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Gender and race influence youths' responses to a training on the law and safe police interactions

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ABSTRACT

Youth-police contact is frequent and can have seriously harmful consequences. To improve youth-police relations, it is important to equip both police and youth with the tools needed to encourage the safest interactions. Few programs exist to educate youth about the law or how to interact with police. We used a mixed-methods approach to evaluate a school-based program for middle and high school students in the U.S. that focused on educating them about the law and strategies to promote safer youth-police interactions. We obtained data from Strategies for Youth, the organization that provides a Juvenile Justice Curriculum including Juvenile Justice Jeopardy. Participants ($N = 872$, ages 10–20) in five states completed pen-and-paper surveys immediately before and immediately after completing the program. Participants' knowledge increased after the program, particularly for self-defense claims following a fight and about pat downs. Gender and race impacted some knowledge-based responses, highlighting some potential differences in socialization. Most participants indicated that they felt more prepared to effectively interact with police officers. 42% of youths believed that they could learn similar information from the Internet. Our study demonstrated that the Strategies for Youth curriculum is feasible and demonstrates promise in improving youths' knowledge and self-reported skills to safely interact with police.

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Introduction

Adolescents today are growing up in the midst of one of the largest social movements in U.S. history (Buchanan, Bui, & Patel, 2020) that is raising awareness about the prevalence and consequences of police violence against community members. Of particular concern is how police treat adolescents of color given extant research routinely suggests they disproportionately experience unwarranted, unjust, and biased police-initiated contact (Pollard, 2017; Zeiders et al., 2021). Considering how traumatic police contact can be (Del Toro et al., 2019; Del Toro, Wang, Thomas, & Hughes, 2021; Jackson, Del Toro, Semenza, Testa, & Vaughn, 2021), it is unsurprising that caregivers

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frequently engage adolescents in "the Talk" about police, especially within families of color (DiAquoi, 2018; Sewell, Horsford, Coleman, & Watkins, 2016), though the literature on socialization experiences that prepare adolescents for police encounters is quite sparse (Fine & Del Toro, 2022).

Further, even though adolescents' social ecologies include numerous other adult authority figures who may engage in socializing practices, studies have not examined which other socializing forces attempt to prepare adolescents for encounters with the police, let alone their efficacy. Certainly, a core concern when preparing adolescents for law enforcement encounters should be improving their legal knowledge, including how much adolescents understand what behaviors may warrant or encourage police contact. Unfortunately, the limited body of existing literature suggests that adolescents' legal knowledge—from Miranda rights (Zelle, Romaine, & Goldstein, 2015) to sexting (Cleary & Najdowski, 2019)—is shockingly poor. Accordingly, the current mixed-methods study aimed to fill three critical gaps in the literature. First, we assessed how engaging with a Juvenile Justice Curriculum impacted adolescents' knowledge about the law. Second, we examined how prepared adolescents felt to interact with police. Finally, to our knowledge, our study was the first to examine from what other sources adolescents may seek knowledge, guidance, and content related to law and engaging with police.

Preparing Adolescents for Police Encounters

For the last few decades, Tyler's (2003, 2006) procedural justice framework has dominated the legal socialization field, especially pertaining to individual perceptions of police. The framework argues that how police treat people impacts the public's perceptions of police legitimacy, and such legitimacy in turn drives law-related behavior such as cooperation with police and crime engagement. Consistent with the framework, the literature typically finds that to the extent that the public believes police act in procedurally just ways, they enhance their perceived legitimacy (Bolger & Walters, 2019; Mazerolle, Antrobus, Bennett, & Tyler, 2013).

Generally, scholars and practitioners who have focused on procedural justice have done so because of the purported downstream consequences of unjust interactions for promoting crime commission or undermining crime reporting (Nagin & Telep, 2020). Yet there are, of course, numerous consequences of adolescent-police encounters beyond simply crime-related outcomes. A growing body of literature demonstrates that police-initiated contact with adolescents is associated with worsened physical and mental health (Geller, 2021; Sewell et al., 2016). For instance, when Black male adolescents are vicariously exposed to a recent police-related death in their county, their average nightly cortisol (a stress hormone) spikes by almost 50% (Browning et al., 2021). Researchers are increasingly considering exposure to intrusive and procedurally unjust policing as traumatic events that can result in maladaptive coping strategies (Del Toro et al., 2021; Jackson et al., 2021) including delinquency (Del Toro et al., 2019). Children and adolescents are frequently exposed to police (Fine, Padilla, & Tom, 2022; Testa, Turney, Jackson, & Jaynes, 2021) and the majority of encounters are police-initiated (Davis, Whyde, & Langton, 2018; see also Hofer, Womack, & Wilson, 2020). In the U.S., the average age of

first police contact appears to be around age 12 (Geller & Fagan, 2019), and more than 10 million adolescents encounter police each year (Harrell & Davis, 2020). For decades (and likely longer), compared with White and non-Hispanic/Latine adolescents, Black and Hispanic/Latine adolescents have typically experienced disproportionate amounts of police contact and have been subjected to more physical force during police encounters (Cohen & Piquero, 2008). For instance, studies demonstrate Black men and boys are substantially more likely to experience police violence or to be killed by police during an encounter (Edwards, Lee, & Esposito, 2019; Eith & Durose, 2011).

