



Senate Judiciary Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency



The Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, 1954, Photo Credit: Yale Joel

Part 1: What is a Senate Subcommittee?

The United States Congress has a number of standing committees. These are legislative panels created to address a variety of issues. Subcommittees can be established by the House of Representatives or by the Senate. They are tasked with considering legislature, compiling research, and hearing testimony that applies to a bill or an issue they are investigating. They also make recommendations to Congress.

In 1953, the Senate established a Judiciary Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency. This subcommittee conducted public hearings that took place on April 21, April 22, and June 4 in 1954. They focused on particularly graphic "crime and horror" comic books of the day, and their impact on young people.

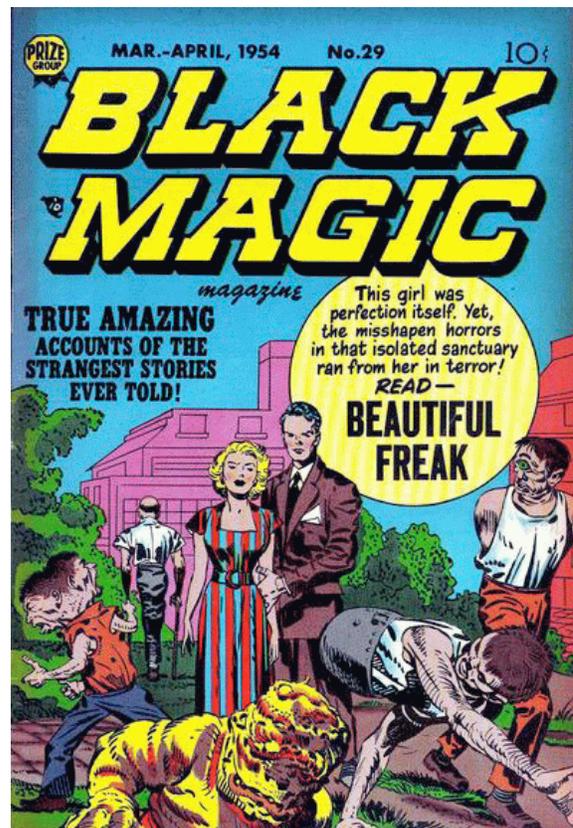
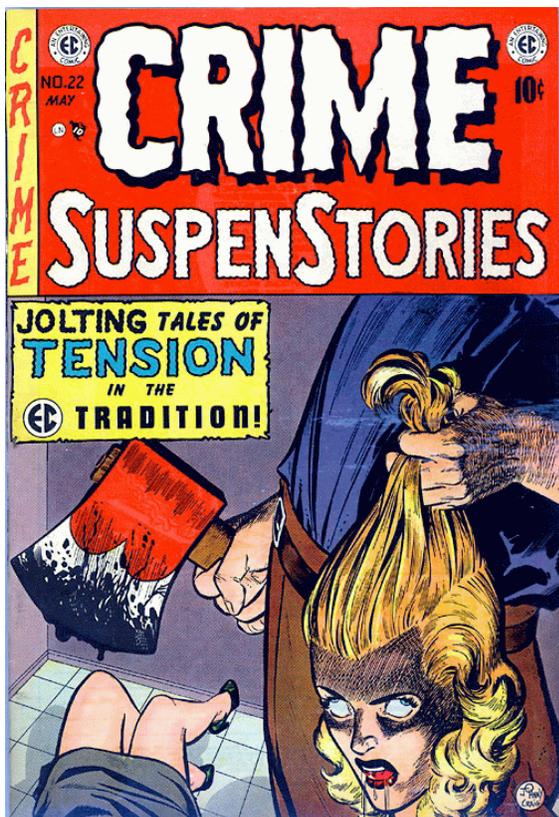
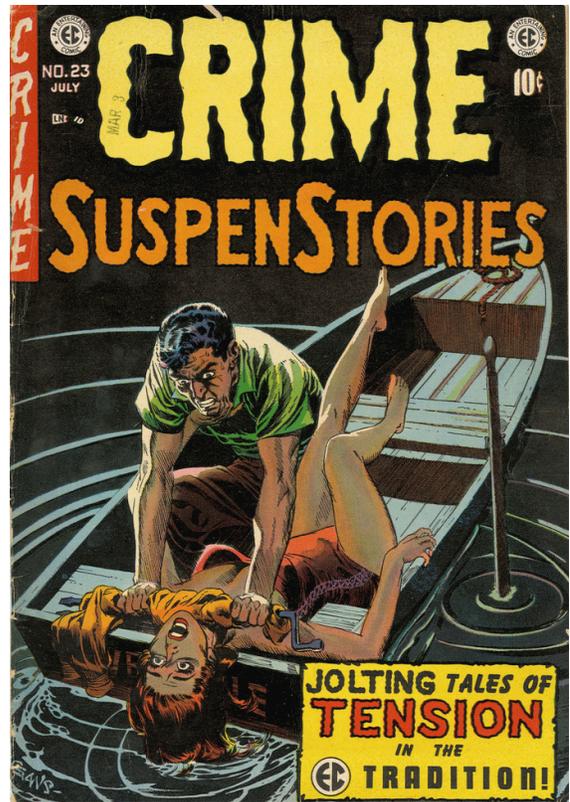
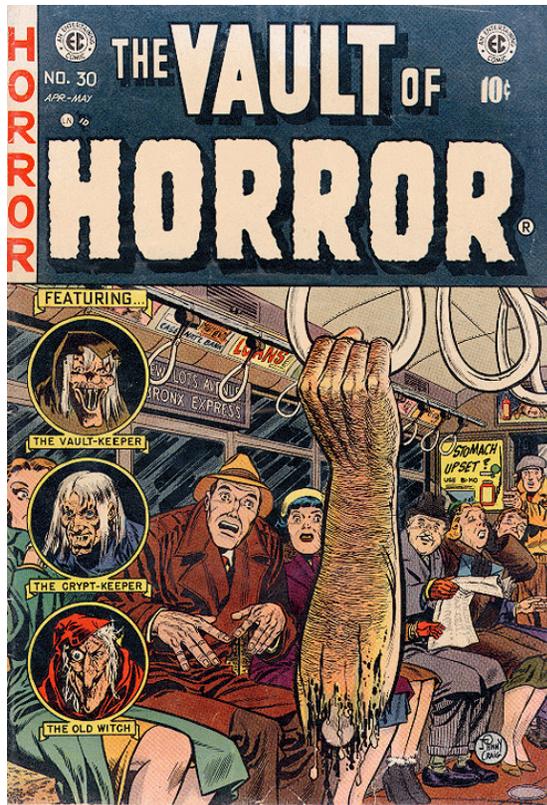
The following is an excerpt from the Interim Report:

