

THE POSTWAR SEX CRIME PANIC

GEORGE CHAUNCEY, JR.

From time to time Americans have found themselves caught up in moments of collective fear and anxiety—what is labeled a “panic” in the story that follows. In 1919, in the wake of the first world war and the Russian Revolution of 1917, the object of that fear and anxiety was the ideology of Communism. In the 1970s, the obsessive concern with cults had some of the earmarks of a panic. And so did the child-kidnapping scare of the early 1980s.

The late 1940s proved to be a particularly fertile ground for such events. The UFO scare of mid-1947 began in late June, when the pilot of a private plane claimed to have seen nine “saucerlike” objects; by mid-July, “flying saucers” had been reported in 35 states. The “sex crime panic” began that same year and held the nation’s attention through the early 1950s. For more than 5 years, newspapers and magazines were full of stories and articles on brutal sex murders and assaults; state commissions studied the problem of the sexual “deviant”; and parents agonized over whether it was safe to send their children outdoors to play.

While some panics are just what they appear to be—that is, real expressions of concern over genuine social problems—others need to be read and interpreted like any other “text.” When this is done, the flying saucer scare can be understood in part as a reaction to anxiety-producing events in Europe, including the failure of the United Nations to resolve a serious crisis in the Balkans and the Soviet decision not to participate in the Marshall Plan, a program for which UFO sightings were one expression of Cold War an

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The sex crime panic, too, was a more complicated event than it seemed at the time. Like the UFO scare, it was partly a product of the Cold War, reaching a peak of intensity in the winter of 1949 to 1950, just as the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb, China fell to the Communists, and Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy began charging that Communists had infiltrated the State Department.

In the following narrative, George Chauncey, Jr. probes a very different side of the sex crime panic. For Chauncey, the panic was no mere reflection of postwar anxiety over world events, although his account gives the Cold War its due. More important, he argues, the panic reflected the deep tensions in family life and sexual culture that had resulted from the upheavals of the war. The conflict had divided

families, put women into men's jobs, and brought men into intimate—and sometimes sexual—contact with other men. Many Americans wanted to put an end to these and other threatening developments, and to enforce conformity to orthodox ideas of gender, sexuality, and family.

The sex crime panic evoked genuine fears about sexual violence. But it was seized on by a variety of groups that sought to mold it and use it to advance their own social programs and organizational interests. As a result of their efforts, the panic—for all the lurid tales of ice pick murders and rape mutilations of women and children—ultimately had as much to do with keeping women in the home as with keeping sex criminals off the street.

On November 14, 1949, Linda Joyce Glucoft, aged 6 years, was sexually assaulted by an elderly relative of the friend she had gone to visit in her Los Angeles neighborhood. When she cried out, her assailant, a retired baker whom the police had already charged in another child molestation case, choked her with a necktie, stabbed her with an ice-pick, and bludgeoned her with an axe, then buried her body in a nearby rubbish heap. Only a few days later, a drunken farm laborer assaulted and murdered a 17-month-old baby girl outside a dance-hall in a small town near Fresno. That same week, the Idaho police found the body of 7-year-old Glenda Brisbois, who had last been seen entering a dark blue sedan near her home; she had been murdered by a powerful assailant who had heaved her body 15 feet into an irrigation canal.

The gruesome details of these murders and of the hunt for their perpetrators were telegraphed to homes throughout the country by the nation's press. According to police statistics, such assaults were proportionately no more common than in previous years, but in late 1949 these three murders epitomized to many Americans the heightened dangers that seemed to face women and children in postwar America. Many regarded them not as isolated tragedies but as horrifying confirmation that a plague of "sex crime" threatened their families.

They had reason to fear such a plague. Ever since the war's end, a growing number of newspaper and magazine articles had focused the nation's attention on the murder of women and children; even more chillingly, they had argued that the motive for such assaults was sexual and that their perpetrators were men who had lost control of deviant sexual impulses. Stories with titles such as "Murder as A Sex Practice," "The Psychopathic Sex Menace," and "What Can We Do About Sex Crimes?" appeared with growing frequency in magazines as varied as the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Sir!*, and *Parade*. Between July of 1949 and March of 1951, *Collier's*, a weekly magazine with a large, middle-class family readership, ran a particularly explosive series of 13 articles by Howard Whitman which identified the growing "Terror in Our Cities," particularly the terror caused by the threat of sexual violence, as a national phenomenon. Newspapers throughout the country picked up on the issue and spotlighted local incidents involving children and women. "How Safe is Your Daughter?" J. Edgar Hoover had asked America's parents in a famous article

published by *The American Magazine* in 1947; a barrage of articles on sex crime seemed to confirm his claim that she wasn't very safe at all.

Some of the reporters and editors responsible for such stories published them because they thought they would help sell papers. Other editors, genuinely convinced that the "sex criminal" posed a major new threat to American families, hoped the articles would alert the public to the danger such criminals posed and generate popular support for the drastic new measures they thought were needed to curtail them. "Let's get cracking before it's too late," *Collier's* challenged its readers in one editorial. "Who knows where or when the next psychopath or hoodlum will strike? In your town? In your street?"

The press campaigns worked: They did not just report on the fear of sex crimes gripping many cities, but helped create it. When Michigan's newspapers



Illustrating J. Edgar Hoover's famous article, "How Safe is Your Daughter?" (1947), this photograph evoked every parent's greatest fear—that some harm might come to his or her child—to urge support for the policing of a wide range of sexual nonconformists. The picture's giant hand also evoked the period's sci-fi horror films, which depicted the threats posed to America by alien ways of life; it suggested that every "sex deviate" was equally alien to traditional American values.

spotlighted the murders of three children in the state in 1949 and 1950, for instance, many parents became so alarmed that they wrote the governor to demand action. As one father wired the governor in September 1950: "Who is going to protect my Joey when he is out playing tomorrow[?] The death of eight year old Joey Hausey only speaks to millions of how wicked sex deviates are." After hearing a radio report about sex crimes in February, 1950, a woman wrote to remind the governor that "Every mother of a daughter—and I am one—can not rest with sex perverts at large."

