



## Legal cynicism: Independent construct or downstream manifestation of antisocial constructs? New evidence

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### ABSTRACT

Researchers have found that legal cynicism is a significant predictor of crime. Although legal cynicism developed as a form of anomie, it is also plausible that legal cynicism is itself a deviant rationalization to justify one's criminal behavior. As such, legal cynicism might be a derivative manifestation of other individual-level constructs that bear on criminal propensity. We test this possibility by controlling for temperament traits related to antisocial behavior and psychopathic personality features in a sample of residentially incarcerated youth (N = 253). Results from negative binomial models revealed that legal cynicism was significantly associated with self-reported delinquency (including violence), but not total arrests. The significant associations with general delinquency and violence held even when controlling for sociodemographic characteristics. However, the associations were rendered either non-significant or greatly attenuated when we included temperament and psychopathy measures in the models. Overall, findings are convergent with the notion that legal cynicism is a consequence or product of antisocial traits and criminal propensity.

### 1. Introduction

Legal cynicism is a form of anomie—a state of normlessness or lawlessness—whereby individuals view the criminal law and criminal justice system as illegitimate, ineffective, and not in their best interest. As a result, those who harbor legal cynicism are inclined to advocate behaviors “outside of the law” in part because individuals believe that the police and courts will not help them resolve problems and disputes.<sup>1</sup> As Sampson and Bartusch (1998), p. 786 observed in their seminal study on legal cynicism, “The common idea is the sense in which laws or rules are not considered binding in the existential, present lives of respondents”. Due to differential involvement in criminal offending and criminal justice system processing, there are important demographic differences in legal cynicism with males, nonwhites, youth, and persons with lower socioeconomic status generally having greater legal cynicism than females, whites, older adults, and persons with higher socioeconomic status.

Several studies have shown legal cynicism to be a significant

predictor of assorted behaviors “outside the law,” namely crime (Augustyn, 2015; Corsaro, Frank, & Ozer, 2015; Fagan & Piquero, 2007; Kirk & Matsuda, 2011; Reisig, Wolfe, & Holtfreter, 2011). Legal cynicism has predictive validity even when accounting for other potentially confounding effects as shown among several studies using data from the Pathways to Desistance study, a longitudinal study of serious juvenile offenders. For instance, Piquero, Fagan, Mulvey, Steinberg, and Odgers (2005) found that youth who had more extensive arrest history reported significantly higher legal cynicism. That finding is open to multiple interpretations. On one hand, arrest history and the attendant contact with law enforcement officers can produce adverse experiences that aggravate negative perceptions about the police particularly if the arrestee perceives that he or she received unprofessional or disrespectful treatment. On the other hand, legal cynicism can reflect a general antisocial disposition where those who offend and are arrested frequently dislike the police and harbor cynical views because police are adversaries of offenders.

Fagan and Piquero (2007) found that legal cynicism was associated

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<sup>1</sup> There are several sources of legal cynicism. For instance, Carr et al. (2007) reported six reasons why citizens harbor legally cynical views. In descending order of prevalence, these were having a prior negative interaction with police, viewing the police as ineffective, having a generalized negative view, personally or vicariously experiencing the police as harassing or engaging in excessive force, not wanting to call the police in an emergency, and seeing the police as crooked or corrupt. In their data, nearly 62% of the sample had a negative view of law enforcement.

with greater self-reported offending variety or versatility and more aggression despite controls for costs and rewards associated with offending and punishment, prior court record, prior incarceration, substance use history, psychosocial maturity, and mental health symptoms. Augustyn (2015) reported mixed findings on the association between legal cynicism and offending. On one hand, legal cynicism had no association with a binary measure of compliance with the law and a binary measure of substance use among the total sample and among subgroups of adolescence-onset and early onset delinquents. Legal cynicism was positively associated with frequency of offending among the total Pathways sample and among adolescence-onset offenders. Moreover, legal cynicism was positively associated with frequency of substance use among the total Pathways sample, but legal cynicism had null effects among early- and adolescence-onset groups. The significant effects withstood 23 controls spanning demographic, delinquent career, psychological factors, and offense behaviors.

