How Wild Is Wild Youth?” The New Republic, May 5, 1926

It seems to be an accepted axiom nowadays that our young people are going to the devil. Press, pulpit, and publicist are agreed that youth is wild and getting wilder. The college boy and his flapper friend, it is charged, drink, pet, and are disrespectful to their elders, while the neighborhood gangster, aided by his youthfulsweet and stimulated by the false courage of heroin or cocaine, robs and murders with casual calmness long before he is out of his teens. Most of this lamentation, of course, is based on theory and not on fact. Those who indulge in it have read in the papers of a few sensational cases like the Leopold-Loeb affair, or have witnessed some of the post-Prohibition drinking parties in which youth, imitating the practice of its elders, indulges. The reasoning is almost always from the particular to the general, a type of argument which is as dangerous in this case as usual.

Recognizing that this is true, the Children’s Bureau of the United States Bureau of Labor recently undertook to throw a little light, of a really scientific character, on this question. If youth is as wild as is represented, and the wildness extends through all classes, the results certainly ought to be reflected in the records of the juvenile courts and the institutions in which delinquents are detained. Accordingly, a careful study was made of the statistics dealing with the subject. The figures investigated included delinquency rates in fourteen of the leading cities of the United States . . . .

In nearly all these fourteen cities, the delinquency rates per 1,000 children of “delinquency age” were decidedly lower in 1924 or 1925 than in 1915. There was a not very surprising increase during the war period, 1917 to and including 1919, but in most cities the downward trend thereafter was marked . . . .

These statistics, the reliability of which is beyond question, do not of course show that all the ululations of the alarmed editorial writers and preachers are unjustified. Youth may really be wild, in a fashion which does not get itself reflected in the delinquency and prison statistics. In so far, however, as the complaint has been made of youthful criminals as a new phenomenon, it is clearly without foundation. And certainly whatever wildness of youth exists, if it be not serious enough to draw the attention of the law, cannot be worth as much excitement, as many millions of words of frenzied exhortation, as it has been receiving.

HAS YOUTH DETERIORATED? THE FORUM, JULY 1926, EXCERPTS

The Forum, a magazine of social and political commentary, regularly invited point-counterpoint essays on contemporary issues. For this inquiry, the Forum published essays by two representatives of “modern youth.” Each addressed the older generation’s fascination with the younger generation’s fascination with sex.

YES: “Reaping the Whirlwind” ANNE TEMPLE

. . . This tremendous interest in the younger generation is nothing more nor less than a preoccupation with the nature of that generation’s sex life.

. . . it is almost impossible to get away from the subject of sex today. It is talked over in polite and impolite salons [gatherings for conversation]. There are books about it. There are plays about it. There is even a
science about it. Ordinarily, one might say that the life of the present generation is the result of constant suggestion and rumor. But not so in this instance. It is the young people themselves who are the students and advocates of the “new morality.” Largely through us, old standards are not being laughed at and called blind; conventions [standards] have been dispensed with; obligations are scoffed at; and “Liberate the Libido” has become our national motto. . . .

. . . My quarrel with the young people of today concerns quite another matter—the loss of a thing which some call innate refinement. We lack a certain dignity of charm and refinement which, despite their silly conventions and their inhibitions, our fathers and mothers are not without… We have hurled aside all conventions. Accepted standards are “nil” with us. And now, without precedents, denying all antecedents, we are as bald and as intrinsically uninteresting as a plucked ostrich. We have sowed the wind: we are reaping the whirlwind. True, we have our freedom, our “self expression,” and our inhibition-less theories. Even at that, however, I am wondering if the past generations haven’t something on us.

NO: “The Fabulous Monster” REGINA MALONE

What is our Youth coming to? It is coming, through mistakes, through the unavoidable extremism of any revolt against authority, to a new conception of life—to a new morality, to new “mores” better adapted to the age than those it has discarded. Beneath our studied superficiality, beneath our cynical nonchalance, our assumed indifference, and apparent ill-breeding, is there not more than a germ of that ageless yearning for improvement which has characterized the youth of every age?

Which brings us to a more serious phase of the Youth question: our attitude toward sex. We no longer spell the word with a capital letter; and it is as frankly discussed as automobiles or the advantage of cold storage over moth balls. Why should our elders consider our interest in this subject a sign of unnaturalness or perversion? … As for violations of the moral code: it follows logically that the same class of persons who were promiscuous, both in their discussion and in their acts, existed in our parents’, our grandparents’, and our great-grandparents’ day. . . .
HOMEWORK: Youth and Changing Morality Readings

Directions: Please read all of the attached readings and take notes below. Please incorporate specific detail in your notes.

1. What made the ‘20s an exciting and frightening time to be young?

2. What influence did Hollywood have on America’s youth?