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*Child Psychiatry Hum Dev.* 2018 April ; 49(2): 290–297. doi:10.1007/s10578-017-0750-z.**Perceived police injustice, moral disengagement, and aggression among juvenile offenders: utilizing the general strain theory model****Tamika C. B. Zapolski, Ph.D.<sup>a,\*</sup>, Devin E. Banks, M.S.<sup>a</sup>, Katherine S. L. Lau, Ph.D.<sup>b</sup>, and Matthew C. Aalsma, Ph.D.<sup>c</sup>**<sup>a</sup>Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, 420 University Blvd., Indianapolis, IN 46202, USA<sup>b</sup>State University of New York at Oneonta, 108 Ravine Pkwy, Oneonta, NY 13820, USA<sup>c</sup>Indiana University School of Medicine, 340 W 10<sup>th</sup> St #6200, Indianapolis, IN, 46202, USA**Abstract**

Although many juvenile offenders report experiencing police injustice, few studies have examined how this source of strain may impact youths' behavioral outcomes, including risk for future recidivism. This study begins to address that gap in the literature. We applied the general strain theory as our theoretical framework to examine the interactive effect of perceived police injustice and moral disengagement on juvenile aggressive behavior. Our sample included 95 juvenile offenders who completed questionnaires on measures of perceived police injustice and moral disengagement. Results supported our hypothesis, such that moral disengagement predicted past month aggression among juvenile offenders, but only by youth who reported mean and high levels of perceived police injustice. While more research is needed in this area, this study's findings underscore the need to address both perceived police engagement and moral disengagement among youth at-risk of engaging in delinquent behaviors. Implications for intervention programs are also presented.

**Keywords**

policing; aggression; moral disengagement; juvenile offenders

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Numerous studies have been conducted over the past three decades that have explored the public's perception of law enforcement misconduct and discrimination, in part due to increasing media coverage of the topic (Dowler & Zawilski, 2007; Lersch & Mieczkowski, 2005). However, less work has been done to examine the influence of police misconduct on behavioral outcomes among recipients of misconduct. Among the studies available, there is initial evidence to suggest that perceived injustice by law enforcement is related to criminal activity. For example, Kane (2005) found that among communities characterized by high disadvantage, incidents of police misconduct predicted engagement in violent crimes among

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community members. The author speculated that the findings reflected residents' belief that police would be unresponsive to intervention requests and, as a result, residents relied on other methods to address conflict. More recently, Barkworth and Murphy (2015) found that perceived injustice by police predicted expected non-compliance by youth, and this relationship was partially explained by changes in negative affect. Among youth populations, Borrero (2001) also found that negative police conduct was related to loss of respect for law enforcement and internalized feelings of hostility towards others, which was speculated to lead to fewer adherences to laws and an increase in criminal activity.

To date, only one study has specifically examined the impact of police misconduct or injustice on delinquency (Slocum, Wiley, & Esbensen, 2016). The authors found that youth who were more satisfied with their interactions with police were at lower risk of engaging in delinquent behaviors compared to those who had negative or ambivalent feelings regarding their interaction. Moreover police-initiated contact was associated with changes to juvenile's attitudes toward violence, which was also related to subsequent delinquency. Thus, although studies are limited, there is initial evidence that police contact is related to delinquency among juveniles, and appears to be, at least partially, influenced by youth's cognitions.

## Moral Disengagement

Another form of cognition that may be influenced by police contact is moral disengagement. Moral disengagement is a cognitive process, in which individuals construct justifications for behaviors that violate moral standards (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). Bandura (1999) described eight mechanisms of moral disengagement that are categorized into four broader domains through which moral control can be disengaged. These domains are: cognitive restructure by which the individual construes negative behavior more positively (“It is all right to fight when your group's honor is threatened”), minimization of one's role or responsibility for a given action (“If kids are living in bad conditions they cannot be blamed for behaving aggressively”), disregard for consequences of a negative action (“It's okay to tell small lies because they don't really do any harm”), and dehumanizing or blaming the victim (“Some people deserve to be treated like animals”). Moral disengagement theory has been applied to child and adolescent populations to better understand risk for aggressive or violent behaviors (Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014; Hymel & Bonanno, 2014; Hymel & Perren, 2015). Strong evidence has also been found among juvenile offender populations, indicating that moral disengagement predicts aggressive behaviors (Kiriakidis, 2008), delinquency (Mulford, 2004) and reoffending rates (Cardwell et al., 2015; Shulman, Cauffman, Piquero, & Fagan, 2011), yet to date no study has examined the interactive effect of moral disengagement and police interactions among juvenile populations.