In many cities, parents did more than write letters. In one community after another, they organized to demand governmental protection for their children. The pattern in most cities was the same: a single violent, sometimes murderous assault on a girl, boy, or woman galvanized a public already made deeply anxious about sex crime. Local newspapers and church, women's, and parents' organizations mobilized popular support for increased police protection and more effective legislation to control sex offenders. In Philadelphia, where a newspaper poll reported that 90 percent of the city's women and 50 percent of its men were afraid to walk the streets at night, a series of incidents in 1949 resulted in neighborhood demands for increased police surveillance. On Palm Sunday in 1950, Chicago's "Fighting Priest," Father Jerome Dehnert, asked his parishioners to attend a mass protest meeting at a parochial school where two children had been attacked—and 600 people showed up.

As a result of the press's preoccupation with the issue, the problem of sex crimes and "sex deviation" became, to an astonishing extent, a staple of public discourse in the late 1940s and early 1950s. A popular topic for young orators (one Michigan girl won her high school district's first prize in oration for a talk on sex deviates in 1950 and was later asked to repeat the speech at a Lions Club luncheon), it was also a regular subject of PTA discussions ("PTA Plans Panel on Deviate," announced one banner headline; "Experts Asked to Serve"). Some high school boys heard so much discussion of "deviates" that they even began referring to certain boys they disliked as "Dee-Vees" instead of "sissies."

The local press campaigns and panics set the stage for the eruption of a genuinely national hysteria in the winter of 1949 to 1950, when newspapers riveted the nation's attention on the November murders of the three little girls in California and Idaho. Papers throughout the nation followed the story of each murder in the grim detail normally reserved for local murders. Many also exacerbated local fears by providing additional coverage of local attacks on children, which, while less severe, took on greater significance because of their association with the national stories.

The *Detroit News*, for instance, generally the least sensationalist of Detroit's three daily newspapers, devoted extensive coverage to sex crimes during the week of the girls' murders. Every day that week, the *News* carried stories, several under front-page banner headlines, about the California and Idaho murders, the attempted abduction of a 7-year-old girl in Detroit, and FBI statistics about sex crime. Three editorials in as many days demanded stronger laws to control sex criminals; one in Saturday's paper warned of the "large, potentially murderous population [of sex deviates], floating about in the larger community,

[which] constitutes the problem which in the last week has reasserted itself with appalling force." The front page of Sunday's paper carried the first installment in an 18-part series of articles on "Controlling the Sex Criminal," and another page was devoted to "Michigan's Most Revolting Sex Crimes—In Words and Photos." Monday's paper inaugurated a week-long series of articles, "Somebody Knows!," which reminded readers of the circumstances of eight recent "sex murders" in the Detroit area and offered rewards for information leading to the murderers' apprehension. Not surprisingly, 9 of the 14 letters to the editor published on Tuesday focused on sex crime. The press had created the image of a country whose streets and alleyways were overrun with murderous sex psychopaths.

The sensationalist accounts of the children's murders led church and women's groups throughout the country, as well as the local and national press, to demand state action, and state governments responded in ways that focused even more attention on the issue. The two sex murders in California in mid-November prompted 1000 people to meet in Los Angeles on November 21 to

Sex Crimes Growing Problem In State

FBI Drives on Perverts

Some Of Toughest
Laws In Years
OK'd By Session

Legislation Curbs
Reds, Sex Deviates
And Dope Peddlers

Wave Of Sordid Sex Incidents Stirs Police To Tighten Curfew

107 State Dept.
Workers Fired,
74 Homosexuals

Mother Blamed
for Neurotic Child

Plan to Overhaul Laws on Deviates

Large Audience
Attends Meeting
On Sex Deviates

PTA Urges Action
on Sex Deviate Bills

Deviate Bills Pass Senate

Year-to-Life Clause One of 4 Approved

Life Terms OK'd
For Sex Deviates

Governor's Study Panel
Airs Community Problem
In Three-Hour Session

Move To Treat Sex Offenders As Mental Patients Shows Gain

Headlines like these filled the nation's papers in the late 1940s and early 1950s, helping to construct the image of a nation whose streets were overrun by murderous "sex deviates."

demand state action. California's legislators established a Subcommittee on Sex Crimes the following week, and in December Governor Earl Warren convened both a special session of the state legislature and a conference of law enforcement agencies on "Sex Crimes Against Children" to respond to the crisis. The New Jersey Commission on the Habitual Sex Offender, established the previous spring, kept the issue alive in its state that fall by inviting some 750 judicial, medical, police, church, and civic authorities to testify at well-publicized hearings in Atlantic City and Newark. In February, 1950, it issued its report, and in March a New York study commission reported the results of its 2-year study of sex offenders confined at Sing Sing Prison and recommended legislation that was heartily endorsed by Governor Dewey. Both states' reports received nationwide press attention.

Fifteen state governments responded to the public's concern about sex crimes by establishing such study commissions, and while press reports had generated the initial panic, the commissions played the major role in its subsequent development. In Michigan, for instance, Governor G. Mennen Williams appointed a study commission on the "Deviated Criminal Sex Offender" in November of 1949 in response to the demands of civic and parents' organizations, scores of letters and petitions, and a vociferous press campaign. But a review of subsequent developments in Michigan shows that, once the commission was established, it quickly took charge of the panic, managing it and giving it direction.