Resulting from concerns over how unequipped their children are to interact with police, many families engage in "The Talk" about policing. Broadly, the Talk is a protective and socializing practice that focuses on preparing children on how to interact with police (Anderson, Jones, & Stevenson, 2020; Hughes, Bachman, Ruble, & Fuligni, 2006). While the content varies, the Talk often encompasses a range of coping responses, including defensive disengagement, reflective engagement, and assertive defiance (DiAquoi, 2018; Sewell et al., 2016), yet ultimately it focuses on teaching children to regulate their own emotions and behaviors in order to make it out of the situation as safely as possible (Pollard, 2017; Whitaker & Snell, 2016). Caregivers report feeling that these socialization practices are necessary to protect their children (Cooper et al., 2020; Elliott & Reid, 2019), and it is believed that many families, particularly those raising Black children, begin giving "the Talk" during their child's transition to adolescence (Canedy, 2013; Fine & Del Toro, 2022).

Certainly, adolescents feeling prepared to interact with police could shape how they interact with the officer, how the officer treats them, and the ultimate result of that encounter. Indeed, a small but growing body of literature suggests that individuals' pre-existing attitudes and perceptions also shape how they engage with and perceive subsequent interactions (Braga, Winship, Tyler, Fagan, & Meares, 2014). Within the context of policing, one's existing perceptions of police could impact how one experiences a subsequent police interaction (Madon & Murphy, 2021; Murphy, Bradford, Sargeant, & Cherney, 2021; Oliveira & Murphy, 2015). While studies have typically focused on the role of parents in impacting adolescents' legal socialization (Fine, Thomas, van Rooij, & Cauffman, 2020; Wolfe, McLean, & Pratt, 2017), the family system is not the only developmental context that may impact adolescents (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), and many families do not engage in The Talk or related socialization practices with adolescents (Fine & Del Toro, 2022). There are a handful of educational curricula across the United States that aim to prepare adolescents for interactions with police officers. A guiding justification is that a standardized curriculum is important considering the potential consequences of police interactions. Such programs have rarely, if ever, been studied.

Legal Knowledge among Adolescents

Beyond teaching adolescents how to interact with police, there is the critical question of whether adolescents actually know what behaviors may attract attention from police. On one hand, adolescents may unreasonably attract police attention based solely on their race or age (Jackson, 2021; Padgaonkar et al., 2021). Yet on the other,

they may also attract police attention or be subjected to more aggressive police behavior if they engage in illegal behaviors, regardless of whether they were aware that they were violating the law. Furthermore, the extant literature suggests that adolescents know little about their legal rights or what behaviors are actually illegal. For instance, seminal works indicate that adolescents have difficulty understanding legal language (Smith, 1985), and more recent work indicates they misunderstand laws governing sexting (Strohmaier, Murphy, & DeMatteo, 2014) and sex offender registration policies (Cleary & Najdowski, 2019).

Specifically pertaining to their interactions with police, adolescents have difficulty understanding their right to remain silent even after being provided with a *Miranda* warning and generally have poorer understanding of the warning than do adults (Goldstein & Goldstein, 2010; Haney-Caron, Goldstein, & Mesiarik, 2018; Zelle et al., 2015). In fact, adolescents' comprehension of their legal rights during interactions with police officers is markedly low. In one study, 95% of adolescents mistakenly believed that if they were considered a suspect, police must notify their parents/guardians (Woolard, Cleary, Harvell, & Chen, 2008), indicating how unprepared adolescents can be in interacting with police. Moreover, even caregivers typically score under 50% on legal comprehension tests (Cleary & Warner, 2017), indicating they may not always be reliable educational sources for adolescents when it comes to legal processes, policies, and procedures (Cavanagh & Cauffman, 2017; Fountain & Woolard, 2021). Altogether, the existing but limited literature on adolescent knowledge of the law generally indicates adolescents have little understanding or fact-based knowledge, and that they would benefit from such training.

Current Study

Although there is a paucity of information about how to provide adolescents with knowledge and skills to combat the potential detrimental consequences of police contact, there are some curricula which are being used throughout the nation. One such example is Strategies for Youth's Juvenile Justice Curriculum (JJC) program for adolescents, which is often branded as Juvenile Justice Jeopardy. Taught by local professionals who are credible messengers (e.g., FBI agents, school resource officers, attorneys), the JJC program focuses on prevention of adolescent risk behaviors and non-risk behaviors often associated with arrest by arming adolescents with knowledge and skills regarding police and the justice system as a whole. While JJC has been implemented in 20 states over 10 years, the effects of this adolescent-directed approach on adolescents' legal knowledge and preparation to interact with police have yet to be evaluated. Accordingly, the aims of this study are to use a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the effectiveness of the JJC on adolescents' knowledge attainment and likelihood of propagating their knowledge to others and to evaluate the feasibility by exploring adolescents' perceptions of barriers and facilitators to achieving the intended outcomes of the intervention. Specifically, in the current study we posed three research questions:

1. How does participating in the JJC influence adolescents' knowledge about the law?

2. How much do adolescents feel prepared to interact with the police?
3. From where else do adolescents believe they could learn similar content?