## General Strain Theory (GST)

We used the general strain theory (GST) as a theoretical framework to understand the potential interaction of perceived police injustice and moral disengagement on behavioral outcomes for juvenile offenders. The GST proposes that experiencing stressors interacts with individual characteristics to amplify the risk of engaging in maladaptive behaviors,

such as criminal acts, aggression, or violence (Agnew, 1992; 2001; 2013; Kaufman, Rebellon, Thaxton, & Agnew, 2008). A large body of evidence supports the impact of strain on behavioral outcomes among both adult offender populations (Froggio, 2007; Listwan, Sullivan, Agnew, Cullen, & Colvin, 2011; McGrath, Marcum, and Copes, 2012; Morris, Carriaga, Diamond, Piquero, & Piquero, 2012; Zweig, Yahner, Visher, & Latimor, 2015), and juvenile offender populations (Neff & Waite, 2007; Ngo, Paternoster, Cullen, & Mackenzie, 2011). However, few have examined the interactive effect between strain and individual level factors, particularly among juvenile populations. Piquero and Sealock (2000) conducted one of the first such studies, finding that strain (i.e., history of physical abuse) and negative affect (i.e., anger) both predicted recent interpersonal aggression among a sample of juvenile offenders. In a second study, the authors examined strain and two forms of negative emotionality (i.e., anger and depression) on crime/delinquency (Piquero & Sealock, 2004). However, the interactive effect of strain and negative emotionality was not explored. More recently, Robertson, Stein, and Schaefer-Rohleder (2010) provided a test of the full GST model, examining the impact of strain on coping processes and delinquency, finding among their sample of female juvenile offenders, that the experience of strain (i.e., adverse early life events and exposure to Hurricane Katrina) was indirectly related to recent delinquency through maladaptive coping. Thus, although there is support for the application of the GST to juvenile offender populations, only a limited number of individual-level characteristics have been examined among juvenile offenders, with none examining the interactive effect of moral disengagement. Moreover, current evidence of the GST is primarily based on distant experiences of strain rather than stressors that are more proximally experienced among offender populations, such as perceived injustice by police.

## Current Study

In sum, although many juvenile offenders report experiencing police injustice, few studies have examined how this source of strain may impact youths' behavioral outcomes. We will use the GST as a framework for examine the interactive effect of perceived police injustice and moral disengagement on juvenile aggressive behavior. Based on previous literature, we hypothesize that perceived police injustice will be associated with moral disengagement and greater aggressive behaviors. Additionally, based on the GST as a theoretical model, we hypothesize an interactive effect between moral disengagement and perceived injustice, such that moral disengagement will be associated with higher past month aggressive behaviors at higher levels of perceived injustice.

## Methods

### Participants

The present study was part of a larger research project examining disproportionate minority contact (DMC) in the juvenile justice system in a Midwestern state. A total of 113 juvenile justice youth ages 10 to 18 were recruited in three counties. However, 18 youths did not complete the outcome measure of interest and were excluded from the study analysis. No significant differences were found on demographic variables between the youth excluded from the analyses because of missing data and those that are retained for the present study.

The final sample consisted of 95 youth (71.6% male, 51.6% probation) aged 13 to 18 years ( $M = 16.13$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ ). The sample was primarily White (63.2%).

