CRIMINOLOGY

# CYNICAL STREETS: NEIGHBORHOOD SOCIAL PROCESSES AND PERCEPTIONS OF CRIMINAL *IN*JUSTICE*

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*Studies have found that African Americans are more likely to perceive racial biases in the criminal justice system than are those from other racial groups. There is a limited understanding of how neighborhood social processes affect variation in these perceptions. This study formulates a series of hypotheses focused on whether perceived racial biases in the criminal justice system or perceptions of injustice vary as a function of levels of moral and legal cynicism as well as of adverse police–citizen encounters. These hypotheses are tested with multilevel regression models applied to data from a sample of 689 African Americans located in 39 neighborhoods. Findings from the regression models indicate that the positive association between structural disadvantage and perceptions of injustice is accounted for by moral and legal cynicism. Furthermore, adverse police encounters significantly increase perceptions of injustice; controlling for these encounters reduces the strength of the association between cynicism and injustice perceptions. Finally, the findings reveal that cynicism intensifies the association between adverse police encounters and perceptions of criminal injustice. The results are discussed in terms of their implications for research regarding perceived biases in the criminal justice system and neighborhood social processes.*

Within advanced democracies, the enforcement power of the state hinges on the public support it receives. For the state to secure voluntary compliance from the public, it is necessary for it to be perceived as morally credible (Erickson and Parent, 2007). But concerns about the unlawful exercise of state power surface in national debates involving

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controversial policing tactics, mass incarceration, and racial profiling. African Americans have a long history of being unfairly stopped, questioned, and searched by the police and subject to more severe punishments than people from other racial groups (Brunson and Gau, 2014: 63; Spohn, 2014). In fact, claims about unwarranted police treatment of African Americans have recently sparked civil unrest in several American cities, including Baltimore, Maryland, and Ferguson, Missouri. Such acute perceptions of *racial in*justice in the application of the law reflect public concerns that the police are not exercising their authority in accord with principles of equity and impartiality (Hagan and Albonetti, 1982; Shedd and Hagan, 2006). Regardless of their *objective basis*, these perceptions can fracture critical ties between the police and the public that are necessary for the co-production of public safety (Brunson, 2007).

A growing amount of criminological evidence reveals that perceived biases in the criminal justice system vary closely with dimensions of social stratification. People located in disadvantaged structural positions are more likely to express greater doubts about the fairness of the criminal justice system (Jacob, 1971; Unnever, Gabbidon, and Higgins, 2011) than are people from advantaged structural positions. Specifically, African Americans tend to perceive racial disparities in arrest, incarceration, and capital punishment as a reflection of biases in the functioning of the system and social institutions more broadly (Hagan, Shedd, and Payne, 2005; Walker, Spohn, and DeLone, 2007). These perceptions are not uniformly held among African Americans, and the sources of this within-group variation are not well understood. Furthermore, we have good reasons to believe that perceptions of injustice have an ecological basis. Perhaps the intersection of racial and structural deprivation produces neighborhood processes that lead people to hold stronger misgivings about the fairness of the criminal justice system. According to Hagan, Shedd, and Payne (2005: 400), more attention should be directed at the "community-connected experiences and cognitive processes that accompany changing perceptions of criminal injustice." Although prior work has forged a critical foundation, it is important to move beyond the question of *whether* neighborhoods affect perceptions of criminal injustice to the more crucial question of *how* they matter.

Strands of theoretical research have emphasized the role of neighborhood cultural mechanisms with particular emphasis on norms pertaining to the viability of formal law and conventional rules (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003). Within this vein, various conceptual models imply that coexisting elements of moral and legal cynicism form an emergent contextual mechanism through which structural deprivation generates perceptions of criminal injustice. This process can undermine the procedural qualities of police–citizen interactions leading people to perceive biases in the criminal justice system that are systematically structured along racial dimensions. Prior research has underscored the significance of "place-based encounters" with the police in generating unfavorable dispositions toward legal authorities (Weitzer, 2000), while illuminating the impact of cynicism on public engagement with legal authorities (Kirk and Matsuda, 2011). The purpose of the current study is to examine whether perceptions of racial biases in the criminal justice system develop at the intersection of neighborhood processes and negative encounters with legal authorities.

*First,* we contend that neighborhood disadvantage fosters a culture of moral and legal cynicism. *Second,* we expect that negative or unfavorable police–citizen encounters are more likely to occur in neighborhoods with greater levels of cynicism than they are in other neighborhoods. Consequently, these encounters might generate perceptions of

racial biases in the criminal injustice. *Third,* we argue that neighborhood cynicism functions as a moderating mechanism, intensifying the association between negative police encounters and perceptions of injustice. Where cynicism is pervasive, unfavorable police–citizen encounters will become more strongly associated with perceived racial biases in the criminal justice system. These predictions are tested with data from a sample of 689 African American young adults.

Altogether, the current study's findings will not only contribute to substantive research but will inform ongoing policy discussions about police–citizen relations in disenfranchised communities. Perceptions of inequitable police treatment can set in motion several adverse outcomes. For example, people who perceive racial biases in the legal system tend to disengage from the police and other civic institutions, as well as come to question whether authorities "are in a position to dictate proper conduct" (Jackson et al., 2012: 1053), which ultimately creates a chasm between racial minorities and the police (Drakulich and Crutchfield, 2013). Furthermore, the spread of retaliatory violence is traceable to breakdowns in the perceived impartiality of the courts and police (Rosenfeld, Jacobs, and Wright, 2003). Given the burden of these issues on African American communities, there is a strong need to understand how perceptions of criminal injustice are ecologically structured.

In the next section, we describe research on the normative and rational basis of the law, followed by work on neighborhood processes, racial inequalities, and police–citizen encounters. We then present the study hypotheses, the methodology, and results; after which, we describe the study's potential implications for future research.

## BACKGROUND

### RACIAL AND ECOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CRIMINAL INJUSTICE PERCEPTIONS

Several lines of research have suggested that neighborhood processes and locally structured police experiences are integral to understanding how people come to comprehend the functioning of the criminal justice system. As Hagan and Albonetti (1982: 330) theorized, "perceptions of justice are determined in large part by the times and places … in the social structure from which they are derived." Likewise, Fagan (2008: 128) contended that the modern criminal justice system suffers from a "crisis of legitimacy"—marked by hostilities—because the police, and the laws they enforce, often exist in tension with local neighborhood values particularly in distressed areas. Similarly, other accounts reveal that these challenges are acute in minority neighborhoods where "the police are often on the streets, but they are not always considered to have the community's best interests at heart" (Anderson, 1999: 320).

Empirical work has found that African Americans and people from lower class areas are more likely to distrust legal institutions (Unnever, Gabbidon, and Higgins, 2011), as well as to perceive the criminal justice system as partial and biased against minority groups (Drakulich and Crutchfield, 2013; Schuck, 2013; Weitzer and Tuch, 2005), than are those from higher class areas. A variety of evidence documents how these perceptions are not constant within groups; rather, important variation exists among African Americans that is correlated with dimensions of stratification (Hagan, Shedd, and Payne, 2005). Neighborhood contextual conditions, however, seem to affect injustice perceptions somewhat independent of racial status (Brunson and Gau, 2014: 364). For instance, Jacob's (1971)

study of three neighborhoods suggested that racial differences in perceptions of injustice are partly a function of racial variation in ecological circumstances (see also Weitzer, 2000). Several studies have also found that racial differences in perceptions of the police are attenuated once differences in neighborhood characteristics are statistically controlled (Dunham and Alpert, 1988; e.g., Reisig and Parks, 2000; Wu, Sun, and Triplett, 2009), although these effects are not entirely explained (MacDonald et al., 2007). Altogether, perceptions of racial biases in the justice system are acute among individuals located in marginalized and impoverished urban environments.

The aforementioned research has tended to agree with the assumption that an ecological structuring to injustice perceptions exists. Surprisingly, this work has not explicitly identified the theoretical constructs through which neighborhood effects are transmitted (Hagan, Shedd, and Payne, 2005; Shedd and Hagan, 2006). Nor has research up to this point defined precisely how such mechanisms come to influence individual variation in perceptions of injustice.

## STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY AND MORAL AND LEGAL CYNICISM

Cultural processes have reemerged in the criminological and sociological literatures as significant contextual processes in explanations for crime, police activities, and public engagement with the law (Berg and Stewart, 2013; Berg et al., 2012). Recent stratification research has delineated the institutional and economic conditions that contribute to the formation of emergent legal cynicism particularly in the context of distressed neighborhoods (Sampson and Bean, 2006). Such sentiments of cynicism are fostered by an accumulation of strained experiences with social institutions and by material deprivation, as well as by exposure to others who are impoverished, among other deleterious facets of structural inequality (Massey and Denton, 1993). More specifically, residents of impoverished areas struggle to marshal public services to improve their local communities, and many possess limited material resources. When faced with these conditions, residents come to not only distrust social institutions and express general pessimism about government authority but also to develop attenuated commitments to abstract legal rules (Kapsis, 1978; Ross, Mirowsky, and Pribesh, 2001). Such deprivation generates an adaptive climate of cynicism that becomes contextually embedded within communities (Suttles, 1968). Where moral and legal cynicism is pervasive, the "rules of dominant society (and hence the legal system) are no longer binding or too weak to warrant trust" (Sampson and Bartusch, 1998: 784–5). As Sampson (2015: 201) wrote, such acute "cynicism is socially corrosive."

Kirk and Papachristos (2011: 1207) elaborated on this line of research when they positioned legal cynicism as a "frame through which individuals interpret the functioning and usefulness of the law and its agents."[1] Thus, moral and legal cynicism is a form of cultural

1. Anderson (1999) suggested that some residents of impoverished African American neighborhoods are cynical of others as a result of antagonistic encounters with criminal justice authorities. Consistent with other scholars, he also suggested that distrust and cynicism develop in reaction to acute structural inequalities. Generally, however, Anderson drew vague references to the basis and implications of cynicism. According to Anderson, hostile police–citizen relationships are instrumental to the emergence of the "street code." The content of the street code differs, however, from that of moral and legal cynicism.

knowledge, providing people with shared schemas or mental shortcuts that process incoming information (DiMaggio, 1997). Also, scholars have suggested that legal cynicism constitutes a developmental process involving "legal socialization" that is "embedded in a set of interlocking social contexts" (Fagan and Tyler, 2005: 222), which has implications for how people engage legal authorities. Under conditions of cynicism, people are less likely to resolve everyday problems according to concrete legal rules. Furthermore, their obligations to the law and conventional standards are more fluid because of the view that such rules are not sensitive to the "exigencies" of their daily lives (Kapsis, 1978; Sampson and Bartusch, 1998). In fact, studies have found that several adverse outcomes, including antisocial behavior (Fagan and Tyler, 2005), compliance with the law (Reisig, Wolfe, and Holtfreter, 2011), public cooperation with law enforcement (Kirk and Matsuda, 2011), and unfavorable dispositions toward the police (Carr, Napolitano, and Keating, 2007), all vary with elements of moral or legal cynicism.

Other conceptual models of state power and legitimacy also seem to support the potential linkages between moral and legal cynicism and the perceptions of criminal injustice, emphasizing the normative basis of legal authority. Briefly, theorists have suggested that governments cultivate support from their citizens to secure voluntary compliance with the law because the threat of coercion alone is too ineffective to bring order (Jackson et al., 2012; Tankebe, 2013). Others have argued that governments create social order not through the threat of punishment but "through indirectly fostering cooperation among local actors" (Erickson and Parent, 2007: 246).

Similarly, a normative perspective from the legitimacy framework assumes that order is more common when people believe that the law "ought to be obeyed"; thus, there is an obligation to follow the rules *because they are laws* (Beetham, 1991; see Bottoms and Tankebe, 2012; Papachristos, Meares, and Fagan, 2012: 401).[2] Other scholars have also argued that the law must be consistent with people's *internal sense of right and wrong* (Jackson et al., 2012: 1055). For example, in his classic study of cattle rustling, Ellickson (1994: 141) observed that "people look primarily to norms, not to law, to determine substantive entitlements." Jackson and Bradford (2009) found that people accept the right of the police to dictate their behavior when they believe that legal institutions function according to the shared moral purpose of citizens. When the police act in contradiction to community values, they might remain technically proficient at enforcing crime but do so without the moral assent of the public (Beetham, 1991; Tankebe, 2013). As Tyler (1990) stressed, people tend to obey the laws not out of fear of punishment but because they feel that laws are morally appropriate. Survey research, in fact, has found that respondents tend to cooperate with the police when the actions of the police reflect their own values (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003: 158–9). Likewise, other scholars have noted that legal authorities can create hostilities, inadvertently or otherwise, because they seem "insensitive to the issues that define justice from the public's point of view" (Fagan, 2008: 128). Altogether, the degree of support for the normative thrust of legal rules can vary within societies and across neighborhoods (Berg and Stewart, 2013; Berg et al., 2012). And so when a shared belief in the viability of the law and moral ethics does not exist—encoded

2. Various lines of research on "audience legitimacy" (Bottoms and Tankebe, 2012) have posited somewhat differing notions regarding the conditions that both constitute and emerge from the concept of legitimacy (Herbert, 2006; for extensive review, see Tankebe, 2014).

in moral and legal cynicism—this may produce negative dispositions toward legal authorities, causing people to question the fairness of these authorities.

## MORAL AND LEGAL CYNICISM AND PERCEPTIONS OF CRIMINAL INJUSTICE

The foregoing research implies several assumptions about the extent to which cynicism potentially contributes to the ecological structuring of perceptions of injustice. As suggested earlier, we contend that pervasive moral and legal cynicism leads *directly* to perceptions of biases in the criminal justice system because it causes people to question whether police authority is justifiable and thus aligned with local values and situational exigencies (Tyler, 2006). Furthermore, we reason that collective cynicism operates *indirectly* through its corrosive effects on interactions with the police. Specifically, moral and legal cynicism undermines the quality of police–citizen encounters, which thereby strengthens people's perceptions of racial biases in the criminal justice system. These patterns are theoretically anticipated in conceptual models of policing. For instance, Klinger's (1997) negotiated order framework theorizes linkages between collective perceptions of ecological disorder to variation in police comportment rules (see also Kane, 2002: 873). Similarly, Werthman and Piliavin (1966) described a condition of "ecological contamination" in which the police assume that all persons in "bad" neighborhoods possess the moral liability of the place itself. Although these models articulate different assumptions, they share the general perspective that neighborhood mechanisms are important determinants of policing practices.

## MORAL AND LEGAL CYNICISM AND THE NATURE OF POLICE–CITIZEN ENCOUNTERS

More specifically, from our perspective, strands of theoretical and empirical work have suggested that processes of cynicism at the neighborhood level affect both 1) police enforcement practices and 2) the demeanor of citizens during their interactions with the police. As a result, moral and legal cynicism creates a context of mutual distrust between the public and the police—each actor frames the other in antagonistic terms. Some scholars have suggested that this type of cultural setting provides more opportunities for police deviance because it lowers the standards of professional conduct (Kane, 2002: 872). For instance, Terrill and Reisig (2003) speculated that weakened conventional norms send a contextualized signal to officers that certain forms of misconduct are less condemned (see Weitzer, Tuch, and Skogan, 2008). Police officers are more likely to resort to force because it is "the manner in which conflict is resolved in these types of places" (Terrill and Reisig, 2003: 308).

Research has suggested that unjust and unfavorable police encounters are more common within the context of distressed urban settings. For instance, residents of low-income minority communities are more apt to *report* multiple negative experiences with the law, including being involuntarily and unjustly stopped and questioned and treated disrespectfully (Carr, Napolitano, and Keating, 2007; Mastrofski, Reisig, and McCluskey, 2002; Sun, Payne, and Wu, 2008), than are residents of other communites. Even residents who do not have first-hand experiences with negative police encounters learn about them vicariously based on the shared experiences of friends, neighbors, and family (Brunson, 2007; Weitzer and Tuch, 2005). Additionally, arrestees and suspects from distressed communities

exhibit less deference to the police and engage in more frequent acts of overt resistance (Belvedere, Worrall, and Tibbetts, 2005; Weitzer and Brunson, 2009) than do arrestees and suspects from other types of communities. For example, Reisig and colleagues' (2004) multilevel study revealed that suspects from impoverished communities were more likely to act disrespectfully toward the police than were those from less impoverished communities. Weitzer (2000: 138) also observed that both officers and citizens approach each other with "certain preconceptions" that lend to hostile and unfair encounters.

