ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: ADOLESCENT POLICE STOP INVASIVENESS, LEGAL CYNICISM, AND CRIMINAL INVOLVEMENT IN ADULTHOOD

Karilyn Shin, Bachelor of Arts, 2025

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Encounters with law enforcement can shape a person's life trajectory, influencing their perceptions of justice and their future interactions with the criminal legal system. The current study examines the associations of adolescent police stops, including the invasiveness of the stops, with legal cynicism and adult criminal involvement. Using the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), this research attempts to address a gap in understanding how early invasive police contact is associated with adult criminal involvement, as explained by perceptions of the police. The findings reveal that being stopped by the police during adolescence is significantly associated with adulthood criminal involvement. However, the invasiveness of these stops does not appear to directly influence future offending. Instead, invasive police stops are strongly linked to heightened legal cynicism, though legal cynicism itself is not significantly associated with adulthood criminal involvement. These results suggest that while invasive policing tactics may not directly escalate criminal behavior, they may contribute to widespread distrust in law enforcement, which can have broader societal consequences. This gives partial support for Sherman's Defiance Theory, which finds that

perceived unjust treatment creates defiance to legal authority. The study underscores the need for policing strategies that prioritize procedural justice and legitimacy, ensuring that early police contact does not lead to negative police perceptions or subsequent criminal justice system involvement.

ADOLESCENT POLICE STOP INVASIVENESS, LEGAL CYNICISM, AND ADULTHOOD CRIMINAL INVOLVEMENT

by

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Introduction

Growing distrust in the legal system, particularly law enforcement, has become increasingly prevalent in recent years (Brenan, 2024). Legal cynicism, a concept introduced by Sampson and Bartusch (1998), refers to the perception that the police fail to serve the public fairly and effectively. This distrust is especially pronounced among people of color, who are disproportionately contacted by police and are more likely to experience invasive stops (Kovera, 2019). When adolescents experience intrusive police stops, they may develop heightened legal cynicism, leading to increased distrust, noncompliance, and strained police-community relations (Nagin & Telep, 2020). This erosion of trust may, in turn, contribute to greater criminal justice involvement later in life. Sherman's defiance theory is used to support the examination of how the invasiveness of police stops during adolescence influences adult criminal involvement through the mechanism of legal cynicism.

There has been a growing trend of legal cynicism in recent years, particularly among marginalized communities (Geller & Fagan, 2019). The Black Lives Matter movement, which gained momentum in 2020, brought attention to police brutality and systemic corruption within law enforcement, especially against youth of color. Activists have highlighted the excessive use of force by police and identified systemic oppression as the root cause, demanding greater accountability measures (Gagliardo-Silver, 2020). For instance, Black youth experience disproportionate police contact compared to White youth and report higher levels of feeling profiled and harassed (Wendel et al., 2022); Hispanic youth have faced similar treatment (Foster et al., 2022). These disparities persist into adulthood, as Black and Hispanic individuals are

overrepresented in jails and prisons, comprising 56% of the incarcerated population despite making up only 32% of the U.S. population (NAACP, 2022).

I aim to examine how adolescent police interactions shape adulthood criminal involvement through individuals' perceptions of law enforcement. The history of police violence against youth, particularly youth of color, highlights the importance of analyzing the invasiveness of these encounters. Given the ongoing scrutiny of police misconduct, understanding how specific police actions influence respect for and obedience to the law is crucial. I also refer to the disparities seen among adults involved with the justice system when examining how adolescent police encounters contribute to distrust in law enforcement and adult criminal involvement. By assessing how legal cynicism explains the link between stop invasiveness and adult criminal involvement, this research underscores the broader implications of police interactions and reinforces calls for reform, as emphasized by the Black Lives Matter movement (Oomans, 2021).

To better understand the roots and outcomes of legal cynicism, I will use data from a contemporary cohort of urban-born young adults followed from birth to age twenty-two to examine if being stopped by the police in adolescence is associated with adult criminal involvement. I will also explore, among those stopped by the police, an association between the invasiveness of a police stop and adult criminal involvement. Lastly, if any, I will employ measures of legal cynicism as a mediator in the prior association. In testing these areas of research, it is expected that those stopped by the police during adolescence will exhibit more criminal justice involvement in adulthood compared to those who are not stopped. Additionally, I hypothesize that individuals who describe their police interactions in adolescence as more

invasive will have more adult criminal involvement in adulthood. I also expect that legal cynicism explains the relationship between invasive adolescent police stops and adult criminal involvement.

Background

Theoretical Framework

The relationship between adolescent police contact and adult criminal justice involvement can be understood through the application of Sherman's defiance theory. Sherman (1993) proposed that individuals who undergo criminal sanctions are more likely to offend in the future due to defiance. He defines defiance as the increase in the occurrence, incidence, or severity of future offending caused by an unapologetic response to the enforcement of the criminal sanction (Sherman, 1993, p. 459). This theory explains crime as an outcome of negative interactions between individuals and police. Perceptions of unfairness and discrimination in the interaction, as well as a refusal to accept the shame caused by the interaction, are thought to explain the relationship between the negative interaction and subsequent crime. I do not attempt to test Sherman's theory directly; instead, I use it as a guide for explaining my hypotheses.

