "ideologically grounded regime of punishment" exacerbated troubled youths' alienation, but when youths (often through luck or their own unaided efforts) found rare programs or schools willing to tolerate and help them, they straightened out remarkably.

Currie builds on the sagas of troubled youth to indict post-Reagan America's "shoulder-shrugging individualism that excused most adults, and indeed society as a whole, from what we normally think of as adult responsibilities for nurture and support." Unlike many progressive thinkers, Currie doesn't blame some "system" for today's "peculiarly harsh and irresponsible culture;" after all, modern American adults created this system to serve our interests, indifferent to its damage to young people. The remedies he proposes begin with fundamental changes in Americans' attitudes toward community responsibility.

Currie's last five chapters are convincing and often eloquent, far more grounded and responsible than "troubled teen" works written by self-congratulating therapists and self-absolving parents. The problem with *Road to Whatever*—and it is serious—lies in its introduction and first chapter. Currie launches an otherwise compelling work with a barrage of dire misinformation about middle-class teens that profoundly misidentifies the "crisis" and allows adults off the hook Currie later seeks to hang them on.

Though claiming "disturbing...statistics back up" his impressions that "white youth are now the group at *highest* risk of some of the most troublesome and deadly of adolescent ills," Currie produces just about none. Indeed, general measures show the opposite. In Currie's state, California, statistics indicate white, middle-class ado-

lescents have never been safer or healthier than they are today. While high poverty rates, afflicting mostly black and Latino youth continue to accompany excessive levels of arrest, gun violence, HIV infection, school failure, and other ills, white teens are safer from nearly every serious risk than the white grownups who endlessly fret over them.

The plunge in white teens' per-capita delinquency rates over the last three decades, through the latest (2004) available figures, is astounding: felonies (down 65%), homicide (down 77%), rape (down 58%), violent crime (down 16%), drugs (down 46%), property offenses (down 74%), and misdemeanors (down 42%). California also recorded spectacular drops in white youths' rates of violent death (down 54%), suicide (down 52%), drug overdose (down 67%), murder (down 31%), traffic fatalities (down 50%), drunken driving deaths (down 60%), firearms death (down 47%), and births to teen mothers (down 48%).

National trends are similar. Record numbers of white high schoolers are graduating, enrolling in college, and volunteering for community work. Only 3 percent told Monitoring the Future they're "very dissatisfied" with themselves. Record low numbers report delinquency, violent victimization, and injury in or outside school. These are not the statistics of a generation afflicted with "widespread alienation, desperation, and violence." From the best available information, white youth are among the least troubled segments of society.

Where Currie goes most wrong (and he's hardly alone) is using adolescents as a metaphor for what he justifiably dislikes about modern America. Currie argues past youth generations were safer under "the moral vision that prevailed in much of middle-class America in the 1950s and 1960s," including its "basic notions of collective responsibility." Yet, if there ever was a white-youth crisis, it erupted during the late 1960s and early 1970s, with peaks in violent deaths, suicides and self-destructive demise, random violence, arrests, drug overdose, and other crises of the kind Currie mistakenly attributes to today's young. Alienated, murderous, drug-wasted middle-class white kids? Remember the Manson Family?

Currie's comparison of today's teenage drug risks to those of their parents growing up 30-40 years ago is extraordinarily off-base. "I never saw any heroin during my entire adolescence, nor, as far as I know, did any of my friends... We had never heard of crystal methamphetamine," he writes. "...Today, for adolescents in virtually every community in the United States the drug scene has changed so dramatically that it is as if we were talking about another planet... nearly every drug you can think of is available to (teens) with disturbing ease," with "far

more...opportunities for American adolescents to do something seriously risky... than there used to be."

Why, then, is white teens' manifest drug abuse, especially overdose, so dramatically rarer today? In 1970, four times more California white teenagers died from drugs, including *10 times* more from heroin, than in the latest years reported (2002 and 2003). Instead of examining readily available risk statistics, Currie compares a few severely troubled modern teens to bucolic memories of his middle-class childhood—a lapse common to other youth-panic books such as Mary Bray Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* and Meredith Maran's *Dirty: Inside the Teenage Drug Epidemic*.

In fact, today's readily documentable "crisis," the real one Currie's book convincingly chronicles, is widespread malaise among middle-class *grownups*. Virtually all the parents of the troubled youths Currie profiles suffered severe behavior problems of their own, including rampant addiction, depression, suicide attempts, violence, and family instability—an aging Baby-Boomer crisis that statistics do back up. Among white, middle-aged Californians, rates of drug abuse death rose 250 percent, violence arrest increased 140 percent, and imprisonment leaped 700 percent since the 1970s. Felony trends are simply unbelievable: in 1977 (the first year the Criminal Justice Statistics Center compiled complete statistics), 54,000 white youths aged 10-17 and 27,000 white grownups aged 30-69 were arrested for felonies; in 2004, 15,000 white youth and 98,000 white middle-agers. Failure to acknowledge America's burgeoning midlife crisis is one of social scientists' most striking failures and a source of displaced hostility toward youth.

This pattern recurs in one of the few statistics Currie mentions. Federal Drug Abuse Warning Network figures for hospital emergency cases, he claims, show "adolescent drug abuse took a sharp upward turn in the 1990s, and the rise was sharpest for some of the drugs white and middle-class youth were most likely to abuse." Not so. DAWN tabulations actually show teens were the only age that *didn't* show increased drug abuse during the 1990s, either in hospital treatments or deaths. In contrast, *every* adult age group suffered *dramatic* drug abuse increases, led by a 230 percent jump among ages 35-54 (the parents again). This is especially true for deadliest drugs: cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, and alcohol mixed with drugs.

The issue of which generation is in crisis is not academic. As Currie documents, being labeled "the problem" in modern America is stigmatizing, inviting punishment and abandonment, not caring and help. His "youth crisis" theme prevents an otherwise insightful work from asking

*Book Review of Road to Whatever*

a vital question: if adults' behaviors, attitudes, and treatment of youth sharply deteriorated in recent decades (as I agree with Currie that they did), how do we explain the dramatic *improvements* in teen behaviors?

Perhaps harsh interventions do make youth act better, though a host of studies find popular cure-alls (curfews, zero-tolerance school policies, get-tough therapies, boot camps, prison-happy policing) ineffective. There is little evidence to support the idea that adults, including professionals, can grab credit for teens becoming less criminal, dangerous, and endangered today. It seems more likely that, just as Currie's most troubled teens turned their lives around, perhaps less troubled ones are evolving ways to learn from and compensate for, rather than repeat, the mistakes of their elders. Start *Whatever* with Chapter 2, and Currie's written a compelling book worthy of scholarly and classroom use.

**References**

- California Criminal Justice Statistics Center, *Crime & delinquency in California, 1970-2004*, and supplement, *California criminal justice profiles, 1977-2004* (annual). Sacramento, CA: California Department of Justice.
- Center for Health Statistics (1960-2004). Death Public Use File, 1960-2004. Electronic data file available from CHS. Sacramento, CA: Department of Health Services.
- Drug Abuse Warning Network (1980-2002). *Annual emergency department data*, and *Annual medical examiner data*. Washington, DC: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Johnston, Lloyd D., Jerald G. Bachman and Patrick M. O'Malley. 2005. *Monitoring the Future: Questionnaire responses from the nation's high school seniors, 1975, 2002*. Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research.
- Johnston, Lloyd D. and Jerald G. Bachman. 1980. *Monitoring the Future: Questionnaire responses from the nation's high school seniors, 1975*. Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research.