## Procedures

Data collection commenced after receiving approval from the University Institutional Review Board. A parent study was conducted through which court records were collected for every case referred to county juvenile courts across 92 counties over a five-year period (2005-2009). The current study is based on follow-up data gathered by researchers who worked directly with local justice actors to recruit system involved youth on probation and in detention centers in three of the original 92 counties. These three counties were selected based on their geographic and population variability. Data collections occurred over 2 to 3 days in each jurisdiction, so data collection was time limited. Youth on probation and in detention in the three target counties were eligible to participate if they met the following inclusion criteria: (1) the youth was present at the detention center or at their scheduled appointment with a probation officer during the days of data collection, (2) parental consent was received prior to the data collection, and (3) the youth voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. The study questionnaire was programmed into a web-based survey tool, Qualtrics, and was administered via a WiFi-enabled iPad. Research staff informed the participants that the normal procedure was to read the questions aloud, but participants could choose to “opt-out” if they preferred to complete the questionnaire on their own. Upon completion of the survey, participants received a \$10 Wal-Mart gift card (given immediately to those on probation and placed in the personal belongings of those in detention).

## Measures

**Demographic and background information**—Participants were asked to provide demographic information by indicating their birthdate (converted to age in years), gender (coded as 0 = male and 1 = female), ethnic identity (coded as 0 = white and 1 = non-white), and legal status (meaning currently detained or on probation and not related to immigration status, coded as 1 = probation and 2 = detention).

**Aggression-Problem Behavior Frequency questionnaire** is an 18-item measure that assesses the frequency of physical aggression, non-physical aggression, and relational aggression (Henry & Farrell, 2004). Participants indicate how many times they have engaged in each aggressive behavior in the last 30 days. They can respond: “Never”(1), “1-2 times”(2), “3-5 times”(3), “6-9 times”(4), “10-19 times”(5), or “20 or more times”(6). There are three subscales: Physical aggression (7 items); Non-physical aggression (5 items); and Relational aggression (6 items). Subscales are summed for a composite score, with higher scores indicating higher levels of aggressive behavior. In the current study, the internal consistency reliability estimate was high ( $\alpha = .93$ ), slightly higher than alphas published in previous studies, which ranged from .79 to .86 (Farrell, Kung, White, & Valois, 2000; Sullivan, Farrell, & Kliewer, 2006).

**Moral Disengagement Scale** is a 32-item scale that assesses proneness to moral disengagement (Bandura et al., 1996). The scale assesses eight domains of moral disengagement, each consisting of four items. Participants are asked to answer the items on a

3-point Likert scale from (1 = “Agree” to 3 = “Disagree”). A composite score was used for the current study. Items were reverse coded, such that higher scores represent higher moral disengagement. For the current study, the internal consistency reliability estimate was high ( $\alpha = .86$ ), consistent with estimates reported in previous research, with alphas ranging from .82 to .92 (Bandura et al., 1996; Pelton et al., 2004; Shulman et al., 2011; Walters et al., 2015).

**Perceived police injustice questionnaire** is a 5-item measure constructed for the current study to assess the level of perceived discrimination by the police toward various groups. Items were the following: “People from my racial group are more likely to be unfairly stopped and questioned by the police,” “Police treat young people worse than old people,” “Police treat rich people better than poor people,” “Police treat people from my racial group worse than people from other racial groups,” and “Police treat males worse than females.” Participants respond to the questions on a 4-point scale indicating agreement or disagreement (1= “Strongly Agree” to 4= “Strongly Disagree”) with each statement. Higher scores indicate high levels of perceived discrimination. The internal consistency for the measure was acceptable ( $\alpha = .69$ ).

### Data Analysis

All analyses were performed using SPSS 24.0. A hierarchical linear regression analysis was performed with gender and status were entered into the first step, moral disengagement in the second step, and perceived police injustice was entered in the third step. The PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013) was used to probe the interaction (simple moderation: the conditional effect model specified as Model 1 by Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007) using a pick-a-point method, which a standard deviation below the mean, the mean, and a standard deviation above the mean, respectively is used to probe the conditional effect of the independent variable at various values of the moderator variable (Hayes, 2012). For this analysis, a 5,000 bootstrap sample was used with past 30-day aggression indicated as the dependent variable, moral disengagement indicated as the independent variable, and perceived police injustice indicated as the moderator.