The commission was well aware that the public's outrage over sex crimes might decline when the memory of particular crimes had faded, so for 2 years it worked to sustain that outrage and to channel it into support for the long-term programs it thought would effectively prevent such crimes. The commission cultivated the press in a successful effort to have itself portrayed as the major authority on the problem and to gain extensive, favorable coverage of its work (two of Detroit's three dailies, for instance, ran long series of articles explaining its proposals). In order to keep the public's attention focused on the sex crime issue the commissioners addressed public meetings sponsored by women's, farmers', and police organizations, local health councils, and PTAs. They also established official liaisons with the state's bar and medical associations and informal ties with other important civic, professional, and women's groups in order to mobilize their support for the legislation they recommended to the state assembly. In August of 1951 they mailed copies of their 245-page final report to some 2300 individuals and organizations. During the most important stages of the legislative battles that winter the commissioners sent "Legislative Bulletins" to more than 70 organizations, keeping them posted on legislative developments and urging them to orchestrate letter-writing campaigns and meetings with legislators in support of the bills they had proposed, and arranged for supportive women's and professional associations to send speakers to the public hearings on them.

The commission that so skillfully marshalled this support from the press and the public was dominated, like those in most states, by the psychiatrists and psychologists who served on it. The several clergymen, police, and court offi-

cials who served on the commission with them were accustomed to thinking of sexual behavior in terms of its morality or legality. But the psychiatrists persuaded them that unconventional sexual behavior should be considered not just immoral or illegal, but—more significantly—as a deviation from the psychological norm and the symptom of a deeper pathology or mental illness, which could be treated more effectively by medical men than by clergymen or the police. In Michigan, the one commissioner who dissented from this consensus—an attorney who denounced his colleagues' recommendations for threatening due process and individual liberty—soon stopped attending meetings because, he said, “no one listened to [his] objections.”

Psychiatrists might not have had so much influence on the commissions earlier in the century, but their prestige had grown enormously during World War II because of the crucial role they had played in screening and managing the millions of people mobilized for military service. Their role in the Michigan commission both reflected their new prestige and helped them enhance it. As psychiatrists, the men who dominated the work of the commission genuinely believed that psychiatry had the most important contribution to make to the explanation of sexual “deviation” and to the solution of sex crime. As strategists, they heeded Governor Williams' advice in his address at their first meeting that they should “take advantage of the widespread public concern about this problem for the establishment of [mental health] facilities and programs dealing constructively with this situation.”

Thus in the name of protecting women and children from sex deviates, the commission's psychiatrists urged the public to support the expansion of existing psychiatric institutions and the development of new ones, even if they were only peripherally related to the problem of sex crime. Before a special session of the Michigan legislature in March, the commission argued that the governor's proposal to expand psychiatric treatment programs and programs to educate clergymen, physicians, police, and school children about mental health issues should be supported because sex deviates were likely to remain undetected, untreated, and possibly dangerous without them. Eight months later, the commission urged voters to support a state bond referendum for the construction of mental hospitals; such programs, as the *Detroit Times* put it, would provide the “means of detecting the deviate before he becomes a killer.”

The most innovative recommendation made by most state commissions—and the one most specifically geared to the problem of sex crime—was that the role of psychiatrists in the disposition of criminal “sex cases” be expanded. The Michigan commission's original proposal would have required the courts and prisons to cede authority to psychiatrists at every stage in such proceedings: Psychiatrists were to examine all sex offenders; those they diagnosed as dangerously psychopathic were, at their recommendation, to be sentenced to psychiatric hospitals for indeterminate terms, which would last from 1 day to life; and they were to be released only when a psychiatrist decided that they no longer posed a threat to the community. Some state commissions recommended that such commitment procedures apply to people convicted of specified offenses; others wanted anyone even suspected of psychopathic tendencies to be subject

to them. Such indeterminant sentencing to psychiatric treatment, the Michigan commission argued, promised to cure and change psychopathic sex deviates, rather than just punish them; it was not only more humane but more effective than putting offenders in jail.

Several commissioners in Michigan and other states criticized such procedures for violating defendants' constitutional rights to counsel, cross-examination of witnesses, trial by jury, and other due process safeguards. They expressed particular concern about indeterminate sentencing, which allowed people labeled sex deviates to be confined indefinitely, no matter how serious their alleged offense. But the police, many judges, and the majority of commissioners in most states argued that the gravity of the danger posed by "sex deviates" justified the abrogation of traditional constitutional safeguards. As a sociologist and Nebraska municipal court judge argued in 1949:

Such factors as the presumption of innocence, proof beyond a reasonable doubt and all of the other valuable and ancient safeguards by which the person accused of crime has been surrounded are perfectly proper in their correct application. Still they have no more logical place in the investigation of a known or suspected corrupter of the minds and bodies of little children than in the case of the insane person before the insanity board . . . for such proceedings are based upon theories utterly different from those of the criminal law.

But who was to be subject to such laws? Commissioners and other interested parties disagreed about this as well, although they agreed in general about who should be labeled a sexual deviate. Most of them put "sex murderers" at the top of the list, but they also included sadomasochists, pedophiles (adults sexually interested in children), rapists, homosexuals, exhibitionists, and voyeurs. Some extended the list to include anyone who was too "immature" to "adjust" to the "norms" of society and accept his or her gender-defined social responsibilities as a parent, husband, or wife, including people who engaged in premarital or extramarital sex. Benjamin Karpman, chief psychotherapist at the prestigious St. Elizabeth's Hospital and one of the decade's most important medical writers on sex offenses, argued that the sexual deviate displayed "patterns of sexual behavior" that

are not desirable biologically or culturally and are therefore prohibited. . . . [Such patterns] are not directed ultimately toward procreation, the goal of all normal sexual life. . . . [The deviate] has not matured sexually, having failed to integrate his sexual needs and activities in such a way as to accord with socially accepted modes of sexual expression.