Defiance theory draws on four conditions outlined by Sherman. The first condition is that the offender deems the criminal sanction unfair. Sherman (1993) finds that this takes place in two forms: when the sanctioning agent disrespects the offender or the group the offender belongs to, or when the sanction is "substantively arbitrary discriminatory, excessive, undeserved, or otherwise objectively unjust" (Sherman, 1993, p. 461). The second condition is that the offender is poorly bonded to the sanctioning agent or the community the agent represents. The third condition is that the offender defines the sanction as stigmatizing. Lastly, the fourth condition is that the offender refuses to acknowledge the shame of the sanction imposed; Sherman outlined two circumstances for this condition: the offender chooses to feel active rage rather than helplessness, or the offender believes the sanctioning agent to be weak or ambivalent (p. 460).

Police Contact and Subsequent Criminal Involvement

Being stopped by the police in adolescence may be associated with subsequent criminal involvement in adulthood, according to Sherman's (1993) defiance theory. As previously explained, this theory finds that individuals who perceive criminal sanctions as unfair or illegitimate may respond with defiance, increasing their likelihood of future criminal behavior. Police stops may serve as one form of an unofficial criminal sanction due to their implication of suspected wrongdoing and infliction of stress and humiliation. When these criminal sanctions are imposed on adolescents, who are still forming their views of authority and trust in society, their effects may be particularly impactful and lasting, given their impressionable state (Sindall et al., 2016). As a result of experiencing a criminal sanction early on, youth who are stopped by the police may exhibit more defiance, as seen in later criminal justice involvement, than their unsanctioned peers.

Prior research supports the connection between adolescent police contact and subsequent criminal involvement when measured as delinquency (Wiley & Esbensen, 2013; Wiley et al., 2013). Wiley and Esbensen (2013) found that police contact during adolescence, including stops and arrests, directly correlated with increased future delinquency and stronger deviant attitudes (p. 283). This suggests that early police interventions may potentially contribute to criminal career trajectories. Similarly, Wiley and colleagues (2013) gave support for this, demonstrating that both police stops and arrests were associated with higher rates of subsequent delinquency compared to peers without police encounters. Existing literature also endorses the relationship between adolescent police contact and adulthood criminal involvement (Bernburg & Krohn,

2003; Chen et al., 2005; Liberman et al., 2014; Lopes et al., 2012). This research has primarily operationalized criminal involvement as arrests and rearrests.

Racial disparities have been noted, where the association between early adolescent police contact and subsequent criminal involvement is stronger among minorities (Del Toro et al., 2019; McGlynn-Wright et al., 2020). For instance, it was found that Black adolescents stopped by the police by eighth grade had eleven times the odds of being arrested at age 20 compared to White adolescents (McGlynn-Wright et al., 2020, p. 299). This was supported by Del Toro and colleagues (2019), who found that Black and Latino boys who were stopped by the police in the ninth and tenth grades were more involved in delinquent behavior six, twelve, and eighteen months after being stopped (p. 8621). These findings highlight the disproportionate impact of police stops on marginalized groups and emphasize the need for a deeper understanding of these dynamics.

Stop Invasiveness and Subsequent Criminal Involvement

The second research question investigates whether the invasiveness of a police stop during adolescence is associated with adult criminal involvement. Grounded in defiance theory, I extend the concept of criminal sanction to include the quality or intensity of the sanction, specifically, how invasive the experience is perceived to be. Adolescents, who are in a critical stage of psychological and social development, may interpret highly invasive stops as excessively harsh, unfair, or humiliating. These perceptions can foster feelings of resentment and distrust toward law enforcement, potentially increasing the likelihood of future criminal behavior. By examining the invasiveness of police stops, I aim to explore how different types of law enforcement encounters may shape future criminal justice system involvement.

As previously discussed, prior research has established a link between adolescent police contact and criminal involvement in adulthood (Bernburg & Krohn, 2003; Chen et al., 2005; Liberman et al., 2014; Lopes et al., 2012). However, existing studies have largely overlooked how the invasiveness of police stops influences later criminal involvement, focusing instead on their relationship with adverse mental health outcomes (Geller et al., 2014; Jackson et al., 2020). Yet, Gatti and colleagues (2009) found that more intensive and restrictive juvenile justice interventions were associated with negative impacts on criminal careers, as measured by adult criminal records. This underscores the long-term implications of invasive policing practices. Similarly, Copeland and colleagues (2022) reported that more repressive disciplinary practices within the juvenile justice system increased the odds of both official adult criminal records and self-reported offending.

While these findings highlight the broader consequences of invasive justice interventions, there remains a gap in understanding how the intrusiveness of police stops during adolescence may shape adulthood criminal involvement. Although prior studies have documented the mental health effects of intrusive police stops, few have explored these outcomes as potential pathways to later delinquency (Geller et al., 2014; Jackson et al., 2020). Furthermore, Gatti and colleagues (2009) and Copeland and colleagues (2022) center on juvenile justice interventions more broadly, and do not specifically examine the invasiveness of adolescent police stops. Therefore, given the minimal research on youth stop invasiveness and its connection to adulthood criminal involvement, I aim to address this gap and expand the understanding of this relationship.