Materials and Methods

Participants and Procedures

Eight-hundred-seventy-two adolescents aged 10–20 ($M = 14.6$, $SD = 1.7$) completed surveys after participating in the Strategies for Youth—Juvenile Justice Curriculum (JJC) classroom-based intervention. Adolescents were from 40 schools in multiple U.S. jurisdictions within five different states. The majority of participants were boys (58.9%), and most of the remaining adolescents (39.8%) identified as girls (1.3% identified as non-binary). Participants self-identified their race/ethnicity as Black (25.0%), White (61.9%), Latine (6.0%), and multiracial (4.2%).

At both pre- and immediate post-JJC intervention, participating adolescents were provided with optional paper surveys by the program facilitator. Before handing out the surveys, the facilitator explained to adolescents that it was voluntary to complete surveys. Data were initially collected for internal program evaluation purposes and not for research purposes. To work with these de-identified data, IRB approval was obtained from the lead researcher's institution.

Intervention

All participants underwent the *Juvenile Justice Curriculum* (JJC) in their middle or high school during regular classroom hours (Strategies for Youth, 2021). The core component of the JJC is "Juvenile Justice Jeopardy." The JJC, branded as Juvenile Justice Jeopardy to participants given the central nature of this JJC component, was developed as a part of a set of multistakeholder interventions for adolescents, police (*Policing the Teen Brain*), police agencies through updated policies, and leadership and staff within community organizations. The four foci of JJC are to: (1) increase knowledge about legal versus illegal behavior, (2) help adolescents understand legal consequences, (3) increase knowledge about arrests and court records, and (4) help adolescents navigate interactions with their peers and with police. Program content is facilitated by a credible messenger, such as a juvenile probation officer, police officer, or attorney. Youth are typically enrolled in the curriculum as a part of another class in their school. More detailed information about the JJC can be found on the Strategies for Youth website or in (Fix, 2023).

Measures

Demographic Characteristics

Participating adolescents were asked about three demographic factors: their age (continuous), their gender, and their race/ethnicity. On the Strategies for Youth survey, gender included boy, girl, or other (non-binary). Race/ethnicity included four non-overlapping categories (i.e., Black, Latine, White, other). Adolescents also wrote in the name of their school on the form.

Knowledge-Based Outcomes from JJC

Knowledge specific to three of the JJC foci were assessed on the evaluation survey (knowledge about legal versus illegal behavior, knowledge about legal consequences, knowledge about arrests and court records). To measure whether the JJC curriculum influenced knowledge about legal versus illegal behavior, knowledge about legal consequences, and knowledge about arrests and court records, adolescents were asked nine true-false, three multiple choice questions, and three short answer questions (see Tables 1–3). Responses were coded as correct or incorrect and retained as separate items.

Brief Written Responses about JJC Outcomes

First, participating adolescents were asked whether and how they felt the JJC prepared them to have improved future interactions with police officers. Adolescents were provided with several blank lines on a half a page of the survey to respond; thus, most adolescents' responses were brief and either a phrase or short sentence. Table 4

Table 1. Changes from pre-post JJC in knowledge about the law among youth participants ($N = 852$).

	All Youth Pre % (*n*)	All Youth Post % (*n*)	Change % Change
Multiple choice questions			
Guilt in juvenile court can impact:			
Housing (correct)	38.1 (180)	55.6 (474)	+17.5%
Employment (correct)	78.6 (372)	89.3 (761)	+10.7%
Driver's license (incorrect)	64.1 (303)	70.7 (602)	+6.6%
Joining military (incorrect)	60.3 (285)	70.8 (603)	+10.5%
What should you say to an officer when you are brought into custody?			
Ask for a lawyer (correct)	44.8 (180)	58.7 (418)	+13.9%
Say nothing (correct)	31.6 (131)	14.7 (105)	−16.9%
Ask for caregiver (incorrect)	29.1 (117)	26.5 (189)	−2.6%
You can be patted down when walking with friends			
No—the officer needs a warrant	—	14.8 (126)	–
Yes—if they have a reason	—	76.6 (654)	–
Yes—they can do whatever whenever	—	8.7 (74)	–
True-false questions			
A male police officer can pat down a girl	57.3 (271)	86.4 (729)	+29.1%
Police don't need a warrant to view your public social media posts	80.5 (381)	86.6 (729)	+6.1%
People of color are searched and frisked at the highest rates	66.4 (314)	51.1 (427)	−15.3%
You can claim self-defense if you punch someone when they threaten you	45.2 (214)	79.7 (711)	+34.5%
You can be charged with child pornography for sexting with photos	92.1 (433)	94.4 (793)	+2.3%
You can be charged with possession for being in a car with illegal drugs	81.3 (377)	95.0 (790)	+14.7%
You can be charged with possession if you put a friend's gun in your locker	97.2 (455)	96.8 (807)	−1.6%
Your juvenile records are not sealed when you turn 18	53.5 (242)	66.1 (539)	+12.6%
When you have been found delinquent in court, you have not been convicted	37.8 (264)	57.0 (461)	+21.2%
Fill in the blank questions	***M* (*SD*)**	***M* (*SD*)**	
What is the youngest age you can be arrested?	11.3 (4.0)	11.1 (4.1)	–
What's the youngest age you can legally consent to sex?	16.4 (1.7)	16.1 (1.5)	–
When does possession of a drug become "intent to distribute"?	7.4 (17.8) oz	5.9 (19.1) oz	–

Table 2. Gender comparisons in knowledge about the law at post-JJC among youth participants ($N = 746$).