The postwar consensus thus maintained that to be sexually "normal" was to behave in a way the dominant culture considered not only socially acceptable and moral, but also statistically average and "mature;" the term "normality" thus embodied a moral judgment, a statistical presumption, and a psychological goal all at once. Failure to adhere to the sexual conventions, moral standards, and (supposed) majority practices of one's culture made one a deviate.

What contemporary authorities thought distinguished a sex criminal from

a mere deviate—and made him both especially frightening and difficult to control—was that he was *psychopathic*, not only unconventional (or “abnormal”) in his sexual impulses but unable to *control* his impulses. He was not technically insane, as a noted psychiatrist, Edward Strecker, pointed out in his testimony at the 1949 Philadelphia murder trial of Seymour Levin, a teenager who had raped and killed a neighborhood boy, as he was “able to distinguish between right and wrong behavior.” But he was “still not willing or able to exert inhibitions against anti-social behavior as strong and effective as those which can be excited by the average person.” The purpose of special sex psychopath laws was to place people capable of making such moral distinctions (and thus legally “sane”) but unwilling or incapable of acting in accordance with them (and thus “psychopathic”) under the jurisdiction of psychiatrists.

The dominant public image of the psychopath—based on press accounts of people like the Philadelphia murderer Levin—was that of a murderer out of control. But psychiatrists and jurists regarded murder as only the most extreme manifestation of a mental disease that more commonly resulted in less severe forms of nonconformist behavior. The judges who convicted Levin hastened to note that while psychopaths “commit a tremendous number of anti-social behavior acts, the [acts] are usually not in the major category. They are misdemeanors and slight offenses against the law.” Indeed, many jurists and psychiatrists defined almost any failure to conform to social expectations as psychopathic. The chief medical officer of the Supreme Bench of Baltimore, Manfred Guttmacher, defined psychopaths as people “unable to conform to the standards of their social group, . . . tragic failures in establishing lasting and satisfying interpersonal relationships.” In effect, then, some authorities regarded almost any “deviate” as psychopathic and almost any failure to conform to social norms as a sign of mental illness.

Although most authorities shared this broad definition of sexual deviance and psychopathy, they sharply disagreed about how wide a range of nonconformist (or “deviant”) sexual behavior should render one subject to the new laws. One group of sociologists, psychiatrists, and civil libertarians agreed that a wide range of unconventional sexual behavior resulted from mental disorder, but argued that deviates should nonetheless be divided into two groups. Most deviates, they maintained, were harmless: They violated social norms but posed no direct danger to the lives or freedom of others. The state, they argued, should focus its limited resources on the apprehension, confinement, and treatment of the relatively small number of deviates whose sexual behavior posed a genuine danger, in their estimation, because it involved force or children. It should ignore relatively harmless nonconformists, such as people who engaged in premarital sex or homosexual relations, so long as they kept their behavior hidden (although most of them did still advocate the prosecution of gay people for doing some of the same things heterosexuals regularly did, such as trying to pick up a date at a bar, because they considered *any open* expression of homosexuality to be a public nuisance). They also argued that even if some currently harmless deviates might ultimately become dangerous, there was no way to determine which ones would; in particular, psychiatrists had not proven their

claim that they could make such distinctions. In any case, imposing an indeterminate sentence on a man who had not even been charged with a crime—or, at most, had been convicted of a minor sex offense—simply because a psychiatrist had judged that he *might* become dangerous, would violate his constitutional rights.

A second group of psychiatrists, who received more support from police and court officials and were generally more influential in the debates of the 1940s and 1950s, regarded it as much more likely that a “minor deviate” would “degenerate” to more dangerous forms of deviance. Any nonconformist behavior, including window-peeping and consensual adult homosexual activity, they warned, might be only a symptom of a deeper pathology that would ultimately lead them to harm others. And while such officials disagreed about how likely



Psycho, Alfred Hitchcock’s 1960 thriller, confronted its audiences with the same sort of bizarre, seemingly inexplicable murders that had terrorized urban communities in the postwar decade, and it rehearsed much of the postwar discourse concerning “sex murderers.” The film’s depiction of Norman Bates matched the prevailing clinical definition of a psychopath: the typical guy-next-door, a mild-mannered Mama’s boy who had trouble developing mature relationships with adults. (Copyright © by Universal City Studios, Inc. Courtesy of MCA Publishing Rights, a Division of MCA, Inc., and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences)

such degeneration was, they shared the conviction that psychiatrists could be trusted to determine which sexual nonconformists posed a long-term social danger.

Accordingly, this group argued that if the state wished to prevent sex crimes, rather than simply punish or treat their perpetrators after it was too late, it should seek to identify and examine all sexual nonconformists in order to determine which ones might become dangerous—and to confine those who might, even if they had not yet committed a crime. As a policewoman on the Michigan commission argued: “The police know that although many known sex deviates cannot be charged with a crime, . . . unless these individuals receive help they will probably continue to deteriorate and many of them will be dangerous in the community.” The medical director of a state hospital in California put the case even more strongly: “Whenever a doubt arises in the judge’s mind . . . that [an offender] might be a sexual deviate, maybe by his mannerisms or his dress, something to attract the attention, I think he should immediately call for a psychiatric examination.” Detroit’s Prosecuting Attorney demanded the authority to arrest, examine, and possibly confine indefinitely “*anyone* who exhibited abnormal sexual behavior, whether or not dangerous.”