The previous focus on control variables is particularly salient to understanding legal cynicism. Although it developed as a form of anomie, it is also plausible that legal cynicism is itself a deviant rationalization to justify one's criminal behavior even though its conceptual origins are in the anomie tradition. As such, legal cynicism might be a secondary manifestation of other individual-level constructs that bear on criminal propensity. Fortunately, some prior research has touched on this issue. Although they did not focus on legal cynicism per se, Piquero, Gomez-Smith, and Langton (2004) examined the association between self-control and perceptions about the fairness of sanctions among a sample of undergraduates. They found that individuals with low self-control were more likely to perceive that sanctions were unfair, and that perceptions about the unfairness of sanctions contributed to greater anger among those with low self-control. In this respect, low self-control contributed to a generalized notion that sanctions, and by extension the justice system, are unfair which could contribute to rationalizations for deviant behavior. Those with low self-control may view themselves as potential offenders and develop resentment concerning the likely response to their behavior.

Only one study to our knowledge directly examined whether legal cynicism withstood the potentially confounding effects of an individual-level, trait-like, propensity-oriented construct on crime. Drawing on a sample of undergraduate students, Reisig et al. (2011) empirically examined the interrelations between legal cynicism, low self-control, and offending. They found that students that had low self-control were significantly more likely to exhibit legal cynicism. In subsequent models of criminal offending, legal cynicism exerted a significant association with criminal offending despite controlling for not only low self-control, but also beliefs about police legitimacy, age, race, sex, and ethnicity.<sup>2</sup> The Reisig et al. study is important because it illustrates that legal cynicism maintains an association with offending even when accounting for person-specific variables.

Nivette, Eisner, Malti, and Ribeaud (2015) examined the social and developmental antecedents of legal cynicism, and in doing so, replicated part of Reisig et al.'s (2011) study. Drawing on data from the Zurich Project on the Social Development of Children and Adults, Nivette et al. found that low self-control was *not* significantly associated with legal cynicism once all controls were included. In contrast, prior delinquency and prior police contacts were significantly predictive of

<sup>2</sup>Low self-control has also been shown to be associated with perceptions about police legitimacy and perceptions about procedural justice (Wolfe, 2011), which are related concepts to legal cynicism. That is, persons with low self-control perceive that the police are illegitimate and that the justice system operates in a procedurally unjust manner. There is compelling evidence for low self-control as a robust predictor of many forms of antisocial conduct (see, de Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok, & Baumeister, 2012; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hay & Meldrum, 2015; Pratt & Cullen, 2000; Vazsonyi, Mikuška, & Kelley, 2017), and by extension valuations made about the legitimacy of the criminal justice system to respond to antisocial behavior.

legal cynicism. Nivette et al. (2015), p. 287 took a strong stance on what their findings meant for legal cynicism. Specifically, they suggested, “the strongest predictor of legal cynicism at age 15 was self-reported delinquency in the preceding year. This finding may suggest that cynical attitudes toward the law have a neutralization function. In other words, adolescents may adopt legal cynicism as a technique to justify wrongdoing. This finding suggests that contrary to the assumptions by Sampson and Bartusch (1998), legal cynicism among adolescents may be less of a reflection of continuing experiences of injustice than a post hoc justification of one's own rule-breaking behavior.”

## 2. Current focus

To date, there is uncertainty about the association between legal cynicism and criminal offending vis-à-vis individual-level constructs relating to criminal propensity, and there is fundamental disagreement whether legal cynicism reflects anomie (e.g., Carr, Napolitano, & Keating, 2007; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998) or antisocial rationalization (e.g., Nivette et al., 2015) and whether legal cynicism exists independently of antisocial features or is part and parcel of them (e.g., Fagan & Piquero, 2007; Nivette et al., 2015; Piquero et al., 2005; Reisig et al., 2011). The current study sought to resolve these conflicts by examining the legal cynicism-antisocial behavior association while controlling for two individual-level constructs relating to criminal propensity and demographic factors among a sample of institutionalized delinquents.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Participants and procedures

The current study used cross-sectional data derived from a sample of 253 juvenile offenders in long-term residential facilities in Pennsylvania. With Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the University of Pittsburgh, investigators collected data in 2009 and 2010 from a male-only facility ( $n = 152$ ) and a female-only facility ( $n = 101$ ). Researchers described the study to facility staff and youth, and a supervisor at each facility provided approval for the youth to participate in the study. Prior to administering the instrument, the interviewer explained the purpose of the study and received assent from minors and consent from those who were 18 or 19 years. All interviewers completed intensive training and administered structured one-on-one interviews using computer-assisted survey interview (CASI) techniques. An interview editor was on-site to answer questions and provide quality control for data collection procedures. Research staff conducted all interviews in private rooms and the CASI data collection procedure allowed the respondents to have each question read to them supplemented by response cards.

