



Crime, Justice, and Anglo-American Comics

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Summary

Criminal justice is a perennial theme in modern comics published in the United States and United Kingdom, with dominant narratives revolving around the protection of the innocent from crime and harm or the seeking of justice outside the authority of the state. The history of the comics medium and its regulation in the mid-20th century, particularly in the United States, shows how the comics medium itself—not just its popular content—was embroiled in questions of criminality, in relation to its perceived obscenity and fears that it caused juvenile delinquency. Indeed, the medium’s regulation shaped the way it has been able to engage with questions of crime and justice; the limitations on moral complexity under the censorship of the 1954 Comics Code in the United States, for example, arguably led to both a dearth of critical engagement in crime and justice concerns, and an increased evil or psychopathy in criminal characters (because more nuanced motivations could not be depicted under the Code). From the 1980s onwards, the restrictions of the Code abated, and a broad “maturation” of the form can be seen, with a concurrent increase in critical engagement with criminological questions. The main themes of comics research around crime and comics after the 1980s include questions of vigilantism and retribution, seen as the dominant concern in mainstream comics. But other leading questions go beyond these issues and explore comics’ engagement with the politics of crime and justice, highlighting the medium’s capacity to question the nature of justice and the legitimate exercise of state power. Moreover, stepping back and considering the general relationship between comics and criminology, comics can be seen as important cultural forms of expression of moral and social values, as well as potentially alternative orders of knowledge that can challenge mainstream criminology. From free speech, juvenile delinquency, and vigilantism, to politics, culture, and disciplinary knowledge, there are significant interactions between comics and criminology on a variety of levels.

Keywords: [comics](#), [crime and media](#), [crime in popular culture](#), [cultural criminology](#), [graphic fiction](#), [graphic justice](#), [politics of crime and criminal justice](#), [representations of crime and criminal justice](#), [superheroes](#), [visual criminology](#)

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