The press reports that shaped public perceptions of the problem usually blurred the lines between different forms of sexual nonconformity. They did this in part simply by using a single term, sex deviate, to refer to *anyone* whose sexual behavior was different from the norm. Like the term abnormal, the term deviate made any variation from the supposed norm sound ominous and threatening, and it served to conflate the most benign and the most dangerous forms of sexual nonconformity. People who had sex outside of marriage, murdered little boys and girls, had sex with persons of the same sex, raped women, looked in other people’s windows, masturbated in public, or cast “lewd glances” were all called sex deviates by the press. The term sex deviate could refer to an adult engaging in consensual homosexual relations with another adult, an adult involved in consensual sadomasochistic relations—or a sadistic murderer of children. The very ambiguity of the term served to reinforce the press’s message that any “sex deviate” might engage in any such activity. As the distraught mother of a 4-year-old boy wrote Michigan’s governor after the papers were filled with such stories in late 1949, “Please get some laws in Michigan that protect even a pre-school child, and that also protect boys—not just girls. These deviates do not care.”

The conflation of all forms of sexual nonconformity in press accounts of sex crime had particularly significant consequences for the public image of gay men. While the officials and reporters concerned about degeneration believed in principle that almost any sexual nonconformist might become a psychopathic sex murderer, the deep-seated anti-gay prejudices of the era led them to be particularly concerned about male homosexuals. Not only did they consider homosexual behavior reprehensible and a sign of mental illness (an opinion psychiatrists later repudiated), but they rejected the contention that gay men were harmless and should be left alone so long as they kept to themselves, because they believed gay men were *incapable* of keeping to themselves. “The sex per-

vert, in his more innocuous form, is too frequently regarded as merely a 'queer' individual who never hurts anyone but himself," warned the Special Assistant Attorney General of California in 1949. "All too often we lose sight of the fact that the homosexual is an inveterate seducer of the young *of both sexes*," he insisted, "and is ever seeking for younger victims."

Moreover, they asserted, men who engaged in homosexual behavior had demonstrated the refusal to accommodate to social conventions that was the hallmark of the psychopath—and they could easily degenerate further. "Once a man assumes the role of homosexual, he often throws off all moral restraints," claimed *Coronet* magazine in the fall of 1950. "Some male sex deviants do not stop with infecting their often-innocent partners: they descend through perversions to other forms of depravity, such as drug addiction, burglary, sadism, and even murder."

The stereotype of the homosexual as an "inveterate" child molester had prestigious official advocates, but its most powerful proponents were the local and national press, the reports of which transformed the dominant public image of the homosexual into that of a dangerous psychopath during the postwar decade. The vast majority of cases of child sex murders reported by the press involved men attacking girls. But the press paid special attention to the murders of little boys and used them to try to persuade the public that all gay men were dangerous (attacks on little girls, it almost goes without saying, did not lead the press to make the same argument about heterosexual men). The brutal rape and murder of 6-year-old George Counter in a Detroit basement in the spring of 1949 was graphically described in the national press. Seven months later a description of the murder and the basement furnace behind which Counter's body had been hidden began Howard Whitman's *Collier's* article on crime in Detroit, and the image of it shadowed his description of his tour with a vice squad detective of a Detroit neighborhood where gay men gathered. For half an hour, according to Whitman, they followed one man whom he described as "a hefty six-footer dressed in a flowered shirt"—at once menacingly large and distinctively gay.

Other deviates met and paired off, but this fellow stalked and hunted without success. He grew a little panicky. [. . . He moved to another block, where] he took up the hunt again—the same sordid cycle of exhibitionism, search and enticement. We saw him disappear down the steps of the latrine. . . . 'That fellow is at large on the town. Who knows what he might do?' said [the detective] resignedly. Suppose he got more panicky as the evening wore on? Suppose he finally snapped up a child? In an alley somewhere. Or a basement. And if the child screamed or threatened to tell. . . . I remembered the hissing furnace against which Georgie Counter's body was crammed.

Whitman's article appeared in *Collier's* in November 1949, just as the nation's attention was riveted on the murders of the three little girls in Idaho and California. Along with other articles, it led many people to fear that tolerating homosexuals resulted in just such crimes against boys and girls. Local press

campaigns against sex criminals frequently turned into campaigns against homosexuals, and thus helped turn their readers' understandable fear about the safety of women and children into an irrational fear of gay men.

At a time when few heterosexuals knew openly gay men or women who might counter such stereotypes, the public representation of gay men in the press assumed special cultural authority. If homosexuals had been relatively invisible before the war, they had also been considered fairly harmless. But press reports in the postwar period created a new, more ominous stereotype of the homosexual as a child molester, a dangerous psychopath likely to commit the most unspeakable offenses against children. Magazine reports that homosexuals were almost impossible to detect—that even your next-door neighbor could be one—heightened public fears, provided additional evidence that psychiatrists' special diagnostic skills were needed, and helped justify police surveillance of gay bars. The growing intolerance and fear of gay people forced many of them to become even more careful to hide their sexual identities from their heterosexual associates, which only increased their invisibility and vulnerability. As one gay man lamented in 1956, "To the average parent I am a menace to warn their children against."

The study commissions and press focused on men's behavior when discussing the dangers of sexual deviation, but they had much to say about women's gender roles and responsibilities as well. For although most state commissions requested sweeping new authority for the police to apprehend and investigate sexual nonconformists and for psychiatrists to supervise their treatment, they insisted with equal vigor that such emergency programs alone could not solve the problem of sex crime. Most psychiatrists had little confidence that they could do more than train particularly receptive adult sex offenders to control their impulses. "It is seldom possible," one psychiatrist emphasized at a public forum in Michigan, "to cure completely a chronic sex offender of mature years." But if sexual deviation could not be eradicated in the present generation, it might be prevented in the next. "Abnormal sex behavior, be it in the adult or child," Benjamin Karpman asserted, "derives from the unwholesome family and social atmosphere in which the child develops. The fault lies with the parents."

Many psychiatrists therefore devoted considerable effort to advising parents about the proper way to rear their children. They had done this before, but fears about sex crime made many people more receptive to their counsel, and newspapers frequently reported on their speeches at forums on sex crime sponsored by the PTA and other civic groups.

