Experiences of Police Discrimination Among Latinx Youth: Moderating Role of Social Support and Gender

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Method

Participants: The current study utilized cross-sectional data from a larger study focused on Latinx parent-adolescent dyads living in the US Southwest (N = 293). Youths’ data were collected from Aug 2020 to May 2021. Age: M = 13 years, SD = 1.41. Gender: 51% Male. Nativity: 95% U.S.-born Trans Girl/Female: .3% Non-Binary: 1.7%

Measures

Police Discrimination. Experiences with Police and Law Enforcement scale (English et al., 2021). 10 items (“In the past year, how often have police and law enforcement searched you for no reason?”). Responses: 1 (“Never”) to 4 (Often) (α = .93).

Family and Friend Social Support. Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988) Family and Friend Social Support. 8 items (“Your family tries to help you”) (α = .92).

Academic Motivation. Academic Motivation Scale (Plunkett & Bāmaca-Gómez, 2003). 5 items (“Grades are very important to me”). Responses: 1 (Strongly disagree) to 4 (Strongly agree) (α = .80).

Depressive Symptoms. Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). 20 items (“I felt that people disliked me.”). Responses: 0 (not at all) to 4 (most of the time). (α = .84).

Table 1. Experiences of Police Discrimination and Latinx Youth’s Outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Intercept</th>
<th>Family Income</th>
<th>Nativity</th>
<th>PD</th>
<th>Family Support</th>
<th>Friend Support</th>
<th>PD X Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: PD = Police and Law Enforcement Discrimination; Family Support = Family Social Support; Friend Support = Friend Social Support. Gender coded as 1 = Boy and 0 = Girl. Nativity coded as 1 = US Born and 0 = Born Outside of US. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Results

16% of youth reported at least one experience of PD in the past year. The most common experiences were police assuming they were a thief, being treated unfairly based on how they dress, and being stopped for no reason.

Boys reported more physical abuse by police, t(108) = -2.36, p = .05, and more instances of being arrested for something they did not do, t(120.49) = -2.11, p = .05, compared to girls.

PD was related to higher anxiety and depressive symptoms for all youth (Table 1, Model 1). For boys, PD related to low academic motivation, but showed no relation to academic motivation for girls (Figure 1).

Friend social support moderated the association between police discrimination and academic motivation. At high levels of friend support, no association emerged, but at low levels of friend support, PD was negatively related to academic motivation (Figure 2).

No significant interactions for family support were found.

Conclusions and Implications

PD was relatively low, but still related to Latinx youths’ anxiety and depressive symptoms and, for boys only, lower academic motivation.

Social support from friends, buffered the negative effects of police discrimination on academic motivation, in line with other studies finding that friend social support is an important aspect for youth’s academic functioning (Rodriguez et al., 2003).

The findings from the current study highlight the detrimental role that experiences of PD play among the lives of Latinx youth, and the importance of friends.

Friend social support is a central aspect of peer relationships, and is important for reaffirming self-worth, security, and providing support during times of need (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Wright & Wachs, 2019). Mobilizing friends to provide support was an essential aspect in protecting youth’s academic motivation, even when experiences of discrimination were outside of the school context.

Future research should incorporate a longitudinal design to investigate the long-term impacts of PD on youth’s mental health and academic functioning, and the buffering role of social support over time.

Culturally-informed prevention and intervention programs should be utilized to promote community-level and peer-level social support networks for Latinx youth to lessen the detrimental impacts of individual and institutional discrimination (DeGarmo & Martinez, 2006).

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