The Role of Legal Cynicism

The final research question investigates the extent to which legal cynicism can explain the relationship between the invasiveness of police stops during adolescence and criminal involvement in adulthood. As outlined, Sherman's (1993) defiance theory suggests that when individuals perceive a legal sanction as excessively harsh or unfair, they may reject the legitimacy of legal authority and respond with defiance. In this framework, legal cynicism emerges as the mechanism through which defiance is expressed, particularly in response to invasive policing. In the context of adolescent development, invasive police stops may instill denied shame, a rejection of imposed blame, which leads youth to question the law's fairness and moral authority. This erosion of trust and legitimacy is depicted with legal cynicism, increasing the risk of continued lawbreaking into adulthood. Thus, it is expected that adolescents who experience more invasive police stops will report higher levels of legal cynicism, which in turn predicts greater adult criminal involvement.

Before examining the association between invasive police stops and legal cynicism, it is essential to recognize the broader relationship between police contact and heightened legal cynicism. Geller and Fagan (2019) found that youth who experienced police contact, whether direct or vicarious, exhibited higher levels of legal cynicism compared to those with no police contact. Direct contact, in particular, was associated with more pronounced increases in legal cynicism than vicarious experiences (Geller & Fagan, 2019; Jackson et al., 2020). Additionally, Fine and Cauffman (2015) demonstrated that Black youth, who are disproportionately subjected to police contact, reported the most negative views of the legal system during adolescence, followed by Latino and White youth. These racial disparities in legal cynicism grew even more

pronounced in adulthood (Fine & Cauffman, 2015, p. 325). Collectively, these findings illustrate that exposure to the legal system is strongly linked to heightened legal cynicism, with variation based on the type of contact and racial background.

The invasiveness of police stops plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of legal legitimacy, particularly among urban youth (Geller & Fagan, 2019; Hofer et al., 2019; Tyler et al., 2014). Experiences of intrusive police contact have been linked to heightened legal cynicism, with factors such as the use of force, arrests, and invasive procedures amplifying perceptions of illegitimacy (Geller & Fagan, 2019; Tyler et al., 2014). For instance, Tyler and colleagues (2014) found that young men in New York City who encountered more invasive police actions, including physical confrontations and arrests, were more likely to view the police as illegitimate (p. 775). Similarly, Hofer and colleagues (2019) observed that being frisked or subjected to harsh language during a stop was associated with increased legal cynicism, though the use of physical force did not produce the same effect (p. 114). These findings emphasize the nuanced ways in which the nature of police interactions influences trust and perceptions of justice.

Legal cynicism has been linked to increased involvement with the criminal justice system, particularly through heightened police contact and recidivism (Abate & Venta, 2018; Gau & Brunson, 2015; Kirk & Papachristos, 2011). Gau and Brunson (2015) found that young males with low perceptions of police legitimacy are more likely to face police scrutiny, raising their risk of justice system involvement. At the community level, widespread legal cynicism contributes to persistent violence and a lack of cooperation with law enforcement, reinforcing cycles of criminal justice contact (Kirk & Papachristos, 2011). Additionally, Abate and Venta (2018) found a significant association between heightened legal cynicism and recidivism among

Black and Hispanic youth. Altogether, these findings reinforce the role of legal cynicism as a key factor impacting criminal justice system involvement.

Previous literature provides support for the relationship between youth police stops and criminal involvement as explained by legal cynicism (Cavanagh et al., 2019; Walsh et al., 2019). Positive interactions with law enforcement during adolescence have been associated with lower levels of delinquency in subsequent years, although reductions in legal cynicism only partially explained this effect (Walsh et al., 2019, p. 963). However, legal cynicism played a significant role in another study where adolescent males who felt they were treated fairly during arrests reported lower levels of legal cynicism and demonstrated reduced rates of reoffending (Cavanagh et al., 2019, p. 478). These findings underscore how adolescent perceptions of their interactions with the police may shape their future involvement with the justice system.

I am motivated by a gap in research on how the invasiveness of police stops during adolescence impacts criminal involvement in adulthood, with legal cynicism as a mediating factor. While previous studies have established that police stops are associated with heightened legal cynicism (Fine & Cauffman, 2015; Geller & Fagan, 2019; Jackson et al., 2020) and that legal cynicism is linked to increased offending (Abate & Venta, 2018; Gau & Brunson, 2015; Kirk & Papachristos, 2011), the role of stop invasiveness in this dynamic remains underexplored. Moreover, existing research highlights the connection between more invasive police stops and elevated legal cynicism (Geller & Fagan, 2019; Hofer et al., 2019; Tyler et al., 2014), yet its implications for criminal behavior have not been fully examined. I seek to address this gap by focusing on the interplay between stop invasiveness, legal cynicism, and adult criminal involvement.

Current Study

I aim to address the following research questions: 1) Is being stopped by the police in adolescence associated with adult criminal justice involvement? 2) Among adolescents stopped by the police, what is the association between stop invasiveness and adulthood criminal justice involvement? 3) To what extent, if any, does legal cynicism explain stop invasiveness and criminal justice involvement? First, it is expected that those stopped by the police during adolescence will exhibit more criminal justice involvement in adulthood compared to those who are not stopped. Second, I hypothesize that individuals who describe their police interactions as more invasive in adolescence will be more involved in the criminal justice system in their adulthood. Third, I hypothesize that legal cynicism explains the relationship between adolescent police stop invasiveness and adulthood criminal involvement. Though not addressed as a direct research question, the implications of the results for racial disparities will be discussed.

