

The Rage of Innocence: How America Criminalizes Black Youth

By Kristin Henning. New York: Pantheon Books, 2021.
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Public discourse on defunding the police (or funding more police de-escalation training) is growing and Kristin Henning's thorough and poignant examination of the criminalization of Black youth strikes at the heart of the issue. *The Rage of Innocence: How America Criminalizes Black Youth* demonstrates the multidisciplinary, intersectoral, and deeply cultural problem that exists between the American criminal justice system and the most vulnerable Black Americans, who are children. Henning draws upon her experience as a public defender, professor, and director of the Juvenile Justice Clinic and Initiative at Georgetown University Law Center. She brilliantly applies a critical eye gained from 25 years of experience representing juvenile defenders in Washington, DC. Using statistics and news stories, she soberly examines the intersectional and intersectoral elements at play in criminalizing Black youth. The book seamlessly weaves together the stories we already know, like the Central Park Five and Trayvon Martin, with lesser-known stories, personal anecdotes, research, historical and sociological data, and comparisons to criminal behavior of white youth.

Despite a title that plainly indicts the criminal justice system, the heart of Henning's book—and one can presume her life's work—is the fierce call to let Black children be children. This is a conversation that deserves more attention from discourse on criminal justice reform. *The Rage of Innocence* chronicles deeply ingrained and systemic ways that America's criminal justice system inculcates Black youth with a fear and distrust in police and penal authority and unfairly criminalizes adolescents for the color of their skin. But perhaps more important, this book illuminates how the treatment of Black youth disrupts their development and undermines their childhood. Henning relates the myriad ways in which policing in America robs Black youth of their freedom to test boundaries and experiment with

notions of self. This ultimately denies Black youth the right to healthy adolescent development. Henning's fierce defense of children is a rallying cry to change a system that the world has already acknowledged does not protect, serve, or rehabilitate.

More than half of the book's chapters focus on the criminal justice system's role in criminalizing Black youth, but Henning's foundational focus on the psycho-social development of Black children allows her to explore the many intersections of Black adolescence. The book connects an array of ideas, from fashion trends to playing with toys to sexual experimentation to the criminalization of Black children. In different hands, this book's reach across sectors and arenas may have come off untethered. But, Kristin Henning's unmistakable devotion to affording Black children the same rights and privileges of white children—to explore, be reckless at times, make mistakes, and learn about themselves—anchors the book's many directions.

Ultimately, it offers readers an important truth couched in sobering stories. For example, she introduces the book with a story about one of her clients. The story reveals Henning's path to realizing how racism is at play and how it results in the unjust criminalization of the client. The story sets the tone, introducing readers to the author's goals. She seeks to take readers on a journey of realization—the same journey she has been on for many years—of a reality she is committed to correcting. She draws upon personal anecdotes, stories of Black youths' experiences, as well as data and research that spans child development, history, sociology, criminology, and more. Her ability to intersperse anecdotes with history and crime statistics turns hard-to-acknowledge realities into a gripping read. She carries the reader on a journey as powerful as the one Henning has been on herself.

The first chapter sets forth the thesis to which Henning continually returns. Titled “American Adolescence in Black and White,” Henning contrasts the severity of any interaction between the criminal justice system and Black youth with the freedom and latitude afforded white youth, even those who cause more harm. This chapter also takes a look at the history and science of (white) adolescence, a recent invention of white middle class parents of the Western world. Despite such adolescence being a recent design, Henning also looks at the science of adolescent brain development, which is remarkably consistent across the globe. She cites developmental psychologists who argue it is normal and necessary for youth to “take risks, chase excitement, act without thinking, and [be] easily influenced by friends” (12). These are fundamentals of adolescence, but the benefits are afforded only to “White, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual, college-bound boys” (13). Risks and room to make mistakes while pursuing one’s own interests and ambitions is not a privilege afforded every young person.

In subsequent chapters, Henning outlines the many privileges that are *not* comfortably afforded to Black youth in America and the harm that does to their development. Chapter 2 looks at how Black youth playing with toys, using cell phones, and attending parties is criminalized, all the while reminding readers that these are normal and necessary parts of growing up. Chapter 3 examines the criminalization of Black dress and culture, showing both how clothing is an important part of how young people express themselves and that Black youth are criminalized for it. Chapter 4 discusses adolescent sexuality and experimentation alongside the harmful myths of hypersexuality projected onto Black youth.

Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 take a deep dive into the role of policing and how it dehumanizes and criminalizes Black children. These chapters explore topics from school resource officers to vigilante racism to contempt of cop (arrests of Black youth for “disrespecting” police officers). In chapter 9, Henning explores trauma and damage, both direct and vicarious, that racist policing causes. Then, chapter 10 describes the utter dehumanization and erasure of Black youth that occurs when courts try Black children as adults, incarcerate Black youth in adult prisons, and execute Black adolescents. The chapter draws a through-line from the executions of a 14-year-old Black child in 1944 and a 16-year-old

Black child (sentenced) in 1945 to the modern day decisions to place Black children in adult prisons and solitary confinement, effectively ending their lives. In chapter 11, Henning takes a closer look at the impact of America’s criminalization of Black youth on their families. It outlines the pain, trauma, and fear Black families face every day, as well as the impossible situations that the criminal justice system puts Black parents in and the impossible choices they must make. This chapter also outlines the impact on siblings of criminalized and incarcerated Black youth, a reality with which Henning is personally familiar. These chapters chronicle the deep and insidious consequences of criminalizing Black adolescents and unfairly treating Black youth like adults.

In the final chapter (chapter 12), “#BlackBoyJoy and #BlackGirlMagic: Adolescent Resilience and Systems Reform,” Henning offers the hope she clings to and gives suggestions on moving forward with an intention to do no (further) harm. The resilience and persistence of Black children and their families is inspiring and heartening (though we hope one day unnecessary, as well). She recalls the story of the client she introduced in the first chapter. The client, then wrongfully pulled from school, arrested, and charged, is now an activist with a thriving passion and purpose of feeding protesters. The chapter is divided into sections subtitled “Help them heal,” “Let them lead,” “Let them learn,” “Keep them safe,” and “Treat Black children like children.” The syntax of these subtitles is not without meaning. Henning calls on readers not to be saviors, but to let Black children be children and to prioritize their voices and that of their families when reforming policy and process.

Each section of chapter 12 deserves to be read, reread, and reread again by public administrators until the harm has been repaired and new standards are in place. Henning’s guidance is no more or less revolutionary than other calls to defund the police or to fund de-escalation training. Yet, Henning’s call to provide all children, not just white children, with the rights and privileges of adolescence make her words that much more pressing and pertinent. The book is a powerful indictment of the criminal justice system and the pervasiveness of racist, inequitable structures that permeate our culture and influence our criminal justice decisions. More importantly, the book calls on readers to trade in the collective criminalization of Black youth for a collective care of all Black youth.

The book challenges readers, and encourages them

along the way to make connections, see the bigger picture, and ultimately to examine their own role in America's criminalization of Black youth. She reminds readers that police officers and those who call police to complain about Black youth do not view their actions as racist and they likely do not intend to do harm. But the most powerful biases are unconscious, insidious, pervasive, and deep-seated. Indeed, Henning does not let individuals off the hook. She ends the last subsection with the clarion call: "Every actor in the criminal legal system—the lawmakers, police officers, probation staff, prosecutors, judges, and defenders—has an opportunity and a responsibility to resist the criminalization of Black adolescence" (341). She reiterates that Black youth are an important part of the community and deserve to be treated as children and offered the same grace as white children. The first step is to reduce harm to Black youth by not calling the police and by staffing schools with educators and support staff instead of school resource officers.

Simultaneously, Henning addresses the systemic issue, connecting police interventions with harmless Black children to larger cultural issues, policy, and budget decisions. Her words demonstrate the harm and trauma done to Black children in America when criminalization stifles their psychological and social development. The book paints a powerfully compelling picture of the contrast between white and Black adolescence. It ends with hope and suggestions for next steps, which range from school-based reforms to regulation of police contact with youth to the role of courts, jails, and prisons. It concludes with calls for the stories of Black children to be heard. Henning consistently evokes images of all that Black children can be: of their resilience, persistence, and potential. Listening to the stories of Black

children and to their thoughts, opinions, and needs in the discourse of reform is critical to healing the past and building a better future.

To call this book timely would be to ignore the pattern of controlling, criminalizing, and erasing Black people, as well as the American tradition of editing out those parts of history. Throughout the chapters, Henning interweaves this history with the social tools that have long been used to criminalize Black youth. She reminds readers that this is not a new phenomenon but, rather, a deeply ingrained and insidious part of American history built into the fabric of the criminal justice system. Henning tells a vivid story heartbreakingly centered on the needs of Black children and how we fail them.

The Rage of Innocence ends with hope and a call to action that should echo throughout institutions of public administration and criminal justice. In any forthcoming effort to achieve social equity and repair the racist foundations of the American criminal justice system, we would be wise to consider Kristin Henning's words and guidance. *The Rage of Innocence* ought to be required reading for law enforcement and criminal justice professionals, as well as educators and other public administrators who interact with children. Henning's words deserve attention among all public administration scholars who value social equity. Its scope and span offer merit to students of public administration seeking to understand the interconnectedness, depth, and breadth of public systems and institutions, as well. The thesis of this book and its recommendations are no less than essential for healing the harm done and building a community that is safe, supportive, and celebrative of Black youth.

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