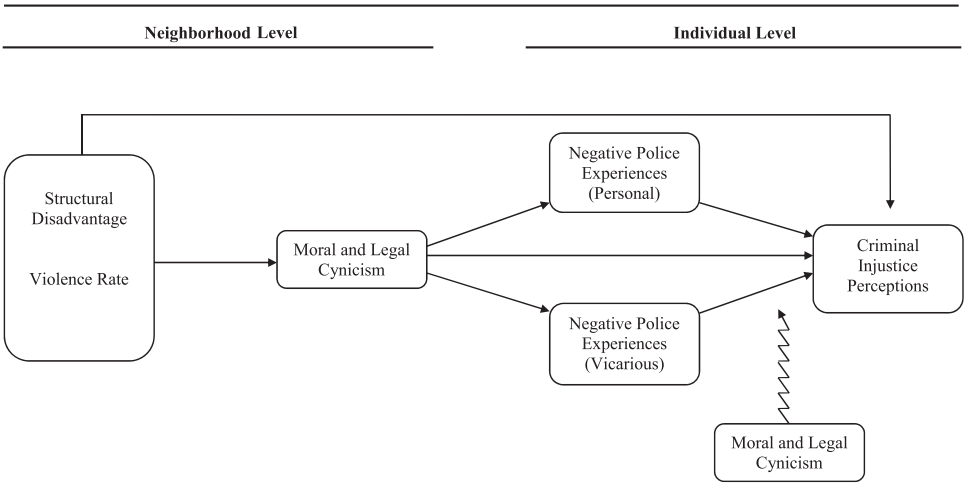
Altogether, the literature has suggested that police–citizen interactions tend to be unfavorable under cultural circumstances where the law is deemed normatively nonbinding or insensitive to local expectations. The next section describes research on the implications of negative police encounters for perceptions of criminal injustice.

## NEGATIVE POLICE–CITIZEN ENCOUNTERS AND PERCEPTIONS OF CRIMINAL INJUSTICE

A growing body of research has so far also indicated that the quality of police interactions is an important determinant of how unfavorable perceptions of the police and courts are formed. Unwanted and hostile experiences with the police—whether experienced vicariously or first hand—generate acute perceptions of criminal *in*justice, as well as heightened levels of dissatisfaction with police crime control efforts (Engel, 2005; Schuck, 2013; Worrall, 1999). Wortley, Hagan, and Macmillan's (1997) study of a Toronto, Canada, sample found that involuntary police contacts were strong determinants of perceptions of injustice, especially among Black residents. Negative encounters outweigh the impact of positive encounters, producing more durable effects (Skogan, 2006). Process-based legitimacy models, indeed, contend that perceptions of criminal justice actors are heavily affected by the fairness of the *procedures* the police adopt during their encounters with suspects (Tyler, 1990), irrespective of the actual outcome of the encounter (Tyler and Folger, 1980). For instance, Scaglion and Condon's (1980) study of Pittsburgh residents found that prior police contacts were *stronger* predictors of their attitudes toward the police than were sociodemographic indicators including race.

As described earlier, however, these police–citizen interactions are contextually situated or "place based" (Weitzer, 2000). Neighborhood cultural processes also serve as cognitive filters through which citizens interpret the meaning of encounters with law enforcement authorities. More specifically, citizens may retrieve certain schemas from the local cultural knowledge structure and use these to evaluate the nature of their experiences with police officials (DiMaggio, 1997). Where cynicism is widespread in the cultural landscape, people are apt to judge procedurally unfavorable police encounters as characteristic of a criminal justice system operating in a partial and discriminatory manner. Such adverse experiences are likely to resonate in the context of a social environment with greater levels of institutional mistrust and pessimism. Absent this cultural context, adverse police encounters may have less of an impact on how people perceive the functioning of the criminal justice system. Hence, when negative encounters transpire against the backdrop of cynicism, it can intensify individually held perceptions of criminal injustice (Brunson and Gau, 2014: 369). Even encounters that are not *conducted in an unfair manner* could be interpreted by residents in unfair terms, depending on the cultural messages against which the encounters are evaluated. When put in this way, neighborhood moral and legal cynicism may function as a triggering mechanism that amplifies the

**Figure 1. Conceptual Model**




*NOTES:* All individual-level and neighborhood-level controls are included in the model.

negative impressions created by procedurally unjust police treatment, both personally and vicariously experienced by local citizens.

## CURRENT STUDY

Several strands of literature have suggested that moral and legal cynicism channels the effects of structural disadvantage on negative police encounters, and this cultural process conditions how police encounters are individually perceived. The conceptual assumptions expressed in the study hypotheses are illustrated in figure 1.

*First,* our baseline hypothesis assumes that structurally disadvantaged neighborhoods will exhibit higher levels of moral and legal cynicism than will other types of neighborhoods; this is illustrated by the directional line flowing from neighborhood disadvantage to cynicism. *Second,* to build on this assertion, we propose that neighborhood moral and legal cynicism explains a significant portion of the linkage between structural disadvantage and perceptions of racial biases in the criminal justice system. This hypothesis addresses a potential reason perceptions of injustice are acute among people located in impoverished settings. We then examine the mechanisms through which cynicism generates injustice perceptions. Our *third* hypothesis posits that negative police encounters mediate a portion of the presumed effects of moral and legal cynicism on perceptions of injustice. In other words, negative police–citizen encounters, both vicariously and personally experienced, are more likely to occur in cynical environments than in other types of environments, and these foster perceived racial biases in the criminal justice system. This hypothesis is illustrated in figure 1 where arrows connect cynicism to police encounters and then connect these encounters to injustice perceptions. Finally, our *fourth* hypothesis predicts that neighborhood moral and legal cynicism intensifies the effects of negative police experiences on perceptions of injustice. We illustrate this hypothesis in figure 1, where on the lower right-hand side, a jagged arrow emerging from cynicism connects to the arrows pointing from negative encounters to injustice perceptions. The latter

hypothesis expects a conditional process in which the presumed linkages between negative encounters and perceptions of injustice are sensitive to levels of cynicism.

Moreover, it is important for us to acknowledge that possible alternatives exist to our causal specification. For example, moral and legal cynicism might develop in response to negative police encounters as well as to perceptions of perceived biases in the criminal justice system. Although we see theoretical value in these alternative pathways, our current data do not allow for us to test them. The conceptual model examined here is based on our interpretation of the theoretical and empirical research described in the aforementioned sections.

## DATA AND METHODS

### SAMPLE

This study uses data from the Family and Community Health Study (FACHS). The data are well suited to address the study questions because they include information on cynicism, negative police–citizen encounters, and perceptions of injustice. Indeed, discussions of race differences in attitudes toward, and experiences with, the police and criminal justice system overwhelmingly focus on estimating race effects net of other factors, which overshadows important within-group variation, especially among Blacks (Hagan and Albonetti, 1982; Stewart et al., 2009). The FACHS data are unique in providing a large sample of Black respondents that, in turn, provides an opportunity to identify neighborhood- and individual-level factors that may contribute to attitudes and beliefs about the exercise of formal social control.

A central goal of the larger study was to investigate the effects of neighborhood characteristics on the functioning of children and families (Murry et al., 2008; Stewart et al., 2009). Families were recruited from neighborhoods that varied on demographic characteristics, specifically racial composition (i.e., percent Black) and economic level (i.e., percent families with children living below the poverty line). In selecting neighborhoods from which to draw the sample, neighborhood characteristics at the level of block group areas (BGAs) were used. BGAs were identified for both Iowa and Georgia in which the percentage of Black families was high enough to make recruitment economically practical (10 percent or higher), and in which the percentage of families with children living below the poverty line ranged from 10 percent to 100 percent. When we used these criteria, 259 BGAs were identified (115 in Georgia and 144 in Iowa). The study families were recruited from these BGAs.