I expand on prior research linking negative police encounters to higher legal cynicism by examining how the invasiveness of adolescent police stops influences adult criminal involvement through perceptions of police legitimacy. In doing so, I contribute by drawing from Sherman's definition theory to guide my hypotheses. Building on Geller and Fagan's (2019) work, I incorporate additional FFCWS data from 2020-2024 to assess long-term criminal outcomes. Additionally, drawing from Cavanagh and colleagues (2020), I shift the focus from adolescent recidivism to adult criminal involvement. Further, the findings have significant implications for policing policies, particularly in strengthening community relationships. Implementing procedural justice strategies that promote fair treatment by police may help reduce legal cynicism and its adverse effects, thereby potentially serving as an effective crime reduction

strategy. Addressing racial disparities in police stops can also inform more equitable and effective policing practices.

Data and Methods

Data

I draw my data for this study from the Future Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), a longitudinal study of twenty large urban cities in the United States. This study comprises nearly five thousand couples with children born between 1998 and 2000. Unmarried parents were oversampled, resulting in a larger number of Black, Hispanic, and lower-income families in the sample. Seven waves of data were collected through interviews between 1998 and 2024, starting at the child's birth and following up when the child was one, three, five, nine, fifteen, and twenty-two years old (Y1, Y3, Y5, Y9, Y15, and Y22 follow-up waves). Mother and father interviews were conducted at baseline through Y9, primary caregiver interviews were conducted between Y3 and Y22, and child interviews were conducted between Y9 and Y22. Interviews collect data on parental and child attitudes, relationships, behaviors, demographics, health, socioeconomic status, neighborhood characteristics, etc. I use data from the Y15 and Y22 waves, focusing on the focal child's experiences with and perceptions of the police and their adult criminal involvement. I will also use data from the mother and father baseline waves when accounting for control variables. The extensive measures provided by FFCWS on my research topics over the life course and the representation of racial minority groups in the sample serve as the basis for its selection to test my hypotheses.

Analytical Sample

The first research question uses an analytical sample including valid data from Y22 of focal children charged with a crime since they turned 18 years old. Y22 had a total of 2,990

participants who completed the survey, but after dropping invalid data for those charged with a crime, a sample of 2,942 observations resulted. Then, missing data were excluded for the measure on being stopped by the police at Y15, dropping 187 observations. Lastly, after dropping 472 missing data observations for all control variables, the analytic sample size for the first research question came to 2,283 participants.

Furthermore, a subsample is utilized to address the second and third research questions. When creating this subsample, I dropped the missing data for those charged with a crime in the Y22 survey, resulting in 2,942 participants. Then, respondents who were not stopped by the police at Y15 were dropped, resulting in 711 observations. The subsample then excludes missing data on the measures for police stop invasiveness, dropping 8 observations. Then, I dropped 2 missing data observations for those who did not provide valid responses to the measures for legal cynicism. Lastly, after dropping the missing data for all control variables, the total subsample size came to 584 participants.

Measures

Outcome Variable

To measure the outcome variable - adult criminal involvement - I look at the Y22 wave question of "Since you turned 18, have you been charged with a crime?". This was recoded for 0 to represent "No" and 1 to represent "Yes". This question was chosen to measure adult criminal involvement for temporal ordering purposes, as it specifies involvement once the participant legally became an adult. Additionally, it is important to note that this question indicates a broad measure of justice system involvement. This may allow for more coverage of potential criminal

involvement among participants; however, being charged with a crime does not necessarily mean that the individual committed it.

Explanatory Variables

The first explanatory variable is whether the police stopped the child. This is measured at Y15 by "Have you ever been stopped by the police while on the street, at school, in a car, or some other place?". In recoding this variable, 0 represents "No" and 1 represents "Yes". The second explanatory variable - stop invasiveness - was also measured at Y15. The FFCWS survey asks participants to recall their most memorable incident with the police and answer if the officer frisked or patted them down, searched their bags or pockets, used harsh language, used racial slurs, threatened physical force, or used physical force. Responses were recoded such that 0 represents "No" and 1 represents "Yes" and then summed to yield a total mean stop invasiveness score, ranging from 0 to 1, where a higher score indicates a higher level of stop invasiveness.

Legal Cynicism

Legal cynicism is measured at Y15 through six questions regarding the participant's perceptions of the police and law abidance. Each question uses a Likert scale where 1 represents "Strongly Agree", 2 represents "Somewhat Agree", 3 represents "Somewhat Disagree", and 4 represents "Strongly Disagree". The statements include "I have a great deal of respect for the police", "It's okay to do anything you want", "There are no right or wrong ways to make money", "Laws are made to be broken", "If I fight with someone, it's nobody else's business", and "The police create more problems than they solve" (Sampson & Bartusch, 1998). All variables, except for "I have a great deal of respect for the police" were reverse-coded so that a

higher number would suggest more agreement. Responses were then averaged to yield a total mean legal cynicism score, ranging from 1 to 4, where a higher score indicates a higher level of legal cynicism.

Control Variables

I control for numerous variables, largely drawn from prior research (Geller & Fagan, 2019; Hofer et al., 2019; Jackson et al., 2020). All control variables on the child's parents will be measured at the baseline surveys of the mother and father. Each parent's educational attainment and substance use will be accounted for, along with whether they were married and living together at the time of the baseline wave. For mothers, their unemployment status and income insecurity will be included. For fathers, their incarceration status and ability to work will be included. These separate measures are not used for both parents due to challenges with handling missing data. Lastly, for the child, demographics such as sex and race are utilized. See Appendix C for descriptions of how all covariates were constructed.

