

# Identity-Linked Perceptions of the Police Among African American Juvenile Offenders: A Developmental Perspective

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**Abstract** Ethnic identity development can play a role in youths' perceptions and attitudes concerning police, but this process has not been explored in delinquent samples. In this article, we examine how youths' perceptions of police legitimacy and levels of legal cynicism are related to processes of ethnic identity development. Participants were 561 black youth ages 14–18 (12% female) who were adjudicated of a felony or serious misdemeanor. Data were taken from semi-annual interviews conducted over 3 years. Increased ethnic identity exploration was related to positive perceptions of police legitimacy and lower legal cynicism. Higher ethnic identity affirmation predicted higher perceived legitimacy over time, but affirmation was not related to legal cynicism after accounting for psychosocial maturity. This study provides evidence that ethnic identity development operates similarly among high risk youth as in non-delinquent samples, and that it is connected to beliefs that can have implications for juvenile offenders' future compliance with the law.

**Keywords** Ethnic identity · Juvenile offenders · African American youth · Legal cynicism

## Introduction

For many African American youth, particularly those in low-income, urban settings, the contextual circumstances associated with being black often include police contact in the form of neighborhood surveillance, racial profiling, harassment, and arrest processing (Brunson and Miller 2006; Carr et al. 2007). Aside from a multitude of statistics confirming the over-representation of African Americans in the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Snyder and Sickmund 2006; US Department of Justice 2006), we have little understanding about how these experiences are related to youth development. Scholars acknowledge several contributing factors to this over-representation, including disparities in delinquent involvement (Piquero 2008) as well as differences in rates of economic disadvantage (Morenoff 2005). Importantly, biased police behavior also has been cited as a factor that plays a role in disproportionate minority contact with the justice system (Bishop 2005; Blank et al. 2004; Morenoff 2005; Piquero 2008). Given that processes of legal socialization—including levels of legal cynicism and perceptions of police legitimacy—continue to develop in adolescence and are related to behavioral compliance with the law (Fagan and Tyler 2005), there is a critical need to better understand factors contributing to black youths' beliefs about the legal system.

Evidence suggests that black youth recognize the “criminal” stigma associated with their group and also have come to expect negative police behavior (Brunson and Miller 2006; Carr et al. 2007; Fine et al. 2003; Hinds 2007). For example, in a study of police interactions among young

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black men living in a low-income neighborhood in St. Louis, one participant said that he regularly anticipated that the police would treat him and his peers like they were “not even human” (Brunson and Miller 2006, p. 631). Scholars in the field of adolescent development suggest that during adolescence ethnic minority youth who belong to historically stigmatized groups often become “hypersensitive to social messages about inferiority and stigmatization” (Cross and Cross 2008, p. 168), and for black males in particular, continual exposure to negative stereotypes may contribute to poor adjustment and perpetuate involvement in the criminal justice system (Cooper et al. 2008).

Research shows that personal experiences with the police are significantly related to beliefs about the legal system, with fair treatment (i.e., “procedural justice”) predicting more positive views about the police and an increased likelihood of compliance with the law (Fagan and Tyler 2005; Piquero et al. 2005; Rusinko et al. 1978; Sunshine and Tyler 2003; Tyler 1997, 2006). Researchers have also identified racial group differences in perceptions of the police, with African Americans typically holding more negative views compared to other groups (Reitzel and Piquero 2006; Weitzer and Tuch 1999). In addition to differences in perceptions of police based on demographic categories (e.g., race, socioeconomic status, age, education; Brown and Benedict 2002) and personal experiences (e.g., procedural justice), structural factors such as concentrated neighborhood disadvantage are also related to negative beliefs about the law and low levels of satisfaction with the police (Sampson and Bartusch 1998). However, recent evidence suggests that ethnic minority youth (both delinquent and non-delinquent) living in low-income, high crime neighborhoods who have had negative contact with the police may endorse “pro-criminal justice” solutions to crime and may also recognize the need for the police in their community (Carr et al. 2007).

These disparate findings suggest that we do not yet fully understand how factors outside of demographics, situational experiences, and structural conditions may contribute to youths’ beliefs about the law. Indeed, much of what we know about adolescents’ (and adults’) perceptions of the legal system is based on criminological and sociological research (Brown and Benedict 2002), and while this work has been critical to developing a better understanding of legal socialization, it generally lacks a developmental perspective. One of the goals of the present study is to bridge this divide by investigating how a central developmental process that takes place in adolescence may be linked to youths’ perceptions of the police. Given a sociohistorical context in which race and policing are particularly and inextricably linked for African Americans (Rice and White 2010), we focus specifically on processes and patterns among black youth.

During adolescence, youth often engage in the process of identity exploration in an effort to make meaning of multiple social categories like race, ethnicity, and gender (Cross and Cross 2008; Erikson 1968; Phinney 1993). We know from several theories in the field of psychology that one’s identity with respect to social group membership (e.g., racial or ethnic group) is linked to perceptions, beliefs and behaviors (Major and O’Brien 2005; Spencer 1995; Tajfel and Turner 1986; Turner 1985). Moreover, the meaning and salience of that identity is influenced both by sociohistorical context (e.g., societal representations of group status) and individual experiences (e.g., parental socialization practices). For youth of color in particular, being a member of a racial and/or ethnic minority group can become especially meaningful in adolescence and contribute to developing views about the world; likewise, the process of exploring one’s identity may increase the salience of factors that are potentially linked to race (e.g., experiences with the police; Cooper et al. 2008; Cross and Cross 2008; Fiske and Taylor 1991).

In this article, we examine how processes of ethnic identity development are related to delinquent youths’ perceptions of police legitimacy and legal cynicism. We begin with an overview of research on legitimacy and legal cynicism, highlighting findings that are particularly relevant for African Americans and youth, and then move onto discuss recent research on ethnic identity development. We suggest that these domains of research lead to competing hypotheses about how the process of ethnic identity development—with respect to both identity exploration and identity affirmation—is related to youths’ views of the police as a legitimate institution as well as their perception of cynicism about the law. Our study focuses specifically on African American youth who have been identified as serious offenders, given that they are more likely to have police contact than their non-delinquent peers.