In Georgia, families were selected from BGAs that varied in terms of economic status and ethnic composition. Families were recruited from metropolitan Atlanta areas, such as South Atlanta, East Atlanta, Southeast Atlanta, and Athens. Within each BGA, Black community members were hired to serve as liaisons between the University of Georgia and Iowa State University researchers and the communities. The liaisons compiled rosters of children who met the sampling criteria from school districts within each BGA. In Iowa, all BGAs that met the study criteria were located in two metropolitan urban communities: Waterloo and Des Moines. Families with Black children within the age criterion were identified through the Waterloo and Des Moines public school districts. In both Georgia and Iowa, families were drawn randomly from rosters and contacted to determine their interest in participation. Of the families that could be located, interviews were completed with 72 percent of eligible Iowa families and slightly more than 60 percent of eligible Georgia families. These recruitment rates are comparable with those obtained in

earlier community studies of families that used intensive measurement procedures (e.g., Conger and Elder, 1994). Data were collected in Georgia and Iowa by using similar research procedures.[3] The interviews were conducted with the child and his or her primary and secondary caregiver. Wave 1 data collection occurred in 1998, wave 2 occurred in 2001, wave 3 in 2004, wave 4 in 2007, and wave 5 in 2009. In total, at wave 1, there were 867 Black children (400 boys, 467 girls; 405 in Georgia and 462 in Iowa); at wave 5, 689 of the original respondents were interviewed. Analyses undertaken by Simons et al. (2014) indicated that the attrition was not patterned with respect to youth, family, or neighborhood characteristics. Approximately 3 percent of the sample had missing data on items used in our analyses.[4] Respondents were reimbursed for participating in the study. Primary caregivers received $100, and target children received $70.

To operationalize neighborhood context in a meaningful way for our participants, we combined the 259 geographically proximal BGAs in Iowa and Georgia with similar levels of racial composition, socioeconomic status, poverty, family organization, housing density, and employment status into 39 larger "neighborhood clusters" (Sampson, Morenoff, and Earls, 1999). In forming these neighborhood clusters, the clear consideration was that they be ecologically meaningful areas composed of proximal and internally homogeneous BGAs with regard to a variety of census indicators (Sampson, Morenoff, and Earls, 1999). We used cluster analyses on the census data to place the BGAs into homogeneous neighborhood clusters within each geographic region. The cluster analysis was performed with Ward's minimum-variance method, which is available within the SAS Cluster (SAS Institute, Inc., Cary, NC) program. This method tends to join clusters with a small number of observations and is strongly biased toward producing clusters with roughly the same number of observations (SAS/STAT User's Guide, 1990). The cluster analysis was performed separately for various geographic areas within Iowa and Georgia. The city of Des Moines, for example, was divided into four sectors, and the cluster analysis was completed for the BGAs in each of these sectors. This approach was designed to identify clusters of BGAs that were close to one another geographically as well as similar in socioeconomic circumstances. This process generated 39 neighborhood clusters, 20 in Georgia and 19 in Iowa. The number of study families in a neighborhood cluster averaged approximately 17 and ranged from 9 to 36. Overall, 29 neighborhood clusters included 15 to 20 families. Furthermore, the neighborhoods within a cluster are internally homogenous and shared a common set of socioeconomic and geographic characteristics (e.g., racial composition, socioeconomic status, poverty, family organization, housing density,

3. Sites in Georgia and Iowa were chosen partly because they are located in different regions of the country, which would potentially allow us to increase the generalizability of our research findings. The project's principal investigators (PIs) at the University of Georgia's Center for Family Research and Iowa State University's Institute for Social and Behavioral Research have a long history of conducting large-scale longitudinal studies in their respective states. The selection of sites for the FACHS project was a natural extension of the PIs' previous research experiences.

4. We used the multiple imputations by chained equations "ICEs" available in Stata (StataCorp, College Station, TX) to impute missing values (Royston, 2005a, 2005b). This three-step procedure generated 10 imputed data sets. We then estimated regression models separately for each of them. Finally, we computed the pooled parameter estimates of the 10 regressions to account for the possible underestimation of standard errors (Acock, 2005). To assess whether our results were influenced by the number of data sets imputed, we estimated an additional 30 data sets with no improvement in precision beyond what the 10 data sets generated (Von Hippel, 2005).

and employment status). Thus, the study families assigned to a particular neighborhood cluster were considered to be living within roughly similar community contexts (Sampson, Morenoff, and Earls, 1999). Given the sampling design, the respondents represent a sample of Black respondents from the two research sites that come from extremely poor to middle-class families and who reside in neighborhoods that exhibit significant variability in economic status, racial composition, and other factors, with sampling features that are well suited for studying neighborhood effects (Jencks and Mayer, 1990). Indeed, we examine the relationship between wave 4 neighborhood moral and legal cynicism and negative police contact on wave 5 perceptions of injustice for the 689 respondents at wave 5. Controls include a range of measures from across waves 1–4. The longitudinal data allow for a stronger assessment of whether collective cynicism and negative police contacts contribute to appraisals of racial biases in the criminal justice system.

## MEASURES

### DEPENDENT VARIABLE

#### Perceptions of Criminal Injustice

A six-item, self-report scale measured this construct at wave 5. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which Blacks were treated in an unjust manner by actors of the criminal justice system (*1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree*). The questions included the following: Law enforcement officials/police are more likely to stop and question Blacks unfairly than those in other racial groups; law enforcement officials/police threaten Black suspects worse than those in other racial groups; law enforcement officials/police tend to violate Blacks' constitutional rights more than those of other racial groups; courts are biased and unfair when it comes to deciding cases with Black suspects and White victims; courts punish Blacks more harshly than Whites; and most of the punitive laws (i.e., three-strikes, habitual offender, etc.) are designed to punish Blacks more so than those of other races.[5] The responses were summed and represent the extent to which respondents held beliefs that were consistent with perceiving criminal injustice. The alpha coefficient was .81. Descriptive statistics for the dependent variable as well as all of the key study variables are provided in table 1.

### INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

#### Neighborhood Level

*Neighborhood Structural Disadvantage.* Five census variables form this construct at wave 1: proportion of households that were female headed, proportion of persons on public assistance, proportion of households below the poverty level, proportion of persons unemployed, and proportion of persons who are Black. Previous studies have used some combination of these variables to assess community socioeconomic status (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls, 1997). These variables are strongly intercorrelated, and principal components and alpha factor analyses indicated that these variables loaded (>.72) on

5. The items used to measure perceived criminal injustice are similar to those used in prior studies by Hagan and colleagues and were informed by this line of work (e.g., Hagan and Albonetti, 1982: 340; Hagan, Shedd, and Payne, 2005: 388; Wortley, Hagan, and Macmillan, 1997: 653).

**Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviations for Study Variables**

| Variables | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Criminal injustice$_{w5}$ | 12.56 | 2.73 |
| Neighborhood Level | | |
| Structural disadvantage | 9.51 | 4.07 |
| Moral and legal cynicism | 12.77 | 3.52 |
| Police Contact | | |
| Respondent's negative police interactions | .38 | .43 |
| Parent's negative police interactions | .24 | .32 |
| Controls | | |
| Family SES | 12.59 | 4.14 |
| Single caregiver (1 = single) | .49 | .49 |
| Male (1 = male) | .44 | .49 |
| Violent offending | 2.18 | 3.29 |
| Prior arrest | .11 | .29 |
| Prior criminal justice contact | .16 | .35 |
| Perceived societal discrimination | 2.98 | .75 |
| South (1 = south) | .49 | .46 |
| Urban (1 = urban) | .52 | .48 |
| | .15 | .47 |
| Neighborhood Controls | | |
| Neighborhood violence rate[a] | | |
| Neighborhood stability | 3.34 | 1.99 |
| Neighborhood collective efficacy | 7.53 | 2.68 |

*NOTE:* $N_1 = 689$ individuals; $N_2 = 39$ neighborhoods.
*ABBREVIATIONS:* SD = standard deviation; SES = socioeconomic status.
[a]The violent crime rate is per 1,000.

a single factor. The items were standardized and combined to form a measure of disadvantage. We added a constant (10) to the term that eliminated negative values and allows for ease of interpretation. The alpha coefficient was .89.