Analytical Approach

Since the outcome variable of being charged with a crime after turning 18 is binary, linear probability models are implemented to test the hypotheses. First, linear probability is used to test the association between adolescent police stops and adult criminal involvement. Second, it is used to test the association between the invasiveness of adolescent police stops and adult criminal involvement. Though I do not conduct a formal mediation analysis to address my third research question, which adds legal cynicism to the prior relationship, I examine the other relationships that legal cynicism may have within my study. Specifically, I separately explore the

associations between stop invasiveness and legal cynicism and then between legal cynicism and adult criminal involvement. Thus, using linear probability models works to explain any variations in the outcome variable, adult criminal involvement.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

I begin by examining the descriptive statistics for all study variables in the full analytical sample, as presented in Table 1. As discussed previously, this sample is limited to cases where respondents provided valid data for the Y22 measure on criminal involvement and the Y15 measure on whether the respondent had been stopped by the police. Out of the 2,283 participants, only 7.4% reported having adult criminal involvement. Additionally, about 26% reported being stopped by the police during their adolescence. This reflects that the participants in the full analytical sample had more justice system involvement during their youth compared to adulthood. Moreover, Black youth had the highest percentage of being stopped by the police across all racial groups, at 30.2%, as depicted in Figure 1. Regarding the demographics of the analytical sample, slightly more respondents were female (52.5%) than male (47.5%). Furthermore, children of color were overrepresented, with the majority identifying as Black (48.4%), followed by Hispanic (23.4%), then White (20.4%), and lastly Multi/Other (7.8%).

Table 1 also reveals notable characteristics of the sample for their parental covariates, all of which were taken at the baseline wave. The average educational attainment level of respondents' mothers and fathers in the analytical sample was a high school degree or G.E.D. Almost half (40.3%) of the focal children had a mother facing income insecurity, but only 5.39% of them had a father who had a limited ability to work. Also, only 27.3% of youth had parents who were married, and about 35.8% of them had parents who were cohabiting.

The descriptive statistics of the subsample, which only accounted for respondents who had been stopped by the police during adolescence, are seen in Table 1. It reflects that the

average level of stop invasiveness, on a range from 0 to 1 with 1 being more invasive, was .189. This implies that the overall mean level of stop invasiveness for those stopped by the police in adolescence was relatively low. Additionally, the average level of legal cynicism within the subsample, ranging from 1 to 4, was 1.98. Thus, the average legal cynicism level was moderate, suggesting that among those stopped by the police in adolescence, the average perception of the police was neither completely legitimate nor illegitimate.

In comparing descriptives of the full analytical sample to those in the subsample, similarities and differences are noted. First, a higher proportion of respondents reported having adult criminal involvement (13.7%) in the subsample compared to the full analytical sample (7.4%). This suggests the potential that those who were stopped by the police during adolescence are more likely, on average, to have adult criminal involvement compared to those who were not stopped, providing insight into the first research question. The subsample also reflected larger proportions of respondents whose fathers were incarcerated, Black respondents, male respondents, and those whose fathers had a limited ability to work. Furthermore, the subsample had lower proportions of respondents whose parents are married. Overall, it appears that those who were stopped by the police during adolescence are more likely, on average, to be subjected to adversities than those in the full analytical sample.

Police Contact and Adult Criminal Involvement

The first stage of analysis focuses on the relationship between being stopped by the police during adolescence and adulthood criminal involvement. Table 2 displays the linear probability models for this association with and without control variables. When examining the regression coefficient for being stopped by the police during adolescence in the model that does

not include control variables, the expected probability of adult criminal justice involvement among adolescents who were stopped by the police is .085 higher than the probability among adolescents who were not stopped by the police ($p < .001$). When adding the control variables to this model, the relationship between being stopped by the police during adolescence and having adulthood criminal involvement declined by 21.18%, yet remained statistically significant ($p < .001$). In this model, the probability of adult criminal justice involvement among adolescents who were stopped by the police is .067 higher than the probability among adolescents who were not stopped by the police.

Stop Invasiveness and Adulthood Criminal Involvement

The second stage of analysis focuses on assessing whether the level of invasiveness experienced during a police stop in adolescence has a meaningful impact on an individual's likelihood of criminal involvement in adulthood. Table 2 presents the results of linear probability regression models, which examine this relationship before and after the inclusion of control variables. The results do not show evidence of a statistically significant association between stop invasiveness and adulthood criminal involvement, and the association remains statistically insignificant with the inclusion of the control variables. In sum, I find no evidence of an association between the invasiveness of a police stop and adulthood criminal involvement.