### Results

Means and standard deviations for the measures of interest are shown in Table 1. Initial bivariate correlations between all study variables are shown in Table 2. Correlation analyses revealed that gender and status (i.e., probation or detained) were significantly correlated with most of the predictor variables of interest. Specifically, males were more likely to engage in past month aggressive acts ( $r = -.20, p = .048$ ), perceive greater police injustice ( $r = -.27, p = .007$ ), and report greater moral disengagement ( $r = -.28, p = .006$ ) than females. Similarly, youth who were detained were more likely to engage in past month aggressive acts ( $r = .34, p = .001$ ) and report greater moral disengagement ( $r = .30, p = .003$ ) than youth who were on probation. Thus, gender and status were included as control variables in subsequent analyses. Regarding the variables of interest, consistent with our hypotheses, perceived police justice was positively associated with aggressive behaviors ( $r = .34, p = .001$ ). Moral

disengagement was positively associated with both perceived police injustice ( $r = .30, p = .003$ ) and aggressive behaviors ( $r = .49, p < .001$ ).

### Unique and Interactive Effect of Moral Disengagement and Perceived Police Injustice

Hierarchical linear regression analyses were conducted to examine the unique associations of moral disengagement and perceived police injustice and on aggression, while controlling for the potential effect of gender and status. Results indicated that moral disengagement was significantly predictive of past month aggressive behavior above gender and status ( $\beta = .42, p < .001$ ). When perceived police injustices was added into the model, although moral disengagement remained a significant predictor ( $\beta = .37, p < .001$ ), perceived police injustice added unique and incremental variance in predicting aggressive behavior ( $\beta = .21, p = .03$ ). The model accounted for 32% of the variance in past month aggressive behaviors among juvenile offenders. See Table 3 for detailed results of the hierarchical linear regression analyses.

Based on the simple moderation analysis conducted in PROCESS, a significant interaction between moral disengagement and perceived police injustice was found ( $b = .09, p = .01$ ). The interaction between moral disengagement and perceived police injustice on past month aggressive behavior was probed. Results indicated that perceived police injustice was significantly related to aggression only at mean ( $t = 3.68, p < .001$ ) and high levels (one standard deviation above the mean;  $t = 4.70, p < .001$ ) of perceived police injustice (see Table 1 for variable means and Figure 1 for moderation results). The model accounted 36.5% of the variance in past month aggressive behavior among juvenile offenders.

## Discussion

The current study examined the impact of moral disengagement on aggressive behaviors among juvenile offenders and, is the first, to our knowledge, to also examine the moderating effect of perceived police injustice. Based on the GST, we hypothesized that perceive police injustice would amply the effect of moral disengagement on aggressive behaviors among justice-involved youth. Our hypothesis was supported. We found a positive relationship between moral disengagement, police injustice, and aggressive behavior. Furthermore, in support of our moderation hypothesis, moral disengagement was associated with higher past month aggressive behavior among justice-involved youth at moderate and high levels of perceived police injustice. Stated differently, juvenile offenders are at greater risk for engaging in maladaptive behaviors if they have cognitive distortions that support transgressive behavior and also perceive unjust treatment by police – even at average levels of this perception.

These findings first highlight the need for further research on moral disengagement among offender populations. Specifically, research is needed to better understand whether there are certain types of moral reasoning strategies that are more strongly associated with delinquency than others. For example, as noted in the Borrero (2001) study, negative contact by police was speculated to result in youths' loss of respect for police and internalized feelings of hostility towards others. Thus, based on these experiences, justice-involved youth may be more inclined to develop moral disengagement strategies that disregard negative

consequences of their actions due to a loss of respect for the law or feel a heightened sense of threat due to negative statements expressed by police compared to other types of moral reasoning (i.e., cognitive restructuring, minimization of one's role or responsibility for a given action, and dehumanizing or blaming the victim). Understanding these processes can further inform intervention programming identified above.

Additionally, given that a significant relationship between moral disengagement and delinquency has been found in the current study, which is consistent with previous findings (Cardell et al., 2015; Shuman et al., 2011), providing interventions to address moral disengagement is critical. There is evidence to suggest that merely identifying the process of moral disengagement (McAlister, 2001) and/or helping youth to identify alternatives to moral disengagement (Bustamante & Chaux, 2014) are effective intervention tools at reducing levels of moral disengagement. Additionally, based on work by Bandura (1996), it was proposed that moral disengagement was linked to delinquency through lessening of guilt and prosocial behavior; which in turn, led to increased distorted cognitive and affective reactions conducive to aggression (i.e., increased angry rumination and irascibility). Thus, novel interventions aimed at attenuating these specific effects of moral disengagement and increasing prosocial behaviors may also be important treatment targets in order to reduce risk for continued aggression and recidivism among justice-involved youth.