*Neighborhood Moral and Legal Cynicism.* The FACHS data do not have the same five survey items from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN) comprising the Sampson and Bartusch (1998) legal cynicism scale. To create a comparable construct, we assembled a set of survey items that closely approximate both those found in the Sampson and Bartusch construct and those consistent with the classic theoretical conceptualizations of moral and legal cynicism (e.g., Kapsis, 1978; Srole, 1956), from which Sampson and Bartusch "drew on and modified" to create their original scale (1998: 786).[6] According to Sampson and Bartusch (1998: 786), the items in their scale "refer to the sense in which laws or rules are not considered binding in the existential present lives of respondents," and moreover, they "tap variation in respondents' ratification of acting in ways that are outside of law and legal norms." More recently, Sampson

6. We apply the label "moral and legal cynicism" to our construct as opposed to simply "legal cynicism" as a result of the work by Sampson (2015) that suggested the term "moral" conveys important information about its content. Sampson (2015: footnote 13, p. 567) wrote that, "because the questions ask about broad conceptions of ethical behavior (e.g., "no right or wrong way to make money . . . ) and not just 'about the law,' however, moral cynicism is perhaps the more accurate description." The additional term "moral" also emphasizes the ethical components of the construct prominent in the early literature (e.g., Kapsis, 1978).

(2015: 209) added that moral and legal cynicism also refers to the compulsory effects of legal norms on people's daily lives, if people are "indifferent to the concerns of others," and the degree to which "norms of other-regarding behavior" are diluted. Altogether, these interlocking conceptual explications operate as a measurement framework guiding our selection of items to create the moral and legal cynicism scale from FACHS.

Nevertheless, we depart from Sampson and Bartusch's (1998) operationalization by also incorporating five survey items pertaining to beliefs about the acceptability of various criminal behaviors. Notions about the acceptability of criminal behaviors also tap into an underlying disengagement from conventional norms and legal rules. Perceptions about the appropriateness of such behaviors represent additional components of moral and legal cynicism that also become situated in conditions of concentrated disadvantage (Kapsis, 1978; Kornhauser, 1978; Srole, 1956).[7] Some people might perceive the laws governing certain behaviors as insensitive to the demands of their material circumstances. In fact, Kapsis (1978), whose work is influential to modern advances in this area of research, also speculated that cynicism encompasses notions that the "rules of the dominant society (particularly those of its legal system) are no longer binding or valid" (p. 1139). Such rules govern the acceptability of breaking the law and harming others.

To measure the moral and legal cynicism scale, we used 10 self-report items across various conceptually related dimensions based on wave 4 data. First, respondents indicated "How important they thought it was to obey the law" and "How important they thought it was to work hard to get ahead." Second, respondents indicated how much they agreed or disagreed with the following statements about justice-oriented behaviors: "Arguing or fighting with other people usually makes matters worse rather than better" and "Behaving aggressively is often an effective way of dealing with someone who is taking advantage of you." Third, respondents indicated how wrong they thought it was to engage in the following nonaltruistic behaviors (see Sampson, 2015: 207–10): "Hit someone with the idea of hurting them;" "Steal something worth less than $50;" "Steal something worth more than $50;" "Use illegal drugs other than marijuana"; and "Sell marijuana or other illegal drugs." Fourth, respondents indicated the degree to which the following statement was true about people's motives: "When people are friendly, they usually want something from you." The scales were standardized, summed, and aggregated to the neighborhood level to form a composite measure of neighborhood moral and legal cynicism. The neighborhood-level reliability is .74. To eliminate negative values, we added a constant of 15.[8] Even though we are interested in the experiences of African American families, it would be ideal to have information from the entire communities from which the samples were drawn to obtain a more representative sample that would allow us to

7. Specifically, Kapsis (1978), Srole (1956), and Kornhauser (1978) all speculate that when under conditions of marginalization and structural deprivation, people are less apt to sanction ethical and legal rules governing deviant and illicit behavior and are less willing to grant the state the authority to sanction such behaviors.

8. We estimated both exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, which indicated two distinct factors: moral and legal cynicism and criminal injustice perceptions (for detailed information, see tables S1 and S2 in the online supporting information). Additional supporting information can be found in the listing for this article in the Wiley Online Library at http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/crim.2016.54.issue-3/issuetoc.

capture the experiences and perceptions of other racial and ethnic groups. As a result, our neighborhood-survey measures may not reflect the experiences of groups in less segregated neighborhoods.

### Negative Police Encounters

We used two separate measures to investigate the different dimensions of individual-level police contact at wave 4. Both measures capture whether respondents, as well as their parents (vicarious), experienced *negative police encounters.* The items ask sample members (respondents and parents) whether they had been treated unjustly or in a discriminatory manner by the police during the previous year. The measures were coded "1" if the respondent/parent reported having experienced unjust treatment during police encounters and coded "0" if he or she reported no such experiences. Approximately 38 percent of respondents and 24 percent of parents reported having a negative police interaction. Furthermore, our measures of perceived negative police encounters are similar to those used in a few prior studies, which assessed experiences with unjust or unfair police treatment (Leiber, Nalla, and Farnworth, 1998: 174; Weitzer and Tuch, 2004: 312).

## CONTROL VARIABLES

We controlled for 12 measures at wave 4 that may affect the proposed associations between our independent variables and outcome measure. These predictors include socioeconomic status, single caregiver, male, violent offending, prior arrest, prior criminal justice contact, perceived societal discrimination, region (i.e., study site), urbanicity, neighborhood violent crime rate, neighborhood stability, and neighborhood collective efficacy. Table S3 in the online supporting information provides the full details about the metrics and definitions for these variables.

## ANALYTIC STRATEGY

We used multilevel modeling techniques to examine the effects of neighborhood legal cynicism on perceived criminal injustice, net of individual- and neighborhood-level factors. Multilevel models are appropriate because we are interested in an individual outcome that is affected by both neighborhood-level and individual-level characteristics. Multilevel modeling has become customary for estimating contextual effects when individuals are clustered within neighborhoods (Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002). These models explicitly recognize that individuals within a particular neighborhood might be more similar to one another than they are to individuals in another neighborhood and, therefore, might not provide independent observations. Statistically, this finding suggests that the residual errors are likely to be correlated within neighborhoods in nested data, which violates the assumption of independence of observations that is fundamental in traditional ordinary least-squares analysis and tends to bias standard errors downward. Multilevel models specifically account for this form of nonindependence and produce correct estimates of the standard errors (Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002). Thus, to estimate our theoretical models, we used the multilevel function in STATA 13. The predictors were grand-mean centered, and all slopes were fixed except for the two negative police experience variables.

**Table 2. Multilevel Model Predicting Neighborhood Moral and Legal Cynicism**

| | Model 1 | |
|---|---|---|
| **Variables** | ***b*** | **SE** |
| Intercept | 12.35* | .96 |
| Neighborhood Level | | |
| Structural disadvantage | .18* | .06 |
| Neighborhood Controls | | |
| Neighborhood violence rate | .66* | .27 |
| Neighborhood stability | −.10 | .09 |
| Neighborhood collective efficacy | −.20* | .07 |
| Intercept Reliability | | |
| Reliability estimates | .79 | |
| Random Effects | | |
| Neighborhood level $\sigma^2$ | 2.58 | |
| Neighborhood variance explained | 37.4% | |

*NOTE:* $N_2 = 39$ neighborhoods.
*ABBREVIATION:* SE = standard error.
*$p < .05$.

## RESULTS

Before beginning with our primary analyses, we estimated a null multilevel model that contained no predictors. The results of the null multilevel model (not shown in tabular form) revealed that the total variance in the dependent variable is 7.8. The amount of variance within neighborhoods is 6.71. The between-neighborhood variance is 1.09 with an interclass correlation of .14 = [1.09 / (1.09 + 6.71)]. This result implies that approximately 14 percent of the variance in perceptions of criminal injustice is between neighborhoods, whereas the remaining 86 percent is within neighborhoods. Furthermore, the null hypothesis of no variation in the average level of criminal injustice across neighborhoods is rejected ($\chi^2_{(38)} = 305.19$, $p < .05$). This finding suggests that our measure of criminal injustice varies significantly across neighborhoods and can be modeled. The reliability for the intercept is .87.