Mothers took most of the blame. "Psychopath's Start Traced: Lack of 'Mothering' in Youth Blamed" ran one headline in the *Detroit News*; "Mother Blamed for Neurotic Child" ran another. Such warnings implied that the women who failed to follow psychiatrists' advice had only themselves to blame for the men who attacked them and their children.

Much of the advice psychiatrists gave women, however, concerned their roles as wives as much as their roles as mothers. It emphasized the importance of parents making clear to their children the differences between their gender

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roles as husband and wife and their genuine contentment with those roles. It warned that failure to do so could confuse the child about his or her own role, undermining his or her development as a mature, gendered human being. Thus, women were encouraged to stay at home while their husbands went to work, to invest their self-worth in their "homemaking" and childrearing, and to affirm their husband's authority in the marriage.

Postwar advice also contended that "domineering mothers" were the single most important cause of homosexuality. This effectively warned women that a family structure in which women held power or refused to be subservient to their husbands (that is, were "domineering mothers" married to "passive fathers") bred pathology. The culture's simultaneous denunciation of homosexuality and glorification of women who invested their self-worth wholly in their children made the idea that domineering mothers could turn their children into homosexuals an exceptionally powerful warning to women.

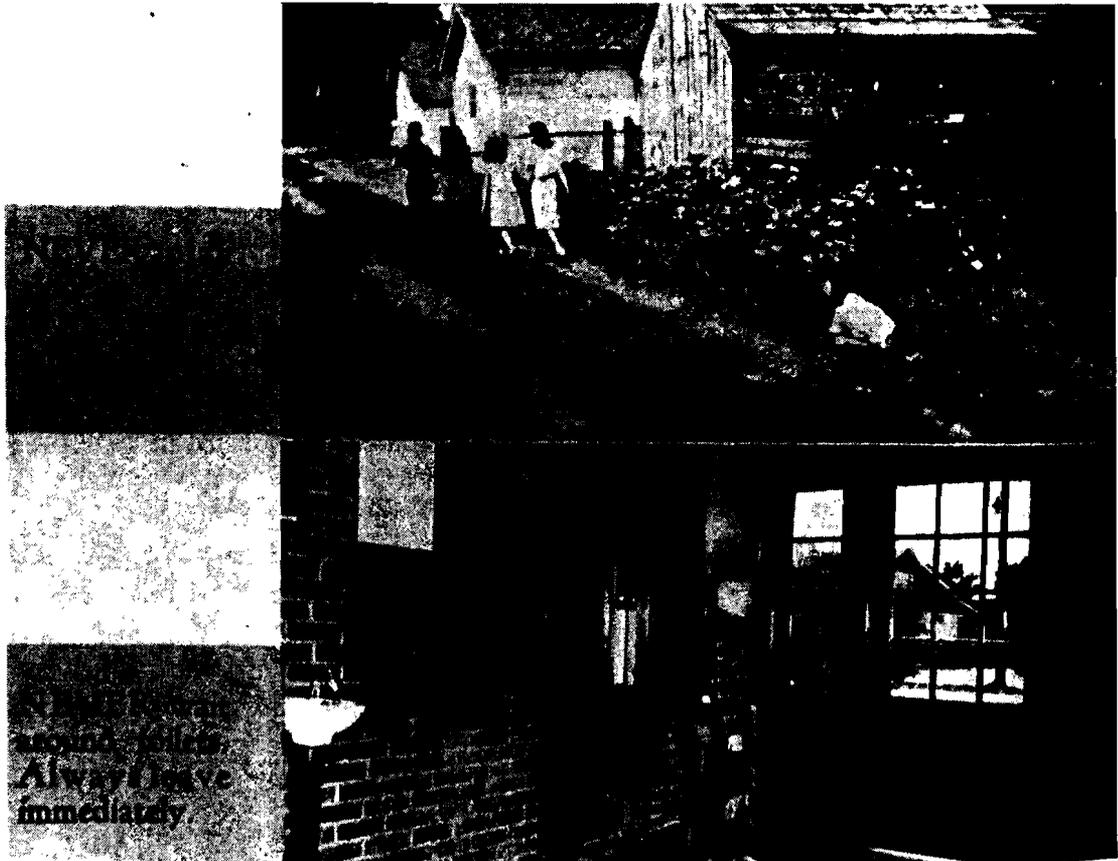
Many psychiatrists and government officials were unwilling to depend on parents following their advice, however; they also recommended new government programs that would supervise the rearing of children to ensure their socialization into acceptable gender roles and sexual identities. They called for the establishment of programs to train school personnel, clergymen, and police to recognize children who displayed nonconformist sexual tendencies and to refer them to psychiatric programs for treatment. "Obviously the teaching population should be alerted to the urgency of 'typing' emotionally maladjusted children as incipient sex deviates," one Michigan consultant pointed out to a gubernatorial assistant; "all teachers should be given training to recognize the symptoms of sexual deviation," concluded the Utah study commission.

Once identified as sissies, bullies, tomboys, or some other problem type, the children were to be referred to an expanded program of child guidance clinics for treatment by psychiatrists. Many teachers took such advice seriously, although inadequate state funding meant that few clinics were established to which they could refer "deviant" children. In a Philadelphia suburb in 1950, for instance, a teacher sent the parents of a 9-year-old fourth grader a note warning them that because their son was uninterested in sports the other boys considered him a sissy and there was a danger he might grow up to be a homosexual; she recommended that they get him counseling and force him to play sports. (His parents ignored the advice about counseling, but did set up a basketball hoop in the backyard.) The panic over sex deviates gave new urgency to adults' efforts to ensure that boys turned into rugged young men and girls into proper young women; the engendering of children (their socialization into conventional gender roles), which was supposed to be so natural, had never seemed so difficult.