The youth in the sample had extensive involvement in diverse forms of antisocial conduct and delinquency. Youth averaged 15 acts of delinquency, approximately 70% sold drugs, 38% had a juvenile court referral by age 13, and nearly 20% had their first juvenile court referral by age 12. In both behavioral history and risk factors for continued offending, the current sample is comparable to other samples of serious delinquent youth in residential placement and related juvenile justice settings (e.g., Abram et al., 2017; Amemiya, Monahan, & Cauffman, 2016; Baglivio, Wolff, Howell, Jackowski, & Greenwald, 2018; Heirigs, DeLisi, Fox, Dhingra, & Vaughn, 2018; Trulson, Haerle, Caudill, & DeLisi, 2016; Van Vugt, Lanctot, & Lemieux, 2016).

### 3.2. Measures

#### 3.2.1. Legal cynicism

We measured legal cynicism using Sampson and Bartusch's (1998) 5-item measure ( $\alpha = 0.61$ ) where youth reported their level of agreement to the following items: “Laws were made to be broken,” “It's okay

to do anything you want as long as you don't hurt anyone," "To make money, there are no right and wrong ways anymore, only easy ways and hard ways," "Fighting between friends or within families is nobody else's business," and "Nowadays a person has to live pretty much for today and let tomorrow take care of itself." Response categories included 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = disagree, and 5 = strongly disagree, thus lower scores indicate higher legal cynicism. We then rescored these items so that higher values indicated greater legal cynicism (reversed the reverse coding). The items were subjected to exploratory factor analysis and inspection of retained factors indicated clear evidence of one factor with Eigenvalue > 1 ( $\alpha = 0.61$ , Eigenvalue = 1.16) and after varimax rotation, the following factor loadings were found: "Laws were made to be broken" ( $\lambda = 0.37$ ), "It's okay to do anything you want as long as you don't hurt anyone" ( $\lambda = 0.50$ ), "To make money, there are no right and wrong ways anymore" ( $\lambda = 0.63$ ), "Fighting between friends or within families is nobody else's business" ( $\lambda = 0.45$ ), and "Nowadays a person has to live pretty much for today and let tomorrow take care of itself" ( $\lambda = 0.42$ ).

### 3.2.2. Psychopathy

The Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory (YPI; Andershed, Kerr, Stattin, & Levander, 2002) is a self-report measure of psychopathy in adolescents ( $M = 105.74$ ,  $SD = 20.92$ , range = 53–189). The YPI contains ten subscales that capture the various features of psychopathy including dishonest charm, grandiosity, lying, manipulation, remorselessness, unemotionality, callousness, thrillseeking, impulsiveness and irresponsibility. Several studies (Andershed, Hodgins, & Tengström, 2007; Colins, Bijttebier, Broekaert, & Andershed, 2014; Colins, Van Damme, Andershed, Fanti, & DeLisi, 2017; Dolan & Rennie, 2007; Fossati et al., 2016; Poythress, Dembo, Wareham, & Greenbaum, 2006) support the YPI in terms of convergent validity with other psychopathy measures and criterion validity with externalizing/antisocial behaviors (e.g., Andershed et al., 2007; Colins et al., 2014; Colins et al., 2017; DeLisi et al., 2014; DeLisi et al., 2014; Dolan & Rennie, 2007; Fossati et al., 2016; Poythress et al., 2006).<sup>3</sup>

### 3.2.3. Temperament

We measured temperament using DeLisi, Fox, Fully, and Vaughn's (2018) 15-item temperament scale ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ) reflecting deficits in effortful control and negative emotionality in accordance with DeLisi and Vaughn's (2014) temperament theory. Exemplar items include "Little things set me off," "When I get really mad I hit someone," "When I am angry I lose control over what I do," "When I am angry I just lose it," and "I am touchy and easily annoyed." All items were subjected to exploratory factor analysis and inspection of Eigenvalues showed clear evidence of a single factor (Eigenvalue = 5.20, difference = 4.55, proportion = 0.86, cumulative = 0.86 with no other Eigenvalue factors > 1). Higher scores on the temperament measure indicate temperamental features characterized by low effortful control and/or greater negative emotionality, which research has shown to have significant associations with antisocial behavior (Baglivio, Wolff, DeLisi, Vaughn, & Piquero, 2016; Baglivio, Wolff, Piquero, & Epps, 2015; Veeh, Renn, Vaughn, & DeLisi, 2018; Walters, 2015; Wolff, Baglivio, Piquero, Vaughn, & DeLisi, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Meta-analyses and systematic reviews have shown that psychopathy has broadband associations with multiple forms of offending, including general offending (Leistico, Salekin, DeCoster, & Rogers, 2008), institutional adjustment and misconduct (Walters, 2003), recidivism (Edens, Campbell, & Weir, 2007; Salekin, Rogers, & Sewell, 1996), homicide (Fox & DeLisi, 2019), and sexual offending (Hawes, Boccaccini, & Murrie, 2013; Knight and Guay, 2006) in addition to psychopathy as a general theory of crime (e.g., DeLisi, 2016; Hare, 1996).