Secondly, these findings further highlight the impact that perceived police injustice can have on behavioral outcomes for juveniles. Given that justice-involved youth come into contact with multiple actors within the justice system, further research is needed to also assess the impact these types of contact, whether positive or negative, has on behavioral outcomes and recidivism among this population of youth. Such findings can be used to inform policies and procedures in training of legal actors on best practices when interacting with juvenile populations, as well as education on the short and long-term impact they have. For instance, a recent intervention sought to train police officers in adolescent developmental theory to limit the arrest of youth in general, and minority youth specifically (Goodrich, Anderson & LaMotte, 2014). Training officers to approach adolescents in developmentally appropriate ways may also improve adolescents' perceptions regarding the legitimacy of police officers (Tyler, Fagan & Geller, 2014).

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Although this study involved a very unique sample of youth and tested a novel relationship between moral disengagement and perceived police injustice among youth within the legal system on aggressive behaviors, there are several limitations that must be addressed. First, although significant relationships were observed, restrictions in recruitment limited the number of youth that were able to participate in the study. Thus, future research should employ larger representative samples of juvenile offenders to strengthen and clarify the associations found in the present study, and to improve the generalizability of the results. A larger sample size would also allow group comparisons; especially between racial/ethnic groups in examining the influence different types of perceived unfairness has on youth's behavioral outcomes, such as perceived discrimination within and outside of the justice system based on racial identification. Moreover, there was a gender imbalance within our

sample, thus no conclusions could be drawn on any potential gender differences within the risk process. Second, the perceived police injustice measure was constructed for the current study, thus more research is needed on validation of the measure. Additionally, the measure was based on perceived acts of injustice that may not have been directly experienced by respondents. Future studies would benefit from disaggregating perceptions of injustice from direct personal experiences of injustice. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the study precludes the assessment on the temporal order of the study variables and long-term effects of these factors on recidivism. Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to clarify whether the development of moral disengagement is independent from police injustice, as well as whether the experience of police injustice is associated with increased aggression over time and recidivism among juvenile offenders.

## Conclusions

This study is the first to examine whether perceived police injustice, a source of stress more commonly experienced by youth within the justice system, amplified the effect of moral disengagement on aggressive behaviors among juvenile offenders. These findings highlight the impact of maladaptive cognitive processes on behavioral outcomes among this high-risk population of youth, but how perceived negative views of police can further amplify this relationship. These findings can be used to inform intervention-programming efforts on ways to restructure maladaptive cognitions in order to reduce risk for recidivism among juvenile justice-involved youth. Moreover, given effect perceptions of police injustice has on aggression among this populations, working to reduce these perceptions and increase positive interactions between police and juvenile offenders would be beneficial.