It is firmly believed that the public is entitled to be fully informed on all aspects of [juvenile delinquency] and to know all the facts. It was the consensus that the need existed for a thorough, objective investigation to determine whether, as has been alleged, certain types of mass communication media are to be reckoned with as contributing to the country's alarming rise in juvenile delinquency. These include "crime and horror" comic books and other types of printed matter, the radio, television, and motion pictures.

-Senate Judiciary Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, Interim Report, 1955

Part 2: Comic Book Examples Submitted at Evidence





Part 3: Congressional Testimony

Name: Dr. Robert H. Felix

Title: Director of the National Institute of Mental Health

Testimony: I doubt that the comic books can be blamed for originating delinquent trends as such in children, but they might well be instructive in the techniques of delinquency and criminality since they do portray techniques of criminal activity and of the avoidance of detection. It is not my feeling that the solution to delinquency or emotional disturbances in children is to be found in the banning or elimination of comic books. Rather, I feel that parents do have a responsibility for remaining alert to the kinds of reading material and viewing material, including the comics, being utilized by their children. The wise parent will exercise some discretion and some authoritative control in this connection.

Key Points:

- Many were concerned that comic books were “instructive” to “emotionally disturbed” youth.
- People feared that comic books were providing methods and techniques for how to conduct criminal activities and how to avoid getting caught.
- Dr. Felix also makes the point that parental involvement is key and parents have a responsibility to know what their child is reading.

Name: Walt Kelly

Title: Artist of “Pogo” Comic Strip and President of the National Cartoonist Society

Testimony: The National Cartoonists Society views as unwarranted any additional legislative action that is intended to censor printed material. We believe good material outsells bad. We believe people, even juveniles, are fundamentally decent. We believe, as parents and as onetime children ourselves that most young people are instinctively attracted to that which is wholesome. Our belief in this sound commercial theory is only in addition to our belief in free expression and the noble traditions of our profession. For ourselves as artists and free Americans we too cherish freedom and the resultant growth of ideas.

Key Points:

- Comic books can be an incredible tool for communicating positive messages in society.
- Censoring printed material is strongly advised against and would be “unwarranted.”
- Comic books are a part of the “reading diet” of thousands of American youths and can be an educational asset as well.

Name: Dr. Fredric Wertham

Title: Consulting Psychiatrist, Department of Hospitals in New York City and Author of “Seduction of the Innocent”

Testimony: Mr. Chairman, I am just a doctor. I can't tell what the remedy is. I can only say that in my opinion this is a public-health problem. I think it ought to be possible to keep the children under 15 from seeing [comic books] displayed and preventing these being sold directly to children. You see, if a father wants to go to a store and says, "I have a little boy of seven. He doesn't know how to rape a girl; he doesn't know how to rob a store. Please sell me one of the comic books," let the man sell him one, but I don't think the boy should be able to go see this rape on the cover and buy the comic book.”

Key Points:

- Dr. Wertham has been called “the leading crusader against comic books.”
- He strongly believed that even the “normal” child could be “tempted” and “seduced” into committing a crime portrayed in a story.
- Dr. Wertham declared that his conclusions were based upon the study of thousands of children; however, he never offered any statistical details to the subcommittee.

Part 4: Senate Recommendations and the Comics Code Authority

The Senate subcommittee gave the following recommendation on March 14, 1955:

The subcommittee believes that this Nation cannot afford the calculated risk involved in the continued mass dissemination of crime and horror comic books to children.

Where does the responsibility rest for preventing the distribution of such materials? With the comic book industry? With the parents, assisted by educational campaigns of civic organizations? With government censorship either at the Federal, State, or local levels?

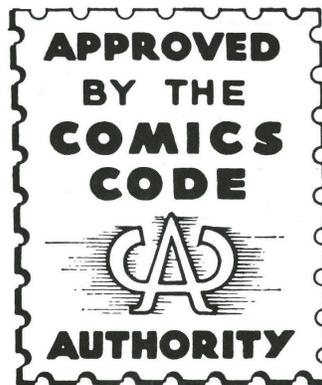
The subcommittee flatly rejects all suggestions of governmental censorship as being totally out of keeping with our basic American concept of a free press operating in a free land for a free people.

The subcommittee believes that the American people have a right to expect that the comic-book industry should shoulder the major responsibility for seeing to it that the comic books placed so temptingly before our Nation's children at every corner newsstand are clean, decent, and fit to be read by children. This grave responsibility rests squarely on every segment of the comic-book industry.

Anticipating that the Senate Subcommittee would make such a recommendation, the comic book industry had already begun to self-regulate. The Comic Book Association of America created the "Comics Code Authority" in 1954. In this new system, publishers submitted comic books, which were screened to make sure they adhered to the code. The 1954 code included such criteria as:

- Policemen, judges, government officials, and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority.
- Criminals shall not be presented so as to be rendered glamorous or to occupy a position that creates a desire for emulation.

If it complied with the code, a comic books was given the following seal for its cover:



The "Comics Code Authority" remained partly in effect until 2011.