Other Associations With Legal Cynicism

Given that the third research question extends to the second research question, and that I did not find evidence of a significant association between stop invasiveness and adult criminal involvement, I turn to examine other relevant associations that legal cynicism may have within

the study. First, in Table 4, I examine the association between legal cynicism measured in adolescence and adulthood criminal involvement; however, the results do not provide evidence of a statistically significant relationship between the two. The inclusion of control variables also yielded statistically insignificant results. Additionally, I examined the association between police stop invasiveness and legal cynicism. Table 5 reflects that among adolescents who were stopped by the police during adolescence, each 1 unit increase in the level of stop invasiveness, ranging from 0 to 1, was associated with a .913 increase in legal cynicism, ranging from 1 to 4 ($p<.001$). When including the control variables, this relationship remained significant but slightly less correlated, at a .813 increase.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide insights into the associations of adolescent police contact with perceptions of the police and adult criminal involvement. The results support Hypothesis 1, indicating that being stopped by the police during adolescence is significantly associated with adulthood criminal involvement. However, Hypothesis 2 was not supported, as no evidence was found for a significant relationship between the invasiveness of adolescent police stops and adulthood criminal involvement. Hypothesis 3 was partially supported as invasive police stops were significantly associated with legal cynicism; yet, there was no evidence for the association between legal cynicism and adulthood criminal involvement.

The significant association between adolescent police stops and adulthood criminal involvement suggests that early police contact may contribute to continued involvement with the justice system. This finding aligns with prior research linking adolescent police contact to increased adulthood criminal involvement (Bernburg & Krohn, 2003; Chen et al., 2005; Liberman et al., 2014; Lopes et al., 2012). Although racial comparisons were not explicitly made, the overrepresentation of Black and Hispanic individuals in the sample offers insights into potential racial disparities. Furthermore, because Black youth in the full analytical sample were more likely to experience police contact than other racial groups, they may face an elevated risk of continued criminal justice involvement into adulthood.

The lack of evidence for a significant association between police stop invasiveness and adulthood criminal involvement may stem from several factors. Limitations related to the subsample's size and composition may have influenced the results. Also, in communities where invasive stops are more frequent, individuals may become desensitized, potentially reducing the

impact of such encounters on future criminal behavior (Sherman & Weisburd, 1995). Therefore, while I did not find evidence for a significant relationship in this association, I do not preclude the existence of such a relationship in a different sample.

I found partial support for Hypothesis 3, where I explored the associations that legal cynicism has within my study. First, I did not find evidence for a significant association between legal cynicism and adulthood criminal involvement, possibly due to the small subsample size. It is also possible that individuals with greater legal cynicism actively avoid interactions with the justice system. This finding contrasts with existing literature linking higher legal cynicism to increased subsequent criminal involvement (Abate & Venta, 2018; Gau & Brunson, 2015; Kirk & Papachristos, 2011). However, the significant relationship between police stop invasiveness and legal cynicism suggests that individuals who experience more invasive police encounters tend to hold more negative perceptions of law enforcement. This aligns with prior research by Geller and Fagan (2019), Hofer and colleagues (2019), and Tyler and colleagues (2014), all of whom found that more intrusive police contact was associated with worsening perceptions of the police. These findings support the notion that a more invasive interaction with the police can shape personal attitudes toward law enforcement.

These findings can be understood from the perspective of Sherman's (1993) defiance theory. According to this theory, individuals who view police contact as unjust or overly harsh may become more defiant toward legal authority, increasing their likelihood of future criminal involvement. The significant link between invasive police stops and legal cynicism supports this framework, as negative police experiences may foster resentment and mistrust, reinforcing oppositional attitudes toward law enforcement (Fratello et al., 2013). However, the lack of

evidence for a direct association between police stop invasiveness and adulthood criminal involvement suggests that other factors, such as personal resilience or social support, may influence whether defiance translates into future offending. Thus, more research is needed to test the psychological mechanisms that may impact the association between stop invasiveness and adulthood criminal involvement.

Limitations

Addressing the limitations of my study is essential for interpreting the results and guiding future research. First, the small subsample size limits the generalizability of findings from the second and third probability models. While the FFCWS dataset provides a well-representative sample of disadvantaged populations, findings cannot be generalized to the general population, given the sample's selectiveness. The sample also captures only periodic measurements of youths' perceptions and behaviors, potentially overlooking important developmental changes. Additionally, the operationalization of the outcome variable, adulthood criminal involvement, also serves as a limitation, as being charged with a crime is just one measurement of criminal justice involvement, and the frequency of charges was not assessed. Further, FFCWS relies on self-reported data by the participants, creating the potential for bias.

Moreover, a significant number of participants did not complete the Y22 survey, introducing potential non-response bias. Similarly, perceptions of the police are only measured at Y15, meaning earlier attitudes are not accounted for. This omission raises the possibility that longstanding perceptions influence police contact at Y15 rather than police encounters shaping later attitudes. Lastly, incorporating additional control variables, such as prior delinquency, would strengthen the reliability and accuracy of the findings.

Implications & Future Directions

This research contributes to the understanding of adolescent police contact and its implications for adulthood criminal involvement. While no significant association was found between invasive police stops and adult criminal involvement, future studies could explore other factors related to youth police encounters. Additionally, although legal cynicism was not incorporated into the models as initially intended, its significant relationship with stop invasiveness highlights the impact of intrusive police encounters on perceptions of law enforcement. Future research should aim to measure stop invasiveness before assessing legal cynicism to better establish causal relationships (Geller & Fagan, 2019).

Although Black youth were more likely to experience police contact, suggesting that they are more often exposed to the consequences of said contact, it would also be valuable to analyze the regressions for each hypothesis by racial group given the disparities found in prior research (Del Toro et al., 2019; McGlynn-Wright et al., 2020). This would enable a deeper insight into the varying racial impacts of adolescent police contact, legal cynicism, and adulthood criminal involvement. Consistent with the study's limitations, utilizing datasets with higher retention rates and comparable variable measurements could further strengthen future findings. Overall, these findings give reason for ensuring that policing practices are just and equitable to prevent negative attitudes toward the police and any negative impacts that these may have on an individual's development.

