

# Perceptions of Interpersonal and Group Discrimination: Implications for Maladjustment among Ethnic Minority Youth on Probation



Aerika S. Brittian<sup>1</sup>, Geri R. Donenberg<sup>2,3,4</sup>, and Erin Emerson<sup>2,3,4</sup>



<sup>1</sup>Department of Educational Psychology, <sup>2</sup>Healthy Youths Program, <sup>3</sup>Community Outreach Intervention Projects, <sup>4</sup>School of Public Health

## Purpose of the Study

- Explore the prevalence of discriminatory experiences among youth on probation
- Examine the associations between two types of discrimination (interpersonal experiences and perceptions of group discrimination) and youth's internalizing and externalizing symptoms
- Begin examination of moderating factors -- cultural resources (ethnic identity) and coping abilities (active coping, and coping with discrimination through education/advocacy)

## Background and Significance

- Discriminatory experiences related to societal determinants such as race/ethnicity, can negatively impact mental health (Brittian, Toomey, Gonzales, & Dumka, 2013; Seaton et al., 2013)
- Poor mental health (e.g., anxiety, depression) shares complex relationships with behavioral health, including increased substance use and risky sexual behavior (Donenberg et al., 2001)
- Perceived discrimination is a common social stressor reported by ethnic minority juvenile offenders, especially male youth of color (Lee et al., 2011)
- Youth on probation report rates of mental health disorders three times higher than community samples (Cauffman, 2005)
- In addition, many youth offenders with mental health problems have co-occurring substance abuse disorders (Teplin et al., 2005).
- However, few studies have examined implications of racial stress for mental health among youth on probation.
- Thus, there is a critical need to understand how discrimination related to ethnic group membership impacts health and development among youth involved in the juvenile justice system.

## Results

### Summary of key findings

- Perceptions of interpersonal discrimination were predictive of higher internalizing symptoms ( $\beta = .30, p < .01$ ). No moderating variables were significant and no interactions effects were found.
- Associations between interpersonal discrimination and externalizing symptoms were buffered by active coping
- Associations between group discrimination and internalizing symptoms were moderated by coping with discrimination

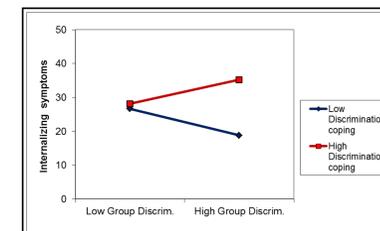
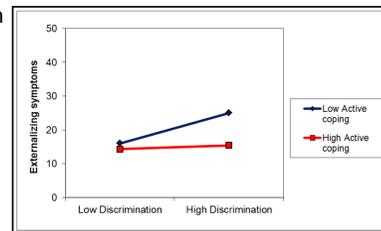


Table 1. Frequencies of prevalent interpersonal discriminatory experiences

How often have each of these events happened to you during the past 3 months, related to being Black, White, Asian, etc.?	Never	Once or twice	3-5 times	6-10 times	More than 10 times
People acted as if they were afraid of you	48.4%	29.6%	11.9%	4.4%	5.7%
People acted as if they thought you were not smart	48.4%	28.9%	10.1%	6.3%	6.3%
You were hassled by police	44.7%	20.1%	11.9%	6.3%	17.0%
People expect more of you than they expected of other kids your age	42.8%	31.4%	10.1%	3.8%	11.9%

\* Full summary of items with frequencies are available from the authors.

Table 2. Zero-order correlations for key study variables \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Interpersonal discrimination	--						
2. Ethnic group discrimination	.44*	--					
3. Active coping	.21**	.02	--				
4. Coping with discrimination	.43**	.24	.52**	--			
5. Ethnic identity	.26**	.19	.37**	.42**	--		
6. Internalizing symptoms	.27*	.52**	-.01	.13	.14	--	
7. Externalizing behaviors	.26**	.34	-.16*	.01	.02	.62**	--

## Conclusions

- Youth of color are disproportionately involved in the juvenile justice system and particularly vulnerable to racial stress, which consequently promotes poor health outcomes.
- In this study, perceptions of interpersonal discrimination (e.g., you were called racially insulting names) and ethnic group discrimination (e.g., my group has been disrespected in America) were related to higher levels of internalizing symptoms and externalizing symptoms among youth on probation.
- Lack of understanding regarding youth's cultural experiences may contribute to less sustained prevention/intervention effects for minority youth on probation.
- Thus, research on cultural experiences is essential to inform programs that seek to change these youths' developmental trajectories.

## Policy Implications

- It is of public health significance to identify factors that increase risk and to understand factors that promote resilience among ethnic minority youth on probation who also experience disproportionate health disparities.
- This work has the capacity to impact policy decisions regarding funding for research that examines risk and resilience among youth of color who encounter the juvenile justice system.
- In addition, "public policies can directly impact federal and state initiatives that guide local program objectives and influence program activities (Xing, et al., in press)". In this case, rehabilitation programs for adjudicated ethnic minority youth should address their racialized experiences.

## Method

**Overview of PHAT Life:** The parent study is a federally-funded randomized controlled trial testing the efficacy of an innovative and uniquely tailored HIV/AIDS/STI, mental health, and substance use program (PHAT Life). PHAT Life was designed for and pilot tested with recently arrested 13-17 year-old urban males and females who are released on probation. The ongoing 2-arm trial compares PHAT Life to a health promotion program with primarily ethnic minority (as representative of Cook County) juvenile offenders.

### Sample and participants

Participants for this substudy included 159 adolescents (ages 13-17; 89% African American; 59% female) who completed baseline and 6-month follow up assessments.

### Measures

- **Interpersonal discrimination** - The *Adolescent Discrimination Distress Index* (Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000) assesses interpersonal experiences with discrimination in institutional, educational, and peer contexts.  $\alpha = .84$
- **Ethnic group discrimination** - The perceived discrimination subscale of the *Scale of Ethnic Experience* (Malcarne, Chavira, Fernandez, & Liu, 2006) measures participants' perceptions of how their ethnic group is treated.  $\alpha = .66$
- **Active coping** - The *Children's Coping Strategies Checklist-2nd Revision*, a modified version of the CCSC-R (Ayers, Sandler, West, & Roosa, 1996), measured adolescents' dispositional active coping skills (e.g., thinking of ways to solve a problem).  $\alpha = .92$
- **Coping with discrimination** - The *Coping with Discrimination Scale* (Wei, Alvarez, Ku, Russell, & Bonett, 2010) evaluates ways youth may cope with discrimination. We included the education/advocacy subscale.  $\alpha = .89$
- **Ethnic Identity** - The *Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure* (Phinney, 1992) measures ethnic identity achievement (exploration and commitment to one's ethnic/racial group), and affirmation/pride (feeling positively about being a member of an ethnic/racial group).  $\alpha = .88$
- **The Youth Self Report** (YSR; Achenbach, 1991) was used to measure internalizing and externalizing symptoms.



Presented at the Society for Research in Child Development Biennial Meeting, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, March 19-21, 2015

This research is supported by NICHD Grant R03HD077128, NIMH Grant R34MH075628 and NIMHD Grant R01MD005861