### 3.2.4. Demographic covariates

Controls for sex (female = 0, 39.7% male = 1, 60.3%), race (non-white = 0, 77.4% white = 1, 22.6%), and age ( $M = 15.98$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ , range = 13–19) were used based on their association with delinquency, violence, and arrests (Abram et al., 2017; Latzer, 2018; Piquero, Jennings, Diamond, & Reingle, 2015; Vaughn, Salas-Wright, Cordova, Nelson, & Jaegers, 2018).

### 3.2.5. Self-reported delinquency and violent delinquency

Self-reported delinquency ( $M = 15.29$ ,  $SD = 13.16$ , range = 0–65) and self-reported violent delinquency ( $M = 8.94$ ,  $SD = 7.84$ , range = 0–35) were based on the self-report of delinquency employed in the National Youth Survey Family Study (Elliott, Huizinga, & Menard, 1989). This is among the most widely used self-report delinquency measures and it has convergent validity with official measures of crime (Pollock, Menard, Elliott, & Huizinga, 2015). The delinquency items include motor vehicle theft, theft over \$50, bought or sold stolen goods, stolen marijuana or other drugs, carrying a hidden weapon, gang fighting, hitting a teacher, hitting a parent, hitting other students, strong arming students, parents, and teachers, hitting an animal, and attacking someone.

### 3.2.6. Arrests/police contacts

Self-reported arrests ( $M = 3.73$ ,  $SD = 4.0$ , range = 0–32) was the number of police contacts the youth reported.

### 3.2.7. Analytical approach

In testing whether the association between legal cynicism and antisocial behavior withstood competing confounds, we employed hierarchical negative binomial regression models. Negative binomial regression is appropriate to estimate count-data dependent variables, such as self-reported delinquency and arrests when there is overdispersion (the variance exceeds the mean). In model 1, legal cynicism was the only independent variable. In model 2, we specified the demographic controls and in model 3 psychopathy and temperament were included. We conducted sensitivity analyses by examining results in total and by sex and race. Likelihood ratio test of  $\alpha$  was conducted and reported in each table confirming the negative binomial and not the Poisson estimator was appropriate. To increase confidence in the estimates, we specified bootstrapped standard errors with 500 replications.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Negative binomial regression models for self-reported delinquency

As shown in Table 1, legal cynicism had a significant association with self-reported delinquency ( $IRR = 1.08$ ,  $z = 5.30$ ,  $p < .001$ ) in model 1 such that youth with greater legal cynicism reported greater involvement in delinquency. The addition of demographic controls in model 2 had little effect on legal cynicism ( $IRR = 1.09$ ,  $z = 4.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ) as the significant association remained. In model 3 with the inclusion of psychopathy and temperament, both of which had significant positive associations, the association between legal cynicism and self-reported delinquency was no longer significant ( $IRR = 1.04$ ,  $z = 1.82$ , ns).

### 4.2. Negative binomial regression models for self-reported violence

As shown in Table 2, legal cynicism had a significant association with self-reported violence ( $IRR = 1.10$ ,  $z = 4.82$ ,  $p < .001$ ) in model 1 such that youth with greater legal cynicism reported perpetrating more violent acts of delinquency. The addition of demographic controls in model 2 had little effect as the significant association between legal cynicism and self-reported violence ( $IRR = 1.10$ ,  $z = 4.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ) remained. In Model 3 with the specification of psychopathy and temperament, the significant effect for legal cynicism remained