The initial set of analysis examines the neighborhood sources of moral and legal cynicism, which corresponds with our first hypothesis. According to the multilevel estimates reported in table 2, concentrated disadvantage significantly increases the degree of moral and legal cynicism. Neighborhood violence is also positively related to cynicism, whereas neighborhood collective efficacy reduces the level of moral and legal cynicism.

Table 3 presents the results of three multilevel models predicting perceptions of criminal injustice while controlling for individual- and neighborhood-level factors. To be consistent with prior research, model 1 illustrates that neighborhood disadvantage is significantly and positively related to perceptions of criminal injustice ($b = .10$, SE = .04). Moreover, eight individual- and neighborhood-level covariates are related to our outcome of interest and remain stable across our various model specifications. The predictors in model 1 explain approximately 23.6 percent of the total variation in criminal injustice when compared with the null multilevel model. In model 2, we added neighborhood moral and legal cynicism to the predictive equation. According to our second theoretical prediction, we expect cynicism to mediate a significant portion of the relationship

**Table 3. Multilevel Models of Criminal Injustice$_{w5}$ Regressed on Neighborhood Context and Police Contact**

| | Model 1 | | Model 2 | | Model 3 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Variables** | ***b*** | **SE** | ***b*** | **SE** | ***b*** | **SE** |
| Intercept | 12.43* | .83 | 12.23* | .82 | 12.02* | .82 |
| Neighborhood Level | | | | | | |
| Structural disadvantage | .10* | .04 | .04 | .04 | .04 | .04 |
| Moral and legal cynicism | — | — | .23* | .04 | .17* | .04 |
| Negative Police Interactions | | | | | | |
| Respondent's negative police interactions | — | — | — | — | .84* | .17 |
| Parent's negative police interactions | — | — | — | — | .52* | .17 |
| Controls | | | | | | |
| Family SES | .03 | .05 | .03 | .05 | .03 | .05 |
| Single caregiver (1 = single) | −.04 | .04 | −.04 | .04 | −.04 | .04 |
| Male (1 = male) | .31* | .11 | .28* | .10 | .28* | .10 |
| Violent offending | .73* | .23 | .70* | .23 | .67* | .23 |
| Prior arrest | .66* | .26 | .65* | .26 | .64* | .26 |
| Prior criminal justice contact | .73* | .31 | .72* | .31 | .70* | .31 |
| Perceived societal discrimination | .48* | .11 | .46* | .11 | .46* | .11 |
| South (1 = south) | .05 | .30 | .04 | .30 | .04 | .30 |
| Urban (1 = urban) | .56* | .22 | .54* | .22 | .53* | .22 |
| Neighborhood Controls | | | | | | |
| Neighborhood violence rate | .12* | .03 | .08* | .03 | .07* | .03 |
| Neighborhood stability | .02 | .05 | .02 | .05 | .02 | .05 |
| Neighborhood collective efficacy | −.14* | .05 | −.12* | .05 | −.11* | .05 |
| Intercept Reliability | | | | | | |
| Reliability estimates | .84 | | .81 | | .79 | |
| Random Effects | | | | | | |
| Neighborhood level $\sigma^2$ | .88 | | .72 | | .70 | |
| Individual level $\sigma^2$ | 5.08 | | 5.08 | | 4.44 | |
| Total $\sigma^2$ | 5.96 | | 5.80 | | 5.14 | |
| Total variance explained | 23.6% | | 25.6% | | 34.1% | |

*NOTE:* $N_1 = 689$ individuals; $N_2 = 39$ neighborhoods.
*ABBREVIATION:* SE = standard error; SES = socioeconomic status.
*$p < .05$.

between neighborhood disadvantage and perceived criminal injustice. When moral and legal cynicism is added to the equation in model 2, it is significantly related to perceptions of criminal injustice ($b = .23$, SE = .04), whereas neighborhood disadvantage becomes nonsignificant and the effect is reduced by 59 percent (.10 vs. .04), which is consistent with our expectations. These findings suggest that it is not simply structural disadvantage that generates perceptions of injustice among African Americans. Rather, disadvantage promotes collective cynicism, which is associated with appraisals of biases in the criminal justice system.

In model 3, we evaluate our third theoretical prediction and assess whether negative experiences with the police account for the association between neighborhood moral and legal cynicism and perceptions of criminal injustice. Model 3 includes two measures of negative police contact. The results suggest that both personal [$b = .84$, standard error (SE) = .17] and parental or vicarious negative police encounters ($b = .52$, SE = .17) are significantly related to perceived biases in the criminal justice system. Furthermore, model 3 demonstrates that neighborhood cynicism remained significant. Nevertheless,

**Table 4. Multilevel Models of Criminal Injustice$_{w5}$ Regressed on Interactions**

| | Model 1 | | Model 2 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Variables** | ***b*** | **SE** | ***b*** | **SE** |
| Intercept | 12.02* | .83 | 12.02* | .83 |
| Neighborhood Level | | | | |
| Moral and legal cynicism | .20* | .04 | .16* | .05 |
| Negative Police Interactions | | | | |
| Respondent's negative police interactions | .70* | .17 | .66* | .17 |
| Parent's negative police interactions | .52* | .17 | .50* | .17 |
| Interactions | | | | |
| Neighborhood legal cynicism × respondent's negative police interactions | .26* | .07 | — | — |
| Neighborhood legal cynicism × parent's negative police interactions | — | — | .17* | .05 |
| Intercept Reliability | | | | |
| Reliability estimates | .77 | | .77 | |
| Random Effects | | | | |
| Neighborhood level $\sigma^2$ | .68 | | .69 | |
| Individual level $\sigma^2$ | 4.34 | | 4.39 | |
| Respondent's negative police interactions slope $\sigma^2$ | .13 | | .13 | |
| Parent's negative police interactions slope $\sigma^2$ | .16 | | .15 | |
| Total $\sigma^2$ | 5.02 | | 5.08 | |
| Total variance explained | 35.6% | | 34.8% | |

*NOTES:* $N_1 = 689$ individuals; $N_2 = 39$ neighborhoods. All variables from table 2 are retained in the analysis but not shown.
*ABBREVIATION:* SE = standard error.
*$p < .05$.

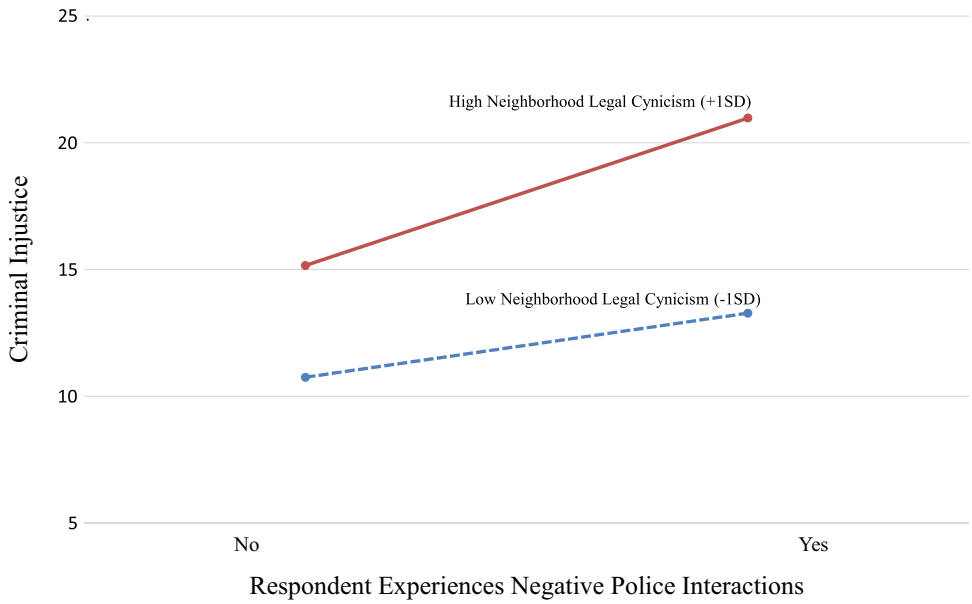
once the measures of negative police contact are entered into the equation, the coefficient for moral and legal cynicism is reduced by approximately 26 percent. Broadly speaking, these results suggest that neighborhood moral and legal cynicism influences perceptions of criminal injustice partially through negative encounters.