Conclusion

To conclude, my findings contribute to a better understanding of whether and how adolescent police stops influence adulthood criminal involvement. By incorporating measures of both police stop invasiveness and legal cynicism, I address key gaps in existing literature, yielding both expected and unexpected results. The analysis revealed that being stopped by the police during adolescence is significantly associated with adulthood criminal involvement, though the invasiveness of these stops was not a determining factor. However, the findings also highlight that more invasive police stops are linked to heightened legal cynicism, yet legal cynicism itself does not appear to predict adulthood criminal involvement.

These results underscore the need for continued research into the broader implications of legal cynicism in the criminal justice system, both in adolescence and beyond. The significant association between invasive police stops and legal cynicism suggests that aggressive policing strategies may erode trust in law enforcement, potentially shaping long-term attitudes toward legal authority. Notably, the disproportionate police contact experienced by Black youth highlights the importance of addressing racial disparities within these dynamics, as they may exacerbate legal cynicism and adulthood criminal involvement. While I did not find a direct link between legal cynicism and criminal involvement, the broader policy implications remain critical. Ultimately, law enforcement agencies should prioritize procedural justice in their interactions with youth, ensuring that policing practices do not inadvertently create mistrust or alienation.

Appendices

Appendix A. Tables

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Full Analytical Sample and Subsample

	Full Analytical Sample (n=2283)		Subsample (n=584)			
Variable	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Outcome Variable						
Adult criminal involvement	.074	.263	.137	.344	0	1
Explanatory Variables						
Stopped by police	.258	.438			0	1
Stop invasiveness			.189	.255	0	1
Mediator Variable						
Legal Cynicism			1.98	.596	1	4
Control Variables						
Mother educational attainment	4.909	1.85	4.717	1.737	1	9
Mother unemployed	.114	.318	.091	.288	0	1
Mother income insecurity	.403	.491	.45	.498	0	1
Mother substance use	.037	.188	.043	.203	0	1
Father incarcerated	.042	.2	.063	.244	0	1
Father educational attainment	4.825	1.825	4.598	1.664	1	9
Father limited work ability	.054	.226	.065	.247	0	1
Father substance use	.045	.207	.05	.217	0	1
Parents married	.273	.446	.195	.4	0	1
Parents cohabiting	.358	.48	.406	.491	0	1
Child sex						
Female	.525	.5	.344	.476	0	1
Male	.475	.5	.656	.476	0	1
Child Race						
White	.204	.403	.17	.376	0	1
Black	.484	.5	.57	.495	0	1
Hispanic	.234	.423	.183	.387	0	1
Other/Multi	.078	.268	.077	.267	0	1

Note. Data from Future Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS). Statistics are shown for the full analytical sample and subsample.

Table 2

Linear Probability Regression Models for the Association Between Stopped by the Police and Adulthood Criminal Involvement

	No Added Controls		Added Controls	
Variable	β	SE	β	SE
Stopped by police	.085***	.012	.067***	.013
Mother educational attainment			-.001	.004
Mother unemployed			-.001	.018
Mother income insecurity			-.006	.012
Mother substance use			-.002	.029
Father incarcerated			-.055*	.028
Father educational attainment			-.007	.004
Father limited work ability			.051*	.024
Father substance use			.053*	.027
Parents married			-.027	.017
Parents cohabiting			-.004	.013
Female			-.057***	.011
Black			-.009	.078
Hispanic			-.014	.023
Other/Multi			-.04	.019

Note. Data from Future Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS). Both models utilize the full analytical sample (n=2283). ***p<.001 *p<.05

Table 3

Linear Probability Regression Models for the Association Between Police Stop Invasiveness and Adulthood Criminal Involvement

	No added controls		Added controls	
Variable	β	SE	β	SE
Stop invasiveness	.103	.056	.072	.059
Mother educational attainment			.002	.011
Mother unemployed			.042	.052
Mother income insecurity			-.001	.03
Mother substance use			-.069	.071
Father incarcerated			-.149*	.059
Father educational attainment			-.011	.011
Father limited work ability			.141*	.058
Father substance use			.106	.067
Parents married			-.075	.046
Parents cohabiting			-.05	.033
Female			-.056	.03
Black			-.03	.045
Hispanic			.025	.051
Other/Multi			-.026	.062

Note. Data from Future Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS). Both models utilize the subsample (n=584). *p<.05

Table 4

Linear Probability Regression Models Between Legal Cynicism and Adult Criminal Involvement

	No Added Controls		Added Controls	
Variable	β	SE	β	SE
Legal Cynicism	.028	.024	.019	.025

Note. Data from Future Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS). Both models utilize subsample (n=584).