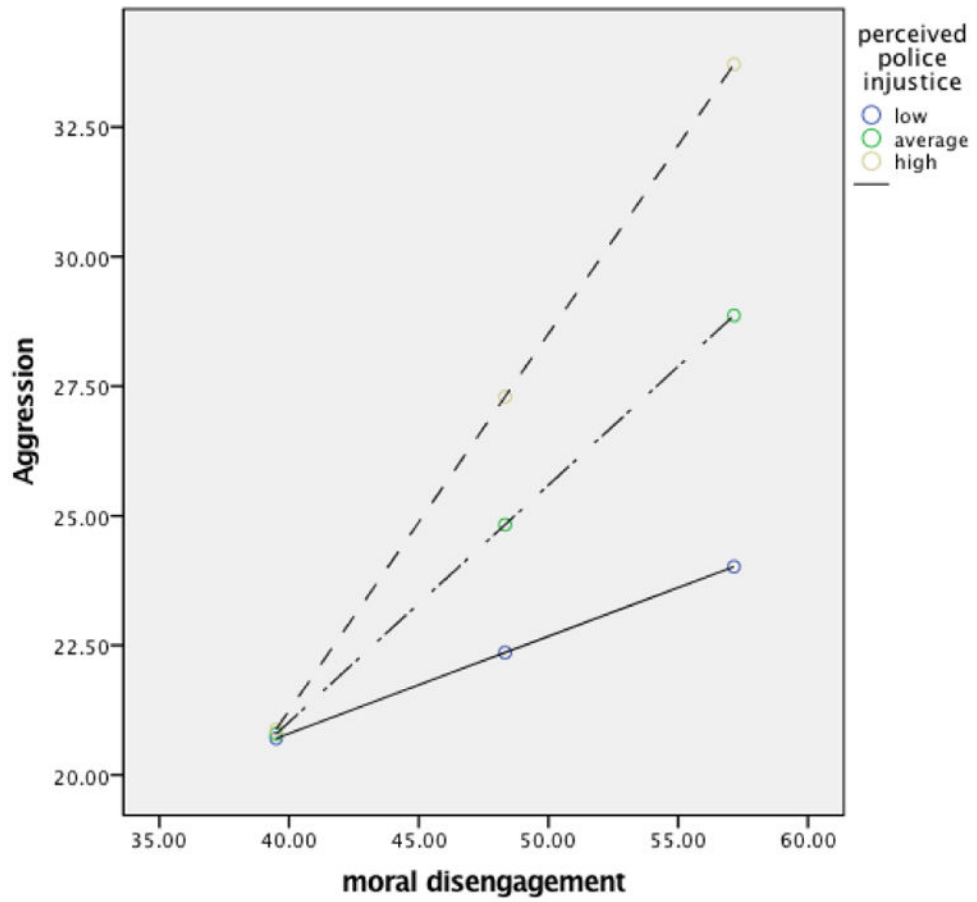
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**Figure 1.** Probed interaction of moral disengagement at three levels of perceived police injustice and its association with past 30-day aggressive behavior.

**Table 1**  
**Demographics and Descriptive Statistics for the Sample**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>N or Mean</b>	<b>% or SD</b>
Age	16.13	1.94
Gender		
Male	68	71.6
Female	27	28.4
Race/Ethnicity		
White	60	63.2
Non-White	35	36.8
Setting		
Probation	49	51.6
Detained	46	48.4
Aggression-Total	25.54	11.71
Perceived Police Injustice	13.48	3.00
Moral Disengagement	48.33	8.82

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Table 2

## Associations of Study Variables

	AGG	AGE	GEN	STAT	RACE	PPI	MD
AGG		.04	-.20 <sup>*</sup>	.34 <sup>***</sup>	-.11	.34 <sup>***</sup>	.49 <sup>***</sup>
AGE			.10	.10	.05	.06	.01
GEN				-.28 <sup>***</sup>	.09	-.27 <sup>***</sup>	-.28 <sup>***</sup>
STAT					.13	.14	.30 <sup>**</sup>
RACE						-.12	-.28 <sup>**</sup>
PPI							.30 <sup>**</sup>
MD							

Note. AGG = past year aggressive behavior; AGE = age; GEN = gender coded as male = 0 and female = 1; STAT = status coded as 1 = probation and 2 = detention; RACE = race coded as 0 = white and 1 = non-white; PPI = perceived police injustice; MD = moral disengagement.

\*  $p < .05$ ,

\*\*  $p < .01$ ,

\*\*\*  $p < .001$  (2-tailed)

**Table 3**  
**Hierarchical Regression Analyses Examining the Effects of Moral Disengagement and Perceived Police Injustice on Youth's Aggression**

Predictors	B	SE B	$\beta$	$R^2$
<b>Step 1</b>				.13**
Gender	-3.00	2.62	-.12	
Status	7.17	2.37	.31**	
<b>Step 2</b>				.15***
Moral Disengagement	.55	.13	.42***	
<b>Step 3</b>				.04*
Perceived Police Injustice	.81	.37	.21*	
<b>Overall <math>R^2</math></b>				.32***

*Note.* Gender: coded as male = 0 and female = 1; Status: coded as 1 = probation and 2 = detention

\*  $p < .05$ ,

\*\*  $p < .01$ ,

\*\*\*  $p < .001$  (2-tailed)