Finally, to examine our fourth prediction, we tested whether neighborhood cynicism moderates the effects of negative police experiences on perceptions of injustice. To examine these relationships, we tested cross-level interactions between cynicism and each police encounter predictor on injustice. The cross-level interactions displayed in table 4 show significant positive effects between neighborhood cynicism and each measure of negative police encounters on perceptions of criminal injustice, which is consistent with our expectations. These findings lend support to our hypothesis by indicating that the effects of negative encounters on perceptions of racial injustice in the criminal justice system are more intense in neighborhoods where moral and legal cynicism is pronounced.

To illustrate the interaction results, we plotted the predicted values of experiencing negative police contact on perceptions of criminal injustice at high and low levels of neighborhood cynicism.[9] As figures 2 and 3 show, respectively, individuals who experienced negative encounters and reside in neighborhoods characterized by high levels of moral and legal cynicism are more likely to view the criminal justice system as biased against

9. We define "high cynicism" as 1 standard deviation above the mean for the neighborhoods in our study and "low cynicism" as 1 standard deviation below the mean.

**Figure 2. Effect of Respondents' Negative Police Interactions on Perceptions of Criminal Injustice by Neighborhood Legal Cynicism**



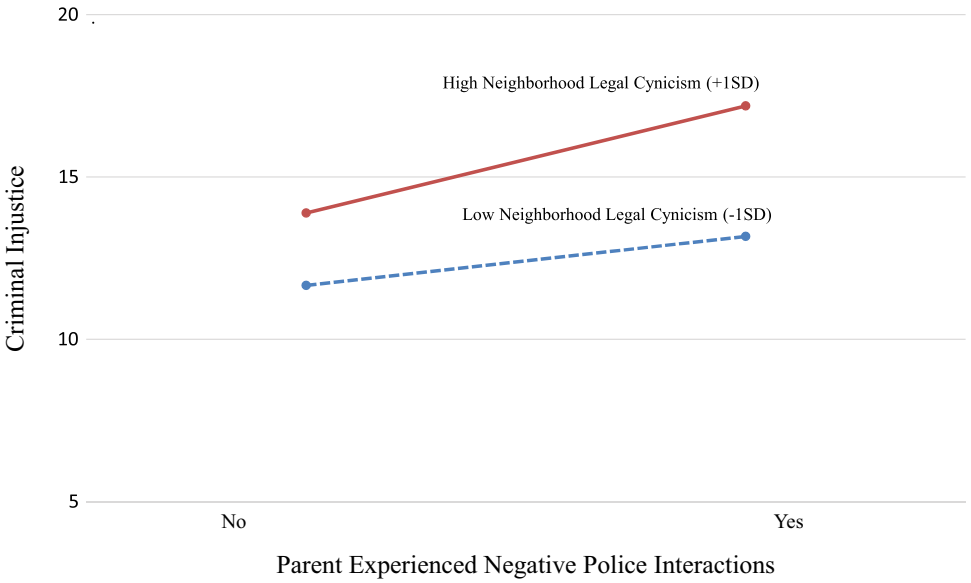

racial minority groups when compared with those who reside in neighborhoods with low levels of legal cynicism. These patterns suggest that the relationship between negative police encounters and injustice perceptions seem to be context sensitive.

## SENSITIVITY ANALYSIS

We conducted a series of sensitivity analyses to examine the robustness of our results. First, because our measures of cynicism and negative police encounters come from the same assessment wave, we are precluded from making firm assumptions about whether these results involve a pure mediation process (see table 3, model 3). Under the hypothesized mediation pathway, neighborhood cynicism should also predict personal and vicarious police encounters. We estimated two additional multilevel logistic models in which each police encounter measure was separately regressed on neighborhood moral and legal cynicism, net of the control measures. Cynicism was positively and significantly ($p < .05$) related to increased odds of both negative personal police encounters (odds ratio = 1.41) and to negative vicarious police encounters (odds ratio = 1.34), which is consistent with the implied mediation effects. These findings, in combination with those reported in models 2 and 3 of table 3, are indicative of the mediation process anticipated in hypothesis 3.

Second, we examined the degree to which the effects of our moral and legal cynicism construct were driven by the illicit behavior items (e.g., "How wrong is it to hit someone with the idea of hurting them?" and "How wrong is it to steal something worth less than $50?"). We removed those five items from the measure and reestimated the models.

**Figure 3. Effect of Parents' Negative Police Interactions on Perceptions of Criminal Injustice by Neighborhood Legal Cynicism**




Our findings with respect to moral and legal cynicism remain robust and display the same patterns as the findings presented in the tables that apply our broader measure. These results indicate that the effects of our measure of moral and legal cynicism are not primarily influenced by the illicit behavior items.

Third, several studies have found that race and dimensions of economic disadvantage are ecologically entangled and, thus, confounded within neighborhoods across most large U.S. cities (Sampson, 2015). As with prior work, the measure of percent Black in our structural disadvantage construct partly functions as an indicator for allocation mechanisms that concentrate African Americans in impoverished environments. Nevertheless, it is possible that the association between disadvantage and injustice perceptions is mainly driven by the racial composition item. To examine this issue, we created a disadvantage construct that excluded percent Black. We then reestimated the regression models in tables 2 through 4 by using the modified disadvantage construct; the results of these models are similar to those reported in the main analyses ($b = .04$: model 2; $b = .04$: model 3). Thus, the disadvantage effects do not seem to be primarily influenced by the percent Black measure.

Finally, the literature has implied that moral and legal cynicism operates as a neighborhood-level contextual mechanism; however, it is possible that the effects of neighborhood-level cynicism reflect the unmeasured effects of respondents' sentiments of cynicism. We specified an individual-level cynicism measure in table 3 to determine whether the measure alters the main set of findings. The results revealed that the effects of neighborhood-level cynicism were slightly weaker in models 2 ($b = .21$, $p < .05$) and 3 ($b = .15$, $p < .05$) with the inclusion of the individual-level measure (relative to the models reported in the text that exclude the measure). Still, the contextual variable remained positive and statistically significant in both models. Moreover, the individual-level

measure exhibited a weak and positive association with perceptions of injustice in model 1 ($b = .13$, $p < .05$), and its estimated effect was reduced to nonsignificance in models 2 ($b = .09$, $p > .05$) and 3 ($b = .08$, $p > .05$), net of the neighborhood-level cynicism variable. Altogether, the results in table 3 are robust to the individual-level measure of moral and legal cynicism.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Why people come to doubt the fairness and impartiality of the criminal justice system has become a topic of increasing theoretical and practical importance. Emerging research has so far revealed that perceived racial biases in the application of the law are not evenly dispersed across communities, but they are concentrated among people located in impoverished social locations, in particular among African Americans. Deciphering the foundations of racialized injustice perceptions is important for resolving unanswered questions about their ecological origins. Few studies have examined within-group variation in these perceptions *among* African Americans, and fewer still have examined whether neighborhoods have an important explanatory role. To build on this prior work, this study examined several hypotheses concerning the mechanisms that potentially reproduce perceived racial biases in the criminal justice system among African Americans situated in impoverished neighborhoods.

On balance, the results advance current substantive knowledge about the social processes through which within-group variation in criminal injustice perceptions materialize in a sample of African Americans. *First,* providing support for the initial study hypotheses, the results indicate that moral and legal cynicism tends to be situated in impoverished settings. These results provide further evidence that concentrated poverty can undermine the perceived relevance of legal rules and conventional moral sentiments (Kapsis, 1978; Sampson, 2015). Future research should consider whether perceived racial biases in the criminal justice system represent an additional component of the legal socialization process of which neighborhoods are known to have an important role (Fagan and Tyler, 2005). By following the logic of a developmental perspective of legal socialization, these perceptions may be internalized by youth because of their exposure to contexts where cynicism is socially pervasive. Additionally, the results show that collective cynicism accounted for a significant portion of the association between structural disadvantage and injustice perceptions. These findings suggest a mediating pathway between disadvantage and injustice perceptions that operates via moral and legal cynicism, which is consistent with expectations. Where laws and moral sentiments are not uniformly considered binding "in the existential, present lives of respondents" (Sampson and Bartusch, 1998: 786), they come to express greater doubt about the fairness and racial impartiality of criminal justice actors. Efforts to theorize perceived racial biases in the criminal justice system should thus be attentive to the cultural properties of the places where they take hold.