	Boys ($n = 446$)	Girls ($n = 300$)	Gender Chi-Square Test	
	% (n)	% (n)	χ^2	Boys *OR* [CI]
Multiple choice questions				
Guilt in juvenile court can impact (select all that apply):				
Housing (correct)	50.0 (221)	65.2 (191)	16.5***	0.5 [0.4, 0.7]
Employment (correct)	86.7 (383)	93.9 (275)	9.8**	0.4 [0.3, 0.7]
Driver's license (incorrect)	66.5 (294)	76.5 (224)	8.4**	0.6 [0.4, 0.9]
Joining military (incorrect)	70.6 (312)	73.0 (214)	0.5	–
What should you say to an officer when you are brought into custody?			2.0	–
Ask for a lawyer (correct)	60.3 (231)	56.7 (135)		
Say nothing (incorrect)	13.3 (51)	11.8 (28)		
Ask for caregiver (incorrect)	26.4 (101)	31.5 (75)		
You can be patted down when walking with friends			0.6	–
No—the officer needs a warrant	15.2 (68)	14.0 (42)		
Yes—if they have a reason	76.2 (340)	236 (78.7)		
Yes—they can do whatever whenever	8.5 (38)	7.3 (22)		
True-false questions				
A male police officer can pat down a girl	87.7 (386)	84.9 (248)	1.2	–
Police don't need a warrant to view your public social media posts	87.0 (382)	87.4 (256)	0.02	–
People of color are searched and frisked at the highest rates	56.6 (246)	44.9 (131)	9.6**	1.6 [1.2, 2.2]
You can claim self-defense if you punch someone when they threaten you	89.2 (263)	81.2 (355)	8.4**	1.9 [1.2, 2.9]
You can be charged with child pornography for sexting with photos	93.6 (408)	95.2 (279)	0.9	–
You can be charged with possession for being in a car with illegal drugs	94.0 (405)	96.6 (280)	2.4	–
You can be charged with possession if you put a friend's gun in your locker	94.9 (41)	99.7 (290)	12.7***	0.1 [0.01, 0.5]
Your juvenile records are not sealed when you turn 18	67.6 (290)	63.3 (174)	1.4	–
When you have been found delinquent in court, you have not been convicted	59.3 (253)	53.4 (149)	2.4	–
Participants who wrote "16" as the youngest age to legally consent to sex.	70.3 (301)	61.6 (197)	0.1	–
	***M* (*SD*)**	***M* (*SD*)**	*F*	*p*
Fill in the blank questions				
What is the youngest age you can be arrested?	8.4 (5.9)	7.4 (6.2)	4.4*	.036
What's the youngest age you can legally consent to sex?	16.1 (1.5)	16.1 (1.5)	0.1	.712
When does possession of a drug become "intent to distribute"?	7.8 (23.6)	2.9 (8.7)	11.9***	< .001

includes categories of codes along with code descriptions and example responses. Second, participating adolescents were asked about additional sources of information where they thought they could learn content similar to the JJC content. Adolescents had a small space in which they could write a brief statement. Most such responses were one or two words in length (see Table 5).

Data Analysis

We evaluated rates of correct responses to knowledge items at pre- versus post-JJC (see Table 1). A series of chi-square tests for independence were run to test for

Table 3. Black-white racial group comparisons in knowledge about the law at post-JJC among youth participants ($N = 729$).

	Black ($n = 181$) % (n)	White ($n = 548$) % (n)	Race Chi-Square Test	
			χ^2	Black *OR* [CI]
Multiple choice questions				
Guilt in juvenile court can impact (select all that apply):				
Housing (correct)	65.7 (117)	74.3 (335)	4.6*	0.7 [0.5, 0.97]
Employment (correct)	51.7 (92)	57.9 (261)	2.0	–
Driver's license (incorrect)	81.5 (145)	92.2 (416)	15.4***	0.4 [0.2, 0.6]
Joining military (incorrect)	42.1 (75)	24.2 (109)	19.9***	0.4 [0.3, 0.6]
What should you say to an officer when you are brought into custody?			1.0	–
Ask for a lawyer (correct)	58.5 (79)	58.7 (233)		
Say nothing (incorrect)	11.1 (15)_	14.1 (56)		
Ask for caregiver (incorrect)	30.4 (41)	27.2 (108)		
You can be patted down when walking with friends			1.7	–
No—the officer needs a warrant	15.5 (28)	14.7 (67)		
Yes—if they have a reason	74.6 (135)	78.2 (356)		
Yes—they can do whatever whenever	9.9 (18)	7.0 (32)		
True-false questions				
A male police officer can pat down a girl	84.5 (147)	88.4 (396)	1.7	–
Police don't need a warrant to view your public social media posts	76.4 (133)	91.3 (407)	24.5***	0.3 [0.2, 0.5]
People of color are searched and frisked at the highest rates	80.5 (136)	39.9 (178)	80.7***	6.2 [4.1, 9.5]
You can claim self-defense if you punch someone when they threaten you	79.1 (136)	85.0 (380)	3.2	–
You can be charged with child pornography for sexting with photos	93.0 (160)	94.4 (419)	0.4	–
You can be charged with possession for being in a car with illegal drugs	94.0 (156)	95.5 (423)	0.6	–
You can be charged with possession if you put a friend's gun in your locker	95.8 (160)	97.1 (431)	0.6	–
Your juvenile records are not sealed when you turn 18	61.1 (102)	68.4 (294)	2.9	–
When you have been found delinquent in court, you have not been convicted	68.6 (120)	51.2 (218)	15.3***	2.1 [1.4, 3.0]
Participants who wrote "16" as the youngest age to legally consent to sex.	77.9 (134)	66.1 (297)	8.0**	1.8 [1.2, 2.7]
Fill in the blank questions	***M* (*SD*)**	***M* (*SD*)**	*F*	*p*
What is the youngest age you can be arrested?	9.3 (5.5)	8.0 (6.1)	9.7**	.002
What's the youngest age you can legally consent to sex?	16.1 (1.4)	15.9 (1.7)	0.1	.686
When does possession of a drug become "intent to distribute"?	9.4 (19.1)	5.5 (22.1)	2.9	.089