### Legitimacy and Legal Cynicism

Two important components of individuals’ beliefs about the police and the legal system are legal cynicism and legitimacy. Sampson and Bartusch (1998) suggest that legal cynicism refers to “anomie about law” (e.g., “laws are meant to be broken”), and they argue that it is distinct from tolerance of delinquency. They demonstrated that Black and Latino adults living in urban areas are less tolerant of deviance but also have greater legal cynicism compared to white adults. In contrast to legal cynicism, “legitimacy” refers to an individual’s perception that an authority figure (an individual or organization) is just or appropriate and entitled to be obeyed (Sunshine and Tyler 2003; Tyler 1997, 2006). Among the critical components underlying

perceived legitimacy are trustworthiness, respect, and neutrality of decision-making (Tyler 1997), and there is a strong connection between perceptions of fair treatment, or “procedural justice,” and perceptions of legitimacy (Fagan and Tyler 2005; Piquero et al. 2005; Rusinko et al. 1978; Sunshine and Tyler 2003; Tyler 1997, 2006). Both legal cynicism and legitimacy are critical beliefs about the law and have implications for deviant or compliant behavior (Fagan and Piquero 2007; Piquero et al. 2005) and informal social control (Silver and Miller 2004). Indeed, Tyler (1990) argues that, when people believe an authority figure lacks legitimacy, they are less likely to feel obligated to follow the rules and regulations of that authority figure. Thus, it is clear that a better understanding of factors related to these beliefs in deviant youth is needed.

Several studies are relevant to the current one and provide important background material. Carr et al. (2007) conducted interviews with a sample of Philadelphia youth and found that, across neighborhoods and ethnic groups, youth had fairly negative views of the police (e.g., lower legitimacy, higher cynicism). However, over half of the youth believed that stronger enforcement of laws and increased police presence were needed in order to reduce crime. This was true among both delinquent and non-delinquent youth and among those who had negative views of and/or experiences with the police. Importantly, the authors note that although most youth described negative interactions with the police, many of the African American and Latino youth made specific references to police injustice that they attributed to race/ethnicity.

Brunson and Miller (2006) reported that black youth in a poor urban area whom they interviewed believed they were often stopped by the police because of their race, and they considered this a form of harassment. As one teen stated, “they can’t see a black male these days having a good job. They always want to pull you over or search you to find something” (p. 624). Likewise, several youth described the unilateral suspicion towards young black men that prompted police to stop, search, and lock them up, even when they were doing something as innocuous as walking to school. The authors astutely note that, “whether because of their neighbourhood, their race, or some combination, the experience of ‘getting hassled’ remains a disproportionate burden [for young black men]” (p. 616).

While there are a handful of studies of youths’ perceptions of the police (Fagan and Tyler 2005), few have focused on perceptions among serious adolescent offenders. In a notable exception, Piquero et al. (2005) examined trajectories of legitimacy and legal cynicism in a sample of adolescent offenders. Using data collected every 6 months over an eighteen-month period, they identified four groups with different trajectories of legal cynicism, which were fairly stable and distinguished primarily by attitudes about

cynicism at Time 1. Notably, youth with the most prior arrests were also the most cynical, while youth with more favorable perceptions of procedural justice were the least cynical; however, being African American was not associated with a particular trajectory of legal cynicism. Five trajectories of perceived legitimacy were identified: four were stable and distinguished by mean-level differences at the first time-point, and the fifth group started off relatively high and increased slightly over time. Older youth, African Americans, and youth with more lock-ups were more likely to have the most negative perceptions of police legitimacy. As with legal cynicism, more positive perceptions of procedural justice predicted membership in the higher trajectory groups (i.e., more positive perceptions of legitimacy). These results partially support existing evidence indicating that African Americans generally have more negative attitudes toward the police compared to other groups; however, black youth were represented in all five trajectories of perceived legitimacy and legal cynicism, suggesting a need to better understand factors that shape the heterogeneity in these perceptions.

Although it appears that direct encounters with the police as well as the vicarious experiences of other African Americans play a role in shaping attitudes toward the police (Browning et al. 1994; Carr et al. 2007; Feagin 1991; Reitzel and Piquero 2006; Weitzer and Tuch 2005), researchers have rarely considered developmental processes that might also factor into how youth view the legal system. For black youth, we argue that one developmental process that might be centrally linked to perceptions of the police and the legal system is that of ethnic identity development, or the process of exploring and making meaning out of belonging to a particular ethnic group, which may make ethnicity-linked information more salient (Fiske and Taylor 1991). In the next section we summarize existing research on ethnic identity development and discuss connections between identity and perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors.

### Ethnic Identity Development

There is both conceptual and empirical evidence supporting a link between ethnic identity development and perceptions of one’s experiences. Indeed, several theories that have been supported empirically suggest that identity shapes beliefs about other groups (Social Identity Theory; Tajfel and Turner 1986), perceptions of identity-threat (Stigma-Induced Identity Threat; Major and O’Brien 2005), and coping outcomes (Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory; Spencer 1995). Cross and Cross (2008) highlight why this association can be especially meaningful in adolescence:

During adolescence, identity contestation and clarification become central. More so than at earlier points in development, youth take an active role in accommodating, assimilating, or rejecting ideas about understanding the world, other people, and themselves. It is during moratorium that [racial/ethnic/cultural] youth become hypersensitive to social messages about inferiority and stigmatization (p. 168).

Thus, it is evident that youths' experiences in the process of ethnic identity development have implications for how they view the world. Moreover, although juvenile offenders often are ignored in the literature on normative adolescent development, it would be incorrect to assume that being delinquent precludes youth from experiencing processes that are typical during this developmental period (e.g., Knight et al. 2009).

Identity exploration is often considered a hallmark of adolescence (Erikson 1968), and one aspect of this process that is particularly important for ethnic minority youth is the integration of a sense of ethnicity into their larger personal identity (Phinney 1990, 1993). Ethnic identity development is a process of change over time that revolves around attachment to a particular social group; relevant theories have incorporated constructs from both social and developmental psychology. Social categories (e.g., "African American," "teenager," "athlete") to which an individual belongs contribute to his or her self-image, and these memberships can serve as a source of self-esteem (Tajfel and Turner 1986). Furthermore, the meaning and salience of a given category can change over time. Although there are a variety of models of ethnic identity development, they generally describe a similar pattern: in the initial stage, ethnicity is not salient; this is followed by a period of exploration (or "moratorium") when adolescents begin learning more about their ethnic group. Ideally, a sense of ethnic identity is established that includes a secure sense of membership to one's ethnic group and an understanding of the value of having a positive ethnic or racial identity (Phinney 1993).