**Table 1**  
Negative binomial regression model for self-reported delinquency.

Variable	IRR (BSE)	z	IRR (BSE)	z	IRR (BSE)	z
Legal cynicism	1.08 (0.02)	5.30***	1.09 (0.02)	4.17***	1.04 (0.02)	1.82
Sex			1.02 (0.12)	0.13	1.14 (0.12)	1.25
White			0.91 (0.13)	-0.65	0.88 (0.11)	-1.03
Age			1.01 (0.03)	0.13	1.02 (0.04)	0.54
Psychopathy					1.01 (0.00)	2.42**
Temperament					1.04 (0.01)	4.99***
Wald $\chi^2$	28.09***		23.83***		84.83***	
LR Test of $\alpha$	1512.72***		1510.44***		1179.04***	

Note. IRR = incidence-rate ratio, BSE = bootstrap standard error with 500 replications, z = z-score.

\*\*\* p < .001.

\*\* p < .01.

**Table 2**  
Negative binomial regression model for self-reported violence.

Variable	IRR (BSE)	z	IRR (BSE)	z	IRR (BSE)	z
Legal cynicism	1.10 (0.02)	4.82***	1.10 (0.02)	4.68***	1.07 (0.02)	-2.841**
Sex			1.27 (0.16)	1.85	1.51 (0.20)	3.09***
White			0.88 (0.11)	-0.99	0.89 (0.11)	-0.89
Age			1.01 (0.04)	0.19	1.03 (0.04)	0.82
Psychopathy					1.00 (0.00)	0.46
Temperament					1.05 (0.01)	4.39***
Wald $\chi^2$	23.21***		30.85***		107.86***	
LR Test of $\alpha$	786.83***		757.1***		576.56***	

Note. IRR = incidence-rate ratio, BSE = bootstrap standard error with 500 replications, z = z-score.

\*\*\* p < .001.

\*\* p < .01.

(IRR = 1.07, z = 2.84, p < .01). Psychopathy was not significantly associated with self-reported violence whereas temperament was.

4.3. Negative binomial regression models for total arrests

As shown in Table 3, legal cynicism was not significantly associated with total arrests either in the baseline model (model 1), the demographic model (model 2), or the fully specified model including psychopathy and temperament (model 3). In model 3, males, youth with greater psychopathic features, and youth with greater temperamental problems accumulated more arrests.

4.4. Negative binomial regression models for self-reported delinquency by sex

Table 4 contained negative binomial regression models for self-reported delinquency by sex. In the first specification, legal cynicism, race, and age were included and in the second specification, psychopathy and temperament were added. For female delinquents, legal

**Table 3**  
Negative binomial regression model for total arrests.

Variable	IRR (BSE)	z	IRR (BSE)	z	IRR (BSE)	z
Legal cynicism	1.02 (0.02)	1.02	1.03 (0.02)	1.16	0.99 (0.02)	-0.28
Sex			1.31 (0.16)	2.20*	1.29 (0.16)	2.12*
White			0.91 (0.14)	-0.58	0.93 (0.16)	-0.45
Age			0.96 (0.05)	-0.71	0.96 (0.05)	-0.89
Psychopathy					1.01 (0.00)	2.39*
Temperament					1.02 (0.01)	2.26*
Wald $\chi^2$	1.04		9.88*		25.36***	
LR Test of $\alpha$	237.13***		224.62***		202.0***	

Note. IRR = incidence-rate ratio, BSE = bootstrap standard error with 500 replications, z = z-score.

\*\*\* p < .001.

\* p < .05.

cynicism was not significantly associated with self-reported delinquency regardless of specification. Among females, psychopathy was not associated with self-reported delinquency whereas temperament was. In contrast, significant linkages were found for legal cynicism in both models (IRR = 1.10, z = 5.80, p < .001 for model 1 and IRR = 1.07, z = 2.82, p < .01) among male delinquents.

4.5. Negative binomial regression models for self-reported delinquency by race

Table 5 contained negative binomial regression models for self-reported delinquency by race. In the first specification, legal cynicism, sex, and age were included and in the second specification, psychopathy and temperament were added. Among white delinquents, legal cynicism was significantly associated with more self-reported delinquency; however, the significant effect fell from significance once psychopathy and temperament were specified. Among non-white delinquents, the same situation was seen: legal cynicism was significantly linked with self-reported delinquency in the first model but fell from significance once psychopathy and temperament were specified. Positive associations between temperament and self-reported delinquency were seen among whites and non-whites. Positive associations between psychopathy and self-reported delinquency were only seen among non-white delinquents.