differences in observed knowledge at post-JJC by participant gender and race (see Tables 2 and 3). We were only able to test for Black-White racial group differences due to the small number of Latine and multiracial participants in the study sample. We report odds ratios for statistically significant tests.

Members of our study team coded written responses (qualitative data) using inductive methodology (Vanover, Mihas, & Saldaña, 2021). The first author developed a codebook after reviewing responses and discussing them with members of our team. Team members first used the codebook to independently code the same small subset ($n = 20$ participants) of written responses to assess for coding consistency between coders. On the first round of coding, our team had an interrater reliability of

Table 4. How youth responded when asked whether and how JJC prepared them to better interact with police ($N = 579$).

Code	% (*n*)	Examples
Felt more prepared post-JJC	**89.4**%	
I learned how to better interact	48.0 (278)	"I know what to do" ($n = 16$); "I know what not to do" ($n = 6$); "I know what to say" ($n = 5$); "[I] know what to do" ($n = 3$); "I know how to react" ($n = 2$); "They walked us through it"; "They tell you what to say"; "I know to stay calm and know what rights I can execute"; "I have steps to get through it"; "I know how to keep myself from being suspected of anything"
I gained knowledge	26.9 (156)	"I know more" ($n = 17$); "Because I know more" ($n = 11$); "Because I got that information" ($n = 6$); "I know my rights" ($n = 5$); "more knowledgable" ($n = 2$); I learned something new ($n = 2$); "Know all my rights"
I am more confident about interactions/ Feeling trust in police	7.6 (44)	"I'm not scared"; "I'm confident"; "it's easy"; "I don't feel afraid"; "They just want to help" ($n = 2$); "because he is just a person"; "because I know is not scary"; "because I learned from [a police officer]"
Generally received good advice	3.6 (21)	"I just feel more prepared"; "they had good advice"; "it was well explained"
Described a strategy to stay safe/ Focused on the end game	3.3 (19)	"I know to just stay calm" ($n = 4$); "I know not to run" ($n = 3$); "I know to keep my hands in view"; "don't resist"; "I know what to say and what they're capable of doing"; "So I won't go to jail"; "Because I know what could happen"
Not more prepared post-JJC	**9.6**%	**Examples**
I was already prepared	5.2 (30)	"I already felt ready" ($n = 6$); "I already knew" ($n = 3$); "It confirmed what I already knew" ($n = 2$); "I already have experience"; "always have"
Emotional responses	1.0 (6)	"Fuck the cops"; "I am scared of cops"; "I would feel uncomfortable"; "I still get nervous"; "because i don't like them"
Other	3.3 (19)	"I'm never prepared"; "I will never feel prepared"; "[JJC] didn't answer my questions"; "In the middle, I don't think it helped my mindset"

85% (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We then divided up remaining responses between team members to be independently coded. The first author (Fix, 2023) reviewed approximately half of these codes to ensure continued fidelity to the developed coding system.

Results

Knowledge about the Law Pre- and Post-JJC

Twelve items were developed by the program team to assess whether the JJC improved knowledge about legal versus illegal behavior, knowledge about legal consequences, and knowledge about arrests and court records. Table 1 provides more comprehensive data on pre- and post-JJC knowledge. Overall, the largest gains in knowledge were specific to knowing that a male police officer can legally pat down a girl (+29.1%), that you can claim self-defense if you punch someone who has threatened you (+34.5%), and that when you have been found delinquent in court, you have not necessarily been convicted (+21.2% from pre- to post-JJC). We observed noteworthy decreases in correct responses about how people of color are searched at

Table 5. How youth responded when asked where else they could have learned similar information to the program ($N = 781$).