Ethnic identity is often assessed using the Multi-Group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM; Phinney 1992), which captures two domains: a sense of belonging to and pride in one's ethnic group, and the level of exploration and acceptance of one's ethnic identity. Researchers have argued that the "group affirmation/belonging" (affirmation) construct may reflect the affective component of ethnic identity, whereas the "exploration/achievement" (achievement) construct may be more related to the cognitive component of group membership (Greene et al. 2006; Pahl and Way 2006). This distinction is important, given evidence that the two subscales are differentially related to a variety of outcomes (Greene et al. 2006; Karcher and

Fischer 2004; Romero and Roberts 1998; Pahl and Way 2006). For example, Karcher and Fischer (2004) found that higher levels of ethnic identity achievement but not affirmation predicted "optimal" (i.e., more advanced) cognitive skills when youth discussed beliefs about other groups; moreover, higher levels of ethnic identity affirmation predicted lower levels of "functional" (i.e., less advanced) cognitive skills regarding intergroup understanding.

Several studies using the MEIM or a similar measure have explored concurrent associations between ethnic identity status and psychosocial or behavioral variables, including self-esteem (DuBois et al. 2002; Phinney et al. 1997), attitudes about fighting and violence (Arbona et al. 1999; French et al. 2006a), emotional adjustment (Seaton et al. 2006; Phinney and Kohatsu 1997; Yasui et al. 2004), attitudes toward other groups (Phinney et al. 2007), and perceptions of discrimination (Greene et al. 2006; Operario and Fiske 2001; Pahl and Way 2006; Romero and Roberts 1998). In general, a stronger sense of ethnic identity is related to more positive outcomes, particularly among African American adolescents.

Recently, changes in ethnic identity over time have been demonstrated empirically using longitudinal data (French et al. 2006b; Knight et al. 2009; Pahl and Way 2006; Syed and Azmitia 2009). French et al. (2006b) found that among an ethnically diverse sample of early adolescents, affirmation increased over 3 years while achievement remained stable. Among middle adolescents, both components of ethnic identity development increased over a three-year period. Pahl and Way's (2006) estimation of patterns of ethnic identity development among Black and Latino high school students over 3 years showed that an initial increase in achievement diminished over time. There was random variation between individuals in the growth of the affirmation component, suggesting that the pattern of change was not the same for every youth. Syed and Azmitia (2009) demonstrated that among college students, both achievement and affirmation increased over time. Finally, in delinquent sample of Mexican and Mexican-American adolescents, Knight et al. (2009) found that for most youth the affirmation component was fairly high and increased slightly over time, whereas the achievement component was slightly lower and remained stable. They also identified two additional trajectory groups: one in which both components were high and increased over time, and one in which both components were moderately low and stable over time. Taken together, these longitudinal studies suggest that for many youth both dimensions of ethnic identity increase from early through late adolescence and even into young adulthood, but the patterns of change can vary across individual youth. Moreover, average levels of affirmation and belonging appear to be higher than average levels of exploration and achievement.

In addition to these studies, a small number of researchers have examined how demographic, behavioral, or psychosocial variables predict changes in dimensions of ethnic identity over time (Syed and Azmitia 2009). However, little is known about how changes in ethnic identity are related to perceptions, behaviors, or overall well-being. An exception is a study by Pahl and Way (2006), which examined separate growth curves for the exploration and affirmation subscales of the MEIM in black and Latino high school students, and entered perceptions of perceived discrimination by peers and by adults as separate time-varying covariates. Youth whose exploration declined over time reported low perceived peer discrimination, while youth whose exploration was higher and remained stable over time reported high peer discrimination. Although discrimination by adults was significantly related to within-person changes in exploration, it did not predict changes in exploration over time. These results suggest that both the status of and changes in ethnic identity are linked to ones' beliefs and experiences.

### Ethnic Identity and Psychosocial Maturity

During adolescence, youth from low-status groups often show a heightened sensitivity to messages communicating the social status or stigmatization of their group (Cross and Cross 2008). Researchers who have distinguished between ethnic identity subscales note that during the exploration process leading to identity achievement, in-group/out-group distinctions, and subsequently perceptions of group stigma, may be more salient (Greene et al. 2006). The fact that it is the exploration subscale that has been consistently associated with awareness of stigma is potentially a reflection of the cognitive maturation that underlies identity development in adolescence (Karcher and Fischer 2004). In earlier developmental stages, children's cognitive immaturity may actually protect them from perceiving negative stigmas associated with their ethnic group. However, as youth are able to comprehend processes that are increasingly abstract and potentially more nuanced, they may become more susceptible to the harmful effects of these stigmas (Brown and Bigler 2005; Dupree et al. 1997; Spencer 1985, 1995; Spencer and Markstrom-Adams 1990).

Although it has been suggested that ethnic identity exploration represents the "cognitive" dimension of ethnic identity, this is best understood in terms of "cultural cognition" rather than a reflection of general underlying cognitive or intellectual abilities. As Spencer and Dornbusch (1990: p. 131) note: "With cognitive maturity, minority adolescents are keenly aware of the evaluations of their group made by the majority culture." This is notable,

because it suggests that identity-linked perceptions of the police and legal system may be driven by general increases in psychosocial maturity, in addition to (or in coincidence with) increases in ethnic group identification. The dimensions of psychosocial maturity described by Greenberger and Sørensen (1974) include a youth's ability to function individually and interpersonally and the ability to promote "social cohesion" (e.g., contributing to community, tolerance of difference). An adolescent's ability to understand nuanced messages conveying the inferior status of some groups compared to others, institutional discrimination, or even, as Brown and Bigler (2005) note, "racial profiling by security personnel and police departments" (p. 541) may be linked to increases in psychosocial maturity as well as ethnic identity, which could both contribute to perceptions of the legal system. Accordingly, the present study examines the links between ethnic identity development and attitudes about the police while accounting for levels of psychosocial maturity.

### Summary and Hypotheses

The focus of the present study is on examining the relationship between ethnic identity development and perceptions of the police in a sample of African American adolescent offenders. Recent cross-sectional evidence suggests that these constructs are related (Lee 2008; Lee et al. in press), but there have been no longitudinal studies examining ethnic identity development among delinquent black youth. Thus, we first describe trajectories of achievement and affirmation in a sample of delinquent African American youth to provide insight into whether these youth are undergoing changes similar to non-delinquent youth. Based on a recent study of Mexican and Mexican-American adolescent offenders (Knight et al. 2009), we expect that patterns of ethnic identity development in the current sample will mirror findings from normative samples, including higher affirmation compared to exploration, significant increases in affirmation over time, and smaller increases in exploration over time.

