

MARY E. ODEM

DELINQUENT

Daughters

**PROTECTING
AND POLICING**

ADOLESCENT FEMALE

SEXUALITY

IN THE UNITED STATES,

1885-1920



DELINQUENT
Daughters



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FOR MY PARENTS

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INTRODUCTION

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I

n the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the sexuality of young single women became the focus of great public anxiety and the target of new policies of intervention and control by the state. Middle-class reformers and social experts expressed mounting concern about the sexual dangers and temptations that appeared to surround young working-class women in American cities. They conducted many investigations, produced a barrage of reports, and organized nationwide purity campaigns calling for government attention to the problem. Their demands resulted in an elaborate network of legal codes and institutions designed to control the sexuality of young women and girls. In particular, age-of-consent laws made sexual intercourse with teenage girls a criminal offense, and newly established juvenile courts, reformatories, and special police monitored and punished young females for sexual misconduct.

Campaigns for the moral protection of young women were not a new phenomenon in the late nineteenth century. Since the beginnings of urbanization and industrialization in the United States, middle-class Americans had worried about the impact of major social changes on the morality of young working women. In the period from 1820 to 1850, reformers in northeastern cities engaged in numerous efforts to prevent the corruption of morals among wage-earning women. Inspired by evangelical Protestantism, they ventured into working-class neighborhoods to set up missions, distribute Bibles, and establish rescue homes to convert wayward women to a Christian way of life.¹ What was new in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, was the broadened scope of the campaigns and the mounting demands for state regulation of the problem. Public anxiety about the morality of young women greatly intensified and spread to all regions of the country during this period of rapid urban and industrial growth. Instead of the religious and voluntary efforts pursued earlier, moral reformers now began to insist on a forceful response from the state.

This book explores both the moral reform campaigns that produced new policies of sexual regulation and the actual enforcement of those policies at the local court level. It focuses on four sets of protagonists who had distinct, often competing goals and interests in this process: middle-class reformers who led moral campaigns; state officials (judges, police, probation officers) responsible for enforcing the new legal measures; working-class teenage girls who were the principal targets of sexual regulation; and working-class parents who became active participants within the legal system.

The expanded state regulation of adolescent female sexuality was part of a broad trend toward greater control of sexual behavior in general. Expressions of sexuality that did not conform to a marital, reproductive framework were increasingly subjected to government surveillance and control, as evidenced by a range of legal measures enacted during the period. These included legislation prohibiting the dissemination of obscene literature, the criminalization of abortion, stringent measures targeting prostitution, and heightened legal repression of homosexuality. Such developments reflected Americans' deep anxiety about the increased potential for sexual expression outside of marriage—a situation that threatened middle-class Victorian ideals of sexual restraint and marital, reproductive sex.²

The particular anxiety about adolescent female sexuality stemmed from profound changes in the lives of young working-class women and girls that increased their opportunities for social and sexual autonomy. Rapid urban growth and the expansion of industrial capitalism, which affected all aspects of national life, greatly altered the experience of adolescence for daughters in working-class families. New avenues of employment and recreation in American cities drew them increasingly out of the domestic sphere and into a public urban world where they experienced unprecedented freedom from family and neighborhood restrictions. Instead of being limited to domestic work or household manufacture, the main forms of female employment in the nineteenth century, young white women now had access to jobs in factories, department stores, and offices. These new prospects fundamentally altered the context of female labor as daughters worked in settings free of family supervision. Young African American women did not share in the new employment opportunities and were confined primarily to domestic service. But they too enjoyed greater social autonomy as they left farm households in the rural South to live and work in American cities.³

In the evenings after work, young women participated in a new world of commercialized leisure that further undermined familial control. The dance halls, movie theaters, and amusement parks opening in cities throughout the country catered to a young, mixed-sex crowd. In contrast to their mothers before them, young working women attended nightly entertainments with male and female peers instead of participating in family and neighborhood activities.⁴ Within the youth culture that took shape in American cities, working-class daughters explored romantic relations and heterosexual pleasures outside of marriage. City streets, workplaces, and amusement centers all provided spaces for flirtation and intimate encounters with young men away from the watchful eyes of parents and neighbors.⁵

As they earned wages in stores, offices, and factories and spent their leisure hours in dance halls and movie theaters, young women were constructing a new social role for themselves. They were departing from a centuries-old pattern and ideal in which daughters had passed directly from the control and supervision of their parents to that of their husbands. An unprecedented number of young working-class women and girls now enjoyed a period of relative autonomy that lasted from the time they entered the paid labor force until they later settled into marriage. As they challenged traditional roles and expectations, working-class daughters became the focus of great social anxiety. Their move outside the home was linked to a host of social problems—prostitution and vice, venereal disease, family breakdown, and out-of-wedlock pregnancy. It was in response to these fears that middle-class reformers organized their nationwide campaigns to demand state regulation of female sexuality.

Delinquent Daughters traces two distinct stages of moral reform and regulation during this period that indicate an important shift in the way Americans conceived of and sought to control the sexual behavior of female youth. In the first stage, which began in the mid-1880s, white purity activists launched a national effort to make sex with teenage girls a criminal offense by raising the age of consent. Their demand was based on the belief that seduction by adult men was the major cause of moral ruin among young women and girls. Female reformers challenged a widespread perception of the “fallen woman” as depraved and dangerous by portraying her instead as a victim of male lust and exploitation. The way to protect young women from sexual harm, they argued, was to subject male seducers to criminal penalties.

The second stage took shape during the first two decades of the twentieth century under a new generation of Progressive reformers and social