Code	% (*n*)	Examples
Internet	41.8 (326)	"online" ($n = 113$); "(the) internet" ($n = 71$); "Google" ($n = 40$); "trusted website"; "juvenile justice website"; "on the state of [redacted website"
Police and SROs	24.1 (212)	"an officer" ($n = 20$); "[Officer's name]" ($n = 19$); "a police officer" ($n = 12$); "(the) school officer" ($n = 8$); "police" ($n = 6$); "other officers" ($n = 6$); "by going to a police station" ($n = 2$); "police officer interaction"
Family	19.8 (174)	"parent(s)" ($n = 98$); "family" ($n = 14$); "mom" ($n = 10$); "at home" ($n = 2$); "sister"; "guardians"; "grandfather"
Teachers or School	9.6 (85)	"teacher(s)" ($n = 26$); "school" ($n = 22$); "social studies class" ($n = 2$)
Other People	9.1 (80)	"trusted adult(s)" ($n = 7$); "probation officer" ($n = 6$); "people" ($n = 2$); "therapist"; "people who would know"
Books	4.2 (33)	"book(s)" ($n = 13$); "textbook"; "law book"; library
TV	2.8 (22)	"TV" ($n = 8$); "the news"; "shows"
Nowhere Else/I Don't Know	2.7 (21)	"I don't know" ($n = 7$); "just this game"; "nowhere else"; "nobody else"
Community/Direct Experience	2.2 (17)	"the street(s)" ($n = 2$); "the hood"; "life"; "Experience"

higher rates than White people (−15.3%). There were not very robust changes in items where adolescents already had a fairly good understanding of content. For example, that adolescents can be charge with weapon possession if they store a friend's gun in their locker (97.2% at pre-JJC and 96.8% at post-JJC), and the age at which adolescents can legally consent to sex ($M = 16.4$ years at pre-JJC and $M = 16.1$ years at post-JJC).

We ran a series of chi-square tests for independence to evaluate whether there were gender or racial group differences in knowledge at post-JJC (see Tables 2 and 3).[1] As is displayed in Table 2, girls were significantly more likely to answer items correctly about how a guilty verdict in juvenile court can affect outcomes and that an adolescent can be charged with possession if you put a friend's gun in their own locker compared with boys. Boys were significantly more likely to correctly respond to questions about racial disparities in the criminal legal system, about claiming self-defense for fighting in response to a threat, and were more accurate about the youngest age at which an adolescent can be arrested.

Table 3 presents racial group differences in knowledge following the JJC. Compared with Black adolescents, White adolescents were significantly more likely to report the wrong answers in response to a question about how guilt in juvenile court can impact outcomes, and were more likely to correctly identify that no warrant is needed for police to view public social media posts. Black adolescents were significantly more likely to accurately answer the question about the presence of racial disparities in the criminal legal system and were more accurate in youngest age at which adolescents can be arrested.

[1]We also ran a series of binary logistic regressions to assess for effects of age and whether race and gender effects were observed after controlling for age. Age significantly increased the likelihood a young person would correctly answer the question about racial disparities in the legal system and that being adjudicated delinquent is not synonymous with being convicted at post-JJC. Race and gender effects remained significant in these models.

Qualitative Outcomes on Post-JJC Preparation to Interact with Police

96.9% of adolescents reported that JJC was helpful, and when asked how much of the JJC content was new for them, participating adolescents reported an average of 53.3% ($SD = 26.5\%$). In addition, most said they felt better prepared to deal with police officers following JJC. Adolescents were further asked to write about how they felt better prepared (if they did feel better prepared). Of adolescents who described feeling better prepared to interact with police, eight types of written response categories were observed (1–5 reflecting feeling more prepared and 6–8 not feeling more prepared): (1) how to behave during interactions, (2) new knowledge gained, (3) increased confidence/trust in police, (4) good advice broadly, (5) specific strategies to stay safe or focusing on possible outcomes, (6) reporting they were already prepared, (7) emotional responses about not feeling prepared, and (8) other responses. Table 4 provides a more in-depth overview of these coding categories. No major differences or themes in these responses emerged based on adolescents' gender, race, or ethnicity.

Adolescents Who Felt More Prepared After JJC

About 50% described that they now felt they knew what to do during a police encounter. Oftentimes, adolescents used the same language to convey this point. Many adolescents made the blanket statement, "I know what to do" or, similarly, "I know what not to do." One 19-year-old White young woman wrote, "I know how to act," while a 17-year-old Hispanic boy wrote, "I learned how to interact." Others gave more information about ways they know what to do, writing things such as, "Because I know what to say when they come to me" [16-year-old Black boy]. A 14-year-old White non-binary adolescent wrote that they learned about the importance of attending to, "Body language" during encounters with police.

Twenty-seven percent of adolescents described gaining knowledge as the reason they felt better prepared to interact with police officers. Some representative statements within this category included, "Better understanding" [15-year-old Black girl], "I will understand more" [15-year-old multiracial girl], and "I learned something new" [17-year-old Black boy]. And some wrote about general changes in their knowledge from the perspective of an adolescent and a police officer, "I know what they expect and I know what to expect" [Black 20-year-old young woman]. Altogether, these adolescents felt equipped to better interact with police through increased knowledge following the JJC.

Other responses to this question included statements such as those concerning safety such as "don't resist" [15-year-old White girl]. Some adolescents described what appeared to be newfound appreciation for responding to police officers as individuals as evidenced by the statement, "Just because not all cops aren't the same" [17-year-old multiracial girl]. Additionally, adolescents wrote about how the JJC informed their ability to effectively interact with police: a 15-year-old Black boy noted that they felt prepared because JJC, "gave me good tips"; "Because it talked about how to interact with police" [12-year-old White girl]; and "Because they let me know how to handle it correctly" [15-year-old White boy]. Finally, one 16-year-old White boy said, "Telling me how to have my right to remain silent." These statements reflect how the JJC content

empowered adolescents to feel prepared for safer and more effective interactions with police officers.