Our current understanding of links between ethnic identity development and perceptions or beliefs, as well as inextricable connections between race and the legal system, leads to competing hypothesis about how development in each dimension of ethnic identity could be associated with perceptions of police legitimacy and levels of legal cynicism. The first set of hypotheses is guided by a "collective oppositional attitudes" perspective on African Americans and the police. Several criminological and sociological studies suggest that negative attitudes towards the police are common in black communities, especially among young people (Anderson 1999) and particularly

among delinquent youth (Leiber et al. 1998). Moreover, stronger perceptions of ethnic group belonging have been associated with more negative attitudes towards others (Karcher and Fischer 2004). The alternate set of hypotheses represents a “developmental maturity” perspective informed by research showing positive links between ethnic identity development and prosocial attitudes, cognitive maturity, and optimal psychosocial functioning. As the present study represents a novel approach to considering developmental processes in relation to perceptions of the law, we present both sets of hypotheses.

The collective oppositional attitudes hypothesis suggests that African American youth who feel more connected to their racial/ethnic group (i.e., higher affirmation) and youth who explore the meaning of their ethnic group membership (i.e., higher achievement) will have a heightened sense of “oppositional values” (Anderson 1999; Leiber et al. 1998) including more negative perceptions of police legitimacy and higher legal cynicism. In contrast, the developmental maturity hypothesis suggests that increases in ethnic belonging and affirmation and increases in exploration and achievement will predict more positive attitudes toward the police, including higher perceived police legitimacy and lower legal cynicism. Importantly, the developmental maturity hypothesis also suggests that higher ethnic identity development reflects more general, underlying increases in cognitive and psychosocial maturity; in other words, viewing the police as a legitimate authority and expressing more normative, prosocial beliefs about the law could be a result of maturity that comes with age and experience. Increasing ethnic identity development, particularly in the domain of exploration and achievement, could reflect higher psychosocial maturity more generally. Thus, in examining the associations between ethnic identity development and attitudes about the legal system, we account for youths’ psychosocial maturity.

## Method

### Data

The data in these analyses are from the *Pathways to Desistance* project, a longitudinal study of juvenile offenders in two major cities designed to examine persistence in and desistance from criminal activity over time (Schubert et al. 2004). A total of 1,354 adjudicated youth ages 14–18 were recruited from the juvenile and adult court systems in Philadelphia and Phoenix; the present analyses only use data from the African American youth in the sample ( $n = 561$ ). For the first 3 years of the study beginning in 2000, in-person interviews were conducted at six-month intervals (e.g., baseline, 6, 12 months, etc.) and

then annually thereafter. The present study uses the semi-annual data collected from the baseline through the 36-month collection point for a total of seven time points.

Youth eligible for the study had been adjudicated delinquent or found guilty of a serious offense, and eligible crimes for enrollment into the study were overwhelmingly felony offenses. Due to the high number of male offenders with drug law violations, the proportion of male juveniles in the sample whose enrolling charge was a drug offense was limited to 15% in order to maintain a heterogeneous sample of offenders; however, all females meeting eligibility criteria were enrolled in the study. Once consent had been obtained from eligible youth and their parents or guardians, baseline interviews were conducted either in facilities, the juvenile’s home or another community location. Trained interviewers and participants sat side-by-side facing a computer, and questions were read aloud to avoid any problems caused by reading difficulties. For questions about sensitive topics, respondents had the option to enter their responses on a keypad out of the interviewer’s range of vision. All attempts were made to maintain privacy during the interview and participants were reminded that their responses were confidential under legal restrictions imposed on the study investigators by the U.S. Department of Justice. Youth were financially compensated for their participation unless this was prohibited by facility rules.

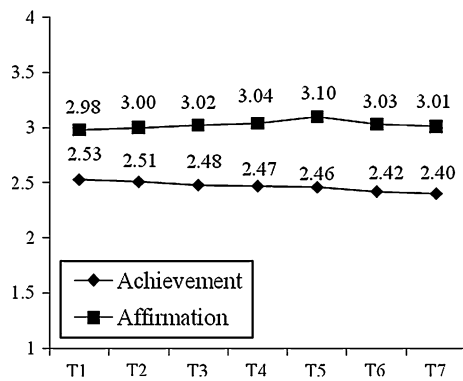
### Sample Characteristics

The average age of the 561 African American youth in the analytic sample was 16 years at baseline, and 88% of the sample was male. Most youth had mothers with at least some high school education (37.7%), or a diploma (37.1%). A smaller percentage had mothers with a business/trade school degree (13.6%) or a college degree (3%). Less than one percent of youths’ mothers had a post-collegiate degree, and 2% of youths’ mothers only attended grade school.

### Measures

#### *Ethnic Identity*

Items from the Multi-group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) were used to measure participants’ overall sense of ethnic identity (Phinney 1992). The scale contains 12 items to which participants respond on a 4-point scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree,” with higher scores indicating greater ethnic identification. Items from the measure assess feelings of “affirmation and belonging” (e.g., “I am happy that I am a member of the group I belong to”;  $\alpha = .86$ ), and “exploration and



**Fig. 1** Means of ethnic identity dimensions over time

achievement” (e.g., “I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs”;  $\alpha = .77$ ). Because the two subscales are differentially related to some outcomes, each subscale was analyzed separately. The means for each dimension over all seven waves are shown in Fig. 1.

#### Perceived Police Legitimacy

The legitimacy scale contained 6 items (e.g., “I have a great deal of respect for the police”, “Overall, the police are honest”, “People should support the police”) to which participants responded on a 4-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”, with higher scores indicating more positive perceptions of legitimacy ( $\alpha = .77$ ). The mean of these items was used in this analysis; the means at Time 1 ( $M = 2.17$ ,  $SD = .55$ ) and Time 7 ( $M = 2.22$ ,  $SD = .61$ ) were similar.

#### Legal Cynicism

The legal cynicism scale was adapted from Sampson and Bartusch (1998), who developed the items by modifying Srole’s (1956) anomie scale. The scale contained five items (e.g., “laws are meant to be broken”, “there are no right or wrong ways to make money”) to which participants responded on a scale from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 4 (“strongly agree”). Higher scores indicate higher levels of legal cynicism ( $\alpha = .80$ ). Mean scores at Time 1 ( $M = 1.99$ ,  $SD = .62$ ) and Time 7 ( $M = 2.01$ ,  $SD = .64$ ) were near the middle of the scale.