4.6. Negative binomial regression models for self-reported violence by sex

Table 6 contained negative binomial regression models for self-reported violence by sex. In the first specification, legal cynicism, race, and age were included in the models and in the second specification, psychopathy and temperament were added. For females, legal cynicism was not significantly associated with self-reported violence in either model. In contrast, legal cynicism was significantly associated with self-reported violence among male delinquents in both model 1 (IRR = 1.11, z = 4.59, p < .001) and model 2 (IRR = 1.08, z = 4.00,

**Table 4**  
Negative binomial regression model for self-reported delinquency by sex.

Variable	Females				Males			
	IRR (BSE)	z	IRR (BSE)	z	IRR (BSE)	z	IRR (BSE)	z
Legal cynicism	1.07 (0.04)	1.74	1.01 (0.03)	0.15	1.10 (0.02)	5.80***	1.07 (0.02)	2.82**
White	1.06 (0.23)	0.27	0.94 (0.18)	-0.33	0.83 (0.13)	-1.24	0.84 (0.15)	-0.99
Age	1.05 (0.08)	0.63	1.06 (0.08)	0.8	0.98 (0.04)	-0.46	0.99 (0.04)	-0.28
Psychopathy			1.01 (0.01)	1.72			1.01 (0.00)	2.12*
Temperament			1.05 (0.01)	3.13**			1.03 (0.01)	3.43***
Wald $\chi^2$	4.43		29.21***		37.39***		75.70***	
LR Test of $\alpha$	1000.51***		758.62***		498.81***		368.94***	

Note. IRR = incidence-rate ratio, BSE = bootstrap standard error with 500 replications, z = z-score.

\*\*\* p < .001.

\*\* p < .01.

\* p < .05.

p < .001). Psychopathy was not significantly associated with self-reported violence among females or males whereas temperament was in both models.

4.7. Negative binomial regression models for self-reported violence by race

Table 7 contained negative binomial regression models for self-reported violence by race. In the first specification, legal cynicism, sex, and age were included in the models and in the second specification, psychopathy and temperament were added. Somewhat similar findings were produced for both white and non-white delinquents. In the first model, legal cynicism was significantly associated with self-reported violence for both whites and non-whites; however, once psychopathy and temperament were specified, these associations fell from significance for whites but remained for non-whites (IRR = 1.06, z = 2.76, p < .01). Although psychopathy was not associated with self-reported violence among white or non-whites, temperament was for both groups.

4.8. Negative binomial regression models for total arrests by sex and by race

To conserve space, we did not table results for negative binomial regression models for total arrests by sex and by race in part because there were null effects for the total sample (shown in Table 3). In the first specification for total arrests, legal cynicism, race, and age were included in the models and in the second specification, psychopathy and temperament were added. Legal cynicism was not significantly associated with total arrests in any specification for female or male delinquents. Null effects were also seen for temperament. Psychopathy was positively associated with total arrests among males. Substantively similar findings were seen in negative binomial regression models for total arrest by race.

**Table 5**  
Negative binomial regression model for self-reported delinquency by race.

Variable	Whites				Non-whites			
	IRR (BSE)	z	IRR (BSE)	z	IRR (BSE)	z	IRR (BSE)	z
Legal cynicism	1.13 (0.05)	2.80**	1.07 (0.05)	1.41	1.08 (0.02)	3.65***	1.04 (0.02)	1.59
Sex	0.84 (0.22)	-0.67	1.07 (0.26)	0.27	1.06 (0.13)	0.49	1.16 (0.17)	1.02
Age	1.09 (0.11)	0.89	1.07 (0.10)	0.7	0.99 (0.04)	-0.32	1.00 (0.04)	0.07
Psychopathy			1.01 (0.01)	1.05			1.01 (0.00)	2.37*
Temperament			1.05 (0.02)	2.71**			1.04 (0.01)	4.02***
Wald $\chi^2$	9.38*		22.56***		15.09***		66.40***	
LR Test of $\alpha$	369.34***		236.85***		1117.36***		890.75***	

Note. IRR = incidence-rate ratio, BSE = bootstrap standard error with 500 replications, z = z-score.

\*\*\* p < .001.

\*\* p < .01.

\* p < .05.