Adolescents Who Did Not Feel More Prepared After JJC

A small percentage of adolescents (10%) wrote descriptions about how they did not feel better prepared to interact with police officers following the JJC. These responses fit into three of the eight coded categories (see Table 4 for categories and examples of adolescents' text). The first category included adolescents who felt they were already prepared to interact with police officers, and therefore may not have felt they had much room for improvement. About half of adolescents who reported not feeling better prepared fell into this category. The second category included emotional responses that suggested adolescents were angry or fearful of police and suggested they still were unprepared as a result of these emotions. The final category was "other responses," which generally included statements suggesting adolescents felt nothing could prepare them to better interact with police and statements about the JJC not helping.

Where Can Adolescents Learn about Police and the Law?

When adolescents were asked from whom or where else they could learn content that was included within the JJC, nine categories of responses emerged (see Table 5). Some adolescents listed multiple sources, and gender and racial patterns were observed. The largest proportion of adolescents (41%) named the Internet as a source for similar information. Only 12 specified credible online sources (e.g., "law site," "juvenile justice website"), and three wrote "social media." Boys (46.7%) were significantly more likely to name the Internet compared with girls (35.9%), $\chi^2 = 7.9$, $p = .005$, $OR = 1.6$ [1.1, 2.1]. No racial group differences were observed ($p = .956$).

Nearly 30% of adolescents described police officers and school resource officers. Girls (33.1%) were significantly more likely to list police officers compared with boys (23.7%), $\chi^2 = 7.4$, $p = .007$, $OR = 1.6$ [1.1, 2.2]. In addition, Black adolescents were significantly more likely to name police officers as a good source of information on policing and the law compared with adolescents who identified as White, $\chi^2 = 21.1$, $p < .001$, $OR = 2.3$ [1.6, 3.4].

Many adolescents reported they could learn similar information from their family members. Girls (27.5%) were again significantly more likely to list family members compared with boys (19.8%), $\chi^2 = 5.6$, $p = .018$, $OR = 1.5$ [1.1, 2.2]. Family members were named comparably between racial groups ($p = .453$).

Other gender or racial group differences emerged in some of the less frequently used categories. Girls (14.8%) also named schools significantly more often than boys (8.6%) $\chi^2 = 6.4$, $p = .012$, $OR = 1.8$ [1.1, 3.0]. Black adolescents (5.8%) listed books as a good source of information significantly more often than White adolescents (2.4%), $\chi^2 = 4.5$, $p = .033$, $OR = 2.5$ [1.1, 6.3]. Finally, more responses that fell into the community category were provided by Black adolescents, $\chi^2 = 8.6$, $p = .007$, $OR = 5.2$ [1.5, 17.4]. Only four responses were provided by White adolescents in this category (e.g., "in public," "safe place," "other resources"), which were qualitatively distinct from

responses provided by Black adolescents (e.g., "the street," "life," and "this program called *name redacted* that I'm in").

Discussion

Despite the potential for significant consequences for youth following police contact, few juvenile justice curricula exist and those that do have rarely been evaluated. Findings from this study demonstrate the benefit of a juvenile justice curriculum to improve middle and high school students' knowledge about the law as well as their reports of feeling more prepared to interact with police following the curriculum. Additionally, this mixed-methods study provides valuable insights into other sources where adolescents may seek knowledge and guidance about the law and police interactions.

Results comparing the pre- and post-JJC surveys indicate that the curriculum improved adolescents' knowledge about the law. Specifically, youth increased their understanding of the consequences of being found guilty in juvenile court, the ways in which police officers can engage with youth, the difference between delinquency and conviction, and importantly that they could ask for a lawyer if brought into custody. While knowledge improved overall, there were notable differences in curricular outcomes depending on youths' gender and racial identity. Findings revealed that adolescent girls and young women had a better understanding of how guilt in juvenile court can impact outcomes, including housing and employment. However, adolescent boys and young men were more likely to correctly identify racial disparities in the criminal justice system, minimum age for arrest, and the ability to claim self-defense for fighting in response to a threat. Gender differences may reflect the historically lower involvement of girls and women in the criminal legal system and consequently boys and young men being more aware of negotiating police contact (Eagly & Steffen, 1986). However, as the proportion of juvenile court-involved youth who are female has increased in recent years, these findings emphasize the need for a standardized JJC administered to all youth regardless of their gender identity (Bright, Kohl, & Jonson-Reid, 2014; Hockenberry & Puzzanchera, 2020).

When testing for differences by race, findings revealed that compared with Black adolescents, White adolescents were more likely to misunderstand how guilt in juvenile court can impact outcomes but were more likely to correctly identify that no warrant is needed for police to view public social media posts. These findings could reflect a gap in education. Black caregivers may focus more on "the Talk" (Fine & Del Toro, 2022) and potentially place less emphasis on illegal behaviors specific to social media use. The high proportion of Black youth who recognize the racial disparities in police contact is not surprising as it may reflect their direct experience (Fine et al., 2022). The literature confirms that many Black youth have had vicarious or direct encounters with the police by 7th grade (Yusuf, Copeland-Linder, Young, Matson, & Trent, 2022). Future research may benefit from examining whether increasing youth knowledge around reasons for and conduct within police encounters buffers the traumatic stress associated with these encounters (Geller, 2021).