#### Procedural Justice

This measure assessed youths’ perceptions of fairness and equity connected with arrest processing (Tyler and Huo 2002) and was adapted from the approach taken by Tyler (1997). The mean of nineteen items was used to measure

participants’ perceptions of police treatment (Time 1  $M = 2.71$ ,  $SD = .49$ ; Time 7  $M = 2.84$ ,  $SD = .57$ ), and reliability was good ( $\alpha = .74$ ). Items tapped direct contact (e.g., “During my last encounter with the police, they treated me the way I thought I should be treated”), vicarious contact (e.g., “Of the people you know who have had contact with the police, how much of their story did the police let them tell?”), perceptions of police treatment based on demographic factors (e.g., “Police treat people differently depending on their gender”); and two items assessed a youth’s understanding of the finality of police decisions (e.g., “Even after the police make a decision about arresting me, there is nothing I can do to appeal it”). All items were measured on or converted to a five-point scale (“strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”), with higher scores indicating more positive perceptions of procedural justice.

#### Psychosocial Maturity

Ten items from the personal responsibility subscale of the Psychosocial Maturity Inventory (PSMI Form D; Greenberger et al. 1975) tapped a youth’s level of maturity with regard to *identity* (i.e., clarity of the self, consideration of life goals, e.g., “I change the way I feel and act so often that I sometimes wonder who the ‘real’ me is”). Participants responded on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” ( $\alpha = .78$ ). All items in the PSMI were reverse coded so that higher scores indicated more responsible behavior (Time 1  $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = .52$ ; Time 7  $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = .49$ ).

#### Self-Report of Offending

Given the target population in this study, individuals’ reports of offending were included in the analyses to control for their possible effects on police perceptions. The Self-Report of Offending (SRO; Huizinga et al. 1991) was adapted to measure youths’ accounts of involvement in antisocial and illegal activities. The 22 items included destroying property, stealing, selling drugs, carjacking, shooting, homicide, and physical assault ( $\alpha = .88$ ). Subjects reported on their participation in any of these behaviors and the frequency of occurrence during the 6 months prior to their interview. SRO can be indicated by a variety score (number of different types of acts endorsed) or a frequency score (total number of unique acts committed); given that frequency and variety scores are highly correlated ( $r > .90$ ) and that youth are unlikely to be “specialized” criminals, the variety score was used as the covariate in the analyses and is reported as a proportion with a range from 0 to 1 (Time 1  $M = .30$ ,  $SD = .19$ ; Time 7  $M = .04$ ,  $SD = .08$ ).

## Analytic Plan

Correlations of key variables are reported in Table 1 (a full set of correlations that includes ethnic identity at all time points is available by request from the first author). Correlations between the ethnic identity variables at each time point were all significant and ranged from  $r = .18$  to  $.41$  for achievement and from  $r = .23$  to  $.41$  for affirmation.

Analyses were conducted using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) in AMOS 16.0 (Arbuckle 2007). AMOS uses the maximum likelihood (ML) algorithm to estimate missing data. This approach provides several advantages over indirect methods of handling missing data (e.g., list-wise and pairwise deletion, single imputation) in that estimates are unbiased when data are missing at random, and less biased than other methods when data are not missing at random (Byrne 2010). Across all seven waves, the average percentage of complete data on key variables was 91% (ranging from 87.7 to 99.3%).

To assess goodness-of-fit, we used the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). CFI values of .95 or greater are considered good, while values above .90 are considered adequate; RMSEA values below .05 indicate a good model fit, and .05–.08 indicates a reasonable fit (Byrne 2010). The first step in the analyses was to determine the best-fitting growth model for each dimension of ethnic identity development (Curran and Hussong 2002). Next, the intercept and slope of each dimension were used to predict perceptions of legitimacy and legal cynicism at Wave 7, controlling for initial perceptions at Wave 1. Finally, these associations were examined after taking into account concurrent (e.g., Wave 7) levels of self-reported offending, procedural justice views, and psychosocial maturity. Age

and gender were not significant in any of the models are not included in the results. Figure 2 provides a schematic illustration of this model.

## Results

### Relations Between Key Variables

An examination of the bivariate correlations (Table 1) revealed a significant, positive association between each dimension of ethnic identity and perceived police legitimacy, while higher scores on the ethnic identity dimensions were related to lower legal cynicism at 36 months. As predicted by the literature, higher self-reported offending was associated with more negative perceptions of police legitimacy and higher legal cynicism. These associations also held in regression analyses not shown here: controlling for baseline reports of offending, lower perceived legitimacy and higher cynicism predicted higher SRO scores at 36 months. Finally, greater psychosocial maturity at 36 months was significantly associated with higher scores on the affirmation and belonging subscale at the same time point; however, contrary to expectations, PSMI scores were not significantly related to concurrent levels of ethnic identity exploration. Psychosocial maturity was also not correlated with perceived legitimacy of the police, but higher PSMI scores were significantly correlated with lower legal cynicism.

### Latent Growth Curves of Ethnic Identity Dimensions

With regard to achievement, baseline levels (i.e., the intercept) were significantly different from zero ( $b = 2.53$ ,

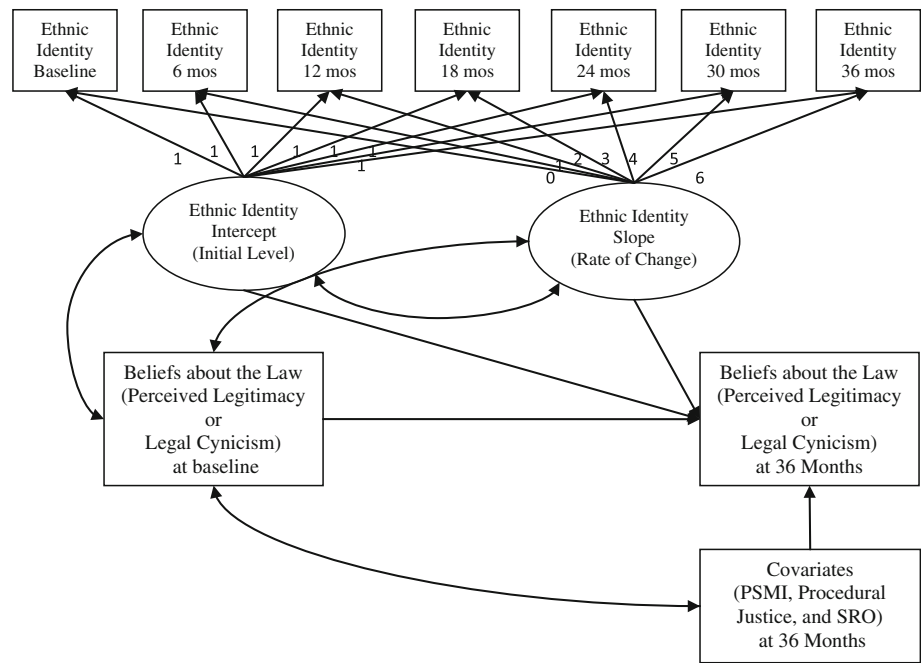
**Table 1** Correlations between key variables