In the first specification, legal cynicism, sex, and age were included in the models and in the second specification, psychopathy and temperament were added. Legal cynicism was not significantly associated with total arrests in any specification among white delinquents. A significant effect was seen between legal cynicism and total arrests among non-whites delinquent, but this relationship fell from significance once psychopathy and temperament were specified. Both psychopathy and temperament were positively associated with total arrest among white delinquents, but neither of these effects were seen among non-white delinquents.

To summarize the findings, legal cynicism was associated with more self-reported delinquency, self-reported violence, or self-reported arrests in 11 of 18 negative binomial regression models that did not include psychopathy or temperament. In fully specified models that contained these propensity-oriented variables, legal cynicism was significantly associated with antisocial behavior in just four of 15 models. By comparison, psychopathy was significantly associated with antisocial behavior in six of 15 models and temperament was significant in 12 of 15 models.

5. Discussion

Legal cynicism is an important construct because it reveals how perceptions and prior experiences with the criminal justice system can influence valuations about the appropriateness and justification for self-serving and antisocial behavior. However, prior research produced mixed findings about the linkages between legal cynicism and offending behaviors and sharply divergent findings about the role of person-specific variables, such as self-control, as a mediator of the legal cynicism-offending relationship. Drawing on a moderately large sample of juvenile offenders in residential placement, multiple multivariate models found that legal cynicism did not fare well once temperament and

**Table 6**  
Negative binomial regression model for self-reported violence by sex.

Variable	Females				Males			
	IRR (BSE)	z	IRR (BSE)	z	IRR (BSE)	z	IRR (BSE)	z
Legal cynicism	1.09 (0.05)	1.71	1.03 (0.04)	0.73	1.11 (0.03)	4.59***	1.08 (0.02)	4.00***
White	1.05 (0.30)	0.18	1.04 (0.25)	0.16	0.81 (0.16)	−1.05	0.83 (0.12)	−1.3
Age	1.08 (0.09)	1.08	1.13 (0.06)	2.01*	0.97 (0.05)	−0.54	0.98 (0.04)	−0.48
Psychopathy			0.99 (0.01)	−0.4			1.00 (0.01)	1.00
Temperament			1.07 (0.02)	4.31***			1.03 (0.01)	3.23***
Wald $\chi^2$	4.26		22.99***		25.97***		76.17***	
LR Test of $\alpha$	480.93***		338.51***		267.7***		193.03***	

Note. IRR = incidence-rate ratio, BSE = bootstrap standard error with 500 replications, z = z-score.

\*\*\* p < .001.

\* p < .05.

**Table 7**  
Negative binomial regression model for self-reported violence by race.

Variable	Whites				Non-whites			
	IRR (BSE)	z	IRR (BSE)	z	IRR (BSE)	z	IRR (BSE)	z
Legal cynicism	1.13 (0.05)	3.06**	1.10 (0.06)	1.64	1.09 (0.02)	4.05***	1.06 (0.02)	2.76**
Sex	1.03 (0.20)	0.17	1.24 (0.33)	0.81	1.35 (0.16)	2.53*	1.63 (0.25)	3.16*
Age	1.01 (0.09)	0.15	1.01 (0.09)	0.02	1.01 (0.04)	0.28	1.04 (0.04)	1.07
Psychopathy			1.01 (0.01)	0.6			0.99 (0.01)	−0.15
Temperament			1.05 (0.02)	2.08*			1.05 (0.01)	7.05***
Wald $\chi^2$	9.37*		10.96*		24.0***		89.34***	
LR Test of $\alpha$	173.75***		144.86***		576.95***		419.22***	

Note. IRR = incidence-rate ratio, BSE = bootstrap standard error with 500 replications, z = z-score.

\*\*\* p < .001.

\*\* p < .01.

\* p < .05.

psychopathy were included, suggesting that core antisocial variables are not only more important than legal cynicism in understanding crime, but also that legal cynicism is potentially not an independent marker of anomie as originally conceptualized (Sampson & Bartusch, 1998), but instead a lower-order or derivative manifestation of antisociality (Nivette et al., 2015). Several points warrant discussion.