Police and school officials also instituted security programs to prevent children from having any contact with sexual nonconformists: They began investigating teachers and other school personnel to ensure that none were homosexual and requiring that men convicted of sex crimes register with the local police department whenever they moved. They also taught children to avoid strangers: At the height of the sex crime panic in the winter of 1949 to 1950,

schools and police departments across the country began to distribute pamphlets on a massive scale to parents and children warning about the dangers of unknown adults. One photo-illustrated booklet issued to thousands of schoolchildren in Detroit warned girls to “NEVER go with strangers when they ask for directions” and boys to “NEVER wait around toilets.”

Strangers certainly could be dangerous to unsuspecting children, but according to studies conducted in the 1950s, whose methodology tended to underrepresent intrafamilial sexual activity, the majority of children who had sexual experiences with adults knew the adult involved. More recent studies have argued even more strongly that incest is more common than attacks by strangers. The postwar pamphlets nonetheless focused exclusively on “strangers” as the source of sexual danger to children, and identified the family as a sanctuary for children from the violence of the external world. Thus they misrepresented some of the real dangers facing children, but in a manner consistent with the ideology of the Cold War nuclear family. The pamphlets intended for children, like the lectures intended for their parents, embodied and defined the dominant postwar vision of the proper family.



The sex crime panic both reflected and heightened many people's fears that suburban and urban life had become more transient, anonymous, and dangerous in the wake of World War II, and prompted local police departments to distribute thousands of brochures like this one to school children, warning them of the dangers posed by strangers in the postwar urban landscape.

AN INTERPRETATION

The postwar outcry over "sex crimes" and "sex deviates" exhibited many of the characteristics of what social theorists have termed a moral panic. Moral panics usually occur in periods of social stress when large numbers of people, already apprehensive about the stability of the social order, focus those anxieties on a social phenomenon, incident, person, or social group, which comes to symbolize (even as it obscures) the forces that seem to threaten their way of life. The mass media often exacerbate or even create such panics, by focusing public attention on the phenomenon and portraying it in stereotypical and threatening ways; public officials and professional "experts" of various sorts usually also play important roles in defining (or even creating) the "problem." The explosion of concern in the 1980s about the problem of child abuse in day care centers, for instance, could be considered such a panic. In retrospect, the problem seems to have existed not so much in the centers as in the minds of the media and the police, but the media "exposés" of abuse both evoked and focused widespread anxieties about the family, working mothers, and the problems of sexual violence and incest.

Why did a moral panic about sex crimes engulf postwar America? Although a number of horrifying murders of children did occur in the late 1940s, they alone cannot account for the panic for the simple reason that such murders were not new. Police statistics showed no disproportionate increase in the number of crimes of sexual violence; statistically speaking, there was no crime wave.

What distinguished the murders of those years was neither their number nor their intrinsic horror but the magnitude of the coverage they received and the manner in which they were interpreted. Press crusades frightened the public (and not incidentally sold papers) by using the murders to create the image of a country whose streets and alleyways were overrun with murderous sex psychopaths. The deliberations of the state study commissions then perpetuated those fears by keeping the public's attention focused on the issue even when the memory of particular crimes had faded; they expanded the panic's ideological significance by becoming an important vehicle for postwar discussions about the boundaries of acceptable sexual and gender behavior and about the extent to which the state ought to enforce such boundaries. State governments acted as forcefully as they did because of the interest several constituencies had in using the panic, once it developed, to advance their own (sometimes conflicting) interests: elected officials keen to demonstrate their ability to manage a problem that had aroused their constituents; police forces anxious to secure new mechanisms for controlling homosexuals and other people they considered "sex criminals"; psychiatrists hoping to enhance their cultural authority and institutional power.

Yet the panic could not have become so widespread and powerful had it not tapped into deep anxieties already existing within the culture about the disruptive effects of World War II on family life, sexual mores, and gender norms. The war had removed millions of men from their families, forced hundreds of thousands of those families to migrate to overcrowded military and industrial

centers, and allowed unprecedented numbers of married women to enter the paid labor force and take over industrial jobs previously considered suitable only for men. Although women's industrial employment was always described as a temporary expedient, it nonetheless had demonstrated that women could do so-called "men's work" and allowed many women to live independently and earn unprecedentedly high wages, gains that many were loath to give up when the war ended.

At the war's end discriminatory management and union policies ensured that most women workers lost their new industrial jobs to returning veterans, and government policies (especially the GI Bill of Rights) allowed many of those veterans to buy suburban homes and establish families. Such efforts to reconstruct the gender order were accompanied by a postwar media campaign that championed the virtues of suburban domesticity, glorified women's roles as homemakers, and warned of the dangers posed by married women's employment. After the hardships of the depression and war, many women welcomed the postwar social order; others discovered there were risks involved in questioning it. The sex crime panic served to increase the pressure on women reluctant to leave their jobs by stigmatizing those who did not devote themselves full-time to mothering. Repeated accounts of rape and child molestation reminded women of the very real dangers they and their children faced outside the home (even as the accounts ignored the dangers they faced inside it), and the commissions provided a platform to experts (rather than to women themselves) who blamed sexual deviation and violence on women's bad mothering.

The panic also reflected and contributed to a more general effort to reimpose the social controls on sexual behavior that had been weakened by the war. The war's disruption of family life led to an increase in nonmarital sexual activity of all sorts, but its most striking effect was to facilitate the growth of urban gay and lesbian communities. By removing men from the supervision of their families and small town neighborhoods and placing them in a single-sex military environment, military mobilization increased the chances that they would meet gay men and be able to explore their homosexual interests. Many recruits met other gay people for the first time, saw the sort of gay life they could lead in large cities, and chose to stay in those cities after the war, rather than return home where they would almost surely have had to hide their sexual preferences. Some of the women who joined the military, as well as those on the homefront who shared housing and worked in defense industries with other women, had similar experiences. The number of bars and restaurants serving gay and lesbian customers grew enormously during and after the war, and in larger cities gay enclaves became noticeable in certain neighborhoods. The Kinsey Report on male sexual behavior, published in 1948, highlighted these changes—and shocked the nation—by showing how widespread homosexual behavior was.