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	T1 EIEA	–									
2	T7 EIEA	.18**	–								
3	T1 EIAB	.58**	.17**	–							
4	T7 EIAB	.13**	.46**	.23**	–						
5	T1 Legit	.04	–.00	.04	.04	–					
6	T7 Legit	.09*	.10*	.10*	.16*	.36**	–				
7	T1 Cynic	–.06	–.05	–.05	–.06	–.19**	–.14**	–			
8	T7 Cynic	–.03	–.16*	.02	–.18**	–.05	–.15**	.30**	–		
9	T7 PSMI	.12**	.07	.11*	.19**	.05	.01	–.18**	–.44**	–	
10	T7 ProJus	.01	–.08	.00	–.04	.23**	.47**	–.11*	–.10*	.03	–
11	T7 SRO	–.02	–.08	–.02	–.07	–.03	–.17*	.12**	.28**	–.14**	–.15**

*Note.* EIEA, ethnic identity exploration/achievement; EIAB, ethnic identity affirmation and belonging; Legit, perceived police legitimacy; Cynic, legal cynicism; PSMI, psychosocial maturity-identity; ProJus, procedural justice; SRO, self-reported offending

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

**Fig. 2** Schematic illustration of the structural equation model predicting youths’ beliefs about the law from the intercept and slope of ethnic identity exploration and affirmation. For simplicity, error terms and arrows depicting covariance between the latent ethnic identity factors and covariates are not shown. This model was tested separately for each dimension of ethnic identity and each domain of beliefs about the law. Note. PSMI, psychosocial maturity; SRO, self-reported offending



SE = .02,  $p < .001$ ) and varied across individuals (var. = .10,  $p < .001$ ). In terms of slope, there was an average decrease in achievement over time ( $b = -.02$ , SE = .004,  $p < .001$ ), which also varied significantly between individual youth (variance = .003,  $p < .001$ ). This two-factor growth curve model was found to have the best fit for the estimation of change in achievement over time [CFI = .963; RMSEA = .043 (CI = .025; .061)]. The addition of a quadratic term did not improve model fit nor was it consistent with the general mean structure showing a linear decline over time. There was a small but significant covariance between the intercept and slope ( $Cov_{IS} = -.006$ ,  $p < .01$ ), indicating that higher initial levels of exploration were related to a larger decline in exploration over time.

For affirmation, a quadratic model fit the data best [CFI = .972; RMSEA = .040 (CI = .018; .059)]. The intercept indicated that average baseline levels of affirmation were significantly different from zero ( $b = 2.97$ , SE = .02,  $p < .001$ ), and variation between individuals was also significant (var. = .10,  $p < .001$ ). The slope factor showed that affirmation increased over time ( $b = .05$ , SE = .01,  $p < .001$ ), and individual variation was also significant (var. = .03,  $p < .001$ ). Finally, there was a slight deceleration in the incline of affirmation over time, as evidenced by the significant quadratic parameter ( $b = -.01$ , SE = .002,  $p < .01$ ), which also varied across individuals (var. = .001,  $p < .001$ ). Covariance between intercept and slope indicated that higher levels of affirmation were related to a smaller increase over time ( $Cov_{IS} = -.02$ ,  $p < .05$ ). There was also significant covariance between the slope and quadratic terms ( $Cov_{SQ} = -.004$ ,  $p < .001$ ), meaning that youth with a

larger increase in affirmation/belonging over time evinced a slower rate of deceleration in these symptoms compared to their peers.

### Perceptions of Police Legitimacy

The growth curves were then incorporated into larger structural models predicting beliefs about the police (Fig. 2) to assess the collective opposition versus developmental maturity hypotheses. The first suggests that increased ethnic-group exploration and affirmation would make collective negative attitudes towards the police more salient among black youth, while the second suggests that ethnic identity processes coincide with general cognitive and psychosocial maturation linked to more normative or prosocial beliefs about the law. In the first model (Table 2), the intercept and slope of the ethnic identity dimension were used to predict perceptions of legitimacy at 36 months while controlling for initial perceptions of legitimacy. Youth with higher achievement and affirmation perceived the police as more legitimate, but growth in each dimension was not related to legitimacy.

In the second model (Table 2), procedural justice, self-reported offending, and psychosocial maturity were added as covariates. As expected, youth who reported more positive perceptions of procedural justice also believed the police to be more legitimate, but psychosocial maturity was not related to legitimacy. Higher self-reported offending predicted lower perceptions of legitimacy. Finally, even after accounting for these other factors, the intercept of each dimension of ethnic identity had a significant, positive association with legitimacy.

**Table 2** Structural equation models predicting perceptions of police legitimacy at 36 months

	EI exploration & achievement				EI affirmation & belonging			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	B(SE)	$\beta$	B(SE)	$\beta$	B(SE)	$\beta$	B(SE)	$\beta$
EI intercept	.25* (.10)	.13	.26** (.09)	.13	.24** (.11)	.12	.32** (.11)	.16
EI slope	.70 (.76)	.06	.88 (.69)	.08	-.22 (.28)	-.06	-.16 (.27)	-.04
Perceived legitimacy at baseline	.39*** (.05)	.35	.29*** (.04)	.26	.38*** (.05)	.34	.30*** (.04)	.27
PSMI			-.05 (.05)	-.04			-.07 (.05)	-.05
Procedural justice			.42*** (.04)	.40			.42*** (.04)	.39
SRO			-.78*** (.30)	-.10			-.97*** (.30)	-.13
Fit statistics	CFI = .967		CFI = .970		CFI = .965		CFI = .966	
	RMSEA = .035 (CI = .018; .051)		RMSEA = .031 (CI = .016; .045)		RMSEA = .039 (CI = .022; .056)		RMSEA = .034 (CI = .020; .048)	

Note. PSMI, psychosocial maturity; SRO, self-reported offending; CFI, comparative fit index; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; CI, 90% confidence interval

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

### Legal Cynicism

A slightly different picture emerged for legal cynicism. The first models used the latent parameters of ethnic identity to predict legal cynicism at 36 months, accounting for initial levels of cynicism (Table 3). Higher levels of achievement were associated with lower levels of cynicism; likewise, increases in achievement (i.e., the slope) predicted lower cynicism. In the case of affirmation, the intercept was negatively associated with cynicism but there was only a trend toward significance. The affirmation slope was also negatively associated with cynicism, meaning increases in this dimension predicted lower cynicism.