First, it is important to recognize the legal cynicism is a more heterogeneous construct than previously believed, and its heterogeneity likely explains discrepant findings in the literature. We suspect that legal cynicism can reflect transient, mostly superficial opinions about the value, integrity, and efficacy of the police and criminal justice system and reflect intransigent, pernicious opinions that reflect antipathy toward the legal system.<sup>4</sup> For many persons, opinions of the police may not be stable or important. For instance, Carr et al. (2007) found that most youth living in high-crime neighborhoods are negatively disposed to law enforcement. Gau and Brunson (2010) suggested crime control-oriented policing strategies produce legal cynicism by damaging individual's view on procedural justice and police legitimacy. For others, they may be manifestations of general political outlook or exogenous psychological factors, such as self-efficacy or optimism. However, they may be stable and driving indicators of offending decision-making representing antisociality and disregard of authority. It is revealing that among the four models where legal cynicism was

significant, three related to self-reported violence where youth perceived that violent delinquency was the only viable option to resolve a dispute since the police would not or could not intervene. It is also revealing that in two of the three models among male delinquents, legal cynicism was significant (null findings were found for girls, whites, and nonwhites). In addition to exhibiting psychopathic features and temperamental deficits, some youth especially males harbor resentment toward the legal system that unfortunately manifests in additional delinquent offending.

Second, one explanation for the weak effects for legal cynicism in the current study likely relates to the behavioral severity of the sample and the explanatory power of psychopathy and temperament. In prior studies that sampled college students (e.g., Reisig et al., 2011), there is likely not adequate variance in antisocial features—in their study, self-control—to mitigate the effects of legal cynicism. When considering justice-system involved youth, some of whom have significant antisocial traits and behaviors, the effect of legal cynicism attenuates. Relatedly, we were surprised about the null effects for legal cynicism on offending among nonwhite delinquents given associations in prior research (e.g., Bell, 2016; Carr et al., 2007; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998). Again, the inclusion of psychopathy and temperament rendered legal cynicism spurious in models disaggregated by sex and race.

Third, the current findings have practical value for practitioners working with at-risk and adjudicated youth. To the degree that practitioners consider legal cynicism among their clients, it is important to explore the potential sources of the youth's attitudes about the justice system to gauge whether their views are superficial, whether their views are seemingly justified based on an extrinsic event, such as police or judicial corruption, or whether their views are illustrations of an ingrained antisocial disposition. In the event that legal cynicism is glib and reflects immaturity, that would seem easier for treatment and supervision staff to help the youth overcome it. Similarly, if an external event seemingly caused the youth's resentment toward the legal system

<sup>4</sup> To illustrate, Carr et al. (2007) found that nearly 62% of their participants had negative attitudes about police, 26% had positive views, and nearly 12% had mixed views where officers were evaluated on an individual basis. In other words, 100% of their sample had an opinion about the police. On the other hand, 61.2% of their sample had never been arrested and 70.7% had never been convicted, and thus potentially have no direct experience with the police. In contrast, 2% of their sample had 10 to 19 prior arrests. Although they did not include quantitative models, we hypothesize that never offenders and serious offenders have divergent rationales for legal cynicism.

that too can be a teachable moment to help the youth understand more productive ways to express dissatisfaction with the justice system as opposed to delinquent conduct. In the event that hostile views toward police and the law are present along with temperamental and psychological risk factors, juvenile justice staff likely face greater challenges in helping the youth reform their behavior.

Some limitations of the current study can contextualize the findings and inform future study. A critical problem not only in the current study but also in this literature generally is the use of cross-sectional data. Longitudinal designs are necessary to specify how and whether legal cynicism predates or postdates criminal offending. It is noteworthy that Nivette et al.'s (2015) study is one of the only longitudinal studies of legal cynicism and it found that self-reported delinquency was the strongest predictor of legal cynicism. Other exogenous events and psychological factors also deserve exploration as predictors of legal cynicism and more attention should be paid to legal cynicism as a potentially important mediating variable. The current study had an individual-level focus, however, it is important to note that prior research on legal cynicism (e.g., Kirk & Matsuda, 2011; Kirk & Papachristos, 2011; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998) focused on its emergent, structural existence emerging at the neighborhood level. Future work could employ multilevel models to see how neighborhood contexts affect the expression of not only legal cynicism, but also psychopathy and temperamental deficits. For instance, recent research found that in neighborhoods with high levels of legal cynicism, youth that have more violent peers display more street efficacy. However, in neighborhoods with lower legal cynicism, youth with more violent peers evince less street efficacy (Soller, Jackson, & Coleman, 2017).

In summary, while we found that legal cynicism was associated with offending, this effect greatly dissipated when measures of temperament and psychopathy were included in the models. The general pattern of results were also robust to various sex and race permutations. In our view, findings are consistent with the theory that legal cynicism is itself a byproduct of antisocial and criminal propensity.

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