The sudden growth in the visibility of gay people led to an upsurge in anti-gay prejudice, as many Americans sought a return to prewar "normality." Even before the war most homosexual behavior—from actual sex to one man trying to pick up another man for a date or two women dancing together at a bar—was illegal, and in many states the law prohibited bars, restaurants, and

other public establishments from serving lesbians and gay men or even letting them gather on their premises. After the war the police in many cities intensified their enforcement of such laws. By 1950 Philadelphia's six-member "morals squad" was arresting more gay men than the courts knew how to handle, some 200 each month.

Local panics over sex crimes, even when they originally had nothing to do with homosexuality, often resulted in even harsher anti-gay crackdowns, as such crackdowns were often the only concrete steps (or at least the most visible ones) the police could take in response to public demands for action. One man who moved to Detroit shortly after George Counter's murder recalled how worried the gay people he met there were about the "campaign against gays" being waged by the city's newspapers and police. He met several men who had been arrested by the police while socializing in gay bars, and he knew others who would not even visit a gay bar for fear of being caught in a police raid. After only 2 months in the city he was himself arrested in such a raid and forced to spend a night in jail. The native Detroiters arrested with him, he later recalled, were terrified they would be sent to a psychiatric prison. "They hold you there," one cellmate warned, in an apparent reference to the state's new indeterminate sentencing law, "until the unlikely event that you turn straight."

Gay people were particularly hard hit by the new climate of intolerance, but the widely publicized deliberations of the state study commissions increased the cultural sanctions against unconventional sexual behavior of any sort. Even when the press reported that authorities disagreed about how dangerous gay men and other "deviates" were, the very terms in which it described those disagreements reinforced the public's anxiety that *any* form of gender or sexual nonconformity was pathologically abnormal and merited analysis and treatment, whether on a voluntary or forced basis. The wide publicity given such ideas served to establish boundaries for the gender and sexual behavior of all. The spectre of the sex psychopath led to the unfair stigmatization of all homosexuals as potential child molesters or murderers, and the spectre of the hidden homosexual contributed to the stigmatization of anyone who violated certain gender norms as "immature" and potentially (or "latently") homosexual. Boys who didn't play sports—and girls who did—were sometimes stigmatized this way, and the public's increased awareness of (and anxiety about) the extent of homosexuality in postwar society quietly contributed to the pressure put on men and women who were reluctant to marry to do so and to assume other culturally defined gender roles, lest they be considered abnormal. The spectre of the hidden homosexual haunted the cult of suburban domesticity.

That spectre haunted the Cold War as well. In February, 1950, when Senator Joseph McCarthy seized the nation's attention by charging that hundreds of Communists had infiltrated the State Department, the sex crime panic was at its height. McCarthy shrewdly played on and exacerbated Americans' apprehensions about communist subversion, and he played on their fears about sex criminals as well. From the beginning he charged that sex deviates had infiltrated the government along with communists, and the State Department fired hundreds of employees whom it discovered to be gay.

The sex crime panic was also linked to—and reinforced—the postwar hysteria about communism in other ways. Both the anti-communist and anti-sex deviate campaigns claimed that minimal deviations signaled greater dangers: Just as homosexuals were branded as child molesters or murderers, so were liberal dissenters, civil rights activists, and union organizers attacked as communists or communist dupes. Both campaigns sought to develop programs that would identify, investigate, and limit social or political nonconformity. Both argued that the dangers posed by such nonconformity justified the abrogation of traditional constitutional safeguards. And both encouraged the conformity that became a hallmark of postwar American society—and against which the social movements organized by African-Americans, students, women, and lesbians and gay men would rebel in the 1960s.

In a moral panic, diffuse public apprehensions and concerns are symbolically embodied in a single object on which public attention is focused. The national panic over sex crimes constituted such a panic, for it became one means of expressing the deep postwar apprehensions about the sexual and gender order and of weighing religious, medical, judicial, and police claims to the authority to arbitrate them. A series of murders came to symbolize, for many people, the dangers of gender and sexual nonconformity. Denounced by the press, explained by the state commissions, and burned into public consciousness by both, the “sex deviate” became a means of defining, by his transgressions, the boundaries of acceptable behavior for anyone who would be “normal.”

Sources: This story is an abbreviated version of a paper I originally presented at the University of Toronto in 1985 and at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians in 1986. The story's most important sources include the papers of Governor G. Mennon Williams of Michigan, the manuscript records of the Michigan Commission on the Deviated Criminal Sex Offender (including the minutes of their meetings, copies of correspondence, and internal memoranda), the reports published by a dozen other state commissions, several oral histories I have collected, articles from contemporary medical and legal journals, and scores of articles published in national magazines and local newspapers during the postwar decade. For a discussion of the intellectual background to the work of the study commissions (as well as a somewhat different interpretation of their politics), see Estelle Freedman, “Uncontrolled Desires: The Response to the Sexual Psychopath, 1920–1960,” *Journal of American History* 74 (June 1987): 83–106. On women and politics in the postwar decade, see Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond* (1982) and Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound* (1988). For more on the federal government's attacks on homosexuals, see John D'Emilio, “The Homosexual Menace: The Politics of Sexuality in Cold War America,” in *Passion and Power*, ed. K. Peiss and C. Simmons (1989). Stanley Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972) is the classic study of moral panics.

TRUE STORIES from the American Past

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