When covariates were added to the model, several changes resulted (Table 3). First, psychosocial maturity had a significant, negative association with legal cynicism: more mature youth had lower cynicism. After taking this into account, the intercept of achievement was no longer significant, but the slope effect remained. In the case of affirmation, the additional covariates completely accounted for the former association, and neither parameter was significant. Finally, in these models procedural justice was not related to legal cynicism, and self-reported offending had a small but significant positive association with cynicism, indicating that youth who reported more crime were more cynical about the law.

**Table 3** Structural equation models predicting legal cynicism at 36 months

	EI exploration & achievement				EI affirmation & belonging			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	B(SE)	$\beta$	B(SE)	$\beta$	B(SE)	$\beta$	B(SE)	$\beta$
EI intercept	-.24* (.11)	-.12	-.12 (.10)	-.06	-.20 <sup>†</sup> (.12)	-.10	-.04 (.11)	-.01
EI slope	-2.165** (.83)	-.19	-2.10** (.77)	-.18	-1.03** (.34)	-.24	-.36 (.27)	-.09
Legal cynicism at baseline	.29*** (.04)	.29	.20*** (.04)	.20	.27*** (.05)	.27	.20*** (.04)	.20
PSMI			-.49*** (.05)	-.38			-.47*** (.05)	-.37
Procedural justice			-.06 (.04)	-.05			-.05 (.04)	-.04
SRO			1.41*** (.32)	.18			1.53*** (.31)	.19
Fit statistics	CFI = .971		CFI = .977		CFI = .959		CFI = .975	
	RMSEA = .033 (CI = .015; .049)		RMSEA = .027 (CI = .008; .041)		RMSEA = .042 (CI = .025; .058)		RMSEA = .029 (CI = .012; .043)	

Note. PSMI, psychosocial maturity; SRO, self-reported offending; CFI, comparative fit index; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; CI, 90% confidence interval

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

## Discussion

Research on juvenile offenders commonly focuses on behaviors that facilitate the maintenance of or decline in criminal behavior. While the importance of studying offending behavior is readily acknowledged, the present study departs from traditions in the literature on juvenile offenders by examining their views of the police. Gaining insight into this perspective is essential when one considers that, for delinquent youth, police contact may have long-lasting implications for future experiences. Moreover, the emphasis placed on offending behavior often takes precedence over any consideration of how normative developmental processes are manifested among delinquent youth. In the handful of studies on youths' attitudes towards the police (e.g., Brunson and Miller 2006; Carr et al. 2007; Fagan and Tyler 2005; Fine et al. 2003; Leiber et al. 1998; Piquero et al. 2005; Rusinko et al. 1978) along with the larger body of work on adults' attitudes (e.g., Brown and Benedict 2002; Browning et al. 1994; Feagin 1991; Reitzel and Piquero 2006; Weitzer and Tuch 1999, 2005), African Americans are often found to perceive the police and legal system negatively, suggesting a "collective" oppositional attitude toward the police; however, this research does not consider developmental processes in adolescence that may be linked to youths' beliefs.

Thus, in the present study, we examined the process of ethnic identity development in shaping perceptions of the police among a large sample of African American juvenile offenders. The relevance of ethnicity in black youths' views of the police is supported by the finding that higher ethnic identity achievement and affirmation are related to more positive perceptions of police legitimacy, even after accounting for initial perceptions of legitimacy, procedural justice, and other related factors. Additionally, black youth who spend more time making meaning of their ethnic group membership (i.e., increased exploration/achievement) report lower legal cynicism. These findings contradict the "collective oppositional attitudes" hypothesis and suggest that although African Americans may hold more negative views of the police compared to other racial/ethnic groups, increased exploration, salience, and affirmation of group membership does not create animosity towards the legal system. In fact, our results suggest that greater ethnic group identification and pride are related to positive attitudes about the legitimacy of the police and the law, even in a sample of serious offenders (i.e., a "developmental maturity" view). This finding is consistent with a large body of literature showing that a stronger ethnic identity is associated with prosocial attitudes and greater well-being in multiple domains (DuBois et al. 2002; Phinney et al. 1997, 2007; Seaton et al. 2006).

Importantly, studies of ethnic identity development have been criticized for a failure to incorporate other aspects of cognitive, social, or emotional development that may jointly influence developmental trajectories and/or associations with outcomes of interest (Torres and Baxter Magolda 2004); we addressed this by accounting for psychosocial maturity in our analyses. Notably, levels of psychosocial maturity were not related to perceptions of legitimacy, which may be explained by evidence indicating some stability in perceived legitimacy (e.g., Piquero et al. 2005) as well as the strong connection to beliefs about procedural justice. However, psychosocial maturity was a strong predictor of legal cynicism. This association is not unexpected when one considers that the cynicism measure taps into one's personal sense of norms and standards about the law, and that higher psychosocial maturity is indicative of a stronger sense of social responsibility.

In examining the relationship between psychosocial maturity and ethnic identity, several interesting findings emerged. First, we expected that psychosocial maturity would be more strongly related to ethnic identity exploration than to affirmation and belonging; however, an examination of the correlations revealed that the latter dimension had small but significant correlations at each time point, ranging from  $r = .11$  to  $.20$ , while correlations with identity achievement were generally not significant. Next, after entering psychosocial maturity into the models predicting legal cynicism, the intercept and slope of ethnic identity affirmation were no longer significant while the slope for ethnic identity achievement remained significant. This suggests that psychosocial maturity may be a stronger mediator of the relationship between ethnic group affirmation and views of the law, while ethnic identity exploration and achievement are somewhat independent of psychosocial maturity. One possible explanation for this finding is that some of the items in the affirmation and belonging component may actually tap into one's sense of resolution or commitment in addition to group pride and confirmation of membership (Umaña-Taylor et al. 2004). Youth who spend more time thinking about what it means to be a member of their ethnic group may also have more mature views of other aspects of life, including the police; thus, perhaps ethnic identity exploration should be considered as a more specific form of psychosocial maturity that has particular ramifications for race- or identity-linked experiences. Whatever the explanation, our results suggest that more research on links between the development of ethnic identity and psychosocial maturity is needed.