The vast majority of youth reported that they felt more prepared to interact with police after the JJC. Youth described how the curriculum provided them with specific information on what to do and what not to do during a police encounter. Youth relayed that the curriculum outlined strategies on how to stay safe and improved their confidence should they interact with police in the future. Altogether, the few adolescents who did not feel more prepared after JJC felt they were already prepared, were understandably emotional about police interactions, or felt they would not ever be adequately prepared to effectively interact with police. These findings may reflect youth who have already experienced a negative police encounter personally or vicariously. It is also possible that the program incited or reinforced fear of police for some youth, particularly Black youth who are more likely to bring personal and community experiences of police brutality and harm (e.g., Brunson & Miller, 2006; Fagan & Davies, 2000; Hyland, Langton, & Davis, 2015). Research has found that youth who have had personal or vicarious experiences of police mistreatment and more exposure to law enforcement brutality events in the media had more negative perceptions and less confidence in police (Franklin, Perkins, Kirby, & Richmond, 2019). Adolescents alone cannot resolve tensions or improve adolescent-police interactions. The JJC program developers recognized this as is evidenced with the advent of their companion *Policing the Teen Brain* intervention (Aalsma, Schwartz, & Tu, 2018).

When youth were asked where else they could learn similar content as the information provided in the program, many (two-fifths) named the Internet. However, very few adolescents named specific and credible sites (i.e., juvenile justice website). This is concerning because the Internet is rife with misinformation. As youth spend increasing time on the internet including via mobile devices, concerns have been raised that the majority of high school graduates in the U.S. lack basic skills to help them navigate and critically evaluate online information (Turner et al., 2017). A further one-fifth of participating youths named family as a resource for information similar to what was provided in the JJC. Family members may or may not be a credible source of information for adolescents. There may be tremendous variability in family members' knowledge and experiences that influence their dissemination of factual versus anecdotal information. Prior research has found that caregivers themselves often gain information from informal sources (Mehus et al., 2021). Taken together, these findings argue for implementation of a universal, standardized curriculum for youth that provides state-specific information on laws and policies that govern police contact with children and adolescents (or legal minors). Naturally, there may be utility in developing curricula or separate modules to enhance curricula that are tailored to community contexts. The Strategies for Youth program already does this to some extent in that it has content specific to youths living in urban environments, but content could also be tailored to rural areas and social identifiers (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation).

Limitations and Future Directions

There were limitations to the current study. First, the population of youth participating in the JJC program may not represent those youths who are most likely to encounter

the police in situations that are of the most concern. As such, our study results may not be applicable to the most vulnerable populations. Follow-up programming and associated research is needed among those most at risk. It is worth noting that a modified version of this curriculum has been provided to a subset of incarcerated youths, but there are too few data to evaluate program efficacy among these youths. Regardless, JJC programming demonstrates meaningful effects and merits continued implementation and more rigorous evaluation moving forward.

Second, the survey used for this program evaluation could be strengthened. For example, knowledge questions on the survey were not all clearly worded. When asked about the amount of a possessed illicit substance for which someone can be arrested, the question did not explicitly say marijuana. Also, very few adolescents correctly answered the question about consequences of being found guilty in juvenile court, which likely reflected the question wording. This question is problematic because the charge matters concerning consequences. Thus, the questionnaire for this program and future programs should be updated to ask more knowledge questions including content covered in the program and to pilot the wording of questions and content with youths for clarity and relevance, a hallmark of community-based participatory action research. Further, evaluation surveys should include additional measures that could influence program outcomes to include as covariates and explanatory variables (e.g., direct and vicarious police encounters and features therein, SES, illegal behavior of the adolescent, beliefs about police alongside knowledge).

Expanding program evaluation materials beyond self-report questionnaires could strengthen future studies. In addition to survey items, because many program evaluation measures are being administered online, it would be both informative and interesting to have a behavioral measure of bias/stigmatized views of police and not just self-report included in the evaluation materials. Collecting data through individual interviews or focus group discussions would provide more rich qualitative data from which to evaluate and strengthen existing programming. Furthermore, to increase anonymity, feelings of confidentiality, and more accurate self-reporting, we strongly encourage use of online surveys instead of paper and pencil. Lastly, we were unable to look at longitudinal changes in knowledge for youths over time. Follow-up research should first ensure pre-post survey matching can happen, and then collect follow-up data and not just pre- and immediate post-program data.

Conclusion

The strengths of this study lie in its ability to quantify the impact of a JJC on adolescents' knowledge about the law as well as to qualitatively provide a deeper understanding of how the curriculum better prepared youth to interact with police. Further, this study revealed other sources where youth seek knowledge and guidance about police contact, several of which raise concerns regarding accuracy and legitimacy of information disseminated to youth about police. While more work remains to be done, results from this evaluation suggest that implementing a JJC holds promise to prevent some negative outcomes for youth.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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