We then examined a potential mechanism through which a cynical moral and legal climate generates perceptions of criminal injustice. Consistent with our hypothesis, our *second* set of findings revealed that negative police encounters explain a portion of the relationship between legal cynicism and injustice perceptions. Respondents located in highly cynical environments tend to report negative and, thus, unjust police encounters. Furthermore, not only were negative personal experiences more common in these settings, so too were similar encounters involving the respondent's caretakers. Hence,

accumulated unfavorable police interactions translate into greater perceptions of criminal injustice among African Americans. Although we cannot address the "objective reality or legal parameters" (Brunson, 2007: 80) of these encounters, the findings underscore the relevance of shared negative experiences with the police as mechanisms through which people evaluate whether criminal justice actors are blind to racial distinctions (Weitzer, 2000). The fact that vicarious negative experiences also yield perceptions of racial biases, again, suggests that knowledge about these experiences is transmitted through a type of socialization process (Fagan and Tyler, 2005). Here it is also worth noting that cynicism exhibited a residual association with injustice perceptions after controlling for police encounters, which means other processes are at work. More attention should be given to variation in the quality of policing at the community level in addition to individual negative encounters. For instance, we need to understand whether unmet expectations for police services, including patterns of underenforcement of serious crimes, explain the linkage between cynicism and perceptions of injustice (Smith, 1986). Also, perhaps coercive policing practices are more common in geographic areas defined by high levels of moral and legal cynicism, in particular in minority communities. If so, negative police encounters may be a by-product of a coercive enforcement style that is unique to certain locales. As noted, some evidence suggests that the police treat suspects according to how they perceive the neighborhood in which encounters occur, irrespective of the suspect's behavioral or personal characteristics (Terrill and Reisig, 2003; Werthman and Piliavin, 1967). Other work has shown that neighborhood reputations are durable and even vital to understanding ecological differences in crime rates and dimensions of social organization (Sampson, 2015). Under some circumstances, negative police–citizen encounters may have less to do with citizens' behavior during an encounter and more to do with the type of policing common to particular neighborhoods.

The findings concerning the mediating role of negative police encounters have implications for research on the structuring of perceptions of racial biases in the criminal justice system. Our findings indicate that negative interactions between the police and the public are more common where the local cultural context exhibits greater cynicism toward the law and moral order. Note that we do not examine the situational dynamics of negative police encounters—their legal basis, potential use of excessive force, actions on the part of the suspect or police officer—which likely affects how such contacts are individually perceived (e.g., Engel, 2005; Terrill and Reisig, 2003). Without situational data on these encounters, we cannot determine precisely *why* neighborhood cynicism increases the occurrence of negative encounters. Although we can only speculate, several possible explanations exist: For instance, perhaps collective cynicism signals to police officers that there are lower expectations for their professional conduct. Or perhaps cynicism heightens sensitivities to stereotypes about African American suspects. Such conclusions are somewhat consistent with Kane's (2002) predictions that officers may develop differential standards of acceptable occupational behavior on the basis of norms unique to local communities. This cultural climate may also cause suspects to behave disrespectfully toward authorities, which affects the nature of police treatment (Brunson and Weitzer, 2011; Reisig et al., 2004). As a result of these disparate pieces of evidence, future research should investigate the means through which moral and legal cynicism affects the behaviors of all parties during police–citizen interactions.

Next, a *third* important finding indicates that reactions to negative legal encounters are not uniform across neighborhoods but that they are context sensitive and moderated by

levels of neighborhood cynicism. As hypothesized, the linkage between negative police encounters and perceptions of criminal injustice is stronger among African Americans exposed to cynical neighborhood environments. Yet, these same encounters are less likely to translate into stronger injustice perceptions among residents of low-cynicism neighborhoods. Such patterns reaffirm early speculation that individuals' evaluations of legal authorities "are dependent upon context" (Bayley and Mendelsohn, 1969: 35). From a theoretical standpoint, this evidence suggests that collective cynicism may operate as a cultural filter against which police experiences are interpreted and then assigned personal meaning. Perhaps this cultural knowledge colors how citizens understand the inconsistencies between the abstract ideals of the law—its normative basis—and the everyday exercise of legal authority, whether experienced firsthand or learned of vicariously. Such notions tend to accord with the general assumption that context is an influential "reference group" against which experiences with legal actors are differentially conceived among African Americans (Hagan, Shedd, and Payne, 2005).

Despite its strengths, this study is not without limitations. For example, as noted, the data do not contain information on the situational dynamics of police–citizen encounters; such information would illuminate the interactional circumstances that motivated negative evaluations of these encounters. We also do not have information that clearly separates the outcomes of police encounters from the police procedures used to obtain them, although we do control for a general measure of prior arrests and justice system contact to capture elements of such encounters. Another potential limitation of our study is that we assume a casual association between moral and legal cynicism, negative encounters, and perceptions of injustice; however, these relationships may be mutually reinforcing. We could not explore alternative specifications in the current study as a result of data limitations; furthermore, our intent was to test the theoretically implied specification outlined in the conceptual model. We are hopeful that researchers might explore alternative conceptual pathways in future work.

Furthermore, our data are generated from an African American sample. Even though it is not necessarily a design limitation, because our focus is to understand the ecological sources of within-group variation, the sample precludes us from examining the generalizability of the findings to other racial and ethnic groups. Survey information from residents of the entire neighborhood would yield a more representative sample that includes members of other racial and ethnic groups. Thus, our neighborhood-survey measures may not capture the wider experiences of people in less segregated neighborhoods. Nevertheless, as we noted, prior work has found that African Americans express stronger concerns about racial biases in the criminal justice system (Drakulich and Crutchfield, 2013), although these patterns seem to be affected by social class (Hagan, Shedd, and Payne, 2005), and it is well established that this group is exposed to more disadvantaged environments (Sampson and Wilson, 1995). Applying an ecological process framework to racial differences in injustice perceptions could illuminate whether the effects of cynicism and negative police encounters are racially invariant or whether these perceptions developed from unique racialized experiences (Hagan, Shedd, and Payne, 2005). As noted, because the negative police encounters variables are taken from the same wave as the items comprising moral and legal cynicism (wave 4), we cannot make firm assumptions about the degree to which police encounters statistically mediate the effects of moral and legal cynicism. Still, both the main and online supporting information results are consistent with the hypothesized mediation effect. Finally, perhaps neighborhood differences in

order-maintenance policing could affect not only emergent cultural mechanisms constituting moral and legal cynicism but also the quality of police–citizen encounters. Future research should examine these possibilities.

Altogether, the findings from the current study add to the growing body of substantive and empirical research on interindividual variation in perceived racial biases in the functioning of the criminal justice system. Given the practical significance of widespread perceptions of injustice for both communities and individuals, the sources and scope of this phenomenon warrant continued research attention. The results may speak to the importance of interventions designed to increase high-quality police–citizen interactions particularly in disenfranchised communities where tension often surrounds the authority and functioning of the law. As Sampson and Bartush (1998: 801) argued, "the law has the potential to be most effective when it acts in concert with social norms of order that informally control behavior." Suspicions about inequities in the criminal justice system can destabilize collaborative efforts between citizens and law enforcement that are necessary to secure public safety and can further marginalize disenfranchised communities.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

**Table S1.** Model Comparison for a One- and Two-Factor Solution of Criminal Injustice Perceptions and Moral/Legal Cynicism
**Table S2.** Confirmatory Factor Analysis Standardized Loadings for the Indicators of Criminal Injustice Perceptions and Moral/Legal Cynicism
**Table S3.** Metrics and Definitions for Control Variables