The finding that indicators of ethnic identity and psychosocial maturity predict more positive views of the police, even in a sample of serious adolescent offenders, resonates with research conducted by Carr et al. (2007). Notably, even among youth in their study who viewed the

police negatively, most reported that in order to reduce crime the best solution would be to increase police presence in their neighborhood. Although this “pro-criminal justice” perspective seems to contradict negative dispositions toward the police, the authors argue that it provides support for a “cultural attenuation” model of social control in which youth may be cynical about the police, but at the same time would like to see reductions in neighborhood crime and feel that the police are necessary for this to occur. This demonstrates the complexity involved in youths’ views about law enforcement; even among delinquent youth, there may be contradictions in how they view the police.

This is one of few studies to consider how ethnic identity development, a process that is normative for adolescents of color, is manifested in a non-normative sample of seriously delinquent youth (cf. Knight et al. 2009). As in other studies, average levels of affirmation and belonging were higher than average levels of exploration and achievement. Thus, not only do the results indicate that changes in ethnic identity exploration mirror findings from studies of normative samples of African American youth (French et al. 2006b; Greene et al. 2006; Syed and Azmitia 2009), they provide additional support for considering dimensions of ethnic identity separately. On average, most youth showed decreases in ethnic identity exploration over time, but overall scores on the affirmation and belonging measure were high and increased for several months before beginning to decline.

The two dimensions of ethnic identity assessed in this study—achievement and affirmation—are derived from scores on the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM), which was developed largely from an Eriksonian perspective of identity formation (Phinney 1992). The MEIM was selected for the larger study as a tool to assess ethnic identity because it can be used with multiple ethnic groups, including African Americans; however, the MEIM does not provide insight into the personal meaning and significance that individuals place on race, often referred to as racial centrality and salience (Sellers et al. 1997), which are also related to perceptions and attitudes (Sellers and Shelton 2003). Additionally, although the results from a sample of seriously delinquent youth may not generalize to other adolescents, they do provide unique insight into their views of the police, which were quite heterogeneous. Moreover, the trajectories of ethnic identity development do mirror findings from normative samples.

Although informative and among the first to examine the inter-relationships between ethnic identity and perceptions of the legal system among a sample of serious youthful offenders, this study has several limitations. First, while the use of an offender sample provided a complement to previous studies, the absence of a non-offender comparison

group makes it unclear whether offenders are different from non-offenders on the key independent variables of interest. For example, offenders may come to the table with a certain view of the law and legal system as well as their ethnic identity, which may influence not only how these two concepts are interrelated, but also how they influence criminal offending over the life course. Second, our focus on adolescence does not allow us to ask whether the patterns uncovered here also continue into adulthood. It may be that with the entrance of early adulthood, youths not only age out of crime, but also begin to hold stronger beliefs associated with the law and legal system and have come to grips with their self-view of race/ethnicity. Studying these perceptions over time, within and across individuals, is in order. Third, the present study conceptualized the link between identity development and perceptions in a particular direction (i.e., identity → perceptions); however, it is possible that perceptions of and experiences with the legal system could influence trajectories of identity development, and future research should investigate the potential bidirectional relations between these processes. Finally, it will be of interest to examine how social context influences the interrelationships investigated by our study. For example, notions of justice and perceptions of race (and corresponding attitudes of each) have been previously linked to the neighborhoods in which persons reside (Anderson 1999). As such, it would be useful to examine how these perceptions form and vary across neighborhood context (cf. Matsueda et al. 2006). The same can be said for the adolescent peer context. Because peer attitudes and behavior are relevant for youth, future inquiry should examine how adolescents’ attitudes regarding the legal system and ethnic identity are influenced by their peers. In general, our findings serve only as a preliminary step in identifying the myriad ways in which racial/ethnic group identification is connected to beliefs about the law above and beyond group membership alone, and it is clear that additional research on youths’ attitudes towards the law that is informed by a developmental perspective is warranted.

Importantly, the present study incorporates the social position variable of race and the social mechanism of police treatment, which are especially relevant for seriously delinquent black adolescents (Garcia Coll et al. 1996). Examining processes of ethnic identity development as they are related to perceptions of the police within an African American sample provides valuable insight into how these processes operate. Indeed, when considering low-income, urban black youths’ experiences with the police, the intersection of social class, race and culture cannot be overlooked (Sampson and Wilson 1995). Moreover, consideration of normative developmental processes in high-risk samples like juvenile offenders can have

implications for rehabilitation (Spencer and Jones-Walker 2004).

Interviews with youth of color in urban settings indicate that many of them do not feel secure in the presence of the police. Youth indicate that “more police makes it less safe; anything can happen with the police around,” and some feel the police actually contribute to criminal behavior, saying that “more police may mean lower rates of murder but more police brutality” (Fine et al. 2003, p. 2). Fine et al. (2003) suggest that such experiences may make youth feel alienated from adult society. If encounters with the police shape views of police legitimacy, and if more positive views of legitimacy lead to an increased likelihood of compliance with the law, then additional research is needed on the correlates of legal socialization like ethnic identity development.

Importantly, our findings converge with other research on adolescent development demonstrating that ethnic identity exploration, achievement, affirmation and pride have positive implications for youths’ prosocial attitudes and general well-being. Additionally, existing research shows that dimensions of racial identity moderate influences on violent behavior such as racial discrimination (Caldwell et al. 2004), and researchers have suggested that ethnic identity should be considered a protective factor with respect to violence in adolescence (Soriano et al. 2004). Programs focused on promoting racial and/or ethnic identity exploration and racial/ethnic group pride may disrupt negative trajectories of delinquent behavior. Indeed, existing research provides evidence that culturally-grounded interventions can promote levels of empathy and decrease the likelihood of violent behavior among African American early adolescents (Jagers et al. 2007). Our findings suggest that an emphasis on promoting positive ethnic identity development has the potential to promote attitudes and beliefs about the police that are associated with compliance with the law, and more work should be conducted to assess whether this would enhance the effectiveness of rehabilitation efforts and promote desistance from crime.

Given the salience of issues of race, gender and social class for adolescents, the dearth of research that examines both individual processes of development and contextual variables like racial/ethnic group membership will ultimately undermine attempts to provide effective intervention and rehabilitation services (Spencer and Jones-Walker 2004). We hope that future research will continue to bridge traditional studies of developmental trajectories in adolescence and studies of delinquency, with an emphasis on the unique sociohistorical and contextual influences and developmental processes that shape the perceptions and experiences of both delinquent and non-delinquent youth.

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