Table 5

Linear Probability Regression Models Between Stop Invasiveness and Legal Cynicism

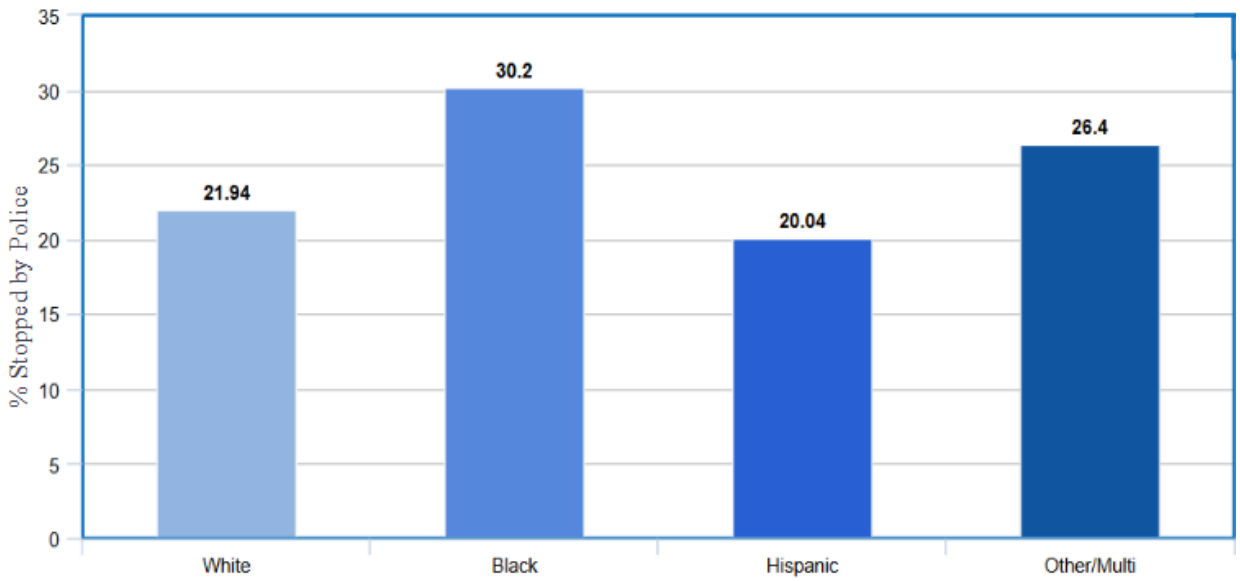
	No Added Controls		Added Controls	
Variable	β	SE	β	SE
Stop Invasiveness	.913***	.089	.813***	094

Note. Data from Future Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS). Both models utilize subsample (n=584). ***p<.001

Appendix B. Figures

Figure 1

Stopped by Police Across Racial Groups



Note: Data from Future Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS). Utilizes full analytical sample (n=2283).

Appendix C. Description of Covariate Constructions

This appendix contains descriptions of how each of the covariates was constructed, as referenced in the 'Data and Methods' section. Unless stated otherwise, each of the covariates was measured at the baseline wave, and any invalid data were treated as missing.

Same Covariates for Mother and Father

A handful of the covariates used for both the mother and father were constructed based on the same survey questions in FFCWS. First, educational attainment was measured on a scale of 1 to 9: 1 (No formal schooling), 2 (8th grade or less), 3 (Some high school), 4 (High school diploma), 5 (G.E.D.), 6 (Some college or 2 year degree), 7 (Technical or trade school), 8 (Bachelor's degree), and 9 (Graduate or professional school). The father's measure for this variable was imputed using the mother's baseline survey in which they were asked, "What is the highest grade or year of regular school that [BABY'S FATHER] has completed?"

Substance abuse was also measured for both parents. Mother's substance use was measured with the question "Have you ever sought help or been treated for drug/alcohol problems?" A "Yes" response was coded as 1 and a "No" response was coded as 0. However, in measuring the father's substance use, imputation was used from the mother's survey in which mothers were asked, " Does bio dad have a problem keeping a job/friend because of drugs/alc use?". A "Yes" response was coded as 1 and a "No" response was coded as 0.

To measure whether parents were married, I use a constructed variable from FFCWS, "Is mother married to child's father?"1 represents that the parents were married at the baseline survey and a 0 represents that they were not. Finally, FFCWS also constructed a variable to determine if the parents were living together at the baseline wave, otherwise known as

cohabiting. It asks “Is mother cohabiting with baby's father” where 1 indicates that they were cohabiting and a 0 indicates that they were not.

Covariates Specific to Mother

Mother’s unemployment was measured by the question, “Do you expect to work during next year?”. This was recoded so that a “0” would indicate that the mother would be employed and a 1 would indicate that the mother would be unemployed. Further, mother’s income insecurity was constructed from two survey questions asking if in the last year, they received income from public assistance or from unemployment/SS/disability. A “Yes” response to either question was coded as a 1 and a “No” response was coded as a 0.

Covariates Specific to Father

Fathers’ incarceration status was used as a control by combining numerous variables from both the Mother and Father baseline surveys into one. An indication that the father of the child was or had been incarcerated was coded as 1 and an indication that the father was not or had not been incarcerated was coded as 0. Next, to measure fathers’ ability to work, I used the question from the mother’s survey, “ Does bio dad have physical/health condition that limits work he can do?” This was recoded so that a 1 represents “Yes” and a 0 represents “No”.

Covariates for Focal Child

Only two covariates were used for the focal child - sex and race. The sex of the focal child is constructed in a variable at the baseline wave. For the purposes of this study, two new variables were created, one for each sex measured - Female and Male. The child’s race was the only variable measured outside of the baseline wave where participants were asked to

self-describe their race/ethnicity at Y15. This variable was broken down into four new variables for each measured race - White, Black, Hispanic, and Other/Multi.

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